Generational Survival, the Repetition of Memory, Autonomy and Empowerment in Gayle Jones' *Corregidora*

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The role of memory and oral tradition in Black communities is a basis for cultural survival, pride and strength. Similarly, memory and oral tradition are foundational to Black feminist thought, as is the importance of female empowerment, self-reliance and freedom. Through an exploration of Gayle Jones' *Corregidora*, a novel centered around a young black woman and her traumatic and frequently relived memories of past sexual abuses suffered by her maternal kin and her struggle to overcome the past and create her own memories not clouded in domination and pain, we can reveal the journey that Ursa Corregidora, and many black women for that matter, must travel in order to achieve self definition.

Corregidora chronicles the life of Ursa Corregidora a young woman in her mid-twenties who after being pushed down a flight of stairs by her husband, Mutt, endures a hysterectomy. The novel follows her life after the "fall" (Jones 4) as she separates from her husband and enters a new romantic relationship with a man named Tadpole. However, Ursa's life is complicated by the reoccurring and traumatic accounts passed down to her by her great grandmother, grandmother, and mother. In particular the sexual abuse they encountered at the hands of their previous owner and great grandfather, Corregidora. Ursa tells Tadpole, when he wakes her up after her hysterectomy and hospital stay that she wasn't sleeping "I was dreaming" (Jones 12). Cultural memory is always dreamt about and lived out through Ursa.

Accordingly, this paper is concerned with cultural and familial memory, the repetition of past domination on present bodies, and the freedom of being self-defined through the realization of genuine emotional and physical touch.

For a culture rich in oral tradition the importance of children or generations is immense. Keeping a record of history and passing it on is an act of resistance that ensures survival. Oral tradition, as well as stories and images that show Black people as self-defined, enables us wholly to resist the dehumanization that comes from internal and external (mis)labeling of Black women. Self-defined Black women become our collective truth tellers and the main transmitters of oral traditions and cultural memories. Patricia Hill Collins writes that "motherhood can serve as the site where Black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in Black women's empowerment" (Collins 191). In short, motherhood allows Black women to create their own identity in relation to their children. However, what role then do women who cannot reproduce (such as Ursa) have within this definition of motherhood? Or better yet what role do they have within Black oral traditions if they are unable to transmit culture and history to the next generation? Madhu Dubey writes that "because of their legal exclusion from literate culture,

slave children had to depend on their mothers and other kin as their primary sources of education and cultural transmission. The disruption of the generational line could thus often literally translate into a rupture of cultural tradition" (Dubey 247) thus Ursa's shattered role as mother, or possible mother, is more than the crisis of an individual but a crisis of an entire culture.

What consumes Ursa is that she cannot "make generations" (Jones 22) and thus truncating the oral process indefinitely by having a 'useless' womb. In Ursa's memory a voice tells her that "the important thing is making generations. They can burn the papers but they can't burn the conscious, Ursa" (Jones 22). This makes a fertile womb capable of producing a witness to past and present historical, social and familial atrocities. Sírene Harb writes "The Corregidora women's] message presented this memory as the exclusive tool allowing one to 'leave evidence'" (Harb 123) and the mind becomes a source of power, evidence and knowledge as tangible evidence such as paper will eventually be destroyed and lost. Jennifer Griffiths writes "After the accident, [Ursa] grapples with the internal witness created by this dichotomy, struggling to form a testimony that incorporates the complexity of her experience" (Griffiths 359) thus Ursa must reconcile the lost of her womb literally and symbolically even as her mind and memory is strong enough to remember the past, incorporate it into her present, and express her complexities.

Black feminist thought centers the importance of witnesses, and witnessing. For Ursa, the memories of abuse that the women in her family endured permeate every aspect of her present life and in turn inform the decisions she makes. In Ursa's dreams her grandmother, 'Gram', tells her "we got to burn out what they put in our minds, like you burn out a wound. Except we got to keep what we need to bear witness. That scar that's left to bear witness. We got to keep it as visible as our blood" (Jones 72). Although this quote can be related to the physical scar of Ursa's hysterectomy, I contend that it can also be in reference to generations as witnesses to the past. The scar, for better or worse, is part of the Ursa's body and is an undeniable piece of evidence that the past did in fact occur. Gran and Mama are the scar and the witness to Corregidora's sexual violence.

Jones writes "it was as if their memory, the memory of all the Corregidora women, was her memory too, as strong with her as her own private memory, or almost as strong" (Jones 129). Ursa may be a victim of memory. Each time she falls asleep she encounters a familial memory. And as she has sexual encounters with Tadpole or Mutt she imagines herself in a sexual situation that her grandmother or great-grandmother experienced with Corregidora. Harb writes that "The Corregidora women become so powerfully immersed in histories of domination and suffering that they are incapable of critically perceiving the past and integrating it into their life story" (Harb 117).

Ursa's memory conflict ask the question: at what point does collective memory and being a "custodian of memory" (Dubey 254) stop and individual identity begin and how does one know how tightly to hold onto either? In a dream Ursa is asked by a voice "what bothers you?" She replies with "it bothers me because I can't make generations" then "it bothers me that I can't" and finally with "it bothers me that I can't fuck" (Jones 90). Ursa does not say I am bothered by the fact that I cannot birth children but instead "it bothers me because…" as if to say that something is bothering her because of her inabilities. This "it" could perhaps be the community and the ancestral past that would be saddened by her inability to procreate. Her cultural memory reminds her of the past violence endured by enslaved women, but also of the importance of motherhood.

What possibilities for clarity or release of memory could Ursa have if she had not been shoved down the stairs? Certainly she could pass her memories down, thus releasing some of its potency to another soul. Ursa's dream response of "it bothers me that I can't fuck" addresses her role as a heterosexually labeled individual. During a sexual encounter Tadpole says to Ursa "damn, you still got a hole, ain't you? As long as a woman got a hole, she can fuck" (Jones 82) so although Ursa may believe that she cannot fuck, through labeling her as a 'hole' (Goldberg 452), the men in her life declare that she still is 'valuable' or capable of being used. Goldberg theorizes that since "There is a hole where her uterus should be, an emptiness which excludes Ursa even from this limited reproductive economy, as well as from the procreative politic of her foremothers' imperative to "make generations" (Goldberg 452) the *can't* of what is bothering Ursa is the physical emptiness of her reproductive capabilities which has also swallowed up her self-worth into a bottomless hole of familial and historical trauma.

But Ursa's deep sentiment about her inabilities is perhaps in reference to the physical satisfaction of sexual intercourse, not merely the act. Goldberg writes, "Still, even consensual heterosexual sex in *Corregidora* is rarely, if ever, figured outside of this historical economy, always descriptively echoing the rape/enforced prostitution of Great Gram and Gram, with emphasis on the "magic" of the female genitalia, described alternately as a "gold piece" (profit) or as a "hole" (pleasure), and sex boiled down simply to a woman "getting fucked" (Goldberg 450-451) thus Ursa's overall displeasure in sexual experiences is not only historically rooted but a clue to the fact that, to some extent, Ursa wants to break free from this 'historical economy'.

The structure of *Corregidora* is rather poetically repetitious characterized by "a coming back, a going over, a completion of a circle, an obsessive returning to something emotionally magnetic or rhythmically compelling" (Drury 240). Repetition within any oppressed community can be an act of coming back or coming home to a place of beginning. In poetry we often repeat to expand on the main point of the poem, to etch into reader's minds our true rhythmic purpose. Slavery and its subsequent lingering is an obsessive returning to something

emotionally magnetic. Arguably, oppression that comes with being Black and female, the 'double jeopardy' (Beale 146-155) is a repetition of the Black female slave experience in contemporary times.

Repetition serves as a tool for the *Corregidora* characters that utter repeated lines as cultural mantras. Audre Lorde's famous lines from *A Litany for Survival* "so it is better to speak remembering that we were never meant to survive" it is a repeated reminder to always speak and never stop speaking (Lorde 31). Arguably, the act of remembering is a powerful tool of resistance. If we remember those who abuse us, and those who love us, we forever have a way of validating that feeling.

Corregidora is full of repeated words and phrases that work to help Ursa remember the past, calm her present, keep her passive, and express a never ending mourning of personal spirit. The first realm of repetition is in relation to the heterosexual sexual acts between Ursa and Mutt and then between Ursa and Tadpole. Mutt asked her each time they have sex "Am I fucking you?" and "What are we doing, Ursa?" to which she replies, "We fucking" (Jones 75) the variation of words may change slightly but Mutt's asking about what is happening mixed with Ursa's response of being dominated is always there. (Sexual) repetition here has several purposes. Repetition is used for a completion of abuse and domination; thus, a completion of pain, a completion of personal colonialism and a repeated validation of humanity.

First, repetition as a completion of abuse and pain. As Mutt and Tadpole have sex with Ursa she practically wills herself to stay connected to the action as her mind drifts to past memories. In one instance Ursa's mere thoughts regarding 'fucking' and the loss of her womb sends her into a memory about when she was anally violated by a boy when they were both very young (Jones 42). Ursa repeats this memory a few times throughout the story, and other instances of anal penetration are mentioned, which arguably spur this memory in readers' minds. The past incident with the young boy and the present violation with Mutt (Jones 75) complete the circle of bodily abuse, a circle in which she cannot escape but instead must experience. However, when she is with Mutt she tells him that he is hurting her unlike the time with the young boy in which she says nothing. Griffiths writes, "The repetition both overwhelms and numbs Ursa" (Griffiths 361). Her experience with Mutt is relived yet revised.

Second, repetition is a completion of colonialism. Ursa's Great 'Gram' was the slave of Corregidora in Brazil (Jones 10-12) and as her body was literally colonized and forced into slavery; so was Gram's, and Mama's bodies and minds: colonized by the sexual abuse they shared at the hands of Corregidora. Angela Davis writes, "the act of copulation, reduced by the white man to an animal-like act, would be symbolic of the effort to conquer the resistance the black woman could unloose" (Davis 213) thus it is no surprise that Ursa's great grandmother, grandmother and mother were trapped in the vicious cycle of rape

and dehumanization. With this, the contemporary colonized body lacks self-definition, true agency and the freedom of erotic autonomy (Jordan 410-411) and Ursa is the embodiment of a colonized soul. As men penetrate her, she derives no pleasure from the act and her body is forced into a position of non-feeling. When Mutt pushes Ursa down the steps her ability to enact agency (i.e. the choice to reproduce) was taken from her for someone else's (Mutt's) benefit (his anger). Colonization is an awful legacy of 'taking' without returning and Ursa's body is constantly taken from without reciprocal return.

Lastly, repetition is a validation of human character. Ursa is in need of her own validation of life when she repeats that she cannot feel anything during sexual encounters. Ursa says, "I was struggling against him [Mutt], trying to feel what I wasn't feeling" (Jones 75) thus Ursa needs to feel something, anything to validate that she is alive. In a sense, the use of sexual contact, of bodily contact expresses what words cannot always express. Griffiths writes that Jones "[uses] the body strategically to indicate the limits of language" (Griffiths 354). Language cannot always capture the sheer range and depth of emotion and certainly in a novel like this would be challenging to attempt. Instead, we can understand Ursa's physical and sexual pain and pleasure on emotional terms. For example, Ursa's violent reaction to Jeffy, a woman, touching her in bed (Jones 39) is not then a purely or even marginally homophobic response but instead is a negative response towards the emotion of truly *feeling* something. About this situation Goldberg asserts that "Ultimately, as revealed in these consuming expressions of fear, Ursa is unable to imagine (sexual) pleasure apart from pain, as the traumatized subject is unable to imagine survival outside of the frame of the traumatic event" (Goldberg 467). As much as Ursa wants to feel pleasure and feel anything she is not prepared to *feel* from anyone. And perhaps Ursa is not ready to let go of pain for the possibility of pleasure because pain has become so normalized to her and her matrilineal kin.

Furthermore, Ursa later runs into Jeffy who tells her "You *know* it felt good that time" (Jones 178) to which Ursa only mildly takes notice of Jeffy's assertion before walking away. While the situation between Ursa and Jeffy cannot conclusively be labeled as erotic I would assert that Jeffy is a symbol of sorts; a symbol of feeling that Ursa cannot embrace. Black female relationships in this novel are clearly troubled. Patricia Hill Collins writes that sometimes Black women reject other Black women sexually or friendship wise because we see each other as a reflection of ourselves: a reflection we do not wish to embrace because of self-hatred (Collins 181). Perhaps what troubles Ursa about both Jeffy and another female character Cat is that they reflect what Ursa could be; free from the binds of heterosexuality or simply free from the binds of pain.

It is not surprising that many readers can identify with Ursa's emotional barrenness and can understand how physical violence of the past seeps into the emotional consciousness of the present. Rape from the past is a repeated action:

'emotionally magnetic', controlling and silencing in the present. Griffiths argues that "the survivors' voices repeat a story over and over, paradoxically creating a kind of noisy silence for Ursa" (Griffiths 361). When Ursa remembers stories of her grandmother or great grandmother being raped and abused she too is emotionally violated by the inherited emotional pain. And the trauma lingers and infests her romantic relationships, making her often passivity with Mutt and/or Tadpole the transcendence of silence from the past.

Various instances of Ursa's physical stripping of dignity are seen throughout the novel; I will mention two here. First, to recall the Ursa/Jeffy scene, Jeffy momentarily takes from Ursa the pain of numbness when she touches her and replaces numbness with possibility. This example is rather positive; however, we can see that the reaction of Ursa is a reaction to a new feeling. And again not simply a physical or sexual feeling but emotional connection. Ursa begins to know what the source of her empowerment may be: feeling again.

Second, Ursa meets and talks with a random man in a bar after her performance one night. The conversation is respectful until he says "I bet you got some good pussy" and "tell me if you ain't got some good pussy" (Jones 171). His crude questioning is not only intrusive but dehumanizing as he limits Ursa to one physical and private attribute. Ursa does not respond to the man but simply stares at him (Jones 171). Thus we can begin to understand Ursa's utter loneliness and invisibility in the world. She is bits and pieces to various people. And she as a whole person has little purpose to anyone. She is a generational womb to her community (and to her personified cultural memory). She is a 'pussy' or 'hole' to Mutt and random men. She is a stunning voice to those who listen to her sing. Her fragmented body renders her fragmented mind; her mind which is preoccupied with the past, lost in the present and not even in the scope of the future.

Although Ursa's ancestral memories flood her mind to what I would argue is a debilitating level she does still have agency. At several points throughout the novel she expresses her agency and empowers herself. The first way she empowers herself is through her blues singing.

In a relived dream/memory Ursa's mother tells her that "songs are devils. It's your own destruction you're singing. The voice is a devil" (Jones 53). Her mother goes on to say that unless singing is for God it is devilish. The voice represents strength and identity and shatters the silence oppressed bodies, here specifically black woman's voices. Perhaps Ursa's mother sees 'songs' and any un-Christian singing as devil music not because it actually is devil's music but because it addresses out loud in a cathartic release the deep pain of generational abuse. Griffiths argues that gospel music, which Ursa's mother supports, offers "forgiveness" that Ursa does not want (Griffiths 366). I argue that Ursa does not want forgiveness in a spiritual sense she instead wants freedom from victimization and self-blame not forgiveness and "cleansing"

(Griffiths 366) of problem not of her own making. In the dialogue Ursa's mother goes on to ask "where did you get those songs? That's devil's music" to which Ursa responds, "I got them from you." Her mother replies with "I didn't hear the words" (Jones 54). Ursa has taken their collected memories and set them to music and in turn set a piece of herself free.

Griffiths asserts that "Since Ursa can no longer rely on "making generations," she brings her story into the public in her singing, and with the audience, she creates an address that includes all the pain, grief, and pleasure of her life" (Griffiths 365). Blues with its African diasporic roots can be a way to externally express the pain within; whether it is the pain of racism, sexism, or even a horrific past. Patricia Hill Collins quotes blues singer Alberta Hunter as saying "to me, the blues are almost religious…almost sacred-when we sing the blues, we're singing out of our own hearts…our feelings" (Collins 116). It is safe to say that when Ursa sings she sings for all of these reasons and "the blues are thus perceived as Ursa's way of transforming the legendary history of the Corregidora victims into a cultural form of art" (Harb 125).

Ursa is brave enough to resist the cycle of domination by speaking (singing); something that her mother cannot understand. Her mother's response of "I didn't hear the words" possibly refers to her lack of being able to replay memories through a critical lens. Perhaps her mother spends too much time hearing the musical beats instead of the words, missing the lyrical significance. Or perhaps the memories are too embedded that she cannot understand anything deeper than that they are painful and thus wishes to shield herself from the reminder. Whatever the reason, it is clear that Ursa has transcended some of the family trauma.

This dream/memory scene ends with "everything said in the beginning must be said better than in the beginning" (Jones 54). Everything that happened to Ursa's great grandmother, grandmother and mother must be brought to the surface in Ursa's life. However, it must be rearticulated in a way that does not cause pain but instead inspires Ursa to be independent and resistant. She can articulate the Corregidora women's struggle better than the women in her family.

Max Munroe, an owner of a club that Ursa sings at tells her "you got a hard kind of voice. You know like callused hands. Strong and hard but gentle underneath. Strong but gentle too. The kind of voice that can hurt you. I can't explain it. Hurt you and make you still want to listen" (Jones 96). Max recognizes, but cannot articulate, that when Ursa sings it is more than her voice coming into the songs; it is the voice of all of her female family members. The hardness is a weathered but intact soul. Ursa's voice is 'the kind of voice that can hurt you' for several reasons. One, its sheer honesty is hurtful and saddening to those who suppress their own pain or who cannot identify with the massive trauma blues singers like Ursa display. And two, Ursa's voice expresses her self-definition, her agency and her creativity. In short, Ursa's voice expresses strength and promise

that she is a woman who can do anything with the emotional power and knowledge she possesses. Max, and most likely countless others, are fearful of a woman in control of her voice, her future, and slowly as we see with Ursa; her past. Patricia Hill Collins writes, "The black women's blues tradition's history of personal expressiveness heals this binary that separates emotion from intellect" (Collins 282) therefore Ursa's songs have intellectual merit of community-based importance.

Patricia Hill Collins writes, "The [Blues] can be seen as poetry, as expressions of ordinary Black women rearticulated through Black oral tradition" (Collins 117). Singing the Blues then gives Ursa the platform to rearticulate a syncopated, melodic restating of history said better than in the beginning.

The 'true' message Ursa is attempting to share through her music is a combination emotion and intellect that are both needed to create a powerful song. While Ursa sings for her own struggle and empowerment she also reaffirms the legitimacy of the community as a body of knowledge. As she sings and other community members respond positively they together are spreading and keeping cultural knowledge: a powerful tool for survival.

Ursa also begins to empower herself through affirming the erotic. Audre Lorde, in *Sister Outsider*, writes that "when I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives" (Lorde 55). Ursa must reclaim the erotic, and feel again, as Lorde insists, in order to be an empowered, self-defined woman. And this perhaps is the most challenging task we see for Ursa throughout the book. I argue that by the end of the novel Ursa begins to feel or at least acknowledge that she has the capacity to feel. And by feel I mean feel the complete joys of life (Lorde 57) instead of the pain she grew accustom to.

We see Ursa's run-in with the erotic particularly involving Jeffy and Mutt. As stated in an earlier sections, Ursa's first interaction with Jeffy though seemingly negative and obviously intrusive was Ursa's subconscious response to real feeling. Years later when the women meet again and Jeffy tells Ursa that she knows Ursa liked it we can tell that Ursa has not forgotten about the incident nor forgotten about how it feels to be touched and enjoy it. This is again not to assume Ursa's lesbianism or possible lesbianism. I argue in fact that the situation reaffirms and inspires Ursa's desire for men as she starts a relationship again with Mutt. We see in the final scene of the novel that Ursa has come back to Mutt with a new sense of self and determination; therefore, their interaction is nothing like it was before.

Fittingly, the last part of this essay discusses the novel's ending and Ursa's return to Mutt. Critics such as Harb, Griffiths, Dubey and Goldberg, have been divided on the ending's meaning and if Ursa 'truly' empowers herself by forming a relationship with Mutt again. Dubey, for example, does not believe that

"the ending [resolves] the complications of either Ursa's own sexual history or the broader history of American slavery" (Dubey 252). While I sympathize with Dubey's conclusion, I offer my interpretation and conclude that I do believe Ursa has in fact empowered herself and empowered the past through her actions.

The novel closes with Ursa giving Mutt oral sex. After they finish they repeat, rather poetically, their desires in a relationship. Mutt says "I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you"; Ursa replies "then you don't want me". They repeat these lines three times, Mutt shakes Ursa and she collapses crying on Mutt. Ursa tells him "I don't want a kind of man that'll hurt me neither." Then they embrace (Jones 185). Aside from the bluesy poetic feel of this scene, it is powerful but terribly confusing. Why would Ursa choose to return to her abuser? And what supposed 'hurt' has or will Ursa inflict on Mutt? Some critics address these troubling issues and rightly so, however, I believe that focusing too much on Mutt and his horrendous actions diverts attention from the true character of importance, Ursa. This story is indeed about her past, her present and her empowerment.

Goldberg writes about the ending, "this last call-response dialogue also begins the process of eliminating pain by expressing it" (Goldberg 469). Ursa allows herself to feel and she allows herself to cry. She allows herself to keep familial memory at the forefront of her mind, does not let it overpower her and never ignores that she is her past and her present. However, Ursa finally chooses for herself and eliminates pain: a radical act of self-reliance upon which Black women form their identity.

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