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The Ethics of Violent Reprisal: Complexity and Productivity in *The Bluest Eye*, *Corregidora*, and *Eva's Man*

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Abstract

This thesis will explore the morally ambiguous nature of violence when used as a response to racial oppression and misogyny in three contemporary American novels: *Corregidora* (1975) and *Eva's Man* (1976) by Gayl Jones, and *The Bluest Eye* (1970) by Toni Morrison. All three of these novels feature female characters whose acts of violence may be interpreted as responses to racism and sexism. Violence is often the characters' answers to abuse, and the results are often egregious and obscene. But just as these women have the capacity to commit heinous crimes, they also inspire sympathy and loyalty in the reader, emotions that complicate any attempt at straightforward vilification. In fact, the way that Morrison and Jones render their characters' acts of violence shows that violence is necessary, even productive. Though conventional morality would reject these characters' courses of action, Morrison and Jones' depict these acts with profound ambiguity while also demanding acceptance.

This thesis will argue that these moments of readerly moral equivocation and suspended judgment are initially summoned by the authors' conscious breaks of narrative convention, breaks that themselves are both violent and progressive. Jones and Morrison break syntactical rules, manipulate narrative structure, and do away with a great deal of conventional punctuation and dialogue designation. The cumulative effect of these breaks is to mirror in the body of the text the violence their characters commit within the narrative. This thesis will also demonstrate the authors' use of the blues as a complicating mechanism for interpreting the novels' thematic violence. During specific violent scenes, both authors invoke the blues, a maneuver that renders opaque or at least obscured the violence their characters commit by collapsing divisions of time and demonstrating a causal chain of events that accounts for present action. And finally, in constructing stories of feminine violence, Morrison and Jones confront specific archetypes and

myths that vilify their female characters. In response to this, they engage in their own process of revision and mythmaking to salvage these stories and construct an independent black feminine discourse. This process conjoins the textual and thematic violence of these novels, with the former illustrating the complexity and productivity of the latter. All three of these novels ultimately incite a shift in conventional morality, one that deconstructs the boundaries between innocence and culpability, and establishes violence as not only a necessary response to oppression, but also one whose effects becoming strikingly productive.

Introduction

Writing during the late 1960s and early 1970s, Toni Morrison and Gayl Jones published their novels *The Bluest Eye*, *Corregidora*, and *Eva's Man* at a time when the Black Arts Movement was starting to recede. Seen as an offshoot of the Black Power Movement, the Black Arts or Black Aesthetics Movement advocated a “radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic... a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology” (Neal 29). The success of this movement, however, was not without qualification, with many accusing its advocates of sexism and gendered exclusivity, saying that “in many cases [the movement] discouraged the kinds of gender and sexual discussions that empowered women” (Jarrett 1247). In fact, many within the movement saw the black woman as “an offensive reminder of the slave past,” their matriarchal power seen as a remnant of their “allegedly privileged status within the slavemaster’s house” (Dubey 19). The effect, then, was a “valorization of men, patriarchy, masculinity, and heterosexuality,” the likes of which ultimately limited the discursive space for black women writers. At the same time, these women continued to battle the cultural hegemony and racial oppression that plagued their predecessors, thus engaging in a two-front war against racial

subjugation and misogyny. Partly as a response, Morrison and Jones crafted novels of violence—both textual and thematic—that helped inaugurate a new black feminine literary discourse.

The textual violence in these novels' mirrors the fictive violence of their plots, providing a mediated response to patriarchy on the level of the text. Both Morrison and Jones recognize that in order to avoid distortion and misrepresentation, their stories must draw upon new language, separate from the discursive rules and norms that precede them. This textual violence manifests itself through various acts of formal manipulation, including breaks in syntax, punctuation usage, and dialogue designation. The result is a powerful portrayal of how futile this patriarchal "language of reason" can be and how it is both "limited and...unable to represent the black woman's point of view" (Agustí 34). With its decisive break from the oppressive discourses that precede it, Morrison and Jones' manipulation of language assumes a necessarily violent form, their stories only capable of being told after breaking through the discursive ceiling that restricts them.

While the textual violence of these novels confronts the hegemonic discourses that provoke them, their representations of physical and emotional violence are also complicated, with Morrison and Jones refusing a strict condemnation of their female characters. This complication of violence is achieved through their employment of the blues tradition. Morrison and Jones incorporate the blues during specific violent scenes, using tonal manipulation, repetition, and call and response techniques to obscure each moment's moral status. The result is an ambiguous response to feminine violence, with these depictions not only refusing an outright rejection of their female characters' propriety, but also submitting these acts as necessary responses to aggression, the likes of which might even be productive in establishing an independent feminine identity.

Finally, in telling these tales of feminine violence, Morrison and Jones deconstruct damaging archetypes and myths in order to solidify an independent black feminine discourse. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison confronts stock literary depictions of the prostitute and rejects them, crafting characters that defy expectation and combat issues of misguided anger and scapegoating. These confrontations take on a violent form, which, though disturbing, can nevertheless be explained as a constructive response to the community's deeply embedded cultural issues. In *Eva's Man*, Jones recalls the Eve story and the Medusa myth only to reconstruct them in ways that no longer demonize those female characters, thus liberating them from their misogynistic confines. By recasting these stories during Eva's own violent act, Jones ultimately forces a redistribution of blame and accountability in regard to her protagonist, demanding that the men responsible for her dismal construction receive their proper due. With these acts of revision and mythmaking, Morrison and Jones demonstrate a powerful union between textual and thematic violence, where the former helps express the complexity and productivity of the latter. Through all of this, Morrison and Jones succeed in portraying violence as a multifaceted response to oppression, the likes of which can often become necessary and productive, though of course never easily appraised.

Reproduction and Revision: Textual Violence as a Response to Adversity

In *The Bluest Eye* and *Corregidora*, Toni Morrison and Gayl Jones both commit acts of textual violence, reproducing patriarchal modes of storytelling only to rebuff them and expand on their shortcomings. Both writers interact with the oppressive literary systems that spawned their work, and in doing so perform acts of textual violence that progress toward a more inclusive cultural discourse. Each of these novels breaks narrative conventions, from common

punctuation practices to narrative structure, to the rules of syntax and dialogue designation. In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison deconstructs passages from familiar Dick and Jane primers in order to critique white familial norms. In doing so, she engages in a textually violent act that frames her novel as something independent of the hegemonic discourse it stems from. Gayl Jones also breaks from patriarchal discourse in her novel *Corregidora*, though instead of focusing her attention on white authority, Jones directs her scrutiny toward a Black Aesthetic movement whose literary standards set precedent for black writers' future work. Her own story rejects these prescriptions, the narrative refusing to conform to the Black Aesthetic mold. When combined, these breaks become acts of textual violence. Rules are broken, norms are shirked, and the effect is a violent response to patriarchal modes of storytelling. In fact, this violent textuality may be the only way such stories can be told. Through their deliberate disavowal of the systems that precede them, Morrison and Jones craft stories whose textual violence progresses toward a multifarious understanding of violence as a response to oppression.

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* opens with a striking display of textual violence, depicting a familiar representation of the white American family only to deconstruct it and demonstrate its futility. Morrison begins her novel by producing and reorganizing a familiar Dick and Jane primer, with each new rendition drastically different from the one before it. She reproduces the initial passage as follows:

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house.

They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow-meow. Come and play. Come and play with Jane. The kitten will not play. See Mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will

you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, Mother, laugh. See Father. He is big and strong. Father, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, Father, smile. See the dog. Bowwow goes the dog. Do you want to play with Jane? See the dog run. Run, dog, run. Look, look. Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good game. Play, Jane, play.

(Morrison 3)

Morrison then repeats the passage again, only this time devoid of punctuation:

Here is the house it is green and white it has a red door it is very pretty here is the family mother father dick and jane live in the green-and-white house they are very happy see jane she has a red dress she wants to play who will play with jane...

(Morrison 4)

And finally, Morrison performs another act of textual manipulation with one final iteration of the original passage:

Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddooritisveryprettyhereisthefamilymothe
rfatherdickandjaneliveinthegreenandwhitehousetheyareveryhappyseejaneshesahas
edressshewantstoplaywhowillplaywithjane...

(Morrison 4)

The three passages, when read in conjunction, serve to deconstruct the original image Morrison presents. The first passage creates a familiar, idyllic image of the white American family, one whose structure is sound and whose relationships—at least on their surfaces—remain flawless. This image stems from the basal readers used to teach young children during the mid-20th century, and its reliance on the familiar Dick and Jane characters is “obviously representative of the white middle-class familial norm” (Dubey 34). Its sentences are short, its clauses

uncomplicated, and the form highlights the simplicity through which each image sustains its perfection. And yet, the string tying together each perfect image is faulty. The sentences are abrupt, and though they flow together sequentially, they do not directly align. There are no colorful images or page breaks to ease the transition from one clause to the next. When combined with the actual content, these awkward shifts create an unearthly image of feigned smiles and laughter. Similarly, just as each moment stands alone amongst the others, Jane herself is alone, her family unwilling to play with her. She remains isolated, a detail that only further emboldens her family's seemingly insincere actions. The restraint and austerity of the passage undercuts any notion of affection, each terse statement devoid of emotion or elaboration. When we combine this strangeness with the idea of Morrison "educating" us through the early-reader form, the image of the paradigmatic family becomes unfamiliar; in many ways it becomes uncanny. And as we move on to the next passage, we witness Morrison repeating the same sentences without punctuation. There are no textual separations between the clauses, no lines dividing the images. They begin to collapse inward, the perfectly delineated lines now fading, so much that once we reach the third passage, where Morrison does away with spacing entirely, we experience a moment of total absurdity. The image itself, once thought to represent harmonious familial existence, has now been mashed together into a mess of signifiers that troubles the reading experience. The compaction of words and sentences has rendered the image unclear, causing us to question our notion of the well-functioning family. How hollow is such a concept? How limited is our understanding of the American family, and how dangerous are those limits when we try to extend the concept beyond its frames? With this, Morrison undercuts the paradigmatic family construct, her textual manipulation provoking a rupture in our conventional characterizations of the American family.

In referencing the Dick and Jane primers, not only does Morrison force an inquiry into the traditional concept of the family structure, but she also undermines its cross-cultural success. Having experienced incredible popularity during their existence from the 1930s to 1970s, these basal readers undoubtedly filtered into and influenced African American conceptions of the family. In manipulating these stories at the beginning of her own, Morrison demonstrates its misapplication in regard to black culture. The Dick and Jane primers, though involved in the retelling of specific historical events, “never allude to events such as conquest, slavery, immigration, or exclusion,” and “by associating white suburban families with prosperity, morality, and patriotism... painted black urban working-class families as un-American” (Werrlein 57-58). The reductive lens through which these stories portray American life inevitably normalizes racial hierarchies and selective history. By placing a segment of these primers as a preface to her novel, Morrison directly acknowledges these stock literary conventions and undermines their cultural authority. Finally, by presenting this subversion textually, Morrison acquaints her readers with a process of violence that is not exclusively destructive. These discursive breaks and narrative blurring actually promote the story Morrison intends to tell, one that does not align with the Dick and Jane paradigm and, in fact, actually suffers from its profusion. In providing (and then deconstructing) a familiar frame for the novel to be told through, Morrison’s prologue reassesses and ultimately reforms the methods by which African American stories are told. By replicating and reducing a paradigmatic cultural text, Morrison establishes her novel as independent of the system that provoked it, demonstrating its shortcomings while also proposing a rejection of its cross-cultural significance.

Morrison’s prologue reappears throughout the novel, with Morrison splicing several sections of her deconstructed passage and inserting them as chapter headings, thus presenting a

contradictory framework that mirrors the cultural tension of the novel. As the story carries on, Morrison tells the tale of Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl who comes to live with the MacTeer family after her father burned down her family's home. The narrator of the first chapter is Claudia MacTeer, the younger of the two MacTeer daughters, and the one through whom the majority of Pecola's story will be told. The first two chapters of Morrison's novel serve to acquaint us with Pecola's young life, a life spent believing beauty to be inextricably tied to whiteness. She drinks milk incessantly, and only from a Shirley Temple cup, all the while dreaming of having beautiful blue eyes. We are also made aware of the "ugliness" of her upbringing, the apartment she later moves into symbolizing this negative aesthetic concept. The furnishings are described as drab and deficient, "having been conceived, manufactured, shipped, and sold in various states of thoughtlessness, greed, and indifference" (Morrison 35). There are no memories associated with these furnishings, no affection or attachment. The apartment itself becomes known not for the family that once lived there, but for the parade of storeowners and customers that have used it since. These representations of the family and its household are strikingly different from the one Morrison conjures in her prologue, which she emboldens by framing her chapter with snapshots of that original text. Rather than title her chapters, Morrison takes pieces of her prologue and turns them into chapter headings. In chapter two, the one in which this description of the Breedlove apartment takes place, she begins with this:

HEREISTHEHOUSEITISGREENANDWHITEITHASAREDDOORITISVERYP
RETTYITISVERYPRETTYPRETTYPRETTYP

(Morrison 33)

This block of text highlights the sort of fracturing that occurs within the narrative itself, taking a section of the prologue and reproducing it, while still sustaining its compacted syntactical

structure. She presents only a small segment of her prologue here, one chosen specifically because of its description of the family household in the original primer, much like chapter two goes on to do for the Breedloves. The repetition of the word “pretty” cements it as a domineering aesthetic concept, its repetitive weight bearing down on those who do not qualify under the white construction of the term. And yet, because of the passage’s formal arrangement and absurd syntax, the word loses its effect and logical grounding as both an ideal and framing device. In fact, as the chapter unfolds, we realize that we are not dealing with the concept of beauty at all, but rather, with its inverse, ugliness, which those in Morrison’s novel have come to associate with blackness. And with that in mind, we have a single chapter—or *fraction* of the novel—being framed by a *fraction* of the prologue, with both parts representing competing ends of the same aesthetic binary. By framing her discussion of an African American family with a seemingly empty American ideal, Morrison further demonstrates the incommensurability of cultural values and concepts, while also pointing out the destructive effects that binary relations can have when used against racial groups. Characterizing blackness as ugly caters to a white aesthetic standard, which becomes a damaging frame of reference for the black communities that adopt these notions. Thus, as we become acquainted with the Breedloves’ plight, we are reminded of the system that spawned it, with these characters pursuing a faulty ideal that can never be truly sustained. Morrison’s break from conventional discourse on the American family thus advocates for a shift away from inherited value systems, ultimately seeking a departure from the white cultural standard and allowing textual violence to become a platform for cultural awareness.

Gayl Jones continues this theme of textual violence with *Corregidora*; however, Jones’ manipulation of form deals specifically with the temporal space the novel occupies, a move that

breaks from the black arts concepts that came before it. Spanning from the mid-1940s to late 1960s, *Corregidora* focuses on the life of Ursa Corregidora, a blues singer whose surname comes from the abusive slave master her great grandmother and grandmother once lived under. Jones depicts Ursa as a woman haunted by her own life and by the slave stories passed on to her. Ursa's narrative begins after her husband Mutt Thomas pushes her down a flight of stairs, an event that remains ambiguous as the narrative never reveals whether she was pushed or simply fell. Ursa has a miscarriage and subsequent hysterectomy as a result of the trauma, thus spending the majority of the novel's beginning in recovery. Embittered and bedridden, Ursa spends most of her time in a daze of recollection and reverie, thinking back to the stories her mother and grandmother would tell, stories of violence and sexual abuse. This synopsis, however, struggles against Jones' own method of storytelling, one that does not lend itself to chronological description. By attaching her own experience to this legacy of violence and abuse, Ursa begins to blend stories and timeframes, the generational divide becoming a convoluted spectrum of false hope and genuine misery. It is during one such moment that Ursa relates the following:

"What's a husband for?"

"Somebody to give your piece of ass to."

"Mutt, just suppose something was in there when they took it out? What would you feel then?"

"Was something in there?"

"Just suppose."

"Don't make any promises you can't keep."

"...They would bend down with their fingers feeling up your pussy."

"You don't care if you ever see me again do you?"

“Naw, I don’t care.”

“What do Mutt do?”

“He works in tobacco.”

“What do you remember?”

“I could feel your thing. I could smell you in my nostrils.”

What do blues do for you?

It helps me to explain what I can’t explain.

(Jones 55-56)

This passage demonstrates a confrontational mashing of emotion and memory, none of which are explicitly demarcated or identified. Jones provides no dialogue designation apart from what is stated in the actual quotation. She also employs italics in some instances and not in others, quotation marks in some instances, and not in others. In that sense, Jones’ narration operates within the conventional narrative system—using specific formal conventions accurately and to effect—while also at times violating the rules of those conventions. And the breaking of those rules is what creates violence in the narrative. She has combined distinctly separate clauses and typographic effects, the result being a narrative that lacks both chronology and clarity, while still mirroring what one might assume the mental process to look like. One distinct thought recalls another, with the passage moving forward, though not in any linear sense. The thoughts are jumbled, and yet there still exists a narrative thread running through and connecting each of them. In that sense, the formal manipulation Jones employs actually promotes narrative progression in the novel, with the story reflecting the process of the mind under duress, a process that does not adhere to typical conventions of chronology but still portrays Ursa’s plight in an honest and affecting way.

This temporal violence, while mirroring the mental processes of her main character, also exemplifies Jones' movement away from the Black Aesthetic discourse that came before her, a discourse whose tenants do not align with Ursa's method of storytelling. The black nationalists of the 1960s and 1970s emphasized a "sharp cleavage between the past and present," one that would signal a "rupture of the oppressive cycle of the past" and usher in a new voice free from white authority (Dubey 26). These writers and critics were pursuing the birth of a cultural moment, when the past could be clipped and removed from the cultural discussion so that a true, black ideology could thrive. With *Corregidora*, however, Jones seems to challenge that perspective, consistently invoking the past so that Ursa's story can be properly told. Ursa desperately tries to relay her story in a way that makes sense, and yet, the only way she can do so is through a conjunction of disparate timeframes. Ursa's psychic functioning is not formulaic; it is not procedural or organized. She cannot compartmentalize her pain. Instead, it comes out in a torrent, and the form Jones employs projects that torrent visually on the page. Jones' temporal vision, then, does not correspond with this "notion of the present as a new and decisive break from the past" (Dubey 83). She seems to be moving beyond the mold that black nationalist critics have constructed, determined to tell Ursa's story free from repression and selective memory. In that sense, by refusing to adhere to the model that her predecessors have placed before her, Jones breaks away from specific temporal conventions and allows Ursa's story to be unearthed, something that could not have happened otherwise.

Both Toni Morrison and Gayl Jones engage in a sort of textual violence with their narratives, however the ways in which they enact that violence differs greatly. Both writers confront the traditions that force their hand, focusing on the literature of those systems and responding to them directly. Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* begins with a powerful

deconstruction of the Dick and Jane primers once given to children, the effect being a criticism of their propulsion of white values and their incommensurability in regard to African American families. In *Corregidora*, the focus shifts to the black nationalist critics who promoted a unified black aesthetic. Jones responds to her predecessors by moving away from their stances on temporality and narration, which promotes an adversarial position in regard to the role of history in black art. With all this, both writers confront restrictions that have trickled down through time, using a manipulation of form and syntax to liberate their voices while also introducing violence as a potential avenue for progress, which ultimately frames the violent themes these novels come to deal with.

Complicating Violence through the Blues Tradition

While the textual violence in these novels helps frame a discussion of violence as potentially progressive and liberating, the thematic violence in these works must also be accounted for and evaluated. Toni Morrison and Gayl Jones incorporate the blues tradition in their novels *The Bluest Eye* and *Corregidora*, and it is this tradition that propels uncertainty during each novel's violent scenes. While some critics explore the use of the blues within these texts, none have used it directly to reinterpret the violence enacted by their female characters. Both Morrison and Jones display brutality in their stories, but they do so in a way that renders each moment's moral value opaque. Each violent act is a response to sexual or racial assault, an answer in kind that refuses any attempt at unquestioned castigation. And yet, the severity of these reprisals is difficult to endure, thus promoting an ambiguous relationship between the text and violence as a whole. Jones and Morrison demand a nuanced understanding of the cultural context in which each act occurs, using the blues as a means to navigate each violent moment's

ethical complexity. Relying on the critical work of Gayl Jones and Ralph Ellison to define the blues and to discuss its use in specific readings from *The Bluest Eye* and *Corregidora*, we begin to see how Morrison and Jones render their characters' violence as both complex and ethically ambiguous. By using common devices such as repetition, call-and-response, and mood transformations, Morrison and Jones frame their novels—and by extent the violent scenes they contain—within the blues tradition, forcing a sustained experience of violence in the narrative. Additionally, Morrison references W.C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues," which contextualizes and unravels the ambiguity surrounding Claudia's dismembering of the dolls in *The Bluest Eye*. Through incorporating the blues tradition, Jones and Morrison portray these cultural and generational conflicts as variations on a repeating theme, the scope of which explains these violent acts while simultaneously reinterpreting them in a way that mediates judgment and accountability.

Gayl Jones devotes a significant amount of space to the blues in her critical work *Liberating Voices* (1991), expounding upon the technical aspects of the musical tradition and providing a lens to explore its use in literature. The "traditional blues structure," Jones writes, "consists of three-lined, twelve-bar stanzas, rhyming aab. Besides repetition, blues forms include worrying-the-line, call-and-response, shouts, 'field hollers,' and other interjections" (195). She goes further, arguing about its use in literature, stating that the writer may abandon the language or rhythm of the blues and instead "simply suggest it through the mood of the texts or even plot resolutions." Finally, she states that like the musical tradition, the "blues mode in the literary text can be used to 'transform the mood' of the reader," tailoring the language in a way that reconfigures the content of the scene itself (196). This definition provides a highly structured interpretation of the blues in literature, something that Jones herself utilizes in her fiction. Ralph

Ellison also defines the blues, calling it “an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy, but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism” (Norton 49). In speaking of this near-tragicomic lyricism, Ellison describes a vacillation within the blues form, as though it simultaneously exists within two separate emotional spheres. Both Morrison and Jones call upon these spheres, with specific scenes in Morrison’s work employing both tragedy and comedy simultaneously. Similarly, keeping brutal experiences alive through story is a quintessential aspect of the blues, one that exists in Morrison and Jones’ fiction as well. Both of these definitions are necessarily working together then, with the formal elements of the blues as Jones describes them contributing to the sustained experience that Ellison argues for. Repetition and mood transformations promote this tragicomic experience, while call-and-response and antiphonal exchanges keep these painful details alive for speaker/writer and listener/reader alike. This section will rely on both authors’ definitions of the blues, interweaving them as each specific moment is analyzed.

In *Corregidora*, Gayl Jones relies heavily on the blues tradition to articulate her character’s plight. Jones communicates Ursa’s predicament through repetition and call-and-response patterns that carry motive far beyond the immediate moment, thus providing a defense of her violent acts. These antiphonal patterns originally allowed for a continuous dialogue between individual and community, where the individual could “at one and the same time...preserve his voice as a distinct entity and [also] blend it with those of his fellows” (qtd. in Callahan 16). The call-and-response pattern exists essentially in blues music as well, where, “like oral storytellers and subsequent modern writers...blues singers [would] improvise variations on existing songs and thereby confirm and intensify bonds of kinship and experience with their

listeners” (Callahan 16). In that sense, the bluesy call-and-response pattern creates moments of repetition with variation, reaching back into the history of the musical canon as well as into the audience at hand to achieve interpersonal communication. Its use in literature produces the same effect, with writers relying on previously told stories for support while also persuading readers to “become symbolic and then perhaps actual participants in the task of...storytelling” (Callahan 17). When used during moments of violence, the pattern invokes past trauma and prior motive and, like its musical counterpart, intensifies its reader’s experience, ultimately demanding a closer engagement with the text. Jones’ *Corregidora* thus employs repetition and call-and-response structures to obscure any immediate judgment that her female characters’ violent acts elicit, her application breaking down the divisions that would normally allow for critical distance.

One such embodiment of the call-and-response pattern occurs during a memory where Ursa’s grandmother and great-grandmother are molested in their sleep:

While mama be sleeping, the ole man he crawl into bed
 While mama be sleeping, the ole 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
 For you get any this booty, you gon have to lay down dead
 For you get any this booty, you gon have to lay down dead.
 (Jones 67)

The blues' call-and-response structure helps explore the complexity of the passage's form, with both stanzas embodying the musical pattern and interacting with each other through it. The first stanza's call "while mama be sleeping, the ole man he crawl into bed" is repeated and then responded to with "when mama have wake up, he shaking his nasty ole head." The second stanza begins immediately after, repeating the call in its second line and then responding to it as well. Donia Elizabeth Allen, in her own analysis of the blues at work in the novel, remarks that while there is a call-and-response pattern within each stanza, there is also a tonal call-and-response occurring between stanzas, "the defiant 'get out of my house' tone of the second stanza respond[ing] to the first stanza, which centers around the unwanted visitor" (Allen 260). Allen's analysis of the passage, however, does not go far enough to explain the ambiguity the pattern provokes. While Allen acknowledges that Jones "creates a call-and-response pattern not only between the characters, but between the past and present" (260), she neglects to recognize its occurrence on the page she herself quotes, where Ursa recalls a story of sexual assault presumably told to her as a child, thereby stretching the pattern to its full potential and exemplifying its temporal quality as well:

"There was a woman over on the next plantation. The master shipped her husband out of bed and got in the bed with her and just as soon as he was getting ready to go in her she cut off his thing with a razor she had hid under the pillow and he bled to death, and then the next day they came and got her and her husband. They cut off her husband's penis and stuffed it in her mouth, and then they hanged her. They let him bleed to death. They made her watch and then they hanged her."

(Jones 67)

This passage can be seen as a response to the call from Jones' previously cited stanzas, thus becoming an instantiation of the previous warning and extending the pattern's reach across generational lines. The passage directly above details an assault on a slave woman, one resulting in the master's death, as well as the death of the woman and her husband. But in returning to the call from the second stanza of the previous passage, an additional call-and-response pattern takes shape. The second stanza begins with "don't come here to my house, don't come here to my house I said," and is then responded to with "fore you get any this booty, you gon have to lay down dead." This second stanza, in addition to responding to the first stanza on the page, issues a call to which the slave woman's story responds. The stanza's speaker warns her attacker that engaging in such an assault will result in his own death. Jones then reaches back into history and provides an example of this occurrence, where a woman acts in accordance with that warning: she lays her master down dead. The fact that this story immediately follows the stanza's warning lends credence to the notion that the call-and-response pattern is instantiated here as well, and yet its employment is complicated. The response occurs before the call; that is, a warning is given but only after the action concerning it has occurred. In that sense, the blues pattern's use indicates a violence done to the temporal order as well, one that indeed reflects the violence of the scene. Similarly, the violence committed by the slave woman—though perhaps explained away as self-defense—acts as a warning to any other man in the future. But as Allen herself says, the original call's tone expresses defiance and anger. These women have not forgotten the atrocities committed against them. The slave woman's story demonstrates the consequences of feminine violence, consequences so extreme that they require a response themselves, if not physically then certainly emotionally. And in creating this reflexive call-and-response pattern between generations and time frames, Jones establishes a temporal space where the past is never

really the past at all. Rather, it becomes a space where prior trauma has present consequences and anger extends across generational lines to explain existing violence. The past is always “present,” so to speak, and is therefore always repeated. These call-and-response patterns provide an important backdrop for the final scene of the novel, where Ursa considers an equally violent end for her ex-husband. Through her use of the call-and-response technique, Jones illustrates the roots of such violent behavior, roots that prevent any concrete conviction of the violence Ursa eventually considers.

Corregidora's ending provides one of the most intriguing responses in the entire story, with Ursa engaging in the same violent act that both the stanzas' speaker and the slave woman are concerned with, thus finalizing the blues pattern with a reply that is embedded in ambiguity. The final scene of the novel reunites Ursa and Mutt after two decades apart. Upon seeing each other, the two return to the Drake Hotel, the same site where Ursa fell/was thrown down the stairs by Mutt after a particularly bad fight, thus providing a recognizable backdrop loaded with ambiguity. Upon arriving at the hotel, Ursa says, “it wasn't the same room, but the same place. The same feel of the place” (Jones 184), as though the narrative has arrived at a moment of repetition with variation. The anger she feels, the resentment, it all remains alive for her, but has taken on a new form and thus evolved from its previous source. But to what place is she referring? Of course the hotel itself, but perhaps also a manifestation of the predicament she has found herself in. Perhaps this “place” is a metaphysical one, a location that transcends the immediate moment. It is a place that all these women have been and cannot escape from. By returning to the same location, Ursa and Mutt “stage a reunion full of direct references to the past and yet distinct from the past, and Ursa, like Mama before her, becomes Great Gram and Gram” (Sharpe 63). Again, Jones has created a tortuous temporal space that breaks the traditional

temporal order and invokes the past, thus reinstating the blues pattern. This shifting chronology confuses character and individual emotion, as though the anger she feels is not exclusively hers, but an amalgamation of the same anger that all the black women of the novel have felt and that has laid dormant, waiting to be expressed in this final scene.

As the final page proceeds, Ursa performs fellatio on Mutt, and it is here that she considers the ultimate act of violence, creating a final moment of ambivalence and emotional uncertainty. As Ursa begins, she thinks about a moment in the past that she never knew the true details of: what had Great Gram done that made the slave master Corregidora want to kill her, that made her run away and leave her child behind? Earlier in the novel, Gram tells Ursa about this moment, saying “Mama stayed there with him even after [slavery] ended, until she did something that made him want to kill her, and then she run off and had to leave me” (Jones 79). Gram never says what it was that Great Gram did, and Ursa never knew either, until this final moment with Mutt:

In a split second 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.”

(Jones 184)

Ursa has finally realized what it was Great Gram did to Corregidora: she bit his penis, or threatened to, thus hearkening back to the double castration that occurred with the slave master and the slave woman’s husband. But just as this certainty washes over Ursa, the passage continues:

I held his ankles. It was like I didn't know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and Corregidora...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, making her walk down the street looking like a whore?

“I could kill you.”

(184)

Allen refers to this passage as well, calling it a repetition of the same scenario involving Great Gram and Corregidora. These two paragraphs rely on a layered form of repetition then, with Jones repeating both sexual scenario and sinister mantra. Just as Great Gram threatened Corregidora, Ursa is threatening Mutt. In doing so, Ursa takes the responsive warning from the first paragraph and repeats it, thus issuing her own threat. With this, Jones uses repetition between paragraphs as well as between scenarios, reinforcing this notion of collapsing chronology and lost individuality.

This final scene also acts as a response to the many calls of the novel, calls that demanded violence or at least provided reasons for engaging in it. Those original calls—the two stanzas previously cited, the slave woman's story—all issue a warning to abusive men, a warning that threatens either emasculation, death, or both. And with Ursa's final moment she reenacts those warnings. Her own action becomes a culmination of the emotional responses elicited from the stanzas and the slave woman's story, as well as a physical response to the legacy of violence her family has endured. The whole novel has been building toward this moment, echoes of violence reverberating through bloodlines, and yet this response is not purely her own. Ursa is unsure where the lines dividing her own life and Great Gram's fall, and if their scenarios are the

same, perhaps their emotions and motives are as well. But Ursa does not end there. She qualifies those emotions by acknowledging the harm she herself has done. She recognizes her own culpability, her own faults, and yet still repeats the threat “I could kill you,” thus repeating this legacy while also contributing to it herself. And in this moment the violence becomes unclear. These women are simultaneously victims and aggressors, and this dual status forces uncertainty when responding to that deadly threat. The reasons for reprisal are clear. The actions can be explained, perhaps even defended. But are they justified? With this final consideration of violence Jones creates a moment of hesitation and uncertainty, one only understood through her employment of the blues tradition. The participatory nature of the call-and-response pattern renders the reader’s response necessary to the novel’s cohesiveness, even when those responses are irresolute. The violence Ursa contemplates is frightening, though perhaps all the more so because of an inability to dismiss or flatly condemn it. Therefore, the use of the call-and-response pattern both necessitates and complicates moral evaluation. Judgment remains suspended, and Ursa’s motive is sustained by the past’s intractable presence.

As a final moment of responsorial blues expression, the very last lines of the novel involve an antiphonal exchange between Ursa and Mutt, thus concluding the story in the blues tradition and cementing it in ambiguity. After Ursa performs fellatio on Mutt, the two begin a dialogue, one that employs an antiphonal exchange that uses the same pattern the previous examples expound upon:

“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.

(Jones 185)

This passage employs a repetitive structure that culminates in a decisive break, one that leaves a call with no definitive response. The speaker, presumably Mutt, utters three times “I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you.” Every repeated utterance takes on new meaning or weight, expressing the speaker’s dissatisfaction with the original response. Repeating it either substantiates the initial claim with greater force or attempts to receive a different answer, but either way each new utterance moves beyond a simple repackaging of the same sentence. After the third response, however, a break occurs in the dialogue, with Ursa collapsing into Mutt after he incessantly shakes her. A new call is then issued, only this time by Ursa. Instead of focusing on what the man desires, Ursa now pivots and asserts her own aspirations. She says, “I don’t want a kind of man that’ll hurt me neither,” thus redirecting the antiphonal exchange and reordering the call-and-response structure. Perhaps this forced intimacy compels Ursa to express her own desires, her own romantic aspirations, as though she can finally speak to Mutt in an honest way. But the final line of the novel leaves the call unanswered. Mutt remains silent, resorting to a physical action that, while perhaps embodying a move toward intimacy and personal connection, still leaves the call without a truly definitive response. He refuses to respond to Ursa’s worry that he will hurt her, while simultaneously coiling his arms around her tightly, which becomes either a protective or threatening gesture. The act indicates where this

relationship might lead, or worse yet, where it might return. The way Jones presents it, the final line leaves us wondering how dangerous this reunion actually is, even after Ursa's own violent threat. The call that Ursa issues, the hope that she offers, never actually receives a direct response, as though her own desires remain intangible. Therefore, her own violent act has perhaps now been supplanted by the potential violence that awaits her. There is no promise that she will be safe, no assurance that Mutt will not hurt her, and these worries are amplified as his arms tighten around her. With this final passage Jones concludes her novel, drawing upon formal techniques that cement it within the blues tradition. But with the final line she breaks the call-and-response pattern, thus sustaining the novel's ambiguity in regard to violence and leaving the resulting questions unanswered even after the last page is turned.

Toni Morrison also draws upon the blues tradition in *The Bluest Eye*, though not in the strictly formalist sense that Gayl Jones does. Morrison builds her invocation of the blues around direct references to the musical tradition, citing songs that help explicate the ambiguity surrounding certain violent scenes in the novel. Morrison often uses vague and contradictory language to describe these scenes, however her explicit references to blues music help make apparent the ambiguity surrounding each violent act.

Perhaps Morrison's first and most pronounced blues reference comes in the first chapter of *The Bluest Eye*, when Claudia describes her mother's proclivity for blues singing. She describes these moments in detail:

She would sing about hard times, bad times, and somebody-done-gone-and-left-me times. But her voice was so sweet and her singing-eyes so melty I found myself longing for those hard times, yearning to be grown without 'a thin di-i-ime to my name.' I looked forward to the delicious time when 'my man' would leave

me, when I would ‘hate to see that evening sun go down...’ ‘cause then I would know ‘my man has left town.’

(Morrison 25-26)

The lyrical nature of the mother’s singing coexists in this passage with the melancholy that the lyrics contain, a combination “suggestive of the sweet and cathartic tone of traditional blues” (Moses 624). Surprisingly, Claudia’s mother sings so beautifully that Claudia actually yearns to experience heartache and struggle like that depicted in her mother’s songs. The young girl’s innocence is evident through her distance from the painful associations that the lyrics bring with them. This moment perfectly instantiates the tragicomic element that Ellison describes in his own definition of the blues. Claudia covets the pain her mother sings of, which becomes a darkly humorous sentiment considering she has no notion of what that pain entails. This ironic awareness stems from the reader knowing what Claudia will find if she experiences that pain, even though she herself does not. Here, Morrison enlists the reader in this tragicomic experience and, like Jones, forcefully withdraws a response to the song’s call, thus ingraining the novel and its participants within the blues tradition.

Morrison also directly references W.C. Handy’s “St. Louis Blues” in the passage above, which points to a decisive, canonical work rather than referencing the blues genre in general, and thus demonstrates a conscious infusion of the blues as well as its inherent compositional ambiguity. The lyrics that Claudia’s mother sings in the previous passage include “hate to see that evening sun go down” and “my man has left town,” both of which directly allude to the opening stanza of “St. Louis Blues,” one of the earliest and most popular blues songs ever recorded. In describing his compositional process, Handy explains that “when ‘St. Louis Blues’ was written the tango was the vogue. I tricked the dancers by arranging a tango introduction,

breaking abruptly then into a low-down blues” (Handy 127). He also explains his attempt to “combine ragtime syncopation with a real melody in the spiritual tradition” (120), thus merging traditions and bringing fringe folk music to the popular storefront. Additionally, the entire tango section was played in a minor key, which most other popular composers had only used sparingly for minor inflection (Howze 2000). A tonal shift occurs once the tango introduction gives way, with the “low-down blues” then taking up the majority of the song. More specifically, the syncopation in “St. Louis Blues” displaces the normal rhythm of the blues beat, thereby introducing surprise and swing that catches the listener off guard. The song’s composition ultimately causes the tempo and mood to vacillate, making it difficult to pin down in both rhythm and tone. This harkens back to Morrison’s own blues passage, where Claudia’s comical yearning for heartache gives way to the sobering realization of the misery that such pain would bring her. Morrison’s reference to “St. Louis Blues” elicits a number of different tonalities, moods, and interpretations, thus further complicating the tenor of Claudia’s mother’s singing. With all of this, Morrison’s passage compounds uncertainty by referencing a compositionally difficult song to express the complex emotions of her characters, thus layering the ambiguity of the blues tradition and obscuring the mood of the novel itself.

While the form of “St. Louis Blues” helps express the complexity of Morrison’s novel, its content also directly aligns with the novel’s thematic concerns. Handy’s song opens with a woman describing how her man has left her for another woman, one with “diamon’ rings,” “powder,” and “store-bought hair.” She then describes her love for him and her attempt to win him back, all the while singing of his attractively dark complexion. The speaker calls her man “stovepipe brown” and “blacker than midnight,” and says that in her eyes, the “blacker de berry, sweeter is de juice” (Norton 57-58). These descriptions help illuminate the “sensitive issue at the

emotional center of *The Bluest Eye*: caste prejudice, or intraracism based upon skin tone” (Moses 626). Morrison’s novel explores the social construction of beauty and the ways that a racially charged definition of the term can be damaging to an entire community and its citizens. Similarly, Morrison critiques the self-hate that occurs after internalizing these pernicious concepts of beauty. The novel expands upon some of the same criticisms that Handy references in “St. Louis Blues”: that an infatuation with physical beauty, particularly that which others determine, is damaging. The singer in “St Louis Blues” values her lover’s dark skin, while he remains attracted to “powder” and “store-bought hair.” This demonstrates a clear rupture between his preference and her own, with the singer’s attraction to dark skin combating a general predilection for whiteness. Similarly, light skin and straight blond hair connotes beauty in Morrison’s novel, which devalues and renders ugly the black communities that adopt these notions. With this parallel in mind, the blues singer’s attraction to her man’s dark complexion “inverts the caste hierarchy that has filtered down from the dominant culture” (Moses 626). The singer’s voice demonstrates a line of thinking that Claudia also subscribes to, and yet has difficulty sustaining within a community that desires light skin. In that sense, the theme of Handy’s blues song illuminates and enriches the intraracial complexities present in Morrison’s novel. This reference also identifies the source of Claudia’s own violent act, one that occurs in the same chapter and responds to the same constructions that “St. Louis Blues” is battling.

“St. Louis Blues” also usefully elucidates the complexity of one of *The Bluest Eye*’s most violent scenes, in which Claudia recalls the white dolls given to her at Christmas. Having experienced the prevailing racism of her culture and its emphasis on beauty as an expression of “whiteness,” Claudia rebels. She resents receiving white dolls as Christmas presents, thereby defying the previous white standard. She tells us, “I had only one desire: to dismember it...Break

off the tiny fingers, bend the flat feet, loosen the hair, twist the head around...take off the head, shake out the sawdust, crack the back against the brass bed rail, it would bleat still” (Morrison 21). This scene is remarkably violent, and all the more so when considering its source: an innocent, young girl. This contrast between a young girl and her actions creates dissonance within the passage. The reader, at once repulsed by the tearing apart of an anthropomorphized object, is also hardwired to defend a child’s innocence. These competing emotions are difficult to reconcile, with the narrative producing a state of ambivalence that leaves the reader uncomfortably suspended between two possible judgments. This tension dissipates, however, if we recall Handy’s blues song. Like “St. Louis Blues,” Claudia directs her violence at a damaging conception of beauty as determined by the dominant culture. The song can be read as an inversion of caste prejudice as well as a criticism of the socially constructed ideal, all of which are present and elicited with every repeated vocalization of its lyrics. Claudia’s mother has made a habit of singing this song again and again, thereby affirming the “cultural values essential to [Claudia’s] growth and development—and the growth and development of any young, black working-class person” (Moses 626). Morrison’s reference to the song elucidates Claudia’s relationship to the white doll in this scene. The doll, with its prevalence and popularity, represents the internalization and reproduction of a dominant culture’s conception of beauty. By contrast, it also expresses all that is *not* beautiful—blackness. The white doll, in its repetition as a consumable object and mass-market toy that will be loved in many households, perpetuates the cycle of self-loathing that exists in the novel’s black community. This scene represents more than a child attacking life-like white objects. The doll has become a plastic reproduction of the insidious nature of unspoken acceptance, where whiteness is accepted as beauty and blackness as ugliness. Morrison’s reference to “St. Louis Blues” then provides a pathway for navigating the

nuances of Claudia's violent act. Handy's song underscores the same sentiments that Claudia carries and thus contextualizes her act within the broader cultural moment.

The doll-dismembering scene concludes with Claudia arriving at a moment of concession, one that surprisingly extinguishes the causticity of her violent act and redirects our intuitions regarding such responses. After recounting her dismembering of the dolls, Claudia shifts the narrative to when she is older, after she has learned to repress these violent urges. Her anger has finally given way to external pressures, her emotions now inculcated with the community's assimilatory expectations. She describes her conversion "from pristine sadism to fabricated hatred, to fraudulent love," saying that she "learned much later to worship [Shirley Temple]," and that the change was "adjustment without improvement" (Morrison 23). Morrison's powerful language here depicts violence as the preferred response, with Claudia lamenting her own acquiescence. Claudia, in referencing fraudulent love and forced worship, has become resigned to her fate as a young black girl growing up in a self-deprecating community. Her violence has been redirected inward, her response to the dolls now twisted and inverted so that she herself has become victimized. With this final moment, Morrison takes Claudia's already complicated violent act and rethinks it, providing an even more dismal alternative. Morrison implicitly asks which we prefer: the violent child that opposes the dominant culture, or the docile adult that accepts their conceptions of beauty and instead does violence to her own self-worth? The answer to this moral conundrum forces a tacit acceptance of violence as a response to adversity. We prefer Claudia's violence to the heart-rending alternative, which establishes a permissibility that was originally precluded. Tragically, Claudia abandons the cultural values implicit in Handy's song by deferring to a community that has already forsaken them. Morrison's reference to "St. Louis Blues" then ultimately acts as a defense for the violence Claudia commits, allowing a more

expansive understanding of the cultural moment while also supporting the notion that violence is not only morally ambiguous, but is at times actually preferred.

Toni Morrison and Gayl Jones engage with the blues tradition in both of their first novels in order to complicate the moral valences of violent actions that might otherwise be read as morally objectionable. Repetition and call-and-response techniques help explicate the generationally-expansive violence that occurs in Jones' novel, violence that, once finally considered by Ursa herself, is rendered morally ambiguous. Similarly, Morrison's own narrator dismembers white dolls in an incredibly detailed and disturbing scene at the novel's beginning. This violence, however, has been framed by Morrison's reference to a classic blues song, "St. Louis Blues," whose composition and tonal manipulation grounds Morrison's characters in the ever-wavering mood of the blues tradition. The song's thematic concerns also correlate with those of Morrison's novel, thus contextualizing and providing support for Claudia's own violent act. By invoking the blues, both writers obscure the morality of their violent scenes, nullifying any initially reproachful response by the reader. Instead, the authors demand a closer analysis of the cultural context in which these acts occur, an investigation that inevitably establishes violence as the only moral response available to their female characters.

Destroying the Archetype and Remaking the Myth

In constructing tales of feminine violence, Toni Morrison and Gayl Jones undoubtedly run into female archetypes and myths, many of which do not allow for nuance or unbiased accountability. To combat this tradition of patriarchal authority and gendered vilification, Morrison and Jones confront certain misogynistic tropes and allegories and deconstruct them, a maneuver that forces a reconsideration of their characters' own violent acts. In *The Bluest Eye*,

Morrison critiques traditional characterizations of prostitutes in literature, removing her characters from these literary confines and establishing them as exceptions to their community, a move that complicates the violence they go on to commit. Similarly, in *Eva's Man* Gayl Jones responds directly to the Eve figure and the Medusa myth, reinterpreting their stories so that blame and responsibility fall on the shoulders of the men who render these characters reprehensible. These revisions have profound effects when juxtaposed with the violence that Eva commits, forcing an interrogation into the roots of such violence and the ways in which a misogynistic history plays a role in conscious action. This process of historical revision ends up uniting both textual and thematic violence in a way that pushes forward a distinctly feminine black discourse. Through addressing and amending these archetypes and myths, Morrison and Jones once again create moments of violence that weigh heavily on the reader's conscience, while still framing these acts in a way that renders unrestrained incrimination impossible.

Morrison's description of the three prostitutes in *The Bluest Eye* creates another nuanced example of feminine violence, however it also pushes the story beyond a repackaging of familiar concepts, with Morrison's characterization doing away with the traditional role of the prostitute and privileging a more dynamic female identity. Toward the beginning of the novel Morrison introduces the prostitutes who live in the apartment above the Breedloves. Pecola seems taken by these women, having visited them just as they are getting ready for their evenings, and becomes entranced by their stories and their relationships with men. But just as Miss Marie begins telling Pecola of her previous love affairs, Morrison interjects, providing a description of the women's true feelings toward men and their actions against them:

Except for Marie's fabled love of Dewey Prince, these women hated men, all men, without shame, apology, or discrimination. They abused their visitors with a scorn

grown mechanical from use...all were inadequate and weak, all came under their jaundiced eyes and were the recipients of their disinterested wrath.

(Morrison 56)

The violence here, though not explicitly physical, still presents a particularly antagonistic relationship with men, both in the women's treatment of them as well as their disinterested methods of inflicting emotional pain. These women repeatedly abuse the men that visit them and, on one occasion, even lured an unsuspecting man upstairs, "held him up by the heels, shook everything out of his pants pockets, and threw him out of the window" (Morrison 56). Their violence has become so frequent that Morrison describes their scorn as "mechanical," as though it has been institutionalized and no longer in need of any immediate or stirring spark. Such a description ends up normalizing the violence, dulling its effects and lessening its emotional impact on the audience. Perhaps most striking, however, is Morrison's inversion of the gender roles in the prostitute-client relationship. Objectively, the violence that these women commit inverts the expectations that men carry for them. Instead of receiving pleasure, the men that visit these women receive pain, emotional or otherwise. In fact, these women hold the power during each dismal encounter, with the men described as both "weak and inadequate." This directly challenges the traditional notion of working girls as subservient or lacking agency. Morrison's prostitutes are neither obedient nor delicate. They remain in control throughout the entire process. Through this notion of normalized violence and subversion, Morrison upends traditional patriarchal expectations of submission and passivity and provides her characters with a position of power that, until now, remained relatively unexplored.

While the prostitutes' violence directly opposes a male conception of sexuality and compliance, Morrison's characterization of these women also opposes certain historical

expectations that one might carry in regard to prostitution. In describing these women, Morrison references several conventional portrayals only to demonstrate their futility in regard to her own characters. Morrison claims that they “did not belong to those generations of prostitutes created in novels, with great and generous hearts...nor were they from that sensitive breed of young girl, gone wrong at the hands of fate...neither were they the sloppy, inadequate whores who...turn to drug consumption and traffic or pimps to help complete their scheme of self-destruction” (55-56). According to Morrison, these women do not exist in any previously delineated category. They have been created outside traditional literary standards. In fact, when juxtaposed with the previous passage, we can see these women constructing their own stories and histories, independent of the expectations that their readers might carry for them. We are told that Marie’s own relationship with Dewey Prince is “fabled,” however when she describes it to Pecola she offers no indication of its invention or fabrication. Similarly, Morrison comments that these women exist independent of the “prostitutes created in novels.” We might read this as Morrison again making reference to all the failed characterizations that came before hers, as though her own characters require a more nuanced existence than her predecessors could provide. This description has profound effects if we recall the reasons for Morrison and Jones’ textual violence from the previous section. Much like the failings of conventional language and syntax when writing novels of female oppression and violence, the conventional characterizations of these women must also be withdrawn. The historical (and perhaps also patriarchal) characterization of the prostitute remains unsuccessful, forcing these women into categories that have far too many holes and missing parts. These expectations pigeonhole the women who identify with these roles, and Morrison does away with those expectations. With this, Morrison asserts her own illustration

of these characters as independent from the tradition it follows, moving away from the familiar paradigm so as to allow her characters a more nuanced and dynamic existence.

Finally, the terms and designations that Morrison uses in referring to these women establish them as individuals whose plights stem from an entire community's misguided hostility, which ultimately provides support for the violence they commit. Morrison names her three prostitutes China, Poland, and Miss Marie, however the latter is also commonly referred to as the Maginot Line. Morrison also sets her novel in the early 1940s, a period in which the United States became involved in the international conflict going on in Europe. The names China and Poland refer to the two major European and Asian warfronts during World War II, whereas the Maginot Line "refers literally to the failed French border fortifications and metaphorically to the tendency to focus on the wrong front," something that has since been dubbed "the Maginot Line syndrome" (Gillan 285). A major critique of the United States' involvement in World War II was its willingness to intervene "on the international front in other nations' racial and ethnic conflicts" while at the same time ignoring or repressing important racial issues at home (285). In providing names for her characters that directly reference these national issues, Morrison highlights her community's willingness to "focus on the wrong front" as well, projecting their anger onto subjects within their oppressed community, thereby engaging in a form of misguided persecution. Morrison demonstrates this process in a scene much later in the novel, where Frieda, Claudia's sister, repeats the same trenchant criticism that her community has hurled at these women for years: "my mama said so. My mama said you ruined" (Morrison 104). The Maginot Line, in responding to this, throws a glass bottle at her, which shatters in front of her feet. Frieda's reproach seems odd, however, when we recall the narrator telling us that the wives of their clients, "although not [the prostitutes'] colleagues, so to speak, nevertheless deceived their

husbands—regularly or irregularly, it made no difference” (Morrison 56). With these two moments read in conjunction, it becomes clear that the community has come to hate these women for acts of adultery and deceit that they themselves commit. These external projections illustrate a spurious sense of virtue and personal awareness, with those in the community “reprimand[ing] each other for their personal failures and shortcomings” (Gillan 285) while never actually confronting their own issues. With this, China, Poland, and the Maginot Line represent the external projection of personal deficiencies, where the collective faults of the community are projected onto three women who refuse to hide their behavior. Morrison, by giving her characters names such as these, ultimately places them on the front lines for self-recognition and responsibility, where collective criticism becomes both groundless and dissembling. The prostitutes’ acts of violence then become responses to unwarranted aggression, and in that sense can be seen as instinctive, perhaps even necessary. These women should be seen not as afflictions or social pariahs, but as “merry gargoyles” (Morrison 55), the type that rest atop cathedrals and are the “conductors of and safeguards for their community” (Atkinson 15). Having already removed these women from traditional definitions and expectations, Morrison has provided a platform for them to break down their community’s damaging defense mechanisms. With all of this, Morrison has taken a familiar character type and completely restructured it, allowing the role of the prostitute to become a critical response to masculine desire as well as communal scapegoating. Their acts of violence facilitate these critiques, directly responding to both patriarchal assumption and misguided communal censure.

While Toni Morrison manipulates conventional characterizations of prostitutes to examine patriarchal assumptions and scapegoating, Gayl Jones references specific allegories and myths in *Eva’s Man*, focusing exclusively on stories that demonize women so that they can be

recreated in a way that redistributes accountability and blame. Jones' novel tells the story of Eva Medina, a woman imprisoned for the violent murder of her lover, Davis Carter. Jones builds toward the shocking scene of the killing through an exhaustive account of the abuse she endures throughout her life. Since childhood, Eva has been the target of sexual abuse and emotional violence, the list of perpetrators spanning from her childhood neighbor, her mother's paramour, her cousin Alfonso, and even her husband, who was more than thirty years her senior. The novel shifts back and forth among these relationships, while still progressing deliberately toward Davis' violent death, a moment in which Jones references two allegorical female characters, Eve and Medusa. In referencing these historically reviled characters, Jones provides a lens through which we should view Eva's crime. Through her historical allusions, Jones calls attention to the exorbitant misogyny and misguided blame that has long been attached to such stories and attacks these concepts, constructing a different interpretation that forces accountability and violence to be carefully reconsidered.

Eva's violent act occurs after she spends several days in a hotel room without being allowed to leave, her pent-up frustrations finally boiling over into insurmountable rage. After dinner, Eva proposes a drink, using the offer as an opportunity to douse Davis' brandy with rat poison. The true violence, however, occurs immediately after, when Davis is dead and Eva is alone in the room with him:

I got back on the bed and squeezed his dick in my teeth. I bit down hard. My teeth in an apple. A swollen plum in my mouth.

"How did it feel?"

A red swollen plum in my mouth. A milkweed full of blood. A soft milkweed full of blood. What would you do if you bit down and your teeth raised blood from an

apple? Flesh from an apple? What would you do? Flesh and blood from an apple... I'm Medusa, I was thinking. Men look at me and get hard-ons. I turn their dicks to stone.

(Jones 128-130)

Eva castrates her dead lover, her legacy of abuse finally ending in a shockingly violent act of her own. And while the content itself is indeed grotesque, the language used to describe the scene is equally striking. Eva refers to several images in her description of the event, but the one that receives the most attention is the apple. This repeated reference no doubt conjures biblical allusions, the image very similar to the Western European interpretation of the temptation and subsequent fall of man. We may recall the traditional story: Eve is tempted by the serpent to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, a fruit which she shares with Adam, thus committing the original sin and forcing their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. When questioned about the act, Adam blames Eve for his sin, though, of course, it was the serpent's beguilement that set the fall in motion. Jones' allusion to the temptation story in this scene recalls another reference that occurs earlier in the novel, when Davis asks, "Why did you come here, Eve?" (Jones 45). Eva abruptly corrects him, and when he asks why she got so upset, she replies, "I don't know. I just never liked being called Eve. I don't know why" (45). These two references to the Eve figure, when read in conjunction, demonstrate Davis' own projection of the temptress role onto Eva, a role that she tries to reject by correcting him but ultimately succumbs to during her final act of violence. With this, Jones allows Eva, at least initially, to appear subsumed under the patriarchal system that designates its female character as the driving force for man's fall.

While Gayl Jones recalls the temptation story and its attendant misogyny during Davis' murder, she also manipulates that story and its respective roles, thus creating a new interpretation

that redistributes blame and complicates Eva's violent act. In Jones' version of the story, the "apple" that Eve/a bites into is one "offered" to her by the male figure. In many ways, Eva's apple represents an entire history of forced acceptance and advances disguised as offers. She does not tempt Davis with the apple, but rather has been tempted since childhood, the object placed before her and forced upon her, her own desires remaining irrelevant. By likening Eva's crime to biting into the proverbial apple, Jones has upended the traditional story. In Jones' interpretation, Adam has offered the apple to Eve, or perhaps more to the point, she has taken it after years of having it forced upon her. The temptation story, initially one of feminine transgression, has now been assigned elements of coercion and sexual subservience, with the male figure standing in as a summation of every forced encounter Eva has experienced. By accepting the apple Eva responds to that subservience, thus ending the cycle of unanswered abuse and "definitively upset[ing] the traditional framework wherein the temptress Eve is condemned as responsible for man's fall from God's grace" (Davison 406). Eva's violence, though perhaps difficult to stomach, can be understood as a response to past atrocities, as though she herself is a victim of man's fall and not the catalyst that spawned it. With this new construction of the temptation story, the question then becomes, what was the original sin? The original crime from which we can begin to trace accountability? Was it this specific act that Eva performs on her dead lover? Or could it be any one of a number of abuses she has received leading up to this moment? Jones seems to posit this question to the reader, taking the moment of the Fall and adding a string of sins before it so that the source of Eva's violence, the crux of her rage, can be found outside the individual and instead somewhere swirling in the depravity of evil men. Jones' allusions to the temptation story allow for this interpretation, a process that ultimately forces a comprehensive reevaluation of Eva's crime.

Just before Eva concludes her description of Davis' death, she makes reference to the Medusa myth as well, thereby invoking another familiar misogynistic tale only to completely restructure it and provide a more adequate account of responsibility and feminine complexity. After Eva commits her crime in the hotel room, she tells us "I'm Medusa... Men look at me and get hard-ons. I turn their dicks to stone" (Jones 130). Here, again, Eva accepts a role that has historically connoted feminine transgression. The Medusa figure is commonly known in contemporary discourse as a woman with snakes for hair that terrorizes men and turns them to stone. But of course, in considering the Medusa myth as a whole, we should recall that she was "raped by Poseidon in Athene's temple and thereafter transformed into a petrifying serpent-headed monster," (qtd. in Davison 405) a fate that ultimately led to her beheading at the hands of Perseus and his reflective shield. In that sense, Medusa and Eva both become "victims of violation," (405) their abuse unrecognized by the patriarchal system under which they find themselves. And like the reference to Eve in the original passage, Jones' allusion to Medusa calls to mind another brief exchange between Davis and Eva, one that occurs earlier in the novel and attracts importance only after the second reference is made. In the first chapter Eva thinks back to one of her first nights with Davis in the hotel room, where he likens her hair to a lion's mane. Eva corrects him, saying that only the male lions have manes, to which Davis replies, "Then you look like a male lion...Eva Medusa's a lion" (Jones 16). Eva then corrects him again, telling him her name is Medina, not Medusa. With this, Jones recycles the same structure that the previous Eve reference instantiated: Davis makes an initial, fleeting reference to an historically disparaging female character, and Eva tries to evade that projection but unfortunately embodies it once the novel reaches its climax.

Similar to her revisions to the Eve story, Jones also uses the Medusa myth as a device to bring attention to the roles that men play in the production of monstrous female characters. As the story builds toward its shocking climax, Eva continues to reveal bizarre details about her relationship with Davis. She describes his refusal to let her leave his hotel room, and also tells us, “he wouldn’t let me comb my hair after we made love” (Jones 66). She later confronts him about this, asking, “Did you take my comb? I couldn’t find it,” to which Davis replies, “Yeah, it’s in my pocket. You don’t need it” (Jones 81). This exchange, which occurs after Davis has already mistaken Eva’s name for Medusa’s, clearly shows how much Eva’s violent transformation can be attributed to Davis’ domineering actions. Earlier in the novel, Eva thinks back to another moment in the hotel room, telling us “my hair was uncombed. It was turning into snakes” (Jones 51). Here, Eva seems to recognize a certain shift in her character, now acknowledging the myth she had once tried to rebuff. This acknowledgment—indeed, this shift—only becomes possible through Davis’ objectification and disarmament of Eva. Perhaps she could have tamed her hair before it transformed into snakes. Perhaps this movement toward violence and rage could have been stymied and the myth avoided altogether. Instead, Davis falls victim to his own creation, with “Perseus’s mirror-like shield...held up to reveal Davis’s role as the “father” of this misogynist portrait” (Davison 405). With these instrumental details placed throughout the novel, Jones depicts Eva’s transformation as an ineluctable result of Davis’ projections, a maneuver that calls attention to the man who is truly responsible for her change, thus framing Eva’s violence with a distinctly feminist lens.

Not only does Jones assign blame to the men who create these female characters, but she also reconstructs the Medusa myth itself, reconfiguring her method of violence so that readers may never again forget the source of her rage. If we return once more to the previous passage in

which Eva castrates Davis, we recall Eva's comment, "I'm Medusa... Men look at me and get hard-ons. I turn their dicks to stone" (Jones 130). With this powerful line, Jones has reached the end of her protagonist's transformation, and yet, she makes a slight amendment to the original story. The focus of Eva's wrath, the object that receives her enraged attention, is the penis exclusively. This revision directs the focus onto the same object that has antagonized her since childhood. The specificity associates the victim with the victimizing object, and then inverts that relationship in a way that still recalls the earlier abuse. Perhaps most disturbing is this new theme of monstrous intimacy that Jones attaches to the Medusa myth, something that was not a part of the original. Male desire and arousal, both of which were catalysts for Eva's abuse, are now the target of her rage. Sex and violence have become inextricably linked, and the source of this union can be traced to Eva's childhood abuse. With emphasis placed exclusively on the penis, the past will always be recalled, the impetus always identified. Eva's violent act, though certainly insupportable, must still be evaluated as a single moment in a long list of irrevocable crimes, all of which were precipitated by men. In that sense, while "Medusa's" rage has limited its target, her myth has expanded its scope. Jones' retelling of the Medusa myth now includes the history of violence that spawned it, which renders a conviction of Eva's crime insufficient if it ignores the brutality that provoked it.

By the end of the novel, Jones seems aware of the danger of misinterpretation and masculine revision, providing an end that warns against the reinstatement of familiar explanations and structures. In one of the last scenes of the novel, Eva discusses the details and motive of her crime to a psychologist. After an exhaustive interrogation in which he starts to guide her answers, Eva tells him, "Don't explain me. Don't you explain me. Don't you explain me" (173). Though she issues this line as a response to the psychologist, it might also be directed

toward the audience at hand, and to the men who rewrite and simplify such histories. Jones, through inserting these powerful lines, refuses any interpretation that might be born out of patriarchal influence. This is Eva's story, one of sexual abuse and its damaging effects, and when the male figure steps in to rewrite that story she rebuffs him. With this, Jones concludes her novel with one last reminder: that these stories are and *must* be told by women. The abuse they receive and the violence they commit, none of it can be understood if not told by them. This assertion then complements the revisions Jones makes. Through amending these myths and allegories, Jones has established a new paradigm, one that redistributes accountability and fills the gaps that were previously overlooked. Vilification will no doubt occur, but only after the whole story has been heard, free from blight and outside influence. In that sense, Jones concludes her novel by removing it from the mechanical reproduction of roles that has taken place over time. This textual violence is necessary in making sense of the actual violence of her characters, and actually promotes a constructive interpretation of violence as response to oppression. The misogynistic myths have been rewritten, the traditions overturned, and Eva's story, though hauntingly violent, shall remain entirely her own.

Toni Morrison and Gayl Jones both engage with archetypes and myths in their novels, inventing variations on existing tropes in order to claim them and more closely evaluate the violence their female characters commit. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison invokes familiar characterizations of the prostitute and deconstructs them, creating characters whose violence provides critiques of masculine expectation and communal scapegoating. In *Eva's Man*, Gayl Jones calls upon both the Eve story and the Medusa myth in order to frame her own character's violent act, taking these familiar narratives and rewriting them so that they might better account for the faults of men. In doing so, both authors remove their stories from the traditions that came

before them, creating a system of thought and storytelling that can exist outside a male-generated mold. This process, then, conjoins both textual and thematic violence in a dependent relationship where the former expresses the complexity and usefulness of the latter. Through reconstruction and mythmaking, Morrison and Jones establish dynamic characters whose violence, though harrowing, ushers in a new mode of feminine storytelling.

Conclusion

Issues of violence and representation are manifested both thematically and textually in the work of Toni Morrison and Gayl Jones, as I have argued in this thesis. Motivated by a Black Arts Movement and a broader literary establishment that allowed little room for their voices, these writers crafted stories around black female protagonists that are both the victims of and, perhaps most critically, the perpetrators of violence. Such stories of black women's response to racial and sexual violence lived on the peripheries of the African American literary canon, which privileged a predominantly masculinist perspective. Jones and Morrison combat this perspective by committing violence to the form in their novels *The Bluest Eye* and *Corregidora*. These breaks in narrative conventions and syntactical structures promote a decisive split from the patriarchal discourses that provoked them, thus embodying a violent textual act that progresses toward a distinctly black feminine discourse. The productive nature of such textual violence ultimately frames our understanding of the novels' thematic violence as well. As a continuation of their reliance on form to demonstrate the ambiguity of their characters' actions, Morrison and Jones often invoke the blues during violent moments in their novels. As a musical tradition, the blues has been described as a way of enduring and overcoming adversity, often involving call-and-response patterns and tonal shifts that collapse divisions of time and demand readerly engagement. By invoking the blues during specific violent scenes, these writers ultimately

remove their characters from the possibility of swift reproach, thus embedding their acts in an ambiguous realm that only the blues can provide. And finally, as a powerful union of textual and thematic violence, Morrison and Jones confront and revise damaging archetypes and myths that have historically demonized their female characters. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison deconstructs customary depictions of the prostitute so that her characters' violence become responses to misguided hatred and communal scapegoating. In *Eva's Man*, Jones references the Eve story and the Medusa myth in order to revise historically misogynistic portrayals of women. By referencing these stories during her own character's violent act, Jones redistributes accountability and blame, thus demanding that punishment be more accurately apportioned. With all of this, Morrison and Jones have established violence as a necessary response to sexual and racial oppression, and though such violence is undoubtedly shocking, it can be ethically redeemed through the language used to describe it. In fact, it is the only way such stories can be told.

On a larger scale, these writers have ultimately demonstrated that violence can sometimes be a defensible course of action. Indeed, in certain cases it might be the only course available. And with demonstrations of violence such as these—both thematic and formal—it becomes clear how productive these acts can be, and how successful they are in reorienting the reader within the cultural moment, often in ways that are neither expected nor commonplace.

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