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The Blues as Black Female Redemption

A Literary Analysis of Gayl Jones' Corregidora, Toni Cade Bambara's "Witchbird" and Alice Walker's "Nineteen Fifty-Five"

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Abstract

This BA thesis examines the figure of the female blues singer through the analysis of three different literary works: the novel Corregidora by Gayl Jones and two short stories, “Witchbird” by Toni Cade Bambara and “Nineteen Fifty-Five” by Alice Walker. The purpose of this thesis is to highlight the importance of the blues as creative manifestation of African American cultural identity and as a tool of emancipation and redemption especially for African American women through the analysis of blues women in their literary representations. After lingering on how the abolition of slavery affected the Black community and how its consequences and impacts were reflected on the blues as expression of the Black collective consciousness, I will focus on the fictional representation of the Black female experience. I will explore in the aforementioned works how blues women challenged the mainstream notion of Black female identity and sexuality, broke taboos, preserved memory, dealt with psychologic traumas and searched for freedom and independence.

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Introduction

The reasons behind this paper are to be found in my academic journey and personal interests. The initial idea consisted in authoring a thesis about jazz and its influence on African American Literature, as I had been particularly struck by James Baldwin's 1957 short story "Sonny's Blues", that was thoroughly analysed by Professor Anna Scacchi in her course of Anglo-American Literature. Being myself interested in jazz music I was delighted to read about how it was intrinsically but also controversially part of African American culture.[1] Nevertheless, my final choice of a thesis topic was also affected by my feminist sensibility. While the jazz world is basically male dominated, women were the first to record the blues music. Although such female emergence in the blues did not last much, female singers found in the blues a tool to advocate for activism, feminism, social equality, emancipation and to denounce the oppression they endured – the blues indeed represented a tool of female redemption.[2] I was thrilled to deepen my knowledge on feminism and furthermore focus my study on Black intersectional feminism, thus combining two of my major sensibilities, music and social issues.

My work is articulated in four chapters ranging from the historical figure of the blues woman to its literary representations. Through the analysis of three literary works, I show how this music, albeit with different purposes, allowed women to achieve their identity, authenticity, and freedom, thus functioning as their redemption tool from a patriarchal, racist, and oppressive environment. The first chapter focuses on blues music being one of the most important expressions of African American culture, especially among the working class. This section explores the origins of this music genre, its implementations and contents, and its controversial reception. The blues served as a tool to elevate Black consciousness within the African American community and was connoted by a particular representational freedom. The "Devil's music" infringed every taboo and strengthened the community ties by addressing every topic Black people could relate to, including for instance economic exploitation, social issues, domestic

[1] See James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues", *Going to Meet the Man*, (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1966), pp. 86-122
For further reading see for instance John M. Reilly, "'Sonny's Blues': James Baldwin's Image of Black Community", *Negro American Literature Forum*, vol. 4, no. 2, (1970), pp. 56–60
[2] See Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday,* (New York: Vintage, 2011), pp. xi-xv

violence, relationships, sexuality. Indeed, the blues represented a means of denunciation that, inter alia, allowed women to be open about the violation of their reproductive rights and the oppression they were frequently subjected to. This chapter also briefly addresses the significance of traveling for African Americans and gender discrimination that affected women, who were not as free as men to move and – in the case of blues singers – perform across the United States. I then conclude this chapter with a brief reference to the blues' dimension of protest, although instead of advocating for particular actions it rather aimed at creating identification within the Black community.

In the second chapter I attempt to examine the impact of the blues on literature. Firstly, I offer a brief excursus in order to then proceed to demonstrate how Black music, despite being obviously an oral form, is also projected onto the written form of contemporary African American poetry. Poetics inherit the direct expressive force of the blues, its structure, and the so-called "mascon images".[3] I then analyse certain aesthetic qualities that were transferred from African Americans' music to writing. A few precise literary tropes – "repetition, chance, and descent"[4] – that distinctly derive from the blues, are thus illustrated with the aim of subsequently applying such theories to the analysis of the three literary works that were chosen for this paper. Finally, after proving how repetition and time recursiveness in both music and narrative derive from the experience of slavery, I explore the importance of the neo-slave narrative in African American culture.

The third chapter consists of the literary analysis of Gayl Jones' 1975 novel *Corregidora*. After providing a brief synopsis of the novel, I first explain why this work belongs to the genre of the neo-slave narrative and can be considered – according to the definition of Ashraf Rushdy – a "palimpsest narrative".[5] Memory is a fundamental theme that pervades the novel and the act of preserving it is here connoted by such importance that it becomes a duty imposed on the protagonist by her foremothers. Creating a matrilineage is considered a fundamental element to the transmission to future generations of the past of slavery and the horrific experiences the protagonist's

[3] See Stephen Evangelist Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References,* (New York: Morrow, 1973)
[4] See Andrew Scheiber, "Blues Narratology and the African American Novel", *New Essays on the African American Novel: From Hurston and Ellison to Morrison and Whitehead*, edited by Lovalerie King and Linda F. Selzer, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)
[5] See Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction,* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001)

great-grandmother and grandmother had to endure. Oral transmission from mother to daughter is meant to leave evidence and fill in the gaps in the official history. But such reproductive mandate cannot be fulfilled, as the protagonist undergoes a non-consensual hysterectomy. The feeling of illegitimacy for being an inheritor of memories that can neither be experienced nor be transmitted as required is present throughout the novel. Sexuality is subsequently analysed in this chapter, as it represents the site where to re-achieve womanhood and to re-discover desire. I then explain how the protagonist indeed interrupts such reproduction chain and finds in her blues the ideal condition to reiterate her ancestors' memory, while also valuing it and distancing from it. The blues here thus represents a fundamental witnessing tool that allows her to voice her experiences and suffering and free her from an oppressive past. I conclude my analysis by delving into how the author used blues both in the content and in the structure of the novel. I cite a few examples of repetition, call-and response device, break technique, chance, and descent, thus employing the theories elucidated in the previous chapter.

In the fourth and concluding chapter I centre my study on two short stories – Toni Cade Bambara's 1977 "Witchbird" and Alice Walker's 1981 "Nineteen Fifty-Five". Both authors share a strong feminist sensibility but most importantly they both value blues music and African American folk tradition as essential to Black people's identity and culture. And indeed, such themes pervade their works. After a brief introduction to Bambara's political consciousness and to the historical context of Black Nationalism in which her short story collection is to be contextualized, I then proceed to examine her work. In "Witchbird" the author highlights the difficulties as a blues woman and entertainer – her expressive freedom being limited by her theatre company, jealousies, and tensions within the female entertainment industry, imposed beauty canons, her manager's sexist treatments, and a discouraging community. The blues here allows the protagonist to shape her authentic identity and autonomy, but also functions as a political tool to ignite an aesthetic revolution and raise female consciousness. "Nineteen Fifty-Five" explores the blues as being subjected to white cultural appropriation. I begin my analysis by briefly describing the collection in which the short story is included and then I shift my focus to the phenomenon of song covering and cultural thievery, which usually involves the easy climb to success of the white artist and the quick disappearance of the original Black composer, who furthermore often

does not receive their compensation. I then explore how the work also implies a critique towards materialism, spiritual emptiness, and false values of the Western society through the character of the white singer. Such hollowness felt by him is rendered through his uninterrupted quest for the meaning of the song he bought and that made his fortune. The numerous references to Elvis Presley and Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton made throughout the story further highlight the contrast between the authenticity of the retired blues singer who originally composed the song and the superficiality and soullessness of the white singer. I conclude this section by illustrating how the blues also informs the structure of the story through contrast techniques, repetition, and personification.

Chapter 1

The Blues and Black Consciousness

When and why has the blues emerged as a fundamental cultural expression in the African American community? First and foremost, it is crucial to bear in mind that American Black music stemmed from slave work-songs. Slaves on plantations lacked any drums or other instruments, as these were considered by slaveholders to be tools of insurrection. Furthermore, they were not allowed to learn how to read or write, therefore the only vehicle of artistic expression left was the chant (and the dancing). The blues would sprout from this unique oral poetry. As Paul Garon states, "The extreme repressive context of its origins, and its consequent subsumption into itself of the whole gamut of creative impulses, together give the blues its unique intensity and distinctive poetic resonance".[6] The blues arose in the late nineteenth century and quickly became a common medium whereby the individual could express his emotional needs and desires, in a sort of musical soliloquy.[7] This music was performed by individuals, who sang alone and were accompanied on guitar, double bass, piano, saxophone, and brass instruments. Not only was the blues a solo music performance, this individualized mode of presenting music was also reflected in the content. Lawrence Levine asserts that "The persona of the individual performer entirely dominated the song which centred upon the singer's own feelings, experiences, fears, dreams, acquaintances, idiosyncrasies".[8]

Emerging after the abolition of slavery, the blues highlighted new personalized psychological realities within the African American population and connoted the progressive rise of individualism. It became the most prominent secular genre in early twentieth century African American music and contributed to shape a new Black consciousness which pointed out a dichotomy between God and Devil, religious and secular. The blues was designated as "the Devil's music", as opposed to "God's music", namely gospel. Gospel music featured the immediate and intimate presence of God and was mainly performed in church. It was collective music of hope, faith, and trust, like the spirituals. Spirituals were the only means of consolation that could be used by slaves

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[6] Paul Garon, *Blues and the Poetic Spirit,* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1979), p. 7

[7] William Christopher Handy, *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography*, edited by Arna Bontemps; with a foreword by Abbe Niles, (New York: Macmillan Company, 1941), p. 99

[8] Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom,* (Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 222

during their existence to bear the violence and oppression of the plantation. These chants would develop a sense of community that infused hope and resistance among slaves. Spirituals conveyed the yearning for freedom and the hopes of Black slaves for deliverance from bondage in religious terms.[9] During the post-slavery era, sacred music became increasingly dependent on institutionalized religious spaces and evolved to gospel, thereby increasingly focusing on the relationship of dependency between God and Man, and the belief in a future state of heaven. Gospel was an encouraging and extremely faithful music, that although acknowledging the sorrows and burdens of life, kept fostering Christian faith and positivity.[10] According to gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, "Blues are the songs of despair, but gospel songs are the songs of hope. When you sing them, you are delivered of your burden. You have a feeling that here is a cure for what's wrong. It always gives me joy to sing gospel songs, I get to sing Freedom, Culture, and Religion and I feel better right away".[11]

Blues, on the other hand, embraced the disappointment that followed emancipation and signified the wakening of twentieth-century African American consciousness. After Emancipation, many white people tried to keep Blacks in conditions of subservience, through death by lynching, mob, forms of peonage such as sharecropping, prison, work camps and segregation enforced by Jim Crow laws.[12] Blues served as a rich terrain to express Black people's frustration and awareness of their state of risk and vulnerability. Compared to gospel music though, the blues would not preach salvation, but it rather required "absolute honesty in the portrayal of black life".[13] Nevertheless, gospel music and the blues also shared some similarities. The relationship between the blues performer and the audience and the blues performance itself reminded of a ritualism that could be observed in churches. Blues singers shared the persuasiveness, eloquence, and charisma of a preacher and both the secular and sacred performance involved addressing community problems and fostering a mutual sharing of experience. Blues, like religion, unified individuals by voicing individual problems that all the community endured. Although blues originated as a musical soliloquy, it was

[9] Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday,* (New York: Vintage, 2011), pp. 6-7
[10] Levine, pp. 175, 176
[11] Mahalia Jackson, *Movin' On Up,* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1966), p. 72
[12] E. Frances Whites, *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability,* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), p. 30
[13] Davis, p. 107

meant to speak out hardships, inequities, feelings, and experiences that all the group related to and drew a sense of involvedness and relief from. Like the spirituals, the blues was a cry for deliverance and a combination of feelings - such as for example discouragement and hope - that were shared by all the African American community. The blues allowed singers through their songs to express their individuality while also connecting to their community. Despite its intrinsic self-centred nature, it was mainly a group-oriented form of communication, as it functioned as an expressive means of support, which so far had been provided only by the Church.

1.1 The Blues and the Politics of Respectability

Unlike religious music, the blues merged the sacred and the secular.[14] What indeed marked the blues was its representational freedom. The blues, and especially women's blues, boldly contested the "high" culture of the Christian church through embracing Black people's own cultural identity. On the other hand, white people often classified the blues as childish, crippled, irrational "low" music.[15] But they were not the only ones, as African Americans criticised this genre too. For instance, close to the African American Church was the Black women's club movement, which tried to uplift the race by establishing links to white women's clubs. Both the Black church and club movements pursued the primary objective of raising the social status of African American women by introducing "bourgeois customs to poor black women and [by persuading] whites of black women's ability to adopt these customs",[16] instead of exposing the entire broken system. Referred to as politics of respectability, it was a discourse used among middle-class and poor working women to contrast racist thinking. The idea of adhering to a "super moral" self-representation was essential for Black clubwomen in order to protect and uplift Black women and attain respect, justice and equity for all African Americans. However, to protect their privacy and counter racist stereotypes on Black sexuality, Black women started adopting a "culture of dissemblance", namely, they created a non-sexual image of themselves by hiding and

[14] Levine, pp. 234-239
[15] See Dorothy Scarborough, *On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs,* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1925)
[16] Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, quoted by E.F. Whites, *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability,* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), p. 30

suppress sexuality.[17] On the other hand, the Church further endorsed racist practices by condemning and fearing sexuality, especially homosexuality. Black people could autonomously be in personal relationships only after Emancipation and therefore, through the censure of sexual freedom, the Church actually denied one of most significant social victories for African Americans, thus validating the dominant racist culture.[18]

Among the expressions of sexuality which were minimized by the politics of respectability was the blues. Indeed, it was considered "The Devil's music" since it openly addressed sexuality, which was considered evil and immoral by Christianity. Gospel singers often disdained the blues and considered it inferior music. Annie Pavageau, for instance, was a former blues performer who, after becoming a church member, quickly stopped singing the blues and devoted herself only to religious chants. Other singers, such as Ida Goodson, enjoyed performing both genres, albeit endorsing the dichotomy between "God's music" and "the Devil's music".[19] The blues singer Gertrude "Ma" Rainey instead contested the concept of "lowness" of the blues, for example in "Down in the Basement"[20]. The singer here challenged the idea of inferiority of the blues as well of the Black community and, as Sandra Lieb argues, she scorned the "highbrow stuff", which - according to a stanza which does not appear in the recording - is classical and sentimental popular music.[21] However, during her last years of life, Rainey became a Christian devotee and she too refused to sing the blues.

[17] Evelyn B. Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 17, no. 2 (1992), p. 272
[18] Davis, p. 131
[19] Davis, p. 126
[20] See Rainey's "Down in the Basement". She sings: "Take me to the basement, that's as low as I can go | I want something low down, daddy, want it nice and slow | I can shimmy from A to Z, if you'll play that thing for me | Take me to the basement, that's as low as I can go" (Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, "Down in the Basement", Paramount 12395, 1926. Reissued on Down in the Basement: *A Third Collection of Classic Performances by the Legendary "Mother of the Blues"*, Milestone MLP 2017, c. 1971.
[21] Sandra R. Lieb, *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey,* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), p. 146. The omitted stanza thus reads: "Grand opera and parlor junk | I'll tell the world it's all the bunk | That's the kind of stuff I shun | Let's get dirty and have some fun"

1.2 … and Sexuality

Gertrude "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith[22] - two of the greatest blues singers - upheld the blues tradition also from a feminist point of view so that the blues could embody a tool to dispute male dominance. In "Preaching the Blues",[23] Smith encourages women to take control of their sexuality and indeed themes such as extramarital relationships, domestic violence, homosexuality, and others filled the blues. As mentioned before, sexuality was one of the most important conquests achieved after the abolition of slavery. While economically there were no particular transformations, Black people's personal relationships were completely revolutionized. For the first time African Americans were autonomous and could freely choose their partners. The sexual sovereignty theme infused music only after the arrival of the blues. Both secular and religious slave music did not address individual sexual love, as those songs were meant to be a cry for freedom. Also, it is important to note that the slave system did not accept any form of self-initiated sexual relationship while it endorsed sexual exploitation of Black women by their white masters with the sole purpose of producing slave children, and this clearly explains why the private sphere of love was distinctly separated from the collective slave music. The blues, on the contrary, was an intrinsically individual music which voiced every aspect of the Black soul, including sexuality.

While in mainstream European-derived American culture, the idea of love and domestic life was completely romanticised and considered the ultimate goal for happiness, the blues envisioned love as social freedom for Blacks. Since economic and political freedom was still not entirely granted to African Americans, it is easy to understand why the only freedom that they could rely on became a fundamental theme in blues and a mediator between the post-emancipation disappointment and new social progress among Black people. Indeed, sexuality permeated both men's and women's blues, albeit it was more frequent in the latter. Women's blues lacked references to idealized marriage and domesticity and challenged both the idea of romanticised love and the concept that women should be confined to the traditional roles at home.

[22] For further information see for instance Chris Albertson, *Bessie: Revised and expanded edition,* (Yale University Press, 2003) and Sandra R. Lieb, *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey,* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1981)

[23] See Bessie Smith's "Preaching the Blues". She sings "I will learn you something if you listen to this song | I ain't here to try to save your soul | Just want to teach you how to save your good jelly roll." (Bessie Smith, "Preaching the Blues", Columbia 14195-D, Feb. 17, 1927. Reissued on *Nobody's Blues but Mine*, Columbia CG 31093, 1972)

Although most Black women were mothers and wives, these figures were rarely sung by blues singers.[24] As reported by Daphne D. Harrison, blues women addressed the following themes: advice to other women, alcohol, betrayal or abandonment, broken or failed love affairs, death, departure, dilemma of staying with man or returning to family, disease and afflictions, erotica, hell, homosexuality, infidelity, injustice, jail and serving time, loss of lover, love, men, mistreatment, murder, other woman, poverty, promiscuity, prostitution, sadness, sex, suicide, supernatural, trains, traveling, unfaithfulness, vengeance, violence, weariness, depression and disillusionment, weight loss.[25] Blues singers did not discard marriage or motherhood, but they did not even consider them relevant to their lives. Although there are a few rare exceptions – some songs by Bessie Smith address neutrally the marital relationship[26] – most blues songs did not evoke romantic sensations, but rather advised women not to be deceived into marriage by exploitative men. Rainey too warns women not to enter marriage in "Misery Blues", in which she depicts the oppression of marriage. She sings the "misery blues" because she agreed to marry, and therefore to be submitted to a man in the traditional patriarchal way.[27]

When women are instead portrayed as being fulfilled within the confines of their relationships with men, the song's theme is usually about the sexual abuse or the abandonment they subsequently suffered.[28] Although women's blues revolved around themes such as oppression, abuse, unfaithfulness - thus exposing the idealized bourgeois patriarchal system - the stance taken by singers is not of resignation or defiance, but rather of independence and assertiveness. As Hazel V. Carby argues, "Women blues singers frequently appear as liminal figures that play out and explore the various possibilities of a sexual existence; they are representations of women who attempt to

[24] Davis, pp. 3-13
[25] Daphne D. Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), p. 290
[26] See for instance Bessie Smith's "Poor Man's Blues" (Columbia 14399-D, Aug. 24, 1928. Reissued on *Empty Bed Blues*, Columbia CG 30450, 1972)
[27] See Rainey's "Misery Blues". She sings "He told me that he loved me, loved me so | If I would marry him, I needn't to work no mo' | Now I'm grievin', almost dyin' | Just because I didn't know that he was lyin'." (Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, "Misery Blues", Paramount 12508, Aug. 1927. Reissued on *Blues the World Forgot*, Biograph BLP-12001, n.d.)
[28] See Bessie Smith's "Weeping Willow Blues". She sings: "Folks, I love my man, I kiss him mornin', noon, and night | I wash his clothes and keep him clean and try to treat him right | Now he's gone and left me after all I've tried to do" (Bessie Smith, "Weeping Willow Blues", Columbia 14042-D, Sept. 26, 1924. Reissued on *Empty Bed Blues*, Columbia CG 30450, 1972)

manipulate and control their construction as sexual subjects."[29] They expressed women's rage against male violence and infidelity and promoted the idea that women had the capacity to end sexual exploitation and reject sexual and financial dependency.[30] Furthermore, instead of romanticising love, women's blues openly affirmed female sexual desire.[31] Such openness about female desire and sexual autonomy proved blues to have a proto-feminist sensibility, since in their own way, female singers challenged the imposition of gender-based inferiority.

Not only that. The realism of blues allowed singers to address issues that otherwise would be publicly exposed only much later, that is in the early 1970, when women started breaking the silence around their experiences of rape, abuse, assaults, and violations of their reproductive rights. Before then, male violence was considered a private problem that needed to be confined to the domestic walls, and only blues managed to offer a cultural space where to disclose male domination and oppression. This is surely linked to the fact that blues had no taboos and never recognized any boundaries between the private and public sphere, at a time when even white women – who had the means to talk about their experiences – felt instead that domestic violence was not to be discussed publicly. It is interesting to point out that blues women were also accused of encouraging submissive responses to violence. Some songs seemed to depict a masochistic acceptance of male emotional and physical abuse, but the actual aim was – through humour, satire, and irony – to implicitly criticize this type of oppression.[32] Blues singers through the narration of individual experiences managed to create unity and emotional involvement while speaking out issues in a public context. They helped solidify community values and "provided welcome entertainment and a necessary reminder that there had to be more to the lives of audience than the struggle

[29] Hazel V. Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime – The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues", *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 474
[30] Ivi, pp. 478-479
[31] See for instance Bessie Smith's "Baby Doll". She sings: "I wanna be somebody's baby doll so I can get my lovin' all the time | I wanna be somebody's baby doll to ease my mind | He can be ugly, he can be black, so long as he can eagle rock and ball the jack." (Bessie Smith, "Baby Doll", Columbia 14147-D, May 4, 1926. Reissued on *Nobody's Blues but Mine*, Columbia CG 31093, 1972)
[32] See Bessie Smith's "Yes, Indeed He Do". She sings: "And when I ask him where he's been, he grabs a rocking chair | Then he knocks me down and says, "It's just a little love lick, dear" | […] Gee, ain't it great to have a man that's crazy over you? | Oh, do my sweet, sweet daddy love me? Yes, indeed he do" (Bessie Smith, "Yes, Indeed He Do", Columbia 14354-D, Aug. 24, 1928. Reissued on *Empty Bed Blues*, Columbia CG 30450, 1972)

for material subsistence".[33] And they also "forged and memorialized images of tough, resilient, and independent women who were afraid neither of their own vulnerability nor of defending their right to be respected as autonomous human beings."[34]

1.3 … and Lesbianism

Nevertheless, the blues did not only talk about heterosexual relationships. As a result of the politics of male domination, male homosexuality and lesbianism were object of utter silence or verbalized homophobia[35] and they were often considered a threat to the African American community by the conservative Black Church. Homosexuality was no taboo for blues though. Rainey addressed lesbianism in her songs to underline her stance on free sexuality. She was herself bisexual and had sexual relationships with women, perhaps also with Bessie Smith. For instance, in "Prove It on Me Blues"[36] (which is not technically a blues song), Rainey proudly affirms her sexual orientations and brags about her sexuality. She admits that the community disapproves of her behaviour, but she does not care and flaunts her sexual orientation. She claims that she will dress as she wants – like a man in a collar and tie – that she will talk flirtatiously to women like a man would do and that she will "do it" with women. It was a powerful statement of lesbian defiance and self-worth,[37] although as Carby claims, the song "vacillates between the subversive hidden activity of women loving women with a public declaration of lesbianism".[38]

1.4 … and the Traveling

The discourse of sexual relations addressed by the blues within the African American community is also strongly linked and affected by the migration to the North, as

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[33] Sherley A. Williams, "The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry", *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (The Massachusetts Review, Inc. Autumn, 1977), p. 543
[34] Davis, pp. 14-41
[35] Akasha G. Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, Barbara Smith, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1982) p. xxii
[36] See Rainey's "Prove It on Me Blues". She sings: "Where she went, I don't know | I mean to follow everywhere she goes | Folks said I'm crooked, I didn't know where she took it, | I want the whole world to know | They say I do it, ain't nobody caught me | Sure got to prove it on me | Went out last night with a crowd of my friends | They must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men." (Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, "Prove It on Me Blues", Paramount 12668, June 1928. Reissued on Ma Rainey, Milestone M-47021, 1974)
[37] Lieb, p. 125
[38] Carby, p. 479

displacement had different impacts on men and women. Female blues indeed reflected the rural-to-urban movement that started in the second half of the XIX century. Until Emancipation enslaved African Americans had been restricted to plantations and any mobility was extremely dangerous for anyone who tried to flee.[39] Although spatial mobility had been important for all the American population throughout history, it represented a revolutionary breakthrough especially for the Black community, since it had been hitherto denied to them. As Levine points out, Black people began travelling as soon as the abolition made it possible, pushed by "the novelty of freedom, economic and political repression, a quest for change and improvement, and acculturation to the American way in which movement was so important".[40] This new freedom translated both in specific movement to more developed places and simple wanderlust. For the next two and a half decades after the Civil War the migratory pattern intensified and reached a large-scale emigration to the North after 1890, although much of it was actually secondary migration. The North became the "Promised Land", where the promise was a better economic and social situation. Mobility indeed meant literally travelling from one place to another but also moving upward socially and economically. Thus, freedom of movement had a profound psychological impact on Black people, as the idea of emigrating was as important as the emigration itself.[41]

Nevertheless, free movement also caused gender discrimination, since men were now autonomous and able to travel in search of work or just to wander aimlessly, but the majority of women remained confined to domesticity and family care. This phenomenon led to country blues, a subgenre created by Black southern men who were now moving back and forth.[42] As music writer and musician Ben Sidran observed:

> The traveling musician, who had taken on the role of truth-teller from the black Preacher, the role of trickster or 'bad nigger', from the Devil, became the ultimate symbol of freedom. Escape from the monotony and static hopelessness of black employment, combined with the potential for earning a living without having to rely on the white man – beating the white man at his own game, in other words – kept the musician's status high.[43]

Along with the freedom of sexuality, also mobility became a central motif in Black songs. While in spirituals travelling represented a desire, it then became reality in the

[39] Davis, p. 67
[40] Levine, pp. 262-263
[41] Ivi, pp. 264-266
[42] Davis, pp. 68-69
[43] Ben Sidran, *Black Talk,* (New York: Da Capo, 1981), p. 24

blues, where it was "individualized, secularised and sexualized".[44] While the traveling blues man is a widely known figure, the same does not apply to blues women. Most women were denied the possibility of migrating: it was more dangerous for them, they often had to take care of their household and those sent away to find better occupations were usually only men. Nevertheless, there were some women who were on the move too. Female blues singers were privileged as they could move both North and South but mostly because they could speak both about women's desires to migrate and homesickness, thus proving that the urban setting was and was not the "Promised Land".[45]

These singers were the first to appear in the entertainment industry and they usually performed in circuses and medicine shows. Since they were continuously on tour, they challenged the common female homemaker stereotype. They would marry but very seldom have children. Indeed, the possibility to travel implied autonomy and control over their sexual life. And although some of them – like Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday – would have wanted to start a family, their independence from domestic responsibilities formed an emancipatory trait that was reflected in their blues. Blues celebrated this newly achieved autonomy of exploration and questioned social norms within the Black community, especially those concerning women, who could finally embark on journeys each with their own goals – a more fulfilling life, stability, or love for example. The female characters in Rainey's songs were not anchored to domestic pursuits and by leaving home they often left their male partner too.[46] In "Weeping Woman Blues"[47] instead, Rainey sings about a woman who is looking for men who have abandoned her, yet she is not powerless or resigned, but rather eager and persevering. Through this song, the singer defied the stereotype of the powerless and absconding stay-at-home woman. Moreover, the song "Walking Blues",[48] by the same

[44] Davis, p. 71
[45] Carby, pp. 476-477
[46] See for instance Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, "Runaway Blues" (Paramount 12902, Sept. 1928, reissued on *Ma Rainey*, Milestone M-47021, 1974)
[47] See Rainey's "Weeping Woman Blues". She sings "Lord, this mean old engineer, cruel as he could be | This mean old engineer, cruel as he could be | Took my man away and blowed the smoke back at me | […] I'm going down South, won't be back 'til fall | If I don't find my easy rider, ain't coming back at all." (Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, "Weeping Woman Blues", Paramount 12455, Feb. 1927. Reissued on *Blues the World Forgot*, Biograph BLP-12001, n.d.)
[48] See Rainey's "Walking Blues". She sings: "Walked and walked 'til I, walked and walked 'til I almost lost my mind, hey, hey, hey | Walked and walked 'til I almost lost my mind | I'm afraid to stop walking, 'cause I might lose some time | Got a short time to make it, short time to make it, and a long ways to go

artist, evokes the exhausting journey the woman is facing and on the resulting emancipation. She can go out and chase her goals – a possibility which most women at that time could not have yet. The woman's tenacity and agency are emphasized, while the man's departure is not even mentioned. In other songs of Rainey's, the travel has a precise goal – stability in the woman's life – that can be reached only by looking toward "home". Home here represents the South, "conceptualised as the territorial location of historical sites of resistance to white supremacy, aesthetically transformed into sites of resistance to male supremacy."[49]

Rainey kept touring during most of her career, nevertheless her residence always remained in the South. On the other hand, Bessie Smith took up residence in Pennsylvania and therefore had the opportunity to better understand the issues experienced by migrant women in the North. Her songs forged a collective consciousness which was affected both by the memory of the South and the working-class experience in the North. After the Civil War the Jim Crow laws kept oppressing, impoverishing, and murdering African Americans in the South, but Blacks did not have an easy life in the North either. There, the unity and family-support system they could rely on in the South was missing. The disappointment and loneliness felt by Black northern migrants was reflected in Bessie Smith's blues, for instance in "Far Away Blues", a duet sang by Bessie Smith and Clara Smith.[50] However, Bessie Smith did not only capture the feeling of homesickness that pervaded most Black northern migrants, for her blues also contributed to create a consciousness that apprehended the exploitation and alienation in the North - the not so "promised land". As Davis claims, Bessie Smith's blues "constructed aesthetic bridges linking places and time and permitting a collective *prise de conscience* encompassing both the unity and the heterogeneity of the black experience".[51]

Lord, Lord, Lord | Got a short time to make it, and a long ways to go | Tryin' to find the town they call San Antonio." (Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, "Walking Blues", Paramount 12082, Dec. 1923. Reissued on *Queen of Blues*, Biograph BLP-12032, n.d.)

[49] Davis, pp. 71-80

[50] See Bessie Smith and Clara Smith's "Far Away Blues". They sing: "We left our southern home and wandered north to roam | Like birds, went seekin' a brand new field of corn | We don't know why we are here | But we're up here just the same | And we are just the lonesomest girls that's ever born | […] Oh, there'll come a day when from us you'll hear no news | Then you will know that we have died from those lonesome far away blues." (Bessie Smith and Clara Smith, "Far Away Blues", Columbia 13007-D, Oct. 4, 1923. Reissued on *Any Woman's Blues*, Columbia 30126, 1972)

[51] Davis, pp. 81-90

1.5 … and Protest

In addition to the topics aforementioned, blues also functioned as a means to denounce the disparities among Blacks and whites and the barriers faced by African Americans after Emancipation, although protest was more evident in work songs rather than blues. According to Levine, since blues was usually sung to an entirely Black audience, it aimed at addressing problems that affected the internal community thus creating identification, rather than denouncing their situation to outsiders.[52] Nevertheless, blues singers such as Bessie Smith and Gertrude "Ma" Rainey frequently addressed issues that affected Blacks during the decades following emancipation, such as racism, economic injustice, crime, incarceration, alcoholism, homelessness, poverty, although Smith depicted the realities of northern Black urban communities, while Rainey's work focused on agrarian Black southerners.[53] A prime example is "Poor Man's Blues", [54] composed by Bessie Smith in 1928, one year before the Wall Street Crash. Smith here does not only show to have interest in race inequalities, but she also proves to have class consciousness. In this song, the singer clearly accuses the wealthy class of ignoring and perpetuating economic and social injustice. She mentions the role played by the poor during World War I while also ironically remarking their naivety in faithfully serving a nation that does not aid them. "Poor Man's Blues" is widely recognised as the pioneer of the Black music subgenre of social protest. Bessie Smith further explored social oppression and inequalities in other works. For instance, she deals with female occupations in "Washwoman's blues", thus exposing slave-like working conditions which women were subjected to.[55] Rainey instead addresses the imprisonment issue in "Chain Gang Blues".[56] The convict lease system spared no one in the African American

[52] Levine, pp. 267-268
[53] Davis, p. 92
[54] See Smith's "Poor Man's Blues". She sings: "Mister rich man, rich man, open up your heart and mind | Give the poor man a chance, help stop these hard, hard times | […] While you're livin' in your mansion, you don't know what hard times means | Poor working man's wife is starvin', your wife's livin' like a queen| […] Poor man fought all the battles, poor man would fight again today | He would do anything you ask him in the name of the U.S.A. | […] Now the war is over, poor man must live the same as you | If it wasn't for the poor man, mister rich man, what would you do?" (Bessie Smith, "Poor Man's Blues", Columbia 14399-D, Aug. 24, 1928. Reissued on *Empty Bed Blues*, Columbia CG 30450, 1972)
[55] Davis, pp. 96-102
[56] See Rainey's "Chain Gang Blues". She sings: "The judge found me guilty, the clerk he wrote it down | Just a poor gal in trouble, I know I'm county road bound | Many days of sorrow, many nights of woe | And a ball and chain, everywhere I go | Chains on my feet, padlock on my hand | It's all on account of stealing a woman's man | It was early this mornin' that I had my trial | Ninety days on the county road

community: men, women and children too were to be found working in chains, according to Paul Oliver.[57] "Chain Gang Blues" realistically depicts the fate of a woman who committed a clearly minor crime. In very few words, Rainey managed to powerfully evoke the exploitative conditions of convicts.

In conclusion, the blues actually implied a dimension of protest, but it also testified the absence of real, achievable possibilities of societal shift. However, it was meant to create the emotional conditions for protest and not to call for any specific action of resistance or protest, which instead would need to be organized by a political structure.[58] As Bruce Jackson asserts, "Instead of weaving narrative elements to create a story, the Negro song accumulates images to create a feeling"[59], and this allowed blues to become a means to convey the experience of the oppressive force harming African Americans. The blues managed to contain and give importance to every aspect of the life of African Americans: what happened to each of them, what they thought, what they desired, what they dreamt about, what they feared, what they suffered and endured. Being both a self-centred and a community-centred music, the blues represented the most sensitive means of cultural expression for African Americans.[60]

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and the judge didn't even smile." (Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, "Chain Gang Blues", Paramount 12338, Dec. 1925. Reissued on *Ma Rainey*, Milestone M-47021, 1974)

[57] Paul Oliver, *The Meaning of the Blues,* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), p. 238

[58] Davis, pp. 103-113

[59] Bruce Jackson, Foreword to the 1965 reprint edition of Newman White, *American Negro Folk-songs*, (Hatboro, Pennsylvania: Folklore Associates Inc, 1965), p. xi

[60] Levine, p. 269

Chapter 2
Blues Narratology and Poetics

Houston Baker's definition of the blues matrix "as a vernacular trope for American cultural explanation in general"[61] does not render how the blues and more generally African American folklore are fundamental to Black culture to the point that their aesthetic is projected onto literature too. Both African American poetics and narratology indeed contain oral folk forms, the blues included. Thus, not only is the blues a cultural reference in the content of the work, but it also informs the very structure of the text. Such musical influence on literature lead to both an alternative and a critique to the prevailing Western literary canon.[62]

2.1 The Blues as African American Poetics

While the blues developed independently from the relationships between Blacks and whites, African American literature and poetry, according to Sherley A. Williams, come from and are thus influenced by a context where Black oral tradition is linked and combined to white literature. Therefore, although the themes dealt with by Afro-American poetry can be understood by a white audience too, the technical writing is profoundly reliant on Black music, language, and lifestyles. Despite being the blues an oral form, some of its devices and structures are adapted and used in contemporary Afro-American poetry. The vocal devices used in the spirituals and gospels usually aim at producing emotional engagement, while the blues can also randomly use the same vocal techniques just to emphasize certain sounds or words, so as to "[objectify], almost [symbolize], the emotional content of the song, through the use of melisma, stuttering and variations in stress, and, in doing so, [the singer] places the situation in stark relief as an object of discussion".[63] This apparent "apathetic" attitude is actually an expression of realism, that further intensifies the relationship between the singer and the audience.

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[61] Houston Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory,* (University of Chicago Press, 1897), p. 31

[62] Andrew Scheiber, "Blues Narratology and the African American Novel", *New Essays on the African American Novel: From Hurston and Ellison to Morrison and Whitehead*, edited by Lovalerie King, Linda F. Selzer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 34

[63] Sherley A. Williams, "The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry", *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 18, No. 3, (The Massachusetts Review, Inc. Autumn, 1977), p. 545

Such role as representative of the people's voices is embraced by African American poets too.

Several Black poets have used loose blues structures for their poems, but only few adopted the simple classic blues structure, among them Langston Hughes, whose "sensitive reproduction of the language of the blues […] and his ability to recreate the rhythmic effect of a sung blues" makes him one of the best poetic interpreters of this music.[64] In his poem "Young Gal's Blues",[65] Hughes uses repetition, and the classic structure of the blues. He evokes known social conditions, thus behaving like a blues singer who shares the same experiences and struggles as the audience. The poem indeed manages through the individual experience to convey the collective one. Blues songs usually do not make use of metaphoric or rhetorical devices, as the expressive force is usually found in the direct speaking out struggles, feelings, and experiences. Nevertheless, the verbal strength is also contained in the "mascon images". According to Stephen Henderson, there are certain words and constructions that "carry an inordinate charge of emotional and psychological weight, so that whenever they are used they set all kinds of bells ringing, all kinds of synapses snapping, on all kinds of levels", and they furthermore create associations of meaning that often cannot be understood by outsiders, for they are strictly linked to experiences of the community.[66] These concepts are used very frequently in everyday life but they nonetheless do not lose any of their meaningfulness, since they are intrinsically part of Blacks' reality. This verbal force is released through the narration of the first-person experience and onto "the literal meaning of the standard English word".[67] Another poet who successfully adapts the blues devices and mascons to poetry is Lucille Clifton, whose poems primarily focus on the African American reality, rather than its relationship with the white one. Clifton, Hughes, and other poets thus managed to extend the expressive potential of the blues while remaining loyal to its content and sources, namely, Black experiences and feelings. But most importantly, blues poetry can convey Black people's

[64] Edward E. Waldron, "The Blue Poetry of Langston Hughes", *Negro American Literature Forum*, vol. 5, No. 4, (African American Review, St. Louis University, 1971), p. 149
[65] For further reading see for instance Langston Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, edited by Arnold Rampersad, (New York: Knopf, 1994), p. 123
[66] Stephen Evangelist Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References,* (New York: Morrow, 1973), p. 44
[67] Williams, pp. 546-551

traditions, culture, lifestyle through both the oral structures of music and the written devices of poetry, thereby merging Black oral forms and Western literature.

2.2 The Influence of the Blues in the Structure of the African American Novel

The blues novel, considered the narrative analogy of blues music, tells some story about the blues while also adapting and deploying blues devices and thus allowing the reader to experience the blues without actually listening to it. [68] It comprises both "a blues story (what is told about the blues)" and a "blues discourse (how the story is transmitted in a blues-related fashion)".[69] The term "Blues narratology" was coined by Andrew Scheiber, who was among the first to analyse how the blues is projected onto narrative. He explores how both blues music and blues narrative share a particular aesthetic, namely "a particular way of organizing and responding to experience",[70] and he identifies three main concepts – repetition, chance, and descent – which indeed feature the narrative of blues but can also be recognised in the blues performance. Most novel structures follow the claims of proto theorists such as Henry James and E. M. Forster, who argue that plot and action hinge upon the character and that events are linked into a casual or rational sequence. Nevertheless, this concept is strictly linked to a particular viewing that is quite dominant in our culture and that is tied to a capitalist-materialist ideology, that claims that events depend solely on the actions and choices we make within the political or narrative economy. This indeed translates into narrative as the idea that the sequence of events throughout the novel is the result of the actions performed by individual characters.[71] However the blues narrative does not reflect such dominant aesthetic. Blues music is characterized by a modular structure, that is a basic harmonic pattern that can be repeated indefinitely, depending on the performance and on the singer's expressive needs. The repetition is neither mechanic nor meaningless, indeed James Snead asserts that "whenever we encounter repetition in cultural forms, we are indeed not viewing 'the same thing' but its transformation, not just a formal ploy but often the willed grafting onto culture of an essentially philosophical insight about

[68] Daniel Barlow, "Blues Narrative Form, African American Fiction, and the African Diaspora", *Narrative*, Vol. 24, No. 2, (2016), p. 136
[69] Ivi, p. 140
[70] Scheiber, p. 34
[71] Ivi, p. 35

the nature of time and history".[72] Repetition constitutes a key device employed by the blues singer in order to be flexible and free to improvise and to explore more deeply and emphasize emotions and experiences expressed in the songs, while instead a chronological sequence in a song would limit the singer's expressive freedom.[73] Both blues music and blues narratives do not embrace progression toward a goal, but the recursion and repetition of patterns of living, though without compromising their effectiveness. What Steven Smith describes as "harmonic simplicity of the blues"[74] – blues does not attempt to create new kinds of tension – can be also found in the blues narrative, for it rejects the narrative pattern of tension-release. There are no particular climaxes or resolutions – the human condition in the blues narrative is defined by a continuous effort towards no possible victory. This repetition denotes nonetheless an educational opportunity, as the character manages to understand the patterns of experience, and to achieve the tools of resistance. This process of awareness can be seen as the only progression in this type of narrative. According to Scheiber, "Conceiving of a narrative sequence as a set of successive hands in a game that can be learned but never ultimately won […] not only challenges the concept of progression that underpins so much of Western narrative aesthetics; it also challenges our Enlightenment-based narrative economy that posits the individual as the primary architect of his or her fate."[75] Characters in blues narratives need to gain a sense of purpose in a world where trouble and tribulation will not end, and this will gave them both tenacity, resistance and fast reflexes for any new hardship.

Another distinctive figure of blues narrative is the play of chance. Schreiber associates the blues performer with chance and gambling, as their art is created through similar improvisational processes. Indeed, the blues performance does not only depend on the singer's individual skills, but also on the interaction between the performer and other musicians, dancers, and the audience, so that the outcome of the performance is completely unexpected and unpredictable. This principle of "chance" is translated into narrative and manages to influence the succession of events through shocking elements of irrationality, which "defy the developmental logic of causality that is the mark of

[72] James A. Snead, "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture", *Black Literature and Literary Theory,* edited by Henry Louis Gates, (London: Routledge, 1984), pp. 62-63
[73] Barlow, p. 139
[74] Steven G. Smith, "Blues and Our Mind-Body Problem", *Popular Music*, vol. 11, no. 1, (1992), p. 43
[75] Scheiber, pp. 37-38

'realism' in its familiar guises, substituting in its place a logic of accident and association".[76] This reminds of blues music, where lines are shuffled or borrowed from other songs, depending on the singer's expressive needs. In the blues narrative, these elements of irrationality impact also the protagonist, who thus learns the importance of improvisation and of responsiveness to twists and turns. Accident and discontinuity are thus intrinsic forces of the blues narrative that open "the way to previously unimagined paths of action and expression". The good outcome depends therefore solely on the character's understanding of how the chance plays in the narrative, and their readiness of response to events that can be expected but never predicted.[77]

The third and last element of blues narrative identified by Scheiber is the trope of descent. It is not a specific moment in the narrative, but it rather repeats itself and can manifest at any time. The descent represents the point in which the character is taken back to a place – often they do not know it existed or they do not want to go there – by a "guide-elder, whose cure for the ills of life is a controlled (or sometimes not so controlled) homeopathic dose of the very things the hero most fears or abjures".[78] This guide-elder embodies historical and cultural memory, especially in novels about post-slavery Black life in the North, where the descent can be identified with the journey to the South and to the past. In fact, the blues narrative requires that the road to the future involves a recurrent journey to the past.[79] As the Invisible Man in the homonymous novel realizes, "the lie that success was a rising upward….Not only could you travel upward toward success but you could travel downward as well: up and down, in retreat as well as in advance, crabways and crossways and around in a circle, meeting your old selves coming and going and perhaps all at the same time".[80] Here the character's movement downward to harsh realities actually translates in an ascension towards the awareness of their human condition. Not only that, as for instance W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) recounts how his descent towards the rural South allowed his identification with African American culture and history.[81] The blues novel consists of a series of paths and junctures, that can lead the protagonist to various

[76] Ivi, pp. 39-40
[77] Ivi, pp.41-42
[78] Scheiber, pp. 42-43
[79] Ibidem
[80] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man,* (New York: Vintage, 1980), p. 510
[81] Scheiber, p. 44

destinations. According to Houston Baker this is a vernacular trope, which he named "the matrix". Blues is indeed conceived by Baker as a matrix of African-American culture, "a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit".[82] The concept of blues as matrix for Black culture implies that the blues singer finds themselves at the intersection of a vast network of experiences, that need to be interpreted and translated into music.[83] In blues novels, the protagonist that faces this network of junctures or events has the opportunity to learn how to overcome unpredicted difficulties, endure troubled times and retaliate against a disappointing, absurd, and hostile world, and hence, this makes it a narrative of realism, rather than of despair.[84]

Barlow further explores the blues narrative by creating a taxonomy of blues music techniques which are adapted to literate forms, among them: multimedial combination, intermedial reference, extended formal analogy, strategic variation, vernacular delivery, and participatory musicality.[85] He asserts that the importance of blues narrative lies in the fact that it includes aesthetic qualities of blues music; it constitutes the literary extension of the most important African American cultural medium and it fosters its minor historical aspects thus allowing new insights in Black history and literary tradition, and guaranteeing "cultural innovation and diasporic community formation".[86]

2.3 Neo-slave Narrative

One of the works that will subsequently analysed – the novel *Corregidora* – is very representative of the impact that both the blues and the recursiveness of the past has on African American literature. Such recursiveness is fundamental in the formation and construction of African American identity, as it stems from the past of slavery. Indeed, Blacks' concept of time differs completely from whites' one, as the former is influenced precisely by the slave experiences. During slavery, as a part of the complete dehumanization process, African Americans were denied not only their name, their roots, their family, but also temporality. Being confined in the plantations and with no

[82] Baker, p. 3
[83] Ivi, pp. 5-6
[84] Scheiber, p. 45
[85] See Barlow, pp. 141-147
[86] Ivi, pp. 152-153

hope of eventual survival, slaves were deprived of their future. However, slaves did not even know the current time or date, and most importantly, they were not aware of their date of birth. As Frederick Douglass remarks in his autobiography, slaves were only provided the timing of work, on the ground of nature's rhythms:

> I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come nearer to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time. A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood. The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege. I was not allowed to make any inquiries of my master concerning it. He deemed all such inquiries on the part of a slave improper and impertinent, and evidence of a restless spirit. The nearest estimate I can give makes me now between twenty-seven and twenty-eight years of age. I come to this, from hearing my master say, some time during 1835, I was about seventeen years old.[87]

Such absence of time awareness impacted also now free Black generations' identity and culture, that were thus characterized by this repetitiveness of time without any resolution. Therefore, the lack of chronological progression in blues music and narrative that was aforementioned in this chapter may be particularly tied to the slave experience that African Americans had to endure. The slave past is so intrinsic in African American identity to have come to determine their culture and thus generate new Black music like the blues and new Black literary genres like the "neo-slave narrative", in which repetition, recursiveness and circularity of time are evident features.

The term "neo-slave narrative" was coined by Bernard W. Bell, who described it as "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom".[88] Not only was the experience of slavery reflected in sorrow and work songs, but it also led to a vast literary production that rose already before the Civil War - when escaped slaves managed to survive a system that denied them literacy - and has kept expanding to this day. The neo-slave narrative includes novels set both during slavery and afterwards. It addresses the institution of slavery through different styles of writing, from literary realism to speculative and postmodern fiction, satire, and combinations of the

[87] Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave,* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2014), p.1
[88] Bernard Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition,* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), p. 289

forementioned[89] and it encompasses a wide range of subgenres, such as historical fiction, historiographic metafiction, ghost stories, fantasy, speculative and science fiction, and vampire tales.[90] Indeed, the twentieth- and twenty-first century writers can benefit from the creative and representational freedom that was instead inaccessible to the fugitive slaves and they also possess a rich knowledge of slavery and of race and power relations, thus having the possibility to be more creative and imaginative. Nevertheless, all these various texts are linked by the importance of the memory of slavery, also in relation to an array of issues that still pervade culture and history, such as: "the challenges of representing trauma and traumatic memories; the legacy of slavery (and other atrocities) for subsequent generations; the interconnectedness of constructions of race and gender; the relationship of the body to memory; the agency of the enslaved; the power of orality and of literacy; the ambiguous role of religion; the commodification of Black bodies and experiences; and the elusive nature of freedom".[91] Most neo-slave narrative production was created after historians started to consider folklore, oral tradition, antebellum fugitive slave narratives and Works Progress Administration interviews with former slaves as valid historical proofs. In the late 1960s and through the 1970s this led to concerns about how and who should represent the point of view of the slave, especially after the release of movies and television shows whose production and narration was filtered by the white gaze. The earliest neo-slavery novels thus attempted to recover slaves' perspectives and their own experiences, as for instance did Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), an historical novel based on the life of the author's great-grandmother, born enslaved.[92] It is also essential to mention *Black Thunder* by Arna Bontemps (1936), which preannounces much of the later neo-slave narrative literature. Based on the real historical event of the Gabriel Prosser Revolt of 1800, the novel addresses a wide range of issues, such as the notion of freedom among Black people; the ideological link between the slave rebellions, the French Revolution, and the Haitian Revolution; the different male slave experiences and identities, and how Black culture is both influenced by Anglo-American and African-derived traditions. By

[89] Valerie Smith, "Neo-Slave Narratives", *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*, edited by Audrey Fisch, (Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 168
[90] Madhu Dubey, "Neo-Slave Narratives", *A Companion to African American Literature*, edited by Gene A. Jarrett, (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2010), p. 332
[91] Smith, pp. 168-169
[92] Dubey, pp. 333-334

expressing various points of view through the interior monologue, the novel also managed to express the collective consciousness of the slave community. The novel falls within the neo-slave narrative genre, as it uses slaves' testimony to describe their experiences and feelings and draw from the past to highlight the ongoing persistence of injustice.[93]

The main purpose of realist neo-slave narratives is nonetheless to expose the lacunas in historical archives and rectify misrepresentations in historical works and narratives, as did later novels, among them: Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings* (1979), Sherley Anne William's *Dessa Rose* (1986), Lorene Cary's *The Price of a Child* (1995), Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Douglass' Women* (2002). Indeed, women novelists are more motivated to offer a more accurate account of slavery, since its hitherto narrative mostly focused on the story of great men. All these works share the use of *voice* as a means of historical reclamation, whilst also recovering women's historical testimonies.[94] As Madhu Dubey claims, the inclusion of *voices* and oral testimonies in the neo-slave narratives allows to enrich the historiography whilst also ensuring assiduous attention to both the unequal relationships of powers throughout history and more inclusive representations.[95] Ashraf Rushdy further explores neo-slave narratives, by focusing on the subgenre that he calls "palimpsest narratives", which "ask us to consider the profound relationship between the past and the present, between a national history of slavery and the contemporary nation and peoples it produced."[96] The term palimpsest means a parchment on which a later writing has replaced the earlier one. However, this notion was metaphorically translated in an interrelation between every historical event from the past and present. A palimpsest narrative allows different historical periods to be explored in the same text, thereby showing how the present is always entwined with the past and how contemporary lives are "inscribed on parchments through which the slave past always shows",[97] namely how the racist notions in antebellum America keep affecting the modern-day Black society. According to Rushdy, *Corregidora* is a significant example of palimpsest narrative, namely a novel

[93] Smith, pp. 170-172
[94] Dubey, pp. 334-335
[95] Ivi, p. 336
[96] Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction,* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001), p. 5
[97] Ivi, p. 8

narrated in first person by a modern Black subject who comes to terms with their family's past of slavery and its lingering grip on the present.[98] In this novel, the memory of slavery is preserved through the continuous handing down from mother to daughter of stories about the past, since written records of slavery have been destroyed by the masters. Indeed, elements of slavery such as the rape of women by their masters would not appear in official documents and needed to be transmitted somehow to future generations.[99] Palimpsest narratives analyse how generational memory can pass on or repress family secrets, how family and race – albeit past social structures - are still present in political contexts and how today's political situation derives from the nation's slave past.[100] These novels indeed demonstrate how the history of rape and miscegenation influences the contemporary discourse on sex and race and they also question many widespread assumptions of racial progress. For instance, in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), Dana, the protagonist, declares that she is "free, born free, intending to stay free",[101] but soon after she has to reconsider her affirmation, as she "she is literally remanded to slavery, stripped of all the rights and privileges she takes for granted, and consequently forced to confront the limits of her modern notions of choice, consent, and free will."[102] She is sent back in time, where she meets her ancestors: Hagar, a Black enslaved woman and her white master Rufus Weylin. Dana must face the fact that her existence depends on the survival of the white master, so that he can rape and impregnate Hagar, thus originating her lineage. This novel underlines how the American nation-state is deeply tied with the sexual violation of Black women, which strengthens the interdependence of Black and white identities and clarifies how contemporary racial relations are defined by the slave past.[103]

Other works, such as Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976) and Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* (1982) take into account the sexuality of Black male slaves – another gap in the historical archives – through the playful use of anachronisms, implausible roles, and humour. These two novels parody the genre of the fugitive slave narrative to underline the abolitionist manipulation of slave narratives, whose

[98] Ivi, pp. 8-9
[99] Dubey, p. 336
[100] Rushdy, p. 10
[101] Octavia E. Butler, *Kindred,* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), p. 17
[102] Dubey, p. 338
[103] Smith, p. 172

testimonies were often made under duress, and therefore not totally reliable. Indeed, Johnson's novel criticizes modern historiography by ironically using the omniscient narrator's reflections to interrupt the slave's narration, and thereby to damage his credibility.[104]

Slave narratives were written during the Enlightenment - "the Age of Reason", or rather the "Age of Scientific Racism"[105] - when pseudo-science was used to argue the alleged biological inferiority of African Americans and therefore to condone their enslavement. Writers of antebellum slave narratives, such as for instance Frederick Douglass, used their writing to show their judgement and fitness for freedom and citizenship. Whilst in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by himself* Douglass recognises literacy as the door to knowledge and therefore to freedom, neo-slave narratives writers are not so unequivocal about it since they also evaluate and undermine master texts in their novels, such as for instance: Adam Nehemiah's guide to slave management in Williams's *Dessa Rose*, Master Swille's will in *Flight to Canada*, the captain's log in Charles R. Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1991), or the Schoolteacher's Notebook in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). In the latter, the notebook categorizes the animal and human features of the slaves, thus "starkly [clarifying] the ways in which writing was embroiled in the ideologies of racial difference that were used to rationalize slavery".[106] Slaves were considered inferior for being illiterate, but they were not allowed to acquire literacy for being enslaved. Unlike Frederick Douglass, slaves in *Beloved* – after being encouraged to learn how to read and write – learn that writing fosters the master's ideology and therefore cannot ensure them any freedom. According to Morrison, in the effort to further reveal the history of slavery, the writing of *Beloved* required additional historical research, combined to the use of imagination, so as to include elements such as the ghost of the murdered infant daughter.[107] In her writing Morrison employs imagination, as she believes that her own and others' memories are not enough to depict the experiences lived by slaves. She defines it as "literary archaeology": "On the basis of some information and a little bit of

[104] Dubey, pp. 339-340
[105] Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory", *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, edited by William Zinsser (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), quoted by Madhu Dubey, "Neo-Slave Narratives", *A Companion to African American Literature*, edited by Gene A. Jarrett (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2010), p. 89
[106] Dubey, p. 341
[107] Smith, p. 174

guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply. What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance on the image – on the remains – in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of a truth".[108] She neither writes fantastic, mythic, magic, unbelievable stories, nor authoritative biographies. The purpose of her writing is not to lie, it is to expose the truth about the interior life of people who could not write about it, and again to fill the gap in the slave narrative.[109] *Beloved* is actually based on true events, although Morrison altered them for strategic reasons. The narration is set during Reconstruction, namely after the Civil War, though the passing of time still does not manage to erase the horrors of slavery from the characters' minds. Indeed, they will keep confronting the past and trying to get through it throughout the novel. The author manages to combine both the rational and the irrational – the daughter is killed to not be captured back to slavery, but she will return from the dead to become the literal incarnation of the characters' past and memories. Through this novel the author challenges readers to understand the characters' subjectivity while reminding them that they will never be able to fully access former slaves' suffering and know what harrowing oppression and horrors they had to endure under slavery.[110]

The novels quoted here are only a few examples of the complexity and wideness of the neo-slave narrative genre. Many different narrative techniques are used, among them: rememory, time travel, flashbacks, flash-forwards, possession. And furthermore, not every neo-slave narrative focuses on the antebellum US slavery. For instance, Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) recalls the neo-slave narrative since here slaves – albeit of all ethnicities – have to flee from the oppressive South to the free North. Novels like this one incorporate features of the fugitive slave narratives "on to unfamiliar and ambiguously racialized forms of inequality", they show how the race system has been reconfigured in the twenty-first century and "provoke readers to imagine a future in which the racial legacy of antebellum US slavery may finally be consigned to the realm of history".[111]

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[108] Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory", *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, edited by William Zinsser, (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), p. 92
[109] Ivi, pp. 93-94
[110] Smith, pp. 175-180
[111] Dubey, pp. 344-345

Chapter 3

The Blues as Historical Testimony in *Corregidora*

Gayl Jones's 1975 novel *Corregidora* is a story about a blues singer from Kentucky who needs to come to terms with her family's past, whilst also trying to overcome her personal individual trauma after an accident that caused the loss of her unborn child.[112] The novel begins with Ursa Corregidora – the protagonist – who recounts how her marriage to Mutt Thomas rapidly fails as he does not want her to sing to anyone but him. Ursa does not accept his possessive behaviour and keeps wanting to sing: "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".[113] However, this attitude only enrages him more, to the point he one night pushes her down the stairs. Ursa miscarries her pregnancy and undergoes a non-consensual hysterectomy. This psychological trauma is further exacerbated by the fact that Ursa is imposed a reproductive mandate – her foremothers expressively demand her to create generations, heirs of their history of trauma. Ursa thus thinks of her genitalia as "a birthmark between [her] legs" (46), a matrilineal mark that can both lead to pleasure and trauma continuity.[114] The narrative moves back and forward in time, following Ursa's dwelling on her great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother's stories of Corregidora, the Portuguese slave owner who fathered both her Gram and Mama. Ursa's parents' relationship is loveless too and the father is not present in her life. The domestic violence and generational trauma keep haunting Ursa and her relationships, not only with the now ex-husband Mutt, but also with Tadpole McCormick – to whom she is briefly married – and with her lesbian friends Cat and Jeffy. At the end of the novel, Mutt reappears. He goes to the nightclub and hears Ursa sing again; they walk back to the hotel together. Here Ursa finally understands the mysterious sexual power Great Gram possessed over her slave owner Corregidora whilst she is performing fellatio on Mutt for the first time. In this moment, pleasure and pain are intensely connected – something that only blues can express. After years of

[112] Janice Harris, "Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*", *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, No. 3, (Autumn 1980), p. 1

[113] Gayl Jones, *Corregidora*, (London: Virago Modern Classics, 2019), p. 1. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically.

[114] Elizabeth Yukins, "Bastard Daughters and the Possession of History in *Corregidora* and *Paradise*", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 28, no. 1, (2002), pp. 228-229

singing alone in bars, Ursa will come to terms with her family's past and understand that her way of witnessing and transmitting her ancestral story is not through the continuation of the matrilineage she is part of, but through her blues. Ursa borrows her foremothers' memories and keeps them alive by turning them into songs, by making public what is private. Through the blues Ursa manages not to be imprisoned in her past as her foremothers, for this music is the only means to freely express the feeling of oppression that this family experiences.[115] *Corregidora* is a novel of pain, loss, and violence but such feelings may be released only through a music genre as expressively free as the blues, where "paralysis, defeat, betrayal" occur in the lyrics whilst "energy, liberation and joy"[116] reverberate in the music.

3.1 The Palimpsest Narrative

As mentioned in the second chapter of my paper, *Corregidora* belongs to the subgenre of palimpsest narratives, for it deals with family secrets, tormenting memories, and with how the past affects "a present American subject tortured by a recollection of the past in an ahistorical society".[117] The palimpsest narrative subgenre is particularly significant in examining how the slave past should be recounted and how the slaves' voices can also be commodified in the writing process but also in exploring the role of generational memory in present subjects. In palimpsest narratives often the protagonist discovers their ancestor's history or attempts to forget it. In either case, their life and their modern social relations are always governed by a slave past. Indeed, historical events endure over time both inside present subjects and outside in the specific places where these events took place. Toni Morrison expresses this point through the artistic device of "rememory", which is a mental structure where one person can reexperience what another person lived at another time. It is a way of comprehending how we can acquire others' past experiences that will never die and that will indeed keep affecting the present.

In Jones' narrative, the protagonist experiences her genealogical past by listening to familial narratives of her great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother, and

[115] Harris, pp. 1-5
[116] Ivi, p. 5
[117] Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction,* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001), p. 5

then by singing them in her blues songs. In *Corregidora*, this hereditary past of slavery will have a deeply oppressive weight on the protagonist, and this will also transfer on her two marriages.[118] The author manages through this novel to underline the intersubjective relations that arise from the narration of slave experiences and to equate both the teller and the hearer's degree of involvement in the events.[119] Jones drew inspiration from Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, an example of "slave narrative [which] is also framed within a novel that dramatizes a modernized version of it" and in which the hereditary slave narrative precedes and foretells the protagonist's own life, by "[providing] the dramatic and revelatory pattern for it".[120] The author thus manages to depict how the ancestral slave narrative can both facilitate and hinder interpersonal relations, which are inextricably linked to memory in individuals, the extended families, and in the modern nation-state. Ursa Corregidora is responsible of historical testimony, yet she feels that her effort will not be valid. Indeed, kinship cannot make up for the actual experiencing of historical traumas, and neither can preserve memory. Ursa feels a "sense of historical alienation"[121] as she did not live the experience of slavery and race segregation that moulded her family's identity. The illegitimacy felt by Ursa haunts her throughout the novel, as in her witnessing effort she is not able to claim possess of her historical inheritance.

Elizabeth Yukins juxtaposes the history of American slavery and the Holocaust by analysing how historical trauma creates collective identity and impacts the descendants of the victims, who find themselves having to "inhabit and enliven a memory that was not their own and to pay homage to a violent and devastating history" that leads them to feel "anxiety, alienation, guilt, and ambivalent desire".[122] They are aware of the importance of this historical legacy, but they cannot actually experience it and they also do not feel legitimate to do so. This feeling of illegitimacy needs also to be contextualized into a gender discourse, since such familial narratives are in the case of *Corregidora* handed down from a woman to another. If women cannot be the carriers

[118] Rushdy, pp. 5-10
[119] Ivi, pp. 34-35
[120] Gayl Jones, *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature,* (Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 132
[121] Elizabeth Yukins, p. 222
[122] Ivi, pp. 223-224

of the familial name, they cannot carry on their own history either, and this is why the daughters feel even more compelled to have access to the matrilineal history.[123]

3.2 Matrilineage – the Duty to Remember

Matrilineage played an essential role in the history of Black motherhood. Reproduction was both a form of oppression and a power tool for Black women slaves. After the 1808 act prohibiting importation of slaves, slave women were increasingly treasured for their fertility and potentiality to grow the slave labour force.[124] Furthermore, whilst in the United States prostitution was hardly incited, in Brazilian plantations women were often the subject of sexual commodification.[125] As Angela Davis argues, women were subjected to all forms of sexual coercion, they were not "mothers", but "breeders", valued only in "their ability to multiply their numbers".[126] Slave mothers had no legal rights over their children, who would often be sold away. As a response, some women impeded this inhuman procedure through abortion and infanticide.

According to Dianne Sadoff, this traumatic experience translates into the duty of Black literary matriliny[127] – since there are often gaps about the slave experience in official historical texts, Black writers would take up the mantle and pursue this Black cultural reconstructive project. They use the mother as the medium to narrate a fictional history, and the handing down between her and her daughter is thus depicted as a continuity of tradition and Black female identity. Jones attempts to explore this project of cultural reconstruction and tradition building in her works *Corregidora* and *Song for Anninho*, but she does not pursue the mother-daughter continuum of tradition and she instead shows its contradictions and difficulties. In *Corregidora* the matrilineage is hindered by deprivation and loss.[128] Ursa is both cut off from and formed by her family history. She did not experience directly what her foremothers suffered, and she also cannot leave evidence through the perpetuating of the lineage. She struggles with

[123] Ivi, pp. 226-227
[124] Madhu Dubey, "Gayl Jones and the Matrilineal Metaphor of Tradition", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Winter 1995), pp. 245-246
[125] Rushdy, pp. 46-47
[126] Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class,* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), p. 7, quoted by Madhu Dubey, "Gayl Jones and the Matrilineal Metaphor of Tradition", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 20, No. 2, (Winter 1995), p. 246
[127] Diane F. Sadoff, "Black Matrilineage: The Case of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 11, no. 1, (Autumn 1985), p. 11
[128] Dubey, "Gayl Jones and the Matrilineal Metaphor of Tradition", pp. 247-248

illegitimacy as she is completely detached from the only thing that her foremothers kept from the Brazilian plantation, namely their memories.[129] Her marriage and her love for her husband Mutt Thomas is thwarted by the complex relationships between her maternal ancestors and their Portuguese slave master, Corregidora. Not only were Black women slaves exploited as prostitutes to white men – Corregidora would also incestuously rape them and create his slave lineage. Furthermore, Ursa's great-grandmother was favoured by Corregidora, for he sold all her male children but let her keep her only girl. As a reaction to this, Ursa's foremothers would thus procreate female offspring so as to narrate and preserve the memory of their experiences, since the slave owner destroyed all the documents that could testify to the horrors of slavery.[130] Ursa is taught biological reproduction as a means of leaving evidence and preserving the family's psychological trauma. The reproductive mandate imposed on Ursa by her foremothers has indeed the only purpose to create "inheritors for their story of trauma".[131] This act of narrative repetition thus becomes a ritual, whose only purpose is to fill in the historical lacunas of official records.

However, through this process these women become "imprisoned in a history that is not of their own making, for what their possession of history gives them is nothing other than the history of their own dispossession".[132] By substituting the slave owner's voice, indeed these women have thus rendered the official discourse less authentic and thus less trustworthy. This witnessing process furthermore recalls the repressive acts that were usual of slavery.[133] The past indeed does not allow Ursa much freedom, as she is forced to completely trust its truthfulness and authority and to preserve it by leaving evidence. When Ursa asks her great-grandmother whether she is telling the truth, "Great Gram" slaps her:

> When I'm telling you something don't ever ask if I'm lying. 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 come time to hold up the 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. (12)

[129] Yukins, pp. 227-228
[130] Dubey, pp. 251-252
[131] Yukins, p. 229
[132] Dubey, "Gayl Jones and the Matrilineal Metaphor of Tradition", pp. 252-253
[133] Ibidem

Great Gram requires no questioning of the past. However, assuming that the narrative is immutable ensures it grows impersonal, as the performer loses their reflexive abilities. Therefore, if what is transmitted from one generation to another is not the power of transmission itself, what Ursa is handed down is only a dead story, deprived of any emotions – a *legend*.[134] Indeed, in the forementioned passage Jones questions the means of creating tradition in the matrilineage. The foremothers insist on passing on one single coherent testimony, but they cannot achieve this result, as Ursa asks herself whether her mother's past is not different from the one of the women before her. In Ursa's case, the mother's past may not facilitate the development of her daughter's narrative, but it may rather do the opposite.[135] Ursa's mother, when recounting her story, recalls feeling completely detached from her body, both when with family or her lover, the father of Ursa. She was completely sure about having a daughter though: "I knew you was gonna come out a girl even while you was in me. Put my hand on my belly, and knew you was gonna be one of us. […] I knew you'd be a girl. I knew my body would have a girl" (123). There is a clear attempt to create a matrilineage, and to create absolutely no patriarchal connection to the original torturer/owner/father, also because a male child born out of wedlock – according to Euro-American legal tradition – has the right to split the lineage and originate a new one, which would thus spoil the Corregidora women's project of history transmission. And thus, women here seek to "create a lineage of illegitimate daughters, all of whom transgressively bear the Corregidora name in order to offer focused and vituperative genealogical evidence of their forebear's brutality".[136] Nevertheless, such matrilineage will end with Ursa, who instead will find her way to transmit history through her blues. Instead of repeating an immutable, dead story, as her foremothers kept hitherto doing, Ursa will transform their memories and convey them in her songs. While the Corregidora women before her keep being tied to their past, blues will allow Ursa to reconciliate with her past, find a way to value it and preserve it, while reaching the necessary distance from it, that her ancestors never managed to achieve.

[134] Rushdy, pp. 38-39
[135] Dubey, "Gayl Jones and the Matrilineal Metaphor of Tradition", p. 253
[136] Yukins, pp. 229-230

3.3 Sexuality as the Locus of Identity

In *Corregidora,* the experience of slavery is also analysed by taking into account the subject of desire, and by showing how it contributes to the contemporary African American subjectivity. Indeed, in the novel the act of overthinking on the ancestral slave past leads to the aversively conditioning of the descendants' sexual lives. The slave narrative is passed on not only from mother to daughter: "My great-grandmother told my grandmama the part she lived through that my grandmama didn't live through and my grandmama told my mama what they both lived through, and my mama told me what they all lived through" (7). The history of the women before Ursa strongly impacts her life and her personality. She values this narrative, and she also recognizes how it is a part of her own identity. She nevertheless does not want to be told what response she should have to that past.[137] Though recognising the historical link in the matrilineage she is part of, Ursa still wants to freely form herself as a subject and throughout the novel she will understand when to limit the power of the slave past and learn "the value and the dangers of remembering generations".[138] But this outcome results from a long inner struggle between an identity filled by historical memory and a rootless one.[139] The hysterectomy Ursa is subjected to after being shoved off the stairs allows the novel to address Black female sexuality outside the reproductive discourse and to exceed a definition of woman restricted to reproductive terms. Indeed, Jones gives a thorough consideration of female identity and sexuality in the novel, as Ursa after the hysterectomy feels "as if something more than the womb had been taken out" (4). The inability to give birth denies Ursa the possibility to pursue her ancestors' aim to create generations and forces her to articulate a new female desire. After leaving the hospital, Ursa is hosted by Tadpole McCormic – the owner of the club where Ursa sings – and she soon starts a relationship with him: a relationship which – according to Ursa's friend Catherine – is rushed into by Ursa out of fear. After the loss of her womb, Ursa indeed feels the urge to regain her femininity through the reaffirmation of her heterosexuality. But apparently, she cannot: she does not feel any pleasure during sexual intercourses with Tad, until he "reached down and fingered [her] clitoris, which made [her] feel more" (78). The clitoral pleasure may represent a way out the

[137] Charles H. Rowell, "An Interview with Gayl Jones", *Callaloo*, No. 16 (October 1982), p. 45
[138] Rushdy, p. 36
[139] Ibidem

reproductive system, although Ursa still does not understand this. And neither does Tadpole, who actually thinks that a woman who does not feel any vaginal pleasure is no longer a woman.[140]

Jones further explores desire outside the reproductive system through the character of Catherin Lawson, who is Ursa's lesbian friend. Lesbianism is nevertheless dealt with as the result of failed heterosexual relationships. Indeed, Cat later explains to her that lesbianism is the response to her husband repulsing her sexually, and also to her feeling humiliated at work. Ursa repels Cat and does not show any empathy to her. However, when Ursa realizes that her relationship with Tadpole was based only on her hope to feel feminine again, she leaves him and in an imagined conversation addressed to Cat she finally admits "her fear that the failure of heterosexual relationships threatens to dissolve her very sense of herself".[141] Clitoral sexuality will not be further explored in the novel after this internal monologue to Cat. Towards the end of *Corregidora*, Jeffy recounts to Ursa that Cat has lost all her hair in an accident in the factory where she is working: "That kind of thing makes you don't feel like a woman" (186). Ursa's and Cat's roles are reversed – Cat loses her feminine identity whilst Ursa is instead retrieving her womanhood with Mutt. As Gloria Wade-Gayles argues, the author addresses lesbianism with sensitivity, but also with uncertainty, as she does not fully develop Jeff's and Cat's characters. The fact that lesbianism is such a delicate subject relates to the cultural and historical context in which Jones decided to author this novel. *Corregidora* was published in 1975, when Black cultural nationalism was as its peak. The Black Aesthetic discourse developed during the 1960s and 1970s was a race-centred aesthetic that although encompassed among others Black literary experimentations, it nonetheless "discouraged any literary exploration of gender and other differences that might complicate a unitary conception of the black experience".[142] Therefore, Black women writers who inserted lesbianism in her works often encountered publishing difficulties, for it was considered a menace to "the whole concept of the Black family or the Black community or the Black male-female

[140] Madhu Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 72-76
[141] Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic*, p. 77
[142] Ivi, p. 1

relationship".[143] This may be an explanation to the ambivalent addressing of lesbianism in *Corregidora*.

Nevertheless, the main focus remains on the questioning of the reproductive ideology and on the women's obstinacy in the novel to create trauma inheritors. The conception of reproduction as a duty and as women's natural desire imposed by the foremothers is instead questioned by Ursa in the second and third chapters. In the second chapter, this reproductive desire is explored in the character of Ursa's mother, who perceives it as something automatic, mechanical: "It was like my whole body knew. Just knew what it wanted" (120). She attempts to naturalize this desire, although she deep down knows she cannot: "I know it was something my body wanted. Naw. It just seem like I keep telling myself that, and it's got to be something else. It's always something else but it's easier if it's just that" (122). Ursa visits her mother to retrieve her female desire but ends up having a further confirmation of the unnatural nature of this reproductive myth. The third section presents the characters of May Alice and the Melrose woman. Ursa's childhood friend May Alice is impregnated as a young girl by her boyfriend who then abandons her, but she feels so guilty about it that asks Ursa to go tell him she is sorry, as if it was only her fault. Guilt pervades the Melrose woman too, as she commits suicide when Ursa is a little girl because she believes to be pregnant. Here motherhood is displayed only as a source of pain and isolation, that thus finally leads Ursa to understand how her womb could also be a "source of oppression as well as limited power".[144]

At the end of the novel, Mutt comes back after twenty-two years and asks Ursa to come back. He tells her how his great-grandfather – after losing his ex-slave wife to the American court for unpaid debts – lost his mind and would only "eat the onions so people wouldn't come around him, and then eat the peppermint so they would" (194). He explains to Ursa that he tried to do the same thing, in vain. According to Rushdy, Mutt here understands that, though recognising and respecting his ancestors' past, he cannot use it to solve his today's problems. He thus learns that the past needs to be recalled but not re-experienced, that there can be a healthy remembering of the past

[143] Alexis DeVaux, in Claudia Tate, *Black Women Writers at Work*, (New York: Continuum, 1983), p. 52, quoted by Madhu Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 78

[144] Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic,* p. 79

without remaining stuck in it, and he no longer asks Ursa to forget hers. They go back to the hotel, and in that moment, Ursa asks herself: "But was what Corregidora had done to her, to them, any worse than what Mutt had done to me, than what we had done to each other, than what Mama had done to daddy, or what he had done to her in return […]?" (195). Here Ursa is finally aware that her ancestral history is not of just victimhood, as women have "some degree of agency despite the historical and social inequities under which they become subjects of their own lives".[145]

In this final scene of reconciliation, Ursa manages to find her desire and exercise her femininity in non-reproductive sex, though heterosexual. Indeed, the lesbian and clitoral possibilities that slightly appeared throughout the novel are now overshadowed.[146] Ursa manages to decipher the family secret, namely what her grandmother did to Corregidora that kept haunting him afterwards:

> It had to be sexual, I was thinking, it had to be something sexual that Great Gram did to Corregidora. I knew it had to be sexual: 'What is it a woman can do to a man that make him hate her so bad he wont to kill her one minute and keep thinking about her and can't get her out of his mind the next?' (194)

She thinks about this while she is performing fellatio to Mutt, and she suddenly understands what her grandmother did:

> In a split second I knew what it was, in a split second of hate and love I knew what it was, and I think he might have known too. A moment of pleasure and excruciating pain at the same time, a moment of broken skin but not sexlessness, a moment just before sexlessness, a moment that stops just before sexlessness, a moment that stops before it breaks the skin: 'I could kill you.' (194)

The act of fellatio charges Ursa with such sexual power that it could also have a potential violent outcome. Ursa indeed knows that she has still not forgiven Mutt and that she still hates him; she is now aware of her emasculating power and has to choose how to use it to Mutt, also whilst considering his possible reaction.[147] What the grandmother did can be analysed as an act of resistance against Corregidora. When Ursa renders this sexual resistance her figure merges with her Great Gram's one: "It was like I didn't know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and Corregidora" (195). In this scenario, Ursa's performance is strongly interrelated to the slaves' stories, where sexuality became both a site of oppression and a tool of

[145] Rushdy, p. 45
[146] Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic*, p. 80
[147] Ibidem

resistance. These stories reveal how sexual coercion commanded Black desire and how Great Gram's story damaged not only her romantic relationships, but also the ones of her descendants. The act of fellatio performed by Ursa translates into her choice of using her family's past to influence her present relationship; she decides to mimic the woman who emasculated her master Corregidora. However, she does not entirely perform the act, as she stops before breaking Mutt's skin. This is when Ursa realizes that continuing to relive her family's past is not going to help her, and that re-enacting her Great Gram's act is not going to heal her relationship with Mutt. Ursa manages here to discern the act of her grandmother from hers with Mutt, but also to recognise the connections between them.[148] She transforms her family's past from a narrative of victimhood to one of agency and she changes her role "from a state of debilitating possession, entailing the loss or arresting of voice, to a state of healthy intersubjectivity".[149] Ursa finally understands that in order to keep alive memories of slavery there is no point in rendering them rigid, monolithic, instead they need to be left open to next generations' interpretations. Her function is not anymore of inheritor and container of memories; instead, she becomes "a site of recovery"[150] where her present life interacts with her past, but it is not conditioned by it.

3.4 The Redemption Tool of the Blues

The blues, though self-centred music, allows the singer to collect the group's yearnings, feelings, experiences. Likewise, in *Corregidora*, Ursa's individual pain is deeply linked to her family's one, and even more bound to African Americans' history and trauma of slavery.[151] Since Ursa cannot fulfil her reproductive mandate, she identifies in the blues her tool of redemption. Through her songs she attempts to voice experiences that the African American community can relate to, to hand down and preserve her foremothers' memory, and to find herself, her persona, her identity. When her mother uses the famous definition of "devil's music" to depict what her daughter sings, Ursa replies that she got them from her (55). Indeed, Ursa uses her mother and foremothers' memories and translates them into her words, into her blues. After more than twenty years of

[148] Rusdhy, pp. 49-54
[149] Ivi, p. 54
[150] Rushdy, p. 55
[151] Cheryl A. Wall, *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), p. 129

singing Ursa manages through her music to narrate her experience, to elaborate it, and to understand it. After undergoing her hysterectomy, Ursa's voice has changed, and Cat thus reacts: "Your voice sounds a little strained, that's all. But if I hadn't heard you before, I wouldn't notice anything. I'd still be moved. Maybe even moved more, because it sounds like you been through something. Before it was beautiful too, but you sound like you been through more" (45). It is clear how pain, suffering and experience are extremely intrinsic in the blues, to the point they improve Ursa's singing. Her painful experiences "deepen her art"[152], as well as make her confront her past, allowing her to express what she cannot describe with words: "If you understood me, Mama, you'd see I was trying to explain it, in blues, without words, the explanation somewhere behind the words. To explain what will always be there. Soot crying out of my eyes" (69). In her musical soliloquy Ursa finds a way to cope with the knowledge, to represent a past she feels it does not belong to her, to reconcile with her ancestors without "imploding, and having the painful details and episodes take over"[153]. Music is a medium to embrace that family's history which is "not only unwritten but also unspeakable",[154] to develop the tools of resistance and empathy that will allow her to live together with all her traumas. And finally, she hopes and aims at exposing what she endured, her ordeal of pain and pleasure: "It was as if I wanted them to see what he'd done, hear it. All those blues feeling. That time I asked him to try to understand my feeling ways. That's what I called it. My feeling ways. My voice felt like it was screaming. What do they say about pleasure mixed in the pain? That's the way it always was with him. The pleasure somehow greater than the pain." (52)

Resuming what mentioned in the second chapter, *Corregidora* is a great instance of "blues novel", as it evidently features tropes such as "repetition", "chance", and "descent". Indeed, the narrative structure does not follow a rational sequence, and the characters' actions do not necessarily lead to given results or events. As the blues music pattern features repetition with little variation, also the novel presents a certain recursiveness. For instance, oppression and physical violence affect all the women in the novel: Corregidora victimizes Great Gram and Gram through sexual coercion;

[152] Ivi, pp. 119-120
[153] Donia E. Allen, "The Role of the Blues in Gayl Jones's 'Corregidora'", *Callaloo*, Vol. 25, No. 1, *Jazz Poetics: A Special Issue,* (Winter 2002), p. 269
[154] Wall, p. 138

Ursa's mother endured Martin's beatings; Ursa is subjected to Mutt's possessive behaviour and to Tad's emotional abuse, in addition to the harassment she has faced since childhood. Oppression and pain are recursive and intersectional motifs for they are inflicted to every character, regardless of age, ethnicity, or gender. Nevertheless, the reasons behind such violence differ among the perpetrators: while Corregidora's behaviour is clearly reinforced by racist ideology and practices, the Black male characters' attitude requires a further analysis. In their case, violence is a consequence of racial oppression, namely the oppressed becomes the oppressor. Slavery, racism, segregation, discrimination, dehumanization, emasculation – what African Americans endured negatively affected their intersubjective relations. Indeed, in Martin's, Mutt's, and Tad's behaviour I see their willingness for redemption and their fears of being emasculated. My intent is not to justify them, but rather to understand why their violence is not to be equated to what happened in slave plantations. Mutt's jealousy and possessiveness and Tad's disrespect towards Ursa's sexuality may be interpreted as their effort in proving their manhood. Indeed, slavery allowed commodification of bodies and ruined the emotional ties among families and couples. But the legacy of slavery inherited by African Americans not only destroys Corregidora's women's ability to love, but it also proves to continue in the systemic emasculation of Black men even after its abolition. Such legacy denies them the possibility of love relationships. The sexual abuses, the exploitation, and the tyranny can only leave hate in African Americans' hearts, and such hate persists throughout generations. Ursa's mother is indeed incapable of love and uses Martin only to make generations, and her daughter is also unable to establish a healthy relationship with her husband. As Donia Elizabeth Allen argues, "tension is set up between Corregidora's women and the men in their lives, a push-and-pull between wanting to be with men so that they can bear children but not wanting or being able to share themselves emotionally".[155] Neither women nor men manage to solve such conflict. This inability to form real relationships results in women's rejection of love – see Ursa's mother's distancing from men and her daughter's loneliness for more than twenty-two years – and in men's frustration and violence, for they are not able to "possess" their women and they thus keep not feeling manly enough.

[155] Allen, p. 261

As repetition is used in blues music to further explore feelings and experiences, the recursiveness of certain events is likewise used in the novel to explore more deeply the characters' emotions. In both music and narrative there is no progression, there is no goal to achieve, but rather a repetition of "patterns of experience",[156] without any particular resolution. Mutt's and Ursa's desires are incompatible at the beginning and will remain so at the end of the novel too:

> He came and I swallowed. He leaned back, pulling me up by the shoulders.
> 'I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you,' he said.
> 'Then you don't want me.'
> 'I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you.'
> 'Then you don't want me.'
> 'I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you.'
> 'Then you don't want me.'
> He shook me till I fell against him crying. 'I don't want a kind of man that'll hurt me neither,' I said.
> He held me tight. (195)

This is an example of call-and-response form of the blues, with in addition the repetition-with-variation structure, typical of a blues stanza. There is a tight symmetry that culminates with the variation "I don't want a kind of man that'll hurt me neither", that aesthetically closes off the structure of the "stanza" but does not actually allow Ursa to explain her desire. Ursa wants someone opposite to Mutt and Mutt wants someone opposite to Ursa. This exchange only further underlines the "incommensurability of their desires".[157] Repetition like this one derives from the blues technique of "worrying the line", namely, "changes in stress and pitch, the addition of exclamatory phrases, changes in word order, repetition of phrases within the line itself, and the wordless blues cries that often punctuate the performance of the songs."[158] An example of this can be found in a conversation between Ursa and Cat:

> 'If that nigger love me he wouldn't've throwed me down the steps,' I called.
> 'What?' She came to the door.
> 'I said if that nigger loved me he wouldn't've throwed me down the steps.'
> 'I know niggers love you do worse than that,' she said. (37)

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[156] See Andrew Scheiber, "Blues Narratology and the African American Novel", *New Essays on the African American Novel: From Hurston and Ellison to Morrison and Whitehead*, edited by Lovalerie King, Linda F. Selzer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 34-36

[157] Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic,* p. 81

[158] Sherley A. Williams, "Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry", *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 18, No. 3, (Autumn 1977), p. 546

Here there is an imitation of the twelve-bar blues form, where Cat's question "What?" allows and incites the repetition and response, with the little variation "I said" that worries the line.[159] When Ursa is recalling her ancestors' narrative, she assumes her voices:

> While mama be sleeping, the ole man he crawl into bed
> While mama be sleeping, the old man he crawl into bed
> When mama have wake up, he shaking his nasty ole head
> Don't come here to my house, don't come here to my house I said
> Don't come here to my house, don't come here to my house I said
> Fore you get any this booty, you gon have to lay down dead
> Fore you get any this booty, you gon have to lay down dead (69)

The repetition is here further encouraged by the call-and-response device, where the call is "While mama be sleeping, the ole man he crawl into bed", and the response rhymes "When mama have wake up, he shaking his nasty ole head". In the second stanza the structure is repeated. However, the two stanzas call and respond to each other too, as the "don't come here to my house" is the response to the unwanted visitor.[160] Also conversations between Ursa and Mutt often present blues devices:

> 'Come over here, honey'
> 'Naw.'
> 'I need somebody.'
> 'Naw.'
> 'I said I need somebody.'
> 'Naw.'
> 'I won't treat you bad.'
> 'Naw.'
> 'I won't make you sad.'
> 'Naw.'
> 'Come over here, honey, and visit with me a little.'
> 'Naw.'
> 'Come over here, baby, and visit with me a little.'
> 'Naw.' (102)

In a dialogue that oozes yearnings, missed connections, and inability to articulate each own desires, Jones inserts the repetition-with-variation and rhyming (bad-sad). The author describes these kinds of conversations as "ritualized dialogue":

> In ritualized dialogue, sometimes you create a rhythm that people wouldn't ordinarily use, that they probably wouldn't use in real talk, although they are saying the words they might

[159] Wall, pp. 122-123
[160] Allen, p. 260

> ordinarily use […] you do something to the rhythm, or you do something to the words […] But both things take the dialogue out of the naturalistic realm – change its quality.[161]

Throughout the novel the author makes frequent use of ritualized dialogues, where call and response are essential elements which further explain the relationships between the characters. Ritualized dialogues happen when communication is failing or when the characters are expressing their most sincere emotions. For instance, the conversation that happens when Cat discovers that Jeffy has molested Ursa while she was sleeping:

> 'If you bother her again I'll give you a fist to fuck.'
> 'I ain't going to bother her again.'
> 'I said if you do you got my fist to fuck.'
> Then there was silence. (48)

Here after the first call, there is Jeffy's response, but the second call remains without any answer. The silence here is symbolic and represents the "lack of communication between the two women".[162] Refusal of engagement in the communication can be easily seen in the dialogues like the one below between Mutt and Ursa. Mutt's answer is not silence, but he responds physically, by turning away and refusing to interact.

> 'My pussy, ain't it, Ursa?'
> 'Yes, Mutt, it's your pussy.'
> 'My pussy ain't it, baby?'
> 'Yes.'
> 'Well, it's yours now.'
> He turned away. (165)

The final scene can be analysed also as repetition of a similar scenario. When Ursa is performing fellatio to Mutt, she is re-enacting what happened between Great Gram and Corregidora.

As Allen notices, Jones also makes use of the blues technique of the break. There are indeed frequent transitions – "shifts from one speaker to another, from one time period to another, and from one subject to another".[163] Breaks appear to interrupt characters' feelings, confusion, fears, and thoughts and also to signal when they do not know the border between themselves and the memories they have inherited. It is a way to facilitate the reader's understanding of who is talking, to whom, where, and when. For example, in the first section, there is a break that identifies a transition between

[161] Gayl Jones and Micheal S. Harper, "Gayl Jones: An Interview", *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 18, No. 4, (Winter 1977), p. 699
[162] Allen, p. 262
[163] Allen, p. 266

narrator voices, from Ursa to her mother. Ursa is here thinking about her accident, wondering how her relationships with men will change and how she will now fulfil her foremothers' request: "What's bothering me? Great Gram, because I can't make generations. I remember everything you told me, Great Gram, and Gram too and." (42) Her flow of thought is suddenly interrupted, to give space to her mother's voice, written in italics. "Good night, Ursa, baby. Good night, Irene. Honey, I remember when you was a warm seed inside me, but I tried not to bruise you. Don't bruise any of your seeds" (42).

Scheiber further identifies in the blues novel the trope of the "chance". The blues singer improvises and shuffles lines according to their expressive needs - their performance is not foreseeable. Likewise in blues narrative, the protagonist is faced with unforeseen events that shock and disrupt their lives and force them to achieve improvisation and readiness of response.[164] Surely the most evident accident is when Mutt pushes Ursa down the stairs, thereby changing completely her life. After losing her womb indeed Ursa is opened previously unimagined paths of life and needs to find her tools of resistance and response to hardships.

The last element is the descent, namely when the character embarks on a voyage towards an undesired place, usually escorted by a "guide-elder".[165] In *Corregidora*, Ursa's foremothers are the evident guide-elder, who since her childhood have kept taking her back to their past of slavery and traumas. And as Scheiber notes, this journey usually ends up with the realization of one's own condition. Indeed, after this long tribulation, through first Great Gram's and Gram's memories, and then also her mother's ones, Ursa finally manages to find her role in her family, to learn more about her identity, and to convey all this experience in a "song branded with the new world" (61).

[164] Scheiber, pp. 39-42
[165] Ivi, pp. 42-44

Chapter 4

The Problem of Authenticity in "Witchbird" and "Nineteen Fifty-Five"

Music and African American folk traditions are essential to both Alice Walker's and Toni Cade Bambara's writing. Walker has always had much regard and appreciation for African American music and its musicians, and this can be clearly seen in her short story "Nineteen Fifty-Five" from the collection *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, and in her novel *The Color Purple*, where Walker celebrates the work of blues women and portrays their lives, struggles, and resiliency within a context of patriarchy, racism, and oppression. Walker believes that only experience, suffering and enduring can render the intensity typical of the blues performance,[166] and recognises the importance of the blues both as a storytelling tool and as one of denunciation:

> The blues can be very disturbing, actually. I love it, and I love some songs much more than others, some musicians more than others, but what's truly disturbing is how frequently when women are singing they are telling about abusive relationships. I'm struck by that time and time again. And then of course it makes me think about all the stories those women were trying to hint at that they were not able to say.[167]

Walker was taught the African American folk culture since she was a child. Such tradition consists of oral transmission of African American art, music and poetry that was produced under conditions of oppression and remained "silent" for 250 years – art forms, proverbs, folktales, work songs, spirituals, secular songs. Folk tradition was all provided in Walker's education and eventually would be incorporated into her writing – in her characters, in the narrative structures, and in the language, as in her works she deeply values and prioritizes Ebonics, namely African American English.[168]

Toni Cade Bambara's interest in music is surely owed to her mother, who "wanted the Cades' to be a musical home that honored cultural traditions"[169] and pushed Bambara to learn classical music since she was a child. Music remained a constant throughout the life of the author and represented an enabling force in her writing too. In her short story collection *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* the stories source the folk

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[166] Maria V. Johnson, "You *Just* Can't Keep a Good Woman Down", *African American Review*, Vol. 30, No. 2, (Summer 1996), p. 221
[167] Alice Walker in an interview with William R. Ferris, "Alice Walker: 'I know what the earth says.'" *Southern Culture*, Vol. 10, No. 1, (Spring 2004), p. 20
[168] Gerri Bates, *Alice Walker: a critical companion*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005), p. 35, 45, 47, 93
[169] Linda Janet Holmes, *A Joyous Revolt: Toni Cade Bambara, Writer and Activist,* (Westport: Praeger, 2014), p.8

tradition and contain both oral storytelling and Black music forms, which inform their narrative structure, perspectives and semiotic texture.[170]

Both Walker and Bambara were influenced by Zora Neale Hurston, who was deeply interested in folk traditions, and both authors frame their works in a feminist perspective either by portraying the gender oppression on women or in advocating as superior a female sensibility achieved through experience.[171] Keith Eldon Byerman argues that the authors' attempt to strengthen ideology through folk values does not always work, as "the folk worldview implicitly assumes that endurance rather than political power is its objective. It insists not on overcoming the enemy so much as outwitting and outliving him",[172] which is an opposite concept to Walker's and Bambara's thrust to activism. Nevertheless, folk tradition actually serves as an activism tool, as blues tools of repetition and variation are used to reinforce their ideologies within the stories. And furthermore, folk tradition is celebrated and emphasized in their writing so as to preserve it and pass it down to future generations. Indeed, as Alice Walker claims, after decades of white imposed censure on African American arts, the Black community has the duty to read and listen to the folk tradition, or else they will lose it: "[…] I know one thing: when we really respect ourselves, our own minds, our own thoughts, our own words, when we really love ourselves, we won't have any problem whatsoever selling and buying books or anything else".[173] And thus African American arts and music pervade the works that will be subsequently analysed – in their content, narrative structure and linguistic style.

4.1 The Blues as Female Consciousness in "Witchbird"

"Witchbird" is the penultimate short story of *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* – Toni Cade Bambara's 1977 collection of tales. This collection derives from stories women shared with the author during her trip to Vietnam, whilst she was visiting the Women's Union in Hanoi. It clearly depicts Bambara's revolutionary love for the community, as the stories therein contained show Black women allied with each other, who struggle in the

[170] Elliot Butler-Evans, *Race, Gender, And Desire: Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker,* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), p. 119
[171] Keith Eldon Byerman, *Fingering the Jagged Grain: Tradition and Form in Recent Black Fiction*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), p. 105
[172] Ibidem
[173] Alice Walker in an interview with Claudia Tate, in *Black Women Writers at Work*, edited by Claudia Tate, (Harpenden: Oldcastle, 1985), p. 183

effort of assuring the survival and integrity of all people. The book was published at a time in which Bambara's writing was effectively involved in political struggle and indeed each story depicts the revolutionary power of Black people towards liberation – both of the self and of the community.[174] The short story is considered by the author the most effective genre when teaching political lessons, as being it short and quick to read it is approached more attentively by the reader. Thus, through the short story she aims at fully portraying an organic Black community and Black nationalist ideology.[175] The female characters in this collection are placed within nonconformist communities, where they can develop and manifest their consciousness; they are "models of self-reliance, self-development, and an independent, self-sustained Black economic base mixed with the resistive spirit of Black culture".[176] Bambara here skilfully combines Black nationalism and feminism, as the protagonists of these fictions commit to Black Power themes such as self-empowerment, self-respect, social equality, mixed with anti-patriarchy spirit.[177] The strength that features Bambara's female characters is progressively acquired through communal interaction. According to the author, the community is a key source of growth, where women need to achieve their personal identity by enduring and emerging from hard lessons within the various and conflicting layers of their communities while also guiding others to achieve their self-actualization.[178] According to Elliot Butler-Evans, politics in *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* are explored through representational strategies, among them:

> (1) more complex constructions of women, stressing their roles as cultural rebels and political activists; (2) an enlarged and extended projection of the Black girl as child-woman who embodies nascent cultural and political consciousness; (3) an increased marginalization of Black males with emphasis on their diminished importance; and (4) more intensified depictions of white males and females as disruptive forces in the community.[179]

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[174] Thabiti Lewis, *"Black People Are My Business" Toni Cade Bambara's Practices of Liberation*, (Wayne State University Press, 2020), pp. 120-121
[175] Toni Cade Bambara in an interview with Claudia Tate, *Black Women Writers at Work, edited by Claudia Tate*, (New York: Continuum, 1983), quoted by Elliot Butler-Evans, *Race, Gender, And Desire: Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker,* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), p. 92
[176] Lewis, p. 122
[177] Ivi, pp. 123-124
[178] Martha M. Vertreace, "The Dance of Character and Community", *American Women Writing Fiction: Memory, Identity, Family, Space*, edited by Mickey Pearlman, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1989), pp. 155-156
[179] Butler-Evans, p. 109

Each female character is involved in Black Nationalist politics, although not always with full conviction, as the feminist discourse is always present and often challenges the nationalist one. These stories are thus the locus of tensions between the desires of the female Black individual and those of the Black nation, between gender and racial politics. Bambara is aware of the importance of Black Nationalism, though she recognises its being a male-centred ideology that thus may disadvantage African American women. Joan Korenman claims that Bambara seems conscious that such aesthetic may also endanger relationships between Black elders and the younger generations within the social structures of the family and community.[180] In Bambara's short stories, despite the ambivalence in their effort towards Black cultural nationalism, liberation remains women's constant struggle and purpose, together with the quest for the self.[181] Self-actualization is itself a tool for revolution. Indeed, the historical context of the seventies – when *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* was written – according to Bambara "is characterized by a refocusing on the self, which is, after all, the main instrument for self, group and social transformation."[182] In a world where the Western civilization imposes itself as the absolute truth, Bambara aims at telling her own truth through her writing. She is aware that social transformation cannot be primarily achieved through the tool of literature, though she recognises its potential:

> So I work to tell the truth about people's lives; I work to celebrate struggle, to applaud the tradition of struggle in our community, to bring to center stage all those characters, just ordinary folks on the block, who've been waiting in the wings, characters we thought we had to ignore because they weren't pimp-flashy or hustler-slick or because they didn't fit easily into previously acceptable modes or stock types.[183]

All these characters are thus portrayed in *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*, where women struggle and achieve experience through a cyclic development within a community that serves both as an ally and an antagonist. Bambara's women's conflict does not stop at achieving personal identity, as such quest implies gaining knowledge, and thus power, within a political framework.[184]

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[180] Joan S. Korenman, "African-American Women Writers, Black Nationalism, and the Matrilineal Heritage", *CLA Journal*, Vol. 38, No. 2, (December 1994), p. 149
[181] Butler-Evans, p. 109
[182] Toni Cade Bambara in an interview with Claudia Tate, *Black Women Writers at Work, edited by Claudia Tate*, (New York: Continuum, 1983), p. 13
[183] Ivi, p. 18
[184] Vertreace, pp. 165-166

The female characters in "Witchbird" are blues women. Written in 1977, this short fiction was also staged in April 1981 by Jomandi Productions, directed by Pearl Cleage. The Atlanta Daily News reviewed the play as a "centering on a woman's determination to explore the dreams 'that have been begging her attention for years'".[185] Honey, the protagonist, is an independent blues singer and actress whose home has become a sort of boarding house for all her manager Heywood's ex-girlfriends. In this story, men are quite marginalized and undermined, while female characters are emphasized and thoroughly explored. "Witchbird" is connoted by a particular political overtone. The story is about the hardships an entertainer must overcome. Honey's life is a continuous struggle against her theatre company, against her community, and against her manager who takes advantage of her generosity to free himself of his "discarded" ex-girlfriends. And it is furthermore a constant fight towards her self-actualization and emancipation from the asexual and matriarchal role she was assigned:[186]

> Heywood spot him a large, singing, easygoing type woman, so he dumps his girl friends on me is all […] I ain't even taken the time to review what that role's done to my sense of balance, my sense of self. But who's got time, what with all of Heywood's women cluttering up my house, my life? […] I'd settle for some privacy. Had such other plans for my time right in through here. Bunch of books my nephew sent untouched. Stacks of Variety unread under the kitchen table. The new sheet music gathering dust on the piano. Been wanting to go over the old songs, the ole Bessie numbers. Ma Rainey, Trixie Smith, early Lena. So many women in them songs waiting to be released into the air again, freed to roam. Good time to be getting my new repertoire together too instead of rushing into my clothes and slapping my face together just because Laney can't bear walking the streets alone after dark, and Gayle too scared to stay in the place by herself. Not that Heywood puts a gun to my head, but it's hard to say no to a sister with no place to go.[187]

Honey claims that she is not forced by Heywood to welcome those women, but she also recognises that those women are victims of their own naiveness and kindness. Despite her "mothering", Honey is not portrayed as a helpless victim, but rather as a fierce and independent woman, who has her interests and passions, who wants to explore "new sheet music gathering dust on the piano", "go over the old songs" (169) and choose her scripts and acting roles:[188]

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[185] Deric Gilliard, "Witchbird's Warning: To Thine Own Self Be True," (Atlanta Daily World, April 28, 1981), quoted by Linda Janet Holmes, *A Joyous Revolt: Toni Cade Bambara, Writer and Activist* (Westport: Praeger, 2014), p. 150

[186] Cristina Di Maio, *La posta in gioco: I giochi e il ludico nei racconti di Toni Cade Bambara, Rita Ciresi e Grace Paley*, (Napoli: La scuola di Pitagora editrice, 2022) p. 171

[187] Toni Cade Bambara, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*, (New York: Vintage, 1982), pp. 169-170. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically.

[188] Di Maio, pp. 171-172

> Got to be firm about shit like that, cause if you ain't some bronze Barbie doll type or the big fro murder-mouth militant sister, you Aunt Jemima. Not this lady. No way. Got to fight hard and all the time with the scripts and the people. Cause they'll trap you in a fiction. […] Forget what you had in mind about changing, growing, developing. Got you typecasted. That's why I want some time off to think, to work up a new repertoire of songs, of life (172-173).

It is clear how Honey's artistic expression is hindered by her company's commissions, that she defines "dead, white pages" (174) but that attract more paying audiences. The control by the artistic production and dissemination tools thus collides with her search for artistic freedom.[189] Further hindrances linked to the show business are explored through the character of Vera. Vera is yet another Heywood's ex who formerly occupied Honey's home and who made her fortune with one of her blues songs. The relationship between the two women is connoted by tensions and envy. Vera promised Honey a minor part in a play in New York once she moved, but then the agreement was not made. Honey believes that Vera's success was ensured only by her sensual moves while she was singing:

> Vera was just not pretty. Not pretty and not nice. Obnoxious in fact, selfish, vain, lazy. But yeah she could put a song over, though she didn't have what you'd call musicianship. Like she'd glide into a song, it all sounding quite dull normal at first. Then a leg would shoot out as though from a split in some juicy material kicking the mike cord out the way, then the song would move somewhere. As though the spirit of music had hovered cautious around her chin thinking it over, looking her over, then liking that leg, swept into her mouth and took hold of her throat and the song possessed her, electrified the leg, sparked her into pretty. (171)

Despite Honey's confidence as singer and actress – "Don't nobody do me no favors, please, cause I'm the baddest singer out here and one of the best character actresses around" (171) – she is not completely immune to the dynamics of the show business, and she is aware that often fame and fortune can be achieved only through the sexual objectification of one's own body. Honey is thus aware of Vera's fate: "Later realizing I was staring at her, feeling bad because of course she'd make it, have what she wanted, go everywhere, meet everybody, be everything but self-deserving" (171). Her pride and confidence do not allow her to fall into such seduction games, as she firmly believes that her persona should be judged for her own work, reputation, and performance. However, at the beauty shop Honey proves to be herself oppressed by the white dominant culture as the owner of the shop unmasks her:[190]

[189] Ivi, pp. 172-173
[190] Byerman, p. 122

> "Come on out from under that death, Honey," Mary says soon's we get halfway in the door. "Look like you sportin a whole new look in cosmetics. Clown white, ain't it? Or is it Griffin All White applied with a putty knife?" Mary leaves her customer in the chair to come rip the wig off [Honey's] head. "And got some dead white woman on your head too. Why you wanna do this to yourself, Honey? You auditioning for some zombie movie?" (181).

Honey is too a victim, although she is firmly trying to overcome and emerge from beauty canons and stereotypes that have been affecting Black women like her for decades. Barbara Christian claims that writers like Bambara manage to defy such painful and belittling stereotypes, as her works, "Whether they be primarily political, cultural, historical, philosophical, […] whether they are weave fantasies or tend toward social realism, whether they are experimental or traditional in style, they leave us with the diversity of the Black woman's experience in America, what she has made and how she is transforming it".[191] Elizabeth Muther further argues that although the author works within a Black Nationalist movement of solidarity and affirmation, she is nonetheless able to resist the common Black community stereotypes and to provide an alternative to the dominating nationalist discourse by creating empowered, self-resistant African American female characters that are essential to the community's existence.[192] In "Witchbird" the author uses the device of the double talk, thereby comparing the protagonist's view of herself and the social role she is assigned by the community.[193] Honey perceives herself as a strong free-spirited woman, whereas the other women keep seeing her with compassion as the asexual "wet nurse". They do not seem to understand the friendship and work relationship between Honey and Heywood: "[Gayle is] looking me over like she always does, comparing us I guess to flatter her own vanity, or wondering maybe if it's possible Heywood sees beyond friend, colleague, to maybe woman. All the time trying to pry me open and check out is there some long ago Heywood-me history" (168-169). Women around Honey are caged in a patriarchal context where they can think of male-female relationships only as oppressive or exploitative, as indeed they are sure Heywood is only taking advantage of Honey's kindness: "'You think it's no harm the way he uses you, Honey? What are you, his

[191] Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*, (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985), p. 28
[192] Elizabeth Muther, "Bambara's Feisty Girls: Resistance Narratives in 'Gorilla, My Love'", *African American Review*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Autumn, 2002), pp. 448-449
[193] Viola Maria Newton, *Never Mind the Catta, Its the Bundle Behind: Discovering the Meanings Behind the Folklore and the Language in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara*, (Ohio State University, 1992), PhD dissertation, p. 124

mother, his dumping grounds? Why you put up with it? Why you put up with us, with me?" (180). Or also for instance: "'Be interesting to see just what kinda bundle he gonna deposit on your doorstep this time' […] 'Like you ain't got nuthin better to do with ya tits but wet-nurse his girls'" (181). Her community thus represents a major hindrance to her empowerment as a woman. Despite their cynicism and underestimation, Honey's "naiveness" and generosity renders her a fundamental figure within her people; she is connoted by a keen political awareness and feminist consciousness; it is she who decides where to stand in her community. This character implies a double consciousness, both as Heywood's and his women's caretaker and as an emancipated woman with her occupations, her money, her house, her ambitions. Her quest for identity is strongly related to her continuous struggle to maintain her identity out of the traditional view of herself as mother or caretaker, and it is her blues that will allow her to achieve self-empowerment and self-respect. Through her blues she will shape her cultural identity, thus evolving into a true woman free from stereotypes:[194] "Shit, I ain't nobody's mother. I'm a singer. I'm an actress. I'm a landlady look like. Hear me. Applaud me. Pay me" (167).

The blues as tool of protest functions as a bridge between Honey and her community. The blues woman expressed all the deeply rooted values and beliefs of her people; she portrayed the hardships, issues, and the oppression all her community could relate to thus strengthening their sense of belonging and triggering changes; her music was meant to be a tool to combat patriarchy, economic exploitation, racial oppression. Honey thus is a cultural activist for her community. Throughout the story there is a clear reference to the historical and political context of Black Nationalism combined with feminist sensibility, as through her music and acting Honey attempts to achieve more expressive freedom in her performances and voice historically empowered women:[195]

> So many women in them songs, in them streets, in me, waiting to be freed up. […] I hear folks calling to me. Calling from the box. Mammy Pleasant, was it? Tubman, slave women bundlers, voodoo queens, maroon guerrillas, combatant ladies in the Seminole nation, calls from the swamps, the tunnels, the classrooms, the studios, the factories, the roofs, from the doorway hushed or brassy in a dress way too short but it don't mean nuthin heavy enough to have to explain, just like Bad Bitch in the Sanchez play was saying. But then the wagon comes and they all rounded up and caged in the Bitch-Whore-Mouth mannequin with the dead eyes and the mothball breath, never to be heard from again. But want to sing a Harriet song and play a Pleasant role and bring them all center stage. (173)

[194] Newton, pp. 117-127
[195] Di Maio, pp. 172-173

Honey thus aims at an aesthetic and political revolution that can bring to the fore blues women and the fundamental role of their music as the quintessential African American means of cultural expression. Gender and racial oppression are thus conveyed by using the recreational tool of the performance:[196]

> Wives weeping from the pillow not waking him cause he got his own weight to tote, wife in the empty road with one slipper on and the train not stopping, mother anxious with the needle and thread or clothespin as the children grow either much too fast to escape the attention of the posse or not fast enough to take hold. Women calling from the lock-up of the Matriarch cage. I want to put some of these new mother poems in those books the nephew sends to music. They got to be sung, hummed, shouted, chanted, swung. (173)

She furthermore uses her "mothering" of her manager's ex-girlfriends as a source for her blues songs: "So they wind up here, expecting me to absorb their blues and transform them maybe into songs. Been over a year since I've written any new songs. Absorbing, absorbing, bout to turn to mush rather than crystalize, sparkling" (170). Women around her represent both a source of inspiration and an obstacle for her artistic development. Honey is expected to absorb the blues from men too: "[…] ole Bradwell crying the blues about his wife. So what am I there for – to absorb, absorb, and transform if you can, ole girl. Absorb, absorb and try to convert it all to something other than fat" (175). Nevertheless, blues remains a "way of transforming or liberating oneself from anxiety or conflict",[197] a space where to identify oneself; a tool that allows to express feminist consciousness and to value women's stories; a medium between the singer and her community.

Blues music also informs the structure of the short story itself as this intrinsically Black genre is consolidated in the linguistic code. The narrative here evokes the improvising and recurring style of the blues, as for instance time is not linear, chronological, but rather convergent. As Eleanor Traylor points out, whether the story is set in a remote past or in an indefinite future, the time nonetheless converges in the immediate present.[198] Musical repetition is a key trope in this short story too, as according to Butler-Evans, "each fleeting reflection of Honey's extended blues solo

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[196] Ibidem
[197] Newton, p. 118
[198] Eleanor W. Traylor "Music as Theme: "The Jazz Mode in the Works of Toni Cade Bambara", *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, edited by Mari Evans, (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984), p. 65

constitutes a comment on some aspect of her life – her career, her past relationships with men, and her overall perception of herself".[199]

4.2 The Cultural Appropriation of the Blues in "Nineteen Fifty-Five"

"Nineteen Fifty-Five" is the first short story of Alice Walker's 1981 collection *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down.* The collection explores various themes, such as cultural thievery, abortion, fame, pornography, sadomasochism, rape, love. Unlike the author's previous short stories collection *In Love & Trouble: Stories of Black Women,* in which the characters struggle and grow from their experience, the women in this collection are more optimistic, successful, and they claim their right to surpass social hurdles. The feminist discourse does not apply only to the topics addressed and the characters. According to Barbara Christian, these short fictions are process, not product. Feminist theorists of the seventies placed importance onto women's process of thought and feeling and how they sensed the world. Walker takes up this idea of process, translating it into her writing and thus obtaining a womanist process (womanist is defined by Walker as "Black feminist"), namely that she "gives us the story as it comes into being, rather than delivering the product, classic and clean".[200] While the title *In Love & Trouble* underlines the trope of trouble and therefore of struggle, *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* celebrates women's self-affirmation and "insistence on living".[201] The title alludes to blues singer Mamie Smith's 14th February 1920 recording of "You Can't Keep A Good Man Down", which together with "This Thing Called Love" was the first documented recording of a Black female singer. The blues song was originally meant to be sung by the popular white singer Sophie Tucker, who often imitated Black music, but who cancelled last-second and was thus substituted by Mamie Smith. The title also recalls African American song writer Perry Bradford's "You Can't Keep a Good Man Down", though while this song celebrates good men's resolution, Walker's collection shifts the focus to good women and their resistance to abuse. It also refers to a 12-bar blues song "You Just Can't Keep a Good Woman Down" (1928) by Lillian Miller. As many other blues songs, by for instance Bessie Smith and Gertrude

[199] Butler-Evans, p. 119
[200] Barbara Christian, "Alice Walker: The Black Woman Artist as Wayward", *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation,* edited by Mari Evans, (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984), p. 468
[201] Ibidem

"Ma" Rainey, this song too contains the figure of the empowered, strong, and authentic woman that cannot be defeated.[202]

"Nineteen Fifty-Five" is a story about cultural appropriation. The fiction begins in 1955, when Traynor, a young white singer, becomes famous and rich after buying a blues song for $500 from Gracie Mae Still, a retired blues singer. His fame is indeed owed only to his cover of Gracie Mae's composition of 1923, from which he earns $40,000 a day. Traynor tries to completely mimic Gracie Mae's way of singing and, as she claims, he succeeds: "Well, Lord have mercy, I said, listening to him. If I'da closed my eyes, it could have been me. He had followed every turning of my voice, side streets, avenues, red lights, train crossings and all. It give me a chill".[203] "Nineteen Fifty-Five" clearly refers to Elvis Presley and to Willie Mae Big Mama Thornton, who originally recorded the song "Hound Dog" in 1952, but whose cover by Presley in 1956 became a million-seller.[204] Walker indeed addresses the white racist cultural thievery through the "covering" of African American songs. Covering consists in singing a song previously recorded by another artist. It became a common phenomenon in the fifties, when white artists were used to stealing blues songs and making them their own. Covering thus represented a way for the dominant white community to perpetrate cultural misappropriation from those less empowered. White covers were not better than the original ones, but they were more profitable.[205] Mita Banrjee argues that as the white racist is not able to understand the African American body and culture, neither is he able to attribute meaning to Black music. The blues functions as a code internalized within the Black community;[206] August Wilson describes it with the following words:

> It is hard to define this music. Suffice it to say that it is music that breathes and touches. That connects. That is in itself a way of being, separate and distinct from any other […] Thus they are laid open to be consumed by it; its warmth and redress, its braggadocio and roughly poignant comments, its vision and prayer, which would instruct and allow them to reconnect, to reassemble and gird up for the next battle in which they would be both victim and the ten thousand slain.[207]

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[202] Johnson, pp. 222-223
[203] Alice Walker, *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, (San Diego: Harvest/HBJ, 1981), p.7. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically.
[204] Johnson, pp. 231-232
[205] David J. Mickelsen, "'You Ain't Never Caught a Rabbit': Covering and Signifyin' in Alice Walker's 'Nineteen Fifty-Five'", *Southern Quarterly*; Vol. 42, No. 3, (Spring 2004), pp. 6-8
[206] Mita Banerjee, "Black Bottoms, Yellow Skin: From Ma Rainey to Maxine Hong Kingston's 'Tripmaster Monkey'", *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 3, (Winter, 2000), p. 414
[207] August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom,* (New York: Plume, 1985), p. xvi

Such importance is beyond whites' comprehension, who can only listen to the music and "cover" it without actually reaching its core. Traynor's attempt to faithfully imitate Gracie Mae's singing does not allow him to understand that the song's meaning is linked to it being a "cultural product emanating from a particular context".[208] Therefore, Traynor and his fans are "getting the flavor of something but [they] ain't getting the thing itself" (17).

This process of covering usually ensures that the original Black composer is forgotten. Indeed, in the short story everyone thinks of Traynor as the actual composer of the blues song, even though he puts on the record "written by Gracie Mae Still" (7). Elvis Presley reached his stardom mostly thanks to his R&B covers of African American artists. And despite the vast amount of money he made, the original Black composers of his covers did not receive much compensation. He therefore was part of the long-established cultural exploitation of African Americans that dated back to the minstrel shows of the 19th century, when white people racially mimicked people of African descent through dancing, music performances and sketches.[209] As Elvis' songs that made him famous are mostly Blacks' covers, also Traynor reach his stardom only through Gracie Mae's song: "I've been thinking about writing some songs of my own but every time I finish one it don't seem to be about nothing I've actually lived myself. My agent keeps sending me other people's songs but they just sound mooney" (11). He skilfully manages to render her vocal rendition, but he does not really possess her song, as he cannot access her experience.[210] The relationship between the two characters develops around Traynor's continuous quest for the song's meaning: "…and you know what, I don't have the faintest notion what the song means" (8), "That's part of what that song means, ain't it?" (13-14), "Some of that feelin' is in the song, ain't it? Not the words, the *feeling*" (16), and "Is that in the song?" (19). The quest for the meaning of the song actually becomes the quest for the meaning of his life. He is full of riches, fame, and fortune, but empty of feelings and authenticity, which are thus searched in Gracie Mae's life and blues. Although the song and its composer become the locus where to look for meaning in his life, there he will actually find his unhappiness and hollowness. Indeed, this short story does not only address the exploitation of African

[208] Banerjee, p. 415
[209] Johnson, p. 231
[210] Mickelsen, pp. 8-9

American music by whites, but it also explores "how the adherence to a false system of values can lead to a spiritually empty life".[211] Walker shows how often happiness is wrongly associated to material possessions, to the detriment of spiritual evolution and emotional connections. Throughout the story the more Traynor becomes intoxicated by his success and wealth, the less he enjoys his life, now deprived of any genuine human feeling and relationship. His marriages fail as he does not know how to feel affection:[212] "I married but it never went like it was supposed to. I never could squeeze any of my own life either into it or out of it. It was like singing somebody else's record. I copied the way it was sposed to be exactly but I never had a clue what marriage meant" (13). The author manages to expose the white culture of materialism by comparing it to Gracie Mae's Black authentic life. At the beginning of the story Gracie Mae sells her song to Traynor's manager, who she calls "the deacon" because he looks like a Baptist deacon. She thus contrasts his outward appearance – one who should save souls – and his inner self – one whose occupation is to make profit out of African American artists.[213] Contradictions can be also seen in Traynor: "Still looking half asleep from the neck up, but kind of awake in a nasty way from the waist down" (6). Gracie Mae keeps portraying him as "asleep looking" throughout the story, for he is not actually living his life; he is spiritually dead. His lower body on the contrary is quite alive, and it is through the sexual objectification of his own body that he reaches his audience: "He wasn't doing too bad with my song either, but it wasn't just the song the people in the audience was screeching and screaming over, it was that nasty little jerk he was doing from the waist down" (6-7). Also in "Witchbird" it's not so much the singing that ensures Vera's fame, but more her sensual legs that attract the audience. This is also a clear reference to "Elvis the Pelvis", who was quite remembered among young white women for his wiggling of hips while he was singing. Further associations to the famous singer's life are made throughout the story. For instance, Elvis Presley's music career started in 1954 and shortly after he reached number one on the pop music charts, thus becoming "The King of Rock 'n' Roll". He also worked as an actor, made

[211] Justine Tally, "Alice Walker's 1955: An Attack on the False Values of Our Times", *Actas del X Congreso Nacional de la Asociación Española de Estudios Anglo-Norteamericanos,* (Seville: Asociación Española de Estudios Anglo-Norteamericanos, 1988), p. 462
[212] Ivi, pp. 461-466
[213] Johnson, p. 226

television appearances, and served in the army in Germany from 1958 to 1960.[214] In "Nineteen Fifty-Five", Traynor is in the army in 1960 and recounts to Gracie Mae of having starred in a lot of "dumb movies" (10). He comes back visiting her in 1968:[215]

> Holy Toledo! Said Horace. (He got a real sexy voice like Ray Charles.) Look *at* it. He meant the long line of flash cars and the white men in white summer suits jumping out on the driver's sides and standing at attention. With wings they cold pass for angels, with hoods they could be the Klan (11).

Here again Walker uses blues opposition and contrasts their appearance to their true essence, while also suggesting that "Klan members do pass for angels in this society, as racist religion passes for spirituality, and record agents pass for deacons, greedy men for saviours".[216] Traynor looks weighted though still soulless: "I could tell his eyes weren't right. It was like some*thing* was sitting there talking to me but not necessarily with a person behind it" (13). Walker here italicizes *thing* to underline how Traynor is not much of a person anymore; his presence is scarce. His laugh is empty too: "He laughs. The first time I ever heard him laugh. It don't sound much like a laugh and I can't swear that it's better than no laugh a'tall. […] What did it sound like? I couldn't place it" (12). The lack of soul is again explored soon after when Traynor mentions Bessie Smith. Smith wanted to sing one of Gracie Mae's songs, but Gracie Mae protested that she should sing only her own repertoire. As Bessie Smith and Traynor achieved stardom but sacrificed their authenticity and humanity, Gracie Mae in her anonymity managed to maintain her spirituality, to be herself, to really be somebody.[217] Walker nevertheless also attempts to humanize Traynor by showing his attachment to Gracie Mae. Traynor feels indebted towards her and her music and despite their race, gender, and economic disparities, he continuously considers himself inferior and an imitator.[218] Gracie Mae remains almost indifferent to Traynor's attentions. Her main concerns revolve around her family, losing weight, fishing, gardening. In response to the numerous gifts Traynor offers her, she firmly replies: "Really, we have more than enough of everything. The Lord is good to us and we don't know Want" (10), or "I already got a house. Horace is right this minute painting the kitchen. I bought that house. My kids feel comfortable in

[214] Ivi, p. 231
[215] Peter Nazareth, "'Nineteen Fifty-Five': Alice, Elvis and The Black Matrix", *Journal of the African Literature Association*, Vol. 1, No. 2, (2007), p. 150
[216] Johnson, p. 228
[217] Ivi, pp. 228-229
[218] Mickelsen, p. 10

that house" (16). Gracie Mae's humdrum but fulfilled life implies a critique towards the star's lifestyle, though she also motherly care about him.[219] Indeed, there is a son-mother relationship between the two; she calls him "son" and he treats her as a mother. The exploration of materialism and its consequent spiritual destitution is further widened when Gracie Mae visits Traynor's mansion, which is so big to result alienating. As Traynor feels so bonded to Gracie Mae and her song, he nervously presents her to his wife by saying: "I want you to know me" (15). Walker continues with the opposition between appearance and reality when Traynor takes Gracie Mae to "The Johnny Carson Show" and they both perform the blues song.[220] Gracie Mae describes her own performance as wonderful: "I am singing my song, my own way. And I give it all I've got and enjoy every minute of it" (18), but the white audience does not understand her blues, they cannot do it, and they thus "[clap] politely for about two seconds" (18), whilst Traynor "is standing up clapping and clapping and beaming at first [her] and then the audience like [she's] his mama for true" (18). While he is singing, though, he limits himself to copy her version without adding anything to make the song his own, and he also forgets a few lines, but the audience's reaction is completely different: "Even before he's finished the matronly squeals begin" (19). Furthermore, when he affectionately embraces her the audience laughs. Gracie Mae's and Traynor's attitude are completely different: while she is not at all concerned about his audience, he looks vexed and dejected.

Gracie Mae has had already her audience, small but honest. Her concern was only about entertaining and pleasing her community as only a blues singer could do, namely by exposing her experience and her people's one, thus creating a true bond within the community.[221] Traynor on the other hand is bothered by his audience that he himself considers fake and insincere: "They getting the flavor of something but they ain't getting the thing itself. They like a pack of hound dogs trying to gobble up a scent. […] You need a honest audience! You can't have folks that's just gonna lie right back to you" (17). Here there is a clear reference to Mama Thornton's original and Elvis Presley's cover song "Hound Dog". In "Nineteen Fifty-Five" Walker alludes to Elvis Presley not only through the character of Traynor, but also through Gracie Mae's one.

[219] Ivi, p. 11
[220] Johnson, p. 229
[221] Ivi, pp. 230-231

Despite being Gracie Mae a blues singer, her character embodies a long tradition of African American female artists, such as for instance Bessie Smith, Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton, and Aretha Franklin. Therefore, although Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton is a R&B singer, the link to the fictional character is evident. Big Mama Thornton's music embodied a tradition of blues women and combined country and "classic" blues, thus carrying on the genre through the eighties. Her unique voice, her distinctive presence, and her expressive ability influenced many other artists, among them Elvis Presley and Janis Joplin. A similarity can also be found in the two women's physicality: Gracie Mae weighting three hundred pounds in 1968 recalls Big Mama Thornton's corpulent body.[222] Throughout the story Gracie Mae is quite obsessed with her own weight, thus showing not to be completely detached from the world of entertainment, which imposes precise beauty standards. Lastly, although Big Mama Thornton did not compose "Hound Dog" – Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller did – she surely made that song her own. Walker does not specify the title of the song in her fiction, thus allowing a more generic reference to the issue of cultural thievery, though at the same time she narrates a special relationship between the composer and the cover singer that surely did not exist in the world of the fifties.[223]

The short story "Nineteen Fifty-Five" ends in nineteen seventy-seven, when Traynor suddenly dies. The reason behind his death is not clear – it may be alcohol, drugs, obesity, a heart attack – but as Gracie Mae's partner's keenly observes: "You always said he looked asleep. You can't sleep through life if you wants to live it" (19). His death is another clue to Elvis, as he died young of heart failure due to drug use.[224] The theme of success and identity culminates at the end of the story, when after a life of excess, and accumulation, also death is connoted by false values. Traynor will see both his life and his death consumed by his dishonest audience: "They was crying and crying and didn't even know what they was crying for. One day this is going to be a pitiful country, [Gracie Mae] thought." (20).

The blues is not only a subject addressed in "Nineteen Fifty-Five", but it also informs the structure of the short story. As Marie Johnson notices, Walker uses blues techniques of contrast to show:

[222] Ivi, p. 232-234
[223] Ibidem
[224] Ivi, p. 231

> (1) Traynor's appearance of material well-being with his reality of spiritual bankruptcy, (2) Traynor's appearance of extreme and lasting world-wide fame, success, and popularity ("The Emperor of Rock and Roll") with Gracie Mae's appearance of moderate local fame, short lived and long forgotten ("Gracie Mae Nobody from Notasulga"), and (3) Traynor's spiritual reality, which is empty, confused, and devoid of meaning, with Gracie Mae's spiritual reality, which is very much alive, filled with creativity and blossoming with the wisdom of age.[225]

There is therefore a continuous repetition of contrasts that shows the significant difference between the two characters and their own cultures, such as for instance Black and white, poor and rich, famous and unknown, asleep and awake, soulful and soulless. Repetition can also be found in the interactions between Traynor and Gracie Mae, which vary through different means of communication. Such interactions fall within six sections differentiated by year that resemble blues stanzas. Variations can be explored during Traynor's visits, through their letters, during television shows and perhaps even in Gracie Mae's dream just before Traynor dies. The blues repetition with variation is clearly employed also to describe Traynor's quest for the meaning of the song: each time he asks her in a slightly different way what meaning she is actually hiding behind her lyrics. And with such tropes of repetition and contrast, the author further broadens the readers' understanding of the characters and their relationship. Indeed, the readers manage to have a full portrayal of Traynor and Gracie Mae only towards the end of the story, when during the television show they both sing the same song, but separately, thus emphasizing their differences and contrasts. The exploration of the two cultures is furthermore rendered through the blues personification: their attitudes, responses and behaviour show the glaring discrepancies between a hypocrite, materialistic, dominant white culture and an authentic, spiritually full, oppressed Black one within a racist and patriarchal framework.[226]

[225] Johnson, pp. 224-225
[226] Ivi, pp. 225-226

Conclusion

My paper is only a brief introduction to the vastness of the blues influence on African American literature and on Black feminism. Providing a complete overview would require a much more thorough research and detailed study but unfortunately, being it a bachelor's thesis, it entails certain structural limitations that led me to stay on the surface and choose only three literary works. I also encountered difficulties in accessing certain sources, that thus hindered my research but also allowed me to improve my literary analysis skills.

This paper has surely had an impact on my formation and cultural knowledge. What sparked my interest was how the blues functioned within a feminist discourse. What emerges from this paper is that the blues was fundamental to women's fight towards their self-actualization, independence, and freedom from oppressive, patriarchal, and racist environments. It represents a multifunctional tool that allows women to free themselves from stereotypes, preserve their memory while facing traumas, interact with their community, express their sorrow. Nevertheless, the concept of music being a means for an aesthetic and political revolution and for liberation is probably what struck me the most. What all the female characters in these stories share is their authenticity, their pride in being African American women, their willingness not to surrender. Through this thesis I aim at emphasizing and voice their fierceness, their process towards empowerment and independence. The purpose of this paper was also to investigate a few of the most significant blues devices that inform the structure of a text from a narratological perspective, thus proving the significance of this oral folk form in Black culture.

Prior to beginning my writing, I would have liked to widen my knowledge about the blues – both female and male artists, their songs, their history. Indeed, as mentioned in the introduction, my knowledge of music was limited to certain jazz composers. This work made me discover a new music genre that certainly intrigues me and that I still have not explored as much as I would like. I further deepened my knowledge about African American culture by exploring one of their most important creative manifestations after the abolition of slavery. Furthermore, I would have wanted to delve into the authors' feminist ideology and the historical context of Black Nationalism

during which the novel and the two short stories were published. I also would have liked to know more about African American women's conditions throughout the XIX century and to research more about intersectional and interclass oppression and exploitation. Indeed, I believe that white exploitation of African Americans through cultural thievery is a phenomenon that needs to be studied in-depth. Perhaps this bachelor's thesis will provide me with a prompt for more detailed future papers.

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Summary in Italian

Il seguente lavoro di ricerca ha come obiettivo dimostrare come la musica blues, in quanto manifestazione creativa afroamericana, abbia avuto un ruolo fondamentale nell'emancipazione femminile nera. Verrà analizzata la figura della cantante blues attraverso il romanzo *Corregidora* di Gayl Jones, ed i due racconti brevi "Witchbird" di Toni Cade Bambara e "Nineteen Fifty-Five" di Alice Walker. La tesi si articola in quattro capitoli in cui viene approfondito il ruolo storico del blues, il suo impatto sulla cultura e sulla letteratura afroamericana, sia nei contenuti che nella struttura del testo.

Il primo capitolo si focalizza sul blues e il suo contesto sociale. Questo genere musicale nasce a fine del XIX secolo e deriva dai canti di lavoro degli schiavi, unica espressione culturale loro concessa. Il contesto oppressivo delle piantagioni influisce sulla musica nera, che si caratterizza da un'intensità e risonanza emotiva unica nel suo genere. In seguito all'abolizione della schiavitù, il blues diviene il genere musicale laico dominante, contrapposto a quello più religioso del gospel. Quest'ultimo è una musica intrinsecamente legata alla religione cristiana, una musica di speranza, di fede, di gioia e fiducia verso il paradiso. Il blues, al contrario, è considerato una "musica diabolica" in quanto non predica la salvezza, ma rappresenta piuttosto con totale onestà gli aspetti della comunità afroamericana. Il cantante blues richiama però la figura del predicatore, il quale attraverso le sue canzoni dà voce a problemi che, seppur individuali, sono condivisi da tutta la comunità. Attraverso un soliloquio musicale, egli riesce a convogliare le iniquità, le difficoltà, lo sconforto e le emozioni condivise da tutti gli afroamericani. Seppur un genere laico, il blues rappresenta un mezzo espressivo di sostegno alternativo al supporto della Chiesa.

Questo genere musicale è soggetto a critiche non solo dai bianchi, ma anche da parte degli afroamericani stessi, poiché considerato una musica inferiore, eccessivamente esplicita, volgare e quindi immagine degradante della comunità. È invece proprio la libertà rappresentativa a risultare fondamentale per la loro emancipazione, specialmente in ambito della sessualità. Temi frequenti e anticipatori nei brani blues sono infatti: desiderio, relazioni extraconiugali, violenza domestica, abusi, omosessualità, tradimento. Il blues incarna una sensibilità protofemminista, in quanto rappresenta uno strumento per contestare il predominio maschile e fornire

un'immagine di donne resilienti, indipendenti e risolute a difendere il proprio diritto ad essere autonome. Il matrimonio non è una condizione contemplata dalle cantanti blues, alcune delle quali lo vivono come un inganno da parte di uomini privi di scrupoli.

Il viaggio è un'altra tematica fondamentale nei testi blues, in quanto testimonia ulteriormente la forte discriminazione di genere. In seguito all'Emancipazione e alla conseguente acquisizione della libertà di movimento da parte degli afroamericani, si registra un forte aumento dei flussi migratori, specialmente verso il nord degli Stati Uniti, che diviene la "Terra Promessa", in cui la promessa era rappresentata da migliori condizioni economiche e sociali. Tale libera circolazione però continua ad essere negata alla maggior parte delle donne, relegate a ruoli domestici subalterni. Le cantanti blues costituiscono un'eccezione allo stereotipo della donna casalinga e attraverso la loro musica narrano le realtà che incontrano: ad esempio, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey si concentra sul sud rurale degli Stati Uniti, mentre Bessie Smith rappresenta il nord urbanizzato. Il blues implica anche una dimensione di protesta, includendo tra i suoi temi ad esempio la povertà, la carcerazione, le iniquità razziali… ma è volta a sollecitare una presa di coscienza, testimoniando l'assenza di possibilità concrete e realizzabili di un cambiamento sociale, senza perciò ricorrere a denunce o contestazioni.

Il secondo capitolo ambisce a dimostrare come il blues, in quanto intrinsecamente parte della cultura afroamericana, impatti in maniera significativa anche la sua scrittura. Numerosi poeti neri incorporano la figura del cantante blues, affrontando tematiche sociali nelle loro composizioni poetiche e rappresentando l'esperienza collettiva attraverso la loro testimonianza individuale. Traslano nei loro poemi le strutture e la schiettezza del oralità blues, o figure quali le "immagini mascon": parole cariche di un tale peso emotivo e psicologico da creare delle associazioni di significato che non possono essere comprese da coloro al di fuori della comunità afroamericana. La musica ha un ruolo fondamentale anche nella narrativa, sia nel contenuto del testo, che nella sua struttura. Studiosi come Andrew Scheiber hanno individuato dei tropi letterari, quali "repetition", "chance", e "descent", presenti nella cosiddetta "narratologia blues". Il romanzo blues non contempla la trama lineare tipica della narrativa occidentale, la cui sequenza degli eventi è puramente il risultato delle azioni compiute dai personaggi. Questo genere prevede invece uno schema armonico che può essere ripetuto all'infinito. Tale ripetizione nella musica viene utilizzata per

esplorare più a fondo il tema trattato, dare enfasi a determinate emozioni e fornire maggiore libertà espressiva al cantante. Nel romanzo si traduce in una semplicità armonica che non cerca di creare particolari tensioni o climax. La trama è caratterizzata dalla ripetizione di uno sforzo continuo da parte del protagonista, che non gli permette di ottenere nessuna particolare vittoria, ma che gli fornisce strumenti di resistenza alla vita, quali tenacia e reattività verso difficoltà e tribolazioni che non potranno mai finire. Altra figura distintiva è il caso, "chance". La tipica improvvisazione blues conferisce al romanzo elementi irrazionali che influiscono in maniera del tutto imprevedibile nella trama e che costringono il personaggio a sviluppare una spiccata prontezza di risposta. Il terzo tropo letterario individuato da Scheiber è la "discesa", "descent". Rappresenta il momento in cui il personaggio viene condotto da una guida anziana verso un luogo a lui spiacevole o temibile. Tale viaggio gli permette però di acquisire coscienza della sua condizione umana. Queste tre figure sono solo alcune delle tecniche blues che possono essere adottate dalla scrittura afroamericana.

La ripetitività del blues è legata alla concezione di temporalità afroamericana, che deriva a sua volta dall'esperienza della schiavitù. Nelle piantagioni, agli schiavi non era sottratto solamente il loro nome, la loro famiglia e le loro radici, ma anche il tempo, in quanto non erano a conoscenza della loro data di nascita e non erano dotati di tempo cronologico progressivo. L'esperienza della schiavitù era così connotata dalla privazione del passato, del presente e anche del futuro, poiché la speranza di sopravvivenza era pressoché inesistente. La vita di uno schiavo era caratterizzata da una continua ripetizione e circolarità temporale, scandita solamente dai tempi della semina o della raccolta. Tale ripetizione rimane poi intrinseca nella cultura afroamericana, al punto dal generare la musica blues e il genere letterario "neo-slave narrative": sono narrazioni che includono sia storie reali che fittizie, ambientate sia durante la schiavitù o successivamente, che spaziano diversi stili di scrittura, ma comunque incentrate su tale istituzione oppressiva. Ciò che accumuna tutti questi testi è l'importanza della memoria, la difficoltà a rappresentarla, preservarla e tramandarla alle generazioni successive e l'obiettivo di colmare le lacune degli archivi storici. Infatti, l'inclusione delle testimonianze orali nei testi del genere "neo-slave narrative" permette di arricchire la storiografia, dando però attenzione anche a rappresentazioni più inclusive. Ashraf Rushdy individua, inoltre, il sottogenere della "palimpsest narrative", o narrativa

palimpsesto, la cui specificità è legata alla memoria generazionale e ad un'idea di un'interrelazione tra passato e presente che definisce lo stato-nazione americano e che inoltre permette all'autore di esplorare diverse epoche storiche nello stesso testo. Nel capitolo vengono in seguito citati romanzi esemplari di questo genere letterario.

Il terzo capitolo si focalizza sul romanzo *Corregidora*, scritto da Gayl Jones e pubblicato nel 1975. *Corregidora*, oltre ad essere un romanzo blues, rientra anche nel genere letterario delle "neo-slave narratives" e nel sottogenere "palimpsest narrative", in quanto affronta il tema del trauma e della memoria generazionale. La vita della protagonista, Ursa Corregidora, è estremamente influenzata dal passato di schiavitù delle sue antenate, che eredita ascoltando i racconti della bisnonna, della nonna e di sua madre. Ursa è responsabile di un'eredità ancestrale, di una memoria che non è la sua, e percepisce di conseguenza un forte senso di alienazione, in quanto è consapevole dell'importanza di questo passato, ma non riesce a rivendicarne il possesso. Le viene chiesto di preservare la memoria in quanto in seguito all'abolizione della schiavitù il padrone portoghese di schiavi, di cui le donne di questo romanzo portano il nome, ha distrutto qualsiasi documento, cancellando così ogni testimonianza degli orrori e violenze che queste donne, fra gli altri, hanno dovuto sopportare. Le progenitrici, quindi, intraprendono un progetto di ricostruzione storica volta a sopperire le lacune nella storiografia. Tali narrazioni familiari vengono tramandate in un contesto di matrilinearità, dove la trasmissione da madre figlia è volta a rappresentare una continuità dell'identità femminile afroamericana. Tale continuità è però ostacolata da privazione e perdita, in quanto Ursa, dopo aver subito un'isterectomia, non è più in grado di procreare eredi del trauma familiare. Di conseguenza percepisce un totale senso di alienazione e illegittimità, in quanto non ha sofferto come le sue antenate e non può nemmeno continuare la perpetuazione della matrilinearità, come le viene richiesto. Le donne Corregidora sono imprigionate nel loro passato, in una narrazione che esse stesse richiedono che rimanga immutata, indiscutibile. Il tentativo di tramandare un'unica testimonianza coerente è ostacolato da Ursa, la quale invece riesce a trovare il modo di trasmettere i loro ricordi attraverso le sue canzoni blues. In questo romanzo il blues, perciò, costituisce uno strumento di testimonianza storica, che permette alla protagonista di valorizzare e preservare il passato delle sue progenitrici, senza però che esso continui ad opprimerla.

Prima che Ursa riesca a comprendere il pericolo del ricordo e quando sia necessario limitarne il potere, ella affronta una lunga lotta interiore tra un'identità imprigionata nel passato e una del tutto priva di radici. Il peso della memoria e del trauma condiziona negativamente le vite sessuali dei discendenti: sia la bisnonna che la nonna subiscono abusi sessuali incestuosi dal padrone Corregidora, la madre di Ursa "usa" il padre solo al fine di procreare, per poi non instaurare alcun tipo di relazione con lui, e la sessualità di Ursa è a sua volta condizionata da questo mandato riproduttivo ancestrale. Ciononostante, l'isterectomia a cui è sottoposta dopo essere stata spinta giù dalle scale da suo marito Mutt non le permette di perseguire la matrilinearità e la costringe invece ad articolare la sua femminilità al di fuori da un contesto riproduttivo. Viene inoltre così menzionato, seppur brevemente, il piacere clitorideo ed il lesbismo. Tuttavia, il romanzo si incentra sulla messa in discussione della sessualità concepita unicamente ai fini della procreazione e della riproduzione stessa ai fini della trasmissione del trauma. Nella conclusione del romanzo, avviene una scena di riconciliazione tra Ursa e Mutt, durante la quale Ursa riesce a comprendere che la continua rievocazione del passato della sua famiglia non farà altro che ostacolare i suoi legami affettivi. Comprende che al fine di valorizzare la memoria familiare deve imparare a distanziarsi da essa, in modo da renderla viva e non più monolitica, ma aperta invece all'interpretazione delle generazioni future.

A tal fine, Ursa individua nel blues lo strumento di riscatto. Il blues, attraverso il soliloquio musicale del cantante, trasmette le emozioni, i timori, le speranze e aspirazioni in cui tutta la comunità si immedesima. Le canzoni di Ursa, allo stesso modo, legano il suo dolore individuale a quello della sua famiglia e a quello della intera comunità afroamericana, la cui identità è intrinsecamente legata al trauma della schiavitù. Il blues permette ad Ursa di raccontare, elaborare e comprendere la sua esperienza, il suo trauma, il suo dolore. È il mezzo per riconciliarsi con i suoi antenati senza soccombere al loro passato, per sviluppare la resistenza necessaria a convivere con i suoi traumi personali e ad esporli. Il romanzo è influenzato dal blues anche nella sua struttura, in quanto la trama non è lineare, bensì caratterizzata dalla tipica tecnica musicale della ripetizione con variazione, individuabile ad esempio nell'oppressione e violenza fisica presente nella vita di ciascuna donna Corregidora. Tuttavia, l'autrice inserisce il blues soprattutto nei dialoghi, dove utilizza la rima, la forma musicale del

"botta e risposta", la ripetizione con variazione, la tecnica "worrying the line", ovvero spezzare una frase e cambiando accenti e intonazione, così da dare enfasi, e la tecnica "break": brusche ma frequenti transizioni nella narrazione tra periodi temporali, interlocutori, o tematiche.

Il quarto capitolo è dedicato a due racconti brevi, i quali affrontano la problematica dell'autenticità nel mondo dello spettacolo, seppur da punti di vista differenti. Entrambe le autrici, Toni Cade Bambara e Alice Walker, sono accomunate da una forte sensibilità verso tematiche femministe e da un interesse per il blues e la tradizione folk che si possono evincere chiaramente dalla loro scrittura.

Il racconto breve "Witchbird", di Toni Cade Bambara viene pubblicato nel 1977 nella raccolta *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*. La collezione raccoglie storie di donne collocate all'interno di comunità anticonformiste, dove poter lottare nello sforzo di assicurare l'integrità di tutti e sviluppare una coscienza femminista. La scrittura di Bambara è particolarmente coinvolta politicamente e attraverso il racconto breve ambisce a cogliere l'attenzione del lettore e trasmettere più facilmente la lezione politica. In "Witchbird", come negli altri racconti brevi della collezione, Bambara racchiude femminismo e Nazionalismo Nero: tematiche come l'auto-emancipazione, l'uguaglianza sociale, e l'anti-patriarcato. L'obiettivo costante in questi racconti rimane però la liberazione femminile, insieme alla ricerca della propria identità all'interno di un contesto comunitario. Ed è proprio la ricerca verso l'autorealizzazione un tema principale in "Witchbird". Honey, la protagonista, è una attrice e cantante blues in costante lotta per la sua emancipazione dal ruolo asessuato e matriarcale che le è stato assegnato dalla sua comunità. Il suo manager e amico Heywood approfitta della sua generosità e le chiede di ospitare le sue ex fidanzate, per cui la casa di Honey diventa una sorta di pensione occupata da altre donne blues. Honey desidererebbe maggior privacy e tempo da dedicare a sé stessa, ma al contempo non vuole lasciare sole quelle donne, che considera vittime della loro stessa ingenuità. La protagonista è una donna indipendente, con i propri interessi e le proprie ambizioni in quanto cantante e attrice. Deve però affrontare le difficoltà derivanti dalla propria professione. Vorrebbe avere maggior libertà espressiva nei ruoli e copioni, ma la compagnia teatrale preferisce invece spettacoli più commerciali e scadenti. Honey dimostra di non essere immune alle dinamiche del mondo dello spettacolo, perché sa che spesso la fama ed il successo non

si ottiene con il talento, bensì attraverso l'oggettivazione sessuale del proprio corpo. Lotta però contro gli stereotipi e cerca così di smentire il ruolo di "badante asessuata" affibbiatole dalla comunità, affermandosi invece come donna autonoma, emancipata e connotata da coscienza politica e femminista. Tale coscienza insieme ad una sensibilità tipica del Nazionalismo Nero si denotano nel suo blues e nella sua recitazione, attraverso i quali Honey ambisce ad una rivoluzione estetica e politica, volta a valorizzare figure storiche di donne afroamericane emancipate. Il blues è inoltre uno strumento di autorealizzazione per la protagonista, orientato a dimostrare la sua autenticità in quanto cantante e attrice talentuosa e a permetterle perciò ritrovare la sua vera identità.

Il racconto breve "Nineteen Fifty-Five" pubblicato da Alice Walker nella collezione *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981), affronta invece il tema dell'autenticità della musica afroamericana blues in relazione al fenomeno della appropriazione culturale. La storia si sviluppa in sei sezioni scandite dagli anni e comincia, per l'appunto, nel 1955, quando un giovane cantante bianco, di nome Traynor, acquista un brano composto da Gracie Mae, una cantante blues afroamericana ormai in pensione. La cover rappresentava per i bianchi uno strumento di appropriazione culturale indebita, un'ulteriore oppressione verso gli afroamericani, ed era un fenomeno molto comune negli anni '50. Nel racconto breve sono infatti presenti numerosi riferimenti ad Elvis Presley, che fece suo il brano "Hound Dog", composto da Jerry Leiber e Mike Stoller, ma registrato originariamente dalla cantante afroamericana R&B Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton. Gli artisti bianchi spesso, perciò, si appropriavano dei brani blues, senza conferire particolari riconoscimenti ai compositori originali, ma senza nemmeno comprendere realmente il significato di tali brani, in quanto il blues è intrinsecamente legato al suo contesto culturale di produzione. Ed è quello che succede in "Nineteen Fifty-Five", lungo la cui narrazione Traynor continua a chiedere a Gracie Mae cosa significhi veramente il brano di cui ha acquistato i diritti d'autore. Tale investigazione in realtà nasconde un'ulteriore ricerca del significato della vita. Walker in questo racconto include una critica ai falsi valori della cultura occidentale ed al materialismo, dimostrando come l'accumulo di beni materiali e di successo non sia garanzia di felicità. Gracie Mae, seppur conduca una vita umile e morigerata, è una donna autentica, realizzata e con una sua spiritualità. Al contrario,

Traynor conduce una vita di eccessi, è un cantante adulato e celebre, rimane un uomo vuoto, senza anima. Traynor, nonostante le disparità etniche, economiche e di genere, si sente in debito nei confronti della cantante afroamericana e cerca di colmare il divario attraverso regalie, accolte con indifferenza. Il contrasto tra le due figure ha come apice l'esibizione durante il "Johnny Carson Show", in cui entrambi eseguono il brano. Gracie Mae, pur pienamente soddisfatta della sua performance, raccoglie un modesto consenso dal pubblico, che invece si dimostra particolarmente entusiasta di fronte a Traynor, il quale pur sbaglia alcuni versi. Tale ipocrisia culmina alla fine del racconto, quando non solo la vita, ma anche la morte dell'artista bianco verrà consumata dalle folle.

Il blues infine caratterizza la struttura del racconto attraverso tecniche di contrasto volte a sottolineare le differenze tra i due personaggi, di ripetizione, e personificazione.