

BODY POLITICS IN CORREGIDORA

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“Bodies write politics.” —Thomas Shevory, *Body/Politics: Studies in Reproduction, Production, and (Re)Construction*

“In the reality of practice the body is never outside history, and history never free of bodily presence and effects on the body.”
—R.W. Connell, *Gender and Power*

Contemporary feminist discourse has consistently revealed that the female body is defined by—and constantly subject to—various socio-political, cultural, economic, and historical forces. Indeed, competing and contradictory politics of representation exist with respect to the female body. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler emphasizes that “the body is not a ‘being,’ but a variable boundary, a surface, whose permeability is politically regulated” (177). Moreover, “the body gains meaning within discourse only in the context of power relations” (Butler 92). The female body thus operates, as Sidonie Smith argues, as a site “upon which the struggle for cultural meaning is waged” (Smith 282). If the female body operates as a site of ideological contestation, this is especially true of the black female body, which is “caught between conflicting narratives,”¹ rendering it “a site of confusion and contradiction” (Barnett 19). In her discussion of black women’s bodies, Karla F.C. Holloway argues that they “metaphorically represent the conflicted presence of gender and race within America’s cultural history,” stressing that “theirs were the very bodies that political and legal systems in the United States had worked hard to render passive and silent” (Holloway 485; 483).

It is this practice of attempting to control and silence black female bodies that Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975) simultaneously reflects and responds to. A novel that centers on the experiences of Ursa Corregidora, a female blues singer, *Corregidora* highlights the

¹ According to Barnett, these include “the vulnerable female body, the sexual, and contagious black body—none of which account for the specificity of her coding” (Barnett 19).

degree to which the black female body operates as a site of ideological conflict in mid-twentieth-century America, a dynamic with roots that, as Jones's narrative makes clear, extend back to slavery. This essay examines representations of and resistance to the black female body as both object and commodity in *Corregidora* by considering how others, and Ursa herself, use her body to define—and confine—her. Those who seek to lay claim to Ursa's body have different, and sometimes competing, agendas. A common theme nonetheless binds them together: the desire to adapt and appropriate her body for their own purposes—purposes that are political in nature and which exist in direct response to the ideological forces of 1940s America at the same time as they link up indirectly with the legacy of slavery that Ursa and the other *Corregidora* women continue to suffer from and bear witness to. Considering the various functions attributed to the black female body in this literary context—and within its historical context—allows me to situate my observations regarding black sexual politics and ideology in *Corregidora* within the larger debate about the roles race, class, and gender play with respect to the commodifying and policing of female sexuality. This type of analysis will also permit me to trace the cycle of violence and exploitation that, as Jones's novel highlights, begins with slavery and ends with late-capitalism.

The cycle of violence that the *Corregidora* women bear witness to and suffer from begins with slavery. Their namesake, old man *Corregidora*, was a "Portuguese seaman turned plantation owner," who sired both Ursa's mother and grandmother (Jones 10). By enslaving Ursa's great-grandmother, her "Great Gram," repeatedly sexually violating her, and forcing her into prostitution, he lays claim to her body in a number of different ways. Through this practice, he both objectifies her for his own sexual desires and commodifies her sexuality by selling her body to other men for profit. Thus, as the passage that follows makes clear, old man *Corregidora*'s relationship with Ursa's "Great-Gram" began with, and was defined by, how he would exploit her for his own pleasure as well as for financial gain; the story of her exploitation and repeated victimization by old man *Corregidora* is passed down to Ursa by her great-grandmother:

Yeah, I remember the day he took me out of the field. They had coffee there. Some places they had cane and then others cotton and tobacco like up here. Other places they had your mens working down in mines. He would take me hisself first and said he was breaking me in. Then he started bringing other men and they would give me money and I had to give it over to him. (Jones 11)

This account highlights that old man *Corregidora* had a personal motive—his own perverse pleasure—as well as a profit-incentive to exploit and abuse Great Gram, incentives which are further under-

scored by his nicknames for her: “A good little piece. My best. Dorita. Little gold piece” (Jones 10).² He benefits on yet another level from his repeated sexual violation of her, since it results in her bearing him a child whom he legally has ownership rights to and can potentially garner a profit from. Thus, he further commodifies her by exploiting her reproductive labor by laying claim to its product—the child she bears—a practice common in slavery.

In the decades since *Corregidora* was first published numerous scholars, including Angela Davis, Deborah Gray White, and Hortense J. Spillers, have discussed this practice as part of their overall examinations of the experiences of female slaves. For instance, in *Women, Race, and Class* Davis notes how the legal system was adapted during slavery times to reward the sexual abuse of female slaves by slave owners. The legislation of that era “adopted the principle of *partus sequitur ventrem*—the child follows the condition of the mother. These were the dictates of the slaveowners who fathered not a few slave children themselves” (Davis 12). White explains in her book *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* that “once slaveholders realized that the reproductive function of the female slave could yield a profit, the manipulation of procreative sexual relations became an integral part of the sexual exploitation of female slaves” (White 68). In her essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” Spillers highlights that “under the conditions of captivity, the offspring of the female does not ‘belong’ to the Mother, nor is s/he ‘related’ to the ‘owner,’ though the latter ‘possesses’ it, and in the African-American instance, often fathered it, and, as often, without whatever benefit of patrimony” (Spillers 269).

Thus, it is under conditions just like those Davis, White, and Spillers describe that old man Corregidora sires Ursa’s grandmother and mother. The legacy the Corregidora women pass on to Ursa is a transgenerational transmission of trauma stemming from the abuses inflicted on them by him under the system of slavery. He is not only her ancestor, but functions in the text as well as “the symbolic progenitor of evil within Ursa’s limited world” (Tate 140). Indeed, Ursa’s foremothers have actively worked to keep his memory alive: “Four generations of Corregidora women, beginning with her great-grandmother, refuse to let his memory die with time. They pay homage to him by promulgating his sins in ritualized oral expression, passed down from generation to generation of female children” (Tate 140). The mandate that

² Tellingly, this label “little gold piece” suggests both an object, the “piece,” and a commodity, via the modifier “gold,” something which is currency and has monetary value, which thus underscores how Great Gram herself was both objectified and commodified under slavery by old man Corregidora.

the Corregidora women must “make generations” is passed down the matrilineal Corregidora line by Ursa’s Great Gram (Jones 101). She believes that by continuing the line, she will preserve the evidence of the atrocities old man Corregidora committed as a “slave-breeder and whoremonger” (Jones 8-9). Great Gram stresses to Ursa that by recounting these stories, she is “leaving evidence” and tells Ursa that “you got to leave evidence too” (Jones 14). Because old man Corregidora, along with other slave owners, destroyed records in an attempt to cover up these crimes, the Corregidora women must pass on the history of these atrocities orally and continue to bear witness to what happened:

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

This edict has been issued in direct response to, and as a way to counter, the slave owners who attempted to hide their crimes. As Stephanie Li points out in her essay, “Love and the Trauma of Resistance in Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*,” “by instructing Ursa to make generations to preserve the memory of their sexual abuse, Great Gram and Gram convert the female body into a form of documentation” (Li 132).

Great Gram’s pronouncement means, as Deborah Horvitz persuasively argues in her book, *Literary Trauma: Sadism, Memory and Sexual Violence in American Women’s Fiction*, that indeed the Corregidora “women’s bodies are again used as the site of history’s inscription” (Horvitz 46). Because Great Gram’s mandate to Ursa refigures the body as a potential path to testimony (“bearing witness”) and healing, her charge—at least to a degree—represents a project of reclamation. Yet these efforts to redefine the female body and, specifically, the maternal body, remain problematic for a number of reasons. First, as Horvitz emphasizes, one result of Great Gram’s charge is that “their commodification is continued by the women themselves, not for money this time, but for history” (Horvitz 46-47). Second, as Li argues, this mandate works also to transform the female body into a tool and thus reduces women to a physical function. She explains:

Once objectified as lucrative ‘pussy’ within the slave economy, the Corregidora women now privilege the womb as the primary site of female value. In both conceptions, women are reduced to a physical function and alienated from any notion of personal desire or sexual pleasure. By shifting attention from the reproductive to the purely sexual, Great Gram and Gram stress the creative potential of women. However, they appropriate the female body as a tool rather than claim it as a means of asserting personal agency. (Li 133)

By using their bodies to “make generations” and “bear witness” to the horrors committed under slavery, the Corregidora women reappropriate for themselves what was once used for others’ purposes, but in their attempt at reclamation they find themselves unable to define their bodies in any ways other than the one laid out for them by Great Gram.

Not only does Great Gram traumatize them by retelling her stories to them time and again—and thus making them relive the abuses she suffered—but her charge to “make generations” also transforms their sexual relations into rote encounters carried out with the purpose of procreation, not pleasure, in mind. Ursa’s mother confides in Ursa that she was drawn to Martin because she saw him not as a life-partner, but as a way to help her fulfill Great Gram’s charge. To Ursa she admits, “I didn’t want no man” (Jones 114). She discloses her reasons for having sexual relations with Martin: “It was like my whole body knew it wanted you, and knew it would have you” (Jones 114). Mama has obeyed the edict laid out for her, but it costs her dearly. She is unable to relate to Martin or any man in any way other than sexually, yet sexual fulfillment is closed off to her too, since for her, sex is strictly about procreation, a way to “make generations.” Horvitz highlights how the tragic Corregidora family history affects Ursa’s mother’s, and Ursa’s own, relationships with men when she declares that “Mama’s sexual life, like her own, has been ruined by slavery” (Horvitz 40). As Li explains,

Mama is the first of the Corregidora women not to experience the horrors of physical enslavement and the perverse cruelties of Corregidora. Instead she endures the destructive consequences of her foremothers’ demand to make generations. Raised upon stories that present men as domineering rapists who commodify and abuse women, Mama fears men even as she is drawn to Martin so that she can fulfill the mandate of her foremothers. (Li 133)

For Mama, the desire to fulfill Great Gram’s charge is so strong and so all-consuming that it eclipses any other longings she might have.

Mama’s attempt to reclaim her body by fulfilling Great Gram’s mandate does represent a shift from how Gram and Great Gram’s maternal bodies were used/abused under the system of slavery, yet her re-appropriation of her body remains clouded nonetheless by historical practices, including the practice during slavery of forcing women to serve as breeders. Additionally, her so-called desires may be tainted by the very system she seeks to subvert. As Butler emphasizes, “the female body that seeks to express itself is a construct produced by the very law it is supposed to undermine” (Butler 93). Despite Mama’s belief that “making generations” is an act of subver-

sion, she participates, to a degree, within a system and society that wants to define her by her reproductive abilities. Thus, she conforms to society's prescribed role for her at the same time as she tries to redefine herself by/through her body's functions. Butler explains this dilemma; the female body, she stresses, "freed from the shackles of the paternal law may well prove to be yet another incarnation of that law, posing as subversive but operating in the service of that law's self-amplification and proliferation" (Butler 936).

Ursa's current dilemma, like her mother's, has its roots in the myriad forms of abuse her foremothers suffered under the system of slavery. When a violent confrontation with her drunken husband Mutt Thomas causes her to miscarry and forces her to undergo an emergency hysterectomy, she must come to terms with her inability to fulfill the mandate laid out for her by her Great Gram. For Ursa, this proves quite difficult. The desire to "make generations" has been deeply ingrained in her, as a conversation she has with Tadpole, the man who will become her second husband, makes clear:

'What do you want, Ursa?'

I looked at him with a slight smile that left quickly. 'What do you mean?'

'What I said. What do you want?'

I smiled again. 'What all of us Corregidora women want. Have been taught to want. To make generations.' (Jones 22)

Ursa's foremothers have indoctrinated her into their belief system so much so that she has internalized their desires as her own. She wants, as she puts it, "what all of us Corregidora women want," and now that she is unable to "make generations," she must find another way to define herself. This already difficult task proves even more complicated for Ursa because she must do it amidst individuals and a society which seeks to define—and confine—her in ways that fit their agendas.

Far from operating separately from the system which exploited her foremothers, the conditions under which Ursa is oppressed and defined link up in a very real way to the legacy of slavery. In fact, Ursa is figuratively confined by the same forces that literally enslaved her foremothers. As Griffiths emphasizes, "the legacy of Corregidora's plantation follows her, and she seems enslaved to others and owned by their desires" (Griffiths 357). Ursa must, then, not only reconcile the voices of her foremothers, who have sought to control her destiny with their mandate to "make generations," but on an almost daily basis she also must confront others who seek to objectify her and lay claim to her body. This is, of course, the case with Mutt Thomas, whose relationship with Ursa is often described in terms

that suggest ownership. What sets Mutt off and leads him to assault Ursa that fateful night at Happy's Café, where he shoves her down the flight of stairs causing her to miscarry and also lose her womb, is that men at this club, where she is singing, "mess with they eyes" at her, which Mutt not only heartily dislikes, but also resents since he sees their gaze as an infringement on his proprietary rights over Ursa (Jones 3). Thus, it is a conflict over her body, and who can lay claim to it, that is responsible for her accident and inability to "make generations." At another point, Mutt demands of her, "Are you mine, Ursa, or theirs?" (Jones 45). Tellingly, Mutt's question assumes that someone must have ownership rights over Ursa—in his view, she must *either* belong to the Corregidora line, and thus be "theirs," or belong to him. He does not allow the possibility that Ursa, perhaps, is her own agent, a self-determining individual. Rather, he feels she must belong to—and thus answer to—someone else. Later in the novel, Ursa recalls how Mutt liked to claim exclusive rights to her body and her sexuality: "Talking about *his* pussy. Asking me to let him see his pussy" (Jones 46).

Mutt is not alone in wanting Ursa to conform to his own desires and agenda. As Jennifer Griffiths highlights,

in every interaction, Ursa must see herself as an object of someone else's desire or as a sexual threat to other women. In both the public space of the nightclub, the fair, and the town streets and in the private spaces in which she seeks refuge and recovery, Ursa's body exists as a spectacle, revealing a legacy that she has internalized and the outside world has confirmed. (Griffiths 356)

Ursa is an object of sexual desire for Cat, whose advance Ursa spurns, and for her second husband Tadpole McCormick, the club-owner who assumes ownership rights over her, as well. Though he does not physically abuse Ursa as Mutt did, he is a very controlling presence in her life, wanting a say in what she eats, how much she sleeps, and how long she performs on stage at a time. When Tadpole puts Ursa on stage at his club to sing, he commodifies her, both because he makes money through her talents and by the way he exploits her physical attractiveness and desirability as a way to fill up seats in his club.

Indeed, it is when Ursa sings the blues on stage that it becomes most obvious that her body is caught between conflicting narratives. Ursa represents a cash profit to Tadpole when she performs at his club. He profits financially from her talents as a blues singer and thus appropriates her bodily functions, her voice and her presence on stage, for his own purposes. This is true, as well, of the owner of the Spider, another nightclub where Ursa performs. He suggests as

much when he repeatedly tells her that his club's popularity is due, in large part, to her singing: "I knew when I seen you, get you here and we'd be doing good business. Something powerful about you" (Jones 93). Ursa, thus, is clearly commodified on the job by those who earn money from her singing. She is also objectified, however, when she performs the blues, a point Mutt makes clear in his jealous rants about how men "mess" with her when she is on stage (Jones 3). Mutt paraphrases these men's desires, asserting that when they see her perform they can think of nothing but "that woman's standing up there. That good-lookin woman standin right up there" (Jones 84).

Though Mutt's anxieties and accusations stem, in part, from his jealous nature and his desire to possess Ursa, his observations about how men objectify Ursa when they see her on stage nonetheless ring true. Ursa is sexually defined on the job; remember, for instance, that part of her allure as a singer is, of course, her physical attractiveness and stage presence. The tendency to sexually define women on the job is a widespread practice, which numerous feminist scholars make clear. In her study *Sexual Harassment of Working Women*, Catharine A. MacKinnon posits that men "consume" women's sexuality on the job, and women [...] must accommodate this fact as part of their work" (MacKinnon 22). MacKinnon is careful to point out the pervasiveness of this practice; she explains that women must confront this tendency regardless of the type(s) of work they perform. Thus, as she emphasizes, a woman "need not be a secretary or hold a 'woman's job' to be sexually defined on the job" (MacKinnon 19). Adrienne Rich, who in her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" also examines the practice of sexually defining women on the job, points out that "women in the workplace are at the mercy of sex as power in a vicious circle" (Rich 21). Indeed, working women have had to learn to accept a degree of powerlessness with respect to this practice. For women, it is part of the price of holding a job in a male-dominated society. Rich explains:

The fact is that the workplace, among other social institutions, is a place where women have learned to accept male violation of their psychic and physical boundaries as the price of survival; where women have been educated—no less than by romantic literature or by pornography—to perceive themselves as sexual prey. (Rich 22)

In Ursa's position as a female blues singer, she must confront her sexualization on the job—and the fact that when she performs the blues at these clubs she is "sexual prey" to the men in the audience.

Yet for Ursa, singing the blues is also a form of expression which represents her attempt at recovery and reclamation. She emphasizes these reasons for performing the blues when she says "I didn't just

sing to be supported [...] I sang because it was something I had to do” (Jones 3). Singing the blues connects Ursa with an ideological framework that is specifically African American; as Angela Davis observes in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, both the “historical context within which the blues developed” and the subject matter of blues songs reveal “an ideological framework that was specifically African-American” (Davis 4). At the same time, for Ursa, singing the blues is a type of personal narrative. As K.M. Langellier highlights in her essay, “Voiceless Bodies, Bodiless Voices,” a personal narrative functions as “a story of the body told through the body which makes cultural conflict concrete” (208). She explains as well that a personal narrative represents a “performative struggle over personal and social identity rather than the act of a self with a fixed, unified, stable or final essence” (208). Singing, for Ursa, is a process rather than a final product. It is by singing the blues that Ursa thus confronts the very forces that attempt to confine and define her as she also reflects them. By performing blues songs, Ursa is finally able to reconcile the legacy of pain she has inherited from old man Corregidora and her foremothers with her personal struggles in mid-twentieth-century America. In her essay, “The Role of the Blues in Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*,” Donia Allen explains that “by digging around in the past and connecting it to her own life, Ursa is able, finally, to move beyond it” (Allen 261).

Thus, for Ursa, her body also functions as a path to testimony: by singing the blues, Ursa connects to the spiritual. Through her ritual of singing, she is finally able to “bear witness” to the atrocities committed during slavery as well as to testify to her own personal struggles. By telling her story and the stories of her foremothers, Ursa’s singing operates as means of recovery and reclamation. Through her voice, Ursa’s body functions as an instrument to counter the various cultural and historical forces that seek to oppress and contain her. Though the path of “making generations” to “bear witness” to old man Corregidora’s crimes is closed off to Ursa because of her miscarriage and subsequent hysterectomy, and because she is therefore unable to literally fulfill that mandate, she is nonetheless able to obey and honor the spirit of this command through her blues songs.

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