

Chapter 3

Pleasure and Pain: Gayl Jones and the Blues Narrative Revisited

In most of the novels written by Negroes until today...
there is a great space where sex ought to be;
and what usually fills this space is violence....
The violence is gratuitous and compulsive
because the root of the violence is never examined.
The root is rage. It is the rage, almost literary,
the howl, of a man who is being castrated.
---James Baldwin, "Alas, Poor Richard"

1. Gayl Jones and Her Bold Love Stories in African American Literature

"Anomaly. Phenomenon. These two words perhaps describe Gayl Jones and her literary career more than any others that come immediately to mind," says Trudier Harris on Gayl Jones (*After the Pain* ix). One of the most important yet less discussed African American women writers, Jones has written novels, collections of poems, a play, and literary criticisms. She is distinctively well educated and she earned her PhD from Brown University. Her career as a writer was ensured when Toni Morrison praised her debut novel, *Corregidora*. Morrison notes, "[w]hat was uppermost in my mind while I read her manuscript was that no novel about any black woman could ever be the same after this. This girl had changed the terms, the definitions of the whole enterprise" ("Toni Morrison on a Book She Loves" 14). Despite this strong encouragement from a literary authority, critics have been disconcerted by Jones' writings and her personal life. Her mysterious relation with a former male student, her hospitalization after his arrest and eventual suicide, and her silence afterward provide fodder for reader gossip. Her writings are also problematic because of the sexual representations that often depict unhappy relationships between a black woman and a black man.

As Morrison recognized Jones' works for changing "the definitions of the whole

enterprise,” critical responses have struggled to come to terms with new definitions for them. Critics mention Jones but do not discuss her works.¹ In her works there are several elements discountenanced by critical responses. First, Jones’ sexual depictions are too straightforward and violent to allow simplification of the meanings of her works. Her second novel, *Eva’s Man* received harsh critiques because it dealt with the murder of a black man by a black woman. Second, Jones’ attitude toward the history of slavery often expands her geographical imagination outside of the U.S. and the African continent. Her first novel, *Corregidora*, is set in Kentucky, but the legacy of slavery portrayed in the novel is Brazilian. Her poem *Song for Anninho* is also set in colonial Brazil, and her novel *Mosquito* is geographically interesting because it goes back and forth between the Texas borders. Third, Jones herself warns against categorizing her works simply as “black” literature even though critics regard Jones’ use of oral tradition as an African American writing style. Jones’ works, in other words, resist simple classification while entailing seemingly most African American themes framed in the African American narrative style.

This chapter looks at the difficulties of situating Jones in African American women’s literature and literary criticism. The critical tendency toward Jones’ works tells us of the problems associated with the act of categorizing literary works according to an author’s race and the difficulties of discussing sexuality when literary works do not conform to a black feminist reading, pointing to an interesting predicament of African American literary criticism. Unlike Mosley and Butler, who were discussed in the previous chapters, Jones’ works initially appear easy to categorize because of her choice of theme and style: blues narrative with black feminist thought. Yet there is also a question of genre associated with *Corregidora*. There are several literary genres under which Jones’ works have been categorized. One is African American women’s fiction overlapping with black feminist thought. Another is the

“blues narrative.” Her novels could also be neo-slave narratives, which I will discuss in detail in subsequent chapter. Furthermore, Jones’ essay, written and narrated by the “personified African American literature’s first person voice” explores the issue of literary genre.

Provocatively, the voice begs for tender considerations:

... don’t mistake me for politics, or economics, or sociology, or history – which folks like to mistake me for, or mere folklore when I tell my stories in vernacular, pidgin or creole. But since I’m literature and more specifically fiction, though not always fictitious fiction, I may contain every sort of implication: political, economic, sociological, anthropological, historical. (508)

Whatever our expectation, the way Jones’ works escape generic categorization requires us to read them from a new point of view. While Octavia E. Butler questions humanity and its (im)possibilities of love through her Science Fiction and interracial/ interspecies relationships, Jones does so through intra-racial relationships. If interpretation of miscegenation cannot escape a racialized reading, how has love between a black man and a black woman been interpreted and what has the dominant interpretive paradigm of it been? Taking *Corregidora* as an example, I will first analyze the tendencies of the criticisms of the novel. In so doing, I shall be delineating how Jones is unique in a way that takes reproduction and love relationships as a topos to examine existential problems associated with black lives in the United States. The novel’s often disturbing representations of black sexuality indeed provide us with a narrative of love. While the sexual boldness of Jones’ works has been analyzed as her alliance with black feminist thought, theoretical emphasis on female agency focuses on power dynamics relying on binary opposition between oppression and submission. Reading

her novel as a narrative of a black woman's journey to attain female agency ignores the aspects of love relations in *Corregidora*. Written during the height of the black feminism and black aesthetic movement, Jones' *Corregidora* explores how amorous and intense emotional relationships between two people can be read not as an allegory of a black female subjugation, but as painful yet powerful bond between two humans. In depicting this human bond, Jones enmeshed characters' relationships into undefinable mixture of literary genres. A different point of view is mandatory if we are to be careful enough to capture that which escapes the generic categorization of Jones' works. The entangled history of black sexuality and love is never easy to undo even for black feminist theories: Nevertheless, Jones delves into the very difficulties of love within this history.

2. So Many Generations, So Many Loves Unattained: Black Feminist Tradition and Burden in *Corregidora*

Published in 1975, *Corregidora*'s story begins in 1947 in Kentucky, where the protagonist, Ursa Corregidora, is entrapped within her maternal ancestral memory of slavery in Brazil. Her great-grandmother and grandmother were slaves of "the Portuguese slave breeder and whoremonger" named Corregidora who owned a brothel (8). Corregidora fathered both Ursa's grandmother and mother, yet the incestuous relationship in Ursa's memory is only one of the many haunting stories, a cause of emotional affliction that Ursa experiences. The three women, Ursa's great-grandmother, grandmother and mother, pass down their stories from generation to generation: stories of how Corregidora raped, how he treated her great-grandmother and grandmother, and what it was like in Corregidora's brothel. Ursa's mother did not experience slavery, yet she also tells Ursa the story of the "Corregidora women":

“My great-grandmama told my grandmama the part she lived through that my grandmama didn’t live through and my grandmamma told my mama what they both lived and 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, where’s the next generation?” (9)

Ursa’s mission as a Corregidora woman is to give birth to a child: “What my mama always told me is Ursa, you got to make generations. Something I’ve always grown up with” (10). At the beginning of the novel, however, Ursa loses her biological means to reproduce. Ursa is a blues singer, at that time singing at a nightclub called Happy’s. One night in December 1948, Ursa’s jealous and angry husband Mutt pushes her down the stairs after work. She was one month pregnant, but had to undergo a hysterectomy due to the fall. This leads her to divorce Mutt and start a new relationship with Tadpole. Eventually, however, their relationship collapses, and she divorces Tadpole as well.

Since the cause of the fall is a push from her husband Mutt, a critical approach recognizes an issue of the male oppression against women in *Corregidora*. Barbara Omolade’s concise yet compelling study on the black female body and its economy shows how black female bodies are commodified as both laborer and breeder, while they are forced to satisfy a white male sexual fantasy: “[h]er vagina, used for his sexual pleasure, was the gateway to the womb, which was his place of capital investment – the capital investment being the sex act, and the resulting child the accumulated surplus, worth money on the slave market” (366). Reproduction is immediately associated with nightmarish oppression of black

women. Hazel Carby, a pioneer of black feminist thought, notes:

The institutionalized rape of black women has never been as powerful a symbol of black oppression as the spectacle of lynching. Rape has always involved patriarchal notions of women being, at best, not entirely unwilling accomplices, if not outwardly inventing a sexual attack. The links between black women and illicit sexuality consolidated during the antebellum years had powerful ideological consequences for the next hundred and fifty years. (*Reconstructing Womanhood* 39)

Sexuality in African American women's literature cannot be separated from the institution of slavery and its continuous legacy. Ursa's loss of her womb and child signifies the continuous oppression upon black women. Reproduction and its problem bring forward a context of the legacy of slavery, such as Angela Davis' distinction between "breeder" and "mother" as contradictory experiences of slave women (*Woman, Race and Class* 7). For slave women, reproduction was a point where the disparities between a man and a woman and between a master and a slave were intensely provoked, as women were made to serve for the pleasure of a male master. In *Corregidora*, this notion of reproduction influences the experiences of the heroine, Ursa, whose fall down from the stairs leads to the loss of both her baby and her womb.

Yet, what is rather peculiar about Ursa's case is that her insistence on having next generation synchronizes African American feminist thought's urge to establish a matrilineal tradition, which was at its height at the time of the novel's publication. Ever since black feminism started to have its own voice, the peculiar history of black womanhood has been revisited and analyzed in many ways. Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Garden* in

1974 has been a long-time milestone for black feminist literary criticism. It established the important metaphor of black maternal lineage and employed the symbolic construction of black literary tradition. Without question, the mission of tradition building is meaningful because much of the history of black women had been neglected. Madhu Dubey explains, “the black feminist discourse on matrilineage seeks to unwrite a brutal history of rupture and dislocation and to write an alternative story of familial and cultural connections” (245). Establishment of black matrilineal tradition was a necessary backlash of the Black Power movements in which recovering the emasculated black masculinity was one of the central missions of its participants. The 1970s marked the emergence of black feminism, which critically responds to women’s subjugation within African American community.² In this situation, matrilineal tradition building was a powerful way to create a theoretical framework for African American woman’s literature.

This act of tradition building, however, paradoxically suggests a lack of tradition: Since there is a limit to excavating historical evidence of matrilineal lineage, it demands particular racial characteristics to construct the black feminist identity. This problem resonates with the challenges of genre studies and African American literature discussed in previous chapters and in the following chapters on Charles Johnson. Dubey remarks on the strange slippage between history and literature in African American literary criticism, pointing out that tradition is a necessary fiction. “[I]t is precisely this lack of a naturalized tradition that motivates the impulse to naturalize tradition and paradoxically expose the constructed status of the natural in black feminist discourse” (Dubey 247). Tradition building inevitably involves a process of selection that disguises selected elements as essential and natural. The tradition building also induces the formation of literary (“African American” or “African American Women”) genre by choosing literary works that smoothly fit into the dominant

discourse within the sphere of African American literary criticism.

Considering this tendency, it is plausible that *Corregidora* (and other works by Jones') does not easily fit into the African American feminist discourse, and it is a simple thing to set the novel aside with the designation of "anomalous." Ursa is deprived of the physical organ that can reproduce the next generation and maintain her maternal tradition. Her maternal tradition, the legacy of the Corregidora woman constantly tells Ursa that she "got to make generations" (10) The demands of her maternal tradition in *Corregidora* is not a psychological support for Ursa; rather, it appears compulsive and inescapable to her. At this point, *Corregidora* departs from the black feminist reading. That Jones' works elude critical attention, Madhu Dubey points out, is suggestive of problems in black feminist thought. With examples of Ann Petry and Nella Larsen, Dubey spells out the tendency in African American feminist criticism to exclude woman writers who do not ally with maternal ancestry (Dubey 245). By shifting the meaning of tradition-building from black female empowerment to the bondage of black female tradition, Jones presents Ursa as a heroine who create dissonance with the black feminist thought.

Furthermore, what is important here is that Jones shifts the meaning of the lost womb from being the lost property of a white man to being the lost mission of Ursa herself. In so doing, Jones is commenting on what Paula Giddings named the "last taboo," the problem between black men and women. Examining the case of Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill, Giddings notes that "racial solidarity is not always the same as racial loyalty" (414). The intricate relations between black men and women are nothing new to African American thought. From the antebellum South to contemporary black America, black male paternity and "their" women, sexually exploited by white men, have had a difficult history to resolve. W. E. B. Du Bois explains the black man's feelings, "... one thing I shall never forgive,

neither in this world nor in the world to come; it is [the white South's] wanton and continued and persistent insulting of the black womanhood which it sought and seeks to prostitute to its lust" (172). This was still recent history when Walker's *The Color Purple* was not welcomed by black male critics because of its depiction of black male violence against black women. Overlapping the issue of reproduction with black intraracial relationships, Jones tries to recapture the meaning of intimacy and love between two people.

Even though Jones strives to restructure the meaning of intimacy and love between two people, the denunciative tone of the matrilineal narrative against the institution enforces the similar meanings between male-female relationships. Traces of her legacy of slavery are visible in her last name, Corregidora. The social institution (of marriage) might have a part in binding the Corregidora women to the obsolete institution (the matrilineal narrative) because of their inheritance of a male lineage. But, this is confused when Ursa actually chooses to keep her last name. The monologue presumably by her ex-husband Mutt reads, "*Ain't even took my name. You Corregidora's, ain't you? Ain't even took my name. You ain't my woman.*" (61). Adding to the notion of lineage, institutional possession is expressed here. Marriage as an institution is always at stake between Ursa and Mutt, and later Ursa and Tadpole. The repeated question is "*What's a husband for?*," which is coupled with Ursa's anxiety over her duty as a wife (55). Marriage – the human relations institutionally guaranteed – is meant to represent an intimacy or "bond" between two people in love. In Ursa's case, it means the biological procreation of next generation to whom she can pass down her matrilineal narrative. It is typical of Jones' works that a relationship between a woman and a man is not easy. In *Corregidora*, Ursa is not able to have intimate relations with her partners because she is trapped both in the institution of marriage and by her ancestral history with this mission to procreate. Bearing the next generation converges with the act of passing down the narrative.

Biological and symbolical reproduction merges into one and it haunts Ursa as the Corregidora women's legacy.

Throughout the novel Jones sporadically inserts italicized monologues by unidentified speakers. Some of them are presumably spoken by Ursa's great-grandmother and grandmother. The others are random quotes and speeches of people Ursa had relationships with, or the voice of Corregidora, whom Ursa has never met. It is also confusing that the memory of all the Corregidora women is mingled together so that Ursa cannot disentangle the collective and individual memories. One time, when she finally faces her mother and hears about her father, Ursa notices that "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" (124). Bearing the next generation converges with the act of passing down the narrative. The condescension of matrilineal memories juxtaposes the white slave master with Mutt, and urges Ursa as well as the reader to unearth abuse and mistreatment in male attitude toward female. This narrative technique connotes correspondence between physical reproduction and symbolical one.

How does Ursa overcome this legacy of the Corregidora, the burden of African American woman's tradition? Physical appearance and ability are never separated from cultural meanings. This correspondence is repeatedly kindled in African American literary criticism. Caroline A. Steeler argues that Ursa pursues her mulatto identity instead of allying herself with the Corregidora woman whose blackness was cherished by the master Corregidora (769). Of course, in *Corregidora*, shades of skin color and their meanings are also represented as social significations of skin color and the standard of female beauty.³ The problem with Ursa is, however, much more complicated. The only way she can transform the meaning of reproduction is to make it the means to mutually communicate with

her partner, a means of love – and this is not an easy challenge for her. Negative meanings (humiliation, oppression, subjugation) charged on the female body prevent Ursa from experiencing pleasure with sexual intercourse. Her renunciation of senses in response to the negative meanings seems as if her body decides to be influenced by no external source in effort to attain autonomy. Having Tadpole “inside” her, she “felt nothing. [she] wanted to feel, but [she] couldn’t” (82). Ursa’s frigidness signifies a state in which one of the most intimate methods of human communication does not work properly.

The pain associated with intimate relationships – physical as well as emotional – is elsewhere described. Among the shocking images in the novel, perhaps the most disturbing image is the castration of a black male slave in front of his wife, who cut her master’s penis off right before her anticipated rape:

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

This bracketed and italicized monologue appears in Ursa’s dream as either her great-grandmother or grandmother’s speech. The graphic image is, unfortunately, a familiar one if one has enough knowledge of slavery and lynching in the U.S.⁴ In *Corregidora*, the

violence takes place in Brazil where slave women were more subjected to forced prostitution than in the U.S. according to historical research (Russel-Wood 55). The horrific incident narrated here is sexual exploitation, resistance to it, and the consequence of that resistance. The consequence shows how physical intimacy transforms into grotesque violence, and sacred procreation becomes menacing revenge on lechery. The meaning of sensual intimacy is transformed into something painful; the disturbing images in the narrative of slave woman deteriorate the meanings of sensual intimacy whenever Ursa tries to communicate with her partner.

The meaning of words also transformed in *Corregidora*. For instance, Ursa is usually secretive, not revealing her whole life story to her partners. Ursa says, “I gave [Mutt] only pieces. A few more pieces than I’d given Tadpole, but still pieces” (60). Immediately after that someone says to her, “[y]our pussy’s a little gold piece, ain’t it? Urs? My little gold piece” (60). This speech is not italicized, therefore it could be Mutt talking to Ursa. Yet it simultaneously resonates with the slave owner Corregidora’s possessive words, “[a] good little piece. My best. Dorita. Little gold piece” to her great-grandmother (10). The piece of herself that Ursa gives to Mutt and Tadpole is part of her own self; it is transformed into Ursa’s physical part, which Mutt very intimately thinks of; the piece then finally becomes somebody’s most lewd property.

In addition, the female body is hurt in *Corregidora*. Looking back at her relationship with Mutt, Ursa thinks, “I’d tell him, I have a birthmark between my legs. That would make him laugh. But it’s your fault all my seeds are wounded forever. No warm ones, only bruised ones, not even bruised ones. No seeds. Let me in between your legs. It ain’t a pussy down there, it’s a whole world” (45). The birthmark, Ursa’s vagina, is a place where she was supposed to propagate the Corregidora women’s memory by giving birth to “a girl” (117).

When Ursa remembers her childhood, her friend Alice warns her against female “bleeding.” Insinuating defloration in a sisterly lecture to Ursa, Alice says that menstruation is “not the only kinds of bleeding a woman, I mean a girl, have to put up with.” (136). Menstruation is a biological function which allows the female body to conceive. When this function is coalesced into the image of defloration and becomes something “to put up with,” Ursa’s female body cannot escape from being the site of oppression. Furthermore, bleeding here also alludes to Ursa’s frigidity because sexual intercourse is always associated with pain for her.

Matrilineal memory/narrative also becomes a forum for the traumatized female body. When Ursa stays at her neighbor Cat Lawson’s house after the hysterectomy, the promiscuous girl Jeffy abruptly asks her, “I bet you was fucking before I was born. How much fucking you think you goin do now?” (38). Jeffy’s utterance, though offensive and irrational, reveals how Ursa has been metaphorically raped repeatedly by the slave master Corregidora through her maternal parents’ narratives. We read at the beginning of the novel about Ursa’s great-grandmother telling her how Corregidora “*put her to work in his whorehouse,*” and how his jealous wife perversely made her (great-grandmother) “*sleep with her [the wife]*” (10-14). Through this recollection, Ursa thinks “*[i]t was like 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*” (11). It is shocking for readers that Ursa adds a line saying “*I was five years old then*” in the end of her great-grandmother’s memory/narrative (14). Ursa was hearing as well as *experiencing* the Corregidora women’s narrative even before reaching puberty.

All the textual details rightly confirm reproduction as a site of oppression for black women. Sex is painful both as a reproductive tool and as love making for Ursa. This also suggests that her matrilineal traditions do not succeed in providing her with psychological support. They rather became a burden for Ursa, and hence nearly destroyed her by hindering

her from having a loving relationship with any man. This impossibility of love resonates with the black feminist thought; however, Jones also depicts how Ursa transforms procreation from an experience of oppression into an experience of love. It is not simply the ability to take pleasure in sexual communication for Ursa to work on the meaning of reproduction.

3. Consequences of Loving You: *Corregidora* and the Blues Narrative

Closely tied to this matrilineal tradition-building in African American feminist reading, another critical approach strives to take weakness for strength through the medium of blues music. While her frigidity seems to be unsusceptible to male influences, Ursa, whose profession is a blues singer, is susceptible to her own situations. Her singing is interpreted as her liberation from male domination and her recovery of a sense of agency. The blues narrative form and the issue of female agency are closely tied together as an interpretive paradigm. Ursa's loss of her womb is a tempting signifier that invites feminist criticism. In black women's fiction, "the womb represents a site of ideological struggle" (227). McKible sees Ursa's ability to sing as a means to generate not only her maternal ancestral memories, but also her own memories and life. Yet, this reading overlooks the insecurity Ursa constantly feels about herself. It is also important to notice how Jones does not tell us the lyrics of Ursa's songs; therefore, readers cannot rely on the blues music as Ursa's only means to recover herself.

Previous studies on *Corregidora* pointed out how the narrative's framework relies on the blues to move from oppression to Ursa's final liberation. In her study, Angela Davis examines how African American female blues singers' songs and performances are not only artistic but also political. Davis argues that this political aspect of the blues tradition is inherited by African American woman writers. She does not discuss Gayl Jones in detail in

her study, but Jones is categorized as one of the contemporary black woman writers who created the image of blues women in their works (intro.). Davis' theory of the blues legacy is adopted by literary critics such as Barbara Christian and Claudia Tate. *Corregidora* is considered unmistakably to be a blues narrative; Ursa is a blues singer, and in many ways the music performance and oral tradition are important elements to enrich the novel. From the perspective of Davis' African American women's blues tradition, *Corregidora* is a story of Ursa's struggle for female liberation through blues.

I argue, however, that *Corregidora* simultaneously transcends the paradigm of the blues narrative with a narrative of love. From the opening of the story in 1947 to the end of the novel in 1969, Ursa's occupation is a blues singer, a job that is "something [Ursa] like[s] doing" (29). In a miscellaneous monologue, someone's voice asks Ursa, "*What do blues do for you?*" Her answer is "[i]t helped me to explain what I can't explain" (56). Interestingly, however, Ursa rarely sings in the novel; therefore, readers almost never come across her song lyrics. What readers do see is the impact of her singing on the audience as well as herself. Readers, of course, cannot actually listen to Ursa's songs, but other characters in the novel tell us how she sounds. After the hysterectomy, listening to Ursa practicing songs, Cat notes the change in her voice: "Your voice sounds a little strained, that's all. But if I hadn't heard you before, I wouldn't notice anything. I'd still be moved. Maybe even moved more, because it sounds like you been through something. Before it was beautiful too, but you sound like you been through more now" (44). Cat's comments foreshadow the development of Ursa's blues. Yet instead of showing how Ursa attains female agency through singing the blues, the novel rather presents the aftereffects of Ursa's singing, what her performance brings to the audience. This lack of lyrics in the novel is discussed by critics in terms of how Ursa's performance itself is crucial to her obtainment of female agency. Quoting Sherley Ann

Williams, Jones claims that the blues strategy is “action, rather than contemplation” (*Liberating Voices* 71). Emphasizing the performativity of the blues over the articulation of experiences into language, Ashraf Rushdy notes that “[t]he blues, for Jones, are performative because they are cultural form generated less for reflection and more for change” (“Relate Sexual to Historical” 292). As several black feminists such as Carby, Davis, Hortense Spillers, and others have pointed out, female blues singers creatively used their performances to contest the “objectification of female sexuality within a patriarchal order” and reclaim the woman’s body as a subject (Spillers 88). The act of singing the blue and its performativity are indeed central to the novel, as Ursa herself confirms that the blues help her to explain what she cannot explain.

It is, however, not so much that the articulation in blues lyrics gives way to its performativity. I argue that implied in the performativity of blues is indeed the language that Ursa has to reconcile with. The songs Ursa performs are always symbolic. For example, when Ursa first met Mutt, what she was singing is very suggestive:

[It is] a song about a train tunnel. About this train going in the tunnel, but it didn’t seem like there was no end to the tunnel, and nobody knew when the train would get out, and then all of a sudden the tunnel tightened around the train like a fist. Then I sang about this bird woman, whose eyes were deep wells. How she would take a man on a long journey, but never return him. (147)

A sexual image and longing for liberty are expressed here, but there are no lyrics that allow us to actually “hear” the language of the blues in the novel. Jennifer Cognard-Black argues how “silence” in *Corregidora*, rather than an articulation of experiences in blues acts as

Ursa's resistance to the patriarchy (43). It is however, important to notice how other languages, especially violent language between Ursa and her partners, operate as reflections of the unarticulated lyrics of the "devil music" (146). Blues is evil and racy because it is boldly about men and women. The absence of lyrics makes readers infer them from daily conversation, the most low-down talk is done by Ursa and Mutt:

"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."

"Mutt, I..."

He laughed. "You ain't no hard woman, baby." (153)

The contrast between the violent/sexual language and the unsung bold language of the blues suggests that they are mirroring each other. It is, therefore, not simply by singing that Ursa obtains her agency, it is rather through the reconciliation of these two languages that she can finally experience mutual love. In other words, Ursa has to change the violent meaning of "fucking" into the intimate language of lovemaking. Singing the blues in and of itself does not liberate Ursa, but it is coupled with Ursa's daily language, in which she also has to transform the meaning of humiliated sexuality.

Ursa needs to take care of not only the impact of her performance, but also the impact of her loving. In Jones' words, it is the "consequence" of one's love (35). Because of her ancestral lineage and her own hysterectomy, Ursa always felt "the consequences of that fucking" as a painful and unsatisfying experience of her intimate relationship (41). The conversation between Ursa and Cat Lawson explains how the causal links are webbed in Ursa's life;

“It ain’t right you to feel that way. I know he did wrong and you got to suffer the consequences. But he got consequences too.”

“He can go out and give other women babies. What kind of consequences he got?”

“Consequences of loving you.”

“Shit.” (34-35)

Everything has a consequence in *Corregidora*. It starts with Brazilian slavery and Ursa’s great-grandmother; women enslaved and sexually exploited still face their consequences – their descendants. Consequences are problematic when one has to build tradition out of the painful history and when one has to rely on the consequences of hideous past to establish a tradition that is supposed to empower one’s self. Ursa and her maternal parents hate the consequences of being Corregidora women so much that they have to constantly remember their experiences in order to keep hating their master. Yet this obsession with remembering the consequences becomes their means of life. The crucial and cruel question in the novel is “[h]ow much was hate for Corregidora and how much was love?”(131). Ursa’s father Martin dared to ask this question to her great-grandmother and grandmother, and was therefore greatly hated by them. Martin eventually fled from the family’s grudge, going up North and never seeing Ursa. What is at stake in his question is the tension blurring boundary between love and hatred. Hatred becomes obsessive love; hence, Ursa’s maternal parents are in a Möbius loop of hatred and love.

Ursa’s relations with her partners also produce consequences, the consequences of loving and hating each other. How can Ursa step outside of this dead-end of loving and hating

others? If Ursa repeats her maternal parents' behavior, she cannot escape from the cycle of love and hatred. Jones inserted a suggestive sentence, anonymously voiced amidst one of Ursa's dreams or recollections: "*Everything said in the beginning must be said better than in the beginning.*" (54). In the case of her maternal parents, consequences remain as consequences continuing from the brutal past, the fact of their oppression and the meaning of their lives. The way in which consequences operate as their identity is possibly liberating but actually oppressive. It becomes the contradictory act of obtaining agency through encapsulating oneself into and clinging to the memory of oppression. They may have agency in denunciation of causes whose consequence matrilineal narratives retain through generations. For Ursa, however, consequences have to come out as something better; she must renovate the past consequences into better things. If Ursa's blues singing is a liberating act, instead of denouncing oppression and obtaining female agency, she has to redefine the meaning of her intimate relations with others. This is where *Corregidora* diverges from the plot of blues singing as the act of politically liberating oneself. It points out the impasse of repeating the traumatic past and proposes a newer and better narrative of love.

As explained above, however, we do not hear her songs' lyric nor how her performance is during the course of the narrative. Readers have to construe how Ursa transfigured the meaning of "everything said in the beginning" into something "better than beginning" through the consequences of her singing upon her audience. Toward the end of the novel, just before the reunion of Ursa and Mutt, one drunken customer at the bar tells her, "[y]ou know you made me feel good singing" (170). It is difficult to judge this articulation, but the man continues to talk about how Billie Holiday changed from her early time to the end of her career: "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” (170). Here, the mention of Holiday and her transition is crucial for understanding how much Ursa has changed over the time. Insinuating the tragic blues singer, Jones alludes to her reader that the transformation of Ursa’s blues singing is “better than beginning,” if not the best.

4. Pleasure and Pain: Searching for a Moment of Love

Consequence of singing blues, therefore, improves narrative for Ursa. Yet since the blues language is coupled with her love language, Ursa also has to face Mutt in order to finally resolve her humiliated sexuality; in order to attain a state of love, Ursa must sublimate both of the languages. Here, Audre Lorde’s concept of the erotic as power is helpful in examining the text:

When we look away from the importance of the erotic in the development and sustenance of our power, or when we look away from ourselves as we satisfy our erotic needs in concert with others, we use each other as objects of satisfaction rather than share our joy in the satisfying, rather than make connection with our similarities and our differences. To refuse to be conscious of what we are feeling at any time, however, comfortable that might seem, is to deny a large part of the experience, and to allow ourselves to be reduced to the pornographic, the abused, and the absurd. (*Sister Outsider* 59)

The erotic experience here is something beyond physicality, beyond the mere “fuck” which Ursa had experienced. It is the way to use sexual experience as a medium to connect with others. Eros is a potentially transformative force for Lorde. Angela Davis also employs this

notion of eros as a power, examining Lady Day's rendition of the song "Some Other Spring." Davis argues that the performance embodies Lorde's idea of the "erotic as power," since it not only articulates the sexual relationship but also envisions better and happier communal lives. While Davis' argument reveals the social and political import of music and the erotic as power, Jones' protagonist is less interested in resolving the social or political obstacles of her life by singing the blues. In *Corregidora*, the erotic is a process to explore the inner self and share it with others. This is where the long history of a black man and woman, the very core of the blues narrative, comes into light.

After Ursa divorces Tadpole, she visits her mother. Ursa's visit has the purpose of hearing her mother's own memories, not the Corregidora women's memory/history. When Ursa's mother recounts her version of the Corregidora women's memory/history, Ursa finds their intense emotional needs suffocating: "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" (101). For Ursa's mother, to narrate her own story is to distance herself from the matrilineal tradition and to consolidate her "self." Ursa thinks, "now that Mama had gotten it all out, her own memory – at least to me anyway – maybe she and *some man*... But then, I was thinking, what had I done about my *own* life?" (132). What she does about her own life is not to sing her blues, but to recount her life as a woman, objectified and exploited. Chapter 3 of the novel lasts 34 pages: it is where Jones allows Ursa to think not only about her memory with Mutt, but also about the Melrose woman who had committed suicide because of her troubled relationship, Ursa's girl-friend May Alice, and other women whom she had met in the past.

Yet strangely, readers are not informed of the consequences of Ursa's remembrance at the end of Chapter 3. Nor are they provided with Ursa's blues performances as they reflect

her dealing with her memories. Jones abruptly cuts the narrative's timeline and takes us to 23 years later. Ursa's reunion with Mutt happens in 1969, 21 years after their divorce. Ursa is 47 years old now, and still singing the blues. Ursa at this time is "a free woman again, whatever that [means]" (173). The last scene of the novel is as shocking as any other part of the novel. Having reunited with Mutt, Ursa goes to the Derek Hotel where they used to live. Ursa performs oral sex on Mutt, and in the middle of her act she knows her great-grandmother's love and hatred for Corregidora. At one time, Ursa was told that her great-grandmother did something to Corregidora that makes him "hate her so bad" but he cannot help but think about her. Ursa does it to Mutt:

It had to be sexual, I was thinking, it had to be something sexual that Great Gram did to Corregidora. I know it had to be sexual: "What is it a woman can do to a man that make him hate her so bad he wont to kill her one minute and keep thinking about her and can't get her out of his mind the next?" 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." (184)

The scene reminds readers of the episode of the punishment in the plantation quoted above. While in the previous episode the female slave has her husband's cut penis stuffed into her mouth, here Ursa is not forced to be silent. Rushdy argues that the story of the "Corregidora women is not one of pure victimage, but one in which the women have some degree of agency despite the historical and social inequalities under which they become subjects of

their own lives” (280). Creating tension between her and her partner, the act of biting the male organ can be read as a manifestation of female power on Ursa’s side.

The agency Ursa obtains, however, is not sexual. The consequence of the fellatio is an emotional conversation between Mutt and Ursa:

He came and I swallowed. He leaned back, pulling me up by the shoulders.

“I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you,” he said.

“Then you don’t want me.”

“I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you.”

“Then you don’t want me.”

“I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you.”

“Then you don’t want me.”

He shook me till I fell against him crying. “I don’t want a kind of man that’ll hurt me neither.” I said.

He held me tight. (185)

The novel ends with this scene, the image of Mutt holding Ursa tightly. The irregular call-and-response style of their conversation confuses who is hurting whom, who wants and who doesn’t want. Immediately after softly biting Mutt’s flesh, it is Ursa who is hurting herself. Mutt also doesn’t want Ursa to hurt herself. The act of hurting implied here is Ursa’s biting, but it is also the very act of enacting her autonomy upon another’s body. To have agency here always carries the risk of “use[ing] each other as objects of satisfaction” as Lorde says. When Ursa hurts Mutt, she is also hurting herself. “[O]ur erotic needs in concert with others” require Ursa not to hurt Mutt as well as herself, and to therefore, mutually “share

our joy in the satisfying, ... make connection with our similarities and our differences.”

The use of “you” here also suggests a strategy of blues repetition in a new way. Usually, third line of call-and-response in blues is meant to provide the final response to the double call.⁵ Repeating the same phrase to endow each sentence with a different meaning, the last scene proposes a way to retell, and therefore reproduce, black women’s history as well as Ursa and Mutt’s history. If one reads “you” as second-person plural, this call-and-response reveals multiple dimensions. In the first double calls, they are simultaneously suggesting that they don’t want a woman who hurt Ursa (you as singular) and you as plural, suggesting the whole lineage of African American women and men. It is, then, either Mutt doesn’t want or you as plural do not want Ursa and/or you as plural. Furthermore, the word “want” also has double meaning: need and lack. When the third line responds to the double calls as “Then you don’t want me,” Ursa is implying, “you are not in short of me.” When Ursa finally deviates from the traditional blues call-and-response and tells her honest feeling to Mutt in the last line, she accepts Mutt, however paradoxically, with a sense of intimacy and love.

Notes for Chapter 3

¹ Recently, several scholars have made great efforts to respond to Jones' works. The first of collected essays on Jones, *After the Pain: Critical Essays on Gayl Jones*, were published in 2006, edited by Fiona Mills and Keith B. Mitchell. Encompassing her works from novels, plays, literary essays and poetry, the collected essays broke a silence. Casey Clabough published *Gayl Jones: The Language of Voice and Freedom in Her Writings* in 2008. Clabough discusses the African American tradition of oral literature and its meanings in Jones' works. As every forward for and comment on these two books mentions, studies on Jones' works have been long awaited, and these two book-length studies are rare examples of extensive examinations of Jones' works. Most anthologies of African American literature include Jones' works. Maurice O. Wallace notes, "[a]t last, a serious, sophisticated, audacious collection of scholarly essays worthy of the reach and imagination of Gayl Jones' craft." Jennifer Cognard-Black says that "[Jones] has long been deserved the keen and perceptive examination of her work offered here."

² For discussions of black masculinity during Civil Rights and Black Power movements, and the black feminists' backrush in the 1970s, see Estis.

³ For mulatto identity in African American literature, see Steeler and Sollors.

⁴ For violence and its images slavery, see Hartman.

⁵ For call-and-response and blues music, see Davis.