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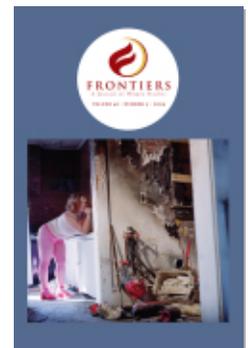
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Making Generations: Gender, Reproduction, and the Afterlife  
of Slavery in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*

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# Making Generations

Gender, Reproduction, and the Afterlife of Slavery  
in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*

TALA KHANMALEK

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Everything said in the beginning must be said better than in the beginning.

—Gayl Jones, *Corregidora*

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In response to editor Charles H. Rowell's question about why she incorporates the "Afro-Brazilian slave experience" into her 1975 neo-slave narrative, *Corregidora*, Gayl Jones declares: "I'd like to be able to deal with the whole American continent in my fiction—the whole Americas—and to write imaginatively of blacks anywhere/everywhere."<sup>1</sup> Although the novel is set in the southern United States from the mid-1940s to the 1960s, nineteenth-century Brazil punctuates the plot at every turn. The narrator, Ursa Corregidora, is a blues singer in Kentucky, where she was born and raised by her foremothers: Mama, Gram, and Great Gram. As Ursa's recollection of the past reveals, Great Gram had been enslaved in Brazil, where she gave birth to her daughter, Gram. Ursa's present context is shaped by the history of chattel slavery in both North and South America. The novel deals with a whole American continent mired in a New World order founded on enslaved women's reproductive lives and labor.

Considering Jones's hemispheric focus, taking into account nineteenth-century Brazil offers new ways to understand the novel. Ursa's recollections consist primarily of Great Gram and Gram's experiences of sexual violence under a Portuguese slave master named Corregidora. Ursa's foremothers insist on "making generations" of specifically daughters who can carry on the memory of these experiences. The command to make generations thus rests upon reproduction. The law of *partus sequitur vetrem*, meaning "that which is brought forth follows the womb," made slavery hereditary in both Brazil

and the US. Historian Jennifer L. Morgan emphasizes, “Women’s lives under slavery in the Americas always included the possibilities of their wombs.”<sup>2</sup> In Brazil the law of *partus* was abolished prior to the abolition of slavery at large, changing the meaning of reproduction in the context of ongoing enslavement.

The characters’ preoccupation with making generations is embedded in the complicated legal system of nineteenth-century Brazil, which covers a period of gradual emancipation from 1871 to 1888. By analyzing this familial refrain in the novel alongside the 1871 Free Womb Law, which abolished *partus* prior to the abolition of slavery, I suggest that making generations attempts to counteract rather than perpetuate control over reproduction and redress past injury while unsettling assumptions of pastness in the whole Americas.

Importantly, Ursa undergoes a hysterectomy at the outset of the novel after a confrontation with her husband, Mutt Thomas, who disapproves of her singing the blues onstage. From Ursa’s fragmented memories while in recovery, we learn of “Old man Corregidora,” Great Gram’s slave master and both Gram and Mama’s father.<sup>3</sup> I begin with an overview of how making generations has been interpreted as an oppressive narrative that tethers Ursa to Great Gram’s traumatic past and, in doing so, subjects her to Corregidora’s mastery despite the fact that she—like Gram and Mama—is not enslaved. According to this interpretation, Ursa’s hysterectomy creates the conditions of possibility for breaking a self-perpetuated cycle of reproductive control and instead taking hold of the blues as a liberatory alternative.

I then situate making generations within the context of gradual emancipation to consider the legal phenomena underlying a narrative that is at once familial and, as Christina Sharpe points out, profoundly historical.<sup>4</sup> In Brazil emancipation was enacted through piecemeal reforms from 1871 until 1888, when the Golden Law fully abolished slavery. I explain how the Free Womb Law, the first of several gradual emancipation laws, preserved *partus* by recognizing the daughters of enslaved women in a strategic employment of gendered language. Even as the law abolished hereditary slavery and allowed enslaved women to claim maternal custody, its “womb-based logic” effectively held freeborn children in bondage by way of their mother’s status.<sup>5</sup>

My subsequent analysis of the novel reinterprets making generations as a way of counteracting the legal forces that perpetuate Corregidora’s mastery beyond the time of slavery. I focus on the often-indistinguishable experiences of Great Gram and her daughter, Gram, as Ursa recollects them in breaks that rupture her contemporary narrative. Given the continuation of slavery, especially in nineteenth-century Brazil, the structural circumstances of Great Gram’s trauma as well as the trauma itself are both specific to Great Gram and intergenerational. Though it seizes upon reproduction as a means of re-

dress, the familial refrain of making generations highlights the repetition of structural circumstances across generations. At stake is the decontextualization of structurally perpetuated traumas that exceed, and in exceeding refute, the bounds of unitary individuals and nations. To conclude, I suggest that my reinterpretation of making generations shifts attention away from *Ursa* as a blues singer toward Jones's formal engagement with blues repetition, which is both comparable to and outside the parameters of repetition in legal discourse.

For *Ursa*'s foremothers, making generations is a corrective to historical erasure as well as the denial of historical continuity. Historical events pertaining to Brazilian slavery magnify the problem of erasure in the novel, which generates the need to bear witness to the past. In December of 1890 Rui Barbosa de Oliveira issued an order to burn all records of slavery housed in the Ministry of Finance, an order that "was interpreted as an attempt to erase the traces of slavery in Brazil."<sup>6</sup> The burning of records, which included slave registries, would not only prevent former slave masters from obtaining financial compensation for the loss of slave property in the wake of abolition; it would also prevent former slaves from obtaining financial reparations from the Brazilian state.<sup>7</sup> At the heart of making generations, then, is the question of redress in the absence of documentary evidence after the destruction of archives.

Jones took up the Afro-Brazilian slave experience during a time when many African American scholars, educators, and journalists were reevaluating contemporary race relations in Brazil—especially the myth of a racial democracy—to question assumptions about Brazil's past and present, including the persistence of anti-Black racism in late twentieth-century Brazil.<sup>8</sup> The English-language historiography on Brazilian slavery likewise began to shift away from the theory, put forth by Frank Tannenbaum following Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre, that slavery was less brutal in Brazil.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the Moynihan Report cites Tannenbaum to reinforce the idea that American slavery is altogether responsible for matrifocal Black family structure—a thesis that Hortense J. Spillers critiques by tracing the symbolic order of race and gender through the legal doctrine of *partus*.<sup>10</sup> Daniel Patrick Moynihan maintains that American slavery was "indescribably worse" than slavery in Brazil, where the slave held "a place as a human being in the hierarchy of society," the results of which are evident in the present situation of Afro-Brazilians.<sup>11</sup> The 1971 publication of Carl N. Degler's *Neither Black Nor White* radically revised this long-held theory as well as the idea that post-emancipation Brazilian society was more egalitarian than the US.<sup>12</sup>

What's more, the year 1975 marked a major moment for Afro-Brazilian literature with the republication of the novel *Úrsula*, written by Maria

Firmina dos Reis under a pseudonym in 1859. It was not until 1962 that Reis, a freeborn Afro-Brazilian woman from Maranhão, was revealed to be the author. The novel, which unlike abolitionist literature of its time employs the conventions of nineteenth-century romanticism to critique slavery from the perspective of enslaved peoples (namely through the characters Túlio, Antero, and in particular, Mãe Susana), suddenly became the first known work by a woman of African descent.<sup>13</sup> The Afro-Brazilian women's literary tradition found a foremother in Reis during a time when a new wave of Afro-Brazilian literature—including presses and literary groups—emerged in conjunction with the Movimento Negro.<sup>14</sup>

#### AN INTERTEXTUAL READING OF GAYL JONES'S *CORREGIDORA*

As Christopher A. Shinn argues, Jones's *Corregidora* put forth a uniquely hemispheric paradigm that reframes North America as a postcolonial nation whose slave past is inextricably linked to Latin America and the Caribbean.<sup>15</sup> The novel's "inter-American" characteristics emphasize the connections and continuities between situated experiences of slavery.<sup>16</sup> Brazil is not a foil for the US but essential to understanding—and for Ursa, negotiating—the enduring presence of slavery. Jones's engagement with Brazil, the last slaveholding nation in the Americas, places the novel squarely within a continental and international context, and indeed within the context of a New World order.

Jones's novel also registers the persistence of slavery's racial and sexual violence as the material traces of a past that is ongoing as well as transnational. Drawing on Saidiya Hartman's theoretical framework of the "afterlife" of slavery brings these material traces to light and unsettles clear-cut temporal distinctions between Ursa's present and her foremothers' past.<sup>17</sup> Applying a legal lens to the novel illuminates the complexity of making generations because the afterlife of slavery has persisted systemically through the law. The Free Womb Law is therefore a critical intertext for *Corregidora*, one that reveals the force of the law in the command to make generations. Kalindi Vora's theorization of juxtaposition as a method suggests that reading across texts of different genres draws attention to the common ground that makes their juxtaposition both possible and productive and "is essential for a materialist analysis that aims to suspend empiricism when it imposes given subject formations."<sup>18</sup>

Vora's latter point speaks to Hartman's assertion that while reproductive labor is central to the afterlife of slavery, "attending to the status of black women's labors has confounded our conceptual categories and thrown our critical lexicon into crisis."<sup>19</sup> The Free Womb serves as a prime example of how

the law manipulated gendered language to unmake the category of daughter as a gendered subject position. My juxtapositional reading fills a gap in feminist analyses of *Corregidora* by drawing attention to the legal binds that tether Ursa's present to the past and, most importantly, by underscoring the link between gender, reproduction, and the afterlife of slavery.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

With few exceptions, however, scholarship on *Corregidora* does not engage the novel's own examination of systems of laws and significant historical events pertaining to Brazil.<sup>20</sup> Instead, literary critics have predominantly read the novel's command to make generations through a trauma studies lens, which focuses attention on how Ursa's foremothers internalize and transmit memories of sexual violence in a way that not only oppressively reenacts their traumatic past but also wields control over sexuality and reproduction.<sup>21</sup> According to Ashraf Rushdy, *Corregidora* is essentially "about how the later generations of a family line suffer psychic and discursive dysfunctions as a result of the traumas that pained an earlier ancestor."<sup>22</sup> For Rushdy, then, making generations is the vehicle through which the traumatic past extends beyond the confines of time and space to damage individual psyches as well as inter-subjective relations.

Similarly, Ifeona Fulani examines Jones's representation of mother-daughter relationships as a site of colonization. Fulani argues that *Corregidora* is in fact an unconventional *bildungsroman* that highlights the centrality of psychic decolonization to self-fashioning. Ursa can find freedom only by breaking away from Great Gram's deterministic maternal discourse, a "colonizing narrative" that prevents individuation and represses Black female sexuality, gender identity, and psychology.<sup>23</sup> The imperative to procreate transforms the command to make generations into a contradictory form of oral documentation that perpetuates precisely what it seeks to resist: the valuation of Black women's bodies under slavery. Similarly, for Camille Passalacqua, making generations is a family narrative of reproduction that imposes "a paradigm of production and power" over the wounded Black female body, which must be revalorized in order for Ursa to heal from trauma.<sup>24</sup>

This line of analysis importantly stresses singing the blues as an antidote to reenacting trauma, giving insights into the pivotal role of song in the novel. However, it runs the risk of decontextualizing Ursa's relationship to the present-past, individualizing a narrative that is simultaneously familial and deeply historical. In doing so, it also runs the risk of upholding her hysterectomy as liberatory rather than a contemporary case of denying Black women's

reproductive autonomy. According to Stella Setka, for example, the hysterectomy forces Ursa finally to confront the ways in which making generations reanimates her foremothers' traumatic past and results in "psychological paralysis."<sup>25</sup> For Setka, Jennifer Griffiths, and Stephanie Li, making generations is not only victimizing—nothing less than "psychological bondage"<sup>26</sup>—but also objectifying in a way that reinforces ideologies of Black female sexuality under slavery. By allowing her to break free from the process of "traumatic re-memory,"<sup>27</sup> moreover, the blues offer an avenue to reclaim sexuality, heal, and ultimately formulate a new narrative.

Following the readings of Rebecca Wanzo, Christina Sharpe, and Kimberly Juanita Brown, which consider the sociohistorical as well as legal entanglements driving the novel, I propose that the command to make generations is a distinct form of reproduction that disrupts the transformation of progeny into property—yet not without its limits.<sup>28</sup> For Gram, slavery is not simply an inherited memory but persists as a psychic as well as a socio-legal reality. Resituating the novel in the context of Brazilian slavery, and the era of gradual emancipation in particular, exposes the limits of a trauma studies lens for understanding the command to make generations, which cannot be reduced to an overpowering ancestral narrative that restricts Ursa's subject formation. Nor is the command simply an "oppositional strategy" directed at Corregidora's incestuous sexual exploitation.<sup>29</sup> Rather, the command to make generations speaks to the systematic perpetuation of "monstrous intimacies" that are specific to slavery albeit in the context of legal freedom.<sup>30</sup>

#### BRAZIL'S 1871 FREE WOMB LAW

The Free Womb Law was officially named the Rio Branco Law, after José Maria da Silva Paranhos, the viscount of Rio Branco and newly elected prime minister in 1871. It consisted of ten different articles concerning freedom, including the establishment of an emancipation fund.<sup>31</sup> However, the Free Womb Law became known as such for the first article, which ruled that children born to enslaved women as of September 28, 1871 would be free and not enslaved. That is to say, slavery was ongoing but no longer hereditary under the Free Womb Law, which ushered in a period of gradual emancipation characterized by contradictory regimes. The Free Womb Law redefined the role of enslaved women's reproduction. While the Free Womb Law was an emancipatory law, it had not been designed to disrupt the sociopolitical order. As historian Martha Abreu explains, the law's objective was "to seal a perfect alliance between the state, which had promised to send forth a wonderful reform designed to 'civilise the country,' and the landowners' interest in maintaining their dominance and prosperity."<sup>32</sup>

Scholars have observed that the Free Womb Law perpetuated bonded conditions under the guise of protecting *ingênuos* or freeborn children.<sup>33</sup> Under the Free Womb Law slave masters were “obliged to rear and bring up” *ingênuos* until the age of eight, after which point the master could claim a monetary indemnity from the state—600 *milréis* in government bonds bearing an annual interest rate of 6 percent for thirty years—in lieu of exploiting the child’s “gratuitous services” for thirteen additional years (until the age of twenty-one).<sup>34</sup> Simply put, the law either indebted freeborn children to their mother’s master or indemnified him for loss of labor while transferring the child’s thirteen-year term of service to authorized associations. At the same time, historian Camillia Cowling explains that enslaved women leveraged the Free Womb Law to make claims based on maternal rights otherwise denied to them, and they consequently advanced the abolition of slavery.<sup>35</sup> The Free Womb Law ensured “that the transition [from slavery to emancipation] would occur via the bodies of women” and, in particular, the womb.<sup>36</sup> In this way, Cowling asserts, gender was central to “conceiving freedom” in nineteenth-century Brazil.<sup>37</sup>

The Free Womb Law centralized the womb precisely because *partus* codified slave status through women’s bodies.<sup>38</sup> Gender was central to conceiving freedom in a way that also perpetuated conditions of enslavement. Cowling draws attention to the law’s “womb-based logic,” which was carried over from the law of *partus* by jurist Agostinho Marques Predigão Malheiro, who developed the rationale for a Brazilian Free Womb Law.<sup>39</sup> In an 1867 newspaper article Malheiro argued that “birth” remained “the only legal title” to slave ownership since the abolition of the slave trade in 1850.<sup>40</sup> He reasoned that the abolition of slavery rested upon abolishing *partus* and summarized a plan for the “gradual transformation of slave labour into free” beginning with “emancipation from the womb.”<sup>41</sup> Malheiro cautioned against the immediate abolition of slavery because it would affect Brazil’s “chief source of production, and consequently of public and private wealth.”<sup>42</sup> After many years of debate, including arguments about the children of conditionally manumitted women, parliament took up Malheiro’s proposal and passed the Free Womb Law.<sup>43</sup> The eldest daughter of Emperor Dom Pedro II, Princess Dona Isabel, signed the law in her father’s absence, a strategic and symbolic act that further framed the Free Womb Law as a benevolent corrective targeting “slave mothers.”<sup>44</sup>

Malheiro’s stance in cases of conditional manumission sheds light on the way *partus* was simultaneously folded into the Free Womb Law’s logic and disavowed. According to Malheiro, the children of enslaved women who had been conditionally manumitted would have to be free precisely because the status of the mother determined that of the child under *partus*.<sup>45</sup> The very same notion of heritability permeated the Free Womb Law: the womb is free

therefore the child is free. That slave masters had rights to the “gratuitous services” of *ingênuos* is not the only contradictory factor. The fundamental contradiction lay in the fact that freedom was founded on the continued enslavement of already enslaved women. Under the Free Womb Law, the child’s status still followed the womb, which bore a separate status from the body. Consequently, Black reproduction made legally cognizable subjects who were nevertheless marked by the mother’s unfree condition.

Unlike *partus*, the Free Womb Law recognized *ingênuos* as the progeny of enslaved women—and enslaved women as mothers to *ingênuos*—yet it did so on the basis of the womb rather than a recognition of matrilineal bonds.<sup>46</sup> The status of enslaved women’s children indeed changed, while remaining squarely within the framework of property relations. Section 3 of the first article distinguished “daughters” in order to extend jurisdiction over the children of enslaved women’s freeborn children. The sole mention of female descendants ruled that “it is also incumbent on owners to rear and bring up the children which the daughters of their female slaves may have while they are serving.”<sup>47</sup> The paradoxical function of gendered language in this sentence was central to the way in which the Free Womb Law reinforced *partus* in new terms, a reform dynamic that Reva Siegel calls “preservation-through-transformation.”<sup>48</sup> The Free Womb Law translated *partus* “into a more contemporary gender idiom” in order to present a semblance of reform, highlighting the significance of gender to naturalizing de facto ownership during the gradual emancipation period.<sup>49</sup> The Free Womb Law recognized daughters for the purpose of reanimating heritability in the context of gradual emancipation; although enslaved women no longer reproduced slaves, the act of birth nevertheless subjected daughters as well as their children to their mother’s (or alternatively grandmother’s) slave master. The naming of a gendered subject position was essential to preserving the property relations that the Free Womb Law’s recognition of daughters ostensibly abolished.

If the reproduction of female descendants enabled *partus* to endure the reclassification of daughters as the progeny of enslaved women and not the property of their mother’s slave master, then the Free Womb Law posed a crisis of meaning. The Free Womb Law failed to actualize matrilineal bonds because enslaved women’s reproduction unmade daughters in the process of making female descendants whose reproduction was tethered to the making of slaves. Such duplicitous language distinguished the Free Womb Law from *partus* and also provided a new justificatory rhetoric for legitimizing bonded conditions akin to those of slavery. Matrilineal bonds could “be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by property relations,” which permeated the gradual emancipation period.<sup>50</sup> The blurred line between protection and pos-

session had subsumed the meaning of daughter—both slavery and emancipation “conscripted the womb.”<sup>51</sup>

#### MAKING GENERATIONS

Changes to laws of slavery during the era of gradual emancipation form the historical backdrop of Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*. Jones’s technique of weaving memories into dialogue brings the situated realities of Ursa’s foremothers, especially the lived experience of slavery, into narrative proximity with her contemporary moment. In turn, Jones forces us to reconsider the hysterectomy, as well as the circumstances surrounding it, in light of enduring claims on Black women’s bodies that extend well into the postwar era.<sup>52</sup>

In spite of the fact that Great Gram is the only enslaved woman of Ursa’s matrilineal line, Gram shares her mother’s lived experience of sexual violence while serving Corregidora, who is also her father. Gram is born on Corregidora’s coffee plantation in 1888, the very year that slavery was abolished in Brazil. Even if Gram had been born before May 18, when Princess Isabel publicly signed the Golden Law during her third and final regency, she would still be free according to the 1871 Free Womb Law. Yet Gram is subjected to routinized sexual violence, until Great Gram returns for her when she is eighteen years old, just three years short of what would be her thirteen-year term of compulsory service under the Free Womb Law. “He raised me,” Ursa remembers Gram saying, “and when I got big enough he started fucking me. Seem like he raised me fucking me.”<sup>53</sup> The gradual emancipation law that would have obliged Corregidora to “rear and bring up” Gram, not as his own daughter—in accordance with European laws of descent—but as the daughter of his female slave, does not protect her from what legal scholar Adrienne Davis calls “the sexual economy of slavery” or the violent control of enslaved women’s sexuality and reproduction in New World economies.<sup>54</sup> In Gram’s words, being “raised” by Corregidora elides into “fucking,” so that sexual violence is constitutive of her experience as Great Gram’s freeborn daughter.

While the command to “make generations” selectively repeats the logic and language of the laws it seeks to contest, as Sharpe points out in *Monstrous Intimacies*,<sup>55</sup> it likewise counter-invests the act of “birth” with the possibility of redress even as redress is beyond the scope of the law. Ursa’s surname, Corregidora, encapsulates this tension as well as the tension between protection and possession in the Free Womb Law. Her surname, which is the Portuguese word for “colonial magistrate” in the feminine, serves as a corrective to the law and its enactment. Making generations must be understood in relation to the afterlife of *partus*. Introducing the Free

Womb Law as an intertext highlights the fact that Gram is conscripted into a preceding set of productive relations in the service of capitalist accumulation and to which, as Nikhil Singh makes clear, enslaved women's reproductive labor was central.<sup>56</sup> Corregidora is slave master and father to both Gram and Mama—freeborn daughters and the freeborn children of those daughters—highlighting the fact that the command to make generations is functioning on a legal register and serves as its own kind of corrective and reparative response to the afterlife of *partus*.

The command to “make generations” speaks to and beside gendered language in Brazil's 1871 Free Womb Law, which renders the stakes of the command more visible. A memory of Gram recalling the past to her granddaughter breaks the course of a dialogue between Ursa and Tadpole McCormick, her employer and husband-to-be, after a follow-up appointment with the doctor: “*The important thing is making generations. They can burn the papers but they can't burn conscious, Ursa. And that what makes the evidence. And that's what makes the verdict.*”<sup>57</sup> “Procreation,” Tadpole states, “That could also be a slave-breeder's way of thinking.” “But it's not,” Ursa responds. The dialogue is once again broken by Gram's own words; this time, a longer sequence in which she explains that although the king of Portugal gave Corregidora land to settle in the New World, his economic success depended entirely on the sexual exploitation of enslaved women. In particular, she recalls an organized system of sexual assault for the profit and pleasure of the slave-owning class.

When the dialogue resumes, Ursa supplements her response to Tadpole's conjecture: “No, because it depends on if it's for you or somebody else. Your life or theirs.” According to Ursa's foremothers, making is a distinct form of production that disrupts the transformation of progeny into property and has the potential to uphold reproductive autonomy. Making also produces *bodies of evidence* whose existence documents and testifies to slavery as not-yet-past. Significantly, it is Gram and not Great Gram who stresses the importance of making generations in relation to the burning of records, thereby situating herself in the time of slavery rather than a post-emancipation period. For Gram, it is not simply the transmitted memory of Brazil's slave past that constitutes indestructible evidence but the material existence of a freeborn daughter who is made to bear witness to the persistence of bonded conditions. Gram's recollection of the plantation illustrates the problem with Tadpole's conflation of making generations with the appropriation of enslaved women's reproductive lives under slavery and its afterlife. *Partus* transformed the womb into a site of speculative value, which changed the meaning of procreation into reproducing a slave labor force. Making generations speaks to the centrality of gender to how this, the crux of slavery, took place and was

preserved in legislative acts and works to undermine ownership of the womb, making Black women's reproductive lives not a conduit of wealth for "somebody else" but a way to claim autonomy over their children.

After singing the supper show at Happy's Café, Ursa returns upstairs, where she lives with Tadpole. He follows Ursa to inquire about an altercation she had with Jim (the cousin of her former husband Mutt Thomas), who came in toward the end of her set. Tadpole begrudgingly asks if he should ban Jim as he banned Mutt. Ursa turns down his offer and takes a prescription pill when he leaves. With eyes closed, she puzzles over her foremothers:

I thought of the girl who had to sleep with her master and mistress. Her father, the master. Her daughter's father. The father of her daughter's daughter. How many generations? Days that were pages of hysteria. Their survival depended on suppressed hysteria. She went and got her daughter, womb swollen with the child of her own father. How many generations had to bow to his genital fantasies?<sup>58</sup>

It is impossible to distinguish Ursa's foremothers in this passage. We know that "the girl" is simultaneously Great Gram and Gram, both of whom survive sexual violence at the hands of Corregidora and his wife. Yet they are only "master and mistress" in relation to Great Gram by law. The fact that "the girl" refers to both Great Gram and her freeborn daughter reveals the continuities between their lived experiences, namely the persistence of sexual violence. Similarly, in the next sentence, the pronoun "her" refers back to both Great Gram and Gram, and to Mama, for Corregidora is her father as well. In the following sentence, "her" is again not easily identifiable, and continues to reference Great Gram and Gram simultaneously. Although the "her" of "her daughter's daughter" seems to refer clearly to Great Gram, the preposition is in full motion at this point and completely unhinged from a fixed time—or space, since Great Gram and Gram move to the US. As Ursa states, the question is: how many generations of free wombs will be enough to counteract a circuitous law that re-entrenched slavery with gendered language? This circuitously written passage, replete with repetitions, performs the perpetuation of bonded conditions across generations.

While "her" shifts back and forth—conflating Great Gram, Gram, and Mama in its anonymity—Corregidora remains the same across generations. Every occasion of father, and master, *is* Corregidora. What's important here is not that "her" *could* refer to all of Ursa's foremothers but that it *can and does* move between Great Gram, Gram, and Mama, or every generation of the matrilineal line governed under the Free Womb Law: enslaved women, their freeborn daughters, and the freeborn children of those daughters. Just

as Great Gram and Gram “bear witness [in the present] that it happened [in the past],” Ursa likewise testifies to the ongoingness of Great Gram’s original trauma against the grain of its spatiotemporal boundaries. The repetitive prose—indeed the novel at large—performs the past as “pages of hysteria,” whereas hysteria derives from the Greek “hysteros” or womb. The womb constantly reappears as a fungible commodity precisely because it is written into pages of the law, of burned records, and onto generations of “unprotected female flesh.”<sup>59</sup> Grounded in embodied memory, Ursa’s words consistently situate “daughters” in genealogical relation to the matrilineal line, making generations as she remembers them.

Great Gram rescues *her* pregnant daughter from Brazil, yet again “her” refers to multiple generations at once. Ursa’s questions both respond to and interrupt the repetition of this conflation, and as the passage goes on, she speaks directly to Great Gram, Gram, and Mama, respectively. Questioning the reinscription of “her” subjectivity into “his genital fantasies” allows Ursa to bear witness in the present that it happened in the past *and* testify to what is beyond recognition or the process of witnessing. Ursa herself moves—within and against the grammar of gender, within and against the repetitive prose—from recognition to witnessing, on which subjectivity is founded, according to philosopher Kelly Oliver.<sup>60</sup> Ursa thereby reconceives “her” (own) subjectivity through a different and nevertheless similar form of reproduction: the blues.

#### A NEW WORLD SONG: TRANSFORMATION THROUGH PRESERVATION AND REPETITION IN BLUES FORM

In the interview with Rowell, Jones declares that *Corregidora* “is a blues.”<sup>61</sup> The novel’s formal engagement with the blues allows Ursa to tell her story in her own language, which takes the shape of oral storytelling. Jones sought to write *Corregidora* in a manner that reflected African American oral traditions, including music.<sup>62</sup> In an earlier interview with poet Michael S. Harper, Jones reveals that the first version of the novel could not have been called a novel at all, for it “was sort of a song.” The final version combines layers of oral storytelling with “ritualistic” sequences as well as dreams and memory.<sup>63</sup> While it is important to recognize that Ursa is a blues singer, a consideration of *Corregidora* as a blues novel draws attention to how Jones translates oral traditions into literary forms.<sup>64</sup> Ursa reconciles her foremothers’ history through singing her own songs; however, it is the novel’s formal engagement with the blues that performs a highly nuanced negotiation of the past and present. Like oral storytelling—a form that, for Jones, “can bring in

everything”—the blues structure affords a flexible relationship to temporality and spatiality, one that transcends the fixed boundaries of both.<sup>65</sup> Rather than viewing the past and present in binary opposition, characteristics of the blues such as repetition allow for the past and present or any opposing forces to converge, diverge, and coexist. Blues repetition is analogous to legal precedent, yet it provides for dynamic movement, whereas repetition in the law, and to a certain extent making generations, reenact the past in the present.

### *Transformation through Preservation*

As a professional blues singer, Ursa falls in line with the legacy of early-twentieth-century Black women blues singers, for whom this post-slavery musical genre was an expression of life following abolition. The recorded performances of women like Ma Rainey—to whom Cat Lawson, Ursa’s neighbor, compares her “strained” voice—impart a feminist consciousness specific to poor and working-class Black communities that rescripted politics of gender and sexuality in particular, as Angela Y. Davis contends.<sup>66</sup> Ursa likewise takes hold of the blues as a critical aesthetic and affective engagement with the past and, in doing so, disrupts both the process of preservation-through-transformation and making generations in favor of what I call transformation through preservation. Unlike the reform dynamic apparent in the Free Womb Law, which preserves the existing legal rule—*partus*—by transforming its justificatory rhetoric along renewed gender lines, transformation through preservation repeats a previous regime in order to break with precedent. While the blues plays a major role in the plot as Ursa’s profession, a closer look at the novel reveals that it too takes hold of the blues, specifically blues form, to bridge spatiotemporal boundaries.<sup>67</sup> The novel highlights the continuities between Ursa’s lived experience and that of her foremothers, framing the time of slavery as the time of her present, while subverting the repetition of these continuities at every turn.

As Wanzo has pointed out, the blues form is structurally similar to legal performance in terms of repetition, a key feature of the genre since its inception.<sup>68</sup> Traditional blues verse, which often reflects a narrative, relies on repeating lyrics for the story to progress. A corresponding response follows the repetition of preceding lines, creating a system of address and response—much like Oliver’s notion of witnessing—that also repeats throughout the song. Right before she thinks of “the girl,” Ursa considers “a new world song”: “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.”<sup>69</sup> The blues alone can and cannot be a Portuguese song precisely

because it encompasses contradiction. As a musical genre developed in the wake of abolition, the blues grapples with the collective memory of slavery yet simultaneously expresses autonomous desire in the present. The expression of Ursa's desire for a song that touches across generations already performs the blues in so far as it is both present to itself *and* to the past within itself.<sup>70</sup> A song, unlike the language of bearing witness, has the capacity to touch or affect across the spatiotemporal boundaries that separate her from her foremothers. The shift from Ursa's singular life to "theirs," an indefinite third person plural, contrasts the use of evacuated pronouns in the law and sutures rather than severs through the transfer of status under law. The antecedent of Ursa's life is theirs, not in a legally binding way but one that signals belonging outside the terms of ownership. A song that is and is not a Portuguese song conditions a moment of repetition that breaks from precedent in the Free Womb Law.

What's more, a song "branded with the new world" touches beyond the specification of time and space in other significant ways. Not only does a new world song bring her foremothers' past in proximity with Ursa's present; it also bridges the spatiotemporal boundaries that separate her from the scene of witnessing. In response to Mama's repeated assertion that the blues is "*devil's music*," Ursa explains that she got her songs about the Portuguese from Mama herself, who claims she "*didn't hear the words*." Ursa continues, "*Then let me give witness the only way I can. I'll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee to rub inside my eyes. When it's time to give witness, I'll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee. I'll stain their hands.*"<sup>71</sup> Her words follow Mama's in italics yet are not in quotation marks. As a conversational device, the blues form carries on their dialogue and simultaneously stands apart. On the one hand, obstructing her own vision with coffee grounds—the very product of slave labor in Brazil—alludes to the impossibility of bearing witness to the past. On the other hand, repeating what she will do "when it's time to give witness" enacts that impossibility; the blues form renders the invisible visible even though Ursa cannot see it with her own eyes.

Moreover, Ursa gives rather than bears witness, freely transferring Mama's words. The sonic disruption of her dialogue with Mama performs making generations outside an economy of recognition in "*the only way [she] can*." Singing a new world song in response to Mama, Ursa makes "*a fetus out of coffee grounds*," which she uses to "*stain their hands*." The resolving phrase is in conversation both with her foremothers and with the law. Here, giving witness marks the Portuguese who, in Mama's words, "paid attention only to the genitals."<sup>72</sup> As the last slaveholding nation in the Americas, Brazil sought to

refashion itself on the world stage with the first gradual emancipation law. Malheiro stressed that by passing the Free Womb Law, “the humanity and charity, so characteristic of the Brazilian, would be vindicated; order would not be disturbed, nor social customs.”<sup>73</sup> Yet Ursa’s testimony—the sonic disruption of her dialogue—stains this image of reform.

Ursa’s conversation with Mama later resumes then slips into song. A significant exchange between Ursa and Cat, who serves as the witness to her and Tadpole’s courthouse marriage, unfolds in the interim. After the ceremony Cat confronts Ursa for disapproving of her sexual relationship to Jeffy, a fourteen-year-old that Cat looks after. Before Ursa begins speaking to Mama again, she recounts Cat’s memory of dropping a can of coffee grounds in the kitchen to thwart sexual assault at the hands of Mr. Hirshorn, her employer’s husband. The exchange between Ursa and Cat momentarily begins again. She refuses to embrace Cat, whose departure from the bedroom prompts a shift in dialogue. Ursa addresses Mama, stating that she “*was trying to explain it, in blues, without words, the explanation somewhere behind the words.*”<sup>74</sup> The prose remains italicized, yet is again not in quotation marks, and continues without punctuation before breaking into a blues stanza:

While mama be sleeping, the ole man he crawl into bed  
While mama be sleeping, the ole man he crawl into bed  
When mama have wake up, he shacking his nasty ole  
head  
Don’t come here to my house, don’t come here to my  
house I said  
Don’t come here to my house, don’t come here to my  
house I said  
Fore you get any this booty, you gon have to lay down  
dead  
Fore you get any this booty, you gon have to lay down  
dead.<sup>75</sup>

The dialogue resumes immediately as if in response to the song. The speaker—Great Gram, Gram, or Mama—declares that, “you had to suffer the consequences of not taking it.”<sup>76</sup> The blues stanza emphasizes the multiplicity of voices both in and outside of the dialogues that bracket it. Great Gram, Gram, and Mama all refer to Corregidora as “Old man Corregidora.” Here blues repetition performs the continuities among historically situated experiences of sexual violence across generations.

### *Significance and Implications of Blues Form*

In contrast to legal prose, the blues preserve the past in order to break with precedent, which rescripts both the past and the past in the present. The first line repeats in accordance with traditional blues verse. Despite the line break, which signals a pause in time, “the ole man” rematerializes as before. Though “mama” stays the same, she encompasses different generations of women within and beyond Ursa’s matrilineal line. Blues repetition exceeds the stanza. The repetition of coffee grounds, for example, reveals the material traces of a past that is ongoing so that Great Gram’s original trauma becomes present to Cat as well as other characters and other adjacent traumas. The blues form highlights not only the persistence of slavery’s sexual economy but also, and most important, moments of rupture. Like the dialogues between which the blues stanza is located, refusal subverts the static repetition of an ongoing past. In the blues stanza itself, “mama” refuses “the ole man,” underscoring the consequences of sexual violence for the perpetrator. Jones’s use of blues form enables transformation through preservation. By preserving the past in blues form, a repeatable storyline transforms. What’s more, the blues stanza foregrounds mama’s refusal to the ole man in her own words. Because the blues stanza defies spatiotemporal boundaries, mama’s words resonate intergenerationally. That is, mama’s words literally and figuratively resonate with every generation, thereby articulating a wordless explanation “somewhere behind the words” she speaks.

Using the blues allows Ursa “to explain what will always be there” precisely because it refuses the American grammar.<sup>77</sup> When the story is retold in blues form, another kind of discourse emerges. Ursa’s new world song is and is not a Portuguese song, in part because it signifies the sociopolitical order of the New World. In this way, a new world song is geographically situated squarely within Brazil and breaks with the spatiotemporal boundaries that delimit national history, to represent instead the conditions that “marked *a theft of the body*.”<sup>78</sup> A new world song, then, is not only about the history of slavery in Brazil but about the conditions of captivity that connect and repeat both within and across North and South American slavery. Though a new world song returns us to “the scene of subjection,” it does so in another language.<sup>79</sup> Jones’s use of blues form throughout the novel sheds light on how the conditions of enslavement repeat, and it simultaneously performs “the telling and the un-telling of what cannot, yet must, be told.”<sup>80</sup>

“*Everything said in the beginning,*” Ursa proclaims, “*must be said better than in the beginning.*”<sup>81</sup> In conclusion, I suggest that to say everything “better than in the beginning” requires another aesthetic form, one that resonates across

boundaries, including the boundaries of language. A new world song puts forth another kind of discourse because of its wordless explanation and because of its sound. To say everything said in the beginning better than in the beginning—in a way that does not repeat the beginning but moves us to a point off the given map—might very well mean that it is not said.

This article offers a reading practice for taking up the relationship between slavery, law, and literature. Reading a legal and a literary text in counterpoint to each other undoes the law's language and offers another telling that subverts the dominant narrative. On the one hand, the law draws attention to the novel's sociohistorical context, which shakes up our interpretation of the plot by entry of this intertext. On the other hand, Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* re-frames the legacy of enslavement for Ursa's present through a personal, political, and pedagogical account of the past that exposes our own contemporary moment in its wake. I am not suggesting that we turn to literature as a solution to archival loss but, rather, that literary fiction provides insight into the legal binds that tether our present to the past and how we might forge a future in which alternative resolutions are possible.

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NOTES

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1. Charles H. Rowell, "An Interview with Gayl Jones," *Callaloo* 16 (1982): 40–41.
2. Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 3.
3. Gayl Jones, *Corregidora* (New York: Random House, 1975), 8.
4. Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 31.
5. Camillia Cowling, "Debating Womanhood, Defining Freedom: The Abolition of Slavery in 1880s Rio de Janeiro," *Gender and History* 22, no. 2 (2010): 287.

6. Ana Lucia Araujo, *Reparations for Slavery and the Slave Trade: A Transnational and Comparative History* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 112.

7. Araujo, *Reparations for Slavery and the Slave Trade*.

8. According to David J. Hellwig, the myth of Brazil as a racial democracy in comparison to the US began to fall apart in the mid-1960s and '70s as African American newspapers and magazines published reports on the Brazilian color crisis. See David J. Hellwig, *African-American Reflections on Brazil's Racial Paradise* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

9. Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen: The Negro in the Americas* (New York: Knopf Press, 1947); and Gilberto Freyre, *The Masters and Slaves: A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization* (New York: Knopf Press, 1946).

10. Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64–81.

11. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, DC: Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, March 1965), 15.

12. Carl N. Degler, *Neither Black Nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1971).

13. Maria Firmina dos Reis, *Úrsula* (Rio de Janeiro: Presença, 1988). Also, Dawn Duke traces the impact of the republication of Reis's novel. See Dawn Duke, *Literary Passion, Ideological Commitment: Toward a Legacy of Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian Women Writers* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2008).

14. For more on the intertwined emergence of an Afro-Brazilian literary canon and the Movimento Negro, see Emanuelle K. F. Oliveira, *Writing Identity: The Politics of Contemporary Afro-Brazilian Literature* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2007); and Michael George Hanchard, *Orpheus and Power: The Movimento Negro of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, Brazil, 1945–1988* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

15. Christopher A. Shinn, "Hemispheric Postcolonialism: Black Female Sexuality and Slavery in the Americas," *Literature Compass* 13, no. 9 (2016): 538–47.

16. Stelamaris Coser, *Bridging the Americas: The Literature of Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, and Gayl Jones* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

17. Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), 6. Following Hartman, Alys Eve Weinbaum focuses attention on the reproductive afterlife of slavery to highlight, through a close reading of late twentieth century black feminist texts (including *Corregidora* in brief), the epistemic continuities between forms of reproductive exploitation under slavery in the Americas and the Caribbean and contemporary biocapitalism. See Alys Eve Weinbaum, *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery: Biocapitalism and Black Feminism's Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019): 81–82.

18. Kalindi Vora, *Life Support: Biocapital and the New History of Outsourced Labor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 20.

19. Saidiya Hartman, "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors," *Souls* 18, no. 1 (2016): 167.

20. Both Christina Sharpe's chapter in *Monstrous Intimacies* and Rebecca Wanzo's chapter, "When Testimony Fails," discuss the Free Womb Law and its implications for Ursa. See Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*; Rebecca Wanzo, "When Testimony Fails: Law and the Comforts of Intimacy in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*," in *African American Culture and Legal Discourse*, ed. Lovalerie King and Richard L. Schur (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 159–75; and Sirène Harb's discussion of Palmares in "Memory, History and Self-Reconstruction in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 31, no. 3 (2008): 116–36.

21. Joanne Lipson Freed, "Gendered Narratives of Trauma and Revision in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*," *African American Review* 44, no. 3 (2011): 409–20; Jennifer Griffiths, "Uncanny Spaces: Trauma, Cultural Memory, and the Female Body in Gayle Jones's *Corregidora* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*," *Studies in the Novel* 38, no. 3 (2006): 353–70; Harb, "Memory, History, and Self-Reconstruction in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*"; Stephanie Li, *Something Akin to Freedom: The Choice of Bondage in Narratives by African American Women* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010); Camille Passalacqua, "Witnessing to Heal the Self in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* and Phyllis Alesia's *Stigmata*," *MELUS* 35, no. 4 (2010): 139–63; Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, "Relate Sexual to Historical: Race, Resistance, and Desire in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*," *African American Review* 34, no. 2 (2000): 273–97; Stella Setka, "Haunted by the Past: Traumatic Rememory and Black Feminism in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*," *Mosaic* 47, no. 1 (2014): 129–44.

22. Rushdy, "Relate Sexual to Historical," 43; Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

23. Ifeona Fulani, "Gender, Conflict, and Community in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* and Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*," *Frontiers* 32, no. 2 (2011): 1–30.

24. Passalacqua, "Witnessing to Heal the Self," 150.

25. Setka, "Haunted by the Past."

26. Li, *Something Akin to Freedom*.

27. Setka, "Haunted by the Past."

28. In *Monstrous Intimacies*, Sharpe flags the common misreading of Gram as enslaved despite the fact that Gram is born free under the Free Womb Law. Sharpe asks, in parenthesis: "What do we do with this knowledge [that Gram is not enslaved]? Do we forget it in thinking about the text because it is not one of the repetitions that become fact through the very force of their repetition—even as we are made aware that those repetitions themselves are suspect within the logic of the text?" (40). See Wanzo,

“When Testimony Fails”; Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*; Kimberly Juanita Brown, *The Repeating Body: Slavery’s Visual Resonance in the Contemporary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

29. Madhu Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetics* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 74.

30. Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*.

31. Additionally, the Free Womb Law established a slave registration system, protected enslaved people’s savings, and recognized the right to freedom by self-purchase without a slave master’s consent.

32. Martha Abreu, “Slave Mothers and Free Children: Emancipation and Female Space in Debates on the ‘Free Womb’ Law, Rio de Janeiro, 1871,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 28, no. 3 (1996): 567–80, quote at 569.

33. See Sidney Chalhoub, “The Precariousness of Freedom in a Slave Society (Brazil in the Nineteenth Century),” *International Review of Social History* 56, no. 3 (2011): 405–39; Sidney Chalhoub, “The Politics of Ambiguity: Conditional Manumission, Labor Contracts, and Slave Emancipation in Brazil (1850s–1888),” *International Review of Social History* 60, no. 2 (2015): 161–91; and Henrique Espada Lima, “Freedom, Precariousness, and the Law: Freed Persons Contracting out their Labour in Nineteenth-Century Brazil,” *International Review of Social History* 54, no. 3 (2009): 391–416.

34. “Free Womb Law (Rio Branco Law),” trans., *British and Foreign State Papers, 1871–1872*, vol. 62 (London: Harrison and Sons, 1871): 305–6.

35. See Cowling, “Debating Womanhood, Defining Freedom,” and “As a Slave Woman and as a Mother: Women and the Abolition of Slavery in Havana and Rio de Janeiro,” *Social History* 36, no. 3 (2011): 294–311, esp. 295, 301.

36. Cowling, “As a Slave Woman and as a Mother,” 296–97.

37. Cowling, *Conceiving Freedom*.

38. See Cowling, “As a Slave Woman and as a Mother,” 300; and Martha Santos, “‘Slave Mothers,’ Partus Sequitur Ventrem, and the Naturalization of Slave Reproduction in Nineteenth-Century Brazil,” *Tempo* 23, no. 41 (2016): 467–87.

39. See Cowling, “Debating Womanhood, Defining Freedom,” 287–88; and Camillia Cowling, *Conceiving Freedom: Women of Color, Gender, and the Abolition of Slavery in Havana and Rio de Janeiro* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 55–59.

40. Agostinho Marques Perdigão Malheiro, “The Extinction of Slavery in Brazil from a Practical Point of View,” trans. Richard Austin, *Anthropological Review* 6, no. 20 (1868): 56–63, quote at 59.

41. Malheiro, “The Extinction of Slavery in Brazil,” 59, 63.

42. Malheiro, “The Extinction of Slavery in Brazil,” 57.

43. During these years of debate, Malheiro published *A escravidão no Brasil: Ensaio*

*histórico-jurídico-social*, a three-volume text on the laws of enslavement and manumission in Brazil as well as the rights of *libertos* (freedmen and women). Emperor Dom Pedro II commissioned a study on how to abolish slavery, which was carried out by the future viscount of Sao Vicente, José Antônio Pimenta Bueno, and concluded in 1868 with a draft of the legislation. The Brazilian abolitionist movement grew considerably in the 1860s, as did the extremely conservative Party of Order. See Agostinho Marques Perdigão Malheiro, *A escravidão no Brasil: Ensaio historico-juridico-social* (Petrópolis, Brazil: Editora Vozes, [1866] 1972); and Jeffrey D. Needell, *The Party of Order: The Conservatives, the State, and Slavery in the Brazilian Monarchy, 1831–1871* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2006). As Sue Peabody and Keila Grinberg point out, however, the law was debated through 1871 due to opposition from representatives of Brazil's coffee-growing regions (namely Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, and São Paulo), who maintained that the law infringed on their property rights even though it would indemnify slave masters. See Sue Peabody and Keila Grinberg, *Slavery, Freedom, and the Law in the Atlantic World: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford–St. Martin's Press, 2007), 158.

44. Princess Isabel governed Brazil on three occasions in her father's absence. She signed the Free Womb Law during her very first regency. According to Roderick J. Barman, the princess showed public support for the Free Womb Law though "she took no active role in the struggle to force the bill through the Chamber of Deputies in the face of unrelenting opposition" and even expressed doubts about the law in a letter to her father (see Roderick J. Barman, *Princess Isabel of Brazil* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2002), 117; and Malheiro, "The Extinction of Slavery in Brazil," 59.

45. Chalhoub, "The Precariousness of Freedom in a Slave Society"; and Chalhoub, "The Politics of Ambiguity." Martha Santos turns to agricultural manuals to show that debates about enslaved women's reproduction extend as far back as the 1830s. She also argues that the Free Womb Law was aimed at slave mothers so as to prevent slave rebellion. See Santos, "'Slave Mothers,' Partus Sequitur Ventrem, and the Naturalization of Slave Reproduction"; and Sidney Chalhoub, "Interpreting Machado de Assis: Paternalism, Slavery and the Free Womb Law," in *Honor, Status, and Law in Modern Latin America*, ed. Sueann Caulfield, Sarah C. Chambers, and Lara Putnam (Durham: Duke University Press), 87–108.

46. As Camillia Cowling shows, the Free Womb Law leveraged existing and evolving moral ideas about the significance of motherhood and in particular, the plight of slave mothers, which dominated anti-slavery imagery. She argues that enslaved women likewise appealed to these ideas when pursuing freedom suits, further linking abolitionist discourse, maternity, and femininity. See Cowling, *Conceiving Freedom*, "Debating Womanhood, Defining Freedom," and "As a Slave Woman and as a Mother." Similarly, Sidney Chalhoub notes that the politicization of enslaved motherhood was a central aspect of the debates culminating in the Free Womb Law; see

Chalhoub, "The Politics of Ambiguity." In addition, Julia C. Paulk examines how the allegorical antislavery plays of José de Alencar associated the sanctity of motherhood with enslaved women; see Julia C. Paulk, "(Re)Writing Patriarchy and Motherhood in José de Alencar's Allegorical Antislavery Plays, *O demônio familiar* and *Mãe*," *Luso-Brazilian Review* 42, no. 1 (2005): 61–77.

47. Free Womb Law, 305.

48. Reva B. Siegel, "Why Equal Protection No Longer Protects: The Evolving Forms of Status-Enforcing State Action," *Stanford Law Review* 49, no. 5 (1997): 1111–48, quote at 1119.

49. Siegel, "Why Equal Protection No Longer Protects," 1119.

50. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 74.

51. Hartman, "The Belly of the World," 169.

52. At the beginning of the novel we learn that Ursa suffers a miscarriage after Mutt pushes her down a flight of stairs. She is hospitalized and has a hysterectomy. Whether or not she consents to the surgical procedure is unclear. Following Dorothy Roberts's work in *Killing the Black Body*, one can situate Ursa's hysterectomy in the context of government-sponsored family planning programs in the postwar era that targeted Black women with coercive sterilization practices. See Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage Press, 1999).

53. Jones, *Corregidora*, 172.

54. Adrienne Davis, "Don't Let Nobody Bother Yo' Principle: The Sexual Economy of American Slavery," in *Sister Circle: Black Women and Work*, ed. Sharon Harley (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 103–28.

55. Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*.

56. Nikhil Pal Singh, "On Race, Violence, and So-Called Primitive Accumulation," *Social Text* 34, no. 3 (2016): 27–50.

57. Jones, *Corregidora*, 22.

58. Jones, *Corregidora*, 59.

59. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 68.

60. Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

61. Rowell, "An Interview with Gayl Jones," 48.

62. Jones's nonfiction book, *Liberating Voices*, examines how African American poets, short story writers, and novelists use oral genres in their work. Gayl Jones, *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

63. Michael S. Harper, "An Interview: Gayl Jones and Michael S. Harper," *Massachusetts Review* 18, no. 4 (1977): 692–715, quotes at 697, 698.

64. Rowell, "An Interview with Gayl Jones," 32–34.

65. Harper, "An Interview," 698.

66. Cat compares Ursula's strained voice to Ma Rainey's, asserting that "the strain made it better, because you could tell what she'd been through" (Jones, *Corregidora*, 44); also see Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminisms: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

67. As Donia Elizabeth Allen argues, the content of *Corregidora* is inextricably linked to Jones's use of blues form, including but not limited to repetition, call and response, and the blues break; see Donia Elizabeth Allen, "The Role of Blues in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*," *Callaloo* 25, no. 1 (2002): 257–73. For more on Jones's formal engagement with the blues, see Melvin Dixon, "Singing a Deep Song: Language as Evidence in the Novels of Gayl Jones," in *Black Women Writers (1950–1980): A Critical Evaluation*, ed. Mari Evans, 236–48 (New York: Anchor Press, 1984), and for a discussion of improvisation, see Grace Kyungwon Hong, *Death Beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015): 109–15.

68. Wanzo, "When Testimony Fails."

69. Jones, *Corregidora*, 59.

70. In *Specters of the Atlantic*, Ian Baucom develops the notion of "nonsynchronous contemporaneity," which marks a moment of repetition "in which the past returns to the present in expanded form, a moment in which present time finds stored and accumulated within itself a nonsynchronous array of past times." Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 29.

71. Jones, *Corregidora*, 54.

72. Jones, *Corregidora*, 54.

73. Malheiro, "The Extinction of Slavery in Brazil," 59–60.

74. Jones, *Corregidora*, 66.

75. Jones, *Corregidora*, 67.

76. Jones, *Corregidora*, 67.

77. Jones, *Corregidora*, 66; Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 68.

78. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 67.

79. I am also thinking here of Hartman's question: "How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?" Saidiya V. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14, quote at 4.

80. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 199.

81. Jones, *Corregidora*, 54.