

6-1-2010

Hermeneutics of the Crossroads

Jacqueline S. Farritor
University of Denver

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Farritor, Jacqueline S., "Hermeneutics of the Crossroads" (2010). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 189.
<https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd/189>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact jennifer.cox@du.edu, dig-commons@du.edu.

HERMENEUTICS OF THE CROSSROADS

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of Arts and Humanities

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Jacqueline S. Farritor

June 2010

Advisor: Selah Saterstrom

© Copyright by Jacqueline S. Farritor 2010

All Rights Reserved

Author: Jacqueline S. Farritor
Title: HERMENEUTICS OF THE CROSSROADS
Advisor: Selah Saterstrom
Degree Date: June 2010

Abstract

The main question posed in my thesis is whether or not the crossroads is a paradigm that might open the event of reading and interpretation. I believe this profound place of possibility is a valid intellectual model for innovative and uninhabited modes of understanding. The hermeneutics of the crossroads is an imaginative approach that keeps us open to the transformative power of literature transpiring when we bring to the text our working scholarly knowledge, but also allow ourselves to receive what it has to offer us.

Using the crossroads theory of surrendering and receiving, I have interpreted Gayl Jones's novel, *Corregidora*, in this spirit. In Chapter 1, I briefly examine historical aspects in Blues creation and evolution, and how this relates to Jones's novel. Chapter 2, I perform my hermeneutical interpretive posture. And finally, in Chapter 3, I place myself in the center of possibility within Hoodoo culture, in order to personally discover how this revered, yet often overlooked, culture speaks to and through Blues, literature, and the crossroads.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the faculty and staff of the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 University of Denver English Department. I would especially like to thank my master's thesis advisor, Selah Saterstrom, for all of her insight and guidance during the writing of my thesis. I would also like to thank Bill Zaranka for serving on my thesis committee. And finally, thank you to Arthur Jones of the University of Denver Women's College, for serving as the outside chair on my master's thesis committee.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: The Blues	11
Section I: History	11
Section II: Blues and <i>Corregidora</i>	20
Chapter 2: A Crossroads Reading of <i>Corregidora</i>	22
Introduction	22
Section I: The Blues and Orality	23
Section II: Possibility and Transformation	28
Section III: Legba—Teacher, Guide, Protector	34
Conclusion	36
Chapter 3: Hoodoo	38
Introduction	38
Section I: Interview with Licensed Hoodoo Practitioner Lou Florez	39
Section II: Honey Jar	47
Section III: Hoodoo and Blues	53
Summary	64
Chapter 4: Conclusion	66
Addendum	70
Notes	72
Works Cited	75
Appendices	79

Hermeneutics of the Crossroads

Introduction

The crossroads is celebrated in Blues lyrics as well as Hoodoo culture, which proliferated in the South before and during the rise of the Blues. This site, whether figurative or literal is a profound place of possibility, a location where learning can occur, where transformative exchange transpires. It is a combination of forces, an amalgamation of influences, and a permutation of worlds. At the crossroads we are placed in the center of opportunity where two roads open to four, and all lead away from “home.” Not for the faint hearted, we go to the crossroads to meet the face of mystery. Once there, no matter what happens, we must always make an offering (surrender something) and make a request (thus we also receive something). We then survey the available roads before us, and ask for the mystery itself to co-create the best choice and outcome—the risky gesture that leads to the most important aspect of the crossroads, transformation.

As both a literary scholar and lover of the Blues, my question has become: *Is the crossroads also a paradigm that might open the event of reading*

*and interpretation? Is there such a thing as a **hermeneutics of the crossroads**, and if so, what would this mode of reading look like?* I posit that we, as readers, place ourselves at the crossroads when we encounter texts. I want to celebrate this posture because it means as readers we have come to be transformed. If we let go of our attachments of how a piece of literature should behave, we are offered the opportunity to experience a more vulnerable engagement and exchange between the text and ourselves.

The hermeneutics of the crossroads as a mode of reading and engaging is analogous to the experience I undergo when submitting myself to the impact of the Blues. In Blues music, words make lyrics, and notes form melodies; but it is not the way these two elements follow musical rules that initiate emotion. As opposed to simply interpreting lines being sung, or critiquing chords being played, it is in the breaking and bending of the rules and musical standards that produces a much more powerful exchange for me as a listener. There are vaguely established standards for what constitutes Blues music, but there is also a place of possibility where many different techniques of singing, playing, and expression can occur. The opportunity for variety and personal style let the song construct its own world, narrative forms, and method of interpretation. The emotion is transmitted in and through the between space. The combination of words and music are generated in this unique space by the performers as well as the audience. All feed off of each other to create a synergistic narrative expression. The interchange is where the transformation occurs. Let me

contextualize this with the following vignettes encapsulating some of the elements of the crossroads.

“I went to the crossroads, fell down on my knees.” *Cross Roads Blues*¹

This famous Blues lyric, recorded by Robert Johnson in the 1930s, and many other musicians since, alludes to a mythological place within Blues culture. Legend says that Robert Johnson, in order to become a virtuosic Blues guitarist, took his guitar to the crossroads at midnight, and sold his soul to the devil in order to become the greatest Blues guitarist the world had ever experienced. There are different versions of the story, embellishments made to the legend, and discrepancies found in the tale. Facts about the story are disputed by historians, many of whom claim it was not Robert Johnson who fabricated the “crossroads deal with the devil story.” Rather, as explained by Cat Yronwode in her research, “It was Tommy Johnson, Not Robert Johnson,” many Blues historians believe the story originated with one of Robert Johnson’s Blues guitarist friends, Thomas Johnson (Yronwode, *Website*)².

Discrepancies in this particular story illustrate the dynamic nature of the oral storytelling tradition. Details in stories change each time they are told to different audiences and by different storytellers. This reveals the living nature of stories. They are changing, flexible representations of a culture. The oral tradition of storytelling, inherited from African slave ancestors, was still

common among African Americans during the 1920s in United States history. Congruent with the times, it stands to reason that either Robert Johnson decided to start telling the story as if it was his own, or others started telling the story using his name in order to produce a more alluring appeal to audiences who would recognize his name. Either way, Robert Johnson is the one who still benefits from the power of this crossroads story. Whether Robert Johnson stole the story, or storytellers misconstrued the details, one fact remains: the prevalence of the crossroads image in the oral tradition of Blues history.

“He’s gone where the Southern cross the Yellow Dog.” *Yellow Dog Blues*³

Another famous Blues lyric, sung by W.C. Handy, refers to a historical location in Moorhead, Mississippi where two railroad tracks crossed: The Southern Railway and the Yazoo Delta Railroad, referred to as, “Yellow Dog.” Legend says, while waiting at a train station in Mississippi, Handy heard a guitar player, singing and playing in a way he had never before experienced. It was Handy’s first encounter with what would become known as Blues music. While at his crossroads—one of intersecting tracks—he was influenced by the musical style he would soon help to develop. One important aspect of this crossroads image is that it portrays how the crossroads is a place where a physical journey can take place: the different trains lead the traveler in multiple directions, all leading away from the site of origin. The traveling imagery

associated with both the crossroads and trains represents a form of autonomy for the traveler: there is a sense of possibility and freedom associated with a journey to someplace new. The image of a train is one that can carry a person to a new locale, similar to the concept of a transformation at a crossroads. The body has the option to physically be transported someplace new, and with this there is a sense of acquired sovereignty. The idea of traveling leading to the discovery of new opportunities lying before us, is exemplified by Handy opening himself to the possibility of a new musical style. The freedom he experienced allowed him to discover a new form of expression, the Blues. It is no accident Handy's story occurs at a renowned historical crossroads.

“Done sold my soul, sold it to the Devil, but he won't let me be 'lone.” *Sold it to the Devil* ⁴

These lyrics, from a Black Spider Dumpling's Blues song, refer to the “devil,” which in Blues and Hoodoo cultures is not always the same connotation as in a Western religious sense. Polytheistic religions (namely, African and Pagan religions) were interpreted by monotheistic religions (namely, Christian and Jewish religions). African religions have many names for the deity at the crossroads. “In Africa, almost every cultural group has its own version of the crossroads god. Legba, Ellegua, Elegbara, Eshu, Exu, Nbumba Nzila, and Pomba Gira are African and African-diaspora names (in several languages) for

the spirit who opens the way, guards the crossroads, and teaches wisdom” (Yronwode, *Website*)⁵. However, the majority of planting class Southern culture did not have multiple names for deities. Because the crossroads deity was mysterious and did not correspond to conventional religions’ image of God, he must be the devil. Much like the African religions it evolved from, Hoodoo (which will be described in the next vignette) carried on the tradition of the crossroads deity. This supernatural being, Legba, is usually described as a dark man, sometimes in black and red. He is not wicked. As Yronwode explains, “the crossroads spirit is not Satan. Nor is he evil, harmful, deceptive, or cruel in the sense that the Judeo-Christian devil is. He is a revered spiritual entity from a polytheistic religious system” (Yronwode, *Website*)⁶. This keeper of the crossroads is the intermediary between that which is left behind and that which is gained. One must encounter this spirit at the crossroads in order to experience transformation.

“If ah want tuh go gamblin', go to a crossroads 'fore de sunup and have de dice in yore han's . . . an' shook dem dice at dat crossroads until de sun gets up where yo' kin see it” (Hyatt, 1415).

Hoodoo, like the Blues, is another culture that celebrates the crossroads. Cat Yronwode describes Hoodoo as, “The beliefs and customs brought to America by African slaves mingled here with the beliefs, customs, and botanical

knowledge of Native Americans and with the Christian, Jewish, and pagan folklore of European immigrants . . . Other regionally popular names for hoodoo in the black community include ‘conjunction,’ ‘conjure,’ ‘witchcraft,’ ‘rootwork,’ and ‘tricking.’” (Yronwode, *Website*)⁷. Images, vernacular, spells, beliefs, traditions, and characteristics of this practice found their way into the creation and evolution of the Blues. The above excerpt is from Harry M. Hyatt’s collection *Hoodoo, Conjunction, Witchcraft, Rootwork*. As explained by Cat Yronwode, “Hoodoo - Conjunction - Witchcraft – Rootwork (HCWR) is a 5-volume, 4766-page collection of folkloric material gathered by Hyatt in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia between 1936 and 1940 . . . The ‘Hoodoo’ collection consists of 13,458 separate magic spells and folkloric beliefs, [in addition to] lengthy interviews with professional root doctors, conjurers, and hoodoos” (Yronwode, *Website*)⁸. The book is a vast resource representing the practice of Hoodoo, as accounted by authentic practitioners, many who were affiliated with the Blues community.

In Hoodoo practice, the crossroads commonly serves two functions: a place to learn a skill and a place to safely dispose of materials used in rituals. The excerpt above from Hyatt’s *Hoodoo, Conjunction, Witchcraft, Rootwork*, refers to learning how to be a better gambler via the power of the crossroads. In this context, the crossroads was used as a place to “learn a new skill.” The Fayetteville Hoodoo practitioner informs Hyatt how this particular ritual should

be performed. Hoodoo practice has specific instructions on the proper steps to performing a crossroads ritual in order for it to be prosperous.

Robert Johnson, W.C. Handy, Black Spider Dumpling, and Harry Hyatt, each refer to important aspects of the crossroads:

- **The Power of Oral Storytelling in Blues Culture**
- **A Place of Possibility and Transformation**
- **The Legba Deity of the Crossroads—Who is a Teacher, Guide, and Protector.**
- **Hoodoo Traditions (which will be examined in Chapter 3)**

I propose that the hermeneutics of the crossroads is a valid interpretive posture for approaching reading, where the same type of exchange transpires.

I believe that within this crossroads space is the larger mystery of the transformative power of literature. It is a place where literature meets reader meets theory. If we bring to the crossroads that which we know about interpretation and reading, but also surrender this knowledge to what texts have to offer us, a power alteration occurs. The function of the crossroads in Blues and Hoodoo creates valid criterion for engaging literature.

I am at the crossroads as a literary scholar. I have been taught theory, interpretation, reading modes, and methods, but I am also interested in meeting my texts on their terms, so that I can be transformed. Using this crossroads theory of surrendering and receiving, I have interpreted Gayl Jones's novel, *Corregidora*, in this spirit. In Chapter 1, I will briefly examine historical aspects in Blues creation and evolution, and how this relates to Jones's novel. Chapter 2 will be a performance of my hermeneutical interpretive posture. Finally, in

Chapter 3, I will place myself in the center of possibility within Hoodoo culture, in order to personally discover how this revered, yet often overlooked, culture speaks to and through Blues and literature.

Chapter 1: The Blues

Section I: History

A brief historical summary of Blues music will help in grounding and unpacking the transformative power of the crossroads functioning in Gayl Jones's text, *Corregidora*. In his book, *Blues People*, LeRoi Jones (a.k.a. Amiri Baraka) claims, as many other scholars on the subject do, that there is not one set answer or definitive history describing exactly when and how the Blues formed. There were few if any written records, recordings, or documentation of the development of the Blues in its earliest stages (dates too are disputed). L. Jones argues that Blues formed as African slaves became more and more American. It was part of the "*path* [Jones's italics] the slave took to 'citizenship'" (ix). The first African slaves were forced from their homeland and brought to a country, the United States, where beliefs, ideals, and social systems were in dire opposition to those of Western Africa.

Jones contends that being enslaved under someone who has an entirely different worldview is one of the most cruel and brutal forms of slavery. Yet, he continues to explain that Blues, "could not exist if the African captives had not

become American captives” (17). Slaves’ “work songs” were the predecessor to Blues music. These work songs were similar to the songs of Western Africa, including strong beats and rhythms. The first generation of African slaves in the United States continued the tradition of singing such songs, and passed these traditions to their children, who were able to combine the African traditions they learned from their parents’ generation, and the United States’ traditions they learned from the country into which they were born. Jones clarifies, “The blues is formed out of the same social and musical fabric that the spiritual issued from . . .” (63). These work songs, combined with the religious elements of the United States, formed the early part of the music now known as Spirituals; and the work songs, combined with secular elements of the United States, formed the early creation of Blues.

Many of the lyrics of these work songs formed from a dialect of Africans trying to learn and emulate the words they heard from their enslavers. They would adapt these words to scales, chords, and rhythms present in their West African music traditions. Slave masters and other authority figures criticized these scales and chords as incorrect and poorly composed because they judged them based on the European musical standards with which they were familiar. For example, strong drum beats found in these early slave songs were considered primitive, because such critics were not aware that many West African traditions used different drum beats as a means of communication. The variance in different beats was recognizable to Africans familiar with the

intricacies of them; while the slave master, generally only familiar with European music, had an untrained ear for the rhythmic variances present in this music. Strong rhythmic beats continued into the formation of Blues music.

The African tradition of storytelling found its way into the slave music. Techniques of shouting and yelling during certain parts of the story were embedded techniques within the music. Additionally, reasons for telling a story, often through song, was a major component in the music of the slaves. Jones explains in *Blues People*, “If we think of African music as regards its intent, we must see that it differed from Western music in that it was a purely *functional* music . . . [examples include] songs used by young men to influence young women (courtship, challenge, scorn); songs used by workers to make their tasks easier; songs used by older men to prepare the adolescent boys for manhood, and so on” (28-29). Slaves had a reason and purpose for creating and singing their narrative, whereas European music was often simply relegated for listening pleasure, and viewed as a “higher art form”.

As future generations of African Americans became assimilated into the United States society, characteristics of both African and American traditions combined to form new religious beliefs, musical customs, and artistic forms. The content of songs, the musical scales, tones, rhythms, and techniques of singing all changed the more the African was exposed to the United States culture. Eventual freedom granted to slaves also affected the intent and style of the early forms of music. Slaves were now, in theory, able to work for

themselves, maintain their own crops, make their own choices, and form their own lives. Therefore, the intention of singing and the subject matter sang about, changed to reflect new, complex concerns. Groups of slaves were divided and started lives in different locations. Emancipation, and the social situation associated with it, created other difficulties for newly freed African Americans that they never had to deal with as slaves. Jones writes, “The music of the Negro began to reflect these social and cultural complexities and change” (62). Change in speech patterns, exposure to European musical forms, and separation from other African Americans who may have previously helped to promote and instill African traditions, all began to change the early music of slaves into the modern, most basic, Blues form of a twelve-bar, three-line, AAB structure.

This structure refers to a song with twelve measures (or musical “bars”), divided into three lines—where each line has four measures, with four beats in each measure, establishing a basic, regular, rhythmic pattern. The three lines are written in a pattern (AAB) where the first two lines are repeated (AA), and the third line is some form of resolution—an answer or reply to the first two (B). This arrangement mimics the call and response convention of early African American slaves’ work songs. One example is the Blues song, “Dust My Broom”⁹:

I’m gonna get up in the morning I believe I’ll dust my broom

I’m gonna get up in the morning I believe I’ll dust my broom

Girlfriend the Black man you been lovin’ girlfriend can get my room

In his book, *“Looking Up At Down”*: *The Emergence of Blues Culture*, William Barlow focuses on the standardization of modern Blues forms, and explains how and why Blues gained such popularity as one of the most popular forms of folk music in the United States. He claims, “It is no accident that the blues came to the forefront of black culture at a time when African Americans were confronting a serious decline in their collective economic and political status in the South. The blues were part of a widespread cultural response to renewed white oppression” (Barlow 7). Freed slaves realized they were still not “free.” They still experienced abuse, discrimination, violence, horrible treatment by the majority of white culture, had to struggle to survive, and feared for their lives. There were ongoing reasons to lament and find an outlet of expression in Blues songs, just as the older enslaved generations did. The new generation had different circumstances, new stories to tell, and other hardships to endure and overcome. Barlow states, “Their songs were the collective expression of the experiences of a new generation of African Americans born after slavery but still living with its legacy, still caught up in a life-or-death struggle for survival and freedom” (8). During the work week, Blues were generally sung as African Americans worked in fields experiencing the hardships of weather, intense labor, substandard payment—if at all—agricultural theft, racism, and many other forms of oppression: the ingredients for a “blue” feeling. Barlow traces the use of the term “blue” back to the 1500s when it was first used as an English expression, “to connote an anxious and troubled state of mind.” In the 1600s it

was associated with “blue devils” who were, “evil spirits that brought on depression and despair.” Finally, the use in the United States dates back to the early 1800s where instead of “blue devils” it was shortened to “blues” in order to, “describe a mood of low spirits and emotional stress.” At the end of the Civil War, African Americans began using the term to describe the music they were singing about their “depression and despair” (Barlow 8-9).

This music was especially prevalent in rural areas of the South, known as the Delta, and the term “Delta Blues” refers to the music from this region¹⁰. Famous Bluesmen, Son House and Lightning Hopkins have both been recorded talking about improvised songs they would compose and sing in the fields to deal with their troubles. The hollers, improvised lyrics, rhythms, and tunes that started as freed African Americans would sing in the fields, were the next stage in the Blues tradition. In the timeline of Blues history, this is known as “rural Blues”. African Americans singing rural Blues alone in the fields during the work week, eventually started congregating on Saturday nights and Sunday mornings to sing in a community atmosphere. The newly freed generation, while still experiencing destitution, found relief, entertainment, and a sense of enjoyment in such gatherings.

The singing and dancing provided a release from the adversity experienced during the week. These gatherings lead to the formation of “juke joints”. In her book, *The Sanctified Church*, Zora Neale Hurston describes a juke joint as a “word for a Negro pleasure house. It may mean a bawdy house. It

may mean the house set apart on public works where the men and women dance, drink and gamble. Often it is a combination of all these” (62). This type of atmosphere lead to the popularization of more instruments being used in Blues music, such as guitars, drums, banjos, harmonicas, and fiddles. The addition of such instruments was more conducive to dancing. The original form of Blues coming from only a voice—as slaves could not play an instrument and work in the field at the same time—began to merge into a form with more instrumentation, and in short order the instruments began to acquire many of the original characteristics of the voice in early forms of Blues music. They too had to keep a beat, tell a story, have a purpose, yell, shout, holler, and soon became critical elements to Blues music.

Popular Bluesmen eventually started traveling the Delta entertaining audiences becoming increasingly fond of the music. Subject matter, musical structures, and instrumentation honored the early forms of the music, but soon such music was not simply an outlet for emotion on a rural plantation, it was a way for freed African Americans to come together within a powerful narrative tradition. Popularity and recognition of the Blues spread as Blues musicians made their way to other parts of the country. Famous Blues musicians such as Charley Patton, Thomas Johnson, and Robert Johnson traveled around the country. Each Blues musician began to develop their own style. This diasporic element in Blues history began the development of different Blues styles all around the United States.

One of the most notable occurrences for increasing knowledge and interest in the Blues was the recording of Blues musicians in the early 1900s. This phenomenon has also been pivotal in the preservation of early Blues. Up until the beginning of the twentieth century, there were no recordings of Blues songs. This was the first time in the history of the Blues, that the music was tangibly documented and attainable to a wider audience. The combination of traveling Blues musicians, and their recordings, helped the music spread to other areas of the United States. More musicians developed in areas all over the country and new Blues styles and techniques began to cultivate in multiple locales.

One new type of Blues music was developed by women. In the 1920s, famous female Blues singers became known as “classic Blues” singers. However, this was not the first time women were singing the Blues. They were also involved in the evolution of Blues music. African women who were brought to the United States carried on West African oral traditions of storytelling. Women sang work songs, spirituals, and used music as an outlet for their pain. Barlow discusses Sojourner Truth having Bluesy renditions of traditional spirituals, Harriet Tubman using music to deliver secret messages in the Underground Railroad, and Marie Laveau, the Voodoo Hoodoo Queen of New Orleans singing about religious and spiritual rituals combining West African traditions and American culture (135-136). However, the “classic Blues” singers became involved in the recording industry, and their music was

used for commercial interests. The Blues singing women before them did not have this opportunity. In writing about both generations, Barlow asserts, “Both genres responded to adversity with self-confidence and determination; they symbolically encouraged and empowered black women to take control of their own lives” (136). These women were able to use Blues to convey feelings in a way society during their time would not allow them to do otherwise. Blues music functioned psychologically, sexually, and socially for these women. It presented new possibilities and a form of escape from debilitating forces in their lives. For African American women, singing the Blues was transcendence over oppression, a means of historical remembrance, a form of healing, a way of keeping stories alive, and a method of passing on stories to subsequent generations.

In his book, *Blues: The Basics*, Dick Weissman explains how the classic Blues women of the 1920s were revolutionary in their song lyrics about freedom and sexuality. In the past, Black women were under the sexual control of their masters. Choosing their sexual partners and experiencing any sort of sexual freedom was not allowed. The master determined who the women would have sex with—and this may have included the master—and in the master’s perception, Black women were only to have sex in order to breed. Because they were forced into a life of slavery, these women did not get to travel unless it was under the master’s control. After freedom from slavery, many Black women were then under the control of Black men. They were supposed to live domestic

lives, where again they were to have children and take care of the home. Many female Blues singers of the 1920s defied these stereotypes and abolished these definitions of what it meant to be an African American woman. They lived independent lives, traveled at will, and stopped singing only about the socially acceptable spiritual matters, and turned their lyrics to sexual topics. Weissman says, “The blues . . . were about everyday behaviors, and its ‘profane’ subjects included sex, violence, dances, and ambivalence, rather than answers or the mediation of a Greater Power” (38). The bravery of these female Blues singers was empowering and liberating. It was a means for African American women to assert their strength and independence into a culture, where on many other levels, this was denied. In this way, the Blues gave language to their pain. Through singing the Blues, these women could say and express their thoughts and emotions in a way not possible in any other medium.

Section II: Blues and *Corregidora*

It is this archetype of the classic Blues singing woman that the protagonist, Ursa Corregidora, represents in Gayl Jones’s novel, *Corregidora*. Casey Clabough informs us in her book *Gayl Jones: The Language of Voice and Freedom in Her Writings*, the Portuguese word “Corregidora translates into English as ‘female judge’” (34). The reader becomes a listener of Ursa Corregidora’s story. Ursa is Gayl Jones’s fictional rendering of actual women

such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday. Through their music these women were in a sense “female judges,” and commentators on the plight of African American females. Through Ursa, Jones illuminates the role Blues plays in the unsayable acquiring form. The lamentation becomes a celebration when these women take that which is troubling them and emote the pain of these circumstances into their rendition of music speaking for their bodies. The embodiment of the Blues is a way the body is ruptured into song by abuse it has experienced.

Created by slaves as an outlet and expression of emotion, Blues music—similar to the stories of West African oral traditions—was passed down through generations. The theme of passing down stories through narrative and music is repeated throughout Gayl Jones’s book, *Corregidora*. The blend of Blues music, oral storytelling, and written words is critical in preserving the history of African Americans. This mixture, like the crossroads, is a junction where separate entities come together to form something new, and is represented in the story of *Corregidora*, proving it too has elements of the crossroads and it is crucial to interpret the text from this standpoint.

Chapter 2: A Crossroads Reading of *Corregidora*

Introduction

I will engage Gayl Jones's text, *Corregidora*, by employing the hermeneutics of the crossroads. I am positioning myself at the crossroads of this text in order to experience a more vulnerable exchange between the text and myself as a reader. Using this interpretive posture, I place myself in the center of possibility of this novel. As previously stated, at the crossroads, an offering is always made—something is surrendered. In this particular exchange, the offering is the knowledge I have gained from reading critical essays written in reflection to this story. I come to the story with theory and insight provided by those scholars who have analyzed the text. My request—that which I receive—is a better understanding of how Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* uses different aspects of the crossroads to corroborate the transformative power of literature. I will interpret *Corregidora* in a manner using the analysis of previous scholars, but also keeping myself open to the possibilities not yet discovered and the roads not yet traveled within this novel. Important aspects of the crossroads are: the power of oral storytelling in Blues culture; a place of possibility and

transformation; and characteristics of Legba, the crossroads deity—who is a teacher, guide, and protector. The following is an examination of how these elements function in *Corregidora*.

Section I: The Blues and Orality

Corregidora, published in 1975, is Gayl Jones's story of four generations of women, told in first person narrative from the most recent descendant's point of view. Ursa Corregidora, the story's Black female protagonist, tells the story of her mother, grandmother, and great grandmother all affected, in different ways, by slavery and abuse from men. The women acquire the last name of the brutal Portuguese slave master, Old man Corregidora, who forced his female slaves to be prostitutes, took the money they made, and raped them. Great Gram, the woman of the first generation in the story, was one of these women. Old man Corregidora preferred Great Gram over all the other slaves. He called her, "A good little piece. My best. Dorita. Little gold piece" (294). These monikers added to the psychological damage Great Gram experienced as a slave. While being forced to have sexual relations with Old man Corregidora, Great Gram became pregnant and bore a daughter: Gram Corregidora. Gram was also forced to sleep with her abusive slave master father, and she too had a daughter: Ursa's mother. The main storyline revolves

around Ursa's relationship to this history and the role her circumstances play in it.

Blues music becomes a central and important theme in *Corregidora*. As Cheryl A. Wall writes in her book, *Worry the Line*, "The blues offer a way of contextualizing the 'private story' *Corregidora* relates. In African American culture, the blues have been the vehicle for discussing and analyzing people's most private concerns. In the musical tradition, the persona of the individual performer dominates the song, which centers on the singer's own feelings, experiences, fears, dreams, acquaintances, and idiosyncrasies" (118). I feel the Blues in *Corregidora* goes a step further than Wall explains, and actually becomes a valid medium for psychological, physical, and emotional healing for Ursa, not just a way to discuss and analyze her situation. Wall goes on to claim, "... blues is the form to which Ursa turns to understand and give shape to her experience" (119). However, it is my firm belief that Blues music helps to create a language for the body, as represented by Ursa in *Corregidora*. The logic of the body becomes apparent to the reader with Ursa's relationship to singing the Blues.

As described previously, Blues was conceived by slaves, a group of misused humans, who used this creation to invoke themselves into a culture where they were ignored. Four generations of misused women are represented in the text. Ursa's Great Gram and Gram were abused, raped, and harmed by their slave owner. Ursa and her mother both experienced abuse, rape, and harm

from their respective husbands—who are symbolic of a violently oppressive force similar to a slave master. It is through Ursa’s embodiment of Blues music, that healing from the consequences of these oppressive forces occurs.

Singing the Blues gives voice to Ursa’s body. What she cannot communicate or express in her everyday life, she is able to do through her singing. In describing Billie Holiday’s singing style in her book, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, Angela Y. Davis writes, “Her [Holiday] performance emphatically represents the power of eros—the ‘erotic as power’—even when, and perhaps especially when, it remains beyond reach” (173). This description is fitting for Ursa’s situation as well. People—especially men—listen, feel, and understand what she is trying to convey. Her singing has an effect on others, both internally and externally. Men are able to comprehend what she is communicating, simply by being a part of the Blues experience Ursa summons. Late in the novel a drunken man in the club where Ursa is singing tries to sexually taunt her, “I want you to put me in the alley tonight, sister . . . Next best than to the blues is a good screw’ . . . I started singing a song, hoping that would make him quiet. It did. I put him where he wanted to get. I sang a low down blues . . . ” (G. Jones 452). Through music she is creating a language for the body. In this instance, sexual arousal is transmitted not physically, but through a Blues song. The power the erotic typically possesses is found in Ursa’s voice.

Descriptions of her singing are portrayed through personifications, proving the corporeal is being emitted through her music. “My voice felt like it was screaming . . . I felt as if they could see my feelings somewhere in the bottom of my eyes” (G. Jones 334-335). The music is giving voice to feelings that she has kept buried in the past. Ursa feels like her voice is “screaming” when she’s thinking about the pain of her relationship. Screaming was a common technique used in early field hollers, which were a precursor to the Blues Ursa sings. This involvement with historical characteristics of the Blues establishes a relationship between the novel and the art form. The music takes form even in her eyes. She feels the audience she is singing to comprehends what she was expressing by looking in the bottom of them.

It is not only about her voice and a song, it is about the song and story taking over her whole being. She is embodying all that she and her ancestors have been through and releasing the inner struggle through a Blues song. In the book, *Black Orpheus*, Katherine Boutry writes a chapter called, “Black and Blue: The Female Body of Blues Writing in Jean Toomer, Toni Morrison, and Gayl Jones.” In this chapter she explains:

Because eyes and reproductive organs are brought together explicitly in this narrative as ways of ‘bearing witness’ to the wrongs committed, Ursa, who has not seen the abuse first-hand but only heard it through oral tradition . . . turns to music and song as her own proof and testimony. Hers will not be a straightforward reproduction, but rather an original *composition*. (110)

Ursa's "original composition" is the Blues she sings, rather than having a child. Through song, not through reproduction, she will pass along the matrilineal story of the Corregidora women. The song becomes part of her just as a child would. In this one particular scene, the song develops in her eyes rather than a child in her womb.

Tadpole (Ursa's abusive second husband) comments on her voice, "It sounded like it had sweat in it. Like you were pulling everything out of yourself. You were beautiful, sweet" (G. Jones 338). Again, physical functions are referred to when talking about Ursa's singing. Her singing "sounded like it had sweat in it." Her entire being is taking form and becoming a main component in the music. It is not only about her voice, movements, feelings, or singing, but rather a combination of all of these elements, mixing to form a bodily, musical experience for herself and her audience.

The importance of passing down this story is frequently repeated in the novel. "My great-grandmama told my grandmama the part she lived through that my grandmama didn't live through and my grandmamma told my mama what they both lived through and my mama told me what they all lived through and we were all suppose to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we'd never forget" (293). The story the Corregidora women wanted passed down through generations is one of slavery, and strategies they used to deal with the oppression associated with it.

The rape, incest, and atrocity involved with slavery obviously impacted an entire population of people. The Corregidora women's story is only one arising out of the gruesome reality that was slavery. As Walls writes, "Ursa becomes a witness not only to her own troubles but to those of women whose historical situations she imagines" (131). In Jones's novel, the official documentation outlining the enslavement of the Corregidora women is burned. Subsequently, the women realize the written record is not the only way to prove their story. Retelling the story to their children, and making sure their children know and retell the story, is far more important than a piece of paper staking claim to an unthinkable life of slavery. *"The important thing is making generations. They can burn the papers but they can't burn conscious, Ursa. And that what makes the evidence. And that's what makes the verdict [Jones's italics]"* (G. Jones 306). The importance of bearing children in order to pass along the Corregidora story is stressed throughout the novel, and therefore the lesson Ursa has been taught.

Section II: Possibility and Transformation

Conflict arises in the story when Ursa is pushed down the stairs by her abusive first husband, Mutt, and she is forced to have a hysterectomy, therefore no longer able to have children—the one important thing that has been stressed her entire life. Her struggle with letting down the generations of women in her

life creates discord. When Tadpole asks Ursa what she wants, her automatic response is, 'What all us Corregidora women want. Have been taught to want. To make generations.' I stopped smiling" (306). The key word in this passage is "taught." Ursa has been told and taught her whole life to "make generations," and now that she is physically unable to do this, it strips the smile from her face and leaves her feeling inadequate and a disappointment to the women who have raised her.

She feels emptiness inside. "I lay on my back, feeling as if something more than the womb had been taken out" (290). Ursa is losing her sex organs, but she is also losing "more than a womb." This feeling intensifies for her, causing her future to take a turn in a different direction. The expectations she always had for herself have changed. What she thought she would always be able to do, she no longer can. After her surgery when Tadpole asks how she is feeling, she responds, "'As if part of my life's already marked out for me—the barren part'" (290). She is referring to barren in terms of her sterility, but also as the way she feels about her future, as if it is desolate, bleak, and empty. She must find a way to cope with her new condition, and find a way to redefine what her expectations and purpose will be in life. As one does when they come to the crossroads, Ursa has to let go of something, and she must replace it with something new. New possibilities must be opened up for her. The roads ahead of her in the novel lead away from where she has been, and forge her into new territory.

Ursa's development of new expectations, and a redefined purpose in her life are elements that drive the plot of *Corregidora*. In dream sequences and conversations with other characters, Ursa's confusion with not being able to have children is repeated: "What's bothering me? Great Gram, because I can't make generations" (325). Ursa must find a way to come to terms with her inability to bear children, and find a new way, in essence, to "make generations." Clabough writes, "While the physical ability to make generations has been taken from Ursa, she still possesses the psychological means by which to judge the past, speaking both its evils and her repudiations of them—a process which holds the promise of a harmonious future" (34). Ursa realizes she must craft a different means of fulfilling the responsibilities of being a Corregidora woman and passing down and teaching the story. She eventually learns that her "psychological means by which to judge the past" and contribute towards a "harmonious future" is through her music.

From the opening paragraph of the book, the reader knows singing is an integral part of Ursa's life. She says, "I sang because it was something I had to do . . ." (G. Jones 286). The word "had" holds great importance. She does not say "want" or "wish" or "would like" to do, but that she **had** to do it. It is a crucial element in her life and part of who she is.

During the recovery from her surgery, Ursa is not able to sing. When talking to Cat, another female character in the novel, Ursa tells her, "It will be good to sing again" (308). When other characters are wondering if Ursa has

recovered, they look for her in the clubs to see if she is back singing. Ursa singing is a sign that things are back to normal.

Ursa soon begins to realize she will “make generations” and pass on the Corregidora story, not by bearing children, but through music. Ursa says, “everything said in the beginning must be said better than in the beginning” (338). She has taken on the responsibility of telling the story and passing it along by employing a new possibility lying before her. Ashraf H.A. Rushdy writes in *Remembering Generations*, “Ursa is also able to alter her relationship to the family narrative so that it is no longer the space where she loses her voice and becomes instead a site for her recovery, allowing her to see how her life is in dialogue with the past, not merely reflective of it or the container of its meaning” (55). Her “dialogue with the past” and the means in which she finds her own voice is through Blues music. This is how Ursa recovers from her own past and the violent collective one of her ancestors. The crossroads reading of the story shows how Ursa renders her past relationship with her family narrative in order to receive the gift of possibilities available in her music.

It is through singing that Jones reveals the nature and function of transformation. After her recovery from her hysterectomy, when she begins to sing again, Ursa finds that her voice has changed. It does not sound the same and has a different tone. The alteration in her voice represents the transformation in her life. This part in Ursa’s story is a place of possibility, a time when learning can occur, a site where a new exchange is opened up for her.

When Ursa practices singing for the first time after her surgery, Cat tells her, “your voice sounds a little strained, that’s all. But if I hadn’t heard you before, I wouldn’t notice anything, I’d still be moved. Maybe even moved more, because it sounds like you been through something. Before it was beautiful too, but you sound like you been through more now” (328). Through her singing voice, Ursa is beginning to expose all she has experienced.

I started humming the part about taking my rocking chair down by the river and rocking my blues away. What she said about the voice being better because it tells what you’ve been through. Consequences. It seems as if you’re not singing the past, you’re humming it. Consequences of what? Shit, we’re all consequences of something. Stained with another’s past as well as our own. Their past in my blood. (329)

Singing helps Ursa to cope with her changed body. Keith B. Mitchell rationalizes in his essay “‘Trouble in Mind’: (Re)visioning Myth, Sexuality, and Race in Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*,” that “Ursa connects to her mother and the other *Corregidora* women through the blues. In this choral space, at least for a time, Ursa leaves that barren world. The blues, as a connection to her maternal ancestors, allows her momentarily to feel” (164). Mitchell’s statement holds validity, but I feel extends beyond a temporary realm. I think “this choral space” not only “allows her momentarily to feel,” but that she is permanently able to feel through this space. Ursa finds confidence in her womanhood again while singing. While humming part of a Blues song, Ursa realizes everyone has a past of their own and is affected by their ancestors’ pasts. She no longer feels so alone. She also finds more confidence in her sexuality—which up until this point in the story had always been lacking. “It ain’t a pussy down there, it’s a

whole world.” (G. Jones 329). She takes ownership of her sexuality rather than letting it be defined by others. All of these forms of healing come through Ursa’s relationship with singing the Blues. Therefore, I do not think this choral space is temporary relief. It actually extends itself into an undeviating element of respite and empowerment as a representation of alternative forms of embodiment allowing for surviving in hopes of thriving.

Ursa also comes to terms with her role in the Corregidora genealogy as is evident through her music. “*What do blues do for you?* [Jones’s italics] It helps me to explain what I can’t explain” (340). In her everyday life she does not have the same confidence she does when she is on stage performing. Men such as Mutt and Tadpole (Ursa’s first and second husbands) are able to sexually, psychologically, and physically abuse her without her standing up for herself or outwardly dealing with this mistreatment. She keeps this pain inside in her everyday life, but when she is on stage, she releases it; she controls and expresses her emotions through music. This power helps her rationalize her responsibility of making generations.

I swallowed it and closed my eyes. I wanted a song that would touch me, touch my life *and* theirs. A Portuguese song, but not a Portuguese song. A new world song. A song branded with the new world. I thought of the girl who had to sleep with her master and mistress. Her father, the master. Her daughter’s father. The father of her daughter’s daughter. How many generations? Days that were pages of hysteria. Their survival depended on suppressed hysteria. (343)

Ursa begins to realize passing down the story is in essence just prolonging the agony, and is not an effective means of dealing with it. The pain becomes a sort

of hysteria and she wants to find a way to resolve it. She wants to tell the story of the older generations, but she also wants to add her account. She wants a song that will “touch” lives, not only tell a story. Ursa reconciles all of this through surrendering and receiving in what she has learned at this crossroads in her life. She must give up what she has been told to do, have children, in order to perform the skill she has been granted: telling the matrilineal Corregidora narrative through singing the Blues.

Section III: Legba—Teacher, Guide, Protector

Ursa remembers her mother criticizing her Blues music as “the devil’s music.” Ursa informs her mother that she first heard the music from her grandmother and great grandmother, the ones who told her stories about the brutality of slavery. The stories, as well as the music, were both passed down to her from the older generations. One lyric Ursa sings is, “*They call it the devil blues. It ride your back. It devil you . . .* [Jones’s italics]” (334). In the crossroads reading of this text, the devil references in the novel relate to the crossroads deity, Legba, who is often misapprehended as the devil.

Ursa’s ancestors’ stories become a sort of “spirit” or “other” world to her. She is aware of it and it has been taught to her, but she is not entirely a part of it. She must unite this story with her own life in order to fulfill the wishes and desires of her ancestors. Legba is the intermediary between the human and

spiritual realms—that which is known, and that which is not. He is the protector of communication between these two sources, a kind of communication Ursa needs to engage with in order to appease the older generations of her family, and thus satisfy herself. She needs to be taught how to communicate between the spirit world—her ancestor’s story—and the human world—where her story resides. Legba teaches Ursa to do this through the Blues. They are a means of empowerment for her to communicate between and reconcile two worlds.

Legba is also described as “the phallic god of generation and fecundity . . .” (Wall 200). The association with fertility is ironic for Ursa because she is infertile and cannot literally “make generations.” Instead, she makes music her child. *“I am Ursa Corregidora. I have tears for eyes. I was made to touch my past at an early age. I found it on my mother’s tiddies. In her milk. Let no one pollute my music. I will dig out their temples. I will pluck out their eyes [Jones’s italics]”* (G. Jones 361). Ursa recognizes her past by stating her last name, Corregidora. She knows the pain of what this means for her, her mother, grandmother, and great grandmother. She has been taught to feel this pain and carry its burden, “I have tears for eyes.” She relates the past stories with maternal issues, “I found it [the past] in my mother’s tiddies. In her milk.” The past has always been a part of her. But she also knows she cannot have children like the three female generations before her, so her child becomes her music. “Let no one pollute my music. I will dig out their temples. I will pluck out their

eyes.” She guards and defends her music like a mother would a child, doing anything to keep it from harm, hurting anyone who tries to damage it.

Another characteristic of Legba is that of a protector. Ursa becomes this for her ancestors’ stories and information. They pass on to Ursa what they have carried inside. She too must learn to guard and protect these sacred elements of their familial history. Ursa says, “I would sing songs that had to do with holding things inside you” (438). It was through Blues music that Ursa’s role in guarding and protecting was manifested. Jon Michael Spencer comments in his book *Blues and Evil*, “. . . it was specifically the personality of Legba, an emulative model of heroic action, that the blues person embodied . . . [Legba] is a being of synchronous duplicity, a duplicity like that in the blues” (11). Ursa was one of these Blues people symbolizing the personality of Legba. She internalized and protected the information and stories she had been told and taught her entire life, and in keeping with the duality of the Legba diety, she also released, taught, and shared these stories through her method of “making generations,” which was embodying and singing the Blues.

Conclusion

Gayl Jones’s novel, *Corregidora*, is indeed influenced by and depictive of major components of the crossroads and its inherent power. Despite the fact the novel was written in 1975, it continues to be a relevant representation of the dynamic, living, and flexible power found in the

crossroads paradigm. This is evidenced in the way the novel genuflects to the culture of orality and Blues music, possibility and transformation, and key characteristics of Legba, the crossroads deity, who reveals and assists in embodying what I have called here, the *hermeneutics of the crossroads*.

The character of Ursa Corregidora helped me contextualize the way Blues music is a valid channel for healing, and how embodying this art form allows someone to create language for the body. I came to the novel as a literary scholar with an interest in Blues culture, and was taken down a path where I was shown how recovery, confidence, insight, communication, and protection—each vital elements of the crossroads—are all found through the narrative of the Blues.

Cheryl A. Wall, Angela Y. Davis, Katherine Boutry, Casey Clabough, Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, Keith B. Mitchell, and Jon Michael Spencer have each provided me with interpretative paths which lead into the body of the novel. However, as a reader, in choosing to meet the text on its terms while remaining open to the potential not yet discovered within its pages, I found surprising, additional elements within this story. By performing a crossroads reading, I gained a more in depth understanding of the transformative power not only in this story—with its commanding ability to ask difficult, necessary questions, and at the same time suggesting strategies for how we might bear those questions—but of literature itself.

Chapter 3: Hoodoo

Introduction

The word “hermeneutics” derives from the Greek, “Hermes,” who in mythology, was the messenger between the gods and humanity. This association coincides with the role Legba plays in the crossroads tradition. The fundamental nature of both crossroads deities becomes that of a mediator. Within this dynamic of mediation, we find the practice of interpretation, a main component in the hermeneutics of the crossroads. In my reading of *Corregidora*, it was my intention to illuminate and reveal that this model can be a transformative dynamism by which to engage a text. However, I also wanted to see if it functions—like it did for Ursa Corregidora—in a corporeal sense for me as a literary scholar and lover of the Blues. What happens, for example, if I placed my body in the center of possibility within the crossroads paradigm? What relationships would I find between two passions, Blues and interpretative theory? What transformative reading strategies would acquire visibility? As a way to engage with these questions, I wanted to explore and learn more about

Hoodoo culture in order to celebrate its relationship to Blues, literature, and the crossroads.

I decided to put theory into practice by connecting more closely with the crossroads on a personal level and embodying this interpretive posture through modern day Hoodoo culture. This spiritual practice formed in the United States when African customs mixed with the conventions of Native American, Christian, Jewish, and European folkloric/pagan beliefs, and still exists today—often referred to as rootwork, conjure, folk magic, and tricking. I wanted to see how the body is celebrated in this tradition, and how this relates to possibility, learning, and transformation. In order to experience this, I chose to participate in an authentic Hoodoo encounter with esteemed Hoodoo rootworker, Lou Florez:

. . . a deeply rooted Sprit Worker, Priest, and Medium who has studied with indigenous elders and medicine holders from across the globe. In the summer of 2008 he was confirmed as a Baba L'Orisha of Shango. Lou also holds the titles of High Priest through the Wiccan Tradition, holder of Snake Medicine through the Mexica Tlacaoel lineage, and he has studied and apprenticed with Curanderos and Hoodoo Workers throughout the South. [He is a] Graduate of Catherine Yronwode's Hoodoo Rootwork Correspondence Course, [and he had a Hoodoo] Apprenticeship with Sister Eugena and Brother Tobias from Sabine Parish Louisiana. (Florez, *Website*)

The following is an excerpt from an interview I conducted with Lou concerning different aspects of Hoodoo and the customs of the crossroads.

Section I: Interview with Licensed Hoodoo Practitioner Lou Florez

Jackie: Lou, briefly tell me about the crossroads in Hoodoo?

Lou: The first thing that comes to mind is the Middle Passage. It was a form of the crossroads where the legacy of Africa was brought to the Caribbean Islands and then to the Southern United States. The crossroads is a figure of passage. The Middle Passage is another way to talk about the crossroads.

The crossroads is the ultimate place of healing – it is where medicine resides. There are two roads, and none point home. We need to get out of our everyday lives to find healing, to find the potency within our lives. When we go to the crossroads, we can ask anything of the universe. All is possible. Everything is open before us. We can also surrender things (unwanted patterns, old grievances and challenges, for example) at the crossroads. We are cleansed in the crossroads space.

Jackie: Can you tell me about Legba?

Lou: Legba is an Orisha, a deity that reflects the manifestations of Olodumare (God) in African traditions, so we could begin by saying that Legba is an African legacy. He is a revered entity and energy often associated with the devil and black magic. But it's more about an association with a sense of resistance. The concept of Legba speaks to what it means to have your destiny, your life purpose contract, in your hands. What options do you have? Legba is the

gateway to the unknown and understands how to navigate the mystery of oppression.

Jackie: What do you mean by the “mystery of oppression”?

Lou: Liminality¹¹. Marginalized communities.

Jackie: I’ve read that Hoodoo is a tradition of the margins. Do you feel this holds true today?

Lou: It is a tradition of queerness. Meaning, a tradition of what is “outside” because it is not the norm. This includes all races and walks of life. People in the tradition think, “I’m doing this because it’s what needs to be done.” And this extends back to marginalized populations, but not necessarily a specific race. Hoodoo historically has been practiced by African Americans, Creole people, as well as white people in the Deep South—before and after Reconstruction.

Jackie: What are some crossroads rituals?

Lou: The simplest and most potent ritual is what we call spiritual bath work—a ritual bath often made from very old recipes, handed down within the tradition, which include herbs, minerals, and other ingredients. Prayers are said in the

making of these recipes and also the client or congregant says prayers while undergoing the ritual. May I be clean? May I be as pure as snow? Baths are taken at dawn or midnight. For example, a midnight bath might begin at 11:30 so that the individual can arrive at the crossroads by midnight. The ritual includes uncrossing work. This breaks those afflictions which are tormenting your life. [Lou gestures by crossing his right hand on his left shoulder and his left hand on his right shoulder, brushing them down across his body at the same time, uncrossing them across his thighs]. I'm uncrossed. I'm whole. It's a ritual of wholeness. Not in terms of bad or dirt, just removing what's not inherently you. The purest form is left. Like the purification process that gold undergoes. The bath ritual releases all that isn't you and of your highest intent. You use a jar to take the bath water to the crossroads and throw it over your left shoulder. This is a simple ritual in the tradition, but it is potent.

Jackie: I'm interested in the relationship between Hoodoo and music—namely, the Blues. Can you explain the importance of drumming or any other instrumentation in Hoodoo ceremonies or traditions and how this relates to the Blues?

Lou: In my experience, drumming is a way of calling down the spirits. It's about the divine coming into the body as opposed to the body coming to the divine. It's about bringing the divine to you. Different drum beats manipulate

energies. Drumming calls things in. Bells get rid of things. In the Yoruba culture there is Shango.

Jackie: Who is Shango?

Lou: He is an Orisha, the owner of the drums, a divine musician who owns the rhythm of the drums. Drums represent him. Ogun is the Orisha spirit of clearing, metals, and railroads.

Jackie: Tell me more about Ogun.

Lou: He owns the bell. He has to clear the way. The bells and drums are a form of call and response. The African tradition was transferred into new world. The drums “talk.” There are three tones associated with drums. This represents the three tones of the tonal Yoruba language. Guitars and other instruments started to come into the traditional beats to create melodies. Improvisational Jazz came from this. Spirituals and Blues came from this. We can’t worship without music. Every prayer is sung.

Jackie: What is Yoruba?

Lou: It's a tribe and culture from Southwest Africa. It is one of the seven African powers.

Jackie: What are the seven African powers?

Lou: They are the original seven tribes of Africa. They came together at the crossroads we call the middle passage. Traditions combined from each tribe in order to help slaves survive in the new world. Elders from each tribe were enslaved in different areas, and bringing the traditions together from each of the elders' tribes was a means to promote the survival of their customs in the different areas where they were enslaved.

Jackie: Tell me about your background and relationship with Hoodoo. Were you raised in the tradition?

Lou: I was raised Catholic in a town outside of Dallas, Texas. There were always elements of Latino folk magic present with my Catholicism. When I was thirteen I became seriously ill. My parents tried traditional medicine, took me to medical doctors, tried Latino folk traditions, tried alternative medicines, and then tried the alternatives of the alternative. Nothing helped. My organs started to shut down. No one could offer a reason or explanation. I was taken to see a little old lady in the ghetto of Dallas. This was my first experience with a

Hoodoo worker. She lived in an unsafe neighborhood and I was scared to go because it was such a rough part of town. It was apparent this culture [Hoodoo] still existed on the outskirts, in economically and otherwise marginalized communities. This rootworker (what Hoodoo practitioners are often also called) diagnosed me with a spiritual illness related to my older sister's pregnancy. She told us that sometimes pregnancy is a gateway space. If there is a spirit with issues in the family it can come in manifestations of illness. This is what I was experiencing.

Jackie: And she was able to treat and heal you?

Lou: Yes. And this began my relationship with snake medicine that led to Hoodoo.

Jackie: What is snake medicine?

Lou: It's nothing bad, evil, or scary. It deals with the ability to transform poison into living substance. Like a snake, being able to slink into whatever situation it needs to. The ability to sense things without being able to see. The idea of using what you have to make things work. I remember when I went to see my first Hoodoo worker, she had a Cambodian neighbor who gave her a little plastic Buddha from her culture. This became part of the Hoodoo lady's tradition and

culture. I like this part. Using what works. Incorporating things from other cultures. It's all about using what you have to make things work. And of course, this is part of the great wisdom of marginalized cultures—skillful will.

Jackie: What else do you think I should know, or what else would you like to share with me about Hoodoo culture and traditions?

Lou: Well, it is a cultural context that goes back to Africa, but it also finds a way to incorporate elements from all types of spirituality. Many cultures talk to each other. It's a spiritual force that says, "so let it be." Everyone has the ability to do anything. We all have certain gifts. Some can be a medium. Some work with herbs. Some are storytellers. There are magicians of the crossroads. It's about family and villages carrying on traditions that their families have passed down. Many of the same traditions in the United States are still worshipped the same in the Congo and Nigeria. I've been there and it's still very much alive and respected there. People leave their offerings at the crossroads everywhere. No one messes with them. It's taken very seriously. Some say the traditions go back 20,000 years. It's one of the oldest forms of worship and spirituality. Archeologists have found remnants of divination trays [items used in Hoodoo] in Africa that date back 6,000 years.

Jackie: Is there any way you could show me or help me experience a part of the Hoodoo tradition?

Lou: Yes, I thought we could do a divination to create a honey jar.¹²

Section II: Honey Jar

After Lou performed a traditional divination on my behalf, he was able to divine what kind of Honey Jar I needed (see endnote 12 for honey jar explanation). We began with an empty jar. Lou provided prayer papers (or petition papers as they are sometimes called within the tradition) and I wrote my name three times in the center of the paper without lifting my pen. After, I wrote my intention in a circle around my name, also without lifting my pen.

I then dabbed “love oil” (a special “condition oil” made with oils and herbs that corresponded to my intentions) on each of the four corners of the paper and in the center of the paper. This pattern is known as the “5-Spot,” and represents the crossroads. It is interesting to note that in the Deep South, 5-Spot is a popular name for juke joints which play Blues Music. I was told to make sure to smell the oil and rub it on my hands, arms, and neck.

Next, I cut off a bit of my hair, spit on it, and put it in the center of the paper. Lou explained that including “personal concerns” (hair, effluvia from the body, and so on) strengthened the ritual’s energy. With these contents on the

paper, I then folded the paper three times towards me (as these are qualities I want to draw in and attract), and dropped it into the jar.

The following ingredients were then added to the jar (each time I added an ingredient, Lou made sure I would smell, feel, and rub the essence of each onto my skin):

Vetiver, chile peppers, magnolia leaves, catnip, rose petals, damiana, hibiscus, python skin, orange peel, mica, fake money, vanilla, Marie Laveau (the Voodoo Hoodoo Queen of New Orleans) grave yard dirt, cinnamon, blue sugar, glitter, and double love/double luck oil (another magical “condition oil”).

I then rubbed a small orange candle with love oil. The candle was held horizontally with the wick pointing toward me. I made sure to rub the oil from the farthest end to the end closest to me. Lou said this was because the desire was to draw things in, rather than pull things away from me. After, I lit the candle and held it over my jar. I closed my eyes and focused on my intention for two or three minutes. I then blew the candle out, dropped it in the jar, and breathed into the jar. Next, the jar was filled to the top with honey, and resealed with its lid. As is the custom, I then hit the bottom of the jar on the table three times to “seal my intention and set the jar to working.” My honey jar was complete!

The following is information on the ingredients I used in my honey jar as described by Cat Yronwode in her book, *Hoodoo Herb and Root Magic: A Materia Magica of African-American Conjure and Traditional Formulary, Giving the Spiritual Uses of Natural Herbs, Roots, Minerals, and Zoological Curios*. (I have omitted the ingredients: mica, fake money, glitter, oils, and candle—as they are not available in this particular book. Yronwode’s book is considered a classic among contemporary rootworkers; however, because the tradition is mainly orally passed down, each worker uses unique ingredients with specific meanings learned from their families and spiritual communities):

Vetiver

VETIVER grass is usually sold as essential oil, but when it can be had in herbal form, it can be soaked in HOYT’S COLOGNE and sprinkled on the bed for marital faithfulness; burned on charcoal to reverse jinxes; and placed in cash registers to draw business.

(Yronwode, *Materia* 202)

Chile Peppers (Red Pepper)

RED PEPPER is used to flavor foods, but, like BLACK PEPPER, it has also long been used to work so-called enemy tricks. It is the central ingredient in GOOFER DUST, Crossing Powder, and Hot Foot Powder, and a subsidiary ingredient in FOUR THIEVES VINEGAR—all of

which are variously employed to jinx and enemy in family, money, job, and health matters and to drive hated people away. (Yronwode, *Materia*, 166)

Magnolia Leaves

MAGNOLIA leaves are reputed to enhance conjugal felicity and fidelity. (Yronwode, *Materia*, 131)

Catnip

CATNIP is a love herb said to make women enticing and charming to men. (Yronwode, *Materia*, 66)

Rose Petals

ROSE buds and petals symbolize love, romance, sexual attraction, and conjugal relations, and they draw good fortune in matters of the heart. ROSE hips are symbols of overall luck. ROSE oil appears in many love formulae, as well as some for luck. (Yronwode, *Materia*, 168)

Damiana

DAMIANA leaves are used by many folks for luck in love affairs; the species name *aphrodisiaca* implies that the plant is believed to have aphrodisiac qualities. (Yronwode, *Materia*, 80)

Hibiscus

Fresh HIBISCUS flowers can be placed on altars when doing love work. Dried and mixed with love herbs, they may be added to a mojo or sewn into a love-dream pillow. (Yronwode, *Materia*, 111)

Python Skin

The blood, eggs, heads, flesh, sheds, and skins of all species of
SNAKES are used in jinxing and crossing. (Yronwode, *Materia*, 186)

Orange Peel

Every part of the ORANGE tree is fragrant. The leaves yield Pettigrain oil, the rind is the source of Sweet Orange oil, and the flowers are distilled for Neroli oil. ORANGE water is used in cooking; ORANGE scents are found in Attraction Oil and Follow Me Boy Oil, as well as in home cleaning and spiritual cleansing products; and ORANGE flowers are a symbol of married life, often found in the wreaths of brides.
(Yronwode, *Materia*, 140)

Lemongrass

LEMON GRASS has been used by many people for the purpose of warding off evil and bringing good luck in love affairs. It is a major ingredient in Van Van Oil, Hindu Grass Oil, and Henry's Grass Oil, all of which are used to scrub doorways and dress amulets. It enhances the popular Chinese Wash, which is widely used to clear away evil messes and crossed conditions. (Yronwode, *Materia*, 123)

Vanilla

VANILLA encourages love; a pod kept in SUGAR scents the SUGAR and those who eat it will be more loving. VANILLA fragrance is an ingredient in Fast Luck Oil. (Yronwode, *Materia*, 201)

Marie Laveau Grave Dust

GRAVEYARD DIRT is soil ritually collected from a graveyard and paid for, usually with DIMES, CENTS, or WHISKEY. Some suppliers sell certain herbs as a substitute, but working with GRAVEYARD DIRT is a survival of ancient African customs in which veneration and communication with the dead is central, so no mere herb can replace GRAVEYARD DIRT in a spell. Depending on the way it is handled, GRAVEYARD DIRT is used for the purpose of causing unnatural illness to enemies, for gaming luck, and in love spells. It is also one of the three major components of GOOFER DUST. (Yronwode, *Materia*, 109)

Cinnamon

CINNAMON bark brings good fortune in business and games of chance. (Yronwode, *Materia*, 70)

Blue Sugar and Honey

SWEETENERS figure in three major classes of work—drawing love, developing goodwill toward one's person, and attracting customers and money to a business. In most of these spells, any sweetener can be substituted for another, the only limitation being physical, in that sugar

is a solid (unless dissolved) and the others are liquids. (Yronwode, *Materia*, 195)

Section III: Hoodoo and Blues

After performing and viscerally experiencing a long revered ritual in Hoodoo culture, I began asking myself: *How do Hoodoo, Blues, and literature relate to one another?* The answer is, much like the crossroads themselves, they work synergistically to inspire new conventions and strategies that help people, in varied ways, continue to stay deeply engaged with their bodies and lives, despite challenges. The practice of Hoodoo, Blues music, and literature are all reflected in one another.

During a portion of my interview with Lou Florez (not included in this text), I asked Lou if he knew of any literature that focused on Hoodoo traditions. He responded with, “No matter where you are in time, the Southern narrative still speaks to what the crossroads is, and what it means to be a body at the crossroads. Southern literature is based in this narrative of folk traditions” (Florez). Lou listed examples such as Toni Morrison’s *Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men*, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, and even claimed the position of the character, Boo Radley, in Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* represents a Legba figure. The literature of the South is steeped in the crossroads ethos.

Literature is both a representation of and a preservation of this marginalized group of people. Zora Neale Hurston is one author, and member of the Blues and Hoodoo community, who documented elements of rural, Southern, African Americans. In her book, *The Blues Aesthetic and the Making of American Identity in the Literature of the South*, Barbara A. Baker maintains that “Zora Neale Hurston was a full-fledged member of the blues community, and perhaps no other writer’s works are more emblematic of the tradition as it took shape in the American cultural scene . . . more than any other American writer, she bridged the gap between music and prose composition” (Baker 63). Hurston’s writing captures the essence of the crossroads dominion because it brings together multiple elements to create something new. Hurston’s gestures are hardly singular. Her world view and the strategies she crafted to ensure her own survival amidst the complexities of the racially charged South, are representative of an entire culture’s efforts to overcome oppressive elements. Hurston’s *Sanctified Church* includes sections on “Herbs and Herb Doctors,” “Cures and Beliefs,” “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” and “The Sanctified Church,” which, in addition to being a literary work, also includes the importance of folklore, dancing, orality, music, improvisation, and spiritual practices for rural African Americans during the rise of both Hoodoo and Blues in American history. The fortitude of Hurston’s literature depicts a group of people who, for the main part, were ignored and/or denied the “usual” systems of support (for example, health care or legal representation).

Music, like literature, is another means of survival and expression for marginalized groups throughout history. Yronwode asserts:

The 1920s - 30s was a period during which mainstream folklorists, scholars, and book publishers paid scant attention to cultural contributions by African-Americans. Hoodoo, a beautifully coherent system of practical folk magic, was for the most part dismissed as 'superstition' and went unrecorded by scholars or occultists. But these same two decades coincidentally marked the time of the greatest development of recorded rural acoustic blues, and hoodoo was a prominent topic addressed in the lyrics to these songs . . . some of the clearest descriptions of magical materials and their methods of employment can be found in acoustic blues of the period between the two World Wars. In other words, blues lyrics themselves form a primary source of oral history and shed light on little known by-ways in folk custom. (Yronwode, *Website*)¹³

My own personal experience with current Hoodoo practice represents this phenomenon. Ingredients and their descriptions used in my honey jar include words and phrases found in many Blues songs. Indeed, many Bluesmen were also Hoodoo practitioners and thus lifted words and phrases from Hoodoo practice to insert into the poetry of their Blues lyrics. As Yronwode explains in the above quotation, in this way, Blues songs are a recorded account of this culture. Three examples—from a seemingly endless multitude— of Hoodoo references found in Blues songs are: Mojo, John de Conquer, and Goofer Dust.

Mojo

A mojo is a small bag containing various items meant to cultivate specific results. Mojos are usually kept in a private location and the magical

items contained in the small bag relate to the desired outcome. They can be used to attract lovers, to keep people away from a lover, to increase luck, to improve or heighten love, for protection, and many other purposes. Yronwode explains that the word *mojo*, “is related to the West African word ‘*mojuba*,’ meaning a prayer of praise and homage. It is a ‘prayer in a bag’ -- a spell you can carry” (Yronwode, *Website*)¹⁴.

A nation sack is a special kind of *mojo*—the recipe was first developed by rootworkers living in Memphis, Tennessee and is worn only by women. In his song, “Come On In My Kitchen,” Robert Johnson refers to this type of *mojo* in one of his verses:

She’s gone I know she won’t come back

I’ve taken the last nickel out of her nation sack

You better come on in my kitchen babe it’s goin’ to be rainin’

outdoors¹⁵

The song reveals that the nation sack is associated with females (“**her** nation sack”), that stealing from it is forbidden—as evident that after Johnson stole from it, she “won’t come back,”—and that it is an item where coins are stored and are a significant part of the nation sack’s contents.

Bluesman, Muddy Waters, sings, “I Got My Mojo Working,” in which he alludes to characteristics of the *mojo* (also commonly referred to as a hand, conjure hand, lucky hand, conjure bag, trick bag, or root bag).

I got my mojo workin' but it just don't work on you
I got my mojo workin' but it just don't work on you
I wanna love you so bad child but I don't know what to do

I'm going down to Louisiana gonna get me a mojo hand
Going down to Louisiana gonna get me a mojo hand
Gonna have all you women under my command

Got my mojo workin'

I got a Gypsy woman giving me advice
I got a Gypsy woman giving me advice
I got a whole lot of tricks keeping our love on ice

Got my mojo workin'

Got my mojo workin' but it just don't work on you¹⁶

These lyrics disclose that mojos have to do with attracting desired outcomes, and in this particular example, it is a lover. By using a mojo, the singer thinks he'll, "have all you women under [his] command." Apparently, the character in this song is not able to attract one certain lover, and seeks the

advice of a gypsy woman in Louisiana. Rootworkers in the Deep South were sometimes referred to as “Black Gypsies”. It seems this gypsy woman uncovers the information that other tricks are preventing the desired lover from being attracted to the singer. “Trick” is another name for a spell or form of rootwork in Hoodoo practice. There are many “tricks” that are used for warding off or keeping people away. Perhaps a person has secretly laid a trick on the singer’s mojo, and this is what is keeping his desired lover from being attracted to him.

Another characteristic of a mojo exposed in Blues song lyrics has to do with the importance of keeping the mojo hidden or in a private location in order for it to work most effectively. Blind Willie McTell refers to this in his, "Scarey Day Blues."

My good gal got a mojo she's tryin' to keep it hid

My good woman got a mojo she's tryin' to keep it hid

But Georgia Bill¹⁷ got something to find that mojo with

I said she got that mojo and she won't let me see

I said she got that mojo and she won't let me see

And every time I start to love her she's tried to put that jinx on me¹⁸

The girl in the song has a mojo, but does not want the singer to see it. “She’s tryin to keep it hid.” Mojos can lose their power if someone else touches it. The woman wants the mojo to work when the singer and this woman are in an intimate setting. “And every time I start to love her she’s tried to put that jinx

on me.” The singer realizes the woman is using the power of her mojo to try and influence him.

John de Conquer

High John de Conquer (pronounced “conker” by Southern rootworkers) is portrayed in Hurston’s *Sanctified Church* as a folkloric character who brought music to the slaves to help them endure. The music he helped create is described as “a tune that you could bend and shape in most any way you wanted to fit the words and feeling that you had” (Hurston 77). In this way, John de Conquer is associated with the creation of the Blues, as it is a type of music representing this description perfectly. Mythic embellishments surrounding his story say he was an actual slave who was always laughing, singing, and inspiring slaves to find comfort during their horrible plight of slavery. He takes on the persona of Legba in that he represents a form of protection and inspiration for slaves. He is a gateway between the spirit world (Africa) and the human world (slavery in the United States). Hurston writes:

He [High John de Conquer] had come from Africa. He came walking on the waves of sound. Then he took on flesh after he got here. The sea captains of ships knew that they brought slaves in their ships. They knew about those black bodies huddled down there in the middle passages, being hauled across the waters to helplessness. John de Conquer was walking the very winds that filled the sails of the ships. He followed over them like the albatross. (70)

High John de Conquer's symbol was a drum-beat, a representation of Shango, the African deity who presides over and is the owner of the drum. African music and storytelling traditions continued in the United States through stories such as these. It was, "an inside thing to live by . . . helped the slaves endure" (Hurston 69). John de Conquer was said to never lose in gambling and could outwit anyone—including slave masters. Eventually, in the legend, High John de Conquer returns to Africa, but before leaving, he leaves his essence in the root of a certain plant. If one possesses this root, they can summon him, and receive the strength of all his attributes. Appropriately, this root is known as "John the Conquer Root."

References to this root are found in Blues lyrics. Muddy Waters mentions the root in his song, "Hoochie Coochie Man,"¹⁹ when he sings "I got a black cat bone, I got a mojo too, I got a John the Conquer root, I'm gonna mess with you;" and Bo Diddley mentions it in his song, "I'm a Man,"²⁰ with the lyrics, "I goin' back down to Kansas to bring back the second cousin, Little John the Conqueroo"²¹." One example clearly portraying the characteristics of the root in Hoodoo practice is found in Willie Dixon's song, "My John the Conqueror Root," performed by Muddy Waters, with the following lyrics:

My pistol may snap my mojo is frail

But I rub my root my luck will never fail

When I rub my root my John the Conquer root

Aww you know there ain't nothin' she can do

Lord I rub my John the Conquer root

I was accused of murder in the first degree

The judge's wife cried let the man go free

I was rubbin' my root my John the Conquer root

Aww you know there ain't nothin' she can do

Lord I rub my John the Conquer root

Oh I can get in a game don't have a dime

All I have to do is rub my root I would win every time

When I rub my root my John the Conquer root

Well you know there ain't nothin' you can do

Lord I rub my John the Conquer root

Lyrics of this particular Blues song affirm the Hoodoo perception that, “A person possessing a JOHN THE CONQUEROR ROOT will never be long without money or a lover and will be extremely lucky in games of chance and business.” (Yronwode, *Materia* 111). There is always good fortune to be found in the root. “When I rub my root my John the Conquer root / Aww you know there ain't nothin' she can do Lord,” exposes the power the root has over women. “I was accused of murder in the first degree / The judge's wife cried Let the man go free / I was rubbin' my root my John the Conquer root,” discloses the influence it has in legal proceedings. And, “Oh I can get in a game don't

have a dime / All I have to do is rub my root I win every time,” tells how it is connected to providence in gambling.

Goofer Dust

Goofer dust is a powder used to harm or jinx an enemy. Like many Hoodoo tricks (rituals, workings, spells), there are different recipes, but generally it involves grave dust or graveyard dirt. It is a part of the “enemy tricks” category, and can be used not only to hurt, but to even kill an adversary. To a lesser degree it is known to cause bad luck with family, finances, love, and health. Robert Farris Thompson explains in, *Flash of the Spirit* that, “‘goofer,’ refers to grave dirt, often inserted in a charm . . . ‘Goofer dust’ harks back to the Ki-Kongo verb *kufwa* (‘to die’)” (Thompson 105). Allusions to this Hoodoo custom are sung about by Bluesman, Cripple Clarence Lofton, in his song, “I Don’t Know.”²²

Gettin' sick and tired of the way you do
'Time Mama I'm gonna poison you
Sprinkle goofer dust around your bed
Wake up some mornin' find your own self dead

Lofton’s lyrics indicate how one way of employing goofer dust is to sprinkle it around the bed of an enemy. In this Blues song, it seems he wants to

kill or harm a lover who is bothering him. Another method of using goofer dust is to sprinkle it in the doorway, window, or high traffic areas of an enemy's home, to make them ill. Ma Rainey sings about this in her song, appropriately titled, "Black Dust Blues."

It was way last year when my troubles began

It was way last year when my troubles began

I had a quarrel with a woman she said I took her man

She sent me a letter said she's gonna dark me down

She sent me a letter said she's gonna dark me down

She's gonna fix me up so I won't chase her man around

I began to feel bad worse than I ever before

I began to feel bad worse than I ever before

Lord I was out one morning found black dust all round my door

I began to get thin had trouble with my feet

I began to get thin had trouble with my feet

Throwing dust about the house whenever I tried to eat

Black dust on my window black dust on my porch mat

Black dust on my window black dust on my porch mat

Black dust's got me walking on all fours like a cat

Clues in Ma Rainey's song indicate why a person would be "goofered," and what can happen to them once they are. She says she began to feel worse than she ever had before, started having trouble walking, was losing weight, and eventually resorted to walking on all fours like a cat. She attributes it to a goofer fix put on her by a jealous woman who accused Rainey of taking the woman's man.

Summary

Mojo, John de Conquer, and goofer dust, are three Hoodoo references documenting the influence of rootwork in the poetry of the Blues. Blues music became Hermes (a mediator) between a marginalized community's spiritual practice and non-marginalized populations that began to gain interest in this art form in the early 1920's, when the invention of recorded music allowed it to spread in a way not possible before. In this way, the previously ridiculed Hoodoo tradition covertly found a way to embed itself into main-stream culture. This was the crossroads at work. As Lou Florez informed me, "the crossroads is a figure of passage . . . All is possible . . . Everything is open before us" (Florez, *interview*). Through the Blues, African Americans were given a voice and

granted a form of passage never granted to them before. Music became a documentation of the legacy of orality, and a celebration of Hoodoo culture.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

The main question posed in my thesis was whether or not the crossroads is also a paradigm that might open the event of reading and interpretation, and I believe that it is. This profound place of possibility is a valid intellectual model for innovative and uninhabited modes of understanding. The hermeneutics of the crossroads is an imaginative approach that keeps us open to the transformative power of literature transpiring when we bring to the text our working scholarly knowledge, but also allow ourselves to receive what it has to offer us. We should meet it on its terms.

Contextualizing different characteristics of the crossroads reveals important aspects of this revered locale. Performing a crossroads reading of Gayl Jones's novel, *Corregidora*, celebrates these attributes and proves the hermeneutics of the crossroads is a powerful alternative to hierarchical modes of reading. I used my interpretive posture to experience a more vulnerable exchange between the text and myself as a reader. I experienced reification of how the *Corregidora* story functions within the crossroads paradigm. It became apparent that the dynamic, living, and flexible power of this model honored orality in the Blues tradition, exemplified the possibility and transformation present in this art form, and venerated the concept of Legba who is a teacher,

guide, and protector. Most importantly, the hermeneutics of the crossroad, revealed—through Ursa Corregidora—how Blues music is a healing force because it helps to create a language for the body.

My interview with Hoodoo rootworker, Lou Florez, helped me discover how the practice still remains living and dynamic even today. I placed my body in the center of possibility by experiencing a Hoodoo divination first hand, and actually created my own honey jar, one of the oldest customs found in the tradition. I did not simply read about or watch these customs occur, I was an active participant in the rituals. Researching the materials talked about and used in my Hoodoo experience, led to the discovery of a connection between this tradition and Blues music. Many Blues musicians were Hoodoo practitioners, and they would use associations of their practice in the poetry of their music.

I discovered within the crossroads paradigm, a place where Blues music, literature, and Hoodoo traditions work synergistically to inspire new conventions and strategies that help people, in varied ways, continue to stay deeply engaged with their bodies and lives, despite challenges. Zora Neale Hurston, author and member of the Blues and Hoodoo community is one writer who documents the relationship between these three systems. She approaches her writing as Blues musicians do their music, embracing attributes of a culture, and commemorating them in her work. Examples of this are found in her *Sanctified Church*, where she discusses different forms of expression in African American society, including dancing, singing, orality, and spirituality—

characteristics relating back to the legacy of Africa which survived the crossroads of the Middle Passage and thrived in the United States even in the face of adversity.

The Southern narrative—represented in the written works of Gayl Jones and Zora Neale Hurston, and honored in the tradition of Blues and Hoodoo culture—symbolizes the hermeneutics of the crossroads and the inherent possibility found in this space. The combination of forces, amalgamation of influences, and permutation of worlds found here, creates a valid interpretive theory that celebrates the power of orality, transformation, and the teaching, guidance, and protection of the crossroads deity, Legba. All of these characteristics honor the body and how it is used as a source of healing for marginalized people, who are denied the resources often taken for granted by those in higher social classes.

I asked the question in the beginning of Chapter 3, what relationships I would find between Blues music and interpretive theory if I placed my body in the center of possibility within the crossroads paradigm. I did this by participating in a real life Hoodoo encounter, and I found that the concept of skillful will—the ability to use what we have, in ingenious ways, as a means of survival—is a main component in this link.

Blues music is a form of skillful will in the way it gives voice to that which is typically not expressible. This mimics the same notions found within Hoodoo culture, where the body is a readily available resource to use in the

customs of the tradition. Whether through the narrative of literature, Blues, or Hoodoo, the body becomes a manifestation of Legba, in the way it teaches, guides, and protects, allowing us to be transformed by the power of the crossroads and to celebrate the hermeneutics of the crossroads as a mode of engagement in interpretation.

Addendum

Two months after creating my honey jar, I have been asked questions about its effectiveness and what, if anything, I have learned from my encounter with Lou Florez. These are valid questions that I wish to attempt to answer, or at least discuss in this addendum. The answers to these questions relate to transformation, one of the main aspects of the crossroads. After my encounter with Lou and creating my honey jar, I personally feel I have engaged with and experienced the crossroads at work in my life. I surrendered myself and my intentions and was offered the gift of awareness about another culture and practice.

It is important to remember the power and influence of my honey jar is still manifesting. It is an ongoing process of transformation. But what I have noticed to date is my heightened awareness of the Hoodoo culture all around me. I am more aware of references to rootworking in music I listen to, literature I read, and the world I experience. It is a culture that is alive and well and continues to thrive in new and innovative ways, as I feel my experience embodies. As a continuation and representation of one of the oldest forms of bottle spells in the world, my honey jar has sweetened my perception and

triggered attentiveness and appreciation for a long revered, yet marginalized tradition.

It would be amiss not to at least mention the associations with love involved in my honey jar. Sweetening and heightening love affairs is a common theme in many Hoodoo recipes and practices, and my honey jar is no exception. But for the sake of an academic paper, and because it is a personal matter, I choose to simply quote Tennessee Bluesman, Frank Stokes, and say, “ain’t nobody’s business but mine”!

As far as providence and good fortune associated with my intentions for creating a honey jar, I can say for one, I successfully wrote and defended my master’s thesis. The ingredients included in my jar contain many elements of acquiring wisdom and attaining luck. I believe they are working together synergistically to open up new possibilities and opportunities for me, and are helping me appreciate the concept of skillful will and the power inherently found within my own body.

After creating it, I have had my honey jar near me each time I wrote or revised a section of my thesis, and it is sitting in front of me as I write this addendum. It is a reminder of a role, albeit small in comparison to many, I am playing in a long line of tradition. The energy associated with its contents reminds me of the knowledge I am gaining and the wealth of information I continue to acquire in the crossroads journey in my life.

Notes

¹ “‘Cross Roads Blues’ is one of Delta Blues singer Robert Johnson's most famous songs, released on a 78 rpm record in 1937 by Vocalion Records . . . In 1961, producer Frank Driggs substituted the previously unreleased alternate take on the first reissue of Johnson's work, the long-playing album *King of the Delta Blues Singers*” (*Sony Music Soundtrack for A Century: Folk, Gospel & Blues* Liner notes, 35). See Appendix A for the lyrics in their entirety.

² All “Yronwode, *Website*” citations come from the Website:

www.luckymojo.com/hoodoo.html

³ “Yellow Dog Blues” was first published as a Ragtime song, “Yellow Dog Rag.” Handy later added lyrics and changed it to “Yellow Dog Blues.” The versions I can find recordings for are either Handy doing Ragtime Piano versions of the song (*Memphis Blues Band*), or other musicians singing the lyrics. i.e. Bessie Smith (*Martin Scorsese Presents The Blues: Bessie Smith*). See Appendix B for the lyrics in their entirety.

⁴ Often Merline Johnson is credited for this song, but John D. Twitty (a.k.a. Black Spider Dumpling) recorded it first in 1937. See Appendix C for the lyrics in their entirety.

⁵ See Note 2.

⁶ See Note 2.

⁷ See Note 2.

⁸ See Note 2.

⁹ See Appendix D for the lyrics in their entirety.

¹⁰ Ted Gioia begins his book, *Delta Blues*, with a description of this region:

The Delta region of Mississippi is an expansive alluvial plain, shaped like the leaf of a pecan tree hanging lazily over the rest of the state. Stretching some two hundred and twenty miles from Vicksburg to Memphis, it is bounded on the west by the Mississippi River, and extends eastward for an average of sixty-five miles, terminating in hill country, with its poorer soil and different ways of life, and the Yazoo River, which eventually joins the Mississippi at Vicksburg. For blues fans, this is *the* Delta (Gioia 1).

¹¹ From the Latin, ‘limen,’ which means threshold. Liminality is the “transitional period or phrase of a rite of passage, during which the participant lacks social status or rank, remains anonymous, shows obedience and humility, and follows prescribed forms of conduct, dress, etc (“liminality”).

¹² According to Hoodoo expert, Cat Yronwode:

The Honey Jar Spell is one of the oldest forms of bottle spell in the world. There are so many variations that I [*sic*] call it a “spell family.” Most of them consist of a jar of sweetener into which you place the personal concerns of the person you want to influence, along with spiritually powerful magical herbs, wrapped in a name-paper or petition packet, and then burning a candle on top of the jar after dressing it with an appropriate conjure oil. This form of hoodoo spell casting is employed when you want to set up a powerful sweetening spell in a small place and keep it working for as long as you wish. This magic bottle spell can be worked on anyone’s name you want to sweeten. (www.luckymojo.com/honeyjar.html)

¹³ See Note 2.

¹⁴ See Note 2.

¹⁵ See Appendix E for the lyrics in their entirety.

¹⁶ See Appendix F for the lyrics in their entirety.

¹⁷ The reference to Georgia Bill is McTell talking about himself, as this was a pseudonym under which Blind Willie McTell recorded songs.

¹⁸ See Appendix G for the lyrics (except where I could not understand well enough to transcribe them) in their entirety.

¹⁹ See Appendix H for the lyrics in their entirety.

²⁰ See Appendix I for the lyrics in their entirety.

²¹ There are various spellings, but all derivations refer to the same root.

²² This song was released by Cripple Clarence Lofton around 1938 or 1939. It was recorded by Willie Mabon in 1952 for Parrot, and in 1953 for Chess. See Appendix J for the lyrics (as recorded by Willie Mabon) in their entirety.

Works Cited

- Baker, Barbara A. *The Blues Aesthetic and the Making of American Identity in the Literature of the South*. New York: Peter Lang, 2003. Print.
- Barlow, William. *"Looking Up At Down": The Emergence of Blues Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1989. Print.
- Boutry, Katherine. "Black and Blue: The Female Body of Blues Writing in Jean Toomer, Toni Morrison, and Gayl Jones." Ed. Simawe, Saadi. *Black Orpheus: Music in African American Fiction from the Harlem Renaissance to Toni Morrison*. New York: Garland Pub., 2000. 91-118. Print.
- Clabough, Casey. *Gayl Jones: The Language of Voice and Freedom in Her Writings*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008. Print.
- Davis, Angela Y. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. New York: Vintage, 1999. Print.
- Diddley, Bo. "I'm a Man." *The Definitive Collection*. Geffen Records, 2007. CD.
- Florez, Lou. *Lou Florez*. N.p., 2009. Web. 24 Mar. 2010.
< <http://www.louflorez.com> >
- . Personal interview. 13 Mar. 2010.
- Gioia, Ted. *Delta Blues*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2008. Print.
- Handy, W.C. "Yellow Dog Blues." *Memphis Blues Band*. Inside Sounds/IODA, 1994. CD.

- Hurston, Zora Neale. *The Sanctified Church*. Berkeley: Turtle Island, 1981. Print.
- Hyatt, Harry M. *Hoodoo, Conjuraton, Witchcraft, Rootwork*. Cambridge, MD: Western Pub. Co., 1973. Print.
- Johnson, Robert. "Come On In My Kitchen." *King of the Delta Blues Singers*. Columbia, 1961. CD.
- . "Cross Roads Blues." *King of the Delta Blues Singers*. Columbia, 1961. CD.
- . "I Believe I'll Dust My Broom." *King of the Delta Blues Singers*. Columbia, 1961. CD.
- Jones, Gayl. *Corregidora*. New York: Griot Ed., 1998. Print.
- Jones, LeRoi (a.k.a. Imamu Amiri Baraka). *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. New York: W. Morrow, 1963. Print.
- "liminality." *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc. Web. 17 Mar. 2010. <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/liminality>>.
- Mabon, Willie. "I Don't Know." Chess, 1953. Web. 30 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.luckymojo.com/bluesidontknowmabon.html>>
- McTell, Blind Willie. "Scarey Day Blues." *The Definitive Blind Willie McTell*. Columbia, 1994. CD.
- Mitchell, Keith B. "'Trouble in Mind': (Re)visioning Myth, Sexuality, and Race in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*." Ed. Mills, Fiona. *After the Pain:*

- Critical Essays on Gail Jones*. New York: Peter Lang, 2006. 155-171. Print.
- Rainey, Ma. "Black Dust Blues." *The Very Best of Ma Rainey*. Shout Factory, 2003. CD.
- Rushdy, Ashraf H.A. *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction*. Chapel Hill: UP of NC, 2001. Print.
- Smith, Bessie. "Yellow Dog Blues." *Martin Scorsese Presents The Blues: Bessie Smith*. Columbia/Legacy, 2003. CD.
- Sony Music Soundtrack for A Century: Folk, Gospel & Blues*. Legacy Records J2K 65804, 1999. Liner notes, p. 35. Print.
- Spencer, John Michael. *Blues and Evil*. Knoxville: U of TN P, 1993. Print.
- Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy*. New York: Vintage, 1984. Print.
- Twitty, John D. (a.k.a. "Black Spider Dumpling), "Sold It to the Devil." Victor, 1937. Web. 4 Mar. 2010.
<<http://www.luckymojo.com/bluessoldittwitty.html>>.
- Wall, Cheryl A. *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition*. Chapel Hill: UP of North Carolina, 2005. Print.
- Waters, Muddy. "Hoochie Coochie Man." *The Definitive Collection*. Geffen Records, 2006. CD.

---. "I Got My Mojo Working." *Storytellers*. HHO Licensing / X5 Music, 2007. CD.

Weissman, Dick. *Blues: The Basics*. New York: Routledge, 2005. Print.

Yronwode, Catherine. *Hoodoo in Theory and Practice*. Lucky Mojo Curio Co., n.d. Web. 4 Mar. 2010.

<<http://www.luckymojo.com/crossroads.html>>.

---. *Hoodoo Herb and Root Magic: A Materia Magica of African-American Conjure and Traditional Formulary, Giving the Spiritual Uses of Natural Herbs, Roots, Minerals, and Zoological Curios*. Forestville, CA: Lucky Mojo Curio Co., 2002. Print.

Appendix A

Johnson, Robert. "Cross Roads Blues." *King of the Delta Blues Singers*.
Columbia, 1961.

I went to the crossroads fell down on my knees

I went to the crossroads fell down on my knees

Asked the Lord above have mercy save poor Bob if you please

Mmmmm standin' at the crossroads I tried to flag a ride

Standin' at the crossroad I tried to flag a ride

Didn't nobody seem to know me everybody pass me by

Mmm, the sun goin' down boy dark gon' catch me here

oooo oeee eeee boy dark gon' catch me here

I haven't got no lovin' sweet woman that love and feel my care

You can run you can run tell my friend boy Willie Brown

You can run tell my friend boy Willie Brown

Lord that I'm standin' at the crossroad babe I believe I'm sinkin' down

Appendix B

Smith, Bessie. "Yellow Dog Blues." *Martin Scorsese Presents The Blues:*

Bessie Smith. Columbia/Legacy, 2003.

Ever since Miss Susie Johnson lost her Jockey Lee

There has been much excitement and more to be

You can hear her moaning moaning night and morn

She's wonder where her easy rider's gone

Cablegram goes off in inquiry telegram goes off in sympathy

Letters came from down in Bam

Everywhere that Uncle Sam is the ruler of delivery

All day the phone rings it's not for me

At last good tidings fill my heart with glee

This message came from Tennessee

Dear Suze your easy rider struck this burg today

On a southbound rattler beside the Pullman car

I've seen him there and he was on the hog

Ah, you easy rider's gotta stay away

He had to vamp it but the hike ain't far

He's gone where the Southern cross the Yellow Dog

Appendix C

Twitty, John D. (a.k.a. "Black Spider Dumpling), "Sold It to the Devil."

Victor, 1937.

I sold my soul sold it to the devil and my heart done turned to stone

I sold my soul sold it to the devil he won't let me alone

Said I'm hateful and I'm evil I carries a Gatling gun

I drink carbolic acid be darned if I will run

But I sold it I sold it sold it to the devil and my heart done turned to stone

I done sold my soul sold it to the devil but he won't let me alone

I got a little baker shop right downtown

Everything I bake it is nice and brown

But I sold it I sold it sold it to the devil and my heart done turned to stone

I sold it I sold it sold it to the devil but he won't let me be 'lone

My life it is unhappy it won't last me long

Everything I do seem like I do's it wrong

But I sold it I sold it sold it to the devil and my heart done turned to stone

I sold my soul sold it to the devil but he won't let me be 'lone

I eat black spider dumplings for my dessert

Go to the blacksmith let him make my shirt

But I sold it I sold it sold it to the devil and my heart done turned to stone

I sold my soul sold it to the devil but he won't let me be 'lone

I live down in the valley five hundred steps

Where the bears and the tigers they come to take their rest

But I sold it sold it sold it to the devil and my heart done turned to stone

I done sold my soul sold it to the devil but he won't let me be 'lone

I went to a place that I knew so well

I shot that devil right in Hell

But I sold it sold it sold it to the devil and my heart done turned to ... eee-eee-

vohl eee-vohl [evil]

Appendix D

Johnson, Robert. "I Believe I'll Dust My Broom." *King of the Delta Blues Singers*. Columbia, 1961.

I'm gonna get up in the mornin' I believe I'll dust my broom
I'm gonna get up in the mornin' I believe I'll dust my broom
Girlfriend the Black man you been lovin' girlfriend can get my room

I'm gonna write a letter telephone every town I know
I'm gonna write a letter telephone every town I know
If I can't find her in West Helena she must be in East Monroe I know

I don't want no woman wants every downtown man she meet
I don't want no woman wants every downtown man she meet
She's a no good doney they shouldn't allow her on the street

I believe I believe I'll go back home
I believe I believe I'll go back home
You can mistreat me here baby but you can't when I go home

And I'm getting up in the mornin' I believe I'll dust my broom

I'm getting up in the morning' I believe I'll dust my broom

Girlfriend the black man you been lovin' girlfriend can get my room

I'm gonna call up Chiney see is my good girl over there

I'm gonna call up China see is my good girl over there

If I can't find her on Philippine's island she must be in Ethiopia somewhere

Appendix E

Johnson, Robert. "Come On In My Kitchen." *King of the Delta Blues Singers*. Columbia, 1961.

Mmm mmm mmm mmm mmm mmm

You better come on in my kitchen babe it's goin' to be rainin' outdoors

Ah the woman I love took from my best friend

Some joker got lucky stole her back again

You better come on in my kitchen babe it's goin' to be rainin' outdoors

Oh-ah she's gone I know she won't come back

I've taken the last nickel out of her nation sack

You better come on in my kitchen babe it's goin' to be rainin' outdoors

Oh can't you hear that wind howl?

Oh-y can't you hear that wind howl?

You better come on in my kitchen baby it's goin' to be rainin' outdoors

When a woman gets in trouble everybody throws her down

Lookin' for her good friend none can be found

You better come on in my kitchen baby it's goin' to be rainin' outdoors

Winter time's comin' it's gon' be slow

You can't make the winter babe that's dry long so

You better come on in my kitchen cause it's goin' to be rainin' outdoors

Appendix F

Waters, Muddy. "I Got My Mojo Working." *Storytellers*. HHO Licensing /
X5 Music, 2007.

Got my mojo workin' but it just don't work on you

Got my mojo workin' but it just don't work on you

I wanna love you so bad child but I don't know what to do

I'm going down to Louisiana gonna get me a mojo hand

Going down to Louisiana gonna get me a mojo hand

Gonna have all you women under my command

Got my mojo workin'

(Got my mojo workin')

Got my mojo workin' but it just don't work on you

I got a Gypsy woman giving me advice

I got a Gypsy woman giving me advice

I got a whole lot of tricks keeping it on ice

Got my mojo workin'

(Got my mojo workin')

Got my mojo workin'

(Got my mojo workin')

Got my mojo workin'

(Got my mojo workin')

Workin'

(Got my mojo workin')

Got my mojo workin', but it just don't work on you

Appendix G

McTell, Blind Willie. "Scarey Day Blues." *The Definitive Blind Willie
McTell*. Columbia, 1994.

I wants to wait around here baby [I cannot accurately transcribe the lyrics
here]

I wants to wait around here baby [I cannot accurately transcribe the lyrics
here]

Because I think I got a nickel I wants to buy me one

I want to cut out and find a woman and do like my last rider done

Want to cut out and find a woman do just like my last rider done

She kept it all for her daddy she didn't give nobody none

Said my baby got a bed it shines like a morning star

My good mama got a bed it shines like a morning star

And when I crawls in the middle it ride me like a Cadillac car

My good gal got a mojo she's tryin' to keep it hid

My good woman got a mojo she's tryin' to keep it hid

But Georgia Bill got something to find that mojo with

I said she got that mojo and she won't let me see

I said she got that mojo and she won't let me see

And every time I start to love her she tried to put them jinx on me

(spoken: Play a little bit for me [I can't tell what name he says here]. I know you like it.)

Well she shakes it like the Central she wobble like the L & N

I said she shake it like the Central she wobble like the L & N

But she's a hot-shot mama and I'm scared to tell her where I been

Said my baby got something she won't tell her daddy what it is

My good mama got something she won't tell her papa what it is

And when I crawls in my bed I just can't keep my black stuff still

Well I done got records and I broke my mama's rules oh Lord

Well I done got records and I broke my baby's rules

I'm your wanderer around Georgia with these doggone scary day blues

Appendix H

Waters, Muddy. "Hoochie Coochie Man." *The Definitive Collection*. Geffen Records, 2006.

The gypsy woman told my mother
Before I was born
I got a boy child's comin'
He's gonna be a son of a gun
He gonna make pretty womens
Jump and shout
Then the world wanna know
What this all about
But you know I'm him
Everybody knows I'm him
Well you know I'm the hoochie coochie man
Everybody knows I'm him

I got a black cat bone
I got a mojo too
I got the John the Conquer Root
I'm gonna mess with you

I'm gonna make you girls
Lead me by my hand
Then the world will know
The hoochie coochie man
But you know I'm him
Everybody knows I'm him
Oh you know I'm the hoochie coochie man
Everybody knows I'm him

On the seventh hour
On the seventh day
On the seventh month
The seven doctors say
He was born for good luck
And that you'll see
I got seven hundred dollars
Don't you mess with me
But you know I'm him
Everybody knows I'm him
Well you know I'm the hoochie coochie man
Everybody knows I'm him

Appendix I

Diddy, Bo. "I'm a Man." *The Definitive Collection*. Geffen Records, 2007.

Now when I was a little boy at the age of five

I had somethin' in my pocket keep a lot of folks alive

Now I'm a man make twenty-one

You know baby we can have a lot of fun

I'm a man

I spell m-a-n man

All all all all all you pretty women stand in line

I can make love to you baby in a hour's time

I'm a man

Spell m-a-n man

I'm goin' back down to Kansas to

Bring back the second cousin little John the Conqueroo

I'm a man

Spell m-a-n man

Oh ah oh ah

The line I shoot will never miss

The way I make love to 'em they can't resist

I'm a man

I spell m-a-n man

Ah oh Ah oh

Appendix J

Mabon, Willie. "I Don't Know." Chess, 1953.

(spoken: This number was introduced to me by the late Cripple Clarence Lofton, titled, "I Don't Know.")

I'm getting sick and tired of the way you do

Good kind papa's got to poison you

Sprinkle goofer dust all around your bed

Wake up one of these mornings find your own self dead

She said you shouldn't say that

I said what should I say this time baby

She says mmmmmmm I don't know

My oh my oh my I don't know what my baby puttin' down

The woman I love she got dimples in her jaws

The clothes she's wearin' is made out of the best of cloths

She can take and wash and she can hang 'em upside the wall

She can throw 'em out the window and run out and catch 'em a little bit
before they falls

Sometimes I think you got your habits on
She said you shouldn't say that
I said what should I say to make you mad this time baby
She says mmmmmmm I don't know
My oh my oh my I don't know what my baby puttin' down

My papa told me my mother sat down and cried
Say you're too young a man son to have the many women you've had
I looked at my mother then I didn't even crack a smile
I say if the women kills me I don't mind dyin'

The woman I love I won the week before last
The woman I love I got out of class
I thought I won you baby a long time ago
If you don't watch your step I'm gonna have to let you go
She said you shouldn't say that
I said what did I say to make you mad this time baby
She says mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm I don't know
I don't know I don't know what my baby putting down putting down