Disability Politics and Reproductive Critique in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*

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Abstract

This essay takes a reproductive justice lens, together with the analytical and liberatory insights of intersectional literary and cultural disability studies, to unearth an archive of medical eugenics exercised via non-consensual sterilization in Gayl Jones's 1975 novel, *Corregidora.* My analysis also accounts for the ways in which the intimate family unit or couple can serve as a site where historical/state violence is reproduced and perpetuated, troubling the notion of a private sphere, particularly when it comes to Black Americans. Finally, I consider the stakes of such a reading of Jones's novel for feminist health humanities and the contemporary conversation about reproductive rights and justice in the United States.

Keywords: Race and Misdiagnosis, Eugenic Sterilization, American Literature, Crip-of-Color Critique, Intimate Partner Violence

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Reproductive justice, disability politics, and reading methods for health humanities

This article develops a reproductive justice and an intersectional disability politics-informed analysis of Gayl Jones's 1975 novel *Corregidora*. My reading aims to model a feminist health humanities framework that is grounded in the values of reproductive justice and in a literary and cultural intersectional disability politics—elaborated as *crip-of-color critique* by Jina B. Kim (2021). Such a framework is rigorously attuned to historical context, as well as formal and aesthetic considerations, in attending to minority literature and storytelling as sites of truth-telling, witnessing, and potential transformation.

As Loretta Ross and Rickie Solinger (2017) elaborate, reproductive justice is the application of a human rights framework to issues of reproductive rights. The primary principles of the framework are: "(1) the right *not* to have a child; (2) the right to *have* a child; and (3) the right to *parent* in safe and healthy environments" (Ross & Solinger, 2017, p.9). Founded in 1994 by Ross and a collective of African American women, the framework was meant to offer more safeguards for women, beyond a single-issue abortion rights debate, which still dominates the public and media conversations around reproductive autonomy. A reproductive justice approach recognizes the inaccessibility to the fundamental rights of having and parenting children (in safe and healthy environments) to women of color and otherwise socio-economically disadvantaged women, and ultimately seeks to shore up human rights protections with attention to gendered and racialized vulnerabilities. Furthermore, as Ross tells it, a political practice of storytelling helped to create the national coalition of SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective in 1997, coalescing around the framework of reproductive justice (Ross & Solinger, 2017, 60). The group renamed themselves to SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective in 2011 (Ross & Solinger, 2017). The movement for reproductive justice has been founded and shaped by Black women, because of the ways in which they were (and still are) vulnerable to systematic deprivation of both reproductive and human rights.

In elaborating the intersectional disability politics known as crip-of-color critique, Jina B. Kim draws from Roderick Ferguson's attention to "ruptural possibilities" in minority literary forms (2003, p.26, as cited in Kim, 2021, p.80) and Cathy Cohen's elaboration of a multi-axis queer politics attuned to "the systematic relationship among forms of domination" (1997, p.440, as cited in Kim, 2021, p.82); including "heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism" (Berne, 2015, as cited in Kim, 2021, p.82). My analysis is aligned with a crip-of-color critique framework, and extends it to consider the practice of eugenic non-consensual sterilization of a Black woman in the American South as a specific form of domination that subtends the narrative of Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*. The event of eugenic sterilization irrupts into *Corregidora*'s narrative by way of the protagonist Ursa Corregidora's medicalized experiences following an episode of intimate partner violence. Ursa's subsequent post-traumatic, psychic experiences through dreams and flashbacks allow readers to understand how her sterilization instantiates a modern transmogrification of the violation of bodily autonomy and reproductive rights that Ursa's grandmother and great-grandmother experienced while enslaved in Brazil. My discussion will also attend to the ways in which this legacy is urgently relevant to present-day reproductive rights and justice debates and events in the United States.

In my reading of Jones's novel I conceptualize a critically reproductive textuality that I call "[sic]k archives," as an instantiation of Ferguson-ian "ruptural possibility." [Sic]k archives as a textual heuristic in *Corregidora* allows readers to access a sophisticated and trenchant historical consciousness and cultural criticism. Specifically, I argue that the event of

Ursa's hysterectomy—layered with power, culture, and biomedicine—is a pivotal moment of [sic]k archives and ruptural possibility in the novel's narrative. Through close attention to Ursa's interactions with the biomedical realm in the orbit of the novel, and through close attention to the historical contexts and repetitions of reproductive injustice in the novel, I hope to show that the contexts and consequences of Ursa's hysterectomy demonstrate Jones's novel as a site of significant and potentially transformative cultural archive.

In relation to feminist health humanities, I aim to demonstrate how Jones's *Corregidora* has the capacity to animate a critical healthcare consciousness beyond an exclusively biomedical paradigm. In other words, this essay articulates the critical implications of a feminist health humanities-informed reading of *Corregidora*, and the ways in which a close, contextualized reading of Ursa's hysterectomy can help us to formulate a more just approach to contemporary reproductive politics.

Contextualizing reproductive harm in *Corregidora*

To more properly contextualize how and why I understand Ursa's hysterectomy as a "ruptural possibility" for bearing witness, leaving evidence, and for catalyzing a critical consciousness, I will rehearse some pertinent details. To begin, *Corregidora* is grounded in the worlds of the late 19th century in Brazil and of the 1940s -1960s in the South of the United States. Further, as it is published in 1975, the novel is conceptualized and written in the culturally and socially engaged Black Arts and Black Feminist movement of 1960s and 1970s. Ursa Corregidora, the protagonist in Jones's novel, is a blues singer descended from enslaved women on a coffee plantation in Brazil, who were dominated by a Portuguese plantation owner, referred to in the novel as "old man Corregidora." Ursa's great-grandmother and grandmother, who remain nameless in the text except as "Great-Gram" and "Gram," experienced sexual exploitation, incest, and the systematic severing of kinship ties. "Old man Corregidora" prostituted Ursa's Gram and Great-Gram, and fathered both Gram and Ursa's mother, with any male siblings and children having been separated and sold off. Following an act of sexual resistance, Great-Gram had to flee the plantation, though she ultimately returned for Gram—pregnant by then with Ursa's mother—and the three settled in Lexington Kentucky around the turn of the century. The narrative time of *Corregidora* begins with Ursa's story in 1948, in Lexington, Kentucky; Ursa's flashbacks go several generations back; the book ends in the late 1960s. Throughout the narrative, Ursa is processing personal and family traumas, following an unplanned hysterectomy. Weaving together flashbacks and memories of oral histories, the novel is thick with interpenetrated temporalities, not unlike a traumatized mind (See Carter, 2021) or, as others—including Jones herself—have noted, the novel is formally akin to a blues song, where "the blues structure affords a flexible relationship to temporality and spatiality" (See Khanmalek, 2019, pp.12-13).

At the outset of the book, readers are immediately brought into a painful story of violence and loss through a scene of intimate partner violence: As Ursa is leaving from the back exit of "Happy's" club, where she is employed as a blues singer, her then-husband Mutt Thomas surprises and assaults her in a jealous, drunken rage and she falls down the stairs that lead to the alley. Beyond the violence and trauma innate to the interaction, this incident comes to function as a site of deep rupture and a portal for haunting, because it results in pregnancy loss and a hysterectomy, performed by doctors in the hospital, following Ursa's fall. In scholarly discussions of *Corregidora*, this incident is framed as the outcome of an accident, and Mutt, her husband, is considered at fault (Abdur-Rahman, 2012, 121; Setka, 2014, 130). Ursa's hysterectomy has thus been generally understood to be the consequence of an episode of intimate partner violence that leads to a fall down some stairs, landing her in a hospital,

and ultimately on an operating table. I contend that a reading in which the burden of blame is placed, with finality, on a Black man (Mutt) is limiting because it easily folds back into the pathologization of Blackness, which had long been enlisted in rationalizations and justifications for the nation's racial capitalist origins in slaveholding, as well as contemporary transmogrifications thereof that perpetually retrench inequities along the lines of race.

In her 2019 article on *Corregidora*, Tala Khanmalek observes that "Jones's technique of weaving memories into dialogue brings the situated realities of Ursa's foremothers, especially the lived experience of slavery, into narrative proximity with her contemporary moment" (2019, p.9). Khanmalek contends that as a result, "Jones forces us to reconsider the hysterectomy, as well as the circumstances surrounding it, in light of enduring claims on Black women's bodies that extend well into the postwar era" (2019, p.9). In a footnote following this sentence, Khanmalek writes:

> Whether or not [Ursa] consents to the surgical procedure is unclear. Following Dorothy Roberts's work in *Killing the Black Body*, one can situate Ursa's hysterectomy in the context of government-sponsored family planning programs in the postwar era that targeted Black women with coercive sterilization practices. (2019, 22).

Attending to a cultural and regional backdrop of often-concealed and disavowed eugenic sterilizations—referred to as "Mississippi appendectomies" (Roberts, 1997, 90)—is one such powerful example of "enduring claims on Black women's bodies that extend well into the postwar era" (Khanmalek, 2019, 9). *Corregidora* takes place after the Second World War, at a time when the anxious drive to reinforce and shore up white heteropatriarchal domesticity motivated eugenic medical interventions. As I note above, the novel is written and published during a period of Black feminist consciousness-raising and collectivity. Informed by both the narrative's and the publication's historical moments, my reading argues that a *haunting context* of endemic practices of non-consensual sterilization of Black women is in fact evident in *Corregidora.* Furthermore, the ways in which the haunting element of eugenics is itself somewhat buried in the novel are in keeping with the shrouded nature of this euphemized practice. My reading identifies ways that the narrative points us towards a more contextualized reading of who and what bear blame and responsibility for this indelibly concretized loss of Ursa's bodily autonomy and reproductive agency.

Bearing witness reproductively: [Sic]k archives

The novel narrates Ursa's trauma and recuperation following the hysterectomy, and her psychic reckoning with her inability to "make generations," all while haunted by the memories and stories of her foremothers—past generations of "Corregidora women"—and of her ex-husband, Mutt. A central concern for Ursa and her foremothers is reproductive agency, as part and parcel of a commitment to bearing witness to their experiences and legacy in the face of an official disavowal and erasure of their history. As Ursa's Great-Gram told her when she was five years old (and as her grandmother and mother repeated over the years), all the slavery records from the plantation were burnt upon abolition:

> 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. (Jones, 1975, 12)

> …The important thing is making generations. They can burn the papers but they can't burn conscious, Ursa. And that's what makes the evidence. And that's what makes the verdict. (p.22)

In these passages, flashbacks of interactions with Great Gram leaving evidence consists of two layers: biologically, in bearing a child ("making generations"); and intellectually or creatively, in transmitting oral histories that bear witness to her foremothers' experiences while enslaved and in the aftermath of slavery. Jones's narrative fashions a visceral interdependence between progeny and archives, where an imperative to continue to bear witness to harm and to combat disavowal is both embodied and remembered/voiced, reproductively. Ultimately, Ursa does not birth a child to whom she will recount these histories. However, she is a performing artist—a blues singer—and transmits her histories in a more public way as a participant in popular cultural production (See Jones, 1975, pp.55, 57, 61). Scholars have suggested that Ursa's blues singing is a transformative avenue for a "new world" version of making generations and leaving evidence (See Setka, 2014, pp.137-138; Khanmalek, 2019, pp.14-16). Following the reasoning that creative cultural production—and specifically one affiliated formally with the blues—can be an avenue for reproductive testimony, my reading makes the case that Jones *also* performs such a reproductive, witness-bearing performance through the novel itself: Jones leaves evidence through the recursive telling of the stories of the Corregidora women, in *Corregidora.*

I treat the moment on page two of *Corregidora*, where Ursa relates that "the doctors in the hospital said my womb would have to come out," (Jones, 1975) as both a wound and a portal: It opens the narrative, and deeply affects Ursa, whose whole being from a tender age had been saturated with instructions to "leave evidence" of the horrors her foremothers endured by "making generations," and transmitting their oral histories to her progeny. This act of her womb "coming out" literally ruptures the core of her reproductive flesh and sense of self and family duty. In Ursa's case, this event and its consequences are more than a tragic deprivation of futurity in the loss of her embryo and her uterus. It is also a visceral break with her lineage, harming her relation to her past. It also leads to the break-up of her marriage (she relates, immediately following the sentence about the womb needing to come out: "Mutt and me didn't stay together after that" [2]), precipitating a rupture of kinship at yet another level, in the present.

In an even broader context, this opening moment for the novel's narrative is not only a traumatic and triggering event for Ursa Corregidora in light of the impact on her sense of family duty and sense of self and on her future, past, and present kinship ties: Ursa's hysterectomy is also the basis of the narrative's haunted engagement with eugenic sterilization as a rampant yet under-recorded practice in the medical industrial complex in the United States, and especially in the post-slavery South. This practice was (and in some cases, still is) a particularly violent and twisted then-contemporary legacy of the gender-based and family-based, kinship-rupturing and motherhood-depriving violence of slavery. Whereas enslaved women and their wombs were sexually exploited for profit and to produce more slaves, with the abolition of slavery, the motivation flips toward that of *eliminating* those who would now be considered a burden on society, or a public charge, or otherwise incompatible with eugenic aims and views in service of a white nationalist agenda (see Roberts, 1997; Briggs, 2000; Washington, 2006; Kim, 2021).

Bearing all these layers of harm, I refer to this moment of fleshly, psychic, and familial rupture as a *portal* in the narrative: Ursa's hysterectomy instantiates and opens up a *dehiscent* "[sic]k archive" in the world of Jones's *Corregidora*. What I mean by a [sic]k archive here is

a literary and aesthetic tactic: a textual reproduction of reproductive harm. Such a citational reproduction just barely remarks on this extant/prior harm, merely letting us know, *sic erat scriptum* or "thus it was written," which is commonly seen in reproduced quotations with a mistake, as a way of quietly indicating that it is not the *present author's* mistake, but one that is nevertheless included, for the sake of authenticity and accuracy; as evidence to which the "[sic]" bears witness. Intended for use within a reproduced quotation in a written text, [sic] is defined as "a parenthetical insertion used in printing quotations or reported utterances to call attention to something anomalous or erroneous in the original, or to guard against the supposition of misquotation" (Oxford English Dictionary).

"Thus it was written" is the phrase that "sic" is shorthand for. It codes and euphemizes critique through the practice of making the error apparent with the affirmative "sic," and by reproducing the error or harm. Notably, while normally a silent inscription, [sic] renders the scribe *visible* in their *lack* of exercise of editorial license. If editorial licenses were exercised, this would perpetuate a scripted cultural disavowal of harm, because the editorial redress would be *invisible* were they to *correct* rather than *reproduce and flag* the error in the citation. Thus, as a narrative tactic, "[sic]" points to a practice or ethics of critique and truth-telling that would prefer to risk reproducing harm prior to, *rather than correcting it*. This is because the alternative – the covering over of it – perpetuates a greater violence and even complicity. The purpose of chronicling the violent history of Ursa's foremothers' experiences in slavery and post-slavery, for instance, is a form of respect and homage to those who were direct victims of the violence, and part of a duty in the orientation towards justice. Not frequently remarked upon, "[sic]" is like a visual glitch in the midst of the thickness of uninterrupted script on a page; often passed over as an invisible and inaudible, tiny, window-like space in a written text. Here, I suggest that we think of the [sic] narrative tactic as a potentiality that points to a fundamental textual fracture or fissure. Ursa's is a painful story from which some might wish to turn away. Yet, a [sic] reading orientation allows us to understand how it functions as a vital portal—in the ways that it encodes and reproduces harm—for bearing witness and leaving evidence that gives readers access to potent cultural and historical critique.

In adding the "k" to this analytic, [sic]k, I connect the moment of critique to illness and disability, as there are viscerally embodied consequences; it is pathological and health-impacting. That is to say, the domestic violence and sterilization are pathological and health-impacting at the same time as they both cite and indict the material conditions that enabled and formed the broader context for the consequences that Ursa suffers. In this particular example, *Corregidora'*s story is an indictment of the way in which reproductive oppression at the core of slavery is genocidal; *reprocide*, in the words of Loretta Ross (Ross, as cited in Ross et al., 2017, p.23). The story viscerally inscribes the loss and ruptures of intimacy that slaveholders enact upon the enslaved, in Ursa's deprivation of her "reproductive flesh"—both the uterus and the proliferative cells of the embryo—leaving her only with stitches that later become scars from the surgery.

My analysis derives its conceptualization of reproductive flesh as an inscribed archive from Hortense Spillers' path breaking essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987), and further elaborates the critical agency that reproductive archival flesh might be seen to exercise. The concept of captive Black flesh as an archival register comes to us from Spillers's articulation of the marks of violence on the captive body as "lacerations, woundings, fissures, tears, scars, openings, ruptures, lesions, rendings, punctures" which compose a "hieroglyphics of the flesh" (1987, p.67). Spillers's essay de-constructs a cultural grammar for colonized North America (the site of "Americanness")

and she designates a foundational "cultural vestibularity" to captive flesh and its violent inscriptions (1987, p.67): Where a vestibule is an initial chamber that one must pass through to enter into a home or a building—or, in terms of female genitalia, the vestibule is the zone of tissue that marks the transition between the vulva and the vaginal canal—Spillers is making the point that it is this very brutalized and unprotected flesh that *is the entrance and passageway towards American culture* as it was founded and as we know it; foundational to an American cultural grammar-book. In other words, the American culture of sanctioned violence passes through and *requires* this passage-chamber of flesh.

On defining Black flesh through the perception of race via skin color, Spillers opens the passage I discuss above as follows: "These undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color" (p.67). What Spillers means by "disjunctures [that] come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color" is that *the perception of skin color* sutures, covers over, hides; rationalizes and *justifies* the markings that the violence of slave traders, owners, and others have inscribed upon Black flesh. In other words, the perception of race rationalizes unthinkable violence and harm. Victim blaming begins with skin tone; and this is a foundational logic of American culture, from which the medical sphere is anything but immune.

Reading evidence: Blame and eugenic resonances

I argue that, in *Corregidora*, Jones offers readers some clues towards evidence of Ursa's sterilization as eugenically motivated. First, perplexing slippages as to whom to hate or rage against reveal the implication of doctors and the medical industrial complex, and, most significantly, whiteness, in bearing the blame for the loss and sickness that Ursa endures. Second, there is a diagnostic slippage where a digestive ailment is mentioned in proximity to her hysterectomy, in a suggestive rhetorical gesture towards the euphemistic "Mississippi Appendectomy."

Readers are informed from the outset of the book that Ursa raged intensely and vocally in the hospital after she was sterilized and informed of her pregnancy loss: "They said when I was delirious I was cursing him *and* the doctors and nurses out" (italics in the original, p.2). Readers later learn that Ursa had been "about a month pregnant, little over a month" at the time of the fall and subsequent sterilization (p.14). Speaking with Tad, the proprietor of Happy's who was putting Ursa up after her hospital stay, and who would later become her second husband, this comes up again, when he says, "They said you had those nurses scared to death of you. Cussing them out like that." (pp.6-7). The fact that she raged against – and frightened – the nurses and doctors is notable because the attentive repetition of these details is suggestive and serves to link nurses/doctors to her rage. Furthermore, Jones italicizes the "and," for emphasis, in the first example. I take this added element as a subtle cue and clue that Ursa, even if in her state of delirium, was experiencing a pointed and righteous rage and targeting of the medical workers in relation to her sterilization: Italicized words play a significant role in the novel as they typically signify not just emphasis in dialogue, but extended italicized sections indicate flashbacks of her foremothers bearing witness and leaving evidence. The italicized conjunction, then, bears added significance as a site of potential testimony and witness. Further in this conversation with Tad, in a semi-willful misunderstanding as to whom to hate - Mutt or Old Man Corregidora - Ursa addresses Tad's question of whether she hates Mutt for what happened to her by addressing the question of whether she hates Old Man Corregidora. When she begins to talk about Corregidora in response to Tad's question, "[Tad] frowned and I knew he hadn't meant the old man, but I went on as if he had" (p.8).

This misrecognition of whom to hate suggestively shifts responsibility up the chain, even from the medical providers, and points to a critical indictment of white supremacy and the legacy of slavery as responsible agents of harm, as opposed to letting the blame land and stay with the Black man.

Finally, as a nod to the term Mississippi Appendectomy, there is curiously a passing mention of gastritis in her post-hospitalization debrief with Tad, which Ursa immediately pushes back against: "They said you had gastritis too. You weren't eating right." / "I was eating all right." (p.6). This detail of gastritis or digestive issues doesn't come up again, and the proximity in which a fleeting mention of a potentially nonexistent digestive ailment ostensibly diagnosed by Ursa's attending physician(s) who performed her sterilization reveals a specter of such a Mississippi Appendectomy associated with her hospitalization. Even if the gastritis isn't cited as the reason for her sterilization, readers are nevertheless presented with a *rhetorical haunting* by association, of the Mississippi Appendectomy, which in itself is a bitter and wry reference to a surgeon's willful misrecognition of abdominal organs and their expendability – confusing a non-vital digestive appendage with a Black woman's reproductive organs.

Intimate partner & reproductive violence as [Sic]k archive

To further contextualize my reading of spectral clues of the Mississippi Appendectomy and the blame and etiology that Ursa traces to Old Man Corregidora and, by proxy, white supremacy and the slaveholding economy, it is important to note the ways in which Jones's narrative is also haunted by the legacy of the fungibility of the Black woman and her foreclosure from a truly private sphere. Intimate social ties and the right to familial ties of one's choosing—reproductive rights in the broad sense—should be conceived of as fundamental to a citizen-subject. And yet, the culturally constitutive institution of chattel slavery is defined by the deprivation of this fundamental need and right, inscribing the dispossessed slave as a critical contributor to the domestic sphere of white America, as an economic asset, and a provider of unpaid vital domestic reproductive labor in every sense. Scholars of race, sexuality, and disability (including Briggs, 2000; Glymph, 2008) argue that the sphere of intimate kinships and relationships is not in fact private in many instances: In the Americas, the domestic and family space was a workplace for African Americans; in the case of disabled or incarcerated people, it can be a non-space of institutionalization. And, as Laura Briggs has elaborated in her essay on hysteria and race (2000), the domestic sphere became a place of ideological control for racial and sexual purity, a site of production and preservation of [white] "American-ness." Therefore, as a space that is never quite private to begin with, the family space can also function as a critically reflective "[sic]k" archive of forcibly forgotten histories and contexts of violence. In effect, a family space can be an intensified zone of historical harm, where traumatic and violent moments that might be erased from the dominant historical narrative are preserved.

The intimate partner violence inflicted by Mutt in *Corregidora* is an instance where family dynamics and intimate struggles express a deeper and greater harm done to the community by the state *and* the history of slavery: If read as a [sic]k archival moment of rupture, this instance of intimate partner violence (and others) can be understood to be "telling on" this origin story of the American family. Furthermore, in Ursa's family history, prostitution was a key component of experiences during slavery, as her foremothers were prostituted by Old Man Corregidora, who would notably call Great-Gram "my little gold piece" (Jones, 1975, p.9). This epithet, "my little gold piece," denoting the Black woman's fungibility, is repeated throughout the narrative in flashbacks, and is also mimetically uttered by Mutt in reference to Ursa's pussy, haunting their marriage. The specter of prostitution is also spectrally present

through Mutt's jealous anxiety about Ursa's performances in her work as a blues singer, specifically regarding the men who watch her, consuming her performances. Mutt felt that it threatened their relationship, as she was singing her stories for public consumption – a form of intimacy that generates profit. It is this very jealousy that motivated his violent assault that sent Ursa to the hospital and induced a miscarriage. Notably, Mutt's drunken assault on Ursa occurred in a liminal public space, on the back stairs, which Ursa took when leaving her place of work to walk the short distance to their shared home. Furthermore, following her return from the hospital, Ursa was essentially homeless, as she did not want to return to the formerly shared apartment with Mutt. Instead, she spends the earlier part of the novel shuttling between between Tad and Cat's homes. Here, Ursa's dislocation from a space of personal home arguably further reveals the way in which an incident of domestic violence can tear the veil from a semblance of privacy or insularity.

Significantly, an incident of domestic violence can often function as a catalyst towards vulnerability in the public sphere, exposing both victim and perpetrator to further—and similarly structured—public violence by way of medical intervention (as with Ursa), or by way of policing and incarceration. Ultimately, the violence perpetrated against Ursa by her then-husband Mutt serves as the [sic]k window of opportunity for the intimately invasive diagnosis of a "medically necessary emergency hysterectomy" to be made and inflicted. Ursa's confinement to a hospital immediately after the violent incident brings her story firmly into post-slavery structures of violence and control: In the hospital, she is dispossessed of her womb, dictated, as I argue below, by a eugenic (mis)diagnostic logic.

(Mis)diagnosis and reprocide: Lessons for feminist health humanities

The nascent professional medical sphere, and ultimately the medical-industrial-complex, are shaped in fundamental ways by a material reality of an economy founded upon racialized denigration and exploitation. Whilst the economy was quite literally sustained by the enslavement and exploitation of Black people in the 18th and 19th centuries in the Atlantic world, the dependence on exploitation of Black people became rationalized and entrenched through a medicalization of Blackness, which medical practitioners canonized in an endeavor for professional status in a slaveholding economy (See Hogarth, 2017). The medicalization of Blackness is a sibling to scientific racism, but, where scientific racism is largely disavowed, the medicalization of Blackness is more insidious, and has been quietly incorporated into the canons of medicine and persists today in race-based diagnoses and race-corrections in testing and measurement. In the wake of this legacy, a Black woman's encounter with the medical industrial complex in the postwar South is especially ripe for the facile incursion of eugenics. In closing, I consider Ursa's hysterectomy through the lens of a culturally inflected (mis)diagnosis, and ask what implications a [sic]k reading heuristic might have for contemporary and ongoing reproductive justice struggles.

Literature in medical sociology paints a picture of a medicalizing, diagnosis-oriented epistemology in the healthcare professions. While a diagnosis (when accurate, or approximately) can provide legitimation to suffering and access to institutional support, it is also a powerful agent of objectification, classification, and control. Symptoms, behaviors, or conditions that may or may not be biological in nature are organized into disorders and syndromes and classified into diagnoses that then come to shape identity categories (Brown, 1995; Conrad, 2007; Horwitz, 2007). The medical, legal, and otherwise institutional deployment of the discourse of diagnosis also structures a system of authority and agency where the "diagnosed" "patient" experiences the dispossession of themselves, beginning with being spoken about in the third person and frequently having their personhood reduced to their

diagnosis (Irigaray, 1993; Jutel, 2011). Further, the word "diagnosis" comes from the greek "dia" meaning to separate, and "gnosis" meaning to know: thus, to know via separation. Such an epistemology of separation contrives ahistorical socio-bio-medical patient-subjects, and thereby risks sliding into a reprocidal, eugenic imposition upon social ties and kinship. Such a biomedically determined model of diagnosis excludes historical and socio-political etiologies for present conditions and suffering, ignoring structural socio-economic orientations and affective traumas of racism and sexism that might produce pain, suffering, and vulnerability (Geary, 2014; Metzl & Hansen, 2014).

Further, the way that biomedical diagnostic practice tends to cleave a subject from context shares common features with the practice of historical whitewashing that American culture and the medical-industrial-complex prefer to a critical historical consciousness. This type of historical disavowal holds harmful consequences for vulnerable populations, as the ensuing contextual vacuum is readily filled by ideologies of personal responsibility and victim-blaming, which severely limits any true etiology and thwarts healing. Indeed, framed in this way, diagnosis shares uncanny resonances with the effect of "cultural seeing" of skin tone that, per Spillers, causes the markings of severe violence on captive flesh to be hidden (1987, p.67), and also with the phenomenon of medicalizing Blackness, whereby an essentialized Blackness comes to stand in for material conditions impacting health (Hogarth, 2017). The intersectional compounding of the decontextualizing operations of biomedical diagnosis with medical and cultural varieties of racism, on top of misogyny, holds the risk of great and ongoing harm for historically oppressed and racialized women. With these harmful resonances in mind, it becomes urgently evident how badly a truly intersectional disability politics is needed in order to achieve a measure of health and reproductive justice.

In the case of *Corregidora*, I argue that a (mis)diagnosis based on antiblack "cultural seeing"—as an indoctrinated bias toward the need to curb population growth for non-white groups that simultaneously disavows the violence and deprivation of kinship that these groups have already endured—arguably took place in the moment of Ursa's medical encounter that involved her post-traumatic miscarriage. Here, then, as a tool for cutting reproductive flesh, diagnosis was deployed to eugenically sterilize someone whose progeny may be perceived as a burden, or simply incommensurate with the racialized project of nationhood (Briggs, 2000). To put it another way, if the common practice was to sterilize Black women who went in for anything abdominally related, the questionable "necessity" of Ursa's hysterectomy was a heavily culturally inflected (mis)diagnosis, and the indicated treatment was reprocidal (Ross, 2017).

When we direct our gaze toward persistent health inequities and the ongoing struggle for reproductive autonomy and justice in the 21st century Americas, we should all be mindful of haunting resonances of (mis)diagnoses via racist "cultural seeing" that lead to harmful outcomes which, in Ursa's case, happened to be eugenic sterilization. The critical consciousness that a reading of *Corregidora* as a [sic]k archive affords us is particularly needed in the contemporary American struggle over reproductive rights, where a recent ruling in Alabama established that embryos were persons with rights under the law. As Lauren Rankin (2024) writes, fetal personhood legislation erodes the right to privacy and, by extension, to "individual bodily and personal autonomy." Additionally, such legislation is yet another iteration of racially motivated endeavors to control the racial makeup of the nation by dictating who gets to (or is compelled to) bear and parent children, and when: young, white, heterosexual cis-gendered women. A [sic]k analytic might allow us to better see the legacies of violence and control that subtends a so-called pro-life legislative agenda that stands to give (presumptively white, nondisabled) embryos more rights than Black women.

As I have sought to bring feminist health humanities into conversation with reproductive and disability justice lenses, in closing, it is worth reflecting on the importance of "leaving evidence" as articulated not by Ursa's foremothers, but by contemporary disability justice writer, speaker, and activist Mia Mingus, who named her blog "*Leaving Evidence*" in 2009. Mingus (2009) writes, in a pull quote that populates every page of the blog as a persistent framework:

> We must leave evidence. Evidence that we were here, that we existed, that we survived and loved and ached. … Evidence for each other that there are other ways to live--past survival; past isolation.

It is this spirit of evidence mobilized in service of "other ways to live—past survival; past isolation" that also drives the goal of my essay in hopes that we can approach Jones's novel as a vital site of evidence that not only documents violent cultural histories, but that creates a space for recognition which moves us out of isolation and towards greater solidarity and historical consciousness in our approach to reproductive justice in the present.

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