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THE COLLECTIVE MEMORY OF VIOLENCE IN GAYL JONES NOVEL "CORREGIDORA"

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ABSTRACT

Violence against African American females, young and old, is an overwhelming concern in the novels of Gayl Jones. Black female children face abuse in their own homes as well as from their own community. In this novel, the remembrance of ancestral memory enacts a type of violence.

The present study analyses the work of Gayl Jones novel *Corregidora*, the novel falls short of appropriating the collective memory of violence in all its extent. In her fiction, Gayl Jones seeks to clarify the ways in which the history of the collective violence in four generations of a family of women. The paper analyses about the collective memory of violence in Gayl Jones novel "*Corregidora*". Black women have devised their own strategies for coping with their oppression; these tactics have enabled many of them to survive their ordeals and come out of their marginalized state. Violence is exertion of force so as to deal injury or abuse. It entails inflicting physical, material, emotional, sexual, and intellectual damage. It can be the exercise of force or constraint, perpetrated by individuals on their own behalf, or for a collective or state-sanctioned purpose. In its most obvious form violence is physical which includes battering, assault, murder, and rape. Though violence is largely physical, it occurs in a psychological context and invariably produces mental and spiritual anguish. Isolation, deprivation, imprisonment, and badgering are also factors that cause great agony. Mental cruelty, the wish to hurt another person's feelings, is at times more painful than physical hurt. Subtle and probably more enduring forms of violence like humiliation, ridicule, verbal abuse, and social and economic constraints tantamount to emotional imprisonment.

Violence and Black Females naturally embody two aspects, of race and gender. Violence is without doubt most central to African American experience. The history of blacks in America has invariably been one of victimization and oppression with the interracial violence manifested in whipping, lynching, branding and various other tortures, pogroms, race riots, and the brutality of white police. White racism appears in the lives of blacks as "the stepchild of slavery, of colonialism, and as a sentiment which emanated from European nationalism and capitalism" (Baker, Lee.D). Slavery, a culture held together by violence, had worked havoc with the black sensibility, not only alienating them from their native African culture but also rendering them chattel status.

The protagonist and narrator, Ursa *Corregidora*, tells the story about the relationship and the performance of the *Blues* to speak back to unyielding legacies of family violence. The collective memories of the *Corregidora* women are deeply marked by their psychosexual history as slaves. These memories have such a relentless hold on their psyches that they follow these women from a Brazilian plantation to the state of Kentucky, where they live in a rural setting from the early to mid-twentieth century. The collective memories of slavery in Brazil remain vivid, persisting through ritualized storytelling.

The collective memory of a world organized by the master-slave relationship has transmitted the ancestral compulsion to reenact the violence of the past. Transcending time and space, the relationship between white male slaveholder and African female slave. Ursa's family history is illustrative of the power of this social connection, plagued by mistrust and driven by fear. The master-class fears rebellion and the slaves dread cruelty. Given the existence of runaway communities like the quilombos of Brazil and news of occasional revolts all over the New World, it is in Simon *Corregidora*'s best interest to protect his plantation by preventing his slaves from forming any type of bond among themselves. Great Gram relates to Mama the terrible fate of a teenage slave who risked Simon's wrath by befriending her (COR 126).

The protagonists of both *Corregidora* and *Song for Anninho* grope for a lover's language that is not readily equated with the mother's language (SFA 255). The fragmentation of the matrilineal legacies of violence renders the mother's language unsuitable for the redemption of the daughters. In *Corregidora*, a purely maternal language is disrupted by the intrusion of the white masters into the genealogy of the black female descendants. Similarly, in *Song for Anninho*, the maternal language is disrupted by the grotesque violence of geographic dislocation. In this sense, the maternal

language is replaced by one hybridized by the institution and histories of slavery.

The novel opens, however, with Ursa facing the crisis of not being able to bring the next generation when her uterus is removed after she is pushed down a flight of stairs by her enraged husband, Mutt. Suddenly unable to fulfill the script her ancestors have passed on to her, Ursa must find a new way to relate to her inherited history of sexual violence. *Corregidora* is chosen as the first novel in the cross-cultural study of post memory because the novel is as clearly structured as an interrogation of the destructive effects of inherited collective memory.

Their plan is to make generations in order to pass the story down from mother to daughter so it will never be forgotten (COR 4). Mama and her daughter Ursa, a *Blues* singer and the novel's protagonist, the third and fourth generation of *Corregidora* women, are raised from birth hearing Great Gram and Gram's stories of their history with *Corregidora* and charged with the responsibility of passing their testimony down to the next generation. As Ursa recalls, "I was made to touch my past at an early age. I found it on my mother's tiddies. In her milk" (COR 77).

The identification with violation effects among the *Corregidora* women a Pre-occupation with the body, which during slavery was a sexual commodity to be bought, sold, and consumed. Great Gram and Gram's strategy of making generations reclaims the female body from sexual objectification and violation, making it instead a historical archive on flesh, and transforms the sex act from an act of oppression to an act of resistance. Making generations dictates, first, that the purpose of the female body be to bear, rise, and indoctrinate the next generation of *Corregidora* women and, second, that the purpose of the sex act be to produce the next generation who will provide evidence of the suffering of their foremothers. Thus, while "the aim of the *Corregidora* women is to wrest authority from the slave owner," their means is "self-defeating" (Wall 131).

Here, collective memory becomes a gap in the family legacy through which the survivors, Great Gram and Gram, view every aspect of life since the traumatic events and through which the post memorial. Janice Harris quoted in Sally Robinson, *Engendering the Subject: Gender and Self-Representation in Contemporary Women's Fiction*, 160. Generations, Mama and Ursa, must pass in order to understand their origins and bring closure to the traumatic cycle. Until that traumatic gap is addressed, it is the frame of reference from which all generations experience life. Thus, the repetition of this mythicized past traps

Mama and Ursa, both psychologically and physically, in a cycle of violence they can neither escape nor transform (Dubey 78). From the character Ursa, the collective memory is seen from her childhood she is helpless before the towering figures of her elders who relentlessly pass on their memories: "Always their memories, but never my own" (COR 100). Most disturbing about this scenario is the repetition of sexually graphic stories to one so young. Monier suggests that even as Great Gram presents scenes of violation, the added confusion of her suppressed desire comes through the telling as well: "Great Gram rubs five year old Ursa's thighs while she describes young slavemaster *Corregidora* as 'a big strapping man: she then catches herself and pulls her hands away, but not before evidence of her own suppressed desire leaves its own imprint on Ursa's memory'" (COR 97). Unable to assimilate such violence and desire into the understanding of a child, Ursa reaches adulthood still grappling with the traumatic memories on which she has been raised. Additionally, when on one occasion Ursa questions the veracity of Great Gram's story, "She slapped me. I was five years old then" (COR 14). Both Mama and Ursa, literally nursed on their foremother's stories of *Corregidora*, experience the trauma of premature knowledge and forced indoctrination into Great Gram and Gram's belief system. Great Gram's strong reaction to Ursa's question reflects the seriousness of her endeavor to create her own history, "a conscious collection of memories that, like official history, eliminates contradiction" (COR 96). This sense of temporal impasse is fitting in a novel about the power of the past infringing upon the present. Possessed by images of the violent past, Ursa and her mother are unable to move forward.

Thus, we notice from the novel *Corregidora*, women as the custodians of collective memory help tighten the grip of history on Ursa's narrative present, Zibatra, Almeyda's surrogate mother in *Song for Anninho*, draws up on magic rather than memory to conjure up a new future for Almeyda. Casting the mother as a "wizard women" (COR 1981, 11), *Song for Anninho* feeds directly into the black feminist discourse on conjuring. Marjorie pryse argues that conjuring, a black folk art passed down from the mothers to the daughters, offers a unique metaphor of literary authority for black women writers, displacing the official patriarchal genealogy that invokes divine inspiration as the source of its authority. For black women writers, who are doubly excluded from this tradition, magic provides as alternative, unofficial basis of cultural authority, a "power to reassert ones's heritage in the face of overwhelming injustice" (SFA 16). Pryse's words seem to describe exactly the function of Zibatra's conjuring in *Song for Anninho*: in the face of the Portuguese soldier's brutal conquest of the rebel slave stronghold, Zibatra's wizardry reasserts the continuing imaginative power of the heritage of resistance embodied in the lost palmares. (Pryse 1985-9).

From this paper, Gayl Jones challenges by implementing many perspectives, Gayl Jones challenges societal stereotypes by forcing the reader to consider all angles. Although spiritual love can be religious, it does not necessarily have to be. The notion of healing through communal love is confused by the sexual and historical dynamics of the novel. The family community of *Corregidora* women is unable to heal, or even truly love one another because they are so consumed with their history of abuse and the need for historical vengeance through generations.

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