

The blues of corregidora



“ Yes, if you understood me, Mama, you’d see I was trying to explain it, in blues, without words, the explanation somewhere behind the words. To explain what will always be there” (Gayl Jones, *Corregidora*, p 66). In Gayl Jones’ novel *Corregidora*, the past is presented as a terrifying and dominating force that practically physically infects those who must live with it. Ursa’s mother, grandmother and great-grandmother all live with the pain of what was done to them in the past. Their memories, which Ursa must carry and pass on, are deeply disturbing to her—and should be to any of us—and also carry with them the elder women’s agony and their resentment and distrust of men. She cannot be free of the tyranny of *Corregidora*, even as a free woman, as she is instead trapped in relationships with abusive and unfaithful men. The women of *Corregidora* are free from legal bondage, but the mark left on them by slavery’s legacy makes “ real” freedom impossible. (Many of these motifs later appear in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, where the rage of the past—and forgetting it—is actually manifested in a destructive being.) For Ursa, the past has such a powerful force that it overpowers her individual identity. Even her physical appearance—light-skinned with fine hair—takes after that of *Corregidora*. She expresses this herself by responding “ I got evil in me” when asked what makes her hair so long (42). When she is suddenly denied the ability to “ make generations” (22), she loses not only her “ function” as a woman, but also her function as one of *Corregidora*’s women and, consequently, her purpose in life and in her family. But Ursa is a blues singer, and her songs seek to master the fragmented past she otherwise could not resolve. The nonlinear structure of the novel reinforces the erosion of the distinction between past and present. Many of Ursa’s flashbacks take place as she recovers from her assault by Mutt, when she is

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usually semi-conscious. In her dreams, her own experiences often overlap her great-grandmother's memories. For Ursa, there is barely any distinction between her own life and the history she is told to pass on. She is often at the mercy of a past that she has never actually experienced. She speaks to this notion herself when she says " It was like I didn't know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and Corregidora" (184). The dream passages, most often presented without indication that they are dreams, leave the reader just as vulnerable to confusion from the fragmentation of memory, history and experience as Ursa. Here, the reader must form these connections in order to understand the history of slavery as Jones condenses it. The subject of how to give testimony becomes important in the conflict between generations. Though Ursa will not be able to pass on her family's history through another generation of women, she is able to manifest the force of the past and her own pain in her singing. This form of expression is raw and cathartic, and more constructive to Ursa than the obligation to make generations, which she has been denied. Ursa finds strength in revisiting her past through song, yet her mother fears their raw emotion and frank demonstration of how enslaved the family is to the memory of Corregidora. " Songs are devils. It's your own destruction you're singing. The voice it a devil," she tells Ursa. " Where did you get those songs? That's devil's music" (53-54). " I got them from you," Ursa replies (54). Her mother prefers to pass on the stories of Corregidora through a conventional oral history, passing on the memories rather than dealing with them. Ursa uses the blues to pass on the story of Corregidora's women, a form radically different from the system retelling that her family has been built on. For Ursa, song is a less damning means of retaining the past. As

singing the blues is, by nature, cathartic, Ursa is able to “ make generations” without destroying them. As she responds to her mother’s criticism: “[e]verything said in the beginning must be said better than in the beginning” (54). But while the Ursa’s chosen medium of repetition is a more constructive way of dealing with her past and her emotions, and thus leaving them behind, her escape is difficult and frequently marked by traumatic experiences. Like her Great Gram, Ursa compulsively and consistently returns to moments of trauma in her personal life. Her return to Mutt is full of ambiguity. Ursa has advanced as a strong woman outside of her expected roles as a failed mother or a carrier of memory, but her return to a once abusive husband may suggest that she is still beholden to the tradition of Corregidora’s women. It is a powerful commentary on how damaging abuse and degradation—manifested here in the abhorrent form of human slavery—are to those who must carry the memories of the past.