Jones, Gayl:

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Femme But Not Fatal: Audacious Clarity in *The Hermit-Woman* and *Eva's Man*

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Whatever vortices the religions of patriarchy and white supremacy (d)evolve into, Gayl Jones' highly nuanced texts seem to always provide a literary oasis in which the witness/survivor/resister can sit for a moment, gathering and readying herself for the next inevitable spirals and torrents. Yet, her texts certainly are not pleasurable panaceas, but they rather operate as blues meditations – an idiom that the late notable Sherley Anne Williams in her trenchant essay "The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry" describes as a form that deals

> with a world where the inability to solve a problem does not necessarily mean that one can, or ought to, transcend it. The internal strategy of the blues is action, rather than contemplation, for the song itself is the creation of reflection…. [T]he blues singer strives to create an atmosphere in which analysis can take place. (Williams, 123-125)

Jones' choral mastery of her symphony of black female protagonists and speakers (blues singers all) is quite palpable in her second novel *Eva's Man* and her second poetry collection *The Hermit-Woman* for many important reasons. Chief among these reasons is Jones' privileging of black female subjectivity by way of audacious narrative strategies that accommodate specific themes associated with this subjectivity, themes that are typically trivialized, misrepresented, severed, or flatly ignored in the mainstreams of literature and civic life. These themes include, but are not limited to, dialogic binaries and dualisms that are associated with and contested in black female subjectivity:

voice/voicelessness; visibility/invisibility; femininity/masculinity; beauty/ugliness; sanity/insanity; victim/criminal; oversexuality/asexuality; etc. Jones' treatment of these themes is stark, brutal, taut, genuine, courageous, inventive, quiet, and sophisticated. One does not read Jones and forget her. One does not read Jones and not learn. One reads Jones and reflects, even if such reflection becomes painful and obsessive.

And like a painful, obsessive refrain in a blues stanza, the meditations in the title poem "The Hermit-Woman" and in the novel *Eva's Man* reveal themselves much in the way a photograph develops in its solution. Jones' lessons are gradual, dependent upon the reader's own application of light, her degree of intellectual generosity. This quality allows for a deepening awareness that facilitates the reader's "knowing" in such a way that the reader's goal is not to "get it and move on," but rather to witness it and stay put long enough to admit that there is something else to learn now, or later. And while it is true that this quality is a definitive trait of any good book of imaginative literature, what is important here is that Jones' texts are among the very few that deal with themes specific to the status of black women in genuinely inventive, unpredictable ways.

And so, here, in the midst of my fifth re-read of *Eva's Man* and my third re-read of *The Hermit Woman*, I am grappling with the notion of reading Jones' protagonists as **femme fatales**, as part of my *Encylopedia* assignment, but also as part of my own intellectual journey with Jones, one of the few writers that has kept my attention for many years. Wikipedia says that a femme fatale is French for "deadly woman" or "fatal woman," who is "a stock character in European drama and a stereotype usually of a villainous woman, who would deceptively mislead and ensnare the hapless hero and/or other males in order to gain some end they would not freely help her achieve." Furthermore, the femme fatale is nemesis to the ingenue, a "girl or young woman who is endearingly innocent."

Of course this ingenue can only be and is always white. And, indeed, in the goodly Anglo-Christian literary tradition wherein the alleged benchmark of Literacy and Culture is Europe or Europe-like, if the innocents are white, then, logically (read Plato, Hegel, Conrad, et. al.= precepts of Western Civilization) the criminals are not. To Americanize this further, we can also consider Nobel winner Toni Morrison's very astute meditations on "black surrogacy" (see *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*) as manifest in the Great Works of (White Male) American Writers such as Melville, Poe, Hawthorne, and Hemingway, a phenomenon where black characters or the black "presence" can only be articulated/known through white characters, and where whiteness, as a full cultural experience and identity, can only exist as inscribed in and against "blackness," the Jungle. Furthermore, the scholar Karla F.C. Holloway, in her excellent *Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature* troubles the notion of a meta-definition of womanhood by pointing to the disparate differences in history between black and white women such that the very basic notions of womanhood for black and white women are interrogated and turned over. She gives a striking example, among many, of what motherhood was like for enslaved black women versus white women: very simply, black women were often raped by white men who stole their breast milk. And, we need to read "breast milk" with all the figurative meaning this symbol sustains.

But more, to contemporize, we can also consider the hideously ubiquitous and incessantly depraved depictions of a mutilated and falsified black female identity on any number of internet porn sites, any number of regular and cable channels, most notably MTV and BET, and the new hyperghetto-hyperfabulous show *I Love New York.* Put this all together and it's not hard to understand why Katrina happened, why mothers with crying infants in their arms were bypassed by "rescue" helicopters as they struggled to get air on rooftops, as they struggled to keep themselves and their kin above water. Or why Ryan McFadyen, white and 19, one of the lead defendants in the recent Duke University lacrosse team scandal, in which 11 mostly well-to-do, white teammates "allegedly" brutally beat and raped two black women, stated in an email sent to his teammates that he was interested in "killing bitches" and "cutting off their skin" and that these acts would be "very sexually gratifying."

As the public intellectual bell hooks has articulated in her various articles, black women can never be innocent because black women have been defined on all levels, in every area of life activity, as the opposite of innocent, as innocence's nemesis. In fact, it is this ascribed trait of guilt, of criminality, that actually defines blackness in general, and certainly black women in particular. Blackness is synonymous with guilt, vice, and criminality. So much so have we all internalized this crippling myth, that our response to blackness, especially a female blackness, as a site of guilt, vice, and criminality is a cellular response in our collective consciousness.

For many of us sensitive readers we already know this, for the story has long been told by our prominent writers and thinkers. But the story needs to be told, again and again, as mantra, as salve. Because the Katrina and Duke spectacles *did just happen.* And the assaults on black women in every area of life continue, whether they are published or not, seen or not, acknowledged or not.

And so now I turn back to Jones' blues women – the hermit-woman and Eva. The hermit-woman in "The Hermit Woman" is an intelligent, highly self-aware individual who addresses a visitor, a lover, by giving him/her reflections on the nature of love. The hermit-woman, like most of the female speakers in the collection, is a kind of witch and seer/healer, and yet her disposition is that of the "everywoman." She stands apart from her visitors, yet humbly welcomes them. The concept of the hermit-woman can be traced back to the earliest forms of religion in northeast Africa, particularly the animist tradition. In animism, unlike Anglo-Christianity, human beings are not considered superior to animals and plants, and all life is considered as having a soul. While a full comparison of animism and Anglo-Christianity is beyond the scope of this paper, the hermit-woman provides an interesting lens through which to view the various complexities Jones articulates through her female characters. Hermit-women believe in the interconnectedness of nature and human beings, and they are pursuers of knowledge.
In one compelling sequence, the hermit-woman identifies herself and her knowledge, evoking her agency: "It is only my own self/I must swallow./It is only my own shape/I must assume/….I'm any ordinary woman,/pulling at the back/of my own eyelids,/trying to see better./I'm any ordinary woman,/in plain sight/….Does love transform?/….Love's a danger/and a promise./Love's a drum/on the ribs,/hair pulled out./Lights" (10-11).

"The Hermit-Woman" is a tightly-knit, rhythmic narrative poem in which line breaks occur at the end of concepts, often allowing for double-entendre. Jones uses repetition and one-line refrains to emphasize key ideas that are central to the poem, the collection itself, and to *Eva's Man*, published prior. The one-line refrain is the question: "Does love transform?" The other repeated lines are "I'm any ordinary woman" and "To tell the truth." These are the critical meditations: one's ordinariness as a way to empathize so that one can see better; one's better seeing so that truth can be told; truth-telling as a way to interrogate the potential of love. By the end of the poem, the hermit-woman tells the lover (very likely male) that she hopes the mushrooms she picked for them to eat are not poisonous and that she'll taste them first to be sure. Her tone is generous, helpful, and wise. Genuine.

Love's potential is examined deeply in *Eva's Man*. Eva, a woman struggling to make sense of sex, sexuality, male abuse, and her own burgeoning agency, is a genuine victim who becomes criminalized because her act of resistance – which is an act of visibility – profoundly subverts the biblical ideation of woman (as epitomized by Eve) as original temptress and sinner, or the original femme fatale. In the Anglo-Christian biblical story, as in much of the Western iconography based on this story and associated with femme fatales, the assumption is that these women are inherently evil, or, at least, are given to becoming evil. In order for this assumption to be true, we have to accept that there is nothing in the climate in which women live that influences their behavior; in order for us to accept that women really are inherently evil (deceptive, manipulative, mean, low, whorish, cunning, etc. and etc.) we have to accept that women's indentity develops and evolves in a vacuum, untainted by the religion of patriarchy.

Of course this is flatly untrue. bell hooks quotes John Stoltenberg's "Toward Gender Justice":

> Under patriarchy, men are the arbiters of identity for both
> males and females, because the cultural norm of human indentity is,
> by definition, male identity – masculinity. And, under patriarchy,
> the cultural norm of male identity consists in power, prestige, privilege,
> and prerogative as over and against the gender class women. That's
> what masculinity is. It isn't something else….[T]here is a social process
> by which patriarchy confers power, prestige, privilege, and prerogative
> on people who are born with cocks, and…there is a sexual program
> promoted by patriarchy (not Mother Nature) for how these cocks are
> supposed to function. (hooks, 99-100)

After years of being victim of and witness to confusing and debilitating messages from both men and women as to what woman – specifically black woman – is and should be, Eva poisons, rapes, and orally castrates her lover, Davis, in a scene rife with Edenic and necrophilic imagery and Eva's psychological interiority, a landscape repeatedly permuted by voices and events associated with both victims and purveyors of sexual abuse that she and others in her life have experienced. Jones carefully crafts the scene so that we are sure to catch the Edenic imageplay, as well as Eva's state of mind:

> I put my hand on his hand. I kissed his hand, his neck. I put my fingers in the space above his eyes, but didn't close them…. I put my forehead under his chin. He was warm. The glass had spilled from his hand. I put my tongue between his parted lips. I kissed his teeth…. I opened his trousers and played with his penis. My mouth, my teeth, my tongue went inside his trousers. I raised blood, slime from cabbage, blood sausage. Blood from an apple. I…dug my fingers up his ass, then I knelt down on the wooden floor…. I got back on the bed and squeezed his dick in my teeth. I bit down hard. My teeth in an apple. A swollen plum in my mouth…. I got the silk handkerchief he used to wipe me after we made love, and wrapped his penis in it. I laid it back inside his trousers, zipped him up. I kissed his cheeks, his lips, his neck. I got naked and sat on the bed again. I spread my legs across his thighs and put his hand on my crotch, stuffed his fingers up in me. I put my whole body over him. I farted. (Jones, 128-29).

While Eva's sanity in this scene is debatable, her actions nonetheless establish a way of critically examining the extent to which her female identity was/is dependent upon Davis' male identity, symbolized by his penis. Jones further riffs variations on the Eden theme by establishing Davis as participant in, rather than victim of Eva's rape and castration (his eyes are open and he is still warm). Furthermore, this imagery conjures alternating ideas of sacredness and blasphemy, benevolence and hatred in such a way that we are unable to view Eva's actions as simply premeditated and sinister.

Why does Eva kill her boyfriend? What other fruits does his death bear? Is Eva's motivation the same as that of the hermit-woman? Near the end of the novel, Eva, who is now hospitalized in an institution for the "criminally insane," is interrogated about her motive. For several pages, Jones deliberately confuses the origins and nature of the questions and the sequences of answers that Eva gives in order to establish the cumulative effect of her abuse. Near the end Eva finally articulates herself in a series of spare, revelatory dependent clauses and seeming non sequiturs:

> He kept thinking I was that kind of woman. Always. They would, wouldn't they. Always. No matter what I. Just because the place I went, the way I talked or how I wore my hair. Any woman's talk. You know…. But he thought I would. After he left me or I left him. He thought I was. The way he was looking at me. James wouldn't let me have no telephone. When he was sitting on that bed, the way he was looking at me. He came in the house. I was sitting there in the dark. I scared him. He didn't have to be scared. He could have said anything to me anytime. Every man could look at me the way he was looking. They all would. Even when I. He thought I was his. (Jones, 171)

Here Eva is talking about all of the men in her life, and, by extension, the lives of other women, and her admission evinces her desire to have been loved respectfully. Eva's personal "I" voice is a public eye on the state of affairs as regards women. Davis' death – and the way he died – stand as proof of Eva's ability to defend herself and to make her self visible within the ethos of patriarchy and white supremacy, despite the overarching negative consequences.

While it is true that Eva deceived her lover and that her deception proved fatal to him, Eva cannot be properly considered a femme fatale. What she wants – respect, equity, peace, genuine love – could not be given to her by Davis or any of the other men, for it is impossible for these men to do so. Because the patriarchal system is corrupt totally, then so, too, are its progenitors and followers, resisters and victims. Eva is a product of the very system that would define her as something deviant, outside of it. Eva is a black female living within a system that would rather consume and erase her, a system that requires black women to be permanently mute and mutilated. She is not "fair game" in the way that a femme fatale would be; instead, she is the game. Further, in order for Eva to be a femme fatale, she would have to have an ingenue, an innocent nemesis. This is not possible for black women. ***Unlike the (white) femme fatale, Eva is not able to exercise the option of choosing to be one since the very constructs of such an identity necessarily exclude black female subjectivity. Unlike the (white) femme fatale, Eva's act is not borne of sexy, leisure choice, but rather the icy poverty of inequity and restriction.***

Eva's castration of Davis is a symbolic indictment and punishment of patriarchy as epitomized by the men in her life. It is a powerful act of agency and clear vision. Yet, she doesn't get away with it. In this way Eva is a blues singer, independent and audacious as the hermit-woman – a whole woman who wants to be what she should, experiences that are a part of an alternate culture that may only entirely exist in her own mind. As blues singer, she does not run and hide, but accepts the consequences of her actions. By the end of the novel we may think that Eva is a broken curio, insane, misunderstood, silenced.

Instead, we can read Eva as appearing vocal, alert, forthright, refined. She may not have transcended the prison of patriarchy and white supremacy, but she has created a space within which she, and others, especially her current inmate, can analyze the system within and against which they struggle. Though, sadly, she is quarantined, she has rid herself of the mental shackles that keep her from "pulling at the back/of [her] own eyelids,/trying to see better" (Jones, "Hermit Woman," 10).

Better, clearer sight is not the goal of a femme fatale. Better, clearer sight is the goal of marginalized, abused women of color, specifically black women, for such sight is redemptive, and redemption, itself, is self-reflexive, a freedom on and all its own.

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