

# *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

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## **Abstract**

Jesmyn Ward’s 2017 novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is about a teenaged boy, Jojo, and his family traveling to Parchman Prison to pick up his father. Along the trip, the narrative is interwoven with different family perspectives and memories of the past. This unit is drawn from the 2022 TIP Seminar Black Visual Culture, uses *Sing* as the anchor text, and explores its intersection with Black boyhood, the American South, incarceration, grief, and family. The unit draws on poetry, film, and informational texts, and asks students to write their own poetry and film analysis. The unit relies on student-centered discussion and provides several ways for students to verbally discuss the text. The culminating assessment is a comparative essay on the film *Moonlight* and the novel, which includes a critical analysis of a scene. This culminating assessment also asks students to create a collage as their own piece of visual art to accompany their analysis.

## **Keywords**

*Sing, Unburied Sing* • American South • *Moonlight* • Parchman Prison • Mississippi Delta • American literature • Natasha Tretheway • Ekphrastic poetry • Found poetry • Film analysis • English Language Arts • High school English

“Instead of relying on mainstream, corporate media to endlessly and mindlessly recirculate images of Black suffering—or Black joy, for matter—there should be a space for Black people to contribute to this visual narrative on our own terms, in service of our own needs.” - Roxanne Gay

## **Unit Content**

### **Introduction**

This unit uses Jesmyn Ward’s novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* as the anchor text. The unit explores racism, family, the carceral system, addiction, and other issues as depicted by several different contemporary Black Southern authors, poets, and other artists. It is intended for a high school English class and could be used for grades 10-12. The justification for this unit is simply that Black lives matter and are worthy of analysis and study. Ward tells *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and her other stories because,

I’ve always wanted to write black characters who are multidimensional, who are complicated, who are sympathetic, who have soul...part of what was really motivating me to do that was because I had encountered so many people who thought that the people that I wrote about weren’t anything like that. They totally discounted their humanity and complexity. That really made me very angry. (Elliot)

There will be limitations to this unit and its exploration of the Black lives centered in the

novel, as I, the author, am a white woman. My goal is to introduce new, exciting, relevant content and Black voices to my students through this unit and to facilitate the elevation of my students' analysis and commentary.

*Sing, Unburied, Sing*, winner of the 2017 National Book Award, is many things: a road trip novel, bildungsroman, a ghost story, and more. The novel is about a mother, Leonie's, trip to Parchman Prison from the fictional Bois Sauvage, MS, to pick up her boyfriend and the father of her children, Michael. The main character of the novel is thirteen-year-old Jojo, Leonie's oldest son and brother to three year old Kayla. Jojo and Kayla are primarily raised by Leonie's parents, Mam and Pop (River), because Leonie is traumatized after the killing of her brother, Given, and is addicted to drugs; this disintegrates the mother-son bond between Leonie and Jojo. The journey to collect Michael is interwoven with Pop's stories about his own time as a boy at Parchman, during which he bonded with another boy, Richie. There is a layer of the supernatural, as Mam and Jojo have voodoo and hoodoo powers, and both Richie and Given appear to Jojo

and Leonie, respectively, as ghosts. Leonie, Jojo, and Richie all serve as narrators for different parts of the text.

My goal for students is always to make connections between our anchor texts, themselves, the world, and other informational and fictional texts. This unit uses several different supplementary texts to help students draw meaning from the novel. Students will read historical information about Parchman farm and also explore Ward's other autobiographical works to make connections between the past and the present depicted in the novel. Students will read and write ekphrastic poetry in response to photos of Parchman farm and depictions of Black boyhood. The unit culminates in a viewing and analysis of the movie "Moonlight."

### ***Essential Questions and Enduring Understandings***

- In what ways does the past stay with us?
- How do external factors shape how we grow up?
- How do different authors and artists depict the South? Being Black in the South?
  
- The generational trauma of racism
- The legacy of mass incarceration
- The intricacies of family relationships

### **Context for the Novel**

Jesmyn Ward is the author of several other books, including her memoir *Men We Reaped*, and the 2011 National Book Award-winning *Salvage the Bones*, about Hurricane Katrina. Ward's works are centered around the South, specifically the Mississippi delta area in which she grew up and lives. Ward has said that her novels and characters are, "...about how history bears in the present," and she asks, "How does the past bear fruit? And why are we so often blind to it?" (Ward). This idea is seen in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, her fourth book, as Pop, Leonie, Richie, and Michael's pasts all influence Jojo and Kayla's present.

Another bit of context for the novel is Ward's memoir *Men We Reaped*. In it, she tells of five young men from her hometown who died young, one being her cousin, and another her brother, Joshua, who was killed by a drunk driver when he was nineteen and she was twenty-three. Although I have not come across explicit mentions of this in interviews with Ward, to me as a reader, it is impossible not to draw a connection between Ward's struggle after Joshua's death and the depths Leonie sinks to in part because of the death of her fictional brother.

Much of the novel indirectly takes place at Parchman Prison in Mississippi through Pop and Richie's recollections and retellings. Founded in the late 1800s, Parchman grew because of convict leasing, in which jam-packed prisons would loan inmates to farms to work (Oshinsky

35). Leased convicts lived in squalid and inhumane conditions, and countless Black men were killed in these arrangements (Oshinsky 78). Although Parchman more closely resembles a farm rather than prison, convicts, called gunmen, worked under prisoner trustees who were armed and emboldened to shoot convicts who try to escape (Oshinsky 145). Today, Parchman houses just over 4,500 inmates and has been the defendant of several lawsuits alleging inhumane conditions.

### **Formative Assessments**

This unit calls on students to make connections between and among the novel, their lives, informational texts, and forms of visual art. The formative assessments are used to check for understanding and to help students make literary connections.

The unit uses a lot of poetry to help students succinctly respond to the text and for the teacher to check for understanding of the main ideas of the text. Two of the major types of poetry are Ekphrastic poetry and an unusual form called the Golden Shovel. An Ekphrastic poem is a vivid written description of a piece of art or other work (Ekphrasis). The Golden Shovel is similar in that it is “after” another existing piece, but in a Golden Shovel, the poet selects a line from one text and uses that line as the “backbone” of a new poem, which can be thematically related or not (Brewer). Ekphrastic poetry can be used with any image, but the unit calls for it to be used in direct response to Carrie May Weems’s photo “Blue Black Boy,” as a response to the boy characters in *Sing* and *Moonlight*, and also as a response to photographs of Parchman farm. Ekphrastic poetry allows the student/poet to, “...amplify and expand” the original image’s meaning and to infuse their own narrative into the image.

When introducing Ekphrastic poetry, this unit draws on Natasha Trethewey’s ekphrastic poetry on Spanish casta paintings and on a photograph of Ship Island after Hurricane Katrina. Of Trethewey’s poem “Time and Space”, William Cunningham says that she seeks to answer the question, “How do you get there?” Cunningham writes, “Trethewey responds to this question by turning the camera on the readers of the poem and setting up a call-and-response, where she re-visions a journey through the southern landscape. Her poem says, assertively, that the answer to that question can only be found if she holds the camera...” Similarly, the student as poet holds the camera on the images of boyhood and Parchman using their knowledge gained from examples, informational texts, and the novel, as well as their own experiences.

While the ekphrastic poetry calls for students to insert their voice, the Golden Shovel as it is used here asks students to do a more careful character study of Leonie. When I re-read the “Joshua Adam Dedeaux” chapter from *Men We Reaped* immediately after re-reading *Sing*, I was struck by some of the plot similarities and language between Leonie and Given and Ward and Joshua. Students will select a line or phrase from the chapter on Joshua and construct their poem around Leonie’s character.

Student-centered discussions are used here for a few different purposes. The ultimate goal is to help students gain understanding and dig deeper into a text together. As well, students should work to prepare for the type of work required of them in a college English course. Discussion relies on asking thought-provoking, open questions, and using text evidence to make inferences and meaning. While my goal is to have a discussion with me as the teacher as just a member and not the driving force, there are several modifications teachers can use to scaffold up to entirely student-generated discussion. One method I have used to gamify discussion and help students build positive discussion behaviors is from the Institute of Play: a “Socratic Smackdown”. In it, students are in teams, and the teacher has a “scorecard” to assign and take away points for positive and negative discussion behaviors, like adding evidence and interrupting. Students not actively discussing complete a “coaching card” to offer feedback to their classmates, which is something that I have used even when not using the Socratic Smackdown method to keep students engaged, as it is not always productive to have 33 students in one discussion.

Students will write a critical analysis of a scene from a short film, “Glory at Sea,” to practice the skill that they will then use in the summative assessment for *Moonlight*. Students should watch the film once to get a sense for the plot, and then choose a scene that connects to the section theme of depictions of the American south. Once students have selected their scene, they must be able to vividly describe the action, dialogue, cinematography, sound, and mise-en-scene in order to capture the scene and analyze it for an audience of readers. Once students have taken detailed notes on the aforementioned filmmaking elements, they should write a few paragraphs of analysis connecting to their inference about what the scene is “saying” about the South, specifically, the damage wrought after Hurricane Katrina. Students will then incorporate the feedback they receive on “Glory at Sea” to their critical analysis of *Moonlight* in the analytical essay.

To assess if students have read at home, I issue short reading “quizzers”. Although I utilize audiobooks in class, time is precious, and students still need to read on their own. A quizzer is 1 question worth 5 points: 5 points if the question is right, 0 points if the question is wrong; I usually assign students one of three questions to prevent cheating, so this year, I let students answer a question they were not assigned for half credit. Every teacher has different methods of assessing home reading, but I have found quizzers speed up grading, which offers “in the moment” feedback if students are reading or not retaining what they read.

*Sing, Unburied, Sing* offers so much to analyze when it comes to figurative language, imagery, mood, symbolism, and other elements of literature, and often, this is where students have the most trouble. An exercise to help students dig deep into the author’s choices is an imagery analysis. Either students or I select a quote from the book. Students signal, embed, and copy the quote on the top third of a long sheet of paper. In the middle third, they illustrate the quote. In the bottom, they answer a series of questions about the quote: is there figurative

language, color imagery, sensory imagery? What is the mood? The tone? Does any of the imagery connect to other parts of the text? Then, ultimately, students write a few sentences about the purpose of the scene in the text. This helps students practice pointing out specific literary elements and choices the author has made.

### **Summative Assessment**

The unit culminates in an analysis of the novel and film. This analysis should draw on inferences from the book and film, including specific analysis of visual and filmmaking elements in addition to literary analysis of the novel. In both the novel and the film, none of the characters have a carefree adolescence. Richie and other real-life boys like him never got to grow up because of the racism of the South in the 1940s. Pop struggles with what happened to Richie. Jojo must care for Kayla and Mam while Leonie is absent. Chiron watches his life from a distance because of his struggles with his sexuality. As a reader and viewer, I picked up on several plot connections among all of the characters, like addicted mothers, absent fathers or father figures, and a lack of love. Students could also bring in outside connections of how the media and other outlets depict Black boys and young men.

As part of the planning stages for their written analysis, students will create a collage representing the ideas and evidence they want to include. This collage serves at least two purposes. I am curious about students being able to plan in a non-written way; I think it is an interesting exercise to incorporate found imagery in their meaning-making. I also want students to be able to create an additional visual product along with their ekphrastic poetry.

## Teaching Strategies

The teaching strategies employed here will follow a “reading schedule” or segmentation of the book. Each chunk of chapters has been organized thematically, and teachers can use them as a way to assign reading and to pair activities.

### Chapters 1-2: The Family Relationship

The book opens on Jojo’s thirteenth birthday. Readers are introduced to Pop, Mam, Jojo, Kayla, Leonie, and Richie, a boy Pop knew in Parchman. Readers meet Richie through stories Pop tells about him. In the second chapter, Leonie describes her life growing up with her parents and older brother Given. Readers also learn that Leonie sees the ghost of Given when she is high. Leonie decides to take Jojo and Kayla with her when she goes to pick up Michael. Leonie, the children, and Leonie’s friend Misty make their first stop at a gas station.

This section of the unit overviews the intricate family relationships in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Much of Leonie’s pain is because she feels that she has failed her parents, and her relationship with them is tense and resentful. Jojo and Leonie’s relationship is fraught, as Jojo does more nurturing for Kayla, and their sibling bond is tight.

This section can also include pre-reading. One strategy for pre-reading is called Windows and Mirrors. Students are presented with a set of quotes from a text or a variety of texts, and choose one quote that is a “window” (they see “through” it to a different experience), and one that is a “mirror” (it reflects their experience back on themselves). I usually post the quotes around the room and have students circulate, selecting their quotes, taking it back to their seat, and free-writing in what way the quote is a window or a mirror. We then share. I have also done this virtually, where students post one of the quotes on the Question feature of Google Classroom, students scroll through the quotes, and respond underneath. Although students do not yet know the content of the text, windows and mirrors allows them to preview it and build empathy and connection.

As students read chapters 1 and 2, they are introduced to Natasha Trethewey’s ekphrastic poems in *Thrall*. Students then learn what an ekphrastic poem is and read and discuss her poems along with the Casta paintings they respond to. Students will write their own ekphrastic poems later in the unit. At this stage, students should also read the “Joshua Adam Dedeaux” chapter from *Men We Reaped* in order to connect Ward’s real experiences and feelings with Leonie and Given and Jojo and Kayla.

### *Journal Prompts and Discussion Questions:*

- Discuss the similarities between the brother/sister relationships between Leonie/Given, Jojo/Kayla, and Ward/Joshua

### **Chapters 3-5: Depictions of the South**

Jojo narrates the second stop at a drug dealer's house. In chapter four, Leonie describes that the stop was to pick up drugs to run to Al, Michael's lawyer. Kayla becomes sick in the car and Leonie tries to use the natural remedies Mam taught her to cure her illness. Jojo does not trust this, and helps Kayla on his own. They pick up Michael from Parchman, and Richie appears to Jojo as a ghost.

When she first began writing, Ward wondered if people would want to read the kind of novels she wanted to write: novels about poor, Black Southerners (Elliot). Ward sees herself in the same lineage as Southern writers such as William Faulkner and Eudora Welty. This portion of the unit explores how Ward and others depict the American South.

Students are exposed to Trethewey's ekphrastic poetry again in this section of the unit. Students will read her poem "A Theory of Time and Space" in response to Ship Island after Hurricane Katrina. Students will also watch the short film *Glory at Sea* and write a critical analysis of a scene that draws a conclusion on the effect of Hurricane Katrina, or natural disasters more generally, on Southern people.

#### ***Journal Prompts and Discussion Questions:***

- Discuss the natural imagery in this section of the text, the poem, and the film. How is nature depicted? How is the relationship between humans and nature depicted?
- Mam explains to Jojo that there's "things that move a man. Like currents of water inside," (Ward 80). What does she mean?
- How is our understanding of Leonie and Jojo's relationship evolving? Do you feel more or less sympathetic to Leonie?

### **Chapters 6-8: Parchman Farm and Mass Incarceration**

Chapter six is told from Richie's perspective and describes more about his life in Parchman. In chapter seven, Leonie describes returning to Al's house to clean up; when they continue on the road, they are pulled over by the police and Jojo is brutally subdued by the officer. In chapter eight, Jojo is visited by River again, who says he does not know how he died, while Leonie suffers from the effects of the drugs she swallowed during the police stop.

This section is based on informational texts. Students will read an excerpt from David Oshinko's *Worse Than Slavery* to gain valuable historical context for Pop and Richie's experiences. Once students have discussed real and fictional depictions of the Farm, they will write ekphrastic poetry on an image of their choosing of Parchman farm. Students should center their poem around a narrative, but the narrative is up to them. Teachers can find images of Parchman Farm from a variety of resources and books, including *Worse than Slavery* and Alan Lomax's *Parchman Farm: Photographs and Field Recordings*. There are some images in the

Appendix. Students can preview all of the images in a gallery walk and then can select the image they would like to respond to.

### ***Journal Prompts and Discussion Questions***

- How is Richie an embodiment of Pop's past? Why do you think he has come to Jojo?
- How is white privilege highlighted in this section?

### ***Modifications:***

If time or reading level calls for it, the excerpt from *Worse Than Slavery* can be substituted with a shorter piece. There is one from The Innocence Project in the Appendix.

### **Chapters 9-12: Black Boyhood**

In chapter nine, Richie talks more about Parchman and the meaning of home. In chapter ten, the family arrives home and first visits Michael's parents, whose racism causes a physical confrontation between Michael and his father. They then return to Mam and Pop's house, where Mam asks Leonie to help her die. In chapter eleven, Jojo tries to adjust to Michael living with them. In twelve, Richie watches the family as Leonie decides what to do about Mam's request.

At this point in the text, students should watch *Moonlight*. I provide guided notes or a theme to track when we watch films as a class, as I do not have time to show the films twice. However, students could watch the movie together with no notes and then re-watch on their own. One suggestion is for students to choose a theme, character, or other element of *Sing*, *Unburied*, *Sing* to keep track of in *Moonlight*. In addition to this, which is to be used for the final essay, students should take notes on boyhood and manhood in the film so that they can discuss it after viewing. One discussion strategy that works well with a video or film is "Save the Last Word For Me". Students are given one or more questions to respond to with evidence. This could even be something as simple as a favorite or memorable scene. Then, they are in groups of 4-5; one student is chosen to start by sharing their response to the original question with no extra elaboration. Then, the group members take turns responding to the student response or the original question. Once all group members have gone, the student that started the discussion can elaborate on their original response or what the group members have said. This strategy ensures that everyone shares, and students can practice responding to each other.

### ***Journal Prompts and Discussion Questions:***

- How is the novel a "coming of age" for Jojo?
- Discuss different views of masculinity and what it means to be a man: River/Richie, Jojo, Michael/his father, Chiron
- How does this section reinforce or challenge Leonie's narrative of her life?

### **Chapters 13-15: Returning Home - Grief**

In the final section of the book, Jojo finds out that Pop killed Richie in Parchman. Leonie fulfills Mam's request to help her die, which leads to a violent confrontation between Leonie and Jojo. Readers learn that Leonie, overcome with her grief, leaves with Michael and occasionally returns to the house with Pop, Jojo, and Kayla. Richie finds himself unable to leave. The novel ends with Kayla speaking to the ghosts as the product of all of the different strands of her family members.

The final section of the unit, before transitioning into the longer summative assessment, explores how the characters, Ward, and artist Calida Rawles experience grief. As mentioned previously, Ward lost her brother Joshua when he was nineteen, just as the fictional Leonie lost her brother Given. In addition to exploring Leonie's character through a Golden Shovel drawing from the "Joshua" chapter of *Men We Reaped*, students will read Ward's essay on the death of her husband from COVID-19. Then, students will examine the pairing of artist Calida Rawls's painting "On the Sea of Time" and some of her other paintings. In Rawls's paintings, "Water is consistently depicted as turbulent and terrifying but also enveloping and elevating," (Solomon). Students will examine paintings dedicated to Black men killed by police and some of her more thematic paintings as well. Students can then make connections to depictions of water and nature in the novel, and discuss why Ward's essay may be paired with that specific painting.

Once the book is finished, students should discuss the whole novel and the supplemental materials presented in the unit. This leads into the summative assessment of a collage and an essay on the novel and *Moonlight*.

***Journal Prompts and Discussion Questions:***

- Discuss water imagery. What role does water play in the novel? What is water a metaphor or symbol for?
- Do you think Leonie loves her children?
- How does the family heal or remain hurt after Mam's death?
- How are the ghosts physical manifestations of the past?

## Classroom Activities

### Lesson 1: Ekphrastic Poetry

*Note: this lesson is divided into two class periods at least a week apart: the second exposure to ekphrastic poems with the Casta paintings and students writing their own poems in response to photographs of Parchman Farm.*

Objectives: SWBAT read, understand, and respond to informational text – with emphasis on comprehension, making connections among ideas and between texts with focus on textual evidence.

Materials:

- Casta Paintings (accompanied by the poems on the links)
- Selections from *Thrall* by Natasha Trethewey - [1. De Español Y De India Produce Mestiso](#) and [2. De Español Y Negra Produce Mulato](#)
- Parchman information (Appendix B)
- Parchman photos (Appendix A)

Steps:

Lesson 1 - Casta Paintings:

Time allotted: .5 class periods

1. Refresh student memory on ekphrastic poetry from the poem on Ship Island
2. Give brief background information on casta paintings (these paintings were made for the Spanish people to see the racial diversity in the “New World”; they were often organized by perceived hierarchy and purity)
3. Distribute copies of poems and project paired poetry on the board
4. Read each poem with the poetry reading protocol:
  - a. Read the poem out loud twice
  - b. Define any words students do not know; if student reading level calls for it, paraphrase each line or stanza
  - c. Mark figurative language and sensory details
5. Discuss with students:
  - a. What lines or stanzas do you notice the most with the pairing of the paintings?
  - b. What does Trethewey “read” into the artwork? How does she write a vivid description?

- c. How might Trethewey's mixed race background affect her "reading" of the artwork? (You could also introduce some of her poetry about her father and Mt. Vernon)
- d. What connections can or do you make among the paintings, the poems, and Jojo's identity?

## Lesson 2 - Parchman Farm Ekphrastic Poetry

Time allotted: 1 class period

Steps:

1. Distribute Parchman information (either the Innocence Project handout or the chapter from *Worse Than Slavery*)
2. Read information with students, in small groups, or independently
3. Debrief information with students
  - a. What did they learn?
  - b. How does the information in the reading add to Pop, Michael, and Richie's stories in the novel?
  - c. What was life like at Parchman?
4. Show students Parchman photos; as they watch, they should write down what they notice on first glance and then what they notice when looking closer
5. After reviewing and discussing all photos, students pick 1 photo to respond to with their Ekphrastic poetry
  - a. The teacher can print the selected photo and students can write their poem directly underneath the image for a display, students could write their poem on a slide with the image
  - b. Students should take care to pick a narrative perspective on the poem, using the factual information they learned from the reading and the fictional accounts from Pop and Richie
  - c. Students should also be careful to provide a vivid image of the image
6. Share poems if desired

## Lesson 2: Socratic Seminar

Objectives: SWBAT present appropriately in formal speaking situations, listen critically, and respond intelligently as individuals or in group discussions.

Time allotted: 1 class period

Student Materials:

- Discussion questions (teacher or student generated) (Appendix D)
- Novel
- Notebook

Steps:

1. Distribute discussion questions to students; *optional: give students “think time” to jot down ideas and page numbers before the discussion.*
2. If using a rubric, review the rubric with students
  - a. Idea: 10/10 - participating with text evidence; 8.5/10 - participating with paraphrased evidence or a related example; 6/10 - non-verbal participation
3. Depending on the number of students, divide students into small groups of 6-8
4. Call one group of students to the discussion circle; they can choose a question or have one assigned to them; students discuss the question freely for the allotted time
  - a. You may want to have something for students to complete as they listen to the discussion; one suggestion is “One thing I wanted to ask” and “One thing I wanted to add” from the discussion, or responding using sentence starters
5. Once students discussing have finished their question, take additional comments from the observing students or just switch groups

Modifications:

- Add a “hot seat” - one empty desk in the circle that students listening can sit in to offer their two cents to a discussion
- Gamify the discussion to reinforce positive discussion behavior using the Socratic Smackdown method in the Resources
- If students do not complete work while listening to other discussions, add an “exit ticket” to assess understanding and what students learned from the discussion; they can use the idea of the “last word” - “If I had the last word...”

### Lesson 3: Critical Analysis of a Scene

Objectives: SWBAT a basic understanding of filmmaking terms and techniques; SWBAT analyze a visual medium for larger meaning

Time allotted: 2-3 class periods

Materials:

- “Glory At Sea” (25 min)
- “Writing About Film” handout (Appendix C)
- Video resources: [13 Creative Film and Video Editing Techniques](#) , [15 Essential Camera Shots, Angles and Movements in Filmmaking](#) (you can also compile clips from current or student favorite movies)

Steps:

1. Introduce the assignment: students will learn to critically view and analyze video to make meaning from it
2. Watch the film in a first viewing
  - a. Students could take loose notes on themes, particularly nature, and striking visual imagery, or plot
  - b. Teachers may provide context for the film or filmmaker
3. Review “Writing About Film” handout and the video resources
  - a. Teachers could use Edpuzzle to upload the videos and provide targeted questions at specific moments for independent student work
  - b. Teachers could also select different moments from the film to review techniques with students
4. Watch the film again, either as a class or individually; this time, students should watch for the scene that they want to focus their critical analysis on; students should also brainstorm and take notes on the message of the short film has about people and nature; students could also focus on the relationship with the past or the impact of the past on the people in the present
5. Once students have viewed the film again and had time to brainstorm, they should come up with their thesis or argument about the purpose of their chosen scene in the film’s larger message about nature (or ghosts of the past). Students can use the “Writing About Film” handout to help them generate ideas and make meaning.
6. Once students have written their thesis, they should write the full analysis; students could outline a more formal five-paragraph essay to start, or they could just write a paragraph.
  - a. Evaluation tool: Some suggested rubric criteria are the quality of the thesis or argument, the amount and relevance of specific film terms used, citation, and the quality of written description.

7. Students can refer back to their feedback in this assignment for the final assessment; the final essay should contain some critical scene analysis of *Moonlight*.

## Resources

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“Mississippi State Penitentiary (Parchman) Photo Collections.” *MS Digital Archives*, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 2020, <https://da.mdah.ms.gov/series/parchman>. This is the official Mississippi State archive of photographs of Parchman Prison from 1914-1940 for use with the ekphrastic poems.

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<https://vimeo.com/10066407>. Short film for use with the critical scene analysis.

## **Appendix**

### **Common Core Standards for Grades 11-12 ELA**

CC.1.2: Reading Informational Text: Students read, understand, and respond to informational text – with emphasis on comprehension, making connections among ideas and between texts with focus on textual evidence.

CC.1.3: Reading Literature: Students read and respond to works of literature - with emphasis on comprehension, making connections among ideas and between texts with focus on textual evidence.

CC.1.4: Writing: Students write for different purposes and audiences. Students write clear and focused text to convey a well-defined perspective and appropriate content.

CC.1.5: Speaking and Listening: Students present appropriately in formal speaking situations, listen critically, and respond intelligently as individuals or in group discussions.

## Appendix A: Parchman Farm Photographs



Hystercine Rankin (1929–2010)  
*Parchman Prison*, 1992  
quilted fabric  
84 1/4 x 93 1/4 in.  
Collection of the  
Mississippi Museum of Art  
Purchase, with funds from  
the Searcy Fund  
2008.103

"Other quilts are based on social themes, such as "Parchman Prison," an expression of her concern for "so many kids going to prison for drugs and things." In the center of the quilt is a "prison room" of four-inch squares. Surrounding the room are rows of three-inch multicolored squares representing the guards, the prison yard, and fences" (Hystercine)



Children working in the field at Parchman Prison (Detroit).



Gregory Applewhite at Window ©  
Kim Rushing (Brook)



Male prisoners picking cotton. Credit Courtesy of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History



Parchman Penitentiary Farm. Large open field with thick brush and small bushes.  
Credit: Courtesy of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History



Parchman Penal Farm. Male prisoners hoeing in a field. Credit: Courtesy of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

## The Lasting Legacy of Parchman Farm, the Prison Modeled After a Slave Plantation

[innocenceproject.org/parchman-farm-prison-mississippi-history](https://innocenceproject.org/parchman-farm-prison-mississippi-history)

By [Innocence Staff](#) 05.29.20



Male prisoners hoeing in a field. (Image: Mississippi Department of Archives and History - Mississippi State Penitentiary [Parchman] Photo Collections, PI/PEN/P37.4)

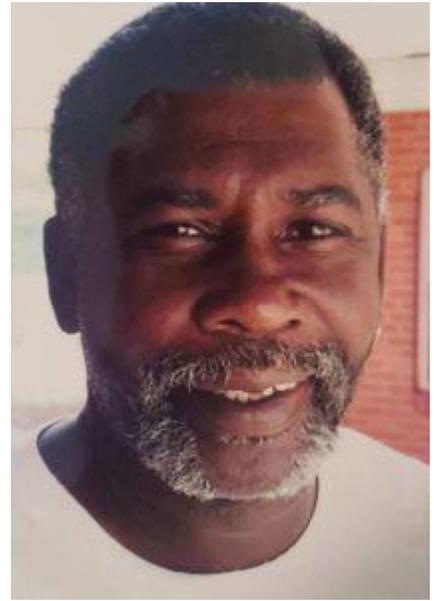
In her memoir *Men We Reaped*, Mississippi-born writer Jesmyn Ward recalls a Christmas Eve when she was 9-years-old and woke up in tears after a nightmare. In the dream, all of her uncles and father had been arrested and sent to the Mississippi State Penitentiary — an infamous prison in the Mississippi Delta, often referred to as Parchman Farm.

“When I thought about prison, that’s the prison that came to mind,” Ward said in a 2018 interview [with PBS News Hour](#). “I didn’t know much about it, but I knew it was a place I never wanted to end up. And the danger that I would end up there was a real thing, for me and for people that I know and loved.”

The danger became a reality for Levon Brooks in 1990 when he was arrested and wrongfully convicted in Noxubee County, Mississippi. And Ward's nightmare, that she would lose her uncle to Parchman prison, became reality for Brooks' 19-year-old niece, Gloria Williams. Brooks, her favorite uncle, was wrongly accused of raping and murdering a 3-year-old girl from their neighborhood.

"We knew he was innocent," Gloria says, "that he couldn't have done what they said." Brooks spent 15 years at Parchman before being exonerated.

"They just wanted anybody," Brooks' father, Richard Brooks, said in "The Innocence Files," a documentary series on Netflix. His words encapsulate what it means to be poor and black in America — an especially common reality in Mississippi, the poorest and blackest state in the country.



Courtesy of Gloria Williams.

Today, Black Mississippians account for 70% of Parchman's incarcerated population, while making up 37% of the state's population.



**"By the numbers, by all the official records, here at the confluence of history, of racism, of poverty, and economic power, this is what our lives are worth: Nothing."**

Jesmyn Ward

Author of *Men We Reaped*

## 'The Ancestral Roots of Parchman Farm'

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Parchman's history is rooted in Black suffering.

After the Civil War, the South's economy, government, and infrastructure were left in complete shambles. Desperate to restore the previous economic and social order and to control the freedom of newly emancipated African Americans, Southern states adopted criminal statutes, collectively known as "Black Codes," that sought to reproduce the conditions of slavery. These laws are also commonly known as Jim Crow laws.

"The plantation owners, as best they could, wanted Blacks to return to the same place as they had been as slaves," according to historian David Oshinsky, author of *Worse Than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice*.

In addition to denying Black people the right to vote, serve on juries, and testify against white people, African Americans could be arrested en masse for minor "offenses" such as vagrancy, mischief, loitering, breaking curfew, insulting gestures, cruel treatment to animals, keeping firearms, cohabiting with white people, and not carrying proof of employment — actions which were not considered criminal when done by white people.

In Mississippi, Texas, and other states, legislatures passed "Pig Laws," which labeled the stealing of a farm animal — or any property valued at more than \$10 — "grand larceny," punishable by five years in prison. Such laws were enforced almost exclusively against Black people, reinforcing the man-made association between Blackness and criminality. "A single instance of punishment of whites under these acts has never occurred," declared a Tennessee Black convention, "and is not expected."

While the 13th Amendment abolished slavery and involuntary servitude, it carved out a loophole that allowed for the exploitation of incarcerated people, who were then and now, disproportionately Black.

The amendment abolished slavery and involuntary, "except as punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted." Prisoners — men, women, and hundreds of children as young as 6 or 7 — were then leased to private farmers and business owners who'd previously depended on cheap labor supplied by slaves. By 1880 "at least 1 convict in 4 was an adolescent or a child — a percentage that did not diminish over time," according to Oshinsky.



For nearly a century, Black children could be bought to serve as laborers for white plantation owners throughout the South. (Image: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Detroit Publishing Company Collection, LC-D428-850)

States profited substantially from the Black Codes and prisoner leasing system. The number of state prisoners in Mississippi rose from 272 in 1874, the year the “Pig Law” was passed, to 1,072 by 1877.

“They needed a workforce,” Oshinsky wrote in *Worse Than Slavery*. “The best workforce and the cheapest workforce they could get were convicts who were being arrested for largely minor offenses and then leased out for \$9 a month.”

The system was synonymous with violence and brutality, a murderous industry considered “slavery by another name.” In 1882, for instance, nearly 1 in 6 Black prisoners died because, unlike under chattel slavery, lessees had little incentive to safeguard the lives of prisoners. “Different from chattel slavery, ‘It is to be supposed that sub-lessees [take] convicts for the purpose of making money out of them,’ wrote a prison doctor, ‘so naturally, the less food and clothing used and the more labor derived from their bodies, the more money in the pockets of the sub-lessee,’” Oshinsky wrote.

Working prisoners to literal death was so commonplace that “not a single leased convict ever lived long enough to serve a sentence of ten years or more,” he wrote.

Due to shifts in the political and economic landscapes, prisoner leasing faded in the early 20th century, but in its place rose Parchman Farm in Mississippi, Angola prison in Louisiana, and hundreds of other county camps — prisons that used racial oppression to create a supply of forced labor.

## 'Convicts on a plantation'

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In 1901, the state of Mississippi began purchasing land in the heart of the Mississippi Delta — home to some of the richest land and most successful cotton plantations in the United States, including Parchman plantation, named after the family that previously owned the land. Months after its purchase, prisoners were taken to Parchman and ordered to prepare the land for farming.

In *Worse Than Slavery*, Oshinsky chronicles the history of Parchman Farm, which he describes as “the quintessential penal farm, the closest thing to slavery that survived the civil war.” People incarcerated there labored sunup to sundown, sometimes 15 hours a day in 100 degrees Fahrenheit, on Parchman’s 20,000-acre plantation, planting, picking cotton, and plowing fields under the control of armed guards.

“Convicts dropped from exhaustion, pneumonia, malaria, frostbite, consumption, sunstroke, dysentery, gunshot wounds, and

‘shackle poisoning’ (the constant rubbing of chains and leg irons against bare flesh),” Oshinsky wrote.

For the state of Mississippi, Parchman was “a giant money machine: profitable, self-sufficient and secure,” Oshinsky observed. By the end of its second year of operation, Parchman earned \$185,000 for the state of Mississippi, the modern-day equivalent of roughly \$5 million. For those imprisoned at Parchman — 90% of whom were Black, it was legalized torture. Inmates were whipped into submission by a “leather strap, three-feet-long and six-inches-wide, known as ‘Black Annie,’ which hung from the driver’s belt.” According to Oshinsky:

*At Parchman, formal punishment meant a whipping in front of the men. It was done by the sergeant, with the victim stripped to the waist and spread-eagled on the floor. What convicts most remembered were the sounds of Black Annie: the ‘whistlin’ air, the crack on bare flesh, the convict’s painful grunt...When asked to defend Black Annie, Parchman officials did so with pride. The lash was effective punishment, they insisted, and it did not keep men from the fields. ‘You spank a fellow right,’ claimed a superintendent, ‘and he’ll be able to work on.’ Most of all, Black Annie seemed the perfect instrument of discipline in a prison populated by the wayward children of former slaves. There simply was no better way ‘of punishing [this] class of criminals,’ said Dr. A.M. M’Callum, Parchman’s first physician, ‘and keeping them at the labor required of them.’*



The original superintendent’s residence at Mississippi State Penitentiary (Wikimedia Commons).

Parchman also relied on the “trustly system.” Incarcerated people known as “trustly-shooters,” some of them convicted of the most violent crimes, were selected to intimidate and watch over others who were incarcerated. Armed with rifles, they were expected to use brutal force to maintain order. The horrors of Parchman Farm — referred to as “destination doom” in William Faulkner’s novel *The Mansion* — have been documented in works of fiction and nonfiction, including novels, plays, and blues songs, such as Bukka White’s “Parchman Farm Blues”:

*Oh listen you men, I don't mean no harm (2×)*  
*If you wanna do good, you better stay off ol' Parchman farm*  
*We got to work in the mornin', just at dawn of day (2×)*  
*Just at the settin' of the sun, that's when the work is done*



**“There were two reasons for Parchman. One was money-making and the other was racial control. They went hand in hand.”**

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David Oshinsky

Author of *Worse Than Slavery*

## ‘Breach of the peace’

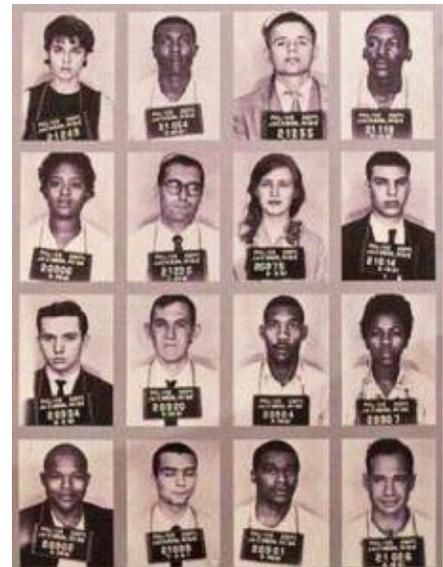
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In the summer of 1961, Freedom Riders, including Stokely Carmichael and Joan Trumpauer, were sent to Parchman for challenging the policy of segregation on public buses. While at the prison, they were kept in horrid conditions, isolated in the supermax unit on death row, and often served inedible food. Their treatment brought national attention to the prison’s dangerous, inhumane conditions. Despite criticism — and Supreme Court rulings declaring segregated interstate buses unconstitutional — Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett defended his treatment of the activists, reportedly telling Minnesota delegates, “When people come here to willfully violate the laws, you can’t expect them to be treated like they were at a tea party.”

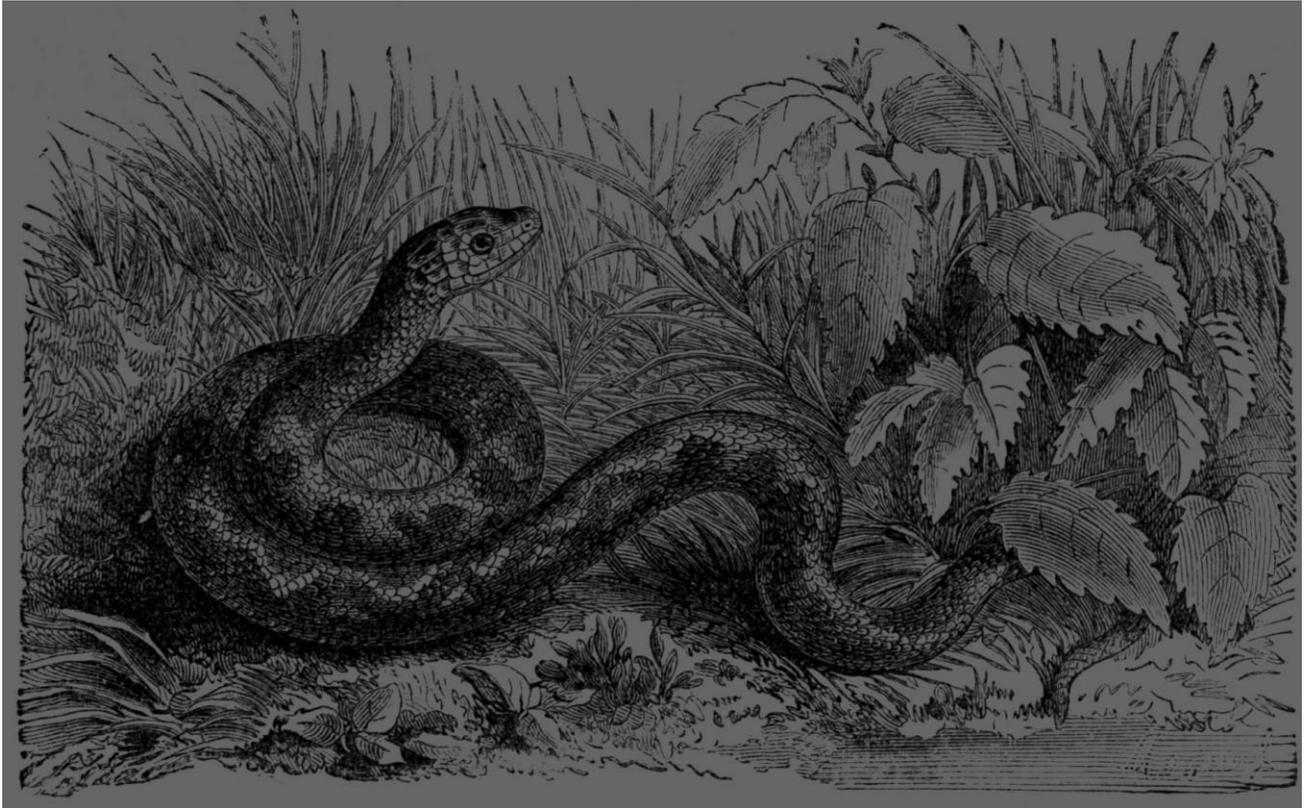
In 1971, Parchman inmates filed a class action lawsuit (*Gates v. Collier*) against the superintendent of Parchman Farm, members of the Mississippi Penitentiary Board, and the governor, arguing that “deplorable conditions and practices” violated the prisoners’ civil rights. When federal judge William C. Keady inspected the facility he found an “institution in shambles, marked by violence and neglect,” wrote Oshinsky. “The camps were laced with open ditches, holding raw sewage and medical waste. Rats scurried along the floors. Electrical wiring was frayed and exposed; broken windowpanes were stuffed with rags to keep out the cold ... he saw filthy bathrooms, rotting mattresses, polluted water supplies and kitchens overrun with insects, rodents and the stench of decay.”

After several visits, Keady declared that Parchman was “an affront to modern standards of decency” and the living conditions were “unfit for human habitation.” He ordered an immediate end to the trusty system and all other

unconstitutional conditions and practices, including the beating and shooting of prisoners; the deprivation of mattresses, hygienic materials and adequate food; the practice of handcuffing or otherwise binding inmates to fences, bars, or other fixtures; and the use of cattle prods to keep prisoners standing or moving, as well as several other inhumane practices. (*Gates v. Collier*)



Mug shots of some of the more than 300 Freedom Riders who were arrested in Mississippi during the summer of 1961.



**“Sometimes I think it done changed. And then I sleep and wake up, and it ain't changed none...It's like a snake that sheds its skin. The outside look different when the scales change, but the inside always the same.”**

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Jesmyn Ward

Author of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

### **‘Inside always the same’**

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Williams, who visited her uncle at Parchman during his wrongful incarceration, prays she never has to return to Parchman again.

“I can’t do it again,” she told the Innocence Project, recalling the two-hour drive there and back where she would witness men, hunched over, harvesting crops field after field. Williams said even visitors were treated poorly and subjected to invasive searches.

“They even checked the baby’s diaper,” she recalled. And, on top of that, the indescribable pain of leaving the person you love behind in that place of suffering.

Today, incarcerated people at Parchman still work in the same fields that their enslaved ancestors once plowed and tended, only the cotton has been replaced by fruits and vegetables. The fieldwork, according to Mississippi’s Department of Corrections, is supposed to address “inmate idleness.”

Parchman remains a site of forced labor, deadly violence, and unsanitary conditions. Recent videos and photos have exposed inhumane conditions that match those from a century ago: Rat-infested cells without power or mattresses, unusable showers and toilets, and unidentifiable food. Nine deaths were reported in January 2020, including due to stabbings, beatings, and suicide.



Parchman. Left: a shower with damaged walls; top right: a shower with missing ceilings and knobs; bottom right: a backed up shower drain. One building had a single working shower for more than 50 inmates. (Parchman 2019 Health Inspection Report).

These stories are not limited to Parchman. Across the United States, where there are more than two million incarcerated people — the overwhelmingly majority poor and disproportionately Black and brown — human beings labelled “convicts” and “inmates” routinely live and die in inhumane conditions. In 2019, the U.S. Department of Justice’s Civil Rights Division released a 53-page report on Alabama’s men’s prisons. Page after page detailed accounts of beatings, murders, sexual assaults, and drug overdoses.

In May 2016, for example, officers found a strangled prisoner “lying face down in his bed ... his face was flattened, indicating that he had been dead for quite some time. At some point, the assailants appeared to have urinated on the victim.”

Brutal conditions also exist in America’s jails, where people presumed innocent are held awaiting trial. According to a report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1,071 people died in local jails in 2016. The leading cause, suicide, accounted for nearly one-third of those deaths.

The 13th Amendment continues to permit the enslavement of prisoners, who are still required to work for little or no pay in various public and private industries. In 2010, a federal court held that “prisoners have no enforceable right to be paid for their work under the Constitution.” Yet, across the country, prison labor remains essential to running prisons and services beyond prison walls. They cook and clean, work in fields, manufacturing warehouses, and call centers, fight wildfires, do commercial laundry, make masks and hand sanitizer, sometimes for as little as two cents an hour —if anything — often under threat of punishment.

Taken together, these accounts provide a grim picture of the injustices inside, and outside, of our nation’s jails and prisons, where the vestiges of slavery live on through updated modes of state-sanctioned violence, neglect, and coerced labor. As Angela Y. Davis observes in *Are Prisons Obsolete?* “[Prison] relieves us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism and, increasingly, global capitalism.”

## Writing About Film: Terminology and Starting Prompts

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[owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject\\_specific\\_writing/writing\\_in\\_literature/writing\\_about\\_film/terminology\\_and\\_starting\\_prompts.htm](http://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/writing_in_literature/writing_about_film/terminology_and_starting_prompts.htm)

Writing about what makes a film good or bad involves a similar analytical skillset as writing about literature. However, because film is a medium that is newer and more collaborative than literature, and because film production involves very different technologies, film writing requires its own unique vocabulary. The following terminology guide is not comprehensive, but it provides a strong foundation for making sense of what you see on the screen.

### Types of Shots

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A **shot** is any continuous stretch of film occurring between cuts or edits.

The camera's point of view automatically tells you something about how a film's creators intend viewers to perceive a setting or subject. Below are terms to describe a subject's spatial relationship to the camera.

- **Close-up:** The camera is a very short distance away from the subject. This is used to depict detail. Close-ups of faces are common (usually to show an important expression or reaction), but the term also applies when the camera is very close to any body part or object.
- **Medium Shot:** The camera is a middle distance away from the subject, focusing on the subject while still conveying contextual or background information. If the subject is a person, the shot typically encompasses their head and shoulders. This is often used in dialogue scenes.
- **Long Shot:** The camera is a long distance from any identifiable subject, or is encompassing an overall view of a setting or scene. Long shots are often used at the beginning of new scenes as **establishing shots** that orient the viewer in a new setting. If the subject of the shot is a person, their whole body is usually visible.
- **High-Angle Shot:** The camera looks down on a subject. Often used to make the subject appear powerless, vulnerable, or overwhelmed by their surroundings.
- **Low-Angle Shot:** The camera looks up at a subject. Often used to make the subject appear powerful or threatening, or otherwise increase their sense of importance.
- **Reverse Shot:** The camera cuts from one shot to show the opposite view of the previous shot. This is often used in dialogue sequences to track who is speaking and put the viewer in the place of the interlocutor.
- **Point of View Shot:** The camera sees what a particular character sees.
- **Static Shot:** The camera is stationary for the entire length of the shot, performing none of the movements discussed in the next section.

- ♦ **Dynamic Shot:** At some point in the course of the shot, the camera performs one of the movements discussed in the next section.

## Camera Movement

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Dynamic shots can make use of several different types of camera movement. Below is a short list of the most common moves.

- ♦ **Zoom:** The camera stays stationary, but the lens adjusts to move the viewer closer to or farther away from the initial shot
- ♦ **Pan:** The camera stays stationary but rotates horizontally
- ♦ **Tilt:** The camera stays stationary but rotates vertically
- ♦ **Dolly Shot:** The entire camera moves to change the initial shot
- ♦ **Tracking Shot:** The camera follows a single subject or object as they/it move(s) out of the initial shot

## Shot Composition

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Many decisions go into the construction of a shot beyond the camera's position and movement.

- ♦ **Mise-en-scène:** This theory, which literally means “placing on stage,” assumes that everything that is placed before the camera was intentionally put there and can be read for meaning. Analyzing a shot for its mise-en-scène involves looking at the background setting, acting style, lighting, props, costuming, and choreography of the scene.
- ♦ **Focus:** Refers to the depth of field of a shot, or how many layers of a shot the viewer can easily perceive.
  - ◊ **Deep focus** shots make use of wide angle lenses so that the foreground, middle ground, and background of a shot can all be easily seen.
  - ◊ **Shallow focus** shots make use of narrow lenses so that only one layer of the shot can be made out. Other layers remain blurry.
  - ◊ **Linear Composition:** Shots composed largely of horizontal and vertical lines generally give the impression of stability. Shots composed largely of diagonal lines give the impression of stress, tension, or uncertainty.

## Cuts & Other Postproduction Transitions

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A **cut** is a break between two shots. After filmmakers have gathered sufficient raw film, in postproduction they choose which shots will make up the finished product, and how to best transition between them. The term “cutting” comes from the old process of physically slicing rolls of film. Much of this editing process happens digitally today, but we still use the same terminology. Below is a short list of some common types of postproduction edits.

- **Jump Cut:** A sudden or otherwise startling cut that provides a strong contrast to the previous shot; this cut violates the 30 degree rule, thereby disrupting the viewers' orientation and the shot's continuity.
- **Fade In / Out:** A shot gradually appears from a blank screen, or a shot gradually disappears into a blank screen
- **Dissolve Edit:** A transition in which the old shot fades out while the new shot fades in.
- **Montage:** Several disparate shots are overlapped in editing so that they appear on-screen at the same time or in sequence.
- **Pacing:** If a sequence makes use of a lot of cuts in a short span of time, it's considered fast-paced and usually conveys the feeling that there's a lot of action happening. On the other hand, if a shot is not broken by a cut for a long stretch of time, this can slowly build tension as the audience anxiously waits for a cut. A shift between fast- and slow-paced sequences often marks an important narrative or tonal shift.

### Starting Places for Writing on Film

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- Describe a shot, sequence, or scene that stands out to you. Sometimes just writing a good, detailed description will indicate an argument about how the filmmakers wanted us to see something in the world.
- Who are the filmmakers, and how does the film you're analyzing fit into their career? Think of the directors, writers, actors, cinematographers, musical score composers—everyone involved in the making of this film, and choose the career of one to contextualize the film in. Is it typical of their other work, or a notable break in some way?
- Is the film often considered to be part of a wider historical or filmic movement? How does it film illustrate or complicate a certain theory, style, or genre?
- When was the film made? How did that historical moment influence the production of the film? Were the filmmakers responding to a specific historic event? How does their depiction of that event encourage viewers to think of that event, and in turn of their present historical moment?
- What technology was used to create this film? Does the film innovate any new uses of camera or editing technology? If so, how did this innovation influence future filmmakers

## **Appendix D: Whole Novel Discussion Questions**

*Some questions are adapted from the publisher's "reading group" guided questions.*

Does Leonie love her children? What about her feelings and actions are most shocking to you? How does Leonie complicate the idea of motherhood?

Leonie says from the first moment she saw Michael, he "saw me. ....Saw the walking wound I was and came to be my balm" (Ward 54). Discuss how guilt, desire, taboo, defiance, and grief are at work in Michael and Leonie's connection to each other.

In what ways is the novel a ghost story? How are Richie and Given's appearances as apparitions different from each other? How do the living and the dead serve each other in the novel?

Now that we have read several of Ward's other writings, what connections do you make among them? What do you think Ward is "saying" about history, grief, the past, racism, and other topics in her works?

What do you think the title means? How is it fitting that Kayla closes the novel, telling the ghosts to "Go home" and singing to them and to Jojo?

In an interview with Bomb Magazine, Ward said of deciding to write Jojo's story, "I wanted to write about him specifically because I felt like so much of what he is struggling with in his life is about trying to understand who he is and who he might grow up to be and what the world thinks of him. Those are very private struggles yet what he's struggling against...carries the weight of history behind it" (Elliot). How do the events on the road trip help or force Jojo to understand who he is?