(RE)WRITING THE NATION IN THE AMERICAN AFRICAN DIASPORA IN *A MERCY* (2008), *MALAMBO* (2001) AND *SANTA LUJURIA* (1998)

by

CHANTELL SMITH LIMERICK

(Under the Direction of Lesley Feracho)

ABSTRACT

The study aims to discover how representations of the pre-national stage confront dominant history, how the portrayal of the experiences of women of color unsettles the masculine construction of the nation and whether historical fiction's connection of colonial slavery to national foundations articulates and problematizes a shared black American discourse. It concludes that the genre of historical fiction represents a diasporic space within which the common evocation of the cultural memory of slavery engages the relationship between national origins and racialized elements of contemporary national identity.

It places in dialogue three contemporary historical novels set during the colonial era of slavery written by women of color which represent three points of contrast in the Americas—North America, South America and the Caribbean: the U.S. novel *A Mercy* (2008) by Toni Morrison, the Peruvian novel *Malambo* (2001) by Lucía Charún-Illescas and the Cuban novel *Santa lujuria o Papeles de blanco* (1998) by Marta Rojas. All feature the personal journeys of Afro-descendant female protagonists. The study elucidates the roles that historical fiction, a pre-national setting and a gendered understanding of the construction of the nation play in defining the African diasporic experience in the Americas across national boundaries. The phrase

"American African," an inversion of "African-American," is used to unsettle the hegemony of African-American representations of blackness and to indicate that these African Diasporic novels articulate an experience of the Americas as a whole.

The theoretical framework draws primarily from Homi K. Bhabha (1990) regarding the nation as a literary, narrated construct; Edouard Glissant (1989) regarding the hegemony of Western, Eurocentric History and the existence of many histories which literature has the power to represent; Doris Sommer (1991) regarding the nation as a patriarchal construct and literature's role in constructing national identity; Linda Hutcheon (1998) regarding historical fiction's role in unsettling historical truth-claims to authenticity; and Carole Boyce Davies (1994) regarding the interrelation of race, gender and other identitarian discourses when considering the "rewriting of home" black women's writing represents.

INDEX WORDS: African, African-American, Afro-descendant, black, Caribbean, colonial, contemporary, Cuba, diaspora, gender, historical fiction, history, identity, Lucía Charún-Illescas, *Malambo*, Marta Rojas, *A Mercy*, nation, national identity, North America, Peru, race, *Santa lujuria*, slavery, South America, Toni Morrison, transnational, United States, women

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CHANTELL SMITH LIMERICK

B.S., The University of Alabama, 2005

M.H.S., Auburn University, 2009

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Major Professor:	Lesley Feracho
Committee:	Dana Bultman
	Betina Kaplan
	Lorgia García-Peña

Electronic Version Approved:

Suzanne Barbour
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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DEDICATION

To my grandmothers, Irene Smith and the late Helen Christine Harrison, who did not have the opportunity to further their educations and who were not told that academic achievement was within their realm of possibility.

And to my mother, Christine Adele Smith, who told me I could do anything I set my mind to do.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: (RE)WRITING HISTORY IN THE AMERICAN AFRICAN DIASPORA

> No one can blame the conqueror for writing history the way he sees it, and certainly not for digesting human events and discovering their patterns according to his own point of view. But it must be admitted that conventional history supports and complements a very grave and almost pristine ignorance.
>
> —Toni Morrison at Portland State, May 30, 1975

Two experiences come to mind when I think back to where the inspiration for this project began. The first "a-ha" moment came during a seminar on Citizenship and Nation in which I read a host of contemporary Afro-Hispanic novels which dealt with themes of race, gender and national identity. Before beginning my doctoral program, I had already read *A Mercy* (2008) by Toni Morrison. However, it was in this seminar that I first encountered the Peruvian and Cuban texts I analyze in this project, *Malambo* (2001) by Lucía Charún-Illescas and *Santa lujuria o Papeles de blanco* (1998) by Marta Rojas. As I read the latter two novels, I realized that Charún-Illescas and Rojas, also Afro-descendant women, were doing the same thing as Morrison, just within their respective national contexts. What do I mean by "doing the same thing"? I realized that in addition to all three novels sharing striking similarities regarding genre, subject and characterization, all three novels also counter contemporary hegemonic discourse by making a return to the pre-national stage. It seemed natural to analyze these three novels as a body of work which represents a restorative effort to, in effect, (re)write history by representing historically marginalized perspectives. The second experience which helped me to formulate the questions I pose in this project was during a trip to Cuba in 2013. While I spent the majority of my time in la Habana, I took a weekend trip to Santiago de Cuba, a city on the eastern side of the

island which has a larger black presence and Caribbean influence than la Habana. During a program I attended for el Día de África, a celebration of African heritage, I found myself the lone American in a room of Angolan medical students, Cuban researchers and a Congolese ambassador, the guest of honor. I considered the fact that all of those present would be considered black in the United States, but because of our differing cultures, languages and national histories, what it meant to be black, for each of us, would differ according to context. A few days later, I met with the Congolese ambassador along with the president of the Angolan student association which organized the event. An austere, grandfatherly, Aimé Césaire-like figure, the ambassador began to lecture us on African pride and setting a good example as we stood before him like protégés tasked with preserving the wisdom he was to pass down to us. He first addressed the Angolan student, telling him of the responsibility he had as an African and ended by giving him 50 CUC. He then turned to me and said, "You aren't African, but you have African blood in your veins, and you, too, have a responsibility." He said that I was like a daughter to him and that he wanted me to return to the United States telling people of African generosity, also giving me 50 CUC when he finished. Aside from being surprised at the gift of the equivalent of $50 from a man I barely knew, I was intrigued by the idea of a "responsibility" I shared because of my ethnicity. What did it mean to have "African blood in my veins"? Was it merely an allusion to my phenotypically Afro-descendant features? I was left with the impression that the shared "responsibility" I bore, according to the ambassador, was due to more than my physical appearance and implied heritage. One of the purposes of this project is to uncover what it is that is "shared," not only among the novels and the perspectives of their respective authors, but by extension, also among the members of the African Diaspora impacted

by the cultural memory of slavery. In addition to shared elements, however, equally important is acknowledging the nuances of difference.

The core of my project's aim is to elucidate the roles that historical fiction, a colonial setting, as well as a gendered understanding of the construction of the nation play in illustrating the African diasporic experience in the Americas across national boundaries. I draw primarily from Homi K. Bhabha (1990) regarding the nation as a literary, narrated construct; Edouard Glissant (1989) regarding the hegemony of Western, Eurocentric History and the existence of many histories which literature has the power to represent; Doris Sommer (1991) regarding the nation as a patriarchal construct and literature's role in constructing national identity; Linda Hutcheon (1998) regarding historical fiction's role in unsettling historical truth-claims to authenticity; and Carole Boyce Davies (1994) regarding the interrelation of race, gender and other identitarian discourses when considering the "rewriting of home" black women's writing represents. I posit that these three novels represent a return to the pre-national past to make claims about the present: to uncover truths and dispel myths about national identity by evoking a time when the nation was in formation, to challenge contemporary rhetoric surrounding national identity and belonging, and to privilege the voices of history which have been marginalized by official, hegemonic registers.

This project places in dialogue three contemporary historical novels set during the colonial era of slavery written by women of color which represent three points of contrast in the Americas—North America, South America and the Caribbean. The U.S. novel *A Mercy*, the Peruvian novel *Malambo* and the Cuban novel *Santa lujuria o Papeles de blanco* all feature the personal journeys of Afro-descendant female protagonists as well as a palimpsest of characters in varying states and situations of servitude. I pose the following questions: How do fictional

representations of the pre-national stage confront hegemonic registers of history? How does the portrayal of the experiences of women of color unsettle the masculine construction of the nation? And lastly, does historical fiction's exploration of the connection of slavery in the colonial era to national foundations articulate and problematize a shared black American (in the larger sense of the word) discourse?

The Definition of Diaspora

As previously mentioned, one of the common characteristics of the corpus of novels I analyze is the depiction of slavery, specifically, transatlantic chattel slavery. Inextricably linked to the formation of the African Diaspora in the Western hemisphere, the transatlantic slave trade left a legacy that profoundly affects all corners of the Americas, and is a common thread in the histories of New World Afro-descendant communities. It was responsible for the physical 'scattering' understood in the literal Greek meaning of the word 'diaspora' as well as the specter of slavery and the psychological, cultural and economic trauma it inflicted still echoes today. However, the legacy of this institution also functions as part of a wider diasporic understanding not strictly tied to origin or a displacing event, but rather a modality that evokes a sense of cohesion as well as dispersal; as Paul Zeleza states, one that evokes "a state of being and a process of becoming" as well as "a navigation of multiple belongings" (41). Literature plays a role in constructing the concept of a cohesive diaspora because of its ability to illustrate the diasporic experience's link to identity. In *Theorizing Diaspora* (2003), Jana Braziel and Anita Mannur posit that while contemporary conceptions of diaspora are divorced from essentialist notions of origin, it cannot be viewed as independent from historical or epistemological categories of analysis nor identitarian discourses such as race, class, gender, sexuality and

nationality—in other words, diaspora demands analysis in connection with aspects of identity. Though there are many discourses which dialogue with identity, diaspora looks at the seemingly concrete ideas of 'location' and 'movement' through the lens of identitarian discourses, which differ according to context.

However, while the legacy of slavery is a common thread which links Afro-descendants from a variety of cultural, linguistic and national backgrounds and is strongly tied to the conceptualization of the African Diaspora, it must be noted that the cultural memory of transatlantic slavery is not one which affects the African Diaspora at large. In his seminal work *The Black Atlantic* (1993) Paul Gilroy conceptualizes a black diasporic consciousness with a cultural memory of slavery, but one that has been divorced from notions of African essence. Scholars such as Zeleza (2005), however, highly critique Gilroy for an oversimplification of the African-American experience regarding the role of Africa as well as for its failure to take into account other African Diasporas outside of the Atlantic slave trade (such as intra-African migration) as well as recent African migration since the twentieth century. Like Zeleza, Michelle Wright (2015) posits that Middle Passage epistemology is insufficient for conceptualizing twenty-first-century blackness for the same reasons: its failure to address recent migrations and other constructions of African diasporic consciousness which fall outside of slave diasporas. While African-American literature and scholarship which view the legacy of slavery within a North American context is prolific, the fact remains that the African-American experience of the institution of slavery and its aftermath is just one of many. Zeleza echoes the criticisms of scholars like Brent Hayes Edwards for the hegemonic politics often attached to the term 'diaspora,' who complains that it "has often imposed a U.S. and English language-centered model of black identity on the complex experiences of populations of African descent" (48).

Cognizant of the criticisms of scholars like Edwards, Zeleza and Wright cautioning against conceptualizing the African Diaspora as a monolith, I evoke the term 'American African Diaspora' in my project's title for two reasons: First, to indicate that my analysis is specific to the Americas and linked to the transatlantic slave trade—the American, Atlantic slave diaspora representing a particular experience in the African Diaspora which cannot be applied to the Diaspora at large due to the fact that not all parts of the Diaspora were affected by transatlantic slavery, nor are all Afro-descendants descendants of slaves.[1] Secondly, the phrase 'American African,' an inversion of 'African-American,' is also an attempt to unsettle the hegemony of African-American representations of blackness—the African-American experience being only one of many black experiences.

There are differences in the histories of slavery throughout the Americas, in its implementation and length of legality; differences in the cultural and religious practices which survived or adapted or ceased as a result of slavery; and differences in language and culture in distinct national contexts due, in part, to the differing origins of European colonizers who relied upon slavery in the Americas, all differences which must be recognized and nuanced.[2] While an extensive historiography analyzing the differences between U.S., Peruvian and Cuban slavery is not attempted here and goes beyond this project's scope, examining these works as a corpus itself represents slavery in a multifaceted manner, and in my analysis I elucidate the differences between U.S. and Latin American slavery the novels depict. I situate my own analysis within a

1. While terms such as 'Pan-American' could be applied to indicate the regional, non-U.S.-centric sense of 'American' I evoke here, I use it very sparingly within my project because of the term's political history: 'Pan-American' has connotations connected to the Monroe Doctrine (1823), which was fundamentally a U.S. excuse to further imperial interests in Latin America. Throughout this project, I avoid using 'American' in a hegemonic sense, preferring 'U.S.' as an adjective to indicate anything solely connected to the United States. When referring to the nationality of a person or group of people, I employ the term 'U.S. American.'

2. See Chapter 2 for a review of historians who have taken a comparative approach to analyzing North American, South American and Caribbean slavery.

body of scholarship reflecting a trans-American, international, and/or multi-linguistic turn in the investigation of Afro-descendant female literary perspectives. Studies informing my work include *Bridging the Americas* (1995) by Stelamaris Coser which investigates the idea of inter-American relations and influence in works by African-American women writers; *Linking the Americas: Race, Hybrid Discourses and the Reformulation of Feminine Identity* (2005) by Lesley Feracho which places works by Anglophone, Hispanophone and Lusophone women writers in dialogue concerning the articulation of feminine writing and identity across the Americas; *Between the Lines: Literary Transnationalism and African American Poetics* (2011) by Monique-Adelle Callahan which examines nineteenth-century U.S., Cuban and Brazilian female poets and their comparative articulations of race and gender; *Difficult Diasporas* (2013) by Samantha Pinto which examines experimental works by women of the Black Atlantic including African, African-American, Afro-Caribbean and black British literature and their "disordering" of literary genre and the very concept of diaspora; and *Oshun's Daughters: The Search for Womanhood in the Americas* (2014) by Vanessa K. Valdés which analyzes representations of Afro-descendant spirituality in works by female authors from the United States, Brazil and the Hispanophone Caribbean. What each of these previous critical analyses contributes to my own work is a broadened understanding of Afro-descendant female subjectivity, one that underscores the critical need to cross national and linguistic boundaries in order to have a nuanced understanding of the feminist dialogue within the African Diaspora. My project adds to the body of work recognizing the transnational element in literary works by Afro-descendant female authors which illustrate the links between diasporic experiences and the articulation of identities by placing U.S., Peruvian and Cuban works in dialogue. By comparing Afro-Latin American literature and U.S. African-American literature, it overcomes linguistic

barriers, conceptualizes black identity outside of a dominant Anglophone context and highlights the important fact that writers like Morrison, Charún-Illescas and Rojas, though from distinct American backgrounds, are articulating not only a common American national critique, but also a common black American transnational discourse born of the shared diasporic cultural memory of slavery. By arguing for this "commonality" I do not wish to fall into the very essentialist traps that I, as well as the authors of the novels I analyze, eschew. Instead, I want to emphasize that ultimately all three novels advocate fluidity and inclusivity in articulations of blackness—whether an offering of "another story" of U.S. origins, a broadened definition of *peruanidad*, or a nuanced understanding of *mestizaje*.

Countering History through Historical Fiction

The genre of historical fiction provides a vehicle for contesting hegemonic, "official" narrations of history, "History with a capital H" (64), as Glissant would call it:

> is a totality that excludes other histories that do not fit into that of the West. […] Only technical hegemony (that is, the acquired capacity to subjugate nature and consequently to intoxicate any possible culture with the knowledge created from this subjugation and which is suited to it) still permeates the West, which has known the anxieties resulting from a challenged legitimacy, to continue to exercise its sovereignty[.] (75-76)

Furthermore, Glissant characterizes this totalizing history in opposition to "histories," a variety of stories and voices which have the power to resist the linear structure and "hierarchical vision" of dominant history (66). Historical fiction has the power to recreate these "histories," highlighting points of cohesion while also recognizing the nuances of difference within the

diasporic experience. Of the writer's responsibility within the context of articulating histories of Caribbean peoples, he writes: "The past, to which we were subjected, which has not yet emerged as history for us, is, however, obsessively present. The duty of the writer is to explore this obsession, to show its relevance in a continuous fashion to the immediate present" (64). In other words, contemporary historical fiction has the power to explore and reveal the relevance of the past to the immediate present. It has the unique ability to trouble History's claims to objectivity and "authenticity" without having to assert the same claims; it is fiction, after all. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot explains in *Silencing the Past* (1995), in the Western worldview, the historian's role in the public eye is "to reveal the past, to discover or, at least, approximate the truth" (5). However, "[w]ithin that viewpoint, power is unproblematic, irrelevant to the construction of the narrative as such. At best, history is a story about power, a story about those who won" (5). My project analyzes these works of historical fiction through a demythifying lens—one which demonstrates the continued relevance of the past to the present, counters History's authoritative claims about the way to recount the past, recognizes the literary elements inherent in the historical, privileges marginalized voices, and challenges the idea of a singular narrative—the story of "those who won."

Applying Linda Hutcheon's theory regarding "historiographic metafiction," I argue that an important purpose of each novel is to trouble the truth-claims to authenticity that traditional history wields. In my study, I focus on her point that historical fiction (and postmodern literature in general) rejects the idea of a single narrative. It does not "aspire to tell the truth as much as to question *whose* truth gets told" (123). I argue that *A Mercy*, *Malambo* and *Santa lujuria* not only question the same, but represent those truths which are not told. Furthermore, she posits: "The interaction of the historiographic and the metafictional foregrounds the rejection of the claims of

both ‘authentic’ representation and ‘inauthentic’ copy alike, and the very meaning of artistic originality is as forcefully challenged as is the transparency of historical referentiality” (110). In other words, historical fiction rejects the historical as an authoritative, transparent discourse. It is as much a construction as fiction itself.

A compelling, contemporary example of historical fiction’s challenging power which echoes the potential of the three novels I examine in my project involves *The Farming of Bones* (1998) by Edwidge Danticat, a work of historical fiction which gives an account of the 1937 Haitian Massacre from the Haitian point of view. What this example eloquently demonstrates is an example of what bell hooks describes as the “proof” demanded of marginalized people who do not or cannot rely on written documentation:

> There will never be enough proof, enough documentation, since so much data has been lost that can never be recovered. The need for “proof” must be interrogated, however. Often it is the voice of the biased and prejudiced who demand proof. [T]he burden of proof weighs heavily on the hearts of those who do not have written documentation, who rely on oral testimony passed from generation to generation. Within a white supremacist culture, to be without documentation is to be without a legitimate history. (192-193)

What Danticat accomplishes and what I propose Morrison, Charún-Illescas and Rojas also accomplish with their return to the past is impacting the popular imaginary of what is considered historical truth, thus challenging hegemonic registers of history, countering established myths and unveiling truths from the margins. Their fiction fills a void induced by dominant culture, legitimizing the “undocumented” history of those who will never have enough proof. Danticat has an exchange with Dominican historian Bernardo Vega in a series of letters where he

dismisses as unrealistic an episode in the novel where a Haitian man is assaulted by Dominicans who stuff parsley in his mouth.[3] She answers that she based that episode on something that happened to her great uncle, so surely it was realistic to him. In his response, Vega asserts that since there were no instances of this kind of violence documented, it must have been an exception. Vega's insistence on the written, official register and his appeal to the authority of that register to dismiss an act of violence as "an exception" is an example of the hegemonic power that History wields. The reason Danticat chooses to include that episode in her narrative is the same reason Vega dismisses it—it and others like it are erased from the official version of historical truth. The silencing, and thus, erasure of marginalized histories inspires the literary recuperation of history through historical fiction. The exchange between Danticat and Vega is a vivid example of literature's power to reexamine and (re)write history in such a way that reveals the dynamics of power that persist in the present, but which were established in the past. Historical fiction's power to trouble historical authority can be seen through the quarrels over lack of historical accuracy. Interestingly, attempts at dismissal by authoritative registers ironically serve to legitimate historical fiction by placing it on the same plane, implying that, though fictive, it has the ability to affect historical perception and interpretation.[4]

Lastly, to the point of historical fiction having the power to trouble hegemonic discourses of history, there is evidence that the authors of the novels analyzed in this project view their own work as a response to dominant historical perception and representation. An October 30, 2013

3. The series of letters that comprise this exchange can be found in "Bernardo Vega y Edwidge Danticat discuten la matanza de 1937." *Periódico Hoy*. 5 June 2004. http://hoy.com.do/bernardo-vega-y-edwidge-danticat-discuten-la-matanza-de-1937-2/

4. Of the negative reviews I read of Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* the most common complaint was the supposed lack of historical accuracy. Though this was not the general consensus (Morrison did, in fact, base her fiction upon much research and critics noted historical *accuracy* as well), some use the charge of historical inaccuracy as a way to discredit the past's link to present-day concerns. See Chapter 2 for further discussion of negative reviews and the issue of historical inaccuracy applied to *A Mercy*.

tweet from Toni Morrison reads "If there is a book you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, you must be the one to write it," implying that her own work can be categorized as a creation of the books she wanted to read which did not exist. Echoing Morrison's sentiment during an April 6, 2016 visit to the University of Georgia, Lucía Charún-Illescas, when asked what her inspiration was to write *Malambo,* answered that she wanted to read a book about Afro-Peruvians, but this book didn't exist, so she had to write it. In a 2006 interview, Marta Rojas cites the lack of representation of the licentious sexual behavior of so-called Founding Fathers, and references her novel *Santa lujuria* as a text which highlights and exposes this behavior ("Desde el periodismo" 144). In some way, each of these authors views their oeuvre as a response to absences left by dominant discourses.

Race, Gender, Nation and Historical Fiction

Having established historical fiction's power to contest dominant history, I give a theoretical lens through which to view the interconnected discourses of race, gender and nation and how the genre of historical fiction underscores their connection. As I discuss earlier, theorists such as Trouillot and Glissant argue that history is a construct that is based upon the power of story—the mythic and the literary. Theorists such as the seminal Benedict Anderson characterize the nation, like history, as a construct. Rather than concrete groups of people who know each other, interact and depend upon one another, Anderson characterizes nations as "imagined communities" simply comprised of the people who consider themselves a part of a particular community because of ostensibly shared values or characteristics (6-7). Like Anderson, Bhabha also characterizes the nation as a construct, which, like history, is based upon the power of the literary. In the very first lines of *Nation and Narration* (1990), Bhabha

connects the emergence of the nation to the literary, suggesting that rather than an objective reality that has a fixed origin, the nation is a constructed idea that serves a political and historical purpose: "Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation—or narration—might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west" (1). Furthermore, he advocates "encounter[ing] the nation *as it is written*" and suggests that "[s]uch an approach contests the traditional authority of those national objects of knowledge—Tradition, People, the Reason of State, High Culture, for instance" (3). In other words, focusing on the literary, linguistic, rhetorical, and written discourse that constructs the nation is a part of problematizing the supposed "transparency" or "privileged visibility" which constitutes the authoritative weight the concept of nation carries. In addition, "[t]o study the nation through its narrative address does not merely draw attention to its language and rhetoric; it also attempts to alter the conceptual object itself" (3). That is, one of the keys to investigating the nation's claims and even to question the concept itself is to focus upon the narrative that defines it. If the nation is constructed upon a narrative, what better way to question it than by offering a counter-narrative? Historical fiction provides a vehicle for doing so.

In *Foundational Fictions* (1991), Doris Sommer notes the fact that many of the Founding Fathers involved in politics during the incipient stages of many Latin American nations' foundings were also prolific writers. One of her core arguments is that nineteenth-century Latin American romances, many of which currently remain a part of the literary canon of their respective nations, were part of nation-building projects which framed idealized discourses of national harmony. Literature and nation building went hand in hand in the aftermath of Latin

American independence because they helped establish narratives for a unifying sense of self-defined national identity. In order to propagate a rhetoric of unity, however, certain ethnic and social tensions are elided within some narratives; in others, points of "origin" are invented to obfuscate undesirable ones (as in the case of the Dominican Republic's *Enriquillo* (1882), whose purpose was to highlight an indigenous past as an acceptable substitution for the reality of African heritage in Dominican identity). The novels in my project bring attention to the tensions, contradictions, fluidity and heterogeneity present in national foundations which counter traditional narratives of unity, harmony and fixity. The pre-national stage, then, is integral in these particular novels because it allows the narration to return to a point before the nation itself, and therefore, before the rhetoric informing nation and national identity, crystallized. *A Mercy*, *Malambo,* and *Santa lujuria* make a return to the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, a time when the nation was in formation, in order to examine and challenge present-day national claims.

Colonialism, coloniality and slavery

In addition to the pre-national moment representing a nascent national identity, the political milieu of the setting of the novels I analyze is the colonial moment. The economic and political conditions of colonialism is fundamental to what Aníbal Quijano (1991, 1992, 2000), and later Walter Mignolo (2003) and Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007) term 'coloniality.' Distinct from colonialism as a system of government,

> [it] refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations…It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and

> so many other aspects of our modern experience…Coloniality is not simply the aftermath of the residual form of any given form of colonial relation. Coloniality emerges in a particular socio-historical setting, that of the discovery and conquest of the Americas. For it was in the context of this massive colonial enterprise…that capitalism, an already existing form of economic relation, became tied with forms of domination and subordination that were central to maintaining control first in the Americas, and then elsewhere. (Maldonado-Torres 243)

The significance of the colonial era in these novels, then, is not simply that it reveals the context in which national identity is constructed. It also represents a moment of the construction of a mechanism of power that not only effected political domination but cultural domination, particularly the production of knowledge. The corpus of works I analyze challenges the coloniality of the dominant production of historical knowledge via fiction. Furthermore, as Maldonado-Torres underscores, the inception of coloniality (in the context that Quijano, Mignolo and Maldonado-Torres conceptualize it) is particularly American. The American experience of colonial conquest is mirrored in the American experience of transatlantic slavery evoked in these works. The colonial condition reflected in the novels' depictions of imperial and sectarian jockeying for dominance is a direct parallel to the nature of the institution of slavery itself. Slavery, then, is representative of another element Maldonado-Torres highlights as a feature of coloniality—the solidification of capitalism's link with domination and subordination. Capitalism's emergence as the most powerful imperial tool in the colonial era is a reality which lurks beneath each novel's depiction of both slaves and women being made a part of the same economy.

The intersectionality of gender

Besides being set during the colonial moment, as mentioned at the outset, all three novels feature female protagonists and tell the story of their journeys, both physical and metaphorical. I draw from Sommers' argument that the nation itself is a patriarchal construction which is supported and propagated with a hegemonic masculine discourse. In theorizing the patriarchal symbolism of terms and images connected to nationhood, Sommer states the following:

> Whereas man's agency swells metonymically to national dimensions, woman's work is canceled by metaphoric evaporation. As the inanimate motherland, woman's very identity depends on him, because the feminine *patria* literally means belonging to the father. He is dependent too; the father needs the female land to bear his name, to give him national dimensions and the status of father. (258)

Morrison, Charún-Illescas, and Rojas demonstrate how the voices and experiences of women challenge this construction. I propose that the female voices the authors centralize in their works resist the foundational patriarchal norm characterized by Sommer and reveal the contributions of minority groups in the foundation of the nation, the marginalized histories silenced by official registers and the truth of the link between gender and the national imaginary. In addition to centralizing women's voices and experiences, these novels feature journeys in which the female protagonists cross boundaries, whether through geographical space or from one social status to another. The idea of movement and crossing provide a metaphor especially fitting for national critique given that the imposition of boundaries is integral to establishing national sovereignty—traversing them is evidence of the boundaries' very permeability and instability. In this way,

feminine voices and experiences refute the patriarchal discourse concerning the concept of the nation and contribute to the deconstruction of national myths.

In addition to the historical/national critique and the relationship between gender and nation that these novels demonstrate, they also question the place of black identity within a larger sense of national identity, as well as highlight the contributions of Afro-descendants to national foundation. Furthermore, they address the intersection between gender and black identity. Just as Braziel and Mannur (2003) advocate a conceptualization of diaspora that goes beyond an essentialized idea of "origin," other theorists echo the same regarding conceptions of blackness. For example, Stuart Hall (1990) insists that identity is "enunciated" not predetermined or fixed, and Paul Gilroy with his landmark work *The Black Atlantic* (1993) argues against "ethnic absolutism." Davies (1994) and more recently, Durán-Almarza (2013) highlight how gender intersects with articulating black identity via their analysis of black women writers throughout the diaspora. In sum, the African Diaspora reflects themes of intersectionality, fluidity and hybridity, all consistent in the works analyzed in this project.

The Colonial Neo-slave Herstory

Although the novels I examine generally fall under the umbrella of the historical fiction genre, they particularly overlap with iterations of black historical fiction and/or historical fiction which depicts the institution of slavery and its legacy. One of the earliest monographs investigating the genre of historical fiction from a black perspective is Jane Campbell's study *Mythic Black Fiction* (1987) whose analysis of nineteenth and twentieth-century African-American historical fiction theorizes African-American writers' engagement with the genre of romance. She characterizes the purpose of this genre as a radical act, "inviting the audience to

subvert the racist mythology that thwarts and defeats Afro-America and to replace it with a new mythology rooted in the black perspective" (x). Later critics analyze a subset of black historical fiction which specifically engages the institution of slavery. Bernard Bell (1987) first coins the term "neoslave narrative," using it to loosely describe a contemporary genre which consists of "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom" (289). Ashraf Rushdy (1999) borrows the term coined by Bell and transforms it with a hyphen, giving a slightly different take on what he calls "neo-slave narratives," contextualizing this genre as "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative" (3). Elizabeth Beaulieu (1999) adds a feminist critique to the conceptualization of the neo-slave narrative, focusing on "black women writers who choose to author neo-slave narratives to reinscribe history from the point of view of the black woman" (xv), focusing particularly on the themes of gender and motherhood. Angelyn Mitchell (2002), continuing with a focus on black women's perspectives in her analysis, engages what has been called neo-slave narratives and coins the term "liberatory narrative" (4). Refusing to focus on the idea of enslavement, she also terms original slave narratives "emancipatory narratives" (4). While the nineteenth-century female emancipatory narratives furthered the cause of abolition by revealing the harsh conditions of slavery that women endured, Mitchell contends that the contemporary twentieth-century liberatory narratives differ from their emancipatory predecessors by revealing the "*residuals* of slavery in the context of Black womanhood" (xii). Other critics have incorporated the diasporic dimensions of this genre, going beyond a U.S.-centric analysis. Arlene Keizer (2004), for example, broadens the parameters proposed by earlier critics in her coining of the term "contemporary narrative of slavery" (2). Keizer views this genre as one that crosses gender lines, not limiting her study to female authors, while also taking

into account the "diasporic reach" of the genre, noting that previous conceptualizations have focused primarily on African-American literature, excluding Caribbean and Black British writers (4). Though she recognizes the diasporic element in this genre, her analysis is limited to Anglophone literature. Critics like George B. Handley (2000) approaches what he terms "postslavery literature" from a comparative literature perspective. Although his analysis does not look exclusively at black writers and perspectives, he does recognize the transnational element of literature that "although written after the demise of slavery, return to slavery's past in a genealogical exploration of its deep, historical roots in order to understand its relationship to the present," analyzing a corpus of American Anglophone, Hispanophone and Francophone literature (3). Likewise, Timothy Cox (2001), also recognizing the diasporic dimensions of the genre while focusing on black perspectives, theorizes it as a "black New World literary phenomenon" (x). He incorporates analysis from Anglophone, Francophone and Hispanophone literature, examining what he calls "New World remembrance-of-slavery novels" within the framework of post-structural and postcolonial theory (x). Other critics, like A. Timothy Spaulding (2005) focuses on the postmodern aesthetic and stylistic experimentation in what he terms the "postmodern slave narrative" (3). He focuses on African-American works which feature "subjective, fantastic and anti-realistic" representations of slavery. By rejecting realism, he argues, "these writers do more than question the nature of historical representation, [they] claim authority over the history of slavery and the historical record" (2).

While engaging the terms and parameters provided by this critical genealogy of contemporary literature of the Americas which features the representation of slavery, particularly the term "neo-slave" coined by Bell and revised by Rushdy and Beaulieu, I offer my own term to characterize the genre novels I analyze for this project: the colonial neo-slave herstory. This

term encapsulates the common, consistent elements of the works I examine: the pre-national setting ('colonial'), the twentieth to twenty-first-century cultural context of each novel's publication ('neo'), the depiction of slavery and servitude ('slave') and the privileging of the voices and experiences of women ('herstory'). Furthermore, 'herstory,' a term coined in the 1970s in response to what some feminists viewed as history's traditionally male-centric representation (Morgan 51), not only alludes to centering female perspectives, but also to the earlier mentioned idea that these narratives trouble history as a genre, questioning its claims to authority by literally revising the term 'history,' which symbolizes the theme of (re)writing it.[5]

Thematic Commonalities of the Corpus

In addition to the common elements of the colonial neo-slave herstory—colonial setting, contemporaneity, depiction of slavery, and centering of female perspectives—there are three main themes common to all the novels here which further justify the need for them to be examined as a corpus: the act of (re)writing, the commodification of women's bodies, and the use of narrative experimentation. The first common theme which links these novels is what Davies calls "the rewriting of home" (115). She defines this (re)writing as "a play of resistance to domination which identifies where we come from, but also locates home in its many transgressive and disjunctive experiences" (115). I apply Davies's concept to the (re)writing the authors of the novels I analyze accomplish: each takes an "identifying" element, a ubiquitous canonical theme, image or text, and resists it in some manner by altering it or presenting an alternative. To give brief examples, in *A Mercy*, the traditionally white, male upper-class

5. While Robin Morgan originally coined the term 'herstory' in 1970, others have also applied the term to countering male-centric historical representation. For example, in their volume *Words and Women* (1976), Casey Miller and Kate Swift, write: "When women in the movement use herstory, their purpose is to emphasize that women's lives, deeds, and participation in human affairs have been neglected or undervalued in standard histories" (135).

narrator of the U.S. historical narrative, a voice typified by writers such as William Bradford and John Winthrop, is (re)written in the voice of a young, black female slave.[6] In *Malambo*, the idea of Peruvian national identity being centered in the idealized image of the Inca is (re)written as a multiethnic alliance prominently featuring Afro-descendants. In *Santa lujuria*, the canonical Cuban text *Cecilia Valdés* (1882) is (re)written in a plot featuring a *mulata* who exercises political and sexual agency, breaking free of the "tragic" archetype which typified the figure of *mulata* in nineteenth-century Latin American literature. Essential to (re)writing is what I term "engaging the archive." In order to (re)write the past, each author has had to delve into archival sources to give themselves a foundation upon which to construct their narratives. Engaging the archive not only lends each novel rich historical detail, but is also part of what gives alternative interpretations and representations of canonical events and perspectives authoritative weight and is necessary to highlight and valorize historical details either relegated to the footnotes of, or altogether erased from, dominant narratives of history.

Besides their commonality of being written by Afro-descendant women and privileging Afro-descendant female perspectives, another strong thread running through the novels of this study which justifies their being examined as a corpus is the theme of commodification of women's bodies. Commodification is not only that which ties the discourses of race and gender to the national project, but also what ties the capitalist project of economic profit to national foundation. First of all, the centrality of slavery within the capitalist economy in the rise of the modern nation-state has been well-documented within historical and economic scholarship.[7] As a

6. Valerie Babb, in her article "*E Pluribus Unum*? The American Origins Narrative in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*" cites these authors of early U.S. historical narratives as contributors to what would become a totalizing, oversimplified "mythohistory of American origins" (147).

7. See seminal work *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) by Eric Eustace Williams and *Between Slavery and Capitalism* (2014) by Martin Ruef for examples.

part of the institution of slavery, black women's bodies were literally sold for profit, their bodies provided domestic and agricultural labor and their bodies bore children who, by default, were considered property and also entered the slave economy.[8] Furthermore, as a part of the institution of marriage, white women's bodies were also economically commodified. Upper class women often brought property to their marriages which became their husbands',[9] middle and lower class women often provided domestic and agricultural labor as a part of establishing their husbands' estates, and white women of all classes gave birth to "legitimate" male heirs whose purpose was to carry on their husbands' economic legacies. Marriage and childbirth, two gendered experiences, are two themes some feminist scholars have tied to the concept of the nation, insofar as they carry symbolic, ideological weight regarding the establishment and perpetuation of the nation.[10] In each novel, there is a connection made between the racialized condition of slavery with the gendered considerations of motherhood, marriage or simply victimization due to a patriarchal society. It is the idea of nationhood tied to the bodies of women, which bore either additional slaves to further the institution of slavery—an economic foundation of American nations, or heirs to establish patriarchal legacy—another institution

8. In "Women Confronting Terror: Land, Labor and Our Bodies" Rose Brewer and other collaborators analyze black women's relationship to the political economy: "Enslaved African women, in particular, suffered the super-exploitation of being forced agricultural and domestic labor, sexually used and abused, and being used as breeders through their reproductive labor" (104). Speaking specifically of the historic regulation of U.S. black women's sexuality, Patricia Hill Collins links the commodification of women's bodies and capitalism, describing how they have been objectified and subsequently commodified: "[O]bjectifying black women's bodies turns them into commodities which can then be sold or exchanged on the open market" (132). In addition to literal bodies being sold in the institution of slavery, "parts of the body could be commodified and sold for profitability...Black women's sexuality could be reduced to gaining control over an objectified vagina that could then be commodified and sold" (133).

9. The common situation of husbands assuming control of women's property and other assets upon marriage is analyzed in the context of accusations of witchcraft in Historian Carol F. Karlsen's work *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman* (1987). In colonial New England, unattached financially independent women without a male heir were often accused of witchcraft in order to have their assets taken from them (Karlsen 83-84).

10. For example, Doris Sommer and Nira Yuval-Davis cite the reproductive role of women as a part of national construction and foundation (Sommer 18-19; Yuval-Davis 26).

which enabled national foundation, which represent race and gender as two sides of the same marginalized coin.[11]

Lastly, a common theme which ties into the earlier discussed idea of troubling historical authority is narrative experimentation. Each novel demonstrates some type of experimental, non-standard aesthetic with the construction of narrative voices within the novel, symbolizing the need to resist dominant forms of narrating and genres traditionally represented within historical narration. This experimentation with narrative form often invokes elements of orality and oral culture, may use non-standard forms of English or Spanish, and at times represents temporal shifts in opposition to a chronologically linear manner of narrating. In addition, genres not usually considered historical documents are inserted and valorized—songs, folktales and myths, episodes from oral family history, found notes and even etchings upon the walls of an uninhabited building are all given narrative prominence.[12]

Overview of Dissertation Chapters

Having established the theoretical framework and thematic highlights of my project, I now give an overview of its organization. Comprised of three main chapters of analysis, my project is structured by text, beginning with *A Mercy,* continuing with *Malambo*, and ending with *Santa lujuria*. There are several reasons for the placement of the novels in this order

11. In her article "The Commodification of Intimacy: Marriage, Sex and Reproductive Labor" Nicole Constable analyzes the ways in which recent scholarship has tied "intimate and personal relations" to "commodities and to commodified global processes" within an increasingly global economy (50). Though I focus mainly on the relationship between marriage, reproductive labor and a capitalist economy within the scope of national foundation, I acknowledge the contemporary transnational dialogue on the issue of the commodification of gendered relationships raised by Constable and the many others she cites.

12. In *Difficult Diasporas* (2013), Samantha Pinto looks in depth at the aesthetics of narrative experimentation in writing by women of the (Anglophone) African Diaspora. This diasporic aesthetic is "difficult" because the experimentation is to such an extent that the texts may be categorized by some as inaccessible, which Pinto argues is a purposeful, radical strategy to disrupt dominant generic conventions. In a similar way, the authors of my corpus also employ narrative experiementation to challenge dominant generic modes and forms, particularly regarding the ways in which history is narrated and transmitted.

(coincidentally, from most to least recently published): the order of the novels' chronological settings, the cultural links between them, their narrative and thematic complexity, and lastly, the establishment of a dialogue between canonical and "lesser-known" authors. First of all, I begin with the novels set in the earliest time frame. *Malambo* serves as a link between *A Mercy* and *Santa lujuria*—the chronology of *A Mercy*'s and *Malambo*'s settings are both seventeenth-century while *Santa lujuria*'s setting is the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century. While I see the former two novels as dialoguing more with an early sense of national origins, the latter, though also set in the pre-national stage, is more concerned with the rhetoric of independence. However, *Malambo* and *Santa lujuria*, as Latin American novels, are more culturally aligned than either is with *A Mercy*, particularly regarding the concept of *mestizaje* as well as the ways slaves were able to negotiate their status via religious brotherhoods and certain features of Latin American slavery (Peruvian urban slavery which allowed slaves a certain degree of autonomy, for example) which differed from North American slavery. The *Malambo* chapter's placement in the middle ties them all together. I also chose to analyze them in the order of each novel's narrative and thematic complexity. While *A Mercy* is a richly layered and aesthetically complex work, representations of pre-national discourse, questions of *mestizaje*, investigations into an array of historical events and figures and, lastly, analyses of canonical works which represent intertextuality become increasingly intensive with *Malambo* and *Santa lujuria*. Lastly, I start with Morrison who has become a canonical voice in the twenty-first century (although she most certainly began as a literary iconoclast) in order to demonstrate how the "lesser-known" works dialogue with, contribute to, challenge and otherwise problematize "canonical" blackness, which, as I discuss above, has long been attributed to the African-American experience. While Morrison's work does challenge canonical U.S. blackness (from within a contemporary U.S.

canon) by confronting fixed ideas concerning race and slavery, it marks the beginning of a dialogue with Charún-Illescas and Rojas, who also challenge canonical elements in their respective national traditions, opening up space to reevaluate American blackness in a larger sense.

A Mercy: (Re)writing U.S. origins

In Chapter 2, I analyze *A Mercy* by Toni Morrison to argue that the novel de-links slavery from race by revealing the processes by which race, racial slavery and white privilege were constructed. Morrison engages the historical and legislative archive, referencing historical events and subsequent legislation which instituted race as the dividing line between enslaved and free. In addition, she presents a nuanced view of servitude which breaks with traditional representations of the institution of slavery when what is now the United States was in its infancy. I argue that Morrison's desire to de-essentialize race and representations of servitude reflects a larger effort to do the same with discourses of race and nation which become normative after the national moment. Central to my analysis of the novel is an examination of the intersection of race and gender through representations of the commodification of both women and slaves: I highlight several key allusions in the novel where both women and slaves are subject to the same marginalizing discourse. Next, I examine Morrison's casting of Florens, a black female slave, as a first-person narrator as well as the aesthetics of her narrative voice. I argue that Florens cast as a narrator and the experimental qualities of her narrative voice contest dominant historical production as well as enable her to perform the radical act of inserting herself into the canon. Lastly, answering the question "Why now?" which I pose at the end of

each chapter, I link *A Mercy* to contemporary discourse regarding "post-racialism" during Obama's rise to the presidency.

Malambo: (Re)writing peruanidad

Chapter 3 examines the Peruvian novel *Malambo* by Lucía Charún-Illescas and its call to recognize the contributions of Afro-descendants in the foundation of the Peruvian nation, and thus, African heritage alongside indigenous and European heritage in articulations of Peruvian national identity. A term encapsulating Peruvian national identity, *peruanidad*, was coined in 1943 by Peruvian sociologist Victor Andrés Belaunde. He conceptualizes it as a synthesis of Andean and European heritage, a characterization completely invisibilizing any consideration of Africanness, which still represents the general essence of Peruvian identity today (Belaunde 42).[13] After beginning with the problematic of indigenous identity (rather, an idealized, whitened version of indigenous identity) being used to elide the foundational African element in *peruanidad* that persists but remains unrecognized, I argue that one of the main ways Charún-Illescas makes a claim for Afro-descendant inclusion in *peruanidad* is through privileging Afro-descendant ways of knowing. Pancha, the main protagonist of *Malambo*, challenges the written record through her reliance on oral tradition and her abilities as an herbalist—a tradition that also has origins in African as well as indigenous Andean culture. Charún-Illescas therefore inverts the dominant value system—valorizing Afro-descendant oral culture and religious traditions often considered Other while depicting the failure of Eurocentric knowledge which relies solely

13. In his conception of the term *peruanidad*, it is significant to note that he conceives of the Peruvian essence as the synthesis of not simply Andean and European heritage, but a synthesis of Incan and European imperial systems: "La peruanidad, que ha heredado elementos tan valiosos del Incario…no puede considerarse…como la continuidad integral y principalmente síquica del Incario. Nuestra conciencia nacional…es un producto posterior creado en la evolución histórica subsecuente, sobre la base de elementos que venían del Incario y los de la civilización cristiana traídos por la Conquista" (42).

on the written register. By highlighting orality, herbal tradition and other Afro-descendant cultural elements which strongly figure into contemporary Peruvian identity, Charún-Illescas uncovers the reality of a multiethnic Peru—from its foundations to present day. In this chapter as in the last, I also examine the interrelation of race, gender and nation by investigating how the female characters negotiate their status within the patriarchal system of the evolving nation. In the last section of this chapter, I connect the themes explored in *Malambo* to the Peruvian socio-political climate in which the novel is published—during a movement towards greater Afro-Peruvian governmental recognition.

Santa lujuria: (Re)writing mestizaje

Chapter 4 examines *Santa lujuria o Papeles de blanco* by Marta Rojas and its demythification of traditional ideas connected to Cuban identity concerning slavery, the church, sexuality and the discourses of *blanqueamiento* and *mestizaje*. One of the central ideas critiqued in the work can be found in the "alternative" title: *Papeles de blanco*. If one can acquire "whiteness" through legal means as does the protagonist, Lucila Méndes, a *mulata*, as well as her son Filomeno, the idea of race as anything more than a social construct is called into question. The focus of my analysis in this chapter is how discourses surrounding *mestizaje* are challenged in the novel. Throughout many parts of Latin America, *mestizaje*, or racial mixing, is seen as a positive, harmonious element and is foundational to many countries' sense of ethnic and national identity.[14] However, what Rojas does in *Santa lujuria* is counter the Martían rhetoric of racial harmony by depicting instance upon instance of corporeal violence against the bodies of women

14. Doris Sommer (1991) and Jossiana Arroyo (2003) both mention "harmonious" *mestizaje* as an element in Latin American national romances and national discourses as a way to promote national unity.

of color.[15] The so-called *derecho de bragueta*, the legal right of white slave owners to sexually possess the bodies of their slaves, is an element that Rojas highlights throughout the novel which counters the myth of racial harmony, demonstrating that the reality of *mestizaje* was a forced and violent affair. I investigate the idea of the bodies of women of color serving as the site for the inscription of a marginalized history which informs Cuban national identity. Furthermore, I examine Rojas's allusions to the many revolutionary movements in Cuba and throughout the Americas which feature people of color as historical subjects and agents and connect this emphasis of black political agency to the socio-political environment in which *Santa lujuria* makes its debut, a time during Cuba's Special Period where there is a shift to a more open discussion of race and racial inequality after a strict post-Revolutionary prohibition on mentions of race in public discourse.

In sum, I examine a body of works from distinct cultural and geographic points which represent the African Diaspora in the Americas as a testament to the truly polysemic nature of the black experience. Putting the works examined here in dialogue with each other is not only part of creating a nuanced vision of blackness in the Americas, but at the same time, part of investigating a commonality in their claim to black representation in present-day articulations of national identity.

15. This harmonious sense of racelessness due to *mestizaje* is famously encapsulated in José Martí's "Nuestra América" (1891): "No hay odio de razas, porque no hay razas."

CHAPTER 2

(RE)WRITING U.S. ORIGINS

It was there I learned how I was not a person from my country, nor from my families. I was negrita. Everything. Language, dress, gods, dance, habits, decoration, song—all of it cooked together in the color of my skin.

—Florens's mother in *A Mercy*

In the last section of *A Mercy* (2008), from which the epigraph is taken, a mother pleads with her daughter to understand her, to hear her, to believe her. She recounts her experience of being sold into slavery and how her identity is reduced to single phenotypical marker: Negrita. Her blackness. In the same section, the mother attempts to explain why she gives her daughter away. Throughout the novel, the mother's action of giving her daughter away is misinterpreted by the daughter as abandonment; however, it is actually an act of mercy. A mother begs another slaveholder she deems more humane to take her daughter instead of herself in order to spare her daughter the sexual abuse she would endure if she were to stay with the current master. This mother's intervention in her daughter's inevitable entrance into the slave economy highlights the theme which all of the novels of this project share—an exploration of the intersection of gender and race and its connection to national formation. The mother pushes her daughter forward to settle a debt rather than the son she holds at her side precisely because she is a daughter, who she feels has a greater chance of falling prey to the lasciviousness of her current master. The "humane" slaveholder's acceptance of her daughter is the merciful act from which the novel takes its name.

Race and gender as two sides of the same coin of the systematic marginalization central to U.S. foundation is explored in the novel as women's harrowing experiences in the New World

are juxtaposed with the conditions of forced labor. One of the ways in which this intersection of race and gender and its relation to the national moment is explored in the novel is by casting a black female slave as the articulator of a story, a *her*story which represents a retelling of American origins from an overlooked, marginalized perspective. I frame Florens's retelling through the lens of what Edouard Glissant terms "the struggle against a single History" (93), a counter to what he terms History "written with a capital H," a dominant, Eurocentric, exclusionary Western history (75). Connected with the idea of the construction of historical narrative, is that of the narrative construction of the nation-state. Florens, a subaltern character who exercises historical authority through the crafting of her narrative, offers an alternative to "traditional history" and represents the centering of a voice often silenced in "official" accounts of the nascent United States.

In this chapter, I argue that Morrison's desire to de-essentialize representations of slavery and labor reflects a larger effort to de-essentialize discourses of race, gender and nation which become normative after the national moment. The retelling Morrison offers which reveals racialized slavery as a phenomenon that has a legislated, politically constructed birth also underscores gender dynamics and their relation to national origins as a part of the same resistant narrative. Several themes undergird the novel's overall aim: The reductive construction of race, the construction of race as a part of institutionalized racism, and the retelling of silenced or misinterpreted voices. First, there is the idea of race as a construction, a notion which many other scholars have also explored.[1] The reductive characteristic of race is evident in this

1. Peter Wade, for example, in *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America* not only asserts that race has no biological basis, but that it can neither be objectively tied to phenotype. Instead, race and racial categories, he argues, have emerged through history and more specifically through signifiers of difference through European colonial encounters: "[T]he concept of race is even more surely linked to a European history of thinking about difference, rather than a concept describing an objective reality that is independent of a social context. To see races as social constructions built on some neutral biological fact of phenotypical variation is to assert that we can recognize a racial categorization independently of history and build a study of race on an objective basis. In fact,

chapter's epigraph—all of the ethnic characteristics tied to the mother's identity are erased and reduced to a single signifier. In addition to being revealed as reductive, the construction of race is revealed to be a part of a deliberate process to institutionalize racism and racial separation. Part of what the novel illuminates about the construct of race is the process of its being instituted as a dividing line between bond and free. Racial slavery was not a pre-established reality, but a political, juridical, institutional process. By representing a nuanced view of servitude when what is now the United States was in its infancy, *A Mercy* de-links slavery from race only to expose the processes by which the two were linked in the first place. Another theme alluded to in the epigraph is that of a retelling of that which is silenced or misinterpreted. The daughter misinterprets her mother's actions, and her mother's explanation for her actions is never heard by the daughter. For the novel's coda to be an ultimate voicing of a heretofore silenced and misunderstood presence is a reflection of the novel itself as a vehicle for the retelling of marginalized stories central to U.S. beginnings.

Although an evocation of the historical past is an element common to many other novels in Morrison's oeuvre such as *Sula* (1973), *Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz* (1992), in *A Mercy*, she goes further back in time than she ever has with any of her previous works, to the year 1690. She returns to the pre-national past, indeed, the colonial past, where the colonies themselves are still emerging and being defined. Wilderness reigns. Religious sectarian divisions abound. The lines that separate bound and free run deeper than the lines that separate black, white or Native. In this uncharted, unpredictable world where survival is subject to the whims of drought, plague or the kindness of strangers, harmony is forged out of necessity. Morrison returns to this portrait of a nascent United States because it represents a point in time before not only racial identity

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only certain phenotypical variations make racial categories and the ones that count have emerged through history" (15).

became crystallized—a point before blackness was wedded to slavery in the North American imaginary—but also a point before discourse surrounding national beginnings became established lore. In an interview on *A Mercy*, Morrison explains why she chose to return to the seventeenth century:

> I wanted to separate race from slavery. To see what it was like, what it might have been like to be a slave, but without being "raced." Because I couldn't believe that that was the natural state of people who were…born, and people who came here, that it had to be constructed, planted, institutionalized, and legalized. So, I moved as far back as I was able when what we now call America was fluid, *ad hoc*, a place where countries from all over the world were grabbing at land and resources and all sorts of people were coming here. (NPR)

In other words, she recalls the past in order to uncover a truth about the formation of the United States and about the racialization of slavery—there was a time before the national imaginary was fixed as it is now, and there was indeed a time when forced labor was not synonymous with the black race. By highlighting the experiences of women and the relationships between them in a nation founded upon patriarchal succession and legacy, Morrison also offers a harrowing connection between the injustice of slavery and the injustice of female victimization.

I structure this chapter beginning with an examination of *A Mercy*'s critical reception, specifically focusing on negative reviews and their representation of the question of historical authority and its connection to literary production. Next, I examine the specific ways in which Morrison (re)writes the U.S. story—by investigating the origins of racial slavery, representing the intersections between race, gender and national foundation, re-imagining dominant portrayals of slavery, and presenting a subaltern narrator. Lastly, I explore the question Why now? as I

will at the close of each chapter in this project, investigating the connection of the novel's setting with contemporaneity, particularly the discussion of a "post-racial" era during Obama's rise to the presidency.

Synopsis and Critical Reception

Florens, the protagonist of *A Mercy,* whose mother is owned by Portuguese plantation owners, is taken in by Jacob Vaark, an English farm owner of Dutch descent, and his wife Rebekka in order to resolve a debt. Florens's narrative develops alongside that of Lina, a Native American survivor of a smallpox epidemic who works on the farm owned by Vaark, Sorrow, a mysterious mixed-race young woman who survives a shipwreck and talks to an imaginary friend named Twin, Willard and Scully, two white indentured servants from a neighboring farm, and a free blacksmith of African descent who specializes in folk remedies. With this multi-ethnic cast of characters who are all orphaned, rejected or seen as outsiders in some way, *A Mercy* depicts a time of national beginning that is wildly diverse, disjointed and united only through a shared sense of loss.

Following a stylistic element which features alternating narrators, common to Morrison's earlier works such as *The Bluest Eye* (1970), the narration in *A Mercy* shifts between Florens's first-person recounting of her journey to the blacksmith and third-person accounts of the backstories of the various characters. A third, haunting voice detached from the chronology of the other perspectives appears in the very last chapter. It is that of Florens's mother, referred to by Florens as simply *a minha mãe*, Portuguese for 'my mother.' Though Florens is bought from the Portuguese trader by Vaark to settle a debt, it is Florens's mother who suggests Vaark take Florens instead of herself. She divines that there is something different about Vaark, something

in him which sees Florens as a human child and not a piece of merchandise. While throughout the novel, Florens interprets her mother's having given her away as abandonment, it is actually a way to spare Florens the sexual abuse that she herself suffered at the hands of the Portuguese trader. This theme of a disconnect or misunderstanding between a mother and her child as well as that of a supposedly immoral act being recast as a benevolent one because of the extraordinarily immoral circumstances of the institution of slavery are also themes which appear in Morrison's earlier work. In *Beloved* (1987), a mother's act of murdering her own child rather than allow it to be enslaved is the troubling act which parallels *A minha mãe*'s "abandoning" Florens rather than allow her to be subject to sexual violence in *A Mercy*. In both cases, the past remains alive—the murdered child returns to haunt her mother and *a minha mãe* remains in Florens's psychological periphery, pleading with her child in vain.

In contrast to the common thematic strains in Morrison's oeuvre, her readership is varied and wide, a fact which attests to the reach and resulting impact of her work: as a novelist who has won the Nobel Literature Prize in 1993, the Pulitzer Prize as well as the American Book Award in 1998, and whose novel *Beloved* was made into a major motion picture the same year, Morrison has popular as well as scholarly recognition. Although a sampling of reviews, some from scholarly journals, some from literary and cultural publications for a popular audience, show the reception to be overwhelmingly laudatory, what intrigues me about the negative reviews of *A Mercy* is that they reveal a truth about the very elements Morrison counters in her novel—whose story is told and whose story is silenced. Furthermore, these negative reviews provide a salient example of the connection of history to the present. For example, American author John Updike, in a 2008 review in *The New Yorker*, suggests that the white characters in *A Mercy* are the more appropriate ones to represent a story about the founding of the United States.

He states, “The white characters in ‘A Mercy’ come to life more readily than the black, and they less ambiguously dramatize America’s discovery and settlement” (Updike). This statement also echoes a dominant desire to preserve intact a canonized version of American history which conceives of whites as *the* “discoverers” and “settlers” (terms which are themselves problematic). That a (white, male) writer like Updike whose own fiction has entered the American literary canon would perceive the white characters as more fitting to represent the story of American beginnings in a novel whose purpose is to problematize the canonized representation of events is illuminating. In another instance, a reviewer excoriates Morrison for her supposed lack of attention to historical detail and allusions to contemporary rhetoric, claiming the supposed decentering of “accuracy” and the highlighting of historical connections to present concerns reinforce the “literature of self” rather than a story addressing the collective:

> *A Mercy* resembles its creator's own art, which is far less of a portrait of what 17th-century America was or could have been, given its unintentionally comic stereotypes and historical inaccuracies, than it is a guide to its author's litany of political, social, sexual, and moral grievances. Instead of the unblinking inquiry into American history Morrison promises, we just get yet another installment in the deadening literature of self [.] (Miller 64)

These criticisms are very telling to me, first, because they seem to point towards uneasiness over literary attempts to offer a retelling of dominant representations, justifying themselves by appealing to historical “fact” and “accuracy,” and secondly, they point towards uneasiness with allusions of present connections to the past.[2] That present connections to nascent beginnings

2. The historical inaccuracy cited is Morrison’s supposedly “vague” characterization of the customs and specificity of the Native American character’s tribe, and the novel’s being populated with principal characters who are “outsiders” from diverse origins (including two white male indentured servants whom the narration suggests are lovers) which the reviewer translates into a “dramatis personae of contemporary American identity politics” (63).

could be disregarded as mere personal grievance is a testament to historical fiction's role in troubling the claims of History.

It is precisely because of the conclusions drawn which point towards a lingering hegemonic view about the role of history and the boundaries of fiction which make works like *A Mercy* bold, resistant endeavors. Works preceding *A Mercy* written by other African Diasporic female writers such as *The Farming of Bones* (1998) by Edwidge Danticat is another example of a work of historical fiction which represents a marginalized historical point of view, in this case, that of the Haitian victims of the 1937 Massacre. Like *A Mercy*, *The Farming of Bones* has also been questioned for its supposed lack of historical accuracy.[3] The critical responses these novels have provoked are evidence of the ability of historical fiction to trouble historical authority. As referenced in my introduction, historical fiction as a genre has the power to present an alternative story from a different point of view without being bound to historical truth-claims, which in turn reveals historical truth-claims as privileging certain voices over others. *A Mercy* challenges conventional wisdom about American foundations, revealing that the way we view the beginning has a lot to do with the way we view the now.

Re-imagining the Story of the United States

While some critics focus more on the stylistic elements of *A Mercy,* others such as Valerie Babb and La Vinia Delois Jennings focus on its historico-political import—*A Mercy* as a reworking of the story of U.S. beginnings. According to Jennings, *A Mercy* "challenges us to historicize the racialized political momentum that ushered in perpetual servitude based on non-whiteness and to meditate on the analogous forms of early colonial servitude" (645). Babb

3. See the introduction chapter for a more detailed explanation of the exchange between Danticat and Dominican historian Bernardo Vega.

echoes Jennings's sentiments as she characterizes *A Mercy* as "an American origins narrative that re-places the racial, gender, and class complexities lost in the creation of canonical narratives that sought to privilege the few over the many" (147). I continue in this analysis of *A Mercy* as a (re)writing of the mythos of the grand history that accompanies dominant conceptions of U.S. beginnings, building upon Babb's and Jennings's conclusions, yet focusing on four distinct ways Morrison accomplishes her (re)writing. The first way in which Morrison (re)writes history via fiction is by engaging the historical and legislative record to reveal the origins of racialized slavery and by critiquing traditional values central to U.S. foundation such as rugged individualism. The literary becomes a resistant, alternative text, not because it contradicts the historical or juridical text but reinterprets them and offers another lens through which to view them. The second way is through her breaking with traditional representations of North American slavery. Her de-essentialized presentation of slavery parallels her desire to de-essentialize racial discourse. Thirdly, she highlights the harrowing experiences of women in the nascent U.S. landscape, connecting the discourses of gender, race and national foundation by depicting both women and slaves to be made a part of the same economy. Lastly, she centers Florens's "non-standard" voice as an articulator of a marginalized history. Florens's literacy as a black female slave is unlikely, but is what empowers her to insert herself into the historical canon.

The origins of racial slavery

The key component of *A Mercy* which figures into a (re)writing of U.S. origins as well as a de-linking of race from slavery is Morrison's return to a point in the story of the United States' founding before a slave-based economy became entrenched and before distinct racial lines had

been fixed, proof that racial separation was not inherent, *a priori*, in the American story. To highlight the historical moment before slavery and racism are wedded, she alludes to a historical event which presages the hardening of racial lines, Bacon's Rebellion (1676). As I will detail later in this section, in the aftermath of this rebellion in which a multiethnic group of slaves, indentured servants and freedmen rose up against the white elite, a series of laws were passed which discouraged interethnic solidarity—from increasing the punishment on white bondservants found escaping with black slaves, to prohibiting interracial marriage. The need for these laws discouraging racial union is evidence of the accord that existed before they were passed. There were also laws passed instituting white privilege, which included whites being spared punishment for plundering during Bacon's Rebellion and those which made it illegal for blacks to bear arms. The novel seeks to highlight that "America's coupling of slavery and racism had not been an inherent ideology of colonial society at America's founding" (Jennings 645). Rather, as Morrison points out in the aforementioned NPR interview, the novel seeks to demonstrate that the process by which slavery became wedded to race was "constructed, planted, institutionalized, and legalized" (NPR). To reveal this constructed process, *A Mercy* evokes the historical events and subsequent legislation mentioned above which have the effect of not only linking blackness to perpetual servitude, but also establishing a precedent for the invocation of white privilege based on a construction of whiteness. As Jacob Vaark makes his way through Virginia on his way to Maryland in order to collect a debt owed, he recalls the events detailing Bacon's Rebellion, a multiethnic "people's war" fought against the upper class in the territory he traverses:

> When that 'people's war' lost its hopes to the hangman, the work it had done…spawned a thicket of new laws authorizing chaos in defense of order. By

> eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel, and bearing arms for black people only; by granting license for any white to kill any black for any reason; by compensating owners for a slave's maiming or death, they separated and protected all whites from all others forever. Any social ease between gentry and laborers, forged before and during that rebellion, crumbled beneath a hammer wielded in the interests of the gentry's profits. (*A Mercy* 10)

This allusion to Bacon's Rebellion cites a series of decrees which explicitly and legally institutes lines of racial separation and which explicitly and legally privileges whiteness as its aftermath. In order to avoid a situation where economic interests of the upper class could ever be undermined by a united, multiethnic, multi-class coalition again, raced-based hierarchy was institutionalized.

What began as a dispute over protecting colonists from Native American tribes between two members of the elite, plantation owner Nathaniel Bacon and Governor of Virginia Sir William Berkeley, erupted into a full scale uprising in 1676.[4] Initially, Bacon attacked peaceful Native American tribes and in response, Berkeley tried to maintain ties with "friendly" tribes while rebuking Bacon's actions by removing him from the Virginia Council. An unrepentant Bacon began to gather followers who perhaps shared his racist grievances against Native Americans, but who had grievances of their own: freemen who were unwilling to pay unfair taxes, and servants and slaves to whom Bacon offered freedom in exchange for joining him. Bacon eventually died (of causes unrelated to fighting in the rebellion) and the movement fizzled out (Morgan 250-70). The fact that "one of the last groups to surrender was a mixed band of eighty Negroes and twenty English servants" (Morgan 327) is evidence of the significance of

4. This summary of Bacon's Rebellion and its aftermath is based on Edmund S. Morgan's seminal work *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (1975) in the chapter entitled "Rebellion."

Bacon's Rebellion as an event where black and white slaves and servants rallied together. Morgan explains that before 1660, class and race prejudice were nearly indistinguishable in Virginia:

> [A]s long as slaves formed only an insignificant minority of the labor force, the community of interest between blacks and lower-class whites posed no social problem. But Virginians had always felt threatened by the danger of a servile insurrection, and their fears increased as the labor force grew larger and the proportion of blacks in it rose…If freemen with disappointed hopes should make common cause with slaves of desperate hope, the results might be worse than anything Bacon had done. (327-28)

In the aftermath of Bacon's Rebellion, discouragement for any subsequent uprisings fostered by interethnic solidary among those who would be otherwise in the same socioeconomic predicament was ensured by institutionalized racism. The laws instituted in the time leading to Bacon's Rebellion and during its aftermath not only institutionalize racism, but paradoxically point to evidence of racial solidarity. For example, the Virginia law of 1661 states that if "any English bond-servant ran away in company with any African life-time bond-servant, the English bond servant would have to serve the penalty of the time twice, one for his own absence and once for the African's" (Allen 48). In other words, this law which discourages solidarity between English and African bondservants implies that at one time it was common for them to run away together. There are a series of other laws passed during this time whose purpose was doubtless to institutionalize racial separation by legislating familial and sexual relationships. In 1662, an act was passed which determined that the status of children of black women by an English father would be slave or free depending on the status of the mother (Morgan 333).

Furthermore, any white man found in an illicit interracial relationship would be fined double (Allen 54). By 1691, any white person who dared marry interracially would be banished from the colony (Morgan 335). Other laws explicitly institute white privilege: For example, "In 1680 the Virginia Assembly repealed all penalties which had been imposed on white servants for plundering during Bacon's Rebellion" (Allen 55).[5] By including a reference to a seminal event like Bacon's Rebellion—one that some historians view as a step towards the eventual American Revolution (Gaul 34)—and tying it to an initial breakdown in the fluidity of relations between races and classes and a step towards institutionalizing separations between them, *A Mercy* (re)writes the mythic U.S. story by highlighting an event which signals a shift in racial attitudes.

In addition to critiquing the idea of the fixity of race and racism in American beginnings, Morrison also challenges ideals that are considered integral to U.S. ethos and considered the bedrock of U.S. foundation. One of these is individualism. J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, author of one of the earliest canonical works of U.S. literature, *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), praises this valued ethic in his letter entitled "What is an American?": "We are all animated with the spirit of an industry which is unfettered and unrestrained, because each person works for himself" (29). St. John de Crèvecoeur's exaltation of industry tied to the idea of every person working for himself is one of the earliest examples of a U.S. idealization of self-reliance and the figure of the "self-made man." Morrison challenges this idealized traditional value by highlighting how rugged U.S. individualism actually contributes to a breakdown in societal fabric, representing individualism's practical and moral failure. This breakdown of community and move towards isolation parallels the aforementioned institution of legislation that enforced racial separation and racialized slavery. The fact that the Vaark estate is named Milton is a

5. In the same year, blacks were forbidden from carrying arms, and it was made legal to kill any black runaway slave who resisted recapture (Allen 56).

symbolic detail which alludes to the author of *Paradise Lost* (1667), casting the novel's cobbled-together community, a microcosm of U.S. society, as an Eden already in decline.[6] One example in the novel which alludes to the failure of individualism is when Scully, one of the white indentured servants who is occasionally hired out to work the Vaark farm contemplates how Vaark's death has caused those who live and work together on the farm to turn away from each other:

> They once thought they were a kind of family because together they had carved companionship out of isolation. But the family they imagined they had become was false. Whatever each one loved, sought or escaped, their futures were separate and anyone's guess. One thing was certain, courage alone would not be enough. Minus bloodlines, he saw nothing yet on the horizon to unite them. (*A Mercy* 155-56)

Scully mourns the sense of togetherness, the dependence upon one another, that all understood was necessary for survival. This shift from a need to depend on one another because of common circumstances and a common desire for survival towards a fractured sense of every person for themselves mirrors the shift from a multi-ethnic colonial community where class and religion were the sharper dividing lines towards one where race becomes *the* dividing line.

All of those who live and work on the Vaark farm are orphans and castaways, consigned to the margins of society. Circumstance throws them together and they are forced to eke out a shared existence. For example, when Rebekka arrives on the farm after marrying Vaark, the tension Lina and Rebekka feel towards each other eventually dissipates:

6. Tessa Roynon has written an article and a book chapter analyzing the Miltonic allusions in *A Mercy*: "Her Dark Materials: John Milton, Toni Morrison, and Concepts of 'Dominion' in A Mercy" (2011) and "Miltonic Journeys in *A Mercy*" (2011).

> [T]he animosity, utterly useless in the wild, died in the womb…They became friends. Not only because somebody had to pull the wasp sting from the other's arm. Not only because it took two to push the cow away from the fence. Not only because one had to hold the head while the other one tied the trotters. Mostly because neither knew precisely what they were doing or how. Together, by trial and error they learned[.] (*A Mercy* 53)

At the novel's outset, Rebekka and Lina depend on each other—considerations of status and ethnicity and even religion are mitigated by their need for survival. However, the bonds they forge are broken and replaced by a warped sense of pious duty. As the novel progresses, Vaark dies and Rebekka herself nears death when she is struck with smallpox. She survives the sickness, but turns inward, becoming excessively pious and severe. After describing details of her abusive behavior, Florens says of Rebekka: "Her churchgoing alters her but I don't believe they tell her to behave that way. These rules are her own and she is not the same" (159). The "rules" that Rebekka begins to abide by that contribute to a breakdown of community on the Vaark farm mirror the legislated "rules" of racial separation that contribute to constructing white privilege and racial slavery in the colonial United States. In this new order, there is a shift towards "bloodlines" as the sole factor that could ever unite them. In allegorizing this shift in the change in relational dynamics on the Vaark farm and its resulting disarray and decline, Morrison paints a picture of a nascent nation in moral decline—a "world so new" (12), yet a paradise already lost.

(Re)writing dominant portrayals of slavery and servitude

Retelling a dominant version of history through a reexamination of historical events is only part of *A Mercy*'s function as an alternative U.S. origins story. Another notable feature of this novel is the way it re-imagines dominant portrayals of slavery and servitude. Within the popular North American imaginary, slavery evokes images of the U.S. South, of the plantation system and of agricultural work carried out in the torrid heat. Popular renderings in the media of the slave experience, from *Roots* (1977) to *Twelve Years a Slave* (2013) reinforce this image in the States and abroad. However, though these representations are not unfounded, they represent one aspect of a multifaceted experience.[7]

Following the impetus to represent a multifaceted experience, in *A Mercy*, Morrison breaks with traditional representations of U.S. slavery. Instead of a large scale, Southern plantation worked exclusively by black slaves, her novel takes place on a small patroonship in rural New York tended to by black and Native American slaves as well as white indentured servants. Instead of the sweltering humidity and heat that permeates conventional accounts and depictions of the conditions of North American slavery, Morrison's narrative aches with the harshness of the bitter cold. In the same way that Morrison explicitly expressed a wish to de-link slavery from race, she also de-links slavery from common images and settings traditionally associated with the institution in an attempt to unsettle monolithic representations of it. Just as viewing black identity through a monolithic lens erases the nuance particular to culture, as *a minha mãe* protests in this chapter's epigraph, viewing the institution of slavery through a

7. Historians from the 1940s on have undertaken comparative research investigating the systems of slavery throughout the Americas. The first seminal work was Frank Tannenbaum's *Slave and Citizen* (1947) which compared the Latin and Anglo-Saxon systems of slavery. Since then, examples of studies focusing on the characteristics of systems of slavery outside of a strictly North American context include Herbert S. Klein, *Slavery in the Americas* (1967); Laura Foner and Eugene D. Genovese, *Slavery in the New World* (1969); H. Hoetink, *Slavery and Race Relations in the Americas* (1973); and Eric Nellis, *Shaping the New World* (2013).

monolithic lens erases the reality of the nuances of how this institution was implemented and experienced in a variety of settings. For example, in the same way that the U.S. South has become a generalization for North American slavery as a whole because of the far reaching effects of the plantation system, the abundance and availability of accounts of U.S. slavery, and in contemporary times, because of the strong influence of representations in the media, in many ways, the experience of North American slavery has become a stand-in for colonial slavery at large.[8] What Morrison accomplishes with *A Mercy* as a non-conventional narrative of North American slavery is to contribute to a varied and more nuanced picture of the institution which goes beyond the United States. Narratives which break from a conventional mold are one step in going beyond a U.S.-centric perspective as well as a step towards awareness of factors which shaped concepts of racial identity in other points of the American African Diaspora which were also impacted by the institution of slavery.

As previously mentioned, some of the factors that present *A Mercy* as a narrative featuring slavery outside of traditional representations are the setting and the multi-ethnicity of the characters bound in servitude. I argue that these elements are a part of Morrison's theme woven throughout *A Mercy* that race and racial privilege were institutionalized and not *a priori*. For example, a deliberate choice by Morrison is that, with the exception of Jacob Vaark, the one character who exercises the agency of a free subject is the African blacksmith. In fact, Morrison includes a scene where Willard, one of the white indentured servants, finds himself in the position of being jealous of the blacksmith's freedom: "[L]earning the blacksmith was being paid for his work…roiled Willard, and he…refused any request the black man made" (150). The idea

8. Historian David Brion Davis theorizes about the comparative approach to investigating slavery in the Americas, citing the frequency with which discussions of slavery are tied to the U.S. South and U.S. race relations. Critiquing this tendency, he states "A trade which involved six major nations and lasted for three centuries, which transported some 10 to 15 million Africans to the New World, and which became a central part of international rivalry and the struggle for empire, cannot be considered a mere chapter in the history of North America" (61).

that the blacksmith had access to an economy which Willard did not is foremost in his feelings of resentment towards him more so than the mere idea of the blacksmith as a black man with authority over him. The way that the blacksmith gains Willard's favor reinforces this idea when he one day begins to address Willard as "mister," changing Willard's perspective completely:

> When the smithy said, "Mr. Bond. Good morning," it tickled him. Virginia bailiffs, constables, small children, preachers—none had ever considered calling him mister, nor did he expect them to. He knew his rank, but did not know the lift that small courtesy allowed him…Although he was still rankled by the status of a free African versus himself, there was nothing he could do about it. No law existed to defend indentured labor against them. Yet the smithy had charm and he did so enjoy being called mister. (151)

It is striking to consider a situation during this early epoch in U.S. history where a white man would feel a sense of pride because a black man addressed him as "mister," a title above his rank as an indentured servant. Morrison highlights the idea that rank and status were not as strongly tied to race as it is in conventional narratives set during the era of slavery. However, later in the passage, Willard's reference to "law" when considering his status versus that of the African blacksmith is yet another nod to the often overlooked fact that the origins of racial slavery and racial privilege in what would become the United States was via a legislative, institutional process. As previously discussed, there are indeed laws passed soon after the year *A Mercy* takes place which do institute racial privilege.[9]

9. Some of the laws outlined which institute white privilege include whites being pardoned for plundering during Bacon's Rebellion, blacks being prohibited from bearing arms, and making it legal to kill a black runaway slave who resisted recapture.

Race, gender and national foundation

While one of the earlier discussed ways Morrison characterizes the nascent United States is as an already-tainted Eden, she also casts it in another biblical light—that of a pre-Creation void, an unknowable mass on the cusp of entering into order.[10] This order, however, is not divine, but man-made, delineated by constructed lines. In the same musing cited earlier regarding "bloodlines" as the new order and the breakdown of community on the Vaark farm, Scully remembers how a curate who had loved and later rejected him "described what existed before Creation[.] Scully saw dark matter out there, thick, unknowable, aching to be made into a world" (156). This world, aching to be made, a state inching towards birth, would eventually be founded upon lines drawn which would make a clear delineation between whites, who were beginning to achieve societal privilege based upon skin color, regardless of their state of servitude, and blacks and other minorities who were beginning to be marginalized according to race, regardless of their state of servitude. By exploring the conditions right before these lines are concretized, *A Mercy* depicts a landscape where race and gender intersect. One of the main arguments of my project is that the marginalization of both women and people of color is a part of the foundational discourse of the burgeoning nation evidenced by women's experiences being juxtaposed with the conditions of slavery and servitude. The linking of these experiences demonstrates that the marginalization of both women and those subjected to forced labor were integral to the founding of the United States.

Alongside the conditions of labor for those of varying races and states of servitude, *A Mercy* highlights women's experiences. The novel abounds with references to the precarious, vulnerable position of women in the colonial period and tells tales of their experiences which

10. "And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep" (Genesis 1:2, *KJV*).

resound with marginality and powerlessness. Linking the novel's challenge to patriarchal national discourse to an objectifying treatment of women, these harrowing experiences of the women in the novel are representative of what Babb references as the theme of commodification. Babb observes that all of the women arrive at the Vaark farm as a result of a transaction: "Lina is bought by Vaark; Rebekka becomes his wife through his funding an arranged marriage; Florens is acquired in the settlement of a debt; and Sorrow is given to Vaark free of charge to remove her from the sons of a local sawyer. As each tells her story, her awareness of her devaluation becomes a condemnation of that devaluation" (156). The commodification of women which Babb comments upon and which I further explore, is, I argue, tied to the foundation of the nation itself. The women's telling of their stories not only serves as self-awareness and condemnation of the devaluation they suffer, as Babb suggests, but also reinforces it as an untold part of the story of national beginnings.

A salient example of the idea of commodification can be observed through the comparison of the language used as Jacob Vaark describes his fortune in acquiring his wife Rebekka, for whom he paid passage from England, with the language used when scanning the advertisements to find and purchase Lina, a Native American woman, for extra help on the farm. The similarity in the language used to describe the purpose of a slave and the purpose of a wife in being brought to the farm refers to the idea that women were made a part of the same economy as those subjected to forced labor.[11] The description of how Vaark acquires a wife is steeped in the language of transaction. Vaark has inquired through his connections at sea about a wife to help him take over the patroonship, stressing "'*reimbursement*' for clothing, expenses

11. The importance of the slave economy to nation building has been well documented (See seminal work *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) by Eric Eustace Williams, and *Between Slavery and Capitalism* (2014) by Martin Ruef) as well as the role of gender commodification in nation building (See *Woman—Nation—State* (1989) and *Gender and Nation* (1997) by Nira Yuval-Davis.)

and a few supplies" (74, emphasis mine) from her father who was "quick to *offer* his eldest girl" (74, emphasis mine). He reflects on meeting her for the first time and of their later life together: "[T]he young woman who answered his shout in the crowd was plump, comely and capable. Worth every day of the long search made necessary, because taking over the patroonship required a wife […] He was confident she would bear more children and at least one, a boy, would live to thrive" (21). The idea of women serving a reproductive role in the founding and preservation of the nation-state is one that Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias theorize as one of the primary ways in which "women have tended to participate in ethnic and national processes" (7). Yuval-Davis and Anthias's proposal of women's bodies serving as a site for the establishment of the nation-state parallels Vaark's hopes for marrying Rebekka which included producing a male child who would serve as an heir and establish the longevity of his patroonship. Rebekka's purpose is foremost to help establish the farm, through labor and also through bearing an heir to eventually pass down wealth and ownership of it. Rebekka's arrival to the farm as Vaark's wife and Lina's arrival to the farm as Vaark's property are framed similarly. When searching through ads to acquire extra help on the farm, he searched until he got to "Hardy female, Christianized and capable in all matters domestic available for exchange of goods or specie" (52). Lina had been taken in by Presbyterians after the death of her tribe from smallpox and, like Rebekka, was also being taken off of someone's hands by Vaark.

Morrison makes the reality of the constant subjugation and victimization of women as a fact of colonial life painfully clear. For example, before boarding a boat to take her from England to the colonies to marry Vaark as a mail-order bride, Rebekka considers her drastically limited choices: "[H]er prospects were servant, prostitute, wife, and although horrible stories were told about each of those careers, the last one seemed safest" (*A Mercy* 78). Florens's

mother gives a harrowing description of how she and other female slaves are raped in order to be "broken in" and states, "There is no protection. To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal" (163). Lina, trying to warn Florens against being too taken with the free blacksmith, tells her about being brutally beaten by a lover at fourteen years old (104). Sorrow, who gives birth to two children whose paternity is never quite clear, recalls her sexual experiences as "silent submission to the slow goings behind a pile of wood or a hurried one in a church pew" (128). When considering the position of all the women on the Vaark farm and others she had come into contact with, Rebekka concludes that what they all share is their dependence upon men: "Although they had nothing in common with the views of each other, they had everything in common with one thing: the promise and threat of men. Here, they agreed, was where security and risk lay" (98). All of these tales paint a picture of the constant exploitation, danger and oppression to which women were subject in colonial America.

In addition to depicting the ways in which both women and slaves where made a part of the same economy, Morrison also depicts women and slaves in a similar situation due to their both being subject to a discourse of difference, exemplified in accusations of witchcraft. Historian Carol F. Karlsen, in her work *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman* (1987), explains that in colonial New England, financially independent women without a male heir or male influence who owned property or other assets were often accused of witchcraft in order to have it taken from them (83-84). In *A Mercy*, Morrison alludes to this phenomenon in an episode with a widow and her daughter, in whose home Florens takes refuge. An examination of the treatment all three women receive from townspeople who accuse both Daughter Jane and Florens of being demonic further demonstrates the theme of the intersection between race and gender in the novel. Seeking shelter on the way to locate the blacksmith, Florens happens upon the Widow Ealing's

house, and is welcomed with food and shelter for the night. Widow Ealing's daughter, called Daughter Jane, has a lazy eye and, because of this, is accused of being a demon by townspeople. In an attempt to show that her daughter is human, the widow whips her to prove that she bleeds. Florens overhears a hurried, hushed conversation between the widow and her daughter in which Daughter Jane suggests that the town leaders want the pasture they own, and though they are making accusations against her now, her mother could be next (109). When one of the town's leaders arrives with a group of other women, questioning whether Daughter Jane is a demon becomes secondary to the spectacle of Florens's blackness: "One woman speaks saying I have never seen any human this black. I have says another, this one is as black as others I have seen. She is Afric […] It is true then says another. The Black Man is among us" (*A Mercy* 111). Florens is ordered to strip and then subjected to humiliating physical scrutiny as they try to determine whether she is a minion of Satan. The townspeople leave vowing to return after they've considered the matter, and Daughter Jane helps Florens escape. There is a haunting, poignant moment of solidarity between the two before they part ways:

> Daughter Jane hands me the cloth of eggs. She explains how I am to go, where the trail will be that takes me to the post road…I say thank you and lift her hand to kiss it. She says no, I thank you. They look at you and forget about me. She kisses my forehead and then watches as I step down into the stream's dry bed. I turn and look up at her. Are you a demon I ask her. Her wayward eye is steady. She smiles. Yes, she says. Oh, yes. Go now. (114)

Although Daughter Jane is accused of being demonic ostensibly because of a physical condition, there is evidence in the novel as well as historical evidence supporting the idea that Daughter Jane and Widow Ealing are actually singled out because they are independent, property-owning

women of means without the presence of any male influence or authority. When Florens is brought into the same space, the Black Man, a reference to Satan, takes on a new meaning when she, too, is accused of being demonic because of a physical condition—the color of her skin. This twinning of circumstances between Daughter Jane and Florens—in effect, the demonizing of both women and people of color as categories of Others—is a salient metaphor for the way dominant discourses regarding gender and race have been framed since before the nation's foundation. In the passage referenced above, Daughter Jane thanks Florens saying, "They look at you and forget about me," suggesting that the spectacle of Florens's blackness distracted the townspeople from their interrogation of Daughter Jane and Widow Ealing. Though this comment can be viewed as a circumstance that simply built a sense of camaraderie between Florens and Daughter Jane, it is also an allusion to the tendency of race obfuscating gender instead of both being viewed as identitarian discourses which are fundamentally linked.

Florens and Daughter Jane form a kinship forged from their shared marginalization: a complex interaction of gender dynamics and racial and physical difference. The last time we see Florens and Daughter Jane together is near the end of the novel where Florens "dreams a dream that dreams back" at her (137). Florens and the blacksmith become lovers when he frequents the Vaark's farm while aiding in the construction of the new estate. When she is later charged with the errand of traveling to his home to bring him to cure her mistress, we learn that Florens's first-person voice which has been interspersed between chapters narrated in the third-person is addressed to the blacksmith and recounts her journey to find him. When she finally reaches the blacksmith's home, she finds that he has taken in a male foundling and intends to raise him as his son. Immediately having flashbacks to the moment her mother gives her away, she recalls her mother's actions as a preference for her little brother over her. Seeing the blacksmith's adopted

son, Florens goes into a defensive mode, determined not to be rejected again, especially by the man from whom she desperately craves affection and for whom she would sacrifice anything. After deciding she will not go back to the farm, Florens vows, "Never never without you. Here I am not the one to throw out…No one screams at the sight of me. No one watches my body for how it is unseemly. With you my body is pleasure is safe is belonging. I can never not have you have me" (136-37). She problematically attributes her self-worth to the blacksmith's acceptance of her. She—sexually and figuratively—gives the blacksmith power over her body. Florens's giving ownership of herself to another foregrounds *a minha mãe*'s pleading, unreceived advice in the novel's coda: "to be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing" (167). The dream Florens has where she re-encounters Daughter Jane can therefore be viewed through the lens of Florens's determination regarding the ownership of her body:

> I notice I am at the edge of a lake. The blue of it is more than sky, more than any blue I know…I want to put my face deep there. I want to. What is making me hesitate, making me not get the beautiful blue of what I want? I make me go nearer, lean over, clutching the grass for balance…Right away I take fright when I see my face is not there. Where my face should be is nothing…I am not even a shadow there. Where is it hiding? Why is it? Soon Daughter Jane is kneeling next to me. She too looks in the water. Oh, Precious, don't fret, she is saying, you will find it. Where, I ask, where is my face, but she is no more beside me. (138)

Florens once again shares a moment of solidarity with Daughter Jane. This time, it is not in the aftermath of a conflict regarding some aspect of her identity that is external, that causes an

external stir, or an outwardly manifested spectacle. As a slave who is technically "owned" by another, Florens experiences an internally generated crisis when she loses the ability to see herself after deciding to give her ownership to the blacksmith. It is important to note, however, that Florens's internally generated crisis has an external catalyst which ties into the institution of slavery and its treatment of black women: While Florens's fierce attachment to the blacksmith is a residual effect of her feelings of abandonment by her mother, the reason for her mother's "abandonment" is because she felt it was her only option within a system where the sexual abuse of female slaves is nearly inevitable. Daughter Jane's reappearance at this juncture is an additional allusion to the intersection of gender and race regarding the idea of ownership; whereas Florens as a slave, marked by racial difference, is owned by a master, Florens as a woman, emotionally crippled out of fear of abandonment, gives ownership of herself to a man.

Indeed, in the last conversation Florens has with the blacksmith, where he ultimately rejects her, the idea of ownership is a source of tension as she forthrightly tells him that he alone owns her (141). While the blacksmith goes to cure Rebekka, he asks Florens to care for the boy he has taken in while he is away. Florens (accidentally?) hurts the child, and upon the blacksmith's return, he demands that she leave. In their ensuing argument, the blacksmith explains that he rejects her because she is a slave. Florens's reply:

> What is your meaning? I am a slave because Sir trades for me.
>
> No. You have become one.
>
> How?
>
> Your head is empty and your body is wild.
>
> I am adoring you.
>
> And a slave to that too.

You alone own me.

Own yourself, woman, and leave us be. You could have killed this child.

No. Wait. You put me in misery.

You are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind.

You shout the word—mind, mind, mind—over and over and then you laugh, saying as I live and breathe, a slave by choice. (141)

The gender/race interplay is evident in Florens's conversation with the blacksmith as he accuses her of being "a slave by choice," not in the racialized context of labor, but in a gendered relationship dynamic between himself and Florens. Daughter Jane's reappearance while Florens grapples with her identity in the context of "ownership" as a woman suggests that the present circumstance is linked to the one in which Florens initially comes into contact with Daughter Jane. By placing these two figures in the same space at crucial moments in Florens's process of identity formation, Morrison not only demonstrates the ties that bind race and gender as intersecting factors within the context of Florens's development, but ultimately presents a metaphor which present race and gender as intersecting factors in the development and foundation of the nation.

(Re)writing narrator and narration

Connected to the themes of deconstructing the link between race and slavery as well as highlighting the shared link between race and gender presented in *A Mercy* is the theme of centering voices that have been heretofore consigned to the margins of history. Florens, as a black, female slave, is a subaltern figure whose "telling" offers a perspective of the story of U.S. origins which is left out of the conventional narrative, thereby offering a representation of the

idea of a historical silence being given a voice. I apply Glissant's theory about dominant history to this theme, regarding Florens's narrative voice what he calls an excluded history (75), that is, voices which have been excluded because they do not fit into a totalizing historical narrative—in this case, the story of U.S. beginnings. Continuing to apply Glissant's challenge to the legitimacy of History, I argue that Florens's narrative voice is representative of a marginalized voice which is valorized. As Babb comments on Florens as narrator:

> Narrative space must be made for those voices that once talked to and for themselves but have been muted by the historical record. Casting Florens as a writer underscores this imperative. She becomes part of a frequent trope in African-American literature, that of writing as a self-creating curative. Her gesture suggests the need to acknowledge the existence and validity of stories on the margins, and that is what *A Mercy* does. (159)

Florens's narration not only underscores the necessity for alternative narrative space, but the lyrical, metaphorical aesthetic of her narrative voice represents a counter to the literal, "standard" construction (white, male, employing standard English) of the voice which narrates dominant history. Rejecting standard constraints in order to reacquire creative power as theorized by Carole Boyce Davies applies to Florens's radical act as narrator: "Black women writers are engaged in all kinds of processes of reacquisition of the 'tongue'…It means listening to the 'polyrhythms,' the polyvocality of Black women's creative and critical speech. It means rejecting some of the category maintenance which generic constraints demand" (23). Rejecting generic conventions, Florens's first-person narrative voice echoes the purpose of *A Mercy* itself; fiction which unsettles History is manifested in the literary voice which represents the heart of the novel.

At the beginning of this chapter, I refer to Florens's mother as a figure whose voice is silenced throughout the novel. Florens can sense that she is saying something "important" and directed to her, but while her mouth moves, her words produce no sound (*A Mercy* 8). At the very end of the novel, the mother's voice is finally heard as she pleads with Florens to hear and understand her. We see this motif of an silent voice being heard doubled in *A Mercy*: The voice of Florens's mother, directed to Florens, functions as a compliment to Florens's voice, which the reader finds is actually directed to the blacksmith. The same confessional, explanatory tone which *a minha mãe* employs when addressing Florens can be seen in Florens's account to the blacksmith.

The novel *A Mercy* itself, through its exploration of the past as a part of the genre of historical fiction, questions the dominant discourses Florens addresses in her first-person account. The novel begins in Florens's voice and frames itself as a confession, as a need to explain a truth which has been overlooked or misunderstood: "Don't be afraid. My telling can't hurt you…I explain. You can think what I tell you a confession, if you like," she begins (*A Mercy* 1). In the same introductory paragraph, she asks two questions of the blacksmith which, in reality have a more far-reaching import: "One question is who is responsible? Another is can you read?" (1). In the context of the novel, perhaps in the question of who is responsible Florens is referring to her ultimate act of physical violence against the blacksmith after he rejects her. The ambiguity of Florens's act, whether she murders him or simply wounds him, is referred to on more than one occasion, but in the context of what Florens's voice ultimately represents on a larger scale, the question of who is responsible has a timeless ring. Who is responsible for the violence that was a part of the nation's founding? Who is responsible for the current state of affairs regarding the status of women, people of color and others who have been historically and

systematically marginalized since the nation's founding? The process of how we got here, how we ended up at this point, so to speak, is relevant in the temporality of the novel, but also at the heart of what *A Mercy* does—questioning the processes of how and why the nation has arrived at its current state by returning to the past.

Another aspect Morrison highlights through Florens's voice, the concept of literacy, is represented in the second question Florens asks, "Can you read?" Florens, as a literate, black female slave appeals to her identity as a lettered woman to, in effect, insert herself into the canonical history from the margins, taking part in a tradition of black women exercising agency through their literacy. Black female literacy as a curative path to self-actualization is a frequent trope in the African-American literary tradition (Babb 159). From slave narratives[12] to novels,[13] literature by and about black women feature literacy as a step towards empowerment. Florens takes part in this tradition by creating her own testimony. Writing as access, or writing as a tool for a marginalized voice to fill silent historical gaps is an idea that Florens employs in her account and one that Morrison employs in her very work of fiction *A Mercy* which counters dominant historical discourse.

Part of my overarching argument is that there are points of contact between the African-American literary tradition and that of other parts of the American African Diaspora which is borne out of a common experience of slavery and colonization. An early example is that of Juan Latino, a former slave-turned-professor in Granada, Spain who lived and wrote during the Early Modern Era. In addition, the first slave narrative in the Americas is that of Cuban slave Juan

12. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by Harriet Jacobs is the first female fugitive slave narrative written in the United States. Jacobs is taught to read and write by a "benevolent" mistress despite the prohibition against teaching slaves to read and write in the same manner that Florens and her mother are taught.

13. *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker is an epistolary novel where a black female character, Celie achieves personal freedom in part by expressing herself in written form.

Francisco Manzano, *Autobiografía de Un Esclavo*, published in 1840. This trope of writing as self-actualization is one of those points of contact which reflects an African diasporic tradition at large.

Florens's literacy is not only a part of re-imagining the story itself, it is a part of re-imagining who writes that story and who interprets it. She tells of how an altruistic priest secretly taught her, her mother and her little brother to read, clandestinely disregarding restrictions on educating slaves. During Florens's "confession," she delineates between "talk," which she associates with (religious) confession and communication with others, and writing, which she realizes has a different type of power: "Confession we tell not write as I am doing now. I forget almost all of it until now" (6). Florens indicates that there is something about "now" that necessitates her entering the written record to confess, and doing so brings to her remembrance a skill that she has almost forgotten. At the very end of the novel, we discover that Florens is actually carving her confession to the blacksmith into the walls of one of the rooms in Vaark's new estate the blacksmith helped build but which is never inhabited: "I am holding light in one hand and carving letters with the other. My arms ache but I have need to tell you this. I cannot tell it to anyone but you" (160). Florens realizes, however, nearly at the end of her labor, that the blacksmith is illiterate: "Sudden I am remembering. You won't read my telling. You read the world, but not the letters of talk. You don't know how to. Maybe one day you will learn" (160). Just as Florens never hears the voice of her mother, the blacksmith will never hear Florens's voice, will never read her words. This is a powerful reversal of power dynamics—her literacy gives her access to a world that he cannot inhabit. Though at first she reasons that if the blacksmith doesn't read her words, then no one will, she ultimately reconsiders: "Or perhaps no. Perhaps these words need the air that is out in the world" (161). The very act of writing has a

redemptive, defining quality that goes beyond the context of the intended recipient of her words. In etching her words into a wall, Florens has ensured that they will last, that they bear record of her "telling."

Connected to the literary themes in Florens's narrative voice is the question of literary style. Not only does Florens as a figure re-envision whose voice is worthy to tell the (hi)story, but the aesthetics of her voice re-envision the manner in which the story is told. Florens uses a lyrical, metaphorical, non-standard English characterized by sparse punctuation and abundant sentence fragments. She emphasizes the present and present progressive tenses and although she narrates past events, she rarely uses the past tense. These curious grammatical details recall Boyce Davies's commentary on an earlier Morrison work, *Beloved,* citing language as one of the "boundaries" Morrison crosses in order to "make reconnections and mark or name gaps and absences" (17). In the same way, Florens's "violation" of the norms of standard English represents an attempt to represent an experience absent from the normative historical record. Examine this passage where Florens writes of Lina warning her about her devotion to the blacksmith, asking Florens if she thinks he would take Florens with him when he leaves the farm after his work is done. Florens writes: "I am not wondering this. Not then, not ever. I know you cannot steal me nor wedding me. Neither one is lawful. What I know is that I wilt when you go and am straight when Mistress sends me to you" (*A Mercy* 105). As a voice that represents a subaltern inserting herself into the written record, it makes sense that the style of her voice is lyric and fragmentary rather than the literal, chronologically linear style that characterizes dominant registers of history. In this short passage, one can see several experimental, "non-standard" elements: the use of the present progressive and present to narrate past events, the use of the noun "wedding" instead of the verb "marry," and the metaphorical floral imagery used to

describe her emotional state with and without the blacksmith's presence, perhaps even an allusion to her own name. Her non-standard usage can be jarring and disruptive, and alludes to the need for a similar break from convention when re-imagining the U.S. story. Lastly, her reliance on the present and present progressive tenses in her account gives it a sense of immediacy and evokes a haunting, ever-present past—a suggestion that the past still has present ramifications. Although we find that Florens is actually writing, she characterizes her confession to the blacksmith as a "telling": her account has an oral sensibility, which alludes to the fact that oral tradition is a history which is often overlooked in official versions of History that rely solely on the written record.

Through her entrance into the world of letters, Florens makes her voice heard. Not only does Florens's marginalized voice move the margin to a place of greater recognition, the aesthetic of her voice suggests the need for an alternative way of imagining and relaying the many histories which weave together to form the American story.

The Story of U.S. Origins and "Post-racial" Contemporary U.S. Society

Having explored the questions *A Mercy* raises about the way we conceptualize U.S. beginnings, another central question arises: Why now? Although historical fiction is a common vehicle to explore contemporaneity, what is it about contemporaneity that prompts an exploration of the pre-national stage? If we return to the interview previously cited, Morrison indicates that she returns to the point in U.S. colonial history just before present-day ideas concerning slavery, race and privilege crystallized. In order to deconstruct those ideas, she had to return to the "source" so to speak. She had to return to a time before "race" was race as we know it in the present-day U.S. imaginary—a "pre-racial" time ("Toni Morrison on Bondage").

If one examines the year in which *A Mercy* was published, 2008, a watershed event takes place which may precipitate a literary return to the pre-racial past—the election of the first African-American president. This event ushered in, at least in the eyes of some pundits, columnists and cultural critics, the "post-racial" age. Indeed, in numerous reviews and articles addressing *A Mercy*, the connection of a "pre-racial" colonial period to the sociopolitical ramifications of Obama's election was not lost.

Jessica Cantiello, in her article "From Pre-Racial to Post-Racial? Reading and Reviewing *A Mercy* in the Age of Obama" discusses this connection in depth. First of all, Cantiello mentions that the release of *A Mercy* was timed to coincide with the election (155), and also cites the interesting fact that Obama was the first and only president that Morrison has ever publicly endorsed for president (155). In her endorsement, which consists of a letter addressed to him, Morrison herself views Obama's (possible) election as a watershed moment that has an undeniable link to the past. After weighing the reasons she deems Obama fit for office, she states: "Our future is ripe, outrageously rich in its possibilities. Yet unleashing the glory of that future will require a difficult labor, and some may be so frightened of its birth they will refuse to abandon their nostalgia for the womb" (McGeveran). The birthing imagery that Morrison employs here is salient and alludes to her purposes in penning *A Mercy*. She likens Obama's leadership as a position at the helm of a new order, a "glorious future" for the direction of the United States. However, she cautions against those who have "nostalgia for the womb." What do those who have "nostalgia of the womb" long for when imagining the (re)framing of the nation? I argue that one of *A Mercy*'s aims is to deconstruct this "nostalgia of the womb" revealing it to be precarious at best, false at worst by presenting a version of an early United States which breaks with traditional ideas of a racially delineated and stratified society. *A*

Mercy, in effect, functions as a national mirror—reflecting that the birth of the United States rooted in a multiracial past is just as real as the United States at the dawn of a multiracial future symbolized by Obama's election, and embodied in Obama himself as a biracial African-American man. In other words, there is nothing new about the idea of the fluidity of race and racial boundaries in the contemporary national imaginary.

However, there is a caveat, which Cantiello also addresses in her article: Morrison embraces the idea of "pre-racial" as well as "post-racial" with reservation because she rejects the idea, which some may use these terms to suggest, that race and racism is or was ever obsolete. Race is not absent from *A Mercy;* it is has a palpable and at times violent presence, as the aforementioned episode of Florens's inspection by townspeople while she is in the Widow Ealing's home attests. For this reason, it would be disingenuous to mistake Morrison's presentation of a multiracial early United States for a de-racialized one. As Cantiello elaborates, "Morrison's characters are all raced, but what these identities mean in 1690 is different than what they would mean in 1850 or 2008" (167). The linkage of slavery to race, which was and still is a guiding discourse in U.S. society, is a strong one, to the extent that the changing relationships U.S. Americans have to race can only be expressed in terms of "pre" and "post." While some of the readings of *A Mercy* by various reviewers linking the Age of Obama with a "pre-racial" colonial past are appropriate, Cantiello states that "the tendency to emphasize certain comparisons, particularly the semantic relationship between Morrison's use of pre-racial to describe the novel's late-seventeenth-century racial landscape and the media's use of post-racial to describe Obama's America, simplifies and at times misreads the complexity of the racial relationships Morrison explores in the text" (Cantiello 165). "I guess [it] is good enough" is how Morrison judges the term "pre-racial" to describe her novel ("Toni Morrison on Bondage"),

evidence that she's not exactly comfortable with the term. According to Morrison, "pre-racial" does not mean "raceless" in the world *A Mercy* depicts; it simply indicates that the relationships U.S. Americans currently have to race were not yet in place and that it was a time before race was directly linked to slavery.

The other side of the coin, "post-racial," comes with a similar caveat. In the previously cited interview with NPR's Michele Martin, she asks Morrison, "We talked at the beginning of our conversation about the fact that this book takes place at a time that pre-racial is pre-racist, and a lot of people now call this a post-racial era. Do you buy that?" Morrison's response: "I certainly don't like that word. I don't know why. But it seems to indicate something that I don't think is quite true, which is that we have erased racism" ("Toni Morrison on Bondage"). Again, there is something that ties the "pre-racial" with the "post-racial," but as Morrison states, it most certainly is not the idea that with the election of Obama, race has been transcended or that it is a concept which no longer has any bearing on the U.S. psyche. More fitting with the overall aim of *A Mercy*, perhaps "post-racial," rather than an indicator that race or racism has been erased, should instead be viewed within the framework of race as a multifaceted concept. Rather than race as a construction which inscribes fixed boundaries, it should be viewed as something with multiple possibilities—as is Obama himself, being a man who self-identifies as African-American, but who also liberally references his biracial parentage and multicultural upbringing.[14] The nation, just as race, is conceived of having fixed, inscribed borders and boundaries, but as Benedict Anderson argues, the multifaceted possibilities of the construction of race serves as a

14. In President Obama's first memoir, *Dreams from My Father* (1995), he talks extensively about his black Kenyan father, his white American mother from Kansas, and being raised partly by his mother and Indonesian stepfather in Indonesia, and partly by his white grandparents in Hawaii. In addition to discussing his upbringing, educational formation, and later experiences in the South Side of Chicago, Obama tells of his experiences of understanding himself as a black person. The reasons for that understanding span from his phenotype and how he is viewed by society without discussing his background (xv), to his experiences with racism (80), to his desire to be politically conscious and "avoid being mistaken as a sellout" (100).

reflection on the possibilities of the (re)construction of the U.S. nation.[15] The multiracial era evoked in *A Mercy* is a reminder that the United States has always been a multiracial family.

What joins the "pre-racial" past with the "post-racial" future is the idea of the fluidity in race and racial boundaries. In the setting of *A Mercy*, the fluidity lies in the fact that the boundaries and meanings ascribed to race which now make up contemporary U.S. race consciousness are amorphous, still in formation, hence, fluid. If we take "post-racial" at its meaning which suggests "multiracial," we see that fluidity lies in the fact that, though race in the contemporary United States still bears the weight of its eventual association with slavery, race is not strictly categorical. Obama brought to the national stage not only the unprecedented advent of a black man in the White House, but also the possibility of an African-American identity completely congruous with a biracial, multiethnic one.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analyzed the aim of *A Mercy*—to (re)write the story of the origins of the United States, representing a time before slavery and race were linked, thereby revealing the constructed nature of race and racial separation—and have demonstrated its engagement with the past as well as its connection to the present. To accomplish this, I demonstrate how *A Mercy* is a retelling of the foundational U.S. origins narrative in several distinct ways: First, I examine

15. In her article, Cantiello examines several possibilities for the concept of "post-racial," the very last of which characterizes the term as a synonym for "multiracial" (168). She argues that this characterization of the term is most relevant to *A Mercy* in light of the fact that the characters "create a temporary multiracial family in a multiracial era" (168). Another telling point Cantiello brings up in her article regarding multiraciality that is worthy of further exploration is the treatment of the character Sorrow in reviews of *A Mercy* and ideas concerning her significance in the novel itself. In my own analysis, I identify Sorrow as a mixed-race young woman because of the ambiguity of her physical appearance. She is described as "a bit mongrelized" (*A Mercy* 120) and as having "never groomed wooly hair the color of the setting sun" (51) as well as "over-lashed, silver-grey eyes" (53-54). These descriptions, to me, are deliberately presented ambiguously, referring to both European and African features, as evidence of racial mixing in Sorrow's presentation. Cantiello cites several reviewers who describe Sorrow as "black" as well as several who describe her as "white," and makes a compelling argument that some reviewers' insistence on categorizing her as either/or belie the idea of a "post-racial" United States in which race has been supposedly transcended or rendered obsolete.

how Morrison engages the historical and legislative record in her novel, revealing the truth that modern-day racism is a result of a process that was legislatively instituted. Then, I argue that the intersectionality of race and gender in the narrative reveals that these two identitarian discourses are two sides of the same coin as the harrowing experiences of women are juxtaposed against the conditions of forced labor, illustrating that female exploitation and commodification were integral to national foundation. Next, I characterize *A Mercy* not only as a retelling of American origins, but also as an alternate representation of slavery and servitude, one which breaks with dominant, essentialized portrayals. Lastly, I analyze how Florens's voice, as the main voice which tells the story in the narrative, valorizes marginalized history, mirroring the function of *A Mercy* itself. In my last section, I turn towards contemporaneity and explore how the setting of *A Mercy* is tied to the present day, particularly the reality of a multiracial United States and the idea of racial fluidity.

An idea which ties U.S. racial fluidity to the same idea addressed in the Latin American novels to be analyzed in this project is that of hybridity. Obama's claiming of an African-American identity alongside his biracial, multiethnic identity, for example, is, in essence, the claiming of a hybrid identity. Though it would be disingenuous to equate a U.S. sense of hybridity with Latin American notions of *mestizaje*, my goal is to demonstrate the links between Afro-descendant identities within the Americas while also recognizing and exploring their differences and nuances. Amongst the complexities regarding race and nation presented in *A Mercy* is the novel's overall aim, to paint a portrait of U.S. beginnings before race was wedded to slavery. This purpose, however, is accompanied by the idea that the era of U.S. foundation is a multiracial one, not unlike the reality of the contemporary United States. In the following chapter, I return to the theme of the reality of multiethnic national foundation within a Peruvian

national context in *Malambo* (2004), a novel which, like *A Mercy*, also features a protagonist who is a woman of color whose experiences reinforce the intersectionality of race and gender during a time when the Peruvian nation was still in formation. [16] I argue that the novel is a part of a national conversation to represent the marginalized, overlooked historical truth of a multiethnic Peru, as well as to highlight the contributions of Afro-descendants to Peruvian national identity.

16. My choice to use "multiracial" to refer to U.S. foundation while "multiethnic" to refer to Peru and Latin America in general is deliberate. In contemporary U.S. discourse, the idea of "race" is much more prevalent because of factors such as stronger historical ties between race and slavery, birthing such concepts as the "one drop rule," the fact that many ethnic distinctions within Afro-descendant populations in the United States were homogenized earlier and to a greater extent than in Latin America, and because of the longevity of legislated race-based discrimination in the U.S. "Ethnicity" holds much more weight in discussions of national identity in Latin America. This is not only because of the endurance of Afro-descendant and indigenous ethnic legacies and populations, but because the celebratory ideals of Latin American *mestizaje* makes discussion of "race" in a Latin American context not quite comparable to discussions of the same in North America (Wade 14, 49-53, 55, 87).

CHAPTER 3

(RE)WRITING *PERUANIDAD*

En la orilla equivocada, cerca de los corrales del ganado y las tierras de cultivo, y en las faldas del cerro San Cristóbal, surgen las casuchas miserables del Arrabal de San Lázaro…
—*Malambo*, Chapter 1

Embodying the marginalized truth of a multiethnic Peru which *Malambo* (2001) reveals, is the marginality of the space in which the novel unfolds. Opening with a florid description of the features surrounding and contained in this space, the narrator evokes Malambo,[1] a historical seventeenth-century slave community, also known as Arrabal de San Lázaro, situated on the other side of the river from Ciudad de los Reyes, what is now known as Lima, in colonial Peru. One of the recurring features of the novel is the characterization of the river which runs through the city, the Río Rímac. The river is consistently personified, and often referred to as the "Río Hablador" as it echoes, whispers, repeats gossip and is described as an all-knowing force that harbors secrets and offers wisdom from the past and present. In the epigraph which opens this chapter, the community Malambo is described as being on the "wrong side" of this river, geographically situated in a marginal position. The geographically marginal physical location of this community mirrors the way in which History has relegated the story of its inhabitants, a mélange of black, *mulato*, and indigenous populations, to the margins. Applying bell hooks's theorization of marginality, however, I posit that Malambo's marginal position serves as a site of contestation of the very discourses that have silenced its story. hooks speaks of resistance as a

1. Throughout this chapter, "Malambo" in italics will refer to the novel, while un-italicized it will refer to the community the novel depicts.

mode which is precisely a contribution of marginality and she values the vantage point it affords as a space of radical openness:

> [M]arginality [is] more than a site of deprivation…it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. It was this marginality that I was naming as a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives…It offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds. (341)

In other words, the space of Malambo, situated in a position of marginality, becomes a radical site of resistance, especially suited to give voice to the silenced stories of its inhabitants. Valuing and recognizing the contributions of Afro-descendant culture which has been traditionally relegated to the margins of history as well as the inclusion of blackness which has been largely invisibilized in considerations of national identity emerge as motifs in *Malambo*. Following Martha Ojeda's analysis that the novel characterizes the community Malambo as a "re-appropriated" space ("De la Ciudad" 131), in this chapter, I argue that *Malambo* recuperates a forgotten history of Peruvian beginnings by centering the story of a community relegated to the periphery, valorizing the contributions of Afro-descendants to *peruanidad*.

After a close reading of *Malambo* and an extensive review of sources pertaining to Afro-Peruvian culture, I found that one of the most interesting ways Charún-Illescas valorizes Afro-descendant contribution to *peruanidad* in her novel is through homages to prominent Afro-Peruvian figures in the names and portrayals of her characters. For example, the last name of a central character who functions as a griot figure, Tomasón Vallumbrosio, is very similar to that of famous Afro-Peruvian musician and dancer, Amador Ballumbrosio (1938-2008), one of the

first to disseminate Afro-Peruvian art (DiLaura 448). Additionally, in *Yo Soy Negro: Blackness in Peru* (2011), author Tanya Maria Golash-Boza speaks of Afro-Peruvian cultural revival and social movements. She notes the influence the 1956 debut of the Pancho Fierro Dance Company, the first Afro-Peruvian dance company, had on raising awareness of Afro-Peruvian cultural traditions. Noticing a similarity between "Pancho Fierro" and, the protagonist's name, "Pancha" and her father's name, "Francisco," (the common nickname being "Pancho"), I investigated and found that Pancho Fierro was a nineteenth-century Afro-Peruvian *costumbrista* painter. Some of his most popular works depict scenes which are included prominently in *Malambo*, particularly his *Son de los Diablos* which is the dance in which Pancha participates with masked devils when she goes to sea in pursuit of her intended, as well as his paintings which feature people being accused of heresy being paraded through the streets during the Peruvian Inquisition, which is illustrated several times in *Malambo*. Charún-Illescas pays homage to the cultural contribution of a historical Afro-Peruvian painter not only by the inclusion of the aforementioned scenes in the novel but also by making a character who functions as a repository of Afro-Peruvian cultural memory, Tomáson, a painter.

Accompanying the idea of highlighting Afro-descendant contribution is the theme of centering a marginalized history. In *A Mercy* as well as *Malambo*, the strategy of engaging the archive, utilizing overlooked details, or even reinterpreting ubiquitous details culled from the archive, is used to counter exclusive history. Just as Morrison engages the historical and juridical record in her re-imagining of the story of U.S. beginnings, Charún-Illescas does the same in her depiction of the colonial Peruvian landscape, particularly in her depiction of urban slavery and in the novel's events unfolding against the backdrop of the Peruvian Inquisition. As Morrison ultimately argues, the U.S. has been multiethnic from its founding, and as Charún-

Illescas demonstrates, so has Peru. While the novel highlights the contributions of Afro-descendant populations and culture, the particular space of Malambo is also characterized as a site of interethnic alliance and interaction. As Morrison dispels the myth that the existence of racial categories was a pre-established reality, Charún-Illescas dispels the myth that Afro-Peruvian traditions, culture and ethnicity is somehow distinct from *peruanidad* as a whole. *Peruanidad*, a term coined in 1943 by Peruvian sociologist Victor Andrés Belaunde, conceptualizes Peruvian identity as a synthesis of Andean and European heritage, a characterization which completely invisibilizes any consideration of Africanness (Belaunde 42). I argue that Charún-Illescas (re)writes *peruanidad*, making a claim for Afro-descendant inclusion. Through her depiction of Malambo, she argues that Afro-Peruvian traditions, culture and ethnicity are a part of what makes up *peruanidad*. As Ojeda argues and as I expound upon in this chapter, in spite of its peripheral location, Malambo emerges as a site of resistance and contestation as well as a reclamation and valorization of African identity ("De la Ciudad"129).

Central to the explorations of race and national identity in each of the novels I analyze in this project is the discourse of gender within the construction of national identity. The most outstanding gendered experiences I explore in this chapter which illustrate these intersections are motherhood and matrimony. Regarding the connections of gendered experiences to national founding, Doris Sommer reveals marriage and childbirth as part of a process of literally "engender[ing] new nations" (18). For example, in her description of Latin American nation building, she cites Argentine founding father Juan Bautista Alberdi's declaration "to govern is to populate" as a part of an ideology of "national consolidation," a way to make "strategic bonds that were stronger than merely political affiliations," thereby constructing social systems "preliminary to public institutions including the state itself" (19). Similarly, Nira Yuval-Davis

theorizes on the implications of childbearing "for both the constructions of nations and women's social positionings" (26). Women, she posits, function "as the biological 'producers' of children/people, 'bearers of the collective'" (26). In other words, the experiences of women regarding marriage and childbirth carry ideological weight in the construction of institutions integral to nation building and in the construction of the "collective," or national identity. In this chapter, as in the last, I will examine how female characters in differing stages of servitude and varying ethnicities in *Malambo* negotiate their status as women in an evolving nation based upon patriarchy and how those negotiations, within the experiences of marriage and childbirth, intersect with race.

Themes connected to the negotiations the female characters make which challenge hegemonic and colonial discourses that I explore in *Malambo,* many of which have resonance with those I address in *A Mercy,* include the ideas of oral history and legacy confronting the written, official registers of History, Afro-syncretism and interethnic alliance. Although thematic analysis is central to my project overall, so is the investigation of form—particularly narrative experimentation and how those features embody the aim of this particular genre of historical fiction—to question and trouble the validity of hegemonic historical registers. Lastly, I will return to the question of Why now? by addressing the connection of contemporaneity to the past, investigating *Malambo*'s ties to contemporary national rhetoric and its reflection of a time of rising consciousness of the contributions of Afro-descendants to Peruvian national identity.

Synopsis and Critical Reception

Malambo has gained a level of exposure because of its translation into English in 2004 that perhaps has not been enjoyed by much Afro-Latin American literature. Reviews and critical

articles on the work have been published in both Spanish and English. Some frame *Malambo* within the context of a larger project: for example, Leo J. Garofalo, in a review which places *Malambo* in dialogue with three works of non-fiction highlighting the history of Afro-Peruvians, describes the novel as a reflection of El Quinto Suyo, an idea used by some Afro-Peruvian advocacy groups to bring the plight of marginalized Afro-descendant groups to the fore. Other reviewers, such as Emmanuel Harris, highlight the interethnic theme, painting *Malambo* as a work that reaffirms African connections throughout the Black Diaspora in Peru as well as Afro-descendant connections with other racial and ethnic groups which also form a part of *peruanidad*. Critics such as Martha Ojeda analyze the intertwined themes of recuperating marginalized history and orality, both of which figure strongly in my own analysis. Aida Heredia discusses the Afro-spirituality in *Malambo* and its contrast with a Eurocentric worldview, which I also discuss in my section on knowledge and privilege. However, critics such as Rosario Swanson center the female perspective in the novel, providing a point of thematic analysis which underpins the link between woman and nation not only in this chapter, but in the overall argument of my project. She states:

> Cabe notar que en la novela el rescate de esta historia [of Afro-Peruvians] se da mediado por la perspectiva de la mujer afroperuana hecho de suma importancia si se toma en cuenta que la mujer afroperuana ha sido doblemente marginada. En ella se tematiza la importancia que la oralidad y la lengua tienen en el desarrollo de una voz y perspectiva literaria desde la cual se inicia el rescate de la historia peruana de ahí que la novela se sitúe en un momento histórico—el siglo XVII—en el que tanto la identidad afroperuana como la peruana está en estado de gestación. (312)

In other words, privileging the doubly marginalized perspective of the Afro-descendant woman reflects the very theme of privileging a marginalized history. Recuperating history through fiction requires not only a reexamination of the story being told, but also a reexamination of who tells the story and how the story is told. In the case of *Malambo*, the History of a patriarchal nation which relies on a written register from a Eurocentric worldview is countered with a tale which highlights the experiences of black womanhood and which incorporates the oral tradition as well as an Afro-syncretic cosmology.

Malambo is set during the seventeenth century, the period where Peru is known as the Viceroyalty of Peru, a colonial system based on a viceroy governing "in the place of" the Spanish monarch. Although there are never specific dates mentioned, one can situate the chronology of *Malambo*'s events during the tenure of "Jerónimo Cabrera Bobadilla y Mendoza, Conde de Chinchón y decimocuarto Virrey del Perú" (*Malambo* 35), which was from 1629-1639.[2] Charún-Illescas's decision for this setting is not arbitrary. Setting the novel during this particular period is one manner of engaging the archive to counter the marginalization of present-day Afro-Peruvians. Just as Morrison chooses the year 1690 as representative of a time in U.S. national formation on the cusp of passing legislation which essentially codified racial categories and separation, Charún-Illescas sets *Malambo* during a time when Lima had become a predominantly black city (Jouve-Martín 105). A census submitted to the viceroy by the Archbishop of Lima in 1636, for example, shows a total of 10,758 Spaniards in comparison to

2. The full official name of the 14th Peruvian viceroy is Luis Jerónimo Fernández de Cabrera Bobadilla Cerda y Mendoza ("Chinchón").

13,620 classified as *negro* and 861 as *mulato* (Bowser 341).[3] Charún-Illescas sets her novel during a period of Peru's history where Afro-descendants were a large, vibrant constituency.

Much like *A Mercy*, *Malambo* consists of a multiethnic ensemble cast of characters. The novel is framed by the remembrances of Tomasón Vallumbrosio, an elderly Afro-Peruvian painter who, although technically a slave, has gained a level of independence through completing commissioned paintings. He takes in the *cimarrón* Francisco Parra and his daughter Pancha who begins to establish herself in Malambo as an herbalist. Francisco mysteriously disappears and Pancha goes on a search to discover her father's whereabouts. On the other side of the river, in Ciudad de los Reyes, lives Manuel De la Piedra, a manipulative slave trader who sustains an illicit relationship with his domestic slave, Altagracia Maravillas, but also has indefinite plans to marry Catalina Ronceros, a Spanish widow who only has a small farm to her name. *Malambo* follows Pancha's search alongside that of a young *mulato* sold into slavery named Guararé, also in search of his father. Guararé enlists the help of Chema Arosemena, a young Spanish academic who is in Lima to gather information to write a book on *limeño* customs. After Pancha resolves the mystery of her father's disappearance and murder, she takes a journey far away from Malambo to find Venancio, her husband-to-be who goes out to sea in an attempt to earn enough money to buy the freedom of Altagracia, his half-sister, before De la Piedra sells her away.

3. Other ethnicities noted in this census are a total of 1,426 indigenous people, 377 *mestizos* and 22 Chinese. At this point in history, Afro-descendants also outnumbered the indigenous population in Lima. I was also intrigued by the fact that a Chinese population was noted in the 1636 census. According to Frederick P. Bowser in his volume *The African Slave in Colonial Peru*, "a not inconsiderable number" of Asian slaves called "*esclavos chinos*…found their way to Lima via trade with Mexico and Manila" but were often excluded from previous censuses (340). These numbers not only give insight into the very diverse ethnic milieu of colonial Lima, but serve as a reminder that enslaved people in South America often included a more diverse ethnic constituency than those in North America. Although the Asian influence in *peruanidad* is not the focus of this study, it must be noted that the inclusion of Asian ethnicity within *peruanidad* also counters its hegemonic, exclusionary image of a mere synthesis of indigenous and European heritage.

Even a brief synopsis of the novel as detailed above gives insight into the differences between the way that slavery and servitude is represented in a South American context versus a typical North American account. The representations in *Malambo* may be surprising to readers who are only familiar with a U.S.-based concept of slavery and plantation societies, as reviewer Leo J. Garofalo notes (304). In contrast to *A Mercy*, *Malambo* gives an account of urban slavery. Urban colonial Lima was an environment within which many slaves, as artisans, skilled laborers, market sellers and domestic workers were able to achieve certain degrees of independence. In the same way that *A Mercy* breaks with conventional North American representations of slavery by its re-interpretation of conventional spaces—a small-scale farm in the rural Northeast vs. a large-scale plantation in the deep South, for example—*Malambo* re-interprets space in its own right. Although introduced as being on "the wrong side" of the river, Malambo becomes a space where marginality is contested (Ojeda, "De la Ciudad" 132). For example, in his act of *cimarronaje*, Tomasón flees from the center (Ciudad de los Reyes) to the periphery (Malambo) and is able to exercise a degree of agency because of money he earns through his skill as a painter, having the ability to pay his master with his earnings. Others, like Venancio, were even able to purchase family members' freedom with their savings. Although *A Mercy* and *Malambo* depict different kinds of slavery, they share a similar aesthetic in that their representations highlight fluidity. *Malambo* demonstrates fluidity in the levels of independence Afro-descendants in varying states of servitude were able to achieve, which echoes the "fluidity before fixity" of the states of servitude and racial codification associated with them demonstrated in *A Mercy*.

While a summary of *Malambo*'s plot gives insight into the themes, an examination of the novel's narrative structure represents the theme of valorizing knowledge conventionally ignored

by hegemonic history. The events in *Malambo* unfold in a third-person omniscient narrative voice. The tone of the narration is personified in the aforementioned Río Hablador, the timeless, listening, whispering, all-knowing river which separates Malambo from Ciudad de los Reyes. Like the narrator, the river knows everyone's thoughts and secrets. Although the narration never centers on the perspective of a singular character as it does at times in *A Mercy*, Pancha is one of the main protagonists in *Malambo* whose journeys comprise much of the novel's plot. She emerges as a central character, one who not only links the two worlds separated by the Río Hablador by constantly traversing that boundary due to her occupation as an herbalist, but one who also links Malambo to the world beyond it on her final journey. There are also entire sections of narration in the third-person in italics. Many times they appear during episodes of Tomasón's reminiscences or they follow an episode "in real time" which is thematically related. This mode is often employed with retellings of folktales, stories of the Orishas from the Yoruba pantheon and songs praising them, which often include words and phrases from African languages, reminiscent of the voice of Florens's mother in *A Mercy* because it is presented on a different temporal plane than the main narration. It is also indicative of historical artifacts passed on orally which exist outside of temporal space or a linear chronology, a strategy I examine in more detail in a later section, which is a part of countering History's sole reliance on the written record. I now examine a central theme which connects all the novels in this project's corpus—the intersection of gender and nation.

Gender and Nation in *Malambo*

In the previous chapter, I give several examples of the subjugation, victimization and commodification common in the experiences of the female characters in *A Mercy.* I conclude

that their telling of their experiences not only serves as self-awareness and critique of their devaluation, but also as a reinforcement of how that devaluation was central to founding the nascent nation. While *Malambo* echoes the transactionality inherent in some of the relationships between the male and female characters, particularly the master/slave relationships and the husband/wife relationships shown in *A Mercy*, ultimately, Charún-Illescas and Morrison slightly differ in the tone conveyed in their characters' moments of self-actualization. One of the points of comparison which prompts this exploration of the novels' differences in tone is the celebratory end of *Malambo* versus the ambiguous, if not bleak atmosphere at *A Mercy*'s end. Both Morrison and Charún-Illescas return to the epoch of their respective nations' nascency at two critical moments—for Morrison, before racial separation in the U.S. became codified, and for Charún-Illescas, during a time when the black population of Lima was at its height. Both authors critique ideas attached to a hegemonic vision of History—for Morrison, that racial separation was *a priori*, and for Charún-Illescas, that Afro-descendant cultural contribution and identity is absent from *peruanidad*. However, the tone in which Morrison's and Charún-Illescas's female characters exercise agency differ. In this section, I will examine a character from *Malambo* and contrast her with a comparable character in *A Mercy* to analyze what the differences in tone convey about the different ways of articulating the intersections of gender and the nascent nation. In my examination of black female subjectivity, I compare and contrast the protagonists, Pancha from *Malambo* and *Florens* from *A Mercy*, arguing that Pancha's confident, celebratory characterization versus Floren's ambiguous, emotionally-fraught self-actualization parallels *Malambo*'s celebration of Peruvian Afro-descendant contribution versus *A Mercy*'s depiction of the United States as a nation already in moral decline. Next, I analyze the trope of motherhood and motherlessness which also connects both novels through a comparison of the

character Altagracia from *Malambo* and Sorrow from *A Mercy*. Lastly, I investigate the experience of matrimony in both novels by examining Catalina Ronceros in *Malambo* and Rebekka Vark in *A Mercy*.

Pancha, Florens and black female subjectivity

To conceptualize elements of Pancha's and Florens's physical and metaphorical journeys, I apply Sondra O'Neale's conceptualization of the black female Bildungsroman. She describes it as a genre which "depict[s] the Black woman's internal struggle to unravel the immense complexities of racial identity, gender definitions…and awakening of sexual being—in short to discover, direct, and recreate the self in the midst of hostile racial, sexual and other societal repression" (25). Elements of those characteristics can be found in the journeys Pancha and Florens undertake—Florens, to find the blacksmith, and Pancha to find Venancio—which both have elements of rites of passage and self-discovery as they travel through vast and at times hostile spaces in which they are vulnerable as unaccompanied young women of color. Their journeys are both in search of men with whom they have romantic/sexual ties in order to help another female character: in *A Mercy*, the blacksmith is sought for his curative knowledge to save the mistress, Rebekkah, and in *Malambo*, Venancio is sought to fulfill his promise to purchase the freedom of his half-sister, Altagracia, before she is sold. The overall similarities between these two characters' placements and circumstances in their respective novels are countered by the contrast in tone of their denouements. At *A Mercy*'s climax, Florens has a violent confrontation with her lover the blacksmith after he demands that she "own herself" (*A Mercy* 141). There is evidence that she is altered in the aftermath. She is hardened and carries herself differently: regarding Florens's demeanor after she returns from being with the

blacksmith, the narrator notes that "the docile creature they knew had turned feral" (146). Florens's ultimate moment of self-realization is one fraught with misunderstanding, conflict and ambiguity. Her radical act of etching her experiences into the walls of the uninhabited Vaark estate is suffused with irony—the moment it becomes clear she addresses her tale to the blacksmith is the same moment Florens realizes her writing won't even be read by him because of his illiteracy. While Florens's act of writing is powerful, inserting her into the canon from the margins, there is a sense of uncertainty about her future, and the community she forges with other characters in the course of the novel is depicted as falling into ruins (155-56). Pancha, on the other hand, has a less fraught path to self-discovery. She, like Florens, is orphaned,[4] but is depicted as self-sufficient, without the hungry emotional void Florens displays:

> Era cierto que Pancha color de aceituna ya no era la niña que le dejó [to Tomasón] Francisco Parra, sino una hembra de dieciséis años, adusta, cejijunta y a veces malhablada. Venancio se desvivía por ella, pero Pancha no se fijaba en amores. Después de vender sus yerbas trabajaba en la huerta, y en las noches se quedaba a su lado viéndolo pintar mientras se peinaba la larga trenza y oía la conversa del río. (*Malambo* 66)

Pancha is an assertive woman who earns a living through her own specialized knowledge of herbs and is not emotionally dependent on Venancio. Her "realization" comes in acknowledging that she loves Venancio and is not going in search of him just for Altagracias's sake. Before she sets off on her journey, she's questioned about her motives by Tomasón (169), but during the course of her journey she realizes she wants to marry him. During her pursuit of him, someone

4. Florens is not technically an orphan because her mother is still alive during the timeline of *A Mercy*'s plot, but she is separated from her at an early age, and the mother confesses she never knew who Florens's father was. On the other hand, Pancha arrives to Malambo with her father who is later murdered. We never hear of her mother except for a brief reference to the herbalist knowledge she passed down to Pancha.

she meets along the way asks: "Ah, ¿quién es ese Venancio?" and she answers, "Un amigo. Mi novio, más bien. Me voy a casar con él" (206), suggesting that Pancha and Venancio's relationship isn't depicted with the same dynamics of power and ownership as is Florens and the blacksmith's. *Malambo* doesn't describe the moment Pancha and Venancio are reunited, but Venancio later confirms the fact that they plan to marry (217) and the last we see of them in the novel is entering Tomasón's house together before he passes away (224). This tableau-like scene of the couple on the threshold of Tomasón's house before he passes on implies that Pancha and Venancio's union—that of a *cimarrona* who carries on the herbalist tradition taught to her and a black freedman who purchases the freedom of another—will produce a future generation of (free) Afro-descendants who will carry on the legacy of Afro-descendant culture and tradition.

Observing Florens's and Pancha's characterizations side-by-side gives insight into two different ways these authors from distinct national backgrounds envision black female subjectivity in relation to national beginnings. Each presents a "doubly marginalized" black woman, in each case, a salient figure to articulate a history from the margins into the center. However, they each have a different relationship to ownership and freedom—Florens as a slave, and Pancha as a *cimarrona* who lives with Tomasón, who has obtained his own "freedom" of sorts. Morrison's portrayal of Florens's troubled self-actualization and ultimately ambiguous end is in line with her reflection of a nation founded on exploitation and holding an uncertain future in a geographical space depicted as an already tainted paradise—a world forged out of cooperation based upon necessity, but on the verge of fracture because of a new order based on legislatively codified racial separation. Charún-Illescas, on the other hand, figures Pancha as a reflection of a strategy to celebrate Afro-Peruvian contributions as a way to center this community's often overlooked history. Charún-Illescas depicts the stratification of colonial

Peruvian society, the horrors of the slave trade and the persecution of religious Others; however, these exploitative truths of the basis of Peruvian national foundation are overlain with several instances of subversion of the hegemonic system established (or, in the process of being established), the aforementioned "escape" of Tomasón being the most emblematic. Pancha's characterization is a celebratory re-imagining of the experience of a black woman in colonial society who appeals to Afro-descendant tradition and knowledge to succeed—her knowledge and work as an herbalist allows her to be independent, and her reliance on oral tradition and an Afro-syncretic cosmovision of knowledge allow her to uncover the truth about her father and locate Venancio. Charún-Illescas's presentation of Pancha is in line with her novel's overall proposition—the valorization of Afro-Peruvian identity and its inclusion within *peruanidad*.

Maternity, motherlessness, matrimony and the language of transaction

Besides the tone of the characterization of the main female protagonists, maternity and motherlessness figure as another trope which connects *Malambo* to *A Mercy*, yet another similarity in the ways the two authors explore a gendered experience to articulate the intersection of gender and national foundation. Rosario Swanson astutely notes the absence of maternal figures in *Malambo* and suggests that this absence actually highlights its importance:

> [E]s precisamente su ausencia lo que nos avisa su importancia ya que es a esa figura ancestral/espectral de la madre como origen perdido con la cual se quiere reconectar. Sin embargo, el carácter patriarcal y ajeno de la sociedad a la que se entró como esclava y esclavo dificulta la reconexión con la madre y por ello, se requiere de la magia de la tradición oral, de las enseñanzas de los ancestros para realizar el regreso a esta fuente primaria. (312-13)

What I find especially salient about Swanson's observations of the idea of the absence of maternal figures is the relevance of the patriarchal nature of the society which the characters of *Malambo* inhabit—this patriarchal character being that which heightens or even causes the symbolic maternal disconnect. Although Swanson's comments are in the context of her reading of *Malambo*, they are also very applicable to *A Mercy*. The original conceit of *A Mercy* is that of a child (Florens) separated from her mother and misinterpreting that separation as abandonment. The motif of maternal/filial disconnect which runs through *A Mercy* originates with an act of separation, of Florens's mother "giving her up" out of necessity due to the sexual violence the mother fears is in store for Florens (as it was for the mother herself), and the inevitability of that sexual violence as an outgrowth of the exploitative system of slavery upon which the masculinist U.S. national project is founded. While both Morrison and Charún-Illescas use the familial relationship to textually represent the ill effects of the patriarchal national project, *Malambo*'s prominent portrayal of the herbalist tradition juxtaposes matrilineal knowledge with the patriarchal society within which the national project unfolds. In *Malambo*, Pancha, like Florens, is motherless, and also like Florens, becomes a part of a cobbled-together family. The one reference to Pancha's mother is in the context of knowledge passed down to her: "Pancha cuida las yerbas tal como se lo enseñó su madre y las esclavas en la hacienda en que pasó su niñez" (*Malambo* 64). In this instance, Charún-Illescas presents the herbalist tradition Pancha practices as matrilineal—via her mother and other women who most likely represented maternal figures to Pancha before her arrival in Malambo. While *A Mercy* depicts the confusion and emotional void caused by maternal separation, *Malambo* emphasizes knowledge which represents a maternal bond in the absence of a maternal figure.

Although the principal protagonists are depicted as orphaned/motherless in both *A Mercy* and *Malambo*, there are also instances in both novels where secondary characters become pregnant or give birth. The way each novel explores the theme of maternity is significant in my analysis, given not only the idea of maternity as a gendered experience, but also the literary symbolism of maternity in novels which explore the dynamics of nations which are still in formation, on the cusp of being born. The two characters I will compare which shed light on the authors' approaches to the theme of maternity and how it reflects upon what they articulate about national formation are Sorrow from *A Mercy* and Altagracia Maravillas from *Malambo*. Both Sorrow and Altagracia have sexual experiences with men who have the advantage of power over them, and I illustrate the ways in which both characters negotiate their sexual experiences or the prospect of the birth of children as a result of those experiences to gain a sense of agency and autonomy over their own bodies.

Sorrow is a mixed-race young woman, described as "daft" (*A Mercy* 152) because she talks to an imaginary companion named Twin and as an "easy harvest" for men (45). Her true name, which she declines to give, is never revealed to us, and the family who initially finds her in the aftermath of a shipwreck gives her the name Sorrow (118). After delivering a stillborn child, she soon becomes pregnant a second time, eventually giving birth to a healthy daughter:

> Although all her life she had been saved by men—Captain [presumed to be her father], the sawyers' sons [who initially found her], Sir [Jacob Vaark] and now Will and Scully [who had helped her give birth to her daughter]—she was convinced that this time she had done something, something important by herself. Instantly, she knew what to name her. Knew also what to name herself [….] She

had looked into her daughter's eyes…"I am your mother," she said. "My name is Complete." (133-34)

The birth of her daughter allows Sorrow to claim an identity for herself. Although she had been both exploited and "saved" by men, this singular act of bringing a new life into the world is something that she achieves on her own and about which she is able to feel a sense of autonomy. The father of her first child was one of the sawyer's sons (119), and though the father of the second is never confirmed, the novel implies that it was a clergyman (123, 128). The narrator characterizes these sexual experiences as "silent submission" (128) and Sorrow realizes that no one had actually ever kissed her on the mouth (128). Although there is ambiguity over whether Sorrow personally feels violated by her experiences, the advantage of age and power the men with whom she was involved definitely had over her suggest that these relationships were exploitative. Furthermore, her realization that no one had ever kissed her on the mouth shows an awareness that her experiences were devoid of tenderness or affection. However, the birth of her daughter signals a change in her focus and behavior—she no longer "wanders" and is no longer dependent on Twin (134). She develops a self-sufficiency which resists the exploitative circumstances of her daughter's conception. Through the experience of giving birth, Sorrow is no longer object, but subject.

In a similar circumstance in *Malambo*, the character Altagracia Maravillas draws a strong parallel with Sorrow. She has a sexual relationship with her master, De la Piedra, one that is similarly fraught with ambiguity and unequal power dynamics, and she also becomes pregnant. One factor which makes Altagracia's relationship with De la Piedra particularly complex is the implication that she was encouraged into it as a part of a transaction by Candelaria, a female slave who had been in De la Piedra's household for a long time. Speaking with Altagracia not

long after her arrival to De la Piedra's household, Candelaria relates a story of her own relationship with a former master and her resulting mistreatment by the mistress. Candelaria earned money each time she slept with her former master, and she encourages Altagracia (in Altagracia's stream of consciousness-like remembrance of the conversation) to do the same with De la Piedra:

> [D]eja esa plancha y ayúdame anda ya muévete de una vez y empieza a quitarte la ropa para bañarte bien Altagracia recién cae en la cuenta de qué es lo que la espera en la alcoba del amo ¡apúrate antes de que vuelva Nazario! [Altagracia's husband]…tienes suerte de que don Manuel sea soltero alégrate que aquí no haya una ama celosa ni infundiosa…¿cuántos maridos has tenido hasta la fecha? Sólo Nazario nadie más ¡ay muchacha! si es verdad lo que dices entonces tú todavía no tienes idea de lo que es saber gozar y hacer gozar pero no seas tonta no temas que Nazario no se dará cuenta. (*Malambo* 54)

De la Piedra pays Candelaria for her complicity in encouraging the young Altagracia to sleep with him. At the beginning of her "advice," Candelaria tells Altagracia "ayúdame;" in other words, in Candelaria's eyes, sleeping with De la Piedra is a negotiation Altagracia could make which would do them both a favor—Candelaria would continue to hoard coins in her secret hiding place which no one knows of and Altagracia would learn what giving and receiving pleasure was really all about (54). The idea of pleasure leads me to another factor which complicates the usual understanding of master/slave relationships consisting of the master exercising power over and inflicting pain upon the slave. In a later passage, once she realizes she is pregnant, Altagracia thinks back to several sexual encounters with De la Piedra and wonders which one resulted in the conception of her child. She graphically describes orgasms

which leave her weak during sex with the master and the pleasure she still feels between her legs while giving her husband evasive answers to his inquiries about her appearance and behavior (162). The "pleasure" described in Altagracia's experiences is one of the elements which contrasts with Sorrow's ambiguous descriptions of "silent submission." Charún-Illescas's choice to frame this master/slave sexual relationship in a way that falls outside of a narrative of victimization is, at first glance, an uncomfortable prospect. In addition, the fact that entering into the relationship is encouraged by an older, more experienced female slave who was in a similar situation when she was younger may further lead one to question Charún-Illescas's choice. Rather than viewing the depiction of Altagracia's relationship with De la Piedra through the lens of either pure victimization or (problematic) sexual self-empowerment, I interpret it as one of the ways in which women in Altagracia's position attempted to negotiate their status. As a slave, a human being "owned" by another, Altagracia's perspective of the relationship is a manner of gaining a sense of control and autonomy over her own body. Charún-Illescas's choice to depict this taboo relationship in a complex and perhaps contradictory manner is not only a representation of the complexities and contradictions often present in reality and which were most likely present in historical relationships of this kind,[5] but also represents a desire to nuance representations of the ways in which women of color attempted to exercise agency. Further establishing autonomy, when Altagracia discovers she is pregnant with De la Piedra's child, she rejects both the system of slavery and the system of patriarchal legacy by declaring the child hers alone: "Altagracia había decidido que esa criatura sería suya solamente. No sería de Nazario ni

5. One of the most well-known instances of these historical relationships in the United States is between the former American president Thomas Jefferson and his slave Sally Hemings. One of the first contemporary historical accounts analyzing the historiography surrounding the controversy that Jefferson fathered Hemings's six children was Annette Gordon-Reed's *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (1997). Hotly disputed at the time, the evidence of Jefferson's paternity was eventually bolstered via DNA analysis in 1998. While there is a near consensus among historians that the DNA evidence combined with historical evidence strongly support the idea that Jefferson and Hemings had a long-term sexual relationship and had six children together ("Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings"), there are still a small number who continue to dispute it (Turner 17).

del amo…Si crece, será suya solamente" (161). Much like the sense of identity and degree of autonomy Sorrow attains when she gives birth to her daughter, Altagracia asserts a sense of self when she decides the child will be hers alone. Implicit in the idea that the child will be "hers" is a determination that the child will neither belong to De la Piedra as a piece of merchandise nor to her husband as a possible male progenitor. Altagracia rejects the idea of "ownership" of her child in the context of the institution of slavery and in the context of patriarchal legacy—both institutions upon which the national project is founded. In her work depicting elements of the patriarchal, slavery-based colonial society in which the nation is in the process of being born, Charún-Illescas portays a woman who repudiates these institutional claims to her future child as a symbolic critique of those systems.

In addition to the tropes of maternity and motherlessness, the last gendered experience I want to explore in *Malambo* which also has points of contact with *A Mercy* is that of matrimony, which also functions within a transactional framework. Referring to the fact that women were made to be a part of the same economy essential to national foundation as those subject to forced labor, in my analysis of *A Mercy*, I highlighted the similarity of the language used when Jacob Vaark was searching for his wife Rebekka with the language used in ads to purchase extra help on the farm. This same idea is presented in *Malambo* with the depiction of the character Catalina Ronceros. When *Malambo* begins, she is a widow who, for many of the same reasons Rebekka Vaark is sent to the U.S. colonies, is initially sent to Peru to marry an old man who claimed to not care whether his new bride was old or ugly:

> Sus padres supieron del encargo y la enviaron en el primer barco que salía para Lima… — Aquí no se necesita solteronas feas y sin dote —le habían dicho sus padres. —Después de la boda haz que tu marido nos envie el dinero para que tu

> madre y yo también viajemos a ese reino, y procura que ni se retrase, porque ya tú ves, muy jóvenes tampoco somos [.] (163-64)

Echoing the transactional language used in *A Mercy* when Jacob Vaark is "reimbursed" for Rebekka's "expenses" (*A Mercy* 74), we see that Catalina Ronceros's parents regard her as a means of financial security. Furthermore, when De la Piedra begins "courting" Catalina after she is widowed, the reader learns that the only motivation he has to marry her (which he never actually does) is that his friend Melgarejo has his eye on buying the farm left to her. If she remains a widow, it remains her property and she would be unlikely to sell it, but if she marries De la Piedra, her property becomes his, he could make a profit, and Melgarejo would have access to it through the transaction. In a similar way that De la Piedra's relationship with Altagracia is based on sexual and economic exploitation, an outgrowth of the system of slavery which foments that exploitation, his relationship with Catalina, or rather, the possibility of marrying Catalina, is framed solely in terms of the possibility of economic gain. Through an examination of the characters of Catalina and Altagracia we can see the ways in which *Malambo* calls attention to the intersection of race and gender by referencing the fact that both the institutions of slavery and matrimony made women and blacks a part of the same economy fundamental in nation building. There are several references in *Malambo* to the Americas and Peru specifically as an idealized place to make a fortune (*Malambo* 101, 140, 141, 208), and Charún-Illescas's characterizations demonstrate the ways in which subaltern members of this stratified colonial society are made to serve the interests of "fortune."

Inverting the Knowledge Hierarchy

Connected to gendered experiences and perspectives with the portrait of a nascent nation, another theme which runs strongly through *Malambo* is the idea of valorizing types of knowledge which fall outside of a Eurocentric model. Specifically, I refer to oral tradition and other cultural knowledge which does not depend on the written record or register. In the previous chapter, I draw from Glissant's concept of History/histories to comment upon not only the act of centering marginalized stories, but also on the importance of who tells the story. In this chapter, I want to focus not only on the importance of *who* tells the story, but *how* the story is told. I refer to this in my analysis of *A Mercy* when I emphasize the oral, lyric quality of Florens's "telling" which distinguishes her narrative mode from hegemonic registers of history. Here, going a step beyond highlighting a narrative mode that alludes to orality, I want to also examine the valorization of knowledge which relies on an oral register or in some way falls outside of a Eurocentric mode. An example of this in *A Mercy* is the African-derived curative knowledge employed by the free African blacksmith. He establishes himself as an authority when he initially cures Sorrow (*A Mercy* 125-27) and, of course, is later the reason for Florens's journey—he alone has the power to cure her mistress. When Florens realizes at the end of the novel that the blacksmith is illiterate, she first concedes that he does "read the world" (160). In other words, the blacksmith inhabits a world of knowledge that lies outside of literacy. I propose that a similar idea of "reading the world," rather than reliance on the written record or Eurocentric modes of knowledge is a theme which runs through *Malambo*—in other words, a valorization of the mode of knowledge that relies on oral and Afro/indigenous-derived tradition. One of those modes of knowledge which figures prominently in *Malambo* is herbal remedy.

Herbal remedy and the power of restoration

An episode alluded to which chronologically situates *Malambo* is the reference to the historical legend of the viceroy's wife being cured of malaria (*Malambo* 38-9). A character refers to her cure as the "brebaje del jesuita" (39), or so-called "Jesuit's bark," the bark of the quina-quina tree which was used by Jesuit missionaries to treat malaria, but cited as a cure used even earlier than their arrival by indigenous populations. The tree from which the bark used to treat her malaria comes is referred to as "chinchona," in honor of the vicereine, also known as the Countess of Chinchón (Achan 144). The significant element about this legend is not only that it serves as a way to historically situate *Malambo*'s chronological setting, but that it also signals a recurring theme in the novel: the success of African/indigenous-derived methods and their power to restore a fractured community versus the failure of Eurocentric ones. The vicereine's sickness is first mentioned in a passage describing a type of pious woman who "no encuentra mejor manera de ayudarla que pasar la noche en vela rezando por ella" (*Malambo* 35). Prayer and offering incessant Our Fathers on behalf of her health are portrayed as ineffective and in vain (36). Later, a De la Piedra's friend Melgarejo overhears a Jesuit priest discussing a proposed cure of extract from a plant used by indigenous people mixed with other herbs. He doubts its effectiveness, but "tres días después, todas las iglesias repicaron anunciando la recuperación de la virreina. Melgarejo tuvo que aceptar la virtud del brebaje" (39). The vicereine's recovery, then, was thanks to a remedy from indigenous herbal tradition, an idea at which Melgarejo formerly scoffed, but which he later recognizes as valid. This episode establishes a motif in the novel of the need to recur to another type of knowledge, one not traditionally recognized as valid by the dominant culture.

The main character in *Malambo* who wields her knowledge of herbal remedy is Pancha, whose knowledge of herbal medicine is passed down to her through her mother. She turns to this knowledge for her livelihood and to help others; the most significant instance is one in which she heals Altagracia's arm. This example is compelling because Altagracia's cure is not only what keeps De la Piedra from amputating her injured arm, it is ultimately what empowers her to separate herself from De la Piedra's influence and lessens the power he has over her until she is freed. The triumph of herbal remedy over De la Piedra's coldly pragmatic solution ultimately gives Atlagracia a sense of self-validation—a textual representation of Charún-Illescas's purpose to validate African-derived knowledge, resisting the presumed authority of Eurocentric knowledge. Altagracia's arm is initially injured from an accident with a grindstone (*piedra de moler*) and is rendered useless, which is suggestive in light of the fact that a man named De la Piedra dominates her (57). Her injury from the *piedra de moler* metaphorically alludes to De la Piedra's heavy presence in her life, hampering her attempts to gain personal as well as literal freedom. The alternative amputation offered by De la Piedra, is represented as a Eurocentric, utilitarian solution. A short while after Pancha begins administering herbs to Altagracia's arm, De la Piedra asks if her arm has improved. When Pancha tells him that it still hasn't gotten better he responds: "Entonces, no sigas perdiendo tiempo con rezos y yerbas. El mal está muy avanzado. Le envenenará todo el cuerpo y yo perderé 'la pieza'. No puedo gastarme ese lujo, sobre todo ahora que Altagracia ha empezado a darme cría. ¡Más vale un esclavo dañado que uno muerto! Avisaré a un cirujano para que le ampute el brazo" (163). De la Piedra disregards the possible effectiveness of herbal remedy and reduces Altagracia's well-being to an economic sense of her worth (and her future child's worth) to him as a slave, a piece (*pieza*) of merchandise. Her personhood and possibility of improvement is framed solely in terms of what

would best benefit him, at her expense. Eventually, because of Altagracia's persistence in holding off De la Piedra's plan to amputate her arm (177), the herbal remedy is allowed to take its course. One afternoon, Altagracia begins to regain feeling in her injured arm. She begins undoing the herb and ointment-filled cloths that Pancha had applied and wrapped around her arm:

> La piel mostraba moretones, estaba reseca y escamosa, pero la hinchazón había bajado y pudo accionar el brazo…Solamente la piel seguía siendo ajena. La sobó suave, muy despacio, como acariciando a un niño que no conoció ternura. Poco a poco, aprendía a ser dulce consigo. Aprendía a quererse. (190)

The moment Altagracia regains control and sensation in her arm is cast as a moment of emotional as well as physical healing, self-discovery and self-love. In an echo of the earlier episode of the Countess of Chinchón's recovery, herbal remedy is vindicated. It emerges as a type of knowledge which resists the "efficient" solution of economic reduction and expediency proposed by hegemonic registers. This knowledge, connected to orality, is portrayed as successful, superior, and related to restoration—in Altagracia's case, a restoration of self-worth; but ultimately, it alludes to a restoration of the worth of Afro-descendant cultural contributions to *peruanidad*.

Oral tradition and the journey

Herbal remedy is a recurrent theme in *Malambo* which connects to oral knowledge, but it is not the only example of the success of this type of knowledge contrasted with the failure of Eurocentric modes. Another recurrent theme in *Malambo* is the idea of a search or journey. Two particular characters, for example, Pancha and a *mulato* slave named Guararé, undergo a search

for a father figure, a highly symbolic detail which alludes to the search for origins. Juxtaposing Pancha's and Guararé's journeys, Charún-Illescas contrasts two different ways of gaining knowledge or assistance—one which relies on oral tradition and one which relies on the written register. Pancha gathers information on the whereabouts of her father and later leaves Malambo in search of her intended, Venancio, depending upon oral tradition to guide her way. In this section, I contrast Pancha's search with that of Guararé who, when he arrives in Malambo, is sold as a slave and appeals to a Spanish academic, Chema Arosemena, to help him find his own father. Depicting the success of Pancha's search in contrast with the failure of Guararé's, Charún-Illescas reinforces Malambo's theme of celebrating and validating traditional registers of knowledge which are often marginalized.

In her essay "Revolutionary Renegades," bell hooks describes the solidarity that has existed between African, African-American and Native American communities not only based upon their common plight of white supremacist oppression, but also based on their common "ways of knowing" which included the practices of "ancestor acknowledgement" and oral transmission of history (179-80, 193). Relying upon this shared way of knowing, Pancha uses word-of-mouth, a process which echoes the oral manner in which memory and history are transmitted in African and indigenous culture, to locate the whereabouts of her father, or rather, tries to find out the details of his death. Each person with whom she speaks in order to find out more about her father's whereabouts relates what they've heard someone else say about the matter or refers to someone else whom they heard was present when her father died. Pancha herself refers to what she hears others say and passes on that information. Speaking with Catalina Ronceros to seek information about what happened to her father, Pancha says, "Por casualidad escuché que Antón Cocolí, el muchacho que vende huevos, contaba que una vez usted

encontró a un hombre muerto cerca del río" (*Malambo* 113). Catalina responds in kind, involving herself in the verbal method of receiving and transmitting information when she answers: "Al menos, eso creo que decía Nazario Briche, que ahora que hago memoria, también lo vi allí" (114). Pancha's involvement of someone of European descent in the African/indigenous oral tradition in this instance underscores Charún-Illescas's purpose to promote the idea that African, indigenous, as well as European elements are all a part of Peruvian national identity, which the search for a "father" ultimately alludes to—the search for origins. While Charún-Illescas warns against privileging European heritage and Eurocentric registers of knowledge, this episode, because of the inclusion of people of diverse ethnicities in a tradition associated with African and indigenous oral culture, also suggests an implicit multiethnic alliance in the construction of *peruanidad*, an idea I will explore further in a future section. In addition to relying on oral transmission of information, Pancha is informed by a source of knowledge which references a mythic cosmology informed by oral tradition. Consulting this realm of knowledge not only contrasts with Eurocentric registers, it is also valorized as a realm that is legitimate, presents greater insight and ultimately brings Pancha closer to her destination when she journeys to find Venancio. During her journey out to sea, Pancha has an exchange with two elders who remind her of her honorary grandfather, Tomasón, and Tomasón's friend, Jaci Mina, in which two types of knowledge are contrasted. After Pancha tells one of the elders she is unaccompanied, she begins to talk about her father:

> —A mi tayta lo mataron. Lo encontraron muerto en el río. Antes no lo creía, porque no lo había visto con mis propios ojos, pero fue así.

—Muchacha—la interrumpió el viejo parecido a Tomasón—olvida eso de "ver para creer". Además los ojos que tú tienes todavía no han aprendido a distinguir lo falso de lo verdadero. Hace un ratito me confundiste con tu abuelo.

—¡Y a mí con su amigo! Esos dos ojazos son bonitos pero todavía no te sirven mucho. Es así, demora hasta aprender a ver lo que está en lo profundo. Toma su tiempo hasta alcanzar a mirar muy lejos sin tener para eso que cansar los pies. Anda, pregúntale a los cuatro vientos por ese Venancio y después agarra tu camino de vuelta. (206-7)

The first elder cautions Pancha against only relying on what she can see, implying that her senses are unreliable. After all, she had just confused him with Tomasón. Seeing is not believing, he warns. The second elder goes even further, suggesting that her eyes aren't of much use because they prevent her from seeing "lo que está en lo profundo." In other words, there is a source of knowledge that goes beyond what she is able to observe with her senses. This knowledge of "lo profundo" is valorized above the unreliable knowledge that one is only able to gain empirically. Pancha is instead advised to ask the "cuatro vientos" for guidance. The Four Winds, a reference to a journey of enlightenment undertaken in the Inca shaman tradition alludes to the type of journey that Pancha undertakes in search of Venancio (Villoldo and Jendresen 29).[6] It is a journey in which she reconnects with indigenous/Afro-descendant tradition and where she learns to value this knowledge as a way to "see." One example of reconnecting with Afro-descendant

6. *The Four Winds* (1990) recounts a journey undertaken by a U.S. American psychologist through the fourfold path knowledge of the Medicine Wheel, also known as the Four Winds. According to an expert of Incan shaman tradition the author meets once he arrives in Peru, "It is the legendary journey that an initiate undertakes to become a person of knowledge…The journey through the Medicine Wheel is a journey undertaken to awaken vision and to discover and embrace the Divine within oneself, to reestablish one's connection with Nature and the mystery of the cosmos, to acquire skills and the wisdom to use them" (Villoldo and Jendressen 29). Villoldo's compelling story is pertinent to the theme of contrasting Western knowledge and ways of acquiring knowledge with traditional ways. As a PhD in psychology, he initially went on this journey because he was eager to do something "different from the antiseptic theories of Western psychology" (6).

tradition during her journey is the instance in which Pancha takes part in the Son de los Diablos (*Malambo* 198), a dance of masked devils which was originally danced in Peru by members of black *cofradías* (Feldman 34). Pancha's experiences during her journey connect her with a kind of "knowing" which is represented as legitimate and superior to the knowledge that she can only gain with her own two eyes.

Charún-Illescas contrasts Pancha's journey with that of Guararé, a *mulato* slave who represents the failure of depending solely on written tradition, or rather, European discourses, to undertake a search for one's past. An oral account passed down to him by his guardian, María de los Ángeles, is ultimately presented as more reliable than a written account Guararé expects an academic, Chema, to use to help him. As Marta Ojeda notes, the fact that María de los Ángeles's oral account is presented as more reliable than Chema's written account "invierte los paradigmas de jerarquía y valoración con respecto a la oralidad y a la escritura" ("Búsqueda y negación" 14). Guararé is initially sold into slavery by María de los Ángeles, who raised him, in order to have enough money for surgery to fix her worsening eyesight (*Malambo* 71-72). Before he is brought to Peru, Guararé asks her to recount a story she has told him many times, *his* story:

> —Despídeme contándome nuevamente mi historia, María de los Ángeles.
>
> —Óyela bien, entonces, porque será la última vez…Se acostó en la hamaca y esperó a que Guararé la meciera antes de comenzar y relató lo mismo sin cambiar una palabra ni alterarlas en su orden. (72)

María de los Ángeles's recounting Guararé's story without changing a word or their order represents oral tradition in a way outside of how it is usually perceived. Part of dominant perceptions of oral tradition has to do with the idea of its "unreliability" since its format makes it susceptible to change. However, the presentation of oral tradition being transmitted without

alteration suggests it can be a familiar, reliable way of transmitting information. What Guararé is not able to gain from María de los Ángeles's retelling, however, are details about his father. After Guararé arrives in Lima, he is sold as a slave. He confides in Chema Arosemena, a student in Malambo, specifically to gather information to write a book on Peruvian history and customs. It is important to note that although Chema is in Lima to write about Peru, the intended audience of his book is not *limeño*, but European (78). Chema's purpose through his writing is to presumably create something which will then be consumed abroad—it doesn't benefit the people whose stories he gathers. As Guararé is in pain after being freshly branded with the initials of his new owner, an event which foregrounds the consequences which await Chema when he subsequently wanders and gets lost in Malambo, he tells Chema his story in exchange for his help in finding information about his father: "Guararé empezó a hablar. Chema mojó la pluma y haciéndola correr en el pergamino fue escribiendo pacientemente hasta que el dolor cedió" (98). Even though Guararé's story is written down, Chema eventually abandons his writing project and never fulfills his promise to help Guararé find his father (101). Charún-Illescas suggests that sole reliance upon the written record, upon which official history is based, is unfruitful: "Guararé trata de registrar su historia para perpetuarla pero la experiencia con Chema, simbólicamente, muestra que la historia oficial/registrada se pierde, se invisibiliza y es ineficaz" ("Búsqueda y negación" 14). Emphasized by the fact that ironically, Guararé dies at the hands of his own father, who turns out to be none other than Manuel de la Piedra, while trying to search for him, Charún-Illescas shows that searching for the past, or specifically one's origins, is futile if one privileges European epistemology (14). Ojeda sums up the significance of Guararé's failure:

> Simbólicamente el Perú, para definirse como nación, necesita conocer su pasado y hurgar en el tejido mismo de su cultura y en los registros no oficiales; es decir,

> reconstruir su historia a partir de las vivencias transmitidas oralmente. Se evidencia la necesidad de explorar y reconocer la herencia africana e indígena para encontrar los rasgos definitorios y poder forjar una realidad nacional multiétnica. (14)

Pancha's and Guararé's search for their fathers, then, becomes a metaphor for searching for one's origins, and not only on an individual level, but on a collective level which points to Peruvian national origins at large. Aside from Charún-Illescas's use of Pancha's character to highlight the necessity of appealing to oral tradition to recover the past, it is suggestive that the person who appeals to Western tradition to investigate his origins is male while the character who appeals to oral tradition is a woman. It is a symbolic detail which alludes to the idea that the discourse of the nation, which is narrated in the official, written register, is precisely a masculine, patriarchal discourse, and that this discourse can be contested through the representation of and privileging of women's experiences.

The oppositional gaze

Comparing Pancha's and Guararé's searches juxtaposes two ways of acquiring knowledge, and through this contrastive portrayal, Charún-Illescas inverts the hierarchy (Ojeda "Búsqueda y negación" 14) of how oral tradition is conventionally viewed in comparison to the official, written register. Other examples of the "inversion" of two systems of knowledge Charún-Illescas represents in *Malambo* are instances in which the Other "others." In other words, *Malambo* presents instances where the point of view and the actions of those who are conventionally viewed as Other in a socially and racially stratified society are inverted and serve to other those at the top of the hierarchy. These instances are salient because it highlights the

idea that judgement concerning the type of knowledge (traditional vs. Western, oral vs. written, Afro-descendant/indigenous vs. European) which is valorized is rooted in the idea of gaze. I draw from bell hooks's theorization of the "oppositional gaze" to clarify the nature of the examples I reference:

> Spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see. The "gaze" has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally. Subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that "looks" to document, one that is oppositional. (116)

The examples I expound upon, which essentially invert the hierarchy of gaze, "look back." Charún-Illescas not only interrogates the initial othering gaze, but also reveals the constructed nature of objectivity and therefore casts doubt on the reliability of truth claims. The idea of the construct of objectivity, for the purposes of this overall project, ties into the idea of the constructed nature of History and claims to objectivity. The first example I analyze is the representation of the slaves' point of view in which the strangeness and otherness of their white captives is described during an auction and the second is the disorienting experience of the aforementioned academic, Chema, when he wanders over to the "wrong side" of the city—the tables are turned as the same bewilderment and pain he observes being inflicted on slaves being branded are subsequently inflicted upon him.

The first example unfolds in a chapter-opening scene of a slave auction where Africans to be sold are given orders, prodded, poked and inspected like animals. The narrator describes the point of view of the slaves during this process: "Les cuesta mucho disimulo soportar el mal olor que esos otros cuerpos despiden, y por si fuera poco, son seres completamente desollados. No

tienen piel. Llevan una nariz horriblemente puntiaguda y sus orejas translucen los rayos de un pálido sol, anotan mentalmente los esclavos" (*Malambo* 94). In the very moment of the slaves' extreme objectification and othering, the narration represents their disgust and bewilderment at their odd, unattractive and malodorous foreign captors. Although they are on display, being ogled and prodded, their projections or "gaze," takes precedence. The particulars of European features—thin noses and pale skin—rather than cast as desirable, are demeaned. This inversion of hierarchical gaze is reminiscent of similar moments in *A Mercy*, for example, where the Native American character, Lina, describes European speech as sounding like "dog bark" (*A Mercy* 54), where Florens's mother describes "whitened men" whom she was afraid would eat her (164) and even other moments of description in Toni Morrison's oeuvre in works like *Beloved* where white men are described, as they are in this passage of *Malambo*, as "men without skin" (*Beloved* 248). The juxtaposition between the characters' marginal status and their demeaning and/or bewildered conceptualization of their aggressors subverts the "objectivity" of the othering gaze which would be conventionally cast upon them. This motif of oppositional gaze is a literary (and cinematic) strategy which privileges points of view rarely seen or knowledge which is under-valorized.

Another way Charún-Illescas represents the inversion of the hierarchy of gaze deals not with an inversion of perspectives, but an inversion of space which ultimately symbolizes a contestation of the reliance on the official, written register. Not long after observing slaves being branded, Chema, the aforementioned academic, attempts to make his way back to Ciudad de los Reyes, but instead gets lost in Malambo. His disorientation and fear at finding himself on the "wrong side" of town (as Malambo is described as being located at the novel's outset) seems to be almost a mirror image of the fear and disorientation of the slaves he has just come from

observing. The tables are now turned; Chema's present circumstance encapsulates the very idea of the hierarchy of gaze: "No faltaban quienes se detenían y lo observaban abiertamente, como si fuera una especie extraña y Chema, tan acostumbrado a hacer lo mismo en otras circunstancias, les hurtaba la mirada" (99). Two *malambina* women he approaches for help offer him *chicha* and he becomes inebriated and even more disoriented. Before he blacks out, he offers, in much the same way he offers Guararé, to record the story of one of the women after she tells him that she, too, was branded: "¿Quiere contarme su historia? La escribiré en mis relatos como testimonio de una mujer liberta—le sugerió y además quiso agregar que estaba en contra de ese sistema, pero de pronto se le escapaban las palabras y no tenía voz. Se le cayó la pluma de la mano" (100). Again, Charún-Illescas contrasts the oral and written record, ultimately representing a sole dependence on written means as futile. Despite Chema's professed objections to the system of slavery, he does not actively oppose it—the image of the pen falling out of his hand serves as a metaphor for the futility of relying solely on written means for increasing visibility or effecting change. Later, while unconscious, Chema is himself branded on the face by the two women with the same initials that appear on the brands of slave-owning *limeño* families, and as the narrator reminds the reader, "Las mismas, si bien burdas, todavía marcaban el cuerpo de sus esclavos" (137). The image of the branding-iron, permanently burning the initials of slave-owning families into human flesh is a visceral reminder that African bodies were *literally* inscribed with their stories. To have a male European writer's body "written upon" in the same way by two Afro-descendant women is an ironic consequence for one whose writing project never comes to fruition as well as a reversal of racialized, gendered power dynamics. The image of Chema crossing over into Malambo and being branded with the same initials previously used to mark ownership of African slaves is not only a contestation of the

dominant gaze by a juxtaposition and inversion of bodies and space, but a contestation of the official register which is constructed by writing.

Syncretism and Afro-descendant Religious Tradition

Connected to valorizing oral tradition and knowledge, another feature of *Malambo* which furthers the novel's overall purpose of recuperating Afro-Peruvian history and cultural contribution to *peruanidad* is the prominence of Afro-syncretic religious references in the narrative and their importance to the characters' sense of identity. This valorization of the Afro-descendant religious tradition is set against the backdrop of the Peruvian Inquisition.[7] Rather than the Peruvian Inquisition as a way to merely historically contextualize her novel, Charún evokes religious persecution as one of the forces which suppressed Afro-syncretic religious practices as well as others outside of Roman Catholicism. Several scenes in *Malambo* depict "heretics" who were accused of practicing Judaism being paraded down the streets to be tortured, hung or burned at the stake in public displays known as *Autos de Fe* (46-47, 90, 104-106, 164, 172, 174).[8] However, the same forces which persecuted crypto-Jews also persecuted the practitioners of Afro-syncretic religions.[9] Both groups posed a possible threat to the stability of Spanish Empire. According to Irene Silverblatt's study on the Peruvian Inquisition:

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7. For a historical overview of the Peruvian Inquisition, see Silverblatt, Irene. "New Christians and New World Fears in Seventeenth-Century Peru." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42.3 (2000): 524-546.

8.There is a reference to a wealthy businessman named "Juan Bautista Pérez" who is executed along with eleven others in one of the *Autos de Fe* (*Malambo* 106). This seems to be a reference to a man named Manuel Bautista Pérez, a businessman in Lima of similar social status, who was among eleven accused of capital offenses and executed in one of the bloodiest *Autos de Fe* in Lima's Inquisitorial history in 1639 (Silverblatt 525). Just as Charún-Illescas pays homage to historical Afro-Peruvian cultural figures, she refers to other historical figures who played notable roles in Peruvian history, emphasizing the way historical fiction can serve to engage the historical record.

9. In a study by Jerome Williams on an Auto de Fe in Lima in 1736, among those condemned for crimes of "witchcraft, heresy, blasphemy, bigamy and sorcery" were "*mestizos criollos* (offspring of Indian and white Spaniards), *españoles* (Spaniards), *judíos* (Jews), *zambos* (offspring of Indian and black parents), mulattos

> Global commerce and cheap labor anchored Spain's colonial enterprise, and New Christians/Portuguese/Jews and indios/negros were key figures in this equation. At least according to stereotype, Portuguese/Jews/New Christians dominated international trade; indios and negros embodied the colony's sources of cheap labor. Both groups were needed for the success of Spain's global endeavors, and both were distrusted. (537)

Furthermore, the term "New Christians," historically (and often pejoratively) used to describe Jewish converts to Catholicism (often forced) during the Inquisition in Spain was expanded to also describe blacks and indigenous people in Peru (527). Viceregal authorities harbored a growing sense of suspicion of blacks and indigenous people, as they were outnumbered by them, concerned about their loyalties, and feared that they would collaborate with New Christians aligned with Spain's political enemies (531). African and indigenous cultural rites were even conflated with Jewish cultural practices as anti-Semitism merged with the fear of the *negro* and *indio* (537).

In an interview with Charún-Illescas, she cites the Inquisition during the Peruvian Viceroyalty as a reason for Peruvians losing connection to Afro-descendant religious tradition. Describing her experiences as an Afro-Peruvian woman traveling to Africa she says:

> [M]e conmueve pisar el suelo de antaño, reconocer un rostro que pudo ser el mío, apretar las manos tal vez de quizás un pariente lejano y redescubrir raíces comunes aunque tengamos que hacerlo en idioma ajeno. A la vez tengo conciencia que las políticas coloniales del virreinato peruano (extirpación de

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(descendants of black and white parents), *cuarterones* (quadroons), and *negros* (blacks)" (Williams 66). Although this particular Auto de Fe is much later than the events which take place in *Malambo*, it is an indicator that a wide swath of classes and ethnicities were often implicated.

> idolatrías, presencia de la Santa Inquisición en Lima, etc.)…me imposibilitó continuar con antiguas rutas de sapiencias, lenguas, ritos, dioses. **(**"Entrevista")

Because of colonial intervention, she feels cut off from a cultural legacy as an Afro-descendant woman. Her travels in Africa are restorative, serving as a way for her to reconnect and rediscover "roots" and "old ways." Thus, the depiction of religious persecution is deliberately presented because it represents a time where the connection with Afro-descendant culture via religion was in the process of being erased. Just as Spain is a country of diverse beginnings which featured a mélange of Christian, Muslim, Jewish ethnicities and culture, so is Peru a country of diverse beginnings which featured a mixture of European, indigenous and African ethnicities and culture. The Inquisition, in both countries, ultimately represents an attempt to invisibilize that history with religious persecution. Through her references to the Peruvian Inquisition, Charún-Illescas alludes to a similar invisiblizing throughout history of the Afro-Peruvian community and its religious and cultural practices.

Although the Peruvian Inquisition symbolizes an attempt to erase Afro-religious practices and cultural ties, in *Malambo,* it also provides a salient contrast to another process that serves to preserve vestiges of Afro-descendant religious practices—syncretism. The religious purity demanded by the Inquisition juxtaposed with the religious hybridity portrayed in *Malambo* serves to highlight the strategies by which Afro-descendants attempted to resist complete erasure of Afro-syncretic practices: Two elements in *Malambo* refer to the intermingling of Afro-syncretic traditions and the dominant Catholicism—Tomasón's paintings of saints from Catholicism as well as gods from the Yoruba pantheon, and the prominence of the black *cofradías*.

Throughout *Malambo*, the Orishas, gods from the Yoruba pantheon are invoked in abundant references relating songs (31, 110, 144, 171-72, 218) or tales of religious myth and folklore (33-34, 109-110). In her article on Yoruba cosmology represented in *Malambo,* Aida Heredia states that this representation appears "as a life force that vindicates the humanization of Africans and their descendants in Peru at the same time that it subverts the alienation to which they are subjected as enslaved individuals" (77). While Heredia recognizes the role of power and resistance Yoruba cosmology plays in *Malambo,* she claims that it is displaced by Catholicism which "asserts itself in the novel as the epistemological tradition that moves Blacks to 'transcend' the machinery of slavery in order to become legitimate members of Spanish Peruvian society" (78). I wholeheartedly disagree and posit that instead, the emergence of Catholicism in the novel as a mode for Afro-descendant identification does not supplant Yoruba cosmology, but becomes intertwined with it—syncretism in itself is a form of resistance. Figures such as el Señor de los Milagros (and others like it such as the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico) are sanctioned as a part of Catholic orthodoxy, but have undoubted origins in indigenous and African religiosity. An illustrative example of syncretism is the scene where Tomasón is first encouraged to paint the Orishas. As mentioned earlier, the reason he is able to live somewhat independently after leaving Ciudad de los Reyes and escapes to Malambo is because of his skill as a painter. Tomasón is usually commissioned to paint Catholic figures, but one day he is visited by the spirit of a deceased friend, Juanillo Alarcón, who asks Tomasón to paint gods for him from the Yoruba pantheon:

> ¿No cree usted que ya está bueno ya esto de estar pintando puro dios y santo blanco?...Desde que nos trajeron a estas extrañezas todos los negros debemos ser un solo. ¿No le parece a usted que estaría bueno invocar a Elegguá para que nos

> dé coraje y paciencia con lumbre de camino, y que Oggún nos reponga de las fuerzas frente a tanto maltrato? […]¿Cuándo me va a pintar algún santo que no sea de la parte contraria? Mi gremio siempre quiso pedirle que nos trajese un Changó que supiera oírnos, que hablase nuestro idioma. ¿Y qué tal si usted empieza con una buena Yemaya, celestita, brilladora, aunque de tabla o de cartón nomás? (*Malambo* 21-22)

Juanillo's series of questions to Tomasón is almost accusatory in asking whether he hasn't painted enough white religious figures—it is a call to reconnect with and remember the gods of the land they were taken from. He makes references to Afro-descendants being brought to a "strange land" and the mistreatment they suffered while describing how the Orishas provided them with comfort and strength to endure. Charún-Illescas invokes the Orishas to link Afro-descendants to a culture and way of life before the Middle Passage, and not only that, but as a way to reinforce black solidarity—"todos los negros debemos ser uno solo" (22).

The very last figure Tomasón completes before his death at the end of the novel is a portrait of el Cristo Crucificado, also known as Señor de los Milagros. Charún-Illescas's inclusion of el Señor de los Milagros, a figure associated with Afro-Peruvians and presently included in mainstream Peruvian culture, in her novel set during the period that veneration of this figure originated, reinforces her claim that Afro-descendant culture is an intrinsic part of Peruvian identity. Tomasón completes his work on behalf of Altagracia, who is a member of the *cofradía* in Lima. The *cofradías* were religious brotherhoods through which many blacks and *mulatos* took part in Catholic ceremonies and festivities, but which also functioned as a social institution where people of color were able to meet, organize and foster a sense of community and gain a sense of social standing in the community at large (Bowser 247). Charún-Illescas

makes several references to the *cofradías'* role in the black community in Malambo (11, 14, 147, 172, 177, 187, 188). Although the *cofradías* functioned within the confines of Catholic orthodoxy, she hints that they have ties to African-descended practices and belief. Take, for example, the way that De la Piedra explains the *cofradías* to his friend Melgarejo: "Hacen como si le rezan a un santo católico, pero bajo la imagen de San Bartolomé es el arco iris de la libertad lo que ven sus ojos. Cristo es el dios Obatalá. La virgen María, una diosa de las aguas de Guinea, y así por el estilo" (*Malambo* 177). This, in turn, causes Melgarejo to consider that the figures he's seen on the walls of Tomasón's house aren't as Christian as they say his paintings are (177). Tomasón's final painting, el Señor de los Milagros, is the ultimate symbol of syncretism in Peruvian culture.

In an article on the African influence in modern Peruvian culture, Aldo Panfichi characterizes this figure as "un culto religioso de origen negro, que paulatinamene se institucionaliza y gana otros grupos étnicos y sociales, hasta convertirse en el mayor culto religioso del país" (144). This black Christ figure has origins in 1651, when an Angolan black slave painted it on a wall of his local *cofradía.* When it was left intact after a severely destructive 1655 earthquake, it began to be venerated with the same dances and rituals reserved for African gods. Although the Catholic Church at first disapproved of the mixture of Catholic and African elements the cult represented and initially demanded the image be erased in 1671, every attempt to destroy it was "miraculously" thwarted (144-45). As suggested above, the veneration of el Señor de los Milagros is currently considered a part of mainstream Peruvian culture, no longer associated primarily with its Afro-descendant origins. Charún-Illescas's inclusion of el Señor de los Milagros and her portrayal of Afro-syncretism in general functions as a valorization of the origins of cultural practices no longer associated with Africanness. She

represents them as a way to reconnect with a way of life from which Afro-descendant people were violently separated, as well as a way to figure Afro-descendant culture as a part of Peruvian national identity at large.

Racial Hybridity and Multiethnic Alliance

Along with religious syncretism, an additional manner *Malambo* addresses its overarching claim for the inclusion of Afro-descendants within *peruanidad* is by highlighting another kind of "syncretism," racial hybridity. Shedding light on the present-day national rhetoric Charún-Illescas challenges in her depictions of ethnic blending, Shane Greene, in his article on what he calls "Inca whiteness" and Afro-Peruvian citizenship, argues that

> the representation of 'the Inca' in Peru serves as a central discourse of nation, civilization, and citizenship. It is thus necessarily conflated with discourses of whiteness, modernity, democracy, and liberalism in contemporary Peru. It also serves to make invisible multiple other forms of postcolonial ethnic difference and the subaltern forms of citizenship that certain members of Peruvian society are using as they make claims on the state…[These members include] Afro-Peruvians, whose different historical trajectory [in comparison to Andean and Amazonian indigenous groups] leads them to be largely invisible in the Peruvian imagination. The status of Afro-Peruvians is particularly difficult to visualize from the point of view of Peru's national narrative because they are represented as both not Inca and not Indian: neither as contributors to Peru's national "civilization" nor indigenous to Peruvian soil. (Greene 283)

In other words, blackness or Africanness is excluded from the Pervuian "national narrative," made invisible due to a conflation of the discourse of whiteness and modernity with Inca representation. Charún-Illescas's catalogue of racial categories, in this instance, serves to resist the notion that Afro-descendants are somehow foreign to Peruvian soil, particularly if Afro-descendants and indigenous peoples who are native to Peru have intermingled since before the national moment. For example, Pancha's father Francisco is described as "un mulato aclarado, híbrido de blanco y negra emparentada con indio, de esos que la gente conoce como 'ténte-en-el-aire'" (Charun-Illescas 29); a description of the slave Guararé says, "Se aseguran que bajo el marrón achocolatado o el negro de Guinea, no se esconda un cruce con indio: un zambo" (94); and the academic Chema notes the diversity of the population of Lima which included "mulatos, zambos claros y prietos. Sacalaguas, colorados, cuarterones, quinteronas, salta pa-tras, prietos, chinocholos y tanto cruce entre negros, indios y blancos que le enseñaron los niños a diferenciar" (100). Even Pancha is described in racially ambiguous terms. She is first presented as being olive-skinned (66) and as cited above, her father is described as a *mulato* with black, indigenous and European features, indicating that Pancha herself, though having African heritage, is also ethnically hybrid. Although in my analysis, I present Pancha as Afro-descendant and specifically tied to Afro-descendant culture and tradition because she and her father are *cimarrones*—the trope of the runaway slave being strongly associated with Afro-descendants—and because she carries on the herbalist tradition she initially learned from her mother and other female slaves—a representation of Afro-descendant cultural heritage, I also believe that Charún-Illescas deliberately presents Pancha as ethnically blended, a suggestion that most Peruvians are. The language of *mestizaje* which characterizes these descriptions makes several references. First, it references the ideology of Latin American *mestizaje*, as discussed in the introduction of this

project, ideally, the ideology of ethnically distinct citizens blending together in solidarity to form a nation-based identity, central to nation-building in post-independence Latin America. However, in this cataloguing of descriptions of different mixtures of black, white and indigenous, Charún-Illescas employs the language of *mestizaje* as a reminder of not only the variations of mixtures of black, indigenous and white in colonial times, but also a reminder that Peruvian Afro-descendants, although a presently small and marginalized population, contributed not only culturally but also ethnically to *peruanidad*.

Connected to the idea of racial and ethnic hybridity of varying groups in colonial Peru is the idea of sociopolitical alliance between the groups. The theme of multiethnic alliance, particularly between Afro-descendants and indigenous groups is one that Charún-Illescas traces throughout *Malambo*, but is best embodied in the friendship between Tomasón and an indigenous character named Yawar Inka. At the end of the first chapter, there is a scene between these two characters where Tomasón provides him with a map which details all of the hidden places in churches in the city so that Yawar Inka would be able to recuperate precious metals and jewels stolen from his community and repurposed into Catholic icons and other paraphernalia (*Malambo* 27-28). This relationship is a clear example of the way in which Charún-Illescas makes a claim for a Peru forged from interethnic cooperation—the fact that Tomasón aids Yawar Inka in "reclaiming" treasures that were stolen from his community is a suggestive metaphor for interethnic alliance as a strategy for marginalized groups to reclaim rights. Charún-Illescas's presentation of this strategy as a reality of colonial times can be interpreted as a possible solution for redress for the same groups—Afro-descendants and indigenous peoples—in contemporary times.[10] A later conversation between Tomasón and Yawar Inka reveals an awareness that they

10. I discuss the contemporary connections to *Malambo* in a later section, but I will briefly note that 2001, the year *Malambo* is published, also marks the creation of the Instituto Nacional de Desarrollo de los Pueblos

are both in a similar situation due to the ills of colonialism and slavery: Yawar Inka suggests that whites treat indigenous people as people while they treat blacks as beasts to be bought and sold. Tomasón offers an explanation that an animal is unaware of his value upon being sold, while blacks are very conscious of theirs and offers this rejoinder: "Así…es preferible a que te vengan a engañar con eso de que tú no eres esclavo pero te obligan a romperte el lomo, no te pagan lo que es debido y te tratan peor que requetemal. Esa libertad, ¿para qué sirve?" (82). Tomasón reminds Yawar Inka that although the terminology used to refer to each group and each group's history in relation to the colonial power may have been different, the reality is that they have both been dehumanized and marginalized. In the same article cited above, Greene refers to a similar situation regarding Afro-descendant and indigenous groups in contemporary times, again referring to the hegemonic image of an idealized, whitened Inca central to Peruvian national identity:

> In Peru, the fight is not simply one against the global doctrine of white supremacy. More specifically, the struggle is to make blackness visible within a space already characterized by a complex fusion of discourses about the white supremacy of the Incas. The global logic of whiteness is indeed manifest in the idea of Peru as a modernizing liberal republic eager to cast out racialized others, including, of course, the masses of "ordinary" Andean Indians. (302)

In other words, the same national discourse of modernity, progress and whiteness excludes Afro-descendant as well as indigenous groups. Much in the same way that Toni Morrison features a multiracial cast of characters in *A Mercy* to suggest that the multiracial U.S. past is just as real as

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Andinos, Amazónicos y Afroperuano, a governmental initiative designed to recognize the rights of these long marginalized groups. The creation of this institute is simply a contemporary example of governmental action which speaks to interethnic alliance.

the multiracial present, Charún-Illescas portrays Tomasón and Yawar Inka's relationship to suggest that not only is interethnic alliance and cooperation a reality of the Peruvian past, but a strategy for the present for both groups to make claims on the state.

Oral History and the Construction of Counter-history

Connected to the literary themes which the novels in this project share is their common characteristic of stylistic experimentation regarding narrative form in order to contest official discourse. In my analysis of *A Mercy*, I examine the particulars of Florens's literary voice—her lyrical, non-standard English with an oral sensibility which emphasizes the present and present perfect tenses to narrate past events as a way to de-privilege standard English and the written register used to narrate official history. Here, Charún-Illescas accomplishes something similar in certain instances where her prose takes on a slightly experimental nature—her occasional use of italics signals the entrance of the narration into a different plane, one outside of the temporality of the novel, or one that indicates a collective rather than individual narrator. These italicized episodes represent not only a type of temporal shift but also the idea of privileging "another kind" of knowledge connected to orality which I interpret in an earlier section of this chapter. In contrast to Western, writing-centered genres of historical record, Charún-Illescas's italicized narration consists of pieces of oral history, of collective memory—fables, songs, legends—as a type of counter-history. Just as Florens was able to insert her "non-standard" voice into the canon in *A Mercy*, these italicized episodes insert themselves into the narration to make a claim for these genres' inclusion in the historical record. In other words, the insertion of these pieces of marginalized history is a part of confronting History. Examples of these episodes in italics include a legend about the orisha Obalatá (*Malambo* 33-34), a moral fable involving animals

(60-62), a traditional song in Yoruba associated with the orisha Changó (144), a story about another orisha Babalú Ayé (171-72) and a song of praise Tomasón dedicates to Obatalá at the novel's end (218). This centering of stories, fables and songs—pieces of oral history not usually associated with narrating national history fulfills *Malambo*'s overall purpose to valorize Afro-descendant contribution to Peruvian national identity.

Afro-Peruvian Recognition in Contemporary Peru

While the theme of the intersection of race and gender and its connection to national identity as well as that of recuperating history are common to each novel in this project, so is the theme of contemporary national commentary. While in the previous chapter, I connect details as minute as the timing of *A Mercy*'s release with Morrison's engagement with the election of President Obama in 2008, I cannot argue here that *Malambo*'s 2001 release had a specific political event or historical moment in mind which precipitated it or with which it dialogues. Rather, I see *Malambo* as a part of an overall early twenty-first-century effort to increase the visibility of Afro-Peruvians and as a reflection of rising consciousness of the Afro-Peruvian presence. Connected to this rising awareness, for which Charún-Illescas makes a claim in her novel, is the acknowledgement that Afro-Peruvians are a part of Peruvian national identity, which is only the first step for Afro-Peruvians to make claims on the state for social and legal redress.

As a part of my interview with Charún-Illescas, I asked whether she saw connections between the setting of *Malambo* and contemporary Peru, beginning with why she chose to set her novel in the seventeenth century. She answered:

> No lo escogí premeditadamente. Siempre digo que: escribo lo que siempre quise leer, consciente que la creación sigue sus rumbos y también recrea momentos de las múltiples historias que viven dentro de cada persona. Coincide que en el siglo XVII el sacerdote Francisco de Ávila del arzobispado de Lima fue nombrado primer juez de la "extirpación de idolatrías." Como consecuencia de esta campaña evangelizadora, de los juicios de la Inquisición de Lima, también se da comienzo a lo que yo llamo "olvido."

For Charún-Illescas, the seventeenth century represents a time when Afro-descendants are forced to forget their traditions and cultural practices considered "idolatrous" which tied them to the places in Africa from which they were forcibly brought to Peru. Her novel is a snapshot of this "forgetting" juxtaposed with the ways in which Peruvian Afro-descendants attempted to oppose it and preserve ancestral memory and practice. The significance of the seventeenth century for both Morrison and Charún-Illescas is that this time period represents a place of "origin" of a phenomenon which has an importance for the modern-day national imaginary. For Morrison, the origin of the codification of race and racial separation in the United States, and for Charun-Illescas, the origin of state-sponsored attempts to erase Afro-descendant religious tradition and cultural practices from *peruanidad*.

Subsequently, I asked Charun-Illescas about the connections of the setting of *Malambo* to contemporary times. In response to my question about why she chose the seventeenth century, she talks about the character Tomasón: "Con él se inicia la oposición y la recuperación de la memoria ancestral." So, when asked whether the seventeenth century has any connection with today, she said, "Sí. Las comunidades afrolatinoamericanas están recuperando, reivindicando el pasado para comprender el presente y dar nuevos pasos hacia el futuro." Just as Tomasón

represents the beginning of attempts to recuperate ancestral memory through his paintings on the walls of his home, contemporary Afro-Peruvians are beginning to reclaim rights and governmental recognition in light of their often marginalized status in present-day Peru. A contemporary example of organized efforts to gain governmental recognition for Afro-Peruvians is the 2001 (the same year *Malambo* was published) founding of the Centro de Estudios y Promoción Afroperuanos, also known as LUNDU. According to their website, the organization "busca el desarrollo de la población afrodescendiente a través de la lucha contra el racismo, sexismo y otras formas de discriminación desde una perspectiva intercultural, intergeneracional y de género" ("Nuestra misión"). *Malambo*'s underlying theme of Afro-Peruvian contribution to *peruanidad* reflects the goals of organizations like LUNDU.[11] Just as this organization for social justice recognizes the intersectionality of racism and sexism and approaches these issues from an intercultural perspective, so too does *Malambo* with its centering of black female experiences and its portrayal of interethnic alliance in making a claim for Afro-descendant inclusion in Peruvian national identity. These similarities provide an example of how this work, set in the seventeenth century, fits into a contemporary framework and addresses contemporary issues.

I later asked Charún-Illescas about contemporary national rhetoric regarding the black presence in Peru and recognizing the rights of Afro-Peruvians. She mentioned the 2009 "Perdón Histórico al Pueblo Afroperuano" which was a governmental apology for racial injustice. While

11. Although Charún-Illescas has no official connection to LUNDU, I have spoken with LUNDU's founder, a young Afro-Peruvian female activist, writer and artist named Monica Carrillo. I met her at a graduate student conference at Stony Brook University in New York in 2012, and learned that she appeared in Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s PBS documentary *Black in Latin America* (2011) in the segment on Peru. I spoke with Carrillo about Charún-Illescas and *Malambo*, and I likewise spoke with Charún-Illescas about Carrillo and LUNDU during her visit to the University of Georgia in April 2016. Both have interacted and participated in panels together promoting Afro-Peruvian recognition. According to conversations I had with Charún-Illescas during her visit, there is not a "movement," as in, a large, formally organized coalition to promote Afro-Peruvian solidarity and governmental rights, but rather small, individual groups like LUNDU which hold common values and goals and all participate in overarching efforts for the recognition of Afro-Peruvian identity and contribution.

this declaration falls short of mentioning slavery, Peru is the only Latin American country to have apologized to its black citizens for racial discrimination.[12] She says, "Este reconocer que somos parte de la identidad nacional (no somos invisibles ni anónimos, al menos oficialmente) hace que el reclamo de derechos, las luchas contra la desigualdad y las actitudes discriminatorias, tengan un asidero legal." In other words, the fight for the rights of Afro-Peruvian citizens is ongoing, but the Peruvian government's apology, for Charún-Illescas, represents at least an acknowledgment that Afro-Peruvian identity is indeed a part of Peruvian national identity. The publication of her novel is not only a reflection of the twenty-first-century call for Afro-Peruvian visibility, inclusion and valorization, but a part of intentional efforts to push the national conversation towards governmentally recognizing the rights of the nation's most marginalized citizens.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have analyzed *Malambo*'s overall aim—the valorization of Afro-Peruvian identity and a recognition of Afro-Peruvian contribution to Peruvian national identity at large. Throughout this chapter, I dialogue with thematic similarities as well as differences between *Malambo* and the previously analyzed novel *A Mercy*. In the first section, I examine how *Malambo* portrays women's experiences in relation to national identity, concluding that, overall, portrayals of black female subjectivity, motherhood and marriage represent the negotiations women of varying ethnicities make within the patriarchal system of the evolving

12. During Charún-Illescas's visit to UGA, I asked if there was something that precipitated the "Perdón Histórico." Did something happen concerning the Afro-Peruvian community which prompted this governmental response? Her answer, somewhat surprisingly, if not anti-climatically, was simply that the Peruvian president at the time, Alan García, had many friends in the Afro-Peruvian community, particularly popular cultural figures. She believes his "Perdón" was motivated by his friendships more than an overarching political response to any particular event. Nevertheless, I still see this act, although possibly not politically motivated, as at least reflective of a Peruvian cultural shift towards greater visibility and recognition of the Afro-Peruvian community.

nation—ranging from reliance on Afro-descendant herbal tradition to using sexuality to negotiate status and exercise autonomy over one's body. Secondly, I examine the ways in which *Malambo* valorizes oral knowledge in contrast to Eurocentric knowledge which relies on the written record, demonstrating that Charún-Illescas ultimately inverts the dominant hierarchy of value by showing the success of orally-transmitted knowledge in contrast to the failure of relying solely on the written register. My examination of the themes of religious and ethnic syncretism highlights the cultural as well as ethnic contributions of Afro-Peruvians to *peruanidad*. I examine *Malambo*'s experimentation with narrative form and its representation of the inclusion of Afro-Peruvian oral history and collective memory into the historical record, before I conclude with connecting the seventeenth-century setting of *Malambo* to contemporary Peru.

The fundamental theme of centering a marginalized history is a thread which ties together both *Malambo* and the previously analyzed novel *A Mercy*. In order to achieve moving an overlooked history from the margins to the center, both authors have thoroughly engaged the archive in order to convincingly (re)write history through their fiction. In the following chapter, I analyze the Cuban novel *Santa lujuria o Papeles de blanco* (1998), a work where the archive is engaged to such an extent that an archival document is a part of the novel's very title—"white papers." Engaging the discourse of *mestizaje* as does *Malambo* and exposing the constructed nature of racial codification as does *A Mercy*, *Santa lujuria* also engages the archive to explore the intersection of race, gender and national identity by tracing the journey of the protagonist from her beginnings as a *mulata* to her legally achieved status as a *mujer blanca*.

CHAPTER 4

(RE)WRITING *MESTIZAJE*

España está demostrando más sabiduría que Inglaterra y Francia juntas tocante a su población y a los negros, porque hace morenos a éstos, y a los mulatos los hace pardos o quinterones…y ahora blancos.

—Don Antonio in *Santa Lujuria o Papeles de blanco*

The above epigraph is taken from an instance of interior dialogue from the nefarious Don Antonio Ponce de León, a white Creole aristocrat who is a main antagonist in *Santa lujuria o Papeles de blanco* (1998) by Marta Rojas. He reads in a local Cuban newspaper the details of a slave revolt,[1] and while at first alarmed—the specter of the Haitian Revolution (1794-1801) hangs heavy in the slavery-dependent Spanish colonies[2]—he reasons away his anxieties, believing that Spain has an advantage over its imperial rivals England and France because of how it differs in its approach to its black population. Don Antonio then describes an archetypal progression from black to white, a pithy summary of the process of *blanqueamiento,*[3] using a few of the many caste descriptors that formed part of the racial hierarchy of Cuban society.[4] Don Antonio's musings highlight a central tenet of the novel, the possibility of a person of color in

1. The revolt Don Antonio reads about in the newspaper is a 1791 revolt which took place in Bayamo, Cuba led by Nicolás Morales, a *mulato* milicia officer (Childs 127).

2. See Sibylle Fischer's *Modernity Disavowed* (2004) and David Geggus's "The Sounds and Echoes of Freedom" (2007) for an in-depth analysis on the impact of the Haitian Revolution throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

3. Peter Wade, in his work *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America* (1997) speaks extensively about *blanqueamiento*, a process of ethnic whitening through intermarriage, its relation to *mestizaje* and its impact upon the conception of race in Latin America (32, 84-87).

4. See Knight (85-120) and Wade (28-30) for a discussion of *castas* and the racial hierarchy in Cuban slave society.

colonial Cuba to achieve whiteness, due to the Spanish crown's instituting the process of *gracias al sacar*, a way to legally purchase whiteness by obtaining the novel's secondary namesake—*papeles de blanco.*

In fact, the idea that a person who is born black could become a white person via a legal process was the seed for the concept of *Santa lujuria*. In an interview with Marta Rojas, she answers a question about what motivated her to write *Santa lujuria,* and describes reading the catalogue of an art exhibition which featured the nineteenth-century Cuban painter Vicente Escobar:

> El catálogo de la época dice 'Vicente Escobar, el pintor que nació negro y murió blanco'. Eso es lo que me motiva y empiezo a buscar. Todo el mundo lo decía y nadie sabía por qué. Hasta que un día me encuentro con un conocido experto en heráldica y le pregunto sobre esto. Él me contesta que había un decreto Real que se llamaba Gracias al Sacar de Carlos IV en donde España, para favorecer a los hijos tenidos con indias o negras, les daban un ascenso en la sociedad. ("Desde el periodismo" 140)

In sum, Escobar was born a *pardo*[5] but died as a white man because he was able to get his "título de blanco" purchased for him (141). While in Chapter 2, I discuss the ways in which *A Mercy* alludes to the constructed, legislated process by which race and racial separation were instituted in the United States, in this chapter, I examine how *Santa lujuria* takes a similar path within a Cuban context as Rojas reexamines the discourse of *mestizaje* and highlights the white supremacy inherent in an idea strongly related to it, *blanqueamiento*. Rojas's novel gives historically-based examples of whiteness as a commodity to be purchased and of descendants of

5. The category *pardo* in Cuban slave society referred to a free light-skinned black person (in contrast to the term *moreno* which referred to a darker-skinned free black person) (Wade 29).

slaves who, like Escobar, gain the social ascent whiteness provides with a legislative sleight of hand. The Cuban white elite, then, could find their "roots" in the same tree as the slaves their ancestors owned during a time when the Spanish colony was becoming increasingly dependent upon their labor (DeCosta-Willis 105). In addition to negating the claims of white supremacy of the Cuban elite, Rojas also troubles the nineteenth-century rhetoric central to Cuban national identity—that of a nation forged out of racial and cultural *mestizaje*, projecting the idealized image of a raceless, harmonious, unified whole.[6] As I discuss in this chapter, the representations of *mestizaje* in *Santa lujuria* are anything but harmonious and instead highlights the violence carried out upon the bodies of black and *mulata* women.

This sexual violence which resulted in a forced *mestizaje* is also evoked in the novel's oxymoronic main title, *Santa lujuria*. In general, it captures the novel's at times derisive, comic tone and language which juxtaposes the sacred and profane, but specifically, it alludes to the unbridled sexual excess of the white slave-owning elite and suggests that the Church, at best, turned a blind eye to it and at worst, was complicit. This sexually obsessive, coercive behavior was not only something tolerated by the Church, but legally institutionalized by the often-invoked *derecho de bragueta*, a royal decree which gave slave owners the right to sexually possess their "property" with or without their consent (DeCosta-Willis 110).

Like *A Mercy* and *Malambo*, but perhaps even more so, *Santa lujuria* displays the author's engagement with the historical archive. In fact, the basis of the novel's plot comes from a case Rojas uncovered during her investigation into the Archivo de Indias in Seville, Spain: In interviews, Rojas talks about searching through cases of those who attained *papeles de blanco*, among them, a Francisco Filomeno Ponce de León, a likely descendant of Juan Ponce de Léon,

6. This harmonious sense of a *mestizaje*-forged racelessness in the interest of cementing national unity is famously encapsulated in José Martí's "Nuestra América" (1891): "No hay odio de razas, porque no hay razas."

Spanish "discoverer" of Florida, recorded in the archive as the son of an Antonio Ponce de Léon and a free black woman ("Desde el periodismo" 141, DeCosta-Willis 108). In addition to featuring fictional representations of historical people drawn directly from the archive there are several examples of meticulous historical research evident in the novel: First, there are abundant references to the jockeying between the imperial powers of England, Spain, France and even the United States during the late eighteenth/early nineteenth-century period during which the novel is set. Secondly, there are references to the many slave rebellions and uprisings which dotted the Latin American colonial landscape during this period in catalogues of the names of many black and *mulato* leaders involved in independence movements throughout Latin America. This attention to historical detail serves not only to give her narrative verisimilitude, but also to center people of color throughout the Americas as instrumental historical agents and contributors to national founding and identity, serving to foster a sense of an American African Diaspora.

While all three of the novels I analyze in this project share the overall aim of articulating a subaltern version of national history from the margins which centers Afro-descendant people and culture, *Santa lujuria* does contain a few differences which make it more of an outlier than the other two. First of all, while the first two are set during the seventeenth century, *Santa lujuria* is set during the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century. Though the difference in the period of *Santa lujuria*'s setting does not lessen its appropriateness to be analyzed in dialogue with the other two novels, it must be recognized that *Santa lujuria* responds to a different aspect of national formation than the other two. Rather than a focus on a time when the very idea of an independent nation was nebulous and fluid, *Santa lujuria* focuses on a period which is integral to the rhetoric of Cuban independence. Another important distinction between *Santa lujuria* and the earlier novels deals with the idea of a response or counter-response to an official discourse.

While *A Mercy* and *Malambo* resist canonical histories and dominant contemporary conceptualizations of national identity in their respective national contexts, *Santa lujuria* aligns with rather than resists the contemporary official political discourse of post-Revolutionary Cuba. Rojas's work is undoubtedly shaped by the ideals of the Cuban Revolution.[7] According to critic Miriam DeCosta-Willis: "Marta Rojas's vision of history is forged by her personal and professional involvement in the Cuban Revolution of 1960, which challenged scholars and creative writers to deconstruct pre-revolutionary historiography—a cultural production that seldom acknowledged the contributions of Afro-Cubans to the forging of national identity and to the creation of a revolutionary ideology and praxis through their struggle for liberation and independence" (106). Because of *Santa lujuria*'s attention to a pre-Revolutionary deconstruction of history, I do not view *Santa lujuria* completely within the same lens of countering contemporary official discourse as I do *A Mercy* and *Malambo*; however, like the other novels, it is born of a contemporary project of black writers throughout the Americas responding to scholarly and literary discourse on slavery (DeCosta-Willis 103). Furthermore, although *Santa lujuria* doesn't necessarily challenge contemporary Cuban Revolutionary discourse regarding the depiction of black and *mulato* agency, it does emerge as a response to the more open manner in which race is discussed during 90s-era Special Period during which *Santa lujuria* is published.

The central theme connecting all three novels in this project is that of the discourse surrounding gender and race and how they relate to national foundation and identity. First, engaging Doris Sommer's coining of the idea of foundational fictions, I examine how *Santa lujuria*, through its intertextual allusions to nineteenth-century texts such as *Cecilia Valdés*, emerges as a type of counter-foundational fiction. Secondly, as I did in my analysis of *A Mercy*

7. Rojas herself is seen as a canonical figure in the Revolution because of her famous report on the Assault on the Moncada Barracks, an attack led by Fidel Castro and a group of rebels in 1953 which marked the beginning of the Cuban Revolution ("Desde el periodismo" 135).

and *Malambo*, I continue my examination of the interrelatedness of gender and nation: Here, as in the previously examined novels, I analyze examples of women from varying degrees of social strata and servitude and how they critique tenets which are the building blocks of national foundation—in the case of *Santa lujuria*, the focus is particularly upon Cuban identity forged by *mestizaje*, embodied in the archetypal figure of the *mulata*.

Other themes I explore in this chapter also resonate with those explored in earlier chapters which connect to my overall thesis of (re)writing history: the representation of black political subjectivity, demonstrating the theme of Afro-descendant contribution to national identity; the contrast of two types of knowledge, African-derived and Eurocentric, which refers to theme of valorizing Afro-descendant cultural memory and tradition; and an exploration of narrative form, in particular, an exploration of the temporality of the narrative voice and an ironic tone which juxtaposes sacred language with the profane, which is linked to the theme of questioning dominant discourse and historical authority. Lastly, I again return to the question of Why now? by examining the political and cultural milieu in Cuba of the late 90s in which *Santa lujuria* made its debut and the debate over the acceptability of focusing on race in the post-Revolutionary era.

Synopsis and Critical Reception

Santa lujuria is actually the second novel in a loosely-related trilogy of antislavery novels by Rojas. They do not interconnect concerning character and plot; however, they all explore the role of people of African descent in the development of the Cuban nation. Although the time period of *Santa lujuria*'s setting is the earliest, its publication falls between *El columpio de Rey Spencer* (1993) and *El harén de Oviedo* (2003). *Santa lujuria* is set in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century and takes place in both Cuba and San Agustín de las Floridas, both colonies

of Spain at the time. Similar to the way in which *Malambo* was set during a time in seventeenth-century colonial Lima when it was a predominantly black city, *Santa lujuria*'s setting also reflects a time of significant demographic change within the black slave and free populations. According to Franklin W. Knight's study *Slave Society in Cuba During the Nineteenth Century*, the Cuban slave population in 1774 was over 22 percent of the total population. Within two generations, by 1841, the slave population had increased to just over 43 percent—a result of the expansion of the slave trade due to a shift to a plantation economy (22). Within the same span of time, Cuba went from a black population (slave and free) of 43 percent to over 58 percent (22). *Santa lujuria*, then, is a reflection of a time when Cuba transitions toward being a predominantly black colony, and thus a reflection of a time of shifting considerations of race in the definition of Cuban identity. As mentioned briefly earlier, *Santa lujuria*'s plot also unfolds during the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution and there are several allusions in the novel to anxieties over the island's changing demographics and the fear of Cuba's slave population being inspired by the establishment of the first black republic. I view the allusions to the Haitian Revolution along with many other slave rebellions, notably the 1812 Aponte Rebellion, as one of the prominent themes of *Santa lujuria* of centering black political agency, which I discuss in further detail in a later section.

Santa lujuria, like *A Mercy* and *Malambo,* features an ensemble cast of characters of varying ethnicities, classes and states of servitude. The main story centers on *parda* Lucila Méndes who, by the novel's end, attains *papeles de blanco* and enjoys the privileges of a white woman. The daughter of a black slave woman, Aborboleta and a Portuguese ship captain, Lucila is born free on the estate of Aguas Claras in la Habana, eventually owned by marquis Don Antonio Ponce de León. Don Antonio and Lucila become lovers and soon a son, Filomeno, is

born. Having no legitimate heir after the death of his Spanish wife and young son, Don Antonio decides to entrust his legacy to Filomeno and has him educated and raised among the white aristocracy, and, under Don Antonio's dictates, Lucila is only allowed to care for her son as an *aya* rather than as his true mother. After moving from la Habana to Santiago de Cuba for a brief time, Lucila rejoins her son in San Agustín de las Floridas. During the journey from Cuba to Florida, Lucila and the ship captain, a Catalán named Albor Aranda, fall in love. Aranda purchases Lucila's *papeles de blanco* and they marry. Concurrent with Lucila's social ascent is that of her son Filomeno. In contrast to Lucila, who still embraces her African roots as a leader in a *cabildo*[8] and becomes a patroness to other people of color even after her achievement of white status, Filomeno does all he can to dissociate himself from his origins, taking pains to stay out of the sun and apply ointments to his skin to lighten it. Although he does eventually attain *papeles de blanco* and inherits his father's estate and title of marquis, he can never seem to completely rid himself of the "stain" of his Afro-descendant heritage. While *Santa lujuria*'s characters in some aspects can be considered stock and without significant character development, the static, archetypical presentation of characters—the slave mother, the *mulata*, the *negrero*, the white aristocrat, the revolutionary hero—symbolize aspects of Cuban identity and is a stylistic point of similarity to the nineteenth-century Latin American national romances with which *Santa lujuria* dialogues (DeCosta-Willis 108). As I will expound upon in a later section, this stylistic similarity emerges as a strategy to purposefully counter and (re)write these archetypes as a part of *Santa lujuria*'s function as a counter-foundational fiction.

8. I discuss the organizations of *cabildos* and *cofradías* earlier in Chapter 3. They are religious brotherhoods, often organized according to African ethnicities, which allowed people of color to form a sense of autonomy and community. They "provided services, such as education, artisanal training, housing, loans, burials, festival celebrations, and even purchased freedom for enslaved members" (Childs 18).

Santa lujuria's narrative voice is a third-person omniscient narrator which at times focuses on the thoughts of particular characters. Rojas's use of a third-person omniscient voice is an effective challenge to History because it presents itself as authoritative, having the advantage of temporal distance from the events it describes. One of the more notable exceptions to the third-person narrator is the presentation of Filomeno's written "Relato" in which he describes the events of a Día de Reyes celebration,[9] an extended passage rendered in italics in Chapter 6 of the novel. The presentation of another perspective or narrative plane is a consistent feature in all three novels I analyze in this study. The narrative shift comments upon oral versus written history or signifies a temporal abstraction from the chronology of the novel's plot. An intentional narrative strategy of the authors, it reevaluates the transmission of history as well as authority of certain modes of historical transmission above others. Another feature of *Santa lujuria*'s narrative voice which I discuss more at length in a later section is the occasional emergence of a first-person narrator/researcher whose voice is disconcertingly contemporary in a novel set in the eighteenth to nineteenth century. This narrative mode is a voice 200 years removed from the events of *Santa lujuria* and describes events, people and even documents which are found and then which are reproduced in the novel's narration from a temporal distance, a definite allusion to Marta Rojas's own investigative background as a journalist and researcher who undertook extensive archival research in preparation for *Santa lujuria*.[10] Like the overall narration, the first-person contemporary narrative voice also has the effect of establishing

9. El Día de Reyes, celebrated on January 6 the Day of the Epiphany was one of the most popular celebrations associated with the *cabildos* and *cofradías* in Cuba. They were parades of song, dance and elaborate costumes which blended European and African cultural elements (Landers 109).

10. See María Elena Bermúdez's interview with Rojas for further elaboration on Rojas's background, professional experience as a journalist and the questions that inspired her to undertake archival research.

a sense of authority, originating from a place which has the benefit and advantage of hundreds of years of historical hindsight as well as producing a jarring, destabilizing effect upon the reader.

Out of the three novels analyzed in this project, *Santa lujuria* is the one which has had the least exposure outside of a Latin American context. It was published in English by the Editorial José Martí in 2007, but there has been limited published academic criticism on the novel outside of specifically Cuban academic and literary spaces. Miriam DeCosta-Willis characterizes the novel as "a counterdiscourse to the 'official' story, written by the founding fathers whose master texts created and preserved the disinformation that undergirded Cuban colonial history" (103). Rojas's engagement with official history highlighted in DeCosta-Willis's analysis informs my examination of *Santa lujuria* as much as the other novels in this project—the fictive engagement with History being a crucial theme all the novels in my project share. Critic Patricia Valladares-Ruiz focuses on *Santa lujuria*'s critique of the discourse of *blanqueamiento* and how this discourse informs the class and racial conflicts of the colonial period as well as the myth of the eroticized *mulata*, and lastly, she examines Rojas's work as part of a literary element in Cuba which represented a more open discussion of race relations in contemporary Cuba. In my own analysis, I draw from Valladares-Ruiz's assessment of the ways in which Lucila's character both references and subverts the *mulata* archetype as well as *Santa lujuria's* position in contemporary Cuban articulations of the problematic of race.

Mestizaje, Blanqueamiento **and Counter-foundational Fiction**

The type of novels containing the archetypes which Rojas references and ultimately (re)writes is what Doris Sommer describes as the nineteenth-century Latin American national romance. As a genre promoting national unity, one of their functions is to signal a need to

overcome the dividing line of race. In the Cuban context in particular, Sommer states: "Romance between previously segregated sectors might ideally create the national unity among whites and blacks, ex-masters and ex-slaves, that the war for Independence would need" (125). These novels are not just "romances" in the sense that they are a product of the nineteenth-century literary aesthetic of Romanticism, but also in the sense that they literally feature heterosexual romantic longing and relationships between characters of differing socio-ethnic backgrounds to promote a symbolic consolidation of a nascent national identity which depended upon racial harmony (5).

William Luis, elaborating on the function on nineteenth-century Cuban works which he terms antislavery narratives, states:

> The antislavery narrative, on the other hand, is a counter-discourse to power whose immediate aim is to question and ultimately dismantle nineteenth-century colonial and slave society…If the fabric of colonial Cuba was based on sugar and slavery, the antislavery narrative questioned the very strength that motivated the society by resorting to an image that challenged and undermined it. In the antislavery works, blacks are not described as mere accidents of history but as an indispensable element of Cuban culture and nationality. (2)

Here, Luis highlights another element of the nineteenth-century novel which is also an integral element of *Santa lujuria*—featuring people of color as historical agents. What the nineteenth-century Cuban national romance/antislavery novel reflects about political thought which was the basis of the rhetoric of national identity, then, was sustained in two related points: first, *mestizaje*, a process of ethnic and cultural mixing, the natural result of the harmony these novels

were meant to promote, and secondly, the incorporation of people of color as an integral part of Cuban society.

The classic Cuban national romance/antislavery narrative *par excellence* is *Cecilia Valdés o la Loma del Ángel* (1882) by Cirilio Villaverde.[11] It is a work considered by many as the "canonical foundational novel of Cuban identity" (Manzari 45). Depicting a detailed snapshot of the Cuban slaveocracy and populated with characters from a variety of racial and class backgrounds, it is a love story of sorts whose tragic end points toward the need to abolish the evil system of slavery which precipitates such an end, telling the story of a beautiful *mulata*, Cecilia Valdés, the illegitimate daughter of a powerful land and slave owner, Cándido de Gamboa, who falls in love with her (unbeknownst to her) half-brother, Leonardo de Gamboa. *Cecilia Valdes* emerges as a cautionary tale, one which depicts the ill-effects of an anti-black, slavery-based society which first, enables the incestuous situation in which Cecilia and Leonardo find themselves (due to Cándido's licentious behavior and the truth of Cecila's paternity being shrouded in secrecy), and secondly, is what influences Cecilia's desire to "move up" by joining herself to a white man as well as Leonardo's decision to abandon her, refusing to "move down" and instead marrying a white woman. Once Cecilia and Leonardo become lovers, she eventually bears Leonardo's child. A poor free black musician, José Dolores Pimienta, falls in love with Cecilia as well, but she rejects him. Soon, Leonardo rejects Cecilia for the wealthy Isabel Ilincheta. A jealous Cecilia plots revenge with the still faithful José, and in the end, José

11. There was an initial version of *Cecilia Valdés* published in Cuba in 1839, but the 1882 version published in New York is considered the "definitive" one today and is the version containing an antislavery message (Luis 100). *Cecilia Valdés o la Loma del Ángel* is alluded to in *Santa lujuria*'s full title because it also has an "alternate" title separated with "*o*": *Santa lujuria o Papeles de blanco*. While the title of the canonical text refers to a specific character and community, *Santa lujuria*'s reference to sanctioned unbridled sexual violence and the legal process of *blanqueamiento* in its title ties together generalized dominant discourses applicable to women's bodies and *mestizaje*. Three of many allusions and intertextual references to *Cecilia Valdés* in Cuban literature and popular culture include a zarzuela of the same name which had its premiere in Cuba in 1932, Reinaldo Arenas's post-modern rewrite *La loma del ángel* (1987), and Daína Chaviano's *La isla de los amores infinitos* (2006).

murders Leonardo on his wedding day at Cecilia's urging. As a result, José is executed and Cecilia imprisoned.

In *Santa lujuria*, we see echoes of *Cecilia Valdés*, but with a twentieth-century twist. It goes beyond the nineteenth-century denunciation of the system of slavery as an obstacle to national solidarity to focusing more explicitly on the sexual behavior of those in power which the system of slavery enabled and sanctioned. In an interview with Rojas, Rojas speaks about what she saw as a major shortcoming of national romances like *Cecilia Valdés*:

> El canon de la novela anti-esclavista en Cuba es *Cecilia Valdés*…Siempre se presentaba el caso de un hombre que tenía una relación con una india o con una negra, tenían un hijo, el hijo no se podía casar, lo que fuera, pero no se decía cuál era la conducta sexual del amo, del poderoso. Esa no aparece en *Cecilia Valdés*… no aparece en las novelas anti-esclavistas de aquí ni en la de los Estados Unidos. Por ejemplo, Jefferson vivía con todas sus esclavas, con todas las que le gustaban. La conducta sexual de esos Padres de la Patria nunca aparece, pero de algún lugar aparecían esos mulatos de negros o indios. Lo novedoso que yo le doy a ese relato, es la conducta sexual del amo, del dueño. ("Desde el periodismo" 144)

According to Rojas, *Cecilia Valdés* and other antislavery novels, even in the U.S., absolve powerful white men who shaped the political and economic climate of society. What *Santa lujuria* does that *Cecilia Valdés* and other novels of its ilk does not is highlight the sexual licentiousness and depravity of white men who at times used force over the bodies of women of color they owned (which was a legal right, the *derecho de bragueta* which Don Antonio often cites) or otherwise had power over. She connects *mestizaje* and national foundation as she cites "Founding Fathers" as the perpetuators of the illicit sexual behavior which is downplayed in so-

called foundational novels like *Cecilia Valdés* and its U.S. counterparts like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. To rephrase Rojas's wry commentary above, "mulatos de negros o indios" didn't just appear out of nowhere. Rather than a result of an indeterminate, benign *mestizaje*, the *mulatos* Rojas references are often specifically the result of powerful men taking sexual license with women of color. Regarding this sexually licentious behavior, I second Rojas's insistence that there is a connection between the way Founding Fathers, framers of the national project, are portrayed and the stories, representations of official history, which are told about the nation's formation. *Santa lujuria* reveals itself to be an exposé of sorts—it tells a side of the story of *mestizaje* and of the moral depravity of the elite that is overlooked in canonical literature which denounces the system of slavery.

Besides a focus on the sexual depravity of the elite, another element of *Santa lujuria* which distinguishes it from the canonical nineteenth-century antislavery novel is an abundant depiction of corporeal violence. Rojas's focus on the way that women's bodies in particular were brutalized serves to disabuse the reader of any notion that the overarching reason slavery was an intolerable institution was because of its harm to society at large—rather, its harm was overwhelmingly inflicted upon the very bodies upon which the institution perpetuated itself. Part of the ideology behind nineteenth-century Cuban works like *Cecilia Valdés* and others influenced by the Del Monte literary circle was a Reformist notion which portrayed slavery as not only an institution which made victims of innocent blacks, but more importantly, one which also had negative moral effects upon white society and symbolized an impediment to modern progress.[12] According to this philosophy for why slavery should be abolished, it was depicted as

12. Domingo del Monte was Cuba's most influential literary critic in the 1830s who requested the publication of many antislavery novels (Luis 1). He was the leader of a literary circle in which he encouraged his friends to write about the ills of slavery and the abusive treatment of slaves (27). For Del Monte, "slavery held back Cuba's progress into the modern era. [He] argued that slavery and slave masters were a thing of the past,

a societal ill, one that believed whites to be as much the victims as blacks who were literally victimized. While Rojas definitely has elements of this argument in her story, particularly in the character Buen Ángel, a *negrero* so filled with remorse for his treatment of his "merchandise" that he commits suicide (*Santa lujuria* 218), she resists the notion that slavery was a mere societal ill, liberally depicting the physical and sexual violence the system enabled and sustained.

If *Cecilia Valdés* is a foundational fiction, a novel which suggests that cross-racial romantic love, which would result in a solidarity-building *mestizaje*, is made impossible by the evil system of slavery, *Santa lujuria* is a counter-foundational fiction, one which (re)writes the foundational to point out that the supposedly benign ideal of *mestizaje* is itself a part of the violence of the evil system of slavery. Moving into the twentieth century, Cuban scholars have often cast *mestizaje* in terms of ethnic and cultural synthesis: Fernando Ortiz's ideas concerning "transculturación" suggests an osmotic process: though acknowledging blacks were forcibly brought to Cuba and abused, he implies that blacks and whites equally suffered from dislocation and intermingled to create a culture which has elements of both but which is ultimately something distinct (96-97). Another well-known Cuban theorist, Antonio Benitez-Rojo, who dedicates his *La isla que se repite* (1989) to Ortiz, conceives of the "africanización de la cultura" in the Caribbean in conceptual terms, citing the plantation as a site for what he terms "interplay" as a part of creating a syncretic Caribbean culture (39-50). However, in neither of these canonical theorists' conceptualizations for the meshing of European and African elements is there an explicit mention of the concrete, corporeal experiences of women of color whose bodies often bore the fruit of literal contact with white men who often used force or otherwise held

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characteristics of an uncivilized country…Del Monte proposed that Cuba could maintain its agricultural prominence without slaves and claimed that Cuba's success would be lost if the growing black population rebelled" (30).

power over them.[13] Rojas, however, rather than suggesting that *mestizaje* was in any way a sustaining ideology for national solidarity, an abstract concept, or a positive, or at the very least, neutral process, reminds the reader time and time again that *mestizaje* was usually a forced and violent affair.

Tied to the discourse of *mestizaje* is the idea of *blanqueamiento*, an essential part of Cuban and Caribbean racial discourse by which people of color can "mejorar la raza," "better the race" by intermarrying with white partners, thereby creating generations of increasingly whitened children and ultimately, citizens of the nation.[14] In a literary strategy which I explore in Chapter 2 which echoes Morrison's desire to return to a time before race and slavery were linked in order to expose the processes by which race was constructed, Rojas illustrates a similar process regarding race by focusing on the way whiteness in particular was constructed in a Cuban context. With depictions of the offspring of people of color, some former slaves, being absorbed into white upper class society, Rojas reminds the reader of the origins of the Cuban white elite. Just as Morrison demonstrates that the marriage of the idea of 'black' to 'slave' was a result of a legislated, institutionalized process, so Rojas depicts the history of the construction of whiteness, and therefore the "black roots" of the Cuban elite. If whiteness is something that could be purchased, legally bestowed upon a person of color who had the right connections, the very idea of whiteness as an objective claim or state of being is quite arbitrary, precarious at best. Rojas incorporates popular Cuban phrases which reference the idea of *blanqueamiento* in Cuban society when a volume written by Filomeno, a *pardo* who ultimately achieves whiteness and

13. The idea of the concrete, corporeal experience of inhabiting a black body marked as Other is eloquently communicated by Franz Fanon in his essay "The Fact of Blackness" from *Black Skin, White Masks* (originally published in 1952).

14. Peter Wade, in his work *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America* (1997) speaks extensively about *blanqueamiento*, its relation to *mestizaje* and its impact upon the conception of race in Latin America (32, 84-87).

inherits his father Don Antonio's estate, is found centuries later. The found volume includes a note from a curator to a researcher between its pages. It comments on an unrelated case of a formerly black heir acquiring whiteness, evoking phrases such as "Y tu abuela, ¿dónde está?" and "A los nietos de la negra, el dinero los blanquea" (*Santa lujuria* 121). These phrases serve as mocking reminders that the subjects in question are denying their blackness and suggest their pretentions after achieving the status of whiteness worthy of derision. In addition to chronicling the trajectory of *mulatos* who become *blancos* by acquiring *papeles de blanco*, Rojas mentions the marriage of the children of *mulatos* into white society. For example, Graciano, the child of *mulata* slave Caridad and Don Antonio, marries into a wealthy white Floridian family (285). Lucila and Albor Aranda's child, Paloma, also marries a wealthy white man and soon Lucila welcomes her first grandchild into the world, "un niño de tez rosada, pelo ensortijado rojizo y ojos grises" (285)—a phenotypically white child, a concrete example of *blanqueamiento*.

Gender and Nation in *Santa lujuria*

Having established the distinct dialogues with dominant ideology in which *Santa lujuria* engages, I return to a core component of *Santa lujuria* which it shares with the other novels in this project. *Santa lujuria*, like *A Mercy* and *Malambo*, feature female protagonists and focus on women's experiences as a way to refute the masculinist narration of the national story of each novel's respective context. As feminist theorists referenced earlier such as Patricia Hill Collins and many others remind us, the female body, specifically the black female body, via agricultural, domestic, sexual and reproductive labor, has been historically commodified during the nation's founding and beyond. Referencing the transactionality attached to the experience of being woman and slave, each novel reflects upon the intersectionality of gender and race—prominent examples being the transactional language used in both the context of slavery and in marriage,

where both the slave and the woman are made a part of a contractual exchange as well as gendered experiences such as the dynamics of black women's negotiation of their social status with their sexuality. The first two novels have their moments of depictions of violence, one of the most prominent of images being the scene of slaves being branded after being auctioned off in *Malambo*. But what sets *Santa lujuria* apart from the other two novels is a graphic depiction of violence and sexuality that slavery inflicted and permitted.

Many passages are explicit, some episodes even presented in a darkly comedic light which contributes to the "irreverence" of the explicitness, some also based off of archival and oral history from Rojas's research, as I will discuss below. *Santa lujuria* engages gender and race and their relation to national discourse in three primary ways: the reinterpretation of the *mulata* archetype, the doubling of transactional language in the slave/master context as well as the husband/wife context, and lastly, the depiction of physical and sexual violence against the bodies of women of color.

(Re)writing la mulata

As are Florens from *A Mercy* and Pancha from *Malambo*, Lucila is also a woman of color who experiences a transformation; however, unlike the other two protagonists, she is specifically described as a *mulata*. This *mulata* designation is significant for several reasons: First, she is the embodiment of the *mestizaje* upon which Cuban national identity is founded, as a figure who is by definition the product of the union of white and black, as well as a literary archetype which was made ubiquitous in *Cecila Valdés*, a novel, as mentioned above, with national implications. Secondly, the *mulata* has been historically characterized as sexualized and sexually available, and Rojas references and subverts this characterization with her representation of Lucila, particularly with intertextual allusions to *Cecilia Valdés.* With her evocation of the archetypical

mulata in Lucila's character, Rojas presents *Santa lujuria* as a novel which not only alludes to but ultimately reinterprets the ethos of the nineteenth-century original. One of the ways she accomplishes this reinterpretation is by presenting the archetypal *mulata* not merely as sexualized object, one who ultimately falls victim to a color-conscious Cuban society, but as a subject who exercises sexual as well as political agency. In other words, the *mulata*, a figure who debuts in the Cuban national canon as a passive, sexualized object who yearns for whiteness for her personal social ascent à la Cecilia Valdés, is (re)written in Lucila as an agent who uses her achieved whiteness, in part, to empower members of the black community.

First of all, Cecilia and Lucila are both *mulata* archetypes—beautiful, sensual objects of desire—and I believe the similarity even extends to their names, "Lucila Méndes" figures as a play on the name Cecilia Valdés. The early liaison Lucila has with musician Miguel Villavicencio whom she ultimately rejects alludes to Cecila's relationship to the character José Pimienta, also a free black musician, who is also rejected by the object of his affection. While Rojas imbues Lucila with characteristics that make her recognizable as a *mulata* in the image of Cecilia Valdés, at the same time she presents Lucila as one who uses her power for political ends even after she attains her *papeles de blanco*. For example, estranged from her husband, Albor Aranda, Lucila has a liaison with an illiterate black soldier named Arcángel del Puerto. She is described in stereotypically sensual terms from the soldier's point of view: "Su bata de muselina le permitió descubrir las formas ondulantes de su cuerpo...Aunque no era el cuerpo que lo seducía, sino el misterio de su vida y de su calidez. No sabría explicarse, era su espiritu…" (*Santa lujuria* 238), but a few pages later she wields the same sexual power over him as she helps him write his name: "[Lucila] colocó su mano derecho sobre la de Arcángel del Puerto, y llevándole el torpe pulso de los iletrados lo ayudó a escribir su nombre sobre las cruces que había

hecho…Él sintió un escalofrío que no lo abandonó ni cuando ella volvió a colocar la pluma en la escribanía" (244). I choose this example because it references how Lucila appears within the mold of the sexualized *mulata* archetype while at the same time re-inscribing it by becoming an agent of political empowerment. By guiding a young black soldier—a figure representative of the role blacks are to play in the future independence of the Cuban nation—to learn how to write his name, she is shown to go beyond the characterization of sexual availability and using her sexual power to "enchant" men and is cast in the light of a "Black Founding Mother" (DeCosta-Willis 107). This recasting of the *mulata* as a figure who creates a sense of solidarity, a solidarity symbolizing a nascent Cuban identity which recognizes black and *mulato* contribution, is one of the ways in which Rojas (re)writes the canonical narrative.

Another way Lucila challenges the canonical *mulata* characterization to achieve sociopolitical and sexual agency is that she subverts the "tragic" narrative. The trope of the so-called "tragic mulatto" is one which appears in U.S. and Latin American literature in which a mixed-raced character faces inner turmoil because of not "belonging" to either race and/or faces social rejection for the same cause—their disastrous endings always a result of being a "victim of divided racial inheritance" (Bogle 9). Besides the already discussed *Cecila Valdés,* another Cuban nineteenth-century novel which fits neatly into this categorization is *Sab* (1841) by Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda. It is the only story in which a male *mulato* slave dares to desire his white mistress. Sab's end, much like Cecilia's, is ruinous. While his love goes unrequited and he dies, literally, of a broken heart, in contrast, Lucila's story doesn't have the same "tragic" end that casts her as a victim of society. Although she begins her journey controlled by Don Antonio—some characters note that he treats Lucila like his slave although she is free (*Santa lujuria* 21)—she becomes independent of him, and a part of her independence from Don Antonio

entails sexual freedom. Rojas gives the *mulata* archetype another twentieth-century revision which distinguishes *Santa lujuria* from the nineteenth-century canon—she is not only the desired object, she is a subject who desires and whose desire is not solely confined to a situation of unequal power dynamics.

In "Los usos de eros en el Caribe," an essay included in a series about eroticism and Caribbean identity entitled *Sobre piel y papel*, Puerto Rican writer and literary theorist Mayra Santos Febres conceptualizes the complex, contradictory constraints of desire in a situation where sexuality is tied to work, as was all too often the case of slave women, where "el deseo es lo que surge de la obligación de tener que sentir, que experimentar, el cuerpo de la dominación dentro del cuerpo" (85). She cites the iconic poem by Cuban poet Nancy Morejón, "Amo a mi amo,"[15] where the speaker is a black slave woman who describes her complicated desire for her white master, alternating between passion and rejection, which depicts her being seduced by him yet exploited by him at the same time (85). A relationship of this nature is explored between the character Altagracia and her master De la Piedra in *Malambo*. The power dynamics of this type of situation is one in which we first find Lucila and Don Antonio. Although he is not technically her master, their respective social positions place her in a submissive role to him. This passage where Lucila considers the state of their relationship captures the essence of the complicated politics of desire between a woman of color and her powerful white lover:

> En el fondo del alma conservaba la ira que le provocó don Antonio cuando le quitó a su hijo…En su primer momento, la ira encubrió el miedo que le produjo la acción engañosa. Miedo a perder su libertad, miedo a la sumisión, rechazo a que la tratara como a una esclava. Su juego de pasiones con él hasta el embarazo,

15. Nancy Morejón, "Amo a mi amo," in *Piedra Pulida.* La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1986, 100-102.

había sido espontáneo, ardiente, sincero. Pero impuesto después del nacimiento de Filomeno. (*Santa lujuria* 96)

The trajectory of Lucila and Don Antonio's relationship displays the contradictory elements of seduction and exploitation described in Santos Febres's analysis and Morejón's poem. Santos Febres later connects this complicated, characteristically Caribbean eroticism to the figure of the *mulata*, citing the ubiquitous *Cecilia Valdés* and a Puerto Rican drama of the same era, *La cuarterona* (1867), stating that the *mulata* is a part of a long-standing discursive strategy connecting the erotic to discussions of Caribbean identity (87). However, I follow Santos Febres's further argument that "en el discurso literario del Caribe actual, existen aún otros usos de lo erótico, donde la identidad se reescribe, ya no desde el bando del abuso del poder, o del deseo del otro, sino el deseo propio" (88). It is precisely within this contemporary turn from the focus on abuse or desire of the Other towards desire in and of itself that I place Rojas's re-writing of the *mulata* via Lucila's character. Although Don Antonio continues to manipulate her by limiting her access to their son, Lucila begins a torrid love affair with a free *pardo* who is her social equal, she later falls in love with and marries a white Catalán who treats her as an equal and obtains her *papeles de blanco*, and when she becomes estranged from her husband, has an affair with a young black soldier whom she teaches to write. In other words, her sexuality is not circumscribed by her "complicated" relationship with Don Antonio. Instead of coming to ruin because of her desires clashing with the dictates of a race-conscious slaveocracy, Lucila dares to desire while negotiating her status. Not only does she legally transition from a *mulata* to a *blanca*, she transitions from a woman who is treated like a slave to a woman who exercises power within her circle of influence.

In sum, Rojas takes the time-worn, archetypal figure of the *mulata* which has been traditionally evoked in Cuban literature in turn as an erotic Other, a piteous cautionary tale, and a symbol of Cuban national identity and (re)writes it. She purposely alludes to the canonical Cuban *mulata*, Cecilia Valdés, only to re-inscribe a new version of the *mulata* who is not simply a static symbol of *cubanidad*, but a dynamic one who is cast as a sexual and political agent. That Rojas would choose this female figure, one which is so strongly tied to national identity, to reconfigure, is a literary strategy which troubles the canon as well as casts light on the intersection of gendered representations and the nation.

The commodification of women

In Chapters 2 and 3, I explore the intersection of gender and race by analyzing the language of transaction characterizing both slave/master relationships and husband/wife relationships in *A Mercy* and *Malambo*. As established in my introduction, within the context of both slavery and marriage, women's bodies are commodified, whether for the purpose of physical, domestic or sexual labor. I further argue that this commodification is directly linked to national foundation: the system of slavery which was the economic bedrock of the Americas was perpetuated upon the bodies of slave women, and the production of a "legitimate" heir one of the main duties of a wife. The same theme of the commodification of women is echoed *Santa lujuria*: The use of slave labor, the sexual depravity carried out upon the bodies of women of color and the need for a legitimate heir are all connected to this commodification.

One of the ways in which commodification of bodies is represented in *Santa lujuria* which links it with earlier works analyzed in this project is with the trope of names and naming and its relation to questions of agency. I explore this with the character Sorrow in *A Mercy*, who

has a "real" name which is never mentioned to the reader and is given her name by the family who finds her in the aftermath of a shipwreck. After the birth of her second child, however, she renames herself "Complete," an act that indicates self-possession and agency (*A Mercy* 133-34). The same theme of naming and agency is echoed in *Santa lujuria*. Each instance revolves around Don Antonio's attempts to exercise control over *mulata* women and articulate his possession of them. One of the first scenes we encounter is of Don Antonio forcing a *mulata* slave, Caridad, into the bed of his deceased wife. He repeatedly calls her "Isabel de Flandes" (a name he actually gives Lucila) and Caridad protests, insisting "Yo no soy Isabel de Flandes, yo soy Caridad" (*Santa lujuria* 18), and Don Antonio answers, "¿Qué no eres Isabel de Flandes? ¿Y no voy a saberlo? Eres lo que yo desee" (18). All the while, he threatens to take away her child, Graciano, also his son, if she doesn't do exactly as he says: "Si me desobedeces voy a quitarte el chiquillo, porque es de mi propiedad" (16). The idea that Caridad is whoever he wants her to be is part of the same discourse that allows Don Antonio to view his own son as property. Caridad, as a slave woman, is not only his "property," but a vessel to produce more "property." Graciano, as an illegitimate son, is not under consideration as an heir, and therefore also "property." This proprietary claim parallels a situation in *Malambo* where the *negrero* De la Piedra, upon finding out that his slave mistress, Altagracia, is pregnant, declares the child as "his" (*Malambo* 161). What connects both of these instances is a conflation of the concepts of master, lover—in the case of Don Antonio and Caridad, the more appropriate word would be 'rapist'—and father. Each falls within the discourse of patriarchal entitlement, ownership and legacy, which slavery entailed.

As referenced above, Don Antonio renames his once-lover Lucila as "Isabel de Flandes" in a letter outlining his conditions for allowing her to take care of their son, framing his terms in

the aforementioned discourse of patriarchal legacy. He states: "Ya sabes, Lucila, si quieres ver al muchacho y atenderlo en San Agustín donde vivirá y estudiará durante unos cuantos años…tanto para él como para ti y para los demás, tú serás el aya y no la madre, aunque le dije a Filomeno que lo pariste, de modo que no haya misterios perjudiciales que trastornen mis planes para su vida futura" (*Santa lujuria* 30). In a situation which echoes Don Antonio's manipulation of Caridad to do his sexual bidding by threatening to take her son away, we see Don Antonio placing conditions upon Lucila which requires her to deny her role as mother in order to have access to her son. Lucila must submit to Don Antonio's terms for the sake of Filomeno's future as his successor. After Lucila hears the contents of the letter, the narrator tells us: "Aceptó las condiciones. Se dejó nombrar por el marqués Isabel de Flandes. Él le revelaría que había escogido el nombre entre los de las primeras pardas libres y negras, viajeras a Indias desde un puerto de España, y no de África" (31). Lucila is obligated to submit herself to this renaming, a symbol of Don Antonio's "owning" her although she is free. That the narrator highlights the fact that Don Antonio chooses this name among women of color who made their way to the New World via Europe and not Africa is a suggestion that her new name is an attempt to deny Lucila her connection to her Afro-descendant heritage, which is connected to denying the truth of Filomeno's origins as well. However, when Lucila later obtains her *papeles de blanco*, it's done "con el nombre verdadero de Lucila Méndes" (98). While it might seem contradictory or problematic that Lucila only attains a degree of agency in reclaiming her "true" name as a white woman, the narrator insists that the privileges Lucila has with her newly acquired whiteness is only a "*título*" (98, italics original to text). Furthermore, in the following paragraph opening a new chapter, the narration begins, "Ahora, como nunca antes, Lucila Méndes sería la reina de las cofradías" before going into a description of Lucila's central role in the Afro-syncretic

brotherhood's Día de Reyes celebration to signal to the reader that Lucila is "white" in name only and still embraces her Afro-descendant heritage (100).

In addition to patriarchal attempts to commodify slave women, women of color and their offspring, *Santa lujuria* demonstrates how white women are also made a part of this system of commodification via the institution of marriage. In *A Mercy* and *Malambo,* I argue that transactional language illustrates women being made a part of the same economy of those subjected to forced labor. For example, I analyze the similarities of the language in a passage in *A Mercy* where patroonship owner Jacob Vaark describes what he is looking for in a wife with that of an ad he scans describing a Native American female slave he purchases. In the same vein, I analyze a situation in *Malambo* where slaveowner De la Piedra contemplates marriage with Spanish widow Catalina for the sole purpose of acquiring her farm which would then allow him to enter into a business deal**.** This transactional theme is echoed in *Santa lujuria* with the idea of legitimacy. The need for a legitimate heir is the main tenet which drives the plot of *Santa lujuria*. Filomeno is only given consideration by his father Don Antonio because both his Spanish-born wife Mercedes and male child, who was the only product of that union, pass away. In order for Filomeno to legally attain legitimacy, and ultimately, whiteness, he first has to be re-baptized as the son of Don Antonio and his deceased wife (*Santa lujuria* 173). This detail not only highlights the arbitrariness of the concept of "legitimacy" according to a Church hypocritically concerned with appearances, but also demonstrates the use of Don Antonio's marriage with a white woman to be used as a transactional tool to retroactively legitimize the existence of his "illegitimate" *mulato* son. Even though Mercedes is deceased before the events of the novel even begin, her marriage to Don Antonio, legitimate and sanctioned, is currency, used for the purpose of establishing his legacy. In sum, *Santa lujuria* demonstrates several

aspects of the commodification of women's bodies, whether in the context of slavery or marriage, as an integral part of an economy which is central to national foundation.

The depiction of violence against women of color

The last way in which *Santa lujuria* engages gender and race in relation to national discourse which, like the idea of commodification, is related to women's bodies, is its unsettling depiction of violence against women of color. Rojas's decision to make graphic violence and sexuality a strong theme in this novel is multi-layered: to turn the spotlight onto the consequences of excessive, privileged male sexual license during the era of slavery, particularly during a time when stereotypes about black hyper-sexuality were pervasive; to demonstrate that the *mestizaje* upon which Cuban identity is based and which is praised as a progressive symbol of ethnic and cultural synthesis, was actually a forced, violent affair inflicted upon the bodies of women of color; and lastly, to be as faithful as possible to the stark truth of the horrors of slavery.

From the very beginning of the novel, the reader is thrust into a scenario which not only depicts the depth of Don Antonio's depravity, but also establishes a pattern for the rest of the novel of explicit scenes of violence and sexuality. We are introduced to Don Antonio as a hedonistic manipulator who has a sick fetish for, in a perversion of the common situation of slave women as wet nurses, suckling at the breasts of slave women who have recently given birth (*Santa lujuria* 14).[16] The image of a white man satisfying his sexual desires by taking milk from

16. It is important to note that the situation of slave women as wet nurses to the white children of slave owners is itself a situation attesting to the arbitrary, hypocritical discourse justifying slavery: Blacks are subhuman and unfit to (legally) intermingle with white society, but at the same time were enlisted by whites to perform the very intimate, universally human act of nursing their children. In addition, the institution of slavery turned this intimate, nurturing act into one of physical labor for slave women. See Janet Golden's *A Social History of Wet Nursing in America* (1996).

the breasts of a woman of color, milk meant to nourish her own child and other white children, represents a dual appropriation, symbolically informing why he does so. It is not only an image which echoes with similar ones in literature of the American African Diaspora, but also a striking symbol of hegemonic control of the female body.[17] Just as Don Antonio tells Caridad that she is whoever he wants her to be, he forces her body to do what he wants it to do. The fact that Don Antonio consumes breastmilk meant to nourish an infant also alludes to the idea that the institution of slavery allowed those in power to reduce the bodies of women of color into objects of consumption at the expense of forming human bonds, at the expense of the possibility to be mothers to their children and at the expense of their humanity.

Another disturbingly memorable episode of violence in *Santa lujuria* is the story of Jackín, an African princess captured by a *negrero* ironically nicknamed Buen Ángel. The idea of women's bodies as a site of inscription for the benefit of those in power is clearly seen in Buen Ángel's remembrances about his behavior with the captured African women aboard his ship: "Hasta en Gorée había cargado mercancía y mi verga no descansaba; la mojaba como pluma de escribiente que entra y sale del tintero, sin parar, ¡y tanta tinta había!" (66). Buen Ángel speaks of his anatomy as if it were independent of him and alludes to the myth of a supposed white male lack of control in the presence of black female bodies (Santos Febres 121).[18] For Buen Ángel to essentially throw the blame upon his penis for its abusive acts is ridiculously ironic due to the fact that he experiences these reminiscences during a drunken night of phallic failure. Furthermore, his description of his phallus as a pen being dipped into ink not only alludes to the

17. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) contains an infamous scene where the protagonist Sethe is assaulted by white men who take her breastmilk.

18. In her essay "El color de la seducción," Santos Febres elaborates upon the myth of the black woman as a Great Seductress: "Posee ese indescriptible 'no sé qué' que transforma al todopoderoso hombre blanco en víctima de sus propias pasiones. Entonces, a través de su cuerpo oscuro, dicha mujer conquista al conquistador, quien no puede resistirse a la fuerza de su propio deseo" (121).

idea of written discourse and the hegemonic manner in which History is inscribed, but also to the violence of writing the nation via the sexual violence of *mestizaje*. Buen Ángel demonstrates a flippant attitude about the consequences of the violent treatment of slave women's bodies: "Parieron varias negritas. Le pareció gracioso recordar esa incidencia; aunque era normal, resultaba simpática: todos los críos eran color maíz" (*Santa lujuria* 72). The fruit of his and others' "inscriptions," corn-colored children, was something normal to Buen Ángel, a passing detail. By depicting this dismissive attitude, however, Rojas highlights the fact that scores of *mulato* children were incarnations of a *mestizaje* which was all but benign. She depicts the conceptualization of this fact as a passing detail only to juxtapose it with her novel's insistence that the bodies of women of color served as sites of conquest, an extension of the conquest of the Americas, and essentially served to found the Cuban nation (DeCosta-Willis 108).

In addition to rape, another form of violence depicted in this episode is the "inspection" of slave women's bodies. Of Jackín's body in particular, Buen Ángel recounts: "Llegó el turno a Jackín. Registraron su cuerpo: estaba sana. Se veía su calidad, pero el comprador quiso cerciorarse y le hurgó entre las piernas con la mano, tomándose tiempo, comprobando hasta la saciedad lo que buscaba: estaba intacta" (74). This inspection scene recalls an earlier scene in *A Mercy* when white townspeople begin to inspect Florens's body because they suspect her of being demonic due to her blackness. The difference in this case is the acutely sexual aspect of the inspection. Jackin's potential buyer's violating her body with his hand demonstrates the intersection between sexuality and commodification, a position in which many women of color were forced during the era of slavery. Further heightening the violence of this scene is Jackín's tragic end. When she attempts to run away, a pack of hungry mastiffs is sent after her and they ultimately corner her and tear her apart (76). Buen Ángel recounts this part of the story with

remorse. Rojas includes this story not only to highlight the horror and violence of slavery, but also to highlight Buen Ángel's hypocrisy in lamenting her loss—though Jackín ends up being consumed by dogs, he does the same thing by making her a product of consumption as a slave. The parallel Rojas makes between vicious dogs and slave owners is strong and effective—the human slave owners which consume the bodies of female slaves commit the same slaughter as vicious animals. The last example I highlight here actually involves a child—Perlita, a slave girl who captures the attention of a visiting merchant because of her brilliant smile. The fact that this chilling episode involves a child indicates that the impact gender has upon the treatment of black bodies is ever present, affecting a child even before sexual maturity. In the story, even Perlita's pre-pubescent body is sexualized, her budding breasts described as "teticas, como botones, espigando todavía, altas y duras" (140). The idea of the ever-present danger at any age to female slaves is an idea which propels the plot of *A Mercy*: Florens's mother gives her away to Jacob Vaark because she fears *future* sexual abuse would befall her daughter if she were to stay with the current slave owners. Like the description of Perlita's body, the image of Florens's breasts, "rising too soon" symbolize this ever-present danger (*A Mercy* 162). Perlita's story is also significant is because it is based upon the oral record, symbolizing the overarching theme of my project's corpus of recuperating history omitted from the written record. In an interview, Rojas explains this story was passed down to her from her grandmother ("Desde el periodismo" 136-37): Upon seeing Perlita's beautiful smile, the merchant comments upon her beauty and tries to purchase her, to which her owner refuses. When the merchant returns on a separate occasion, the owner presents him with a velvet box full of Perlita's teeth; he has them pulled to present to the merchant as a gift since he liked her smile, and the story ends with Perlita smiling with an empty mouth (*Santa lujuria* 140-42). That Perlita's story is a part of oral tradition passed down to the

author connects to one of the overarching themes of this project—the idea that the novels in this corpus recuperate history left out of the written record. The reader would hope that something as chilling as capriciously extracting all of a child's teeth and presenting them as a gift is based on the author's imagination, a literary strategy to highlight the depravity of slavery. Although it is obvious the author has included many other historical details which are gained though archival evidence, Rojas revelation that this particular story actually is based on evidence, oral evidence, makes it all the more horrifying.

Black Subjectivity, Political Agency and Contribution to National Identity

Just as Rojas insists on detailing the horror of the sexual and physical violence women of color suffered under the system of slavery, she also insists on detailing revolutionary movements and national conflicts in Cuba and elsewhere in Latin America in which people of color play prominent roles. Just as I demonstrate how Morrison centers the perspective of a young black female slave in the retelling of the story of U.S. beginnings in *A Mercy*, and how Charún-Illescas makes visible the Afro-descendant contribution to *peruanidad* in *Malambo,* Rojas centers people of color in the retelling of pivotal moments in Cuban history, highlighting the black contribution to Cuban national identity and suggesting that people of color were foundational to establishing the national project. Not only are these episodes included to depict black agency, but, as Valladares-Ruiz suggests, are also included to question the ideal of a nation supposedly founded upon harmony and unity between blacks and whites (135). The novel depicts black involvement in conflicts that served imperial powers, in slave uprisings, and in later independence movements, situations in which Europeans and Afro-descendants were not necessarily always in one accord leading up to the national moment. In other words, in the same way Rojas

reinterprets the canonical *mulata* figure and counters the harmonious notions often attached to *mestizaje*, she also questions the ideal of Cuban national unity. Furthermore, in addition to moments of conflict and uprising, Rojas also includes cultural and historical references casting people of color as central figures within an African diasporic framework by including examples from a variety of national contexts. The diasporic aspect of Rojas's painstaking historical detail is a particularly significant element which suggests Rojas sees Cuban history within the framework of American African Diasporic history, and perhaps sees her own work as a part of a larger African diasporic conversation connecting black subjectivity to the national moment. She gives specific details about particularly Cuban pieces of history and lore prominently featuring blacks—from the origins of the famous poem "Espejos de paciencia"[19] where a black slave, Salvador, who rescues the bishop of Yara from a French pirate, is the hero (*Santa lujuria* 35), to an uprising in Bayamo headed by *mulato* militia officer Nicolás Morales (35), to a reference to the Aponte Rebellion, one of the largest slave rebellions of its time in Cuba (223, 232).[20] However, she also mentions several pieces of cultural and political history mentioning black agents from other national backgrounds: African-American runaways who find refuge within the indigenous Seminole tribe (103), José Leonardo Chirino, a black man who led an uprising against Spaniards in Venezuela in 1795 (100), a Dominican slave uprising (100), and a mention of the black presence in Mexico, referring to Africans Cortéz brought to work in sugar mills (35). She makes several references to a political event which sent shockwaves throughout the Americas, which was the inspiration for many slave rebellions in its wake and even today represents the cornerstone of black political agency—the Haitian Revolution (38, 223). *Santa*

19. "Espejos de la paciencia" written in 1608 by Silvestre de Balboa is an epic poem considered the first Cuban work of literature.

20. The 1795 Bayamo uprising as well as the Aponte Rebellion are thoroughly discussed in Matt D. Childs's *The 1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba and the Struggle Against Atlantic Slavery* (2006).

lujuria's recasting of Cuban history which highlights black contribution extends to an interconnecting discourse of the depiction of black agency in the Americas at large.

Two characters in particular, Salvador Hierro, a free black man who is a helmsman on the *Saeta*, the ship captained by Albor Aranda, and Lucila's brother José, are figures who have revolutionary associations and best embody Rojas's theme of centering black subjectivity. DeCosta-Willis describes José as a "revolutionary hero" who is "modelled after the historical José Antonio Aponte" (109), leader of the aforementioned 1812 Aponte Rebellion. Also modeled after a historical figure, the character Salvador (aside from also sharing the name of the black savior of the aforementioned epic poem) is a reference to Salvador Ternero, a black militiaman who was a co-conspirator of Aponte's and who was punished with Aponte after the uprising was quelled (Childs 95). In the constructing of José's and Salvador's characters, history and fiction are intertwined.[21] Both of these characters are not only depicted as being involved in pivotal moments in Cuban history, but they also represent ways in which members of black society were able to exercise levels of agency—Salvador's gaining status through his former military service and José through his leadership role in a respected *cabildo.*[22]

The Aponte Rebellion is one of the episodes Rojas connects to the Haitian Revolution. The connection of black political agency in Cuba to Haiti is not only a reflection of the political atmosphere in the Revolution's aftermath, but could also be seen as an allusion to recognizing

21. Both the characters of José and Salvador are indicted for being co-conspirators in the Aponte Rebellion (*Santa lujuria* 246). *Santa lujuria*'s José, like the historical José, is the leader of a *cabildo,* in fact, he is the leader of the *cabildo* founded by Aponte, Changó-Teddun (245). Meanwhile, like the historical Salvador, *Santa lujuria*'s Salvador is also a free black militiaman (151), and like the historical Salvador, he is executed in the aftermath of the rebellion (232). The only reason the novel's José escapes execution is because he feigns insanity in an episode I will analyze later.

22. Participation in military service was a common way black men were able to achieve freedom in exchange for service to the Spanish crown. See Jane Landers's chapter "Transforming Bondsmen into Vassals: Arming Slaves in Colonial Spanish America" in *Arming Slaves: From Classical Times to the Modern Age* (2006).

the role and place of people of color in contemporary constructions of national identity—throughout the Diaspora, Haití was and is still seen as a point of origin and source of inspiration for expressions of black agency.[23] The "horrors of Saint Domingue" echoes throughout *Santa lujuria*, much as it did throughout the world when it took place (Fischer ix). If any event in history is representative of centering black political agency, it is the establishment of the world's first black republic. There are several mentions of Haiti in the novel which overshadow many of *Santa lujuria*'s references to the slave population and black participation in revolutionary movements, particularly ones which portray slaveowners' fears that something similar could happen in Cuba. For example, Don Antonio suggests that Spain should create more divisions in the ranks of their black militias giving certain classes of blacks more privileges than others, discouraging solidarity, to make sure that "el peligro de Saint Domingue se alejará de Cuba" (38). During an uncomfortable conversation with members of the white elite, Albor Aranda mentions slave uprisings in other parts of Latin America, and the narrator suggests that talk of uprisings refer to "el sacrilego tema haitiano" (100). Additionally, in a passage where Filomeno describes African American runaway slaves, he suggests their motivations are "fundada de lograr hacerse libres en la isla de Haití" (103). Lastly, the Aponte Rebellion is described as "una rebelión que 'pudo ser semejante a la de Haití'" (223). Rojas suggests the Aponte Rebellion was inspired by the successful Haitian Revolution; however, she also emphasizes the draconian punishments meted out as a part of suppressing the Rebellion which was ultimately unsuccessful: "[S]obre todo en relación con uno de los compinches del negro Aponte, el moreno libre Salvador, que a estas ya habrán decapitado como escarnio, al igual que se hizo con Aponte y su 'Estado Mayor', cuyas cabezas se exhibieron en jaulas de hierro en sitios bien visibles de La

23. In Chapter 2 of her manuscript *The Borders of Dominicanidad: Race, Nation and Archives of Contradiction*, Lorgia García-Peña discusses the centrality of Haiti in the political imaginary of the Americas as well as a source of literary inspiration and African pride in the Americas.

Habana" (232). Such violent and public punishment was surely instituted in order to discourage future uprisings; however, the inclusion of these details is a part of the earlier mentioned questioning of the myth of Cuban ethnic solidarity. Leading up to the Cuban national moment, episodes such as the Aponte Rebellion fly in the face of the ameliorative Martían rhetoric "no hay odio de razas porque no hay razas" that would later form the foundation of Cuban national identity. During a conversation between Don Antonio and a priest in which they discuss political events in which blacks and *mulatos* play a role, Don Antonio exclaims, "La historia tiene que ser escrita…tal cual es, sin omisiones sospechosas, ni tratándose de infelices exclavos" (39). The meaning of "tal cual es" differs according to who is writing history. Rojas's recounting of the many episodes in Cuban history and the history of the Americas at large addresses this very fundamental concern of historical authority by centering the roles of people of color, demonstrating that the concerns of "infelices esclavos" was a part of what drove the actions of historical agents, and that *Santa lujuria* is a part of recuperating the "omisiones sospechosas" left out by hegemonic historical discourse.

Valorizing Afro-descendant Knowledge

Just as centering black subjectivity, agency and contributions to national identity is a theme which ties all the novels I analyze in this project together, so is the idea of contrasting different types of knowledge or different discursive registers. Earlier examples which best compare to the valorization of knowledge and tradition considered "Other" in *Santa lujuria* are found in my analysis of *Malambo* concerning the importance of the *cabildos*, Afro-syncretic religion, herbal remedy and oral tradition. Similarly, *Santa lujuria* presents a contrast between a Eurocentric perspective and an Afro-descendant one, echoing *Malambo* in its portrayal of the

cabildo as well as the use of herbs as a symbol of African-derived knowledge. One of the principle ways in which Rojas makes this contrast is through the characterization of Filomeno. The son of Lucila and Don Antonio's union, he is constantly referred to as *el marquesito de color quebrado.* While this description of him makes it clear that he is phenotypically marked by blackness, Filomeno makes it clear that he wishes to disassociate himself from his origins, referring to his black heritage as "sangre impura" (82). He takes great pains to ensure that his skin doesn't darken by applying ointments and staying out the sun, although he also expresses frustration at the fact that he knows even his riches won't rid him of the "shame" of his origins:

> Lamento que no me frotaran las unturas desde que nací; de habérseme hecho quizás yo fuera igual de blanco que mi padre el marqués. Empero, seguro estoy que mis riquezas me favorecen, y si son más esas riquezas, abochornaré menos el gusto de mi sociedad. Yo creo que mi color quebrado ofende más por mi oscuro origen. (83)

Further complicating Filomeno's self-image is the fact that he is bilingual and bicultural—he is culturally literate in both the European world of letters, the world in which his father makes sure he is educated in preparation for him to become an heir, and in the African languages and Afro-descendant religious traditions of his mother Lucila and uncle José. While he makes it clear that he disdains this "Other" knowledge and considers it inferior to a Eurocentric world view, at the same time, he demonstrates his familiarity with it. For example, in a description of an Africanized rendition of a traditional Catholic prayer he hears a group of blacks and *mulatos* reciting, he demonstrates this combination of familiarity and disdain:

> No había escuchado antes como aquella mañana de enero, rezos dichos de forma más extraña y a la vez más emotiva, porque resultó una susurrante letanía de los

> muchos negros y mulatos en su jerigoniza. 'Makio María' (*Salva María*), 'Okún fun are' (*llena eres de gracia*)…La traducción la hice yo, pues el trato obligado con ellos me permitió entender ese lenguaje salvaje de tan mal gusto. (89)

In demonstrating this cultural dexterity, even though Filomeno demeans the traditions and language of his Afro-descendant heritage, he cannot fully divorce himself from, to borrow Fanon's phrase, the "fact" of his blackness.

Another example of Filomeno's disdain yet familiarity with Afrocentric knowledge is seen in his description of the Día de Reyes celebration in an account entitled "Relación Sobre la Cena por el Día de Reyes y el Concierto en casa de doña Isabel de Flandes, y Otros Hechos de Interés, Ocurridos Durante las más Larga Estancia de mi padre don Antonio Ponce de León y Morato, marqués de Aguas Claras, en sus Posesiones de San Agustín de Las Floridas, que Yo Vi o me Contaron" (*Santa lujuria* 81). An absurdly long title that mocks the conventions common to European chroniclers of detailing the episodes that they relate within the title, it refers to the pretentiousness of the written register presented in the formal European tradition. Instead of eventually being regarded a significant historical account, Filomeno's writing becomes a "libro raro o curiosidad literaria" (82) in the contemporary period, and Rojas, in the voice of a contemporary interlocutor ironically describes Filomeno as "el ya olvidado pero ilustre hombre de leyes" for having written it (81). The figure of Filomeno as a man of letters who values the written register is presented as a counterpoint to the figure of Lucila who makes the navigation of legally achieving whiteness in such a way that she continues to rely upon the traditions of the Afro-descendent community. Filomeno's writing, his reliance on the validity of written discourse and the way his perspective contrasts with what he describes recalls the academic Chema who initially makes a trip to Malambo to write a book about Peruvian traditions to be

sold to a European audience. In Filomeno's case, his written account is reduced to nothing more than a curious footnote, consigned to the margins of history. In Chema's case, his book project is forgotten and never completed. In each case, the authors of each novel depict the failure of the hegemonic, official means of written discourse and, in effect, invert the Eurocentric value system.

Filomeno's contradictory ways of negotiating his bicultural literacy go beyond his tone in describing African-derived languages and traditions in writing and extends toward his ambivalent embrace or rejection of the elements themselves. Although he associates himself with these elements with a certain degree of reluctance and maintains an ambivalent relationship with them, he ultimately embraces them because they ostensibly benefit him. For example, he embraces the ointments that he obsessively applies to lighten his skin which are prepared for him by Lucila from herbs collected and dedicated to the orisha Osaín by José (82-83). While he goes to the extent of burning off a butterfly symbol that his grandmother Aborboleta scratches into his hand at birth, emblematic of his wanting to erase any evidence of his origins (193), he still relies on his grandmother's talisman for security (198).

Not only does Filomeno embrace certain Afro-religious elements which benefit him, he believes in their power, despite his reluctance to be associated with them publicly. For example, Filomeno is one of the presiding justices during José's sentencing after being accused of participating in the earlier discussed Aponte Rebellion. José feigns insanity in order to avoid execution, gesticulating wildly, jumping, slithering and yelling threats in Lucumí, an African language which Filomeno understands and occasionally translates to the other justices. During this episode, José approaches Filomeno and takes his talisman, holding it hostage until Filomeno makes a recommendation that he be committed to the insane asylum instead of the executioner's

block (248-50). Knowing Filomeno understands Lucumí and relies on the talisman, José manipulates him, using Filomeno's bicultural literacy and ambivalent relationship to elements from his African heritage against him.

The last example of Filomeno's complicated, utilitarian relationship to elements from his African heritage is before he presents himself to the Spanish king to claim his inheritance. Filomeno partakes in sacred herbal baths prepared by Lucía (268), a special diet recommended by José after consulting with the Oracle (268), and a ritual performed by José in Lucumí to rid him of bad influences (270). Filomeno humbly submits himself to these rituals and even insists on getting white clothing made for him to wear (271), a reference to the wearing of white in the process of becoming a *santero* in the syncretic Cuban religion of Santería. Filomeno's adherence to these rituals and traditions serve as a mere means to an end for him. While Lucila's continued participation in the Afro-descendant community after she attains her *papeles de blanco* serve a communal purpose, Filomeno, in contrast, appropriates elements from his Afro-descendant heritage only when it suits him and only in circumstances when it serves to provide him ostensible protection for personal gain. Rojas's presentation of Filomeno's contradictory, simultaneous embrace and rejection of religious and cultural elements associated with his black heritage serves to provide a thematic contrast between Afro-descendant elements of Cuban identity, the Eurocentric aspirations of members of the Cuban elite and the inherent ideology of white supremacy those aspirations entail. Her characterization of a man who can never completely divorce himself from his black "roots" comments on a Cuban national discourse which cannot ultimately evade the reality of racial difference and inequality despite a national identity sustained upon the rhetoric of racial unification.

Narrative Temporality, Tone and Challenging Historical Authority

Connected to the theme of the valorization of knowledge which resists dominant epistemology is that of experimentation with narrative form. The features of centering subaltern ways of knowing and stylistic experimentation shared by each novel in this project make some commentary about the transmission of history—how it is recorded, the language used to record it, the genres of which it consists, and the temporal space from which it is related. I explore this theme earlier in my analysis of *A Mercy*, first, regarding the voice of Florens's mother, one transmitted from a separate temporal plane from which the events of the novel transpire, and secondly, regarding the lyrical, oral, non-standard, disruptive qualities of Florens's prose, a contestation of the chronologically linear, literal manner in which History is narrated. Likewise, in the following chapter, I analyze Charún-Illescas's usage of italics in *Malambo* to represent pieces of Afro-descendant collective cultural memory—folktales, religious myth, and traditional songs—and her insertion of them into the historical record. In *Santa lujuria*, italics are also present to represent a narrative shift, but in this case, it is used to denote a transcription of Filomeno's written "Relación" referred to earlier as well as a transcription of a note later found within the pages of one of Filomeno's notebooks. As in other stylistic elements that I will comment upon below, this particular shift is first used ironically to mockingly call attention to Filomeno's pretentions towards a European standard and presentation of himself as an erudite man of letters although he nevertheless belies a raging insecurity. In connection to the italic rendering of Filomeno's "Relación" and in a few other instances, is a narrator centuries removed from the events of the novel which makes comments on certain events with hindsight knowledge. The appearance of this contemporary voice in the middle of a novel set in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century is jarring and disruptive to the chronology of the main narrative. I believe the narrator is the same throughout *Santa lujuria*; however, the emergence of

this narrator from a contemporary period is only occasionally made clear. This particular mode of *Santa lujuria*'s narrative voice provides a commentary on the construction of history and its subsequent interventions—a meta-meditation on the question of historical authority, as a work of historical fiction itself. [24] An interesting example of this chronologically removed narrative voice is a transcription of found notes from a curator addressed to another researcher, Zoila L. Becali, a contemporary Cuban musicologist and historian ("Zoila Lapique Becali"). When describing these notes later found within the pages of one of Filomeno's notebooks, the narrator begins: "Que el azar es un informante fortuituo y oportunito del que escribe, lo comprobé una vez más…" (120). The narrator refers to herself in the first person, and reveals herself to be a researcher or investigator or some sort, commenting that the notes she found "al principio me pareció inútil para tener en cuenta" (120). The third-person narration throughout the novel suddenly transforms into first-person narration, and addresses the reader directly, referencing the usefulness (or lack thereof) of sources that she is gathering to write the very novel we are reading. To solidify that point, she adds, "Resultó una distracción la lectura de este tremendo embrollo del mestizaje…no era objeto fundamental de mi interés adentrarme en el árbol genealógico de la llamada nobleza criolla cubana, y mucho menos cuando, como en ese momento de la novela, la historia que iba tejiendo llegaba a un punto meridiano…" (123). Although the narrator claims that taking the time to read the notes is a distraction from her task, the content of the notes relates a case of a noble Cuban white *criollo* family with probable Afro-descendant ties, which parallels the plot of *Santa lujuria*. This inclusion of supposedly found notes dated "de fecha reciente" (*Santa lujuria* 120) addressed to an existing contemporary Cuban

24. The idea of a metanarrative dialogues with the previous novel in the trilogy of which *Santa lujuria* is a part, the earlier mentioned *El columpio de Rey Spencer*. The narrative goes back and forth between the findings of a digital investigator who attempts to recover parts of Cuban history, and the early twentieth-century family history of a writer tasked with creating a text in celebration of Cuba's 500th anniversary.

figure known for her work as a researcher is a way to playfully validate *Santa lujuria* itself, as a work which has also been carefully researched.[25] In the same passage cited above, the narrator overtly refers to the novel that she is writing, connecting it to *historia*. Rojas plays with the ambiguity of the Spanish term *historia,* with its possible meaning of 'story' or 'history.' Exposing the narrator as a researcher from a point in time centuries removed from the events she describes in the act of collecting sources to write her narrative is a way of exposing the processes by which history is constructed, demonstrating that the lines between 'story' and 'history' are indeed blurry.

The investigative framework which becomes apparent in *Santa lujuria* is related to working outside of a canon, undoubtedly influenced by Rojas's formation as a journalist (an educational background shared with author of *Malambo* Charún-Illescas). In her answer to an interview question about how she incorporates historical information within a work of fiction Rojas answers: "Además de una auto-disciplina, [el periodismo] me favoreció en una búsqueda, una investigación no académica, porque la investigación académica tiene un canon, pero la periodística no…Que puede ser oral o puede ser escrita, o puede ser un cuento o una canción; cualquier cosa que te conecte" ("Desde el periodismo" 141). Though journalism certainly has its limitations as a medium, it is a part of what has prompted Rojas to rely upon a variety of

25. Another example of this voice emerging is during the aforementioned italicized episode of Filomeno's "Relato." According to the narrator, the account of the Día de Reyes celebration is not put into print until two centuries from when the events take place and has been edited for clarity: "[D]espués de haber sido revisada con detenimiento, en cuanto a algunas rarezas a todas luces contraproducentes, pero respetando del manuscrito incluso ese cierto alarde imaginativo prodigado por el ingenuo literario aficionado que había en el…hombre de leyes Francisco Filomeno" (81). The previous passage evokes the language used in contemporary prefaces to translations of works or edited renditions of archaic works regarding the idea of staying "faithful" to the original author's intentions or "spirit" of the work despite editorial interventions. The question of "faithfulness," accuracy or of an intermediary "authentically" representing the writings of an original author applies to later works in the Cuban canon such as *Autobiografía de un esclavo* (1840 in English, 1937 in Spanish) written by Juan Francisco Manzano, undoubtedly influenced by Domingo del Monte and English translator Richard Madden (See Silvia Molloy's "From Serf to Self" for more information on the interventions regarding Manzano's text) or *Biografía de un cimarrón* (1966) dictated by Esteban Montejo yet mediated by Miguel Barnet.

sources—oral, written, story, song—allowing her to trouble the canon in a recuperative way, questioning historical claims to authority.

The last stylistic element I want to analyze is *Santa lujuria*'s tone. The primary title of the novel is in itself an indicator of its ironic, derisive tone and abundant use of religious language as sexual metaphor (DeCosta-Willis 108). Juxtaposing the sacred with the profane demythifies the idea that the Catholic church served as a mitigating influence against slavery by demonstrating its complicity (DeCosta-Willis 103); however, I would add that it highlights the patriarchal structure and language of the Church being wedded to the patriarchal ideology of the earlier discussed premise of sexual conquest and the juridical discourse (*el derecho de bragueta*) which essentially legalized the sexual mistreatment of female slaves. A prime example is at the appearance of the phrase "santa lujuria" in the novel when Don Antonio rationalizes his decision not to confess his sexual promiscuity to the priest: "¿¡Confesarme yo esta *santa lujuria*?! ¡Ay, no!...No tuve culpa, Dios me hizo así. *Ésta es mi santa lujuria, el demonio en el paraiso*" (*Santa lujuria* 48, italics original to text). Don Antonio justifies his hedonistic, abusive sexual excesses in the name of God. Rojas demonstrates how religious authority becomes conflated with sexual authority and makes the point that both contributed to the perpetuation of the institution of slavery. Lastly, even Don Antonio's death is depicted in darkly comic terms—he dies in the middle of having sex with a slave woman and rigor mortis sets in while his penis is still erect. To avoid any speculation about the way he dies, his member is cut off and thrown to pigs (188)—poetic justice for Don Antonio, who lived by the sword and died by the sword.[26]

In sum, Rojas's experimentation with narrative shifts is consistent with the novel's overall aim to question historical authority and to trouble the canonical ways in which history is

26. Don Antonio's death could be an ironic biblical allusion to Matthew 26:52 (NLT): "Put away your sword," Jesus told him. "Those who use the sword will die by the sword," with "sword," of course, used as a sexual metaphor.

constructed and transmitted. Furthermore, her use of irony and a farcical tone which juxtaposes the sacred and profane furthers her project of exposing the patriarchal ideology of both religious and juridical discourse which justified the institution of slavery and the sexual mistreatment of female slaves.

"La Cuestión Racial" in Contemporary Cuba

After an examination of consistent themes within my corpus, the question Why now? is important to the project as a whole in order to understand what it is about contemporaneity that prompts the authors of each novel to make a return to the past. My argument throughout is that each novel responds to the sociopolitical climate surrounding the time of their respective publications and that one of the most effective ways to respond to discursive sociopolitical shifts—be it the plausibility of a "post-racial" U.S. society with the advent of Obama's election examined in the chapter on *A Mercy*, or of a rising black consciousness focused on advocating for governmental representation of Afro-Peruvians examined in the chapter on *Malambo*—is to examine a moment in history where fundamental questions regarding national identity first arise. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, rather than specifically countering "official" discourse, *Santa lujuria* can be placed within the framework of supporting the Revolutionary project to "deconstruct pre-revolutionary historiography" (DeCosta-Willis 106) and to recognize the contributions of Cubans of color within the formation of national identity. However, one of the drawbacks of the Revolution, despite its incorporative efforts, was an ultimate invisibilizing of racial inequality which persisted because of the impulse to base national identity upon racial harmony. Because of the Marxist focus on eliminating class inequality, addressing racial disparities fell under the umbrella of addressing social injustice overall and political unity was

seen as the primary struggle—racism was assumed to have been abolished along with class inequality. As a consequence, race became a forbidden, "divisive" topic, while discrimination persisted (Fernandez 119). As Alejandro de la Fuente states in *A Nation for All*, "The revolutionary government imposed its own brand of official silence on race…Race was treated as a divisive issue, its open discussion as a threat to national unity. The government has 'solved' the racial problem: to speak about it was to address a nonissue" (4). However, with the advent of the Special Period, a time of intense economic crisis in Cuba in the 90s following the collapse of the former Soviet Union, there began to be a greater tolerance for addressing topics within cultural and academic discourse once considered taboo (Valladares-Ruiz 130). What was it about the Special Period that facilitated this increased interest in and higher tolerance for focusing on and discussing what is commonly referred to in Cuba as "la cuestión racial"? Some scholars attribute it to the fact the economic crisis made racial tensions more acute and others note that it was also in response to greater interest in the topic of race in Cuba from outside of Cuba, particularly the U.S. (Fernandez 128). A widely cited representation of the more open manner of discussing the topic of race in Cuba is a 1996 issue of leading Cuban magazine in the humanities and social sciences, *Temas*.[27] The introductory "Enfoque" section of the issue entitled "De la etnia y la raza," encapsulates the impulse behind this new turn toward a more open discussion of race:

> Etnicidad y raza son componentes de la identidad nacional…Esa compleja historia [of the various ethnic groups forming Cuban identity], *todavía insuficientemente elaborada*…demand[a] un enfoque multidisciplinario…En

27. During a 2013 trip to Cuba, I met with a researcher at the Instituto Cubano de Investigación Juan Marinello in Havana named Rodrigo Espina Prieto, an anthropologist interested in the topic of race. I have him to thank for procuring me a physical copy of the famed *Temas* issue on "la cuestión racial."

> Cuba, *la cuestión de la desventaja social había dejado de ser—hasta que fuera retomada a mediados de los 80—un tópico del debate público.* A diferencia de los casos de otros grupos…ninguna organización social había considerado que *los problemas relacionados con el color de la piel* fueran parte de su agenda. Desde que el discurso de la *rectificación* lo recuperara, ello se ha ido convirtiendo en un asunto del mayor interés, *tanto dentro como fuera del Cuba*.
>
> (3, emphasis mine)

Taken together, in addition to being a continuation of the Revolutionary impulse for greater representation of black subjects, which corresponds to the same impulse for the proliferation of neo-slave narratives in the U.S. at the onset of the Black Arts Movement and beyond (DeCosta-Willis 105-06), *Santa lujuria* fits into the 90s-era framework of *apertura* regarding the discussion of race in Cuban cultural discourse.[28] In correspondence with the points highlighted above, *Santa lujuria* emerges as a work which is a part of continuing to elaborate upon the complexity of the history of race in Cuba, of addressing the question of race in public discourse, and of connecting Cuban discussions of race with similar discussions in other national contexts. In connection with the last point, I refer to the historical allusions to revolutionary movements and other details which center the political agency of people of color in the Americas found throughout *Santa lujuria*, an element which frames the novel in the context of an American African Diaspora. Rojas's figuring her novel as a part of a transnational dialogue on black political contribution and agency is perhaps more overt than that of the other two I analyze in

28. Interestingly, when personally asked the question of whether the Special Period had any influence over her work in an interview, Rojas doesn't specifically mention issues of economics or race, but cited the fact that journalism, the sector in which she worked, was gravely impacted because of the cost of paper. Since her journalistic work was limited, she had more time on her hands to write her novels ("Desde el periodismo"140).

this project, but all three are undoubtedly a part of reexamining and questioning historical production and participating in a diasporic project of historical recuperation.

Though *Santa lujuria* is a product of the 90s, I end with a more contemporary example which demonstrates the fact that the discussion of race in Cuba, though there began to be a transition towards more openness in the mid-80s through the 90s, is still a matter of fierce debate.

On March 23, 2013, *The New York Times* published an article entitled "For Blacks in Cuba, the Revolution Hasn't Begun." It was penned by Roberto Zurbano, the first black Cuban editor and publisher at Casa de las Américas. In sum, the article maintains that despite gains made and despite Cuban rhetoric of racial equality, Afro-Cubans still suffer from lack of economic access. He writes, "Racism in Cuba has been concealed and reinforced in part because it isn't talked about…To question the extent of racial progress was tantamount to a counterrevolutionary act. This made it almost impossible to point out the obvious: racism is alive and well." He ends on a hopeful note, suggesting that there is still the possibility for equality and opportunity for Cubans of all colors. The publication of this article set off a firestorm of controversy. He was widely excoriated in the Cuban press and in academic circles and demoted from his senior editorial position—all because he dared intimate that the Revolution was not wholly successful within the context of achieving racial equality. As Zurbano, and in her way, Marta Rojas in *Santa lujuria* attest, an examination of race and its relation to Cuban national identity is a vibrant and, at times, still polemical theme which links history to the present.[29]

29. In a trip to Cuba in May 2013, I had the unique opportunity to meet Zurbano and we discussed the differences between racial identity in the U.S. and in the Caribbean, Obama's election and the NYT article controversy. He expressed preferring the U.S. "one-drop rule" conception of race. "In the U.S., one drop of black blood makes you black, but in the Caribbean, one drop of white blood makes you not black," he explained, opining

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have investigated *Santa lujuria*'s questioning of national discourse on Cuban national identity which idealizes *mestizaje* and racial harmony by representing the sexual conquest of the Americas via the bodies of women of color. I discuss the novel's relationship to furthering a Revolutionary project of inclusion of black subjects to the construction of the Cuban nation as well as its response to a Special Period-era opening of acceptable public discussion on race and racial injustice. Throughout the chapter, I relate themes in *Santa lujuria* with recurrent themes also discussed in the chapters on *A Mercy* and *Malambo:* the historical novel as counter-foundational fiction, the depiction of the relationship between gender and nation, focusing on its (re)writing of the *mulata* archetype, the language of commodification, and the graphic depiction of physical and sexual violence against black and *mulata* women. I explore *Santa lujuria*'s theme of centering black political agency and analyze the novel's contrast of Afrocentric knowledge with a Eurocentric worldview, a theme which most strongly ties *Santa lujuria* to *Malambo*. I then examine *Santa lujuria*'s experimentation with narrative form, relating these stylistic elements to a reexamination of historical authority and end by connecting *Santa lujuria*'s exploration of the past with contemporary discussions of race. In my concluding chapter, I explore the overarching question of a shared black diasporic discourse represented by this project's corpus.

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that there is a lack of black pride in the Caribbean. I was shocked to hear a Cuban express a preference for the conception of race in the U.S., especially because I was used to hearing about the supposedly positive "racial fluidity" in the Caribbean versus the negative "racial fixity" in the U.S.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: (RE)WRITING GENRE AS DIASPORIC SPACE

> It was her first time at this salon—her regular one was closed because the owner had gone back to Côte d'Ivoire to get married—but it would look, she was sure, like all the other African hair braiding salons she had known: they were in the part of the city that had graffiti, dank buildings, and no white people, they displayed bright signboards with names like Aisha and Fatima African Hair Braiding, they had radiators that were too hot in the summer, and they were full of Francophone West African women braiders, one of whom would be the owner and speak the best English and answer the phone and be deferred to by the others…The conversations were loud and swift, in French or Wolof or Malinke, and when they spoke English to customers, it was broken, curious, as though they had not quite eased into the language itself before taking on a slangy Americanism.
>
> —Chimananda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah*

In this fragment of *Americanah* (2013), a novel about a Nigerian woman who migrates to the United States but ultimately decides to return to her native home, Ifemelu, the main character, goes to an African hair salon in Trenton, New Jersey to get her hair braided. The hair salon reveals itself to be a microcosm of the African Diaspora, rooted in the context of the experience of migration to the United States. Though Ifemelu and the other customers and workers surrounding her in the shop have differing national backgrounds, speak different languages, and represent disparate class backgrounds, they are all drawn together out of a common experience—Afro-descendant women getting their hair done.[1]

The black hair salon as a symbol of diasporic blackness was also an idea I pondered during my 2013 trip to Santiago de Cuba, which I reference in this project's introduction where I describe meeting a Congolese ambassador. While the ambassador's comments about my

1. Other studies investigating the diasporic space of the hair salon include *Black Behind the Ears: Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty Shops* (2007) by Ginetta Candelario in which she examines Dominican beauty culture and its negotiation of blackness, particularly regarding ideas surrounding hair texture, in a salon in Washington Heights, a community in New York City known for its large Dominican population.

"responsibility" due to having "African blood in my veins" prompted me to consider the parameters of an Afro-descendant commonality which went beyond phenotype and implied heritage, my visit to a Cuban hair salon prompted me to reconsider the idea of diasporic space and the interpretation of those spaces. I accompanied a young Angolan woman I met at the Día de África event I mention in the introduction to the Peluquería Belleza y Calidad, a small living room space transformed into a makeshift hair salon. As a U.S. American used to categorizing salons specializing in either "black" or "white" hair, I was surprised as I witnessed the stylist, whom I would categorize as white, proceed to wash, condition and flat-iron the hair of an Angolan woman I would consider black. I was in a familiar space, but because I viewed it through the lens of U.S. racial constructions different from those held by the stylist, a Cuban used to working with a diverse variety of hair textures, and probably even those of the Angolan student, a cultural outsider like myself, my interpretation of that space was challenged.

Just as the hair salon represents a diasporic space for the negotiation and construction of black female identity, a space not strictly tied to geography but rather to a common experience, I demonstrate how the genre of historical fiction represents the same. Genre itself, specifically the colonial neo-slave herstory, becomes a lingua franca through which differing iterations of blackness and their relation to national identity is expressed. Furthermore, the colonial neo-slave herstory functions not only as a diasporic space, but also as a site to challenge monolithic conceptions of blackness. Just as my experience in the Cuban living-room-turned-salon forced me to reexamine my culturally constructed ideas about race regarding "black" and "white" hair and who is likely to have experience with certain hair textures, encountering the colonial neo-slave herstory serves to challenge commonly held assumptions about the institution of slavery and its connection to race, gender and national identity before the national moment.

Within each chapter representing a particular interpretation of the diasporic space of the colonial neo-slave herstory, I have analyzed the interconnected themes related to the (re)writing of history each novel accomplishes: centering the experiences of women of color, highlighting the intersection between race and gender via the commodification of women's bodies, engaging the historical and juridical archive, troubling the historical and literary canon, and lastly, challenging the norms of who narrates history and how this history is relayed through narrative experimentation. In my concluding thoughts for this project I attempt to answer the questions I pose at the outset: How do fictional representations of the pre-national stage confront hegemonic registers of history? How does the portrayal of the experiences of women of color unsettle the masculine construction of the nation? And lastly, does historical fiction's exploration of the connection of slavery in the colonial era to national foundations articulate and problematize a shared black American discourse?

First, the pre-national stage is one of the elements which distinguishes my corpus from other contemporary narratives featuring the institution of slavery and centering the experiences of women. The pre-national period, or the colonial period, is integral to confronting hegemonic historical discourse because the official story of national foundation is central to its authoritative nature. With support from the archive, focusing on the period before the discourses informing national identity are solidified, each novel highlights often overlooked historical details as well as reexamines and reinterprets events and discourses upon which History is established, thereby challenging and (re)writing it. To give brief examples and reminders: *A Mercy* reexamines Bacon's Rebellion; rather than a mere precursor to the American Revolution, it is recast as evidence of a U.S. society as yet unencumbered by legally inscribed racial separation. In *Malambo,* the Spanish American Inquisition is featured, not simply as evidence of Catholicism

being used as an oppressive imperial tool in the New World, but as a representation of the erasure of Afro-descendant culture and religious tradition from Peruvian national identity. *Santa lujuria* includes a wealth of references to colonial revolutionary movements and slave uprisings throughout Cuba and the Americas at large which emphasize black political agency, evidence of the contributions of Afro-descendants to Pan-American independence and identity. The depictions of these historical highlights and reinterpretations within the diasporic space of the historical fiction genre not only call the authority of dominant history into question, but also underscore its literary, narrative elements, revealing it to be as much a construction as the fiction which engages it.

Connected to the pre-national setting and its importance to these novels' challenge to dominant history is the importance of centering the experiences of women of color in their refutation of the masculinist discourse of the nation. Afro-descendant women, as doubly marginalized figures, triply marginalized if one is woman, black and slave, are the main protagonists of each novel in my corpus, and in the case of *A Mercy*, specifically cast as narrators. I have shown how the privileging of their experiences and perspectives is a counter to the overwhelmingly Eurocentric, upper-class, male perspective which characterizes dominant historical discourse as well as the Founding Fathers of whose writing it consists. While each novel illustrates the victimization of women as a consequence of the patriarchal societies they inhabit, the protagonists Florens, Pancha and Lucila all maintain or achieve a degree of agency despite the victimization they face: Florens inserts her account into the historical canon from the margins as a literate slave, Pancha maintains her independence by her reliance on her skill as an herbalist passed down to her from women of generations past, and Lucila, in a (re)writing of the *mulata* archetype, gains sexual and political agency, creating a sense of solidarity with other

black and *mulato* Cubans. These novels' depiction of Afro-descendant female subjectivity and the casting of Afro-descendant women as protagonists and narrators are all powerful refutations of the masculinist, patriarchal construction of the nation.

Related to countering patriarchal national discourse is the question of how each novel demonstrates the links between national foundation and slavery in the colonial era, and whether these links are evidence of a shared black American discourse. In each chapter, I have investigated the way the novels illustrate slavery's inextricable connection to national foundation. To give brief examples: in *A Mercy*, Jacob Vaark buys slaves (hires indentured servants, and marries) for the purpose of establishing his estate, Milton, a microcosm of American society; slavery's link to acquiring wealth and establishing oneself in Peruvian society is represented in the character De la Piedra in *Malambo*; and the archetypal characters in *Santa lujuria*, namely, the slave mother (Aborboleta), the *mulata* (Lucila), and the *negrero* (Buen Ángel), all representations of foundational aspects of Cuban national identity, are influenced by slavery and the slave trade. Overall, the depiction of the institution of slavery in this corpus is linked to the capitalist economy it fueled, which was integral to national foundation, as well as to conceptions of race and national identity shaped by the slave-holding society.

Addressing the second part of my last research question regarding evidence of a shared black American discourse, in conclusion, I return to the concept of genre as diasporic space. The commonality which runs throughout the black communities represented by my corpus does not reside in Afro-descendant heritage as a categorical trait. Rather, it lies in the common evocation of the cultural memory of slavery as a way to express the relationship between national origins and racialized elements of contemporary national identity, which, of course, differs according to cultural, linguistic and historical context. In sum, the colonial neo-slave herstory is a genre

where varying, nuanced iterations of blackness can be, to borrow Stuart Hall's term, "enunciated." Genre, then, is (re)written as diasporic space and functions as a diasporic discourse whereby writers of the American African Diaspora can recognize commonality while also expressing difference.

Having established the current import of my corpus on negotiating diasporic black identity, I now turn to possible avenues of future investigation. A prospective thematic line of inquiry is the cultural memory of slavery and the possibility of works of historical fiction featuring the institution of slavery to serve as a strategy to overcome cultural trauma. I use the phrase "cultural memory" when describing the depiction of slavery in my corpus because although the actual memory of the institution is centuries removed from those who engage it in contemporary literature, the memory of it has nevertheless been culturally "inherited"; the residuals of the trauma it has inflicted are still very present in contemporary society. Examining the genre of historical fiction within the framework of confronting and attempting to overcome this cultural trauma through fictive historical recuperation is an aspect of (re)writing I would subsequently explore.

Lastly, in the future, I would like to further contextualize my work by undertaking archival research. I have already highlighted the central strategy the writers in my corpus have employed to (re)write the nation: engaging the archive. As demonstrated throughout my project, the authors of the novels I analyze have completed substantial archival investigation in order to construct their narratives. While I have consulted secondary sources in order to gain a better understanding of the historical events and figures referenced in the novels and to ground my analysis within the cultural and political milieu of the novels' settings, I would like to provide an

even richer framework for (re)writing by embarking upon my own engagement of the archive. Morrison, Charún-Illescas and Rojas have already provided me with clues for where to begin.

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