

"I Said Nothing": The Rhetoric of Silence and Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*

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*Paying attention to gaps and breaks in women's narratives has long been a mode of reading performed by feminist and antiracist scholars. This article builds on such practice by linking contemporary critical discussions of literary silence through Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*, a text that makes the agency of speaking its primary concern. Whereas previous scholarship has examined how Jones's protagonist, Ursa Corregidora, empowers herself via the blues, this essay suggests that the text resists an easy valorization of voice. By complicating prior interpretations, this article looks to the mute, missed, and stifled in *Corregidora* that form a rhetoric of silence. Examining Jones's novel in this manner not only rethinks previous critiques of voice in *Corregidora* but also offers another way for considering how to engage antiracist and feminist interpretations of narratives by and about African American women.*

I

There was silence. She sat looking at me. I'd stopped looking at her again. I could feel her flutter as if she wanted to say something, but she didn't. I wouldn't make it easy. I waited.

Then she said finally, "You don't know what it's like to feel foolish all day in a white woman's kitchen and then have to come home and feel foolish in the bed at night with your man. . . . You don't know what that means, do you?"

I said nothing She was looking at me, expecting something. She wanted me to tell her that I knew what it was like, but I wouldn't tell her. (Jones 1975, 64)

This dialogue, from the first chapter of Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*, epitomizes the narrator's mode of interaction with other characters, a mode that defies the conventions of how speech works in novels at the same time that it rewrites the dynamics of textual conversation into a rhetoric of silence.¹ In form, the passage looks like a verbal exchange: paragraph breaks distinguish one character's words from another, quotation marks designate spoken words, and the first-person narrator provides occasional glimpses into her private thoughts. Yet for all its seeming status as dialogue, this "discourse" tells the reader virtually nothing about the narrator. Like the character who speaks out loud about feeling foolish, we, the readers, end up feeling a bit foolish ourselves; our desire to know more about our narrator meets the narrator's reticence, reticence that iterates

itself through silent sentences: "There was silence"; "I stopped looking at her"; "I waited"; "I said nothing." To write that there was silence erases the act of writing as a practice of revelation, sharing, communication; to stop looking refuses the possibility of visualization; to wait suspends the prospect of narrative action; to say nothing revokes meaning even as the words themselves appear to say something. Like the inquisitor in this dialogue, we ask the narrator questions, we watch her, we read her, expecting something, and she denies our expectation, doesn't show us what we want to see or tell us what we want to hear. Ursa Corregidora, Jones's narrator, refuses to make reading easy for us.

I take *Corregidora* as a case study of rhetorical silence because the expression Ursa most often employs in the novel is a pronoun or proper name plus the phrase "said nothing" (e.g., "I said nothing"; "Cat said nothing"; "We said nothing"). At one level, I am intrigued by what it means when a narrator repudiates her reader, when the "I" is so consistently and insistently held back in the same instant it is extended. But on another level, I am fascinated that over the quarter-century that *Corregidora* has functioned as a touchstone for antiracist and feminist literary criticisms, all of the novel's reviewers have taken Ursa's agency of speaking as their primary concern. Without exception, these scholars have identified Ursa's blues as an empowering practice, an inscription of communal memories that witness Ursa's individual story at the same time that they reveal the interrelated histories of her Mama, Gram, and Great Gram.² "The form of Jones's novel is circles within circles," notes Janice Harris, "memories within memories . . . which slowly advance as Ursa's ability to sing increases and her and our understanding of her song grows" (1981, 2). Epitomized by this attention to Ursa's "song," Jones's previous critics believe Ursa's narrative stands as a collective memoir to the suffering endured by black women in slavery as well as an articulation of black women's ability to endure.

Of course, it is little wonder that *Corregidora* has garnered attention as an oraliterary narrative, for feminist and antiracist opposition to silence is a practical tautology (although such approaches to silence are not synonymous).³ But without negating or attempting to supplant these interpretations, in this essay I hope to complicate such unilateral readings by looking to the mute, missed, detained, and stifled in *Corregidora* that I believe form a distinct pattern of discursive stillness: a rhetoric of silence. I find that this rhetoric of silence, as much as blues singing, populates Ursa's self-representation, "calling" and demanding a very different "response" through its unique refrain, "I said nothing." Examining *Corregidora* in this manner rethinks the importance of attending to how acts of voicing and withholding voice "speak" differently and demand a different kind of reader participation. As such, this examination puts pressure on one of our most relied-upon methods of antiracist and feminist literary

criticism, namely criticism that privileges voice over silence. I want to ask what it means when a narrative negates the authority of memory or voice and renounces the charge to bear witness against silence.

In the following discussion, then, I examine various manifestations of the rhetoric of silence in *Corregidora*, manifestations that show silence to be a remarkably allusive narrative strategy, one Ursa uses to resist conscription and to forge an intricate and versatile counternarrative or "anti-discourse." Specifically, I argue that Ursa's silences commence on the very first page with the loss of her womb, a loss structured not only as symbolic silence (i.e., the silence of lost generations and, as a result, lost history) but also as an impetus for reinventing Ursa's identity through a metaphor of what might be called a rapacious silence: the black hole. In turn, this initial silencing of future generations is complicated by various cultural "silencers" that accumulate as the story unfolds: the missing slavery documents that kept Ursa's foremothers in bondage; the true nature of their rapist's, old man Corregidora's, ancestry; and Mutt's sexual violence against Ursa. Importantly, such silencers are the product of white cultural dominance, and this concept of threatening whiteness functions as a kind of "present-absence" in the text that prompts further silences from Ursa. Indeed, combined, Ursa's womb-lack and the present-absence of whiteness necessitate, either by choice or by force, a pervading voicelessness throughout the novel. Explicit narrative examples from the novel itself serve as the clearest indicators of Ursa's reticence and help us understand how to read Ursa and her antidiscourse in a new way. Thus, my investigation not only enhances previous critical interpretations of voice in Jones's novel but also provides another way for thinking about how we engage antiracist and feminist interpretations of novels by, and about, black women.

II

The first two pages of *Corregidora* relate the brief history of Ursa's marriage to Mutt and their violent exchange that leaves Ursa infertile. Angry that Ursa continues to perform at Happy's Café after they are married and jealous that other men watch her sing, Mutt ambushes Ursa after work one night, telling her, "I'm your husband. You listen to me, not to them" (Jones 1975, 3). Ursa explains, "That was when I fell. The doctors in the hospital said my womb would have to come out. Mutt and me didn't stay together after that" (4). Thus *Corregidora* takes as its initiating circumstance an instance of compound and interrelated loss, Ursa's hysterectomy and her ensuing separation from Mutt. This loss is the both the result of forced silence (i.e., Mutt punishing Ursa for singing the blues to others) and the circumstance that, in effect, keeps Ursa silent, keeps her

from passing on her family's brutal history through succeeding generations. Just home from the hospital, Ursa describes this pervasive sense of loss, saying it is not so much how she hurts in a physical way but the feeling "[a]s if part of my life's already marked out for me—the barren part" (6). This emptiness comes from her tangible forfeit, of course, but also from "feeling as if something more than the womb had been taken out. . . . Something I needed, but couldn't give back. There'd be plenty I couldn't give back now" (6).

Adam McKible has argued that in black women's fiction, the womb represents a site of ideological contention (1994). Certainly Ursa's self-conception is reflected by wombs and in wombs. She is expected to "give back" by having generations like her foremothers, and she herself is engendered from roots of aggression, her own body a testament to practices of rape and forced pregnancy on a slave plantation in Brazil. McKible believes that in *Corregidora*, the interplay of "maternal reproduction and hegemonic practices and discourses intensifies around reproductive issues," potentially enabling the *Corregidora* women to revise the morbid symbolism of the womb into an emancipatory trope (228). Yet McKible does not attempt to interpret Ursa's literal and figurative inability to achieve this promised, emancipatory consciousness, other than to say the hysterectomy allows Ursa the position of critique, the sagacity to question whether a womb is or should be the "center of a woman's being" (Jones 1975, 46).

Because of the central place of Ursa's womb-lack in the novel (as the narrative opening) and, ironically, its metaphoric role as the thing that will keep Ursa's family narrative silent, her womb-lack deserves a closer reading than McKible offers. Not only does it launch the novel and, at one level, prompt the following 183 pages that articulate a response to this complex loss, but, additionally, the language and imagery evoked in relation to Ursa's womb-lack confound typical notions of how bodies interact with and produce words, turning the 183 pages into a response and a refusal, a silent rejoinder.

For if *Corregidora* is about anything, it is about how bodies invent and influence stories: stories of sex and sexuality, pain and pleasure, the uses and abuses to which bodies are put. As such, the novel is also a mordant commentary on the assumption that the actions and sensations of the body are simply a species of writing or that language necessarily reveals bodies. For instance, Ursa's dreams are rife with tactile images, exhibiting and inscribing the body by comparing her inability to have children to spilled glasses and bruised seeds, the place where her womb should be to a broken guitar string and curdled milk. These comparisons construct Ursa's body as not just defective but also useless: bruised seeds produce no growth, spilled glasses no drink, a broken string no music, curdled milk no food. Akin to the dialogue at the beginning of this essay that mimes

established literary form only to negate it in the moment of writing, Ursa's dreams utilize imagery only to undermine their purpose and form. At its most basic, imagery inserts a material analog for an abstraction (e.g., the personality of a potato, love like chocolate). Imagery makes writing and the written body tactile. But while Ursa's dreams suggest concrete synonyms for her sterility, these images perform a kind of narrative silence, suspending the imagistic potential to germinate seeds, consume milk, play music. In other words, the experience of Ursa's body, its double "barrenness," negates language by employing a specific kind of linguistic silence: the refusal of sensation.

Indeed, Ursa's descriptions of women's bodies are predicated on an incapacity to feel that is repeatedly linked to an incapacity to engage language. When Ursa takes her first lover after Mutt—Tadpole, her manager at Happy's—she can't feel or describe sex with him. "He was inside, and I felt nothing. I wanted to feel, but I couldn't" (Jones 1975, 82). Insensate, her body not only carries but also enacts silence, the act of sex crased to feeling nothing. Remembering another encounter from childhood, Ursa recalls, "I was out in the yard playing with the little boy from across the street. He'd bet me I didn't know how to play doctor. . . . I lay across [a] board on my belly, and he raised up my dress. Mama saw us." Ursa continues:

She jerked me in the back door by the arm, and slammed the door.
 "Don't you know what that boy was doing? He was feeling up your asshole."
 "I couldn't feel it."
 "If I could see it, I know you could feel it."
 "Mama, I couldn't feel it." (42)

Here, verbs and nouns seem to suggest that Ursa is well aware of the physical world: she feels her belly on the board, the boy raising her dress. She feels when her Mama yanks her arm. But it is the action that mimes sex that Ursa cannot feel or articulate—a specific and deliberate senselessness—and this erasure both presages the lost history that is her lost womb as it iterates the sexual violence from which she is descended.

For, indeed, Ursa's family history is one in which women's bodies were continually "silenced": Ursa's Great Gram and Gram were repeatedly raped by the same slavemaster and made to work as prostitutes; her mother Irene was beaten up and cast out by her husband, forced to walk down the street "looking like a whore" (121). In turn, while Ursa's own memories of these stories become the text of *Corregidora*, paradoxically, they also signal disconnection, dissolution, and suppression—i.e., silences—as fundamental to Ursa's idea of what a woman's sexual body is and what it does in a slave economy.

Ursa's images are obverse and reverse at once, palpable descriptions of forced sex and attending threats of consequent sexlessness intertwined.

On the one hand, Ursa remembers and relates stories of sexual assault as told by her Mama, Gram, and Great Gram:

There was a woman over on the next plantation. The master shipped her husband out of bed and got in the bed with her and . . . she cut off his thing with a razor she had hid under the pillow and he bled to death, and then the next day they came and got her and her husband. They cut off her husband's penis and stuffed it in her mouth, and then they hanged her. (67)

On the other hand, however, it is clear that the price of fighting against sexual commodification—or "telling" one's brutal story—is forced silence: having one's mouth "stuffed" and one's head (intellect) "hanged" or having your husband push you down the stairs.

But because Mutt, Tadpole, her foremothers, and, through her dreams, old man Corregidora all insist that Ursa reproduce bodies and, thus, stories in order to claim an identity, Ursa associates her womb-lack or ancestral-lack with both undesirability and the loss of the only position (motherhood) open to her to witness or give voice to her foremothers' oppressive history. To men, Ursa lacks appeal because she lacks the ability to provide material for men's own stories. In typical paternal prescriptions, sons carry on the father's "narrative," and as Mutt warns Ursa in one of her reveries, "Urs, [Tadpole's] going to wont more" (75). Ursa understands that, to men, a womb is the center of a woman's being because it represents a man's participation in language. Indeed, in the slave economy from which Ursa is descended, black women's wombs are the gateway to a whole masculine world of exploitation, monopolization, and brutality. As Ursa quips, "I have a birthmark between my legs" (45).

To Mama, Gram, and Great Gram, however, Ursa's womb-lack arrests the necessary counternarrative that comes from their stories, a history that fills in the silences of the slavery records and official accounts. Bearing children is equal to authorship, a liberatory impulse. In Ursa's clan, a fertile womb brings forth daughters, provides heirs to an estate of postcolonial sensibility, and daughters signal rebellion, create bodies that, in turn, create more daughters. Telling a revised history of slavery to one's daughter does two things: it establishes a matrilineage in opposition to slave patriarchy, and it "embodies" a black female script, a black female history. In a moment of desperation to give that witness, to break silence, Ursa decides, "I'll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee," the Brazilian slave crop, and "I'll stain their hands" (54).

In essence, then, the loss of Ursa's material and psychological reproductivity means that Ursa lacks language: "Silence in my womb" (99). Caged within symbolic cages, Ursa is a "barren" or "silent" woman in a world demanding descendants for identity. Thus Ursa's cage of silence is twice-bound. If she has a child, she can express her foremother's history, yet a child also signals a participation in a dehumanizing narrative based

on the silencing of female bodies: in either case, Ursa is being valued for the same thing. But rather than capitulate to this either/or dilemma, partly by necessity and partly by will, Ursa rejects the choice altogether, refusing to render her story in the form demanded by any of her progenitors. The loss of Ursa's womb inevitably removes her from this conundrum in which a black woman gives birth to a child (to a story) who embodies a contradiction, both her objectification and her humanity.

The way for Ursa to keep her own mouth from being "stuffed" is, ironically, for her to choose silence instead of having silence forced upon her; she creates an antidiscourse to wombs as a path to language. The opposite of authoring (mothering), the reversal of creating or feeling, Ursa's rhetoric of silence undermines a straightforward equation between wombs and witnessing, bodies and speech.⁴ Whether it is the slavery lived by her foremothers or the racist culture evolved from slavery that Ursa knows, the result of surviving in slavery are Ursa's representations of abused, rent flesh: fissures, tears, wounds, and especially holes. From this perspective, effacing the body's capacity to feel or be revealed in story effaces the dynamics of psychic and corporeal oppression.

When one character, Jeffrene, says to Ursa, "I bet you were fucking before I was born . . . [b]efore you was thought," she is right. Figuratively, Ursa has been valued for her sex—and has been forced to have sex—before even she, herself, was born. And if a woman's worth is reduced to her vagina, her "hole," she is valued according to something interior and unseen, something that must be felt to be measured. "[T]ha's all they do to you was feel up on you down between your legs see what kind of genitals you had," explains Ursa's Mama, relating the history of Great Gram, "either so you could breed well, or make a good whore" (127). But if Ursa's is a history of women prized for their vaginas and their vaginas alone, then depicting senselessness—the inability to feel the body—as well as silence—the inability to write others' stories through the propagation of bodies—negates the possibility that someone else can control Ursa's body. Ultimately, a hole cannot be taken away or exploited for the purposes of others; even with a hysterectomy, a female retains the capacity to receive, to take in: "And what if I'd thrown Mutt Thomas down those stairs instead, and done away with the source of his sex, or inspiration, or whatever the hell it is for a man, what would he feel now? At least a woman's still got the hole" (40–1). In this manner, Ursa equates the hole with a kind of silence that has potential liberatory power, and by reconceiving herself as a hole (silence) instead of a womb (story), Ursa cannot be silenced by an outside force; rather, she *is* silence. Thus Ursa reclaims the image of the hole as a powerful, even intimidating, trope. For while the slavemaster or abusive husband wants to believe the hole is empty, easily delineated by feeling up inside it, the hole is anything but vacuous.

Indeed, in space a black hole is dense, a full or substantial place that constantly consumes everything else around it.

Ursa is savvy in her association of herself with such voracious yet empty density, especially in her relationship with Mutt. "When I first saw Mutt," Ursa recalls, "I was singing a song about a train tunnel. About this train going in the tunnel, but it didn't seem like they was no end to the tunnel, and nobody knew when the train would get out, and then all of a sudden, the tunnel tightened around the train like a fist" (Jones 1975, 147). Because it has no beginning and no end, no attributes that can be circumscribed by someone outside it, the silence of the hole is the ultimate weapon against a culture that has fetishized her genitals as a knowable, marketable commodity. In Ursa's song, the extended metaphor surpasses its own representation, for a tunnel or hole cannot be fully captured in language, always containing unknown capacities and attributes. The hole represents the "Otherness" the Portuguese or old man Corregidora or Mutt reject and deny within Ursa and her foremothers. As she tightens her hold like a fist around these men, Ursa remakes herself into a dangerously rapacious black hole, a vagina dentata.

While white feminists such as Hélène Cixous have encouraged women to write in the ink made of mother's milk, give voice via phantasmagoric motherhood, and thus rewrite culture through the birth of a woman-centered language to overcome silence and silencing, Ursa denies this avenue to autonomy and agency because, finally, it speaks the master's tongue. White ink is white language, and, a priori, girl babies incarnate an entire history of sexual abuse. Whereas Cixous calls her theory the "gestation drive"—"just like the desire to write: a desire to live self from within, a desire for a swollen belly, for language, for blood"—Ursa instead expels the white beast from her own swollen womb (878). "I dreamed that my belly was swollen. . .," relates Ursa, "and I lay without moving, gave birth without struggle, without feeling. . . . But I felt the humming and beating of wings and claws in my thighs. . . . His hair was like white wings" (Jones 1975, 76–7). The distended, distorted belly and this horrific birth are the consequence of those who rape her, the white and black men who violate her body and unconscious. Ursa's recourse to this violence is to retender her desire. She does this by utilizing a rhetoric of silence (not writing, not speaking, not white ink or birth) and, literally, the "barrens," i.e., sexual abstinence for twentysome years. Ursa removes herself from feeling and flesh, from all that has been scorned, used, torn, and violated on/in black women's bodies. And the moment when she takes back flesh, when she is finally able to see a kind of redemption in its fissures and cracks, is when, at the end of the novel, she tightens her own hole on Mutt, striating his penis with her teeth and squeezing it with her mouth—her organ of both silence and language—and thus iterating the threat of

the slave woman with the razor under her pillow, the threat of the greedy black hole. The metaphor of the hole, then, is one instance of Ursa's cogent antidiscourse; Ursa rewrites holes and the language of holes into an empowering "whole" for black women living with the consciousness of slavery and under the slavery of consciousness.

III

Toward the end of the novel, an old blues singer says to Ursa, "[L]et me tell you something and I don't have to spell it out for you cause you know what I'm talking about." He continues:

Sinatra was the first one to call Ray Charles a genius, he spoke of "the genius of Ray Charles." And after that everybody called him a genius. They didn't call him a genius before that though. He was a genius but they didn't call him that. . . . If a white man hadn't told them, they wouldn't've seen it. . . . Like, you know, they say Columbo discovered America, [and] he didn't discover America. (Jones 1975, 169–70)

This vignette provides an insight into how the threat of ideological whiteness functions as a "present-absence" in *Corregidora*. Under the slavery of consciousness, if language indicates the power of whiteness, then names are suspect, for whites delimit the practices of naming. To guide the reader through the vagaries of white interpretations, interruptions, and appropriations of black experience, the old blues singer constructs an analogy: the concept of artistic genius as well as the very term "genius" must be applied by the owner of culture in order for the word and its idea to have significance. If bestowed by someone other than the owner of culture, even if the named epitomizes the qualities the appellation supposedly signifies, the word's meaning is absent, detached from meaning. In other words, Ray Charles is a genius because Frank Sinatra called him one, which marks the authority of Sinatra, not the genius of Charles. Without Sinatra, Charles exists outside language; he is the necessary foil, in fact, to Sinatra's bid to own the idea of, and meaning behind, "genius." In turn, if Sinatra had failed to name Charles a genius, then Charles and his talents would have been effectively silenced.

The same pertains to history. The written records state that "Columbo" discovered America, and even if that's not true, what passes as truth are the formal, institutional accounts. Fixed and seemingly univocal—often delivered in an imperturbable, passive, third-person voice—the language of white record controls what is and what is not history, what is told and what is censored. While many other studies have looked to Ursa's stories and blues as explosive, raucous alternatives to the history old man Corregidora engendered—a first-person voice of riotous expletives and fierce

images to offset the dispassionate voice of textbooks or habeas corpus—it is important also to examine why the old blues singer does not have to spell out for Ursa what he's trying to say. This enigmatic "something" he wants to talk with her about is how white silencing works: the perpetual and pervasive threat of lost naming, lost history, lost language.

So even though whiteness as a self-conscious ideology is largely absent in *Corregidora*, another way in which silence presents itself as a powerful antidiscourse is the novel's handling of whiteness, specifically its function as the great silencer behind and in Ursa's narrative. Whiteness is the "something" that deletes the legal documents testifying to Great Gram and Gram's enslavement, that authorizes Mutt's attempts to stifle Ursa, and that conceals the ethnic background of old man Corregidora and, as a result, Ursa's potential complicity in practices of racial and gender suppression.⁵

Considered as a threatening silencer, then, whiteness manifests itself in *Corregidora* by, first, muffling certain aspects of Ursa's family history, in particular the history of Brazilian slavery, at least as defined by *lex scripta*. Many of the events from slavery that Ursa's foremothers recall were initially codified in written accounts before being expunged. But as Ursa's Gram suggests, written documents are but fickle versions of history. "[T]he officials burned all the papers," she tells Ursa, "cause they wanted to play like what had happened before never did happen" (Jones 1975, 79). But Gram remembers what really happened in Brazil and bears witness to it via oral stories and the body. Ursa's foremothers tell her that whites "can burn the papers but they can't burn conscious, Ursa. And that's what makes the evidence. . . , the verdict" (22). As examined in the previous section, Ursa is expected to make generations (girls) and to tell them of the horror, the humiliation, and the sexual exploitation of living as a slave woman in Brazil; her foremothers believe passing down story is the only way to combat the erasure of their version of history.

Yet this tactic, strangely enough, potentially sustains the hazard of whiteness as a powerful silencer, for the implicit danger of rewriting the history of slavery is that one also rewrites white terrorism. In some way, the retelling of the tale solidifies white despotism and, in effect, the importance of white record as something that must be acknowledged as well as disputed. Ursa says, "I can't make generations. And even if I still had my womb, even if the first baby *had* come—what would I have done then? Would I have kept it up? Would I have been like *her* [Mama], or *them* [Gram and Great Gram]?" (60). She interrogates, insistent, "How many generations had to bow to [old man Corregidora's] genital fantasies?" (59). Thus, even if Ursa could have extended her foremothers' oral history, it is a chronicle of sexual violence, of black female subjectivity as someone else's genital fantasies—and Ursa is not so sure she wants to transmit such terrorism. Indeed, not only does Ursa suspend the storytelling ca-

dence along her own lineage, she refuses to reveal it to anyone else: "I never really told [Mutt]. I only gave him pieces. A few more pieces than I'd given Tadpole, but still pieces" (60). Ursa's rhetoric of silence here is a kind of withholding, a story that exists but, in the words at the conclusion of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, a story not to pass on (1987).

However, herein lies yet another conundrum: *Corregidora*'s readers have access to the concentric circles of story through Ursa's narrative reveries—reveries that constitute the novel itself. On the one hand, then, Ursa intends to move beyond the reality of slavery by participating in silencing herself, by withholding language and the privilege of naming, rendering her objecthood by refusing to articulate its formulation. In this manner, silence becomes a potent reconception of the real, a decision to interrupt white narrative and whiteness' capacity to repress other narratives. Ursa's silence is the same as no knowledge of history, of place and space, intention and consequence, shame and bitterness; silence wipes away the white lies that state that there is a world without blacks as people. Ursa's withheld speech crushes old man Corregidora with the sheer force of her corporeal presence, her mute aspect, an ongoing, material signifier that makes it obvious that this world is indeed full of black people and black women's instrumentality, full of black artistic geniuses whether they are named as such or not.

On the other hand, the collective memories of Ursa's foremothers continue to exist in the world as history; once articulated, they take on a life of their own, etched into Ursa's body and psyche and into the substance of Ursa's story to the reader. Their memories undermine the stifling practices of whiteness: the lost slave titles, the enigmatic ancestry of old man Corregidora, the social systems that sanction wanton brutality against black women. A story "not to pass on" is also a story "not to be passed on," missed, given up, forgotten. Even if these memories are kept to the margins of evocation in the text itself, withheld from other characters, outside the text Ursa reveals this history to her readership. Ursa asks them (us) to note the present-absence of whiteness in her narrative and comprehend its discursive menace. Thus, silence is in fact passed on, not to another black girl-child but to an audience of women and men who, at least in part, perpetuate certain kinds of silencing, who are themselves the embodiment, the scripted bodies, of the threatening present-absence of whiteness.

But it is not enough to focus on how absent whiteness attempts to silence (or elicits strategic silence from) *Corregidora*'s black women characters; in order to appreciate how whiteness affects the novel's black men, especially Mutt, one must examine, too, how racial ideology and racism infect the intellect and actions of masculine masters. To first consider a Hegelian notion of the master-slave dialectic, "[t]he Master," writes Hegel,

is the consciousness that exists for-itself . . . an existent-for-self-consciousness that is mediated with itself through another consciousness. . . . [T]he Master relates himself to the Slave *mediately*, through the independent existent; for this is what captures the Slave; this is his chain [and] the Slave thus prove[s] himself to be a dependent consciousness which has its 'independence' only in Thinghood. (1807, 58–9)

In other words, the slave is granted autonomy only as Thing, as a superficial liberty, and the master's supposed independence—his capacity to name the world around him—exists because of the slave's dependence: that obsequious dependence is the single mirror masters have from which to view their own illusory freedom. Thus, Hegel concludes, the master "is not certain of existence-for-self as the truth," an uncertainty that maintains his need to display his dominance (61). Building from these precepts, one might initially begin by asking how this dialectic plays itself out in terms of the novel's white, male masters and their control of language (and, therefore, "reality"). For instance, when Tom Hirshorn attempts to seduce and then shames Cat for rebuking him, how is the white man's need to silence Cat's sexual autonomy both negated and reflected by Cat's actions? Or when old man Corregidora makes generations by raping first his slaves and then his own daughters, and when one of these "kin" threatens to bite off his penis—in effect threatening to break the transmission of the old man's brutal narrative—how has the slavemaster's reflection suddenly altered? How has Corregidora come to perform his own dependency on his slave-whores?

Such questions are difficult to answer given the limited ways in which a reader is explicitly shown white hegemony in *Corregidora*; few scenes depict white, masculine agency. However, the lurking menace of white threat facilitates a reading of Mutt as the instigator of domestic violence against Ursa and her resulting inability to have generations. Mutt's violent heterosexuality is an appropriation of the master-slave dialectic engendered by white, masculine power and results in a desire to stifle Ursa as well as a dependency on Ursa's silence, both literal silence (i.e., not singing the blues to other men) as well as metaphorical (i.e., not having children).

Ursa herself links Mutt to the legacy of white, masculine exploitation her foremothers endured, asking, "But was what Corregidora had done to *her*, to *them*, any worse than what Mutt had done to me. . . ?" (Jones 1975, 184). Like old man Corregidora's abuse of Ursa's family, Mutt takes on the function of both slavemaster and rapist. For instance, at one point, Mutt proclaims to the male patrons of Happy's bar, "I got a piece of ass for sale, anybody want to bid on it?" and at another juncture, Ursa admits, "Whenever [Mutt] wanted it and I didn't, he'd take me, because he knew that I wouldn't say, No, Mutt, or even if I had, sometimes I wonder about whether he would have taken me anyway" (159, 156). In this manner,

Mutt reproduces the white man's threat—especially his sexual threat—to black women. Just as old man Corregidora needs Gram's and Great Gram's abjection for his seeming authority, Mutt depends on Ursa's compliance as a silent black woman (a woman he knows won't say, "No, Mutt") for the articulation of his masculine self.

Yet for all of Mutt's psychic potency over Ursa's narrative, akin to the present-absence of whiteness, he is outside the story's frame until the final few pages. At the onset of the narrative, he is already barred from Happy's, Ursa's place of work, but also from Ursa's interior place, her vagina as well as her *divina*. She confides, "He's been barred from my place too" (4). Throughout the rest of the novel, Mutt's absence resurfaces as emptiness, longing, relief, and, subtly, a hushed threat. Eventually Ursa realizes that Mutt has vanished, that he isn't going to crash Happy's to get at her. "Mutt never stood outside the window [of the bar] anymore. I never even saw him by accident on the street. . . [,] and nobody I knew had seen him. . . . It probably meant he really was gone" (74). Importantly, Mutt's permanent removal preserves Ursa from immediate dehumanization and sexual humiliation. Although much of the novel is devoted to Ursa's embittered recollections of Mutt—her vexation over the consequences of his malignity—having his flesh-and-blood body removed from the story grants Ursa a narrative space to recast her and her foremothers' sexual abasement. Her imprisoned psyche is set free to lick its proverbial wounds for a narrative gap of 22 years. Just as the slaveholder's version of history must be banished in order for the tradition of female silence to be resisted and recast, Mutt must be not-there, except as an ominous ghost, so that Ursa can figure out how to equalize heterosexual inequity, sidestep the master-slave dialectic, and offer a model of sexual partnership that does not demean but allows for mutual recognition of gender difference.

Thus, the crucial method of protecting herself against silencing whiteness (including its agent, Mutt Thomas) is for Ursa to establish an anti-discourse to the white imaginative landscape; and necessarily, Ursa must conceive of herself as opposite to the forces that suppress, repudiate, and erase her selfhood. Yet Ursa's skin color and ability to pass are touched on again and again, problematizing her own position as one beyond whiteness and its discursive terrorism. Ursa is lighter than most blacks in the novel (save her own foremothers): one woman, Sal, thinks she could pass—if not as Anglo, then as Spanish—and a wealthy black man mistakes Ursa for Latina when he tries to pick her up: "You look like you Spanish. Where you from?" (71). Ursa's fair skin is directly equated with danger by black women who think her beauty is defined by white attributes, "light skin and good hair": "Who's that? Some new bitch from out of town going be trying to take everybody's husband away from them?" (73). Called a "red-headed heifer" (reminiscent of her own father's nickname for Gram, a "half-white heifer"), Ursa is legitimized by her peers only when she marries Mutt, a dark-colored, "satin-black" man.

Furthermore, Ursa keeps that "funny name" of hers, old man Corregidora's name, and her father's nickname for her mama was "Correy." In fact, it is her father's resounding question—"How much was hate for Corregidora and how much was love?"—that iterates Ursa's racial dilemma: she is perceived, and sometimes treated, as not-black yet she struggles against Corregidora's paternity and its complicated inheritance. Indeed, racial passing and questions of racial identity are further confounded by the obfuscation of old man Corregidora's own heritage: "Corregidora himself was looking like an Indian . . . so that this light black man looked more like a white man than he did" (124). As such, Ursa acknowledges their inexorable interconnectedness, the terrorizer and the terrorized, the white menace and the black abject, the silencer and the silenced, when she says Corregidora and she were "united at birth" (77).

Thus, Ursa must safeguard herself against the malicious legacy of old man Corregidora by comprehending the master's dependence upon the slave for his power. Ursa's understanding is part of becoming a black woman unto herself, a "slave" who transcends thinghood. Although an awakening of this sort does not invert the master-slave dialectic, once Ursa finds out what Gram did to make Corregidora want to kill her (biting his penis), or how Cat waylaid Tom Hirshorn's advances (spilling coffee grounds), she perceives how to challenge the white master's supremacy and domination through both domestic manipulation and outright physical resistance. She now knows herself to be powerful in her abjecthood: the very creator of old man Corregidora's supposed mastery, the mythic black mother who bore him and his "dirty race." In the dream where she purges her body of his evil, his forced entry, and gives birth to a monster with claws and hair "like white wings," Ursa repudiates white language but also delivers the self-stylized terrorist, enables his seeming ascendancy while ultimately realizing her own productive force. Finally, then, Ursa's narrative of the silencing power of whiteness holds many of the novel's contradictions in suspension: insecurity and confidence, sovereignty and submission, strength and debility. Pervading all yet always in the background, whiteness informs cultural myth at the same time it is structured for cultural subversion. Thus, in *Corregidora*, the rhetoric of silence vis-à-vis whiteness—in its various guises of historical erasure, violent heterosexuality, and racial domination—is always, necessarily present.

IV

Ursa's foremothers equate storytelling with truth. "My great-grandmama told my grandmama the part she lived through that my grandmama didn't live through and my grandmama told my mama what they both lived through and my mama told me what they all lived through and we were

suppose to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we'd never forget" (Jones 1975, 9). Toni Morrison concurs that there is a need to relate personal stories, especially in matters of oppression (1993). "To enforce [racial] invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body. According to this logic, every well-bred instinct argues *against noticing* and forecloses adult discourse" (9–10). And yet as soon as an epistemology, such as literary discourse, speaks about heterogeneity and the infringement of social codes on the part of writers of color, it homogenizes the instance, links it up with a system, and allows it to be co-opted as part of a dominant paradigm. As such a paradox evolves: speak of a thing, and you conventionalize it; leave it unspoken, and you may very well erase it. This paradox is central to African American colonialist stories in which giving voice and portraying multiple voices are necessary to demonstrating and witnessing alternative accounts of cultural memory. Yet in the world of material bodies—or as Ursa calls it, "the life not spoken"—historically blacks have been forced to employ silence for safety. Evelyn Hammonds provides a contemporary example: "silence about sexuality on the part of black women academics is not more a 'choice' than was the silence practiced by early twentieth-century black women. This production of *silence* instead of *speech* is an effect of the institutions such as the academy which are engaged in the commodification of Otherness" (1994, 135). And, in fact, Ursa's silences are often strategic, willful, a resistance to the alien talk of masculine violence, white violence, sexual violence, even when her silences are unsuccessful.

For instance, in the hospital after her hysterectomy, Ursa raves. "You was cussing everybody out," Tadpole tells her, "They said they didn't know *what* you was" (Jones 1975, 167). It is a rush of noise, "hard cussing," an unintelligible rant with "words they ain't never heard before. They kept saying, 'What is she, a gypsy?'" (8). When the subaltern speaks, she is misunderstood by the owners of culture; she is exoticized, foreign, her words mysterious and incomprehensible to scientia. Tadpole, at least at some level, grasps what Ursa is trying to tell him, relating to her that she "kept saying something about a man treat a woman like a piece of shit" (167). Her speech, then, is a form of anger, rebellion, but ultimately ineffectual since Tadpole—a member of her discourse community—hears her words and then proceeds to treat her like a piece of shit. Ursa is invisible in her own speech—labeled a "gypsy," unintelligible—and, consequently, she ceases to own her language in the moment she ceases to be heard within it. Ursa's moment of voice, her attempt at creating a unique parole, backfires, backlashes.

All the events I've discussed in terms of womb-lack and whiteness are ones in which Ursa meets adversity with reticence, writing the language of the novel as a language of silence, highlighting her refusal to speak by

informing her reader that, indeed, she's not speaking. She refuses to inform Mutt or Tadpole about her pregnancy before the hysterectomy; rather, she tells Tadpole, "I can't talk to you about it" when he alludes to the lost child (8); she resists telling Tadpole that Mutt isn't going to come back anymore (55); she never answers Tad when he asks, "What's wrong?"; she responds with silence when Tadpole informs her that his grandmother was white; she won't discuss prostitution with Cat: "Now we ain't talking about that" (30); though irritated, she doesn't acknowledge Sal's claim that she could pass for Spanish; she will not talk to Cat about lesbian desire: "I didn't know what she meant, but I didn't ask. She kept looking at me. I wouldn't look at her" (66);⁶ she doesn't explain to her childhood friend May Alice why she is not her friend anymore: "'You my best friend, ain't you?' [asked May Alice]. I said nothing" (145); when listening to her foremothers' stories, she is expected not to speak—if she does, she is often admonished to keep quiet. "Don't ask *them* that," says Mama, "The only reason I'm telling you is so you won't ask them" (61).

Ursa also expects and extracts silence from others. She starts to slap Jeffrene to shut her up, "I was going to if she said another word" (39); she pretends not to hear Cat when Cat jokes about Ursa not having a man; she wishes Tadpole would have not said he loved her: "I was thinking I'd only wanted him to love me without saying anything about it" (55). In fact, her relationships are predicated on silence, especially in moments of tension. With Tadpole: "He said nothing, and we got in the car. When I looked over at him, he was looking as if he was mad at me. When he saw me watching him, he looked ahead quickly, and turned on the ignition" (20). With May Alice: "I wanted to say something real nasty to her, but instead I ran across the railroad track without looking. . . . But after that day . . . me and May Alice didn't speak to each other, and then finally her and her mama moved" (146). Most strikingly, with Mutt:

He said, "Whose woman is you?"

I wouldn't look at him.

"'Whose woman is you' I asked."

I still wouldn't answer.

"You got your bitch on today, ain't you?"

I stood there.

"I said, 'Ain't you got your bitch on today?'"

I think I got up enough nerve to go inside just because I wanted to get rid of him. (147)

By revoking her part of these potential dialogues with Tadpole, May Alice, and Mutt, Ursa evades having other people "own" her with their desires or needs or anger; put simply, she refuses to be Mutt's or anyone else's woman. More than once Ursa distinguishes between life expressed in language and the life of experience, "The lived life, not the spoken one"

(108). Silence keeps her true to the lived life, defying the entanglement and possible misstatement that comes from verbal exchange. By not speaking, Ursa remains aloof, refusing to debase herself by haggling over representation. She doubts the validity of the spoken life from the start, even as a child, Great Gram smacks her for asking, "You telling the truth, Great Gram?" (14). Engagement without engaging refuses the expectation—even definition—of narrative, and in this manner, Ursa remains her own sovereign, "whole" in a way that Mama, Gram, and Great Gram (already dissolved in language) cannot. The intangible mysteries and particulars that make up Ursa's inner life are meticulously and purposefully sealed off by her refrain, "I said nothing," a kind of negative blues, a phrase that iterates and enacts the barrens she's experienced her whole life.

And "I said nothing" further resonates because it revises accepted notions about how language functions in novels, implying that it is not necessary to portray character or consciousness through words that speak or act, that reveal or testify or demonstrate. This interpretation substitutes for conventional narrative form a way of speaking that effaces as it asserts, like a black hole, eating up the very text it creates, perhaps reclaiming the processes of "eating the Other" enacted by old man Corregidora, the Portuguese, Mutt, and others. At a local level, withholding within the moment of telling provides Ursa Corregidora an alternative technique for telling her story of sexual and racial violence, one that turns accepted narrative mediums on their ears by, in fact, denying "ears," and other organs of language, a comfortable or accustomed mode of interaction. Each time Ursa proffers and revokes her speech, she withholds but also, simultaneously, she preserves. A life always spoken and only spoken will always be subject to control, revision, and erasure.

On another level, however, recognizing a rhetoric of silence offers a multilayered approach for understanding narratives that map the interrelated histories of gender and race domination. Identifying the self-conscious presence of silence in such works can open up interpretations of these narratives, teaching readers how to appreciate rhetorical refusals in tandem with rhetorical assertions. As such, my investigation allows for another way of conceiving literary analysis beyond the precepts of what one might call "speech criticism." In terms of learning how to read *Corregidora*, I find Jones's own preoccupations with listening compelling evidence that I am being asked by this novel, by Ursa and by Gayl Jones, to be my own best listener. "I [am] particularly interested," says Jones in one of her essays, "in oral traditions of storytelling . . . in which there is always the consciousness and importance of the hearer, even in the interior monologues where the storyteller becomes her own hearer" (Tate 1983, 91).

Listening, in this sense, is not an activity of passive reception where the hearer absorbs the words or omissions of another; rather, listening is work, a productive strain. Listening is that tender and precarious act of attempting true empathy, of putting oneself in the proverbial shoes of another character or person, of taking the lesson, even if that lesson is hard to take. Listening is one moment where history is made, and in *Corregidora*, listening on the part of a reader is a process of acknowledging that Ursa and her foremothers can reveal something cutting and vital about systems of meaning-making, a savage use of race and literacy as means for domination or an antiracist critical praxis that refuses silence as witness. *Corregidora* continues to teach me that a rhetoric of silence carries a real-world capacity to change my notions of reading and my habits of readership, even as it potentially evades my capacity to understand the fullness of its complexities.

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Notes

1. I am indebted to a number of individuals who read this essay and commented on its ideas. To Debra Modellmog, I owe the most thanks. She read and edited this piece through numerous incarnations, providing me with invaluable resources and continuous encouragement. Barbara Christian made me think harder about how Ursa's blues work in tandem with her rhetoric of silence. Valerie Gray Lee furnished me with hard-to-find psychoanalytic readings of black women's texts. Both Andrea Lunsford and Elizabeth MacLeod Walls gave me excellent advice on clarity and style. The anonymous reviewers for the *NWSA Journal* and the journal's editor, Margaret McFadden, helped me hone and clarify the final version. And Anne Cognard, as always, buoyed my spirits and re-energized my thinking. I could not have finished this essay without the contributions of these readers. Throughout this essay, I mean "rhetoric" in the literary rather than the Aristotelian sense of the term.
2. Employing both historical and formalistic approaches, these critics have sought to establish *Corregidora* in relation to the African American oral literary

tradition and to interpret Ursa's voice as representative of black female identity. They have examined aspects such as African American cultural legacies (e.g., blues singing, folktalk), matrilineal patterns of storytelling, and the articulation of autonomous, female sexuality in relation to rape, incest, domestic violence, and prescriptive reproduction. Studies of interest are Melvin Dixon (1984), Madhu Dubey (1994 and 1995), Jerilyn Fisher (1978), Janice Harris (1981), Rebecca Hymah (1991), Valerie Gray Lee (1980), Françoise Lionnet (1993), Sally Robinson (1991), and Gay Wilentz (1994). For compelling discussions of the revolution of novelistic form in *Corregidora*, see Joyce Pettis (1990), Claudia Tate (1979), Jerry Ward (1982), and John Wideman (1977).

3. Since the publication of Tillie Olsen's *Silences* (1965), interest in the personal and political clout of women's language has been a hallmark of white feminist criticism (the work of Adrienne Rich, Marge Piercy, Hélène Cixous, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar leaps to mind). In turn, over fifteen years ago when Audre Lorde famously dared black women to transform their silence into language and action, she instigated an entire oeuvre of antiracist criticism dedicated to, in the words of Lorde, making black women's thoughts "verbal and shared, even at the risk of having [them] bruised or misunderstood" (1984, 40). Perhaps the most important study in the past few years that surveys silence from a range of feminist as well as antiracist critical perspectives is Elaine Hedges's and Shelley Fisher Fishkin's *Listening to Silences: New Essays in Feminist Criticism* (1994), although there are also articles of interest in Gudrun Grabher's and Jessner Ulrike's *Semantics of Silences in Linguistics and Literature* (1996).
4. Others have argued that Ursa attempts to reconstruct her splintered body, and thus her inability to articulate history, as the blues. It is true that Ursa-as-songwriter desires connection and insight, a clear understanding of where she comes from and who has shaped her; she wants to be made sense of, to sing what she calls a new world song. Longing for the narrative authority she sees in her foremothers—the power to enforce, designate, persuade, inspire, beget—Ursa desires the power of an author. But it is crucial to remember that Ursa's blues also carry an inherent silence, ultimately something more than the song's words can capture: Ursa's awareness of meaning without language, of witnessing without verbalization. "[I]f you understood me, Mama, you'd see I was trying to explain it, in blues, without words, the explanation somewhere behind the words" (66).
5. In recent years, there has been a call among antiracist theorists for studies of how whiteness informs American literature. For instance, Toni Morrison (1993) argues that there is an inclination in contemporary literary criticism to pigeonhole black characters as victims of violence and systematic maltreatment. As Morrison points out, although it is precisely a consequence of these inquiries that anything at all has been achieved on matters of literature and race, such "well-established stud[ies] should be joined with another, equally

important one: the impact of racism on those who perpetuate it. It seems both poignant and striking how avoided and unanalyzed is the effect of racist inflection on the subject" (11). Requiring a deconstruction of "blinding whiteness," Morrison asks literary critics to examine symbols and images of aggrandizing whiteness at the expense of ineffectual, contained, or dead black characters.

In addition, bell hooks (1992) suggests that readers pursue an evaluation of whiteness in novels and writings by black authors, asking how white characters in these novels are mirrored, negated, and/or absorbed by the presence of blacks and blackness. Hooks maintains that black writers inhabit a privileged place from which to comprehend and critique white culture; like the exile, hooks argues, blacks are in a cultural position in the United States to stand removed from the workings of dominant culture.

6. It is interesting to note that, like whiteness, lesbian desire is a silenced topic in the novel, one fraught with distinctions of race and racial identity. When Cat, a friend of Ursa's and a lesbian, attempts to justify her lifestyle, in typical fashion Ursa withholds any response to her; the dialogue at the very beginning of this essay is the heart of this "conversation." In addition, toward the end of the book, the novel's two proclaimed lesbians—Cat and Jeffrene—are deposited in a storyline on "the other side of the street," keeping lesbian desire at arm's distance from Ursa. "[Jeffrene] strangled any impulse I had to go see Catherine. And after that day, whenever I saw Jeffrene, I'd cross the street" (Jones 1975, 178). Like the relegated Mutt, the repression of lesbian desire in the text implicates Ursa's sense of her own black female sexuality.

It is worth mentioning, however, that Ursa is obviously attracted to Cat and fears her own lesbian inklings. That she so quickly and efficiently silences this desire as an alternative may be predicated on the fact that Ursa's symbolic is so enmeshed with the violence perpetrated by men's organs upon women's; it is possible that Cat's lesbianism is outside of Ursa's system of meaning and therefore creates a kind of identity-panic that Ursa refuses to concede. Of course, Jones's next novel, *Eva's Man* (1976), allows the lesbian alternative as a possibility.

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Old Magic and New Fury: The Theaphany of Afrekete in Audre Lorde's "Tar Beach"

M. CHARLENE BALL

In Chapter 31 of Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, the young lesbian hero Audre meets a woman named Afrekete. This meeting crowns the book: from Afrekete, Audre receives the gift of knowledge herself and learns a way to live on the borders of her multiple identities. The encounter between Audre and Afrekete functions as the sacred marriage in a heroic quest narrative. However, since the hero is African American lesbian, the structure of the sacred marriage changes, as do the definitions of hero and anima. Lorde explicitly identifies *Zami* as a biomythography, thus indicating that she is deliberately creating myth from her own life. This essay discusses *Zami* as a work that re-visioned both Eurocentric and African archetypes.

In Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* the young lesbian hero Audre meets a woman named Afrekete (Lorde 1994).¹ This meeting crowns the book: from Afrekete, Audre receives the gift of knowledge herself and learns a way to live on the borders of her multiple identities. *Zami*, described on its cover as "a biomythography," is a quest narrative in which Lorde creates myth from her own life. In the classic quest narrative, as described by Jung and Campbell, the hero reaches the culmination of his quest when he meets and is united in a sacred marriage with a divine female figure who represents his anima or soul (Jung 1909; Campbell 1973). This pattern assumes the hero is male, with male experience as the norm. As feminist scholars have noted, when a woman is the hero, the narrative changes.² This is certainly true of *Zami*, as I shall show in the following essay.

Zami re-visioned both Eurocentric and African archetypes.³ I address the following questions: how does this quest narrative by a Black lesbian differ from the classic male quest narrative? What narrative strategies does Lorde use in creating this biomythography? Who is Afrekete, and what role does she play? I shall examine the culminating episode of *Zami* first published as a short story under the title "Tar Beach," demonstrating how mythic archetypes from Afrocentric and Eurocentric cultures are reinscribed and re-visioned, with particular reference to the archetype of the sacred marriage and the character of Afrekete. By applying feminist archetypal theory, African American women's literary criticism, and an African myth to this episode in *Zami*, I hope to show how African American women's writing, drawing as it does from both European and African mythic sources, can provide correctives to the truncated and incomplete mythic images of women found in Western literature.