"YOU GOT A LITTLE BIT OF EVERYTHING IN YOU": NARRATION AS RESISTANCE IN *CORREGIDORA* AND *EVA'S MAN*

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ABSTRACT

“YOU GOT A LITTLE BIT OF EVERYTHING IN YOU”:
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Narrative has the power to construct worlds both fictional and real—to carve out spaces for marginalized voices, to engage in the most intimately human conversations, and to open up new possibilities for expression and resistance. The narrative worlds Gayl Jones constructs in *Corregidora* and *Eva’s Man* betray “linearity, logic, and conventional realism,” as Trimiko Melancon states (140), in order to challenge our thinking about racialized gender discourses taken up in the law, the economy, and in literary representation. Using “unnatural” narratology—a theory that has attempted to grapple with postmodern texts such as Jones’s—as a mooring point, this project intends to explore how Jones uses disruptive narrative practices to write up against the boundaries of stereotype and positivist representations of black subjectivities. By radically shifting how she tells her protagonists’ stories, Jones invites her readers to question the many oppressive forces that shape *Corregidora* and *Eva’s Man* while giving her protagonists a way to resist these forces with the power of their own voices, or lack thereof.

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Introduction

When you tell a story, you automatically talk about traditions, but they're never separate from the people, the human implications. You're talking about language, you're talking about politics and morality and economics and culture, and you never have to come out and say you're talking about these things—you don't have to isolate them and therefore freeze them—but you're still talking about them. You're talking about all your connections as a human being.
—Gayl Jones[1]

Narrative has the power to construct worlds both fictional and real—to carve out spaces for marginalized voices, to engage in the most intimately human conversations, and to open up new possibilities for expression and resistance. Within African American literature, the stakes of narrative and representation have taken on highly sociopolitical significances. As bell hooks states in *Black Looks: Race and Representation,* "From slavery on, white supremacists have recognized that control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of domination" (2); and likewise, representation has become a pivotal space for resisting such systems of domination. As a result, black authors are perpetually "working to transform the image" by "looking at new ways to write and talk about race" (hooks 2). Although hooks encourages a multiplicity of voices throughout *Black Looks,* implicit in her call for transformative representation is a possibly dangerous reactionary, monolithic politics of respectability that sees racial uplift as its primary concern. As the epigraph to this project suggests, Gayl Jones writes from a very different position: she views herself as a storyteller first and foremost, and in stark contrast to many of the "respectable" narratives that pepper the post-civil rights moment, she challenges her readers to rethink both white supremacist and racial uplift discourses in her two earliest full-length novels, *Corregidora* (1975) and *Eva's Man* (1976).

[1] Interviewed by Michael S. Harper

This is not to say, of course, that Jones's novels are not transformative; to the contrary, *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man* "transform the image" by pushing the boundaries of representation at the very level of language, betraying "linearity, logic, and conventional realism," as Trimiko Melancon states (140). In order to fully explore this transgressive literary form, it might be helpful to turn to a particular flavor of narratology, even if the theory's primary authors and objects of study tend not to be dominated by African Americans or members of the African diaspora at large. Jan Alber and Rüdiger Heinze, two narratologists working from universities in Germany, are prominent contributors to a type of narrative theory they call "unnatural narratology," which describes texts, like Gayl Jones's, that "confront us with strange narrative worlds which rely on principles that have very little to do with the actual world around us" (5). By distorting the "actual world's" physical, temporal, and linguistic boundaries, "unnatural" narratives like *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man* "have a defamiliarizing effect because they are experimental, extreme, transgressive, unconventional, non-conformist, or out of the ordinary" (Alber and Heinze 2).

However, Jones engages in this discourse for very different reasons in comparison to canonized white novelists and playwrights, and likewise, we must be careful about accepting the term "unnatural narrative"—considering the loaded connotations "unnatural" has when mapped or applied to African American texts. African American literature at large generally engages in expression and resistance from underneath the weight of centuries of mythic stereotypes that have historically relegated African Americans themselves to the status of "unnatural"—either biologically, sexually, or socio-politically. In comparison, unnatural narratology has traditionally been used to provide terminologies for scholars of writers like Samuel Beckett who, according to Martin Esslin, were concerned more with a loss of faith and metaphysical

ontologies (xix), which is a motivation in stark contrast to Jones's. *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man* are purposefully anti-mimetic in order to render absurd many mythic grand narratives which dictate the lives of many African American women, while simultaneously representing the psychological trauma and resistance these same women carve out of very liminal spaces. This ultimately distances *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man* from canonized post-modern literature like Beckett and James Joyce, who are employing and resisting Western philosophy at their core. Likewise, although the African American literary tradition has been resistive and transgressive as a whole, Jones simultaneously distances herself from other black female writers—such as Jesse Fausset—who have, as Amy S. Gottfried states, "sought to dissociate their bodies from 'a persistent association with illicit sexuality'" (562). Thus, although I find the terminology in unnatural narratology useful for discussing Jones's narrative style, I do so sparingly, while acknowledging the many complications of such an endeavor and with the hope that using these terms will not be enacting a violence against the fluidity and multiplicity of Jones's stories, intentions, and contexts.

Ultimately, by disrupting the mimetic reading of black narratives, Jones is able to defamiliarize readers from the many discourses that govern our understandings of black women's identities, norms, and behaviors—and thus our understanding of black fictional protagonists. *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man* draw attention to the way that racialized gender—the intersectional whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, race and gender—has been scripted, constrained, and pathologized throughout the centuries, ultimately rendering these scripts absurd or nonsensical by utilizing experimental and transgressive narration styles. In other words, by disrupting traditional *literary* narratives, these novels are able to also disrupt *racial* grand narratives. Brian Richardson, one of the forefront unnatural narratologists, has noted, "different

aspects of human experience can be better or more appropriately depicted through new techniques" (135). In *Corregidora*, this consists of a destabilized understanding of the haunting, collective trauma of slavery, while in *Eva's Man*, Jones disrupts our notions of abuse and pathology within the context of racialized gender. In so doing, Jones strips convention from these texts and from the subjectivity of her protagonists, illuminating the contradictory realities many black women often experience at the hands of oppressive systems of (literary) representation and behavioral scripting.

Understanding every product of these scripting systems would take an innumerable number of pages; however, if we are to enter the narrative worlds of *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man*, there are a few racialized gender discourses with which readers must be familiarized. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus specifically on a triad of discourses thoroughly elaborated on in Melancon's *Unbought and Unbossed: Transgressive Black Women, Sexuality, and Representation,* and in order to elaborate on them, I will be drawing heavily from other scholars in the field: (1), the binarism in which whiteness maintains its borders against racist constructs of blackness; (2), black masculinity as it attempts to respond to the subsequent emasculation and marginalization of such binarism; (3), finally, and most importantly, black femininity as it negotiates a constrained space within racist stereotypes and racial uplift narratives. The attention given to these first two discourses might seem unfairly brief; however, I am most interested in the way that whiteness and black masculinity not only inform but *construct* racialized gender identities imposed on black women with profound psychological, physical, and/or sexually violent consequences. The protagonists, Ursa and Eva, both perform and disrupt the scripts produced by these three discourses, illuminating the degree to which they enact a violence

against the black female self; therefore, before moving to an analysis of their stories, we must understand the exact nature and context of this violence.

Beginning with the first discourse in Melancon's triad, we can see the precarious and vital relationship between whiteness and blackness in defining racial difference and elevating white supremacy in the national psyche:

> [I]n order for 'whiteness' to signify racial/sexual purity, enlightenment, and acceptability, constructions of 'blackness' within the American and larger Western imagination came to embody both denotatively and connotatively an entirely different set of meanings and semiotics: as intrinsically licentious, impure, ignorant, and abject. (16)

In other words, whiteness *depends* on its relationship to blackness; it only maintains its borders when it stands in opposition to the other half of the constructed binary. When this black/white binary intersects with identity categories such as gender, class, and family, multiple layers of social meaning become inscribed on black women's bodies and subjectivities. For instance, in *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy,* Candice M. Jenkins describes how the nuclear family, "[a]ccording to the republican family ideal was imagined to be a microcosm of the unified republic, and thereby acquired civil as well as social importance as a marker of cultural stability and 'national well-being'" (6). This bourgeois construction of the republican family became entangled in the white/black binary because of its ties to Melancon's description of whiteness—purity, enlightenment, acceptability—and thus became one of the many institutional scripts which excluded African Americans from "national belonging" as well as the many domestic spaces that are integral to such civic endeavors (Jenkins 5).

In addition to the republican family ideal, historically blackness has been pivotal in maintaining gender constructs, specifically in a stark constructed border to white femininity's

"cult of true womanhood," a nineteenth century gender script "constituted by four fundamental tenets—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (Melancon 50). According to Jenkins, "[b]ecause of the conditions of their enslavement—for example their subjection to field labor or strenuous domestic chores"[2] black women became an easily definable border to (white) femininity (7). Particularly, Hershini Bhana Young states how black women were "seen as sexual predators, asserting their (sexual) agency to seduce and consume the white master" ("Inheriting" 378). Thus the black female body was simultaneously necessary and continually reaffirmed in this light to elevate white femininity and the republican family ideal, as well as threatening to both (male and female) whiteness and the white household as a whole, repeatedly "read as 'primitive, as uncontrolled, and as deviant" ("Inheriting 378). Centuries later, we see these constructed stereotypes repeated rather explicitly in the neo-slave narrative of *Corregidora*, and more subtly throughout *Eva's Man*, as both Ursa and Eva are often scripted as hypersexual beings, exploited as both visual objects and open invitations for sexual encounters. Thus Ursa and Eva must negotiate racial discourses that reach out across the fabric of history and continue to mark them as separate from the conservative and "respectable" constructs of whiteness.

While negotiating these racist stereotypes inherited from the artificial white/black binary, black women also must define themselves in relation to black masculinity and, according to sociologist Beth Richie, "the re-ordering of gender relationships in the Black community in favor of patriarchal structures" (111). According to Jenkins, men were similarly scripted by Victorian behavior (8) and thus masculinity constructed a similar racial boundary, using black masculinity as the binary opposite of white masculinity: forced to embody through myth and stereotype the "extremes of brutality and bestiality and the general threat of the breakdown of civil order," as

[2] Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman" speech is a famous example that points to the way physical labor excluded black women from the category of womanhood.

Ronda C. Henry Anthony puts it (5). While this allowed white masculinity to safely protect its borders, it also produced an immense "fear of the uncontained" and the desire to "castrat[e], emasculat[e], and feminiz[e]" black masculinity (Henry Anthony 5-6). Thus, just as black women were excluded from femininity, black men were cast out of the construct of "manhood," which has produced long-surviving consequences on racialized gender to this day.

Battling these constructs of castrated black masculinity on the national level and the predominance of "violence, imprisonment, joblessness, and poverty," Richie argues that black political leaders from the major twentieth-century movements (e.g. the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights and Black Power movements) called for "the reinscription of heterosexual, nuclear families with concomitant gender and generational hierarchy" (111). This move, in essence, aligned black communities with the heteropatriarchal structures of the white majority and fought conceptualizations of blackness as "indecent" with gender structures deemed acceptable by the white Western world. However, this move was also an attempt to recover black manhood from generations of sexual emasculation—via slavery, poverty, lynching, and sexual violence (Melancon 28). As a result, black women's bodies became objects through which black men established their sexual and physical dominance, ultimately becoming "governed by and accessible to (multiple) men" (Melancon 20). Therefore, just as in relation to the white slave master's household and the cult of true womanhood, the era of racial uplift relegated black women to sexual objects and buried "the simultaneity of oppressions [for black women]—racism, patriarchy, sexism, heterosexism, and classism" under the move to privilege black men as the "major component of black cultural nationalism" (Melancon 28).

The combination of these first two racialized gender narratives created very liminal spaces in which black women could define their own identities and sexualities, and arguably the

resulting narrative of normative behavior was even more constraining. In response to the "association between black women's assumed sexual excesses and the sexual and domestic failures of the race as a whole" (Jenkins 8), black women were conscripted as one of the most important sites for positivist racial uplift narratives meant to transform the image of the African American identity at large. In part, the black female body was constrained as this site by black men at the forefront of racial political movements who called for nuclear family structures; but this was also reaffirmed by middle-class black women who "saw the need to insist upon their own 'inclusion in the category of protected womanhood,' even if that meant the strategic acceptances of values that historically had been designed to disallow them" (Jenkins 13). As a result, black femininity came to be dictated by what Melancon calls "'the classical black female script': that is, black women's expected racial loyalty and solidarity, sexual fidelity to black men, self-abnegation, and idealization of marriage and motherhood" (3).

The emphasis that the classical black female has on constrained sexuality and decorum often throws black female desire and both black hetero- and homosexual relationships into crisis. While examining the "salvific wish"—a synonym for the classical black female script for all intents and purposes—Jenkens emphasizes the "*violence* of [it], the manner in which its restrictive, disciplinary assault upon black bodies constitutes a fearful denial of not simply black intimate expression, but of the chaos and vulnerability of human encounters more broadly conceived" (25). In *Corregidora*, we see this crisis of desire and the violence of restrictive gender scripts occurring as Tadpole, Ursa's second husband, pushes her to articulate "what she wants," a question she cannot fully answer apart from the script handed down to her by the women that have come before: "'What all us Corregidora women want. Have been taught to want. To make generations.' I stopped smiling" (22). As will be discussed more thoroughly

later in this paper, we can see how Jones interrogates these many racialized gender discourses as her protagonists participate in and resist these liminal spaces, which is quite clear here: Ursa's own desire is replaced by the script handed to her. She has been taught how and what to want, and as she articulates this, the smile fades from her face.

Related to this most recent example, Richie's interpretation of the classical black female script focuses on the "sexual fidelity to black men" and "self-abnegation" of Melancon's definition through what she calls the "trap of loyalty" (36). Taken to its most violent utterance, this racial phenomenon often leads women to be silent in the face of domestic abuse and sexual violence, in the attempt to adopt "respectability, propriety, and a politics of silence surrounding sexuality as a means to challenge their stigmatization as the quintessence of deviance" (Melancon 22). Although one could read this trap of loyalty in Ursa's relationship with Tadpole—often devoid of her own desire and abundant with sentences to the effect of, "I said nothing."—*Eva's Man* engages with this discourse head on. This second text simultaneously presents Eva as victimized in her uncommunicative response to sexual abuse while also challenging our conceptions of silence as an inherently passive mode of behavior. Through both of Jones's novels, then, we can begin to understand how the trap of loyalty and the classical black female script can limit black women's agency in the face of violence; however, in the way Jones writes up against and transforms so many racial discourses through her postmodern narrative techniques, we must also interrogate what signs we interpret as non-agential or indicative of victimization.

As we can see, black women must navigate a series of scripts and stereotypes that define not only how others relate to black women, but how black women relate to themselves. In an attempt to summarize all of these discourses, we might say, "the ideology about Black women is

influenced by narratives about race (white dominance), about gender (nuclear family), [and] about sexuality (heterosexual reproduction)" (Richie 109); although, I have outlined them more specifically as the cult of true womanhood, the patriarchal agenda of black nationalism, and the "trap of loyalty" inherent in the "classical black female script." Whether readers are aware of the historical and discursive forces behind them or not, these three narratives are prevalent in most of mainstream African American literature (whether as affirmation of or resistance to these narratives)—and they are precisely the racialized gender scripts Jones disrupts by creating transgressive unnatural narrative worlds. Ursa and Eva uncomfortably inhabit, exaggerate, and actively subvert these racial narratives to draw attention to the scripts' inherent, oppressive violence, and by the end of their stories, readers are aware of both their complicity in these discourses as well as the chaos and fragmentation that can occur when black women negotiate such constricted spaces of identity.

It is worth emphasizing, as well, that what these three scripts have in common is that they are produced, disseminated, and resisted at the level of language: through colloquial lexicons, academic articles, literary representation, the written law, etc. According to Carlyle Van Thompson, "As significant as skin color and hair texture, language becomes a critical part of the system of racial categories and hierarchies established by social custom and law" (11). Van Thompson particularly points to the way that "'proper' or standard English can position one closer to whiteness" (11), but this speaks to a larger consideration: that narrative in all of its many forms constructs our social world and is the vehicle for relations of power and resistance. It is with this concept in mind that I find Jones's novels so compelling. As Jenkins states:

> If, in fact, "[n]arrative is one of the ways in which identity, the ideological subject, is manufactured," then it stands to reason that close reading of African American narrative

in particular might offer us insight into the ideological complexities of black subjectivity. (24)

If we are looking to understand particularly the *complexities* of black subjectivity, then the challenging, complicated, and highly transgressive narrative techniques that Jones uses can give us radically transformed representations of black women in the post-civil rights moment, while also speaking to and reworking some of the major tenets of unnatural narratology itself.

As Gayl Jones has said, "When you tell a story… you're talking about language, you're talking about politics and morality and economics and culture," but "[y]ou're [also] talking about all your connections as a human being" (Jones and Harper 693). Throughout these two chapters, I hope to explore the human implications of the particular language, politics, morality, and culture that Jones has encoded within *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man*. Chapter One will primarily expand on the triad of racial discourses described in this introduction, examining how both Ursa and Eva navigate marginalized spaces as black women and how they specifically use language to disrupt the narratives which mark their bodies and subjectivities. Chapter Two takes a closer look at the institutions which both control these narratives and consume Ursa and Eva in the pursuit of maintaining systems of oppression. Again, however, we must be careful not to read these protagonists as active victims, as they manipulate language and silence in order to subvert the institutional gaze of both the law and systems of reading and spectatorship.

Throughout this paper, I will attempt *not* to prescribe a singular reading for either text or map unnatural narratology onto the texts—which, arguably, is a literary theory written by and about members of the white Euro-American majority and carries uncomfortable connotations in the term "unnatural." Both a singular reading and a mapped theoretical reading would ultimately do a violence to Jones's work in the same way that singular constructs of racialized gender and

institutional systems do violence to Ursa and Eva. Rather, I hope to provide my own personal—and limited—access point for understanding both of these novels while acknowledging the validity of other readings and interpretations. As Brian Richardson states, narratives, like Jones's that might be categorized as "unnatural narratives," "follow fluid, changing conventions and create new narratological patterns in each work" (qtd. in Alber and Heinze); and analyses of such narratives should also be read as fluid moments of meaning rather than crystalized structures or hegemonic expertise. Most importantly, however, we must remember that beneath the layers of discourse and oppression, metaphor and narration, ultimately this project is about the human implications of Ursa and Eva's stories—as they speak, sing, and remain silent, these women make human connections with the reader and with other black women just like them who suffer, survive, and heal under the weight of racialized gender narratives.

Disrupting Racialized Gender Discourses

"'[G]ender,' like 'race,' is not given," writes Hortense J. Spillers ("Peter's Pans" 22); beyond skin pigmentation, beyond genitalia, the body is marked with what she calls the "hieroglyphics of the flesh"— meanings, values, and discourses which render the body and the flesh knowable, readable, and culturally appraised in any given context ("Mama's Baby" 206-7). Many of the hieroglyphics of the flesh that Jones takes up in *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man* were introduced in pages previous, and they will be further explicated here. If the body, "in its material and abstract phase" is, as Spillers states, "a resource for metaphor" ("Mama's Baby" 205), then the signification of this metaphor within the creative and disruptive boundaries of the Jones's "unnatural" narratives provide valuable access points for understanding the complexities of black female subjectivity in Ursa and Eva's particular contexts. Narrative, as Jenkins suggests, has the power to "manufacture" identity and ideology (24), and thus also becomes the tool through which Ursa and Eva *disrupt* the marginalizing hieroglyphics that define their existence as black women.

Just as blackness is not a fixed ontological state or even an empirically and scientifically defined category, all black women do not engage with their identities in monolithic ways. Although Ursa and Eva's stories speak to one another and to many of the larger racialized gender discourses, Jones herself has been clear that these stories are in fact very different: "it [*Eva's Man*] sounds a lot like *Corregidora*, but it's not. The woman of the story isn't the same kind of woman either" (Jones and Harper 701). Primary discourses, "unnatural" narrative techniques and the particularities of each character all speak to Jones's participation in a politics of difference rather than dangerous essentialism; as stated in an interview with Claudia C. Tate, Jones disrupts monolithic representations because she believes "it's important to be able to work

with a range of personalities, as well as a range of personalities within one personality" (147). This range of personalities needs to be heeded when comparing *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man* side by side, and it will dictate the way that I structure my forthcoming analysis.

Jones's debut novel tells the story of Ursa Corregidora, descended from a long line of women who "make generations" in order to provide a literal body of evidence that testifies to the trauma of slavery. Ursa, Mama, Gram, and Great-Gram perform a ritualized repetition of memory that attests to the atrocities—including rape, incest, and forced prostitution—incurred at the hands of Corregidora, a Portuguese slave owner in Brazil, before slavery was abolished in 1888. The novel begins when Ursa's first husband, Mutt Thomas, either "pushes" or watches Ursa "fall" down the stairs, resulting in a miscarriage and a hysterectomy that renders her incapable of "making generations." From there, the narrative negotiates the competing memories and voices that dictate Ursa's existence as a Corregidora woman while she determines how to make the memories into a transformative recognition rather than a static repetition that subsumes her individuality and personal desire.

Great-Gram and Gram's story of enduring sexual violence on the Corregidora plantation becomes the gravitational force in Ursa's life—their trauma is the cultural meaning inscribed on her flesh, and the memories ritually repeated become her own, producing a narrative collision represented at the level of language. Very early on in the novel, we are introduced, very explicitly, to the exact nature of this trauma: "He fucked his own whores and fathered his own breed. They did the fucking, and had to bring him the money they made. My grandmamma was his daughter, but he was fucking her too" (*Corregidora* 9). As this trauma is articulated and rearticulated by the multiple generations of women, dialogue tags fall away, and the reader becomes completely unclear of who is repeating this story—Ursa, Mama, Gram, or Great Gram.

It chaotically projects multiple voices into Ursa's first person narration, leading to a shared anxiety between the reader, who attempts to piece the dialogue together, and Ursa herself. Critic Karla Holloway, who pays particular attention to the way narrative worlds speak to black female subjectivities in *Moorings & Metaphors, Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature*, notes that this chaotic collision of voices—this polyphony—is often inherent in African American works "that claim the texts of spoken memory as their source and whose narrative strategy honors the cultural memories within the word" (25). In other words, in the articulation of Gram and Great Gram's lived experience through the oral transmission of history, the "word" itself becomes rooted in "cultural memories," and thus makes use of creative and transgressive "narrative strateg[ies]" to make sense of the multiple voices and myths at work in the spoken testimony to the Corregidora trauma.

The characters who exist outside of this trauma's gravitational force occasionally comment on this polyphony and fragmentation, which serves to voice the reader's concern and anxiety throughout the reading process. For instance, Ursa's second husband, Tadpole, asks, "You mixed up every which way, ain't you?"; he then goes on to say, "You seem like you got a little bit of everything in you," to which Ursa responds, "I didn't put it there" (*Corregidora* 80). The "little bit of everything" in Ursa is the collision of voices and time pulsing through her narration as she vividly remembers how Corregidora "fucked his whores and fathered his own breed" (9), but importantly, Ursa also points to the fact that she "didn't put it there"—she has been marked against her will by the memory of racialized, sexualized trauma, forced to relive a past that was never fully her own. Importantly, then, we can see that the hieroglyphics of the flesh—the racialized gender discourses—taken up in *Corregidora* are sourced both in the way Corregidora codes Gram and Great Gram in the initial trauma of racialized sexual violence and

in the way these women go on to encode a series of discourses and memories onto their children in order to keep the evidence of their trauma visible.

Scholars Marisa Parham, Avery Gordon, and Hershini Bhana Young give us a language with which to examine this collective memory through a concept interchangeably known as "haunting" or "rememory." As Parham states, "haunting names how we experience the pain of others or, even more specifically, how the pain of others shades our own subjectivities" (2). Young, in *Haunting Capital: Memory, Text, and the Black Diasporic Body,* also draws our attention to the way this haunting is felt physically, imprinting itself upon the body as well as the subject, describing the sensation of possessing as an experience "that is not yours yet that now belongs to you" as the physical droplets of "sweat on the gold of your palms" (85). Sweat, itself, is a very prominent motif throughout the course of the novel, arising in Great Gram's palms as she recounts "*the same story over and over again*": "*she started rubbing my thighs with her hands, and I could feel the sweat on my legs*" (*Corregidora* 11). As the story inscribes itself in Ursa's memory and is replayed narratively for the reader, the sweat produced from the retelling simultaneously marks her legs, becoming a physical, bodily sign of the memory. Finally, haunting, as Gordon describes it, "draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition" (8). As discussed above, Ursa's agency in the process of re-memory is complicated and fraught with tension—as she is often resentful of her conscripted memories and of previous generations' demands (*Corregidora* 80)—but more importantly, as will be discussed in more detail later, Ursa is the only one of the four women who is able to transform the haunting, to engage in an act of recognition but also direct that

change against the memory itself, rearticulating it as a synthesis of her past, present, and future in a way that allows her to heal.

Jones utilizes unnatural narrative practices in order to perform the haunting on the level of language, inviting her readers into Ursa's polyphonic existence through the act of reading itself. As Carlyle Van Thompson notes, primarily the moments of rememory are signified by the italicized narration, which "functions as Ursa's consciousness, as dreams, memories, interior monologues, and the storytelling of Ursa's great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother" (73). Because Jones chooses to include not only the shared memory of Corregidora in these italicized moments, but also Ursa's own consciousness, personal memories, and interior monologues, she is demonstrating simultaneously the psychological fragmentation under the weight of haunting and also the way that Ursa resists the overwhelming influence of the collective by projecting her own individuality into the linguistic space marked out as Corregidora's by the italicized portions at the beginning of the novel, which start as clearly marked boundaries between Corregidora memories and Ursa's own personal memories. As the novel progresses, this clearly marked boundary blurs to the point where readers are unclear what the act of italicizing is meant to signify.

For instance, there are moments when she fades seamlessly into the fabric of her foremothers' haunting narration, such as when the prose transitions from Gram speaking to Ursa and then back again on page 172: "*He raised me and then when I got big enough he started fucking me. Seem like he raised me fucking me. Yeah, Mama told me how in the old days he was just buying up women.*" In this italicized narration, we think that the description of Corregidora buying women and examining them on the auction block is Ursa recounting what her mother told her, but then Jones snaps us out of that knowledge by emphasizing Gram's perspective: "*That's*

why he said he always liked my mama better than me" (172). We know that Ursa never spoke to Corregidora, and we know the impossibility of him preferring Mama over her (two women he has never physically met), though previously we assumed Ursa was speaking. Holloway might interpret moments like these in *Corregidora* by stating, "The narrative structures in these works force the words within the texts to represent (re)memories in/of events and ideas that revise and multiply meanings" (56), suggesting that the meaning of Corregidora's sexualized influence over Gram is condensed and multiplied so that it stretches across time to be scripted onto Ursa's psyche itself.[3] Because of the nature of this unconventional narrative style, the reader feels an increased anxiety concerning where the subjectivity of Ursa begins and ends in relation to her Grandmother, and we can probably assume that Ursa feels this same tension as these memories multiply in new ways.

However, there are other instances where Ursa violently asserts her own agency within the space for rememory, stating "*I am Ursa Corregidora. I have tears for eyes. I was made to touch my past at an early age…. Let no one pollute my music. I will dig out their temples. I will pluck out their eyes*" (77). Moments like this demonstrate the pain Ursa must feel from being "made to touch" her past since childhood—to be coerced into rememory to the point where her

[3] It is also worth noting that the way Jones represents rememory seems to align itself well with what unnatural narratologists like Brian Richardson have called "multiperson narrative," where multiple characters engage in the act of narrating (67). Although I will utilize this term later in this paper for its useful connotations with *Eva's Man*, the way that *Corregidora*'s multiplied narrative happens through the vehicle of memory and African American diasporic trauma, seems to transform the way that contemporary narratologists (who generally work with postmodern texts from the white majority) might relate to this literary term. Does the trauma of slavery change the way that these voices overlap in the text, and does rememory create a form of community and oral history unique to African American communities in the way that it functions and is motivated? Is Jones unique in the way she pushes the boundaries of contemporary narratology? These questions go beyond the scope of this project, but are worth noting nonetheless.

own narration occasionally is so subsumed by it that she must explicitly describe who she is ("I am Ursa Corregidora") and threaten anyone who threatens her music with the possibility of violence. This latter point speaks to how, as Amy S. Gottfried states, "For Ursa, two ways out of her repetitive familial narrative are the blues song and her verbalized anger" (567). Both are forms of speaking, of claiming her voice in relation to the other multiplied voices of her foremothers' and Corregidora himself; likewise, it speaks to a long tradition of how African American women engage with the blues as simultaneously a performative subversion and a moment of touching the personal self rather than "touch[ing the] past," as Spillers states in "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words":

> In this instance of being-for-self, it does not matter that the vocalist is "entertaining" under American skies because the woman, in her particular and vivid thereness, is an unalterable and discrete moment of self-knowledge. The singer is a good example of 'double consciousness' in action. (165)

Throughout *Corregidora*, Ursa experiences moments of "vivid thereness" and "unalterable" "self-knowledge" as she uses the blues to carve out a space for her own identity in relation to the audience and her foremothers, which is why she threatens to defend her music so violently, claiming she will "*dig out their temples*" and "*pluck out their eyes*" if someone "*pollute*[s] *my music*"—an act of pollution that would tarnish not only her voice but her own personal subjectivity.

Gottfried also uses the blues to speak to the unconventional and compelling force of Gayl Jones as a writer, focusing in on *Corregidora* as what Jones herself has described as a "blues novel." It is true that the form mimics the blues in many instances, such as on page 67 when the narration states:

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 shaking his nasty ole head

Don't come here to my house, don't come here to my house I said.

Here the rhythm and repetition follows the patterns of a blues song, and is a way for Ursa to engage in an act of rememory in her own, personalized manner. However, Gottfried notes that, "[i]t is no coincidence that Ursa can voice her desire through the blues," for the novel's form itself speaks to the blues because "blues talks about the simultaneity of good and bad… Blues acknowledges all different kinds of feelings at once" (561). This pairing of good and bad is present in how Jones challenges positive race representations (Gottfried 569) and makes her readers question many of the artificial binaries that have traditionally delineated African American women's lives: sexual desire/respectability, trauma/healing, individual/collective memory, etc. Jones writes up against the boundaries of stereotype and identity and pushes her readers to hold competing concepts in the palm of their hands, appreciating the tension as a unified whole as she "sings the blues" in the way she constructs her unconventional narrative worlds.

One of these complicated tensions within *Corregidora* speaks to the way that haunting is not isolated in Ursa's consciousness; rather, just as Gordon emphasizes that ghosts "produce material effects" (17), *Corregidora* emphasizes the physical and interpersonal consequences of that which is passed down via rememory. Particularly, Ursa learns to conflate pleasure and pain, or at the very least recognize the way they are constantly intermingled, especially within the context of slavery. Spillers suggests that all facets of sexuality—"reproduction," "motherhood," "pleasure," and "desire"—are "all thrown into crisis" when experienced in captivity; in fact, she

questions "whether or not 'pleasure' is possible at all under the conditions… [of] non-freedom" ("Mama's Baby" 221). The tension between these seemingly binary opposites is something never fully articulated by Gram or Great Gram—who experienced Corregidora first-hand—but the presence of pleasure and desire within the context of pain seems to be the ghost in the haunting, the "exclusio[n] and invisibilit[y]" that makes this memory a "ghost stor[y]" (Gordon 17). In fact, the possibility of desire—or even love—inhabiting the same space as sexual violence is so threatening to the Corregidora women that it is sourced as the reason why they refuse to welcome Ursa's father into the family; as Mama states:

> I think what really made them dislike Martin was because he had the nerve to ask them what I never had the nerve to ask… How much was hate for Corregidora and how much was love. (131)

Gram and Great Gram experience this possibility as a perversion, as something that perhaps undoes their trauma; though throughout *Corregidora*, Jones complicates our understanding of sexual violence, stated in Christina Sharpe's text as a necessarily deconstructed binary: "[T]here seems to be a growing understanding, working itself out especially in Corregidora, of what is required in order to be genuinely tender… perhaps brutality enables one to recognize what tenderness is" (65).

This deconstructed binary is just as complicated as anything else within the novel: pleasure and pain existing in the same intimate space can be transformative and can also be highly problematic by participating in the "trap of loyalty" that cause black women to remain in abusive relationships with black men (Richie 36). In the transformative moments which allow Ursa to express her own desire, the narrative emphasizes how she is engaging in an act of resistance similar to her violent assertion of her identity discussed earlier:

> What do they say about pleasure mixed in the pain? That's the way it always was with him. The pleasure somehow greater than the pain. My voice screaming for him to take me. And when he would, I'd draw him down into the bottom of my eyes. They watched me. I felt as if they could see my feelings somewhere in the bottom of my eyes. (50-1)

In this moment where Ursa explicitly expresses her desire in the presence of pain, she feels the scrutiny of the undisclosed "they." We might assume that this "they" is in fact the critical gaze of her foremothers, who have themselves rejected the expression of desire—whose only engagement with their own sexualities is to "make generations" or visible, bodily testimonies to their subjugation on the Corregidora plantation.

Through Ursa, Jones makes us question the artificial separation of these two physical experiences: that experiencing traumatic violence or pain prevents one from desiring or even loving one's abuser, and that acknowledging that love or desire makes that violence or pain any less traumatic. This is a paradox which Ursa's foremothers are never able to fully articulate, however. Sexual intimacy that is both violent and pleasurable thus becomes the ghost in the story of Corregidora, an entity or reality never acknowledged as existing—and Ursa attempts throughout the novel to find a way to not deny or disavow her individual intimate feelings when it comes into contact with the collective trauma of her oral history.

However, the novel does not suggest that conflating pleasure and pain is always the path to tenderness or love; rather, *Corregidora* simultaneously suggests the enduring pain of the haunting can result in new traumatic and oppressive intimate memories. For instance, Ursa comes to expect that she is obligated to feel pain, that her own comfort is devalued within an intimate space. While she has sex with her second husband, Tadpole, her body seems to engage in the rememory of pleasure/pain in a way that is not as agential as the previous example: "Does

it hurt?" "Yes, a little." "Did they say you could do it?" "Yes, we can do it." "How does it feel now?" "Go on" (49). In this moment, Ursa, like her foremothers, is incapable of articulating her pleasure, if that pleasure even exists. Furthermore, her decision to subject herself could be linked to her experience of her foremothers' stories, which is supported by the many slippages in the text between her husbands and Corregidora himself. Tamara Lea Spira, for instance, points to the phrase, "*What do you mean you don't know me? I was in your hole before he even knew you had one*" (Corregidora 75) as "particularly disturbing because the voice that starts out as Mutt [Ursa's first husband] ends up being Corregidora. This slippage happens continually as Corregidora's specter works to (re)assert that Ursa is 'his'" (123-4). By aligning Tadpole and Mutt with Corregidora, Jones problematizes the deconstructed binary of pleasure/pain, suggesting that sexual violence is just as present in Ursa's present as it is in her foremothers' past as the haunting specter of Corregidora creates very real and material effects in Ursa's life.

All of these examples demonstrate the complex nature of agency within the context of haunting, and Jones's text emphasizes the need for Ursa to carve out these transformative spaces while her foremothers remain stagnant, caught in the trauma's gravitational force. As Holloway states, "(re)membrance is activation in the face of stasis, a restoration of fluidity, translucence, and movement to the traditions of memory that become the subjects of these works" (68). Mama becomes the primary example that exemplifies how the women before Ursa privilege stasis rather than activation: "She sees [rememory] not as an accumulative process but more like Great Gram does, as a fixed litany that cannot be added to/altered in any way" (*Haunting Capital* 111). As a result, Mama becomes subsumed by the original trauma rather than using rememory as a tool towards "transformative recognition" (Gordon 8), and it prevents her from healing, moving forward, or staking her own claim of individual agency in the process of haunting. In contrast,

Ursa responds with resistance, viewing (re)membrance as activation or accumulation—incorporating her own voice and her own personal traumas into the italicized narration while using the blues to translate these experiences into expression: "*They squeezed Corregidora into me, and I sung back in return*" (103). As Young states, "Mama's pain, her inability to speak her own memories, and her jealous guarding of her own injuries demonstrate her misunderstanding of collective memory" (*Haunting Capital* 111), which means that Ursa engages with collective memory in a much more positive way—she is able to resist the scripts placed on her body and her subjectivity by Corregidora and her foremothers', navigating her liminal space with the help of the blues.

However, Jones also throws our understanding of "healing" or even "moving forward" into crisis in the way she ends the novel. Most readers would assume that these should be strived for—that moving beyond the stasis of the traumatic past, or moving from silence and oppression to a truly vocal moment of "vivid thereness" and "self-knowledge" ("Interstices" 165) is the dynamic turn that must be learned by the protagonist before the last page of the narrative. However, as Donia Elizabeth Allen notes, Jones refuses her readers an easily digestible "moral lesson" in the final scene of *Corregidora*:

> The final sex act is one that renders Ursa unable to speak or sing, both of which are extremely important to her in terms of bearing witness to her personal history and to that of her ancestors… In order to reconcile with Mutt does she give up her ability to speak or sing?... The final ritualized dialogue raises more questions than it answers and clearly, rather than resolving the novel neatly, Jones wants us to continue grappling with the ambiguities her characters have throughout the novel. (265)

Just as the "unnatural" narrative style resists easily digestible meanings, just as the layers of multiplicity throw the reader into disquiet, the way Jones closes the novel undermines a clear trajectory through Ursa's character development, forcing us to grapple with competing racialized gender discourses that have scripted African American female subjectivities throughout history in the very localized and particular blues narrative of Ursa Corregidora.

Corregidora, Jones's debut novel, engages with unnatural narrative techniques as it depicts the process of haunting, demonstrating the scripting forces in Ursa's life: her body and her subjectivity are encoded by Corregidora and her foremothers, which has material effects in the way that she experiences intimacy with the two men in her life. Jones's second novel, *Eva's Man* seems to be an extension as well as a variation on *Corregidora* both in the way she uses/challenges "unnatural" narrative and how she engages with the three racial discourses described in the introduction to this project. Jones distinguishes *Eva's Man* as having different "movement" and a different "way of telling," as well as describing it as a "horror story" whose structure differs from the blues ritual of *Corregidora* (Jones and Harper 701). In many ways, Jones has said that she doesn't "know what it is," suggesting that the "unnatural" narrative in *Eva's Man* takes up severely different elements than her first— and more easily articulated— novel does (Jones and Harper 701).

Through first-person narration, *Eva's Man* details the story of Eva Medina Canada, a black woman convicted of killing and orally castrating a black man named Davis Carter after engaging in a series of sexual interactions with him in a hotel room. Rather than giving the reader a linear progression through the events that lead to this event, however, *Eva's Man* jumps through time to collide previous events from Eva's childhood, laying every moment of sexual abuse on what is essentially the same plane as the main "plot" of the narrative. Throughout the

course of the novel, we gain access to her memories of her parents' tumultuous marriage, her childhood introduction to sexuality, and the many abusive relationships she endures—including Tyrone (her mother's extra-marital lover), Moses Tripp (a man she meets at a bar), Alfonso (her cousin), James "Hawk" Hunn (her abusive husband), and Davis Carter (the lover she kills and castrates).

Structurally, the novel can be confusing to readers, disrupting traditional tropes of plot, dialogue, and reliability:

> Past and present, the cerebral and visceral, even sanity and madness collide and, to some extent, emulsify in ways that stymie coherence, order, structure, and the ability to distinguish between varied events. (Melancon 140)

This incoherence does seem to have a progression to it, and by the end of the novel nearly all dialogue drops away, replaced instead by narration that seems to parrot and collapse previous events and voices, demonstrating the way that Eva internalizes and reacts to them. *Eva's Man* is thus much more resistant to the act of reading, and the relationship that the reader has with the text is much more antagonistic and problematic, as will be discussed more in Chapter Two. Unlike *Corregidora*, which roots the "unnatural" narrative in the process of haunting or rememory, *Eva's Man* seems to have a different purpose for the avant-garde narrative style entirely, which is highly dependent on the racial discourses with which Jones is concerned.

From the very first chapter, Eva appears constrained within the narratives of racialized gender and sexuality discussed in the exposition of this paper. Her body becomes a text: scripted by centuries of identity formation dialectics dictated by the white majority and the patriarchal racial uplift movements. Most importantly, however, *Eva's Man* demonstrates how the people in Eva's life—particularly the men—read and *misread* these hieroglyphics of her

flesh, misinterpreting signs and body language in ways that conform to collective stereotypes of African American women. For instance, Davis's first conversation with Eva illuminates the degree to which he misreads her body without questioning the validity of the scripts he sees and marks there; he misinterprets the fact that she is alone in a club as an invitation for a sexual partner, stating, "You a hard woman, too, ain't you. I *know* you got yourself started" (*Eva's Man* 8). The sexual connotations to this dialogue elicit a paradoxical response from Eva, by first narrating the violent reality of her sexual initiation—"I was thinking of a boy with a dirty popsicle stick digging up in my pussy"—and then by replying instead, "I got started like everyone else does… I opened my legs. My mother said after you've done it the first time, you won't be satisfied till you done it again" (*Eva's Man* 8). Within this latter quote, we see a multitude of things happening: Eva renders her first sexual experience banal ("I opened my legs") and aligned with the collective majority ("like everyone else does"); she privileges a script handed down to her by her mother rather than her own personal interpretation of her sexuality ("My mother said"); and she entangles what might be considered a stereotypical definition of black female sexuality—the insatiable Jezebel—with a very real reality of pleasure leading women to repeat sexual experiences ("after you've done it the first time, you won't be satisfied till you done it again").

Davis, of course, does not take the time to dive into the multiple layers of meaning here, and instead sees this response as a confirmation of his own bias. As a result, the hieroglyphics marking Eva's flesh—determined simultaneously by the definition of black female sexuality in contrast to concepts of whiteness, as well as the sexual subjugation black women are expected to experience at the hands of black men—become a performance that rewrites her own interpretation of her sexuality. Although Eva knows that her initialization into sexuality is

violent ("dirty popsicle stick digging up into my pussy"), she performs it as her mother and Davis expect her to as a black woman; she got "started" in the neutral opening of legs and became sexually "insatiable" in a way that justifies Davis's advances. Although Eva herself attempts to negotiate these competing narratives in a way similar to Ursa negotiating the conflated nature of pleasure/pain, those around her misread these negotiations as confirmations of racialized gender stereotypes and grand narratives of collective identity.

If Eva understands the intermingled nature of sexual agency and victimization in relation to her mother, we can see how her mother's marriage becomes one of the central points of analysis in most scholarly interventions. Probably the most quoted moment occurs after John, Eva's father, learns of what he interprets as his wife's own "unbridled" sexuality:

> Act like a whore, I'm gonna fuck you like a whore. You act like a whore, I'm gonna fuck you like a whore." He kept saying that over and over. I was so scared. I kept feeling that after he tore all her clothes off, and there wasn't any more to tear, he'd start tearing her flesh. (*Eva's Man* 37)

Because of her stigmatized promiscuity—and thus her perceived culpability in her own sexual abuse—Eva's mother, Marie, is denied the status of the "deserving victim" we often see in media today: the quintessential innocent, white, middle-class woman who embodies the perfect victim for sexual assault advocate support (Richie 24). The deserving victim is the uncomplicated, "easily understood by mainstream society" victim (Richie 24), and thus black women like Marie and Eva—who are not only perceived to be "asking for it" but who also internalize and enact constructs of unbridled, deviant sexuality—are rejected from this narrow construction of victimhood. This partially explains why John's violence is directed at Marie rather than her lover, Tyrone, for, as Carol Margaret Davison rightly notes, "Eva's father and his society regard

women as *naturally* sexually promiscuous," just as Davis and the other men in the novel regard Eva (396-7, emphasis original). However, this act also serves, "through sexuality, virility, and sexual domination… to display masculine strength, or a semblance of it" (Melancon 147). Marie, then, like her daughter, falls victim to multiple narratives about her sexuality which exist in order to support identity structures opposite to herself.

How, then, does Eva manage to disrupt these oppressive narratives of racialized gender (violence) that seem to permeate every instance of her life in the first chapters? How does she work to disrupt the white perspective (debased sexual agency), the black masculine perspective (object for display of male control), and the reactionary classical black female script (contained sexuality in the name of respectability, which we rarely see as a feasible option in *Eva's Man*)? The answer is one part "unnatural" literary narrative and one part sexual transgression of these three racialized gender narratives.[4] Throughout the novel, Eva seems to fixate on the figure of the queen bee, a woman who seems to kill her sexual partners—unconsciously and via natural causes—but is still found to be irresistible to men (*Eva's Man* 17). During the passages describing Eva's childhood, the adult women in her life, Marie and Miss Billie, tell Eva of this woman, who we are told is a real, embodied person; yet throughout the novel, the queen bee collapses with Eva to the point where we are unsure if the queen bee is literal, figurative,

[4] Again, I must pause to acknowledge the problematic connotations for "unnatural" narrative style, which has heightened consequences when discussing an African American female protagonist whose sexual identity has been described by critics—such as Melancon and Jenkins—as highly "transgressive" (again a term that should not be interpreted as negative), as well as a protagonist who is transgressive or in the eyes of the law because of the way she murders Davis and "desecrates" his body. I reference unnatural narratology repeatedly throughout this project simply because it is a useful mooring point for discussing narratives which so disrupt the traditional conventions of what reading prose feels like. However as my readers might notice, I make a point to always mark this term with quotations marks as a way to note that I do not intend for any connotative slippages (even though I am sure they will occur), and I often privilege African American critics like Karla Holloway rather than Brian Richardson or Jan Alber and Rüdiger Heinze.

separate from Eva's consciousness, or collided with her self. This uncertainty and conflation of these two characters or voices lends itself to Holloway's description of "translucence" in African American narratives, which is a quality that "complicates the identities of tellers of the stories. The boundaries between narrative voices and dialogue become obscure, merging one into the other" (59-60) in a way that "encourages the shimmering of [the text's] metaphorical layers" (55-6). In other words, by ambiguously combining the queen bee with Eva to the point where "the queen bee functions as a double for Eva in the narrative" (Jenkins 173), the unnatural narrative is able to explore and transgress the three racialized gender narratives wrapped up in the threatening concept of the queen bee, allowing readers to grasp more completely the way these constructs can collapse into a single subjectivity.

In order to understand just how the translucent narrative allows for the queen bee to be such a radical vehicle for Eva, first we must return to and understand the conventions surrounding this literal/figurative character. When Eva's mother discusses the queen bee, she says "she would be more scared to be the queen bee than to be any of the men. 'Supposed you really loved somebody,' Mama said. 'You'd be scared to love him" (*Eva's Man* 41). This moment is quite telling in terms of the conventional direction of violent power in gendered relationships. Marie is accustomed to being the victim in her own marriage—as we see in the previous scene of spousal rape—but the position of perpetrator is uncomfortable; it is traditionally reserved for men like her husband, who "wield masculine authority and subjectivity in relation to women in compensatory and systematic ways" (Melancon 21). Marie's description of such a relationship also genders her position, for rather than the queen bee physically using and abusing her men sexually, it is love that seems to kill them—as if the actual position of "perpetrator" in the male sense is impossible for women to inhabit fully, or to use Jenkins's

words, “Women are expected to be passive recipients of male desire/violence; the possibility that a woman could inflict her own violent desire on a man thus verges on the conceptually incredible” (162).

We later see Jones very strategically reify this claim in the way she genders the queen bee’s violence, as well as the way violence is directed against the queen bee herself. When attempting to explain masculine sexuality to a young Eva, the women in the novel describe men as bees who “sting” their women, which provides a way to interpret the metaphor of the queen “bee”: “‘Got to get stung by the bee before they can see.’ / ‘Mama, where does the bee sting?’ / ‘Your heart,’ Mama says. / ‘Down in your draws,’ says Miss Billie” (*Eva’s Man* 139). In other words, men direct their violence simultaneously through love and through aggressive sexuality (“your heart” and “down in your draws”), but the queen bee only has access to violent love rather than violent sexuality. Therefore, the queen bee is a threatening—or even could be read as a castrating—woman who partially reverses the direction of violent sexual power within gendered relationships but is still constrained within this dynamic due to her gendered script for relationships. Rather than being stung by the bee, she *is* the bee who kills her victims through love, rather than masculine physical abuse. However, eventually the queen bee succumbs to the original directionality of intimate violence, as Jenkins notes: “The character of the queen bee, supposedly the embodiment of dangerous female desire, ultimately succumbs to this logic [of passivity] as well, surrendering her own life rather than risk the life of a man she actually loves” (162). As will be discussed later, this is the primary difference between the queen bee and Eva; while one implodes to protect a man she loves, the other directs that violence outward in order to protect herself.

However, we should also turn our attention to the method of this killing, as it also points to a reversal and later conflation of directed power. When Eva describes the queen bee to Davis, he replies, "She must've sucked them hollow. That's why they died. Cause *they* had nothing left" (*Eva's Man* 74, emphasis original). In "sucking them hollow," the queen bee is consuming them both orally and sexually, a tension already set in place in the way Davis combines sex and oral consumption of food early in the novel: "When the vinegar touches the egg it smells like… a woman's smell" (*Eva's Man* 18). However, because Eva is ambiguously connected to the queen bee, the direction of power in the sexual "sucking them hollow" images becomes equally ambiguous: "'Let's play,' he asks. / The sweet milk in the queen bee's breasts has turned to blood" (*Eva's Man* 132). In this moment, which is singled out rhetorically by placing it in a chapter by itself, Jones draws attention to the way the queen bee—an image of a hyper-powerful, hypersexual woman—is simultaneously subjugated by male domination and sexual aggression, further emphasized by earlier lines such as, "A man sucking the milk from her breasts. He is sucking blood" (*Eva's Man* 131).

Critic Megan Sweeney brought *Eva's Man* into a reading group with incarcerated women, with the hypothesis that such women would identify with Eva in a way that bourgeois readers may not, and the findings during the subsequent discussions lead to fascinating interpretations of some of the imagery, such as the breast-blood imagery. For instance, when asked about this section, one woman answered, "To me it was like her life, that [Davis Carter] was just sucking the life from her" (461). It is Davis, then, who sucks Eva hollow, and it is the set of racial narratives that tell Eva to allow him to do it. "On the toilet throne, [Eva is] a queen bee"—a woman victimized by men but interpreted through conflicting racialized gender narratives to be the one in power, the one enacting her unbridled sexual agency. And in order to

maintain a politics of respectability and support the black men in her life, she is expected to accept this victimization without complaint.

However, in killing, orally castrating, and then pleasuring herself with Davis's body, Eva disrupts the conventional forces of racialized gender and transforms the constrained gendering of the queen bee into an externalization of violence rather than a passive internalization of it. In so doing, Eva "flouts both black nationalist and many feminist definitions of victimization and resistance" (Sweeney 469). The murder scene—which serves as the climax of sorts, considering the lack of linear progression—is rife with images of sexual, oral consumption as she subverts the traditional direction of sexual violence onto Davis's body: "I opened his trousers and played with his penis. My mouth, my teeth, my tongue went inside his trousers. I raised blood, slime from cabbage, blood sausage. Blood from an apple" (*Eva's Man* 128). Like the queen bee—and like Davis before his death—Eva sucks the blood from him, "a milkweed full of blood" (*Eva's Man* 128). This act, therefore, works as a disruption of racialized gender narratives not only because of the sexual transgression of conventional power dynamics, but also because we are able to recognize the act of sucking Davis hollow as a moment of translucence that engages with the "shimmering metaphor" of the queen bee (Jenkins 68). Eva's translucent narrative breaks down the notion of a stable distinction between Eva and the queen bee, allowing us to interrogate the resultant "polyphony of discourses within an individual" (Richardson 136). Only once we understand how the queen bee is subjugated (i.e. racialized gender constructs normalize the violent taking of black women's bodies/life forces) can we understand how Eva later disrupts these conventions to become the unchallenged vision of a castrating woman capable of sucking a man hollow.

Through these many layers of metaphor and meaning, through the negotiation between voices both individual and collective, *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man* both construct transgressive narrative worlds that challenge racialized gender discourses that mark Ursa and Eva's subjectivities with cultural meaning. Ursa's body, as a "resource for metaphor" ("Mama's Baby" 205) becomes a witness to the traumatic sexual violence of slavery, and through that process she learns to collapse the binary between pleasure and pain, love and hate in a way that is ghosted in the stories passed down to her by her foremothers. Ursa uses both the blues and "unnatural" narration to assert her own subject position within the collective memory that threatens to subsume those who came before, thus engaging in an act of resistance and transformation. Eva's body is marked in way that more directly engages tropes of insatiable sexuality the trap of loyalty produced by centuries of discourse, but she likewise uses "unnatural" narration to render these narratives absurd and resist violently through the metaphor of the queen bee. Taken together, these two texts speak to the way that Jones and other black women writers "make linguistic rituals in recursive, metaphoric layers that structure meaning and voice into a complex that eventually implicates the primal, mythic, and female community as its source" (Holloway 35). Jones, however, distinguishes herself from many other black women writers by also challenging the way the female community can inscribe additional layers of oppression, marked on the bodies of Ursa and Eva as Spillers' hieroglyphics of the flesh.

Subverting the Institutional Gaze

The racialized gender scripts Ursa and Eva navigate and resist in Jones's texts take on added significance as they become institutionalized in law, in economics, in psychology, and in the act of reading or consuming literature itself. *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man* both interrogate the institutional gaze throughout their pages, demonstrating how racial oppression of centuries past lingers through the present, lurking in systems that protect or service only a portion of the American populace. Because these institutionalized discourses often appear invisible, masquerading as common sense or tradition, *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man* resort to radical reinterpretation, laying bare these systems by representing them in shocking new ways. Ultimately, these two texts disrupt what is considered "normal" within the intersection of the institutional gaze and black women, pointing to the way that systemic oppression was not and still has not been abolished alongside slavery or the subsequent civil rights crusades.

As an introductory example to get a taste of what I mean when I say "the intersection of institutional systems and racialized gender," it might be helpful to turn to systems of economics: currency, commodification, neoliberal exploitation, etc. In her analysis of *Corregidora*, for instance, Hershini Bhana Young points to the lingering entanglement of race and economics in the form of the black slave as property and capital:

> The haunted nature of the slave as commodity assumes vast political importance as it enables us to speak about the affective imprints of violence, injury, and grief that continue to permeate the worlds we live in. (*Haunting Capital* 40)

Likewise, bell hooks discusses the commodification of Otherness thoroughly in *Black Looks,* emphasizing that race and ethnicity continues to be a "*resource* for pleasure" and an "alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-

over in intimate relations with the Other" (23, emphasis added). The way that the black body is commodified and objectified renders it consumable and exploitable in ways that hearken back to chattel era slavery, but have faded to the background in the post Civil Rights era. *Corregidora* takes up this intersection head on, pointing to the repeated recoding of the female genitalia as Corregidora's "gold pussy" (124), and how this connection survives the abolition of slavery through Mutt's verbal violence against Ursa: "Piece a ass for sale. I got me a piece a ass for sale" (159). Jones, then, represents the violence of such economic commodification in Ursa's intimate life, demonstrating how black women often must navigate economic systems of power in their day-to-day lives, while also pointing to how this intersection simultaneously happens and can be disrupted at the level of language.

Again, as I move into the analysis in this chapter, I feel obligated to pause to discuss the structure of the pages to follow. Similar to the differences between the two texts described in the previous chapter, we must not conflate these two texts when discussing the institutional consumption and maintenance of racialized gender discourses: the legal, economic, and literary institutions at play within each text differ significantly as well. Because of the nature of the trauma in *Corregidora*, Jones's first novel is more concerned with the haunting presence of slavery as an institution—primarily in the conflation of sex(uality) and property and the gendered nature of access to legal operations and protections in a heteropatriarchal system constructed and maintained by a white majority. *Eva's Man* explores more thoroughly the intersection of racial discourses and the common conception of criminality—of how we describe and relate to acts of violence when they are either directed against the black female body or when it is a black woman who reverses this directionality and asserts herself violently against the men in her life. Both texts concern themselves with the gaze of the reader and the way literary

texts themselves are institutionalized and entrenched in systems of power; however, *Eva's Man* yet again seems to be a more radical interpretation of this relationship as it purposefully disrupts the reading process and withholds parts of the story. Even with their differences, both of Jones's novels provide challenging alternatives to common conceptions of institutionalized racism and sexism, providing transformative spaces for her characters to resist the lingering effects of systems designed to enslave rather than liberate them.

Now let us return to the first example from the beginning of this chapter in order to explore it more thoroughly. In *Corregidora,* Ursa is not only haunted by her foremothers' experience of sexual trauma, but she is also haunted by the legal forces which bolstered a system of enslavement and forced labor. As Spillers states, "the captive female body locates precisely a moment of converging political and social vectors that mark the flesh as a prime commodity of exchange" ("Mama's Baby" 220), and throughout Ursa's narration, the female body continues to be marked as a commodity of exchange because of the lingering effects of these sociopolitical vectors. The memory of Corregidora is deeply entrenched in the economic, for the trauma sustained by Gram and Great Gram has just as much to do with sexual violence as it does with commodification:

> He didn't send nothing but the rich mens in there to me, cause he said I was his little gold pussy, his little gold piece, and it didn't take some of them old rich mens no time, and then I still be fresh for him. (*Corregidora* 124)

Tamara Lea Spira suggests this intersection of the sexual and the economic creates a "law of value that says 'gold [valuable] pussy'; a woman's vagina equals her economic value and the economic value equals her essence" (120). In other words, the economic value is the only signifier that Corregidora values in Gram and Great Gram—their genitalia-as-capital comes to

define these women as the privileged hieroglyphics of the flesh. Stephanie Li goes on to argue that the women internalize this redefinition of the body, and they transmit to each new generation that the womb is the "primary site of female value" (qtd. in Spira 120-1), they themselves becoming integral to the maintenance of this racialized gender discourse due to the trauma they sustain as forced sexual labor on the Corregidora plantation.

As this interpretation of female worth becomes internalized in the newest generation, we see how Ursa's interactions with the men in her life—Mutt and Tadpole—often take a similar trajectory, demonstrating the lingering entanglement of the female body with economic capital. While Mutt considers himself separate from the histories that came before—"whichever way you look at it, we ain't them"—Ursa consistently collapses that distinction, saying "it was almost as if I was" (*Corregidora* 151); however, Mutt becomes the primary agent of these surviving economic narratives, often descending into jealous rages that linguistically align Ursa with the prostitution her foremothers' survived: "One a y'all wont to bid for her? Piece a ass for sale. I got me a piece a ass for sale. That's what y'all wont, ain't it? Piece a ass" (*Corregidora* 159). In this moment, the stage Ursa stands on becomes a metaphorical auction block, collapsing time and relegating Ursa to a sexualized commodity to be bid on—an "object for consumption and enjoyment" (Spira 121). This moment, in a narrative sense, is a metaphorical repetition, as Mutt and Ursa repeat actions of a distant past, which speaks to the haunted nature of *Corregidora*'s narration. Karla Holloway gives us a useful way of interpreting how repetition might be a vehicle for haunting in African American literature, stating:

> Both place and time are implicated in… recursion and repetition because *displacement is the thematic result of repetition*. It moves the text away from itself and the reader away from a subjective/objective understanding of it… Instead, the text becomes circular, its

referentiality no longer given through the perceived, linear arrangement of words. (78, emphasis original)

Thus we can see how Ursa is incredibly accurate when she says "it was almost as if [she] was" her foremothers (*Corregidora* 151), for Mutt's language results in Ursa's subjectivity being displaced by theirs in the mind of the reader, as the auction block becomes a circular repetition, conjuring up images from Gram and Great Gram's past as enslaved economic capital.

However, Young helps us to conceptualize how, as always, Jones's protagonists are able to subvert common racial discourses such as the commodification of Otherness, emphasizing that the only actual exchange of money in relation to Ursa happens because of the blues: "Ursa, however, by reiterating that she is paid for singing the blues that provides her with a public forum for telling 'her' story, subverts the commodification of the black body on the auction block" (*Haunting Capital* 105). It is important to explore why Jones chooses the blues as the vehicle through which Ursa undermines her own commodification, for sexual objectification, as Amy S. Gottfried notes, "not only sexually constrains but also silences" (567). Through the blues, Ursa refuses this silence and sings back in return, claiming her voice, her subjectivity, and her oral history. Furthermore, the fact Ursa is *paid* for becoming the "primary subject of her own invention" ("Interstices" 167) through her music means that she is able to effectively subvert economic power in relation to black women's bodies: rather than being paid for her body as object, she is paid for the entangled individual and communal oral history she delivers in the highly personal performance of the blues. Thus, just as Ursa is able to carve out a space for her subjectivity in relation to the italicized narration of rememory, she is also able to assert her own subjectivity and privilege her own voice in the realm of the economic, which in turn disrupts the privilege on the female sex as the only definition of the black woman's "essence."

This complicated entanglement of internalization and resistance also runs throughout the most prominent theme within the text: the way rememory functions as an oral and physical resistance to the erasure written history enacts on African American communities. Ursa and her foremothers' charge to "make generations" is entrenched in oral history—in providing an alternative text as evidence of the atrocities sustained while Gram and Great Gram were held in captivity. The oral history passed down through the generations is clearly defined in relation to the void produced in the written historiography maintained by the white majority: "She said when they did away with slavery down there [in Brazil] they burned all the slavery papers so it would be like they never had it" (*Corregidora* 9). Rememory itself is, as Young states, "a collective… repertoire of thought-pictures perpetuated and passed down through active political engagement," which "always exists in relation to other discourses of history, 'that highly functional fantasy of the west,' and the law" (*Haunting Capital* 112). Linguistically, then, the way the story multiplies, the way it folds in and out of different voices and becomes a series of repeated passages and images emphasizes the organic and circular nature of rememory—of the way that it stands in contrast to the "fantasy of the west" which privileges linear accounts of history fixed in progression narratives and documented in written texts rather than oral tradition or physical bodies. The Corregidora women thus subvert the western conception of history and the law, reproducing bodies that attest to the crimes of said Western system and orally transmitting a translucent narrative that serves to disrupt the erasure the Brazil government enacted after slavery was abolished.

However, alongside this resistance, many scholars and many of the characters within *Corregidora* itself have complicated our understanding of rememory, suggesting that perhaps it becomes its own rigid law in the way that Mama, Gram, and Great Gram view the narrative as a

fixed oral text rather than one that is open to accumulation and transformation. For instance, Spira suggests that the demand to "make generations" "serves as a means by which a sexual economy of slavery that reduced enslaved women to their reproductive capacities has become internalized and carried on" (120). In other words, the Corregidora women do more than take on Corregidora's name—they also take on his politics concerning the value of the female womb, privileging reproduction in the same way that he "fucked his own whores and fathered his own breed" (*Corregidora* 9). Jones encodes the tragedy of this internalization in her description of the birthing process—of the moment when a new generation comes into being as a new witness:

> *I never told you how Great Gram had Gram. She thought she had to go to the toilet, and then something told her not to go outside to the outhouse like she was going to, and then she squat down on the chamber pot. And then that's how she had your Gram, coming out in the slop jar. That's how we all begin, remember that. That's how we all begin. A mud ditch or a slop jar or hit the floor or the ground. It's all the same… But you got to make generations, you go on making them anyway.* (*Corregidora* 41)

As Mama tells this to Ursa, she is privileging procreation—"making generations"—while simultaneously devaluing the human being or generation that results, aligning them linguistically with mud and excrement. Hearing this description, Ursa learns to value her womb more than the rest of her subjectivity, which throws her life into crisis when it is surgically removed, leaving "*barbed wire where a womb should be* [and] *curdled milk*" (*Corregidora* 76). As a result, she feels scarred, barren, and decayed, lacking the sexual organ both Corregidora and her foremothers valued both economically and metaphorically.

Ultimately, then, the binary between oppression (historical erasure) and agential resistance (making generations to pass on an oral testimony) is blurred significantly in

Corregidora, and critics who focus on the internalization of reproductive worth must be careful not to oversimplify Ursa's foremothers. As Young points out, "Within the constrained situation of slavery, the space of agency can seem remarkably similar to the space of captivity, as acts 'of resistance exist within the context of relations of domination and are not external to them'" (*Haunting Capital* 97). Jones makes a point to throw these concepts into crisis to challenge the way we interpret the artificial binary of victimhood/agency, especially within the context of slavery. One of the most telling instances of this collapse within the space of captivity happens in Great Gram's description of the runaway boy while she is being raped: "And then somehow it got into my mind that each time he [Corregidora] kept going down in me would be that boy's feets running. And then when he come, it meant they caught him" (*Corregidora* 128). Great Gram engages in a moment of translucence here, disrupting boundaries between subjectivities in order to "encourag[e] the shimmering of [the text's] metaphorical layers" (Holloway 55-6).

Great Gram's narration distorts the boundary between sexual abuse and liberation—transforming each violent thrust into another step towards freedom as she projects her own consciousness into the boy's, as emphasized by the final line. When Corregidora ejaculates, Great Gram's womb—her worth, or her essence as coded throughout the novel—is conquered and claimed by Corregidora's sperm, emphasizing his claim over her as property and translating into the boy being "caught." Because resistance and oppression are so intimately linked in this moment and throughout the novel, Young challenges us to think of the Corregidora women's "urgency around bearing generations" not as an internalization of Corregidora's logic, per se, but rather as "covert resistance that overlaps with the forms of domination" (*Haunting Capital* 101). In this way, we can see how Jones complicates this binary in the same way she complicates all the others—challenging grand narratives concerning racialized gender/sexuality and agency

while interrogating the intersections of institutions such as the law and economics within these grand narratives. Furthermore, the vehicle Jones uses to engage in such an interrogation is the postmodern, "unnatural" narration which utilizes such unconventional techniques as repetitive haunting and translucence in order to speak in new ways to the complexities of black female subjectivities.

Likewise, Jones's second novel, *Eva's Man,* interrogates the institutional consumption and maintenance of racialized gender discourse, similar to *Corregidora*'s interest in the conflation of sex and property. However, Jones's second novel focuses more on the law and psychiatry—two systems that are designed to protect and service the American populace but generally only manage to do so for the dominant races and genders. The violent nature of Eva's transgression and resistance place her at the mercy of these institutional systems, which, as Trimiko Melancon states, "are scrutinized in the novel for their accountability in creating social problems" (135). Within the judiciary and criminal psychiatry systems, black women are often consciously or unconsciously viewed as "outside the parameters of acceptability and protection… which in turn subject[s] them to discursive and corporeal… violence" (Melancon 18-19). According to Beth Richie, as a result, the force that the criminal justice system imposes upon black women can be rooted not only in "misunderstand[ings] and misinterpret[ations of] Black women's experiences of male violence" but also in "racist stereotypes" (18), which leads black women to a severely distrust the "protective" state. This distrust is mentioned repeatedly throughout the novel, such as when Eva's prison bunkmate, Elvira, states, "I ain't never raised my hand against a man myself, cause if you don't get them, they get you, and if you do get them, the law get you" (*Eva's Man* 150). Here, Elvira understands the systemic power positioned within both men and the law—written and enforced primarily by a white, heteropatriarchal

population—and in turn assumes that any violent resistance will not be interpreted as self defense but rather will affirm widely-held grand narratives concerning black women's criminality and otherness.

Furthermore, Eva is simultaneously constrained by a narrow legal definition of victimhood that erases the complex nature of racialized gender violence and its subversive—and often violent—resistance. We see this quite clearly in the aftermath of Davis's death, where repeated interactions with state institutions are clearly marked by an inability to read Eva's victimization: "'She got any marks on her?' [the captain] asked, still looking at me. / 'No, not a mark one [sic]. We had one of the policewomen check her over.' / 'No scratches, or nothing? / 'No sir. / 'He didn't beat her or anything?' / 'No sir'" (*Eva's Man* 69). The captain in this scene relies on the essentialist understanding of abuse as merely physical, so the lack of marks on Eva's body then resists an imposed schema of logical motive. In fact, physical marks actually vilify rather than justify Eva, as Young has pointed out: "Alfonso, Davis, and Moses Tripp have embodied evidence attesting to Eva's criminality while Eva has little but her silence to attest to her lifelong torment" ("Inheriting" 388). By placing scars and physical marks of violence on the men rather than Eva, Jones purposefully points to the way the criminal justice system oversimplifies relationship violence to the point where it actually enacts an *additional* violence against women like Eva who do not fit neatly into the category of "victim."

A lack of physical evidence, a history of racial grand narratives, and the troubling silence Eva exercises combine to produce a legal case shrouded in misinterpretations and assumptions that Eva attempts to disrupt throughout the course of the novel. Although Eva's case is inherently complex, the law repeatedly explains her within the easiest—and generally most stereotypical—terms. When the captain reads her file, he begins with her early childhood—the

names of her parents, where she was born, when she moves to New York—and special emphasis is placed on her previous criminal history: "She's been in trouble before. When she was seventeen she stabbed a man. She wouldn't talk then either, wouldn't say anything to defend herself. She was given a six-month sentence" (*Eva's Man* 70). According to Young, this shallow description of Eva's life signifies how "the judicial system in *Eva's Man* reads Eva's eventual murder of Davis as the continuing degeneration of a criminal who, in a trial run of her murder, stabs Moses Tripp" ("Inheriting" 386). The law's linear interpretation of Eva's criminal history aligns itself with narratologist Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's definition of a traditional "story," which "designates the narrated events… reconstructed in their chronological order" (qtd. in Richardson 94). As Jones present's Eva's story in a nonlinear fashion, then, she is simultaneously disrupting traditional narrative stories told in chronological order as well as the way the legal system interprets Eva's personal history.

The fact that Eva refuses to participate in this linear interpretation of her criminality is a linguistically coded act of agency and subversion, deciding instead to tell her audience her story through a temporally fragmented collision of narrated events. In fact, Eva even reveals the murder and her incarceration before narrating the scene with Moses, so readers are incapable of even conceiving Moses as the precursor to Davis's murder ("Inheriting" 386). Ultimately, as Megan Sweeney states, this disruption serves not only as "a reminder that no easy formula and no readily identifiable single cause can capture the accumulation of lived experiences that lead so many women [of color] to prison" (468-9), but it also serves to subvert traditional power structures wielded by the criminal justice system against black women who are not easily understood by essentialist stereotypes.

While reading *Eva's Man,* it is easy to recognize these temporal distortions and to understand how they might work to disrupt common sense readings of Eva's narrative; however, Eva's most transgressive act of subversion—and the most difficult to wrestle with—lies at the intersection of silence and personal agency. Critics and readers alike have struggled with how to interpret Eva's silence throughout the novel—whether to blame Eva for her passivity, to sympathize with her inability to be heard by the system at large, or to read it as agential subversion. Critic Melvin Dixon, for example, condemns Eva for "'rebelling against language' and imprisoning herself in silence" (qtd. in Sweeney 464), whereas the imprisoned readers Sweeney interviewed "empathize [with] the cultural refusal to hear her accounts of molestation" (464). Although her silence can certainly be read in both capacities, I find Jones's use of silence here most convincing when read alongside Melancon's understanding of the classical black female script and Young's interpretation of criminal confession.

When Eva "just let[s] the man tell his side" (*Eva's Man* 98), she is embodying—and exaggerating for an almost satirical effect—the politics of respectability dictated by the classical black female script. More importantly, however, while she remains silent, she is also refusing to participate in a legal system that objectifies marginalized "criminals" in order to reify its own structural authority. Dating back to the early black women's club movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, black women have "adopted… a politics of silence" and "conventional bourgeois propriety in regards to sexuality, morality, and domesticity" in order to combat "their stigmatization as the quintessence of deviance" at the hands of the white majority (Melancon 22). Eva, as a black woman constrained by this classical black female script, veils her sexuality in a cloak of silence: "I wanted him to stay closer, longer, to stay inside me longer, but he didn't, and I didn't ask him to" (*Eva's Man* 95). However, she exaggerates the construct,

turning it into a caricature in order to demonstrate how ineffective it is for as a model for black women's sexual identities (Melancon 2). Ultimately, her silence infuriates her readers, positioning critics like June Jordan—who actively call for positive images embedded in the classical black female script (Sweeney 469)—so that they critique Eva's exaggerated politics of silence as an imprisoning passivity. Therefore, by embodying the classical black female script to a fault, Eva is able to subvert its power and convert representationalists to interrogators of these supposed "positive" images of racialized gender and sexuality.

Eva's silence also serves to subvert the power structures embedded in the legal system dependent on criminal confession. As an institution that is already susceptible to misinterpretations of marginalized people's experiences, the language of the legal system, according to Toni Morrison, "does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge" (qtd. in Sweeney 479). In other words, the legal system does not allow for narratives which challenge its own understanding of reality—instead it limits knowledge and enacts violence against black women like Eva who threaten the system's authority over conventions of criminalization and victimhood. If she had spoken, if she had confessed, the system would have "diminished the complexity of her actions as a black woman" and instead interpreted Eva's story in such a way to affirm its own biases, demanding that she produce an easily "consumable truth" and become a "known object" ("Inheriting" 385). In this way, the legal system becomes an extension of Davis—a heteropatriarchal structure of oppression that attempts to suck Eva hollow through its rituals of confession. Rather than be consumed, however, Eva—the ultimate queen bee—again disrupts this direction of power and refuses to produce a consumable story for the judiciary system. Her silence is an act of agency that challenges the legal system's authority over her personal narrative.

If Eva invests this much energy in resisting the oversimplification and consumption of her story, we must consider closely the reader's position in relation to *Eva's Man*. Similar to the way Eva invokes silence and temporal distortions to disrupt the authority of systemic institutions, I would argue that Eva places a thin veil of silence on the text and uses a transgressive narrative style to disrupt our act of consumption. As "unnatural" narratologist Brian Richardson states, in traditional, "fictional first person narratives, the depiction of the fictional world is a constitutive act—whatever is said to exist thereby does exist" (Richardson 92); however, in *Eva's Man,* the unnatural narrative world is filled with occasional gaps and contradictions which challenge this constitutive act. Like the psychiatrist who attempts to derive both psychological motive and an interpretation of Eva's crime, readers may express "impatience and discomfort with the text's blurred distinctions between fact and fantasy and with its refusal to provide an explanation or final judgment of Eva's crime" (Sweeney 460). We empathize with the psychiatrist's frustrations, such as when he asks, "It was just because he kept you up in that room and kept his hands on you that you killed him?" (*Eva's Man* 171). Without any other expressed motive, readers fall into traps created by the legal system, thus making us complicit in the institutions Eva subverts and challenges throughout the narrative: "Why didn't she leave?.... Davis was not 'keeping her hostage'" (Sweeney 471).

We are simultaneously troubled as Eva travels down the "unnatural" narrative rabbit hole, increasingly collapsing events, dialogue, reality, and apparent hallucinations; this might lead us to question Eva's sanity or to write off her story due to her circumstances, such as when the psychiatrist asks, "Have you had any hallucinations since I gave you these? / No. / Why did you think you bit it all off? / I did. / The police report says you didn't" (*Eva's Man* 167). By aligning us with the judiciary system and the psychiatrist, Jones is pointing to our complicity in

these systems of oppression, asking us to interrogate our own consumption of Eva's story as an act of power while simultaneously allowing Eva to disrupt our gaze as she does with the other force relations in her life. Through her use of gaps, contradictions, and the fabrication of an unnatural narrative world, Eva reclaims her agency and resists "penetration by others who wish to 'understand her… [and] threate[n] her with imprisonment within monolithic meaning" ("Inheriting" 387).

Thus, *Eva's Man* helps us to understand some of the dangers imbedded in the reading experience itself—that the relationship between an author, a text, and the reader can be entrenched in systems of power that have the power to reinforce racial discourses rather than disrupt them. Reading itself can be considered a voyeuristic gaze and an erasure created by empathy or judgment. Young asserts that an extremely fine line "exists between a visceral sympathetic reliving of trauma that engenders the black body and a fetishistic replacing/erasure of the subject by the reader/voyeur as she puts herself in another's shoes" (*Haunting Capital* 10). The sexualized trauma in *Corregidora* has the danger of becoming, as Ursa's foremothers' states, "nothing but sex circuses," similar to the voyeurism that occurs on the Corregidora plantation: with "all them white peoples, mens, womens, and childrens crowding around to see" (125). Reading can be an act of entertainment or an act of sharing, and if the text invites the former, then the reader's gaze can be considered, as Maisha L. Wester states, a "moment of penetration… rendering the voyeur's gaze a sort of sexual assault" (9).

Thus, *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man* both use "unnatural" narrative techniques to establish distance from the reader, putting up barriers such as silence, polyphony, and translucence that force the reader to question her own position in relation to the text. Reading itself is often thrown into crisis, leaving us to question why we need the motive for Eva's violence or why we

need to understand when Ursa is speaking rather than Mutt, Mama, Gram, or Great Gram. Furthermore, the texts also ask us to question how we pass judgment on these characters who do not fit into the boxes constructed over centuries of racial discourse, just as Jones herself refuses to insert an authorial judgment into the text—choosing instead to "record her observations with compassion and understanding," as Claudia C. Tate suggests (142). In this way, we can see just how transformative Jones's novels are, offering new spaces and challenging her readers to engage with representations of black women in relation to the many institutions that govern their lives.

Conclusion

Taken together, Gayl Jones's first two novels, *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man,* speak to the power of language: in its ability both to oppress and to serve as a vehicle for resistance while black women navigate racialized gender discourses embedded in the political, the economic, and the literary. As Spillers states, "sticks and bricks *might* break our bones, but words will most certainly *kill* us" ("Mama's Baby" 209); however, writers like Jones use words to subvert that destructive force, carving out spaces for difference and agency, while also throwing our commonly held beliefs about concepts such as these into crisis at every turn. With temporal circularity/repetition, translucence, mythic and vulgar imagery, blues syntax and silent gaps in the story, *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man* interrogate the many complexities of black female subjectivities in transformative and controversial ways.

Maisha L. Wester notes that the context in which Jones is situated is a period abundant with postmodern texts which challenge fixed and essentialist interpretations of the African American community (152), but I would argue that the way Jones participates in this transgressive literary discourse is particularly fascinating because of its political implications. The post-Civil Rights period, as bell hooks states, "'successfully demanded a hearing' in part through embracing 'the politics of difference'" (qtd. in Wester 152), ushering in a variety of literary texts, particularly by African American female writers which were, as Holloway states, multiple in their narrative style:

> Multiplied texts have figurative dimensions that continually reflect other, deeper dimensions. Their language and their imaginative visions suggest a certain depth of memory that black women's textual strategies are designed to acknowledge. (14)

Corregidora (with its multiplied narrators, mythic repetition, and displacing moments of rememory) and *Eva's Man* (with its fragmented, circular chronology and its disruptive imagery, which connects Eva to the lingering effects of both personal and collective history) are clearly prime examples of post-Civil Rights, postmodern texts that use unconventional techniques to open up literary representation for a politics of difference. In this way, Jones is in fact speaking to a larger contextual turn towards multiplicity rather than essentialism, and it would be certainly be feasible to read her in relation to other black female writers who take up a politics of difference as well, although for the purpose of this project I have decided not to do so.

I do find—as do many other scholars—that what makes Jones's work so unique as well as so controversial is what some readers interpret as ambivalence, a lack of authorial judgment, and/or a refusal to create "positive" racialized gender representations. Jones is quite conscious of her refusal to be either a "'representative' black woman writer" or to construct "positive race images," stating, "there's a lot of imaginative territory that you have to be 'wrong' in order to enter" (qtd. in Gottfried 559). In entering this "wrong" space and constructing her narrative worlds there, Jones is pushing up against our conceptions of positive/negative race images and challenging us to think of why that distinction exists and how problematic it can be on the lives of black women who might embrace their own "wrongness" alongside their "goodness." Patricia Hill Collins sums this up quite nicely, stating that replacing "negative images with positive ones can be equally problematic if the function of stereotypes as controlling images remains unrecognized" (qtd. in Gottfried 561). Jones not only recognizes the danger of controlling images—whether they be negative *or* positive—but puts this recognition into shocking and moving practice as she tells her readers of the very human implications embedded in Ursa and Eva's highly personal and political stories.

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