

The final chapter



The success of a story is contingent on its ability to survive. Many stories are preserved as texts, a large contributor to the survival. Stories that are non-textual must be preserved by word of mouth. In *Corregidora*, by Gayl Jones, the *Corregidora* women keep their legacy alive by passing on the “evidence” of their own sufferings to their children. To do this the women must “make generations,” then drill the stories so deep into their daughters’ minds that the stories become more like memories. When Ursa *Corregidora*’s womb is removed, she must confront the frightening reality of her inability to “make generations.” Initially this seems to be what troubles Ursa, but eventually it surfaces that her inability to feel troubles her more substantially. The weight of her families’ memories and stories stifle Ursa, inhibiting her from having stories and memories of her own. She keeps the legacy alive through her music, but unlike her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother, her retellings of the stories free her, at least partially, whereas the others are consumed by the horror. The function of Mama, gram and great-gram’s story telling is to ensure that the legacy of *Corregidora* and all that they suffered is not forgotten. Great-gram’s stories are of her childhood in *Corregidora*’s whorehouse. She recalls how she had to have sex with *Corregidora*, his wife and other men on the plantations. She descriptively paints an image of *Corregidora* and she provides Ursa with a limited account of her sexual abuse, a memory that haunts Ursa. Gram’s account is very similar to great-grams: she describes *Corregidora*, and briefly states that she had to “fuck” other men for money that *Corregidora* would take, and that “she [*Corregidora*’s wife] sleep with you herself” (23). Mama tells Ursa the story of her own father, but notes “‘*Corregidora* is responsible for that part of my life. If *Corregidora* hadn’t happened that part of my life

never would have happened” (111). Progressively the influence of Corregidora is lessened from generation to generation. Great-gram and gram are the two Corregidora women most directly affected by his actions and therefore their stories are the most descriptive and personal. The stories that great-gram and gram relay are of their personal experiences with Corregidora. Ursa explains, “My great-grandmama told my grandmama the part she lived through that my grandmama didn’t live through and my grandmama told my mama what they both lived through and my mama told me what they all lived through and we were suppose to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we’d never forget” (9). Mama’s stories are less present and certainly less pertinent, as she had very limited interaction with Corregidora himself. The concept of generations is hereby established and elaborated concurrently. Gram explains to Ursa, “ Because [the slave owners] didn’t want to leave no evidence of what they done— so it couldn’t be held against them. And I’m leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too. And your children got to leave evidence” (14). Passing the stories on to future generations is the one thing that can keep the legacy alive. However, it is also evident that through each generation the children are further removed from great-gram and gram and the stories become less personal and therefore less significant. Mama, although the daughter of Corregidora had less personal interaction with him and as a result her stories are weaker than those from great-gram and gram. Ursa is even further removed. Ursa is in many ways removed from the stories, but they still grip her in many ways. Cat notes, “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 more moved, because it sounds like you’ve been

through something’” (44). Although the effect on Ursa’s singing is not necessarily a negative one, it is evident that she is troubled. Jones never provides readers with a sampling of Ursa’s actual music, but the lyrics must be powerful and emotional in order to receive as much attention as they do. Cat explains that Ursa’s voice itself is particularly gripping here. At this point, Ursa has begun to experience tragedies for herself, such as the end of her marriage with Mutt and the loss of her uterus. Ursa’s interactions with Tadpole give further evidence that she is troubled. She is unable to feel during sexual intercourse with Tadpole, reflecting her exceedingly negative view of sexual relations. Her entire life is permeated by stories of sexual abuse and therefore she perceives sex as bad. Ursa initially believes that she dislikes sex because of her inability to make generations. Mama only had sex one time, to Ursa’s knowledge, with the sole intention of creating a child to continue making generations. Ursa describes, “ And I never saw her with a man because she wouldn’t give them anything else. Nothing. And she still told me what I should do, that I should make generations. But it was almost as if she had left him too, as if she only wanted the memory to keep for her own, not his fussy body not the man himself” (101). Ursa’s mother demonstrates that the only purpose men have is to help the Corregidora women “ make generations.” When Ursa is unable to procreate she tries to convince others and herself that this is what bothers her. In a conversation in her head with Mutt she establishes this: “‘What bothers you?’ It bothers me because I can’t make generations.’ What bothers you?’ It bothers me because I can’t.’ What bothers you?’ It bothers me because I can’t feel anything’” (90). It is evident that although Ursa’s family is concerned with her ability to make generations, it is not what ultimately bothers Ursa.

Tadpole is concerned with her ability to find sex pleasurable. On the surface these things trouble Ursa, but essentially Ursa is so troubled by her past and the grim, dark stories of her great-gram, gram and mama that she is emotionally distraught for deeper reasons. Ursa wants to feel connected to the men in her life but she cannot. She was taught throughout her life that men had the sole purpose of assisting her to “make generations.” When she loses the ability to “make generations,” according to her familial values she has no need for men. Despite the ways in which the stories trouble Ursa, and despite the fact that she cannot make generations, she continues to tell the stories, keeping the legacy alive in her own way. Unlike her great-gram, gram and mama, Ursa tells the stories through song, particularly through the blues. She explains to her mother, “[Singing the blues] helps me to explain what I can’t explain” (56). Since Ursa did not personally experience Corregidora, she cannot explain how she feels about him. Essentially it seems that she does not really even know how she feels about him. It is evident that she dislikes him as she refers to him as “that bastard.” But she explains, “They squeezed Corregidora into me, and I sung back in return. I would have rather sung her memory if I’d had to sing any. What about my own?” (103). Ursa’s memories are frequently stories about Corregidora, devaluing her own experiences and preventing her from creating her own memories. She is told to keep passing the stories down to future generations, and the only way she can do this is through music. Evidently Ursa’s music is able to reach many people, as at 47 years old she still sings the blues (182). Although her music does have a strong effect on her audience, it is ultimately different than the ways in which her great-gram, gram and mama passed on the stories, because it is no longer within the

family. The stories affect the Corregidora women more than they could affect others because it is direct. Ursa has the Corregidora blood within her, and although she may be able to reach out to many, it can never be in the same way. Ursa's blues music is able to free her from the shackles that trap her great-grand and grand in the abuse of Corregidora. Through the music she is telling the story, but it becomes more of her own story and therefore she can deal with it. Her music is essentially about Mutt, Tadpole and her inability to truly live and feel in addition to just the Corregidora legacy. Over time it appears that Ursa has her own memories and stories to tell, which she can do through her music. The italicized text throughout *Corregidora* is used when Ursa is remembering stories passed on by relatives about Corregidora. As *Corregidora* progresses, the italics are additionally used to reveal Ursa's feelings about Mutt through her thoughts and their imaginary conversations. It becomes evident that Ursa has made progress. She can now think beyond what has merely been told to her, as she begins to concentrate on things in her own life. The blues music gives her an outlet to do this that she would not otherwise have. " Making generations" to pass on the story leaves little or no room for one to add personal experience to it. Since Ursa had never met Corregidora, the story would simply be a tale she passes down. However, those who come to hear her music become interested in her life and thereby allow Ursa to incorporate her own personal experiences into her music. Ursa, although a Corregidora woman, clearly differentiates herself from the line of Corregidora women before her. Gayl Jones immediately separates Ursa from the other women, as they are all " coffee colored" and she has light hair and skin. From the beginning Jones wants the reader to perceive Ursa as unlike the others. She is even further established as

significantly different from the other Corregidora women because she lacks the ability to procreate. It seems as if the only tool great-grand, grand and mama have is the ability to “ make generations,” and continue the story of Corregidora. Ursa is unable to “ make generations” and therefore she must find alternate ways to pass on the story. She resorts to music to tell the stories, but more than just helping her to tell the stories, the music helps her to cope with generations of familial suffering. In the time Ursa spends alone she begins to develop a clear sense of self, both as a singer and as an individual. In this time Ursa begins to cope with her troubles, and it is evident that she has in some ways moved beyond the legend of Corregidora as she is able to attempt a relationship again with Mutt. A significant part of the legacy is concerned with viewing men very negatively, so in concluding with both Ursa involved with men, it is evident that something has clearly changed. Considering that Mutt is responsible for Ursa’s inability to make generations, it is possible that she returns to him as a symbol of her gratefulness. However, it is never made clear why Ursa returns to Mutt. Ursa is only able to overcome the legendary stories, in many ways, because she is the last Corregidora woman. Ursa marks the end of the Corregidoras, and therefore the story and the pain alike cease, for the only way the legend can ultimately persist is through future generations.