

A Thematic Study of Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*



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ABSTRACT

Gayl Jones's novel *Corregidora* is a complex web of rape, incest, and the charge to "make generations" in order to keep a record of past wrongs. The main character, Ursa, a blues singer who is the fourth generation of *Corregidora* women, hates Simon *Corregidora*, the Portuguese slave master who fathered her mother and grandmother. Unable to have children and fulfill her charge to make generations, Ursa immerses herself in the blues as a way to ease the pain of never having children, and find a way to come to terms with the family past that haunts her. Through this novel Jones uses call-and-response, repetition, redundancy and *Nommo*, the mere power of words, to tell the story of a family of women and transform it into the equivalent of a blues improvisational piece. By taking the underlying story and adding to that melody—through the stories of each of the women—Jones reveals the blues to be a healing force that Ursa taps into to arrive at a place where her story and her pain can be her own. Ursa uses her blues in the novel as a vehicle for healing and rebirth that allows her blues to bear witness of her own life and thereby "make generations." Through this discussion of Jones's novel I will deviate from the usual criticism of her novels—negative images of both black men and women—and explore the relationship between the blues in and the mandate of making generations.

KEYWORDS: Gayl Jones, Slavery, Brutality, Racism, Feminine, Classic Blues, Diaspora, Black Feminism

INTRODUCTION

Corregidora reveals an unflinching portrayal of the circumscription of female desire and its expression, as well as the ways in which ancestral narratives of enslavement and abuse affect the lives of Ursa's partners. These problematic relationships and subtexts attest to the prevailing effects of slavery on subsequent generations of African Americans, moving from Ursa's individual family trauma to a collective intergenerational trauma enacting precisely what Laura S. Brown terms as trauma "spread laterally throughout an oppressed social group when membership in that group means a constant lifetime risk of exposure to certain trauma" (108). Racism, sexism, classism and sexual violence suffered by the people described in *Corregidora* emerge from structural oppressions which can be traced back to the period of slavery and colonialism.

Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* also explores the effects of ancestral subtexts on the black male protagonist's life. As previously referenced, the protagonist Milkman Dead's life is deeply impacted by his troubled familial relationships. The narrative follows Milkman's life and frustrations, as well as his yearning to escape Southside. However, as A. Leslie Harris points out, "the way to escape Southside is to get money, the gold his aunt Pilate and father stumbled across in Pennsylvania cave" (73). Thus, Milkman's freedom is premised upon retracing his father's and aunt's steps in order to find the gold. This process allows Milkman to learn more about his grandfather, a former slave brutally murdered by whites, and to meet people who knew his father and aunt. Therefore, Milkman's liberation from oppressive ancestral subtexts begins by learning about his ancestors and their lives and establishing a dialogic relationship with his individual and collective histories. *Corregidora* delineates this very process through an exploration of Ursa's partners Mutt and Tadpole, and the ways in which their familial histories of violence impact their relationship with Ursa.

The novel's first few lines reflect an important disjunction between the first husband Mutt's marital expectations and Ursa's career as a blues singer: "It was 1947 when Mutt and I was married. I was singing in Happy's Café around on Delaware Street. He didn't like for me to sing after we were married because he said that's why he married me so he could support me. I said I didn't just sing to be supported. I sang because it was something I had to do, but

he never would understand that” (*Corregidora* 3). In this initial passage, Mutt’s desire to support and control Ursa is contrasted to her singing. She explains that she did not only sing to support herself financially, although that aspect forms an important part of her independence and self-sufficiency. During a particularly heated argument, Ursa falls down the stairs. The event is framed with the following dialogue:

‘I don’t like those mens messing with you’, he said.

‘Don’t nobody mess with me.’

‘Mess with they eyes’.

That was when I fell. (*Corregidora* 3-4)

Mutt’s jealousy and possessiveness culminate in Ursa’s accident which permanently marks her as she loses her ability to procreate. Although it remains unclear whether Mutt deliberately pushes Ursa down the stairs or whether it was an accident, their argument initiated by Mutt does create the conditions for her fall and subsequent injury and it is Ursa who believes he deliberately pushed her. Upon hearing Ursa’s own story of ancestral trauma and enslavement, Mutt confides in Ursa about his own family history and slavery:

He said he knew only one thing about when his people were slaves, but that it was enough for him. I asked him what was it. He said that his great grandfather – he guessed great-grandfather – had worked as a blacksmith, hiring hisself out and bought his freedom and then he had bought his wife’s freedom. But when he got in debt to these men, and he didn’t have any money, so they come and took his wife. The courts judged that it was legal, because even if she was his wife, and fulfilled the duties of a wife, he had bought her and she was also his property, his slave. He said his greatgrandfather has just gone crazy after that. (*Corregidora* 150-151)

Mutt’s narrative establishes the ways in which his ancestral subtext impacts on his life and his relationship with Ursa. Socialised by acquiring oppressive ideas about masculinity and sexuality, Mutt perceives Ursa as his own property and describes her as a “hole”. He is unable to relate to her in an open and equal way, but strives to control her, her singing and interactions with people, particularly other men. Discussing black masculinities, bell hooks argues that black males are socialised from birth to embrace the notion that their manhood

will be determined by whether or not they can dominate and control others; however, the political system they live within, defined by hooks as the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, prevents most of them from having access to socially acceptable positions of power and dominance and for this reason they claim their patriarchal manhood through socially unacceptable channels (*We Real Cool* 57-58). Such a model is relevant to Mutt and his relationship to Ursa as it contextualises his behaviour and places him within an oppressive social structure.

After sharing his family history, Mutt adds: “Whichever way you look at it, we ain’t them” (*Corregidora* 151). This statement can be viewed as Mutt’s emphasis on historical progression, advising Ursa to move past her ancestral burden. However, I argue that this statement reflects Mutt’s *own* desire to distance himself from his ancestors and their conditions of bondage and highlight his and Ursa’s different sociohistorical context. “We are not them” is Mutt’s way of historicising the effects of racism and sexism to avoid engaging with their remnants in the present.

Ursa’s second husband Tadpole also confides in Ursa about his family history, revealing that his grandmother was white:

My grandmother was white’, he said. ‘She was a orphan and they had her working out in the fields along with the blacks and treated her like she was one. She was a little girl, about nine, ten, ‘leven. My granddaddy took her in and raised her and then when she got old enough he married her. She called him Papa. And when they were married, she still called him Papa.

(*Corregidora* 13)

When Ursa asks which one of those was his mother, he leaves before answering. This confession adds to the complexity of interracial relationships and the notion of “impurity” which Ashraf H.A. Rushdy aptly defines as “genuine impurities in American politics and life: impurity of desires, impurity of family, impurity of racial identity” (*Remembering Generations* 102). During slavery, the prospect of racial mixing was marked by rape, forced impregnation or breeding with the purpose of exploiting and abusing slave women or increasing the slave master’s stock. Any consensual relationship between blacks and whites was forbidden by law, legitimised only in cases of rape and exploitation. Tadpole’s

grandmother, as a disadvantaged orphan, was taken in and raised by his grandfather. The unequal basis of their relationship is reflected in her calling him “Papa” even after they were married. Therefore, the complex emotional response that Tadpole reveals about the “impurity” of his own family history is comparable to *Kindred* and Dana’s vexed discovery of a white slaveholding ancestor in her family tree. The descendants’ responses reflect the historical burden behind interracial relationships and once again challenge concepts of “desire” and “consent” in oppressive conditions as argued in the passage speculating on the foremothers’ desire. What both Mutt and Tadpole have in common is their understanding of sexuality and the possessive, phallogocentric focus on their own pleasure. Furthermore, both have the need to control Ursa through emotional abuse or sexual domination. Although Mutt and Tadpole are not violent, they are both possessive, insecure and have difficulty conceptualising sexuality in mutually beneficial ways due to social and historical reasons and damaging constructions of masculinity. As hooks points out, embracing patriarchal notions of manhood, many contemporary black males think of sex as informed first and foremost by male desire (*We Real Cool* 70). Pointing to the ways past violence is reproduced in the present, Mutt’s and Tadpole’s treatment of Ursa echoes *Corregidora*’s treatment of her foremothers. At one point, Mutt tells Ursa: “Your pussy’s a gold piece, ain’t it Urs? My little gold piece” (*Corregidora* 60). This line is similar to the one recounting Great Gram’s memories as she brings back *Corregidora*’s abuse and his words: “A good little piece. My best. Dorita. Little gold piece”(*Corregidora* 11). These statements posit Ursa and her great grandmother respectively as commodities whose value is compared to gold and located in their reproductive organs. Once again replaying the role of abusive slaveholder, Mutt defines women’s value in relation to their ability to sexually satisfy a man, circumscribing female subjectivity and desire in the process. Similarly to Mutt, Tadpole also sees Ursa and her body in the context of his own pleasure. On their wedding day, Tadpole objects to Ursa’s wish to sing the supper show:

‘I won’t have you working on your wedding day.’

‘You won’t start that too, will you?’

‘Start what?’

‘Nothing. It’s not the working; I’d like to sing for you.’

‘Sing for me here,’ he said. He unbuckled his pants and lay down on the bed.

I sang for him, then we made love”.

(*Corregidora* 68, emphasis mine)

Here Ursa compares Tadpole’s possessiveness to Mutt, as both men attempt to limit and control her singing. Similarly, Tadpole states “sing for me here”, asserting his authority over Ursa and keeping her to himself. He dominates the scene as he positions himself on the bed, unbuckling his pants and waiting to be “serviced” by Ursa’s singing and then intercourse. Once again, Ursa’s own desires are circumscribed by this act of possessiveness.

The violence, abuse, exploitation and damaging constructions of black masculinity and femininity, dehumanised under slavery, are evoked through this “way back” surpassing time and space. This line supports the argument that ancestral narratives are continuously replayed in the protagonists’ lives and work as subtexts to their own lives. Finally, both of these relationships end tragically for Ursa and engender the violence inherent in these heterosexual relationships, emerging from the history of slavery and resulting in gendered abuse, racism and class disprivilege. Mutt causes Ursa’s fall down the stairs and Tadpole cheats on her, telling her she doesn’t know “what to do with a real man”, blaming her for her sexual passivity and his cheating (*Corregidora* 88). Jones does not limit her exploration of violence to heterosexuality but demonstrates how ideologies of domination are perpetuated outside those frames as well. This is demonstrated through Ursa’s discovery of her friend Cat’s sexual relationship with Jeffrene which is also marked by violence.

CONCLUSION

Corregidora emerged amidst the strident debates about black identity, community-formation, black aesthetic theory, and liberation more commonly identified as Black Nationalist discourse. Although Jones’ work has often been contested because of her controversial subjects as well as news coverage of her personal life, her work continues to awe readers with its complex style and depth of emotion. She draws many of the themes in her stories from her African-American heritage as well as her own personal life and struggles. Perhaps most important throughout the psychological developments in the characters are their voices which shout from the pages of her work their story, their song, and their truth. Her readers cannot wait to hear what will come next from this quiet woman who writes out loud.

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