

**“What Do the Blues Do for You?” Relying on the Blues for
Liberating and Transcendent Space in Gayl Jones’s**

Corregidora

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Abstract: Gayle Jones is a contemporary African American woman novelist who is keenly aware of and genuinely concerned with Black women and their ability to define themselves. She knows that Black women live very complex lives and that Black women have been historically removed from the process of defining themselves. Subsequently, *Corregidora* enlightens readers about Black women's desire for their own domain, a place of refuge fled to by Black women in order to combat the social politics that lead to oppression.

Whenever Black women use oral lore, oral vernacular, ritual, and rhythmic oralities as agents in order to establish their identity, their oral narratives often house painful traces of violence and deep grief that are ongoing considering the lack of political and social redress. More specifically, for Black women in African American culture, the blues have historically been the intermediary for the discourse of and an analytical tool for many Black women's most personal concerns.¹ Accessing the blues as an oral agent for identity not only helps ensure survival in the present for Black women, but the blues enables a consolidation of processes of identity that are always more expansive than the explanation of a simple psychological determinism. In other words, when viewed through the lens of the blues, issues that address the past and present plight of the black female consciousness are synthesized. Thus, critic Jeffrey B. Ferguson's essay "A Blue Note on Black American Literary Criticism and the Blues" provides an insightful approach to viewing the blues and its complex functions in African American literature when he refers to the blues as "a valuable conduit to the past, but one that avoids the loss of contemporary relevance that so often accompanies such journeys" (700). It is perfectly understandable, then, that blues oration is the form to which Ursa Corregidora in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*² turns to in order to identify with, explain, and give shape to the secure location that she is able to create for herself.

Indeed, the spate of novels where the Black female protagonist has turned to blues as a form of personal expression and even survival is substantial. Mamie Smith Powther in Ann Petry's *The Narrows* (1955); the most popular Black female blues character in African American literature, Shug Avery, in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982); Sugar in Bernice L. McFadden's *Sugar* (2000); and even Tangy Mae in Delores Phillips' *The Darkest Child* (2005) instantly come to mind when I think of a few of these blues characters. To go on, critical discourse interrogating the blues and the role it has played as an instrument in shaping Black female identity has been extensive in the past ten years.³

The discussion for this essay is informed by Kevin E. Quashie's analysis of Black female subjects in his *Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory: (Un) becoming the Subject* (2004). In it, Quashie contends that "Black female subjects mostly materialize as figures of difference in someone else's complicated subjectivity..." (9). Jones breaks

thematic ground with this novel by writing of Black female subjectivity not often touched on in African American communities from the perspective of a Black woman: marital rape, incest, and an underlying psychosexual thread that is shared by every generation of the Corregidora women, to name some of the most intriguing topics. Certainly, it is impossible to avoid the discussion of sexual violence that the Corregidora women are subjected to, but I somewhat diverge from the topic of subjectivity. I wish to carve out what, up to this point, should be considered a rather barren critical path by focusing on Ursa's ability to appropriate the blues form and use it to deliver her to a realm beyond the grasp of patriarchal structure. Ultimately, Gayl Jones' utilization of oral structuring enables Ursa Corregidora to progress beyond the strictures of her past and immediate oppression into Ursa's own sovereign area where she has the ability to exercise her own identity. An examination of *Corregidora* is particularly appropriate in that it is fertile terrain for me to rethink the originative lives of the Corregidora women and allows me to anticipate the discussions and cultural productions that should lead up to the 40th year anniversary of *Corregidora*'s publication (1975).

In *Corregidora*, Jones creates a family legacy of remembering trauma determined and perpetuated by the family members' collective instruction about the past. Remembering becomes a collective and selective mediation for passing down the family's legacy. The Corregidora family matriarchs carry a history of brutality and slavery in their minds and bodies. In fact, it will be Ursa's responsibility to engage in a recuperative and authorial control over the past, but this can only happen once she confronts her family's bitter narrative of enslavement. Literary critic Deborah E. McDowell asserts that black women write the majority of contemporary novels about slavery. She contends that "these novels posit a female-gendered subjectivity, more complex in dimension, that dramatizes not what was *done* to slave women, but what they *did* with what was done to them" (McDowell, "Negotiating" 146). Although McDowell's discussion applies to Jones's creative project, *Corregidora* complicates the ways in which the Corregidora women attempt to recuperate their subjectivity, which reveals slavery's catastrophic effects on an individual. Consequently, much of the criticism on *Corregidora* addresses the haunting nature of slavery for the Corregidora women.⁴ In her text, Jones convincingly demonstrates what critic Hazel Carby concludes regarding the impact of

slavery on the literary imagination: "The economic and social system of slavery is thus a prehistory ... a past social condition that can explain contemporary phenomena" (Carby 126).

Corregidora begins with Ursa "falling" down the stairs after a performance as a blues singer at her job at Happy's Cafe'. She is injured at the hands of her drunken husband, Mutt. Eventually the result is her losing her unborn child and undergoing a hysterectomy. This accident and her resulting sterility, traumatic for any woman, are compounded by the injunction that the women of Ursa's family have passed down from generation to generation - bear witness by bearing generations. Thus the *Corregidora* women have a possession of a genealogy based not on blood origin but on the oral transmittance of the suffering. For Ursa *Corregidora*, the blues becomes both the political rubric that she uses in order to recollect her family's injuries and trauma and the basis for her survival and call for rectification. The opening crisis in the novel signals a movement from the *Corregidora* women's sexually commodified body and the distress that the women endure to a new and necessary form of testimony that focuses on escape and transcendence.

The family oppressor and patriarch *Corregidora* is a Portuguese slave owner in Brazil. Through Great Gram, Jones informs the reader of the imposing size of *Corregidora*. His stature is in direct correlation to the impact that he has on the lives of the generations of *Corregidora* women:

... He was a big strapping man then. His hair black and straight and greasy. He was big. He looked like one a them coal Creek Indians but if you said he looked like an Indian he'd get mad and beat you. Yea, I remember the day he took me out of the field. They had coffee there. Some places they had cane and then others cotton and tobacco like up here. (11)

Upon Brazilian emancipation in 1883, a young Ursa learned that the patriarch, *Corregidora*, burned all slave plantation records in an attempt to hide his abusive treatment of slaves. By directing Ursa to make generations to preserve the memory of their sexual abuse, Great Gram and Gram convert the *Corregidora* women's wombs into forms of documentation:

And I'm leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too. And your children got to leave evidence. And when it come time to hold up the evidence, we got to have evidence to hold up. That's why they burned all the papers, so there wouldn't be no evidence to hold up against them.

I was five years old then. (15)

In order to combat the disappearance and deletions of the history, the Corregidora women orally pass the horror story from one generation to the next.

In her *Something Akin to Freedom: the Choice of Bondage in Narratives by African American Women* (2010), Stephanie Li suggests that the Corregidora women "enshrine a legacy of victimization"⁵ Despite Li's oppositional view towards the Corregidora women's transcendence, their uncensored oral account of truth demonstrates that there is at least an attempt at resistance. Indeed, by identifying themselves with a blues-like oral construction rather than resolving to allow their histories to be erased, the Corregidora women have escaped their own objectification and are able to claim and wrestle their own identities from the grasp of the white patriarchal structure. The voices of the Corregidora women locate them in a space where they are able to continually to both repeat and reconcile the abuse, even as they accept the charge to create more witnesses.

Like a song and dance from a blues song, the rhythmic back-and-forth motion of Great Gram's rocking chair and perspiration on her palms demonstrate, through a physical enactment, the vertically oral connection of the Corregidora women. Great Gram holds on to the child's body on her lap as she recollects what waits to be said:

Great Gram sat in the rocker. I was on her lap. She told the same story over and over again. She had her hands around my waist, and I had my back to her. While she talked, I'd stare down her hands. She would fold them and then unfold them. (11)

Great Gram's ability to access her oral narrative here is consistent with Quashie's treatment of the issue of Black female subjectivity when he states that oration is an agency that "propels her through the world, often ungrateful, often tripping, but with her urge intatct..." (14). These instances of orating the past before and after school, the drowning in worn down words, all form part of this the oral legacy established by Great

Gram to hold up the "evidence" and to move towards a space beyond the humiliation, grief, and embarrassment of a past whose written pages have been burned: "It was if the words were helping her, as if the words repeated again and again could be a substitute for memory, were somehow more than the memory. As if it were only the words that kept her anger" (11). Great Gram uses these ritualistic practices in order to step outside of the injurious existence. Here, she not only goes beyond the location of her own violent history, but she has also taken to "blues orality" as a means of reaching beyond the narrative itself.

Through Great Gram, Gayl Jones uses a codified language in order to place Great Gram in the gap of African and African American language. The speech patterns used are consistent with the cadence, syntax, slang, and rhythm. The repetition of the word "Naw," which appears on the page nine times operates like a chorus. The return to the familiar sentence pattern is the quintessential blues song:

Naw, his wife didn't do that. She sleep with you herself . . . That hot
climate. Nose like a baby hawk. Naw, she couldn't do a damn thing.
Naw, she didn't give him nothing but a little sick rabbit that didn't live but
do be a day old . . . Naw, she couldn't do a dam thing. (28)

The African American Vernacular used here by Great Gram is in direct opposition to the white patriarchal structure in that its usage runs counter to the same written word that Corregidora has had burned. Great Gram's colloquial speech signifies on the white patriarchal structure as it demonstrates her refusal to be retained within the boundaries of that same structure. As Hershina Bhana Young states, "Through the orality of the blues and through Jones's use of the vernacular to write the novel, the women resist the erasure of their injuries and the ghosts that haunt them" (104). It is through expressing through their rage in vernacular and the artistic medium of the blues can movement into a space beyond the reach of phallogentric oppression can occur.

Eventually, Great Gram fashions her own act of resistance. Gram tells Ursa that Great Gram lived with Corregidora "*until she did something that made him wont to , and then she run off and had to leave me*" (79). Unable to gather the information of what happened from either Great Gram or Corregidora, Gram was left with unanswered questions, "What is it a woman can do to a man that make him hate her so bad he wont to

kill her one minute and keep thinking about her and can't get her out of his mind the next?" (173). In the interim, her daughter has taken her place as Corregidora's lover. For Ursa, the mystery of what Great Gram has done is the last memory to be unlocked:

It had to be sexual, I was thinking, it had to be something sexual that Great Gram did to Corregidora . . . In a split second I knew what it was, in a split second of hate and love I knew what it was . . . A moment of pleasure and excruciating pain at the same time, a moment of broken skin but not sexlessness, a moment just before sexlessness, a moment that stops before it breaks the skin. (184)

Because of the punishment endured by slaves for any act of rebellion, Great Gram's violent act has to be seen as a significant moment of empowerment. Great Gram's castration of Corregidora through fellatio adds a rather realistic dimension to the power of orality used by Black women in their quest for freedom and self identity.

Gayl Jones introduces Gram through Ursa by stating that she "looked tall then, because I was little . . . she wasn't no more than five feet" (23). That the white Portuguese master impregnates her and fathers Gram, locates her in a duality of sexual violence and physical oppression. Through Gram's oration to Mama, Ursa is confronted with what would become part of the depth of her relationship with Black men. The issue of emasculation is proffered in Gram's stories:

There were two alternatives, you either took one or you didn't. And if you didn't you had to suffer the consequences of not taking it. There was a woman over on the next plantation. The master shipped her husband out of bed and got in the bed with her and just as soon as he was getting ready to go in her she cut off his thing with a razor she had hid under the pillow and he bled to death, and then the next day they came and got her and her husband. They cut off her husband's penis and stuffed it in her mouth, and then they hanged her. They let him bleed to death. They made her watch and then they hanged her. (67)

From an exterior view, the reading of the emasculated Black men certainly establishes an antagonistic relationship between Black men and women that results from white male hegemony. Examining the passage a little more closely, though, we can view the woman

who is the subject of the passage as an exemplification of the ineffectiveness of the documents and rituals of the white patriarchal structure to protect Black women. Anne DuCille views slave marriage as the primary signifier of freedom and humanity when referring to marriage in William Wells Brown's novel, *Clotel*.⁶ Yet, Gram's message suggests that marriage is a state of pointlessness and defenselessness when measured against a dominant slave/master environment.

What should be observed as Gram's ability to step beyond the white patriarchal structure is her reference to the white slave owner's penis as a "thing." The animalistic treatment of the Black men and women during slavery in America is well documented.⁷ Gram is obviously a product of slavery; however, Gram turns to orality as a means of subtly reversing her place as a "non-human" being in the institution. In her *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*(1989), Catherine A. MacKinnon briefly discusses the "thingification" of women.⁸ MacKinnon's text addresses the irrelevance and the "nonpersonhood" of women who attempt to survive in a dominant male system. The reference to the white slave owner's penis as "thing", which identifies him as a man - a human-confronts notions of objectification and is rejected by Gram's execution of the word. Thus, the white slave owner in the passage, though, empowered by the dominant paradigm of slavery, is marginalized when the story is told through the words of Gram. In what should be seen as a Billie Holiday-like fashion, Gram's orality offers a unique and entitled insight to the dominant culture about Black women. Speaking within the realm of her own commodified existence, Gram's language usage enables her to indict the culture that is seemingly subjecting her to this oppression. Moreover, Gram's reference to "thing," like a blues song, hurls coded insults and conveys a yearning for freedom and a desire for her own domain.

Mama is the first of the Corregidora women not to experience the horrors of physical enslavement and Corregidora's perverse cruelties. Despite the fact that she does not experience the firsthand violence, Mama embodies all the pain and grief that has been bestowed upon her by her grandmother and mother. Earlier in the text, Mama claims to Ursa, "Songs are devils. It's your own destruction you're singing. The voice is a devil" (53). In response, Ursa mentions that Gram listens to the blues. Mama replies, "[L]istening to the blues and singing them ain't the same" (103). This difference points to

the fact that Mama is not yet comfortable to articulate her own pain. The verbal language used reflects Corregidora's abuse that is a result of his sexual exploitation and cruel actions towards Great Gram, which is movingly represented in the following passage:

He didn't send nothing but rich mens in there to me, cause he said I was his little gold pussy, his little gold piece ... But he said he didn't wont no waste on nothing black... some of us he called hisself cultivating us, and then didn't send nothing but cultivated mens to us, and we had these private rooms, you know. But some of these others, they had been three or four or five whores fucking in the same room. But then if we did something he didn't like he might put us in there and send trash into us, and then we be catching everything then. So after that, first time he just talked to me real hard, said he didn't wont no black bastard fucking me ... He was real mad. He grabbed hold of me down between my legs and said he didn't wont nothing black down there. He said if he just catch me fucking something black, they wouldn't have no pussy, and he wouldn't have none either. And then he was squeezing me all up on my pussy and then digging his hands up in there ... he was just digging all up in me till he got me where he wonted me and then he just laid me down on that big bed of his and started fucking me ... (124-125)

The central factor here is the issue of painful subjectivity and how the oration of the episode advances the movement towards liberation, for, as Quashie stresses regarding blues language that it is, "a language that not only records but also invents" (160), making imperative the point that Mama is re-telling the story as Great Gram told it to her. Ursa becomes aware that as Mama tells the story "it wasn't her that was talking, but Great Gram" (124), recognizing that the oral narrative constantly recreates the family members' identities regardless of how each experienced slavery.

The incident when Ursa and Henry "play doctor" is particularly telling as well. In a game of sexual exploration, Henry lifts up Ursa's dress, and Mama intervenes at once, yelling at Ursa that Henry "was feeling up your asshole" (42). Ursa insists that she didn't feel it, but Mama's notion of the past as evil essence overrides Ursa's experience. The incident with Henry ends in a blues song; "I bet you were fucking before I was born. /

Before you was though. / 'Ursa, what makes your hair so long?' / 'I got evil in me.' / Corregidora's evil. / Ole man, he just keep rolling" (42). Though she is not raped by the white slave owner, she still feels the remnants of the injuries of the past. Mama struggles to show meaning to the experiences of life. At first, she avoids a proper response when Ursa asks about her father when she says, "Corregidora is responsible for that part of my life. If Corregidora hadn't happened that part of my life never would have happened" (111). Mama is in the space that consists of the present, past, and future. Her life is crowded by Corregidora's story:

It was as if my mother's whole body shook with that first birth and memories and she wouldn't make others and she wouldn't give those to me, though she passed the other ones down, the monstrous ones, but she wouldn't give me her own terrible ones. . . .Not her private memory. . . . She was closed up like a fist. . . into the world, her incomplete world, full of teeth and memories, repeating never her own to me. Never her own. (103-4)

For Mama the importance of her life lies not in her experiences, but in her continuation of "their" story by bearing generations. Raised upon stories that present men as domineering rapists, Mama fears men even as she is drawn to Martin so that she can fulfill her family's charge:

But still it was like something had got into me. Like my body or something knew what it wanted even if I didn't want no man. Cause I knew I wasn't looking for none. But it like it knew it wanted you. It was like my whole body wanted you, and knew it would have you, and knew you'd be a girl. (114)

Mama's continued description of her own anxiety evidences the element of subjectivity that has become part of her existence. When discussing Martin, Mama tells Ursa how she would sit at the restaurant in which he worked:

I had to go there, had to go there and sit there and have him watch me like that. Sometimes he'd be cleaning the counter and watching me, you know how men watch you when they want something. It don't have to be to

open your legs up, though most time it is. Sometimes I think he wanted something else, and then sometimes I think that's all he wanted. (112)

Here, we can observe that Mama approaches the initially kind and patient Martin strictly through relations of objectification. Deliberately presenting herself as a sexual object, Mama is unable to speak when Martin asks for her name and is not abusive. In their primary exchange, Martin addresses Mama as "woman," a reference that is strange to her. She later explains to Ursa, "I wasn't lookin for no man, cause I didn't feel like no woman then. Sometimes even after I had you I still wouldn't feel like none" (115). Mama's acceptance of womanhood is awkward even after Ursa's birth because she remains part of the lineage of the Corregidora women. Her rejection of the word "woman" is a result of the dehumanization she feels while living under the white patriarchal structure.

A crucial turning point occurs when Ursa goes home to challenge Mama to share Mama's own story. Before returning to her family home Ursa imagines dialogue with Mutt in which she tries to make sense of her confounding childhood memories of her mother. Ursa reminisces:

I never saw my mama with a man, never ever saw her with a man. But she wasn't a virgin because of me ... when I look back, that's all I see. Desire, and loneliness. A man that left her. Still she carried their evidence, screaming, fury in her eyes, but she wouldn't give me that, not that one. Not her private memory ... She was closed up like a fist. It was her very own memory, not theirs, her very own real and terrible and lonely and dark memory. And I never saw her with a man because she wouldn't give them anything else. Nothing. And still she told me what I should do, that I should make generations. But it was almost as if she'd left him too, as if she wanted only the memory to keep for her own but not his fussy body, not the man himself. Almost as if she'd gone out to get that man to have me and then didn't need him, because they'd been telling her so often what to do. (101)

She returns to Bracktown, Kentucky, needing to make sense of her life. Ursa explains, "I have to make some kind of life for myself" to which her mother responds that she is aware of "how situations was with you and Tadpole" (111). Ursa, who is overwhelmed

by memories of the family story, wants an answer to the question: "How could she bear witness to what she'd never lived, and refuse me what she had lived?" (103). Though Ursa, has turned to the blues as the medium for her voice and freed space, she is keenly aware that her mother's story will fill the gap of confusion that Ursa currently confronts with her own interaction with men. Ultimately the mother complies and begins telling the story of Ursa Corregidora's father.

Ursa's father, Martin, "wasn't a man I met at no depot," Mama declares in her own vernacular. The exterior surface of the narrative would indicate that Mama is simply preparing to tell the truth - a truth that she knows is owed to Ursa. A more intimate reading will reveal that Mama's ancestral lore has been revised, and her control of her own words gives Mama the ability to pass the truth on to her daughter. In doing so, Mama arrives in a metaphysical territory where she is able to realize sovereignty. Quashie elegantly forwards the notion of this form of autonomy when he asserts, "This, then, is the necessary reclaiming of the viability and integrity of her physical body as well as the articulating of a Black female selfhood that encompasses nonphysical permutations" (79). Given Mama's liberated space, in the story the reader learns Mama's name - Correy. In the account of her interaction with Martin, Mama reveals her own desire for Martin and that Mama is not simply procreator for her daughter. In relating the violent act that culminates the relationship, Correy remembers saying to Martin, "'Don't hurt me' . . . I said, 'Help me Martin, but don't hurt me'" (119). Not only does Martin beat Correy, but he rips her clothes and sends her out on the street "lookin like a whore." This in turn is how the men who accost her on the street perceive her. But, before she leaves, Correy turns the gaze back on Martin and sees "all that hurt there" (121). Though Mama finally chooses a life of isolation, her oral exchange with Ursa frees her and allows her to be wholly herself. Unlike the "songs of the devils" that Mama had referred to earlier, her own blues assists her in achieving a transcendent space.

While Ursa and Mutt are married, their sexual intimacy eventually erodes into another venue for control and psychological abuse by a man. Madly envious of Ursa when other men watch her perform at Happy's Cafe', Mutt demands that Ursa quit her job as a singer. He only offers the fact that he is her husband as justification giving his character a compelling parallel to Corregidora's power over Great Gram and Gram. Ursa

refuses his instructions, and Mutt retaliates by refusing Ursa sex when she craves it and calling her "my pussy" (156). While Ursa is fixated between a place of pleasure and pain, Mutt's responses to her overtures are confusing and frustrating. Mutt's domineering actions and crude language only help to enhance Ursa's already jaded sense sexual intimacy.

Shortly after her fall, Ursa enters into an imagined dialogue and questions herself, "What do the blues do for you?" (56), to which she responds, "It helps me to explain what I can't explain" (56). For Ursa Corregidora, the blues becomes the form of orality wherein she is able to express the pain she has experienced. As a blues singer, Ursa moves beyond the role of a Black woman who submissively receives to one who actively participates in the telling of the story. As mentioned earlier, Ursa becomes part of the legacy/lineage of many Black women who turn to the blues as a form of liberation. Hazel Carby offers an in depth explanation of the issue:

What has been called the "Classic Blues" the women's blues of the twenties and early thirties is a discourse that articulates a cultural and political struggle over asexual relations: a struggle that is directed against the objectification of female sexuality within a patriarchal order but which also tries to reclaim women's bodies as the sexual and sensuous subjects of women's song. ("It Just Be's Dat Way Sometime", 333)

Ursa can no longer "bear witness" through childbirth, and she has to testify in her own way: "Then let me witness the only way I can. I'll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee to rub inside my eyes. When it's time to give witness, I'll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee. I'll stain their hands" (54). Here, Ursa is conscious of the fact that she has reached back to the horrors of her family's past in order to reappropriate it into a space of her own choosing. Ursa refuses to allow the brutal and violent memories of the coffee grounds to stay on the Corregidora Plantation; instead, the coffee is placed under her control and in her new song.

A rather symbolic song that Ursa performs is "Trouble in Mind". It is considered by blues scholar William Barlow as the anthem of classical blues.⁹ "Trouble" is regarded as a folk blues song with verses that alternate between despair and hope:

Trouble in mind, I'm blue

But I won't be blue always
'Cause the sun is gonna shine
In my back door some day
Say trouble in my mind, I'm blue
But I won't be blue always
'Cause the sun is gonna shine
In my back door some day (Hill)

Ursa's actual performance and the lyrics of the song combine to express a combination of pain and pleasure.

Though some of Ursa's songs are traditional blues songs like "Trouble in Mind" and "Open the Door, Richard," and "See See Rider," Ursa, like the generations before hers, compose her own version of the blues. More than once does Jones refer to two of these songs. A particular song tells of a train traveling through what seems to be an endless tunnel as the tunnel tightens around the train like a fist. The other song is about a bird woman whose eyes were deep wells who would take a man on a journey, and the man would never return. Through the blues, Ursa has subverted male dominance by placing the woman in control of the male figure. The train and the tunnel are metaphors for the male sex organ being dominated by the female sex organ, and the bird woman's eyes become the symbol of control of a woman over a man.

Although Ursa has a yearning for love and affection, her final imaginary dialogue with Mutt ends with an expression of hatred. Ironically, this made up interaction does not signal the end of their relationship; instead, her ability to vent her frustration opens the door for possible reconciliation:

"Do you still hate me?"

"Yes. In the hospital, standing over me. You. I hated you. I cussed you. And I've far more hurt now than then. How do you think I feel? Why did you come back, anyway?"

"I came to get you."

"He made them make love to anyone, so they couldn't love anyone."

"You'll come back."

"If I do, I'll come with all my memories. I won't forget anything."

"I'd rather have you with them, than not have you."

"Mutt, don't."(103-104)

In order for Ursa to achieve true liberation she has acknowledged that the pain and abuse of her past will be unable to be extracted from herself. Also, it is obvious that Mutt must also reconcile himself to living with that part of her history in which she cannot escape.

Madhu Dubey suggests that the ending is a moment of triumph for Ursa: "The act of fellatio enables Ursa to not only exercise her sexual power over Mutt but also to recapture the source of Great Gram's mysterious sexual power over Corregidora" (257). My interpretation of the final episode stands in stark contrast to Dubey's.

Obviously, Ursa is aware through Great Gram how the act of resistance can serve towards her own detriment. She also knows the impact and power the cycle of brutality wreaks on one's identity because she has physical evidence of the results. Her required hysterectomy carries a physical mark as she says that surgery is "going to leave a bad" scar (17). Ursa, indeed, injures Mutt by biting his penis while performing fellatio, but she is already aware of the fact that this is a destructive pattern between herself and Mutt. Once Ursa has bitten Mutt's penis, she disrupts the phallocentric control that has been bestowed upon her through her ancestral lineage. Ursa's confrontation with her family's cruel history and her own painful scar has placed her in a space beyond one of sexual reclamation and empowerment. For Ursa, during the sexual conclusion, her oral position, though prominent and important, cedes deference to her own orality. Ursa's position becomes consistent with the "many-dimensional" Black female subject who Quashie refers to as, "a body that emerges as a subject but also as an/other to the narrator..." (155). This becomes evident during the novel's end when Mutt and Ursa participate in their call and response pattern. Ursa rejects physical violence as a means of communication and behavior; however, Jones' narrative style still manages to encapsulate the unspeakable horrors that the Corregidora women have had to suffer:

I don't want the kind of woman that hurt you, he said.

Then you don't want me.

I don't want the kind of woman that you hurt you.

Then you don't want me.

I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you.

Then you don't want me.

He shook me till I fell against him crying. I don't want the kind of man
that'll hurt me neither, I said.

He held me tight. (185)

The blues-like repetition of this act does not indicate that Ursa plans to return to the behavioral pattern of violence, but they rather point to a different reality. Ursa and Mutt have chosen love over destruction. Ursa is in a transcendent space - one where it is not acceptable for men and women to hurt each other.

Notes

¹ Davis, in *Blues Legacies*, delineates the multidimensional dynamic between blueswomen and their relationship to gender and race issues. In *Bessie*, Chris Albertson specifically details the plight of Bessie Smith and how she responded to gender and race bias.

² Jones, Gayl. *Corregidora*. New York: Random House, 1975.

³ Chavanelle, Sylvie. "Gloria Naylor's Bailey's Cafe: The Blues And Beyond." *American Studies International* 36.2 (1998): 58. *Biography Reference Bank* (H.W. Wilson). and Tettenborn, Éva. "Beyond The Boundaries Of The Blues: Diane Mckinney-Whetstone's "Blues Dancing" As Middle-Class Blues Narrative." *Critique* 48.1 (2006): 44. *Biography Reference Bank* (H.W. Wilson).

⁴ See Claudia Tate's "Corregidora: Ursa's Blues Medley"; Melvin Dixon's "Singing a Deep Song: Language as Evidence in the Novels of Gayl Jones;" Anne DuCille's "Phallus(ies) of Interpretation: Toward Engendering the Black Critical 'I.'" and Madhu Dubey's "Gayl Jones and the Matrilineal Metaphor of Tradition."

⁵ Li, *Something Akin to Freedom* (91). Li also goes on to discuss how the desire to make generations also "erases female sexual pleasure."

⁶ DuCille focuses on the Brazilian circumstance by shedding light on slave marriages in the United States.

⁷ See Berlin, Elkins, and Fogel. All three texts have chapters and passages devoted to the mistreatment of the Black men and women during American slavery.

⁸ Unlike the application being used for Gram, MacKinnon discusses thingification being the result of women who have been "pampered and pacified" (8).

⁹ Barlow, "*Looking Up at Down*," 142. According to Barlow, there are different versions of the song. Ursa Corregidora's paradoxical state is analogous to the song.

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