

Call for papers, international conference, University of Nantes, 24 and 25 March 2027

**The Subversive Work of Gayl Jones Beyond Borders: Rediscovering a
“Liberating Voice” of the Black Atlantic World**

Born in Kentucky in 1949 into a Black middle-class family in which a passion for writing and storytelling was passed down from mothers to daughters, Gayl Jones emerged from a literary environment profoundly shaped by her mother, Lucille Jones, a fiction writer whose work was deeply rooted in Black vernacular language, oral storytelling traditions, and African American community life. This intergenerational inheritance of Black expressive culture would become central to Jones’s own literary practice. Today, Gayl Jones is recognized as a major literary figure whose work nevertheless remains comparatively underrecognized. Her novels *The Healing* (1998) and *The Birdcatcher* (2022) were shortlisted for the National Book Award in 2022, while *Palmares* and *The Unicorn Woman* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 2022 and 2025, respectively. Although honored with an American Book Award for her Lifetime Achievement in 2022, she has yet to receive a major literary prize. Despite the international reach of her writings and consistent critical acclaim, her work remains comparatively understudied outside the United States, unlike other major female figures of African American literature, such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, and Maya Angelou. Gayl Jones was praised for her singular voice from the publication of her first novel, *Corregidora* (1975), which transnationally addresses in raw and startling ways the sexual exploitation of women in Brazil and the Southern United States during and long after slavery and the traumatic consequences of these historical forms of violence. Since this publication, Jones has established herself as a writer whose output—marked by musicality, memory, psychological expressionism, and violence—relentlessly pushes the boundaries of the novel, genre, language, narrative form, and history. According to Toni Morrison, who edited Gayl Jones at Random House, Jones fundamentally transformed both the African American novel and Black women’s writing. As Morrison observed, “no novel about a Black woman will ever be the same again after *Corregidora*” (Dubey, 1994). Such praise firmly positions Jones as a major and innovative literary figure in contemporary African American literature.

Both her literary trajectory and her aesthetic approach invite readers to move beyond traditional frameworks and consider African American literature from a transatlantic perspective that foregrounds the circulation and reconfiguration of identities in the postmodern and postcolonial eras. In the United States of the 1970s, Jones stood apart from many of her contemporaries. Although she published her earliest works during the height of the Black Arts Movement, which advocated a radical departure from Anglo-American aesthetic norms and called upon Black writers to engage in the political struggles within a racist and segregationist American society (Mitchell, 1994), Jones consistently challenged the expectations associated with this movement. In her essay “From the Quest for Wholeness: Re-imagining the African-American Novel,” she advocates a deconstructed and “decolonized” (*ibid.*) approach to the novel, one that should be understood first and foremost as an aesthetic practice rather than merely a sociopolitical object. This avant-garde stance is evident in her characters, who, although carrying a collective history and cultural memory, nonetheless disrupt traditional notions of identity.

Gayl Jones’s work cannot be reduced to an explicit sociopolitical project, and its place within a transnational and transatlantic context also deserves renewed attention. In *The Healing*

(1998) and *Mosquito* (1999), whose characters embody existential drift and identity questioning, Jones crafts a borderless, intercultural, and polyphonic literary space through which to envision an American literature grounded in plurality (Clabough, 2008). Furthermore, Jones's engagement with African and Afro-diasporic history, particularly the resistance of the Maroons of Palmares in Brazil, introduces a distinct form of cosmopolitanism and transnationalism into American literature (Coser, 1995). This poetics of circulation and border-crossing also resonates with her own life. She lived in Europe in the 1980s, and even taught in France (Samuels, 2007). She published her groundbreaking novel *Die Vogelfängerin* in Germany in 1986; its English version *The Birdcatcher*, would not appear in the United States until 2022. Such an editorial history complicates conventional definitions of national literature and invites reflection on the challenges of translating an author whose work itself traverses cultural, linguistic, and geographical boundaries.

With seven novels to her name (*Corregidora*, 1975; *Eva's Man*, 1976; *The Healing*, 1998 ; *Mosquito*, 1999; *Palmares*, 2021; *The Birdcatcher*, (1986) 2022; *The Unicorn Woman*, 2024), numerous short stories and novellas (*White Rat*, 1977; "Ravenna," 1986; *Butter*, 2023), a play (*Chile Woman*, 1974), two books of literary criticism (*Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature*, 1991; *Minding the Word: The Writings of Lucille Jones*, 2004), and an equally substantial body of poetry (*Song for Anninho*, 1981; *The Hermit-Woman*, 1983; *Xarque and Other Poems*, 1985; *Song for Almeyda and Song for Anninho*, 2022), Gayl Jones is undeniably a writer of considerable stature. Despite extended periods of silence, from 1991 to 1998, and again from 2004 to 2021, associated with a deeply troubled personal life, Gayl Jones never stopped writing. Across a wide range of literary genres, she has developed a singular voice addressing of some of the most difficult and taboo subjects: slavery in the Americas, sexual crimes and all forms of violence against women and children, poverty, racism, madness, and trauma. However, apart from Casey Clabough's *Gayl Jones: The Language of Voice and Freedom in Her Writings* (2008) and Fiona Mills and Keith Mitchell's edited collection *After the Pain: Essays on Gayl Jones* (2006), relatively few studies have examined the full scope and diversity of her work. Most scholarship continues to focus on her first two novels, *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man*. Moreover, media attention surrounding Gayl Jones's personal life has often overshadowed the sustained critical engagement with her literary achievements.

The publications of *Palmares* (2021) and *The Birdcatcher* (2022) have renewed scholarly interest in Jones's work, as evidenced by the 2022 symposium "Then You Don't Want Me: Canonising Gayl Jones" at Boston University. Recent French translations of her works in France may likewise encourage a new wave of critical attention. In an academic context, Jones was included in the earliest efforts to define a canon of American Black feminist literature in the 1990s, alongside Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Sherley Anne Williams, Gloria Naylor, and Paule Marshall. These studies emphasized shared themes of resistance (Kekeh-Dika, 1991), the articulation of the marginalized Black female voice (Sutra, 1993), and the tensions between personal and collective memory (Chavanelle, 1994; Sizaire, 1995). While these frameworks establish an African-American literary sisterhood, Jones often occupies a marginal position within it, discussed almost exclusively in relation to *Corregidora*, with *Eva's Man* receiving limited attention outside Anne Kekeh-Dika's thesis. Yet, as Richard Ford asserts, "Gayl Jones is a literary movement unto herself." This conference, therefore, seeks specifically to examine and further define this "movement," inviting a (re)discovery of this "liberating voice" of the Black Atlantic and her subversive work within and beyond national borders.

The international conference will also foreground Gayl Jones's essential contribution to reflections on the history and memories of slavery, in the wake of the commemorations marking in 2026 the twenty-fifth anniversary of the "Taubira Law" (Law no. 2001-434), which recognized the transatlantic slave trade and slavery as crimes against humanity in France. The event will take place in Nantes, a former major slave-trading port, one year after the United Nations resolution of 25 March 2026, which declared the transatlantic slave trade the "most horrific crime against humanity," and at a moment when, in the United States, the memory of slavery appears increasingly fragile due to revisionist policies implemented by Trump's second administration.

Communications may be presented in English or French and may address the following themes:

I. The Aesthetics and Poetics of Gayl Jones's Writing

- Orality and the influence of blues and jazz in her prose
- Polyphony and transculturality in her writing
- Black Women Writing Beyond Genre: Lucille Jones, Gayl Jones, and the Politics of Literary Classification
- "Mothers of Black Language": Lucille Jones, Gayl Jones, and the Inheritance of Black Vernacular Aesthetics
- Recurring motifs and "haunting metaphors" (Mauron)
- Representations of gender-based violence and trauma
- Dynamics of power and oppression in her narratives

II. Diaspora, Memory, and Historicity in Gayl Jones's Imaginary

- The history and "postmemory" (Hirsch) of slavery
- Black feminisms and transnational forms of resistance
- *Palmares*: chronicle of an Afro-Brazilian resistance
- Slave narratives, neo-slave narratives, and aesthetic marronage in Jones's work

III. The Reception and Circulation of Gayl Jones's Work

- The critical reception of her work across different cultural contexts
- Challenges of translating and adapting her work in French-, Portuguese-, German-, and Italian-speaking contexts (among others)
- Comparative approaches to the circulation, resonance, and intercultural dialogues generated by her work across the Americas, the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa.

Submission Guidelines

Abstracts (in French or English), between 1,000- and 2,000-characters including spaces (excluding bibliography and biographical note), should be submitted by **30 September 2026** to the members of the organizing committee:

- Tina Harpin — tina.harpin@gmail.com

- Mérile Mbang Mba Aki — mbandmeryl@gmail.com

Authors whose proposals have been accepted will receive notification by October 15th, 2026.

Travel and accommodation expenses are the responsibility of participants or their research institutions. Meals will be covered by the organizers.

Scientific Committee

Michel Feith, Nantes University

Tina Harpin, University of Guyana

Andrée-Anne Kekeh-Dika, University of Paris 8

Mérile Mbang Mba Aki, Nantes University

Keith Mitchell, University of Massachusetts Lowell

Cassie Osei, Bucknell University

Claudine Raynaud, University of Montpellier Paul-Valéry

Cyril Vettorato, Paris Cité University

Works by Gayl Jones

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