Raven Halle

Margaret Mauk

LIT 3383

7 December 2018

No Peace, But Quiet: An Exploration of Silence in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*

Written in the thick of the post-civil rights movement and the emergence of activism for Black feminism in 1970's America, Gayl Jones's premier novel *Corregidora* revolves largely around the experience of Ursa Corregidora, the novel's protagonist, whose experiences are permeated by the racial and sexual traumas lived and passed down by her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. The narrative chronicled in *Corregidora* relies heavily on the tradition of oral storytelling and notions about the ways in which familial traumas can span generations through working against the erasure of slave narratives: an idea that is central to our understanding of the novel. One critical aspect of the novel is Jones's utilization of silence—whether literal or metaphorical—and how our examinations and interpretations of these silences inform both our understanding of Ursa's character and the novel as a whole. Much of the literary criticism surrounding feminism and antiracism is rooted in the notion that the power dynamic between voice and silence favors voice as a force more influential than its counterpart, and so Jones's inclusion of silences changes the manner in which readers interact with the text. In her subversion of this dynamic and adaptation of silence as more than just a linguistic muting, Jones creates a sort of counter-narrative in regards to Ursa's engagement with her surroundings, ultimately posing the question of what it means for a novel to nullify the power of voice over silence.

The first few pages of the novel introduce us immediately to Ursa's marriage to Mutt and how a destructive altercation between the two leads to Ursa's hysterectomy, leaving her entirely infertile. After finishing a shift at Happy's, the bar which employs Ursa to sing her blues music, Mutt tells Ursa "I'm your husband. You listen to me, not to them" (Jones 3). A few sentences later, Ursa reveals that "that was when [she] fell. The doctors in the hospital said [her] womb would have to come out. Mutt and [her] didn't stay together after that" (Jones 3). Here, we see an instance of intertwined loss—Ursa's loss of her ability to bear children as well as the loss of her marriage—and how these losses are a product of coerced silence perpetrated by Mutt against Ursa. Mutt's pushing of Ursa is his way of chastising her for singing her music to other people, and so this literal silencing then leads to the metaphorical silencing of Ursa's ability to pass her familial history on to future generations. In her essay "Pregnant Possibilities," Donna Booth Summers discusses Wilson Harris's claim that "the womb [is] a metaphor for the transformative capabilities of the human imagination . . . [and that] the creation vessel of humankind [is] the creative vessel of a new spirit" (Summers 2). We see in *Corregidora* that, while Ursa's womb or the lack thereof hinders her capacity to create generations and thus cannot transfer her familial narrative, the hysterectomy does allow for the production "of a new spirit," which is the new identity formed by Ursa separate from the generational identity ascribed to her by her foremothers (Summers 2). Summers further discusses Harris's "[recognizing] the womb and its rebirthing capacity as a part of women, placing the female . . . in a position devoid of exploitation and degradation, for in these tragic trends, humanity experiences the death of pregnant potentiality," which is a claim that forces us to push against the grain (Summers 2). Ursa is not, in fact, "devoid of exploitation and degradation," as we observe through the idea that

Ursa's body itself is breathing evidence of systemic abuse and rape as perpetrated by Mr. Corregidora against Ursa's grandmother and great-grandmother (Summers 2). Because this event occurs at the beginning of the novel, it positions Ursa's loss of fertility as the thing which silences the narrative of her family as well as situating the rest of the novel as a response to this complicated loss, while simultaneously asserting that the diction surrounding Ursa's womb-loss is representative of the ways in which the body does or does not create language.

If examining the novel on a broad scale, it is possible to reduce *Corregidora* to a testament to the many forms through which the human body produces and carries narratives. With this in mind, we can examine Ursa's dreams as examples of the notion that language does not automatically inform us of the body. Ursa equates her incapacity to bear children to palpable images such as "spilled glasses" of tears and "grounds of coffee," which are images that, like Ursa's womb, are inherently inadequate: liquid outside of its container is undrinkable, and coffee grounds alone are not enough to make coffee (Jones 46-54). While these metaphors do serve the purpose of ascribing corporeal qualities to the abstraction that is Ursa's infertility, they also function as metaphorical silences in that the faculty to consume liquid and generate coffee is removed entirely. The unreached potential of these images to successfully carry out their corresponding actions is suggestive of an anecdotal silence in that there is an unspoken space between action and action potential. Unlike the claim that "although emotional words can convey the emotions we feel, they can be used without subjective experiencing of an emotion, as well," Ursa's dreams do not utilize "emotional words," but rather images central to the context of the novel, further asserting ideas about the kind of silences birthed by this example—this, a linguistic silence (Abbassi et al).

Continuing in this vein, we can examine silence in terms of imperialist hegemonies through the notion that language connotes the authority of hegemony. The last chapters of *Corregidora* occur some years hereafter the novel's general time span, and while working at the Spider, a man tells Ursa "I don't like that word discovery. Ray Charles is a genius . . . [and] Sinatra was the first one to call Ray Charles a genius . . . If a white man hadn't told them they wouldn't've seen it" (Jones 169). That Charles's talent was recognized only by few until recognized by Sinatra along with the fact that "they say Columbo discovered America" are testaments to the idea of language belonging to the powerful (Jones 169). This relates to Steinhart's claim that "if nobody ever acknowledged your existence, you wouldn't exist as a person;" however, this notion is subverted by the novel's statement that one exists only if a white person says so (Behnam et al). The man, in saying to Ursa "I don't have to spell it out for you" and asking "do you know what I'm talking about," epitomizes the notion of hegemonic silence because he does not directly state what it is that he is talking about (Jones 169). Further, it can be asserted that the "thing" talked about by this man, hegemonic control over discourse and language, is the same "thing" which is responsible for burning the slavery documents and which enables Mutt's abuse of Ursa. This, then, asserts that the hegemony is equivalent to the silencers, as Ursa's familial history was erased entirely in terms of written language and exists only because of oral tradition and the Corregidora necessity to create generations. Extrapolating on this assertion that language belongs to the oppressor, we see how this is bolstered further by the imperative creation of AAE, or African American English. When groups are oppressed by hegemonic language, as in *Corregidora*, the need for "tools of signification, indirection, circumlocution, intonation, and laughter to accomplish social goals while retaining a sovereign

social space" becomes apparent (Morgan 368). Although the creation of a separate, new discourse is not literal "silence," it is considered so in the context of the novel because it was the initial hegemonic silence which necessitated a new language to begin with.

While the aforementioned cases serve to highlight the ways in which Ursa's silences lead to largely adverse consequences, we observe at the novel's ending how this voicelessness supersedes an act of sexual reclamation. In the future which occurs towards the end of *Corregidora*, Ursa reconnects with Mutt. Despite the traumas experienced by Ursa as a result of Mutt's abuse, Ursa consensually agrees to go with him to his hotel room, during which she states that "[she] knew what he wanted" and that "[she] wanted it too" (Jones 183). Ursa does not speak, but rather "[gets] between [Mutt's] knees," to which Mutt recalls that "[Ursa] never would suck it when [he] wanted [her] to" (Jones 183). This scenario represents a distinct shift in Ursa's psyche—first, her silences give way to abuse, but here, her silence allows her to reclaim her female-identified sexuality. Ursa realizes that the thing "a woman can do to a man that make him hate her so bad . . . one minute . . . and can't get her out of his mind the next" is the act of fellatio, the "moment of broken skin but not sexlessness," because she understands that in this moment, "[she] could kill [Mutt]" (Jones 183). While this ending to *Corregidora* can be interpreted as ambiguous, as the novel as a whole relies heavily on notions of blues music and the ways in which "ambiguity . . . relates to blues feelings and relationships," it is conceivable that, similarly to how the destruction of slave records erased and thus silenced a portion of Ursa's familial history, the silence of Ursa during this sexual encounter can be read as effectively silencing Ursa's own history of abuse as perpetrated by Mutt against Ursa (Allen 258).

This, however, is not where the reclamation ends: just as Ursa's familial traumas have fundamentally affected and influenced her, this sexual act on the part of Ursa also affects and influences her familial narrative. According to Adrienne D. Davis, slavery is "a sexual political economy" which "compelled enslaved Black women to labor in three markets—productive, reproductive, and sexual—crucial to the political economy" (Davis 457-458). In other words, the ability of slavery to be successfully perpetuated relies heavily on the sexual labor unwillingly performed by these enslaved Black women. We see in *Corregidora* how Ursa's relationship with Mutt serves as a modernized mirror for the ways in which Mr. Corregidora physically and sexually abused Ursa's grandmother and great-grandmother, and so by applying this lens to the scenario at hand, Ursa generationally ends the cycle of trauma and abuse maintained by both Mr. Corregidora and Mutt through the act of voicelessness.

Furthermore, through the subverting of the common conception of voice as intrinsically more influential than silence, Gayl Jones compels readers to engage with the text in a way that does not involve only reading, but listening, as well. Listening to silence—the things which are not said—positions silence as an adequate mechanism through which one can bare witness to events such as trauma. The discourse resulting from the linguistic and metaphorical silences throughout *Corregidora* is then one that gives power to the voices traditionally silenced by oppressive forces, effectively fitting into the novel's dominating narrative of the slave experience. In the prevalence of the act of silence as utilized by Ursa throughout *Corregidora*, the novel effectively asserts the notion that silence is, in fact, a credible and accurate way to bear witness.

Works Cited

Abbassi, Ensie, et al. “Emotional Words Can Be Embodied or Disembodied: the Role of Superficial vs. Deep Types of Processing.” *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 6, 2015, doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00975.

Allen, Donia Elizabeth. “The Role of the Blues in Gayl Jones's Corregidora.” *Oral History Review*, Oxford University Press, 1 Feb. 2002, muse.jhu.edu/article/6699.

Behnam, Biook, et al. “Slave-Master Relationship and Post-Colonial Translation and Teaching.” *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2017, p. 565., doi:10.17507/jltr.0803.15.

Davis, Adrienne D. “Slavery and the Roots of Sexual Harassment.” *Directions in Sexual Harassment Law*, 2003, pp. 457–472., doi:10.12987/yale/9780300098006.003.0028.

Morgan, Marcyliena. “Language, Discourse and Power: Outing Schools.” *Language, Discourse and Power in African American Culture*, 2002, pp. 132–152., doi:10.1017/cbo9780511613616.008.

Summers, Deborah Booth. “Pregnant Possibilities: The Boundary-Shattering Transformation of the Caribbean Woman in Brodber's ‘Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home’ and Harris's ‘The Whole Armour.’” *Journal of West Indian Literature*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2007, pp. 1–14. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23019720.

.