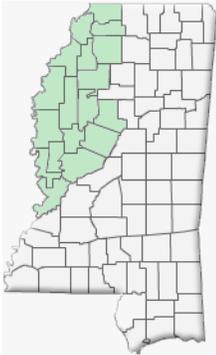


## *Sing, Unburied, Sing* by Jesmyn Ward

### The Locations of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*



(Right) Here is a map showing the two main places where the story takes place. Bois Sauvage (DeLisle in real life, and where Jesmyn Ward grew up), and Parchman Penitentiary. It is approximately a 5 hour drive to get from DeLisle to Parchman.

(Left) Parchman is located in the delta region.

## The Supernatural

### Gris-Gris

There are many supernatural elements in Jesmyn Ward's book, which takes place in the delta region of Mississippi. One form of the supernatural, or magic, present in the story is gris-gris.

*gris-gris*  
(grē'-grē)

The use of charms and amulets in voodoo to ward off evil spirits and bad luck. Practice originated in Africa and the Caribbean. Strongly based in New Orleans.

The word can be traced back to both its African and French roots. It is derived from the African word *juju* (fetish) and the French *joujou* (doll or play-thing). To this day there are still gris-gris doctors in the Cajun and Creole areas of Mississippi and Louisiana.

Gris-Gris is meant to represent the self.

### Voodoo

Voodoo is more than dolls with pins. It is a set of spiritual folkway traditions based in West and Central Africa. The sacred language of voodoo is Louisiana Creole French. Voodoo is rooted in the belief of spirit and ancestor worship that was practiced by slaves brought over from Africa. The reason voodoo thrived in the Delta area of Mississippi is because a larger percentage of enslaved families were kept together. The tunes of voodoo songs were heavily influenced by Catholic symbols and rituals.

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Mam would likely have been a Voodoo Queen.

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Examples of the supernatural influencing the story:

Jojo reaches for the gris-gris his grandfather gave him when they are pulled over.  
“I feel Pop’s bad in my shorts, and I reach for it. Figure if I could feel the tooth, the feather, the note, maybe I could feel those things running through me. Maybe I wouldn’t cry. Maybe my heart wouldn’t feel like it was a bird, ricocheted off a car midflight, stunned and reeling” (170).

Richie is talking about his home.

“Home is about the earth. Whether the earth opens up to you. Whether it pull you so close the space between you and it melt and y’all one and it beats you like your heart. Same time” (182-3).

Mam mentions some voodoo saints when she asks Leoni to help her pass on.

“I done did everything I could. Brewed all the herbs and medicines. Opened myself to the *mystère*. For Saint Jude, for Marie Laveau, for Loko” (214).

## Animal Symbolology

Ward has a certain preponderance with natural elements, and uses natural symbolology throughout her writing. Below are animals that have historical/mythological importance and enrich the narrative through allusion.

**Cranes:** *Pop* “They a sign of luck when you see them, mean everything is in balance, that it’s raining good and there’s fish and there’s things squirming under the marsh mud, that the bayou grass going to be green soon. They a sign of life” (213).

According to one source, “Greek and Roman myth tended to portray the dance of cranes as a love of joy and a celebration of life. The crane was usually considered to be a bird of Apollo, the sun god, who heralded in Spring and light. Throughout all of Asia, the crane has been a symbol of happiness and eternal youth... The powerful wings of the crane were believed to be able to convey souls up to paradise and to carry people to higher levels of spiritual enlightenment” (Hampton Roads Morning of Hope).

*Jojo* “A crane cuts the air, gray and pink-kneed, overhead. It doesn’t squawk or call. It says nothing” (251).

Interestingly enough, the crane appears right before the most difficult section of the book, where we learn about the details of Blue and Richie’s deaths. Why would Ward choose to introduce the crane at such a pivotal moment?

**Snake:** *Richie* “It’s like a snake that sheds its skin. The outside look different when the scales change, but the inside always the same” (172).

The snake is a deep-seated image for the devil, deftly paralleled with Parchman and racial tension in Mississippi. Ward uses the snake as a critique of the social structure, implying that racial oppression exists today.

*Leonie* “[Jojo]’s looking at me like I’m a water moccasin and I just bit him, just sank my teeth into the bone of his ankle, bit it to swelling. Like he would step on my head, crush my skull, stomp me into red mud until I wasn’t nothing but bone and skin and mud oozing in my slits” (209).

This is an interesting reversal of Biblical imagery. In Genesis, God puts “enmity between [the serpent] and the woman” and says that “[the woman’s offspring] shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15). Here we see Leonie, the woman, portrayed as the snake, and her own offspring crushing her head.

Other natural images: Oysters, mollusks, crawdads, raccoons, armadillos, opossums, domestic animals, termites, vultures, hunting dogs, sharks, dolphins, a wild boar, etc.

## Plant Properties

Not only does Ward use zoomorphic imagery, but she displays great knowledge of the botanical world and its remedial uses for men and women.

*Leonie* “I wonder if I pull her hand to my nose and sniff, if I can smell all the offerings she done placed on her altar over the years, done used to heal: strings of peppers, potatoes, yams, cattail, spider lily, Spanish needle, sweet bedstraw, and wild okra. All the green of the earth in her hands” (214-215).

Below is a list of herbs mentioned in the book and potential healing properties:

**Okra:** *may* help with diabetes, protect the heart, aid cancer prevention, promote digestion, improve vision, reduce birth defects during pregnancy, and improve skin health (Stylecraze).

**Milkweed:** “Milkweed has long history of usage, and a lot of what we know about it today comes from Native Americans. The plant has been known to help with the following aspects:

- **Skin:** Milkweed can promote healing of warts and **ringworm**. It can be also used against snake bites on certain cases.
- **Lungs:** Milkweed’s reputation largely lies in its ability to help with lung conditions. It may help relax the bronchioles, reduce spasms and liquefy the mucus in the lungs. As such, it’s used to help various breathing conditions such as asthma, **bronchitis**, pleurisy and tuberculosis.
- **Stomach:** Digestive problems such as diarrhea and constipation may be managed with milkweed.
- **Other uses:** Consuming milkweed may help bring down your temperature when you have a fever. Snow blindness, sore muscles and **rheumatism** may also be alleviated using milkweed.
- Furthermore, planting milkweed in your garden can benefit insects, such as the monarch butterfly. It also attracts buckeyes, bumblebees, eastern tiger swallowtails and honeybees” (Mercola).

**Cow parsnip:** *Mam* “You can use the young leaves like celery when you cook, but the roots is more useful. You can make a decoction for cold and flu. And if you make them into a poultice,

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you can ease and heal bruises, arthritis, and boils” (102). Visit Wild Rose College link below for more information.

**Pigweed:** *Mam* “Ain’t good for any medicine, really, but you can cook with it, use it like you use spinach. Got a lot of vitamins in it, so it’s good for you. Your daddy like it sauteed with his rice, and he say his mama used to make bread with the ground-up seeds” (103).

According to Naturalmedicinalherbs.net, “A tea made from [pigweed] leaves is astringent. It is used in the treatment of profuse menstruation, intestinal bleeding, diarrhoea etc. An infusion has been used to treat hoarseness.”

**Wormseed:** *Leonie* “Good for getting rid of worms if you use it like seasoning in food” (103).

Sources: <http://hamptonroadssos-hope.org/moh/crane.htm>  
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