

Ursa Finds Her Voice: Sex, History, and Self in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*

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In a 1982 interview in *Callaloo*, Gayl Jones said there is supposed to be transcendence in *Corregidora*, her first novel. Many critics, however, seem not to find what Jones believes she wrote. Among them, Jerry W. Ward, Jr. in his 1982 article, "Escape from Trublem: The Fiction of Gayl Jones," states that Ursa "never breaks free of the constrictive role ordained by others" (100). The final scene of *Corregidora* is crucial in this interpretation, showing Ursa, on her knees and submissive, giving oral sex to Mutt, the ex-husband who severely injured her years before, and presumably using this act to return to the same life she had before the story of the novel begins. A close and careful reinterpretation of this scene and the changed Ursa who takes part in it, however, proves that Ursa transcends the bonds of her past, including the brutal history of the slave owner Corregidora and the resultant teachings of her great grandmother, grandmother, and mother. In the final moments of the novel, Ursa finds a voice for her needs while acknowledging with action that she wants men but doesn't need them just so she can pass on her family's stories and legacy in children.

Raised by all three generations of Corregidora women before her, Ursa carries all the combined life lessons and teachings of their experiences and has internalized their hatred of men, which stems from the abuse and sexual slavery they experienced with Corregidora as well as their need to carry on the legacy of that hatred because "the important thing is to make generations. They can burn the papers but they can't burn the conscious, Ursa. And that is what makes the evidence. And that's what makes the verdict" (22). Hearing this over and over again from these women who raised her, Ursa believes that making generations doesn't just carry on history but it solves and resolves history: "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" (9). Ann duCille, in her article "Phallus(ies) of Interpretation: Toward Engendering the Black Critical 'I,'" claims that, in this way, Ursa becomes "the last in a long line of black women haunted and emotionally burdened by history—by a legacy of rape, incest, and patriarchal psychosexual abuse, passed down through four generations like a sacred heirloom" (567). The specific result of this legacy, as carried in the stories Ursa has been told, is a sense of men's ownership of women, a forced dependence of women on men, and men only finding value in women through sex. The Corregidora women who created and raised

Ursa distorted these ideas once they were free from physical servitude and created a new kind of servitude and dependence to which Ursa's mother and, for a time, Ursa, fell victim: dependence on men through sex because, as Jerry Ward says, "procreation is a duty not a choice" (99). For Ursa and the Corregidora women, sex gave generations to continue the history they felt they must pass down, and for that purpose, they continued their dependence on men and their own sexual objectification. Jones herself confirms this influence in an interview with Charles Rowell by saying that "personal and collective history . . . [affect] Ursa's personality . . . and she accepts it as an aspect of her own character, identity, and present history" (45). As such, the drive for generations to preserve the past became the dominant purpose of Ursa's young life, as it had for her great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother before her.

Besides being taught to need men only to make children, Ursa learned lessons about love and sex in her young life. Mixed into the chronicle of prostitution and sexual slavery told by Ursa's grandmother and great-grandmother were the messages that hate and desire were "two humps of the same camel" and that sex precludes love because Corregidora "made them make love to anyone, so they couldn't love anyone" (Jones 102, 104). Hearing these things as a child in a home with three women and no men, Ursa grows up in what Caroline Brown calls "a space where the erotic, although suppressed, saturates everything and becomes the toxin that both vitalizes a family's existence and dissipates its potential" (125). Outside of her home, Ursa learned about sex from her friend May Alice, who was "a few years older than [Ursa] . . . and had already started bleeding" (135). May Alice has sex with a boy from school, and on one occasion, Ursa ends up watching: "she and Harold got over in the grass. They were rolling like they were playing at first, and then I knew what they were doing. They hadn't even told me to turn my head" (139). Brown uses this incident as part of her evidence of Ursa's voyeurism and connects it to her training as a listener and a vessel for someone else's experience (131). This distance from sex and love are a part of Ursa's lack of ownership of both herself and her own destiny. She grows up reluctant to experience anything for herself, even resisting pressure from May Alice and boys from school to have sex, and leaves home believing that her purpose is to create another generation to carry on the stories passed down to her, just as her mother had done in creating her.

Ursa is both like her predecessors and different, and Jones acknowledges this in Ursa, saying she has an urge "to make sense of that history in terms of her own life. She doesn't want to be 'bound' by that history, but she recognizes it as important" (Rowell 45). Although Ursa was not a child of rape or the daughter of Corregidora, as her grandmother and mother were, she was made by her mother as a generation to carry on the story of Corregidora. Mama tells Ursa about that part of the family history by saying, "It was like my whole body wanted you, and knew it would have you, and knew you'd be a girl" (114). Amy Gottfried claims that even though Mama wanted Ursa and, for a while, her father, what she most wanted was to have her own and her families' need for generations fulfilled:

Ursa reflects that Mama had "gone out to get that man to have me and then didn't need him, because they'd been telling her so often what she should do" (101). Denied a sense of herself as a private sexual being, Mama always hears the angry voices of her mothers and their rapist. (565)

Gottfried establishes the last step in the chain of history by recognizing Ursa as not just a product of the generations before her but the first woman within the legacy who

is also separate from the legacy because she was neither the child of *Corregidora* nor his direct victim. For Mama, the difference is irrelevant as she had Ursa to carry the past into the future, but Ursa tells Mama that “what happened with you was always more important. What happened with you and him” (111). Ursa knows all her life that she is somehow different from the women who raised her in ways that go beyond who her father is, but she still internalizes their messages as the structure for her life and relationships with men.

Several clues from the bits and pieces of Ursa and Mutt's relationship described in the novel indicate how Ursa wrongly carried her family history into that relationship. First, Ursa kept her own last name in her marriage with Mutt, and that last name did not come from the father who abandoned her and Mama but from the slave owner who bought her great grandmother generations before. Holding onto his last name, Ursa is also holding onto the past and can give it to her children in the same way her mother gave it to her. Whether or not the baby Ursa lost when Mutt shoved her down the stairs at the start of the novel would have had Mutt's last name or her own, the child would have recognized “*Corregidora*” as part of Ursa and connected it with the stories she passed on to the new generation she had made. But this is hypothetical because Mutt forces “ownership based on sexual relations” as the foundation of his relationship with Ursa, allowing “*Corregidora*'s definition of slave women [to cross] time and place” (Gottfried 560). Mutt and Ursa are living out that legacy, despite Mutt's assertion about their slave ancestors: “whichever way you look at it, we ain't them” (151). What Mutt misses in this statement is that they both carry with them the pieces left over from the past and that Ursa had been raised to use him *for* the past, to carry it on in children. His possessiveness about Ursa begins slowly but remains throughout their relationship and is primarily defined by sex and sexual possession. Mutt insists on having Ursa tell him that her body belongs to him, and most of these references are to the sexualized parts of her body. His final words about this ownership come just before he throws her down the stairs, before she loses her baby, her womb, and her ability to make generations. In Happy's, as he is being thrown out for heckling her while she sings, Mutt says, “Bitch, you coming home. . . . You ain't they woman, is you? Is you they woman, or mines?” (167). Mutt proves his possession by throwing her down the stairs as she leaves that night; Ursa calls it “knock[ing] his piece of shit down those stairs,” still allowing for ownership and adding her own lack of value in herself (167). This factor in their relationship plays out part of the legacy of *Corregidora*. Mutt feels he owns Ursa's body and the sex that comes with it, and their conflict that night, which Ursa describes as happening often, was about her not being completely dependent on him, which is what *Corregidora* had from his slave women and what Mutt wants from his wife. Ursa is applying the modified legacy she was taught, giving men sex to get children from them. She discovers in this early relationship with Mutt that what the *Corregidora* women have taught her does not work in a marriage relationship with a man.

After the loss of her baby and her womb, Ursa sees herself as no longer having value because she has lost the thing that is supposed to give her power over history and *Corregidora*, but she is not yet aware of how her path, previously driven by history, must now change. Lying on the sofa bed in Tadpole's apartment above Happy's after leaving the hospital, Ursa “[felt] as if something more than [her] womb had been taken out” (6). Something more had been taken out; Ursa had lost her baby and the possibility of more, the only things she had been taught she was for (15). Jones emphasizes this by blending the story of *Corregidora* into Ursa's recovery. Whether she is truly sleeping and dreaming or simply remembering is unclear, but as she recovers at Tadpole's,

the reader learns about Corregidora for the first time, which is also at the outset of the novel when Ursa herself is slowly revealed. Ursa finds herself recounting the history she would have passed down to the child she has lost while healing from the wounds that took that possibility away; however, Ursa does not yet force herself to face how the *future* will change, outside of a few references to how men won't want her. The function of this space in the book may be explained through a reference Jones made in an interview shortly after the 1975 publication of *Corregidora*: "I'm . . . interested in psychology of women, psychology of language, and personal histories" (Tate 145). Ursa's reminiscences during her recovery do not involve her lost relationship with Mutt or what her baby could have looked like; they are centered on Corregidora and history and presented so the reader understands that Ursa only knows herself through this story and how she learned it. Jones could let Ursa recover here, skip the journey ahead to seek a new path, but at this point in her life, Ursa is still trapped by her family history in the way that Jones asserts, as mentioned earlier, she does not want to be. This mindset is one the author sets up for Ursa at the start of the book's journey, as she begins her path toward transcendence: she is both trapped by the past and faced with physical facts that require her to seek a new future for herself.

Tadpole is part of Ursa's first step into the rest of her life, but she does not want anything different from him than she wanted from Mutt when she still had a womb. Tadpole hears pieces of Corregidora's story, just as Mutt once did (60). Ursa continues to have sex with Tadpole, as she has been trained to believe that sex is the foundation of women's relationships with men, but Ursa can no longer get what she has been trained to want from sex: children. As Ann duCille explains, Ursa never truly made love because "making love for the purpose of making human evidence turns what should be an act of love into an act of historical vengeance" (567). Ursa can no longer make generations, so her desire for sex, which had stemmed purely from a need to continue the legacy, is nonexistent. Tadpole can occasionally get Ursa to respond to him with manual stimulation, but he is not satisfied with that, as he tells her during the fight that ends their marriage (88). He wants Ursa to desire and enjoy sex, which she cannot now do and perhaps never has done. Tadpole is Ursa's last attempt at marriage in the journey of this novel, which spans her life from twenty-five to forty-eight. As she remembers in an early conversation with Mutt, husbands are "somebody to give your piece of ass to," and after the loss of her womb, Ursa no longer needs what she gets for the giving (55). But it is through this relationship with Tadpole that Ursa begins to see that the life she was trained to want is one she can never have, and so she begins her journey alone, acknowledging her fate but still unable to find a place for men in her life because she was taught it did not exist beyond making generations.

Ursa's first steps toward transcendence happen with her visit to her mother at home in the little town where she has grown up in rural Kentucky. Ursa arrives for a few hours' visit because she needs to fill in the piece of history she is missing—the start of her own life. Ursa grew up without knowing her father, but she also was never allowed to hear the history of her mother's relationship with her father. In the scenes at the end of the middle section of the novel, the two living Corregidora women, mother and daughter, finally discuss this piece of their common history. However, Ursa becomes an observer in their interactions, not just the recorder she was taught to be, and she sees what the burden of carrying the history of Corregidora has done to her mother: "Mama kept talking until it wasn't her that was talking, but Great Gram. I stared at her because she wasn't Mama now, she was Great Gram talking" (124). This transformation surprises and shocks Ursa, who has spent the whole visit immersed in her similarities to her ancestors—with a memory from her grandmother's

funeral, the comment of the barber in town, and her own reflection that her mother “was still beautiful in *their* way of being beautiful, and the way I knew I would still be beautiful when I got to be their age” (110). Kathy Willingham asserts in her article, “*Corregidora*: Retelling (Her)Story,” that Ursa’s “psychological transformation and transcendence” begin as she takes in her mother’s circling narrative—part the story of Ursa’s father and part fragments of the *Corregidora* story Ursa knows well (7). Certainly this place in the novel is where Ursa begins to understand how exactly she is different from the women who raised her because she understands the legacy that is hers and not *Corregidora*. Seeing her mother through the eyes of a woman who is trying to separate herself from history, Ursa can at last draw lines in the legacy she too must carry, dividing *Corregidora* from her father and from other men, something she had been taught not to do. Ursa even goes so far at the close of the section to wonder if her mother will find companionship with a man: “I was thinking now that Mama had gotten it all out, her own memory—at least to me anyway—maybe she and *some man* . . . But then, I was thinking, what had I done about my *own* life?” (132).

Ursa feels ready for a relationship with a man, but it is not until she sees Mutt again that she takes a real step toward it. Ursa even has mixed feelings about seeing Mutt again: “Even when I felt excited about seeing him, I knew I hadn’t forgiven him too” (182). She wants him but doesn’t know how to accept him in her life, especially considering he is the man who changed her fate. The ensuing conversation echoes a scene of closure that never happened for Great Gram and *Corregidora*; Mutt says, “I want you to come back,” and Ursa contemplates, “I wanted to say I can’t come back, but I couldn’t say anything. . . . I didn’t know yet what I would do. I knew what I still felt. I knew that I still hated him. . . like an odor still in a room when you come back to it” (183). These thoughts could easily have been her Great Gram’s in reference to *Corregidora*, but instead, Ursa must come to terms with the man who hurt her and changed the course of her life but for whom she still has something more than hate. Years after losing her womb, Ursa feels echoes of a want for a man that are wholly unconnected to children and sees that Mutt wants her for something more than just sex, which he could get without facing their history.

After Ursa returns to the Drake Hotel with Mutt, they act out a scene with deeper echoes of *Corregidora* and Great Gram, but it is the elements unique to Ursa, not the historical parallels, that carry her toward a transcendence of the legacy she has carried for so long. Wordlessly performing oral sex on Mutt, Ursa thinks, “I didn’t know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and *Corregidora*” (184). It is this piece of the closing scene of *Corregidora* that has fascinated and appalled critics of the novel. A woman who “[gets] between his knees,” as Ursa does for Mutt here, is commonly believed to be in a position of subjugation (184). Mutt’s words after Ursa begins can also be read to reinforce this idea: “You never would suck it. . . . You never would suck it when I wanted you to. . . . I didn’t think you would do this for me” (184). Even Mutt considers this a thing for him, not for Ursa, implying that he is powerful because he gets what he wants. Sexual script theory, which describes how “girls are socialized to conform to traditional expectations for gender-typed behavior in sexual interactions,” could be applied in support of this traditional interpretation of *Corregidora*’s oral sex scene (Kornreich et al. 109). With this interpretation, Ursa is allowing herself to fulfill a traditional expectation for women in sexual relationships and one that Mutt has obviously made a characteristic yet unfulfilled demand of their past relationship.

However, it is the wordlessness with which this act begins that throws this interpretation off. Ursa “knew what he wanted” and “wanted it too” (184). Did she want

to give him oral sex simply as an act of reconciliation in their reunion? She goes on to draw further parallels with what Great Gram used to do to Corregidora:

It had to be something sexual that Great Gram did to Corregidora. I knew it had to be sexual: "What is it a woman can do to a man that make him hate her so bad he wont to kill her one minute and keep thinking about her and can't get her out of his mind the next?" In a split second I knew what it was. (184)

Ursa believes she is doing the same thing to Mutt, but the question she asks herself here and asked many times before in the text clarifies the power dynamics of this act. Oral sex gives her power over Mutt in the same way it gave Great Gram power over Corregidora. Ursa is aware of this in the repetition of "I could kill you," which is most likely thought but perhaps said during her act of oral sex on Mutt (184). Ursa even clearly contemplates the physical power this act gives her over Mutt through analyzing the "moment of pleasure and excruciating pain at the same time, a moment of broken skin but not sexlessness" (184). Jones explains the meaning of this in reference to her second book, *Eva's Man*, in which Eva bites a man's penis off; she claims that "Eva carries out what Ursa might have done but didn't" (Rowell 48). But the power is more than just the possibility of death and the vulnerability that comes with it. While oral sex does not result in children, this no longer matters to Ursa, who cannot make generations. Children may have meant power for the preceding generations of Corregidora women, but Ursa must seek her power in another way. She finds it in the pleasure she gives Mutt with this act. The male is receiving pleasure and is less physically able to move, while the female is clear-headed and very able to escape. The posture of this act truly allows for Ursa's physical dominance of Mutt, but her transcendence comes in words, not through any physical act.

After all the connections Ursa draws between herself and Mutt and Corregidora and Great Gram, she finally changes the pattern in the closing moments of the novel; she transcends her history to find something outside of reenactment. Mutt speaks first after their sexual act is complete and repeats the line, "I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you" (185). Mutt's words carry a number of meanings. Ursa's own thoughts about biting is one, Great Gram's running away from Corregidora is another, and still another is the potential of Mutt's own feelings in their relationship, past and future. Whichever meanings are read into those words and whatever history follows them on the page, Ursa's repeated reply, "Then you don't want me," becomes a new dimension of the story (185). Ursa speaks up for herself, saying over and over again that she is the kind of woman who hurts, can hurt, will hurt, and not in the silent, potential, future way of making generations. Instead of running away as her great grandmother did, Ursa lays claim to herself and refuses to be whatever kind of woman Mutt wants or thinks he has. She tells him clearly who and what she is.

But the change does not stop with just a response to Mutt's wants and needs. Ursa presents her own wants and needs. After Mutt "shook [her] till [she] fell against him crying," presumably because he didn't want to hear what she had said, she says, "I don't want a kind of man that'll hurt me neither" (185). Her statement, a final transcendence, can be read a number of ways: she could mean that she is done with Mutt because he has hurt her in the past, or this could be her demand for him to change, considering he has hurt her in this scene. However, every interpretation comes with a clear statement that Ursa is no longer dependent on men, authorized by their desire for her, or shaped by the needs of their possession of her. This statement is key because none of the past generations of Corregidora women was willing to make a statement of what

they wanted in a man, just what they wanted from them before they left. After a long journey, forced upon her because she could not make generations, Ursa has accepted her desire for men in her life without children and asserted herself as a woman who is not dependent in any way, both of which are so very different from what she had been taught all her life.

Mutt's continuing violence and possessiveness at the close of the novel raise questions about the possibility of Ursa's transcendence and what effect it will have. Ursa acknowledges at the start of their encounter that she "felt that now he wouldn't demand the same things. He'd demand different kinds of things. But there'd still be demands" (183). Since their early relationship was characterized by possessiveness and violence, Ursa's expectation is perhaps that these things will change in a reformed relationship, but the facts of this scene tell otherwise. After her statement of transcendence, Mutt "held [her] tight" at the very close of the novel (185). It is clear from Mutt's actions that he has not changed in his attitude toward Ursa, but her own experience of transcendence represents new responses from her. Part of claiming herself is no longer allowing Mutt or history to claim her, and being able to make those statements represent a powerful change in Ursa's character, a true separation from history and the formation of a new self, not dependent on men. Mutt's actions, held up to the light of Ursa's change, cannot be read as maintaining the status quo of their past relationship but showing that Ursa will be forced to respond to the same influences she suffered under in her own past. While she has changed inside, the external world has not changed, and she must use the new equipment of transcendence to deal with it in new ways.

In this final scene, Ursa transcends the history of *Corregidora* and finally "make[s] sense of that history in terms of her own life," as Jones believes she seeks to do throughout the novel (Rowell 45). This is transcendence for Ursa because she does what the generations of women before her were unable to do: stop the legacy. Yes, she is forced to stop passing the story down because she cannot make generations, but the legacy comes with all the implications of possession and dependence and objectification that four generations of women lived with until one finally broke free. The legacy of *Corregidora* had destroyed Mama's relationship with Martin (Ursa's father) as well as all of Ursa's attempts at relationships, and she was living in the past and accepting it within her marriage to Mutt and was unable to change her deeply internalized view of marriage and sex with Tadpole. She found her own needs in this final scene with Mutt, found them in an answer to a long ago question: what Great Gram did to *Corregidora*. In coming to understand the lines between hate and love and just how they are mixed up with sex, as Ursa does first-hand in this scene, she can finally look inside herself to understand both what kind of woman she is and what kind of man she wants. The real, true transcendence of Ursa is in the voice she finally finds to express them and what that can mean for her future.

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