

CORRECTING THE PAST: MAKING MEMORY SERVE

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## INTRODUCTION

President Obama's election in 2008 marks, for many US citizens, a potential endpoint to a trajectory of racial tension that began with slavery, and may now, in what they call our "post-racial" society, be put to rest at last. For them, the election of the President is proof that racial equality has been achieved, that the problems of the past have been repaired, and that those problems may now be set aside as relics of history without direct relation to the present. While I find that conclusion highly questionable at best, the notion of a "post-racial USA" remains of interest to me. Does post-racial imply that race no longer exists as a social institution, or simply that it remains with us, but no longer matters? How, in such an environment, would we parse the facts of slavery and racial tension that have played such pivotal roles in US history and are inextricably tied to race?

In this paper, the women of Gayl Jones' novel *Corregidora* provide the framework for a discussion of the way that, as a culture, we remember and cope with the trauma of slavery in the United States. I propose that Ursa Corregidora models a strategy of remembering that allows her to learn from, and thus move beyond her trauma, rather than trapping herself in a cycle of repetition. Ursa's break from this cycle is a corrective or updating force in the history of her family and therefore serves here as a context for discourse on repairing our relationship, collectively, to some of our worst national memories.

In order to address that concern, however, it is first necessary to determine the stakes of this discourse. In a social climate in which slavery has become, for

many, an uncomfortable topic with little apparent relevance to life today, it does not go without saying that we, as a nation, still *have* a relationship to that memory. However, with racial discrimination and prejudice still giving momentum to all facets of American social inequality, it seems prudent to turn to the period of history in which that tension was at its height in order to better understand its resonances – its ripples – with our present. Jones' *Corregidora* demonstrates, in the context of this discussion, an individualized anecdote of this resonance of past with present by illustrating how, even generations removed from the end of slavery in the United States, the protagonist is nonetheless unable to escape its influence.

In using this paper as a vehicle for constructing Ursa's story as a metaphor for our national race relations, I seek to enter the discourse on "dealing" with slavery, and suggest a possible avenue of eventual improvement. I do not mean to suggest that I am providing the answer to a problem that has been with this country almost since its inception, merely that I attempt here to provide a useful angle for continuing the conversation.

#### GAYLE JONES' *CORREGIDORA*

*Corregidora*, published in 1975 by Beacon Press, is Jones' first novel, following after her only dramatic work and first publication. The novel precedes a total of four others at the time of this writing, written over several decades. Among her works are also included a handful of poetry collections, and a single work of literary criticism published in the long gap between her third and fourth novels.

Both Jones' fictional and critical works are eloquent of a deep and abiding concern with the transmission of history through story-telling and memory.

For the line of women featured in the novel, the urgency of history is an intense factor in their daily lives. The protagonist Ursa bears the burden of her family's devotion to record-keeping, as had her mother before her, and her grandmother and great grandmother, with whom the line began. Purchased as a slave and forced to work in the brothels of their master, the Portuguese merchant Corregidora, Ursa's great grandmother is raped repeatedly, by not only the customers, but Corregidora himself, and the man eventually fathers a child: Ursa's grandmother, who herself is the victim of Corregidora's sexual abuse. In this way, Ursa's grandmother and mother are fathered by the same man, who maintains control of the family even after the Civil War, despite having burned the papers that documented his ownership, and thus the record of the wrongs he had done to the women.

With the official proof of their enslavement and continuing sexual abuse after the end of the Civil War destroyed, the only remaining evidence, as far as the women are concerned, are they themselves, and the memories of the events of their lives passed down from mother to daughter. These memories constitute an archive of sorts that they preserve in the only way they know how: by living it over and over again. This preoccupation consumes the lives of the members, who lock themselves in a kind of temporal stasis, such that the memories of one woman are not merely related to the next, but *become* that next woman's own. Thus, despite being at least a

generation removed from the man's direct control, Ursa recalls him as though she had known him herself.

With these memories comes the duty of passing them on, to "make generations" to preserve the archive (Jones, 45). It is this aspect of the family's memory-keeping that creates the principle conflict as, from the first few pages, Ursa is struck down by her then-husband, Mutt, in an attack that leaves her hospitalized and in need of an emergency hysterectomy, rendering her barren, and thus, unable to produce any new generations to carry the record forward. Remembering the dehumanizing indignities of the brothel, in which Corregidora "made them make love to anyone, so they couldn't love anyone," (Jones, 118) and afterward, the complicated relationship that ensues, and ends in violent separation, each generation of women remains unable to maintain a relationship with any of the men in their lives except for the old plantation owner's memory. In Ursa's case, the loss of her ability to form relationships has intensified to the point where she loses sensation altogether, apparently unable to feel her genitals or anus, as demonstrated in her insistence as a young girl that she could feel nothing during the game of doctor she played with a neighbor child. This despite her mother's observation that "he was feeling up [her] asshole." (Jones, 46).

Even as an adult, Ursa seems only able to attempt relationships with men, but not to carry them through for extended periods, as her preoccupation with Corregidora and the constant pressure from her family (as she recalls them) to remember him prevents this. For example, her second marriage to a man called Tadpole ends in frustration and heartbreak as he, angry at her unwillingness to have

sex with him, despite her still being capable of the act, has an affair with a younger woman. Ursa's sexual unfeeling, a side effect of her grief over the loss of her uterus and the consequences that that loss holds for her ability to make generations, thus stands as a barrier between her and her new husband, and that barrier eventually dissolves their union.

Eventually, haunted by her family's memories and the stagnated, abortive nature of her own present-day relationships, Ursa returns to her mother, the closest thing she has to an original source. What she asks to hear about, however, is not the Corregidora that reverberates through the history of her family. Rather, she enquires about her father, and the relationship her mother had to him.

While Ursa's mother does respond with the story of Ursa's father and herself, it is worth noting that the conversation quickly returns to the subject of Corregidora, even though, in both the novel's present and the within the story Ursa's mother is telling, the Portuguese slave trader is not the subject of conversation.

"After [Martin, Ursa's father] come, they didn't talk to me about making generations anymore, or about anything that happened with Corregidora, but Martin and me could hear them in there talking between themselves . . . Great Gram telling Mama how Corregidora wouldn't let her see some man because he was too black." Mama kept talking until it wasn't her that was talking but Great Gram. I stared at her because she wasn't Mama now, she was Great Gram talking: "He wouldn't let me see him, cause he said he

was too black for me. He liked his womens black, but he didn't  
wont us with no black mens." (Jones 141)

In this passage, Ursa, as the first person narrator, describes the moment at which she perceives that her mother's account of the household controversy that arose from Martin's presence in the house becomes indistinguishable from the equivalent episode in the life of her Great Gram, when she is thought by Corregidora to have had sexual contact with a black man, even though she had not. With Ursa's parents, as in that earlier instance, the relatively brief contact was broken up by the family's policing factors (Corregidora in his possessive rage and Ursa's grandmother in her slavish adherence to Corregidora's rules) and in both cases, ended as the black man was chased out of each woman's life for good.

To Martin, it seems clear that the force that renders him a perpetual outsider in the family was not merely the Portuguese plantation owner's control over the women. Indeed, it is Martin who finally addresses the reader's likely puzzlement over the fact that when the Civil War ends, the relationship of the women to Corregidora does not, and, not until Ursa wheedles the story of her own conception from her mother is the reader's confusion resolved:

"I think what really made them dislike Martin was because he had the nerve to ask them what I never had the nerve to ask."

"What was that?"

"How much was hate for Corregidora and how much was love." (Jones, 150)

While that question remains without an explicit answer throughout the work, the novel ends with Ursa returning to Mutt, her own Corregidora, of her own volition, resuming the emotional and sexual relationship she had originally rejected after his attack. Ursa's resumption of their relationship, however, is marked by a crucial condition that establishes its difference from that between the original Corregidora and her great-grandmother. Unlike the latter relationship, which ended, it is hinted, in a violent attack that left the original Corregidora as reproductively crippled as Mutt has left Ursa, the two of them return to each other with the admission that they *do* want a relationship, but not with partners that will hurt them (Jones, 213).

This fictional work accomplishes, on a microcosmic scale, an anecdote of how slavery remains with one family long after its abolishment, and what steps might be taken to address its influence constructively. While that does not necessarily suggest that the novel provides a viable solution to many decades of post-slavery racial tension, *Corregidora* does offer a starting point to a discourse on dealing with the past.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Fradenburg and Freccero, in their introduction to *Modern Sexualities*, propose that "history is how the living remember the dead, how the familiar know the unfamiliar; it is how the dead and the strange instruct the living . . . [how] the knowable and the unknowable, become mutually intelligible" (xiii). The history of



US slavery, then, in this way of thinking, could do nothing less than provide the framework with which Americans interact with their past and understand their present. The process of remembering slavery (as with any other part of our national history) is what allows us to make sense of a present that, without the informing quality of history, would lack the otherwise unknowable, but indispensable context.

Michelle Alexander provides an example of how crucial this context is to our present-day realities. In her book, *The New Jim Crow*, she traces a detailed account of how the practice of present-day law making and enforcement has led to a de facto continuation of the Jim Crow conditions that followed the Civil War. The original Jim Crow itself, she notes, constituted a legally supported continuance of slavery in every way but name, just as the formulation of drug enforcement, prosecution, and the treatment of convicts, she argues, repeats the effects of Jim Crow under an ostensibly colorblind system that, in practice, persecutes minorities almost exclusively (12).

The groundwork she lays for her greater argument provides a forceful example of how the thread of one historical era remains woven into our current social fabric. Without knowledge and consideration, that is, without *remembering* slavery and Jim Crow, she illustrates, it is not possible to perceive, understand, or resolve the social problem of mass incarceration that plagues our nation today.

*Corregidora* suggests, however, that dependence on memory is at best a two-edged sword, as much a source of strength and purpose as a paralyzing distraction from the business of living life in the present. The weight of memory in the family of Corregidora women then functions as an interesting point of comparison to the

fetishization of the child discussed in Edelman's early chapter in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. He argues that the obsession with protecting fictive children is indicative of the adults' attempt to "restore" to themselves a sense of innocence and a perfection of circumstance that never existed in any real sense. Moreover, this reproductive futurism, to use Edleman's term, is precisely what keeps that goal out of reach. (21, 27) In this way, the author flips the notion of the "death drive," an alleged tendency of the queer body to pursue social suicide and spiral with purpose toward ultimate deterioration, by suggesting that the very insistence on othering queerness locks normative society into its own, and *actual* death drive, characterized not so much by a dramatic implosion, but by a less apparent, and ultimately more harmful kind of deterioration. Worse, this static fixation leaves the normative social body unable to address or even *perceive* the nature of that deterioration. What Edelman describes is stagnation, a social order wasting away before a false image of itself like Narcissus at his reflection (27). This result is not far, as we will see shortly, from the one that Benn-Michaels hints is the danger of fixating on slavery as a past that requires our constant, continuing attention.

Ursa's story picks up at the place that her family has occupied for generations. Even after her divorce from Mutt, she seems only able to attempt relationships, but not to carry them through for extended periods because of her thoughts about Corregidora and the constant pressure from her family (as she recalls them) to remember him. In other words, so concerned is she with passing on their experiences that she becomes essentially unable to make her own. In this way,

the greater project of archival preservation fails, as the successive generations of women can only repeat experiences in that archive without adding any new contribution of their own. As Edelman predicts, the result is stagnation, with the ultimate consequence of social death. As is illustrated in the previous section, however, this repetition is neither coincidental nor accidental. Rather, Ursa's grandmother sought intentionally to preserve her daughter's relationship to Corregidora as nearly to her own mothers' as possible. Unlike in Edelman's examples, the preservation of memory here is a force of applied will, and not merely unconscious folly. Ursa's grandmother does not *want* there to be any difference or progress with time, and sees Ursa's mother's transgression as a betrayal of that goal. To depart from the habit of Corregidora is, to the grandmother's way of thinking, not only to *forget* the record of slavery and one's duty to it, but to actually *destroy* it.

To depart from the past, however, that is, to depart from our own national memory of slavery, is seen by some as the only way to dismiss the misconception that that past should still hold sway over the present. In his essay, "You Who Never was There: Slavery and the New Historicism, Deconstruction and the Holocaust," Benn-Michaels addresses this position with the question of whether Americans believe their myths. For Benn-Michaels, the question's urgency is that myth is a kind of illusion, a reference to an event in the past, thought (he might say imagined) by those in the present to have an effect that extends well beyond the lives of anyone who actually experienced it. His use of the word to describe present-day reference to the institution of slavery in the United States, abolished near the end of the Civil War in 1863, then, already begins to illustrate his implication that he believes that

the era's relevance is past, and its connection to the current state of affairs merely an illusion. What he does not address, and as other voices will illustrate later in this paper, the effects of slavery are still with us, and that bare reality weakens his contention.

The question he poses, then, of whether Americans believe their myths is therefore a question of whether the belief in slavery as a present influence is still with us as a nation, which, he indicates, it does, but the other main assertion of his essay adds another layer to that question. Insisting that "slavery can be and must be either remembered or forgotten," draws our attention to his feeling that we are presented with a choice – so that he is not only asking whether slavery remains a part of our conceptions of the present, but also whether or not it *should*. In other words, slavery must either be acknowledged and addressed as part of our historical narrative in the present, or discarded as irrelevant. For him, indeed, this choice has real consequences. His concerns echo Edelman's in that he believes that our decision to remember slavery would not only be an insistence on its continuing influence, but what actually *causes* that influence. The situation, then, would appear to be one well within our control: without reference to slavery as a foundational influence on our current society, it would be impossible to maintain a memory of it at all, and thus we could, in theory, be rid of slavery's effects simply by deciding they did not exist.

In order to answer his question, however, it is necessary to examine what Benn-Michaels means by "myth." Using the example of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Benn-Michaels observes that slavery is experienced indirectly through story telling by people that, since they live in the present, have no actual memory of it. Myth, in

Benn-Michaels' thinking, does not require of the believer any form of direct experience with the subject of the myth. In this way, he allows for memory that is not technically memory at all, and which is passed culturally rather than through experience. This kind of memory<sup>1</sup> is what he is referring to with his concept of "myth." In his estimation then, what Ursa Corregidora experiences as the memories of her female ancestors is not a passing on of memory, but the creation of a mythology, and one that, were she a real person and not merely a myth herself, she would have the power to abolish as no longer relevant to her present day life.

Relevant to this discussion, however, is the fact that while a particular novel's account of slavery may be fictional at least and mythological at best, slavery is neither of those things. What seems to go unaddressed (though certainly not denied) in Benn-Michaels' analysis of American myth-making is that both of the events he cites – the Holocaust and slavery in the United States actually happened. This is worth mentioning, as the simple laws of cause and effect suggest at minimum a link between past and present that cannot be abolished with a simple decision.

Thus Benn-Michaels' conception of myth lacks any validation of the force that our historical "myths" have on those who "believe" in them. However, Roland Barthes offers a further reflection on the subject that informs both our discussion here and Benn-Michaels'. In his book *Mythologies*, Barthes describes myth as a signifier that has more than a single signification, that is, which has meaning held

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<sup>1</sup> Not only does he reject the validity of this kind of myth-making, but he does so by comparing it unfavorably both to a biological or "racial" memory that is modeled in a science fiction novel he mentions, and to the belief in aliens (3). Quite apart from his dismissive treatment of national history, this writer is distressed by his implicit derision of the genre of science-fiction and not just a little because of her concern that, implied in this dismissal is the feeling that this contempt is in part *because*, rather than in spite of, its mass appeal.

simultaneously on multiple levels beyond its relationship to its signified. Moreover, in his formulation of myth, this multiplicity of meaning results in a flexibility with serious consequences:

Entrusted with “glossing over” an intentional concept, myth encounters nothing but betrayal in language, for language can only obliterate the concept if it hides it, or unmask it if it formulates it. The elaboration of a second-order semiological system will enable myth to escape this dilemma: driven to having neither to unveil or to liquidate the concept, it will *naturalize* it. . . . Here [is] the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature. (Barthes, 240)

As he goes on to clarify, Barthes is suggesting that the nature of myth is that its multiply-signifying characteristic allows the meaning it makes to the observer seem a matter of course, or illustrative of the natural order of things, when instead it is the reflection of a complex process of manipulation (intentional or otherwise) of the myth invoker on the part of the observer.

In Barthes’s conception of myth, attention is paid to the fact that myths begin with a citation, and then multiply into other meanings that still coexist with the original referent. Thus Benn-Michaels’ myth of slavery is incomplete. In choosing to focus only on the “memories” held by “[those] who never [were] there,” he attempts, unproductively, to divorce our knowledge of history from its effects (Benn-Michaels, 1).

This brings up another concern: *Corregidora* is a novel – a work of fiction. Even Benn-Michaels’ example of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is a citation of fiction,

written within the last couple of decades, with a considerable gap in time, generations, between their publication and the time of their stories. Despite this, both in this paper and for Benn-Michaels, the novels carry the weight of source material. Thus, here again we have an example of events being remembered without any living witness.<sup>2</sup>

Yet both novels present only a fictional anecdote of the past, each of which help to distill the nature of slavery's relevance to the present in a way more concise and comprehensive than a factual account of a slave's lived experience in the nineteenth century could do. Our willingness to substitute works of literary fiction for historical accounts is indicative of our priorities in holding onto the past, though Benn-Michaels suggests that he sees it rather as our devotion to myth-making. As he put it, "the answer to the question, do the Americans believe their myths, is yes" (Benn-Michaels, 1). Our "mythology" of slavery still informs our sense of ourselves as a nation in the present, and for black Americans, their sense of their own identity as having progressed up from that horrifying beginning. Maintenance of that identity, however, does not depend on texts for which citations of history are exact. Rather, as Corregidora and Ursa's great-grandmother represent the legends, respectively, of the plantation owner and the black slave for whom beauty is a curse, so, too, do such texts as *Corregidora* and *Beloved*<sup>3</sup> become part of the archive for a

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<sup>2</sup> *Corregidora* takes place in the middle of the twentieth century, at which time we would likely, only seven decades on, still have had living witnesses. Nevertheless, Ursa's present is, as I have demonstrated, mired in the past, preoccupied with and even performing events that happened in the century preceding it, a time period approximate to the events of *Beloved*.

<sup>3</sup> By this what I mean is that *Beloved* is another example of a fictional slave narrative which focuses not so much on faithfulness to any real individual's history, but instead constructs a fantastical account of a fictional slave.

legend, or myth of American slavery, not by directly citing the past, but by citing our concerns regarding that past in our discourse in the *present*.

Caruth explicates this tendency further in her book, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, by noting that understanding a catastrophe of history – her example is the bombing of the Japanese city of Hiroshima at the end of World War II – “can only be perceived, it would seem, through a language of fiction, a fiction that inherently erases the reality of the past it conveys” (49). The fictionalized accounts of slavery that Spillers notes have been “proliferating” since Harriet Beecher Stowe and her *Uncle Tom* (53), provide a distance from which we can view our traumatic national history comfortably, without having to confront it directly. In Caruth’s estimation, this distance is intended to allow us to hide from the realities of the past, to erase it from our minds, if not history, and replace it with something a little easier to accept. While that is certainly an option and a hazard to remain alert for, I would suggest that that does not *need* to be the role of fiction in our discourses on history. Fictionalized accounts of America’s slave history allow a means through which we might begin to accept it as part of our past and thus begin to address its lingering influence. In much the same way, this paper takes Jones’ novel as an entry point from which to open the discussion here.

With this in mind, we may observe how the trajectory of the Corregidora family’s relation to memory begins to suggest the nature of the relationship between Americans and their history. After the Civil War, with nowhere to go despite having been freed from their enslavement, the former slaves of the United States also returned to their former masters, under arrangements not unlike those of their



enslavement, just as the Corregidora women return to their respective Corregidoras.

This return, arguably one of the most baffling aspects of the novel, may cause the reader to question, as does Ursa's father, what factors influenced and led up to it.

### REMEMBERING, FORGETTING, AND REPEATING

In Ursa's case however, her remembrance goes further than simple recall. Her familial culture inculcates her with access to a trauma that, until she begins to repeat the sequence of behavior in her own present, she has never actually experienced. Freud would classify this situation, in which "something is 'remembered' that could never have been 'forgotten' since it was never at any point noticed, never conscious," as neither remembering, nor forgetting, despite a person's convictions otherwise. (Freud, 393). However, Freud goes on to describe a phenomenon of forgetting that bears uncanny resemblance to the case modeled in Jones' novel. In the "Repeating, Remembering and Working Through" chapter originally from *Further Recommendations on Technique*, he describes how a patient that has forgotten or repressed a traumatic event may only remember that event by acting it out: "The patient will yield to the compulsion to repeat – which now takes the place of the impulse to remember . . . The part played by resistance, too, is easily recognized. The greater the resistance, the more extensively will acting out (repetition) replace remembering" (Freud, 395). This repetition is not the same as remembering the trauma. In fact, Freud posits that it is an act of repression, or, we

might say, forgetting it. If we take Freud's prediction seriously as a psychoanalysis of Ursa (and thus the United States in the context of this paper), then this suggests a disheartening possibility that the more we struggle to get away from slavery, the closer we will get to versions of its reality.

This possibility is in line with Alexander's findings. She notes:

Following the collapse of each system of control, there has been a period of confusion— transition— in which those who are most committed to racial hierarchy search for new means to achieve their goals within the rules of the game as currently defined. It is during this period of uncertainty that the backlash intensifies and a new form of racialized social control begins to take hold. The adoption of the new system of control is never inevitable, but to date it has never been avoided. (Alexander, 21-22)

She does not close down the possibility that we might break from this cycle of forgetting by repeating, but she notes that we have never managed to do so before. Rather, each iteration has simply been replaced by another very much like it. In the case of what she identifies as the current iteration, the root of the problem is not simply that institutional racism today finds its strongest foothold in the American justice system, but that it operates specifically *because* of the belief that it is part of a racially unbiased – indeed, colorblind – system. In other words, the more we deny that race continues to present a problem for the United States, the greater a problem it is, and the greater a problem it becomes. Were we to admit the

connection, to face our trauma, we would be able to see the problem, and thus begin to resolve it.

In Ursa's case, too, for all that her and her mother's experiences of the time of their parents and grandparents during slavery are only second-hand, their tendency to re-perform the events of the great-grandmother's life is very strong. In apparent contrast to Freud's predictions, Ursa's grandmother, who would have experienced some of that relationship firsthand – being as she was the first *Corregidora daughter* – *does* remember in great detail. Indeed, far from forgetting her own experiences, she goes out of her way to hold onto them and those of her mother's. Her actions, however do not depart from Freud's predictions. The grandmother's obsession, rather, amounts to the very act of repetition that Freud describes, and despite her apparent willingness to engage with those memories, she only succeeds at replicating – playing both the roles of *Corregidora* and her mother – and not resolving them. Thusly, for Ursa, though her grandmother provides Fradenburg's and Freccero's contextual anchor for her understanding of the present day, what she passes on in the process is the same repression by obsessive repetition that leaves the matter so cripplingly unsettled.

A textual example of the consequences of this repression can be seen in Ursa's description of the original slave owner *Corregidora's* physical appearance.

"I've got a photograph of him. One Great Gram smuggled out, I guess, so we'd know who to hate. Tall, white hair, white beard, white mustache, a old man with a cane and one of his feet turned outward, not inward, but outward. Neck bent forward like he was raging at something that wasn't

there. Mad Portuguese. I take it out every now and then so I won't forget what he looked like." (Jones, 9)

The emphasis on his being white, illustrated by the repetition in his physical description is a clue to his ascension to the status of mythology. Despite passages in other parts of the book that describe him as dark enough to be mistaken for a Native American (and the rage he exhibits to anyone who points this out) the photograph, and the way Ursa describes it, records his whiteness as the key component of his appearance, eclipsing nearly every other feature. He stands not for himself, at least, not *just* himself, but for the idea of the white slave owner more generally. As an object of memory, he is simply white. It is worth noting that the only men allowed to purchase sex with Ursa's great-grandmother are those who are white like Corregidora himself, thus adding to the impression that while the substance of the women's' memories is specific, what they represent to them is not. In his time, Corregidora provided an anecdote of oppression and abuse, but the memory of the women has made him a representation of white males more generally.

Nor is this phenomenon limited to whites. Rather, fetishization of the blackness of Ursa's great grandmother is equally strong: valued for her skin color, Ursa's ancestor, and later Ursa herself, are generalized by this process of memory-making into an almost legendary trope of the beautiful black woman for whom the fact that she is darker skinned is a part of her identity as much as it is part of her appearance.

For both Corregidora and Ursa's Great Gram, then, the two of them have become, in the micro-society of their family, and for the purposes of this discussion,

versions of Barthes' concept of mythology. No longer referencing only the direct presence of two once-living people, the images of the two of them provide a model of the "natural" relationship that the women should have with men. The strength of this naturalized myth is most notable in how much stigma was placed on Ursa's mother for consorting with a black man, despite the fact that that union created a new generation, Ursa, to pass on the record. Indeed, Ursa is not only necessary for providing them the next generation, but more than that, she closely resembles her Great Gram (with whom the line began) moreso than either of the other two women.<sup>4</sup> While Ursa, then, is a welcome result of her parents' relationship, her male parent is not, despite his necessity to her existence. Thusly does Ursa's grandmother repeat, in the Freudian sense, the trauma of *Corregidora's* conditioning by insisting that the slave holder's rules be not only recalled (remembered), but also observed, (repeated).

In conjunction with Edelman's theoretical framework, which establishes the dangers of fixation on the past, comparison of racial politics in the US with *Corregidora* suggests another unsettling possibility. Too great an emphasis on preserving a present memory of the past, and without preserving the distinctions between one generation and the next, that is, marking progression, is the force that traps Ursa into a relationship with the man who most closely resembles the abuser of her family's past. For that matter, Mutt is her *own* abuser, having injured,

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<sup>4</sup> It is noteworthy, thinking of Edelman, to consider that had Ursa's grandmother succeeded in preventing her daughter's relationship, and thus her resulting grandchild, her obsession with a past that is unreal if not actually fictional – in the sense that her memories are manifestations of repression and not open engagement – would have destroyed any chance of her family continuing. She would quite literally have enacted the death drive that Edelman attributes to those thus obsessed.

sterilized, stalked, and emotionally wounded her, yet as with the original Corregidora women, she cannot get her tormentor out of her head. Our collective national memory of slavery, and moreover the black American use of racial oppression as a focal point of community-building shows reprisals of some aspects of Ursa's relationship to Corregidora, and in several places in the novel, hints are given that suggest its possible allusion to a relationship that transcends individuals. As an example, I draw your attention again to Ursa's description of Corregidora.

There are, however, two key differences between Edelman's fixation and what is seen here, both in the novel and in our racialized society. In the first place, the fixation is not, in the case of Ursa's family, on returning to the conditions of the past, even as they repeat it. Rather, the fixation is on preserving the *memory* of that past. More importantly, however, is the second difference: crucial to Edelman's theory is that the idealized past is wholly imagined, and completely impossible. Not only un-reclaimable, then, but never having been had in the first place. Thus Benn-Michaels' easy dismissal of slavery as a mythology of our present day is invalid on the simple, if seemingly self-evident grounds that slavery actually happened, and indeed, its proliferations, as Alexander has shown, are actually happening *now*. As with the photograph of Corregidora that Ursa keeps to remind herself of the old man's appearance so that she "[would] know who to hate," constant referral to slavery and its after-effects for the sole sake of not forgetting wrongs done would seem to carry with it the same risk of stasis, of being unable to move beyond that trauma, but is that what has really happened to Ursa? Perhaps not.

Similarly, I would argue that as a nation, we are getting closer, incrementally, to moving beyond merely repeating our worst memories by unproductively fixating on them. More than one hundred years on since the abolition of slavery, the place of blacks in the US has changed for the better. Despite persistent racial inequality, conditions have improved to the extent that, with the inauguration and re-election of a black President, talk of a “post-racial” nation has begun to enter the discourse on the state of social order. This diagnosis, I would say, is premature at best, indeed, I believe, as does Alexander, that it is indicative and encouraging of the worst kind of Freud’s forgetting.

It would be heartening to be able to think of the example of the Corregidora women as an extreme one, inapplicable to society at large, but our relationship to memory bears more than passing resemblance to that of Ursa and her ancestors. For Benn-Michaels, “racial memory” or “mythology”, two terms he uses to describe the set of social beliefs about the past that are held collectively by its members, are not only highly visible threads in the social fabric, but even have their place in some groups as the basis of community formation and reaffirmation. He concentrates on two groups to illustrate his point: Jews and black Americans, positing that the memory of great traumatic events, the Holocaust and the institution of slavery in the US, is not merely a part of the history of these two groups, but a force so influential that it is that event that produced the community in the first place. Citation of history, then, becomes a means of identity-building among such groups, making the

pressure never to forget, and to ensure that no one *outside* the group forgets, the mechanism by which those groups maintain their boundaries.<sup>5</sup>

Further, Benn-Michaels seems to attempt to make a purely abstract argument about rather substantiated realities. While his dismissal of the mythology that he claims operates as the binding force of these groups suggests that they have no *real* center upon which to build their community, what seems to be left out of his discussion is the fact that there exist other forces that bind the groups together besides the mere knowledge of a shared past. In the first place, the shared past itself is, in a very practical sense, a binding force. As a simple example, the majority of black Americans in the US are here because their ancestors were slaves. One could presume with relative safety that without the transatlantic slave trade, the United States could very easily have developed without a significant black minority.

On a greater scale, the Civil War, which began the cultures of many US states on the journey to their current social climates was *caused* by fights over state rights for which disputes over varying laws on slave ownership were the flashpoint. The emancipation (need I say it?) of *slaves* was accompanied by three separate amendments to the United States Bill of Rights. The release of those slaves into a social atmosphere of prejudice and racial oppression did nothing to integrate blacks into the American populace. Indeed, what happened was the opposite, as boundaries between the races were so fiercely maintained that black Americans

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, that in and of itself would suggest an inherent value of social mythology, in that, without it, if Benn-Michaels' view is to be accepted, these groups would not exist at all. That he recognizes this and yet persists in his point is eloquent of his dismissal of these communities as meaningful entities rather than mere inventions. The accepted socially constructed nature of all groups, however, inclines this writer to wonder why he finds this kind of group formation so much less compelling than others.



could expect to be identified with each other whether they self-identified as a group or not.

That may seem a strange, or at least a self-evident declaration, but as Benn-Michaels counts “mythologies” as a central point of cohesion, it is worth taking the time to illustrate how weak that assertion appears in light of reality. The choice of identity maintenance that he implies in his article, I mean to show, is even more of an illusion than his concept of the mythology of slavery. Indeed, to complete our journey of connection to the present, I will add that the Civil Rights movement of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century sought to continue the process that was begun with Emancipation, to integrate black Americans as equal members of a society that they had been a part of for generations. Finally, in the present day, the election of a black President (note that his being half-white still does not allow him to choose his racial identity, as he is never considered white, rarely called mixed, and nearly always deemed black) has marked for many that process’s completion.

True, no person alive remembers slavery, but the black community in the US has never been allowed to forget it. For whites, a similar problem exists. No white person currently living held slaves in the nineteenth century or any time prior to that. Yet the national embarrassment about slavery as a discourse in the present day in some degree stems from the resentment of being held (even by implication) responsible for the actions of one’s ancestors, or even, in the case of more recent immigrants, held responsible by association. Thus for both groups, the memory of slavery remains a kind of social burden, a trauma for blacks that keeps repeating itself, and for whites, a constantly repeating crime in which each successive

generation can claim no direct part but must, it would seem, shoulder the guilt and culpability associated with it.

As Ursa observes of her own relationship to Mutt, “We give each other too much hell” (Jones, 113). By this I am not suggesting, as Ursa is not, that hurt has not been given to either party, or that no blame may thus be justly laid. But as two parties that, like Ursa and Mutt, do not have much chance of simply staying away from each other, blacks and whites in America have no choice but to learn how to be together productively instead of injuriously. There is however, value in accepting and then moving beyond the simple insistence that racism is hurting everyone. The real issue is, how do we make the hurt stop? It cannot go unsaid, however, that the temptation to accept Benn-Michaels’ suggestion of dismissing slavery from the repertoire of national myths might seem attractive for its simplicity, and since it would mean that no one would be compelled to feel guilty or resentful over past wrongs. To do so, however, would be impossible, not because we cannot let go of the past, but because the past cannot, will not, let go of us.

In some ways, this might suggest the possibility that slavery manages to remain with us because we are constantly expecting it to. Moreover, and perhaps more disturbingly, the implication we might take away from Edelman’s and Freud’s arguments is that we might even be actively repeating the circumstances of slavery in the form of maintained racial inequality as a manifestation of our being unable to address the issue more directly than simply repeating it with differences, and yet, as evidenced by this very same repetition, we are wholly unable to step away from it. It remains imperative, however, that we do something to address it.

It is worth noting at this point that the name “Corregidora” is the feminine form of the Portuguese word for “corrector.” As the original Corregidora is male, the name does not reference him, but Ursa is also Corregidora. Thus, we might say that she is our *correctress*. The tenacity with which her family has held onto the moniker seems to be, by the end of the book, at least one way in which their stranglehold on memory has had a positive effect. Ursa repeats the conditions of her great-grandmother, but she does it with a difference – a correction. Her return to Mutt marks the breaking of the cycle, even as her hysterectomy breaks the genetic line of her family. Instead of remembering in the stagnating way modeled for her by her mother and grandmother, and instead of forgetting, denying the relevancy of that past to the present like the “post-racial” camp might insist upon, Ursa has chosen a different relationship to her memories. She acknowledges her past injuries, but does not use her memories as a reason not to continue moving forward. She has stopped repeating the past, and therefore may finally move into her future. For the US, too, while we are hardly “post-racial, our memories need not consume us.

What then is the alternative? In *Mythologies*, Barthes acknowledges that myths, being as they are insidious and unavoidable, can nevertheless be contended with. In his estimation, by maintaining consciousness of the significance of a social myth on all levels, one is able to limit its undetected influence as a shaping factor of one’s worldview, and also allows for one to even stand a chance of taking charge of that influence on others (240).

In other words, rather than allowing the myth to be a part of one’s naturalized view of the world, Barthes urges constant awareness of its contrivance.

Benn-Michaels might be willing to agree to some extent on the contrivance of the myth of slavery since, as previously stated, he remains skeptical of whether slavery is a facet of our history whose influence cannot be dislodged from our present. Indeed, Benn-Michaels would likely also be willing to grant that the slavery myth is as charged and multi-valenced as Barthes suggests is natural to any social myth. I propose, however, that that feature, properly applied, could be turned productively rather than simply ignored. For that matter, it is not very clear what ignoring or dismissing that social myth would accomplish.

That aside, if the maintenance of memory creates its own version of Edelman's "death drive" for the Corregidora family, then what is the corrector that allows us to avoid our own crippling stagnation? As Ursa demonstrates, Benn-Michaels' suggestion of what options are available in America's relationship to slavery is incomplete. It is possible to remember history constructively, and without allowing it to subsume our present. In other words, the choice does not exist either between remembering and stagnating *or* forgetting and moving forward. Slavery, being history and not merely memory despite its current status as a national mythology, is a traumatic event in the life of our country that as Freud predicts, cannot be resolved or addressed by repression or avoidance. Benn-Michaels' "forgetting," then, would ensure that we *never* got past it. Remembering slavery for what it was, and addressing its consequences (at least partially accomplished just by admitting them for what they are) is not only the *correct* option, but the *correcting* option as well.

## CONCLUSION

Luckily for us, perhaps, Jones' novel provides a potential suggestion for how to move forward. Turning again to the instance of Ursa's realization of how then generations of her family run into each other, we witness a moment of illuminating clarity, certainly for the reader, and perhaps for Ursa as well as she realizes, in this blurring between experience, memory, and imagination, what her family is actually doing: that they describe a holding pattern that renders *them* static as much as it does the record they are trying to hold onto. By the end of the encounter, Ursa reflects that "I was thinking that now that Mama had gotten it all out, her own memory – at least to me anyway – maybe she and *some man* . . . but then, I was thinking, what had I done about my *own* life?" (Jones 151).

This point in the novel marks the beginning of the change in Ursa, in which she begins to alter the pattern that her family has modeled for her. Important to remember, however, is that Ursa's change is not a complete departure from the Corregidora model. As Martin was able to guess, the relationship of Ursa's Great Gram to Corregidora after the Civil War was a complicated one, with conflicting and powerful emotions attendant. Likewise, Ursa's return to Mutt is not one without its contradictions.

By accepting back her own Corregidora, Ursa would seem to be doing so in ignorance of the warning that Barthes gives about "naturalizing" mythologies, and choosing to continue the status quo of Corregidora women. To give it a different reading, she may simply be illustrating the difficulty commonly experienced by

battered partners in completely cutting off ties with their abusers. Let us not forget that Mutt hospitalized her and caused her to lose her uterus, and not because she cheated on him, but because she sang in a nightclub where men could look at her. Equally important is that he stands in Ursa's mind for the Portugese slaver that raped her great-grandmother and grandmother, his daughter, and pimped them out to other men for the same purpose. Mutt both is and represents an incorrigible abuser, and yet Ursa is drawn to him.

This illogical move might then be more usefully considered in broader terms than a single fictional character's relationship to her battering husband. Black Americans, as I have suggested throughout this paper, have followed a similar trajectory to Ursa, fixating on a past that has saturated their present, and caught (more by circumstance than design) in the constant company of their abusers, to whom they must always return because there simply is no one and no where else.

Then too, this relationship is necessarily having to be resolved by a generation of people on both sides who were not present at its beginning. No memories exist, though the power of the mythologies that are left to us are so strong as to command the attention of memory and the substance of our fictional works.

That kind of remembering, though, is a triumph, not just over forgetting, but potentially over repeating as well. To see Ursa's return as one more cycle of harmful, stagnating re-enacting is only one way of parsing the ending of Jones' novel. More productively, we might take Ursa's return, coming after, as it does, her long examination of the terms of her family and its past, as an acceptance of the inevitability of mythologies as part of our daily life, but an acceptance that comes

with the benefit of the knowledge that those *are* mythologies, and thus are tools that we may use to move forward.

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