

Property and Possession in Gayl Jones's Novel *Corregidora*: A Study in African American Literature and Literary Theory

¹Dr. Dhiffaf Ibrahim Al-Shwillay

University of Baghdad/ College of Education for Human Sciences Ibn Rushd /Department of English. dhiffaf@hawaii.edu

²Dr. Raindrop Wright

University of Hawai'i at Mānoa/ College of Languages, Linguistics & Literature. rainwright17@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Gayl Jones's novel *Corregidora* (1976) exemplifies stories of the commodified bodies of African American women who carry the traumatic memory of their ancestors. The novel navigates sites of trauma, memory, and blues music while resisting the bourgeoisie-capitalist relationships that permeated not only white society but also African American communities. Jones's novel presents the plight of an African American woman, Ursa, caught between the memory of her enslaved foremothers and her life in an emancipated world. The physical and spiritual exploitation of African American women who bear witness to the history of slavery in *Corregidora* materializes black women's individuality. This article is framed by trauma studies as well as the Marxists' concepts of commodification, accumulation, and production. Ursa, one of the *Corregidora* women, represents a commodified individual in her own community. However, in Ursa, Jones writes a black woman's voice that undermines, interrupts, and destabilizes the patriarchal dynamic of America. *Corregidora* is a novel that forms from a black women's perspective that refuses the enslavement of African American women's bodies, hi/stories, and voices (both during and post-slavery).

Keywords:

African American novel, Trauma, Marxism, contemporary American Literature, Gayl Jones

Article Received: 18 October 2020, Revised: 3 November 2020, Accepted: 24 December 2020

Introduction

Normative body and beauty images created from the history of slavery and patriarchal discourses imposed an othered gaze onto the bodies of African American women. The impacts between body identity and violence, either self-directed or from outside sources, brutally affected the formation of positive self-representations within black female identity and black communities. Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1976) interrogates harmful characterizations of African Americans, textually establishing a voice as an African American novel about African American women. Additionally, in her work, Jones structures a critique on the commodification of black women's bodies and identities from white capitalist systems and the inherited trauma of racism. The new discourse Jones constructs demands a reevaluation of the long-term consequences of slavery on black female identity. Furthermore, *Corregidora* positions black women's experiences in the canon of the American novel.

The corpus of African American literature opens new horizons for understanding the history of slavery. African American narratives dramatize history; a history told in the form of literature, which embeds facts in fiction. *Corregidora* historicizes the abuse of African enslaved women and the trauma that outlived its witnesses. Through the story of the central character, Ursa, Jones's novel reflects on the violence of slavery and colonialism in the Americas and the Caribbean. Additionally, the narrative of Ursa's family, her generations, and her life in post-slavery America, also emphasize a capitalist ideology. The trauma of Ursa's foremothers, *Corregidora* women, stems from the commodification of their bodies and lives; their enslavement functions within a profit-generating system. That is, Simon *Corregidora*, the slave owner, uses enslaved women in the prostitution industry. However, in her novel, Jones forms a complex genealogy of women who act as oral storytellers and story carriers through their female descendance; they transmit the memory of

trauma (and healing) from generation to generation.

In her article “Quest for Wholeness,” Jones positions herself not only as a writer but as the novel itself. By locating her body, mind, and being as the novel, she meticulously forces a dialogue with established discourses. She writes:

I am a novel of the Third World, and so you would expect me to be different from those other novels, to have a different aesthetic, to revise (or rewrite) genre, characterization, style, theme, structure, viewpoint, values, and so I do. Paradox and ambivalence may be seen in the margins of this marginal text, and maybe read in between these lines. Satire and irony are plentiful here, for its part of my tradition. Sometimes I may support or challenge your sense of logic or rationality; depending on who you are, I may be a novel full of contradictions. But 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)

Jones acknowledges the importance of not only the theme and aesthetic differences of African American women's literature, but also a resistance to the lasting effects of slavery on the body through her writing; the very construction of her identity as a black woman, and as a novel form this space.

In Jones's *Corregidora*, singing the blues allows the protagonist, Ursa, to communicate emotion, to find her voice as a woman, and to find an agency, which parallels the construction of the identity of the realized “self” through the novel. The blues acknowledges various levels of being and feeling for Ursa as a woman. In addition, the blues Ursa sings is a technical discourse that upholds the structure of the novel, complicating the narrative of “self” as it forms a call and response

for the agency through poetic and symbolic devices that rupture the history and the lived memory of slavery.

Moreover, *Corregidora* explores the psychological burden that remains for generations from the trauma of slavery. Stephanie Li examines *Corregidora*, noting the psychological problems of inheriting the trauma of maternal slave narratives as Ursa searches for her own woman's voice, identity, and relationships. Li contends that *Corregidora* works beyond the predominance of the mother-child bond and envisages healthy heterosexual relationships that challenge the trauma and history of slavery. Li argues that the intimate relationships between men and women in *Corregidora* present the novel as resistance to traumatic history. Stella Setka similarly finds that *Corregidora* addresses issues of black female sexuality. She posits that Ursa claims agency and identity by freeing herself from repressive cycles of subjugation by employing memory as a healing agent.

Setka leans on Toni Morrison's definition of rememory to illustrate her claim. Rememory, in Morrison's terms, is a therapeutic and emancipating process that reconceives the past of slavery from a maternal space that is personified and emotive. Setka formulates her own term from this conception, which she calls traumatic rememory. Traumatic rememory acts as a collective memory that reclaims narrative construction and, also, engages the reader in the process of textual healing. While both Li's and Setka's readings of *Corregidora* offer thoughtful evaluations on Jones's work from psychological and feminist perspectives, they do not address the capitalist economic system at work in the novel that views black women's bodies as use and exchange schema.

Jones not only conceptualizes the inheritance of trauma in *Corregidora*, she also infuses her novel with capitalist systems that penetrates the lives of the traumatized characters. Marx claims that slavery preserves the possession and the means of production for the old world. The process of commodification of Ursa's ancestors by

slave owner, Simon Corregidora, functions as use and exchange in the economic system of slavery. Ursa carries this genealogy of trauma and commodification in her body, her narratives, and in her voice. Furthermore, Jones's African-American male characters in *Corregidora* do not escape the structure of white patriarchal capitalism. Jones applies the concepts of commodification in the structure of African American man-woman relationships. This inheritance, similar to the destructive history of slavery, carries trauma passed from generation to generation. For example, Tadpole's relationship with Ursa functions within an archetype of a patriarchal capitalist society. Ursa's body's worth as inherited property is seen as devalued when she cannot produce generations.

Jones's novel examines the intergenerational histories of trauma, and, significantly, how traumatic memory/postmemory resides in mind, body, and community. Marianne Hirsch coined the term, postmemory, suggesting that dissimilar to memory, postmemory's association with the past is "not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation..." (Hirsch 107). Jones's novel is an "imaginative investment" in the exploration of African women's identity. Although Jones's work is fiction, it emphatically relies on histories from the lived experience of slavery. The tradition of memory transmission from generation to generation, postmemory, is not uncommon in African American literature. For example, Toni Morrison refers to trauma's generational transmission as "rememory" in her novel *Beloved*. In her contemplation on time, Sethe, in *Beloved*, tells her daughter Denver:

It's so hard for me to believe in [time]. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my

head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. (Morrison 35-36)

Rememory, then, for Morrison performs as a memory that entails transmission as a means to preserve the stories of African American enslavement from an African American viewpoint. Furthermore, family becomes the main site of generational connection. The transmission of families' and ancestors' history of enslavement becomes one of the common tropes of Jones's novel.

The postmemory that Ursa experiences represents family inheritance, which becomes a form of regret. Ursa experiences the trauma of postmemory (the dream of her lost baby symbolizes familial lineage and the inheritance of a traumatic history). This traumatic history forms within her body as well as her memory; it comes to her through her mother's milk. She states: "*I am Ursa Corregidora. I have tears for eyes. I was made to touch my past at an early age. I found it on my mother's tiddies. In her milk. Let no one pollute my music. I will dig out their temples. I will pluck out their eyes*" (77). Hirsch defines this type of postmemory as "the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (106). Ursa receives knowledge and education through her matrilineal line, mother and grandmother, and her involvement with this form on inter-generational memory-keeping. The women in her family build an archive of strong and rooted memories through their women's stories. Ursa drinks from this genealogical milk and builds her physical body.

Jones' creation of a black woman who bears memories, not children, claims and reorients the narrative of abuse through a black woman's subjective narrating instance. In her essay "Acts of Testimony: Bastard Daughters and the Possession of History in *Corregidora* and *Paradise*," Elizabeth Yukins discusses the claiming of

traumatic memory by the generations of survivors of traumatic events in Jones's *Corregidora* and Morrison's *Paradise*. Yukins visualizes memory as a property that can be claimed, possessed, and passed on to others. She contends that Ursa "is simultaneously formed by family history and denied access to matrilineal legitimacy" (Yukins 227). Moreover, Ursa "not only lacks the direct experiential and genealogical link to a Brazilian slave owner that her mother and foremothers share, but she also lacks the means to produce witnesses to the family trauma" (Yukins 227). This production becomes a means to refute "the legitimacy of official history" (Yukins 227). Ursa's foremothers raise her with a moral responsibility towards the *Corregidora* women though she has not experienced the historical events of slavery. Rather, she has been given the stories and feels connected to them directly: "... *Naw, I don't remember when slavery was abolished, cause I was just being born then. Mama do, and sometime it seem like I do too*" (Jones 78). Her mother's history weaves with Ursa's memories, giving her moments of rapture. These forms of inherited memories shape Ursa's identity, and they suggest a subversion of the unjust white patriarchal systems in America. Thus, those who most often bear the narratives of American exceptionalism (white privilege) must hear the voice of Ursa and her ancestors.

Ursa's history (her matrilineal genealogy) also illuminates the weight of trauma on commodified bodies. For instance, even Ursa's intimate relationships function within the aftermath of subjugation. Ursa's relationship with Tadpole exemplifies a Marxist sense of commodification set against this history of trauma. For a commodity to be a commodity, there must be two attributes: the value and the exchange. Elizabeth S. Anderson examines women's reproduction and commodification in "Is Women's Labor a Commodity?" Anderson argues that "the norms of the market are appropriate for regulating its production, exchange and enjoyment" (Anderson 72). Ursa's position as a blues singer vests her with a sign value for Tadpole. Marrying Ursa assigns

him wealth, luxury, and the power attached to her as a blues singer. Margaret Radin, a legal scholar, defines several categories of thought on commodification. She uses the term "radical non-commodification" to refer to a utopian vision in which people and things are embodied with a unique personalities and cannot be exchanged under any circumstances (Radin 79-83). The ideal of universal non-commodification is associated with Marxism, and arguably defines the background of Radin's early work, which idealizes a future world without commodification but acknowledges the distance between this world and that one.

Conversely, radical commodification describes an ideal where anything of value will be ownable and freely exchangeable. In her discussion of Market-Inalienability, Radin explores the impact of universal commodification and its connection to personal identity. She states: "Universal commodification undermines personal identity by conceiving of personal attributes, relationships, and philosophical and moral commitments as monetizable and alienable from the self" (1849). Jones's Ursa troubles the lines of history between the commodified bodies of black women (owned) and the post-slavery gaze of otherness that remained on the bodies of black women. She attempts to find the story of "self" beyond commodification. Radin suggests:

A better view of personhood should understand many kinds of particulars—one's politics, work, religion, family, love, sexuality, friendships, altruism, experiences, wisdom, moral commitments, character, and personal attributes—as integral to the self. To understand any of these as monetizable or completely detachable from a person—to think, for example, that the value of one person's moral commitments is commensurate or fungible with those of another, or that the "same" person remains when her moral commitments are subtracted—is to do violence to our deepest understanding of what it is to be human. (Radin 1849-1850)

Ursa test the bonds of her personhood in her various identity constructions. For instance, After their marriage, Ursa asks Tadpole if he married her for her beauty. His response: “Your hair’s like rivers,’ he said. ‘Is that why you married me?’ ‘Naw, that ain’t why I married you.’” He laughed a little. ‘Naw, that’s hardly why I married you’” (81). Ursa fears his response; a response that could ultimately devalue the intimacy of the relationship. She says, “[s]ometimes I found myself not knowing how much men did mean friendly and how much meant something else” (94). She suspects his estimation of her personhood, her freedom of self beyond the history of commodification.

In patriarchal societies, the institution of marriage, for women, perpetuates the Marxist use and exchange value systems. In “Women on the Market,” Luce Irigaray finds that “the society we know, our culture, is based on the exchange of women” (70). Women are used as private property and are subject to exchange. This exchange does not occur among women but by men who own “this” property and give “them” proper names. In this framework, being able to bear a child links to a woman’s use-value. Accordingly, Ursa has a reduced or decreased “value” because she does not and cannot bear children. However, Jones creates a compelling narrative with women who are more than the bearers of children. She infuses Ursa with the ability to bear, or carry, the voices of generations. Ursa’s value ties with her mother and her ancestors; she is valuable for her ability in the reproduction of witnessing.

Nevertheless, because Ursa lives within and builds identity within the structure of a patriarchal capitalist society, she mourns the loss of her ability to bear generations, to produce children. Her identity as a woman resides in having a working womb. She states that “something more than the womb had been taken out” (*Corregidora* 6). To affirm the preservation of her history, Ursa chooses to keep Corregidora’s name rather than her husband’s name: “‘He didn’t know I kept my name and Mutt kept his’” (19). Joanne Lipson Freed states: “The fact that both Ursa and her mother

Irene choose to keep the last name Corregidora, rather than taking their husbands’ names, reflects the continuing centrality of Simon Corregidora’s abuses in the women’s self-definition” (411). Keeping the surname of Corregidora generates attention for Ursa’s story. The name forms a creation or origin story that the women do not want to forget. They carry the narratives in memory and postmemory. They actively remember to hold Corregidora responsible.

Ursa’s foremothers are caught in her memory (memory and postmemory) and in the history of the capitalists system of accumulation. Their narratives preserve the memory and history of Corregidora’s physical and spiritual abuse. Moreover, Jones infuses narratives of black women’s trauma with her novel within the act of the removal of Ursa’s womb. The trauma of surgery, the removal of Ursa’s womb, directly links to the experience of slavery and abuse. When Ursa cannot produce children, she problematizes the concept of women’s use value. Jones forces the gaze of a patriarchal society to evaluate women beyond their means of production.

The structure of the novel reveals an aspect of the Marxist process of the commodification of objects. A commodity, Marx states is “an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind. The nature of these needs, whether they arise, for example, from the stomach, or the imagination, makes no difference” (*Capital* Vol I). The commodification of female slaves begins with Corregidora. However, after Ursa’s surgery, Tadpole and Ursa have a conversation about nurses’ reaction to Ursa’s language:

“They said you had those nurses scared to death of you. Cussing them out like that. Saying words they ain’t never heard before. They kept saying, ‘What is she, a gypsy?’ ”
 “What did you say?”

“Naw. I said if she’s a gypsy I’m a Russian.”

“*How do you know you ain’t?* (emphasis added)

One a them might a got your great-grandmama down in a Volga boat or something.” (Jones 8)

Here, Ursa refers to the possibility of losing the history and roots and subjugation of the African-American people, which requires an active or even angry engagement with language—language carries history. The history presented in Jones’s novel is both physical and memorial. Ursa’s Great Gram intended to carry evidence through memory transmitted down to female descendants. Physical evidence, documents, and papers, are often destroyed and burned; hence, oral storytelling can safely pass down the family origin stories and the history of abuse they underwent. The transformation of Corregidora’s women into evidence-bearers implies another layer of slave objectification and commodification.

This legitimating possession as property in the Marxist sense marks Corregidora’s women’s resistance. In the first place, he owns ‘Corregidora women As means of ownership’ who stand for the means of production since they are producing more ‘female’ commodities and they themselves make more money for him. The language of possession and ownership intensify this sense of the possession of means of production: “A good little piece. My best. Dorita. Little gold piece”(Jones 10). Hence, the Great gram is dehumanized and objectified as part of Corregidora’s property. In the second place, Ursa’s great grandmother deputizes her daughter to this mission of reproducing?? bearers of history, their owner’s abusive employment. Ursa announces:

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 supposed 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. (Jones 9)

The commodity then owns ‘itself’ and shares ownership with Corregidora. Furthermore, the second owners, represented by the Great Gram

and her daughters, see the new products use-value in the ability to reproduce bearers of evidence whose exchange value is determined by its biological gender. Thus, Ursa’s mother announced that “It was like my whole body wanted you, Ursa”(Jones, 117). She used to put a ribbon on Ursa’s baldhead to show that she owns the “means of production.” A point of departure is made here: according to Marx, the issue of private property is related to alienation, which he refers to a kind of estrangement that occurs when the worker puts his labor in the object he created. It is only through the reproduction of new consciousness that this history can be kept alive. The loss of the reproduction capability stirred Ursa’s thoughts of her function as a bearer of evidence assigned to her by Corregidora women. The story suggests that this function can be accomplished by telling the story to different people rather than assigning the mission to a new generation. The hysterectomy that Ursa undergoes may also suggest that the Great Gram ‘Marxist’ policy (in some sense) is declined by the fact that there are other means of accomplishing her intellectual goals. Hence Ursa declared that she wants “ a song that would touch me, touch my life and theirs. A Portuguese song, but not a Portuguese song. A new world song. A song branded with the new world” (Jones 59). The song she wished for is of a new kind that combines her mother’s history—and her suffering of bearing it— with her talent and voice.

The novel frames itself in the historical paradigm of slavery, in which the slave owner and oppressive white system of commodification place value signs on the bodies of black women. For example, Simon Corregidora evaluates and finds value in Ursa’s great grandmother more than other women because of her attractiveness to rich men. Jones writes:

He didn’t send nothing but the rich mens in there to me, cause he said I was his little gold pussy, his little gold piece, and it didn’t take some of them, old rich men, no time, and then I still be fresh for him. But he said he didn’t wont no waste on nothing black.

She also remembers what her mother told her about the less attractive women:

Some of them womens he had just laying... and just sent trash into them. But some of us he called hissself cultivating us, and then didn't send nothing but cultivated mens to us, and we had these private rooms, you know.... But then if we did something he didn't like he might put us in there and send trash into us, and then we be catching everything then. (124-125)

The act of cultivation, according to *Corregidora*, signifies the objectification of those women and the commodification of their bodies.

While *Corregidora's* women recognize their obligation to make generations (22), historically, black men were sold because they had less value, and Jones emphasizes this aspect of slavery in *Corregidora*; Simon *Corregidora* sells the men for profit but retains the women because he generates profit from their bodies. Additionally, Jones furthers notions of women's commodity in Ursa and Tadpole's marriage. Ursa's value to Tadpole lies in the sign value rather than Marxists' sense of possession. This does not suggest that Ursa's value to Tadpole completely lacks private property in Irigaray's terms. His evaluation of Ursa is built on social appearance—compared to Mutt who believes that he owns her body—The act of marriage transfers her body from *Corregidora* to him—marriage is exchange.

Jones further imbues the theme of commodification in *Corregidora* by employing the story of Mutt's great grandfather to underscore the white capitalist view of enslaved Africans as property. Mutt tells Ursa his great grandfather worked as a blacksmith and bought his and his wife freedom when he earned enough money. Nevertheless, Jones complicates the narrative, emphasizing the structure of racism that never allows people of color absolute autonomy because of white supremacy founds the U.S. Mutt becomes indebted to the white people from whom he bought his wife's freedom; thus, taking back his wife. Mutt says that the "courts judged that it was legal, because even if she was his wife, and fulfilled the duties of a wife, he had bought her, and so she was

also his property, his slave" (150-151). This story unfolds the capitalists system that pervades American society during the antebellum slavery era (and currently). *Corregidora* structures the systems of oppression that built slavery, but the novel unseats the white gaze of subjugation.

Jones's novel builds on the black literary traditions that do not compromise black aesthetics through the voice of Ursa. According to Gregory Smithers, it was the mission of "black scholars" who "crafted their own narratives of the past that aimed to challenge the hegemonic white culture's understanding of American history" (83). Crucially, Jones's work forms on and into the black women's literary tradition, which positions women's narratives as central. The women, in *Corregidora*, strive to speak against generations of sexual abuse and objectification after centuries of physical, mental, and emotional trauma. Their survival becomes dependent on the memories they pass on, many of which are created on histories of suffering.

Jones position trauma as an impetus for storytelling (hi/story carrying) for the women in *Corregidora*, built she formulates pathways of healing for her characters. For instance, Ursa experiences trauma before her miscarriage and hysterectomy, but Jones gives Ursa a singing. Jones opens her novel with Ursa's voice. Ursa declares, "[Mutt] didn't like for me to sing after we were married because he said that's why he married me so he could support me" (3). She states that singing is more than a means of support, "I sang because it was something I had to do" (3). Identity, then, to Ursa, forms in her singing; to her—the blues troubles the lines of trauma and transmits self-knowledge and personhood. Ursa's voice articulates the narratives of abuse and trauma. In the instance of singing, Ursa activates empowerment. Moreover, with Ursa's voice, Jones establishes a voice in her novel that disturbs the narrative that slavery wrote on black women's bodies.

Songs and singing directly link to the matrilineal memory in the *Corregidora* family. Jones's embeds memories and the mother-daughter

dynamic into the narrative. For instance, in one of her memories Ursa argues with her mother during which she declares her deep connection to singing:

‘Songs are devils. It’s your own destruction you’re singing. The voice is a devil.’

‘Naw, Mama. You don’t understand. Where did you get that?’

‘Unless your voice is raised up to the glory of God.’

‘I don’t know where you got that.’ (Jones 53-54)

Jones position Ursa’s singing a means to voice emotional pain. Ursa’s position as a retrospective narrator permits a symbolic call and response with the voices of her past generations. Her voice has the power to express pleasure with pain and past with the present. Ursa strives to link past memories with the present through her songs: “I wanted a song that would touch me, touch my life and theirs. A Portuguese song, but not a Portuguese song. A new world song. A song branded with the new world” (59). Throughout the novel, Ursa faces opposition to her singing, but her voice seeks recognition. The novel itself is a call and response, asking the reader to witness the atrocities of slavery, and the power of black women’s bodies and stories—to not look away. Julie Rak contends that “Testimonies about trauma require readers to carry on the work of agency and social responsibility to the event and its author, because the author of the testimony needs witnesses to make the story complete, and even real” (63). Many aim to silence Ursa’s voice; to continue narratives of trauma instead of healing, but Ursa’s voice becomes agency and power articulation.

Jones’s *Corregidora*, in many ways, presents traumatic history as a type of property that the *Corregidora* women strive to retain through witnessing. Ursa’s singing and the weight of memory within the novel suggest that memories of trauma imprint on the mind and body. The impacts of trauma pass from generation to generation carried in DNA strands. Mark Wolynn states: “When a stressor or trauma occurs [...] irregularities in DNA methylation that can be transmitted, along with a predisposition for

physical or emotional health challenges, to subsequent generations’ (30). Thus, trauma is inherited, and repetitively revisiting trauma becomes a means to order the narrative and find meaning in recovery. Sigmund Freud termed this pattern of repetition “repetition compulsion” (qtd in Wolynn 1). The unconscious returns to moments of trauma, reliving to create order from chaos—nonsequential narrative structure to ordered story. Jones’s novel seeks this sequence of order. Bessel A. van der Kolk. MD contends that during moments of trauma—rape, domestic violence, accidents—speech does not function. However, the moments of trauma are imprinted as vivid images (254-5). Trauma, for Ursa, becomes ordered through retelling (ordering) and singing (self-expression) to overcome the vivid imprint and image of trauma/slavery.

Ursa’s inherited cultural trauma from the memories of her foremothers’ functions as a means to navigate healing. According to Jeffrey C. Alexander, cultural trauma “occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (1). While trauma is inherited, Ursa attempts to navigate the boundaries of her inherited cultural trauma in order to break the mental, emotional, and physical cycle that trauma entrenches in the family. Ursa contemplates: “How many generations? Days that were pages of hysteria. Their survival depended on suppressed hysteria” (59). Here, Ursa reflects on the hardship or carrying memories into the conscience of future witness bearers. Wolynn argues that “[r]ecent developments in the fields of cellular biology, neuroscience, epigenetics, and developmental psychology underscore the importance of exploring at least three generations of family history in or to understand the mechanism behind patterns of trauma and suffering that repeat” (17). Ursa’s struggles to subvert generational trauma; she represents a catalyst of change.

However, as with any significant examination of trauma, the more Ursa attempts to

break the bondage of suffering, the more traumatic emotions surface, many in her dreams. Jones permits Ursa to confront the chaos of trauma in her dreams. Ursa dreams of her miscarried child, imagining that she is talking to a boy-baby. The persona in the dream reminds her of her trauma: “Where’s the next generation?” (77). Producing generations becomes the center of her thoughts, and she associates any episode in her daily life with that mission of producing new witnesses to carry the narratives of abuse her ancestors endured. Dreaming, then, uncovers Ursa’s traumatized mind. Ursa not only bears witness in her active waking moments, but she also carries trauma in her subconscious, actively engaging with modes of understanding and witnessing on multiple levels of awareness.

The act of bearing witness often underscores the loss of pieces of evidence in the novel, or, at times, creates further instances of trauma. Ursa’s grandmother states:

And then after that black people could go anywhere they wanted to go, and take up life any way they wanted to take it up. And then that’s when the officials burned all the papers cause they wanted to play like what had happened before never did happen. But I know it happened, I bear witness that it happened. (79)

The responsibility of *Corregidora* women to “[leave] evidence” marks them emotionally and mentally as the witnesses to violence; witnesses not only to the violence perpetuated through slavery and rape, but also the violence of living in a black woman’s body in a system that upholds the structure of white supremacy even after emancipation. Hirsch states:

To grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness, is to risk having one’s own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. (106-7). Ursa relates her trauma to memories narratives of

her ancestors’ trauma. Jones depicts these moments as modes of a stream of consciousness, in which Ursa appears confused or in a dream-like state. At times, the characters around Ursa interrogate this state. For instance, she is seen as “staring wide-eyed at the ceiling” (24). The weight of Ursa’s responsibility toward her maternal genealogy displaces her personal memories. Thus, her focus remains on the past and not the future. Jones anchors Ursa’s memories and the weight of bearing witness to intergenerational trauma through music.

As a blues singer, Ursa voice and songs signify property in connection to familial history, but they also provide agency for Ursa as a black woman. For Ursa, her voice functions as a private commodity used to rupture traumatic memories, but her voice has value for the Happy’s café. Cat states: “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” (44). Cat negotiates Ursa’s value post-surgery, finding that the surgery has gifted her with more profound levels of the blues. Jones writes: “Every time,” Ursa declares, “I ever want to cry, I sing the blues” (46). As Ursa fluctuates between property and agency, the blues grounds her narrative while providing personal freedom; it becomes her identity. Ursa’s songs are more than just songs. Hers contains the “explanations somewhere behind the words” (66). Ursa’s voice is a channel and an outlet. It is what Franz Fanon suggests allows aggression to be released (145); her songs become an essential part of her self-identification in her struggle in her postmemory state.

Thus, *Corregidora* presents an antithesis to the Marxists’ sense of values, which is inherited in a property. While presenting the two kinds of Marxist values (the use value and exchange value) in *Corregidora*, Jones’s work recognizes resistance, which acts against profit and generation makes. Marx writes that the “utility of a thing makes it a use-value” (*The Capital* np). The *Corregidora* women are means of production

whose use-value manifests itself in their ability to produce money for Simon Corregidora.

Forcing women into prostitution objectifies women as means of production. Being inherited with the power of consciousness and mind, while acting out a Marxist sense of commodity, Corregidora women resist, managing to find freedom. The exchange value or quantitative worth of a commodity represents another important factor of a commodity. In the material world of Corregidora, Ursa's great grandmother and her daughters are worth more than other black women, and they are put in private bedrooms. However, the act of sexual consumption and procreation act as women's resistance against the owners of the means of production. The great grandmother is inclined to reproduce the utility whose agency is undermining the capitalist system built by slave-breeders. Nevertheless, the reader is told that her sensual and intellectual targets are to keep the history and the story of enslavement, torture, and anger.

Jones's *Corregidora* unfolds many layers of American oppression of enslaved Africans and the impact of that history on the new generation living after gaining freedom. African American female characters in the novel are determined to keep their traumatic history alive through the reproduction of witness bearers. However, this inclination turns out to be a traumatic experience and hinders the way that these generations see their future.

The power embedded in Corregidora's character is presented through his inclination to objectify the female slaves he owns. The sexual bondage to Corregidora's power as manifested in his sexual exploitation and harassment is kin to Marxist ideology of reproduction and controlling the means of production. In the story of *Corregidora*, the means of production transformed into the hands of slaves whose aims are separated from Marxist materialism by the intellectual line represented by the Great Gram's intention behind the reproduction. The novel presents a way out of the capitalist system of objectification through the message embedded in Ursa's ability to accomplish

the mission given to her by her ancestors even after losing the factory of reproduction: her womb. However, the possession in this representation of African American lives is not limited to materialistic entities, but rather reaching the spiritual side of the characters and their self-knowledge.

Works Cited

- [1] Alexander, Jeffrey C., Eyerman, Ron, and Giesen, Bernard. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley, CA, USA: University of California Press, 2004. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 20 December 2014.
- [2] Anderson, Elizabeth. "Is Women's Labor a Commodity?"
- [3] Hirsch, Marianne. "The Generation of Postmemory." *Poetics Today* 29.1 (2008): 103-128.
- [4] Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1985
- [5] ---. "Freed, Joanne Lipson. "Gendered Narratives of Trauma and Revision in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*." *African American Review* 44.3 (2011): 409-420. *Project MUSE*. Web. 22 Dec. 2014.
- [6] Jones, Gayl. *Corregidora*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986.
- [7] Li, Stephanie. "Love and the Trauma of Resistance in Gayl Jones's 'Corregidora,'" *Callaloo*, Volume 29, Number 1, Winter 2006, pp. 131-150.
- [8] Marx, Karl *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume I: The Process of Capitalist Production* [1867] . Trans Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling. Marx/Engels Internet Archive. Web. 7 Dec. 2014.
- [9] ---. *The Poverty of Philosophy: Answer to the Philosophy of Poverty by M. Proudhon*. Marx/Engels Internet Archive. Web. 4 Dec. 2014.
- [10] Rak, Julie. 2003. "Do Witness: Don't: A Women's Word and Trauma as Pedagogy." *Topia* 10: 53-71.

- [11] Setka, Stella. "Haunted by the Past: Traumatic Rememory and Black Feminism in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*." *Mosaic: A Journal for the interdisciplinary study of literature*. Volume 47, number 1, March 2014. Pp. 129-144. Print
- [12] Smithers, Gregory D.. *Slave Breeding : Sex, Violence, and Memory in African American History*. Gainesville, FL, USA: University Press of Florida, 2012.
- [13] Yukins, Elizabeth . "Acts of Testimony: Bastard Daughters and the Possession of History in *Corregidora* and *Paradise*" *Signs*. 28.1. (2002): 221-247. JSTOR. Web.20 Dec 2014.
- [14] Radin, Margaret. "Market-Inalienability." *Harvard Law Review*, vol. 100, no. 8, 1987, p. 1849.
- [23] Singh, Amritjit., et al. *Memory, Narrative, and Identity : New Essays in Ethnic American Literatures*. Northeastern University Press, 1994.

Bibliography

- [15] Baker, Houston A., Jr. *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984.
- [16] Dinwoodie, Graeme B., and Mark D Janis. *Trademark Law and Theory: A Handbook of Contemporary Research*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2008
- [17] Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage International, 1995
- [18] Epstein, Rich A.. *Contract - Freedom and Restraint: Liberty, Property, and the Law* *Liberty, Property, and the Law 4*. Routledge Ltd, 2013.
- [19] Griffiths, Jennifer L. *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009.
- [20] Levy-Hussen, Aida. *How to Read African American Literature*. NYU Press, 2016.
- [21] Posner, Richard A. *Economic Analysis of Law* (4th ed.).
- [22] Weisberg, D. Kelly. *Applications of Feminist Legal Theory to Women's Lives: Sex, Violence, Work, and Reproduction*. Temple Univ. Press, 1996.