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GAYL JONES'S *CORREGIDORA* AND *SONG FOR ANNINHO*: HISTORICAL REVISION, FEMALE DIASPORA, AND MUSIC

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Abstract

In this article I analyze how black music may be used to (re)interpret the legacy of slavery in Gayl Jones's literary works *Corregidora* (1975) and *Song for Anninho* (1981). I argue that female Classic Blues from the 1920s functions as a testimony of resistance and as a means to recount the stories featured in these two texts. The U.S. black author uses the cadences, themes, and tropes of the blues in order to decode female versions of the black diaspora in the Americas. In addition, by setting her literary work in Brazil, Jones establishes an inter-American dialogue and imagines polyphonic and syncretic spaces where the blues is the model for historical revision. Inscribing my study within the theoretical frame of black feminist cultural studies, I emphasize the importance of the first person enunciative voice in female blues, as well as in the texts selected.

Keywords: Gayl Jones; classic blues; diaspora; black feminism; historical revision.

*No time to marry, no time to
settle down
I'm a young woman and ain't done running' 'round
I'm a young woman and ain't done running' 'round*
(Bessie Smith)¹

Introduction²

Gayl Jones is one of the lesser-known representatives of the generation of black writers that led the female literary rebirth of the 1970s in the United States. Together with her, other internationally recognized authors, such as the Nobel Prize Laureate Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, or Maya Angelou, challenged race, gender, and social class inequalities with their writings, and claimed a place for black women as protagonists of their own stories.³ In this article, I examine how Jones uses both music and oral texts as discursive spaces in order to create alternative versions of the official written history, as well as to provide cultural contestation against social constraints

imposed on black womanhood. From the time of slavery, music has contributed to the performance of cultural agency within black communities in the United States; spirituals, gospel, blues, jazz, freedom songs, and rap have provided spaces for protest and affirmation. It is noteworthy that West African cultures were mainly oral, a feature that was highly reinforced during the long period of slavery and well after its abolition in 1865.⁴ Moreover, few black people had access to education, a right that was denied to them because, as Toni Morrison firmly asserts, "literacy was power" ("The Site of Memory" 89). Both music and the spoken word have long empowered members of the black community as creative subjects. In fact, popular African stories, together with dances and music were the only "baggage" that enslaved people brought to the Americas (Abrahams 4).

Since the late 1990s, black feminist intellectuals such as Angela Davis, Hazel Carby, Eileen Hayes, and Cherrie Tucker have argued for the importance

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of women in music, claiming this field as productive cultural terrain where issues of race, gender, and class intersect. For the purposes of this article, I will focus my remarks specifically on Classic Blues, a designation that refers to the blues that black women performed, and sometimes composed, during the 1920s and 1930s. The first singers to record blues music were women: in 1920 the singer Mamie Smith recorded her single “Crazy Blues” and its unprecedented, record-breaking sales within black neighborhoods helped inaugurate the style of Classic Blues, a distinctly female genre. The white businessmen who ran major record companies became aware of the commercial potential of black women and created the “race record” section. Records labeled as “race records” were marketed in black communities and recorded by blacks, becoming a hallmark of the widespread segregation of the times.

The itinerant theater circuits were also segregated, but offered black women a unique opportunity for travelling, otherwise impossible for them during this period. In 1924, Trixie Smith and Clara Smith recorded “Freight Train Blues”, a song that referenced women’s limitations in terms of mobility:

When a woman gets the blues she goes to her
room and cries
When a woman gets the blues she goes to her
room and cries
But when a man gets the blues he catches the
freight train and rides. (C. Smith)

The success of traveling musical theater troupes also provided female blues singers with more autonomy when choosing their outfits.⁵ Generally, these performers wore luxurious dresses and displayed their sensuality and sexuality on stage, mixed with provocation and aggressiveness, creating an image that suggested a kind of power. Such empowerment was further expressed through the artistic names of royalty that the performers assumed; to mention just a few, Bessie Smith was “The Empress of the Blues”, Ida Cox “The Uncrowned Queen of the Blues”, and Clara Smith “The Queen of the Moaners.”

The structure of Classic Blues consolidates the traditional form of the first nineteenth century Southern blues, which explains why the adjective “Classic” is employed to refer this musical style. Its structure is defined by the use of various stanzas, formed by three lines each; the second line is a repetition of the first, and the third is a conclusion that rhymes with the previous lines. This model admits variations but the main features are repetition and call and response, established by the pattern AAB and by the interaction between the singer and the audience. In this regard, it has been frequently pointed out that when the singer sang “I” the audience heard “we”, and blues singers often presented themselves as advisors to the community; Rainey’s “Trust No Man” is exemplary in this respect: “I want all you women to listen to me / Don’t trust your man no further than your eyes can see” (*Ma Rainey*).

In the decade of success of this music genre, singers such as Bessie Smith, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Sippie Wallace, Alberta Hunter, and Ida Cox created a musical repertoire that voiced a proto-feminist and social consciousness, proving that protest could also be oral. These singers became icons for other working-class black women for raising their voices against social injustices, portraying sexual taboos—including homosexuality—and breaking with the limits of social conventions. In order to avoid scandal and subversion, the recording companies exercised very rigid control over the songs that were recorded. To counteract this censorship, singers usually employed a metaphorical language charged with symbolism. Although the heyday of Classic Blues was relatively brief (the decline started with the 1929 economic crash), its cultural legacy, as I argue in this essay, has been truly significant. Despite the richness of Classic Blues and its sociocultural relevance, however, music historians—mainly male—have either ignored the contribution of the above-mentioned singers, or have only made cursory references to them.⁶ In my reexamination of Classic Blues, I propose that the blues lyrics represent a discursive sphere that reflects the singers’ complex responses to social prejudice in the realm of race, gender, and sexuality. Barbara Christian acknowledges that “the genuine poetry of the black woman appeared not in literature but in the lyrics of

blues singers like Bessie Smith” (*Black Feminist* 122). I explore the suggestive relationship between blues and literature in my analysis of Gayl Jones’s literature.⁷

1. *Corregidora*: the (re)presentation of slavery through female blues

In her first novel, Gayl Jones depicts a complex representation of slavery through four generations of women: Great Gram, Gram, Mama, and Ursa. The recollected story of the family begins on a Brazilian coffee plantation during the nineteenth century, whose owner, the Portuguese slaveholder Simon Corregidora, systematically raped two generations of women: “Corregidora fathered my grandmama and my mama too” (10).⁸ The four generations of Corregidora women decide to keep the slave-owner’s last name to leave evidence of the incestuous daughters he engendered. The legacy of sexual and physical abusive brings about inevitable traumas that Ursa, the youngest of the lineage, will have to confront. She will also have to find a place in the family’s story as well as in her own. Keeping in mind the mission of her female ancestors—to leave evidence of the atrocities perpetrated during slavery—, Ursa is shaped by a deeply fraught and contradictory psychological trajectory: “What my mama always told is Ursa, you got to make generations. Something I’ve always grown up with” (10).

The family’s obsession to maintain proof that reveals how they were sexually abused and subjugated, is directly connected to Brazilian slave history.⁹ Madhu Dubey contends that one of the motivations that could have led Jones to set her novel in Brazil may be the fact that Portuguese slaveholders frequently prostituted their female slaves for financial income, a practice that was not so widespread in the United States (251).¹⁰ Since sexual exploitation and violence are key to the novel, Jones refers to prostitution as the most degrading situation for women under slavery. For Simon Corregidora, Great Gram’s sex is “a gold piece,” whose selling he finds quite profitable (10). In terms of the socially constructed stereotypes associated with black womanhood, it is the dominant white society that over two centuries of slavery produced this cultural

imaginary. On the one hand, there is the image of the black asexual and submissive woman (mammy), who took care of the white families’ children, and on the other, the myth of the hypersexual woman (Jezebel).¹¹ Female blues singers and their sexually open attitude problematized these stereotypes, creating songs that depict black women in contradictory terms: vulnerable, sexual, spiritual, independent, and sometimes abused by their lovers.

A fact that is repeated as a refrain throughout Jones’s novel is how all the traces that could validate the long era of abusive power inequalities and the dehumanization of African descendants were systematically eliminated after abolition. This is a direct reference to the burning of all the slave-trade documents that the Brazilian Minister of Finances, Rui Barbosa, ordered in 1891 (Coser, *Bridging the Americas* 129). Ursa recalls this historical episode through a conversation she had with Great Gram when she was five years old:

Because they didn’t want to leave no evidence of what they done—so it couldn’t be held against them. And I’m leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too. And your children got to leave evidence. And when it comes time to hold up evidence, we got to have evidence to hold up. That’s why they burned all the papers, so there wouldn’t be no evidence to hold up against them. (14, emphasis in the original)¹²

From childhood, Ursa is constantly reminded about the family’s mission of engendering testimonies that will be able to retell the atrocities suffered under bondage, in order to counter historical erasure. Later in the novel, her mother will repeat the same refrain: “*They burned all the documents, Ursa, but they didn’t burn what they put in their minds*” (72, emphasis in the original); “Anyway, they ain’t nothing you can do when they tear the pages out of the book and they ain’t no record of it. They probably burn the pages” (78).

The novel begins in 1947 in Kentucky (USA), with a passage that dramatizes how Ursa’s husband Mutt, in a fit of jealousy, pushes her down the stairs after she finishes her daily blues show. As a consequence of the fall, she suffers a miscarriage, followed by a

hysterectomy that leaves her sterile at the age of twenty-five. From the outset of the novel, the parallelisms and divergences between the roles and the stories of the Corregidora women and Ursa are established. In this respect, the latter's sterility forces her to find a different way to represent and engender testimony, a means of expression in which the blues will play a crucial role. Ralph Ellison eloquently described the connection between blues music and the act of remembering:

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy, but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. (*Shadow and Act* 78)

The tragic lyricism infused in Ursa's memories, any time she recalls the cruel violence and sadism inflicted on the Corregidora women under slavery, is directly related to Ellison's definition of the blues.

The novel also describes a maturation process in how Ursa uses her voice as a singer/interpreter of her female ancestors. This development reflects, in a symbolic manner, the complexity entailed in the construction of one's identity after a history of abuse suffered at the hands of white society, as well as within the black community. In this sense, the literature of the 1970s generation of female writers gives voice to an issue that was very much silenced until then: sexism within the black community. These authors rebel against the chauvinist attitude of the 1960s Black Arts Movement ideologues, primarily male, "because when they said black, they meant black men" (Christian, *New Black Feminism* 76). Hence, black women writers contested the gendered definition of the word "black" in the nationalistic discourse promoted during the previous decade.

Ursa, like her female Corregidora predecessors, endures patriarchal domination in the form of the aggressiveness and jealousy of her first husband (Mutt), and of her second partner, Tadpole. But Jones surpasses victimization, delving into the consequences of bondage in Ursa's present life; the singer's performance

of the blues will allow her to forge her own identity and to help her overcome the traumas caused by long-term dysfunctional relationships with men. Blues, the cultural creation that immediately follows Abolition, acquires at once symbolic connotations:

The blues gave musical expression to the new social and sexual realities encountered by African Americans as free women and men [...] the postslavery African American musical form, articulated a new valuation of individual emotional needs and desires. The birth of the blues was aesthetic evidence of the new psychosocial realities within the black population. (Davis 4-5)

Jones's text reveals this new psychological reality, described by Davis, in a very complex manner that avoids presenting a monolithic idea of female identity and black culture. The paradoxical situations depicted and the hostility of Ursa's circumstances could be compared to the harsh lives of Classic Blues singers, whose biographies are essential for an understanding of the social context and their cultural impact.¹³

From the first paragraph of the novel, the protagonist underlines the vital function that blues plays for her: "I said I didn't just sing to be supported. I said I sang because it was something I had to do, but he never would understand that" (3). The black intellectual Houston A. Baker, Jr. also stresses the regenerative potential of the blues, described by him as "a matrix, a womb [...] a point of ceaseless input and output [...] enabling *script* in which Afro-American cultural discourse is inscribed" (4-5, emphasis in the original). Being now sterile, Ursa literally conceives blues as a womb that performs the function of engendering history. Until then, the wombs of Corregidora women were like "archives" (Coser, *Bridging the Americas* 129) that rendered the memories of oppression.

Ursa's identity as a woman and as a singer is tightly linked together. In the novel, there are frequent allusions to the process of creating a new voice that conveys her story and her family's. The first appears when she sings to her friend Cat, while she is still recovering from the accident Mutt provoked: "it sounds like you've been

through something. Before it was beautiful too, but you sound like you been through more now” (44). Then, Cat compares Ursa’s voice to Ma Rainey’s: “Like Ma, for instance, after all the alcohol and men, the strain made it better because you could tell what she’d been through. You could hear what she’s been through” (44). After this assertion, Ursa reflects on the meaning of her new voice: “Stained with another’s past as well as our own. Their past in my blood. I’m a blood” (45). From that moment, the singer becomes aware of the connection between her singing and the history of oppression of her ancestors. She realizes that her voice, like her last name, carries a whole family legacy. Afterwards, she finally connects her sterility with the blues and with her new voice, which now sounds more mature: “No seeds. Is that what snaps away my music, a harp string broken, guitar string, string of my banjo belly. Strain in my voice” (46). Through the use of the word “strain” to refer to her new voice, Ursa is connecting it to Ma Rainey’s, whose “strain” made the voice better and more experienced.

When she takes up professional singing, Ursa emphasizes the alterations in her voice: “I started singing about trouble in my mind. Still the new voice. The one Cat said you could hear what I’d been through in” (50). As the plot unfolds, the blues soloist will become more aware of her new voice’s power, which matures as she does. Tired of her second partner’s possessive attitude, she abandons him and starts singing at a different music club, The Spider, where her voice continues to develop in a notable fashion. The owner of the club admits: “You got a hard kind of voice[...]. Something powerful about you” (92-93). The changes that Ursa steadily introduces in her life gradually break with the spiral of oppression, infusing different nuances to the blues she sings. She succeeds in not only articulating the family epic, but also in creating an alternative to submission.

Ursa ultimately intends to compose a song that expresses all the “suppressed hysteria” that the family carried as a burden from generation to generation:

I wanted a song that would touch me, touch my life and *theirs*. A Portuguese song, but not a Portuguese song. A song branded with the new

world. I thought of the girl who had to sleep with her master and mistress. Her father the master. Her daughter’s father. The father of her daughter’s daughter. How many generations? Days that were pages of hysteria. Their survival depended on suppressed hysteria. (59, emphasis added)¹⁴

Composing a song in Portuguese that represents her life and “theirs” is quite suggestive, not only because of the language chosen but also due to the inclusiveness it posits; the use of “theirs” could refer both to the women in her family and to the Brazilian female slaves.¹⁵ In this sense, Jones echoes the call to widen black feminist discourse in the U.S., a position widely disseminated a few years later by the landmark anthology edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), comprised of Latina, Native American, and Asian writers. Following this trend, in the 1990s black feminists such as Carole Boyce Davies and Valerie Smith formulated a transnational conception of diaspora, one that focuses on the intersections among race, gender, and class, without geographical limitations.

In addition, the above-cited passage lays bare the mixed feelings that Ursa intends to express through the blues by incorporating the cadences of the “New World”. These tangled emotions evince rage, frustration, and ambiguity, which are very much present in blues lyrics.¹⁶ Ursa eventually realizes that music empowers her as a singer and as a composer. Once she is able to fully appropriate her sexuality, she will be able to free herself and her voice, a task that she seems to fulfill by the end of the novel. In this regard, recognizing the model that female blues singers established is key to the reader’s understanding of her development as a free woman, because their songs often emphasized freely chosen sexual love as a token of emancipation: “Men, they call me oven, they say I’m red-hot” (Lieb 106).

2. Ma Rainey: Mother of Classic Blues

Ma Rainey, one of the foremothers of Classic Blues, branded “Mother of the Blues” by Columbia Records, was a remarkably prolific singer who composed 40% of her repertoire, a total of ninety-two records. Her creative

talent brings to mind Ursa's own musical productivity, whose imposed motherhood is replaced by singing the blues. A second connection that links the two female figures is Ma Rainey's popular version of "Slave to the Blues" (1925):

Ain't robbed no bank, ain' done no hangin'
crime (twice)
Just been a slave to the blues, dreamin' 'bout
that man of mine
Blues, please tell me do I have to die a slave?
(twice)
Do you hear me pleadin', you going to take me
to my grave
I could break these chains and let my worried
heart go free
If I could break these chains and let my worried
heart go free
I'm a good-hearted woman, just am a slave to
the blues. (*Mother of the Blues*)

In this song Rainey metaphorically addresses the blues as her slavemaster. Angela Davis underscores the double function of the blues in this song, that stands at once in the place of slavocracy of previous times, and functions as a means of registering the repressive force now weighing on the black community (115).

"Slave to the Blues" confronts the ambiguous relationship between the singer and the music. The lyric figuratively highlights the supremacy of power institutions, even after the abolition of slavery: "do I have to die a slave?" To get away from this submissive bond, the singer cries out: "I could break these chains and let my worried heart go free." In the novel, Ursa also intends to break with the chains of the past. In order to do so, she must acknowledge her own story and (re)interpret it in a way that avoids perpetuating an inherited history of abuse. A different allusion to the aftermath of slavery in the female protagonist's present takes place when Mutt, in a second outburst of jealousy, threatens to auction her to the male audience that packs the club: "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, aint it? Piece a ass. I said I got a piece a ass for sale, anybody wont to bid on it?" (159). Yet, the blues vocalist manages to prevent her public humiliation by singing even louder (160).

Ursa is empowered onstage, where she interprets some blues composed by Ma Rainey such as "See See Rider" or "Broken Soul Blues" (157-8). The first song sarcastically praises a woman who decides to kill her lover and run away on the Cannonball train to Chicago:

I'm going away, baby, won't be back 'till fall,
Lord, Lord, Lord
Goin' away, baby, won't be back 'till fall
If I find me a good man, I won't be back at all
I'm gonna buy me a pistol, just long as I am tall,
Lord, Lord, Lord
Gonna kill my man and catch the Cannonball
If he don't have me, he won't have no gal at all.
(*Ma Rainey*)

The second deals with female recovery after male abandonment, using an ironic tone:

You made me love you, you made your mama
care,
You demanded money, I didn't scold
When you asked for lovin', I gave you my soul:
I'm cryin' now, but still I feel somehow,
I'll be laughin', dearie,
When you got the broken soul blues. (*Madame Gertrude*)

Irony and sarcasm are employed in these blues lyrics as a way to show defiance and subversion; both rhetorical figures are common in black culture and music. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. explores the importance of these and other rhetorical tropes such as parody, humor, metaphor, and the use of figurative language in black oral tradition as a way to signify racism and "rhetorical self-defense" (*Signifying Monkey* 90). In the particular case of female blues singers, they also reference sexism. In this regard, Sandra Lieb points to Ma Rainey's distinctive sense of humor, indicating that she was the first artist to include black actors in her vaudeville shows. Thanks to her growing fame, the Theater Owner Booking Association (T.O.B.A.) hired her in 1924 to go on tour through the main Southern cities.¹⁷

Like Ma Rainey, Ursa also composes her own blues. The night that she first met Mutt, she talks about the authorship of some of the songs she sings and explains

the meanings of the lyrics, which employ two of the most significant tropes in the blues: the train, a symbol for movement, and flying, an indicator of freedom:

When I first saw Mutt 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. Then I sang about this bird woman, whose eyes were deep wells. How she would take a man on a long journey, but never return him. (147)

These compositions provide evidence of the singer's psychological agony and yearning to escape from her past. This troubled relationship with the past permeates the novel; Ursa's struggle to define her place as a black woman, long ignored by historiography, complicates her position even more. To use Barbara Omolade's words in this regard: "the black woman griot-historian must wrestle herself free of the demons of the discipline of history that denies her" (110). Moreover, the system of slavery itself assigned to black women a very specific role as childbearers, a historical imposition that Ursa will subvert by singing the blues.

3. *Song for Anninho*: singing as a form of resistance

Song for Anninho is a narrative poem in which Gayl Jones chronicles the destruction of Palmares, a group of cities created in the sixteenth century by fleeing slaves in the current state of Alagoas, in Northeast Brazil. The Brazilian historian Abdias do Nascimento contends that Palmares, which existed for almost a century, represents a symbol of resistance against slavery in the American continent (47-48). Instead of a male narrator who recounts the details of battle—characteristic of male European conquest chronicles—the first person enunciative voice belongs to Almeyda, a runaway slave who sings-recites her feelings towards her lover Anninho, to whom she dedicates the poem-song after he is killed by Portuguese soldiers. The poem's intimate tone, structure, and repetitions are reminiscent of

the same features found in songs of the blues. Jones combines the symbology attached to Palmares with the meanings of the blues in a poem that poignantly recreates a foundational history of resistance: "This is a song I am singing. / All of the women are singing" (28). Historical revision, in this case, includes a modern chronicle sung through the lyricism of the blues.

Given that the only information about Palmares is to be found in colonial chronicles of conquest, Jones's task is to envision what Palmares was like from the perspective of those who resided there.¹⁸ *Song for Anninho* intertwines historical facts, Afro-Brazilian and U.S. black folklore, with the poetic imagination of the author. In this sense, *Song for Anninho*, like Classic Blues, reclaims the voices of the colonized, gendered subaltern in the first person. The poem could even represent the "New World" blues that Ursa intended to compose, a song that would make all the silenced voices emerge: "A new world song. A song branded with the new world" (*Corregidora* 59).¹⁹ Even though the story is set at the end of the sixteenth century, Jones imbues Almeyda's voice with modernist references to the blues. The language that she employs adheres to the codes of the blues, because every element acquires multiple meanings, and all of them are related to the effects of slavocracy. Houston Baker refers to the semiotic relation between blues and oppression as the "economics of slavery," in which blues music represents the experience of subjugation of Africans in the New World (5). In *Song for Anninho*, this diasporic experience of oppression effectively connects Brazil with the United States.

Almeyda becomes a metaphorical blues singer, who intones her love story during a time of battle, constantly repeating the difficulty of keeping love alive in such a harsh environment: "how we could sustain our love / at a time of cruelty [...]. How we could look at each other with tenderness [...]. It's hard to keep tenderness / when things all around you are hard" (36). Many of Classic Blues songs also convey this same anxiety, and do not represent love in an idealized and romantic manner. Instead, blues emphasizes the ambiguity and complexity of human relationships in a racist, sexist, and classist society. *Song for Anninho* reproduces these same contradictory features, as Almeyda sings: "This is a

country that doesn't allow men / to be gentle. White men or black men. It doesn't allow them to be gentle. / It is not easy to remain tender. / It is a very hard thing" (45).

The historian R. K. Kent affirms that the Portuguese colonizers began trading with slaves in 1552 and, together with the Dutch, sent around 4,400 slaves every year to the sugar plantations of the Brazilian Northeast. Some of those slaves managed to escape and created settlements—called *quilombos* in Portuguese—and Palmares was the largest and best organized among them. Founded circa 1605, its population grew to 30,000 residents, most of them black, but also included runaway or freed slaves, natives, whites, and mulattoes.²⁰ Peter Fryer points out that Palmares was not an isolated community but a group of settlements; there is historical evidence that at least nine small cities comprised this unprecedented neo-African governmental system (70).

Singing as a means of resistance in Palmares, especially for women, is presented at the very outset of the poem/song: "I do not believe the trees / can hear me singing" (1). The second part (79-110) pays tribute to Almeyda and Anninho's relationship, as they try to escape from the Portuguese attack. Again, the transcendence of singing love songs is reiterated: "And the love songs, Anninho. / Sing me a love song. / At first I thought it was an / age when we must leave the love songs behind, / or get new voices to / sing them" (80). As I have previously noted in my reading of *Corregidora*, it is crucial for Jones's female characters to find a new voice that is able to communicate the hope and strength needed for resistance: "We must remake our voices, Anninho. / This is an age when the old voices won't do." (81).

3.1. "All we have is our memories": a new world song of the diaspora

Almeyda often refers to her willingness to compose a love song, which should have the cathartic effect of laughter: "I will make all my laughter a love song, / but it can only be a heavy laughter, / a laughter that takes up the sounds of / things I am not telling you, it can only / be that kind of laughter" (82). One of the first songs recorded by a U.S. black artist was "The Laughing Song" (1894), composed by George W. Johnson, whose

refrain celebrated the freeing power of laughter: "Then I laugh ha ha ha ha ha ha, ha ha ha ha ha / I couldn't stop laughing ha ha ha ha ha ha, ha ha ha ha ha."²¹ This song anticipates the tragicomic combination of elements and figures that was later celebrated by the blues, and was already part of black folklore and popular wisdom: "When you see me laughin' / I'm laughin' to keep from crying" (*Ragtime Ephemeralist*). The singer Chippie Hill was one of the artists who popularized this motif in the blues:

Trouble in my mind, I'm blue,
But won't be always . . .
Trouble on my worried mind,
When you see me laughin'
I'm laughin' to keep from cryin'. (Levine 230)

Composed by Richard M. Jones, this song was recorded by Hill and by more than fifty different artists during the 1930s, which proves that blues songs were communitarian emblems.

The new song that Almeyda intends to compose should be able to convey the lovers' distress: "And if I sang you a love song now, / Anninho, it would be the kind that would / hurt your ears. It would set your ears to bleeding [...]. It would not be romantic. / It would be full of desire without / possibility. It would not be like the old songs, Anninho" (87). Throughout these lines, the poetic voice ponders the language that she will employ, and foretells the contradictory nature of the song. If she dedicated a love song to Anninho, it would not be like the "old song", but rather filled with agony and repressed desire. These old songs suggest the medieval *chanson de geste* that European minstrels recited to portray historic or romantic epics, which, in any case, reproduced the colonizers' vision of the events.²²

Instead of connecting the poem with the spirituals of that historical period, the author prefers to instill her lines with the meanings and the complexity of the blues: "There is neither time nor place for us here / Unless we create it" (53). Although blues songs were influenced by spirituals, the latter were mostly defined by their religious nature, a combination of West African and Christian sacred traditions.²³ Blues songs still

maintained the solid West African influence—also present in spirituals—, through call and response, improvisation, syncopation, polyphony, and the double meaning of words. Nevertheless, blues songs constituted one of the earliest secular musical forms created by African descendants on the American continent, work songs being the first. Another difference is that the soloist voice stands out in the blues, as opposed to choral singing, distinctive of spirituals and work songs. According to Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), this feature embodies the acculturation of Africans in the New World, because the blues is an expressive manifestation of an individualized ethos that was alien to the slaves brought to the continent (*Blues People* 126).²⁴ Therefore, the blues ethos was not distinctive of Africans, but of U.S. blacks, and was determined by their situation of exploitation in the Americas. Larry Neal defines it as: “the musical manifestation of one’s individual, cultural experiences in Afro-America with which members of the black community can identify” (48).

In *Song for Anninho* the blues ethos includes the persecution of the runaway slaves in Palmares, and Almeyda’s desperate attempt to express love amid the devastation. She also personifies this distinctive ethos in many of the stanzas she sings, a reproduction of the repetitive model and structure of the blues:

Come close to me, Anninho,
and speak to me through a kiss.
Speak to me through a kiss
so that this feeling will leave me.
Speak close to me through a kiss,
so that this feeling will leave me
whole. I want to be left whole. (67)

Aninho accentuates the importance of repetition, in order to leave evidence of this historical barbarism: “*I keep repeating myself, Almeyda. / But the repetition is necessary, / What I tell you must stay*” (62, emphasis in the original). This is the reason why the soldier planned to write a chronicle of the siege of Palmares, a mission undertaken by Almeyda after his murder: “I’ll write your chronicles, Anninho” (78).

As was highlighted in *Corregidora*, registering the colonizers’ brutality and the history of slavery is

similarly crucial in *Song for Anninho*. Once again, blues music is the means of giving voice to the memories of subjugation: “*this is an age when all we have is our memories*” (88, emphasis in the original). *Song for Anninho* portrays the transcontinental agony caused by slavery: “the blood of the whole continent / running in my veins” (6). A new language and a new perspective are required in order to recount these painful memories, which must include the gendered subaltern. Almeyda appeals to the need of reporting history in a truthful manner, thus avoiding the deceptive nature of European chronicles: “You see how they transform heroes into villains, / and noble actions into crimes, and elevated / codes into venality?” (78). Precisely, this reflection on truthfulness, in relation to history, is one of the major contemporary preoccupations. In this regard, Jean-François Lyotard and Linda Hutcheon, among other scholars, call our attention to the fictitious nature of history, generally written by the conquerors. On the one hand, Lyotard warns us about the postmodern necessity of questioning totalizing narratives about history, that he calls “metanarratives.” On the other, Hutcheon contends that historiography, like literature, is discourse-defined, and the interpretation of events in both cases is central (105).²⁵ To avoid exclusion and misinterpretation, a common feature in European chronicles, Almeyda’s song will include the names of the conquerors: “even our traitors have names” (*Song for Anninho* 79).

One of the strategies Jones employs to illustrate the Palmaristas’ spirit of resistance is to connect the factual incident at the Serra da Barriga to the myth of the flying Africans. This legend attributed to Africans and their descendants the ability to fly back to Africa rather than submit to slavery. The origin of this folktale probably has its historical roots in an 1803 collective suicide by newly imported slaves, who jumped from the vessel and drowned themselves off the Georgia coast—an act that most scholars have understood as a deliberate, collective suicide. The site of their fatal immersion was named Ebos Landing (Snyder 39).

As opposed to Jones, historians such as Ernesto Ennes and R.K. Kent refer to the jump of the two hundred Palmaristas from the mountain where they

had sought shelter, as a suicidal surrender, while Nina Rodriguez, Arthur Ramos and J.F. da Rocha Pombo consider the action to be heroic (King 760-763). Although the recorded fact has received multiple interpretations, Jones decides to associate it with the African myth, introduced in the poem by a dream in which Almeyda crafts feathers for Anninho (26). Almeyda ponders the meaning of that premonitory dream and only understands its implications following the episode on the mountain:

And didn't the war end like that?
Only cliffs to be jumped from, or surrender?
... I did not know what
it meant until after the thing had happened
in the world. And our brave Palmaristas,
jumping from the cliffs rather than surrender.
Oh, if they had become birds then! (42)

The myth of the flying Africans became a symbol of resistance in the context of the African diaspora in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States, as an alternative to the European hegemonic myths (Wilentz 22). In this sense, the use of the myth in *Song for Anninho* links the experiences of oppression in Brazil and the United States. The third part of the poem-song celebrates the immortality of the Palmarista soldiers and Zumbi, their leader: “What became of him? Zumbi. / They killed him so that his people would not / think he was immortal. / I saw his eyes. He had the eyes of an / immortal man. / I wonder how his woman feels” (114). Rather than recounting the details of the battle—a common feature of colonial chronicles—the poetic voice chooses instead to focus on inner feelings.

Being aware that slaves were deprived of their native language when they were traded—an essential part of the imperialist mission of expansion through linguistic imposition—Almeyda ruminates on the language that will be used to tell their history of Palmares: “My grandmother always talked about how we / lost our language here” (58).²⁶ Anninho is convinced that they will have to invent their own language: “*We will / make words out of words. / We will use the same words, / but with a different meaning*” (58, emphasis in the original). To achieve this goal, Jones creates a hybrid

blues that fuses the language of the colonized natives, the experience of slavery, and their lives as fugitives in the *Quilombo*. Almeyda's blues ethos interconnects Portuguese, African and U.S. influences, made evident in the poem through the use of Portuguese words such as “desapego” (8), “macumbeiro” (56), “curador” (98), and the reproduction of the African chants that Zibatra, the healer, sings: “She speaks in tongues / *anii ennana khety inini / merikere ibihe kenikhesait / iudenet ipuiwer* [...] and then sings *wallada aie wallada aie*” (4, 7).²⁷ The cadences of the blues connect them all.

Jones creates a new blues song that pays tribute to Brazilian slaves, and to Palmares as a symbol of resistance. Moreover, this hybrid song rearticulates a reading of the flying Africans as an icon of bravery. The blues ethos sets the perfect tone in order to communicate the frustration, anxieties, and paradoxes that both Almeyda and Anninho experience during the devastation of the *Quilombo*. Singing in the first person is the means to bear witness to colonization and slavery in the Americas, from the point of view of the sexed subaltern. Jones powerfully imagines the space where the reader can finally hear the Palmares blues, silenced for too long.

4. Conclusion

In the texts analyzed, music serves as a subversive language capable of bearing witness and representing the foundational legacy of slavery in the American continent. This multilayered historical revision through music, and especially through the blues, is enacted in three different ways: first, we listen to the voices of women and the traumas they had to bear during and after slavery; second, Jones evinces the social construction of history and cultural traditions that tend to silence and stereotype black women; and third, singing the blues about the largest settlement for runaway and freed slaves in Brazil constitutes a symbol of resistance in the Americas.

In *Corregidora* and *Song for Anninho*, the blues communicates a repressed past that Brazil and the United States shared through slavery. Recovering the history of the African diaspora is fundamental to Gayl

Jones's important literary project comprised in equal parts of orality, music, and folklore. The hybrid blues songs that the author creates include factual events and historical personages from Brazilian history, mixed with her own imagination, inventing a creative space in the United States and in Brazil where all those cultural references coexist. My analysis of the stylistic and formal characteristics of female Classic Blues, as well as the social protest implicit in the lyrics, reveals how history and tradition have forever been reformulated in the voices of two unforgettable women singers: Ursa and Almeyda.

Notes

1. "Young Woman's Blues", composed by Bessie Smith and recorded in 1926.
2. This article derives from my Ph.D. dissertation entitled: "La influencia del blues y el jazz en tres autoras afroestadounidenses: Toni Morrison, Alice Walker y Gayl Jones", defended in May 2014, and supervised by Professor Juan Ignacio Guijarro González (Universidad de Sevilla, Spain), and Professor Stelamaris Coser (Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo, Brazil).
3. Toni Morrison was the editor of *Corregidora*, at Random House, and has said of the book: "No novel about any black woman could ever be the same after this" ("On a Book She Loves" 109).
4. Most of the slaves traded to the Americas came from the Western Angola-Congo perimeter. For more information on African cultures see Janheinz Jahn's hallmark study.
5. The early minstrel shows had mocked black men and women. In Bessie Smith's biography, Chris Albertson recalls that "one of the show's routines had Bessie dressed as a Southern mammy, complete with bandana, a red dress with white polka dots, and an exaggerated posterior, which was actually a pillow" (94).
6. See Paul Oliver's *Barrelhouse Blues*, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) *Blues People*, and Albert Murray's *Stomping the Blues*.
7. For more information on blues and feminism, see Davis, Carby (*Cultures in Babylon*), and duCille.
8. For a thorough historical and cultural comparison between the ideological practices and discourses in the nineteenth century United States and Brazil, see Heloisa Toller's *Marcas da escravidão: o negro e o discurso oitocentista no Brasil e nos Estados Unidos*.
9. The references to Brazil are frequent in Jones's literary works; the most noteworthy are found in her poetry books *Xarque and Other Poems* (1979) and in *The Hermit-Woman* (1983).
10. In her groundbreaking work in black feminist studies *Ain't I a Woman*, bell hooks analyzed the double discrimination suffered by women during slavery in the United States, in terms of both race and sex (15-53).
11. For more information on the construction of stereotypes and black womanhood see Walker 231-243; Hill Collins 70-96; Christian (*Black Feminist Criticism* 2-30) and Carby (*Reconstructing Womanhood* 20-40).
12. In an interview with the poet Michael Harper, her professor at Brown University Graduate School, Gayl Jones mentioned the thorough historical research she undertook to write the novel.
13. On Ma Rainey see Lieb; on Bessie Smith, see Albertson, and on other famous blues singers, see Harrison.
14. Clara Escoda Agustí analyzes and deconstructs madness, violence, and silence as responses to domination in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man*, and in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.
15. Ethnic and racial inclusive representation has been a constant in Jones's literary work, whose last novel, *Mosquito* (1999) is set in Rio Grande, South of Texas. The frontier location allows her to deal with ethnic and intercultural relations between a U.S. black woman, a Mexican, and a Chicana.
16. See Michael Taft's *Talkin' to Myself: Blues Lyrics, 1921-1942*, an exhaustive compilation of over two thousand blues lyrics.
17. The T.O.B.A. circuit was a vaudeville tour addressed to a black audience and was popularly known as "Tough On Black Asses," due to the abusive labor conditions and racist white owners. For more information on the vaudeville circuits see: Lauterbach (39-50), Abbot and Seroff, and Gates ("The Chitlin' Circuit").
18. The Brazilian historian Décio Freitas analyzes and annotates unpublished documents about Palmares, using a critical approach that questions the "historical truth" and the problems that arise from the "ideological falsehood" of colonial documents (13).
19. "Subaltern" was a term popularized by Gayatri Spivak in her influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), in which she criticizes the Eurocentric epistemic violence that prevents black and poor women (the sexed subalterns) from representing themselves in the particular context of India.
20. The number of runaway slaves increased after 1630, when the Dutch invaded the Brazilian Northeast to control the sugar cane commerce, ruled until that time by the Portuguese. The slaves took advantage of this

turmoil and broke away from sugar plantations in large numbers (Fryer 69).

21. George W. Johnson (1850-1910) was a Ragtime musician, born in Virginia as a slave. He recorded "The Laughing Song" hundreds of times, whose success was attributed to his contagious laugh. Although he was one of the first black artists to record a song, almost none of the histories of music refer to his relevance (*Ragtime Ephemeralist*).
22. In the introduction to her book of essays *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature*, Gayl Jones mentions the oral influence in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, one of the most representative works of English medieval literature.
23. For more information on the West African influence on spirituals, see Lawrence-McIntyre 1987.
24. It is not coincidental that the blues stresses individuality, since Puritan ideology strongly fostered personal attainments in the United States during that period.
25. Hutcheon coined the influential term "historiographical metafiction" to refer to novels that display a theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction. For a study of Hutcheon's theories in relation to *Song for Anninho* as a postmodern text see Coser's "Imaginando Palmares".
26. Eric Cheyfitz calls the discourse of European expansion a "poetics of imperialism" that depicted the inhabitants of the Americans as savages.
27. Regardless of the diverse ethnic and racial presence in Palmares, the original inhabitants of this area most probably spoke Bantu, the language spoken in Angola (King 756).

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