

## Cycles of Violence: Ancestral Subtexts in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*<sup>1</sup>

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And her eyes stayed on mine Anninho,  
until all her words and memory  
and fears and the tenderness  
ran through me like blood.  
That was the moment I became  
my grandmother and she became me.  
—Gayl Jones, “Song for Anninho”(37)

The impossibility of a comprehensible story however,  
does not necessarily mean the denial of a transmissible truth.  
—Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (154)

Written against the post-civil rights backdrop of the 1970s, black feminist activism, and African American women's literary re-inscriptions of slavery's legacies, Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* is a neo-slave narrative permeated by traumatic reproductions of sexual and racial violence that emerge from the haunting presence of an ancestral narrative of abuse in the descendants' lives. Jones' story of familial origin, a story steeped in pain, violence, and incest, testifies to the devastating effects of slavery, silencing, and historical amnesia on subsequent generations. The novel maps the blues singer Ursa Corregidora's life and her troubled relationship with her foremothers and her male partners. Ursa learns as a child the story of her Great Gram and Gram's suffering. Great Gram grows up as a slave on a Brazilian plantation where she is raped, sexually exploited<sup>2</sup> and abused by the slave-owner Corregidora and his wife. She soon becomes pregnant and gives birth to Ursa's Gram. Fearing for her life after an unexplained act of resistance, Great Gram runs from the plantation, leaving her daughter behind. During Great Gram's absence, Corregidora rapes Gram, who is also his own daughter, and impregnates her. At that point, Great Gram returns and takes her pregnant daughter with her to North America. This is where Ursa's mother Irene is born, and eventually Ursa herself. Ursa grows up to be a blues singer haunted by her foremothers' trauma and the inability to experience fulfilling sexual and emotional connections with other people.

Great Gram's narrative of Corregidora's abuse is so pervasive in her descendants' lives that they embrace her memories as their own. Apart from the women in Ursa's family, Ursa's husbands are also burdened with

their own familial narratives involving an enslaved ancestor. This article argues that the ancestral narratives of enslavement in *Corregidora* function as ancestral subtexts to the characters' lives, where the enslaved ancestor's narrative gets reproduced through performing the role of the ancestor or "becoming the ancestor" (Harb 116) and internalisation, resulting in cycles of violence. I use the term *ancestral subtext* to refer to the implicit and indirect but inferable aspects of the ancestral narrative which are continuously present in the characters' lives.<sup>3</sup> Within this context, I postulate that an integration of such troubling narratives makes the descendants' project of healing possible, creating a dialogic relationship with the past as well as identifying the ways in which that past continues to saturate the present.

Trapped within Great Gram's trauma of rape and sexual exploitation and her continuous retelling of the same story, her descendants are exposed to "insidious trauma," a concept developed by feminist trauma theorist Maria Root. Based on this model, women living in a culture where there is a high rate of sexual assault become aware that they could be raped at any time and by anyone. As a consequence, many women who have never been raped have the symptoms of rape trauma, such as hypervigilance, avoidance of situations they deem high risk, or numbness in response to overtures from men which might in fact be friendly (Brown 107). The women in the *Corregidora* family experience symptoms of Great Gram's trauma to such an extent that they "become the ancestor" or perform Great Gram's narrative as if it were their own. The "insidious trauma" therefore functions as an *ancestral subtext* to their own lives. Ursa relates this particular state of consciousness in the novel through imagined dialogues, merging a multitude of voices. As the narrative alternates between italics and regular font, resembling oral narration without a specific pattern or structure, the identity of the person telling the story frequently remains unclear. Ursa's family history is initially introduced through Ursa, who confides in her two husbands. Commenting on the transmission of the story, Ursa states:

My great-grandmama told my grandmama the part she lived through that my grandmama didn't live through and my grandmama 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)

Through an intergenerational chain of women, a single narrative of family origin is continuously passed on. *Corregidora*, the slavemaster, and his rape of Great Gram and subsequently his own daughter functions like a story "frozen in time and space, in a state of stasis and stagnation" (Harb 120). Great Gram has been repeating this narrative to Ursa since childhood. As Ursa recalls:

*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 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. . . . (Jones 11).*

The repetitive words which work as a substitute for memory demonstrate trauma's "literality and its insistent return" (Caruth, "Trauma" 5). Reflecting on the imperative of the traumatized to tell one's story, Dori Laub argues that "the 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" (63). As a survivor of rape, abuse, and the violence of enslavement, Great Gram retells an inflexible story that keeps her anger unmitigated. Her insistence on singularity consequently obstructs any critical reflection or interpretation which could allow integration and healing.

Attesting to the reproduction of violence, Great Gram slaps the child Ursa when she dares to question the veracity of her words, solidifying her narrative in the process. She angrily shouts at Ursa:

*When I'm telling you something don't you 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 evidence to hold up. That's why they burned all the papers, so there wouldn't be no evidence to hold up against them. (Jones 14)*

Great Gram underscores an imperative that the women in the family are obligated to follow: they must procreate in order to create more witnesses and pass the story on. Great Gram's authoritative approach to memories bears a similarity to hegemonic versions of history which marginalise and suppress other perspectives or, in Madhu Dubey's words, replicate "the masterful and repressive gestures of the dominant tradition . . . [they try] to supplant" (253). Slapping Ursa for her scepticism, Great Gram not only fixes her narrative further and prevents critical intervention but also *performs* the same violence found within the story of her origins. There is no room for dialogue and alternative views, and it is precisely this insistence on singularity that obstructs healing and integration of traumatic experience into everyday life and narrative memory.<sup>4</sup> Discussing insidious trauma, Laura S. Brown notes that "the private, secret, insidious traumas to which feminist analysis draws attention are more often than not those events in which dominant culture and its forms and institutions are expressed and perpetuated (102). This argument illustrates the way in which Great Gram's narrative mirrors that of the oppressor by constricting her descendants' subjectivities and transmitting a single narrative of trauma.

Another ancestral narrative which Ursa receives comes from Gram, Great Gram's daughter, also raped and abused by Corregidora. Although Gram passes on Great Gram's rigid slave narrative, she is the one who perceives her personal history differently. As Sirène Harb insightfully

comments, “this ancestral figure knows that memory is slippery and mutable; it involves processes of construction and reconstruction” (122). Admitting to the fragility of Great Gram’s story, Gram clearly separates herself from her mother by distinguishing certain memories as her own: “*Naw, I don’t remember when slavery was abolished, cause I was just being born then. Mama do, and sometime it seem like I do too*” (Jones 78). Although Gram identifies with her mother’s trauma, she also acknowledges the possibility of dialogue with respect to historical ambiguities. Furthermore, it is Gram who reveals the existence of a family secret to Ursa that potentially led to her own abuse:

*Mama stayed there with him even after it ended, until she did something that made him want to kill her, and then she run off and had to leave me. Then he was raising me and doing you know I said what he did. But then sometime after that when she got settled here, she came back for me. (79)*

Reflecting on the role of this secret, Stephanie Li argues that “the narrative silence surrounding Great Gram’s departure points to the uncomfortable question of how the mother’s resistance exacerbated the trauma of the daughter” (134). By creating a unified, monolithic narrative that transmits the same experiences over and over again, Great Gram authoritatively chooses which parts to engage with and which to silence.

### Beyond Corregidora: Private Memories and “Enabling Scripts”

The ancestral slave narrative about Corregidora’s abuse serves as a subtext to Ursa’s life, hindering her self-constitution and deeply affecting her interpersonal relationships. Encouraged by her foremothers to keep the memory of Corregidora alive and “make generations” through procreation, Ursa is unable to form meaningful relationships and develop her sexuality. She struggles to make sense of her own experiences and separate them from her foremothers. Harb points out that “paralysing their struggle for transformation and wholeness, the ancestral stories shape immutable versions of memory that catalyse the perpetuation of the dehumanizing and objectifying effects of psychological enslavement” (117). Reflecting on her foremothers’ loneliness and isolation, Ursa questions the deliberately omitted aspects of Great Gram’s narrative. This intimate curiosity also works to disrupt Great Gram’s authoritative version of events:

*Sometimes I wonder about their desire you know. Grandmama’s and Great Gram’s. Corregidora was theirs more than hers. 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, that’s what I was going to say. (Jones 102-3)*

Interestingly, numerous critics express ambivalence toward the co-existence of hate and desire described in this passage, citing it as

potentially controversial ground in its willingness to explore the possibility of desire in dehumanising conditions. For instance, Deborah Horvitz sees this as Jones' "most radical and political question" (249), one that establishes hate and pain as intertwined with desire and pleasure to explain the foremothers' attachment to Corregidora. In a similar vein, Amy Gottfried suggests that "*Corregidora* is at its riskiest in hinting that desire can exist even in the most abusive situations" (561). However, Jones' "question" of desire is far more nuanced. The passage does not necessarily speculate on *the foremothers'* desire. Following Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg's succinct argument, Corregidora's desire is at issue here since it is "anthropomorphized in the metaphoric of hate and desire riding them, as in the sexual act, specifically the act of rape" (453). Based on this view, *the hate and desire riding them* serves as a metaphor for Corregidora and his abuse rather than a description of how Great Gram and Gram are subjected to contradictory feelings. Proving this point, Goldberg applies Hortense Spillers' comments on the issue of desire in captivity to the text:

Whether or not the captive female and/or her sexual oppressor derived "pleasure" from their seductions and couplings is not a question we can politely ask. Whether or not "pleasure" is possible at all under conditions that I would aver as non-freedom for both or either of the parties has not been settled. . . . Under these arrangements, the customary lexis of sexuality, including "reproduction," "motherhood," "pleasure," and "desire" are thrown into unrelieved crisis. (76)

Spillers' argument is useful in this context as it does not attempt to erase the possibility of captive women's subjectivity and sexuality, but rather, points to the radically different conditions in which women lived, conditions where concepts of "desire" and "choice" are not equally applicable. Spillers warns against easy comparisons and co-optations and grounds her analysis in historically specific conditions. Similarly, Jones' engagement with desire *is* political, but instead of treading on "dangerous territory," she highlights the risks of appropriating and distorting the lived realities of enslaved ancestors. For this reason, Ursa's thoughts on her foremothers' own desire remain speculations, conclusive only on the subject of Corregidora's abuse and its devastating consequences.

Distancing herself from Great Gram's narrative, Ursa yearns to know her mother's private memory. This insistence begins the process of reclaiming her selfhood and integrating her ancestral trauma. At one point Ursa scrutinizes a photograph of herself and her husband Mutt, contemplating:

But I knew why I was looking. Because I realized for the first time I had what all those women had. I'd always thought I was different. Their daughter, but somehow different. Maybe less Corregidora. I don't know. But when I saw that picture, I knew I had it. What my mother and my mother's mother before her had. The mulatto women. Great Gram was the coffee bean woman, but the rest of us. . . . But I am different now, I was thinking. I have everything they had, except the generations. I can't make generations. And even if I still had my womb, even if the first baby had

come—what would I have done then? Would I have kept it up? Would I have been like *her*, or *them*? (Jones 60)

Ursa feels different from her foremothers since she is unable to have her own biological children due to a hysterectomy and therefore cannot fulfil the imperative of “making generations.” The “it” Ursa refers to when stating “I knew I had it” is the trauma that binds the Corregidora women together, surpassing similarities in physical appearance and connoting a shared bond in the form of Great Gram’s slave narrative. The question she asks herself at the end is also relevant: “Would I have been like *her*, or *them*?” The *her* in this context refers to Ursa’s mother and *them* to Gram and Great Gram. Beginning with the crucial process of separation from Great Gram’s single narrative, Ursa wonders about her mother’s *own* story in her eagerness to know her “secret.” In one of her imagined dialogues with Mutt, Ursa talks about her foremothers’ loneliness, differentiating her mother’s story from Great Gram and Gram’s in the process:

*Loneliness. I could feel it, like she was breathing it, like it was all in the air. Desire, too. I couldn’t recognize it then. But now 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. And then when Grandmama told me I hid my face in the pillow and cried. I couldn’t tell her I knew. . . . She was closed up like a fist. (101)*

Ursa’s yearning to connect with her mother reflects her willingness to move past her foremothers’ burden of memories. Permanently marked by the trauma of rape and sexual exploitation, Great Gram and Gram view all men as either potential rapists or as means to an end. For this reason, Ursa’s mother, like Ursa, is unable to form her own memories and relationships as she is convinced that her only purpose is to make generations and transmit the familial slave narrative. Interestingly, it is Great Gram who tells Ursa about her mother and the man who fathered Ursa and then abandoned them. However, Great Gram’s intention is not to provide Ursa with her mother’s personal history but to portray men as redundant once they have fulfilled their procreative function. Once again, Great Gram asserts herself as the authoritative voice in transmitting her own version of her daughter’s past. Ursa is unable to share this knowledge with her mother and inquire about it, finding her “*closed up like a fist*.”

Seeking her mother’s personal *herstory*, Ursa begins the process of transformation in which she reclaims “the ethics and dialogism of storytelling” (Harb 117). In their conversation, Mama opens up to Ursa about Martin, Ursa’s father, revealing her personal suffering and self-blame. She describes their only sexual encounter with the following words:

He kept asking if he could touch me certain places, and I kept saying yes. And then all of a sudden it was like I felt the whole man in me, just felt the whole man in there. I pushed him out. It was like it was just that feeling of him in there. And nothing else. I hadn’t even given myself time to feel anything else before I pushed him out. But he

must have. . . . I . . . still that memory, feeling of him in me. I wouldn't let myself feel anything. It was like a surprise. Like a surprise when he got inside. Just that one time. (Jones 117-18)

Mama's inability to experience pleasure during sexual intercourse is connected to her received notions about sexuality. Encouraged to "make generations" and engage in sexual activity only for the sake of procreation, Mama feels this sexual act as a violation of her own selfhood, feeling "the whole man in her." Defining herself through the procreative imperative, she feels herself violated by the act of intimacy, unable to experience enjoyment beyond a suffocating, overwhelming presence. That one sexual encounter results in a pregnancy that leads to Ursa's birth. Pressured by Great Gram, Martin agrees to marry Ursa's mother and they start living together with Gram and Great Gram. As Ursa's mother describes in more detail their life together to Ursa, an evocative moment of "becoming the ancestor" occurs:

"We'd be in the front room, and they'd be back there in the bedroom, Great Gram telling Mama how Corregidora wouldn't let her see some man because he was too black." Mama kept talking until it wasn't her that was talking, but Great Gram. I stared at her because she wasn't Mama now, she was Great Gram talking: "He wouldn't let me see him, cause he said he was too black for me." (124)

Although Mama begins with her own story, she suddenly *becomes* Great Gram. She is still unable to separate her own memory from Great Gram's or produce her own version of the ancestral story by enriching Great Gram's narrative with dialogic elements and reflections and incorporating it into her own life. Although the meeting with her mother might seem defeating, Ursa asks herself afterwards: "But then, I was thinking, what had I done about my *own* life?" (132). This question reveals that her mother's words and story influenced her sense of self, giving way to possibilities instead of traumatising restrictions and allowing the two women, in Stephanie Li's words, to "embark on the creation of a whole new model of relations" (138).

Apart from insisting on hearing her mother's story, Ursa's singing is another crucial element in establishing a dialogic relationship with her ancestors. *Corregidora* is frequently called a "blues novel," as its structure, numerous dialogues, use of call and response, and the presence of contradictory emotions and interrupted thoughts reflect qualities associated with blues music.<sup>5</sup> The function of the blues in the novel is frequently underscored in critical readings as Ursa's substitute or compensation for her lost womb or procreative abilities. However, Ursa's singing goes beyond being a simple compensatory mechanism for a lost procreative ability. To be more specific, Ursa was a blues singer long before her hysterectomy. The blues work as Ursa's means of resistance, economic self-sufficiency and, crucially, her way of *bonding* with her foremothers. Her singing represents the possibility of integration, as Ursa testifies to her ancestors' pain on stage. Houston A. Baker defines the

blues as a “multiplex, enabling script in which Afro-American cultural discourse is inscribed” (4). While singing, Ursa vocalises her pain, her memories, and her own family history through the improvisatory and creative form of the blues, which serves as an “enabling script” offering possibilities of diverse discourses rather than restrictions. Ursa’s yearning to sing a particular kind of song represents her wish to lovingly re-connect with her foremothers: “I wanted a song that would touch me, touch my life and theirs. A Portuguese song, but not a Portuguese song. A new world song. A song branded with the new world. I thought of the girl who had to sleep with her master and mistress” (59). Ursa’s blues are thus connected to embodiment; she wants a song that will touch her family members and herself. This merging that Ursa requires can be read through Houston A. Baker’s definition of the blues as “an invitation to energizing intersubjectivity” (5), a relation that allows the establishment of dialogue. The song *touching* them refers to physicality that could break through her foremothers’ loneliness and pain and offer comfort and healing.

### Violence, Masculinity, and the Circumscription of Female Subjectivity

In exploring Ursa’s emotional and sexual relationships with her two husbands Mutt and Tadpole, including the eventual breakdown of those relationships, *Corregidora* reveals an unflinching portrayal of the circumscription of female desire and its expression,<sup>6</sup> as well as the ways in which ancestral narratives of enslavement and abuse affect the lives of Ursa’s partners. Exploring these problematic relationships and their ancestral subtexts attests 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 Brown refers to 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 that can be traced back to the period of slavery and colonialism.

The novel’s first few lines reflect an important contrast between the marital expectations of first husband Mutt and Ursa’s blues:

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. (Jones 3)

In this initial passage, Mutt’s desire to support and control Ursa is contrasted to her singing. She explains that she did not just sing to support herself financially, although that aspect forms an important aspect 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. (3-4)

Mutt’s jealousy and possessiveness culminate in Ursa’s accident, which permanently marks her as she loses her fertility. Although it remains unclear whether or not Mutt’s pushing her down the stairs is an accident, the argument he initiates does create the conditions for her fall and subsequent injury. Moreover, it is Ursa who believes he deliberately pushed her.

Reminiscing about her relationship with Mutt, Ursa leads numerous imaginary dialogues<sup>7</sup> with him, revealing their strained and frequently destructive relationship. Upon hearing Ursa’s own story of ancestral trauma and enslavement, Mutt confides in her 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 great-grandfather has just gone crazy after that. (Jones 150-1)

Mutt’s narrative establishes the ways in which his ancestral subtext impacts 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, in her role as a singer and in 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 (57-8). After sharing his family history, Mutt adds: “Whichever way you look at it, we ain’t them” (Jones 151). This statement can be viewed as Mutt’s emphasis on progression, advising Ursa to move on and distance herself from her ancestral trauma. However, I maintain that this statement actually reflects Mutt’s own desire to distance himself from his ancestors and their conditions of bondage and highlight

his and Ursa's different sociohistorical contexts. "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. He actually internalises the effects of his grandfather's story, which then replays as a subtext to his own life. For instance, during an argument with Ursa, Mutt threatens to make a scene in front of the audience while she is singing by trying to sell her: "One a y'all wont to bid for her? Piece a ass for sale. I got me a piece a ass for sale. That's what y'all wont, ain't it? Piece a ass. I said I got a piece a ass for sale, anybody wont to bid on it?" (159). This scene exemplifies Mutt's internalisation of his grandfather's narrative, placing Mutt in the role of the abusive slaveholder who sells his slave. It can also work as a distorted version of his grandfather's story, where he has to sell his wife to pay his debts. Therefore, Mutt replays his ancestral narrative by inverting it and consequently destroying the relationship with his wife.

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, the, '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." (Jones 13)

Motivated by a sense of mutual vulnerability and lack of privilege, Tadpole's grandfather marries this orphaned white woman and they have children. Tadpole adds that "one of the children came out black and the other came out white" (13). When Ursa asks which one of those was his mother, he leaves before answering. This confession adds to the complexity of interracial relationships in oppressive contexts. The spectral white ancestor and whiteness haunt both Tadpole and Ursa's life in different ways. During slavery, the prospect of racial mixing was marked by forced impregnation or breeding, by rape—essentially, procreating to increase the slavemaster's stock. Consensual relationships between blacks and whites were forbidden by law, legitimized only in cases of rape and exploitation. Tadpole's grandmother, as an 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 are married. Therefore, Tadpole's complex emotional response about the "genuine impurities" (Rushdy 102) of his own family history points to the historical burden interracial relationships carry and once again challenges notions of "desire" and "consent" in oppressive conditions.

What both Mutt and Tadpole have in common is their understanding of sexuality and the possessive, phallocentric focus on their own pleasure. Furthermore, both have the need to control Ursa through emotional abuse or sexual submission. Although Mutt and Tadpole are not violent, they are both controlling, insecure and have difficulty conceptualising sexuality in mutually beneficial ways due to social and historical reasons and damaging constructs of masculinity. As hooks points out, in embracing

patriarchal notions of manhood, contemporary black males thought of sex as informed first and foremost by male desire (70). Encapsulating the ways past violence is reproduced in the present, Mutt 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" (Jones 60). This line is identical 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*" (10). 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. [italics added] (68)

Here Ursa compares Tadpole's possessiveness to Mutt, as both men attempt to limit her freedom of movement 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," first by Ursa's singing and then through intercourse. Once again, Ursa's own desires are circumscribed by this act of possessiveness and entitlement.

Both of Ursa's husbands continuously reduce Ursa to a hole or a "pussy." Their sexual relationship with Ursa is based on what Goldberg aptly terms the "violent effacement of clitoral pleasure" (456). Reflecting on her inability to enjoy intercourse or take initiative, Tadpole asserts: "I want to help you Ursa. I want to help you as much as I can. . . . Let me up in your pussy. . . . Let me get up in your pussy, baby. . . . Damn, you still got a hole, ain't you? As long as a woman got a hole, she can fuck" (Jones 82). With this urging, Tadpole frames his frustration with Ursa's lack of sexual response and initiative in terms of his wish to "help" her, basically by reducing her to a hole to be filled. Similarly, Mutt asks Ursa: "My pussy, ain't it Urs?" (156), and "What am I doing to you, Ursa. . . . I'm fucking you, ain't I? What's wrong? Say it, Urs. I said *I know you from way back*. I'm fucking you, ain't i? Say it [italics added]" (153). Both Mutt's questioning and the insistence on Ursa verbalising his possession of her reproductive organs serve to affirm his dominance as the one performing the sexual act and Ursa's submission as the one passively receiving it. Mutt's line, *I said I know you from way back*, is also relevant

in the context of the circumscription of Ursa's subjectivity. Mutt uses this line as a form of paternalism, positing himself as the one who knows Ursa "from way back," that is, the one who has an in-depth, authoritative knowledge about her past. Furthermore, this statement also implies ancestral subtexts or a reference to familial histories of enslavement, attesting to a "dangerous overdetermination of past cycles" (Li 140). The violence, abuse, exploitation and damaging constructions of black masculinity and femininity, dehumanised under slavery, are invoked through this "way back" surpassing time and space. Mutt's 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, which emerge from the history of slavery and result 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" (88). Moreover, he blames his cheating on her sexual passivity.

The cyclical violence is not only limited to heterosexual relationships, as *Corregidora* includes a lesbian context as well. Staying with her friend Cat after her hysterectomy, Ursa describes being sexually harassed one night by Jeffrene, a young girl whom Cat took care of while her mother was at work. Feeling Jeffrene touching her breasts, Ursa kicks her off onto the floor: "I kept calling her a goddamn bull, but I didn't like what else I was wondering. I was wondering how Cat Lawson got her to mind" (Jones 39). Overhearing Cat's argument with Jeffrene, Ursa discovers that the two have a sexual relationship. Ursa's extremely negative reaction, aversion and subsequent distancing from Cat, has been interpreted by some critics as a symptom of Jones' negative portrayal of lesbians.<sup>8</sup> Following this argument, these incidents and Ursa's response do seem to frame lesbianism in a deviant way. Firstly, Jeffrene harasses Ursa, initiating sexual contact without her consent. Jeffrene is therefore presented as a predatory lesbian attacking an unsuspecting victim. Even Ursa's offensive slur, "a bull," short for "bull dyke," is a disparaging term connoting a lesbian with stereotypical "masculine" traits. However, Ursa's negative reaction can be viewed in a different way. Ursa's response is not necessarily homophobic, but can be read, according to Goldberg, as "her inability to imagine pleasure outside of the pain of the violent heterosexual contract as she has experienced it" (465). Although lesbianism is evidently figured as an alternative to heterosexuality and its oppressions as they are described in the novel, Cat's relationship with Jeffrene is also marked by violence. Confronting Jeffrene about harassing Ursa, Cat tells her: "If you bother her again I'll give you my fist to fuck" (Jones 47). Ursa overhears this threat of sexual violence and even repeats it herself when she catches Tadpole cheating with another woman in her own bed: "If you want something to fuck, I'll give you my fist to fuck" (87). Therefore, apart from pointing to alternative sexualities focused on different types of

pleasure, these instances also demonstrate that the effects of violence are not solely limited to heterosexual relationships.

### Disputed Acts and Troubling Connections: Uncovering the Family “Secret”

The ending of the novel is significant for Ursa’s discovery of the “family secret,” or Great Gram’s act of resistance, which forced her to abandon her daughter and escape Corregidora’s plantation. Reunited after twenty years, Ursa and Mutt go to the same hotel room at the Drake where they used to go while married. It is here that Ursa performs the critically disputed act of fellatio on Mutt. He comments on this act with the following words: “You never would suck it when I wanted you to. Oh baby, you never would suck it. I didn’t think you would do this for me” (Jones 184). Melvin Dixon sees this act as Ursa assuming control over herself and Mutt, with her mouth serving as “an instrument of direct sexual power” (239). Contrastingly, Ann duCille reads the scene through a lens of female submission and surrender (568). Responding to Dixon, duCille argues that Ursa’s mouth does not *become* a powerful instrument through the act of fellatio, as it has always been a powerful instrument through her singing (568). In my view, the idea of choice and context are crucial in reading Ursa’s decision to perform fellatio and can be compared to her singing. Firstly, Ursa chooses to sing the blues as a means of creative self-expression and economic self-sufficiency, and she perseveres in her decision despite objections from her partners and family. Therefore, Ursa’s blues singing is empowering as it represents an important factor in her self-constitution. Following this argument, I maintain that Ursa chooses to perform fellatio on Mutt in a similar vein. The fact that she never did this before reveals her transformed stance towards sexuality, brought about by a particular way of life. Ursa’s role as an independent blues singer proves this point, as it places her in a context of autonomy, choice, and self-sufficiency. As Angela Davis points out, blues singing provides affirmations of sexual autonomy and open expressions of female sexual desire, giving historical voice to possibilities of equality not articulated elsewhere (24). The critically charged issue seems to revolve around the question of whether Ursa feels pleasure in performing such an act or whether she is, in fact, submitting. Li rightly suggests that the varied critical interpretations of the act of fellatio point to the “continued debate about what defines female desire” (146). The dichotomy that might emerge from these readings (her pleasure and empowerment *or* submission to his pleasure) neglects Mutt’s *own* change and the ancestral associations that come to Ursa’s mind, framing this act in terms of both pleasure and pain, with an ultimately healing potential.

Reunited after twenty years with Ursa, Mutt continues his ancestral story by telling her once again about his grandfather, whose wife was

taken from him and sold as his property. He explains: “After they took her, when he went crazy he wouldn’t eat nothing but onions and peppermint. Eat the onions so people wouldn’t come around him and then eat the peppermint so they would. I tried it but it didn’t do nothing but make me sick” (Jones 183-4). Mutt uses his grandfather’s story to show Ursa that he has changed and evolved since their last meeting. While married to Ursa, Mutt internalises his ancestral slave narrative and replays its oppressive aspects through possessive outbursts, violence, and jealous rage, which culminate in his threat to sell Ursa as though he is her slaveholder. He distances himself after he causes Ursa’s fall down the stairs. Encountering her after more than twenty years, he tells Ursa he tried doing the same thing as his grandfather, who pushed people away and then tried to get them back. Opening up to Ursa, Mutt admits his vulnerability and loneliness in an effort to disassociate himself from the negative and damaging aspects of his ancestral past. He positively identifies with his grandfather instead of replaying the traumas he went through. Opening up to Ursa, he shows signs of change and remorse. It is within *this* context that Ursa chooses to perform fellatio. Therefore, her choice to engage in this sexual act is triggered by Mutt’s emotional submission. This act of opening up and demonstrating both physical and emotional vulnerability is relevant for discussions about sexual pleasure and the potentially empowering aspects of sexual acts such as fellatio. Furthermore, Mutt’s subjectivity in this context does not limit Ursa’s but allows her to explore her sexuality and take initiative. As Dubey argues, “the nonreproductive configuration of Ursa’s desire for Mutt at the end of *Corregidora* disrupts the generational continuity of the Corregidora women’s matrilineal tradition” (257).

The act of fellatio leads Ursa to realise Great Gram’s untold act of resistance as she contemplates:

It had to be sexual, I was thinking, it had to be something sexual that Great Gram did to Corregidora, I knew it had to be sexual: “what is it that a woman can do to a man that make him hate her so bad he wont kill her one minute and keep thinking about her and can’t get her out of his mind the next?” In a split second, I knew what it was, in a split second of *hate and love* I knew what it was and I think he might have known too. 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 just before sexlessness, a moment that stops before it breaks the skin: “I could kill you.” [italics added] (Jones 184)

Ursa realises her power to hurt Mutt in this scene and thus understands the violence inherent in their relationship, a violence stemming from their ancestral histories of abuse, sexual violation, and enslavement. Linking to the previous argument on the foremothers’ desire and Hortense Spillers’ critique, it is my contention that this passage does not demonstrate Great Gram’s ambiguous feelings about Corregidora, but rather, capitalises primarily on *Ursa’s* ambiguous feelings towards Mutt. The connection to her foremother she identifies stems from the violence contained in Great

Gram's narrative and its transmission. Simultaneously establishing their proximity, Jones also establishes their difference, which remains crucial. While Great Gram and Ursa both perform the act of fellatio, the notion of choice is not equally applicable to Great Gram, who lived in conditions of slavery.

Through this discovery, Ursa establishes a dialogical relationship with the past and her foremothers, as evidenced in another act of becoming her ancestor: "It was like I didn't know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and Corregidora—like Mama when she had started talking like Great Gram" (Jones 184). Although Ursa starts from a position of empowerment, choosing to perform fellatio and explore her sexuality, I argue that the discovery of the family secret does not ultimately "resolve" her ancestral burden and pained relationship with Mutt.<sup>9</sup> This is also evidenced by her final thoughts: "But was what Corregidora done to *her*, to *them*, any worse than what Mutt had done to me, than what we had done to each other, than what Mama done to daddy or what he had done in return, making her walk down the street like a whore?" (184). This question is not necessarily about placing abuse "into a hierarchy of pain" (Li 106), referring to the various traumas that Ursa's family and their partners have been through, but about recognizing the ways in which the past saturates and challenges the present. Even in the context of taking initiative and asserting oneself sexually or opening up to vulnerability, an impulse to dominate and protect oneself from emotional and physical suffering remains as a spectre of ancestral trauma.

Another instance of sexual harassment at the end of the novel anticipates this very conclusion. Shortly before reuniting with Mutt, Ursa talks to a man in a bar called Spider. He also sings the blues and they bond over a shared passion and experiences. He mentions his favourite blues singers and compliments Ursa on her singing, telling her that she made him feel good. He even compares her to Billie Holiday:

You know the onliest time I felt good was when I was in the Apollo Theater. . . . But the Lady was singing. Billie Holiday. She sang for two solid hours. And then when she finished, there was a full minute of silence, Just silence. And then there was applauding and crying . . . If you listen to those early records and then listen to that last one, you see what they done to her voice. They say she destroyed herself, but she didn't destroy herself. *They* destroyed her. [italics added] (Jones 170)

Although the image of Billie Holiday that the man portrays is tragic, he shows admiration, compassion, and understanding. The man's use of the third person plural pronoun *they* to refer to people who destroyed Billie holds numerous associations, from the various individuals in Billie's life to systemic sexism, racism, and the exploitation of a talented black female singer. The man links Ursa to Billie, demonstrating an understanding for her difficult circumstances, recognizing that she also might carry a particular history of oppression. However, the scene is suddenly altered as the man observes:

“I bet you got some good pussy.”  
I said nothing. I really hadn’t expected that. I just looked back at him.  
“Tell me if you ain’t got some good pussy.”  
I didn’t tell him anything. I just kept looking at him. (171)

This conversation anticipates the complex realisation that Ursa has during the act of fellatio as she connects her traumatic family history to her own experiences in destructive heterosexual relationships. The man who talks to Ursa at the Spider starts from a position of bonding over a shared passion and art, compliments her singing and shows an understanding for the tragic fate of a black female singer. However, he suddenly reduces Ursa to her “good pussy” or a commodity existing for male sexual enjoyment. Ursa does not respond and the man tells her, “I didn’t mean to get nasty with you. I ain’t got nasty with a woman a day in my life, and I didn’t mean to get nasty with you” (171). Through this comment, the man realises that Ursa is hurt by his surprising words, but this does not prevent him from repeating the question when they part. The act of bonding is simultaneously marked by an act of objectification, or the circumscription of female subjectivity. Similarly, Ursa realises the co-existence of pain and pleasure in her act of fellatio. She comprehends the violence and domination inherent in her relationships with others, stemming from her ancestral past and permeating her present. Deborah Horvitz locates the possibility of healing in this final moment, suggesting that the victim encounters and translates her “unspeakable” tragedy into “her”-story, making her capable of envisioning a future without violence (239). While I agree that the final scene signals a potential for healing, it is the realisation of past violence and its reproduction in the present that brings forth this very potential. Integrating her traumatic familial subtexts, Ursa is able to assert herself as a subject, acknowledge the ways in which the ancestral past serves as a subtext to her present, and create dialogic and constructive relationships with her individual and collective histories.

## Notes

1. Warmest thanks to Dr Michelle Keown, the editor Dr Saadi Nikro, and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful suggestions on this essay.

2. According to Sirène Harb, sexually exploiting female slaves is frequently identified as a particular feature of Brazilian slavery (differentiating it from the United States context), where slavemasters forced slave women to work as prostitutes. Doing so enabled masters to secure themselves an additional source of income (Harb 128).

3. See Sabine Broeck’s “The Ancestor as Subtext” for a discussion of the ancestor as subtext in the context of Toni Morrison’s work. Broeck



discusses Morrison's inspiration, the African American community of ancestors, and her insistence on the "crucial role of material and spiritual ancestry" (6). While Broeck's discussion of the ancestor as subtext revolves around literary ancestry and writers' creative genealogies, my essay discusses "ancestral subtexts" figured as the haunting presence of enslaved ancestors' narratives in the contemporary lives of their descendants, as identified in the fictional world of *Corregidora* and its protagonists.

4. My understanding of traumatic and narrative memory is based on Pierre Janet's differentiation of narrative and traumatic memory. According to Bessel A. Van der Kolk and Onno Van der Hart's theoretical formulation, Janet defines narrative memory as "mental constructs which people use to make sense out of experience." This is opposed to "traumatic memory," where the subject is incapable of making sense of the event or turning it into narrative memory (qtd. in Van der Kolk 160). The distinction is particularly relevant for differentiating Great Gram's narrative from other forms of memory which perceive events more fluidly.

5. For a detailed discussion of the blues in the novel, including ritualised dialogue, repetition, call and response, and the blues break, see Donia Elizabeth Allen, "The Role of the Blues in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*," which places emphasis on the inextricable link between form and content.

6. In their analyses of *Corregidora*, Madhu Dubey, Stephanie Li, and Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg emphasize that female subjectivity or desire in this context gets erased or negated. Dubey suggests that *Corregidora* forcefully renders the impossibility of black sexual desire (258), while Goldberg argues that the text contains the traumatic impossibility of female desire and therefore full female subjectivity resulting from the legacy of torture, underscoring "the effacement of the clitoris" (446, 458). Li claims that the *Corregidora* women "inscribe a new form of psychological bondage that erases female sexual pleasure" (91). My reading privileges the term "circumscription" as it points to *confining* or *limiting* and leaves semantic space for subsequent reclamations. I thank Michelle Keown for pointing out the relevance of this semantic difference.

7. In an interview with Michael S. Harper, Gayl Jones identifies these dialogues as ritualised dialogues, which she defines as the type of language one does not ordinarily use but which highlights the importance of rhythm: "In ritualised dialogue, sometimes you create a rhythm that people wouldn't ordinarily use, that they probably wouldn't use in real talk, although they are saying the words they might ordinarily use. But you change the rhythm of the talk and response and you change the rhythm between the talk and response. So in ritualised dialogue, you do something to the rhythm or you do something to the words" (699).

Ritualised dialogue and the specific rhythm used to convey Mutt and Ursa's conversations resemble blues music; their improvisatory nature underscores Ursa's states of mind as she attempts to resolve her internal conflicts.

8. For example, Barbara Smith argues in her "The Truth that Never Hurts: Black Lesbians in Fiction in the 1980s" that Jones, who has "not been associated with or seemingly influenced by the feminist movement, has portrayed lesbians quite negatively" (qtd. in Allen 257).

9. In their astute readings of *Corregidora*, Goldberg and Li also point out Jones' lack of closure. More specifically, Goldberg argues that the novel's very structure, resembling a "pattern of traumatic repetition," offers neither "the satisfactory closure of a linear narrative (of either progress or decline) nor the redemptive healing of a circular narrative recalling ancestral strength" (446). Li also concludes that the novel offers no closure, that is, "no simple promise of future harmony, but a continued struggle with cycles of violence and moments of loving communion" (148). Li's telling emphasis on "cycles of violence" inspired, in part, the title of this essay.

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