

Black Craft: Black Girls Crafting Self and Spirit in
The Gilded Ones, Brown Girl in the Ring, and Sing Unburied Sing

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Abstract

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in

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I am a writer of Black girl stories. The use of fantastical elements and speculative futures in fiction puts Black girls in conversation with power; not in the way power is typically used against those less privileged, but redefines it as an equalizing act, a chance. Distortions and retellings are key to sustaining these stories, particularly as it relates to time and memory. I will explore the ways I want my work to become an unfolding and understanding of memory and time. This essay examines my experiences as a Black writer, mother, and daughter through the lens of Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*, Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, and Namina Forna's *The Gilded Ones*. These novels reimagine Black girlhood using fantasy and horror, countering violence with magic and self-as I analyze the ways they redefine power, while

distortions of time and memory reshape narrative possibility. This essay aims to expand the literary map for those who've felt rootless, offering new ways of belonging. Through both creative and critical writing, I hope to remap my family history—transforming pain, loss, and memory into revelation.

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Magic

My daughter tells me she is magical, has color-changing skin, and powers to control the rain. She says she is "Etherian," and I don't necessarily disagree with her definition. She says it means she is part plant, animal, and human and can see all things. However, I don't think she knows that to be Etherian is to be a humanoid reptile native of the desert planet of Etheria and that Etheria is a fictional planet in the 1985 animated series *She-Ra: Princess of Power* where a blonde girl in a bustier fights evil. She is mixed, Black from me, white from her dad, born in 2017. There ain't no way. But that doesn't matter. What matters is that she believes she is strong; somehow, somewhere down the line, I am responsible for that. My mother and grandmother, too, deserve credit. I may have to apologize to her later for telling you her deepest secret. I'll take responsibility for that, too, as mothers are meant to do. We become responsible for so much so quickly and for so long.

Girl

I once was a girl who saw a beast—named her Beast. Beast sounded just like me, but when she breathed, her chest heaved beneath brown fur-covered bones, her heart beat too fast, and her eyes were darker than the shadows beneath my bed. She stunk up my space and raged inside as I tried to change her to make her more presentable, a creature I could befriend. I straightened her hair through ceramic hot plates and listened to the sizzle at her scalp each day until she no longer burned. I became fierce alongside her. I controlled her when I could, and when I couldn't, she controlled me. Her smiling gap was wide and taunting.

Beast was not like anyone I had ever read in my books. I searched for reasons why she existed and found that the seed of this beast was planted in the soil of uncertainty by hands larger and whiter than mine. When I tore away her mask and confronted this beast, I discovered she was a part of me, but we were not the same. She wasn't my Beast. She may have been handed down by the women who raised me, unknowingly shadowed by their own beasts. Still, I found myself feeding her, naming her Beast. Until I realized the cycle I was stuck in—the cycle I had to break if I were to spare my little Etherian child.

Black Craft

The first time I typed words with intention, I used a monitor we found in the trash can behind my apartment building. I was thirteen. It breathed heavily and hot. It made my room a sauna and only ran well for an hour or two before it had to reboot. I don't remember the stories, their plots, or their purposes, but I'm sure the girls within them had "ivory skin and green eyes." I remember writing one of these stories for a composition class in high school. The white instructor looked at me perplexed. Her left eyebrow arched madly toward the ceiling, and her lip curled up in that ugly way people's lips can do when they are about to say something horrible. "Ivory skin? Really?" She couldn't understand why a Black girl would create a character within a first-person story who didn't look like her, and who would have expected her to? I barely knew what it meant to have representation in writing. I didn't even realize I was missing from my own stories. I wasn't aware that people who looked like me could exist in work other than *Roots* and stories about Africa. I read classics like Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* and anything they required we read in school, Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, and Roald Dahl's *The BFG*. They were books that introduced me to magic and fantasy, speculative existences, but not to diversity. Despite what they lack, I still hold them close when I think of my childhood.

I've been experimenting with my writing since graduating from my undergrad program in 2022. Playing with ideas of fantasy, magic, and alternate realities with aspects of Afrofuturism has led me down a path that finally feels good. Since a young age, I've been attracted to YA literature and have always dreamed of writing a YA novel. I can now see what I've been practicing and dreamed of in connection with each other. Young adult literature is why I love to read and, ultimately, what led me toward a life as a writer. Reading was an escape and a way of relating myself to places of importance outside my normal. It became my method of understanding and navigating my reality. As I grew older, throughout high school and early in college, I became more aware of my differences, specifically around being Black and a girl. I saw how few of these characters were in the novels I picked up. Part of me is tired of this conversation about representation. A more significant part of me is finally ready to join the conversation and the fight. I am prepared to write it— Black and brown daughters filled with the magic and fire of their ancestors. Black Craft, I'm learning, is survival. I am building on memory, entwining imagination, which will be forgotten if left unnoted and unrecorded.

As I write, I imagine the characters I create at first holding back unknown power, unnoticed because of the neglect of their societies, until the most crucial moment of their lives. I see their powers come to the surface and challenge them in ways that will allow them to become who they are meant to be. I hope to write these characters in the tradition of Namina Forna's *The Gilded Ones*, Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*, and Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, amongst others I may have to write about later. While these works are novels, I'm interested in how they capture and retell Black girlhood and womanhood while using fantasy and horror elements. There is a commonality surrounding the violence, sexual and otherwise, written on the pages for and against these characters' bodies.

The writers give back to these girls, who have had much taken away from them, through gifts of magic and self-determination. They use fantastical elements and speculative futures that put Black girls in conversation with power, not in the way power is typically used against those less privileged, but redefined as an equalizing act, a chance at survival and the ability to thrive in their world. Their characters hold very human qualities, but they also embrace certain animal instincts, a knowing and unexplainable ability at times: Dekka, in *The Gilded Ones*, and her relation to the terrifying and slaying Deathshrieks; Ti-Jeanne, from *Brown Girl in the Ring*, and her ability to call forth the dead to aid her in defeating dark spirits; and Leonie, of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the lost, drug-addicted daughter of a medicine woman willingly haunted by the spirit of her dead brother unable to call upon her connection to ancestral magic. Distortions and retellings are key to sustaining these stories, particularly regarding time, memory, and dreams. I plan to strengthen and use the authors' methods in my work.

These stories have become vital for understanding my relationship with the characters I write. Often, my main character is some version of myself, powerless in the sense of magic but spiritual and yearning for something greater than themselves. I want to give them more in the way these authors do. These authors show me that characters like the ones I want to create, outside of myself but very much within who I am, can exist in literature and with purpose. With this essay, I aim to ground myself in these authors' stories and study their craft and creation of powerful Black girl characters placed within their worlds of fantasy and horror. These writers created worlds where Black crafting of self became essential for these characters, enabling their continued existence and promising vitality.

Dream

“First, there was the dream... of a girl in golden armor striding onto a battlefield. I didn't know who she was, but I knew she had a great story.”

— Namina Forna, *ReadMoreCo*

In her dreams, she swims in dark oceans. Her mother's voice reaches out to her, "Deka..." she calls. It had been three months since Deka's mother died from "red pox [that] turned her insides to sludge" (Forna 22). On the day of the "Ritual of Purity," the young girls of Earfoot, a small northern province in the world of Otera, stand in front of the village and reveal the pureness of their blood by cutting their skin. It becomes clear that Deka is not considered pure by her community and the elders who enforced the rules and expectations of purity and gender roles.

Deka's mother was a Southerner described as having "dark brown skin and tightly curled hair" (Forna 6). She fled the southern province for the expected freedom and protection of the north, which was far from the emperor's control. With her mother's death before the novel's beginning, I hoped someone was on Deka's side. Something about Deka's position in her mother's wake and her character's vulnerability at the beginning of the novel provides a sense of hope. It was my wishful thinking that the story couldn't start with the main character's ultimate demise. However, I also found that in the presentation of her thought process through the narrative writing of Forna, Deka's questioning of the things that happen to her and her desire to do well, to survive well, hope blossoms. Deka has something to fight for. This journey sounds familiar to me, like an echo from the past. Wanting to be wanted but struggling to be seen.

In various interviews, Forna often talks about her purpose for writing this story. Otera was conceived "as a global empire, one that would stretch across three continents. Imagine that West Africa – particularly Nigeria and Sierra Leone – conquered the globe instead of vice versa.

[Forna] wanted to make sure that [her] world was diverse, but that in this diversity, everything had a noticeably West African flair" (Forna, *United by Pop*). She wanted to express, through writing, the fantastical existence of magic and the absence of European colonization in Africa.

This novel became an expression of Forna's vision. She braided in aspects of reality. The existence of colorism and racism, gendered expectations, and sexism. In the novel, there is much doubt about Dekka's purity because of who her mother was and what she looked like. Not only had Dekka been born a girl, meant to support a man for the rest of her life, but she inherited her mother's dark skin and thick hair. The village elders expect all girls to show their purity during the ritual. Dekka looks forward to it as a chance to prove her worthiness in the north. Through exposition, it is revealed that the village people were not fully aware of the truth behind the magic of the ritual and its foundation in the history of the Gilded Ones. The Gilded Ones are presented as a folktale formed over centuries. They were put to sleep and imprisoned by their sons, the Jatu. Though led by "myth," the people of Otera, also blinded by emperor control, searched for impurity among girls who were possible descendants of The Gilded Ones. To be impure was to be labeled demonic, to be banished and killed, with no forgiveness. Dekka's impurity is unveiled through her self-discovered ability to control the common enemy that attacked her village moments before she was to take the stage. Deathshrieks were suddenly upon them.

A Deathshriek, "[a] hulking beast of a creature, it's rawboned to the point of gauntness, its clawed hands dragging almost to its knees, spikes erupting all the way down its bony spine. It seems almost human, black eyes blinking, slitted nostrils flaring as it surveys the village" (Forna 11). They hunt in packs. Deathshrieks turn out to be "impure girls" after their transition with death, which seems to represent the ugliness and the animalistic views humans can often place on girls who do not follow societal expectations. It was a decisive move for Forna to put these

creatures within the story and force her readers to empathize and understand them even after their destruction.

With one powerful call from deep in her chest, Dekka stops the Deathshrieks as they attack the villagers, moving for Dekka's father. She doesn't realize what she is doing; she knows in her heart that she doesn't want to see him die. This moment was the first sign of her physical strength. The Deathshrieks retreat to the forest. Dekka surprises everyone, even herself. Her father stands in front of her, out of breath with his mouth agape, horror torn across his face. She physically changes. Her eyes darken, and her voice deepens, all while her father's heart hardens towards her. She turns to find the boy she thought liked her wielding a sword in his hand that he swiftly, without hesitation, forces through her stomach. She is punished for existing despite her ability to stop the killing and save the village. Her dream of a life of absolution fades as she bleeds liquid gold from her wound, another sign of her "impurities," and all goes black.

As I read this scene, I tried to imagine what Forna had experienced or felt. Then I remembered the ways I had changed my voice, chemically straightened my hair, and said the right things to feel accepted, afraid of becoming the "beast" people expected of me, labeled "ghetto" or "ignorant" and stabbed in the gut by people I thought I could trust. I can't speak for Forna or her experiences as we grew up in different parts of the world in other bodies, but I could imagine something happening close to that. I could imagine this scene stemming from a memory that gave her the words to form this tragedy.

Dekka is then rescued from a cell where the elders leave her to be tortured and used for her golden blood. The emperor's cousin, lady of the Equus, or "White Hands," comes to offer her a chance at a new life. Dekka's kind, the ones with golden blood, is called the Alaki, or the "worthless and unwanted." They are the daughters of The Gilded Ones. She joins White Hands

as a reach for absolution from what she felt were her sins. During her journey, she sleeps and dreams. In her dreams, she swims through that dark water. She is in terror. She relives the killings she survived. Those moments of torture are representative of the trials many Black girls go through to survive. Lives are lost, and those of us who live often lose something, some part of our innocence, in this battle of growing up in a world that is seemingly against us. Those who may not have experienced pain, physically or mentally, hear about it from those who have. I asked my therapist why I am so anxious about bad things that can happen to my body or my daughters. I wish her answer provided relief. She said I am preparing for the worst that may never come. Deka's abilities allow her to be reborn through a magical sleep, "The Gilded Sleep," when her body reconnects. A preparation of its own. She is renewed. Shortly after reading this novel, social media flooded with memes telling Black women to rest, designating March 10th as the National Day of Rest for Black Women. I think about this rest and wonder if it is for me.

Deka's sleep and ability to use a state of unconsciousness become integral to her survival. She sleeps for days and sometimes weeks at a time without a look of malnourishment or dehydration, often experiencing the same dream repeatedly. Through her dreams and with the help of White Hands, Deka learns to enter the "combat state," a state of mind where the Alaki's senses and abilities are heightened. This moment felt like a message. That with rest comes power. In this dreaming state, she is encouraged to swim through the ocean toward a golden door, ignoring the call of her mother, whom she begins to doubt as her mother is dead. In the combat state, where her eyes turn black, "like death shining through her face," and her voice becomes layered with what seems like the vocals of many ancestors, she could control the Deathshrieks and other Alaki. She chooses, in the end, to use her abilities for liberation. A choice wasn't given to her. She had to take it (Forna 92). I couldn't help but wonder what life could be like if dreams

were more than flashes of images my mind created, if they somehow helped regenerate my body and my mind and connected me to my past and the past of those who have come before me.

Deka is brought to a battle along with her Alaki sisters. She discovers the truth about her birth, that she is not the daughter of her mother or her father but is a divine spirit meant to be protected until called upon. The dreams are her calling. She answers their call and becomes the leader of the Alaki. I found this experience similar to the way this novel came to be. Forna dreamt of a girl with golden blood and imagined an existence for her, a what-if. According to Forna, *The Gilded Ones* begins as a dream and stems from a traumatic childhood. In a Q&A presented by ReadMoreCO, she says she identifies with two character traits, fear, and rage, "both of which are common side effects of trauma, which [she] experienced growing up in Sierra Leone at the beginning of the Civil War, and then once again when [she] immigrated to America. For the longest time, [she] was stuck in cycles of fear and rage, which is why [she] wrote *The Gilded Ones*."

As I write, I have found that in creating my characters, I can dissect parts of myself that I need to understand more. It is never intentional as I do it, but it becomes clearer once I am finished. Forna used characteristics she felt were familiar to her and created characters that succeeded despite these markers. My emotions do not always feel acceptable; as a woman, I feel labeled in negative ways based on feelings that rise as naturally as the tide. As a child, this was even more so as my mother feared my tears, feared her own, and as her mother, my grandmother, feared hers and others. Though I was often told not to cry or to get over emotion quickly, it feels important to allow my characters to face similar trials and eventually succeed regardless of their anger and fear. Within stories led by Black girl characters, I can pave paths where these labels can be removed and redesigned into something that serves me and others.

Standing at the feet of The Gilded Ones, these massive, shimmering mothers, Dekka is finally in a place of understanding, of promise. Dekka's healing sleep and calling dreams made me wonder what sleep and dreaming could do for women like me, existing and surviving outside of fairy tales, an anxiety-ridden mother often afraid of the darkness in many of its forms. I try to see darkness differently. Darkness doesn't have to be bad. I think about the night and all the light that comes through from the moon, the stars, and the lightning bugs. It's silence and permission to give me time to breathe and to write. As a child and even a teen, had I known the night and all that comes with it, sleep, darkness, night terrors, and dreams would become friends, I wouldn't have fought it so hard. I wouldn't have constantly felt as if I was being lazy or missing action that I should be a part of. I wouldn't have let my nightmares take hold of my sanity. I would have allowed sleep to hold me in its waters, to rock away the beast, to cure me of its reign. It's stories like this, though set in magical, fantastical unreality, where I can see where my power lies and imagine an otherwise.

Black Craft is dreaming and rest.

Ring

“...even though there's fantasy happening, there's always reality.”

Nalo Hopkinson, *Between the Covers Podcast*

Before you blink, open your eyes and let in a sort of reality. Allow another kind of dream to happen. For a moment, picture the city you've lived in your entire life, barricaded from the rest of the land. Picture it abandoned by the government. Controlled by gangs. You are kept within, female, afraid. Milk fills your teenage bosom, and your baby suckles greedily, needing your support. You are Mama now. Mami warns of dangers beyond the threshold and eventually dies at the hands of your lover. Duppy magic and evil spirits combine. You are called to duty, young

brown girl. You lose too much before you gain it all. So it goes for Ti-Jeanne, who lives in a dystopian Toronto in the near future novel by Nalo Hopkinson, *Brown Girl in the Ring*. She is raised by her grandmother, Mami Gros-Jeanne, a Canadian citizen by way of Jamaica, an attempt at a better survival for her family, and who held a deep spiritual connection to African voodoo magic.

Gros-Jeanne is often rejected by her Canadian-born daughter, Mi-Jeanne, and granddaughter, Ti-Jeanne; she tries to pass on her gifts and connections, a testament to the pressures of diasporic culture shifts. Ti-Jeanne finds that she can communicate with the dead as the daughter of the Prince of the Cemetery, *Legbara*, but she is afraid of this gift, ignoring the spirits that arrive. She refuses to share this with her grandmother, who could help her learn to control it. It felt normal to me: this desire to prove independence and the fear of revealing the truth and ending up alone. She wanted to craft her existence in this place where she was already viewed differently by the people in the province who knew of her grandmother's healing abilities, her dedication to Earthly medicines, and what they thought to be a loyalty to dark magic. I thought of conformity and imagined being the daughter of an immigrant to North America. No matter what became of those who governed the land, there were still certain societal expectations that tried to shape young girls into something easily digestible in Hopkinson's world and in reality. Perhaps Hopkinson attempted to show this process through TiJeanne's rejection of Caribbean culture and spiritual practice on Canadian land.

The novel begins with the political darkness taking hold. Top politicians are after human hearts in a future where pig hearts are being used exclusively for people needing transplants. As a way of grabbing votes through a narrative of "people helping people, not...preying on helpless creatures," the female prime minister of Toronto, Premiere Uttley, dying from heart failure, cares not about the methods at which the heart would be obtained (Hopkinson 3). Her government

official, Douglas Baines, is sent to the "Burn," the part of Toronto where Ti-Jeanne, her mother, and her grandmother live. Kept there with little choice, limited resources, and no support from the government, the inhabitants of the burn, mostly Black immigrants and underserved groups, appear to be caged by the barriers created by Hopkinson. Baines is there to talk to Rudy, a gangster boss who took over once the government gave up. Rudy, Ti-Jeanne's grandfather by blood, the father of her mother, the divorced husband of Gros-Jeanne, is a ruthless murderer. Throughout the novel, it remains unknown to Ti-Jeanne that Rudy is her relation until the very end. Rudy uses dark magic, brought on by the slaughter of innocents, to obtain power and control, youth, and immortality. Baines asks Rudy for help in claiming the bodies of those he would inevitably kill to save their hearts for this possible transplant. Rudy's agreement feels like the ultimate betrayal, "Black on Black crime," if you will. But it became about more than race; it was about capital and power dynamics that turn those who listen against their people.

Ti-Jeanne enters the scene in Chapter 1 as a girl who is aware she can see death but innocent in her fear and rejection of this ability:

"Sometimes she saw how people were going to die. When she closed her eyes, the childhood songs her grandmother had sung to her replayed in her mind, dancing to their music were images: this one's body jerking in a spray of gunfire and blood, that one writhing as cramps turned her bowels to liquid." (Hopkinson 9)

She fears these visions. She thinks they will cause the separation of her and her grandmother as it was, she believes, for her mother. When her mother sees the visions for the first time, she tells Gros-Jeanne. Young Ti-Jeanne witnesses what she thinks to be a rejection by her grandmother. A hatred and refusal turned out to be her mother's objection to her father's leaving. Gros-Jeanne kicks him out of the house after teaching him how to utilize these spiritual connections and discovering that he is abusing the power. Mi-Jeanne leaves and never comes

back, but unknowingly to Ti-Jeanne or Gros-Jeanne, she is left wandering on the streets of the burn as Crazy Betty, who is found babbling to herself and attacking passersby. Ti-Jeanne decides she would keep these visions to herself and blame them on the stresses of motherhood and not the generational and inseverable string connecting them to the ghosts of their past. The relationship dynamic here feels purposeful. The narrative web is created between these three women. It says a lot about Black sisterhood and motherhood. More importantly, towards the end, they all come back together.

Ti-Jeanne wakes up at one point to a Soucouyant, or African-derived shapeshifter who plays a considerable role in Caribbean lore, at her bedside, begging for her child. She places her body between the baby and the Soucouyant, a mother in defense. At this moment, a Jab-Jab, or devil-like figure known for playing games, comes through the doorway yelling at the Soucouyant, "*Old lady! Like you don't know me?*" it screams (Hopkinson 45). This moment, though fleeting, taught me how to approach the weaving of folktales into the "reality" of my stories. It happens naturally as if the Soucouyant's existence was terrifying but not entirely out of the ordinary. Ti-Jeanne finally reveals her visions to her grandmother. This interaction begins TiJeanne's journey to strengthen her abilities for the better, not without fear from Mami GrosJeanne, who doesn't want a Rudy repeat. What I found powerful at that moment was how stories are shared to connect generations. In Gros-Jeanne's sharing of her methods to control her magic, she left Ti-Jeanne with something she could share with her child if the time came.

Tony enters the picture early in the story. He is the father of Ti-Jeanne's baby boy and the reason for Mami Gros-Jeanne's demise. Much happens before this murder, but Tony feels like a representation of temptation. There is nothing supportive in his character, but his existence challenges Ti-Jeanne in a way that strengthens her. In his attempt to help Rudy, he arrives one day with the task of killing Gros-Jeanne. Followed by a duppy, a trapped spirit controlled by dark

magic and powered by the spirit of Mi-Jeanne, Tony finds a way to Gros-Jeanne. During this time, Mi-Jeanne, through indescribable power to control her physical body, the one of Crazy Betty, arrives at their home and warns Ti-Jeanne of this plan. By the time it becomes clear to Ti-Jeanne, Tony injects her grandmother with a lethal drug and calls the ambulance to take her body away while her heart is still viable. It all happens in a flash. Ti-Jeanne is left in an empty house, her baby in her hands, and the body of her mother lying on the floor thought to be dead. These scenes were devastating. I thought of a conversation Jesmyn Ward, the author of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, had during a TV interview. She said she had to put her characters through hard things to help her stories feel more realistic despite the existence of the fantastical. Hopkinson took that step with her characters, and it felt real. I felt the need to mourn as a reader.

Ti-Jeanne learns that her mother's spirit is still alive and in the hands of Rudy, who she finds out is her grandfather. This is a necessary turn in the story where Ti-Jeanne embraces her magic and ancestral connection. She is pushed beyond her perceived limits with a dead grandmother, a dying mother, a child, and a backstabbing lover. She uses her connection to Legbara to conceal herself and trick Rudy, who was at his most potent, bleeding energy from the duppy spirit of Mi-Jeanne. She is eventually captured by Rudy and given the option to become a free, unattached duppy, able to fly and let go of all worry and responsibility. As terrible as a person Rudy was, this became a tempting contemplation, even for me. I imagined floating high above responsibility, watching life go on below. I thought of home and how the gears would eventually still turn because they must. But just like Ti-Jeanne, I knew that was not the answer. That was not freedom. It's moments like these in a story, moments that speak to the reality of the people who may be reading the novel, that give the narrative strength.

With the help of all the spirits of people Rudy killed and Ti-Jeanne as the portal between worlds, they escape and destroy the duppy pot used to contain them all. She fully accepted her

abilities and thus received her power to overcome the trials of patriarchal control in her life and within society. This crafting of herself was not done alone but was fueled by her will. And though she was expected to take the place of Mami Gros-Jeanne as a healer and medicine woman, she wasn't sure she wanted to fill that role for the community. Though Ti-Jeanne seems to have a calling, she is given the choice to decide her fate at the end, which feels like the whole purpose of her struggle. Her character enters the story afraid and ready to escape with Tony, and the novel ends with her and her child being stronger than before.

The story closes with her holding her baby, who remains unnamed throughout the novel as life begins to settle around them. She asks him, "So, bolom baby...what we going to name you?"

"Wire bend, story end!" (Hopkinson 247)

Black Craft is ancestors calling you.

Sing

"This is the answer with teeth."
—Jesmyn Ward in *Time Magazine*

How do I write about ghosts? How do I bring forth something people claim to feel, something dancing in the peripheral vision, resting in dreams? My stories are like ghosts, I think.

The people within them no longer walk this Earth or never have. Doesn't that make them ghosts? I wonder if I think about ghosts healthily, which is all the time. Haunted by memories and the sound of voices from my past. When I picked up Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, I was haunted differently by the ghosts of someone else for once. Not in the same way it happens in a film, but more how I imagine my mom was haunted when she would visit Mississippi as a child,

living in a home that wasn't hers. She told me stories of ghosts surrounding her, ghosts she came to know, ghosts transitioned to memory as she headed back to California. She knew her ghosts. I do, too, now.

This novel was recommended to me through a fleeting text message. After engulfing themselves in the ghosts of Ward's memory and imagination, someone thought of me. I say "memory" because I recently watched a PBS video interview with Ward, her small children playing in the background on a playground in her hometown of Delisle, Mississippi. I don't remember if this video was recorded before or after her husband became one of her ghosts. This feels important. Death changes the living. The camera briefly pauses on a young Black girl, her daughter's friend, flipping upside down on the monkey bars in shorts too short for the camera's angle...and its focus. I remember the darkness of her upper thighs and feeling embarrassed about my own; then, the video suddenly flashes to another image, another feeling. A cemetery was shown as Ward talked about the book she wrote in 2013, *Men We Reaped*, and the murders that happened in five years to five black men in her life. One by drug addiction, another by accident, one by misfortune (though I feel they all had an ounce of this), another by his hand. Lastly, her brother, who was gone before he turned twenty, died in a car accident. He sounded like a young, vibrant boy. I sensed it from the longing in her voice. From how she talked about her desire to write to give him the life he never got to live. I can sense a sister in pain. I am connected to my brothers by spider-webbed complexities as well. Each connection is as important as the next. I talk to them, joke around, and pry just enough to find out if they will be okay. It's easier said. It's as if my brothers were never permitted to reveal themselves. I wonder if I ever was or if I demanded permission and took it for my own.

As I read *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, I felt that Ward's brother lived within the book's pages. The "sing" referred to mourning cries, and he remained "unburied" as he floated through the

spaces between pages, either behind or woven within Given, the brother character who dies at the hands of racism and loss of pride. Is holding onto our ghosts an unburial? An unresting? I hope not. Given's character is shot in the back by his White football teammate and the cousin of the man Leona chose to love. He is left cold in the woods with a bullet in his back. He is discovered by his family, Leonie, Mam, and Pop. And it's no wonder Leonie struggles until the very end of this novel. A connection torn by gunpowder and hate. I imagined the fall of Black boys who look a lot like my brothers. Broad smiles and sad eyes, distant and gray. I could cry. But I won't. They're still alive. I refuse to mourn them before I have to.

This book holds many ghosts. The pages felt thinner than paper should feel. I began to wonder if my copy was bad or if, like memories, the pages were transient. What we think to be a story from a young boy's perspective, JoJo, the child of Leonie, a young Black mother and sister of the cold, gone, Given, turns out to be a story about blackness, motherhood, womanhood, childhood, the connection between siblings, death and spirituality. Though JoJo's story moves us through the novel, Leonie's spoke to me. Leonie is Black. Leonie is a mother. Leonie is a woman. Leonie is a child. Leonie is a sister. Leonie sees death, and through her, Jojo has a spiritual connection to his ancestors that she was unable to reach for herself. As if it skipped a generation, Jojo could tap into these powers like Mam, though he doesn't realize it until the end of the novel when it is most important.

Each character needs something from Leonie that she couldn't deliver. Even I needed something from her. It was hard for me to accept as someone willing to fill other needs before my own. I eat, but not until everyone else has been served. Jojo needs a mother until he learns to expect the least from Leonie, as he was primarily raised by his grandparents, Mam and Pop. Mam needs the spiritual support that Leonie couldn't provide. Pop needs Leonie to rise for her children as he is struggling with Mam's diagnosis. Leonie needs release from obligation and

eventually takes it for herself. In chapter 7, about her baby girl and Jojo, Leonie says, "It feels good to be mean, to speak past the baby I can't hit and let that anger touch another. The one I'm never good enough for. Never Mama for. Just Leonie, a name wrapped around the same disappointed syllables I've heard from Mama, from Pop, even from Given, my whole fucking life" (Ward 147). There is pain when she speaks and very little reach for change. For most of the novel, I felt this yearning for a side of her character that didn't exist. I wanted her to be the mother I felt the kids deserved, but perhaps that was too much to ask. Requesting change doesn't come easy. I found that change happens when each person chooses it for themselves. I applied this to the possible scenarios my characters will be placed in. I must consider what can happen to them when they change and what will resist movement when something is out of their control.

In my first read of Ward's novel, Leonie's character comes through as a disconnected girl, an irritation. One I had a hard time understanding. She was lovestruck, uncaring, and hopeless. After reading with intention and direction, I found characterization happening between the pages, within words left unsaid; I saw Leonie's pain and wondered how I missed it the first time. This time, I felt it. She is a daughter losing her mother. A sister who lost her best friend. She narrates that she often feels like she is drowning. Like she was allowing her family to drown, and I couldn't get the image of this drowning out of my mind. In a dream, she says:

We are all sinking, and there are manta rays gliding beneath us and sharks jostling us. I am trying to keep everyone above water, even as I struggle to stay afloat. I sink below the waves and push Jojo upward so he can stay above the waves and breathe, but then Michaela sinks and I push her up, and Michael sinks so I shove him to the air as I sink and struggle, but they won't stay up: they want to sink like stones. I thrust them up toward the surface, to the fractured sky so they can live, but they keep slipping from my hands. It

is so real that I can feel their sodden clothes against my palms. I am failing them. We are all drowning. (Ward 195)

And I wonder if anyone notices her clawing at the surface of this dark water.

Leonie's mother, who plays a crucial role in this novel as the matriarch of the family, referred to as Mam, is mainly brought to life through memory as cancer snaked its way through her body. Through flashbacks, she is often described as an herbalist and a believer in voodoo magic. These reaches into the past were methods of characterization as well. Some things were purposefully lost by reaching back for these stories instead of writing about them presently. Mam is only reachable through memory; present conversation and connection are lost as she lies in bed limp. Given is only reachable through a drugged Leonie. We flashback on moments of his life and vision of his afterlife. What is lost is his ability to come and go as he pleases. He has no agency. The power lines were frayed between the living and the dead. Often, in books and movies, the dead are given so much control, even so, to the point where the living are driven mad in their attempts to rid themselves of their ghosts. It gave me ideas on playing with the power dynamics within ghost stories that I look forward to experimenting with.

Mam is a character who knows about plant medicine and prayer when things are out of human control. It is on this deathbed, behind this thin veil, to the other side, where she asks Leonie for help. Mam calls on the priests and priestesses, "Saint Jude...Marie Laveau...Loko", and they don't answer her call. She is ready to go and has one more option: *Mystere*, also known as Maman Brigitte, the Haitian spirit of death. She tasks Leonie with gathering rocks and cotton from the cemetery. It pushed a memory of mine to the surface of a young eight-year-old me watching Mississippi highways from foggy, fingerprinted windows on our way back west. The fields were scattered with cotton plants. I wondered which wind those seeds floated on and how they got so far into the fields. I don't remember why that mattered. But there is magic in memory

and fiction. How we remember things can often be considered fictitious as the gaps are filled with a way of understanding and piecing together scenes and conversations. This is how Mam's character is pieced together, with bits of memory and imagination.

Mentally, Leonie moves further away after this request to help Mam transition. She hopes her mother will live to cure herself. Leonie says, "I want to walk out the room. Walk out the front door. Walk straight to the bayou, to the water, step on it, shimmering glass under my soles, and walk until I disappear over the horizon" (Ward 216). It takes Leonie longer than I would have wished for it to take when tasked with a dying person's wish. I was surprised she did it in the end. She gathers the tools to prepare for Mam's going. Without this blessing, I would have seen Mam as another ghost. I believe Mam did, too.

Voices layer the novel. Multi-vocal narratives allowed a story to be told from opposite sides of a room, on different sides of the spectrum, and gave voice to the invisible. I could read from the perspective of an innocent child, the complex place of Leonie, and from beyond the grave. The novel's first half is dedicated to the complicated relationships between Leonie and her children, Leonie and her mother, and Leonie and her father. The third perspective lies in that of a ghost boy named Richie, who is trying to reach Riv, Jojo's grandfather, who is also known as Pop. Richie, a twelve-year-old Black boy, was sent to a labor camp for stealing. He is murdered by Leonie's father, who was also sent to that camp in his younger years. Riv/Pop stabbed Richie in the neck as he learned of Richie's fate of being ripped apart, alive, by dogs set forth by overpowerful white correctional officers. He felt he had to protect Richie like an older brother would. He "held him til the blood stopped spurting" (Ward 255). Richie follows Jojo throughout the novel's second half to try and make sense of his own death and his place in the world. Richie smells Riv on Jojo's body. He is lured by the closeness of an answer, of the truth. When a ghost

is hungry, I imagine they will do anything to be fed. Richie just about does before he finally pushes Jojo hard enough to ask Riv what happened.

I think about how ghosts are introduced in this story and how they are desperate for connection. The narrator is observant of the things happening around them but not of the things they would have had to worry about if they existed in the reality of the novel, such as the opening of doors or entering a moving car, both things Richie is not bothered with as he enters the family's life. Ward didn't focus on these details, perhaps because they are unimportant when a ghost enters a story that is not solely about the haunting. I was not worried about the way they entered the room. They entered the room. That was important.

Through these shared and separated perspectives, I found an ancestral connection to spiritual magic through Mam's faith in voodoo. Mam's gift is passed down to her children: recycled magic. It is not until her death at the very end of the novel that closure sets in, in the only way closure can when dealing with the loss of loved ones, in a cloud of deep sadness but realization and acceptance of her need for rest. Leonie completes the request of her mother, bringing "cemetery rocks...From the bathroom: cotton balls. From the cupboard: cornmeal. From...the liquor store...: rum" and repeats the litany meant to bring forth Maman Brigitte (Ward 356). In this intense moment where all characters collide, Mam is so close to death she begins to bleed beneath her skin; Leonie is at her bedside chanting the litany, "For Maman Brigitte, Mother of all the Gede. Mistress of the cemetery and mother of all the dead...Grande Brigitte, Judge. This altar of stones is for you. Accept our offerings...Enter...Enter. Dance with us" (Ward 357). Jojo begs Leonie to stop as the small amount of trust he had in Leonie dissolves with each word Leonie mutters; Pop fearfully stands in the doorway; Michaela cries into Jojo's shoulder; Richie holds Given back as he attempts to latch on to Mam's soul to take over as a new son; Given uses all the power he has left to release himself from Richie's grasp. Mam's spirit is

left holding hands with her son. Richie comes to accept his death and is finally at peace as the novel ends. Unfortunately for Leonie, in a way that felt more like reality than anything else within these fleeting pages, she escapes the turmoil of Mam's passing by moving up north with Michael, further separating herself from her children and the burden of motherhood, daughterhood, and sober reality.

Black Craft is searching for place.

Light

Harvard graduate and mechanical engineer Dr. Natoshia Anderson wrote in an article titled “Mask Off: Unveiling Imposter Syndrome from a Black Woman’s Perspective”:

“The path of a Black woman is a journey walked with the echo of ancestral resilience. It’s paved with the stones of systemic racism, historical trauma, and an enduring fight for equality...the Black female experience, has been one of battling not just to succeed, but to prove that their success...is not a matter of tokenism, luck, or affirmative action, but of merit.”

I want this journey, this echo of resilience passed on from those before us, to reverberate through my pages: the characters, the places, the plots, twists, and schemes. I want to create a map of belonging for those who come after me. I want my work to unfold who I am.

When approaching this program in the summer of 2022, I knew what I came here to do. I knew but didn't necessarily understand how I would make it happen. Writing had always been a fleeting thing that I wanted to do but was afraid to start. I told myself I was a writer who didn't write. When asked, I told others I wasn't a writer but liked to write. After finding out about my acceptance, I started writing. I wrote “When the Lights Come On”. It began as a way to prove to myself that I had what it took to succeed in this MFA program. I was fighting against doubt,

heavy like the weight of wet clothes. Doubt that stuck to the skin and started to smell. Doubt that I tried to ignore it as if it would evaporate eventually, with no work or effort. This is hard to admit today because I am beginning to see my worth, even if it is still a work in progress. It is both comforting to know and unfortunate that so many Black and brown women experience this feeling. Perhaps it was passed down to me at dinner table conversations, in grocery store aisles while holding my grandmother's purse, in church pews, feeling the pinch on the soft parts of my arm as I snickered with my siblings. I've somehow found comfort, not necessarily in these shared experiences with other Black women, but in the continuing efforts I've made to overcome these feelings of uncertainty around my power.

As I battled imposter syndrome (and still do, as habits are hard to break), I've slowly found that this battle is fruitless if I continue to fight with the satisfaction of others in mind. It is a battle against demons that aren't mine. They never will be and never were. This feeling of being an imposter, someone who doesn't belong, will always be there if our world continues to take this shape. If Black women are continuously seen as too loud, as too much, as lazy, as symbols of sex and lust, and as less than, othered, we are not fighting our fight; we are fighting theirs. I see who I am. I see who we are.

When approaching this story, "*When the Lights Come On*," I knew exactly where to start. It was something I had been wanting to write about for many years. It began with the title. I was a mother to a five-year-old and couldn't help but think about the differences in our upbringing. At five, I was running around the neighborhood with my freckled friend Courtney, digging holes at the end of her cul-de-sac, waiting for the lights to turn on in the road as a sign to head home. That light did more than my father ever did, "Come on home, baby. It's time. These streets are not safe at night," they said. I could never imagine a door between my daughter and me. Not one with so much distance and many opportunities, good and bad. Eventually, I must let go and trust

her to decide for herself. But for now, as she grows past my waist, closer to my shoulders, and eventually taller than me, I will try and show her the way.

In this story, I wanted to depict the innocence and freedom of a time when I refused to see the world like my mother and grandmother did. They saw so much darkness and pain. I wrote it in first person plural because it was more than my story. It felt like the story of every Black and brown girl we hung out with at the time in those North Las Vegas backroads. The girls whose mothers watched their every move, the girls whose mothers were numb on the couch, the girls who had no mothers, and the girls whose fathers, grandmamas, and aunties raised them. Some were like me, and some I could barely understand.

This story could be considered creative nonfiction as it was based on a specific time in my life, but it is also fiction. I am not all those girls and women. My voice is not theirs. My experience is not theirs. This is something I've had to think about when approaching my work. "*When the Lights Come On*" is my story and my imaginings. When I was sixteen, and in that strange place drifting between tweenhood and young adulthood, not yet free enough to go out alone, I met my best friend. We share a name, more than a name, but a story. As young Black girls who grew up fatherless and had our fathers enter our lives around the same time, we found out we were also both daughters of Baptist pastors. Pastors who sat in church on Sunday morning preaching to hungry and greedy congregations about the importance of supporting a family, about the importance of building unbreakable foundations, about the importance of a girl's virtue and a young boy's understanding. We were out searching for something to call our own. We didn't know what we were looking for at the time. We knew it was not within the confines of our homes where our mothers bore swords in the form of their words and a lethal backhand swing wet from pans of dishes being cleaned. And most importantly, it was not going to be found within church walls where our fathers preached lies.

It became a story that stemmed from the tiring, often painful moments in childhood, preteen, and teenhood that stick with me like the memory of thick peanut butter at the top of my mouth. It became a way for me to understand why we felt so caged in our youth, why we felt we couldn't leave and still stay close to home today. I wanted to evoke the feeling of captivity and limitations. It was my mother's primary method of protection. It was the surest way of keeping us alive. This is realized toward the end of the story by the narrator. Something I'm still trying to understand as I age with my daughter to protect and teach.

In adulthood and motherhood, I have found this ability to connect with the mother character within my story as the overprotector of her lineage. For this reason, because it still applies to my life today very prominently, this story will be a part of my creative manuscript for the program. It may introduce my work as an introduction to my upbringing and why I write. In my collection, I plan to include a series of stories with characters representative of the ones found within the novels this essay is grounded in. The characters may represent myself and hold characteristics outside of myself, placed in futuristic realms near and far. Characters like Dekka in *The Gilded Ones*, Ti-Jeanne in *Brown Girl in the Ring*, and Leonie in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. I want to challenge myself with this manuscript to achieve even a miniature version of what I hope to reach with my career in the future.

Underneath embarrassment and shame around writing, I was about to light the spark of my own curiosities and discover what was missing in my writing. I no longer have to daydream about Black girl characters, for crafting is the means for imagining. When I first allowed myself the chance, I didn't know what happened after I described their "brown skin glittering in the sunlight." I didn't realize the lengths I could go for her; this Black girl was finally centered. I didn't know that I could have made her fly above the ground that held her. I didn't know I could

have flown myself until now; as I fly, looking down at Grounded Girl as she looks back up at me, not exactly seeing but dreaming.

Black Craft is cartography.

Grounded

I imagine knocking on the door of my apartment building. It's 2005. I may not be able to recognize myself as the younger me opens the door, wondering who this wild-looking woman is at the stoop. Nose piercings, tattoos, and locs on her head. I would stand there wondering what I should say to myself. I could tell her so many things or nothing at all. I could say hello and leave. I could tell her how clear it is from up high. When you stay close to Earth, beneath the trees, under the shadows of clouds, you will never truly be able to see. I could tell her there was no beast; this was a version of something someone created and shoved in her head. I could tell her that someday she would write stories that feed that part of her who hungered for endings where brown girls survive. I would tell her about Deka and how some girls look like her with dark skin and golden blood in Deka's world. Seeing how I talk to my daughter, I would tell her that her blood runs gold, too. That it may seem red to others, but she is goddess born and can become anything in this world.

I fear that chance of telling her that younger, wishful me. The me that dreamed of magical moments like this. The me that changed her whole being after reading something as whack as Twilight. What a visit from the future could change. I fear that if I had a moment in time with her, I would change the whole course of her life. She wouldn't have the same friends she does; she may not be as close to her mother in these ways that make her cry because she couldn't imagine one day not having her mother by her side. Her daughter would look different or be

nonexistent. Everything could change. If I had the chance, I could tell her all these things, but I don't think I would. I probably wouldn't even knock.

I would visit this girl's world, which I used to exist in, that has changed so much in so little time. I would watch from afar, from high in the trees, as she chats with her friends, as she embraces her nickname "Oreo," as she illuminates the most minor bits of whiteness in her identity through the perfecting pronunciation of every syllable in each word, as each burnt strand of breaking hair falls down her back. I would watch as she grows to see this rejection of herself for what it truly is. A cover-up of all the women built up inside of her, a muting of the true power held in the melanin of her skin, a continuous attempt at erasure. I would stand far away from any possibility of interrupting this growth of who she is to become and let her go.

Black Craft is releasing.

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