THE CONSTRUCTION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN IDENTITY WITH THE RETELLING OF SLAVERY IN JESMYN WARD'S *SING, UNBURIED, SING* AND TA-NEHISI COATES'S *THE WATER DANCER*

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การสร้างอัตลักษณ์ชาวแอฟริกันอเมริกันโดยการเล่าเรื่องราวใหม่เกี่ยวกับความเป็นทาสในงานวรรณกรรม *Sing, Unburied, Sing* ของ Jesmyn Ward และ *The Water Dancer* ของ Ta-Nehisi Coates

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This research examines the construction of African American identity through the protagonists of Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) and Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer* (2019), using W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness. First, the findings indicate that the protagonists' identities develop through Du Bois's stages of the veil, twoness, and second sight. Jojo, in *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* constructs his identity as a spiritual guardian of African culture, while Hiram, in *The Water Dancer,* discovers his identity as an activist against racial discrimination through self-discovery. Second, the findings reveal the importance of oral traditions in shaping identity. Both characters' experiences are deeply shaped by historical events, traumatic memories, and supernatural stories that have been recounted through personal perspectives. Oral traditions transmit historical pain but also become a source of healing and empowerment. For Jojo, they offer a path to self-understanding amid a complex ancestral African culture within American society. By embracing their dual cultural identities and engaging with retold historical trauma, both characters form hybrid identities that reflect the complexity of the African American experience.

Keyword : identity, double consciousness, oral traditions, Sing, Unburied, Sing, The Water Dancer

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

What is the value of being American? Why does the land of immigrants become the mightiest nation in the world? Furthermore, why does a country convinced of “equality” use power through slavery and have racial discrimination as a societal root problem? For centuries, African Americans in America have experienced undeniable exploitation, marginalization, oppression, and racism. Although slavery was abolished, the African American's community continues to be treated as an inferior and unwanted race in America. Racism not only results in negative experiences but also plays an important role in developing the African American identity.

Constructing identity can be complicated, which is most likely regarding roles as being of African descent living in America and members of American society. In *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Hall (2021, p. 222) defines identity as not a complete fact but an incomplete production that is always in process and permanently established within, not outside, representation. This means that identity is an ongoing process that is related to an individual’s own experiences and perceptions. Given that identity is formed through relating to our experience and perception, our identity is not something separate from us, but it is formed from how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us. For people of African descent in America, their identity is shaped not only by their background but also by their experiences, how they perceive themselves, and how others perceive them within American society. As part of the African diaspora, they face various social, cultural, and historical factors that influence who they are. They may encounter challenges like racism, discrimination, and the mixing of different cultures as they balance their African heritage and their American reality. These experiences play an important role in shaping their identity.

Recognizing and understanding the complexity of the diverse identities within the African diaspora, Hall’s argument centers around the notion of constructing identity

for African descendants whose African ancestors were enslaved and forcibly brought to America. Not only is his argument is specifically focused on African descendants' personal experiences, but also their shared historical and cultural heritage (Hall, 2021, p. 223). Therefore, African American's identity construction is characterized by an interplay between individual identity construction and the broader historical and social contexts that have shaped the African American community over time. It is the identity that the African Americans must bring to light as it is a powerful force in the form of representation among marginalized people in America.

Besides, Hall (2021, p. 224) has compared the process of constructing identity to retelling history because marginalized people's "hidden histories" have played a significant role in social movements, particularly anti-racism. In this sense, the history of slavery, imperialism, colonialism, and racism are significant factors in analyzing identity and the consciousness formation of African American people. These histories are crucial in enabling marginalized groups to challenge dominant culture and gain their voice in society. Therefore, the idea implies that the ability to tell one's own story and be genuinely represented is a powerful tool for resistance.

However, the African diaspora, whose ancestors were forcibly removed from their homelands in Africa and brought to America as slaves, has experience a loss of identity and separation due to the historical events such as slavery and colonization. The forgotten histories and cultural traditions can be rediscovered and used as sources of identity and resistance against dominant cultural systems, particularly in the West. Hall's argument emphasizes the importance of valuing histories as a means of constructing identity and resisting dominant Western culture. By retelling these forgotten histories, African American can reconstruct their identities and assert their cultural presence within a larger cultural context.

The issue of orality has become significant since many scholars from the Black diaspora and Africa have begun to raise their voices in affirmation of the humanity of Black people. In *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*, Quayson (2009) also said that orality is the set of conceptual skills that transmit a similar status as literacy in

constructing a sense of cultural identity. In this context, orality is also understood as "aesthetic traditionalism," illustrating that for Africa, it is not just a mode of communication different from writing but an entire way of life (Irele, 2001, p. 32 as cited in Quayson, 2009, p. 159). In addition, Gunner (2004, p. 1), in *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature,* claimed that Africa made its history and its existence by using orality long before the colonial presence of the West demonstrated itself. Orality in the African context was how societies of different complexity managed themselves, regulated their past and present, and, in some cases, resisted power.

Thus, orality in Africa was not a mode of discourse different from writing but their entire way of life. As discussed, orality is a skill for telling stories about their lives. Their oral storytelling skill became a tradition for the African diaspora, forcibly relocated to the West, helping them preserve their lived experiences. Harris's (2011) argument emphasizes a significant transformation of this skill and tradition. He proposes that African American literature has two distinct historical backgrounds. It encompasses a formal, capital "H" history made up of official, written accounts, but also a lowercase "h" history of everyday African Americans. These individuals, especially those enslaved and unable to read or write, relied on oral traditions transmitted by enslaved people, and official written records became crucial tools in shaping African American history and literature. This duality highlights cultural preservation through both spoken and written forms and illustrates the conversion of auditory knowledge into visual texts.

In *Beloved* (1987), Toni Morrison drew on the story of Margaret Garner, an enslaved African woman. During the dullest era of American history, Garner attempted to kill her child rather than allow the child to be forced back into plantation slavery. Morrison retold these painful memories through the character Sethe, a formerly enslaved person. The novel presents the appearance of Beloved, her killed daughter, as the catalyst for recognizing memories in search of survival and healing.

Thus, it was no surprise that contemporary African American writers often relate the history of slavery to their works. African American authors like Jesmyn Ward and Ta-Nehisi Coates also received inspiration from Morrison's works. Both of their works

relied on the history of slavery toward retelling the story through their ancestors to commemorate the cultural bonds of the African diaspora. So, Ward and Coated not only follow Morrison's path but also resist its literary legacy by passing to contemporary American stories that dead people and the pervasive suffering of African American still haunt.

To study the construction of African American identity in the dominant country, we must trace back to the colonial experience. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008, p. 89) Frantz Fanon depicted his experience of himself as the Black people who were positioned in the dominant regimes of representation were the effects of normalization and cultural power. He asserted that the West constructs Black people as distinct individuals within its knowledge. The West could make them see and experience themselves as 'Other.' The core of Black's cultural identity is crippled and deformed. This idea is consistent with DuBois's 'double consciousness,' that forming self-identity results from social processes and interaction.

The 'color line' can cause different processes of self-formation among marginalized groups. According to Du Bois's theory of double consciousness, it includes three elements: the veil, twoness, and second sight. The first element, the veil, represents the color line that separates the races. The veil works as a one-sided mirror, as the whites see the racialized reflected on it by their projections. The gaze from the outside leads to the second element, which is twoness. Twoness is the way the Blacks have to reconcile with two worlds: the world of dominant and oppressed. And the third element, second sight, refers to the racialized world's ability to perceive what the white world cannot. It functions as a gift for them to contend with their dehumanization. This perspective led them to challenge the complications of their identity. In the face of systemic oppression, this process empowers them to regain their story and affirm their humanity. Ultimately, they can reveal truths concealed from those who profit from the current state of affairs.

In this study, the researcher examines the construction of African American identity through the main characters Hiram in Ta-Nehisi Coates's The Water Dancer

(2019) and Jojo in Jesmyn Ward's Sing, Unburied, Sing (2017). Ta-Nehisi Coates's The Water Dancer (2019)

Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) is a modern novel that tells the story of an African American family in Mississippi. The narrative unfolds through the perspective of Jojo, a 13-year-old boy who grows up in a violent, poor, and haunted past. Leonie, Jojo's mother, is a drug addict who is obsessed with her love for her white boyfriend, Michael. When she and Jojo and his little sister Kayla go to pick up Michael, who has just been released from Parchman, the trip turns into a confrontation with disturbing memories from the past. The spirit of Richie, a Black boy who was prisoned and died in Parchman, demonstrates the past that hasn't been healed. Jojo, who possesses a special power, is trying to figure out who he is in the middle of a lot of chaos. Kayla, Jojo's younger sister, can comfort people with her music. In contrast, Leonie, who is both physically and emotionally weak, mainly relies on her husband, who must confront racial issues within their family. Pop, or River, is Jojo's grandfather. He takes care of Jojo and tells him about his time in Parchman prison. This book shows how memory works between generations, how racism is built into society, and how stories can heal and reveal things that haven't been told before.

Coates's *The Water Dancer* (2019) is the historical novel with a surreal fantasy about Hiram Walker, an African American young man born during the slave era. His parents, a white plantation owner and a Black slave girl, sold him when he was a child. Despite his special ability to remember things with pinpoint accuracy, he could not remember his mother's face. One day, he had a horse-drawn carriage accident and miraculously survived. The event was the beginning of his discovery of a supernatural power called "conduction," which involved memory and movement through water, leading to his joining the Underground Railroad movement to free Black people from slavery. Key characters include Hiram Walker, who has magical powers but is haunted by his past and struggles with being in the white family with his father, Howell Walker, and his brother, Maynard. Another character is Sophia, a strong and courageous slave girl who plays a key role in Hiram's life, and Thena, an elderly former slave girl who

raised Hiram and communicates the pain of her predecessors. Moreover, Corrine Quinn is a wealthy white woman who worked undercover in the anti-slavery movement. And Moses, or Harriet Tubman, is a spiritual and traveling guide who had the power of conduction, like Hiram. The novel highlights the power of memory, ancestral stories, and the search for identity in a world still plagued by injustice and oppression.

Thus, both *The Water Dancer* (2019) and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) can be good resources for studying African American characters' identity construction for various reasons. Initially, there is a significant connection between the effects of African American identity and the history of slavery. Coates and Ward are among many notable African American writers who try to reconstruct African Americans' identity as African inheritors in America. It is not just a legacy of pain that they inherit, but also the power of spiritual connection, ancestral memory, cultural richness, and the power to resist forgetfulness. Both authors retell this inheritance in their works as a source of identity reconstruction. As victims of history, Ward and Coates transform African Americans into authors of it. The protagonists, Hiram in Coates's *The Water Dancer* (2019) and Jojo in Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), were born as victims of discrimination. The family history with roots deep in slavery resulted in their struggling with the problem of double consciousness because of their mixed identity as African and American. While trying to recognize their place in American society, they also preserve their ancestors' culture. Thirdly, the protagonists are regarded as a minority in a society dominated by others. They unavoidably face the problem of the hybridity of American and African cultures. The protagonists seek their self-identity as African Americans by reinterpreting their ancestral past.

A key theme in contemporary African American literature is the construction of African American identity through stories of slavery, and the two novels in this study illustrate this theme effectively. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Water Dancer* present the history of enslaved people's attempts to construct African American identity. The main focus of these works is the retelling of slavery, which serves not only to recover suppressed histories but also to shape contemporary consciousness. This study aims to

reinterpret the slave history contributing to forming African American identity through the main character in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), and Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer* (2019). To do so, the researcher will employ Du Bois's double consciousness theory as the primary analysis device.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the construction of African American identity in the protagonists of *The Water Dancer* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* using W.E.B. Du Bois's theory of double consciousness.
2. To study the impacts of oral traditions on the African American identity construction of these protagonists.

1.3 Significance of the study

This study is intended to assist readers in understanding the construction of African American identity. The identity development of African American can be utilized in today's modern world, where various cultures are continuously reconstructed and mixed, while being challenged by the influences of Western culture. Exploring the retelling of the slave history has enabled the readers and minority groups who live in the dual culture to acquire a feeling of being firmly rooted in their own identity. Additionally, this study benefits those interested in writings by other minority groups in America. Exploring literature by minority writers helps us understand the complexity of identity formation and promotes empathy and cultural understanding in our interconnected world.

1.4 Scope of the study

This study analyzes the construction of African American identity in Hiram from Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer* and Jojo from Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. It employs W.E.B. Du Bois's theory of double consciousness as a primary framework. Additionally, the study examines the significant role of oral traditions as

a means of passing cultural knowledge, preserving collective memory, and shaping the protagonists' identities in both novels.

1.5 Definitions of term

Identity - identity refers to an individual's sense of self and how they perceive themselves. It involves various aspects such as personal characteristics, cultural ties, social roles, and experiences that contribute to one's understanding of who they really are. For African Americans within dominant cultural systems, identity is impacted by the widespread acceptance and cultural influence of Western culture. To understand the ancestor culture, African American people derive a sense of identity from oral slave history, which is essential for them to construct an identity and survive in the dominant Western culture while also accepting their own culture.

Oral traditions - a tool for maintaining a shared identity and preserving history. It is a communal and dynamic form of narrative shaped by collective experience, performance, and memory, and it also takes a significant role in maintaining customs, worldviews, and languages across time.

Double consciousness - is a social condition caused by the conflict between American culture and the culture of the minority. People in this culture must accept the culture of white people mixed with their rooted culture to construct their identity. Du Bois employs the terms of the veil to demonstrate the appearance of the color line in the everyday experiences of racialized people in today's oppressed society. This process leads to the effect of the racialized subject's consciousness: the feeling of twoness and the occurrence of second sight (Itzigsohn & Brown, 2020, p. 38).

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter is focused on the review of African American identity and its connection to Du Bois's concept of double consciousness. The significance of oral traditions in shaping and defining identity will also be explored. Furthermore, this section will include relevant research that has been conducted on this topic.

2.1 African American Identity

2.1.1 Formation of African American Identity

The concept of African American identity began to take shape as a collective identity, deeply rooted in the historical event of slavery, rather than as individual formations. In *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (2004, p. 60), Eyerman highlights that the idea of African American identity started to take shape in the few years following the Civil War, after the abolition of slavery. He suggests that slavery, though a brutal period, paradoxically united all African Americans in the United States. This unity occurred regardless of their direct connection to Africa, their understanding of the continent, or whether they had personally been enslaved. Therefore, slavery served as a foundation for a collective identity through shared memory, which, depending on the level of abstraction and perspective, identified and distinguished them as a race, a people, or a community.

The slavery trauma enabled African Americans to form their identity, and a strategic tool for forming the institution and political activism in the emancipation era is collective memory. The immediate psychological effects on those who directly experienced it or the retrospective trauma felt by later generations lead to the complex nature of slavery's traumatic legacy. The severe emotional toll of slavery was immense and had a long-lasting impact on enslaved children who witnesses their parent's sexual exploitation and degradation. Patterson's (1998, p. 40) focus extends to the post-slavery generation in the late 19th century, for whom the pain of slavery wasn't directly lived but

rather remembered. This memory, which is expressed through activism, art, and speech, takes on a crucial role in fostering collective action and constructing African American identity, as illustrated by the construction of institutions like the NAACP. For Black gurus at that time, the trauma of slavery was not only painful but also acted as a political and strategic function in civil rights advocacy and identity construction. Built on Patterson's argument, Eyerman (2004, p. 61) emphasizes cultural trauma as its collective nature, not physical or psychological trauma. Cultural trauma is more about a deep disruption in a group's shared meaning and identity than it is about individual wounds. Although this trauma is not directly experienced by everyone, it affects communities that hold social unions and can be caused by situations that are remembered collectively and interpreted as traumatic. Through processes of mediation, time, and representation, the trauma becomes culturally important, more than the sudden impact of the situation itself. He describes national traumas as resisting easy dismissal, enduring, and constructing themselves in collective memory through repeated reflection. Public discourse and mass media play a crucial role in forming and maintaining this shared understanding of the socially constructed phenomenon, thereby mediating cultural trauma.

As mentioned earlier, the cultural trauma is not just an individual wound, but a collective one of the community. Eyerman (2004, p. 63) emphasizes that national or cultural trauma should not be seen as an abrupt response to an event, but rather as a mediated and interpreted effect that develops over time. Particularly in collective circumstances when the situation is reflected in the media, the term "trauma" refers to interpretation, signifying meaning and selective creation. Such trauma is essential in the process of negotiation over the nature of the victims, the suffering, and who is responsible; it becomes a crisis of meaning and identity. The intellectuals, including activist, artists, and others beyond academia, serve as mediators between the political and cultural spheres in this process and translate collective experiences into public discourse. In constructing collective memory and connecting trauma on behalf of affected groups, these intellectuals play a significant role, especially within social

movements, where even those without formal knowledge can act as movement intellectuals by giving voices to the goals and values of their communities.

Like psychological or physical trauma, cultural trauma is a reconciled process through which societies try to fix disharmonies in their collective identity by retelling the past to address present and future needs. As Hale (1998, p. 6) claims, such trauma provokes the desire to "narrate new foundations," producing voices and diverse strategies that compromise identity and memory. In terms of African American history, there are many different ways for people to deal with the failure of Reconstruction and the painful effects of slavery, such as escaping to Africa or the regions in the north to create the "African American" identity itself. This identity was one of various possible ways it was formed by resistance and historical memory to dominant narratives that showed slavery as benign.

To conclude, the enduring cultural trauma originating from slavery and racism is central to understanding the complexity of African American identity. This trauma is expressed as an internal struggle when Black Americans strive to unify their communal identity within a society that frequently views these aspects as contradictory. As Eyerman (2004, p. 64) emphasizes, this dilemma is central to W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, which captures the internal conflict encountered when African Americans are reconciling with their layered identities. This persistent struggle is deeply rooted in the history of slavery and its subsequent collective memory. For instance, the experiences of Black people were often erased in the post-Reconstruction era, where slavery was deemed harmless and the Civil War was recast as a "civilized" conflict. This progressive, revisionist memory significantly marginalized African Americans from the national identity, effectively allowing the South and North to unify in opposition to a demonized Black identity.

2.1.2 The Collective Memory in Constructing African American Identity

Collective memory significantly acts as a powerful tool for groups to foster community identity, conserve shared experience, and preserve cultural progression intergenerationally.

Collective memory plays a vital role in shaping a group's identity, especially for marginalized communities. Eyerman (2004, p. 65) states that the role of collective memory is to build African American identity. The concept of memory refers to an individual's mental capacity that encompasses the storage of sensory experiences, acquired cognitive skills such as mathematics, and various types of information. Individuals perceive memory as intrinsic and essential for enhancing their personalities and selves, shaping their behavior through hidden reactions to past experiences. In this view, memory is a significant tool in learning emotional life and personal identity. However, those from the collective behavior school, according to theories of collective identity, access memory diversely. The focus is on how each person in social movements learns a “loss of self” and improves new, group-based identities that occur during collective action. In this view, individual memory, which is considered to arise spontaneously and independently of prior individual experience, may be downplayed or even considered as an impediment to the formation of a collective identity. Significantly, this view leaves a gap in understanding how memories might function beyond the individual level and rarely considers whether collectives themselves can generate or sustain a form of memory.

Moreover, the collective memory, which is rooted in power, language, and historical context, is like a fluid element whose process produces and echoes identity at both communal and individual levels. It is an act of remembrance, which is part of a wider struggle over belonging, meaning, and identity. According to Halbwachs (1992), memory is social by nature; people recall things in relation to the political, ideological, generational, or familial context of the groups they are a part of. Individual memories are interpreted by collective memory using a common historical narrative. It functions similarly to a "cognitive map," defining temporal boundaries, guiding current behavior,

and tying individuals and societies together across time. Memory is like a speech act anchored in power and language, so it impacts the building of both personal and communal identities. Singh, Skerrett, and Hogan (1994) also state that the collective memory is a complex network of interchanging discourses, such as racial, sexual, regional, ethnic, cultural, historical, familial, and national, that unite inside the individual; it is not plainly the shared recollection of people's past. These narratives construct a metanarrative that serves as a cultural framework and shared language through which people understand their identities and biographies. Memory in this model is not purely inherited or static but dialogue that is compromised through conversation and interaction. These narratives shape people and position them in relation to the larger cultural narratives around them.

Importantly, we often remember the past in ways that reinforce a group's identity; we cannot completely reshape it to align with present desires. Schudson (1989) proposes that the idea that memory is flexible because some parts of the past are written down, and it is more difficult to change. Similarly, Schwartz (1982, p. 398) argues that we have recorded history, so the past is not fully reinvented; it can only be selectively used. Schwartz's view not only shows how collective memory preserves key cultural narratives over time and allows them to be passed down across generations, but also helps distinguish between official history and collective memory. Thus, memory is the selective and shared memory of a group, and it is formed like a myth to sustain people's current identity. As Eyerman (2004, p. 67) explains, history is an academic discipline that is more universal and objective, while collective memory is related to how people see themselves and change over time. For historians, even if their works still indicate their cultural background, they follow methods and rules strictly. However, because collective memory adheres to different rules than professional history, it can be contested for being ethnocentric and biased.

So, the main issue of the construction of collective memory, especially the way that the past is in constructed the present for both groups and individuals. Hale (1998, p. 8) states that not only language and storytelling (the "power of telling") make the past

visible; memory is also recalled through material objects and visual culture (the “power of looking”). People have raised significant questions about who has the power to shape this representation, to speak, and to be visible. And the representation is how history is remembered, who is left out, and whose stories are told.

Thus, the process of memory and representation plays a crucial role in constructing African American identity. The portrayal of Black life and the representation of slavery in art, music, public discourse, and literature have shaped how African Americans understand their identity today and their shared history. Social movements transform personal and ancestral memories into collective political identity. African Americans oppose subjugation and build a shared identity embedded in communal struggle, historical continuity, and resilience by taking back the power to express their histories.

2.1.3 Oral Traditions in African American Literature

As mentioned earlier, oral traditions are a practice that merges the storytelling skill with a desire to preserve culture. For the African diaspora, this oral storytelling became a tradition crucially vital for transmitting ancestral heritage. By preserving ancestral heritage, oral traditions then not only play an important role in identity construction, but also in confronting historical trauma and its ongoing effects of slavery.

The oral traditions transmitted by enslaved people and official written records are the crucial tools in shaping African American history and literature, spotlighting the cultural preservation as the form of spoken and written and the conversion of auditory knowledge to visual texts. According to Harris (2011, p. 451), enslaved Africans and their children and grandchildren were forbidden by law from learning to read or write. So, they created rich oral storytelling traditions that came from their native African culture. Folk arts like quilting and basket making, along with these oral histories, became important ways to record and pass on African American experiences. These are authentic historical facts that complement written and researched histories. So, African American history is made up of both written records and oral histories, which are two

ways of preserving culture that work hand in hand. Oral traditions transform "ear-based" knowledge into "eye-based" texts when they influence written literature. Formal historical materials, on the other hand, are mostly visual, making the relationship between spoken and written African American history very complicated.

Interestingly, oral traditions, including visual culture and music, also play a significant role in constructing African American identity. Saboro (2021, p. 437) highlights that African war songs and dance performances not only record African experiences from the past, but they also demonstrate how these "discursive practices" and "performative acts" performed in public and private places can help us all realize more about how African cultural identity is constructed. Intergenerationally, these oral traditions transmit values, histories, and encoded messages rooted in identity through performance, sound, and participation. This approach reflects the idea that identity is fluid; it circulates with the process of storytelling traditions.

Moreover, the reason that African American works shaped by oral traditions often built envisioned audiences within the texts is to make the readers feel as if they were listeners, so the presence of listeners is vital for the folk narratives. This illustrates how African American literary devices derive from the interactive and communal nature of oral storytelling embedded in their historical communities. As Harris (2011, p. 452) highlights Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1947), which is deeply rooted in the power between listener and storyteller, much African American literature started to concentrate on Black communities' historical experiences and cultural patterns. There are many themes that can be explored in these works, such as the embedding of their stories in the lived realities, the collective memory of African Americans today, racist violence (like the Atlanta Child Murders), the Civil Rights Movement, religious practice, folkloric and historical figures, and the enduring impact of slavery. The use of collective memory, folklore, and lived realities leads the reader to feel as if they are listeners at a storytelling event. The effect of oral traditions affirms that stories need an audience to live. Listeners both within and outside the story in African American literature enable cultural memory to evolve, survive, and empower future generations. Thus, as the authors try to

reinterpret and reclaim their history, the effects of slavery proceed to form identities and narratives within African American work. Through oral traditions, they interpret the creativity of Black communities and enable the readers to understand their shared triumphs and struggles.

Postmemory and oral traditions grant African Americans the ability to regain identity by addressing historical erasure and connecting to inherited memories. Especially in the aftermath of trauma and dislocation, ancestral narrative nurtures a sense of continuity and belonging. According to Hirsch (2008), she states the meaning of “postmemory”: postmemory's link to the past isn't really through recall, but through imaginative involvement, projection, and creation. Stories that occurred before conception or one’s birth, or growing up with numerous inherited memories, can lead to the risk of having experiences overshadowed and personal stories deleted by those of previous generations (Hirsch, 2008, p. 107). This idea primarily relates to the inheritors of African American slaves, who construct their identities through collective stories, inherited memories, and cultural rituals. Thus, these oral traditions enable African Americans to stand for the erased and absent histories.

Moreover, oral traditions play a crucial role in confronting historical trauma and preserving communal memory, as they empower African Americans to process trauma, transmit identity, confront power, and reclaim history. In the works of Ernest J. Gaines, his narratives serve as a living archive that constructs present identity and future possibilities by blending real historical injustices with fictional storytelling to expose the truths of African American life. Gunner (2004, p. 464) states that, in Gaines’s *A Gathering of Old Man* (1983), the author uses fictional confessions to disclose a long history of silencing and oppression as many Black men in the story demand responsibility for the death of a white racist farmer. In this case, fictional oral narratives transmit a truth deeper than the official historical records. In addition, in *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993), through Jefferson's wrong conviction, Gaines shows how racist the Louisiana court system was as a whole. This conclusion is based on the fact that Black men were often wrongly accused and put to death. The author illustrates that oral and

fictional stories are significant for understanding the real experiences and historical trauma of African American communities, as demonstrated through these narratives.

Besides, within a broader historical and cultural context, the essence of identity construction is the idea that oral traditions through ancestral stories help us realize who we are by situating our experiences. This function of narrative is particularly crucial for marginalized groups. At the same time, oral traditions can hold trauma and beauty and revive the African American experience, which was marked by systematic racism, segregation, and slavery. According to Zhou (2019, p. 3), each character's unique identity in *A Mercy* is shaped by their communication memory. More significantly, the individual is able to convert communicative memory into common cultural memories by his or her own efforts. Morrison explores the histories and experiences of the ethnic communities that have been previously ignored or "un-remembered" by the mainstream culture by weaving together a complex web of ethnic cultural memories in *A Mercy*.

In this way, oral traditions allow African American people to connect to a sense of self that is both communal and personal. Most African American authors often use myths, communal experiences, and ancestral voices to construct a shared identity. For instance, in Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), the author uses the ghost trope not as a haunting process but to symbolize historical trauma that exists in the collective memory of Black people. In her analysis, Raynaud (2007, pp. 43-44) cites Morrison's statement that memory work, dream work, and grief work all address complex and shifting time frames, along with deep psychological changes that occur when subconscious parts of a person's mind become aware. Because the novel smoothly moves from one focus to another and between different time frames, the characters' minds are open to new ideas. This narrative approach enables the novel to mimic and reflect the process of memory, both the act of remembering itself and the passing down of memories through oral traditions. So, in *Beloved*, Morrison's use of magical realism facilitates the merging of personal and communal memory, transforming the individual act of remembering into a form of cultural resistance.

Another significant role of oral traditions is to empower African Americans to reclaim their identity from dominant narratives that have historically silenced and misrepresented Black voices. Especially, oral traditions in literature serves as a tool to contest this enforced vision and form independent identity. There are many contemporary authors who start this tradition, such as Jesmyn Ward and Ta-Nehisi Coates. In Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), she interweaves the voices of the dead and living to produce a multigenerational story that focuses on spiritual inheritance, resilience, and Black suffering. Likewise, Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer* (2019) brings back slavery memory through the lens of oral traditions to create the protagonist's identity, which is constructed through storytelling and memory.

Thus, Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer* both utilize oral traditions that include spectral voices, storytelling, and ancestral memories to reveal intergenerational trauma and recover suppressed histories. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* Ward narrates the story through the voices of Leonie, Jojo, and Richie, a spiritual boy who died in Parchman. The "unburied" ghosts in the book are Richie and Given, Leonie's murdered brother. They represent young Black lives lost without justice or proper grief. Their deaths, which were hidden or ignored by a racist system, show how deeply traumatized Black communities are. Ward demonstrates how the pain of racial violence lives on through generations by showing how the living are still haunted by ghosts (Swartzfager, 2020, p. 314). Simultaneously, Coates' neo-slave novel could be considered a spiritual companion to Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016) because it uses a lot of pre-colonial African religious elements. For example, the main character, Hiram Walker, mentions how he worked hard to master his power of conduction, a kind of spiritual teleportation, and then he and other slaves could teleport to free states (Ferreira, 2022, p. 50).

In conclusion, oral traditions are not just an African American writing device; it is a deep cultural tradition that has its roots in survival, remembrance, and resistance. Many African American authors use these traditions in their works to maintain collective memory, construct identity, and confront historical silences. To question the dominant

and emphasize Black experiences, these narratives orally passed knowledge into captivating literary expression, retrieving power over historical truth and cultural memory. By focusing on ancestral memory, ghostly presence of the past, and collective voices, African American literary works continue to seek the hidden truths and present how strong Black communities are.

2.2 Du Bois's Theory of Double Consciousness

This section will explore Du Bois's theory of double consciousness, which consists of the veil, twoness, and second sight. At the core of Du Bois's explanation of subjectivity—that is, the meanings that shape our environment and our culturally and historically situated conceptions of self and other—is the notion of double consciousness. As noted in Itzigsohn and Brown's *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois: Racialized Modernity and the Global Color Line* (2020, p. 27), the pillar of Du Bois's analysis of subjectivity is double consciousness, which situates understandings of self within specific historical and cultural contexts and highlights the symbolic meanings that shape the world we live in. The first essay in Du Bois's *The Soul of Black Folk*, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," offers the most well-known explanation of double consciousness, though Du Bois originally introduced the concept in an 1897 Atlantic essay titled "Strivings of Negro People." The question, "How does it feel to be a problem?" anchors Du Bois's exploration of Black people's lived experiences in both essays. In response to this question, Du Bois attempts to explain how Black people perceive the environment and themselves in daily life by developing a phenomenological analysis of Black subjectivity in response to this query. However, the sociological significance of double consciousness is hardly recognized. Lemert (1994, p. 389), one of the few sociologists to recognize its significance, states that "Du Bois's double-self-concept deserved a prominent place in the lineage of self-theorists, which, from James and Baldwin through Cooley to Mead to the symbolic interactionists," follows the development of the sociology of the self.

Du Bois's double consciousness is not just a historically significant concept but a significant theoretical contribution that corrects a flaw in earlier identity theories and

remains crucial for understanding identity in a world shaped by race. Itzigsohn and Brown (2020, p. 27) argue that the idea of double consciousness is not only deserving of a place in the early sociology of the self's genealogy. The theory addresses a major oversight in the work of other early thinkers about the self and identity, and it is crucial for understanding how people experience their identity in a racially divided modern world. The significance of the color line, which refers to the racial division between Black and white people in America, defines access to resources, power, identity, and rights; it serves as the primary social structure that arranges lived experiences under racialized modernity—something that other theorists of the self and identity who were contemporaries of Du Bois, including William James, Charles Horton Cooley, and George Herbert Mead, did not understand. Du Bois's personal experience with the color line allows him to understand racialized subjectivity in a way that many of our contemporaries and his own are unable to. The theory of double consciousness indicates the epistemic significance of lived experience for social theory.

Du Bois (1903, as cited in Itzigsohn & Brown, 2020) describes the experience of double consciousness as follows:

> a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second- sight in this American world,— a world which yields him no true self- consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double- consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two- ness,— an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body. (p. 28)

Du Bois presents the veil, twoness, and second sight—the three components of the idea of double consciousness—in this little but important passage. The subjectivity of racialized modernity is structured by the veil, also known as the color line. On either

side of the color line, people perceive and experience the social environment in different ways. Because White people project their own conceptions of Black people onto the veil and see their reflections reflected back, the veil functions as a one-way mirror. For them, the racialized subject is invisible, and they have the ability to define both themselves and other people. On the other hand, Black individuals must deal with the realities of white projections onto the veil as they create their identities.

2.2.1 The Veil

The veil keeps people from fully seeing the humanity of racially marginalized groups. For those who live on either side of the veil, it structures their daily experiences, self-formation, and worldview. There is no genuine contact or process of mutual recognition between the racializing and racialized subjects since those who dwell behind the curtain are invisible.

The white world either ignores or misunderstands what those living behind the veil are trying to say, regardless of how honestly, clearly, or articulately they present themselves. Itzigsohn and Brown (2020) has drawn on Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* that Du Bois portrays life behind the veil as isolated from the white world. The main issue raised by Du Bois is how the veil dehumanizes Black people to the extent that others fail to see their humanity. When exposed to the systematic ignorance of the outside world, the people within may become hysterical. Not understanding in their confusion that they are shouting in a vacuum and going unheard, and that those outside who are looking in might find their antics amusing, they scream and hurl themselves against the barricades. This passage illustrates how the lack of recognition affects the lives of Black people. However, this depression is a symptom of living in a racist American society rather than an ontological state of being. Shawn Michelle Smith argues that Du Bois "describes the struggle of a healthy mind forced to confront and inhabit a perverse world; pathology finally resides not in an African American brain but in the American social body" (Itzigsohn &Brown, 2020, p. 39).

Thus, both *The Souls* of *Black Folk* and *Dusk of Dawn*'s examination of double consciousness draws attention to the repressive nature of the racialized world and its effects on those who live behind the veil, while also highlighting the ways in which Black subjects work to influence their surroundings. In Du Bois's portrayal of the racialized world, there is oppression and pain along with dignity, self-expression, and inventiveness.

2.2.2 The Twoness

According to Du Bois, twoness refers to the experience of being both Black and American. It describes the condition of living with "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (Du Bois & Edwards, 2007, p. 8). Itzigsohn and Brown (2020, p. 39) further explain this condition as the experience of belonging to two opposing worlds: the world of their own community, which offers agency, identity, and support, and the world of the dominant group, which rejects the racialized individual's full humanity. These conflicts force the racialized to reconcile the space between the subjectivity and self-construction of racialized individuals—not by letting them fully exist in either position.

While the dominant white society has widespread influence, the lived experience of racialized individuals isn't fully dictated by it. Instead, their own racial community provides an environment that often impacts them more completely and compellingly. As Itzigsohn and Brown (2020) explain, this dynamic resonates with Du Bois's observation that "the Negro American has for his environment not only the surrounding white world but also, and touching him usually more completely and compellingly, the environment furnished by his own colored group" (p. 40). In *The Souls of Black Folk*, the church and religion serve as the primary spaces for this kind of community world-building. Du Bois claims that the Black church is "the social center of Negro life in the United States and the most characteristic expression of African character" (Du Bois & Edwards, 2007, p. 130). It serves as the center of Black communities, as he states, "A variety of organizations—the church proper, the Sunday school, two or three

insurance societies, women's societies, secret societies, and mass meetings of various kinds—meet here" (p. 131). In addition to the five or six regular weekly devotional services, there are talks, dinners, and entertainment events. For Black subjects, music is central to everyday experience. As Du Bois states, "The Music of Negro religion is that plaintive rhythmic melody, with its touching minor cadences, which, despite caricature and defilement, still remains the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil" (p. 129). The sad soul-life of the enslaved adapted, altered, and strengthened this music until, under the pressure of law and the whip, it became the only genuine expression of a people's grief, despair, and hope. Its origins can be traced to African forests, where its equivalent may still be heard. These passages expose the rich social and cultural realm that lies beyond the veil, concealed from the dominant world.

Though he acknowledges that twoness can produces various responses to the veil, Du Bois (2007) views twoness as defining self-formation and subjectivity behind the veil. He articulates this argument by offering a typology of three ways that in which racialized communities typically respond to life behind the veil. As he writes, "But when an environment of men and ideas is added to earth and brute, then the attitude of the imprisoned group may take three main forms: a feeling of revolt and revenge, an attempt to adjust all thought and action to the will of the greater groups, or finally a determined effort at self- realization and self-development despite environing opinion" (Du Bois & Edwards, 2007, p. 36)

Moreover, the internal struggle of being both Black and white, known as “twoness,” reflects the various ways African Americans have reacted to life behind the veil. According to Itzdigsohn and Brown (2020, p. 41), Du Bois believed that a powerful response to racial oppression was to assert Black selfhood through independent institutions, like the Black Episcopal Churches. From his early faith in science and the Talented Tenth while growing up in Atlanta to his civil rights activism with the NAACP, his support of Black self-organization during his second term as an Atlanta University professor, and Pan-African socialism towards the end of his life, Du Bois advocated

several paths to follow this decision because it was most consistent with his beliefs and actions. He did realize, though, that there were other responses to the veil, including uprisings and attempts at integration (such as the Haitian Revolution). It is clear from his scathing criticism that he believed Booker T. Washington had publicly opted for the third option. Black people would lose if they began an assimilation project without full recognition, according to Du Bois, because it would keep them from ever becoming self-conscious and fully accepted.

Itzigsohn and Brown (2020, p. 41) also state that Du Bois revisited the topic of responses to the veil by examining how educated young Black people cope with twoness. He contends that there are two poles in the responses, those who avoid every appearance of segregation and try to assimilate by avoiding interaction with Black organizations and blending in with the white community. And there is a group that prides himself on living with his people and tries to keep as far away from white people as they can is at the other extreme.

For Du Bois, each response to the veil carries a cost. The first group must contend with rejection from the white world, as the veil's "thick plate glass" keeps them from totally merging into society. The second group lives in far-off cultural surroundings, isolated from broader participation. According to Itzigsohn and Brown (2020), Du Bois argues that neither group ultimately gets recognition or participates in defining social reality through cross-veiling communication. Between these two extremes, Du Bois identifies "all sorts of interracial patterns," nothing that "all of them theoretically follow the idea that Blacks must only submit to segregation when forced." The result, he explains, is the "crystallization of the culture elements among colored people into their own groups for social and cultural contact" (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, p. 42). All of these reflect African Americans' ongoing struggle for the ability to shape their own realities and lives, autonomy, and recognition for true freedom and equality.

2.2.3 The Second Sight

The concept of second sight demonstrates how African Americans develop a deeper awareness of their identity and social reality from behind the veil. The potential for racialized people to see behind a veil is what Du Bois refers to as “second sight.” Reviewing Du Bois’s work in *The Souls of Black Folk,* Itzigsohn and Brown (2020, p. 42) explain that living behind a veil means an individual is left without a true sense of self-consciousness, able to see themselves only through the perceptions of others. As Black subjects eventually come to terms with their invisibility and the reality beyond the veil, “second sight” begins to emerge. Not only is the inherited state of invisibility significant, but so is the "gift" of awareness bestowed by this second sight. As a result, the veil has two effects: it makes it harder for Black people to identify with White people, and it also causes them to misidentify themselves. However, turning Plato's allegory on its head, the “inmates” in the cave may be able to see what lies outside the veil, even while their perception of themselves is distorted.

Moreover, Du Bois explores how African Americans gradually develop self-awareness by searching the distortions imposed by the veil, building on the concept of second sight. The only way for the racialized to see themselves is as reflections of the racializing gaze, as seen through the veil. However, this condition also enables them to identify other options of understanding the world and, at least partially, to suspend the veil's optical distortions. In his examination of African Americans' daily experiences, Du Bois highlights various pathways through which this capacity for second sight may arise and grow. This process is illustrated in his essay "Of the Meaning of Progress," in which he recounts a summer spent teaching in a rural, impoverished Black town in Tennessee. The group he taught, he writes, possessed a "half-awakened common consciousness" (p. 43). Variations in the veil's deformation resulted in varying degrees of subjectivity and second sight. While everyone’s view of the world and themselves is shaped by the veil, the degree of deformation relies on factors such as social positioning and language. Still, the racialized individuals are consistently separated from the world of possibility that they can perceive but not fully access because of the veil.

The development of second sight through narrative fiction, especially in the story “Of the Coming of John,” in which the main character gradually realizes his racialized identity, is further illustrated by Du Bois. In *The Souls of Black Folk,* Itzigsohn and Brown (2020, p. 44) also explain that “Of the Coming of John” serves as a literary example of how a Black character gains a racialized awareness, which Du Bois calls “second sight.” Using narrative fiction, Du Bois artistically illustrates the changes in John’s second sight, as seen through the perspective of a faculty member at a fictional college. Black John, a young man growing up in the Jim Crow South, is initially unaware of his racial reality and social position. To the White residents of his town, he is merely "good-natured." Much to their refusal, however, John’s mother decides to send him away to college. Coincidentally, White John—his childhood playmate—is also leaving for Princeton at the same time. Though they grew up together, the two Johns were rarely considered as intellectual equals. Du Bois notes the symbolic divide between them: while white people thought of one John—the white one—Black people thought of another—the Black one. Produced by each world’s distorted reflection of the other, this duality resulted in “only a vague restlessness.”

Black John’s encounters and educational journey with the White world demonstrate the insight of his second sight. The unexpected but progressive realization enables him to recognize how he is constrained and positioned by the veil and to perceive the racialized structures surrounding him. According to Du Bois, Black John returned to “a world of movement and men” after leaving “his doubtful thinking world.” For the first time, he looked closely at his surroundings and wondered why he had never observed so much before. He gradually began to sense the veil that separated him from the White world and became aware of tyranny that had not previously felt oppressive for the first time (p. 45).

Du Bois's developing comprehension of second sight ultimately revealed that intellectual reasoning alone could not dismantle the veil; action and lived experience were essential. According to Itzigsohn and Brown (2020, p. 46), Du Bois concluded that due to the veil’s power to distort and obscure, even when he spoke with clarity and

intellectual authority, his words often went unheard. The veil could not be lifted through rational discourse or scientific investigation. The strongest voices from within the cave were drowned out by the very structure meant to silence them. This realization prompted Du Bois to pursue political activism, including his leadership of *The Crisis*, his involvement with the NAACP, and his lifelong commitment to the collective struggle for equality, self-preservation, and self-improvement. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, the second sight arises through access to education; however, in *Dusk of Dawn*, Du Bois reflects on how his direct experiences with racialization compelled him to examine the world more critically. His second sight matured and deepened through this sustained opposition to the veil.

2.3 Related studies

In the context of resisting cultural oppression and shaping African American identity, African-based spiritual traditions play a crucial role in this research. In *Continuing Conjure: African-Based Spiritual Traditions in Colson Whitehead's The Underground Railroad and Jesmyn Ward's Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Mellis (2019, p. 1) notes that Ward uses African-based spiritual acts embedded in African American traditions to contest the cultural narratives of the dominant society. These spiritual elements function as a form of resistance against systemic injustice. He further argues that the primary means by which African memories are collected and retold, allowing diasporic memory to become central to identity reconstruction and healing, is from the storytelling. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the retelling of ancestral memory is a dynamic act of resisting racial oppression and reclaiming a sense of home, not merely an aesthetic device.

The retelling of slavery through female-centered memory and the ghostly past has also been explored in the context of intertextual connections with Toni Morrison's works. Cucarella-Ramon (2022), in *Reading Toni Morrison's Beloved in Jesmyn Ward's Salvage the Bones and Sing, Unburied, Sing*, focuses on the role of diasporic memory and motherhood in Ward's narrative. To represent the unresolved trauma of slavery that continues to haunt the present, she notes that Ward revisits the legacy of *Beloved* by

employing the ghost of Richie. As a figure of suspended time, Richie's ghost illustrates how the violence of slavery demands remembrance and disrupts familial bonds. Ramon also affirms that Ward criticizes the dominant culture by raising the importance of spiritual heritage and ethnic bonds as a tool of resistance (Cucarella-Ramon, 2022, p. 79). Thus, in *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* the act of retelling the history is crucial not only for realizing the present but also for envisioning a future rooted in remembrance and healing.

In the same way, slavery's legacy through memory-based magic and African mythology is explored in Coates's *The Water Dancer.* The centrality of Ward and Coates's work is the significance of storytelling and ancestral memory. In *Useful Delusions: Tracing the Flying Africans in Ta-Nehisi Coates's The Water Dancer and Colson Whitehead's The Underground Railroad*, Stephens (2021, p. 128) examines how Coates revises the myth of the flying Africans to demonstrate the magical escape from slavery. Coates presents historical trauma as a lived and liberating force through the power of "conduction"—a form of memory-based teleportation. Stephens argues that both Coates's main character and Morrison's Milkman are paralleled in terms of revisiting their ancestral past to gain spiritual power and identity. She asserts that although the supernatural elements may appear fantastical, these narratives are rooted in emotional truths and serve as tools of future-building and self-recovery. Thus, memory and myth become the crucial components for the African American authors to resist historical erasure and shape Black identity.

Another thread of academicians related to this research focuses on W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness in African American literary work. For example, in the examination of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Johnson (2003) explores the hallmarks of negative double consciousness through how the main character's internal conflict derives from the pressure of racialized society and leads to self-alienation and psychological trauma (Johnson, 2003, p. 2). Similarly, Rezazade et al. (2016, p. 2292) examines Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* through the character of Calpurnia, a Black woman who reconciles both Black and White worlds while never fully belonging

to either. She lives with a white family and acts as a maternal figure for the white children, which reflects the racial prejudice and discrimination issues of American society in the 1930s. The mental burden of living between two opposing cultural expectations led to this split identity, which is the result of cultural displacement and racial segregation. These studies show how double consciousness often causes identity struggles and emotional fragmentation among African American characters who are compelled to reconcile opposing social realities.

The studies above illustrated the effect of Du Bois's theory of double consciousness on African Americans in American cultures. Nevertheless, this research will focus on how double consciousness serves as a tool to construct African American identity in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, and Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer*. According to Hall, identity construction was an unfinished and ongoing process more than a fixed form (Hall, 2021). In both works, the protagonists are faced with unresolved tensions between American social structures and African heritage, leading to an inability to fully reconcile with their enclosed social context and internal conflict. The role of oral traditions is the core to this identity construction, which serves as veins of communal knowledge, historical trauma, and ancestral memory. Through family histories, spiritual storytelling, and ghost stories, these oral narratives present the protagonists framework for understanding their hybrid cultural views. So, this research will look at how the idea of double consciousness, along with African oral traditions, shapes the identities of the main characters in the chosen novels.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides information related to the methodology of the study. It is divided into three sections: the selection of African American novels, procedures of the study, and content analysis.

3.1 The selection of African American novels

This study's two selected African American novels are *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, and *The Water Dancer*. The selection is based on three principles: constructing African American identity, literary device, and the writer. First, both *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Water Dancer* reinterpret slave history that contributes to forming African American identity. Second, Ward and Coates use slavery history and Double Consciousness as literary devices to examine the protagonist's construction of African American identity through the conflict of African and American cultures by retelling slavery history from their ancestors. Lastly, both Jesmyn Ward and Ta-nehisi Coates are successful African American authors. The first novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, by Jesmyn Ward was published in 2017 and has won the National Book Award for Fiction. It was also shortlisted for the Women's Prize in Fiction, named one of Barack Obama's Best Books, and selected as a Book of the Year by The New York Times and The New York Times Book Review. The second novel, *The Water Dancer* by Ta-Nehisi Coates (2019), debuted at number one on The New York Times Fiction best-seller list and was selected for the revival of Oprah's Book Club.

3.2 Procedures of the study

The procedures include the following steps:

1. Oral traditions and their significance in African literature
2. Du Bois’s theory of Double Consciousness
3. The construction of African American identity in literature

3.3 Analysis

The construction of African American identity in African American novels: *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Water Dancer,* were analyzed by using Du Bois's theory of Double Consciousness as frameworks. The availability of certain articles influencing each stage in the development was also explored to reveal African American identity in the discussion.

CHAPTER 4

RESULT

This chapter, the researcher examines and compares the construction of African American identity in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer*. Employing Du Bois's theory of double consciousness, the analysis focuses on the retelling of slavery by their ancestors. The trauma resulting from the diaspora and their missing memory about their ancestors leads to the difficulty in understanding their identities. Besides, as the minority of the land of dominants, the main characters of these two novels were inescapable and struggled with the problem of hybridity of African and American cultures. The reinterpretation of the slavery past of their ancestors served as the way to construct their self-identity.

4.1 The Construction of African American Identity

The construction of African American identity of the main characters in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Water Dancer* will be examined and compared in this chapter. According to Du Bois's theory of double consciousness, the study explores how the main character, Jojo and Hiram, handle with the erasure of the ancestral memory and the trauma of African Diaspora. Du Bois outlines three main components of double consciousness: the veil, twoness, and second sight (as cited in Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, p. 28). Both Jojo and Hiram struggle with their cultural inheritance and the demands of a society built on their oppression. Ward and Coates depict how these protagonists seek to integrate their dual identities. Oral traditions include memory, ancestral guidance, and the supernatural stories become the big part of the protagonists in constructing their African-American identity through the lens of double consciousness.

4.1.1 The Veil: Seeing the World but Being Unseen

According to Du Bois's theory of double consciousness (as cited in Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020), the humanity of racial minority groups that should be recognized fully is blocked by the veil. For people who live on both sides of the veil, it shapes racialized people's daily lives, how they experience the world, and how they see themselves. Those who live behind the veil cannot be perceived because there is no process of true communication or mutual recognition between the racialized subjects and racializing (p. 38).

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* Jojo lives behind the veil because he has to struggle with his identity in a society that doesn't completely accept him. He is ignored by his white father, and Big Joseph, Jojo's paternal grandfather, also rejects him, as he said, "*Ain't got no grandkids*" (Ward, 2017, p. 56). This moment highlights Jojo's invisibility in the eyes of his father's family. This reflects Du Bois's idea that Black Americans are aware of the world that excludes them but cannot fully participate in it. Living behind the veil in both the Black and white worlds makes Jojo's sense of belonging uncertain and his identity is cracked.

Moreover, the most unsettling example of homecoming in the book occurs when Michael returns to his parent's house. Big Joseph's racial hatred is so strong that it overrides Jojo's paternal grandparents' apparent genuine love for their kid, as Big Joseph talked with Leonie, who is Jojo's mother, "*Hell, they half of her. Part of that boy Riv, too. All bad blood. Fuck the skin*" (p. 142). Big Joseph's rage is evident in his remark about bad blood, as he fears a mixed-race child will taint his own white family line. His hostility keeps him from even acknowledging his grandchildren's existence. The veil that Jojo experiences causes him to feel alienated from mainstream society, as he knows he is treated differently based on his race. He is constantly aware of his position as an outsider, and he has to deal with the tension between his desire for belonging and the societal forces that marginalize him.

In addition, the veil is clearest when Jojo sees racial unfairness for himself. When a police officer aggressively targets Jojo while pulling over his family, it stresses that he

is both invisible as a person and very obvious as a Black body. In this moment, Jojo's awareness deepens as he understands the world's perception of him. No matter how careful or innocent he is, he learns that his Black identity stains him with danger and suspicion. The officer is immediately hostile toward Jojo, who is young and innocent. As Jojo said, "*He looked at me like he knew me, but he doesn't*." This moment shows how Black people are sometimes overlooked because of their race instead of who they really are. The way the officer treats Jojo is based on what he stands for in a racist framework, which is shaped by societal prejudice. The veil in this scene is not a natural boundary but an obstacle formed by American society to dehumanize and separate Black people. The fact that Jojo is seen as a suspect rather than as a young child in need of protection indicates how the veil destroys reality. It divides not only how others see him but how he sees himself as well.

Finally, Jojo's veil has become clearer when Richie, the ghost of a young man who died in Parchman jail appears. Richie's appearance leads to the story of racial injustice and discloses how past and present oppression are linked. Richie helps Jojo learn about his ancestors, which opens up his spiritual and historical connections that let him see beyond the veil, even though most people don't see these connections. The ghosts *in Sing, Unburied, Sing* are reminders of Black past that white people in America tend to forget. Like Richie said in Chapter 9:

> When I was thirteen, I knew much more then him, I knew that metal shackles could grow into skin. I knew that leather could split flesh like butter. I knew that hunger could hurt, could scoop me hollow as a gourd, and that seeing my siblings starving could hollow out a different part of me, too." (p. 185)

According to this statement, the metal shackles are not just a weapon for punishing; they are symbols of how incarceration, historical trauma, and racial violence are embedded in the experiences of Black people. The shackles demonstrate Richie's loss of childhood, the profound pain he experienced, and the legacy of slavery that

continues to exist in American institutions. This aligns with Du Bois's notion that Black individuals carry a historical memory that grants them deeper insight into systemic oppression—insight that those outside the veil may never fully grasp. Richie, as an ancestral figure, reminds Jojo that racial injustice is cyclical and that the past is not truly past but rather a force that shapes the present. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness also is reflected here, as Richie consolidates the tension of being both a criminal who is shackled by mental and fully aware of his own humanity. Richie illustrates his internal conflict about perceiving himself through the eyes of others who reject his personhood.

By selecting Richie as one of the narrators in the story, Ward gives voice to the marginalized and silenced dead, allowing Jojo to reconstruct the past of his ancestor. Although the novel is set in the modern day, the appearance of the ancestral spirits bridges the gap between the past and the present. The return of the ancestral spirits is not just a haunting but a search for answers to the unsolved. As Avery F. Gordon (2008) states, even though slavery has ended, there are still some things left in the places where we live, in the veins of the contradictory formation, and in the authority of collective wisdom and shared incomprehension we call New World modernity. This belief has consistently motivated action (Gordon, 2008, p. 139). Therefore, by choosing to use the ghost motif, Ward established a strong connection to African literary customs and emphasized primarily the African aspect of African American cultural identity. To face the lingering effects of history, enable Jojo to realize the shared incomprehension in the present. Through Richie and Pop, Jojo confronts the suffering of the past, which is not only emotional clarity but also historical insight. To see through the veil, it enables him to recognize how silence, survival, and generational trauma continue to shape life in the present. This awareness assists him in entering a more conscious, established sense of identity. The voices of the ancestors need to be respected; by doing this, their stories live on in the collective memory of African American people.

In *The Water Dancer*, Hiram also experiences the veil, as he exists in a world where his intelligence, talents, and supernatural ability are invisible to those who see him

only as property. As Du Bois's veil suggests, Hiram can perceive the world of the white elite, including his enslaver father, Howell Walker, but he remains unseen within it. Howell acknowledges Hiram's brilliance but refuses to recognize him as his son, stating, *"You are of me, but not mine*" (Coates, 2019, p. 45). This reflects the cruel paradox of the veil: Hiram belongs to both the world of the Tasked (enslaved people) and the Quality (white elite), yet he is fully accepted by neither.

Significantly, Hiram's identity is complicated by his status as the illegitimate son of a white man. As Du Bois states, the veil distorts how Black people are seen, often to the point that they are unable to recognize their humanity (as cited in Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, p. 39). Consequently, individuals of nonwhite skin color have been subjected to the oppression of the Whites as a result of their perceived inferiority and uncivilized status. *The Water Dancer* depicts how slavery destroys families by establishing illegitimate relationships between enslavers and enslaved people, such as between Hiram and his white father, Howell. He experiences a profound sense of dislocation, feeling neither fully accepted in the world of the enslaved nor acknowledged in the world of the free. As Hiram mentioned about Maynard, his half-brother, in Chapter 1: "… *all I wanted was to be home and free of Maynard's voice … Maynard who held my chain. Maynard, my brother who was made my master*" (Coates, 2019, p. 5). This quote encloses the deep moral and psychological contradiction of being a slave, where Hiram is bound to serve his brother. His word demonstrates not only his need for freedom but also the pain of being inferior to someone who is a sibling. The irrational injustice of slavery drives him into his unnatural relationship, tearing him of dignity and agency. This moment shows how slavery destroys families by turning them into domination.

Moreover, the veil meant that, under slavery, a person's biological relative did not always define them "family". Thena, his surrogate mother, cautioned Hiram when he had to go back to live with Howell and Maynard: "*They ain't your family, boy. I am more your mother standing right here now than that white man on that horse is your father*" (p. 22). Hiram is the illegitimate child of a black enslaved mother and her white owner,

like many others born into slavery. Hiram's relationship with his family is visibly destroyed by the fact that he is enslaved by them. The racial divide between Hiram and Howell and Maynard effectively destroys their relationship. Since Thena is also Black and enslaved, she is more his family than they are by nature. Furthermore, the fact that Thena has behaved in a manner like Hiram's mother sets her apart from Howell and Maynard. This ambiguity forces Hiram to grapple with questions of belonging and self-worth, shaping his understanding of what it means to be Black in America.

Therefore, Hiram's life is heavily influenced by the historical backdrop of slavery, as a large veil separates him from society. As Du Bois states, the veil creates a barrier that prevents true communication and mutual recognition between the oppressed and the oppressor, rendering those who remain behind invisible. In *Dusk,* Du Bois demonstrates that no matter how sincerely or clearly the oppressed present themselves, the white people neither hear nor fully recognize what the racialized try to convey because of the veil. This idea aligned with Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*; people who live behind the veil are cut off from the whites' dominant world (as cited in Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, p. 38). The violence and experience of the oppression enable Hiram to realize himself and his status in the society. So, Hiram has to confront this dual identity from this relationship: he is both deeply connected to the oppressive system through his ancestors and mother and tied to the oppressor because of his father. Hiram must confront the veil by reconciling these contradictions, understanding its legacy, and finally learning to see through it to reclaim his sense of self.

Sophia's statements also show how the veil continues even when one leaves slavery—Black people remain unseen and underappreciated in a society created to exclude them. Experiences of dehumanization, particularly in his friendship with Sophia another imprisoned person advising him against false aspirations of belonging, deepen Hiram's veil: "Freedom is just the beginning. You still have to live in surroundings not fit for you (Coates, 2019, p. 211). This captures Black Americans' reality—that of institutionalized racism, segregation, and disenfranchisement notwithstanding their legal freedom after emancipation. Sophia's admonition implies that racial restrictions

guarantee that actual emancipation remains challenging even beyond physical bondage.

Simultaneously, the veil between Hiram and society was being constructed, as others perceived him as an object. Hiram is painfully aware that the society around him views him as property, defining him by his status as an enslaved person, as he said, *"You have to remember what I was: not human but property, and a valuable property – one learned in all the functions of the manor, of crops, read, capable of entertaining with my tricks of memory"* (p. 87). Hiram's reflections demonstrate how slavery deprives him of the capacity to appreciate and take delight in his own abilities. This is due to the fact that his talents are not his; rather, they are the property of the individual who possesses him. One of the numerous methods by which slavery dehumanizes and degrades subjugated individuals is the alienation from their own intelligence and abilities.

4.1.2 Twoness: The Conflict Between Two Identities

In *The Soul of Black Folk,* Du Bois describes the concept of twoness as the feeling of being both Black and American. He also explains that in the person's dark body, there are two thoughts, two souls, two warring ideals, and two unreconciled struggles (cited in Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, p. 39). The internal conflict between self-perception and how they are perceived by the dominant society results in the main characters of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* by Jesmyn Ward and *The Water Dancer* by Ta-Nehisi Coates. This duality is constructed in the protagonists as they try to conciliate with cultural, familial, and racial identities formed by the burden of memory and trauma of history. In consequence, Jojo and Hiram's identities appear as fragmented and hybrid, reflecting both the ongoing search for complement within a racially divided society and resistance.

Jojo in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* experiences twoness as he tries to balance the wisdom of his Black grandfather, Pop, with the absence of his white father, Michael. Jojo is torn between his two racial identities. He isn't fully at ease with his Black past,

and his white family doesn't fully accept him either. Jojo still has trouble with the demands that are put on him, but his grandfather Pop helps him. He says, "*I want to be like Pop, but I don't know if I ever will be*" (Ward, 2017, p. 179). His doubt shows how difficult it is to deal with being the child of a white man who stays mentally and physically away while still honoring his family's culture. Moreover, Jojo presumes an adult role by taking care of his younger sister, Kayla, which further drives him to be an adult too quickly. This racial and emotional tension demonstrates Du Bois's concept of twoness: Jojo always reconciles the duality of being African American, the feeling of two conflicting identities. The first one is rooted in the nourishing traditions of his Black heritage, and the other is formed by the silence and rejection of his white bloodline.

The main character's inner conflict is also shown through the twoness stage, as he tries to balance his love for his grandfather Pop with the way others treat him badly because of his race. In Chapter 10, Jojo notices that Big Joseph, who is younger than Pop, doesn't respect him by calling him a "boy," a term that has long been used to insult Black men. This stimulates Jojo's confusion and anger, as he doubts how someone could fail to see him as a man, as he said, "*I wonder what he knows of my daddy, how he could look at Pop and see every line of Pop's face, every step Pop takes, every word out of Pop's mouth, and see anything but a man*" (p. 143). Jojo sees the dignity and strength in Pop, who bears the legacy of Black perseverance, but it is also faced with a society and community that has internalized white standards of worth and masculinity. His feelings shift from hate toward Big Joseph as he fights with a world that derogates the people he loves. The psychological burden of double consciousness is illustrated in the form of emotional conflict: trying to hold on to self-worth while being forced to see someone through the others' eyes. In this scene, Jojo battles not only to protect Pop's manhood but also to reconcile his sense of identity in a world that always breaks it.

It is not only the biracial identity that shaped Jojo's experience of twoness but also his role as a bridge between past and present, between the living and the dead. His interactions with Richie, the Black boy ghost who died at Parchman prison, intensify

this inner conflict. The appearance of Richie drives Jojo to bear the emotional burden of his forefather's trauma. In one of the most bitter moments, as Richie groans to Pop, *"You was the only daddy I ever knew […] I need to know why you left me"* (p. 152). Even though these words are directed to Pop, this lament gets to Jojo, who carries witness to the abandonment and unresolved grief Richie feels. Jojo's perception of Pop is challenged by this moment as he sees Pop as a moral figure while he complicates his desire to imitate him. Jojo's twoness is reinforced by placing him between the realities of emotional conflicts: the grief of a ghostly boy betrayed by the man who he admires the most. Thus, Jojo's identity is constructed by these opposing truths mirroring Du Bois's concept of twoness; he has to reconcile between love and disappointment, heritage and loss toward his role model, like Pop. The protagonist's twoness is no longer just about the race but about the inherited pain with the hope for personal complement to be reconciled.

While Hiram in *The Water Dancer* experiences twoness as he grapples with his role as both an enslaved man and a person with extraordinary power. He is deeply tied to his enslaved roots yet forced to function in a system that sees him as lesser. This twoness is shown very clearly in Hiram's relationship with his white father, Howell Walker. "*You are of me, but not mine*," Howell says, referring to Hiram's education and skills but refusing to call him his son (Coates, 2019, p. 45). This lack of respect is similar to what Jojo experienced with his white grandpa and supports the idea that Black people are often not treated with respect in the white world, even though they live close to it.

Moreover, Hiram's twoness is further complicated by his connection to the Underground, as he has to work with the white abolitionists. As he said *"I knew their cause was right, but I did not know if they saw me beyond it"* (p. 312). From this quotation, it is clear that Hiram understands Black people as full human beings with own histories and aspirations, even those who profess to be fighting for Black freedom sometimes overlook Black people. Though not always as a person with his own dreams, emotions, and complexity, the abolitionists see him as an advantage for their cause.

This mirrors Du Bois's assertion that Black Americans struggle not only for physical liberation but also for recognition as whole, autonomous people rather than symbols of a cause. Hiram's hesitance reflects a broader concern about allyship—whether well-intentioned white supporters truly understand the full scope of Black existence beyond oppression (Du Bois & Edwards, 2007). This reinforces his internal conflict, as he must align with these abolitionists while also maintaining agency over his own narrative and sense of self.

Lastly, Hiram's magical ability to conduct—which lets him take people across water through memory—shows how he brings twoness together. Deeply rooted in family memories, his power tells him to accept the past in order to move forward, as he said, *"Remembering, not forgetting, broke the chain*" (Coates, 2019, p. 273). This suggests that the key to resolving his internal conflict is not to choose between his African heritage and his American reality but to integrate both. By using his ancestral strength to defy the limitations imposed upon him, Hiram ultimately transcends the constraints of twoness.

So, both *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Water Dancer* illustrate how Jojo and Hiram struggle with double consciousness and seek to reconcile their ancestral culture with the mainstream American world. Through their experiences of twoness, both characters confront the reality of existing between two worlds—one defined by their heritage and the other by an oppressive society that refuses to fully accept them. On the other hand, their paths show that real peace comes from accepting both identities, not picking one over the other. They learn that strength doesn't come from carrying around the weight of the past, but from loving and accepting their whole selves. In this way, they support Du Bois's idea that Black people need to improve their second sight, not to fit in, but to get back control of their own stories and lives.

4.1.3 Second Sight: A New Vision Beyond Oppression

Du Bois said that slaves could see themselves through the lens of both white society and their own culture. This is called "second sight." People of color who become more aware of these things sometimes suffer because it helps them understand more

about who they are and how society sees them. In both *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Water Dancer*, second sight comes from knowing about ancestors, having magical experiences, and the main characters becoming more aware of how they are being systematically oppressed.

Firstly, Jojo develops second sight as he grows to see the racial injustices sculpting his surroundings. Jojo realizes the horrible reality of Black bodies being devalued when a white officer pulls over his family and targets him aggressively when he witnesses police violence. He said, "*He sees me but he doesn't see me. Though not me," he notes the skin, the nose, the mouth, the hair*" (Ward, 2017, p. 135). This moment captures second sight—Jojo understands the gulf separating his view of himself from that of white power leaders. Through this experience, he develops a terrible but essential awareness of his place in a society that rejects his full humanity.

Jojo's second sight is further deepened through his connection with Richie. Richie represents the collective trauma of Black history, reminding Jojo that his present struggles cannot be separated from the suffering of those who came before him. Richie tells Jojo, "*We all here at once*" (p. 189), emphasizing that the past continues to shape the present. This spectral connection allows Jojo to see beyond the immediate realities of his life, understanding the painful history that influences his identity. Furthermore, in the novel's last chapter, Ward interpreted the singing of spirits in the same way that the birds did when they perched on the tree, as Jojo described

> 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. (p. 279)

All people had an innate desire to return home, but many obstacles in life could prevent them from doing so, such as addiction, jail, and ghostly memories and traumas.

The fact that nearly all these ghosts were black people who died violent deaths highlights how the South and America were still plagued by the history of slavery and terrible racial violence. Not only do these atrocities still occur today, but the dead victims' ghosts viscerally torment the world of the book, begging that living people like Jojo recognized their pain. Thus, through Richie, Jojo gains insight into the cyclical nature of racial oppression, an essential element of second sight.

Through his supernatural ability to conduct—a gift connected to his memory and ancestral past—Hiram in *The Water Dancer* also experiences second sight. Hiram's power calls for him to remember deep and terrible memories of his sold away enslaved mother. His capacity to carry others across water represents a higher perspective transcending physical reality, as he said, *"it was not forgetting but remembering that broke the chain*" (Coates, 2019, p. 273). This scene captures second sight as Hiram discovers that rather than running away from the past, true emancipation results from embracing and understanding it. His ability lets him see his own value and potential for freedom in ways enslaved people were methodically denied, transcending his immediate persecution.

In the novel, the conduction allows Hiram to connect with his ancestors' experiences and transport himself and others toward freedom. Water Dancing is a way to pay tribute to its history. It is one of Hiram's few recollections of his mother and aunt, from whom he was separated following their sale. His memory of Rose and Emma's water dancing determines his conduct ability. Inspired by the brave rebellions of his ancestors, Hiram rebels and repeatedly saves his life. Driving his half-brother and master Maynard home at the beginning of the story, Hiram crashes the carriage upon spotting Rose and Emma water dancing at the Goose (p. 8). When Hiram manages to conduct himself out of the goose and onto dry land, he is saved mysteriously, but Maynard drowns. Enslaved individuals have access to escape and safety through the water in the Goose, which kills Maynard but saves Hiram. Later in the book, when Hiram has mastered Conduct, he utilizes the Goose to sneak into and out of Lockless, where he keeps running his clandestine Underground Railroad enterprise. This power is

a profound source of pride, as it taps into its cultural roots and demonstrates the strength passed down through generations.

However, Conduction requires Hiram to experience the trauma and pain of his family's past, burdening him with the memories of enslavement and oppression. As the story nears its conclusion, Hiram realizes that to get complete control of conduction and transport more individuals out of Lockless, he needs something more powerful. He explains to Sophia that he wanted a more profound memory so he could wield more power (p. 336). Hiram's mother's shell necklace, which Howell keeps in an elaborate case, provides a clue to deeper memories.

Hiram's second sight is also strongly connected to his mother's necklace, which stands for the memory and connection to his family that gives him this supernatural ability. The necklace is one of the few things he has that reminds him of his mother. It also represents the emotional and spiritual link he needs to heal to use his gift properly. Holding it helps him get to deeper memories and work up his performance potential. As he reflects, *"Her touch was still there, held in the weave of it, a guide through the dark*" (p. 255). This scene makes the point that second sight isn't just about seeing how white people see Black people; it's also about getting back the knowledge and power of your ancestors. The necklace is both a personal talisman and a way for Hiram to access his magical insight. It shows how memory and family history push Hiram to become more self-aware.

Hiram must exchange the trauma memories of his progenitors with the shell necklace of his mother to uncover the potent act of conduction. In *The Water Dancer*, Rose's shell necklace carries layers of trauma and pain for Hiram. The necklace brings back memories of Hiram's forced separation from his mother (p. 350). Not only does the chain stand for Hiram's pain, but it also stands for all slaves' pain. Often, slave families are mistreated and have to be split up. Hiram has to be split up from his mother. The necklace shows the pain of a whole society that has lost similar loved ones. It holds the unsolved sadness and suffering of everyone. Hiram holds Rose's necklace and takes her pain and trauma with him. The necklace is a reminder of his love for her, as

well as the weight of her unresolved sadness and the pain that has been passed down through the years. This trauma drives him to try to heal and restore the dignity that was taken from her and countless others. So, his second sight is magnified as he confronts both the empowering aspects of his heritage and the suffering that fuels his abilities. While conduction connects him to his identity, it also forces him to live within the painful constraints society has placed on his family.

Through his meetings with Underground white abolitionists, Hiram also develops second sight. He wonders whether they really see him beyond his use to their cause even though they fight for Black freedom, as he said, "*I knew their cause was right, but I did not know if they noticed me beyond it*" (p. 312). This captures Du Bois's idea that Black Americans must negotiate how white society views them while yet clinging to their own natural sense of self. Hiram's mistrust highlights the flaws in white-led movements for racial justice; even if they could offer specific help, they sometimes ignore Black humanity totally. His second sight helps him to separate those who pursue justice for an idea from those who truly value Black life.

Jojo and Hiram ultimately use second sight to help them to better grasp their identities and the surroundings. Jojo comes to see the historical weight he bears and the wisdom of his ancestors, so transcending the obvious violence and neglect he encounters. Through his supernatural gift, Hiram realizes that to remember his roots is his actual power. Both characters create African American identities that are neither limited by oppression nor cut off from history, so attaining a kind of reconciliation.

Sing, Unburied, Sing and *The Water Dancer* thus show how Jojo and Hiram battle with double consciousness and try to reconcile their ancestral culture with mainstream American society. By means of second sight, both characters uncover a deeper truth about themselves as well as a profound awareness of how the ruling society views them. This capacity lets them negotiate the conflict between their African background and American reality, so strengthening their embrace of both. Their paths confirm Du Bois's observation that Black people have to develop second sight—not to fit but rather to recover their own narrative and agency. Jojo and Hiram go toward a more

integrated sense of self by appreciating their ancestral past as well as present reality, so transcending the limitations of racial injustice.

4.2 The Role of Oral Traditions in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Water Dancer*

In African American literature, the history preserved through oral traditions is not only used as a tool to resist erasure, but it is also a part of their culture. Especially in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* by Jesmyn Ward and *The Water Dancer* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, oral traditions have functioned as a cultural mechanism in shaping the identity of the oppressed, the authors present oral traditions as a means of connecting the past to the present. Through the framework of Du Bois's double consciousness—the veil, twoness, and second sight, these enable the protagonists of the both novels to see themselves under the system of subjugation. For this part, the researcher will examine the roles of oral traditions in shaping the main characters' comprehension toward themselves and the world they live in.

4.2.1 Oral Tradition as a Means of Preserving History

In Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer*, oral traditions serve as a powerful means of cultural preservation within a society often obscured by Du Bois's metaphorical veil. The act of recounting spoken stories, accessing ancestor memory, and engaging with oral histories becomes a way to remember trauma and transmit knowledge across generations, fostering a "second sight" in the protagonists. This deeper understanding, born from these ancestor narratives, reveals the protagonists' twoness of being both African and American as they face a dominant society that often fails to recognize their heritage. Significantly, the engagement with oral traditions in both novels becomes not just a preservation of the past but a vital element in the construction of their African American identities within the context of historical and continuing racial realities.

Firstly, the oral traditions are made explicit in the stories Pop, Jojo's grandfather, tells Jojo. Pop recounts the time he had with Richie, the young boy who endured and died in the racist carceral system, and met him during his stint at Parchman jail. Jojo is

able to understand the brutal truth of injustice because of these stories that are not recorded anywhere. The observation that history is best told and preserved through stories is underscored by oral history, which ensures that the suffering of people like Richie lives on. As for Jojo, in Chapter 6, River Pop tells Jojo stories about his life to prepare him for surviving and being resilient, particularly about his Parchman Farm experience. He recounts, "*Sometimes a story is both truth and a lie […] This is how we survive*" (Ward, 2017, p. 138). In another moment, Pop says to Jojo, "*He was as little as you. He was younger than you. Under his arms, he had not yet begun to grow hair*" (p. 70). Here, Pop reinforces the atrocities of systematic racism and violence by telling the heartbreaking tale of Richie, a youngster he knew at Parchman Farm. These tales are a sad but essential legacy that makes sure Jojo is aware of the significance of his family's history.

For Jojo, these stories are more than the painful memory of his grandfather. These stories transmit the experiences of African people who was abused, oppressed, and felt the racial injustices in America. In this stage, Jojo gets twoness in himself as he has to struggle with the inner conflicts between his innocent world and the world full of the oppressions. Through the stories of his ancestor, he cannot see the world as a young boy he was before but in the eyes of the heir of the oppressed.

Additionally, Jesmyn Ward uses ghosts and spiritual storytelling to preserve history in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. She reminds the reader that the ghost of Richie exists to reflect memory, suffering, and wrongdoing—of past pain, enduring strength of the Black people, and the social injustice done to them. Their existence speaks of the oral traditions that passes history across generations and children, making it possible through supernatural ways.

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Ward uses the character of Richie to illustrate trauma that has not been resolved. A young boy who was incarcerated at Parchman Farm returns as a ghost because his tale is rather tragic. Richie never truly discloses what did happen to him, but as a ghost, he compels Jojo to reckon with the anguish of racial terror. He is described as looking "*like he did in Parchman, his face young and brown*

and shining, his arms skinny but round with muscle" (p. 183). Jojo's first meeting with the dead, Richie, becomes a haunting embodiment that stimulates a suppressed past to reemerge and seek to be remembered. The countless silenced voices of history, those whose pain is still unresolved, are represented through Richie. His appearance expatiates the theme of historical trauma and racial injustice of the novel, especially as he narrates the painful experiences at Parchman. The following statement further exemplifies the historical and emotional weight Richie bears:

> I tried to tell myself that the way it was wasn't the way it was always going to be. That Parchman wasn't a place where you had to pull a tree out the earth with your hands and your back and your sweat and your prayer, that Parchman wasn't a place where you watched the dogs eat and licked your lips and wondered if you could stomach it raw. (p. 189)

This paragraph illustrates the extreme physical suffering and hunger Richie endured while at Parchman. Dehumanizing Black prisoners is added with the comment that he observed the dogs devouring flesh while they were starving. Moreover, Richie is bringing to life the realities of the past, which still impact the present for Jojo and the readers.

It is clear that the author employs spiritual narration as a form of link between the generations. The novel's specters serve as narrators who connect the living and the dead—as it is done in oral cultures in numerous societies. Jojo, who has the ability to see and hear spirits, becomes a historian in a way, taking on the responsibility of remembering and narrating their stories. In their book *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity*, Assmann and Czaplicka (1995) describe two types of memory use: people talk about events in communicative memory, while texts, rituals, and symbols are used in cultural memory to keep memories alive (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995). In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, ghosts like Richie protect cultural memory by making sure that stories of racial injustice from the past will not be lost. The supernatural parts of the book support

the idea that history is not only written down in books but also passed down through memories, spiritual meetings, and real-life events.

Additionally, the stories that told by Richie ghost tells in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* have an effect on the identity construction of the main character, Jojo. Jojo's identity is shaped through the painful reality of Black people in America, which is suppressed from the history. According to Du Bois's double consciousness framework, the retelling of slavery through Richie's narratives helps Jojo to recognize his status and his history clearly. At the same time, the stories symbolize the preserving collective memory of African people, which is erased by the oppressive system.

The concept of the "veil," which Du Bois describes as the experiences of Black people that they cannot see themselves as they really are but through the gaze of white people, appears significantly when Jojo met Richie after visiting Parchman. In the novel, Parchman is a site associated with the historical oppression of African Americans. Meanwhile, Jojo, as the only character who can see Richie, symbolize the ability to see through the veil and to recognize the suppressed history of slavery. Richie is not merely dead; he represents a memory that has been erased from official history, particularly the memory of Black individuals who have been victimized by the prison system, the government, and society at large.

After learning about the historical stories of his ancestors, Jojo has to negotiate with his twoness, as Du Bois said, being both Black people and American people. As he lives in the society where there is no open space for twoness, Jojo must take on a role as big brother for Kayla, his younger sister, although he is still really young. He is expected to be as strong as Pop, his grandfather; at the same time, he feels lonely, confused, and insecure. The relationship between him and Richie makes his twoness more pronounced, since he is a young boy in the present world and also is an inheritor of a painful past. Through Richie's stories, Jojo cannot deny the historical facts that he has never chosen; however, this piece of history is an unavoidable part of his identity.

According to Du Bois, second sight is a special ability of Black people to perceive the world in a way that White people cannot truly understand. When Jojo knows

the complex truth about Richie's death, including the cause of murder that is done by his grandfather, this event changes his understanding of his family's past. It leads him to the untold history through the perspective that is not just black and white morality but full of internal conflict. Pop did euthanasia to let Richie escape from the brutality of Parchman. This experience reflects the history of Black people that is always suppressed and erased from the system of education and political records of the oppressive world.

Significantly, Richie's narratives are demonstrated as means of preserving history that is erased from mainstream society. Jojo takes on a role as a listener and also a recorder of the past that others dare not listen to. In the last chapter, when Kayla starts singing with ghosts to let them take a rest peacefully, this action illustrates how to keep memories and the past of Black people's families which cannot be found in the official records. This is occurred from oral traditions, singing, and listening to the voices of the forgotten; it is considered an action in resisting the authoritarian erasure of history. The way Jojo and Kayla perceive and respond to ghosts' voices is the succession of duties of the memory keepers who link the past, the present, and the future together.

Thus, Ward presents the ghost's narratives as a crucial tool in exploring the double consciousness identity of the main character in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Through the powerful framework of Du Bois, his work enables us to analyze the plight of Black people in contemporary America. The ancestor spirit's voice serves as a tool in preserving memory and history that the state and society attempt to delete. Through oral traditions, to hear the voice of the past and how to confront it directly may be the truly way to preserve the identity and dignity of Black people.

The storytelling passed down through the generations let Jojo stayed in touch with Pop, who was taken to America on a slave ship. The power of storytelling corresponds with what Bausch (2015) stated in *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith*: *"Every people, nation, and community had stories and myths that preserve and prolong the traditions that give them their identity*" (p. 26). We may conclude that narrative was a very fascinating and necessary source of identity. It served to carry on to

the next generations the customs and legacy of a community. Therefore, Ward turned to oral tradition to preserve historical memories for future generations as well as to impart the uniqueness of African culture orally.

Simultaneously in *The Water Dancer* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, oral traditions have a significant role in constructing Hiram's identity through the process of double consciousness. Through this process, Hiram is able to recognize himself in a world where Black people are compelled to forget the painful past of their ancestors. The main character uses oral traditions as the bridge to connect with the past he both remembered and has forgotten.

Firstly, the oral traditions assist the main character to see through the veil because of his fragment memory about his mother. According to Du Bois's concept, the veil is the condition that Black people cannot fully see themselves because of the veil of oppressors. In Hiram's case, in the beginning of the novel, he cannot fully remember his mother. His forgetting is deep in the level of subconscious that reflects his disconnection from his family roots and history. However, through the oral traditions, for example, Harriet Tubman's narratives make Hiram's memory of his ancestors who fought, dreamt, and suffered pain gradually revive.

In Chapter 32, when Hiram listens to the stories from Harriet Tubman, which are about the experience of her taking people through the act of conduction make him understand that his ancestors are part of the stream of fighting. Although this story has not appeared in writing, the words from the survivors are the thing that makes the veil of forgetting gradually disappear. This leads Hiram to remember his mother and actually see himself, as he said:

> What happened then was a kind of communion, a chain of memory extending between the two of us that carried more than any words I can now offer you here, because the chain was ground into some deep and locked-away place, where my aunt Emma lives, where my mother lived, where a great power lived,

> and the chain extended into that selfsame place in Harriet, where all those lost ones had taken up their vigil. (Coates, 2019, p. 239)

Coates refers to oral traditions as “conduction” to introduce their mnemonic function. Those with superpower-like abilities of conduction can traverse space and time. Crossing these bounds and departing from the self and others is only possible through the act of recalling memories. This is closely associated with oral traditions, which involves the recollection and transmission of stories, especially those concerning ancestry and survival. In *The Water Dancer*, conduction serves as an example of cultural memory in the sense that oral recollection keeps the past alive. Hiram states, "*What fueled my conduction was not just memory. It was special memory, the memory of love. And in returning to my mother, I was returning to the wellspring of my conduction*" (Coates, 2019, p. 271). This quote demonstrates the power of deeply personal memories—particularly those of trauma, love and family—in activating conduction.

Like this, oral traditions enable storytelling so that emotional and historical realities are not suppressed. It is a magical ability to recall the past, personal and societal that triggers Conduction. In a similar vein, oral traditions employ storytelling to guarantee that emotional and historical details are never lost. Conduction is not just a magical ability; it is triggered by remembering one's own and society's past. This is in line with oral traditions, where stories are passed down to preserve identity and prevent erasure.

Moreover, oral traditions enable Hiram to accept his dual identity, as they reflect the two worlds within him. Hiram learns the stories of the slavery, the only way to share their memories, history, and hope. Although Hiram is a part of the white race, oral traditions bring him back to the world of the oppressed, who have no right to write or speak in mainstream history. He was born to a White father, an owner of the plantation a Black mother, who was a slave. Therefore, he fully embodies the concept of “twoness,” being both the oppressed and the oppressor at the same time. But oral

traditions help him see that he can be both sides without destroying either. And he can use this duality in constructing his new power.

His twoness occurs when he listens to the stories of the other slaves or the ones who used to be separated from their families. At this point, he starts to comprehend the pain of the others, not only his. To be the son of the plantation does not make him different. These stories led him to learn that he has a right to be both–the one who was taken away and the one who has a chance to resist this system. In Chapter 2, Thena shares her painful story that she lost her children from selling slaves. She also warns him about the brutality of the White people toward Black ones. This is the shared experience that Hiram also had before. Although the details are different, this wakes him to realize that he is a part of this pain that will never be written in any textbooks, as she said:

> Hiram, I know how much you see. And I know that even though we all have to handle the brutal ways of this world, you have handled them better than some of your elders. But it's bout to get more brutal. (Coates, 2019, p. 22)

From this quote, it reflects that he not only is the son of the plantation but also the victim of this system in the same way.

Lastly, in *The Water Dancer* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, the elders serve as "gaters" of cultural memory and history, and these lead to Hiram's second sight stage, the ability to see the hidden truth. The history, pain, and value of Black people are the things that cannot be seen in the mainstream culture. The way that Hiram gradually develops his power of conduction is also leading him to the stage of second sight, which occurred when he links the past with the stories of the elders, especially through songs and rituals. All of these are the unique way to transmit memory, which is a part of oral traditions. Harriet Tubman does not teach Hiram to perform conduction according to the textbook but through the storytelling, memories, and songs, as she said, "*Foe memory is the chariot, and memory is the way, and memory is bridge from the curse of slavery to boon of freedom*" (p. 238). This power not only makes him see the simulations but also

enables him to realize his past about him and others. This leads to second sight, so he can see things which White people cannot comprehend; all of these are the power of memory.

The elders' wisdom is crucial to the knowledge of younger generations and is vital to ensuring that everything that happened is not forgotten. Tubman, an elderly enslaved woman, is a significant character in the novel. She bears the painful memories of enslavement and bereavement. She, however, suffers and carries the burden of remembrance and how slavery happened. In her isolation, she attempts to remember so that the horrors of the enslavement would never be erased completely. She was shown to be a custodian of painful truths. She is an elder woman on the plantation, possesses deep knowledge of the past. Memories whispering through her tongue becomes a repository for history, concealed within their silence.

Thus, oral traditions are used as the tool to preserve history for Black people. The slavery system makes the oppressed forget their names, families, languages, and homes; thus, oral traditions act in the opposite way, with the unique and undistorted form of preserving history. Characters in the novel use storytelling and the sharing of memories to make sense of their past and present struggles, which passed down through generations. The novel explored the significance of memory and its function, which served as an example of the many ways in which collective memory had kept African American communities united. As in Chapter 33, Hiram is fully able to memorize his mother, and it leads to the powerful conduction at the end of the novel. This proves that narratives are cultural memories, which are more powerful than documents. He is not only an operator but also a narrator as he becomes an inheritor of the story that is told by his ancestors. The retelling of the stories is the way to preserve history that was never recorded in the official record before. But they are revived by the voices of the previous generation.

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Water Dancer,* oral traditions have a significant role in terms of emancipating the main characters from the veil, assisting them to accept their twoness, and finally recognizing their second sight. The reenactment of memory in

the novels was based on the shared storytelling rituals that honored the cultural ties of the African diaspora. In keeping with their literary heritage, Ward and Coates brought tales of pain, death, and suffering to modern America while also bringing to life the atrocities of racism and the widespread suffering of African Americans. Significantly, these narratives are not only used to implement identity development but also function as the way to preserve and transmit unofficial recorded history. This assures that the oppressed memory can be survived through the voices of those who dare to tell and dare to listen.

4.2.2 Empowering the Oppressed Through Oral Traditions

Both *Sing, Unburied, Sing* by Jesmyn Ward and *The Water Dancer* by Ta-Nehisi Coates use oral history as a way to fight against the erasure of history, especially when it comes to African American memory and survival. Oral traditions are the way to regain their voices, resist erasure, and inherit identity. Especially in the context of the Black people in the United States, oral traditions have been a way for marginalized groups to fight back against injustice, keep history alive, and reclaim their identities for a long time. The authors use memory and storytelling to give strength to the characters who have been hurt by systemic violence and pain from past generations. Through telling stories, both books show how oral practices help oppressed people connect with their ancestors, take control of their lives, and turn pain into strength. Moreover, the authors use this tradition as a tool in conveying the past and truths that have been erased from mainstream history. Lastly, oral traditions are an important driving force in constructing the protagonists' identity through Du Bois' double consciousness framework.

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* through Richie and Pop's storytelling of the painful past, this helps Jojo to construct his identity. The voice of the ancestors, especially through Pop and Richie's is more than just the past or storytelling. It helps Jojo to realize his origin and what system he lives in. To listen to and absorb these voices not only changes his inner conflict but also empowers him to see, understand, and resist the oppressive system. After Jojo listens to Richie's story about the brutality inside

Parchman, it completely reveals the veil which separate him from the world of human beings. This narrative symbolizes disclosing the veil for Jojo to see the reality of subjugation, as Richie said, "*There had always been bad blood between dogs and Black people: they were bred adversaries – slaves running from the slobbering hounds, and then the convict man dodging them*" (Coates, 2019, p. 138). From this statement, Jojo realizes that this pain is not only his but it is the collective wounds of Black people. Richie's voice empowers Jojo to see through the veil of the history of violence.

From Richie's narrative, Jojo starts to understand that his personal experiences of fear, racial injustice, and marginalization are not just his own, especially the brutal truth about how Black people were hunted like animals and Parchman; they are part of a broader historical trauma, which embedded in American history. This collective suffering through the shared pain of prisoners or oppressed ancestors enables Jojo to see through the veil. He begins to gain what Du Bois calls "second sight." This recognition empowers him to apprehend the systems of racial discrimination and to oppose them. And this act is not for himself, but as a part of a legacy of survival and struggle. So, collective wounds serve as historical memory, which enables Jojo to open his consciousness to the world of racialized existence; he eventually can lift the veil and form his double consciousness.

Moreover, ancestors' narratives help Jojo to acknowledge his twoness and understand the oppressed history. Jojo was born with conflicts; he has to take on the role of an adult as he is a child of an irresponsible mother and a grandson of Pop, who is still stuck with the painful past. Jojo is living in the world of twoness that will never be harmonized. However, through the orality of who came before, Jojo gradually connects the things that used to be split up. Richie's character is like the mirror that reflects the memory of the buried past of Black people, which becomes the origin of the pain in the present. Besides, Pop becomes the representative of the previous generation who carry the pain still drowning in the wounds of the slavery system of the past. In Chapter 13,

after Pop confesses the truth about that he did with Richie in Parchman, this narrative functions as the bridge that joins the cracks within Jojo's identity, as he said:

> I hold Pop like I hold Kayla. He puts his face in his knees and his back shakes. Both of us bow together as Richie goes darker and darker […] The animals in grunts and snorts and yips. Thank you, they say. Thank you thank you thank you, they sing. (Coates, 2019, pp. 175-176)

This statement reflects a profound reversal of roles between Pop and Jojo. Jojo has to take the role as a caretaker of Pop, his beloved grandfather who is emotionally cracked by the past. This reversal highlights the burden of generational trauma that Jojo has to carry and is forced to be mature. He is not just a passive taker of family history but now becomes an emotional anchor for others, who bears the pain of racial oppression and slavery. Moreover, after Pop's story is fully told in this scene, a ghostly boy, Richie, finally fades into the spiritual realm. The disappearance of the ghost symbolizes a release of long-held guilt and pain over what Pop did to him in Parchman prison. Lastly, the animals' voices become a chorus of nature and ancestors themselves. In African and African American oral traditions, animals often stand for the natural world, attesting to human suffering. The way that animals say thank you to Pop and Jojo is how the spirits accept what they did wrong, and healing can begin. All of these are part of the act of telling the truth and remembering. This thankfulness also indicates the protagonist's role as a witness of the buried history. Jojo gains a deeper understanding of himself as the inheritor of history and embraces the complexity of his dual identity. He finally recognizes his family's pain, which is part of a historical wound in systemic violence and slavery.

Thus, Jojo's relation with the painful memories of his ancestors—especially through Pop and Richie—enables him to deepen his sense of identity. To realize the past allows him to change his pain into understanding and his puzzlement into consciousness. Firstly, oral traditions assist Jojo in accepting the complicated violence

within the context of racial trauma and the nature of love. Through Pop's confession of his mercy killing toward Richie, Jojo recognizes that the act of love can take on tragic forms in an oppressive world. In African American survival narratives, the pain and compassion often coexist, which reconstructs how he understands his grandfather and his own roots. Next, the protagonist becomes the recipient of intergenerational memory. Instead of rejecting their stories, Jojo intentionally listens to Pop and Richie's story without judgment. This memory empowers him with insight that he does not see himself solely as a survivor or a victim, but both of them. And this duality becomes a source of strength. Lastly, Jojo gains the second sight by confronting the cruelness of the past. The disclosure of the brutality of the legacy of anti-Black violence through Richie's story about Parchman makes Jojo realize the pain he inherits and witnesses. This collective racial wound enables him to shape his identity. These ancestral voices empower him to gain clarity, as he no longer rejects the duality of his identity but eventually chooses to live with them.

In addition, how Jojo and his family members are aware of the spirits' presence and hear the voices of animals are part of oral traditions inheritance and restoring the identity of the oppressed. Jojo's special ability is hearing animals' sounds, as he said in Chapter 1, "*But it was impossible to not hear the animals, because I looked at them and understood, instantly, and it was like looking at a sentence and understanding the words, all of it coming to me at once*" (Coates, 2019, p. 16). This is not only his special ability, but it is also how to regenerate the oral traditions culture. African people believe that all things have a soul and their stories in this world. To listen to the animals' voice is like listening to the world of the voiceless. This reflects the postcolonial idea that the oppressed are not voiceless, but it is society that refuses to listen.

The ability to see and hear the spirits and animals enables him to recognize the complexity of the world he lives in and leads to the development of Jojo's double consciousness. In the veil stage, Jojo perceives things that the others cannot such as death, violence, and traumas that hidden in Black families in the South of America. This also reflects his twoness stage; he lives between the world of a Black boy who is forced

to be an adult and the world with spirits. Finally, his magical ability is a specific characteristic of those who can see and hear dimensions that ordinary people are not aware exist, as it is called second sight. Jojo possesses spiritual sight and auditory abilities that enable him to embrace the buried history of Black people. Thus, this ability is more than magic; but political and historical awareness.

So, Jojo's gift serves as a medium for both transmitting buried stories and hearing Richie's voice. He does not comfort or solve problems but listens to it with dignity. In Chapter 11, Jojo decides not to tell his grandmother, Mam, that he cannot see Richie's spirit; he chooses to be silent as the way to understand and respect the unspeakable pain of his family (p. 222). He listens and understands the suffering of his ancestors without judgment. This talent connected with ancestors who believed in nature spirits, which is a part of oral traditions, so Jojo inherits cultural identity and empowers this gift that the colonial system tried to erase from the Black people. This not only constructs his identity but also gives him a space to be a healer and a successor to the power of the oppressed to have a voice again in the world of the oppression.

Moreover, the role of African oral traditions appeared significantly through the voodoo amulet in the form of a gris-gris bag which Pop gave to Jojo. *Sing, Buried, Sing* was an example of how knowledge was passed down across generations to address issues that older generations faced and that still affected current generations. The gris-gris bag demonstrated this use of storytelling and cultural transmission to deal with social problems with historical roots. It is not only a protection amulet from danger, but it is also the transmission of knowledge rooted in the oral culture of African Americans, can be seen through rituals, storytelling, and the objects with spiritual significance. The amulet has an origin in West African Vodun and is deeply embedded in the belief systems of the oppressed in the New World. In the novel, the gris-gris bag becomes a medium of memory, history, and the indestructible power of the Western world. Pop hands a gris-gris bag without words or descriptions but emphasize holiness through attitude and actions. Oral traditions that are presented in the story impress the significance of cultural heritage that does not require written language to support it.

A gris-gris bag also marks a significant milestone in Jojo's development of a double consciousness identity. According to Du Bois's framework, Jojo realizes that he is living in two worlds at the same time– a physical world filled with oppression, racism, and violence and a spiritual world filled with the sounds, memories, and power of the ancestors. The gris-gris bag serves as a reminder for Jojo that even though he is viewed through the eyes of a system that devalues him, he still has deep and strong cultural roots. Pop offered Jojo a gris-gris bag when Leonie said she's taking Jojo and Kayla on a road trip to get Michael home from Parchman. While it was said to bring luck and protection from evil, it also linked Jojo's history and present by uniting him with Pop and the many generations of hoodoo practitioners who precede him. As Jojo put it in Chapter 8, when he faced the white police officers, they told him to sit like a dog. He reached for Pop's bag in his shorts when he felt it (Ward, 2017, pp. 117-118). So, a gris-gris bag saved Jojo's life and made him brave and stubborn in the face of a white thing that could kill him. Pop could also use the gris-gris bag to send Jojo a little something. His African spiritual practices weren't just meaningless words; they were a way for him to stay alive, fight back, and stay safe in a dangerous world, as he said in Chapter 11, "*It was the only way I could send a little of me with y'all. With Mam […] And that being a place I can't go back to. Parchman*" (p. 152). This insight leads to Jojo's second sight which helps him to perceive things around him more deeply than general people. It helps him to be able to listen to spirits' voices and understand his history and ancestors' pain.

Kayla's song in the final chapter not only serves as a prayer to comfort the souls, which is a part of oral traditions, but Jojo's double consciousness is also constructed through this ritual. According to Gunner (2004), from the African model, we can learn that orality, which took the form of formal speech communication, sometimes coexists with instruments, music, or dance. It constructed an incredible variety of genres that strengthened and facilitated spiritual existence, political, and social (Gunner, 2004, p. 1). In the final scene, Kayla's singing is about how to set the spirit free and represent the oral traditions that not only inherit knowledge but also awaken and transform the inner

world. Her song is very simple, and there is no clear musical structure; it is full of emotional truth, which embedded in folk music culture, slave spirituals, and Black people's prayers. The way that Kayla is still young but is able to sing the song without any guidance shows the inheritance of power through bloodline. This is a notable characteristic of oral traditions: that formal language is not required.

Thus, in *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* the song is the tool in empowering the oppressed: Jojo can construct his second sight in this stage. Kayla's song is a part of resistance through sound because it makes the forgotten souls heard and liberated. The second sight changes Jojo from the one who is confuse about himself (twoness) to become the boy who can recognize the history, love, and loss, as Jojo describes:

> She waves her hand in the air as she sings, and I know it, know the movement, know it's hoe Leonie rubbed my back, rubbed Kayla's back, when we were frightened of the world. Kayla sings, and the multitude of ghosts lean forward, nodding. They smile with something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease. (Ward, 2017, p. 194)

Finally, this song not only consoles the spirits but also wakes Jojo and the readers to realize that the resistance against social injustice need not use violence, but it can occur through the voice of a little girl who sings the song with her heart.

As we all know, much African American literature uses the elements of oral traditions not only for recording the memory of those who have been erased from history, but it also serves as a tool in empowering and resisting the power of the oppressive. Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer* prominently uses oral traditions and the sound of memories as central elements in the identity construction and transformation of its protagonist, Hiram. Moreover, oral histories are employed as the way to help the main character fight back, stay alive, and gain power, including double consciousness construction through the main character. From the book, slaves rely on memory and stories to keep their identities and pass on information because they were

not allowed to have written records, family relationships, or public discussions about their past; this the veil that obstructs them. Coates shows that oral traditions are more than just a way to remember things. They are also a way to get through twoness, inner conflicts of being an African American citizen in the oppressive society. *The Water Dancer*'s use of stories, memories, and advice from ancestors shows how oral practices can be a powerful way to gain the second sight, as the main character is able to take back power and bring about social change.

In *The Water Dancer,* the memories and voices of the past are presented through the function of oral traditions that play an important role on a literary and spiritual level, especially in constructing Hiram's double consciousness. The voices of the past, including the stories of his forgotten mother or the voices of Black women who lost their children from the slavery system, are revived in the oral story. These voices serve as the narrative power that breaks through Hiram's veil and resists the silencing imposed by the colonial structure. So, the oral traditions are not just about transmitting information but reviving the humanity of the voiceless and giving Hiram the opportunity to connect with his roots again.

The main character lives in a state of forgetfulness at the beginning of the story. Hiram has no memory of his mother and never truly realizes the pain of his ancestors. However, when he actually listens to Thena, Sophia, and the voices of losers, the veil is gradually transparent. The women's voices in the story, such as Thena's narrative or the memories about his mother, act as a bridge that connects him with the past and his suppressed identity, as Hiram said in Chapter 1:

> I think of your aunt Emma. I think of your momma. I am remembered to them both - Rose and Emma. Why, they were a pair. Loved each other. Loved to dance. I am remembered to them, I say. And though it hurt sometime, you cannot forget, Hi. You cannot forget. (Coates, 2019, p. 20)

This passage underscores the result of oppression, the physical enslavement of ancestors, as well as the destruction of both individual and collective memory. In order to regain a sense of self and understand his role in the struggle for freedom, Hiram demonstrates that remembering is an act of resistance by regaining his lost memories. Moreover, it leads to his twoness clearly– realizes that he is both the son of the slave master and a slave himself. Occasionally he feels attached and alienated from these two worlds. Nevertheless, because of deep listening, that is the core of oral traditions, Hiram is finally able to recognize the pain of others and also learns to understand his own inner voice. At this stage, it leads to his second sight, which makes him see another truth hidden beneath the oppression.

In conclusion, memories through the ancestors' stories are a crucial tool for destroying the veil of oblivion. According to Larson (1999, p. 335), most ethnic minorities relate their collective identities to the remembering of the past, which includes honoring ancestors as a source of strength and positive identity construction, because collective identities and memories are inseparable connected. Memories release Hiram from his twoness and empowers him to be the inheritor of magical power. His new sight enables him to see the value of memories, resistance, and the humanity of the oppressed in American history.

Additionally, Harriet Tubman's character and the idea of conduction serve as a central point of empowerment for the oppressed and help Hiram overcome his fractured identities and his double consciousness. Tubman or as people called her, "Moses," is the one who is able to lead people away from slavery through the magical ability of conduction. In the Bible, Moses is the leader that God chose to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. Therefore, Moses's role is that of a spiritual leader and liberator from oppression. Like Moses in the Bible, Tubman does not just lead people away but also acts as a guide and inspires faith through the power of memory and spirit. Her power is not due to magic but to her ability to remember her ancestral connections and understand the stories of the oppressed. From her, Hiram

learns that conduction is not only a special magic but also the art of memory, listening, and bearing the memories of others.

Moses becomes the powerful oral story in the Black community. Since the slavery era, the story of Moses from the Bible has been told repeatedly through spirituals and oral storytelling. Thus, Moses in *The Water Dancer* symbolizes freedom and liberation in the oral traditions of Black people. Although there are some people who have never met her, her stories are transmitted as Hiram told Moses about the stories that he heard about her:

> I know what they say. Moses tamed oxen as a girl and harrowed the fields like a man. Moses talk to the wolves. Moses brought the clouds to earth. Knives melt upon the garments of Moses. Bullwhips turn to ash in the slave-master's hand. (Coates, 2019, p. 223)

Tubman is represented as the successor to the lineage of spiritual leaders in the Black tradition. Therefore, the story of Moses, both from the Bible and Harriet Tubman, has a significant role as the foundation of identity for African people, especially Hiram. At first, Hiram experiences the twoness stage as being the son of the slave owner and a slave girl. However, when he meets Tubman and learns about the conduction that connected to the memories of the oppressed, he begins to see himself no longer through the eyes of a white man anymore. Through the oral stories, he gains the second sight– the sight of those with roots in the history of struggle. As well as Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt, Tubman becomes a role model who stimulates Hiram to dare to confront the part of history he tried to forget. So, Hiram can construct his new identity through the stories and the pain of the ancestors.

Oral traditions are presented as a connection between the enslaved and their ancestors, allowing them to obtain courage from those who came before. Narrative and memory are not only private but also collective, and that they are transmitted to empower following generations. Hiram learns that embracing the past is essential for

moving forward by making the conduction, a supernatural ability tied to deep remembrance of the ancestors. Slavery seeks to eradicate human identity, reducing persons to mere property; Hiram employs storytelling as a method to resist this obliteration. As Derive (1995) has stated, the oral performance's ability is not just "distinctive sigh" of a specific social state; it also has the possibility to change or influence social conditions and power dynamics (Derive, 1995, as cited in Gunner, 2004, p. 6). As Harriet Tubman said with Hiram in Chapter 23:

> We forgot nothing, you and I. To forget is to truly slave. To forget is to die [...] To remember, friend. For memory is the chariot, and memory is the way, and memory is bridge from the curse of slavery to the boon of freedom. (Coates, 2019, p. 271)

In this passage, Harriet explains the importance of memory, which is portrayed in the book as a kind of superhuman ability. She argues that memory is a path back to freedom and the ability to empower the oppressive, which is why it is so crucial. A person is a true slave since they have lost their opportunity of ever achieving freedom if they disregard the existence of this path or cut themselves off from it.

Furthermore, the background of the ritual, water dancing, serves as a specific form of oral traditions that integrated the memories, pain, and spirit of Black people. How Hiram connects with the narratives and memories of his ancestors through the conduction enables him to revive the oppressed power, enhance self-understanding, and lead to the construction of double consciousness. Water dancing is the power that arises from deep recollection of not only the events in the past but also emotions, love, and loss. All of these relate to oral traditions; it is about conveying history, pain, and hope through sound, song, body, and dance in African American culture. Hiram's special gift will not happen until he is able to remember his past not through the text but through the feeling of being involved with the past through the stories and memories of his ancestors.

According to Sophia's interpretation of the ritual toward Hiram, the water dance represents a celebration of liberation, revolt, and the ancient knowledge and strength found in the African cultures of enslaved people. She relates precolonial African mythology about a water goddess who rescued an African king to Santi Bess's water dancing:

> […] when the king look out, he see that the white folk's army is coming for him with they guns and all. So the chief told his people to walk out into the water, to sing and dance as they walked, that the water-goddess brought'em here, and the water goddess would take 'em back home. It's what Santi Bess done, ain't it? She all I could think about when we came back up out of it last night. That king. The water dance. Santi Bess. You. (p. 329)

Therefore, ancestors' stories empower the oppressed; they are the power of unerasable memories. Typically, slavery erases the oppressed's mastery. However, Hiram becomes a liberator not because he fled, but because he accepted, remembered, and listened to the stories that society tried to forget. Water dancing is thus a reclaiming of Black power through the cultural heritage that the state and the slave system attempted to destroy.

Hiram's water dancing leads to the creation of his identity. Since he gets his memories about his mother back, Hiram is able to use conduction. This is the way to accept his twoness–the painful past of being a Black person in the dominant society. Hiram's second sight gradually created. Through the collective memories of his forebears, he finally is able to construct his new identity that does not depend on the acceptance of the white world but on the power of oneself and one's community.

Lastly, in *The Water Dancer* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, the oral stories and legends in the group of Underground Railroad serve as the powerful oral traditions that resist cultural and psychological oppression. Especially those who are cut off from formal written records or memorization. The stories about the escape of the slaves, whether it is

a story of surviving a child, losing a loved one, or saving another from danger, become an oral legacy that deeply empowers listeners. In Chapter 16 at Otha's house, Hiram heard the painful stories of Mary Bronson, the slave who lost her husband and children. She has been to the North and has a thought about escaping from her white enslaver (p. 179). Otha, an agent of the Underground Railroad, recounts stories of losing loved ones, including the death of his brother due to the brutality of the slave system (p. 184). Mary and Otha's stories show the brutality of slavery. True freedom is found in a family being together; this represents a true home. The stories help Hiram to realize the value of remembering the past and to see that even undocumented Black memories have spiritual and political value. So, in this context, the oral tradition is not only how to transmit the stories but also a tool to create a new awareness for the oppressed to know that they are not without a past or without dignity.

These stories lead Hiram to construct his double consciousness. He starts to recognize his twoness as being both the slave in the others' eyes and a human being with intrinsic value. He feels alienated because he was the son of a plantation owner born to slaves; he could not fit into the world of Quality at first. The stories in the Underground group provide him with a new perspective, allowing him to listen, remember, and ultimately narrate them himself. In Chapter 33, Hiram's power reaches its peak as he remembers all of the stories of his ancestors. In order not to lose power and help fight against oppression, Hiram needs to continue telling these stories himself, as he said, "*I wanted to savor it, but when I tried, I saw them begin to fade from me, fade like mortal life and mortal memory, and I knew that I must keep telling the story*" (pp. 349-350). His second sight leads to the development of a new identity as an African American, empowering him to resist the dominant culture.

The retelling of the story so that the memory does not disappear is how Coates reintroduces the history of the Underground Railroad into his writing. According to the United States Department of the Interior (1995), it is crucial to note that all American races—Black, White, Red, or Brown— participated in the historical Underground campaign. So, implementing its experiences and lessons in the present is a multicultural

process by nature. Moreover, the most transcending social issue of our time is bringing the voices and energies of "the people" to bear on shared issues while reducing the unpleasant conflicts based on race or other ethnic characteristics (p. 2). So, the stories of the Underground Railroad not only inherit the oral traditions, but they also serve as a cultural resistance that leads to the construction of the protagonist's identity as someone with the power to remember, speak, and lead others out of bondage.

Thus, in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Water Dancer,* oral traditions serve as a primary mechanism for transmitting memories, resistance, and identity formation among oppressed people. Not only is it a tool for remembering the past, but also a spiritual force that gives the main characters the strength to fight and understand themselves in a world that does not accept them. Moreover, the oral traditions are the base of double consciousness formation that makes Jojo and Hiram obtain the second sight: people who see oppression and recognize their own value and power as bearers of their community's stories and histories.

4.2.3 Oral Traditions in Healing Intergenerational Wounds

Oral traditions play a crucial role in the healing of intergenerational wounds and conflicts in both *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Water Dancer*. Oral traditions are compelling in African American culture; thus, these customs help to preserve memory, face trauma, and pass knowledge on to next generations. Oral history, ancestral memory, or spoken stories—the act of sharing stories turns into a required process of healing and reconciliation. Examining how each book uses oral histories in its narratives helps us understand how these stories bridge the past and present, thereby facilitating the healing of generational trauma caused by slavery. Consequently, the protagonists construct their double consciousness by confronting social realities and harnessing the power of community-told stories. These lead Jojo and Hiram to recognize themselves and their roles in ongoing history.

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Pop's story conveys the role of oral tradition in African American literature. These traditions have not only passed down knowledge and

preserved memories, but have also mended intergenerational scars. For characters like Jojo, a younger generation who has endured extreme oppression and grown up amidst violence and loss, engaging with these narratives is important. As he deals with issues in his family and the racial discrimination, he develops double consciousness, a process deeply influenced by the oral traditions that carry his family's history and collective memory. Through Pop's stories in Parchman and the origin of Richie's death, a young Black boy who is sent to prison at a young age discloses Jojo's veil to learn and realize a history of violence faced by previous generations. Pop takes a role as a memory keeper of African families and communities who reveals the unrecorded truths to Jojo. These stories and memories from the past help Jojo create his double consciousness identity.

Firstly, the stories of Jojo's grandfather illustrate the violence against Black people that is hidden behind the veil of a mainstream history. At first, Jojo still does not realize his ancestors' past; however, he gradually learns to see through the veil after he listens to Pop's confession. In Chapter 13, Jojo asks Pop to finish the story about Richie. So, it reveals that when Richie tried to escape from Parchman with another prisoner named Blue, they were hunted by a group of White men. Blue faced arrest and endured cruel torture. Pop recognized that Richie was going to face the same fate, so he decided to do a mercy killing to help him (Ward, 2017, p. 255). Revealing these hidden stories is similar to lifting the veil in Du Bois's framework. Jojo recognizes the cruel truth that lies hidden behind the racial veil. He starts to realize the complexity of hidden history and pain that his ancestors have to endure, and it is the beginning of his double consciousness development. So, the event in this chapter enables him to see and understand that he is not only an ordinary boy but also an inheritor of the pain, history, and dignity of African people.

Pop finds healing in retelling his own painful memories, while Jojo's listening becomes part of his own healing. Together, they learn that recovery requires confronting the past. Consequently, Pop meant to murder Richie in a kind of mercy, much as Sethe from *Beloved* killed one of her children to keep her from being sold into slavery.

Confessions made by Pop to Jojo in the woods and around the fireplace link this orality act to their African heritage. So, in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, diasporic memory would thus be essential to reconstruct the family's real tale and set the stage for the ultimate healing process. Ward showed the readers the path to healing by revealing all these heartbreaking memories and the anguish of the Black slaves, as well as the meddling of the ancestors' spirits and beliefs.

Next, Richie's character, who appeared in the form of the Black boy spirit, symbolizes the forgotten history and repressed memories. How Richie appears to inform stories of the past through communication with Jojo is a revival of the role of the oral traditions that used to transmit the pain, memory, and life lessons from one generation to the next. Richie's return aims not only to recount the past but also to pursue healing and acceptance. Jojo learned that Richie's death was a result of the criminal injustice system and the authoritarianism that Black people face. Listening to the stories of his ancestors allows Jojo to understand the history and structural violence of the past as a process of restoring and healing previously unspoken intergenerational wounds.

Moreover, the oral traditions utilize ghost narratives and personal memories to resist the erasure of African history. Chassot (2018, p. 114) argues that the ghost in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) reveals the suffering caused by a cultural past that actively resists being forgotten. Additionally, the ghost undermines the idea of unmediated access to the past and suggest the fluid and imaginative nature of any historical or cultural recovery effort. Similarly, Richie, a ghost in *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* takes on a role as the ghosts of the African diaspora that link to the history of oppression, memory, and identity of Africans in the New World. They are the ancestral voices that lead the main character to awaken and understand deeper truths about his own past and identity.

Significantly, Richie's narratives directly influence Jojo's double consciousness construction. Jojo starts to uncover the hidden truth about African people, concealed behind a veil of silence and subjection. He gradually sees through the veil after knowing that the legal system killed Richie without justice and that Pop must kill him to protect

him from torture. This leads Jojo to the twoness stage that he must confront with the conflict between the identity that is determined by external society and the identity that grows from understanding the history of his ancestors through listening to their stories. He is like a bridge connecting the past and present, between pain and hope. However, Jojo starts to perceive the world with his second sight. He sees not only the outside world as it was but also the more profound meaning of historical memory and his role as an heir and healer. Jojo sees the ancestral spirits and listens to their painful past that leads to the liberation of Richie in the final chapter.

Finally, Richie's retelling the stories is the heart of oral traditions that Ward uses to link the past with the present to heal the pain of history and form Jojo's double consciousness: understanding himself as a Black person and an heir to the memory of the oppressed. As Eyerman (2004, p. 65) claimed, the "public commemoration," a process that uses official rituals to build a shared past or through conversations that are more special to a certain group or collective, is the way that people keep these memories alive and pass them on. This group memory, which is based on history and is made by society, helps people stick together in the present. So, the spirit's voice is not just the sound of death but the power of life that lives on in memories and stories.

In *The Water Dancer,* oral traditions are not only the storytelling strategy, but they are also the space of healing for the wounds caused by colonial history, slavery, and racism. Oral traditions play an enormous role in the novel through the protagonist, Hiram Walker, who searches for his mother's memories, the meaning of freedom, and the truth about himself. The novel does not formally transmit the experiences of the oppressed through documents or historical records. Hiram listens to the stories of his mother, who was taken away, Thena, who lost her children, and others from the Underground Railroad, which enables him to collectively experience their pain and create an internal healing process. The importance of the existence of ancestral stories is in line with the ideas of Gallego (2007), who has mentioned Toni Morrison's seminal essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation." A significant part of creating a sense of community is an ancestor because they give the other members a sense of purpose

and keep Black customs alive: “There is always an elder there.” The ancestors are like timeless people; they are more than just parents who are cautious, kind, and helpful over the characters, and they pass on a certain kind of wisdom (p. 94).

Listening to and inheriting the oral traditions makes Hiram gradually form the double consciousness and escape from being just an object of slavery. Firstly, Hiram is obstructed by the veil of forgetting the past about his mother and roots. However, the stories from the elders, like Thena, or the mother’s stories from Corrine lead him to see through the curtain that his suffering and memories were not personal but personal matters of the oppressed class. A notable example of this is when Hiram met Harriet Tubman and learned about the special power known as conduction. This ability cannot happen without relying on emotional memories and the foundation of love, loss, and connections with others, as he said:

> What happened then was a kind of communion, a chain of memory extending between the two of us that carried more than any words I can now offer you here, because the chain was ground into some deep and locked-away place, where my aunt Emma lived, where my mother lived, where great power lived, and the chain extended into that selfsame place in Harriet, where all those lost ones had taken up their vigil. (Coates, 2019, p. 239)

The chain memory which is burden deeply in a locked-away place conveys the continuation of the memories of the oppressed through the stories, sounds, and experiences that cannot be recorded in writing, memories that exist in listening, touching, and feeling. Aunt Emma, his mother, and Harriet are all women who cultivate these memories within themselves. These are like the memories of a community that have existed through the oral traditions that remains untouched even in the violent conditions of slavery. Schuman and Scott (1989) define collective memory as the shared memories of a small or large group, that are transmitted and maintained through group narratives and public commemoration. Their idea highlights the role of social practices

in preserving a sense of collective identity. To support his own analysis of cultural memory and trauma, Eyerman (2004, p. 65) cites this definition by emphasizing how collective memory, rooted in shared history, serves as a means of group cohesion in the present. Thus, this chain of memory connects Hiram with Harriet, acting like communication between people who bear the same pain through a language without words. This chain not only connected him to his mother and aunt but also brought him into the power of memory and healing, crossing the veil of forgetfulness and the separation from the roots.

Moreover, his ancestors' stories help Hiram to unite his twoness as the way to heal himself and others. Hiram demonstrates the tension between being the son of a plantation owner and being a slave in the system. He has to fight against society, seeing him as not being his own person but, at the same time, not being accepted as a true black person; his consciousness is constantly divided. But when he began to listen and collect stories from the Underground and people in the community, he slowly merged his two identities together and used them as a power to help others. His decision to lead a mission to move the oppressed reflects his choice not to be a product of silence but to be a voice of resistance. His twoness is also reflected through the power of conduction, a journey across the borders between the real and spiritual worlds. Hiram uses this gift to form his two identities and acts as a bridge connecting the marginalized to freedom.

Significantly, Hiram's magic power of conduction is comparable to the second sight that is not just a physical version but a glimpse into the hidden dimensions of the suffering and collective identity of the oppressed. Hiram's ability to tap into the feelings and histories of others makes him more than just a survivor, but a bearer and perpetuator of the collective memory of Black people. The remarkable event that reflects the second sight is when Hiram sees the image of his mother in his memory while he conducts. This magical power takes him to a new world. This vision connects him to his deepest feelings and confirms his own spiritual identity.

Though he is separated from his mother as a child, his memories of her symbolize resilience and love, and they deepen his connection to his African heritage. This connection gives him a sense of identity rooted in a history that, though painful, is marked by dignity and strength. During his stay in the pit, Hiram learns a seemingly straightforward but crucial aspect about his magical abilities: they are connected to memory, particularly his mother's memories:

> Maybe the power was in some way related to the block in my memory, and to unlock one was, perhaps, to unlock the other. And so in those dark and timeless hours in the pit, it became my ritual to reconstruct everything I had heard of her and all that I had seen of her in those moments down in the Goose. Rose of the kindest heart. Rose, sister of Emma. Rose the beautiful. Rose the silent. Rose the Water Dancer. (Coates, 2019, p. 147)

When Hiram shows Sophia how spiritual conduction operates, she reveals that it's like dancing, similar to the story of Hiram's grandmother, Santi Bess, "*It's like dancing. Ain't that what you said? It's what Santi Bess done. She ain't walk into no water. She danced, and she passed the dance on to you*" (p. 329). When you remember, the power of memory turns into a way to fight back against oppressive forces. Hiram learns that his ancestors' memories are more than just ghosts of the past; they give him power and knowledge. He can get back some of the freedom and personality he lost when he was slave by interacting with these memories.

In *The Water Dancer,* the oral traditions are not just a literary technique but crucial tools for preserving marginalized memories erased from mainstream history, constructing double consciousness and the identities of the oppressed, and healing transgenerational trauma. The protagonist is presented as a conduit between past, present, and future since his ability to narrate and regain stories connects him to the memory of ancestors. Moreover, Hiram's second sight enables him to perceive the world through both the external gaze of oppression and internal experience. The role of oral

traditions is illustrated in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* as well, as it is at the core of reshaping the consciousness and healing the wounds of the marginalized. Both novels are the reaffirmation of spiritual, emotional, and cultural identity. Jojo and Hiram are able to assert their presence in a society and reclaim their narratives that often seek to silence them because they are able to embrace and recognize their identity. By interweaving personal and communal histories, these stories value the past, and they offer a foundation from which to imagine new paths forward and find their voice for the future generations.

Thus, both *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Water Dancer* illustrate how oral traditions serve as a crucial tool for healing intergenerational wounds by empowering Black identity and reclaiming silenced histories across generations. The act of storytelling in *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* particularly through Pop's memories of Richie's unjust death, becomes both a personal gesture of love and protection and a testimony to historical violence. The wound of Pop's past that was transmitted to Jojo becomes an emotional compass and moral that shapes him into a protector of African American identity, linking the past trauma with the resistance of the present. The younger generation, like Jojo, finds purpose and strength in carrying forward that memory and bearing witness with intention, while the healing in the generation of ancestors lies in the act of remembrance itself.

However, *The Water Dancer* presents a different version of healing and ancestral trauma. Mainstream historical records have yet to resolve and erase the pain of Hiram's mother and other ancestors who lost their lives in slavery. But through the magical power of conduction, which is powerful through storytelling, love, and memory, Hiram is enabled to be a guide who carries the hope of the enslaved. Despite the incomplete healing of his ancestors' wounds, the protagonist's actions acknowledge their suffering and pain. The conduction symbolizes not only physical liberation but also a spiritual inheritance of hope and resistance. Thus, a counter-historical force is embodied by Hiram, as he builds a small h "history" from below—one rooted in oral transmission, lived experience, and memory, not in official archives.

Both literatures demonstrate that oral traditions are more than cultural transmission; they are metamorphic tools of resistance and survival. Both Jojo and Hiram enable to conversion of memory and trauma into legacy and the transmission of not only the stories of suffering but also stories of spiritual continuities, defiance, and strength. By doing so, both protagonists lay the foundation for future generations to find dignity, identity, and the courage to rewrite history according to their own terms.

In conclusion, the site of memory in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is a haunted site, especially by Richie, the spirit of the boy who was killed in Parchman. This spirit cannot rest in peace, as the truth is still unspoken. In contrast, in *The Water Dancer*, painful memories can become a mobilizing power if we accept and use them correctly. Ward highlights the familial relationships between Jojo, Pop, and Richie, which demonstrate the transmission of memories through personal and emotional channels. However, Hiram's personal story fits into broader historical accounts, such as the Underground Railroad movement, which emphasizes "political memory." Thus, both novels present ancestral supernatural stories as the space of healing trauma memories and pain that African people face. Whether it’s racism, family separation, or state violence, these spaces are not just “physical spaces” but “emotional and spiritual spaces” that connect the past, present, and future.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research has examined how oral traditions in Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) and Coates's *The Water Dancer* (2019) serve as powerful literary tools for constructing African American identity through W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of the double consciousness framework. The role of ancestral memory and storytelling in empowering the main characters, Jojo and Hiram, to reconcile the internal conflict between the suppressed Black cultural heritage and the white-dominated societal norms is central to both novels. Both protagonists gradually construct a hybrid identity—a synthesis of inherited cultural memory that enables resistance and transformation and lived experience within systemic oppression through supernatural connections, familial stories, and spiritual encounters.

Firstly, Jojo's identity is shaped by his merging role as a spiritual guardian, one who preserves and protects cultural memory within his community and family. Jojo, as a boy forced into premature maturity, assumes the emotional burden of taking care of his sister while absorbing the painful memories yet empowering stories from Richie and Pop. He is enabled to unlock the veil of historical erasure through his exposure to Pop's confession and his communication with the ghost of Richie. Jojo finally becomes a guardian of collective memory, whose second sight is embedded in emotional inheritance and diasporic wisdom because of his ability to relate with ancestral trauma and reconcile between the material and spiritual worlds.

On the contrary, Hiram's identity in *The Water Dancer* is transformed to an activist. His hybrid birth positions him at the intersection of two worlds, as he was born to an enslaved Black woman and a white slaveholder. Hiram's fragmented memory initially faded away; however, he gradually gained purpose and clarity through the oral narratives of Harriet Tubman and other freedom seekers. His supernatural power of conduction becomes a metaphor for directing toward communal liberation and cultural

memory. Hiram reclaims agency by transforming from a passive witness of oppression into a liberator, using memory as a tool for empowerment and mobility.

The protagonists' roles correspond with Du Bois's concept of double consciousness and also move beyond it. Both Jojo and Hiram develop their self-dual awareness not as a space of permanent fracture but as a foundation for resistance. Their hybrid identities enable them to relate critically with the cultural legacy that empowers them and the world that oppresses them.

In addition, the analysis reveals that oral traditions serve as a powerful mechanism for preserving African cultural heritage, empowering the oppressed, and healing the intergenerational wound. The voices of ancestors, the narrations of ghosts, and the ancestral storytelling in both novels are not merely narrative devices but communal rituals that retell silenced history. According to Hirsch (2008), "postmemory" is the transmission of trauma across generations, aligning with these ancestral stories, which function as imaginative and affective means. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* Pop's recounting of Richie's tragic death illustrates both a cultural grounding and an emotional reckoning, allowing Jojo to become a memory-bearer. Similarly, for Hiram in *The Water Dancer,* a collective identity that was denied by historical erasure is reclaimed through the stories from Harriet Tubman and other who were enslaved, connecting him to an ancestral lineage of survival and strength.

The role of the recovery of memory and storytelling as crucial tools for strengthening ancestral connections and cultural transmission directly relates to these scholarly perspectives. Mellis (2019) highlights that through African cosmology and conjuring traditions, Ward reclaims African identity and positions oral storytelling as a tool through which cultural roots are passed on and preserved. This relates to the idea of the argument that oral traditions not only resist dominant historical narratives but also serve as ways through which intergenerational knowledge passes. This research also builds on Mellis's insights by focusing on how oral traditions foster the protagonist's internal reconciliation, linking personal trauma with collective memory through Du Bois's double consciousness framework.

Similarly, in *The Water Dancer,* recovered memory and oral traditions also play a crucial role in connecting the protagonist to his ancestral roots. Hiram's supernatural power of conduction can be activated through storytelling and emotional memory, especially when he learns about his ancestors' narratives. These supernatural and oral transmissions serve as cultural channels that enable him to reclaim agency and awaken his hybrid identity. Through the act of narrating and remembering the past—an act that enters the realm of cultural empowerment and transmits personal healing—this act leads to Hiram's transformation, like the character Jojo. Both novels thus demonstrate that oral traditions are not just a literary tool but a mechanism for transmitting ancestral knowledge across generations, restoring identity, and preserving history.

In both *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Water Dancer,* a powerful source of empowerment and healing for characters who have endured generational and historical oppression is illustrated through the act of recovering silenced memories. By listening to Pop's painful memories and the ghost of Richie, whose story embodies the racial injustices erased by dominant historical records, Jojo is enabled to gain spiritual clarity and emotional strength. He transforms from a passive observer of suffering into an active bearer of cultural memory by carrying these witnesses to these truths. Initially, his double consciousness is marked by internal conflict, but as he learns to value the dignity and resilience of his ancestors rather than take the distorted view imposed by a white-dominant society, it evolves into a grounded sense of purpose.

In *The Water Dancer,* Hiram's journey toward healing also starts when he accepts the legacy of slavery embedded in his identity and faces the trauma of being separated from his mother. The stories of his ancestors awaken his sense of purpose and belonging. Emotional and ancestral memories become a source of his supernatural gift, conduction as both a symbolic and literal expression of freedom. Stephens (2021) supports this notion by arguing that conduction is more than a magical element; it embodies emotional reality and cultural truths, enabling Hiram to reclaim control of his narrative. The protagonist not only discovers his past again but also gains power to act as a liberator for others through these inherited gifts and shared narratives. So, in both

novels, Ward and Coates use oral traditions as a device to retell historical truths and transform that truth into a force of renewed identity, resistance, and healing.

Lastly, both *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Water Dancer* demonstrate imagined supernatural spaces where the legacy of slavery is retold and transformed. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* the ghost of Richie becomes a guide for the living to confront hidden historical violence and symbolizes the unresolved trauma of Black history more than a haunting presence. Cucarella-Ramon (2022) also notes that Ward employs the ghost much like Morrison uses Beloved to create a space where the past is retold not merely to represent trauma, allowing characters like Jojo to heal, witness, and listen. The presence of the ghost becomes a spiritual and literary mechanism for reclaiming silenced voices and engaging with ancestral pain. Similarly, Coates's *The Water Dancer* also provides this spiritual memory idea through the supernatural power of conduction. Through the lens of liberation and memory, this power is not merely fantastical but also reimagines the history of slavery and suppressed cultural knowledge. This imagined space becomes a metaphysical realm where historical loss can be transformed into liberation and Black agency can be exercised.

Both novels present alternative spaces of liberation beyond the constraints of racialized institutions and historical archives through these supernatural elements. Ancestral voices, memories, and ghosts that populate these imagined realms offer not only healing from intergenerational pains but also a radical redefinition of Black identity. Slavery is reinterpreted and retold as the beginning of rebirth, recovery, and resistance; it is no longer a static condition of dehumanization.

In conclusion, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Water Dancer* powerfully illustrate how oral traditions serve as transformative tools for constructing African American identity. Both Jojo and Hiram reconcile internal conflicts that occurred from cultural erasure and systemic racism, ultimately constructing hybrid identities rooted in cultural resilience and historical trauma through Du Bois's double consciousness framework. Ward and Coates present employ the oral traditions as empowerment, resistance, and active agents of healing, not only as preservers of suppressed histories. Each

protagonist, Jojo as a spiritual guardian and Hiram as an activist, embodies the power of ancestral wisdom to reclaim agency and voice. Moreover, in both novels, the imagined supernatural spaces provide alternative realms where the legacy of slavery is retold, empowering the protagonists to move from fragmentation and silence toward liberation and remembrance. Thus, the authors challenge dominant narratives by using Black voice and memory, demonstrating cultural and literary spaces in which historical wounds become the foundation for future transformation, communal strength, and renewed identity.

Suggestions for Further Studies

The future study could further compare and contrast other novels that use the concept of “double consciousness” to provide a broader perspective of identity formation within the African American community. Moreover. It would also be interesting to research comparative studies between African American literature and literature from other regional postcolonial contexts to analyze how identity construction plays out in each context. Integrating research approaches from sociology to psychology may help us gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of double consciousness in the daily lives of African Americans.

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