

Tribhuvan University

Central Department of English

Kirtipur, Kathmandu

Politics of Memory in Jones' *Corregidora*

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In the Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

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Letter of Recommendation

Mr. Binam Ranapaheli has completed his thesis entitled " Politics of Memory in Jones' *Corregidora* " under my supervision. He carried out his research from December 2013 to June 2014 A.D. I hereby recommend his thesis be submitted for viva-voce.

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Mr. Shankar Subedi

June 2014

Letter of Approval

This research entitled " Politics of Memory in Jones' *Corregidora* "submitted to the Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by Binam Ranapaheli has been approved by the undersigned member of the Research Committee.

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June 2014

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### Abstract

Implementating the theoretical modality of psychological trauma, the present research is the analysis of the novel *Correigdora* from the viewpoint of how the past affects the psyche of the individuals and their daily activities. Ursa, the protagonist of the novel as well as the representative of the feminine gender, is the victim of the past memory of being underdogged and manipulated by the males. The past not only haunts Ursa's present but also affects her present daily activities. The analysis and interpretation of the profound psychological effects this family edict has on Ursa elicit an examination of the psychological symptoms of trauma in the course of the analysis of the novel from the perspective of psychological trauma. *Correigdora* reveals the symptoms and structure of traumatic experience and its aftermath, and more significantly, it lays bare Ursa's confrontation with and integration of this inheritance with her present self.

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## I: *Corregidora* and the Issue of Past and Memory

This thesis analyzes the manifestations of trauma and the process of working through in *Corregidora* by the African American writer Gail Jones. It argues that the novel works against a collective amnesia by representing traumatic experiences and their impact on individuals and communities, thus dealing with historical issues that many people believe to be a matter of a long forgotten past. Furthermore, the analysis of the novel suggests a model of engaging with trauma that seeks to work through the overwhelming events – a process which involves acknowledging and transforming the legacy of trauma while trying to leave its debilitating effects behind. The thesis thus focuses on how the protagonist and the respective communities come to terms with the shattering experiences by which she is deeply marked.

*Corregidora* is Gail Jones's classic novel: the tale of a blues singer Ursa, consumed by her hatred of the nineteenth-century slave master who fathered both her grand-mother and mother. This is a highly impactful novel wrought with sexual tensions and taboo family secrets. The narrative is interspersed with elliptical stories and memories that bring intense emotions to the surface of the reader's consciousness. *Corregidora* begins with the event that ends Ursa's first marriage. Her husband, Mutt Thomas, not knowing she is pregnant, knocks her down a stairway in a fit of jealous rage, causing her miscarriage and forcing her to have a hysterectomy.

Tadpole McCormick, her employer, and Cat Lawson, her friend, help to nurse Ursa back to health, but neither fully understands how devastating a blow it has been for Ursa to lose the ability to bear a child. The narrative is frequently interrupted by Ursa's memories of being told about her grandmother and great-grandmother, whom Ursa calls

Gram and Great Gram, respectively. Gram and Great Gram endured lives of sexual bondage to Corregidora, a Brazilian slave owner who thus became both Ursa's grandfather and great-grandfather. It is clear that without the power to fulfill their wish that she reproduce, Ursa now feels unable to avoid dwelling on these painful stories. Further, she focuses her own angers and resentments toward her husband on these stories, and they seem to intensify, so that she feels these memories as strongly as if they were her own.

Shifting between scenes of nineteenth-century slave life in Brazil and contemporary urban America, Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* examines continuities between the physical enslavement of black women and modern cycles of abuse. Although the *Corregidora* women are subjected to immense violence and exploitation, Jones foregrounds their demand to overcome and commemorate their traumatic history. However, while the slave past is ever present, the novel does not focus on Great Gram's resistance to Corregidora during her enslavement to him. Descriptions of her life with him suggest a highly ambiguous relationship that complicates conventional conceptions of resistance, agency, and desire.

In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth borrows Freud's psychoanalytic theory of trauma—from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*—and applies it to literature and movies. She asserts, “trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind,” and “that knowing and not knowing are entangled in the language of trauma and in the stories associated with it.” If scholars consider the parallel of Caruth's observations of trauma theory and Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*, we will be more equipped to understand Ursa's continuous mental



breakdown surrounding events that she is forced to share but never experience. The present research, in its three chapters, uses the tool of cultural trauma to uncover the series of psychic and cultural trauma that the protagonist undergoes.

Ursa's sterility and focusing her sexuality on her clitoris rather than her womb creates a problem because she has been told by her mother and grandmother that without a womb she cannot function as a woman. This logic is a heritage of slavery, which reduced women to being sex objects of exchange: for Corregidora, their father and owner, Great Gram and her daughter were valuable because of their vaginas, which was reflected in his calling each woman his *gold pussy*. Thus, Corregidora, who is absent from the novel as a character, becomes an emblem of sexual abuse and violence perpetrated on the Corregidora women. The suffering of the protagonist due to the external and cultural forces create the problem; which can be best resolved by the implementation of the tool of cultural trauma conceptualized by the thinkers like Jeffrey Charles Alexander, Hartman and Fellman.

The major thrust of this study is to explore the fallout of traumatic agony. This research shows how the protagonist and the female characters undergo the series of traumatic psychology. Ursha has found it hard to identify with the external world because she can't find acceptance in the English world nor the black world, so she resorts to identify with nature. Each traumatic event brings more alterations of reality. Her identifications and fantasies are finally destroyed when she learns that she is in England and it's not what she expected and her own brother didn't even recognize her. Ursha's desire to be loved is destroyed by the betrayal of her husband. These facts are to be studied in the research.

Ursa's story unfolds as she revisits her marriage to Mutt Thomas, a jealous tobacco field worker who wants Ursa to stop singing once they marry "so he could support me [her]." She refuses to give up her place on stage and one evening, Mutt arrives drunk and in a struggle with Ursa, pushes her down the stairs forcing her to abort her pregnancy and have a hysterectomy, which destroys her duty as a Corregidora woman "to make generations." If we read Caruth alongside of *Corregidora*, we see how the traumatic event of abortion gives agency to the stories of gram and great gram to interject in the life of Ursa. History and fiction have yielded little about those black slave women who were mistress and breeder to their white owners. There are some facts and figures, but they tell us nothing about the women themselves: their motives, their emotions, and the memories they passed on to their children. Gayl Jones's first novel is a gripping portrait of this harsh sexual and psychological genealogy. Jones's language is subtle and sinewy, and her imagination sure.

Ursa Corregidora tells her own story in 1948. She is a singer in a Kentucky cafe; she has lost her baby, her womb, and her husband Mutt, who hated her that much when he threw her downstairs. And there's no way she can follow the commands of her grandmother and great-grandmother to ""make generations"" -- to bear witness to the savagery of the white Portuguese slave owner, Corregidora, who fathered both these women and Ursa's mother. But Ursa is not his child. Her father was a black man -- the one who dared to spot the hate/love in Corregidora's women, and was pushed out and held off -- like Mutt. As in Ursa's song, there are women ""who take a man on a long journey but never return him."" Ursa tries another marriage, finally years later returns to Mutt -- to perform a symbolic revenge/castration. Both embrace in hurt and need. With

demonic slave tales in stark ""country"" diction, *Corregidora* forces a confrontation of frigidity as a legacy of rape -- violation as black, as woman. Raw, harsh, hypnotic.

This research is strictly confined in the analysis of the history of the formation of traumatic effects in the victims of patriarchal subjugation in Jamaica. This research is limited in the chronicling the traumatic life of Ursha from the perspective of trauma studies. It is a focused study of the sense of displacement experienced by the self as a result of existing in a world of denial, negation and oppression. Such self, who has been rejected and never been granted any recognition because of her race and the color of complexion, survives and gains her independent individuality by defying the brutal acts of one race against another in a world of dichotomy and hierarchy which denies acknowledging the other as a human being.

Gyal Jones is the prominent diasporic writer .She lived in England in her later part of life. She wrote some of popular novels on the troubled and pathetic condition of Jamaicans following the foreign intervention in it. Peter Robinson is the famous critic whose critical insight brings into lights the hidden inconsistencies and subtleties of the text. He takes out the western metropolitan perspective that the author has used while representing the Jamaicans culture of violence. Robinson discloses the following facts regarding this novel:

*Corregidora* has been accused of hindering Western understanding of the Jamaicans by portraying Jamaican members as representatives of various social and doctrinal evils, according to them, not typically attributed to the Jamaicans. The American

Library Association reports that is one of its most-challenged books of 1966. (27)

According to Robinson, Jamaica is just the same land defined by the orient lists of the nineteenth century. To make his novel popular in the circle of metropolitan readers, the author has portrayed Jamaican people as though they are impulsive, carefree, and irrational and orientated towards violence and extremity.

Jonathan Doctorow is the leading critic of Jones. He argues that the novel gives the kaleidoscopic glimpse of Jamaican history since the collapse of the native value of Jamaica. Doctorow is of the opinion that *Corregidora* is the parable of the growth and creative upbringing that take place in the atmosphere prone to conflict and chaos.

Doctorow opines the following view:

*Corregidora* , spanning Jamaican history from the initial days of the British colonialism to the present, tells the story of mental collapse of Antoinette after the death of her father, lost of plantation and collapse of her marriage. She lost everything she loves and happened to fall in to the deep ditch of psychological break down (14)

Doctorow holds the belief that the invasion of Jamaican by the British forces sows the seed of conflict. The Britishers takeover and the subsequent intervention of western countries in Jamaica put the country in constant chaos and conflict that is not resolved till now. The maelstrom of conflict heightens even now in Jamaica provided that there is a slim chance of arriving at the level of reconciliation.

Sulamith Firestone evaluates *Corregidora* as the storehouse of Jamaican culture and history. He could not help praising the power of Jean Rhys in this novel. He agrees with Jean Rhys opinion that Jamaica is the center of excellence. It is the tragedy of Jamaican people that they are always infested and inflicted by conflict. Sulamith makes the following observation:

*Corregidora* in 1966, when the army overthrew the native government of Jamaica. Many people were forced into exile in different parts of the world. Resistance against the new regime formed immediately by Jamaican guerrilla rebels. (34)

Sulamith says that there are still the traces of political instability in the conflict prone country Jamaica. The impact of coup and political overthrow are credible causes for the destiny of Jamaica as the collapse state.

Although all these critics have examined the novel *Corregidora* from different perspectives, none of them concentrated upon the traumatic effects of political unrest, foreign invasion and internal conflict. The researcher dwells upon the effects and consequences of colonial war trauma. The traumatic effects of political conflict and civil war would be examined extensively. When Jamaica was invaded by Britishers, other western capitalist countries also asserted their active interest. The colliding imperial interests are the root cause of the civil war. The researcher asserts that the effects of war can easily be seen in the disintegrating culture, social unrest, displacement and deranged mentality of people. The researcher's issue of the effects of war trauma is distinct in this regard. It differs from the issues raised by all the reviewers and critics whose ideas and insights are cited above.

Perhaps one of the most apt characterizations of trauma is offered by Roger Luckhurst, who describes it as a “conceptual knot” (12) – a concept that ties together so many different elements and fields of study that any specific definition would be inevitably reductive. Throughout its multidisciplinary history, trauma has been most often used to indicate an overwhelming experience that fails to be integrated into the consciousness and continues to haunt the survivors later on through flashbacks, dreams and intrusive thoughts. It has been characterized as an event or a series of events which “assume their force precisely in their temporal delay” (Caruth, “Introduction” 8), “a shock that creates a psychological split or rupture” (Felman 171), an experience that collapses the “distance between here and there, then and now” (LaCapra, *Writing History* 89), “a life-threatening event that displaces [one’s] preconceived notions about the world” (Tal 15), or as “a piercing or breach of a border that puts inside and outside into a strange communication” (Luckhurst 3).

To talk about a “traumatic event” is slightly misleading inasmuch as trauma is not defined by the nature of the event per se, but is more likely to be located in its damaging and delayed aftereffects; in Ana Douglass’s words, “there is no special kind of event that provokes a traumatized reaction; nor is there a universal sensitivity to stress that produces uniform reactions to similar events” (10). It is then one of the central paradoxes of trauma that although it originally derives from the Greek word meaning wound, it is not a simple wound that heals in the course of time as a physical injury does, but one that is not fully experienced at the time of its occurrence and instead manifests itself belatedly, often years after the originating event.

It is important to discuss Sigmund Freud's contributions to the field, since he is still a prominent figure at least in the cultural and literary studies of trauma (even though he is often dismissed in therapeutic and medical discourses), and also because this thesis draws upon some of his concepts, albeit, as it will be pointed out, in a slightly different way from Freud's intended usages. Freud's engagement with the concept is somewhat characterized by his bewilderment, since the reason why he explored this terrain in his essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" was that traumatic nightmares ultimately did not fit with his understanding of dreams as wish fulfillments. He was perplexed by the large number of soldiers who, upon returning from the First World War, displayed symptoms of what came to be known as "shell shock." He concluded that the obsessive return to the scene of the horrors – what he called repetition compulsion – was in fact an attempt to master the event retrospectively. Freud was one of the first people to think of trauma in terms of a dialectical process – namely, that it is neither constituted by the original event that failed to be incorporated into the consciousness, nor by the memory that later triggers that experience, but rather by the dialectic between the two (Leys 20).

Indeed, it is useful to think of the entire field of trauma studies in terms of a dialectical movement between different viewpoints, often leading to heated and at times even violent debates. One of the central questions continuously re-emerging in these disputes is whether traumatic symptoms are produced by an external agent, or whether trauma is an entirely psychic disorder – in other words, the belatedness of the symptoms notwithstanding, is the cause of trauma of a physical or psychological nature? Freud was the

first to posit a paradigm that is entirely based on psychical processes, which then later lead to the charges that he reduced the very real and traumatic experiences of survivors of sexual abuse to a set of unconscious wishes and fabricated sexual fantasies.

This controversy demonstrates how sensitive some of the issues concerning the external/internal nature of trauma are – indeed, if trauma derives its force entirely from the psyche, then questions of agency and responsibility might be easily left intact. Connected to this conflict is the debate whether traumatic memory is preserved in pristine form or whether it is subject to subsequent distortion. This was a matter of disagreement between Freud and Pierre Janet, a psychiatrist who was largely forgotten until a fairly recent rediscovery. Janet conceived of trauma in terms of dissociation based on a horizontal model of the mind, in which traumatic experience divides the mind into separate parts, with “traumatic memory” contained in a mental unit completely unrelated to that of “narrative memory,” and preserved in its original form (van der Kolk and van der Hart 438). By contrast, Freud posited a vertical model of the psyche, in which traumatic symptoms are viewed as signs of latent ideas buried in the unconscious and prevented from 1 This is, however, only one side of the debate concerning Freud and his treatment of female patients. For a different account, see for instance Luckhurst, who claims that “Freud never simply replaced the ‘real event’ with fantasy, truth with falsity,” but rather saw the two as intertwined (47).

The researcher makes use of the theory of cultural trauma. Basically the tool of cultural trauma will be applied. Different notions of trauma given by Caruth and Peter Mason will be cited. Jeffrey Charles Alexander's notion of cultural trauma are brought to prove the hypothesis. *The Effects of Trauma* written by Mason and Unclaimed



Experience by Caruth furnish theoretical insights to the research. The notion of trauma as the lacerated and wounded state of mind or psyche paves the way for the completion of this research. The thorough analysis of *Corregidora* will be an integral part of this research project. Regular library visit and consulting the proper websites can facilitate the research work. In addition, the researcher will consult different websites and external links to collect the pertinent ideas. The researcher collects all the advices and inducements from the respected teachers and professors. The researcher's own insight can be of some help.

## II: Politics of Memory in Jones' *Corregidora*

Jones's protagonist, Ursa, recalls that beginning at the age of five her Great Gram and Gram shared their experiences as enslaved prostitutes owned by the Portuguese slave owner Corregidora. Ursa remembers being told:

“ ... They burned all the documents, Ursa, but they didn't burn what they put in their minds. We got to burn out what they put in our minds, like you burn out a wound. Except we got to keep what we need to bear witness. That scar that's left to bear witness. We got to keep it as visible as our blood” (Jones 72).

Ironically, the order the family matriarchs issue to Ursa and her mother entraps them deeper into the psychological wounds from this past. To speak of burning out the wound left by enslavement exposes the complexity of integrating the past with the present for the Corregidora women. Rather than burning out what is in their memories, Great Gram and Gram solidify their trauma by reliving it through the repetition of the story. Ursa's female ancestors vow that it is through the biological perpetuation of the female line, as well as oral storytelling of the past, that they will pass down the family story of sexual and psychological violation.

In the illuminating work, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag examines the representations of atrocity and the uses and meanings of images that depict such cruelty. Sontag makes a vital distinction between individual and collective memory. She writes: “All memory is individual, unreproducible—it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story about how it happened ... ” (Sontag 86). Rather

than naming this collective memory she recasts it as “collective instruction” (85).

Sontag’s discussion of collective (instruction) and individual memory is particularly useful in beginning my analysis of Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975).

In her novel, 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. The weight of this past exploitation bears down on the future generations and remembering and witnessing become another trauma-producing experience. In a flashback to a conversation with Great Gram when Ursa is a child, she remembers Great Gram saying:

... they didn’t want to leave no evidence of what they done—so it couldn’t be held against them. And I’m leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too. And your children got to leave evidence ... The important thing is making generations. They can burn the papers but they can’t burn conscious, Ursa. And that what makes evidence.

And that’s what makes the verdict. (14 & 22)

Thus, the body becomes the only evidence of this past, and the family matriarchs place the female body at the center of how to keep their story from disappearing in the wreckage of history. Yet, as the novel progresses, Jones reveals that this act of subversion becomes a source for more wounding. In a system that successfully robbed them of control over their bodies, Great Gram’s mandate radically attempts to claim ownership over her own body as well as over the subsequent generations of *Corregidora*

women. Great Gram's means for remembering and transmitting the story reside in the Corregidora bloodline, yet ultimately, this vehicle for controlling and transmitting the story neither ensures Great Gram freedom from the trauma nor any form of healing from it. Great Gram does not become the final authority over her story. 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. Moreover, making generations as a way to tell the story will not undo the horror done to them or establish a sense of safety that they have never known.

Although Corregidora can no longer be punished for his brutality, by giving voice to their story the Corregidora women constitute a vital act of transfer—transmitting knowledge from one generation to another about their survival in a system designed to destroy their humanity while inadvertently keeping the evil alive as well.

My analysis and interpretation of the profound psychological effects this family edict has on Ursa elicit an examination of the psychological symptoms of trauma. The repetition compulsion, a hallmark symptom of trauma, to tell of a traumatic slave past leads to another form of enslavement for the Corregidora women, from which Ursa will try to extract herself as a way to find psychic wholeness. Returning to Cathy Caruth's discussion of traumatic symptoms sheds light on why Great Gram continually engages in this form of repetition. Caruth asserts that the traumatic experience carries a characteristic "belatedness" (Caruth, *Unclaimed*, 92), meaning that it is not fully experienced at the time it occurs. This delay in remembering the moment of the trauma isolates it from other normal memories, thus leading to a trajectory of repetition.

Flashbacks to the trauma can appear at any time "as an interruption—as

something with a disrupting force or impact” (115). In addition, “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent and original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4; italics in the original). Although the victim-survivor may adapt and physically survive the traumatic event, it can severely and permanently alter her physical, emotional, and psychological life, in turn tainting the survivor’s present life.

*Corregidora* reveals these symptoms and structure of traumatic experience and its aftermath, and more significantly, it lays bare Ursa’s confrontation with and integration of this inheritance with her present self. Literary critic Deborah E. McDowell points out that black women write the majority of contemporary novels about slavery. She argues 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 conclusion 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. 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).

For Jones, the history of slavery is a dynamic presence in its very absence because it continues to shape identities, as well as the course of one’s life, as is evident in Ursa’s life. The history of Ursa’s family legacy of enslavement provides the

background for the novel's violent opening scene. One night, after Ursa performs at her job as a blues singer for Happy's Café in post-segregation Kentucky, her husband, Mutt Thomas, throws her down stairs in a fit of drunken jealous rage

As a result, Ursa must have a hysterectomy, thus setting her on a collision course with the family's burdensome edict and her inability to fulfill this responsibility. After waking from surgery, Ursa reflects on what this means for her: "I lay on my back, feeling as if something more than the womb had been taken out" (6). Indeed, she later learns that she was pregnant with Mutt's child. Ironically, Mutt gives Ursa the child she needs to perpetuate the family story while taking from her the same child and any future generations through his violent actions. Unintentionally, Mutt propels Ursa onto a difficult path to self-awareness of the physical and psychological ramifications the haunting family legacy has on her. Ursa's hysterectomy destabilizes the anchor of Great Gram's ideological obsession to reproduce other female children. Now, the psychologically and physically damaged Ursa faces an identity crisis once she can no longer physically "leave evidence" (14) of this slave past. In one moment, the reason for Ursa's creation and her purpose in life is lost.

The oral storytelling of this past, as well as the family edict that all female members must "make generations" (10), construct a framework for how to preserve their tragic history. The familial matriarchs decide what parts of the story will be remembered, retold, and memorialized. Intricately bound to the family's complicated structure and instruction of remembering is the female body. The bodies of the Corregidora women become not only the site of memory for their past but the very way in which they subvert the silencing of their slave past and share a story that involved the

destruction of their humanity. Great Gram's instruction for remembering and witnessing to the past is at once mysterious and terrifying for the child Ursa. This is evident in the following passage as Ursa recalls listening to Great Gram's story:

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 at her hands. She would fold them and then unfold them. She didn't need her hands around me to keep me in her lap, and sometimes I'd see the sweat in her palms ... Her hands had lines all over them. It was as 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. Once when she was talking, she started rubbing my thighs with her hands, and I could feel the sweat on my legs. Then she caught herself, and stopped, and held my waist again. (11)

Ursa recognizes at a young age—although she cannot articulate it until years later—that Great Gram's incessant repetition of the story has lost some of its emotional poignancy and meaning and it is the sounds of the words she speaks that retain her anger. Great Gram's stories have become repetitive remembrances of her past, and the child-witness, Ursa, remembering Corregidora. This repetition of language, body movements as well as the back and forth motion of the rocking chair show how Great Gram recalls and

passes down memory. This transference of knowledge is not only through verbal transmission but also through the connection of bodies between family members. The critical role Great Gram plays in identity formation as mediator and companion for Ursa cannot be underestimated because this edict to procreate shapes Ursa's self-identity from an early age. Great Gram turns the functionality of Ursa's body into one that should procreate, and this becomes a central force as part of Ursa's traumatic inheritance. Her encounters with Great Gram place Ursa in a position of subjugation because she cannot choose how this legacy will configure her identity and purpose in life.

Great Gram's cyclic repetition of her enslavement as a way of remembering and a means for her survival illustrates another distinctive symptom of trauma, which Caruth calls "double telling" (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 7). She explains that the compulsive repetition and reliving of past events exists in a space between life and death. Caruth suggests that this is "a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival" (7). At this point, the victim is stuck, suspended between living and dying.

This novel made an interesting statement about history. Ursa's position in life is compressed by the collective histories of her Great Gram, her Grandmama, and her mother and their relationships with men (most significantly, the Portuguese slave owner, Corregidora). Instead of being able to live her own life, Ursa's life is driven by the women in her family and their instructions to her to produce "generations" and pass their histories down to those generations. However, because of this history that is



constantly bearing down upon her, she's unable to truly give herself over to love. Granted, I wouldn't really deem the men in her life as being worthy of her love, but it seems like she's unable to love fully even when she thinks she wants to. Jones' decision to (plot spoiler!!) put Ursa in the situation where she is physically incapable of bearing her generations complicates her life by bringing into question not only her purpose in life, but also the way she lived her life up to the point at which Mutt's abuse caused the loss of her womb.

By putting this particular character into a situation that prohibits her from passing on her history, her origins, Jones' novel interrogates the significance of history in the lives of contemporary African American people. Ursa's character has been damaged by her history; she lives her life simultaneously attached to the man who enslaved her great-grandmother and her grandmother (Corregidora, whose name she retains even in marriage and whose photograph is one of her few possessions) and also hating him (spreading word of his misdeeds and evil ways to those in her life). However, when Mutt's jealousy results in the loss of her womb (and her unborn baby), she is forced to reevaluate her life and the relationships she's had. She eventually seeks out her mother's history, which has also been buried beneath the Corregidora history, as a means by which to find a way to live her life outside of Corregidora-history. I guess what I'm trying to say is that Ursa's life is a testament to the need to move forward, even though her family history is important and shouldn't necessarily be forgotten or erased.

On another note, I must admit that Ursa's character was a bit difficult to get along with. She reminded me of Alice Walker's character, Celie, in *The Color Purple* in that both Ursa and Celie often fail to react visibly to the people around them. However,

where Celie gave the reader an indication of her emotions, Ursa's character is far more distant and often remains frustratingly impenetrable even to the reader, leaving us as much in the dark about her emotions as the other characters are. While this was somewhat unpleasant to endure (especially as a reader who likes to have a close relationship with the protagonist), it did seem to serve a purpose: the reader had no more insight into Ursa's interior than Mutt or Tadpole or Cat. In fact, while Ursa was relatively likable, she was also somewhat irritating (in a manner similar to Arvey in Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee*) in that she seemed to have some closed-minded views (especially regarding Cat and her sexuality) that were in such stark contradiction to what the other characters deserved that it was sometimes difficult to follow her through her life. Overall, though, I think Ursa's lack of transparency further illustrates the way she was raised to fulfill a singular purpose: make generations, pass on the history of Corregidora.

Her emotionless style of living reflects the history she's supposed to rail against, but has actually allowed to become part of her. Just as her Great Gram was forced into prostitution by Corregidora and her Grandmama was forced into concubinage by the same man, so Ursa has -- like her mother before her -- given up the part of her that can allow her to freely give her love and resigned herself to a life of sexual captivity. The men in her life use her sexuality against her, and eventually she comes to realize that she'll have to play their game. This makes me uncertain of what to do with the ending. I'll admit that it seemed...out of place. I didn't think she'd ever (mega plot spoiler!!) go back to Mutt, and I certainly didn't think she'd do it in the way she did. I'm not sure if I should be happy because I think she might have regained control of her own sexuality,

or if I should be unhappy because Mutt's still getting her to do what he wants her to, and she's still stuck trying to figure out what it is that will please him. I want to say it's the former, but I think it might actually be the latter.

In 1975, while still a graduate student at Brown University, Gayl Jones published *Corregidora*, her first novel. A work that combines stark, deliberately raw language with poetry and dreamlike lyricism, it is narrated by Ursa Corregidora, a Kentucky blues singer who weaves her own story of thwarted desire and artistic strivings with that of her family. As Brazilian slaves and prostitutes, her great-grandmother and grandmother are repeatedly raped by their master, Old Corregidora, who fathers Ursa's grandmother as well as her mother, until Great Gram commits an undisclosed act of violence that makes him murderously obsessed with her. She flees to Kentucky, returning only to retrieve her now pregnant daughter. Like her mother, Ursa has heard this story since birth and has been frequently instructed to raise a child who will in turn bear witness to Corregidora's atrocities; thus does Great Gram try to empower her family, changing her daughters' identity from chattel to bearers of vengeance. But when Ursa is pregnant, her jealous husband (Mutt Thomas) pushes her down a flight of stairs and she loses the baby. Her injuries require a hysterectomy, and Ursa's resulting distress at being unable to "make generations" also affects her capacity for sexual pleasure.

After turning away from Cat Lawson, a friend whose lesbianism disconcerts her, Ursa marries again, only to have the marriage end when her husband accuses her of frigidity. Alternately yearning for and despising Mutt, a man marked by his own family scars of slavery and possessiveness, Ursa spends the next twenty years singing and

writing songs, and grappling with her family's fraught histories of sexual desire and violent abuse. Mutt's reappearance catalyzes an uneasy reunion for Ursa, merging undercurrents of violence with the possibility of healing. Performing fellatio, Ursa finally realizes what Great Gram did to Corregidora (she bit his penis just before orgasm), and thus recognizes the victim's own capacity for violence. Ursa also recognizes the combination of pain and pleasure, power and vulnerability, that constitutes what Jones has called "the blues relationship" between men and women. In acknowledging her own blues relationship with Mutt, Ursa sees how desire survives, however maimed and thwarted, even after a history of abuse. Yet the novel's ambiguous close finds Ursa still searching for a song and identity of her own to replace the angry refrain of vengeance her mothers have taught her.

Critical perspectives about *Corregidora* focus on its use of African American oral traditions: the frequent call-and-response pattern of Jones's dialogue, the spiraling refrains of the blues, the improvisations of jazz, the echoes of black dialects, the emphasis on performance as part of black folklore. Additionally, Jones's depiction of a female African American singer relates to themes in contemporary black women's writing about the search for a voice and the defiance of a rigid, imposed, and usually sexual identity. Perhaps equally important, *Corregidora's* portrayal of the complexities between mothers and daughters meshes with Jones's treatment of the double-edged sword of memory for African Americans, who need to remember their history without being imprisoned by it.

The author of *Corregidora* (1975), Gayl Jones, never allowed her face to be seen on the covers of her books. Although she always wanted to keep her privacy and,

like J.D. Salinger, desired to be known only by her work not by her personal life, various stories concerning her private dramas have been circulating in the media. One particularly tragic story concerns Gayl Jones and her husband Bob (Higgins) Jones, whom she met at the University of Michigan, where she was a teacher and he a student. Mentally unstable, Bob accused his professors of "conspirational malice" when he got a D in German. Then in the late 1970s he appeared at a gay rights rally with a gun, shouting slogans about "burning in hell", for which he got arrested. Before the trial the couple managed to flee to Paris to return to the U.S. many years later. The novelist always stood by her husband, who finally committed suicide by slitting his throat, and Gayl Jones herself was taken to a mental hospital because the authorities feared she might commit suicide as well.

In her fiction Gayl Jones often portrays violence in order to illustrate the repercussions of slavery for twentieth-century African American families, where racism and sexism permeate the most intimate spheres of life, resulting in brutalization of women and degradation of men. The novel's heroine, blues singer Ursa Corregidora, slowly recovers from trauma and mutilation caused by her jealous husband, who pushed her down from pub stairs because she refused to stop appearing on stage. As a result, she lost her child and her womb. Ursa marries her old-time friend and admirer, Tadpole, who finally dumps her for another girl because Ursa, unable to feel anything during sexual intercourse, failed to give him what he wanted. In the novel Ursa struggles to reconcile the knowledge that she is somehow flawed as a woman because she cannot have children with her sexual desire which has not disappeared with the disappearance of her womb. Ursa is constantly aware of the *space between [her] thighs. A well that*

*never bleeds* and regrets the *silence in [her] womb*, bemoaning the inability to feel anything *those times he didn't touch the clit*.

Ursa's sterility and focusing her sexuality on her clitoris rather than her womb creates a problem because she has been told by her mother and grandmother that without a womb she cannot function as a woman. This logic is a heritage of slavery, which reduced women to being sex objects of exchange: for Corregidora, their father and owner, Great Gram and her daughter were valuable because of their vaginas, which was reflected in his calling each woman his *gold pussy*. Ursa learns from the stories told her by her Gram what it meant to be a woman under slavery:

Cause tha's all they do to you, was feel up on you down between your legs see what kind of genitals you had, either so you could breed well, or make a good whore. Fuck each other or fuck them. Tha's the first thing they would think about, cause if you had somebody who was a good fucker you have plenty to send out into the field, and then you could also make you plenty money on the side, or inside.(32)

Paradoxically, man-woman relationship based on sexual ownership has not disappeared with the end of slavery: Ursa's abusive husband also calls her *his pussy*, and Ursa remembers him *asking me to let him see his pussy. Let me feel my pussy*. It turns out then that in her marriages Ursa is reduced to her vagina and her womb to the same extent to which her Great Gram's sexuality was turned into product by Corregidora, who fathered her daughter and her granddaughter. Thus, Corregidora, who is absent from the novel as a character, becomes an emblem of sexual abuse and violence perpetrated on the "Corregidora women". Ursa's blues singing plays then a symbolic function in the

novel, as she bears witness to the pain and survival of her family: I am Ursa Corregidora. I have tears for eyes. I was made to touch my past at an early age... Let no one pollute my music. I will dig out their trumpets. I will pluck out their eyes.

Gayl Jones wrote a novel of extraordinary beauty and lyrical sadness, in which she also dared to raise questions concerning desire's fusion with hatred and to point to the tangled coexistence of desire and abuse. Ursa wonders: Corregidora was theirs more than [Mama's]. Mama could only know, but they could feel. They were with him. What did they feel? You know how they talk about hate and desire. Two humps on the same camel? Yes. Hate and desire both riding them. . . . Still, there was what they never spoke . . . what they wouldn't tell me. How all but one of them had the same lover? ...what I never had the nerve to ask. . . . How much was hate for Corregidora and how much was love? It is for the ability to explore such disquieting issues that I loved the novel best.

For example, Great Gram's memories of life during and after enslavement, in so far as they are connected to her liberation from Corregidora, are the only aspects of Great Gram's past about which readers learn. Her intricate involvement with violence does not lead to a physical death, but rather to a suspended space between the past and present. She lived through the trauma of slavery's brutality, yet the resulting psychological effect is her dissociative state of being, evident in the constant repetition of stories about Brazil and Corregidora. Even though Great Gram is physically present with her family, she nonetheless continually looks back to Brazil and her enslavement.

The symptoms of trauma surface throughout the pages of Corregidora, as Ursa, too, oscillates between past and present. This part of Great Gram's legacy finds

residency in Ursa's life as reflected in her narration of the story. Jones creates a narrative structure reflective of the long-term and on-going consequences of Ursa's family legacy of enslavement. Throughout the narrative, Jones blurs the lines of demarcation between past and present with Ursa's fragmented memories of her maternal relatives' oral stories told to her when she is a child. These remembrances interrupt Ursa's own narrative after Mutt's violent act, her hysterectomy, and consequent loss of her unborn child. The continual return of these flashbacks results in the collapse of time and reality in the text, which in turn indicates the disrupting force of these memories, and their endless impact on Ursa's life. Throughout the novel, the stories Ursa's ancestors tell are identified by the use of italics.

Yet, many of Ursa's memories and emotions about Mutt also appear in italics. By doing this, Jones conflates Mutt's treatment of Ursa with Corregidora's treatment of his enslaved female prostitutes. Both men engage in abusive and despicable attacks on the women in their lives, further emphasizing for Ursa that men hurt and perpetuate these legacies of violence. The result of Jones's narrative structure conveys how the memories and legacy of slavery haunt Ursa and her family members. Consequently, much of the literary criticism on Corregidora addresses the haunting nature of slavery for the Corregidora women. At times, this past possesses Ursa as well as her Great Gram and Gram. To understand how Jones portrays this possession and haunting in the text's structure, Caruth's definition of trauma proves helpful:

To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event. And thus the traumatic symptom cannot be interpreted,



simply, as a distortion of reality, nor as a lending of unconscious meaning to a reality it wishes to ignore, nor as the repression of what once was wished for ... it is a peculiar kind of historical phenomenon ... in which the overwhelming events of the past repeatedly possess in intrusive images and thoughts, the one who has lived through them. (Caruth 4-5)

Although Ursa did not live through slavery, she nonetheless experiences its residual effects through the relationships with her female family members. As the novel progresses, Jones reveals that Ursa indeed suffers from a traumatic inheritance of Great Gram and Gram's nightmare of enslavement. Trauma scholar and psychiatrist Dori Laub argues that the trauma survivor must have someone willing to listen to her story to begin to bridge the chasm between the traumatic past and her survival in the present.<sup>2</sup>

Laub explains the listener's role:

The listener to trauma comes to be a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself. The relation of the victim to the event, therefore, impacts on the relation of the listener to it, and the latter comes to feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels. (Laub 58)

He has to address all these, if he is to carry out his function as a listener, and if trauma is to emerge, so that its henceforth impossible witnessing can indeed take place. The listener has to feel the victim's victories, defeats and silences, know them from within,

so that they can assume the form of testimony. Indeed, Ursa internalizes Great Gram's stories and becomes deeply entrenched in the family paradigm of witnessing. As a result, Ursa experiences traumatic symptoms that Caruth elucidates in her discussion of post-traumatic stress disorder. Caruth writes:

... there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with the numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimulants recalling the event. (Caruth, 4)

The italicized portions of *Corregidora* interrupt Ursa's present day narration of her life. In addition, throughout Ursa's narration she refers to her many dreams about the family stories.

These sections of the story constitute memories of her childhood and Great Gram and Gram's stories of *Corregidora*, in addition to hallucinations of imaginary conversations with her estranged husband Mutt. This creates a circular structure to the text, which carries Ursa back to the past of *Corregidora*'s despicable acts of violence and abuse. The persistent instability of time and narrative voices reflects the disorder and disorientation of Ursa's consciousness as she attempts to find a secure self-identity beyond Great Gram's "crisis of death and ... crisis of life" (Caruth, *Unclaimed*, 7). Great Gram and Gram's memories constantly intrude on Ursa's attempt to redefine her role as witness to the family legacy of slavery and survival once she can no longer physically produce other witnesses to pass on the story. While in the hospital recovering

from the fall and operation, Ursa recalls the family's story to her friend Tadpole, who will later be her husband for a brief period of time. Although the adult Ursa recounts the story, she tells it with a child's voice:

My great-grandma told my grandmamma the part she lived through that my grandmamma didn't live through and my grandmamma told my mama what they both lived through and my mama told me what they all lived through and we were suppose to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we'd never forget. Even though they'd burned everything to play like it didn't never happen. Yeah, and where's the next generation? (Jones 9)

Haunted by this question throughout the text, Ursa understands that the hysterectomy has taken more from her than just a physical womb. As instituted by Great Gram, the fundamental act of remembrance through procreation results in the female body as never her own. Ursa tells Tadpole that even her mother always told her "you got to make generations" (10).

Furthermore, to give a physical image to the name and legacy of Corregidora, Ursa inherits a photo of him from Great Gram with the instruction that this photo will help them "know who to hate" (10). Great Gram explains: "I stole it because I said whenever afterward when evil come I wanted something to point to and say, 'That's what evil look like'" (12). Ursa admits that she takes it out "every now and then so [she] won't forget what he looked like" (10). The Corregidora women offer another way to

re-manufacture their hatred for Corregidora by passing down the photo of him, which consequently infects and affects the photo's carriers.

Inadvertently, they create a shrine to the man they want to denigrate with the way they pass down the photo from one generation to the next as if it is a valuable family heirloom to be treasured and revered. Viewing the photo fills in the gaps of lost memory that Great Gram may have about Corregidora. With each viewing of the photo, Great Gram recalls her rage and hate for this man. Ursa tells her friend Tadpole that even now she looks at the photo from time to time so as to remember what Corregidora looks like—he is the manifestation of evil for her family. And since these memories are not her memories of a first-hand experience, she uses this photograph as a means for remembering whom she should hate and why she should procreate. The photo links Ursa to a man she never met and only knows through the filter of the family's memories. It is really the only evidence other than the female bodies that points to Corregidora's existence—he is not myth or fiction.

Ursa's female ancestors ultimately traumatize her more than does the memory of Corregidora. Ursa recognizes that her memories are "always their memories and never [her] own" (101) and that extricating herself from them will be difficult, if not impossible. In an interior monologue, Ursa concludes: "Shit, we're all consequences of something. Stained with another's past as well as our own. Their past in my blood" (45). Great Gram's memories have shaped and directed Ursa's life until now. She is not only marked by the acts of Corregidora, in that his memory dominates the family narrative and by extension hers, but it is his cruel acts such as rape, incest, verbal abuse, and prostituting them that linger in the stories Great Gram insists on sharing with Ursa.

The constraints of their demands imprison Ursa in a trajectory of always remembering brutality.

Critic Missy Dehn Kubitschek explains what this bearing witness means for the subsequent generations of Corregidora women: “In their world, ‘bearing witness’ becomes literal—their function. Ursa’s mother’s function, Ursa’s function, lies in producing daughters to chant the story anew and ensure its survival” (Kubitschek 146). Yet, ensuring its survival through the female body’s ability to procreate other female bodies only further entraps Ursa and her mother in a cycle of trauma, which results in a new form of enslavement in and entanglement with the past. Ursa becomes ensnared in the extreme events she hears from her family members, meaning that she is deeply engaged and intimately implicated in the unfolding of events, which she is to keep literally alive. In addition, Ursa functions as a witness who is both actively and passively linked to acts of brutality and sexual violation.

Ursa’s proximity to Corregidora’s direct victims, both spatially and psychologically, qualifies her position as another witness to this past. She does not add new facts to the family’s story, yet signals of traumatic memory—repetitions, confusion, merging of time—surfacing in Ursa’s narration point to her position as an entangled witness to these stories of violence.

To think this through further, critic Marianne Hirsch’s discussion of “postmemory” (Hirsch, *Surviving* 9) helps explain the transgenerational memory of trauma that Ursa internalizes. Hirsch explains: “Postmemory most specifically describes the relationship of children of survivors of cultural and collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they ‘remember’ only as the narratives

and images with which they grew up, but they are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories of their own right” (9).

Postmemory is a form of memory not only mediated through recollection “but through representation, projection, and creation ...” (9). Postmemory is the future generation’s response to the traumatic experiences of the first generation. Hirsch further explains that postmemory offers a model for reading the compulsive and traumatic repetition of the story and its connected images, which link the future generation to the first. Whereas Great Gram’s memory of slavery is chronologically connected to the past, Ursa’s memory of the stories are linked to her through what Great Gram chooses to tell her. Ursa’s body represents a legacy of this trauma since she later learns from her mother that she was created for the sole purpose of passing down the family story. Ursa and her mother’s bodies offer the (pro)creative spaces for the mediation of Great Gram’s memories in the family’s master narrative. In addition, Ursa experiences the effects of this multi-generational trauma in that the edict to leave evidence defines and consumes her identity. The violence done to the preceding generations of Corregidora women continues to inflict itself on the future generations of Ursa and her mother with each retelling of the past. Although Great Gram passes her trauma down to future generations, it is inappropriate to equate Great Gram to Corregidora’s brutal violations. Yet, the end result is psychological trauma to those connected to them. Hirsch suggests:

... compulsive and traumatic repetition connects the second generation to the first, producing rather than screening the effect of trauma that was lived so much more directly as compulsive repetition by survivors and contemporary witnesses. The work of Dori Laub with Holocaust

survivors informs my reading of Great Gram's compulsion to tell her story. (8-9)

Great Gram and Gram attempt to recover their narrative of enslavement through the biological production of bodies while the repetitive retelling of events produces for the second, third, and fourth generations traumatic anxiety for witnessing to an inherited trauma. Laub explains the drive for survivors to tell their stories:

... survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative to tell and thus come to know one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life. This imperative to tell and be heard can become itself an all-consuming life task. Yet no amount of telling seems ever to do justice to this inner compulsion. There are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in thought, memory, and speech. The pressure thus continues unremittingly, and if words are not trustworthy or adequate, the life that is chosen can become the vehicle by which the struggle to tell continues. (Laub, Truth 63)

Great Gram's preoccupation to testify about the past to other family members never allows her to reconcile two worlds—the realm of the trauma and the realm of her current, ordinary life.

The consuming nature of the compulsion orally and physically to pass down the story reveals the tremendous pressure with which Great Gram lives. Her traumatic experiences and memories of slavery cannot be transformed into a story with a beginning, middle and end. Trauma's psychological force on the victim-survivor (like that which Great Gram experiences) is insightfully explained by trauma theorist Lawrence Langer: "Trauma stops the chronological clock and fixes the moment permanently in memory and imagination, immune to the vicissitudes of time. The unfolding story brings relief, while the unfolding plot induces pain" (Langer 174-75). Great Gram's retelling of the past to the young Ursa functions as more of a re-experience of this past, rather than memories distinct from the life she now lives.

It is important to clarify that distinction does not imply separation. Great Gram's memories are distinct from the reality in which she lives, yet her past is bound to her present life and identity, thus culminating in significant psychological tension that she passes on to her granddaughter and great-granddaughter. Great Gram's situation reveals the magnitude and utter complexity of the trauma permeating her psychological state—she alternates between silence and pressing repetition of her past. And Ursa knows that "still there was what they never spoke ... what even they wouldn't tell me" (Jones 103). Memory, speech, and storytelling will not crystallize this past, so Great Gram turns to the body as the tangible and permanent way to transgress the silence caused by the burning of the paper evidence and the unspeakable horrors of her enslavement. The body becomes "the vehicle by which the struggle to tell continues" (Laub 63). For her, the story of enslavement and emancipation is unchanging and repeated to the exclusion



of how her survival can offer hope or healing for future generations of Corregidora women.

Ultimately, Great Gram's project to counter the erasure of the official records fails in a significant way. Although Corregidora's acts of violence, rape, and cruelty are exposed long after the abolition of slavery and his death, Great Gram's reproductive ideology and the preoccupation thereof obstructs Ursa's and her mother's healthy psychological development. Her insistence on sexual intercourse for reproduction replicates Corregidora's repressive control over her body and soul and now the future generations. Ursa comments, "He [Corregidora] made them make love to anyone, so they couldn't love anyone" (Jones 104). The indirect result of Great Gram's influence on her progeny and its failure to provide healing from such trauma resonates in Audre Lorde's famous statement, "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (Lorde 112). In this family, the black female body is used as a means for economic and biological production, as well as an outlet for Corregidora's desire. The female body, subjugated and objectified for exploitative purposes, converges in a political and economic vortex. To understand this relationship, I turn to Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish, The Birth of the Prison* (1977). In it he discusses the body's involvement in what he terms as the "political field" (Foucault 25). Foucault explains that in the political space:

... power relations have an immediate hold upon it (the body); they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. This political investment of the body is bound

up, in accordance with the complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination; but, on the other hand, its constitution as labour power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection ... the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body. (25-6)

Although Foucault centers his discussion on the body of the condemned prisoner/criminal, his argument of the body's relation to political and economic power helps clarify how Corregidora views the female bodies of his women. Their biological output is intimately linked to the economic worth their bodies generate for him. They not only become free labor for him, but he profits triply from their enslavement by prostituting them as well as using them for his own sexual desire and gratification. In another flashback to one of Great Gram's stories, Ursa remembers:

... he took her out of the field when she was still a child and put her to work in a whorehouse while she was a child. She was to go out or he would bring the men in and the money they gave her she was to turn over to him. There were other women he used like that. She was the pretty little one with the almond eyes and coffee-bean skin, his favorite. "A good little piece. My best. Dorita. Little gold piece." (Jones 10-11)

He reduces her to the status of an object and, even worse, he remakes her worth through his verbal language to use her as a means to exercise his agency as slave owner, rapist, and brutalizer. Later, readers learn that before Corregidora began bringing men to her,

“he would take [her] for hisself first and said he was breaking [her] in” (11). As a result, Corregidora fathers Great Gram’s daughter and her granddaughter (Ursa’s mother). Their sexuality is commodified into a product to be temporarily, but repeatedly, bought and sold.

Not only are the bodies of Great Gram and Gram turned into sites for economic productivity, but the result of rape and sexual enslavement produces other children that Corregidora sells off for more profit. In every way, Great Gram and Gram’s bodies become sources of production from which he profits monetarily. The Corregidora family matriarchs are not the only victims of his perversions. In a particularly harrowing recollection of how he would decide to buy other female slaves, Corregidora’s first concern focused on their bodies and by extension their sexuality. Ursa recalls Gram’s memory of Great Gram’s story:

Yeah, Mama told me how in the old days he was just buying up women. `They’d have to raise up their dresses so he could see what they had down there, and he feel all around down there, and then he feel their bellies to see if they had solid bellies. And they had to be pretty. He wasn’t buying up them fancy mulatta womens though. They had to be black and pretty. They had to be the color of his coffee beans. That’s why he said he always liked my mama better than me. (173)

Corregidora’s obsession with the bodies of his female slaves eventually becomes Great Gram’s obsession too, although her fixation on the female body functions in a new and

subversive way. Rather than exploiting the female body for economic production and sexual gratification, Great Gram converts it into the production of witnesses to Corregidora's cruelty and acts of rape and violence to the female body.

The Corregidora women do not abandon the objectification of the body, but rather continue its use in a paradigm of production and power. Now the female body's output becomes the source for historical preservation of the family story, a thoroughly utilitarian use. However, while their bodies are sites for transmission of the past, they further confine themselves and future generations to a history imposed on them. In other words, the history they possess and which possesses them is a story of their disempowerment. Although they reveal the absolute control Corregidora wielded over them, Great Gram, in turn, accepts nothing less than a complete surrender to the veracity of her claims evident when she slaps young Ursa for questioning the truthfulness of her stories. Great Gram instructs:

When I'm telling you something don't ever ask if I'm lying. Because they didn't want to leave no evidence of what they done- so it couldn't be held against them. 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 the evidence to hold up. That's why they burned all the paper so there wouldn't be no evidence to hold up against them. (Jones 14)

At a young age, Ursa learns that there is no space for interpretation or exploration of the past beyond what Great Gram and Gram decide to tell. Ursa and her mother must accept the story of the past, how they are implicated in it and how they will transmit the family

trauma to future female generations. Psychologically, this family paradigm wreaks havoc on the grown up Ursa, especially evident when she loses her physical ability to have children. Great Gram decides for her daughter and granddaughter that their bodies and life's purpose will be to witness to the trauma of physical and sexual enslavement, yet their bodies transgress merely witnessing and further perpetuate the source of the suffering—memories of Corregidora and his deplorable acts of violation.

Once this period of enslavement ends, these women survivors continue to use their bodies and their sexuality as a form of power. The master of this power shifts from Corregidora to them, but their bodies are, nonetheless, used in ways that deny them an authentic release from their personal and collective trauma.

As a result, they continue to define the black woman's body as an agent for production—the production of a historical and familial narrative. To achieve this end, they exclude the possibilities for these same bodies to contravene the traumatic and recognize the black female body's capability for a bodily language rooted in dignity, individualism, and agency. They also deny themselves the pleasure of the body because of the obsession to leave witnesses, which will expose Corregidora's brutality. The female body is still owned by another, but now it is the Corregidora women who own these bodies. Ursa and her mother, caught in a web of inherited psychological trauma, do not easily extract themselves from such disempowerment. Indeed, Ursa's mother never successfully finds freedom from the family legacy. Ursa's mother is the product of incest—the result of Corregidora's rape of his own daughter (Gram). Indeed, the generations of Corregidora are all warped emotionally. Reflective of this brutality is the verbal language of abuse born from his sexual exploitation and savage behavior towards

Great Gram, which is poignantly portrayed in the following passage. Corregidora did not allow black men to have sexual intercourse with Great Gram:

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)<sup>6</sup>

It is important to note that Ursa's mother tells this story as she heard it from Great Gram. Ursa notices that as her mother retells the story "it wasn't her that was talking, but Great Gram" (124), revealing that the family narrative of trauma dominates the

family members' identities whether or not they experienced slavery. The retelling of Great Gram's words used to express this extreme abuse incarnates trauma's effect on language and her physical vulnerability to Corregidora's will. Great Gram's repetitions of vulgar words and phrases reveal an affected understanding and inability to control the intrusion of horrific memories. Overwhelmed by the extremity of such circumstances beyond her control, Great Gram remains transfixed by this tragedy that haunts her. The abundance of profane and visceral language in this passage reflects her need to communicate these memories, thus further emphasizing the survival of the body in a context where a corporeal form of language equates sex with violence, disease, and subjugation. Trauma's effects are recognizable in her reconstruction of the episode through the use of a coarse narration and the compulsive repetition of images and words. Focusing on Corregidora's acts of digging, squeezing, and "fucking" strewn throughout this passage convey the displacement of Great Gram's dignity and agency as another source for the trauma she endures. By reliving this grueling scene, as well as many others throughout Jones's text, Jones transmits a deeper understanding of how Great Gram's language can only be one of rage and hatred. Indeed, how does one get on with life after such experiences.

### III: Trauma and Identity

This thesis has explored the concepts of trauma and working through in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*. It has been argued that the protagonists is traumatized by various incidents throughout her life and are therefore possessed by the past, and that this has a potentially harmful effect on the two characters. The manifestations of the major

symptoms of trauma – including belatedness, insensitivity, repression and increased arousal – have been examined.

It has been suggested that since the traumatic events in Ursa's and Naomi's lives are, in LaCapra's terms, of a historical rather than structural nature, a process of working through needs to be enacted, so that a catastrophic experience that one cannot comprehend can be replaced with a mode of reconstruction or renewal. Without doubt, traumatic events continue to reverberate throughout one's life and cannot be completely transcended; nevertheless, an attempt to communicate and think critically about the atrocities of the past is necessary, and might even serve as a basis for a certain kind of politics.

*Corregidora* depicts a female character's compelling and complex engagement with her traumatic experience. While the former novel takes place in twentieth-century Kentucky, and the latter is set in a fictional city in Canada, both protagonists are haunted by the repercussions of a seemingly distant past: in Ursa's case, it is the horrors of slavery that define her existence and relationships, Ursa does not have first-hand experience of slavery; she inherits a narrative from her female ancestors who intend to fill in the gaps in the dominant version of history through an incessant repetition of stories and imperatives.

Nevertheless, the *Corregidora* narrative is so vivid and uncompromising that it leaves an ineradicable mark on Ursa's life even though she was not physically present at the events, suggesting that trauma can be dangerously transmissible. This leads to a state in which neither Ursa nor Naomi can find a way of disengaging herself from the debilitating preoccupation with either the absence or the presence of her female



ancestors, not least because she is not allowed to ask questions or investigate the situation. Thus when they try to introduce some flexibility into the exact repetition of the narrative or the “nightmare” of the silence, their attempts are immediately foreclosed – in order to remain faithful to the injustices as they experienced them in the Corregidora women’s case. The traumatic events analyzed above are the result of specific historical and social contexts, are nevertheless in both cases connected to the issue of sexuality, albeit in different ways.

In *Corregidora*, sexuality, and especially sexual terror, permeates all aspects of the narrative. This inevitably defines Ursa’s subjectivity, especially since she serves as an audience to a number of disturbing tales from an early age. The lesson her ancestors want her to learn from these stories is that sexual violation needs to be countered by bearing witness and handing down the narrative to the future generations, thus reducing sexual activity to the sole purpose of reproduction.

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