

NEGOTIATIONS OF CROSSING, DISLOCATION AND ROOTEDNESS:
PERSPECTIVES ON (RE)MEMORY, SPIRITUALITY AND GENDER IN
BLACK WOMEN'S LITERATURE OF THE AMERICAS

By

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(Under the Direction of Susan Canty Quinlan and Lesley Feracho)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyzes cosmological systems of African descent and how they depict a deeper, rooted connection between Africans in diaspora and traditional African religious beliefs practiced prior to the Middle Passage. Grounded in Jacqui Alexander's concept of African cosmological systems as manifestations of locatedness, rootedness and belonging, I explore how these systems map the individual and collective relationships with the Divine. I question the connection between the fragmented figure of the diasporic African and the collectiveness of the African diaspora community in their new social conditions from a spiritual and, more specifically, a Black woman's perspective based on the works that comprise this study.

I demonstrate how the protagonists of African descent can be viewed as liminal figures negotiating identity and collectiveness through complex and fluid demonstrations of spirituality. To exemplify this point, the main works I analyze are *Um defeito de cor* (2006) by Ana Maria Gonçalves, *Daughters of the Stone* (2009) by Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa, *When the Spirits Dance Mambo* (2004) by Marta Moreno Vega, *La isla bajo el*

mar (2009) by Isabel Allende and *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison. Through their relationships with the Divine, many of these Black female protagonists occupy not just marginalized and subaltern positions within the dominant society, but also the “third space” of the ancestral realm of the Orishas. It is through this contact with ancestral roots and the Sacred that, from their liminal positions, these women are able to negotiate issues of crossing, dislocation, meaning, and belonging, many times turning to (re)memory and ancestral knowledge to map their connection with the Divine.

In my study, I prioritize historical and literary texts from Brazil, the Caribbean and the United States to develop a comparative, Pan-American study on the way in which African spiritual traditions arrived and mutated within the geographic space portrayed in each of the literary works. Additionally, I share the findings of interviews conducted with three of my main authors, Ana Maria Gonçalves, Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa, and Dr. Marta Moreno Vega on issues relating to spirituality, sexuality, gender and identity as women of the African Diaspora.

INDEX WORDS: Black Women’s Literature, African Diaspora, Hybridity, Liminality, Syncretism, Spirituality, African Diaspora Religions, Afro-Caribbean Cults, Slavery, Middle Passage, Crossing, Dislocation, Rootedness, Memory, Identity, Gender, Maternity, Motherhood, Re-Memory, Santería, Candomblé, Vodou, Transnationalism, Feminism – Cross-cultural studies, Myth, Patakís, Yemanjá (Yoruba deity), Oshun (Yoruba deity), Sexuality, Homosexuality – Religious aspects, Ana Maria Gonçalves, Toni Morrison, Jacqui Alexander, Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa, Mayra Montero, Marta Moreno Vega.

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DEDICATION

To my husband and soul mate, Juliano. For always believing in me and for standing by me along every step of the way. You complete me. To my children, Gabriella, Gabriel and Rafael. For your patience and understanding. To the many sources of spiritual inspiration in writing this dissertation. *Paz, Namastê e muito axé. Que assim seja!*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

POR EL MAR DEL CARIBE

*Por el mar del Caribe, llegaron los barcos. Iban
cargados de negros, iban cargados de blancos.
Llegaron los barcos.*

*Llegaron los barcos por el mar del Caribe: Europa
riendo, África llorando. África llegó llorando.*

*Por el mar del caribe, África llegó llorando, venía
con sus oricha, mitos y leyendas, rituales mágicos. Y
la esperaban arcabuces, cepos, barracones y
maltratos; la esperaba la voz del amo: siempre
debajo el negro; encima siempre el látigo.
La esperaba la voz del amo.*

*La esperaba la voz del amo por el mar del Caribe,
pero también las olas hablaron, y en el cuero de las
rocas se oyó el tambor africano.
Se oyó el tambor africano.*

*Por el mar del Caribe, se oyó el tambor africano;
las islas se poblaron: sudor y trabajo y rebeldía y
heroísmo; amor, danzas y cantos.
Las islas se poblaron.*

*Las islas se poblaron por el mar del Caribe, los hijos
fueron brotando: blancos y negros, negros y
blancos; blancos, negros, mulatos, por el mar del
Caribe, por donde llegaron los barcos, por donde se
oyó el tambor, por donde se sintió la voz del amo;
por el camino del cuero, por el camino del látigo, se
juntaron las manos: tu mano y mi mano.*

Por el mar del Caribe, las manos se juntaron.

---Excilia Saldaña (Kele Kele 1988)

Origins and New Beginnings

At first sight, the poem chosen for the epitaph of this introductory chapter by the Afro-Cuban poet and writer Excilia Saldaña serves as a written portrait of the presence and influence of slavery in the New World at the historical moments in which millions of Africans arrived in the Americas and began new lives under the forced condition of slavery. The enslaved individuals who were able to survive the unspeakable horrors of the middle passage were sold upon arrival in the New World to owners of plantations stretching from the sugar cane fields of Brazil, northwards along the Caribbean islands of Cuba, The Dominican Republic, and Haiti, to the cotton plantations of the South of the United States.

The skillful repetitive lull of the lines of Saldaña's poem transports the reader to the waves that bathe the shores of the Caribbean islands and the Atlantic coastline of the Americas. As we read the poem, we are steered to the same waters that year upon year deposited boatloads of enslaved individuals into the slave markets of cities hungry to replenish their depleting plantation workforces. The same repetitive nature of the poem coupled with the *mestizaje* or racial mixing and cultural syncretism that are products of centuries of contact in the region between the Africans and the Europeans brings to mind the ideas set forth by Antonio Benítez Rojo in the introductory chapter to his critical text *La isla que se repite* (1989). The never-ending flow of human cargo that fueled the relentless need of the "machine" of the plantation system in the region or, in the words of Benitez Rojo, "Esa máquina, esa extraordinaria máquina, existe todavía; esto es, 'se repite' sin cesar. Se llama: la plantación" (xi). The same churning, incessant hunger of the plantation machine that ripped Africans from their homelands in Africa, brought

wealth to the New World, and deposited abundant riches in Europe, was also responsible for the constant “rebirth” of new forms of syncretic religions and diasporic communities throughout the Americas.

A more detailed reading of the introductory poem, however, reveals other elements that instigate a more encompassing dialogue insofar as the importance of the sea in the process of crossing, and the crossing itself resemble a transitory space within which Africans arrived in the slave-holding, patriarchal societies of the New World. The poem also establishes a strong connection between the displaced Africans and the countries of origin they forcibly abandoned on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. We note, as Saldaña highlights in the lines of the poem above, that Africans did not disembark the slave ships that transported them from their native countries of origin unaccompanied. The various tribes brought in their collective memory the myths, rituals of magic and healing and, above all, the Orishas that were part of the traditional African religious world vision to the New World environment.

I will argue that the spiritual elements that arrived in the Americas, accompanying the innumerable tribes of enslaved Africans, were transferred overwhelmingly by the women who survived the treacherous crossing. I intend to demonstrate how, oftentimes separated from family, in the New World, women took a leading role in the creation of new spiritual and community-based family systems on the plantations. Within these new systems, women attained positions of greater prominence and respect than were available to them as slaves in patriarchal societies.

It is precisely this point of the cultural elements that arrived on the slave ships in the hearts and minds of the African women and the transfer of these values, both orally

and written, to future generations of African descent that will serve as the base upon which I intend to develop my arguments. This Black woman's vantage point will not only mold my interpretations of the literary works that comprise my analytical *corpus*, but will serve to weave together the other critical texts that comprise this study.

Inspirations and Aspirations

The main inspiration for the title of my study, and serves as a compass to guide my study, are those of Jacqui Alexander in *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (2005). Rooted in the theoretical moorings of Alexander, I intend to initiate a dialogue about the way in which African cosmological systems represent a spiritual connection between Africans in diaspora and the religious traditions they were forced to abandon in their countries of origin. Moreover, I explore Alexander's concept that the Black cosmological systems are manifestations of locatedness, rootedness and belonging that map the individual and collective relationships with the Divine, and question the relationship between the fragmented individual of African descent and the collectiveness of the African Diaspora community in their new social conditions.

Building on theories presented in Chapter 2, namely Stuart Hall's ideas on diaspora and hybridity, W.E.B. Du Bois' notion of "double consciousness", Frantz Fanon's "Other", and Homi Bhabha's concepts of "third space" and "liminality", I use the terms "liminal" and "liminality" in this study to refer not merely to the marginalized social and gender position of the Black protagonists within the patriarchal slave-driven

society in which they find themselves, nor to the reality of being neither socially and culturally one thing or another within the New World society.

Moreover, I use liminality to describe the position of women of the African diaspora as figures, who, through the power attributed to them within the religious scope of the African diaspora religions, are able to enter into the “third space” of the ancestral realm of the Orishas. These women negotiate marginalized gender positions within the dominant society. Likewise, within the spiritual realm while possessed during trances, they negotiate complex gender identities. Ultimately, they assume androgynous positions while embodying gendered identities of the specific Orishas. It is through this contact with their ancestral roots and the sacred that, from their liminal positions, these women are able to negotiate meaning and belonging both as individuals and as members of a larger diasporic community.

My personal interest in the subject of this study is not based on one particular aspect such as hybridity, race or religion. I am not an active participant in any one of the African diaspora religions found here in the Americas. I am, however, a woman and mother to whom spirituality in its varying forms has always been of significant importance. My own spirituality is itself a post-modern mosaic of beliefs and traditions. My makeshift shrine houses statues of Buddha, Yemanjá, crystals and the works of Allan Kardec’s Spiritist Doctrine. I am very aware of my own negotiations of identity, as I myself have had to navigate different cultures for the greater part of my life. As such, it is hard to pinpoint my own identity at times. Not entirely one thing, yet not quite another becomes even more complicated when raising three bilingual and bicultural children. It is through this lens that I intend to examine each of the novels that present protagonists

who, besides their ties to the institution of slavery, share binding commonalities; the most significant of which for the purposes of this study is that of their Black religious beliefs and spirituality.

In my selection of literary works for this study, I chose to highlight primarily those of Black women writers and/or with Black women protagonists who due to luck, destiny or *force majeure*, arrived or were born in the New World under the yoke of slavery. These women, turning to their spiritual beliefs as a tool of resilience and, at times, resistance, fight for a better future not only for themselves and their immediate families, but also for their community and a diasporic people as a whole in an attempt to (re)create roots in a foreign land. More specifically, I prioritize historical and literary texts from Brazil, the Caribbean and the United States that provide a rich framework upon which to develop a comparative study on the way African spiritual traditions arrived and consequently evolved within the geographic space portrayed in each of the literary works. Similarly, I explore how each protagonist is forced to negotiate issues of crossing and dislocation by means of (re)memory and the sacred.

The work that serves as the cornerstone and main source of literary analysis for this study is the memorialistic and meta-historical text *Um defeito de cor* (2006) by the Brazilian writer, Ana Maria Gonçalves. The text, which in addition to weaving historical moments from the colonial era in Brazil with the day-to-day activities of African Brazilians throughout the XIX Century, presents themes such as spirituality, education, race, memory, sexuality and gender as narrated by the protagonist, Kehinde. Through the technique of memory or, as I intend to argue moored in the ideas of Toni Morrison, (re)memory, the narrator/protagonist relates events from her life spanning eight decades,

one ocean and two continents from her country of origin in Africa to Brazil, and back again. Unlike the other literary works I present in following, *Um defeito de cor* appears in all of the chapters of my study due to its richness of content and its portrayal of an African female protagonist as both a mediator of worlds and a hybrid *griot* surpassing both temporal and geographical boundaries.

To explore the themes of diaspora and identity, (re)memory and the institution of slavery, spirituality and the figure of the “divine” woman, as well as issues of gender and sexuality, the main literary texts that I propose to study in comparison to *Um defeito de cor* are: *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison, *Daughters of the Stone* (2009) by Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa, and *When the Spirits Dance Mambo* (2004) by Marta Moreno Vega. Other texts I refer to, albeit to a lesser degree are: *La isla bajo el mar* (2009) by Isabel Allende, *Reyita sencillamente* (2004) by Daisy Ribeira Castillo, *Del rojo de su sombra* (1992) by Mayra Montero, *Changó, el gran putas* (1983) by Manuel Zapata Olivella, *The Farming of Bones* (1998) by Edwidge Danticat, *O jogo de Ifá* (1980) by Sônia Coutinho, *Sortes de Villamor* (2010) by Nilma Lacerda, and *O diário de Bitita* (1986) by Carolina Maria de Jesus. My study is divided into eight chapters; each of which offering an analysis of one of the themes mentioned above based on the Lusophone, Hispanophone and Anglophone narratives.

Following my introductory chapter whose intent it is to present an outline for our study, In Chapter 2, I initiate a dialogue on questions of hybridity and cultural and racial identity in the Americas. Chapter 3 “Embarkations and Disembarkations: The Voices of the Orishas in the Americas” looks at a crossing of the same waters that brought the enslaved Africans to the Americas in order to explore the arrival of the voices of the

Orishas in the New World. Despite the adversities faced by the Africans in diaspora, particularly with regards to their religious practices, the African culture and traditions persevered.

I am interested in exploring the Orishas that hold a position of greater prominence within the African diasporic context, with my focus being the deities Yemanjá and Oshun. These goddesses pervade many of the works of this study and are important divinities within the syncretic African diasporic religions of Candomblé and Santería. I offer a panoramic view of the relevance of these goddesses within the context of women of the African diaspora based on the critical texts: *Iemanjá: a grande mãe africana no Brasil* (2008) by Armando Vallado, *Segredos guardados: Orixás na alma brasileira* (2005) by Reginaldo Prandi, and *Yemayá y Ochún: Kariocha, Iyalorcha y Olorichas* (1980) by Lydia Cabrera.

I intend to explore the images of the African goddesses in the works of my study, as well as the images and “voices” of other Orishas that penetrate the narratives. In doing so, I propose to establish an initial dialogue with other chapters, primarily chapters five and six, whose main themes include those of femaleness, divinity, maternity and sexuality. Due to the highly symbolic importance of water in African cosmology, I have chosen to highlight texts in which water and the theme of crossing can be considered as “protagonists” within the narrative, and lead the other protagonist(s) on a quest for spiritual and personal wholeness. Such is the case of *Changó el gran putas* (1983) by Manuel Zapata Olivella, *Um defeito de cor* (2006) by Ana Maria Gonçalves, and *Daughters of the Stone* (2009) by Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa. In this chapter, I also include

the thoughts and comments of the author of *Daughters of the Stone* shared during a personal interview about her work.

The critical texts chosen as a lens through which to analyze the literary works explore the arrival of the traditional African religions in the Americas and the syncretic adaptations of these beliefs in each particular region. Some of the critical texts upon whose ideas I draw in order to construct the framework for my analysis of the literary texts in this chapter are: George Brandon's *Santeria from Africa to the New World*, Joseph M. Murphy's *Santería: An African Religion in America*, Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert's *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah, and the Caribbean*, Roger Bastide's *The African Religions of Brazil*, Edison Carneiro's *Candomblés da Bahia*, Lydia Cabrera's *El Monte*, and Ruth Landes' *The City of Women*.

Chapter 4 "The Role of (Re) Memory as a Defense Mechanism in the Institution of Slavery in the New World" presents the issue of memory and, turning to the concept of "re-memory" as explained by Toni Morrison, how African diasporic traditions, ancestral presence and community serve as sources of defense, resistance and survival for slaves in the New World. Briefly stated, Morrison's "re-memory" involves the recreation of never before told or written inner lives and the ancestors, and consists in the compilation of personal memories as well as their repositioning. As such, I intend to explore in this chapter the way in which memory serves to redefine and reconstruct history, but in a spiral or circular manner instead of a linear one. I turn to the theories of Michel-Rolph Trouillot in *Silencing the Past* to dialogue with the writing or rewriting of historical events and attempts to fill in the missing pieces of information oftentimes omitted from national discourses.

Morrison's concept of rootedness is primarily based on the understanding of the ancestors as a base upon which individuals of African descent construct new identities and sense of communities within the emerging societies in the Americas. The capacity to "give voice" to the past and to the experiences of the ancestors is something of extreme historical importance when we consider the social condition under which Africans were forcibly maintained throughout the span of three hundred years of slavery in the New World. The power of the word through the act of telling and retelling histories of the ancestors provides Africans in Diaspora with a "power" by which to define themselves as individuals and as members of a larger diasporic community. I explore the oral tradition as a living source of age-old knowledge, as well as critical concepts regarding the importance of memory in the (re)construction of cultures not just based on the ideas of Morrison, but also on those of Paul Gilroy, Elizabeth Pérez, Conceição Evaristo, among others.

I expand my dialogue with Jacqui Alexander's text in Chapter 5: "Negotiations of Crossing, Dislocation, and Rootedness in the Context of the African Diaspora". This chapter concentrates on the concepts of locatedness, rootedness, and belonging. I explore how these themes serve to map the individual and collective relationships with the Divine within the African cosmological system. I intend to analyze the way in which Alexander, as well as Edouard Glissant and his concept of abyssal rooting and subjectivity and Michel-Rolph Trouillot's storage model of memory-history, represent these complex processes within the African Diaspora. I use these critical texts as a framework with which to explore the four main literary works of my study that depict or problematize processes of crossing, dislocation and cultural belonging experienced by the protagonists

throughout the course of the narrative: *Um defeito de cor*, *Daughters of the Stone*, *La isla bajo el mar* and *The Spirits Dance Mambo*. In this chapter, I also include the thoughts and comments of the author of *The Spirits Dance Mambo*, Dr. Marta Moreno Vega, shared during a personal interview about her works.

In order to elaborate on my analysis of crossing and the way in which the representation of African diasporic religions can be viewed as a larger negotiation of belonging, rootedness and locatedness, I have chosen to include an additional literary text in Chapter 5 that encompasses and exemplifies these processes: *Changó el gran putas* (1983) by Manuel Zapata Olivella. Olivella's text is unique in that it brings the voices of the Orishas into the narrative. However, much like the other four main literary works interweaves historical events with fiction to create a meta-historical narrative of the African arrival and presence in the Americas.

Chapters 6 and 7 of my study are of great personal interest to me, and likewise of particular importance to my analysis, as they comprise the main topics of this study: sacred manifestations of women, spiritual healing practices, maternity and sexuality. Furthermore, they offer not just my own analysis of the literary works presented in each chapter, but also the thoughts and comments of three of the main authors chosen for my study: Ana Maria Gonçalves, Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa and, as previously mentioned, Dr. Marta Moreno Vega. All three of these women writers participated in e-mail interviews with me about their respective works. I comment on and cite specific elements from the interviews throughout these two chapters, and include the interviews in their entireties at the end of my study.

The focus of Chapter 6 “The Divine Woman: Medium of Worlds and Guardian of Universal Knowledge” considers women as divine, intermediaries and walking libraries of universal truths, uprooted from Africa and implanted in the Americas. As such, this chapter seeks to divulge not just spiritual questions, but also literary and oral ones in an attempt to penetrate the feminine imaginary and world of these women protagonists. Once again, I have chosen to include an additional literary text in this chapter that exemplifies the spiritually and culturally liminal worlds inhabited by Black female protagonists. Here I include the work: *Sortes de Villamor* (2010) by Nilma Lacerda.

The critical texts chosen as a base for our analysis of the literary texts in Chapter 6 can themselves be viewed as liminal texts in that they stand on the threshold between anthropology and religion. They include for example, *The City of Women* (1947) by Ruth Landes, which explores questions of gender through the presence of matriarchal communities within the Candomblé houses in Salvador, *Candomblés da Bahia* (1948) by Edson Carneiro, the spiritual memoir *The Altar of My Soul* (2000) by Marta Moreno Vega, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (2005) by J. Lorand Matory, and the documentary film *A cidade das mulheres* (2005) by Lázaro Faria.

I explore the role of the woman as a mediator or medium between two worlds, and *griot* as an embodiment of universal knowledge, turning to collections of Afro-Cuban myths such as *Kele Kele* (1988) by Excilia Saldaña, *Teachings of the Santería Gods: The Spirit of the Odu* (2010) by Ócha’ni Lele and *Afro-Cuban Myths: Yemayá and Other Orishas* (1938) by Romulo Lachatañeré, which exemplify the crossing and subsequent adaptation of these oral myths to the written word of the myths in the Americas. I draw

on the theories of Monique-Adelle Callahan in *Between the Lines: Literary Transnationalism and African American Poetics* (2011), Wole Soyinka in *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976), and V. Y. Mudimbe in *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (1988), amongst others, in order to construct a framework for my analysis of these mythological texts.

Additionally, in this chapter I contemplate the idea of spiritual embodiment as both the manifestation of the divine, as well as a process of cultural identification. Critical texts chosen to explore this idea are *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora: Knowledge, Power and Performance* by R. Marie Griffith and Barbara Dianne Savage, *Manipulating the Sacred: Yorùba Art, Ritual and Resistance in Brazilian Candomblé* (2005) by Mikelle Smith Omari-Tunkara, and *Healing Cultures: Art and Religion as Curative Practices in the Caribbean and its Diaspora* by Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert,

The penultimate chapter in my study, Chapter 7 “Gender, Maternity, Sexuality, and Spirituality Under the Yoke of Slavery and Beyond,” is an extension of the dialogue on the theme of the “divine” woman as set forth in the previous chapter, and seeks to expand my analysis of the literary works to encompass issues of gender, maternity and sexuality. I explore how the lines of sexuality, gender, and maternity intersect and intertwine with regards to women within the African diasporic context and, above all, with regards to the “divine” woman, who can be viewed as the incarnation of these syncretic beliefs in the Americas. I analyze how, despite enduring sexual victimization inherent to the institution of slavery, the protagonists of the works reveal their own sexuality and sexual desire as portrayed in *Um defeito de cor* and *La isla bajo el mar*.

Likewise, in *O jogo de Ifá* (1980) by Sônia Coutinho I investigate the presence of the themes of religion, gender and sexual ambiguity within a narrative that offers both male and female view points, thus encompassing an androgynous narrative. A second text I have chosen to exemplify sexual ambiguity and the quasi-androgynous nature of the spiritual leader in Mayra Montero's *Del rojo de su sombra* (1992). In the same way that many of the Orishas are androgynous in nature, so too are many of the mediums that embody the Orishas during a trance. Gender and sexuality lines become blurred when an Orisha of the same sex mounts a medium. It is from this vantage point that I intend to analyze the two literary works, moored in the theoretical roots of Randy P. Conner in *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Participation in African-Inspired Traditions in the Americas* (2004), and *Fazendo estilo criando gêneros: Possessão e diferenças de gênero em terreiros de umbanda e candomblé no Rio de Janeiro* (1995) by Patricia Birman.

Other works that exemplify complex negotiations of maternity, sexuality and gender under the yoke of slavery include: *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison, as well as two of the four main works of my study: *Um defeito de cor* and *Daughters of the Stone*. The critical texts to be used in order to explore the literary works in this chapter are *Women in Chains* (2000) by Venetria K. Patton, *More than Chattel* (1996) by Gasper & Hine, "The Color of Seduction" (2005) by Mayra Santos Febres and the chapter "Divination: The Possibility of a New Order" (*Female Voice* 1991) by Susan C. Quinlan.

In the conclusion, I discuss the results presented throughout the preceding seven chapters. Recognizing that no study is able to fully answer all of the questions raised, I offer ideas for future research to continue and expand upon my observations. With this

study, I hope to contribute to the area of memory, gender and identity studies that have already been undertaken by many of critics previously mentioned. My goal, however, is to add to these perspectives and to expand the dialogues of the interconnectedness within the context of the African Diaspora in the Americas.

CHAPTER 2

HYBRIDITY, IDENTITY, AND LIMINALITY IN THE AMERICAS:

AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

PERSONA

*¿Cuál de estas mujeres soy yo?
 ¿O no soy yo la que está hablando
 tras los barrotes de una ventana sin estilo
 que da a la plenitud de todos estos siglos?
 ¿Acaso seré yo la mujer negra y alta
 que corre e casi vuela
 y alcanza records astronómicos,
 con sus oscuras piernas celestiales
 en su espiral de lunas?
 ¿En cuál músculo suyo se dibuja mi rostro,
 clavado allí como un endecasílabo importado
 de un país de nieve prohibida?*

*Estoy en la ventana
 y cruza “la mujer de Antonio”;
 “la vecinita de enfrente,” de una calle sin formas;
 “la madre – negra Paula Valdés – .”
 ¿Quién es el señorito que sufraga
 sus ropas y sus viandas
 y los olores de vetiver ya desprendidos de su andar?
 ¿Qué permanece en mí de esa mujer?
 ¿Qué nos une a las dos? ¿Qué nos separa?
 ¿O seré yo la “vagabunda del alba,”
 que alquila taxis en la noche de los jaguares
 como una garza tendida en el pavimento
 después de haber sido cazada
 y esquilmada
 y revendida
 por la Quinta de los Molinos
 y los embarcaderos del puerto?
 Ellas: ¿quiénes son éstas que se parecen tanto a mí
 no sólo por los colores de sus cuerpos
 sino por ese humo devastador
 que exhala nuestra piel de res marcada*

*por un extraño fuego que no cesa?
¿Por qué soy yo? ¿Por qué son ellas?*

*¿Quién es esa mujer
que está en todas nosotras huyendo de nosotras,
huyendo de su enigma y de su largo origen
con una incrédula plegaria entre los labios
o con un himno cantado
después de una batalla siempre renacida?*

*Todos mis huesos, ¿serán míos?
¿de quién serán todos mis huesos?
¿Me los habrán comprado
en aquella plaza remota de Gorée?
¿Toda mi piel será la mía
o me han devuelto a cambio
los huesos y la piel de otra mujer
cuyo vientre ha marcado otro horizonte,
otro ser, otras criaturas, otro dios?*

*Estoy en la ventana.
Yo sé que hay alguien.
Yo sé que una mujer ostenta mis huesos y mi carne;
que me ha buscado en su gastado seno
y que me encuentra en la vicisitud y el extravío.
La noche está enterrada en nuestra piel.
La sabia noche recompone sus huesos y los míos.
Un pájaro del cielo ha trocado su luz en nuestros ojos.*

--Nancy Morejón (Mirar adentro 2003)

Hybrid Cultures and Identities in the African Diaspora

My decision to include the poem “Persona” by Afro-Cuban poet Nancy Morejón as an introduction to this second chapter is based on a number of different factors. Firstly, it stems from my own appreciation of Morejón’s talent as a poet, as well as of this poem in particular. Secondly, in her poem, the poet dialogues with both the themes presented, as well as with a number of the critics cited, in this chapter. Likewise, throughout my research for this study, one of the things I came across and found intriguing is the fact that Morejón is responsible for the translation of a number of works of Caribbean writers cited in my study, such as Edouard Glissant and Aimé Césaire. Most importantly, though, my choice of the poem “Persona” is due to the complexities of identity and belonging that resound in the female voice within the framework of the poem. It is on this literary note that I intend to initiate my discussion of hybridity and identity in Chapter 2.

In this chapter, I include an overview, albeit brief, of main ideas regarding the concepts of cultural and racial identity and hybridity in the Americas as they relate to the African diaspora in the region. Although the focus of this study does not strictly rest on the question of hybridity, it would be next to impossible to approach the key points of this study relating to dislocation and belonging without first providing a base of key concepts upon which to build my ideas. My theoretical framework, therefore, is primarily built around the concepts of hybridity, cultural and racial identity of Stuart Hall, W.E.B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, Aimé Césaire, and Antonio Benítez Rojo, among others. Notwithstanding my choice to prioritize the theories of Jacqui Alexander of “rootedness” and “belonging” throughout the entirety of this study, the theories of the aforementioned theorists are indispensable to my analysis and reappear intermittently

throughout the remainder of the chapters to explore issues of identity and marginalization as they relate to the literary works object of this study.

The term “hybridity” is one that has come to be used since the 1990’s in an attempt to describe the multiple identities, politics and cultural productions that arise from the clash of cultures as a result of diaspora or migration. According to Stuart Hall, in his chapter “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (1994), a key part of hybridity has to do with identity formation as individuals find themselves in a position in which their identities reflect both their countries of origin as well as their new countries of residence. Within the new diasporic reality, these hybrid individuals frequently occupy marginal positions in the dominant society. Having lost the cultural identity related to their home countries and finding themselves marginalized from the homogeneous new cultural identity, diasporic individuals are forced into an uncertain position on the outskirts of national discourse or, in the words of Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994); they create and occupy a “third space”.

The “third space” that came to be the new cultural reality for millions of Africans in diaspora is intrinsically connected to power dynamics. This is of particular relevance when considering the institution of slavery in the Americas and the power structure employed by the Europeans in the economic and social structure of the same. Similarly, the power structure of the ruling elite during the colonial period in the Americas and the hegemony of the national discourse relating to race in the region go hand in hand to create both class distinctions as well as self-definition of the dominated based on, in the words of Frantz Fanon, the gaze of the dominant “Other” (*Black Skin, White Masks* 89 – 119). Alternatively, along the lines of Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1979), the European

identity and culture were positioned, both in Europe and in the colonies, as being superior to those of other non-European ones, more specifically those pertaining to the various tribes and nations from Africa brought to the New World by the slave trade (1 – 28). By positioning themselves as the superior and politically dominant ruling class in the slave-driven patriarchal system in the Americas, the Europeans thereby asserted the inherent inferiority of the Africans within the new society.

Likewise, according to Said, “The whole question of imperialism, as it was debated in the late nineteenth century by pro-imperialists and anti-imperialists alike, carried forward the binary typology of advanced and backward (or subject) races, cultures, and societies” (207). One of the underlying premises of imperialism was the creation of a system of difference within which the “Other” and his marginalized discourse was silenced in an attempt to maintain the status quo. Turning once more to the ideas of Benítez Rojo, the critic observes:

La naturaleza es el flujo de una máquina *feedback* incognoscible que la sociedad interrumpe constantemente con los más variados y ruidoso ritmos...Bien, la cultura de los Pueblos del Mar es un flujo cortado por ritmos que intentan silenciar los ruidos con que su propia forma social interrumpe el discurso de la naturaleza. (xxii)

The “machine” of the plantation system stripped enslaved Africans of their traditional cultural practices. However, as I later demonstrate, due to the fluid nature of traditional African philosophy, the Africans and their descendents were able to reinvent their beliefs in the New World setting.

Positioned as outsiders or undesirable presences (albeit necessary to the economic success of the slave-driven plantation colonial economy) in the New World societies, Africans were denied citizenship and identity. As I explore in chapters six and seven of this study, in the specific case of the Black female slaves, maternity and sexuality were also rights that were ruthlessly stripped away by the patriarchal system into which the women were thrust. Along the lines of Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, in which the critic asserts: “If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (82-83), we explore the sexual difference faced by the enslaved women and how this difference affected to an even greater extent their agency and voice within the dominant society.

Applying Said’s theories on the “Oriental” as someone who is stripped of citizenship in the dominant society to my subject of interest - enslaved Africans in the colonial Americas, I concur that they “...were rarely seen or looked at/ they were seen through, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved” (207). In line with the understanding that enslaved Africans, in the eyes of the slave-owning patriarch in the colonial system of the Americas, were nothing more than chattel, objects, or “things”, I affirm José D’Assunção Barros’ assertion that in the specific case of Brazil: “O escravo será visto aqui como mera propriedade privada, uma ‘coisa que fala’ (mais do que uma ‘coisa que sente’), um desenraizado, um estrangeiro absoluto’ (isto é, diferença plenamente realizada)” (36). Although Barros’ comments are related to Brazil, they are relevant to attitudes towards slaves throughout the region of the Caribbean, as I later

demonstrate in my analysis of the master's attitude towards the enslaved protagonist in *La isla bajo el mar*.

Drawing on the concepts of "thingification" of Aimé Césaire and "objectification" of Fanon, I affirm that by relegating the African "Other" to a position of extreme alienation within the society, the White slave-owner established the inherent inferiority and ultimate level of difference of the enslaved individuals as being everything that the dominant society was not, more specifically, they were not free citizens and they were powerless "things". In *Discourse on Colonialism*, Césaire comments on the concept of "thingification" affirming:

No human contact, but relations of domination and submission which turns the colonizing man into a classroom monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production. My turn to state an equation: colonization = "thingification".

(42)

Césaire's idea of the enslaved African serving as a "thing" for the productive and, as I show in Chapter 7 of this study on maternity and motherhood, reproductive needs of the greater slave-driven society is depicted in the main works chosen for my study. In many of the narratives, we witness the cruel and impersonal relations of, in the words of Césaire, "domination and submission" between many of the plantation owners and the enslaved female protagonists who are marginalized to positions of "things" or "objects" to be used by their masters.

Silvio Torres-Saillant echoes the ideas of Césaire in affirming the colonial project of positioning the Other as a subaltern individual in stark opposition to the Euro-

dominant discourse within the society. In *An Intellectual History of the Caribbean* Torres-Saillant establishes that:

The logic governing the prism of the imperial imagination, which tends to assign significance to the ‘Other’ primarily as a source of wellbeing for ‘us,” or construes the world of the vanquished as merely a negative image of the positive world of the conqueror. Similarly, the imperial ‘we’ arrogates the authority to set the terms for defining humanity...Once conquered, dominated, colonized, the Other loses the option to uphold the accoutrements of their humanity other than through mediating Westernization of their being...In other words, the European ‘discover’ regulates the entrance of the Other to the realm of the human. (118)

The regulation of the Other spills over into all of the aspects of life including access to education and discourse. In the specific case of the plantation system, by regulating access to knowledge and self-representation, the dominant slave-owning patriarchal group assured its superiority and power over the subaltern enslaved individuals, marginalizing or negatively positioning them as voiceless property or objects.

Likewise, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008), Fanon discusses the “objectification” of the Black man and the gaze of the “Other” in determining his own identity:

In came into this world anxious to uncover the meaning of things, my soul desirous to be at the origin of the world, and here I am an object among other others. Locked in this suffocating reification, I appealed to the Other so that his liberating gaze, gliding over my body suddenly smoothed of

rough edges, would give me back the lightness of being I thought I had lost, and taking me out of the world put be back into the world. But just as I get to the other slope I stumble, and the Other fixes me with his gaze, his gestures and attitude, the same way you fix a preparation with a dye. I lose my temper, demand an explanation...Nothing doing. I explode. Here are the fragments put together by another me. (89)

Instead of being a person, the Black man is incapable of being seen as anything other than his skin color within the racist Eurocentric colonial society.

Drawing on the ideas of Fanón, I observe the fact that the enslaved African is forced to (re)create a new identity within a society that positions him as the marginal figure that is everything that the dominant discourse is not. He is the ultimate difference *par excellence*. Or, in the words of W. E. B. Du Bois:

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil and gifted with second-sight in this American world...It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (*The Souls of Black Folk* 9)

As suggested in the previously mentioned concepts, the alienation of the enslaved Africans by the dominant society was based primarily on race or, more specifically, on color differentiation. Rooted in the imperialistic and Eurocentric vision of the “backwards” or “savage” nature of the inhabitants of the African continent prevalent during the centuries of transatlantic slavery, the idea of the “Black African” in opposition to the “White European” was one in stark contrast to the tribal differentiation and

identification among the numerous tribes of the sub-Saharan region. As D'Assunção Barros points out: “Se a ideia de ‘negro’ foi construída por supressão ou minimização das diferenças tribais, é preciso salientar que os negros africanos tampouco se viam como ‘africanos’. A ‘África’ foi também uma construção da ‘Europa’” (40). This last point is telling as it speaks to the Eurocentric attempt at a monolithic approach for handling the “non-whites” encountered in the “Dark Continent”, as well as to their repositioning as inferior individuals within the new patriarchal societies of the Americas.

Turning once more to Benítez Rojo’s ideas set forth in *La isla que se repite*, I point to the fact of cultural identity, as well as racial mixing present in the Caribbean, as being the products, once again, of the “plantation machine”. According to Benítez Rojo: “el complejo sincretismo de las expresiones culturales caribeñas...surgió del choque de componentes europeos, africanos y asiáticos dentro de la Plantación” (xv). In considering one of the main points of cultural identity, the religious beliefs of a people, I affirm that it was out of these harsh conditions of the “plantation machine” that the African spiritual beliefs lingered in the collective memory of the dismembered families and ultimately flourished in the syncretic African diasporic religions that served to unite and construct new meanings of family in the form of united diasporic communities.

Narrowing my vision to the impact of diasporic conditions on the creation and retention of cultural beliefs, which is more relevant to my study, I borrow from Stuart Hall and his text “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”. The first way in which to consider cultural identity that Stuart Hall outlines is as a collective body that shares in common historical experiences. According to Hall, “Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural

codes...such a conception of cultural identity played a critical role in all post-colonial struggles which have so profoundly reshaped our world” (223). Hall speaks of a “loss of identity” resulting from the transportation, enslavement and migration of the Africans, and affirms that this identity crisis will only pass once these lost connections are reestablished. Roots are, along the lines of Hall, necessary to (re)create the identity of the individuals in diaspora. This search for roots and rootedness in the new social environment is one of the topics I explore later in Chapter 5 of this study by expanding my consideration of liminality using the lens of Edouard Glissant’s root theory.

The second type of cultural identity Hall speaks of is the individual identity that is greatly impacted by difference: what we are or what we have become after the intervention of history. Along these lines, Hall highlights the role of power and positioning, and affirms, “It is only from this second position that we can properly understand the traumatic character of the ‘colonial experience’” (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 225). According to Hall, the construction of these cultural identities is incessantly by means of memory, fantasy and myth. They are the “...points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture” (226). For Hall, however, the difference exists both within and outside of continuity.

The Caribbean identity, in Hall’s opinion, is built on two dichotic extremes: similarity and continuity versus difference and rupture. The first dichotomy suggest a continuation of the traditions and cultural elements of the country of origin in a new geographic space (the Caribbean, Brazil, and the United States). The second dichotomy is

entrenched in the ruptures that were a product of slavery and the transportation of Africans to the New World by the Europeans.

As previously mentioned, religion is a cultural element that travelled with the Africans from the “Dark Continent” to the Americas, and had a profound impact on the spiritual life of the region. Borrowing from Hall, I note how this rupture and displacement of the traditional African religion is somewhat of a paradox in that it was precisely the insertion of these beliefs in the plantations in the New World (and the hybrid or syncretic religions that formed in the Caribbean) that helped to “unify” the enslaved individuals hailing from innumerable tribes and countries of origin, while simultaneously distancing them from both their past and the “purer” more authentic African form of their religions.

Rooted in the ideas of Césaire and Senghor, the last topic presented by Hall in his paper is that of the “three presences” that comprise the Caribbean identity: *Presence Africaine*, *Presence Européenne* y *Presence Américain*. *Presence Africaine* refers to the repression and, concomitantly, the undeniable African presence in the Caribbean. As Hall reflects: “Africa, the signified which could not be represented directly in slavery, remained and remains the unspoken, unspeakable ‘presence’ in Caribbean culture. It is ‘hiding’ behind every verbal inflection, every narrative twist of Caribbean cultural life” (230). The second presence is the *Presence Européenne*: the European presence. It is this presence, according to Hall, that has to do with the constant voice of the European, which, in contrast to the unspoken African voice, is endlessly speaking (232). This presence has strong ties to exclusion, power and resistance, and Hall cites Fanon’s idea of

the gaze of the “Other” and the recognition by the “Other” as being of utmost importance in defining our own identity.

The final presence is that of the “New World”. Hall presents this *Presence Americaine* as being the place of displacement for millions of people under the condition of slavery, colonization and conquest (234). It is a hybrid space that was built based on the difference of all of the people in diaspora who find themselves confined the space. The cultural identity produced in the Caribbean is, according to Hall, one of difference and transformation. Much along the lines of Fernando Ortiz’s concept of “Transculturation” in *Cuban Counterpoint*, the chaotic encounter of races and cultures in the Caribbean lead to a cultural giving and taking of elements that lead to the transformation of the same and ultimately to the creation of a new society in the Americas. As Ortiz points out:

The Negroes brought with their bodies their souls, but not their institutions nor their implements. They were of different regions, races, languages, cultures, classes, ages, sexes, through promiscuously into the slave ships, and socially equalized by the same system of slavery... Under these conditions of mutilation and social amputation, thousands and thousands of human beings were brought to Cuba year after year and century after century from continents beyond the sea... I am of the opinion that the word *transculturation* better expresses the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another because this does not consist merely in acquiring another culture... but the process also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, which could be defined as a

deculturation. In addition, it carries the idea of the consequent creation of a new cultural phenomena, which could be call neoculturation. (101-02)

In considering the Afro-diasporic religions that grew due to the centuries of cultural and religious transfer among the African, European and Native American presences in the region, we can consider how certain elements of each were lost in Ortiz's concept of *transculturation*, as well as the new syncretic ones that sprouted up in the fertile soils of the Americas. It is precisely this borrowing, loss and transfer of cultural elements and identity that I shall explore in following in Chapter 3. Through the metaphors of embarkation and disembarkation, I illustrate how the African gods left the traditional African cosmological system, survived the treacherous waters of the Middle Passage, and ultimately served as sources of cultural identity for the African diasporic community in the New World.

CHAPTER 3

EMBARKATIONS AND DISEMBARKATIONS:
THE VOICES OF THE ORISHAS IN THE AMERICAS

THOSE WHO ARE DEAD ARE NEVER GONE

*Hear more often things than beings,
the voice of the fire listening,
hear the voice of the water.
Hear in the voice of the wind,
the bushes sobbing,
it is the voice of our forebears.*

*Those who are dead are never gone:
They are there in the thickening shadow.
The dead are not under the earth:
they are in the tree that rustles,
they are in the wood that groans,
they are in the water that sleeps,
they are in the hut, they are in the crowd,
the dead are not dead.*

*Those who are dead are never gone,
they are in the breast of the woman,
they are in the child who is wailing
and in the firebrand that flames.
The dead are not under the earth:
they are in the fire that is dying,
they are in the grasses that weep,
they are in the whimpering rocks,
they are in the forest, they are in the house,
the dead are not dead.*

--Birago Diop ("Souffles", IN *Leurres at Lueurs* 1960)

Embarkations: Traditional African Spirituality

The poem above by Senegalese poet, Birago Diop, beautifully expresses one of the strongest elements of African traditional religions: the ancestral presence in the lives of African families and the greater community. When we speak of African traditional religions, the emphasis here falls on the plurality of the noun “religion”. In *African Religions and Philosophy*, John S. Mbiti attributes this plurality to the fact that “there are about one thousand African peoples (tribes), and each has its own religious system” (1). In order to speak to the plurality of similarities and differences among the various religious beliefs found in Africa, Mbiti uses the word “philosophy” to refer to “the understanding, attitude of mind, logic and perception behind the manner in which African peoples think, act or speak in different situations in life” (2). Within African philosophy, the individual, the group and spirituality are interconnected or, in the words of Mbiti, “To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community” (3). As such, each of the three factors depends on the others for its own existence.

Notwithstanding the fact that there are critics within the area of African Studies who point to Western influence on African philosophy and religion, including on the ideas of John Mbiti, I have chosen to include his ideas in my study as he is one of the most cited and respected theorists on the subject of traditional African religion today. In contrast to Olabiyi Babalola Yai (1998) and Kwasi Wiredu’s (1998) comments on Mbiti criticizing his ideas as being inspired by foreign or colonial influences, I offer the ideas of Aderibigbe who asserts that “with the increase of scholars in the field of African theology such as E. B. Idowu (1962) and Mbiti (1975), there have been some successful attempts

to correct some erroneous ideas about African Religion and its belief systems, thought patterns, rituals, and culture generally” (124). It is based on Aderibigbe’s favorable interpretation and evaluation of Mbiti’s contributions to the field of African Studies, along with similar evaluations by critics such as Jakob K. Olupona and Sulayman S. Nyang (1993), that I turn to his ideas as a framework with which to construct my analysis of the literary works throughout this study on themes related to traditional African beliefs and philosophy.

Reverting to Diop’s poem, contrary to the common Western belief system in which deceased family members die, are buried and then, depending upon the family’s religious beliefs, move on to a “better place” far removed from the mundane life here on Earth, in African religions and philosophy departed family members continue to influence and participate actively in the community even after their physical deaths. The departed loved ones live on not just in the memories of the remaining family members, but at a much more organic level in the day-to-day events and physical surroundings of their loved ones and the communal family.

As Dominique Zahan points out concerning the various evolutions of a human in Traditional African thought, “Generally speaking, the death of the individual is the necessary condition for becoming an ancestor throughout Black Africa. This is because death does not represent the end of human existence, but rather a change in its status” (10). The spirit lives on in a different form and realm, but the physical body dies. It is from this spiritual realm that the ancestors interact with the living family members and are thought to be, in the words of Geoffrey Parrinder in *African Traditional Religion*, “...watching over their families like a ‘cloud of witnesses’” (58). Here we can see why

Diop expresses in his poem that “the dead are not under the earth”. They live on as an invisible presence in the lives of their loved ones and the greater community.

My choice of this poem to begin this third chapter is to set the tone of the chapter with the image of ancestors who, even after their physical deaths, continue to play an important role in the traditional African community. The connection with the elements of nature as well as with the realm of the deceased are notions that are integrally linked to traditional African religions. In his text “Ancestral Spirituality and Society in Africa”, Ogbu U. Kalu states, “Ancestral beliefs, in summary, underscore certain social ideals: the vibrant reality of the spiritual world or ‘an alive universe,’ the continuity of life and human relationship beyond death, the unbroken bond of obligations and the seamless web of community” (55). These ideals will serve as a base upon which to initiate an analysis of the presence of spirits and the “voices” of spirits in a number of the works chosen for this study. As I demonstrate in second half of this chapter in my analysis of *Um defeito de cor*, *Daughters of the Stone*, and *Changó, el gran putas*, these ancestral voices play an integral part in both the narratives as well as in the lives of the protagonists of African descent in each of the works.

I have chosen the metaphors of “embarking” and “disembarking” to represent the original elements of the Traditional African belief systems that “embarked” or accompanied the millions of Africans who were wrenched from their homelands during the centuries of slave trade with the Americas, and “disembarking” to signify the syncretic forms of these religions that sprouted up or branched out in the Americas through the merging of these beliefs with other Native American and European forms of religion.

My interest in this chapter is to explore the Orishas that hold a position of greater prominence within the African diasporic context. Specifically, I focus on the goddesses Yemanjá and Oxum who, as I demonstrate, pervade many of the works that I analyze in this study, and are highly prominent feminine divinities within the syncretic African diasporic religions of Candomblé and Santería. As I present in following, Oxum is the Orisha worshipped by two of the protagonists of the works I have chosen to analyze for this chapter. In both *Um defeito de cor* and *Daughters of the Stone*, not only is Oxum the Orisha of Kehinde and Fela, but she also serves as a visible connection of the African women with the ancestors of their homelands. In both works, spirituality guides, protects and binds the protagonists with a far-removed past and roots them in their new diasporic conditions in the Americas.

In keeping with the metaphors of “embarking” and “disembarking”, as well as with the fluid nature of the goddesses and the symbolic importance of water in African cosmology, I have chosen to highlight texts in which water and the theme of crossing are central to the ongoing process of the protagonist’s quest for spiritual and personal wholeness. The loss and transfer of culture processes and search for wholeness by the diasporic communities found in African diasporic religions a base upon which to develop their search. As I demonstrate later in this study on the themes of re-memory and Jacqui Alexander’s concept of “pedagogies of crossing”, the Sacred played an integral part in the cohesiveness of the African Diasporic Community, especially in the lives of women of the African diaspora.

In order to set sail on my transcontinental analysis of African religion in diaspora, I turn first to the theories of John S. Mbiti on religion and its importance in the lives of

Africans. According to Mbiti, “Religion is the strongest element in traditional background, and exerts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the people concerned” (1). The idea that religion is present in the life of the African wherever he or she may be in the world is very relevant to my study in considering the religious diaspora of the hundreds of thousands of Africans who came under enslaved conditions to the New World. It is precisely this transnational religious presence that will underpin my later discussion of memory in Chapter 4, and the themes of crossing and rootedness in Chapter 5 of this study.

Turning once more to Mbiti, and drawing also on the verses of Diop’s poem, I attest that for Africans, “traditional religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and the non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life” (2). Ibigbolade Simon Aderibigbe in *Religious Thoughts in Perspective* echoes the complex nature of the “primitive” traditional African religious system affirming:

The African religion is the religion of the Africans and strictly for the Africans. It is not a religion preached to them, but rather a part of their heritage that evolved with them over the years. They were born and not converted into it. It has no founder, but rather a product of the thinking and experiences of their forefathers who formed religious ideas and beliefs. (124)

The passing down of myths and religious rituals from one generation to the next is integral to the continuation of the African diasporic religions in the New World. As I demonstrate in later chapters, oral tradition is of utmost importance in maintaining the

Orishas and ancestors “alive” in the collective memory of the African diasporic communities during the centuries of their enslavement, as well as post-enslavement. According to Parrinder, the ancestors are deemed to have a special knowledge of the spiritual realm and are consulted as oracles; many times offering their advice in the form of dreams (61). As I show in my analysis of the literary works chosen for this chapter, *Yemayá y Ochún: Kariocha, Iyalorichas y Olorichas, Um defeito de cor, Daughters of the Stone*, and *Changó, el gran putas*, the voices of the Orishas, in addition to appearing in myths, oftentimes make use of onirical and possessional methods in order to contact and speak with the protagonists.

I initiate my dialogue on the African traditional religions that embarked on the slave ships along with the millions of enslaved Africans from countries such as Nigeria and Benin with an historical overview of the nations at the time of the embarkations. For, as Baba Ifa Karade points out in *The Handbook of Yoruba Religious Concepts*, “In order to study the religious and cultural definitions of the Yoruba it is important to be somewhat versed in the historical conditions that gave birth to them” (1). In the case of the African diaspora religions, while the origins that gave rise to the diasporic religions are undoubtedly from one particular continent, the variety of traditional concepts that comprise what Mbiti terms “African Religions and Philosophy” differ greatly “from individual to individual and from place to place” (xii). As Mbiti points out:

Traditional religions are not universal: they are tribal or national. Each religion is bound and limited to the people among whom it has evolved.

One traditional religion cannot be propagated in another tribal group. This does not rule out the fact that religious ideas may spread from one people

to another. But such ideas spread spontaneously...In times of crisis they often come to the surface, or people revert to them in secret. (3-5)

It is this last point that speaks most to the underpinning factors that contributed to the creation of New World or African diaspora religions. It is near to impossible to analyze the arrival of traditional African beliefs in the Americas and the unique form in which the varied religious beliefs developed in each country or region without first looking at the source that brought all of the peoples into close proximity with each other: The Trans-Atlantic slave trade. This source, while steeped in trauma and one of the most horrific displays of human injustice and cruelty ever witnessed in modern history, provided the rich soil upon which the various African diaspora religions would flourish in the New World.

From a historical viewpoint, African enslavement started in the 15th and 16th centuries. It was during that time that the Portuguese began to transport Africans from the West Coast to Spanish mines and plantations in the New World. Slave trade operations between Africa and Brazil occurred between 1551 and 1850, and can be divided into four main “cycles”: the Guinea Cycle, which ran during the second half of the XVI Century, the Angola-Congo Cycle, which ran throughout the XVII Century, the Mina Coast Cycle, which ran through the beginning of the second half of the XVIII Century, and the Benin Cycle, which ran up until the middle of the XIX Century.

Similarly, Roger Bastide points out in *The African Religions of Brazil* that the main civilizations brought to Portuguese America were the Sudanese, the Islamized civilizations, the Bantu of the Angola-Congo group, and the Bantu of the east coast of Africa (46). Within the first group highlighted by Bastide, the Sudanese, we find housed

the Yoruba (Nagô, Ijeja, Egba, Kety) and the Dahomans of the Gêgê group (Ewe Fon). For the purposes of our study, this group is of most interest to us based on its significant contribution to and influence on the Afro-Diasporic religions in the region of the Caribbean and Brazil.

As previously mentioned, the institution of slavery began in the 1500's. The primary reason for the slave trade was economic in nature: the monoculture production of sugar on the large plantations. The owners of the large tracts of land used for sugar cane cultivation required endless numbers of workers to toil the land. Of the approximately five million Africans who were brought to the New World, over half of them carried out the rest of their days working on the sugar plantations in the region. Arthur Ramos in *O Negro na civilização brasileira* discusses the institution of slavery as one of the most painful and shameful parts of the history of the Americas:

Foi o braço negro que argamassou a civilização brasileira. Ele trabalhou a cultura da cana de açúcar e do café e extraiu os metais das minas. Mas em quatro séculos de um labor contínuo, até a época da abolição da escravatura, quantos sofrimentos, quantos vexames, que história longa e dolorosa a do escravo negro, no Brasil, como em outras parte do Nôvo Mundo! (39)

Many of these enslaved Africans referenced above by Ramos were taken to work on plantations in countries such as Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Brazil. With regards specifically to Cuba, the African presence in the country increased considerably after 1790. According to George Brandon in *Santería from Africa to the New World*:

The period from about 1790 through 1870 forms a real watershed in the racial and economic history of Cuba. Cuba before this period was one thing, Cuba after this period was becoming something else...The ravenous hunger for labor power was satisfied by the importation of African slave labor. Importing large numbers of slaves dramatically shifted the demographic balance and initiated a process common to most of the Latin American colonies – one that was to have profound social and cultural consequences. Between 1790 and 1922, 240,000 Africans entered Cuba. (52-53)

The constant flow of enslaved Africans to the plantations in the Caribbean and Brazil infused the dwindling traditional African religions in each diasporic community with new members and renewed fervor in age-old traditions. As such, the presence of the Orishas was a constant in the lives of the Africans in Cuba, Brazil and other Caribbean nations and, as I demonstrate in the second part of this chapter, contributed greatly to the passing down of oral traditions from one generation to another of enslaved Africans through the guise of new diasporic religions. This, as I demonstrate, is in stark contrast to the type of religion that developed on the plantations in the South of the United States.

In relation to the spirituality of the enslaved Africans in the Americas, Baba Ifa Karade tells us that it is important to note, “The greatest percentage of Africans enslaved were war-political prisoners of elite classes of soldiers and warrior-priests. As a result, the New World became inundated with a people knowledgeable of their culture and who were initiated members of its higher teachings” (4). These culturally and spiritually

advanced individuals undoubtedly played an important role in the transfer of the traditional African beliefs into the innumerable slave communities of the Americas.

As previously stated, the Yoruba people contributed most significantly to the syncretic religions that developed in the diasporic communities in the New World. One of the interpretations regarding the origins of the Yoruba people is that they lived in ancient Egypt, ultimately migrating to the Atlantic coast. According to this particular interpretation that I have chosen to follow in this study, King Oduduwa, the first king of the Yoruba, is said to have settled at the already established city of Ile-Ife during the Bronze Age sometime between 2000 and 500 B.C.

The slave trade witnessed its peak between 1680 and 1830. During this time, the Oyo Empire dominated in the Yoruba world, and the slave trade developed primarily along the coasts of Nigeria. Most of the gods, as previously cited in Prandi, were associated with particular regions and activities throughout the Yoruba territory. Shango, for example, was actually a king and associated with thunder and lightning. Ogun was the protectorate of warriors and blacksmiths. Two female deities, Oshun, Orisha of the Osogbo River and goddess of sexual pleasure and childbirth, and Yemanjá, Orisha of the Ogun River and goddess of maternity and family were both associated with specific rivers in their native country. Still others exist today in Yoruba territories such as Orunmila, god of divination, Osain, god of vegetation and natural medicines, Eshu Elegba, god of communication and the crossroads, amongst others.

The term *Orisha* originally comes from the combination of two Yoruba words: *Ori* and *Sha*. *Ori*, as explained by Baba Ifa Karade, “is the reflective spark of human consciousness embedded in human essence, and *sha*...is the ultimate potentiality of that

consciousness to enter into or assimilate itself into the divine consciousness” (23). The Yoruba people do believe in one God, Olodumare or “the owner of all destinies, the almighty, the ground of life” (Murphy 7). In addition, they worship divinities who perform an intermediary role between man and Olodumare.

The religion of the Orishas is intrinsically connected with the idea of family, which encompasses both the living and the dead. According to Pierre Fatumbi Verger:

O orixá seria, em princípio, um ancestral divisado que, em vida, estabeleceria vínculos que lhe garantiam um controle sobre certas forças da natureza...ou adquirindo o conhecimento das propriedades das plantas e de sua utilização o poder, à se, do ancestral-orixá teria, após a sua morte, a faculdade de encarnar-se momentaneamente em um de seus descendentes durante um fenômeno de possessão por ele provocada. (9)

Reginaldo Prandi comments the control over nature by the Orishas also in “Os Orixás e a natureza”, highlighting that within the traditional African religious belief system, the divinities were intricately woven into the fabric of the society and economy of the community. As the economy itself was based on agriculture, hunting, fishing and handicrafts, Prandi points out that there was a shift of the Orishas from the realm of nature to the realms of the social division of labor, with the Orishas undertaking a protectorate role over the basic activities carried out by the people in the society (“Os Orishas e a natureza” 2). According to Prandi, at one point in the history of African Traditional Religion the animist nature of the religion gave way to a focus on ancestor veneration, which can be defined as:

O culto dos antepassados como o conjunto de crenças, mitos e ritos que regulam os vínculos de uma comunidade com um número grande de mortos que viveram nessa comunidade e que estão ligados a ela por parentesco, segundo linhagens familiares, acreditando-se que os mortos têm o poder de interferir na vida humana, devendo então ser propiciados, aplacados por meio das práticas sacrificiais para o bem-estar da comunidade. Através do sacrifício, o antepassado participa da vida dos viventes, compartilhando com eles o fruto do sucesso das colheitas, das caçadas, da guerra e assim por diante. (“Os Orishas e a natureza” 3)

In the new condition of enslaved individual within the larger patriarchal society, the African no longer performed the same work he or she had traditionally done. Without a need for hunters or farmers, the Orishas that had historically protected people performing these particular activities lost devotees due to their dwindling importance within the New World slave-driven environment.

According to Aderibigbe, for the African the divinities are real and the number of divinities in Africa ranges between 201 and 1,700 depending upon the Yoruba locality (126). In the diaspora, however, this number decreased considerably to approximately seven to thirteen main Orishas venerated in both the Santería and Candomblé traditions. Turning once more to Prandi’s ideas on the dislocation of ancestor worship following the arrival of the Orishas in Brazil, I point out that:

Com a vinda para as Américas, ao processo de antropomofização e mudança ou diversificação do patronato adicionou-se a unificação do panteão...como a religião dos orixás foi refeita no Brasil por africanos ou

descendentes...a preocupação com atividades agrícolas era muito secundária, de sorte que os orixás do campo foram esquecidos ou tiveram seus governos reorganizados. (4-5)

As such, the institution of slavery had a direct and profound affect not only on the Africans who were brought to the New World, but also in the way in which their traditional deities were transferred and reappropriated within the new racial and social environment.

In addition to ancestral worship, the veneration of African deities or Orishas crossed or transferred in varying degrees to Brazil and the Caribbean. In places such as Cuba and Brazil, African traditions survived and thrived despite facing adversities of enslavement and White colonial rule. As commented by Margarite Fernández Olmos in *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah, and the Caribbean*, “In the Crucible of the plantation – amid relationships based on European power and African powerlessness – the slaves’ very survival depended on their ability to manipulate and resist their complete absorption into the core values of the plantation masters” (2). In others areas, such as in the United States, traditional African religions all but vanished in their original animistic forms as new Protestant-influenced Black religions emerged out of the plantations. However, as I later explore drawing on the ideas of Albert J. Raboteau, there are subtle ways in which Africa “survives” in African American religion. I demonstrate how the diverse political and social environments of each of the regions in the Americas where the enslaved Yoruba were taken contributed to the various levels of preservation of African beliefs and Orisha worship.

Disembarkations: New World Syncretism

*The gods of Africa were carried in the memories
of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic.
To be sure, they underwent a sea change.
Albert J. Raboteau*

The “sea change” proposed by Albert J. Raboteau in the above epitaph refers to the development, progression and modification suffered by the Traditional African Religions in the Americas. The immense body of water that transported the enslaved Africans to the shores of Brazil, the Caribbean and the United States contributed to the “washing away” or disappearance of many of the Orishas, and the metaphorical “rebirth” of the Africans who miraculously survived the horrors of the Middle Passage. We know from Jean Chevalier that water can symbolically lead to regeneration as it has the capability to erase the past: “A água, possuidora de uma virtude lustral, exercerá ademais um poder soteriológico. A imersão nela é regeneradora, opera um renascimento, no sentido já mencionado, por ser ela, ao mesmo tempo, morte e vida. A água apaga a história, pois restabelece o ser um estado novo” (18). Chevalier’s point that an individual emerges from the water in a new state is of particular interest for the purposes of this study when we consider the horrors endured during the Middle Passage, and the new identities assumed and new lives undertaken by the enslaved Africans who were brought to the New World.

For millions of Africans, who for centuries were captured, ripped away from their homelands and families, and enslaved in the most inhumane manner in the new patriarchal societies of the Americas, they undoubtedly disembarked as “reborn” individuals. Presumably, this “rebirth” was particularly painful as it was coupled with the understanding that in addition to having lost their families and homelands, their freedom

had also been lost or, more appropriately, stolen from them. In the case of Fela in *Daughters of the Stone* and Kehinde in *Um defeito de cor*, both women emerged from the waters of the Middle Passage as essentially new women. Kehinde is “reborn” as “Luísa”, but secretly never rescinds her traditional birth name, which is her connection with her deceased sister and homeland. Chevalier also depicts the sea as a place of births, transformations and rebirths. It symbolizes a transitory state and a zone of doubt and uncertainty (592). Chevalier’s last point will be of particular interest in Chapters 4 and 5 of our study when we consider the themes of memory, crossing and Glissant’s abyssal roots theory.

As discussed in the first part of this chapter, the religious beliefs and oral traditions of the Yoruba arrived in the New World along with the enslaved Africans. It is interesting to note that, despite the adversities faced by Africans throughout the Diaspora and the oppressiveness of those who enslaved them, their culture persevered. The French sociologist and anthropologist Roger Bastide illustrates the binding capability of adversity stating:

Slavery not only divides; it also unites what it divides. Slavery united the African civilizations, now detached from their substructures, mutilated in the process and transformed from communal civilizations into class sub-cultures, with the European ruling-class civilizations. This produced the new phenomena of religious syncretism and cultural crossbreeding. (67)

Drawing on the previous ideas of Bastide relating to the uniting affect of slavery, I assert that, while on the one hand the unifying and resisting capacity of the creole religions was a positive factor for the enslaved Africans, it was undoubtedly something to be

feared by many plantation owners and colonial authorities in the region. This fear was rooted in the fact that many of the religious leaders of the African diasporic religions worked, either openly or overtly, alongside some of the most renowned figures in the histories of the countries.

One particular example of this collaboration of a historical figure working together with spiritual practices ultimately achieving national freedom is Haitian Vodou. The mystic and revolutionary leader, Makandal, led the Haitian Slave Revolt. It was claimed that he was able to “magically” shift his human form into animalistic forms, and he managed to instill a widespread fear within the hearts of the French colonists. The mystical and spiritual properties of the Vodou religion gave the enslaved Africans a tool that aided in creating a new social and political environment. Ultimately, the revolt led to the declaration of the first black independent nation in the New World.

Continuing with the idea of religious syncretism, the African Diasporic religions took on very different appearances in each country based on the particular cultural, social and political situation of each country. In *Creole Religions of the Caribbean* we see that “creolized religious systems, developed in secrecy...they nonetheless allowed the most oppressed sectors of colonial Caribbean societies to manifest their spirituality, express cultural and political practices suppressed by colonial force, and protect the health of the community. Creole religions developed as a result of cultural context” (2). As is the case with many religions persecuted or shunned within a society or nation, the creole religions used the technique of disguise to get by or survive within the dominant society.

In considering creolization within the religious history of the Caribbean, we turn to the definition of Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert: “malleability and mutability

of various beliefs and practices as they adapt to new understandings of class, race, gender, power, labor, and sexuality” (*Creole Religions* 4). Drawing on Alexander’s concept of “pedagogies of crossing”, I contrast this concept with the use of the word “new understandings” by Fernández Olmos to refer to the adaptations necessary for the inclusion of new forms of traditional African religions in the Americas.

The rituals and myths of the Yoruba religion brought by the enslaved peoples from Africa slowly fused with the Catholic saints and beliefs of the indigenous peoples in the New World to form what is now known as Santería in the Caribbean and Candomblé in Brazil. When the enslaved Africans saw the Catholic saints and how the colonists venerated them, they found a way in which to incorporate their own major Orishas into the worship practices by hiding them under the veil of the Catholic religion. It is out of this syncretism that religions such as Santería and Candomblé developed. Many of the Orishas were lost and forgotten in the waters of the Middle Passage, and only the ones that were more relevant to the new conditions and reality of the Africans in the New World survived.

Another interesting fact related to the syncretic nature of the creole religions, is the idea of “mixing” in order to more fully represent the new identity and reality of the enslaved Africans in the Caribbean and Latin America. If we consider, for example, the goddess Oxum, we see that in her native form in Africa she is a beautiful, black woman. However, in order to adapt to the new reality of the Caribbean, Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert recount a story in which the goddess was changed into a lighter-skinned version of her African self: “Our children will now go through the world spreading our wonders and millions will remember us and worship once again...but not

everyone is black like us; there are also many whites...Please make my hair straighter and my skin lighter so that all Cubans can see some of themselves in me” (*Creole Religions* 46). In all of the images, we see of the new syncretic and “New World” version of the goddess, her skin is more copper-toned and she is a vision of female beauty that better represents the diasporic people who venerate her in this new environment. I shall explore this myth in greater detail in chapter six of this study when I analyze the importance of the *patakís* or sacred myths of the Santería religion.

Creole religions grew and prospered as products of cultural contact and enabled the enslaved Africans to come together and preserve their own individual and collective identities. Furthermore, they served as tools of resistance, albeit ingenious and subtle in nature, with which to face and stand up to the dominant Catholic religion, which was so prevalent in the Caribbean and Latin American regions, such as in Cuba and Brazil.

According to Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert:

The syncretic revision of dominant discourses sought to transform the authority that these discourses upheld...the power and violence mobilized by slave revolts and revolution were built into the logic of New World syncretism itself. The Catholicism of Voodoo, Candomblé and Santería was not an ecumenical screen, hiding the worship of African deities from official persecution. It was the religion of the masters, revised, transformed, and appropriated by slaves to harness its power within their universes of discourse. In this way, the slaves took possession of Catholicism and thereby repossessed themselves as active spiritual subjects. (*Creole Religions* 9)

By “taking possession” of the religion of the oppressors in the New World setting and transforming it into their own fluid and evolving form of spirituality, the slaves were able to create both spaces of resistance against the dominant discourse, as well as niches for empowerment of the members of the diasporic communities.

Despite the varied social and political backdrops into which the Creole religions developed in each country, there are a number of characteristics that are common amongst them throughout the Caribbean and Latin American region. They all, to some degree and extent, worship one Supreme Being, while reverencing African diasporic deities who are the interconnection between the earthly life and the ancestral life. The interaction with these deities is achieved many times through spirit possession and divinatory practices. The evolutionary and fluid nature of the traditional African religions has enabled them to adapt to the new social conditions of worshippers in the New World. In their new environment, the African diasporic religions have helped to unite the dispersed people of the new diasporic communities, and have served as spiritual bridges to their more distant overseas roots with the Yoruba nation of West Africa.

In order to expand the scope of my study of works of Black women writers of the Caribbean, Brazil and the United States, I explore the way in which the religious context of plantation life in the United States differed greatly from the religious context of life on plantations in Cuba and Brazil. This contrasting look at religion within the African Diaspora will also contribute to establishing a theoretical groundwork upon which to build my later analysis of African American spirituality in *Beloved*, particularly the figure of Baby Suggs and the importance of the clearing in her spiritual practices.

As previously mentioned, the transcontinental movement of African religion into Latin American and the Caribbean developed in an evolutionary and fluid nature in many of the countries of the region. Faced with a new social condition in the New World, traditional African religions merged primarily with Catholicism to create New World syncretic religions. These syncretic religions helped forge new diasporic communities, as well as to create new cultural identities for the enslaved Africans within the region. However, African religion did not undergo a uniform insertion into all areas of the Americas. While African traditional beliefs are still very much alive in the Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian religions of Santería and Candomblé, they have all but vanished in their original animistic forms from Black religion in the United States. The exception to this point would be the syncretic versions or “double diaspora” undertaken by the Yoruba and Fon religions brought to the United States by Cuban, Puerto Rican and Haitian immigrants throughout the middle to end of the twentieth century.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned ideas regarding the disappearance of traditional African beliefs and practices from African American religions, and envisioning a Pan-American overview of the African diasporic religions in the Americas, in this section I aim to offer insights and possible explanations for the decline of the traditional African religions in the United States, as well as the subsequent conversion of enslaved Africans to primarily protestant forms of Christianity. Contrastingly, I show how, focusing on the traditions and practices of Black religion in America, despite the very different nature of the religion in the United States, subtle elements of traditional African beliefs managed to “survive” in the religion. My explanations are rooted primarily in the ideas of Albert J. Raboteau in *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution”*

in the Antebellum South, African American Religion, Canaan Land: A Religious History of American Americans, and “Slave Autonomy and Religion” and those of Roger Bastide in *The African Religions of Brazil*.

In his research on slave religions in the Americas, Raboteau questions such ideas as the origins of Black religion in the United States, the aspects of African religions that were retained by the enslaved Africans, and how the evangelization and conversion of these enslaved peoples took place in the United States. In particular, he explores two main ideas that he offers as possible answers to these questions: the role of Protestantism over Catholicism in the religious conversion of the enslaved Africans and the specific demographic factors present in antebellum period of the United States. Both of these factors lead to a very different religious environment within the African American community when compared with the heavily African-influenced religions found in, for example, the Caribbean and Brazil.

From an historical viewpoint, the enslavement and transportation of approximately ten million Africans to the New World is a tragedy that, in the words of Raboteau, “is difficult to imagine, much less comprehend” (*Slave Religion* 4). We now know that not only were tribal and linguistic groups broken up in the violent enslavement of Africans within the diaspora, but also family and community ties. To exert a better control over their “property”, many owners insisted on eliminating all forms of African culture in an attempt to quell any form of resistance or rebellion amongst the slaves.

African culture, in particular folklore, language and religion, were transplanted into the New World, but underwent certain adaptations in their new environment to the different countries or regions of origin. Many enslaved Africans practiced different forms

of African traditional religion, and also had their own dialects and traditions. It is estimated that approximately four million slaves were taken to Brazil over the four hundred years of the slave trade, with a much lower number of close to four hundred thousand being taken to toil in the fields of the plantations in the United States.

Despite differences in language and traditions, a large percentage of American slaves had their roots in West Africa and Congo-Angola religions, and shared many religious belief commonalities such as the belief in a Supreme Creator, secondary gods associated with natural forces, spirit possession, the world of spirits, ancestors, burial rites, magic, rituals and music (*Slave Religion* 7-16). Notwithstanding the cohesiveness of these commonalities, they were not strong enough to keep the flame of traditional African religion alive in the slave quarters of plantations of the United States.

The unequal distribution or importing of enslaved Africans in the Americas points to one of the main ideas Raboteau offers on the disappearance of traditional African religion in the United States and the continuation of these same religious practices in other regions of the Americas: demographic factors. Contrary to the beliefs of other critics such as Herskovits (1941) and Frazier (1939), Raboteau posits demographic factors as the underpinning explanation for the decline of African religion and the incorporation of the protestant religion in the lives of the enslaved Africans. The main factor is that the bulk of the US slave population was native born.

In opposition to the steady importation and constant replenishment of slave populations on many of the plantations in Cuba and Brazil, the majority of the slaves on plantations in the United States were products of reproduction on American soil. This explains the more prevalent tie of the Cuban and Brazilian slaves with traditional African

culture and religion: it was constantly being strengthened and reaffirmed by the new African slaves arriving on a weekly or monthly basis to the plantations. Without a direct link to the home country, many slaves on United States plantations began to worship less and less their traditional African Orishas, and looked more towards the Protestant forms of religion as sources of salvation and, more importantly, freedom.

Other demographic explanations offered by the author are that of the number of slaves on the plantations in both regions. On most of the plantations in the Caribbean and Brazil, the slave labor was intense and required constant replenishment by healthy, strong enslaved Africans. As Bastide affirms regarding the plantation system in Brazil:

Of course, time, in the long run, would erode all traditions, however firmly anchored in the new habitat. But the slave trade continually renewed the sources of life by establishing continuous contact between old slaves, or their sons, and the new arrivals, who sometimes included priests and medicine men. In this way, throughout the whole period of slavery, religious values were continuously rejuvenated at the same time that they were being eroded... We should therefore think of the religious life of Africans in Brazil as a series of events lacking any organic links – traditions that were broken and resumed but that nevertheless retained from one century to the next, probably in the most diverse forms, the same fidelity to the African mystique or mystiques. (47-48)

While hundreds of slaves were required to toil on the sugar cane plantations in the Caribbean and Brazil, on the plantations in the United States most were smaller, requiring fewer slaves to work the land, at times only fifteen to twenty. With such a reduced

number of native-born Africans, it becomes easy to see how the loss of African culture was common on United States plantations. This also became an important factor during the conversion and evangelization of the slaves, as success rates with native-born slaves were much higher than with African born slaves.

The second idea proposed by Raboteau for the decline of traditional African religion in the United States is that Catholicism was more conducive to the survival of African Religion than was Protestantism. It was much easier to form a syncretic form of veneration of Catholic saints in Cuba and Brazil than it was with Protestantism in the United States, which places greater emphasis on Bible study and inward conversion. These two factors, bible study and inward conversion, would act as a particular deterrent to maintaining traditional African beliefs, as they operate in stark opposition to the oral traditions and communal nature of African religions. Conversely, the veneration of Catholic saints in Cuba and Brazil contributed to the continued, albeit secretive, worship of the Orishas by the enslaved Africans, pairing African deities with Catholic saints who presented similar characteristics. As such, Shangó came to be venerated as Saint Barbara in the Americas, and Yemanjá as Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, thus appeasing the slave owners' requests for "conversion" and the enslaved Africans' worship of their traditional Orishas.

Whereas in Brazil each plantation had its own chapel and, often times, chaplain who performed all religious ceremonies and rituals for both the masters and the slaves, in the United States the evangelization of slaves was oftentimes an extension of segregation between the white masters and the black slaves. Another aspect regarding Catholicism on the plantations in Brazil is the fact that it was a form of the religion that was rich in

superstitions, which coupled well with the mysticism and spirit worship of the African religions. Bastide affirms:

The implanted Catholicism was that of the Counter Reformation, which, unlike Protestantism, revived the old worship of the saints and, along with it, some of the superstitions of the Middle Ages...In short, the morphological transformation the society underwent when it was transplanted from Portugal to Brazil had repercussions that reached far into the domain of symbols, values, and religious ideals through the creation of what might be called a 'household' Catholicism centered on the worship of the patriarch's guardian saints and of the family dead, who were buried in the same chapel and surrounded by the same reverence.

(40-41)

The same saints that occupied the plantation chapel and were venerated by the masters in the original Catholic forms were "repossessed" by the Africans as syncretic versions of their own beloved Orishas that survived the Middle Passage. Unlike in traditional Protestantism where God and the spiritual realm is kept at a certain distance, the Catholicism of the Counter Reformation brought the saints into daily contact with the slaves.

Notwithstanding the contrasting manner in which the slaves were included in each New World religion, Bastide points to one underpinning similarity between the two: race and racial segregation. In the Protestant form of Christianity imposed on slaves in plantations of the United States, blacks and whites worshipped separately. Bastide comments on how there were two separate church services with different sermons for the

white masters and black slaves. Out of this segregated worship “Two separate Protestantisms emerged, reflecting ethnic temperamental differences: the more emotional Protestantism of the blacks and the more rational Protestantism of the whites” (110). In Brazil, there was also a racial segregation within the Catholic church, with the plantation chapel itself being divided so as to, even in the spiritual realm, relegate the slave to an inferior position related to the white master.

Bastide points out that, “the African was both included and separated; he shared his master’s religion, but as an inferior being. Architecture followed the model of the color hierarchy” (110). Although in Brazil the Catholic religion followed similar segregation lines as Protestantism in the United States, by giving white leaders control over Black Catholicism, “it prevented race consciousness from expressing itself through the mystical experience. It was the emergence of the black preacher that enabled the United States to develop its quite distinct forms of worship” (110). By African American preachers taking the lead and establishing Black sects, they were able not only to integrate subtle elements or remnants of traditional African religions into Black Protestantism, but also to create a space within which they could contribute to other social and political issues for the benefit of the African American community.

Speaking to the importance of Black churches in the United States at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Raboteau comments that the churches were intent on, “educating and improving their communities ‘in the cause of God and the cause of freedom’” (*Canaan Land* 36). The critic points out that during this same historical moment, the Black church took on a number of important roles within the greater African-American community in the United States. As such, according to Raboteau,

“As sources of moral uplift, agencies of economic cooperation, arenas for political action, promoters of education, and houses of refuge in a hostile white world, the churches stood at the center of African-American community life” (*Canaan Land* 36). It is out of the religious setting of Black Protestant churches that some of the most memorable and influential African American preachers and political activists, such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. arose seeking justice within the dominant society on issues such as abolition and civil rights.

Contrastingly, in the case of slaves in Brazil, due to the sheer number of slaves on the plantations and the economic interests of the masters, slaves participated in the “separate but equal” Catholic masses, but were allowed to “amuse themselves ‘after the fashion of their nation,’ on Sunday evenings or on holidays ‘sanctified by the Holy Mother Church’” (Bastide 49). The slave owners on Brazilian plantations believed that by allowing their slaves to enjoy themselves in their African dancing and singing, they would be more willing and able to labor tirelessly in the fields and increase production for the masters. It was out of this “amusement” that the traditional African religious beliefs were able to flourish on the plantations in Brazil, eventually moving to the Quilombos with the fugitive slaves and, ultimately, to urban regions of the country following abolition.

In *Slave Autonomy and Religion*, Raboteau raises another point regarding the acceptance by the slave owners of religious conversion of their slaves: manumission:

Despite the justification of slavery as a method of spreading the gospel, the conversion of slaves was not a top priority for colonial planters. One of the principal reasons for the refusal of British colonists to allow their

slaves religious instruction was the fear that baptism would require the manumission of their slaves, since it was illegal to hold a fellow Christian in bondage. This dilemma was solved quickly by colonial legislation stating that baptism did not alter slave status. (51)

It becomes increasingly obvious that two of the main issues linked with the religious conversion of the slaves in the United States were race and power. The American slave owners were reluctant to relinquish any type of power they might hold over the slaves by allowing them to become Christian. The slave owners allowed for the conversion of the slaves, but under their strict guidelines including, for example, preaching allowed by black preachers for specific funeral and marriage services with the permission of the owners.

In *African-American Religion*, Raboteau comments on the question of freedom and how for African Americans, reinterpreting the biblical story of Exodus, America was not the “Promised Land of milk and honey”, but rather “Egypt because they, like the children of Israel of old, still toiled in bondage” (49). Citing Frederick Douglass, Raboteau notes that the “Promised Land” or Land of Canaan for the thousands of enslaved Africans in the United States was the North of the United States, which was where many fugitive slaves headed after managing to escape from plantations in the South. I cite *Beloved* as a literary representation of this search for the “Promised Land” in the North by fugitive slaves, noting how Sethe escapes and crosses the Ohio River to join Baby Suggs in the North, where her children await her arrival.

Another important issue linked with evangelization was literacy of slaves. The masters would only allow oral instruction of the bible to the slaves to assure that none of

them could read or write. This is noteworthy as it was contrary to the Protestant tradition of bible reading and personal conversion, and contributed to the oral tradition that is an intrinsic part of traditional African religion. The fear of slave literacy was likewise connected to the fear of slave rebellions, as the owners believed that with knowledge from literacy and equality from conversion to Christianity the slaves would be more capable of carrying out revolts and rebellions. Undoubtedly, with knowledge comes power.

This particular point of slave literacy and the connection with revolts is interesting, as it appears in countries such as Haiti and Brazil with historical records of significant slave revolts headed by enslaved Muslims. In Haiti during the middle of the eighteenth century, for example, the leader of the revolution Francois Macandal in addition to being a maroon leader and known sourcerer, was also highly literate and a Muslim. Likewise, in Brazil the Malê Revolt of 1835 in Salvador involved the participation of a large number of Muslim educators. In *Um defeito de cor*, Kehinde is taught by a Muslim, Fatumbi, and becomes involved in revolts in Salvador lead by Malês.

Reverting to the theme of literacy and the role it played in the manner in which slaves on plantations in the United States had access to bible teachings, we note that, due to the imposed illiteracy of the slaves, many of the bible teachings were passed down orally from the black preacher to the rest of the slaves, as well as amongst the slaves themselves in the form of slave spirituals. We note here the African oral tradition being readapted to a New World setting. Commenting on the “emotional” form of Protestantism that developed among Blacks in the United States, Bastide points out:

The (US) blacks imitated and stuck to revivalist religion rather than non-emotional Protestantism because it suited them better, fitted their own view of man's relations with the supernatural, their love of music, rhythm, and dancing, and their ancient ritual of communion with the divine...we should have every reason to define it as a reinterpretation of Africa. (366)

This last point made by Bastide in which he defines Black Protestantism as “a reinterpretation of Africa” speaks to my previous point on subtle elements of African religion being present in African American religion.

Although, due to the different social and demographic conditions of the American plantation system, enslaved Africans in the United States gradually saw the ties to their ancestral past in Africa weakened and replaced by a new Protestant form of religion, it was not, however, the same Protestantism of their masters. It was a new, African-infused version of the traditional Protestant religion. The enslaved Africans in the United States managed to retain elements or Africanisms in the new religion and turned it into something that more accurately represented them and their own reality, primarily through the use of oral tradition, music, song and dance. Speaking to this “repossession” of the Protestant faith, Raboteau affirms that,

Drawing upon the worship traditions of Africa, as well as those of revivalistic Christianity, the slaves created services that resembled the spirit-empowered ceremonies of their African ancestors. Both traditions assumed that authentic worship required an observable experience of the divine presence...Ritual, in this perspective, was supposed to bring the

divine power tangibly into this world, so that people might be transformed, healed, and made whole. (*African-American Religion* 50)

Relating Raboteau's ideas on spiritual transformation, healing and wholeness to Alexander's concept of African cosmological systems being manifestations of locatedness, rootedness, and belonging that map individual and collective relationships to the Divine, in the case of Black Protestantism, the Divine becomes manifest in the words and movements of the believers.

Speaking to one of the ritual practices of Black Protestantism in the United States, the ring shout, Raboteau affirms that, "inspired religious trances among the slaves, closely resembled religious dances in Africa, the Caribbean, and Brazil that also brought the worshippers into states of trance" (*African-American Religion* 56). Some other examples of spiritual embodiment that arose within the context of Black Protestantism are the ring shout, rhythmic clapping, call and response, syncopation, chanting and body movement.

One particular manifestation of Black Religion in the United States that shares commonalities with the Patakís or sacred myths prevalent in Africa and in the New World religions of Santería and Candomblé is that of the Spirituals. As Raboteau points out, the slaves learned the Bible in an oral fashion, and incorporated Bible passages as parts of their own folktales through memorization and retelling. Spirituals brought together Protestant hymns and African music styles into a distinctly creative and expressive synthesis. These Spirituals were used during the "ring shout", or Protestant version of spiritual trance, and passed through a signification or re-signification process (*African-American Religion* 52-53). In much the same way that myths and traditional

African storytelling relies on the storyteller to “pass on” his or her version of the myth or story, the Spiritualls could also undertake different meanings.

Moving my focus slightly away from the United States to consider the syncretic forms of religion that developed in Brazil following the arrival of enslaved Africans in the country, I point out that the new contact between the Portuguese colonizers, first with the native Indians and then with the Africans, gave way to a dualism of both culture and race and, more importantly for this study, of religion. It is this duality of Portuguese Catholicism with native spirituality and, later, with traditional African religious beliefs which, when combined with the European hybrid belief of Spiritism, gave way to the new mixed religion of Umbanda in the first part of the twentieth century.

The first merging of religious ideals in Brazil came in the form of staunch Catholicism and the Jesuit priests, whose divine obligation it was to convert the “heathen” native Indians. Instead of trying to merge their Catholic beliefs with the natives’ spiritual practices and beliefs, they Portuguese colonizers made use of the same unifying process that they had used in Portugal against the “infidels”. The powerful Portuguese cathedral or church gave way to a more close-knit chapel on each plantation. The plantation chapel was of great significance throughout the period of slavery in the country, and was of great concern for the Jesuits due to the close proximity it placed the chaplain with the slave women and young girls. The chapel stood adjacent to the Casa-Grande. But, as Roger Bastide points out, “...the implanted Catholicism was that of the Counter Reformation, which, unlike Protestantism, revived the old worship of the saints and, along with it, some of the superstitions of the Middle Ages” (40). It is this last portion of Bastide’s comment on the worship of the saints, along with the family dead

who were buried in the same chapel, that are most going to be of relevance in the merging with traditional African beliefs on the plantation.

With the creation of “Negro or mulatto brotherhoods”, according to Bastide, assimilation and religious syncretism would develop...Everything in the African customs that could be adapted to Catholicism was accepted, though of course it was reinterpreted and given another meaning” (53-54). We see that, in this manner, the church “...promoted the syncretism of Catholicism with African religion rather than the Catholicization of the blacks” (Bastide 56). It is precisely this adaptation and reinterpretation that gave way to the new Afro-Brazilian religion of Candomblé.

Although the African social structures were essentially shattered with slavery, the religious and cultural values remained preserved and were passed down from one generation to the next of African descendants in Brazil. In the case of Cuba, African religious beliefs arrived with the approximately 500,000 enslaved Africans who were brought to the country primarily from the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries. As previously cited, the underlying explanation for the arrival of the Africans in Cuba was economic: to satisfy the needs of the sugar plantation owners in the Americas.

During the early part of the nineteenth century, Cuba had a Black majority of approximately sixty percent. The newly arrived Yoruba people and subgroups were mixed with other people mainly from West and Central Africa. George Brandon comments on this mixing of groups and creation of the Lucumi nation stating that these people:

Were classified into groups called *naciones* (nations), and each bore a distinctive name. Descendants of the Yorubas and some of their neighbors

became the Lucumi nation...a secondary phenomenon in Cuba, a result of the inclusion of heterogeneous Yoruba subgroups within an exploitative system of urban and rural slavery alongside Africans from other areas. (55).

Contrary to what we have already presented with regards to the loss of African beliefs in the United States and along the same lines as those presented regarding the preservation of African religion in Brazil, in Cuba the diasporic Lucumi belief system persevered and flourished. Brandon refers to the Lucumi religion as a:

Flickering light, a lamp handed, trembling, from one generation to the next, brightening with each limited influx of new Yorubas, dimming with each decimated generation, only to flicker weakly or almost die out in the corrosive forge of subgroup competition among slaves, interethnic marriage and sexual liaisons, racial demonization, and the grinding brutal regime of slave labor. At some point the Yoruba traditions may actually have died out completely only to be revived or sown anew by the next influx of Yoruba slaves. (58)

It becomes very clear that religion has historically accompanied the changes in the Cuban society, while simultaneously linking the past, present, and future generations of people of African descent.

This important theme of religion as a linking element that provides cultural roots for the African diasporic communities throughout the Americas is what I explore in chapters four and five of this study. The memory of ancestors and the worship of Orishas combined with the spiritual practices passed down from one generation to the next within

the traditional African belief system played an integral role in the creation of these tightknit diasporic communities. In Brazil as well as other countries of the African diaspora in the Caribbean and South America, the veneration of the Orishas developed in quite a different manner than in Africa. Whereas in Africa, as previously discussed at the beginning of this chapter, each Orisha was worshipped in a particular region over which it served as a protector. In the New World, however, all of the Orishas became clustered into one group of veneration due to the lack of freedom of the enslaved Africans as well as space to have a separate worship space for each individual Orisha. With no land to farm for themselves as slaves on the plantations, the worship of the earth deities faded into existence.

Baba Ifa Karade makes the point that “throughout Yorubaland every aspect of nature is a vehicle to god-consciousness” (27-28), and distinguishes seven major Orisha of the New World Yoruba belief system who have survived the Middle Passage: Obatala, creator of human form, Elegba, guardian of the crossroads, Ogun, war and tools, Yemoja, motherhood and family, Oshun, sensuality and intuition, Shango, masculinity and lightning, and Oya, death and progression (29). I offer a more indepth look at the two female Orishas of greatest interest to my study, Yemanjá and Oxum, in Chapter six through the *Patakís* or sacred myths of the Orishas as narrated by Lydia Cabrera, Exilia Saldaña, Ócha’ni Lele and Romulo Lachatañeré. These myths offer various interpretations of actions and characteristics of the Orishas. According to Brandon (77) and Prandi (25), some of the most popular Orishas in Cuba and Brazil are those highlighted in Chart 1 below.

CHART 1. Comparison between Major Brazilian and Cuban Orishas and Saints

Cuban Orisha	Brazilian Orisha	Cuban Saint	Brazilian Saint	Characteristics
Elegguá, Elegua or Eshu	Exú	Holy Child of Atocha	Devil	Messenger to the Orisha, keeper of the crossroads, communication.
Changó	Xangô	Barbara	Geronimo and John	God of thunder, lightning and fire.
Ochún	Oxum	Our Lady of Caridad del Cobre	Our Lady of Candeias	Patroness of love, money and yellow metals. Rules sex and marriage.
Yemayá	Iemanjá	Our Lady of Regla	Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception	Mother of the Orisha, goddess of the sea and maternity.
Ogun	Ogum	Peter	Anthony and George	God of iron and warfare.
Babalu Aye	Omulu Obaluaiê	Lazarus	Lazarus and Roch	Patron of the sick.

Oyá or Yànsá	Oiá or Iansã	Our Lady of La Candelaria	Barbara	Guardian of the cemetery.
Obatalá	Obatalá	Our Lady of Mercy	Our Lord of the Good End	Father of the Orisha.
Olofi	Olodumaré or Olofi	Christ	The Supreme God and Creator	One of the three aspects of Olodumare (God)
Orúnmila or Orula	Orunmilá	Francis of Assisi	Francis of Assisi	Owner of Ifá Divination, guardian of the knowledge of past and future.

Yemanjá and Oxum: African Goddesses in Dialogue with the Americas

To open my discussion on female deities in the New World setting, I highlight two of the water divinities, Yemanjá and Oxum. These two goddesses are of special interest to my study, and to this chapter in particular, due to their fluvial and fluid natures. In considering the waters that brought the slave ships to the Americas, it is easy to understand the importance of the water goddess who protected the Africans and brought them to safety after the perilous crossing. According to Kathleen O'Brien Wicker in her chapter on "Mama Water in African Religion and Spirituality":

Water divinities and spirits are arguably the most adaptable, flexible, and innovative of all African divinities, since fluidity is the essence of their being... They are characterized by shifting dispositions, genders, and representations... The major symbolic value of water divinities and their representations in African cultures is to express the possibility of bridging worlds. Water divinities demonstrate by their very nature the intimate connection between the divine, the human, and the natural worlds. (198)

This last point made by Wicker on the capability of water divinities to bridge worlds is also interesting in that it highlights the fluid nature of spirituality and contact between both the spiritual and the secular world.

In addition to serving as bridges between worlds, the water Orishas also serve to bridge gender identities and representations. As Wicker affirms: “Originally hermaphroditic, they are now more commonly portrayed as male-female pairs. They attract devotees of the same or of the opposite sex” (198). In this case, by functioning to attract either same sex or opposite sex devotees and presenting hermaphroditic or dual genders, the water Orishas demonstrate their fluid natures by breaking binary gender structures. Yemanjá, the archetypal mother figure who, according to African mythology, gave birth to all of the other Orishas, has certain “paths” or representations within which she is depicted as “more manly than a man”. I explore these questions of fluid gender identities and breaking binary gender structures in Chapter 7 on the themes of manifestations of gender, sexuality and spirituality in the Pataki and the main literary works of my study.

In *Iemanjá: A grande mãe africana do Brasil*, Armando Vallado affirms that upon arrival in the New World, Yemanjá was fused with other water goddess images such as the American Indian “*iaras*” and the European pagan mermaids: “Iemanjá, Oxum e Nanã aqui tiveram uma profunda inter-relação mítica com as sereias do paganismo europeu, com as diferentes dominações da Nossa Senhora católica e com as *iaras* ameríndias, as mães-d’água” (33). Yemanjá (also Yemojá and Iemanjá) is one of the Orishas that survived the Middle Passage and is today venerated by worshippers throughout the Americas.

As the ultimate maternal figure, Yemanjá embraces and offers protection for all her children. Mikelle Smith Omari-Tunkara affirms: “Yemojá’s name is derived from Yeye Omo Eja (the mother of fish children) and is a metaphor for bodies of water where fish abide, including ponds, lakes and the ocean” (65). Her colors invoke the depths of the oceans: crystal and light blue. They also convey her calm, transparent, cool and peaceful temperament. Children of Yemanjá are, according to Omari-Tunkara, “alternately obstinate, yielding, inflexible, adaptive, protective, passionate, haughty, and sometimes arrogant; possess a keen sense of rank and hierarchy and command respect” (75). While most of the myths associated with Yemanjá portray her as a loving, maternal figure, not all of them attest to her purely feminine nature.

In *Yemayá y Ochún* by Lydia Cabrera, one of the myths recounted describes a “manly” version of this Orisha: “A Yemayá le gustaba cazar, chapear, manejar el machete. En este camino es marimacho y viste de hombre” (45). It is also interesting to remember that as a water deity, Yemanjá is part of a group of Orishas amongst whom androgyny is quite commonplace. In yet another patakí, Cabrera recounts, “Yemayá amó

locamente a un andrógino, el bellissimo Inle. Para satisfacer la pasión que el joven dios le inspiraba, lo raptó, lo llevó al fondo del mar y allí lo tuvo hasta que, saciado del todo su apetito, se aburrió de su amante y deseó regresar al mundo” (45). I explore the androgynous nature of Yemanjá, as well as the gender identity of Orishas and the theme of representation in possessional states in greater detail in Chapter 7.

Oxum, the great goddess of rivers, is the Orisha of love, femininity and sensuality. In actuality, she symbolizes and encompasses the complete spectrum of the womanhood. She is, you might say, the Yoruba equivalent to Aphrodite. In her current form, she originated in the American continent as a long, straight haired, golden-skinned “mulata” (Saldaña 150). She is the young women who flirts with men while at the same time appearing as an elderly matriarch giving life advice and remembering events from her own life. Within the *patakis*, the mythical stories of the Orishas in Santería religion, Mother Oxum tells the story of the everyday woman; they are stories for all women.

In Cuba, Oxum is identified with the patron Virgin of the country: Our Lady of the Caridad del Cobre. In his text “La Regla de Ocha: The Religious System of Santería”, Miguel Barnet affirms that in addition to being a symbol of female sensuality, Oxum is also “a symbol of the colonial mulatta, sensual and merry” (95). Her worship in Cuba is linked to the syncretic nature of the deity, as well as the fact that, according to Barnet, “she is thought to represent many Cuban women in her sensual grace and Creole mischievousness” (95). The syncretic and hybrid nature of the Orisha in the Americas is a direct corollation with the hybrid nature of Cuban and Caribbean women in the Americas. Not quite one thing, yet not entirely another is precisely the situation many

Black women found themselves while attempting to navigate the complex waters of identity and belonging within the diasporic communities of the Americas.

Um defeito de cor: Crossings and Manifestations

The choice of the term “embarkation” to refer to the sea crossing of the Orishas to the Americas is extremely pertinent to our analysis of the main literary work of this study: *Um defeito de cor*. Obviously, the verb “to embark” immediately brings to mind travel and dislocation. In the case of this particular work, however, the reader embarks upon not just the sea of words that carry him through the narrative, but also on the physical and memorialistic journey of the main protagonist. In the narrative, the verb word “embark” takes on a more concrete and profound meaning: the spiritual crossing undergone by Kehinde.

Um defeito de cor is a “historiographical novel” that relays the memories of an elderly woman, Kehinde, from her native country in Africa to Brazil, and back. In addition to recounting the most significant events in the life of the protagonist and narrator Kehinde, it also interweaves historical moments from the Colonial Era in Brazil. As such, it paints a telling picture of the daily lives of the Afro-Brazilians during the XIX Century in Brazil, as well as numerous references to traditional African beliefs within the new context of the diasporic communities in Brazil. The work opens with an introduction by the narrator:

Eu nasci em Savalu, reino de Daomé, África, no ano de um mil oitocentos e dez. Portanto eu tinha seis anos, quase sete, quando esta história começou. O que aconteceu antes disso não tinha importância, pois a vida

corria paralela ao destino. O meu nome é Kehinde porque sou uma ibêji,
(Ibêji: Assim são chamados os gêmeos entre os povos iorubás). (*Defeito* 7)

From these first few lines of the text, the narrator provides the reader with the historical time, place of origin, her name and the highly important fact in the novel of her being a twin. Additionally, as readers we understand that we have before us a text within which the narrator relays her life from the age of six or seven and, due to some type of extraordinary event, whose destiny changes courses from that age onwards.

We also note from the importance of African religious traditions from the first few pages of the first chapter with references to the gods of Kehinde's grandmother: "Dan também é nome de serpente sagrado...a cobra que engole o próprio rabo...as estátuas de Xangô, de Nanã e dos Ibêjis" (*Defeito* 20-25), as well as the significance of *Ibêji*, twins among the Yoruba people, and *Abikus*, children born to die, within the African cosmological system: "Assim são os *abikus*, espíritos amigos há mais tempo do que qualquer um de nós pode contar e que, antes de nascer, combinam entre si que logo voltarão a morrer para se encontrarem novamente no mundo dos espíritos" (*Defeito* 19).

Destiny is the force behind the journey on which the narrator embarks and is presented in a fatalistic manner by the narrator in the first few pages of the novel: "Mas ninguém foge ao destino, a não ser que Ele queira, porque, quando Ele quer, até água fria é remédio" (*Defeito* 20). The destiny to which the narrator refers is a tragic chain of events whose beginnings are in the brutal attack of warriors who kill Kehinde's mother and older brother, after first raping the mother in front of Kehinde's grandmother, Kehinde and her twin sister, Taiwo, as well as sexually abusing the two young girls.

Following the attack, Kehinde's grandmother leaves their home and takes the twins with her to begin a new life in Ouidah, a city on the Atlantic coast of Benin where today stands the monument of the "door of no return". It is in the city of Ouidah that Kehinde first pays a visit to the sea or, according to the kindly woman who offers room and board to Kehinde and her grandmother and sister after arriving in the town market, Titalayo: "a morada de Iemanjá" (*Defeito* 31). The narrator notes the presence of Orishas in Titalayo's room: "Em seu quarto, a Titilayo tinha uma Oxum com uma racha enorme, um Xangô com seu machado de duas pontas e um Ogum que parecia vigiar, com seus olhos atentos de caçador...Akin disse que tinham sido feitas pelo pai dele antes de ir embora" (*Defeito* 31). It is also in Ouidah that Kehinde's life changes forever when she is captured by slave traders and sent to Brazil.

While imprisoned in the port awaiting the arrival of the slave ship, Kehinde seeks comfort in the Orishas. This is the first time in the narrative that we witness the protective "presence" of the Orishas, and the impact of the spiritual interaction on the life of the narrator:

Acho que foi a primeira vez que os senti. Abracei a Taiwo e coloquei a cabeça dela sobre os peitos de Nana, e fiquei com os de Iemanjá. Xangô sentou-se ao nosso lado e passou a mão sobre nós, abençoando, e os Ibejis cantaram até que conseguíssemos dormir. Foi como cachaça, não como felicidade, mas sentimos uma quentura por dentro do corpo abrandando a tristeza. (*Defeito* 41-42)

The spiritual warmth of Yemanjá bathes Kehinde in a maternal embrace from the spiritual realm of the Orishas. During the traumatic experience of the initial part of her

life of enslavement, the Orishas accompany Kehinde and her sister and watch over them in a touching display of spiritual protection.

The crossing on the slave ship with her grandmother and sister is just one of the countless moments throughout the narrative that has a profound and lasting effect on the reader due to the graphic description of the horrifically inhumane treatment of the enslaved Africans. These descriptions reflect the harsh and cruel reality of the institution of slavery. In *Candomblés da Bahia*, Edson Carneiro affirms the presence of slaves from the nations or tribes that Kehinde mentions that accompany her on her journey from Africa to Bahia:

Os primeiros escravos que aportaram no Brasil vinham a região da Guiné Portuguesa...As *peças de Guiné*, chegadas à área dos canaviais, principalmente Bahia e Pernambuco, eram na maioria fulas e mandingas, tribos alcançadas pela expansão africana do islã, mas não inteiramente islamizadas...A Costa da Mina – a linha setentrional do Golfo da Guiné – foi visitada pelos tumbeiros durante todo o século XVIII, e ainda depois, em busca de negros para os trabalhos da mineração: negros do litoral, nagôs, jejes, fantis e exântis, gás e txis (minas), e negros do interior do Sudão islamizado, hauçás, canúris, tapas, gurunxes, e novamente fulas e mandingas. Desembarcados na Bahia, que detinha o monopólio de escravos com a Costa da Mina, esses negros eram transferidos, pelo interior, para as catas de ouro e de diamantes de Minas Gerais. (7-8)

From the depths of the hold of the slave ship, in a literary echoing of Carneiro's description of the various tribes during the Middle Passage, Kehinde describes not just

the encounter of various nations or ethnic groups of Africans, but also of the religions that accompanied each group on the horrendous crossing. Of the various gods who made the voyage the narrator comments:

Pedidos de proteção foram ouvidos em várias línguas. Depois que todos acabaram, o silêncio foi ainda maior, com a presença de Iemanjá, Oxum, Exu, Odum, Ogum, Xangô e muitos eguns...A minha avó comentou que, pelas saudações ali deviam estar jejes, fons, hauçás, igbos, fulanis, mais, popos, tapas, achantis e egbás... (povos africanos da região do antigo Daomé-Benim), além de outros povos que não conhecia. (*Defeito* 48)

It is also in the hold that Kehinde first meets Muslim Africans or “muçurumins”, who will play an important role many years later in Salvador in the fight for slave freedom.

The religious syncretism that ultimately became part of the Africans’ new diasporic culture in the New World began even prior to setting foot on Brazilian soil. As we can see in Kehinde’s narrative, bound by the horrific yoke of slavery, the disparate nations and religions joined as a unifying force against the religion imposed by the White colonizers. Recalling the words of a priest prior to embarking, Kehinde comments:

Alguém lembrou que o padre também tinha dito que, a partir daquele momento, eles deviam acreditar na religião dos brancos, deixando em África toda a fé nos deuses de lá, porque era lá que eles deveriam ficar, visto que os deuses nunca embarcam para o estrangeiro. Quando alguém comentou isso, todos fizeram saudações aos seus orixás, eguns ou voduns, demonstrando que não tinham concordado. (*Defeito* 50)

This last point the priest makes about the gods never embarking to overseas destinations is of particular interest to us in this chapter, as they did in fact make the crossing to the Americas.

Before passing away during the middle passage, Kehinde's grandmother gives her advice about the importance of worshipping and respecting her ancestors. She instructs her granddaughter to never forget Africa and her traditional African beliefs: "Então, mesmo que não fosse através dos voduns, disser para eu nunca me esquecer da nossa África, da nossa mãe, de Nana, de Xangô, dos Ibêjis, de Oxum, do poder dos pássaros e das plantas, da obediência e respeito aos mais velhos, dos cultos e agradecimentos" (*Defeito* 61). She reminds her that if the ancestors do not find someone to invite them to go overseas and to build a home for them in the new place, they will not go.

Upon arrival on Brazilian soil at *Ilha dos Frades*, another priest would await the arrival of the Africans in order to baptize all of the "pagan souls" arriving from overseas with a Christian name. Kehinde refuses to change her name and manages to escape the baptismal ceremony by jumping into the sea and swimming to the beach on the island. In the words of the narrator:

Eu não sabia o que era alma pagã, mas já tinha sido batizada em África...Em terras do Brasil, eles tanto deveriam usar os nomes novos, de brancos, como louvar os deuses dos brancos, o que eu me negava a aceitar, pois tinha ouvido os conselhos da minha avó. Ela tinha dito que seria através do meu nome que meus voduns iam me proteger. (*Defeito* 63)

Within the Catholic religion, the slaves were required to be baptized using names of Saints upon arrival in the New World. Kehinde, however, understands the importance of

maintaining her name, her African identity, and manages to escape being baptized upon arrival in Bahia.

In order to be purchased in the warehouse where she was taken in Salvador, however, Kehinde is forced to acknowledge the new name given her by the slave traders in order to be bought and to escape the slave warehouse. As such, she is “reborn” in Brazil as Luísa Gama, affirming:

Para os brancos fiquei sendo Luísa, Luísa Gama, mas sempre me considerei Kehinde. O nome que a minha mãe e a minha avó me deram e que era reconhecido pelos voduns, por Nanã, por Xangô, por Oxum, pelos Ibêjis e principalmente por Taiwo. Mesmo quando adotei o nome de Luísa por ser conveniente, era como Kehinde que eu me apresentava ao sagrado e ao secreto. (*Defeito* 73)

Kehinde’s last statement is of particular interest, as it puts her African name and, likewise, identity in direct dialogue with spirituality. As “Kehinde” the narrator is recognized by and granted access to “the sacred and the secret” of her traditional African religious roots, including to her twin sister, Taiwo. As “Luísa”, however, her sacredness is replaced by her new “non-identity” as a slave and a name that has no spiritual meaning to the protagonist.

During her time spent in the plantation house and the slave quarters, Kahinde meets two elderly African women who spark her interest in African religious beliefs and traditions. One of them is Nega Florinda who is herself a *jeje* and a Voodoo priestess much like Kehinde’s deceased grandmother. The other is Agontimé, the queen of Abombé who is head of the *Casa das Minas* in São Luís do Maranhão. Nega Florinda

tells Kehinde that the voodoo gods and Orishas are with her as she has an important mission to complete. The priestess also affirms the importance in Bahia of the Orishas and the loss of veneration of the Voodoo gods: “Na Bahia, os orixás já tinham tomado conta das cabeças dos pretos e o culto deles vinha de muito tempo, praticado por quase todos os africanos que, por muitos e muitos anos, iam parar naquelas terras” (*Defeito* 83).

After first arriving on the plantation, Kehinde is instructed by the other slaves to speak only in Portuguese and to learn how to say the Catholic prayers in order to please the masters. In the introduction of *The City of Women* by Ruth Landes, Sally Cole highlights, “Perfunctorily baptized in Roman Catholicism upon their arrival and left to their own devices in their plantation quarters, slaves freely interpreted Iberian Catholic imagery in the context of their African beliefs” (IX). Or, as Kehinde discusses with the Voodoo Priestess Nega Florinda, the worship of the White saints was something done merely to appease Sinhô José Carlos and Sinhá Ana Felipa. Nega Florinda agrees to help deliver statues of the Orishas to Kehinde in secret, “como tinha que ser naquele lugar onde fingíamos cultuar os santos dos brancos” (*Defeito* 84). From this last point, we note how the worship of the Orishas took on a different look in the New World based on the new conditions under which the enslaved Africans found themselves on the plantations.

Kehinde comments on the various Orishas that survived the Middle Passage and became part of the Candomblés in Bahia:

Havia casas frequentadas por muitas nações, onde vários orixás eram cultuados, e por isso recebiam o nome de candomblés. Os povos de Ketu e de Savê cultuavam Oxóssi e Omolu, os de Oyó cultuavam Xangô, os

egbás tinham levado Iemanjá e Ogum, os ijexás tinham assentado minha mãe, Oxum, os ekitis também cultuavam o deus do ferro, Ogum, a gente de Ifé tinha levado Oxalá, os de Ifá levaram Oxalufã. Oxagiyan apareceu pelas mãos dos ejigbos e os povos da foz do Níger não se esqueceram de Iansã, a que governa as tempestades. Havia mais alguns orixás, como Nanã, que quase todos cultuavam, mas estes eram os mais importantes. (*Defeito 502*)

Kehinde's comment on the numerous Orishas venerated at the various candomblés in Bahia is testimony to previously stated ideas regarding the transfer of the Orishas to the New World setting. While in Africa each family or tribe venerated one Orisha, in Brazil the syncretic melding of tribes and Orishas resulted in candomblés in which many of the major Orishas were venerated in one location.

After the birth of her son Banjokô, the first thing that Kehinde thinks of doing is to take her son to see “alguém que conhecesse os segredos do Ifá” (*Defeito 118*). Some time later in Salvador, Kehinde goes to the Candomblé of Babalaô Gumfidityimi to have her destiny or fortune read using the Jogo de Ifá or the Ifá Divination Board:

O Babalaô Gumfidityimi estava todo vestido de branco...explicando que aquele jogo não revelava nada além do que eu já sabia mas tinha esquecido. Disse que todos nós escolhemos o nosso iwã, ou destino...O papel do jogo do Ifá é nos ajudar a lembrar o nosso destino, a cumprir com nossos deveres, por meio das orientações dos orixás e com o reforço do axé, a força vital. (*Defeito 170*)

In order to worship her Orisha, Oxum, Kehinde asks Babalaô Gumfeditimi the best way in which for her to pay homage to her saint. He instructs her to build a prayer house painted yellow-gold inside, preferably close to a river or waterfall, which are areas governed by Oxum. He also suggests offering her presents such as bouquets, mirrors, tortoiseshell combs, and shells. The Candomblé priest explains that Oxum is very vain and has a preference for gold and bronze jewelry. He teaches Kehinde the greeting used with Oxum “Oré Yeyéo”, which she should use whenever she is in need of or feels the presence of Oxum.

Kehinde has the gift of premonitions in the form of dreams. Her deceased family members appear in her dreams, mainly her grandmother and twin sister, to give her advice or to warn her of impending danger or situations to be resolved. Through her premonitions and readings performed by the Candomblé priest and another priestess Mãezinha, Kehinde looks to her traditional African beliefs and traditions to guide her on her path in the New World setting. In one such dream, Kehinde’s grandmother shows her a clay jar in the middle of a river and tells her that Florinda has a pot just like the one in the river. When Kehinde awakes from the dream, she tells her dream to Mãezinha who, after consulting the divination shells confirms the meaning of the dream and gives her advice on the pot and on delivering it to Nega Florinda: “Naquele mesmo dia, a Mãezinha jogou os búzios e confirmou que a mensagem do sonho era mesmo esta, que eu deveria partir o mais depressa possível” (*Defeito* 589). Spirituality is both a source of inspiration, as well as protection and recollection for Kehinde. It provides her with the guidance she needs during the dark days of her enslavement, as well as encouragement during other trying moments of her life.

Oxum is a constant presence and force for Kehinde as her Orisha, and Kehinde worships her with prayers and offerings throughout the novel. The dreamlike state of the onirical contact between Kehinde and her deceased twin sister and grandmother is developed in Chapter 6 when I examine the themes of liminality and possession and how spirituality plays into the phenomena of spirit possession. As I show, possession is not merely a religious experience. Conversely, it is tied to complicated and intricate gender negotiation processes undergone by each of the incorporating mediums.

Daughters of the Stone: Oxum Speaks

Daughters of the Stone tells the story of five generations of African Puerto Rican women. It is a journey that spans continents and centuries and leads the reader through the horrors of slavery, the struggles faced by Africans following emancipation, double diasporic negotiations of identity, and a return to or search for ancestral roots in Africa. An integral part of the narrative is the spirituality of the women of African descent, as well as the presence of the spirits in the lives of the various generations of women in the family. It is this last point that I intend to focus on for the purposes of this chapter, particularly the presence of the goddess Oxum. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, I include thoughts and comments of the author, Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa, on her work from a personal interview in this section of the chapter.

In *Daughters of the Stone*, the Orishas enter into the lives of the women in a very direct manner through the special “gift” each one carries, and through the presence of Oxum throughout the text. Mother Oxum is a permanent fixture in the narrative, and plays a very important role in the lives of the various generations of female protagonists.

In Llanos-Figueroa's work not only do we note the references to the African deity, but also the relationship of the women with Oxum and her influence over each of the women.

The narrative begins with the first generation of women in the family, Fela. She is taken to Puerto Rico from Africa in the mid-1800's and goes to work on a sugar plantation. She carries with her a secret pledge made to Oxum in her native country in Africa in order to conceive. The birth of the narrator's great-grandmother, Mati, by Fela happens along the banks of a river in a very powerful scene in which Oxum makes her presence visibly known to Fela:

Oshun...I know I have no right...but please not yet...Great Mother, everything is almost ready...but I must get to the place...your place, Mother...Give me strength...Guide my feet on this long journey back to you, back to Imo, back to the ancestors...She heard the message in the running water. Mother Oshun couldn't be that callous...The river current became violent...The voice thundered in the water, DO NOT TRY ME! Light flashed off the river surface, blinding her. The sound of the rushing water drowned out all other sounds. (*Daughters* 57-58)

From the onset, the reader is faced with the powerful figure of Oxum and witnesses her intense influence over the lives of the five generations of women.

Likewise, in *Daughters of the Stone* we note an interesting dynamic among the various generations of women. After having been born in the river in the presence of Oxum, Mati turns out to be a very powerful traditional healer. She learns from a very young age to use her powers for the good of people. The second of the five daughters in the narrative is a *curandera* and, as such, is responsible for caring members of the greater

diasporic community. In *Healing Cultures*, Fernández Olmos comments that *curandismo* or folk healing “has been more accessible to women; there they can claim an authority denied them in mainstream institutions and are more at liberty to utilize female traditions of caretaking to alleviate their suffering communities” (11). Like Baby Suggs in *Beloved*, and Ismê in *Sortes de Villamor*, Mati fulfills a healing role through her connection with the Sacred.

The gift of healing is something that binds Mati and her daughter Concha. Speaking to the gift of healing and the price paid by spiritual healers, the narrator comments:

The gift of healing had come for Concha as it had come for Mati herself, like breathing, and the child needed no instruction from her mother. Mati was proud that there was so much of herself in the child. But as she watched, she felt sadness. *Curanderas* paid a great price for their gift. She wondered just how much her child would have to pay for hers. (*Daughters* 134)

Spirituality touches the lives of each of the female protagonists of African descent in *Daughters of the Stone*, and it is up to each one of them to decide if they want to accept or reject the traditional African diasporic religions. While some of them embrace their identities within the religious beliefs of Santería and veneration of the Orishas, such as Mati, others reject the presence and influence of these African ancestors in their lives. Mati explains:

Mother Oshun visited me often and told me many things over the years. She taught me much about the old ways, showed me the place she called

Home Place, the place some people called Africa...The most important thing I learned from Mother Oshun is that stories make us stronger. She told me a whole world in stories and asked me to pass it on to the children so that they wouldn't forget. (*Daughters* 163)

The words of Oxum accompany Mati throughout her life, and the Orisha “speaks” both directly and indirectly to the protagonists in the narrative. Her words are there to be heard by those willing to listen to her advice. The willingness or not to embrace the African deity and, in turn, African diasporic religion is a choice that is not always difficult for the female protagonists. African spirituality is, however, a binding force that links each of the generations of women and serves as a reminder of distant roots in Africa. These roots tug at the heart chords of Carisa, the youngest and fifth-generation female of the family, and ultimately lead her on a voyage back to West Africa in an attempt to recover an identity that was annihilated hundreds of years before when Fela was forcibly removed from her homeland and shipped off to the New World.

Focusing on the marginalized position of women of African descent within the patriarchal societies of the Americas during the centuries depicted in the *Daughters of the Stone*, specifically, in the case of *curanderas* or other “spiritually gifted” women, we observe an even deeper level of marginalization stemming from religious discrimination. Focusing in particular on the character of Mati and the idea of her representing a “liminal” character, we question the role of women and, more specifically, women of African descent as mediators or mediums between “two worlds” in the narrative.

In *Daughters of the Stone*, spirituality and the spiritual gifts of healing, intuition and mediumship are intertwined in the narratives of the five generations of Afro-Boricua

daughters. According to Llanos-Figueroa, “Within the context of the *Daughters of the Stone*, spirituality is the bedrock of individual and collective resistance to the institution of slavery” (2014). For many Africans, especially women, spirituality offered, “a more internal, individual and underground method of resistance” (Llanos-Figueroa 2014).

Through the process of syncretization, spirituality as a resistance movement “was effective in not only maintaining tradition and therefore, self-identity, but also in uniting the Africans on emotional and psychological levels against their oppressors.” (Llanos-Figueroa 2014). Unfortunately, though, modern times lead to members of Black communities to question age-old traditions and knowledge, and to doubt the very traditions that have helped them survive the system that has robbed them of their freedom” (Llanos-Figueroa 2014).

The author attributes two main elements in the narrative that speak to the influence of spirituality: the stone and the Goddess Oshun. According to Llanos-Figueroa,

The stone is symbolic of the spiritual tradition that is literally passed on from one generation to the next, coming to the aid of each character as she faces major crises in her life. It accompanies Carisa on her final voyage. The character of Mother Oshun inhabits the lives of all the protagonists whether or not they are entirely aware of her presence. At the end of the novel, we see a total integration as Carisa leaves to find the source of the stories. The last image is one of her recognizing her own face in the face of The Lady, a manifestation of Oshun, who has always lived in Carisa’s dreams throughout. (2014)

When we consider each of the five “daughters” in *Daughters of the Stone*, varying factors determine the depth or type of relationship to spirituality of each woman. The author pinpoints seven key factors that contribute to the different sacred relationships: “proximity to African life, length of time in western society, decline of plantation society, rise of cities, level of education, need to be accepted by the larger society and the need for self-identity” (2014). As women of African descent, the daughters are forced to navigate the turbulent waters of diasporic spirituality, which is in constant conflict with the opposing monolithic blanket of the colonial religion spread over the various societies of the Americas. As such, we observe how the characters occupy liminal positions between the two opposing worldviews or, in the words of Llanos-Figueroa, “The characters stand at the line of demarcation between the traditional African ways of knowing (intuitive, abstract and spiritual realm) and the superimposed European world view (objective, concrete, physical reality)” (2014).

Fela, the original sister and only one of the women born in Africa, brings within her the binding connection to the Goddess Oshun. Throughout Fela’s narrative, the struggles she faces within the institution of slavery in Puerto Rico, as well as her own personal conflict related to conception and heeding the Goddess’s warning and decisions made ultimately lead to her demise. Speaking to the opposing forces that constitute the complex relationships amongst the various women in the novel, the author affirms:

These opposing forces create the contention that drives the mother/daughter relationship as well as the relationships of these women to their communities. Each character experiences this struggle in a very different way. But ultimately, it is the glue of this spirituality that sustains

each one in her hour of need and it is this glue that provides for continuity over the generations. (Llanos-Figueroa 2014)

In analyzing each of the daughters and her own relationship with the sacred, as well as her negotiation of personal and spiritual identity, we note that the Goddess Oshun enters the lives of each of the five women following the death of Fela, and simultaneous birth of her daughter, Mati. Her child lives, but Fela passes away after giving birth next to the river. The author points out that of all the women protagonists, “Mati is perhaps the strongest example and proponent of the African tradition in the novel. She follows the rituals and devotes her life to using her gift to help others. Eventually she risks beloved husband and adored daughter to her overriding faith in her role as *curandera* and spiritual leader” (Llanos-Figueroa 2014).

In focusing specifically on Mati, we affirm that she exemplifies our concept of liminal figure previously set forth in this study. As a *curandera*, she is a woman “between worlds”: both the physical and the spiritual, as well as the old world beliefs of Africa and those of the New World. We are able to observe the complicated waters Mati is forced to navigate as a spiritual healer deeply rooted in the beliefs of her ancestors in her interactions with the older and younger generations of the diasporic community in which she lives. Llanos-Figueroa points out:

While Mati is respected for her gifts by the older generation, some in her community are suspicious and fearful of the gift that they don’t understand. Young *Ladinos*, who never knew the freedom of life in their mother country, only see through the lens of slavery. They increasingly look to the ‘modern’ western paradigms for answers to their problems,

turning to Mati only when all else fails. Her passing is symbolic of the passing of the old ways. While spirituality survives, it will have a very different face in the future. (2014)

Without going to deeply into a character study on the remaining “daughters”, we highlight that each of the women has her own level of spiritual awareness and acceptance or willingness to embrace and embody the ancestral knowledge and teachings of the African diasporic religion practiced by Mati. Concha is the character who, in the words of Llanos-Figueroa, “turns her back on her mother’s teachings,” which she considers “superstitious and backwards” and that “represent the African ways of knowing that she totally rejects” (2014). After her own personal struggles, Concha comes to the realization that the remedy for her “years of alienation and the resulting mental illness” is the traditional African spirituality of her ancestors. According to the author, “Concha realizes that until she makes peace with the rejected tradition, she can’t move forward in her healing. With the help of western treatment, she begins to see that much of her illness comes from the denial of part of her essential self” (2014).

Elena and her daughter Carisa are the last two generations of daughters and equally represent the influence of modern life on traditional beliefs in the context of the African diaspora, and the different ways of looking to the past to give meaning of the present. Elena, whom the author positions as “the ultimate crossover character who builds her life on science and modernity”, ultimately looks to the “dormant tradition” of African spirituality to bring her back from the brink of a nervous breakdown. Llanos Figueroa describes this modern retake on traditional spirituality as a “morphing” in to a “consistent stream of dreaming” (2014). It is through Carisa’s onirical visions, reminiscent of the

trance-like state into which mediums frequently enter while channeling messages or knowledge from the spirit world, that she is able to “provide the answers that have been forgotten by Elena’s conscious mind” (Llanos-Figueroa 2014).

The ways of knowing aren’t lost; they are reconfigured into a different form for a new generation. And when this is presented to Elena, she recognizes it as quickly as she would have recognized Mati’s face” (2014). Carisa faces similar rejection or criticism of modern society inasmuch as her spiritual “ways of knowing”. Llanos-Figueroa points out that it is only when this modern *griot* decides to return “to Concha’s world to seek answers and finds that the answers are a combination of the traditional and the western” that she is able to “reconcile the two and....become whole—an educated, bilingual, bicultural storyteller who fully embraces and celebrates all aspects of herself” (2014). The looking to the past and to ancestral beliefs in order to find one’s identity in or come to terms with the present is something that, in addition to being relevant to many women of the African diaspora, is of particular importance to Carisa in *Daughters of the Stone*. Oshun is the goddess who guides all of the daughters. Ultimately, she leads Carisa back to the “origin” in order to return the stone to its origins, as well as to provide the youngest daughter with the answers she seeks on her quest for personal wholeness.

Changó, El Gran Putas: Spiritual Voices

Along the same lines as *Um defeito de cor*, the Colombian novel *Changó, el gran putas* intertwines historical events with fiction and African mythology to create a narrative from an African Hispanic perspective. This narrative dates back to the nineteenth century, originating in 1826 and continuing until 1949. The romantic historical novel

came to the forefront during the mid-1800's and intended to construct a national consciousness. Sonja Stephenson points out that "1949 marked a seminal year in the literature of Spanish America with the apparition of Alejo Carpentier's "modern" novel, *El reino de este mundo*" (72). The last of the historical novels, the Afro-Hispanic historical novel, did not emerge during the last decades of the twentieth century in response to several international events that affected blacks throughout the Diaspora (72). Sonja Stephenson Watson comments that *Changó: el gran putas* recounts the journey of the Muntu (singular form of Bantú) from Africa to the New World on account of "Chango's curse".

The voices of the spirits appear throughout the narrative in various forms. The beginning of the work is an epic poem that invokes the ancestors to instill the narrator's words with life: "Ancestros / Sombras de mis mayores / sombras que tenéis la suerte de conversar con los Orichas / acompañadme con vuestras voces tambores, / quiero dar vida a mis palabras" (*Changó* 43 – 44). Within the journeys that the novel depicts, we point out that Yemanjá acts as a connecting force among all of the journeys. The narrator affirms that he is not singing for the living, but rather for the powerful Orishas: "No canto a los vivos / solo para vosotros / poderosos Orichas" (*Changó* 47). The use of singing and orality by the author is of particular significance to the work, as the novel looks to key elements of African tradition and heritage to reconstruct history from an Afrocentric point of view.

As Darío Henao Restrepo affirms in the introduction to the work, the epic poem serves as a foreshadowing of the fate that awaits the Africans in the New World: "Todo este santoral africano aparece en el poema épico que desde un comienzo prefigure el

destino de los esclavos africanos en América” (16). Ngafúa is the omniscient narrator who bridges the world of the living and the dead to link past, present and future events in the lives of the Mundo. In following, still in the first few pages of the work, the narrator invokes the Orichas in the order of their importance within the pantheon of African deities. Afterwards, he invokes the major Orishas, repeatedly calling them “hijos de Yemayá” (*Changó* 52). Instead of invoking Exu at the beginning of the session, the narrator invokes him as the “...abridor de puertas...encrucijada de la vida y de la muerte” (*Changó* 73). Finally, he turns to Orunla to foretell the destiny of the Muntu: “Llevamos con nosotros la palabra adivinadora del gran Ifá” (*Changó* 109).

As commented by Restrepo, “Con la protección de Ochún, Orún, Obatalá, Yemayá y Changó la novel hace el recorrido del munto americano...une en un solo nudo al hombre con su ascendencia y descendencia inmersas en el universo presente, pasado y futuro” (20). Other Orishas appear and, at times, manifest themselves throughout the novel. Shango announces his presence through his thunder and lightning in the sky: “Un relámpago iluminó la cubierta y luego oímos su risotrueno hundiéndose en el mar. Changó nos anuncia que está con nosotros. Los sombras de los ancestros, Ngafúa y los difuntos nos protegen. Nos desparramamos, corriente viva, agua de Yemayá” (*Changó* 144). The narrator calls on Eshu to lead them safely to land.

The novel itself is divided into five parts: “Los orígenes”, “El Muntu Americano”, “La rebelión de los vodun”, “Las sangres encontradas” and “Los ancestros combatientes”. In the first part of the novel, the narrator describes pre-historic Africa and offers a vision of the New World from an African mythological viewpoint. The second section takes the reader to Cartagena Colombia where the author portrays the institution of slavery in the

New World and the enslaved Africans as, according to Watson, “agents of social change” (79).

In the third section, the narrative is focused on the Haitian revolution and the presence of the spirits during the event. It is in Zapata Olivella’s portrayal of Mackandal that the author, “revises a literary portrayal of the historical figure which is rooted in Eurocentrism and interpreted outside of the African Diaspora discourse” (Watson 79). Section four depicts the Spanish-American wars of Independence, with the last section offering more recent historical events in the United States related to the civil rights movement.

Based on the five key points outlined by Watson as being defining factors for the denomination of a work as being an Afro-Hispanic Historical novel, we note that *Changó: el gran putas* is a perfect example of this genre as it is a work rooted in Afrocentrism and written by a Spanish-speaking writer of African descent that “...reconstructs the past and incorporates historical vestiges with the aim to revise history and constitutes the five traits outlined below: 1) Orality; 2) Slavery/Middle Passage; 3) Historical Revisionism; 4) Incorporation of historical figures; and 5) Afro-realism” (72).

The question of orality and polyphonic voices in *Changó: el gran putas* is two-fold in significance. On the one hand, the polyphonic nature of the text is in keeping with the Bakhtinian concept of the Carnavalesque and portrayal of events through two or more points of view. On the other, orality is key to African tradition and the actual possessional act of incorporating spirits can be viewed as polyphonic in nature, as the person embodies a spirit and gives way to the voice of the “other” during the trance. An example of this polyphonic nature of the text can be seen when we witness multiple spirits and multiple

voices occupying one narrative space: “Bebí agua del altar a Yemayá y con los labios húmedos, sigo prestándole mi lengua a don Petro” (*Changó* 252). Some of these points, primarily those relating to embodiment and voicing of the “other” during trance, will be discussed in further detail in later chapters in which we explore the importance and presence of orality and African mythology in the literary works chosen for this study.

The three works analyzed in Chapter 3 serve as introductions to the topics on which we intend to focus in the following chapter, which explores the role of (re)memory as a defense mechanism in the institution of slavery in the New World. Rooted in the concepts of Toni Morrison, we intend to analyze how the technique of “re-memory”, along with African diasporic traditions, ancestors and community serve as sources for defense mechanism, resistance and survival for enslaved Africans in the New World. I will also explore the oral tradition as a living source of age-old knowledge, as well as memory in the (re)construction of a diasporic culture.

CHAPTER 4

THE ROLE OF (RE) MEMORY AS A DEFENSE MECHANISM IN THE
INSTITUTION OF SLAVERY IN THE NEW WORLD*A NOITE NÃO ADORMECE NOS OLHOS DAS MULHERES*

*A noite não adormece
Nos olhos das mulheres
A lua fêmea, semelhante nossa,
Em vigília atenta vigia
A nossa memória.*

*A noite não adormece
Nos olhos das mulheres
Há mais olhos que sono
Onde lágrimas suspensas
Virgulam o lapso
De nossas molhadas lembranças.*

*A noite não adormece
Nos olhos das mulheres
Vaginas abertas
Retêm e expulsam a vida
Donde Ainás, Nzingas, Ngambeles
E outras meninas luas
Afastam delas e de nós
Os nossos cálices de lágrimas.*

*A noite não adormecerá
Jamais nos olhos das fêmeas
Pois do nosso sangue-mulher do nosso líquido lembradiço
Em cada gota que jorra
Um fio invisível e tônico
Pacientemente cose a rede
De nossa milenar resistência.*

- Conceição Evaristo (*Cadernos negros*, Vol 19, 2008)

Memory and (Re) Memory in Works of Black Women Writers

To continue on our transcontinental literary journey, and to initiate my discussion on the themes of memory and (re)memory, I open this fourth chapter with the above poem by Conceição Evaristo, which invites us to share in the complexities of memory from a Black woman's perspective. The faculty of memory is both prominent and vital to the protagonists in the works in my study. Likewise, (re)memory and the ability to, in the words of the protagonist Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, "disremember" certain past events are also intricately interwoven into the afro-feminine narratives. The ability to remember certain events that happened in their lives, while simultaneously "disremembering" other more traumatic events, is key to understanding how memory and (re)memory served as defense mechanisms for survival and resistance for many enslaved Africans in the New World. It is precisely this tenuous line between (re)memory and disremembering that serves as a defense mechanism in the institution of slavery in the Americas that I intend to explore in this chapter.

Memory and the ability to remember have the power to transport an individual to far-removed times and places in the past. Pleasant childhood memories of warm summer days spent with grandparents can penetrate years of anguish or suffering, evoking the sights and smells of the house and garden where the individual spent many hours of happiness in a distant reality. The memories a person chooses to allow him or herself to experience has a direct effect on his or her own past, as the selective nature of remembering in itself has the ability to rewrite that person's history.

Likewise, the memories shared by a particular group or community, or collective memory, can radically change the face of history on account of what events are passed on

to future generations, and which ones are omitted and buried in the past. History is after all, moored in the concepts of power, narrative, and silences of Michel-Rolph Trouillot in *Silencing the Past* (1995), something that is written or re-written and incessantly imperfect due to the “silences” that inevitably make up the official narrative. In the words of Trouillot, “The production of a historical narrative cannot be studied, therefore, through a mere chronology of its silences...Power is constitutive of the story...Power does not enter the story once and for all, but at different times and from different angles” (28-29). For the purposes of my study, collective memory and historical silences are of particular interest, primarily concerning the writing or rewriting of history and filling in the missing pieces of information oftentimes omitted from the dominant national discourse.

Memory is complicated. That would undoubtedly be one of the biggest understatement anyone delving into the murky waters of the recollection of past events could make on the subject. But what actually makes it so complicated? What is it about memory and what we as individuals and collective groups choose to remember and disremember about past events? One reason for the complicated nature of memory is that it is lodged in one of the most intricate places known to man: the mind. According to Nicola Abbagnano in *Dicionário de Filosofia* (2007), memory is the ability to make use of past knowledge, or rather, to use knowledge that was available in the past and not merely knowledge of the past. Memory is both the knowledge stored in the mind, and the recollection of past knowledge or things that happened in the past (759-61). However, memory is not solely attributed to the capacity of the human mind.

Turning to the ideas of Jacqui Alexander in *Pedagogies of Crossing* (2005), we understand how certain places, especially those that for one reason or another have experienced unmentionable tragedies, are also imbedded with memory:

Land holds memory. That is why the land and live oak trees rooted in the Georgia Sea Islands of the southern United States whisper in your ear when you allow yourselves to listen. The Georgia Sea Islands. The Ibo of Nigeria were captured and brought to these Islands. When they arrived and saw the conditions of their capture and homelessness, they turned around and walked to “wherever they was going that day”. The place, bearing the name Ibo Landing, holds the memory of that moment, which still lives in the heart of every Gullah child, and in the solid trunks of the live oaks.

The live oaks will us these stories when we listen. (284-85)

Land and buildings can also be impregnated by the unmistakable forces of memory, as can water and, as I shall investigate in later chapters, bodies and embodied spirituality. In *Beloved*, for example, the actual house where Sethe lives with Baby Suggs and Denver is imbued with the tragic memory and haunting of Sethe’s deceased daughter, Beloved. The protagonist uses memory as a defense mechanism to cope with the loss of her daughter, as well as the horrors of slavery. In another work, *Um defeito de cor*, Kehinde uses her memories to construct a memorialistic narrative that encompasses ideas of capture, loss of agency and landlessness.

Alexander’s idea of the live oaks narrating stories from the past as long as they have us as listeners in the present carries me back to the words of the Brazilian writer

Conceição Evaristo regarding the orality of storytelling and its importance in the passing on of history and memories and (re)memories of a collective group:

Na interação da contadora com seus ouvintes, nas histórias que se misturam, e, mais ainda, na memória coletiva que aflora no ato de rememoração da memória individual da narradora, todos são criadores. Todos são autores enquanto sujeitos e objetos de uma ação criadora-rememorativa de uma coletividade. (35)

Evaristo uses the term “ação criadora-rememorativa” along the same lines as Toni Morrison’s concept of “re-memory” to convey the idea of turning to the past to (re)create the present.

As previously mentioned in my introductory chapter, Morrison’s “re-memory” involves the recreation of never before told or written inner lives and the ancestors, and consists in the compilation of personal memories as well as repositioning them. Linda Krumholz speaks of Morrison’s novel *Beloved* and the technique of “rememory” employed by Sethe within the narrative as “ritualistic”. According to Krumholz, “In *Beloved* the reader's process of reconstructing the fragmented story parallels Sethe's psychological recovery: Repressed fragments of the (fictionalized) personal and historical past are retrieved and reconstructed...The central ritual of healing – Sethe’s “rememory” of and confrontation with her past” (101-02). We note how here “rememory” is linked to the retrieval and reconstruction of fragments of the past. It is not just the memory of a past event. Morrison’s “rememory” is, rather, a conscious calling upon and seeking out of buried memories.

Speaking to the struggle of memory to recall oftentimes painful and traumatic events, Caroline Rody mentions memory as appearing through the storytelling used by the characters in the novel to deal with the catastrophic losses suffered during the slavery. In the words of Rody, “In the ‘village’ of *Beloved*, the multigenerational, culturebearing black community of Morrison’s ideal appears in devastated form, in the persons of a few traumatized survivors, eking out an existence in the aftermath of slavery” (105). The memories or forced acts of “rememory” are ones steeped in painful losses and traumatic abuses. Rody notes “For Morrison’s characters...cultural transmission requires the retrieval of traumatic memories. This ‘history’ thus acquires the function of communal ‘talking cure’: its characters, author, and readers delve into the past, repeating painful stories to work toward the health of fuller awareness” (105). It is this recompilation and “disremembering” of past events that serves to redefine and reconstruct history.

By being forced to access the confines of buried memories, such as those of sexual and physical abuse endured during slavery, women of the Black diaspora are able to pass on these memories in the form of a parallel oral history to future generations. On the subject of memory and the reclaiming of memory as an important part of reclaiming subjectivity for Black women in the Americas Deborah E. McDowell comments:

Contemporary fictionalizations of slavery by African American women improvise on many discursive features of slavery's signal texts, their most suggestive mark of improvisation is on perhaps the most prominent discursive feature of male slave narratives: the sexual victimization of women, a feature tied to the silencing of the feminine...the atrocities of slavery find their most powerful synecdoche in the silenced figure of the

slave mother forced to endure rape, concubinage, and the theft of her child ren... While these neoslave narratives do expose such atrocities, they shift their stress away from the silenced victim, the object of sexual abuse...

They announce their emphasis on female subjectivity. (143)

As we note in *Beloved*, as well in *Daughters of the Stone* and *Um defeito de cor*, the capacity of the protagonists to “give a voice” to both their pasts and the experiences of others from their communities (elders, ancestors, etc.), is of utmost importance in analyzing the social condition under which Africans were forcibly maintained throughout the span of three hundred years of slavery in the New World.

Oral tradition serves as a living source of thousand-year-old knowledge for African descendants to fill in the missing pieces of the official history, which frequently omits facts and events to the benefit of the dominant society. When we think of historical events in the countries of interest to this study in the Americas, such as Palmares in Brazil and the Haitian Massacre just to name a couple, we note that within the dominant discourse the voice of the “Other” is usually inaudible. The constant dislocations that come from diasporic moves, such as in the case of individuals from Puerto Rico moving to the United States in *Daughters of the Stone* and *The Spirits Dance Mambo*, as well as Haitians moving to the Dominican Republic in *The Farming of Bones* and *Como rojo de su sombra*, depict the pressures of continued dislocations and the challenges of modernization. It is through the memories of the elders that the younger members of the diasporic communities maintain their links with the homeland and find their own diasporic identities.

By turning to memory and (re)memory as tools with which to unearth histories, a spiral or circular counter history is created as opposed to a traditional Western lineal concept of history. As commented by Michel-Rolph Trouillot:

The classification of all non-Westerners as fundamentally non-historical is tied also to the assumption that history requires a linear and cumulative sense of time that allows the observer to isolate the past as a distinct entity...Further, the exclusive adherence to linear time by Western historian themselves, and the ensuing rejection of the people left “without history” both date from the nineteenth century. (7)

Intrinsically linked to the concept of history and memory is the concept of time. It is impossible for us to consider past events and memories without first considering the varying concepts of Western and Non-Western time. Turning to modern Western theories on time, in *Being and Nothingness* (1958), Jean-Paul Sartre posits that the existence of past and memory is inherently linked to the present and the actuality of the act of remembering:

Every theory concerning memory implies the presupposition of the being of the past...Since the past is no more, since it has melted away into nothingness, if the memory continues to exist, it must be by virtue of a present modification of our being; for example, this will be an imprint at present stamped on a group of cerebral cells. Thus, everything is present: the body, the present perception, and the past as a present impression in the body-all is actuality. (107-8)

Sartre's idea of an "imprinted memory" on the present undertakes a particularly special meaning when considering the literary works in this study. As I present later in this chapter, in Morrison's *Beloved*, imprinted memory takes the form of an otherworldly character as well as physical structures and geographical locations connected to the main protagonist, Sethe. In *Beloved*, "Morrison wishes to fill in the gaps left by history, magnifying the historicism of slavery, as well as the ghosting of slavery, through a dramatization of transgenerational haunting in the figures of Beloved and Sethe" (McCoy-Wilson 2). The ability to remember or disremember past events is linked to a deeper repression of the events resulting from the horrors of the history of the institution of slavery. For Morrison, "rememory" proves to be cathartic for the main protagonist Sethe, and ultimately leads to the embodiment of past memories and traumas in the form of the otherworldly figure of Beloved.

We encounter yet another concept regarding history and memory in the concepts of Walter Benjamin. In his work *Mágia e Técnica, Arte e Política*, the theorist establishes that memory is of utmost importance in being able to develop an historical discourse. Likewise, in Benjamin's ideas we note how he reiterates the importance of the dominant class and power in narrating the past:

Articular historicamente o passado não significa conhece-lo "como ele de fato foi". Significa apropriar-se de uma reminiscência, tal como ela relampeja no momento de um perigo. Cabe ao materialismo histórico fixar uma imagem do passado, como ela se apresenta, no momento do perigo, ao sujeito histórico, sem que ele tenha consciência disso. O perigo ameaça tanto a existência da tradição como os que a recebem. Para ambos, o

perigo é o mesmo: entregar-se às classes dominantes, como seu instrument. Em cada época, é preciso arrancar a tradição ao conformismo, que quer apoderar-se dela. (224)

The capacity of being able to take control or ownership over a memory is of particular relevance when we consider the position of the slaves in the Americas. Stripped of cultural and family ties, the memories carried in the imaginaries of the slaves are forms of power that provide the individuals a way in which to fill in the gaps in the dominant discourse. With various versions of historical events passed down from one generation to the next within African diasporic communities, these stories contribute to giving a face to the millions of identity-less slaves who suffered and died during the centuries of slavery in the Americas.

Reverting to the words of Trouillot in considering history as produced in a specific historical context, we observe that memories and past events are intrinsically linked to history. Likewise, power and historical narratives are intertwined in the construction of a nation's official discourse. Echoing the words of Benjamin on power and history, Trouillot affirms, "power is constitutive of the story...power does not enter the story once and for all, but at different times and from different angles. It precedes the narrative proper, contributes to its creation and to its interpretation....In history, power begins at the source" (22-29). In the case of the Americas, for centuries the dominant, patriarchal society was the not only the source of control over the dominated class of enslaved peoples, but also retained the power over the national discourse and official history of the nation.

When considering memory as it relates more specifically to Black women within the context of slavery and the African diaspora, in many of the texts chosen for our study, rape and sexual abuse of the Black slaves depict the embodied trauma endured by the women within the institution of slavery throughout the Americas. We note the ideas of Pamela E. Barnett when she positions rape as a traumatic memory of particular significance, and cites *Beloved* as the figure of Beloved as the embodiment of remembered stories and the nightmares of having survived the traumatic events suffered as slaves:

Beloved's body swells as she also feeds off her victims' horrible memories of and recurring nightmares about sexual violations that occurred in their enslaved past. But Beloved functions as more than the receptacle of remembered stories; she reenacts sexual violation and thus figures the persistent nightmares common to survivors of trauma. Her insistent manifestation constitutes a challenge for the characters who have survived rapes inflicted while they were enslaved: directly, and finally communally, to confront a past they cannot forget. Indeed, it is apparent forgetting that subjects them to traumatic return; confrontation requires a direct attempt at remembering. (108)

Diverging slightly from the previous discourses on power, history, and memory, in *A Memória Coletiva* (1990), Maurice Halbwachs highlights the importance of lived experience in the creation of individual and collective memories. The theorist proposes that it is not the chronological succession of events that constitutes past memories, but rather the lived experience that (re)creates memories:

Não é na história aprendida, é na história vivida que se apoia nossa memória. Por história é preciso entender então não uma sucessão cronológico de acontecimentos e de datas, mas tudo aquilo que faz com que um período se distinga dos outros, e cujos livros e narrativas não nos apresentam em geral senão um quadro bem esquemático e completo. (60)

Halbwachs affirms that collective memory distinguishes itself from history in at least two aspects: “É uma corrente de pensamento contínuo, de uma continuidade que nada tem de artificial, já que retém do passado somente aquilo que ainda está vivo ou capaz de viver na consciência do grupo” (81). When we consider the texts chosen for analysis in this chapter, *Beloved*, *Um defeito de cor*, *Reyita sencillamente* and *O diário de Bitita*, we undoubtedly witness a strong correlation between location or physical space and the collective memories shared by the feminine protagonists in each of the novels.

In *Um defeito de cor*, Kehinde embarks on a life-long journey in which places on both sides of the Atlantic are harbingers of personal and collective memory. Likewise, in *Beloved*, Sweet Home as well as the spiritual clearing near house 124 and the house itself are places imbued with significant individual and collective memory. These narratives demonstrate the theories of Halbwachs on the subject of collective memory being tied to a spatial framework:

Assim, não há memória coletiva que não se desenvolva num quadro espacial. Ora, o espaço é uma realidade que dura: nossas impressões se sucedem, uma à outra, nada permanece em nosso espírito, e não seria possível compreender que pudéssemos recuperar o passado, se ele não se conservasse, com efeito, no meio material que nos cerca. É sobre o espaço,

sobre o nosso espaço – aquele que ocupamos, por onde sempre passamos, ao qual sempre temos acesso, e que em todo o caso, nossa imaginação ou nosso pensamento é a cada momento capaz de reconstruir – que devemos voltar nossa atenção; é sobre ele que nosso pensamento deve se fixar, para que reapareça esta ou aquela categoria de lembranças. (143)

In relating Halbwach's comments on memory and location specifically to *Beloved*, we can see how memory in the novel is intrinsically linked to the location of the house.

Beloved or the memory of *Beloved* haunts the house and is, as Halbwach's states above, conserved in the physical environment in which Sethe lives. There is no way for her to escape the traumatic memories that are imbued in the very fiber of the physical construction of the house. The location forces Sethe to remember.

Rooted in the theories of another contemporary Western philosopher, we observe that in his work *Matter and Memory* (1911), Henri Bergson places the body as a conductor between the objects that act on it and those that it influences. According to Bergson, the purpose of the body is to receive and transmit these movements over time:

Everything, then, must happen as if an independent memory gathered images as they successively occur along the course of time; and as if our body, together with its surroundings, was never more than one among these images, the last, that which we obtain at any moment by making an instantaneous section in the general stream of becoming. (86)

Bergson is cited by French philosopher Gaston Bachelard in his work *A poética do espaço* when he discusses the concept of memory. Bachelard contemplates: "A memória – coisa estranha! – não registra a duração concreta, a duração no sentido

bergoniano. Não podemos reviver as durações abolidas. Só podemos pensa-las, pensa-las na linha de um tempo abstrato privado de qualquer espessura” (*A poética do espaço* 28 – 29). We note how, for Bachelard, memory represents an ethereal and non-existent duration of time. It is not, however, a concrete element that invades present time. The bachelardian concept of memory serves us well in our analysis of *Beloved* by Morrison, when we acknowledge that the very ephemeral and otherworldly presence of the character Beloved creates a timeless connection between Sethe’s present and past in the narrative.

By contrast, in *Camera lucida* by Roland Barthes, the French theorist affirms: “history is a memory fabricated according to positive formulas, a pure intellectual discourse which abolishes mythic Time” (93). As such, I highlight how the concepts regarding time and memory of the Western theorists, while varying to a certain degree, present time as a primarily homogeneous concept in which events follow a lineal progression and may or may not have a significant impact on the present or figure of an individual and community. I include these Western ideas on time as a contrasting view to the concepts of time as presented in texts such as *Beloved* or *Um defeito de Cor*. Whereas in Western thought, historical events are narrated in successive form, the narratives presented in many of the works in this study present time as a more fluid concept, delving in and out of past and present times through narrative techniques that intertwine traumatic memories and the timeless voices of Orishas or other otherworldly characters.

Continuing on the theme of memory and narrating memories, I turn to the ideas of Toni Morrison in her critical text “The Site of Memory”, in which she comments on her inspiration or task as a Black woman writer:

For me – a writer in the last quarter of the twentieth century, not much more than a hundred years after Emancipation, a writer who is black and a woman – the exercise is very different. My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over “proceedings too terrible to relate.” The exercise is also critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic...these “memories within” are the subsoil of my work. (91-92)

We note in Morrison’s words the significance of narrating the unnarratable, such as rape, as well as the Word as an invitation to participate in discourse as they relate to the experience of women of the African diaspora.

Similarly, David Lawrence comments on the “inability to articulate such embodied experience”, as well as the interaction between language and body as the basis for the “collective confrontation with the ghosts of memory” in *Beloved* (93). Speaking to the exorcism of the character Beloved, who Lawrence calls “an embodiment of resurgent desire”, he asserts that it makes possible “a remembering of the cultural heritage that has haunted the characters so destructively. In the end, the communal body seems ready to articulate a reinvigorated language that, in returning to its roots in the body, empowers its speakers to forge a more open, inclusive community” (93). We note the emphasis Lawrence places on the body as a site of memory. As we explore in our analysis of the literary texts, this concept is of particular significance when we consider the importance placed on the bodies of slave women (for forced sex, for forced

reproduction, for forced breastfeeding), and the traumatic memories resulting from these forced actions.

Following my presentation of Western thought on the subject of memory, time and past, I now present ideas on the nature of traditional African beliefs relating to the same topics. Turning once more to the ideas of John Mbiti in *African Religions and Philosophy*, we see that for Africans time can be resumed to a two-dimensional phenomenon with an extensive past, a present, with virtually no future, in as much as “future time” represents events extending only one or two months ahead of time in the present. According to Mbiti, “The linear concept of time in western thought, with an indefinite past, present and infinite future, is practically foreign to African thinking” (21). This concept is in stark contrast to the Western view of everything leading to a vast unknown. While for Westerners the past is a far-removed place, and the present and future dominate and guide communities, Africans look towards the past to give meaning to the present.

As previously mentioned in the introduction to my study, although there are some critics such as Babalola Yai (1998) and Wiredu (1998) who have cited Western influence on the ideas of John Mbiti, I turn to his theories as he is, according to Aderibigbe, Olupona (1993), and Nyang (1993), one of the most cited and respected theorists, on the subject of traditional African religion today. As such, according to Mbiti, what holds most significance in traditional African society is the past and the importance of past events, ancestors, and myths, and the present in which individuals look to the past as a compass with which to charter the murky waters of the current events, “Actual time is therefore what is present and what is past. It moves “backward” rather than “forward”,

and people set their minds not on future things, but chiefly on what has taken place” (23). Once again, we note the ancestral influence on the present lives of Africans, and how the past serves as a source of age-old knowledge.

This binary orientation of past and present molds the worldview of the African and contributes to both an individual and collective identity and understanding. For, as stated by Mbiti, “A person experiences time partly in his own individual life, and partly through the society which goes back many generations before his own birth” (23). Using traditional African beliefs as a compass with which to guide our analysis of the texts in this chapter, it becomes increasingly clear to us why so many of the texts written by Black female authors in the Americas are rooted in exploring memories and past experiences of previous generations as guiding posts for African diasporic communities in the present.

Continuing with our discussion on the importance of collective memory in the African Diasporic communities in the Americas, we turn to the ideas of French anthropologist Roger Bastide. In his text *The African Religions of Brazil* (1960), Bastide dedicates a chapter to the problems of the collective memory. In defining the concept, he affirms: “It is the structure of the group rather than the group itself that provides the frameworks of collective memory; otherwise it would be impossible to understand why individual memory needs the support of the community as a whole” (247). For Bastide, the act of preserving or forgetting of a memory is intrinsically linked to the social structure of the group: “memories inherited from the ancestors survive only insofar as they can insinuate themselves into the existing frameworks of society” (258). In other words, in the case of the African Diasporic communities, it was the social structure of the

enslaved individuals on the plantations and in the communities during post-abolition eras that contributed to the collective remembering and *disremembering* of past events and knowledge.

Turning once again to Bastide on the subject of memory and its relationship with both the past and the present, we see the anthropologist positing that:

Every memory partakes of both the past and the present and, inasmuch as it belongs to the present, is part of the total stream of consciousness. It is therefore modified in response to changing affectivity or central interest...The study of collective memory must therefore include, besides an explanation of retaining and forgetting, an explanation of the metamorphosis of collective memories. Among the most important of these are changes in the personae of the gods, for these are always carried along in the stream of group consciousness. (250-251)

Bastide, who moved from France to Brazil in 1938 “intending to study dreams and mental illness among the poor urban black population,” believed that one way in which to enter into the Brazilian society was through “the study of poetry, the other was through *candomblé*” (Bastide viii). His European worldview and approach to sociological studies was highly influenced by the spiritual influences of the *Candomblé* religion.

In considering the connection between (re)memory and African Diasporic religions in the Americas, Bastide positions spirituality as a tool with which to fill in the “holes” of the collective memory. He states, “An interesting point is that the unknown rites and myths left gaps in the collective memory, and attempts were made to fill those gaps by using other myths or rites whose exponents or practitioners were available in

Brazil” (Bastide 246). We can affirm, therefore, that along the same lines as the “ação criadora-rememorativa” of Conceição Evaristo, the filling in of gaps and disremembering in the collective memory leads to the creation of new forms of spirituality in the Americas based on the intergenerational transmission of ancestral beliefs. Rooted in the beliefs Bastide states:

Collective memory does not come into play unless the ancestral institutions have been preserved. Memories are so much a part of interpersonal relations, constituted groups, or human associations that they spring to life again only where these sociological phenomena are perpetually operative. Thus, the functionalist thesis and the psychoanalytical one lead to the same conclusion: the primary importance of social frameworks in collective memory. (244)

As an introduction to the literary texts chosen for this chapter to illustrate the importance of “rememory” in the life of the protagonists in each narrative, I look at the values of narrating past events and personal histories of subaltern groups to the creation of a cohesive collective memory. Likewise, in recognizing these liminal narratives, we need to think about the way so many of these stories have been omitted from the history of the dominant society. In the words of Acildo Leite da Silva:

O ato de contar...mais do que presentificar a tradição oral significa, então, transmitir, de boca em boca, todas as experiências que a ancestralidade dessa comunidade adquiriu, em seu caminhar pelo mundo material e imaterial/sobrenatural. Recuperar, pois, essa oralidade estimula os laços de

solidariedade e integração social que sustentaram e sustentam essa memória coletiva. (6)

In analyzing the narratives of this study, I pay attention to how access to discourse through the act of telling and retelling of ancestral histories provides the women of the African diaspora with an added recourse by which to define themselves as individuals and as members of a larger diasporic community.

One of the themes of interest in this chapter, which will be more fully explored in later chapters, is orality and the relationship between oral tradition and the written word. We note that orality has the power to go beyond mere words on the page. It is, within the African religious worldview, something that penetrates much deeper into the hearts and minds of Africans. It is the basis of African narratives, and is comprised of knowledge handed down from one generation to the next.

Parrinder comments on the role of memory in the intergenerational passing down of spiritual knowledge and beliefs: “But where there is no literature there is commonly a retentive memory, and many modern practices repeat the traditions of generations” (17). Although this “repetition” happens throughout the diasporic communities of the Americas, we must keep in mind that the various changes in location and situation have lead to modifications or different versions of the traditional generations. The diasporic nature of the religions implies that while retaining some of the main features of the traditional beliefs, these are new and syncretic versions of the original beliefs or traditions.

We note the reference to orality as opposed to written literature as the medium through which memories and ancestral beliefs are traditionally shared in African society.

According to Ana Rita Santiago da Silva, literature of Black women of the diáspora is centered around “narrativas e textos poéticos com marcas de jogos de resistência, de experiências, afetos e desafetos, sonhos, angústias e histórias de mulheres negras” (178). As such, in the words of Santiago da Silva, this afro-feminine literature “põe-se em um lugar de criação de uma textualidade em interação com histórias, desejos, resistências e insurgências, com memórias pessoais e coletivas e identidades negras e de gênero” (178-79). Oral tradition not only provides women of the African diaspora with a path upon which to seek out their ancestral roots, but also provides them with a canvas upon which they can create their own collective existence.

Patrick Bellegarde-Smith comments in *Fragments of Bone*: “Language and religion remain primordial elements in the deep structure of the psyche. Both are collective and personal, the harbingers of cultural identities” (3). In addition to being spoken word, orality also expresses those unspoken words that are so vital to sacred religious texts. This sacred spirituality offered a unifying base upon which enslaved Africans in the New World could creatively (re)construct diasporic versions of their traditional religious beliefs.

In considering the power of the story in interweaving historical events with fiction in order to create texts that speak to the importance of memory and collectiveness within the African Diaspora, I mention a work that is not included in main *corpus* of this study: *The Farming of Bones* by Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat. The novel masterfully narrates events related to the history of the Haitian Massacre of 1937, and touches on themes of racism and nationalism in the construction of the Dominican Republic and the treatment of Haitian immigrants within the country. Turning once more

to the ideas of Bellegarde-Smith, we observe, “histories are made of fragmentary evidence and selected fragments that are reconstructed, reconstituted, and remythologized in countless ways” (2). Embedded in a story containing not only historical references, but also the emotional love story of two Haitians living in the Dominican Republic, Amabelle and Sebastien, Danticat creates a narrative about nameless people lacking both a past and a future, which exceeds physical and temporal boundaries.

The first thing that caught my attention in *The Farming of Bones* was the dedicatory page in which the protagonist, Amabelle, writes “In confidence to you, Metrès Dlo, Mother of the Rivers”. Immediately, we note both the importance of the river and the symbol of water within the narrative, suggesting a special connection or memory that links the protagonist and the river. In her text “Mother Who Births Worlds of Bone,” Teresa N. Washington comments on the presence of Metrès Dlo, or Yemoja within the Haitian religious belief, stating “Danticat helps her reader recognize the overt and covert roles that religion often plays in genocide, and she invokes Yemoja so that the God can help her write painful truths and provide the sacred water that can help Haitians heal from atrocities decreed by lesser Gods and orchestrated by their scheming minion” (223).

Throughout the novel, we find out that Amabelle’s parents both drowned in the river, once again reinforcing our ideas previously set forth on land and elements of nature being infused with memories. As Washington points out regarding Danticat’s historical novel, it “details the Dominican massacre of tens of thousands of Haitians in 1937 under the direction of Rafael Trujillo, the Dominican dictator whose...anti-Haitian, policy constituted his hatred of his African identity magnified, nationalized, and militarized with devastating efficiency” (223). As readers, we also come to understand that during

the Haitian Massacre, the river played an important role in the atrocity of the event. Many Haitians were either killed and thrown into the river by members of the Dominican Republic military, or drowned in the river attempting to return to their homeland.

Ultimately, Amabelle's onirical memories intertwine with the macabre images of the river in a powerful union of remembering and retelling of a traumatic historical event, "I looked to my dreams for softness, for a gentler embrace, for relief from the fear of mudslides and blood bubbling out over the riverbed, where it is said the dead add their tears to the river flow" (*The Farming of Bones* 310). The river is home to innumerable "anonymous" corpses, much in the same way as we note in *Beloved* with the "haunting" of the clearing and the river out of which Beloved appears by the countless Blacks who suffered "bad deaths" at the hands of their masters.

There are times in the narrative, however, where the author attempts to give these anonymous dead bodies an identity through descriptions such as clothing: "An empty black dress buoyed past us, inflated by air, floating upon the water" and "A man floated past us, face down. I swam towards him and moved his head to the side. Sebastien? No. I turned the head down again, wishing I knew a ceremonial prayer to recite over the body" (*The Farming of Bones* 201). In both of these examples, we note how Danticat tries to return an identity to these thousands of individuals slaughtered during the massacre.

At one point in the narrative, Amabelle comments on the religious figure of the priest, Father Romain, and how he emphasizes the importance of location, more importantly the "homeland" in maintaining the memory of others alive, as well as in creating a shared cultural background in diaspora:

Father Romain always made much of our being from the same place, just as Sebastien did. Most people here did. It was a way of being joined to your old life through the presence of another person...It was their way of returning home, with you as a witness or as someone to bring them back to the present...this was how people left imprints of themselves in each other's memory so that if you left first and went back to the common village, you could carry, if not a letter, a piece of treasured clothing, some message to their loved ones that their place was still among the living...In his sermons to the Haitian congregants of the valley he often reminded everyone of common ties: language, foods, history, carnival, songs, tales and prayers. His creed was one of memory, how remembering – though sometimes painful – can make you strong. (*The Farming of Bones* 73)

It is with this last line of Amabelle's narrative that I would like embark upon my analysis of the main literary works selected for this chapter. The concept of remembering and memory as painful but necessary processes will serve us greatly in considering the feminine protagonists and the healing oftentimes achieved using rememory in each of the novels. As I intend to illustrate in the next section, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, illustrates the idea of cathartic remembrance, which is key to the Sethe's recovery in Post-Civil War America.

Beloved: Haunting Memories and Painful Disremembering

*History is "cannibalistic,"
and memory becomes the closed arena of conflict
between two contradictory operations:
forgetting, an action directed against the past,
and the return of what was forgotten.
—Michel de Certeau*

Of the texts selected for our analysis in this chapter, perhaps the one that best exemplifies or embodies memory as a mechanism of defense and the harsh reality of slavery from a Black female perspective is Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved* (1987). The narrative exposes the physical, emotional and psychological journey of its main protagonist, Sethe during the bitter days of slavery in the United States. While the novel leads to an equally instigating examination of the theme of maternity and motherhood denied under the institution of slavery, which we intend to develop later in this study, our focus in this chapter is on (re)memory and its cathartic role in bringing together the protagonists in a post-slavery reality.

As highlighted by Bernard W. Bell in his text "Womanist Remembrances of Things Past", *Beloved* can be viewed on a textual level as Sethe's "quest for freedom and psychological wholeness" (94). However, Bell comments on a more "legendary or mythic level of memory" that depicts the ethereal and ghostlike figure of Beloved as a haunting memory of the impact of slavery, racism and sexism on the capacity for love, faith, and community of black families, especially of Black women, during the Reconstruction period" (94). With the post-Civil War period as a backdrop, the novel is, according to Bell, a womanist neoslave narrative of double consciousness, a postmodern romance that speaks in many compelling voices and on several time levels of the historical rape of black American women and of the resilient spirit of blacks in

surviving as a people” (94). The tension we note in the novel is Sethe’s struggles with memories of her life as a slave and the act of murdering her own child in order to save her from slavery.

Much along the lines of Bellegarde-Smith regarding the reconstruction and reconstitution of selected fragments in the creation of histories, and the previously discussed Traditional African cyclical concept of time, as opposed to the Western lineal concept, Morrison speaks to the creation of her own novel, *Beloved*:

The novel turned out to be a composition of parts circling each other, like the galaxy accompanying memory. I fret the pieces and fragments of memory because too often we want the whole thing. When we wake from a dream, we want to remember all of it, although the fragment we are remembering may be, and very probably is, the most importance piece in the dream. (1998 388)

In her text “Memory, Creation, and Writing”, Morrison discusses the commonplace attitude of writers of “dropping a veil over” past events that are too painful or horrendous to narrate. As such, these writers ultimately silence and consciously “forget” or “disremember” certain events so as to appease the mainstream readers of their texts. This careful selection and limited portrayal of reality lends itself to our former analysis of what, depending on power dynamics, is included or not within national discourse. Morrison comments that she seeks to “remove the veil” placed over so many other narratives, and relies on both personal and collective memory in the creation of her own literary work:

Moving that veil aside requires, therefore, certain things. First of all, I must trust my own recollections. I must also depend on the recollections of others. Thus, memory weighs heavily on what I write, in how I begin and in what I find to be significant. Zora Neale Hurston said, “Like the dead-seeming cold rocks, I have memories within that come out of the material that went to make me.” These “memories within” are the subsoil of my work. But memories and recollections won’t give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of the imagination can help me. (“Memory, Creation, and Writing” 91-92)

Beloved is, therefore, the fusion of both the horrific history of maternity denied within the confines of slavery, and the creative fiction of Morrison rooted in individual and collective memory.

The historical event or, more specifically, figure underpinning Morrison’s fictional text is that of Margaret Garner. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Garner earned notoriety for murdering her own daughter. The reason for the heinous act was the enslaved mother’s fear of her own daughter having to return to the life of a slave in pre-Civil War America (Morrison 2013). The mother chose death or, more accurately, murder over the alternative. In “The Site of Memory”, Toni Morrison discusses the creative process for herself as a writer, and how the piecing together of bits of history are the instigating forces for her writing:

The pieces (and only the pieces) are what begin the creative process for me. And the process by which the recollections of these pieces coalesce into a part (and knowing the difference between a piece and a part) is

creation. Memory, then, no matter how small the piece remembered, demands my respect, my attention, and my trust. I depend heavily on the ruse of memory (and in a way it does function as a creative writer's ruse) for two reasons. One, because it ignites some process of invention, and two, because I cannot trust the literature and the sociology of other people to help me know the truth of my own cultural sources. (386)

In the introduction to *Beloved*, Morrison shares with the reader that her motivation for writing the book stemmed from her questioning the concept of being “free” to women: particularly to Black women in the historical context of the United States. The importance of creating a textual environment in which the reader would find him or herself thrust into the dark confines of slavery was key for Morrison:

There would be no lobby into this house, and there would be no ‘introduction’ into it or into the novel. I wanted to reader to be kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the book’s population – just as the characters were snatched from one place to another, from any place to any other, without preparation or defense. (*Beloved* xvii)

Morrison does indeed succeed in accomplishing what she seemingly set out to do with this novel, as within just the first four lines the reader is faced with the image of a nameless house with a sinister and “spiteful” nature that preys on the “victims” who reside in the building. No introductions. No flowery descriptions of the Ohio landscape in which the house is located or the family members who, at one time or another, resided in the house. On the contrary, nothing but the harsh, poisonous, predatory image of a house,

identified only by its three numbers: 124. Once again turning to Morrison's own thoughts or motivation for the novel, the author affirms:

In trying to make the slave experience intimate, I hoped the sense of things being both under control and out of control would be persuasive throughout; that the order and quietude of everyday life would be violently disrupted by the chaos of the need dead; that the herculean effort to forget would be threatened by memory desperate to stay alive. To render enslavement as a personal experience, language must get out of the way.

(*Beloved* xviii–xix)

In order to make enslavement an issue that readers of *Beloved* would be able to “experience”, Morrison relies on the technique of putting the reader in contact with memories. When, for example, Morrison presents the rape/milking scene in which Sethe's milk is brutally taken from her, the author never actually “says” that Sethe is raped. The author never actually puts the rape “into words” for the reader. However, by using Sethe's memories to recreate the scene, the reader is transported into the experience and can imagine the raping of not just Sethe, but many enslaved women. As such, language is not needed to understand the horrors of enslavement.

As previously stated, the premise for *Beloved* is the historical figure of Margaret Garner. However, the work itself uses the historical base as a fictional springboard with which to explore issues related to freedom, memory, maternity and motherhood within the pre-Civil war environment. The narrative focuses on the events in the life of the main protagonist, Sethe, as well as those of the people who surround her both during and post-enslavement on “Sweet Home” farm. In order to address the role of (re)memory in the

narrative, we are forced to examine the cause or root of the memory that Sethe tries so hard to ignore or deny herself. The memory is that of Sethe's daughter, Beloved. More specifically, it is the memory of the death of her daughter that Sethe attempts to escape. Mirroring the macabre scene in which Margaret Garner murdered her own child, we learn that Sethe is responsible for the death of Beloved and the attempted murder of her other three children, Buglar, Howard and Denver. The reason behind the murder was the same one that led the real-life enslaved woman in pre-Civil War era America to murder her own child: the fear of seeing her children returned to the life of slavery she had herself endured for so many years on Sweet Farm.

The previous narrative example on the murdering of Beloved in order to save her from slavery is symbolic of larger questions of race, gender and slavery within the African diasporic context. Speaking to the question of gender, maternity and slavery, Barbara Bush comments:

In the African diaspora in the Americas, all enslaved women gave birth and raised children in unique and often traumatic conditions. In contrast with the low fertility rate of enslaved females in the Caribbean, in the American South, women's fertility was normal. Common to all American regimes, however, was the denigration of the enslaved mother and prioritisation of her productive role with serious implications for pregnancy, lactation, childrearing, and female strategies of resistance. (70)

Continuing with the ideas of Bush on the relationship between sex, gender and maternity, she points out the power relationships that were constructed during the Middle Passage, which "set a precedent for African women's experiences in American societies"

(80). As we can observe in *Beloved*, as well as in *Um defeito de cor*, during the Middle Passage many African women were also subjected to rape by the male crewmembers of the slave ship. As such, according to Bush, “The link between sex, violence and ‘the unmothering’ motif persisted and younger enslaved females remained vulnerable to sexual exploitation and rape, risking punishment if they refused the unwanted advances of white men” (80). Within the “female strategies of resistance” mentioned by Bush, we can place natural abortion methods, as well as murder as ways in which enslaved women tried to prevent their children from becoming slaves.

Reverting to *Beloved*, the narrative is steeped in references to memories and in particular, to “rememories” and the act of “*disremembering*”. According to Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, “In Morrison’s novels, understanding self and past is always a project of community, memory always situated within a context of rememory...in *Beloved* of a subjugated culture of slaves” (304). Echoing some of the ideas about locations retaining memories set forth in the beginning of this chapter, Sethe explains to her daughter Denver that places, time, and memories are intricately connected in her process of remembering and *disremembering* when she comments about Sweet Farm:

I was talking about time. It’s so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my Rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place – the picture of it – stays, and not just in my Rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture

of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right there in the place where it happened...Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a Rememory that belongs to somebody else. (*Beloved* 43)

Turning once more to Halbwachs' ideas on memory and, in particular, the importance of memories embedded in a physical location, we observe how the theorist uses the institution of slavery to illustrate the binary relationship between memory and location. Halbwachs ponders the extreme control exerted over one person by another in the institution of slavery. Echoing the concepts of "thingification" of Aimé Césaire and "objectification" of Frantz Fanon in chapter one of this study, Halbwachs claims: "O escravo, é verdade, não passava de pessoa reduzida ao estado de coisa" (147). The enslaved "other" was confined spatially to specifically designated areas of the plantation separated both physically and socially from the realm of the powerful masters who dictated his or her every move. This unspoken barrier of demonstration of power and permeated the imaginary of the enslaved Africans such that the memory of slavery pervaded the mind in a lasting and traumatic manner, such that, according to Halbwachs:

Longe dos olhos do senhor, o escravo podia esquecer sua condição servil. Entrasse ele numa das alas onde seu senhor morava, tomava novamente consciência de ser escravo. Era como se, passando pelo umbral da propriedade do senhor, se encontrasse transportado a uma parte do espaço onde a lembrança da relação de dependência frente ao senhor se conservasse. (147)

Halbwachs' concept of being transported to a threshold of memory is very fitting when we consider previous ideas set forth in this study regarding enslaved African women as liminal figures. By creating a spatial threshold within which the memory of slavery and relational constructs of domination and liminality are housed, the physical location becomes the embodiment of the individual and collective memories contained in the liminal space. In *Beloved*, we observe the physical connection between memory and embodied geographic rememory in the form of the character of Beloved herself. As readers, we are forced to question the true nature or meaning of the figure of Beloved in the narrative. What or who is Beloved? At first sight we can assume that, due to the horrific manner in which she died, Beloved is the ghostly, otherworldly figure of Sethe's murdered child that has returned to haunt the house in which the family lives. Until the moment in which Paul D., one of the Sweet Home enslaved men that shared in Sethe's painful experience on the farm, enters the house and "beats" the spirit out of the house, the haunting figure makes her presence known and felt by tormenting the residents with childish pranks. Although acknowledging the haunting, Sethe prefers to accept it by not talking about or allowing the memories of the horrific event of her daughter's murder to enter into her present.

However, after the arrival of Paul D. at the house, and the ghost is expelled from the location, the past is thrust into Sethe's present, and she is forced to confront the memories and past events that she had *disremembered* up until that moment. It is at this point in the narrative that we witness the embodiment of the ghostly figure in the gruesome, disfigured form of the young girl Beloved who turns up at the house on the day the carnival comes to town. Digging deeper into the significance of the figure of

Beloved, we posit that she can be read as not merely the (re)memory of the tragic death of Sethe's daughter, but as the (re)memory of slavery and the horrific cruelties suffered by Sethe while enslaved on Sweet Home. In the words of Jewell Parker Rhodes, "Beloved, the tragic ghost child, continues her haunting, though she no longer torments Sethe... rememory cannot help Beloved. It does not diminish the horror of the past. It just makes it possible for the living to go on, to move forward, to survive" (91). Therefore, on a wider scope, *Beloved* represents the institution of slavery itself and the horrors endured by millions of Africans throughout the centuries of enslavement in the Americas.

Recalling the words of Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic* on the subject of enslavement and memory, we note how historically slavery has been positioned as something shameful and that should be "disremembered":

Blacks are urged, if not to forget the slave experience which appears as an aberration from the story of greatness told in Africa history, then to replace it at the center of our thinking with a mystical and ruthlessly positive notion of Africa that is indifferent to intraracial variation and is frozen at the point where blacks boarded the ships that would carry them into the woes and horrors of the middle passage. (Gilroy 189)

Gilroy's ideas on a "mystical" and "ruthlessly positive notion of Africa" is of significant importance in terms of countering a frozen idea of Africa. It speaks to the way in which, similar to the way in which African traditions have evolved within their New World setting, many aspects of African society have changed since the time of slavery.

So many tragic events like the one recounted in *Beloved*, (re)memories of slavery, at times disremembered like a bad dream, are, as the author states, "not a story to pass

on” (323). We note, therefore, that the theme of storytelling or orality, of great importance in traditional African culture, also appears in *Beloved* as a way of preserving and making sense of the past. Beloved, or the figure of the embodiment of rememory, gets great pleasure out of listening to the stories of the past told by Sethe: “Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost...as she began telling...she found herself wanting to, liking it...it was an unexpected pleasure (69). The act of recounting past events to another generation not only preserves the memory, but also aids in Sethe’s own cathartic recovery by allowing herself to enter into the world of her memories.

The storytelling spills over to the second generation when Denver, in an attempt to appease Beloved’s desire for stories, uses the scraps of memories handed down by her grandmother Baby Suggs and her mother Sethe to bring life her own version of rememory. We witness the textual embodiment of memory in Denver’s narrative of when Sethe escaped Sweet Farm and made the treacherous journey to Ohio:

Denver stopped and sighed. This was the part of the story she loved...Now, watching Beloved’s alter and hungry face, how she took in every word, asking questions about the color of things and their size, her downright craving to know, Denver began to see what she was saying and not just to hear it...Denver was seeing it now and feeling it – through Beloved...And the more fine points she made, the more detail she provided, the more Beloved liked it. So she anticipated the questions by giving blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her – and

a heartbeat. The monologue became, in fact, a duet as they lay down together, Denver nursing Beloved's interest like a lover whose pleasure was to overfeed the loved. (*Beloved* 91 – 92)

In an interview with Junot Diaz on the subject of her novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison comments on the “ferocity” of Beloved and the needy nature of the murdered child who can “never get enough”. According to Morrison, in order to accurately portray the true slave story of Margaret Garner, it was necessary for her to return to the one person who could give a voice to what actually happened. Her choice of an ethereal character whose true nature was unclear in the text was of utmost importance in constructing a link between the worlds of the living and the dead.

The ability of the murdered child to join Sethe's present with the rememories of unspeakable horrors endured during slavery is of utmost importance in the novel. Turning once again to the ideas of Rushdy on the communal nature of memory, we note:

Beloved is the story that stops haunting when told, and stops being when disremembered, but must be remembered to be told, and must be told to be disremembered...Memory exists as a communal property of friends, of family, of a people. The magic of memory is that it is interpersonal, that it is the basis for constructing relationships with the other who also remembers. The reality of memory is that it must be experienced individually, first, before it becomes communal property. In individual experience, memory is painful, as Milkman and Sethe discover. In shared experience, memory is healing, as everyone in Morrison's narratives discovers. (321 – 322)

We affirm, therefore, that rememory is the bridge that connects Sethe with her past and ultimately allows her to come to terms with the act of motherly desperation committed in resistance to the institution of slavery.

Um defeito de cor: A Life Time of (Re) Memories

To continue on our transcontinental literary journey on the theme of (re)memory, we turn once again to our main text, *Um defeito de cor* by African Brazilian author Ana Maria Gonçalves. In the novel, Kehinde constructs the memorialistic narrative based on her own personal experiences. The question of memory is present throughout the entirety of the narrative, with comments by the main protagonist such as “Justo eu, que tanto me orgulho de ter boa memória’ (251) and “Acho que posso confiar na memória” (447). These comments by Kehinde are significant as they demonstrate the fact that the narrative is a compilation of her personal memories and experiences, while at the same time alerting the reader that a first-person narrator is narrating the text. As such, although we have no reason to doubt Kehinde’s stories, we are forced to acknowledge that memory is not perfect as it depends upon the person narrating to call upon her or his own recollections of events

After the first part of chapter six of the novel, however, the narrator begins to narrate her story not to the reader, but instead to her long-lost son. She uses “você” to refer directly to her son, and even begins to include her own thoughts on certain events or apologize to her son for the tragic event that resulted in the life-long quest to find her missing son. Dialoguing with the main argument for my dissertation, the narration

demonstrates how Kehinde is forced to negotiate a variety of crossings and dislocation, as well as the losses and readjustments she is required to make throughout her journey.

At one point in the novel, after Kehinde gains her own freedom and returns to Africa in the hopes of beginning a new life there, she still continues her incessant search for her son in Brazil who was sold into slavery by his own father. In *Os africanos no Brasil*, Nina Rodrigues comments on the Africans who decided to make the return trip to Africa during the same time period as that which Kehinde narrates in *Um defeito de cor*:

Foram os minas que mais frequentemente lutaram para reivindicar os seus direitos e formaram, no interior do Brasil, as repúblicas de negros fugidos mais prósperas e defendidas com o maior valor. Foram também eles que, por suas filhas, mais contribuíram para os cruzamentos das raças na América portuguesa e que, por conseguinte, mais largamente se aproveitaram dela para regressar à mãe pátria onde se entregam ao comércio, seja como intermediários, seja como importadores. (21)

The comings and goings of the narrator in *Um defeito de cor* contribute to the eternal search and remembering by the narrator throughout the length of the novel: the search for happiness, the search for justice, the search for her lost son, the search for recognition, amongst many other less significant searches in the life of Kehinde. By portraying her past through her own memories and rebuilding the historical events that made up her life, Kehinde represents not just a century of life in Brazil and Africa, but an intimate gaze into the life and struggles of an African woman whose life was profoundly impacted by the institution of slavery.

In “Em Busca dos Rastros Perdidos da Memória Ancestral: Um Estudo de Um Defeito de Cor, de Ana Maria Gonçalves”, Zilá Bernd highlights the importance of memory and ancestors in modern Afro-Brazilian literature: “A principal característica do fazer poético das autoras mulheres da literatura afro-brasileira atual é a de rastrear os ‘guardados da memória’ ...por meio dos traços, dos fragmentos deixados pela herança de suas antepassadas” (31). Throughout Gonçalves’ text, we note how memory and myth intertwine allowing, in the words of Zilá, “...espaço para a imaginação redescobrir, completar e atualizar esses vestígios memoriais” (32). These traces or leftover memories of the past invade the present and, according to Bernd: “...constrói-se a escritura como uma casa assombrada, uma casa habitada pelas intercorrências de recordações fragmentadas integradas ao tecidos textual: rezas, mitos, citações, provérbios, cantigas de ninar, o ressoar dos tantãs e os rituais da cultura africana preservados na América” (34).

These traces of ancestral memory appear seamlessly in *Um defeito de cor*. Not only do we as readers learn of African words, myths and healing techniques through the memories of the narrator, we catch a glimpse into the mindset, albeit fictitious, of an enslaved African woman during the nineteenth century in Brazil. Kehinde’s memories and dreams also serve to connect her to her deceased grandmother and twin sister in the otherworldly realm. As such, memory functions not merely as a link to the spatial homeland, but rather as a deeper bridge to spirituality and ancestral knowledge.

Turning once more to the ideas of Bernd on memory as it relates to slavery and acts of slave resistance, we observe how the innumerable acts put forth by Kehinde in her life-long narrative of memories and historical events are also highly significant inasmuch

as they demonstrate the active role many enslaved and freed Africans took in the quest for freedom and equality within the greater patriarchal society:

Assim, articulando habilmente os jogos de memória longa, o romance traz à tona tanto aos fatos de que os descendentes de ex-escravos podem se orgulhar – tais como a resistência à escravidão (formação dos quilombos, rebeliões, preservação da oralidade e dos rituais religiosos) – quanto aqueles que gostariam de esquecer, ou seja, os castigos cruéis e injustos, os abusos sexuais, as separações das famílias e, sobretudo, a privação dos direitos de cidadania. (33)

Echoing the ideas of Bernd, we affirm that as a reader, we accompany Kehinde's progression from a mere child horrified by the terrors of rape and murder in her home country of Dahomey, to losing her own freedom and identity during enslavement in Bahia, to regaining her freedom and becoming a strong, independent woman who actively participated in acts of resistance against the institution of slavery such as the muslim-lead slave rebellions, to a prosperous middle-aged woman in her home country in Africa, to a blind elderly woman in search of her son in a last attempt to bring closure to her long and memorable life. These various journeys and crossings are linked by the Kehinde's retelling of her memories, as well as by her search for identity and roots. The conscious act of remembering all of the events of her life, however traumatic, enables Kehinde to take control of her life in the present. As the one narrating the events of her own life, Kehinde is able to fill in all of the details as she remembers them, and leave a living memory for her son to whom she narrates the memories.

***Reyita sencillamente* and *O diário de Bitita*: Memories of Identity**

*Recordar es un viaje,
regresando
a aquel pueblito en el que pasó algo
además del tiempo.
- Georgina Herrera*

For the final portion of my chapter on the theme of memory, I have chosen to include the autobiographical works of a Cuban and Brazilian author of African descent: Carolina de Jesus and Maria de las Reyes, Reyita. While these two narratives do not present memory as a defense mechanism in the institution of slavery in the New World, as explored previously in *Beloved* and *Um defeito de cor*, along the lines of Conceição Evaristo they do make use of memory as a tool with which to construct new individual identities in post-slavery eras in Brazil and Cuba. It is from this post-abolition vantage point of female writers of African descent that we intend to explore the memories of each of the women in their memorialistic texts. As such, our focus for this part of the chapter will be on the subjects of race and gender in the processes of self-identification and re-construction experienced by each writer.

O diário de Bitita, the work of Carolina Maria de Jesus published posthumously in 1986, is a memorialistic text that accompanies the thoughts, hopes and dreams of an underprivileged girl born in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais in the decades following the abolition of slavery in the country. Bitita narrates the memories of her life experiences, as well as the frequent racial discrimination suffered at the hands of the dominant class in post-slavery Brazil. As Thomas E. Skidmore points out in *Black into White*, following the abolition of slavery in Brazil, “The newly freed slaves moved into the paternalistic multi-racial social structure that had long since taught free men of color

the habits of deference in their relationships with employers and other social superiors. It is within this context...that race relations proceeded after abolition” (39).

Another factor that we can highlight in *O Diário de Bitita* is that of education and the high illiteracy rates amongst the recently freed enslaved Africans in the country. As Bitita comments: “A maioria dos negros eram analfabetos. Já haviam perdido a fé nos predominadores e em si próprios. O tráfico de negros iniciou-se no ano de 1515. Terminou no ano de 1888. Os negros foram escravizados durante quase 400 anos. Quando o negro envelhecia ia pedir esmola” (27). Access to education was a dream far-removed from the everyday reality of the majority of Blacks in Brazil, even after slavery had been officially abolished in the country. As commented by anthropologist Ruth Landes in *The City of Women* (1947): “For the most part, the blacks could not read or write and never went to the moving pictures, but passed their lives between their places of work and the temples” (61). Landes’ ideas are telling as they contrast the two main areas of education or faith as the ones for the African diasporic community to engage.

The question of gender also presents itself in Bitita’s memories and disremembering her childhood and growing up poor and of African descent in Brazil. At various moments during the narrative, Bitita comments on her desire to become a man, or in her own words, “tornar-se homem”. For the narrator, women held little worth within society. By transforming into a man, she would be able to have access to a better life than the one she was offered as a poor, Black woman. We note the obvious revolt in the narrator’s thoughts on the position of women in society, particularly that of women of African descent within the Brazilian society:

“Mamãe...eu quero virar homem. Não gosto de ser mulher! ...Quando eu virar homem vou comprar um machado para derrubar uma árvore...

“Quero ter a força que tem o homem... Quer ter a coragem que tem o homem... O homem que trabalha ganha mais dinheiro do que uma mulher e fica rico e pode comprar uma casa bonita para morar”. (12-13)

We note the tones of dissatisfaction in the narrator's words, as she builds on the memories of a child in post-abolition era Brazil to construct her new thoughts and identity.

Speaking to the general function of the autobiographical nature of the diary in identity reformulation, Lesley Feracho comments that:

This subjective process of socialization and its multiple representations in the autobiographical narrative is a necessary element in understanding the reformulation of individual identity. In particular, the diary has been legitimated as a form of autobiographical narrative that has proven especially useful in understanding women's reconstruction of the self. (17)

The autobiographical format chosen by Carolina Maria de Jesus portrays the memories of her life as an underprivileged woman of African descent writing from the margins of the Brazilian society during the 1970's. As such, we affirm that *O diário de Bitita* serves both to relate the minute details of the daily life of the writer and her innermost thoughts, as well as to reformulate her own individual identity within the greater community.

In considering the space of African diasporic religion, we cite internal migration and geographical influences on the African communities as the main factors that contributed to the transformation of the traditional religions within the Brazilian religious

environment. Turning once again to the ideas of Roger Bastide, “African religions inevitably suffered repercussions from modifications in the economic or social structures. Wherever black communities found niches in which they could organize themselves” (214). Following the abolition of slavery, many Africans found themselves in precarious economic conditions in the country due to the lack of work opportunities for them in the regions of Brazil that historically had depended on slave labor, such as on the sugar plantations of Bahia. Bastide comments that inhabitants of Bahia travelled to São Paulo the “new land of Canaan” in search of employment, and carried with them their syncretic religious beliefs, “Some of these migrants came from the regions of catimbó and candomblé. It was only to be expected that human mobility should be accompanied by a corresponding religious mobility” (215-16).

In Brazil, under the *Estado Novo* regime during the first part of the XX Century, the idea of racial mixing gained widespread national acceptance. As Thomas Skidmore points out: “The 1920’s and 1930’s in Brazil saw a consolidation of the whitening ideal... Brazilians were getting whiter and would continue to do so...and therefore the (race) problem was being solved” (173). It was during this same period in Brazil that the process to “de-africanizar” or to “de-Africanize” the Brazilian race, accompanied by the subsequent “embranquecimento” or “whitening” of the Brazilian race became a national priority. Likewise, it was at the start of the XX Century in Europe that scientific racism and eugenics were being used to justify the superiority or inferiority of certain racial groups. The effects of these scientific racism ideas crossed the Atlantic and penetrated national thought in countries such as Cuba and Brazil.

Expanding upon the themes of race and religion in the formation of a national identity, we move now to the final literary work chosen for this chapter on memory, *Reyita sencillamente* (1997) by Daisy Rubiera Castillo. The work itself is a testimonial and recounts the life of an elderly Cuban woman of African descent from the beginning of the twentieth Century up until her passing. Reyita narrates all the events of her life, as well as her memories and specific historical events that comprised the Cuban identity throughout the 20th Century and into the 21st Century. Throughout the narrative, Reyita mentions specific moments in history such as “Cuando comenzó la Guerra del 95 todos los Mondeja se fueron para la isla de Jamaica” (39), “el golpe de estado del día 10 de marzo de 1952” (51), and “Eran dos miembros del Partido Socialista Popular...esto sucedía en la década del 40” (84). In a similar manner to the other literary works previously mentioned in this chapter, in *Reyita sencillamente* we witness the importance of memory, history and African diasporic religious traditions in Cuba in the life of the narrator, as well as in the construction of a larger diasporic community. Turning to the ideas of Sarduy and Stubbs on the concept of African Cuban identity, we observe:

Cuba’s African-descended identities and cultures are jostled between asserting a sense of difference and recognizing transculturation. In Cuba more than anywhere else, it might be argued, blacks have demonstrated great individual and collective achievement, awareness, and organization in challenging oppression, eliciting official concern and recognition, gaining power, becoming accepted within the culture, and establishing their national self-identity. (xii)

In *Reyita sencillamente*, the narrator recounts the arrival of her family to the Caribbean island, and the fact that her grandmother was African and had been captured and enslaved, and taken to Cuba. Of the many stories told to her by her grandmother about the country of her ancestors, the narrator comments: “Recuerdo las cosas que mi abuela contaba sobre los africanos que vivían fuera de su país. Decía que sus espíritus regresaban a sus tierras después de muertos...su África querida, a la que nunca olvido y a la que aprendí a querer por todas las historias que nos hacía” (22). Dialoguing with the process of *Rootedness*, which we intend to explore in greater detail in the fifth chapter of this study, and the importance of community in the life of the fragmented figure of the people of African descent in the Americas, Reyita states: “Chicharrones, como barrio pobre que era, nos hacía vivir como en una gran familia: nos socorriamos los unos a los otros en todas nuestras necesidades, las que eran bastantes” (112).

Reyita’s previous comment that the poor neighborhood of *Chicarrones* made the residents live “like one big family”, connects to the idea of rootedness in that the individuals of the disadvantaged place form a type of “support network”, helping each other in all of their many needs. The place itself forces the residents to work together as a community in order to assure their individual and collective survival. Reyita moved into the neighborhood, but created roots in the disenfranchised place, through her own willingness to care for other members of the community.

In a similar manner as to that which occurred in Brazil during the twentieth century, the question of those peoples of African descent was seen as a “mal a ser resuelto,” or a problem to be resolved in the country. According to Elisa Larkin Nascimento, following the abolition of slavery in Brazil in 1888:

Nenhuma medida foi tomada para integrar os novos cidadãos afrodescendentes à economia ou à sociedade nacionais. Muitos ficaram nas fazendas, na condição de semiescravos, ou se mudaram das senzalas para os morros urbanos, formando assim as favelas; algumas destas têm raízes anteriores como quilombos. (124)

In the case of Cuba, we note, according to Sarduy and Stubbs, that the abolition of slavery in the country in 1886 and the Cuban Revolution in 1959 did nothing to take care of the marginal and subaltern position occupied within society by Cubans of African descent: “An unintentional outcome of the revolutionary process has been to equate the black with the humble and dispossessed, thereby traveling a slippery slope along which the black goes from being seen as slave (rebel) to member of an underclass (criminal)” (7). Following the War of Repression of 1912, Black Cubans were freed from the shackles of slavery, but were immediately relegated to marginalized positions within the Republic by the dominant group.

As such, according to Sarduy and Stubbs, they were condemned to peripheral liminality and positioned as polarized opposites to the European with the Cuban society: “...periphery is condemned always to be immigrant and other, the otherness of European” (15). The irony and complexity of the “unintentional outcome” of the revolutionary process mentioned by Sarduy and Stubbs with regards to the issues of race and revolution in Cuba are of great significance, as depicted in the narrative of *Reyita*.

Reyita speaks to the racial discrimination that was prevalent in the beginning of the twentieth century in Cuba, commenting on the racism she suffered within her own family due to the fact of her being the only daughter who was phenotypically “Black”

among her mother's four daughters. This blatant discrimination was the instigating spark for Reyita's undertaking a subsequent attitude of "embranquecimiento" in order to assure the future acceptance within the Cuban society of her own children:

Para mi mamá fue una desgracia que yo fuera – de sus cuatro hijas – la única negra...yo fui víctima de una terrible discriminación por parte de mi mamá. Pero si a eso se suma la que había en Cuba, se podrá entender por qué nunca quise un marido negro...No quería tener hijos negros como yo, para que nadie me los malmirarar, para que nadie me los vejara, me los humillara...No quise que los hijos que tuviera sufrieran lo que sufrí yo. Por eso quise adelantar la raza, por eso me casé con un blanco. (17)

Speaking to the idea of whitening or "embranquecimiento" of the Cuban race in order to assure racial improvement, Sarduy and Stubbs point out, "In this context, bettering or 'whitening' the race denoted upward social mobility, while 'blackening' was equated with backwardness, poverty, and underdevelopment" (16). These concepts of racial inferiority permeated Reyita's memorial process in such a way that she purposely married a White man to "adelantar la raza". By choosing to marry someone lighter than herself, Reyita allowed past events and memories dictate her self-identification and that of her children within the greater Cuban society. As such, the memories served as more than mere remnants of past events for the African Cuban Reyita. They instead solidified into present-day determining factors in the identification process for the African descendant family members within Reyita's immediate family.

Salvador Mendiola refers to Reyita and her near century-long narrative as "un gran relato neobarroco feminista radical" (446). The reason for this label is that,

according to Mendiola, “Todo ocurre desde la Mirada de una mujer, una mujer efectivamente común, colectiva, acordada, entre todas las personas que participan en la realización del proyecto. Una mujer colectiva deja fluir la voz de una mujer concreta” (446-47).

When we consider the role of memory and storytelling as presented in *Reyita*, we note that, similar to in *Um defeito de cor* and *Daughters of the Stone*, Reyita’s grandmother passes along memories and stories. Reyita comments: “A mi Abuela Antonina todos le decía Tatica, y murió en 1917...Tatica contaba que su familia era de una aldea de un lugar llamado Cabinda, que eran de los Quicongos que se dedicaban al cultivo de la mandioca y el café” (19). Likewise, Reyita’s grandmother narrates her capture in her native Africa, as well as the dislocation and destruction of families that occurred during the slave trade. Through the stories handed down by her own grandmother, Reyita passes down the stories to the reader and future generations.

In this fourth chapter of my study, I have explored the various Western and Traditional African concepts of time, history and memory. We have seen how memory can be a very personal process, particularly when related to traumatic events such as the institution of slavery in the Americas. Concomitantly, it can serve as the adhesive with which to hold together groups or communities of people who share the same collective memory. Similarly, collective memories of shared traumas such as slavery can also transform into resistance against the very institution.

We have illustrated, through the literary texts chosen for this chapter on memory, that it can be painful, as in the case of Sethe’s rememories and disremembering in *Beloved*. It can, however, serve to push the individual past the painful experience and to

allow rememories to flood the person's mind. Likewise, (re)memory can help individuals to piece together the missing pieces from their own histories, as well as the collective memory of the larger community to which they belong. The act of remembering functions as a transcendental bridge that has the ability to join present and past in order to offer the wholeness searched for by many of the African diaspora in the Americas.

Expounding on the theme of memory developed in this chapter, Chapter 5 seeks to explore Jacqui Alexander's concepts on locatedness, rootedness and belonging and how these themes serve to map the individual and collective relationships with the Divine within the African cosmological system. Likewise, I also focus on African diasporic religions and how they represent a larger negotiation of these processes in the texts: *Um defeito de cor*, *Daughters of the Stone*, *La isla bajo el mar* and *The Spirits Dance Mambo*. Grounded in Édouard Glissant's concept of abyssal rooting and subjectivity, I intend to explore literary works that depict or problematize processes of crossing, dislocation and cultural belonging experienced by the protagonists throughout the course of the narrative.

CHAPTER 5

NEGOTIATIONS OF CROSSING, DISLOCATION, AND ROOTEDNESS IN THE
CONTEXT OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA*RAÍZES*

*Saga que cega o homem
 Sem nome segue além
 Seu destino a servidão
 A dor no porão do negreiro
 O nevoeiro deixou para trás
 A mãe África... Continente generoso
 Agora distante e doloroso
 Horrroso opróbrio da escravidão
 Açoites, argolas, gritos e dor
 Dentes cerrados...
 Angola nunca mais
 Cativo de sua terra natal
 Nativo de Moçambique
 Guerreiro do Congo e Bissau
 Desembarcou assustado
 Pescoço acorrentado
 A escravidão agora é um novo inimigo
 Que precisava ser derrotado
 Mas apenas ser negro já era complicado
 Ter na cor a raça
 E por sua massa ficava logo marcado
 Sendo vendido como produto em pleno mercado
 Quem se negava ao trabalho escravo
 Era pendurado no poste, castigo e açoite
 Dia e noite até a morte
 Pra vencer a senzala não bastou apenas ser forte
 Tinha que ter no sangue o desejo de liberdade
 E um grito surgiu nos ares
 No quilombo dos Palmares
 E em muitos outros altares
 Nos pilares dos quilombos
 Onde se abrigou a cultura
 A estrutura de um sonho livre
 Que nunca acabou,
 As raízes fincadas em solo estrangeiro
 Crescem fortes e guerreiros
 Levando adiante a alegria
 Que um dia foi um soluçar de dor.
 - Cesar Moura*

Crossings and Dislocations

My choice of the poem “Raízes” by Brazilian poet Cesar Moura is to serve as a literary bridge between our previous chapter on the themes of memory and (re)memory in the context of the institution of slavery, and the subject of negotiations of crossings and dislocations in the African Diaspora in the Americas. Taking as a starting point one of the lines from the poem that mentions “as raízes fincadas em solo estrangeiro,” I examine Chapter Five on the cultural uprooting of Africans brought to the New World, and the subsequent search for and reconstruction of new cultural roots in the diasporic communities formed in the Americas. Building on the concepts of theorists such as Stuart Hall and Aimé Césaire and ideas of memory, rememory and history, my intent in this fifth chapter is to dig deeper into the question of the impact of diasporic conditions in the creation and retention of cultural beliefs within the various diasporic communities in the New World.

Grounded in the theories of Jacqui Alexander in *Pedagogies of Crossing*, I explore how “African-based cosmological systems are complex manifestations of the geographies of crossing and dislocation. They are at the same time manifestations of locatedness, rootedness, and belonging that map individual and collective relationships to the Divine” (290). This particular concept of Alexander’s will serve as both a compass for my initial discussion in this chapter on roots and rootedness in the African Diaspora, as well as the connecting thread with which to weave my analysis of the literary texts chosen to exemplify the concept throughout the remainder of the chapter.

In considering African diaspora religions as they are practiced throughout the Americas, at first glance our tendency is to focus merely on the ancient African traditions

and the way in which they arrived in the New World. Themes of crossing and dislocation are processes intertwined in the history of millions of individuals of African descent. I use the term “crossing” to refer to the voyage of the Middle Passage that enslaved Africans underwent from their countries of origin until arriving at the various countries of destination in the Americas during the centuries of slave trade between the two continents. Likewise, “dislocation” speaks to the cultural rupture or fragmentation that the Africans suffered when brutally ripped from their communities and homelands and forced to begin new lives in captivity on the plantations in the New World.

Notwithstanding the significance of the processes of crossing and dislocation to the various works included in this study, the element that is most intriguing to me in Alexander’s ideas is the concept of African cosmological systems as manifestations of locatedness, rootedness and belonging that map both personal and collective relationships with the divine. More precisely, the intricateness of these parallel processes leads us to consider the relationship between the fragmented and deconstructed protagonists of African descent, and the collective communities portrayed in the literary works of this chapter: *Changó, el gran putas*, *Daughters of the Stone*, *La isla bajo el mar*, *The Spirits Dance Mambo* and *Um defeito de cor*.

From an historical vantage point, despite earlier crossings by African tribes as set forth by Ivan Van Sertima in his instigating text, *They Came before Columbus*, on the African presence in the Americas prior to European colonization, the crossings of enslaved Africans began on a widespread scale during the fifteenth century. It was during this time that the Portuguese initiated slave trade activities between Africa and the New World. The underpinning reason for the startup of this commerce was purely economic in

nature: sugarcane production in the Americas. The owners or masters of the innumerable plantations in the New World required laborers to toil in their fields and sustain their “stock” of healthy bodies. Of estimated five million Africans who arrived in the New World by means of the institution of slavery, over half of them spent the rest of their days laboring in the cultivation and production of sugar. Many of the slaves were taken to work on plantations in Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Brazil.

From this brief historical introduction, it is easy for us to note the importance of crossing within the context of the African Diaspora. The act of crossing a region or sea from one side to another in itself suggests original starting and ending points for the individual making the crossing. In the case of the Portuguese or Spanish colonizers who left their countries of origin in search of a new life in “the tropics”, they left their homelands and exported their dominant culture and society to a new physical environment in The Americas. However, in the case of millions of Africans who were captured and taken in inhumane conditions in the hulls of the slave ships to begin new lives as enslaved individuals, the process of crossing encompasses very different feelings and memories. In *Cuban Counterpoint* (1947), Fernando Ortiz relates this unequal arrival in the New World of each group, affirming:

The Negroes were torn from another continent, as were the whites; but not of their own will or choice, and forced to leave their free and easy tribal ways to eat the bitter bread of slavery, whereas the White man, who may have set out from his native land in despair, arrived in the Indies in a frenzy of hope, converted into master and authority. (102)

Examining the same phenomena of the arrival of Europeans and Africans in the Americas and the cultural values imported by each group, the sociologist Roger Bastide points out that while the Portuguese had to adapt to a new climate in Brazil, they imported the cultural values from their homeland. The Africans, in comparison, not only left behind cultural values, but also were forcibly subjected to the cultural values of the dominant society:

Portugal imported its society along with its civilization. Slavery, by contrast, broke up the African society, and the blacks, herded into slave ships, could bring nothing with them except their cultural values. The Portuguese had to adapt to a new environment, and the modifications that his social organization and civilization underwent were chiefly ecological in nature. The African, on the contrary, had to adapt to a society quite different from his own, a society imposed upon him by the white man. He had to incarnate his own civilization in another social structure. (36-37)

The social structure within which the African had to “incarnate” her/his own civilization was one in which European values were held in esteem as culture *par excellence*, and almost overnight s/he had gone from being a free person to being seen as nothing more than chattel and occupying a subaltern social and economic position within then new society. Turning once more to the theories of Fernando Ortiz, we observe how in the Americas, despite the varied origins of the Africans, slavery served as an equalizer among the various African tribes within the dominant society:

The Negroes brought with their bodies their souls, but not their institutions nor their implements. They were of different regions, races, languages,

cultures, classes, ages, sexes, thrown promiscuously into the slave ships, and socially equalized by the same system of slavery. They arrived deracinated, wounded, shattered, like the cane of the fields, and like it they were ground and crushed to extract the juice of their labor. (101)

In addition to these factors inherent to slavery, another consequence of the institution was the destruction of family and traditional communal ties that were, up until the moment of capture, integral components of the Africans' tribal existence in their countries of origin.

Turning once more to the thoughts of Bastide, we note that, for the African, "Slavery shattered his African tribal or village community and its political organization and destroyed the forms of family life, leaving nothing of the original social structures intact" (43). Even after arriving in the New World, oftentimes friendships or family ties that survived the crossing to the other side of the Atlantic suffered additional ruptures and mutilations in the subsequent sale of Africans in the months and years following her or his arrival.

Rootedness and Spirituality

Launching our discussion on roots and rootedness, we return to some of the ideas presented in our introductory chapter, recalling Stuart Hall's "loss of identity" resulting from the transportation, enslavement, and migration of the Africans from their homelands to their new diasporic realities. The reestablishing of lost connections is, for Hall, of utmost importance in resolving the identity crisis of the Africans in diaspora. The (re)creation of both individual and collective cultural identity in diaspora depends upon roots.

African traditional religion was all-encompassing within the African society, as not only did it represent the fusion of secular life and sacred life, it was in itself the governing set of ideas and practices for African life. At the time when the first Africans were being herded onto slave ships and forcibly baptized into the religion of the dominant European “Other”, the word “religion” did not even exist within the African world vision. Nature, humans, deities and the spiritual realm were all one in the same or all made up a collective “wholeness” for Africans, with land being the primary mooring amongst all four.

As previously mentioned in Chapter 4, land itself carries memories. The tribal villages that Africans abandoned in their homelands were not merely places they left behind. They were physical locations imbued with spiritual and cultural meaning for each member of that community. Speaking to the connection between location and veneration of ancestors, Sonia Aparecida de Siqueira comments, “Ao se transplantarem...por serem religiões voltadas para o culto dos ancestrais, fundadas nas famílias e nas linhagens, perderam a base num país onde as estruturas sociais e familiares não se reproduziram. O culto dos antepassados familiares da aldeia foi impossível” (40). When we consider the violently traumatic act of uprooting that was forced upon Africans during the centuries in which the institution of slavery reigned supreme in the Americas, we are similarly compelled to consider the landless and culture-less position the fragmented enslaved Africans found themselves upon arrival in the new environment.

Brígida Carla Malandrino echoes De Siqueira’s ideas on the connection between location and veneration, positing that, in the case of the Bantu people, uprooting

represented a severing of their communal lifeline. As such, according to Malandrino, within the Bantu culture land is an aspect or extension of the communal group:

A captura e a separação da família alargada e nuclear desestruturam visceralmente a pessoa de tradição *bantú*, que perde, nesse momento, a possibilidade de dar continuidade à participação vital, uma vez que foram rompidos os laços de solidariedade vertical e horizontal. Rompendo esses laços, a pessoa tem desfeita a ligação com a participação vital, havendo também a quebra da corrente vital. O ser humano tem, portanto, a sua força vital diminuída. Esgotam-se os motivos pelos quais se vive, uma vez que, dentro da cultura *bantú*, só se existe pela e na comunidade. Já no que diz respeito ao território, para o *bantú*, ele demarca o espaço da estrutura social. A terra é um aspecto do grupo. Cada família alargada e cada clã possuem territórios bem delimitados. (7)

Without land to give meaning to their lives following the crossing, and a community with an established territory and relationship with the land, it becomes clear to us why feelings of fragmentation and despair engulfed the enslaved individuals.

In an attempt to reconstruct their former wholeness from the remaining fragmented parts of their diasporic beings, spirituality played a significant role in offering both individual and collective identity. In her introduction to *The Search for Wholeness and Diaspora Literacy in African American Literature*, Silvia Pilar Castro-Borrego speaks to the search for spiritual wholeness as represented in African American literature and the necessity to redefine unity in transnational terms. According to Castro-Borrego:

The search for wholeness stands as a key theoretic concept for African American literature and culture, together with double-consciousness, re-memory, and ancestral spiritualism...The search for wholeness goes beyond the dialectic binaries implied by double consciousness and moves forward in its commitment with multiplicity in the relationship between the African self and the Western other. (9-10)

When we consider the previous ideas on the importance of land as an extension of the communal group, and spirituality as a tool for wholeness, in the case of Brazil the Quilombos exemplify the unification of the two in a show of resistance and collective action.

Reverting to the ideas of Bastide, he notes the significance of the Quilombos as places of resistance and identity for the fugitive slaves in which “ancient tribal customs were revived, especially when the fugitive who established the *quilombos* was a new arrival from Africa” (81). The Quilombos have their roots in the groups of fugitive slaves who took to the mountains to form villages and towns based on traditional African beliefs and customs. The mountains served as ideal hiding places for the runaway slaves, and provided the community with a natural forest area abundant in the herbs and plants that are used in traditional healing practices. Bastide mentions Palmares as the most famous Quilombo that “more than anything else...represents a return to the African tradition” (88). Located in the Brazilian sertão and dating back to as early as 1645 in the state of Alagoas, Palmares was a fully-functioning town with over 200 houses, being compared by some as “a Negro republic and compared to Haiti” (Bastide 87). With tribal laws for

such crimes as rape, homicide and adultery, Palmares was a return to Africa within Brazil.

Speaking to the African tribal laws that governed Palmares, as well as the Quilombo itself in his organizational makeup, Bastide comments it was “a phenomenon of cultural resistance, of “tribal regression” – an effort by Africans to combat the disintegration of their ancient customs by reviving the old Bantu systems” (89). The same customs, languages and religions that the slave masters criticized and prohibited were revived in the new diasporic communities on the Quilombos. Spirituality was also a significant factor on the Quilombos as, according to Bastide, “resistance to the white man was as much religious as social” (90). Citing one particular Quilombo in Mato Grosso in the eighteenth century, Bastide points out that “the chosen leader was a black woman. The only plausible reason for this is a religious one: women were supposed to have special magical qualities because they were more susceptible to mystical ecstasy than men” (93). This point is interesting, in that it speaks directly to the idea of the “divine woman” of the African Diaspora that I explore in chapter six of this study. Likewise, I note that the fugitive slave communities are themes that appear in other works such as *La isla bajo el mar* and *Um defeito de Cor*.

Continuing with the communal and ancestral importance on the Quilombos, I highlight that it is through the presence and influence of the ancestors in the text and their memories passed down to the other characters that a meaning connection is established between the characters of African descent and their “roots”. Returning to the ideas of Alexander, we observe that the yearning for wholeness is both psychological and physical for:

Since colonization has produced fragmentation and dismemberment at both the material and psychic levels, the work of decolonization has to make room for the deep yearning for wholeness, often expressed as a yearning to belong, a yearning that is both material and existential, both psychic and physical, and which, when satisfied, can subvert and ultimately displace the pain of dismemberment. (281)

We see that by achieving wholeness, the pain of dismemberment brought about by the colonial experience can be displaced. It is interesting that Alexander does not choose the word “erase” in this context, as one would imagine that by achieving wholeness an individual would in effect erase the pain of fragmentation. This, according to Alexander, is not the case. The pain is not erased, but is “subverted” and “displaced”. This selective displacement brings to mind Morrison’s selective act of “rememory”, in that both involve a psychological healing while never forgetting the past, no matter how terrible the memory of the same.

Reverting to the concept of rootedness in the interaction between humans and the ancestors as a source of a collective history, we note how ancestral knowledge for the African slaves serves as a temporal and historic bridge between the present and far-removed times deeply rooted in the homeland of Africa. We point out that the same ideas would be true if we were to consider the possibility of the slaves being from another country or region of the world. In the same manner in which the representation of the past plays an important role in the reconstruction of a fragmented identity, we cannot fail to mention the importance of memory in the reconstruction of a personal and collective history. According to Bastide, besides seeking a reason for the retaining and forgetting of

certain events, the study of collective memory must include, “an explanation of the metamorphosis of collective memories. Among the most important of these are changes in the personae of the gods, for these are always carried along in the stream of group consciousness (250-51). As previously mentioned in this study, the Orishas that survived the Crossing suffered, in the words of Raboteau, “a sea change”. Although carried in the collective memory, the ideas about and feelings towards the Orishas changed or metamorphosized depending upon such factors as region and local conditions, amongst others.

When we consider the cyclical time of storytelling process, we also not a cyclical time inherent to African spiritual beliefs. Alexander points out the timeless nature of spirituality and affirms that the spiritual myths and beliefs rooted in the memory of the Africans reincarnated in the foreign land when the enslaved individuals disembarked in The Americas: “Housed in the memory of those enslaved, yet not circumscribed by it, these Sacred energies made the Crossing. But they did not require the Crossing in order to express beingness. They required embodied beings and all things to come into sentience, but they did not require the Crossing” (292-93). The Orishas arrived in the Americas with the Africans and served to, along with the ancestors and the elderly members of the community, to bring a sense of rootedness and knowledge to the enslaved Africans and their descendants whose identities were fragmented shadows of what they used to be prior to the Middle Passage.

As previously stated in this study, many of the Orishas were lost in the waters of the crossing from Africa to the New World. Chosen by the elders as a form of resistance and coping mechanism with which to face the particular historical moment in which they

found themselves as enslaved individuals, only the Orishas of greatest importance to the new lives of the Africans and their descendants in the Americas survived and came to be venerated in the new environment. The Traditional African Religions were gradually converted, through syncretic processes, into new religious forms in the New World, based on the specific cultural, social and political environment of each country into which they were taken. Although many of the syncretic religious systems developed in secrecy shrouded beneath the disguise of Catholic saints, Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert point out that, “they nonetheless allowed the most oppressed sectors of colonial Caribbean societies to manifest their spirituality, express cultural and political practices suppressed by colonial force, and protect the health of the community” (*Creole Religions of the Caribbean* 2). The cultural context within which each African Diaspora Religion developed played an integral role in its molding and creation.

In addition to creating syncretic religious systems, the African beliefs that arrived in the New World offered a bridge or connection between the enslaved Africans in diaspora and their abandoned homelands and overseas communities. As previously discussed, the new African diaspora religions serve as structures of rootedness that are based in both individual and collective memory, as well as ancestral ties. According to Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, “Memories are embodied, inscribed in our flesh transgenerationally through the notion of technique...People, and particularly women, embody whole spiritual systems and the powers of re-generation” (6). We intend to explore the idea of embodied memories and spiritual embodiment in Chapter 6 of this study through an analysis of characters who are both spiritual mediums, and who carry the scars of memory literally on their bodies.

In considering the subaltern position occupied by the enslaved African within the new patriarchal society, I intend to look towards not just the present, but also rather the past in order to try to understand the trauma from having been forcibly taken from the country of origin and how this effects the formation of fragmentation. It becomes increasingly clearer to us that these individuals seek to give meaning or, in the words of Toni Morrison, “rootedness” to their new existence.

The new communities built by Africans in the New World served as intertwining forces that contributed to the cultural and social restoration of the Africans and their descendants as pockets of resistance throughout the history of Brazil. These diasporic communities began on the plantations during the years of slavery, and spread throughout the 18th Century on the Quilombos, migrating to the Candomblé terreiros, and ultimately took root in the slums in the first part of the 20th Century. According to Elisa Larkin Nascimento: “A *identidade de resistência*...é criada por atores pertencentes a grupos desvalorizados ou estigmatizados pela lógica da dominação. Construindo trincheiras de resistência a partir de valores distintos ou mesmo opostos aos que permeiam as instituições da sociedade, formam *comunas* ou *comunidades*” (40). The same communal forces or pockets of resistance can be pointed out in the United States with the Underground Railway, as well as in the Caribbean in Haiti with the slave revolts.

The ancestral quest, as well as belonging to a community, provides the subject, devastated by the institution of slavery, a way in which to not only “find her/himself”, but also to “re-find her/himself” with the stories of her or his family and the collective history of the ancestors. Ancestors, therefore, provide the fragmented subject with a past that includes events that have been frequently omitted or forgotten by the Colonizing versions

of History from one century to the next in the Americas. The ability to “give voice” to the experiences of the ancestors is something of utmost historical importance when we consider the social conditions under which the enslaved Africans were forcibly maintained during three centuries.

The power of the word expressed through the act of telling and retelling of ancestral stories provides the Africans and their descendants with agency through which they are able to create self-definitions and clarify ties to a greater community. We intend to explore the importance of myths and the passing down of (her) stories in the context of the African Diaspora. In Chapter 6 of this study, I will study the figure of the *Griot*, or African Storyteller, and storytelling itself as both a memorial and healing act for the protagonists in *Daughters of the Stone*.

Intertwined Root Theories

The Caribbean is a land of taking root and wandering.
- Edouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation*

Using Toni Morrison’s concept of rootedness and ancestral knowledge as a theoretical springboard, I explore the way in which the theories of Jacqui Alexander, as well as Édouard Glissant’s concept of abyssal rooting and fibrils in *Poetics of Relation*, represent processes of crossing, dislocation and cultural belonging within the African diaspora. Grounded in these theories, I analyze the main works selected for this chapter, which depict or problematize these complex processes experienced by the protagonists throughout the course of the narrative. Building on the arborescent theories of rootedness, I suggest that the sacred African baobab tree can be viewed as emblematic of both the

condition of Africans in diaspora, as well as the various African Diaspora Religions that blossomed out of the cultural dispersion of Africans throughout the Americas.

Turning once more to the thoughts of Aimé Césaire in *Discourse on Colonialism*, the poet speaks to the dislocation and uprooting of Africans during the centuries of colonial rule and slave trade:

Millions of men torn from their gods, their land, their habits, their life –
from life, from the dance, from wisdom...the value of our old societies.
They were communal societies, never societies of the many for the
few...They were cooperative societies, fraternal societies. (43–44)

The main point made here by Césaire regarding the cooperative and communal nature of traditional African life and how it was destroyed during the dislocation of Africans to the Americas is of particular significance when considering manifestations such as the fugitive slave communities that arose throughout the Americas as places of resistance and wholeness for the diasporic communities.

Echoing to a certain degree the ideas of Morrison on the importance ancestors, and looking to the past in order to construct a new diasporic future, Césaire affirms, “It is a new society that we must create, with the help of all our brother slaves, a society rich with all the productive power of modern times, warm with all the fraternity of olden days” (52). However, what “fraternity of olden days” referenced by Césaire would enable individuals within the African diaspora to create a new society? What part of the past lives of the uprooted individuals could serve to cement the new communal bonds forged in diasporic conditions? The binding link between the African past and the hybrid communities that sprouted throughout the Americas during the centuries of slave trade, as

well as in the decades and centuries that followed abolition in each of the countries was undoubtedly spirituality. Remembering Alexander's words on mapping individual and collective relationships to the Divine, we begin to note how the sacred functioned as both a gateway to ancestral knowledge, as well as a path along which to join the numerous enslaved tribes or clans into cohesive communities based on shared sacred beliefs.

In considering the relation and relationships that developed out of the new diasporic communities and the search for "roots" for both individual and collective identity, I turn to the ideas of Édouard Glissant. In the first section of his work *Poetics of Relation* entitled "Approaches," Glissant presents his concept of abyssal roots and wholeness. Initiating his discussion with the text "The Open Boat", the poet affirms: "The first dark shadow was cast by being wrenched from their everyday, familiar land, away from protecting gods and a tutelary community" (5). In this one sentence, we observe the use of three key elements by Glissant that have been cited repeatedly in this study: land, spirituality, and community. This tripartite construction appears as being the cornerstone for the reconstruction of new collective communities in a diasporic setting. Glissant presents a visual representation of the Slave Trade, which he denominates "fibril". The poet uses this "fibril" or rhizome-like "creature" to represent the connections between past and future, as well as African roots and African Diasporic communities.

The "abyss" to which Glissant refers is also tripartite in nature. It is the belly of the ship that carried enslaved Africans to the Americas, the depths of the Atlantic Ocean in which thousands of Africans periled during the treacherous crossing, and the "blue savannas of memory or imagination" of everything that has been left behind in the homeland and that can never be regained. The poet first depicts the abyss of the crossing:

“Experience of the abyss lies inside and outside the abyss. The torment of those who never escaped it: straight from the belly of the slave ship into the violet belly of the ocean depths they went” (7). Many fictional and non-fictional works alike have documented the horrors endured at sea and the despair of the enslaved travelers who, sometimes of their own free will and more often not, traded the darkness of the slave ship for the darkness of the waters of the Atlantic.

Glissant continues his description of the crossing and feelings of dislocation suffered by those who survived the first abyss affirming:

But their ordeal did not die; it quickened into this continuous/discontinuous thing: the pain of the new land, the haunting of the former land, finally the alliance with the imposed land, suffered and redeemed. The unconscious memory of the abyss served as the alluvium for these metamorphoses. (7)

We note how the processes or metamorphoses undergone by the individuals gain substance thanks to the act of memory or rememory of the traumatic experience of the crossing.

Ultimately, though, for Glissant, the abyss and survival of the abyss constitutes knowledge: “Thus, the absolute unknown, projected by the abyss and bearing into eternity the womb abyss and the infinite abyss, in the end became...knowledge of the Whole, greater from having been at the abyss and freeing knowledge of Relation within the Whole” (8). The image of the abyssal “belly” of the slave ship and of the depths of the ocean during the middle passage used by Glissant as parts of knowledge of the whole are also depicted by Puerto Rican author Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro in *Las negras*. In the

narrative trilogy that I have chosen to include as an additional text in this chapter, the author pays homage to African women and the horrors they endured during the institution of slavery. In the first section entitled “Wanwe”, the narrator portrays the memory of the slave ship and crossing: “El primer recuerdo pudiera ser el barco. Una barriga de maderos unidos y flotantes a quienes los suyos llaman *owba coocoo*” (25).

In a horrific scene, the narrator of *Las negras* recounts the moment in which one of the women who had attempted to escape from the slave ship is punished by being tied upside down and thrown into the dark waters of the Atlantic. The ocean “swallows” her while she is simultaneously eaten alive by the sharks in a terrifying exemplification of the depths of human domination and cruelty. The protagonist Wanwe makes eye contact with her sister in suffering in a helpless act of solidarity and compassion: “*ojos míos con ojos suyos*” (58). We note the despair of the enslaved African women at being uprooted from their homelands when they believe their gods to have been left behind and that they have abandoned during the crossing:

Los seres ancestrales no las liberan. No hacen acto de presencia a pesar de haber sido convocados con todas las fuerzas...No hacen acto de presencia Orún, Olódùmarè, Bàbá, Ìyá ni las diosas que aún están en la Tierra, ni los verbos conjugados desde el cielo, ni los sabios del mar, ni las esencias ancestrales de culto. Olórun desaparece. Oníbodè desaparece. Ìbí, Ìyé, Àti, Ikú desaparecen...No más nacimiento, vida y muerte. Los miedos de todas ellas, hermanas, se reducen a esto: ¿Quién diseñará nuestro posible retorno? (55–56)

Turning once more to the ideas of Glissant, the poet speaks to the legitimacy of land possession and rootedness in the Caribbean, as well as the “relational interdependence” of all lands. According to Glissant: “The restrictive force of the sacred always tends to seek out the first occupants of a territory...The massacre of the Indians, uprooting the sacred, has already invalidated this futile search. Once that had happened, Antillean soil could not become a territory, but, rather, a rhizomed land” (146). It is only in the third part of Arroyo Pizarro’s narrative, “Saeta”, that we witness the presence of spirits and the connection of spiritual wholeness with the land and the community. It is the land and the spirits who reside in the same that culminate in a shared sense of community and act of resistance under the yoke of slavery.

Undergirding the ideas of Glissant on the search for Wholeness and identity is the relationship with the Other or, according to Glissant, from the “Poetics of Relation”. It is the relationship established among the various shoots that, from a perspective of rootedness, provides for a root-like structure without the “predatory rootstock...of a totalitarian root” (Glissant 11). The inter-connectedness and constant flow of energy among the various root-like elements creates a communal relation, which, while providing the basis for rootedness, is not overly controlling or “totalitarian”. Moreover, it is an intertwined support system that provides cohesiveness while concomitantly allowing for individual shoots and self-expression.

If we are to consider the ideas of French sociologist Émile Durkheim in his work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, we note how religion is the main form of social cohesiveness. The key point set forth by the theorist is that religious phenomena are directly related to social reality and, consequently, that the myths and religious practices

created by the society are collective in nature. Or, in the words of José Serverino Croatto, “...o fenômeno religioso é essencialmente comunitário e, portanto, repercute na sociedade como tal. É um contra-senso falar de religião individual. Mesmo as religiões místicas...são fatos sociais, aglutinam grupos e são partícipes de uma cosmovisão comunitário” (19). Speaking to the collective nature of worship, in his use of the totem or the totemic principle resulting from his studies of aboriginal practices in Australia, Durkheim posits that when the group collectively worships an object, the totem, it is in fact worshipping itself in that the object is created by the group. It is this self-worshipping that leads to the collective consciousness of the group and a communal identity, which revolves around the object and, in turn, the community itself.

In considering the deities of the Traditional African Religions, the totemic principal comes into play as they are deeply-rooted in the community and African society. As mythical “creations” that ultimately survived the Middle Passage in the imagination and memory of the millions of Africans who also survived the crossing, the Orishas served both as a pathway to the sacred and a cement with which to bind the disperse diasporic communities in the Americas. The sacred has served as the timeless answer to human trials and tribulations.

As commented by Croatto: “O ser humano soube ‘imaginar’, em todos os tempos, maneiras de superar suas limitações recorrendo ao sagrado: passar do *fragmentário* ao totalizador é um desejo essencial do *homo religiosus*” (46). This “imagining” of a larger group commented by Croatto lends itself to a comparison with the “Imagined Communities” posited by Benedict Anderson: “In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagine.

Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (49). Through worship of the totem or other totemic figures, the individual imagines not just her/himself, but also the larger community. In this sense, and echoing the previously stated ideas of Alexander, the sacred functions as the geographic link to mapping connections between individuals and communities.

In *O Peregrino e o Convertido: A Religião em Movimento*, French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger expounds upon the interconnectedness of memory, movement and the communal continuation of religious practices. According to Hervieu-Léger: “Em todas as sociedades, a continuidade é garantida sempre na e pela mudança. E essa mudança coloca inevitavelmente as novas gerações em oposição às antigas” (57). The sociologist affirms the need of a global repositioning of collective references, ruptures in memory and a reorganization of values that question the very fundamentals of social ties.

Specifically related to the focus of my study, I note how, for Hervieu-Léger, collective memory is intrinsically linked to the recreation and continuation of religious practices and traditions. As such, the present religious realities of the shoot-like African Diaspora Religions are the memorialistic fruit of the collective recollections of the roots of the traditional African religions. Hervieu-Léger affirms that practitioners form a religious “group” which maintains the faith through acts of rememory and constant reinterpretation of the tradition based on present conditions. As such, according to the sociologist:

Essa contínua reelaboração da identidade religiosa coletiva se realiza, por excelência, nas atividades rituais que consistem em fazer memória (*anamnese*) daquele passado que dá um sentido ao presente e contém o

futuro...Na medida em que a transmissão se confunde com o processo de elaboração dessa ‘corrente da memória’ a partir da qual um grupo crente se realiza como grupo religioso, a transmissão é o próprio movimento pelo qual a religião se constitui como religião através do tempo. (Hervieu-Léger 61-62)

Using the ideas of Hervieu-Léger as a theoretical springboard, we now delve into the interrelatedness of memory and group transmission in sustaining a religion. Given the focus of our study, we question what could be more fitting to illustrate “rootedness” with regards to African Diaspora Religions than the traditional African baobab tree or, as it is often called, “The Tree of Life”. This tree perhaps more than any other element, symbolizes the concept of rootedness in the African diaspora. Besides being of utmost importance in the African society due to its ability to store water in its huge, hollow trunk during the rainy season to produce fruit during the dry season, the baobab tree is also a sacred tree for Africans. Many creational myths tell of the origins of this sacred tree that has, according to legend, its head stuck in the ground and its roots pointed towards the heavens.

In the Traditional African Belief system, with its immense trunk and root-like branches, the baobab tree reaches high into the sky and serve as a resting place for both birds and spirits. Likewise, it is thought that if an ancestor is buried within the hollow baobab trunk, her/his soul will live for as many years as the tree itself. This particular legend is intriguing, as it positions the tree as both the source of spiritual rootedness, as well as a timeless bond between man, the sacred and the land or physical location.



Figure 1. African Baobab Tree.

For the purposes of our study, we focus on the point that the “upside down roots” of the traditional baobab tree are a grounding connection between man and the heavens. Once again, we note the significance of the relationship between the sacred and the secular. It is only fitting in the case of Africans in diasporic conditions that the search for “rootedness” comes through spirituality. As such, building on the arborescent and rhizomatic theories previously presented in this section of the chapter, we posit that in the “upside down” situation in which enslaved Africans found themselves in The Americas, the grounding or rootedness appeared in the form of spiritual connections and bonds formed within the various diasporic communities. Like the many root-like branches of the baobab tree, the endless connections formed amongst the various enslaved peoples looked to Africa as a spiritual guiding post or trunk, but the rootedness itself and cultural fruits that blossomed in the New World took place in the intertwined connections of the skyward reaching upside-down roots.

Negotiations of Diaspora: A Literary Selection

To elaborate on my analysis of crossing and the way in which the representation of African Diasporic Religions can be viewed as a wider negotiation of these processes, in addition to the main texts of my study, I have chosen to include two other literary works in this chapter that encompass and exemplify these processes: *The Spirits Dance Mambo* by Marta Moreno Vega and *Changó, el gran putas* by Manuel Zapata Olivella. This last text is particularly unique in that it brings the voices of the Orishas into the narrative. However, much like the other main literary works interweaves historical events with fiction to create a meta-historical narrative of the African arrival and presence in the Americas.

A text that we highlight to exemplify the importance of community in the African Diaspora is one of the main works of our study, *Daughters of the Stone* by Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa. As previously presented in chapter two, the novel encompasses five generations of women of African descent from the arrival of the first protagonist, Fela, in the Caribbean in the middle of the nineteenth century, until the journey undertaken by Carisa to Africa in the symbolic search for closure or return to ancestral roots, which began with the enslaving of her great-grandmother, Fela. In an attempt to draw attention to the histories told from a woman's point of view, we intend to explore the "herstories" that connect the women of the novel, as well as the interpersonal relationships of the various generations in Chapter 6.

We draw attention the representation of community in the *batey*, or slave quarters, on the plantation in Puerto Rico, in the words of the wise, elderly figure of Tia Josefa talking with Fela. When Fela arrives at the sugar cane plantation *Hacienda Las Mercedes*

in Puerto Rico, she adopts a cold attitude towards *Tia* and the other slaves as a defense mechanism. In response, *Tia Josefa* tells Fela: “Here there is no living alone. All we have is each other...This is your new village and we are your people. Here, too, we work together. We all have stories...We’re all part of each other’s pain and can be a part of each other’s healing, too (19). This last point, with regards to the destruction of family and the social structures of millions of Africans who arrived in the Americas and the importance of creating new roots in the makeshift communities comprised of Africans and their descendants on the plantations, leads us to question the processes of dislocation and rootedness; both of which are products of the crossing or *Middle Passage*.

The waters that brought Africans to the Americas are not merely the fluvial paths over which they arrived in the continent. They are the source of life and, as was the case of many Africans who died or were killed during the crossing, of death. Nonetheless, according to Alexander, more than anything, water is a spiritual and memorial conduit: “Water overflows with memory. Emotional Memory. Bodily Memory. Sacred Memory. Crossings are never undertaken all at once and never once and for all” (Alexander 290).

Due to the strong symbolism and importance of water in the African world vision and during the centuries that the slave ships carried human cargo from Africa to the Americas, it is not surprising that water holds a prominent position in the literary works whose storylines share a connection with the beliefs of African descendants and the theme of slavery. Of the literary works chosen for analysis in this study, I cite merely a few of the examples of texts within which water represents a connection with these very themes: *Daughters of the Stone*, *La isla bajo el mar*, *Um defeito de cor* and *Changó, el gran putas*. In each of these works, water and the theme of crossing can be considered a

separate character that leads the other main characters on journeys throughout the narrative in search of their own conception of wholeness.

In the first part of *Daughters of the Stone*, in addition to being responsible for the crossing of Fela from Africa to Puerto Rico, water plays an even more significant role in the life of the main character. In the novel, the river is the personification of the African spirituality and the goddess Oshun. At a highpoint in the narrative, Fela goes to the river to give birth alone in the dark of night within the waters of the river. Due to a spiritual “promise” made to Oshun while still in African with her husband Imo, Fela gives birth to a beautiful baby girl, but is forced to give herself up to the power of Oshun, the goddess of fresh waters, and the raging waters.

When Mati is born and Fela stares into her daughter’s eyes, “the baby was watching her with the eyes of an old soul. They stared at each other for a flash of a second before the child went back to being a newborn baby” (*Daughters* 56). The spiritual presence of the ancestors in the eyes of the newborn speaks to both Fela’s connection with the homeland, as well as a foreshadowing of her own death. Fela hears the voice of Oshun telling her that “It is time” (*Daughters* 56), and tries to negotiate with the goddess replying that “Not yet. Please, not yet...I need more...I’m sorry...It was my fault they were all taken...I know it...atonement...but not yet...not this” (*Daughters* 57). The same water that gives life to Fela’s newborn daughter, Mati, in an instant takes the life of Fela in a show of force of both Mother Nature and the waters. In the narrative, Fela ponders: “She thought about that other night, near that other river...The lapping water became more agitated...She heard the message in the rushing water...The river current became violent...rushing toward her and her child” (57). Fela’s comments to Oshun

affirming that she understands and accepts the responsibility for what happened to the people of her village dialogue with Alexander's ideas about emotional and sacred memory that is a process not a one-time crossing.

Water appears not merely as part of the title in *La isla bajo el mar* (2009) by Isabel Allende, but also throughout the narrative as the personification of the connection with the African ancestors. The backdrop of the work is the eighteenth century in the Caribbean Islands and the wars of independence of the slaves that were simultaneously occurring during this same historical moment, and the South of the United States during the nineteenth century. The narrative unfurls in a binary manner, dialoguing between the "official" history of the narrator and the memories and lived experiences narrated in chapters by the main character Zarité interwoven into the main narrative, an enslaved African woman from Guinea. Music, drums and spiritual beliefs that arrived in the islands of the Caribbean serve to root the protagonist in her place of origin overseas, and to confront the cruel reality of her life as a slave within a new and faraway society. The protagonist comments:

La música es un viento que se lleva los años, los recuerdos y el temor...me endulza la memoria...el ritmo nace en la isla bajo el mar...los tambores son la herencia de mi madre, la fuerza de Guinea está en mi sangre...Nadie puede conmigo, entonces, me vuelvo arrolladora como Erzuli, *loa* del amor, y más veloz que el látigo...los tambores son sagrados, a través de ellos hablan los *loas*...llevaba los sonidos en el cuerpo, los había traído de Dahomey. (9-10)

In *Changó, el gran putas* by Colombian author Manuel Zapata Olivella, the significance of water can be noted from the onset of the narrative. In the very first few pages of the novel, the reader faces a historical text yet mythological, within which the Muntu people during the sixteenth century is condemned to exile out of African soil, taken in slave ships to the New World. In the first ode, the narrator invokes the ancestors to give life to his words: “Ancestros / sombras de mis mayores / sombras que tenéis la suerte de conversar con los Orichas / acompañadme con vuestras voces tambores, quiero dar vida a mis palabras” (43-44). This invocation of the ancestral spirits and vibrant orality present in Olivella’s work dialogues with the orality and storytelling also found in *Daughters of the Stone*, which will be explored in detail in the next chapter.

In Olivella’s work, *Changó, el gran putas*, the voices of the Orishas intertwine with that of the narrator in order to foretell future events which, read from a modern-day perspective, serve as bitter reminders of the Middle Passage. Antonio Tillis presents a postmodernist reading of the novel, commenting that:

Changó is a novel that is self-reflexive in that the work represents a palimpsest of “fictions” that have a defined historical base. As a postmodern text, *Changó* de-centers, disrupts and de-mythifies Eurocentric accounts of the literary representations presented in the work while focusing attention on the fictionalization of actual social, political and historical realities in an “Africanized” context”. (171)

Recalling concepts of African time previously expounded in this study, as readers, we note the otherworldly and timeless aspect of the work, which is intrinsic to and

inherent of the African cosmology within which past, present and future time is connected through the presence of the ancestors:

El oricha sentó frente a él. Pone sobre el suelo su sonaja y allí donde la apoyaba, arde una llama. “Vengo a decirte que te alistes para la partida. Vendrá la gran nave en donde se confundirán todas las sangres. Estarán unidas aunque las separen las lenguas y las cadenas. En mitad del mar nacerá el nuevo hijo del muntu y en la nueva tierra será amamantado por la leche de madres desconocidas. (*Changó* 91-92)

In a similar manner to the way in which we previously cited in *Daughters of the Stone*, the power of the community in the life of the Africans and their descendants in the New World is highlighted in the historical fiction novel *La isla bajo el mar* by Isabel Allende. In the second part of the novel, Zarité is taken by her master to begin a new life in Louisiana in the United States. She begins to live amongst other enslaved Africans from new and different countries of origin, which was in stark contrast to the communities with which she was familiar on the former plantation in the Caribbean:

Había casi doscientos esclavos, algunos provenientes de África o las Antillas, pero la mayoría nacidos en Luisiana, unidos por la necesidad de apoyarse y la desgracia de pertenecer a otro...Era una sociedad jerárquica...Las abuelas mandaban, pero el de más autoridad era el predicador...dirigía los cantos religiosos...citaba parábolas de santos de su invención y servía de árbitro en las disputas, porque nadie quería ventilar sus problemas fuera de la comunidad. (*La isla bajo el mar* 334-335)

The syncretic storytelling and religious songs mentioned above speak to the commonal retelling and reinventing of traditional African and Catholic beliefs. The fact that las abuelas cited stories relating to the saints “of their own invention” leads to the understanding of the syncretic nature of religion throughout the diasporic communities of the Americas.

In addition to the importance of community in the life of the protagonist in *La isla bajo el mar*, the themes of memory and history are ones that occupy a prominent position within the narrative. Memory appears in the histories of many of the characters in the work such as, for example, in the narrative on Zarité’s romantic partner, Gambo. In one of her dialogues, Zarité comments on Gambo’s memories from the crossing on the slave ship. It is through the technique of orality that not only do tragic images from the Middle Passage come through in the narrative, but also those of water and the place which is referenced in the very title of the work, the island beneath the sea. Reminiscent of the previously cited scene in *Las negras*, as well as the ideas of Glissant on abyssal rootedness, the middle passage scene in *La isla bajo el mar* speaks to the horrors of the crossing:

No supo cuánto tempo estuvo allí...ni cuántos murieron, porque nadie tenía nombre y nadie llevaba la cuenta...Después vino lo peor, lo que él no quería recordar, pero volvía a vivirlo en los sueños: el barco...los marineros lanzaban por la borda a los muertos y los enfermos, después escogían a algunos cautivos y los azotaban por diversión...Buscó la oportunidad de lanzarse por la borda, pensando que después del festín de los tiburones que siguieron al barco desde el África hasta las Antillas, su

alma iría nadando a la isla bajo el mar a reunirse con su padre y el resto de su familia. (140)

Once more, we observe the importance of spirituality and location as they relate to the diasporic community and connectedness; thus forming a haunting embodiment of memory for those who were able to survive the abyss of the crossing.

The historical figure of François Mackandal, who is the main focal point of the renowned novel *El reino de este mundo* by the Cuban author Alejo Carpentier, pervades the narrative and has an important connection with Gambo in *La isla bajo el mar*. Similarly, this historical figure appears in the third part of *Changó, el gran putas*, as do the African diaspora religion Vodou and the Orishas in a textural fusion of fiction, History and mythology. Mackandal, leader of the slave revolt in Saint-Domingue, is historically described as a *houngan* or Voodoo priest. In Zapata Olivella's work, Mackandal is presented as a figure who was predestined by the Orishas to lead the enslaved people of Haiti to their freedom: "...nuestro papaloo sabe que Changó lo ha nombrado emperador de Haití" (275). Mackandal also appears as the literary culmination of the rebellions that make up the History of the country of Saint-Domingue during the eighteenth century and the narratives of the characters in Allende's work.

In Zapata Olivella's *Changó, el gran putas*, other historical figures and moments are portrayed through the recourses of memory, ancestral voices and the Orishas. The work spans from the sixteenth century and the first embarkations of enslaved Africans, through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the wars for Independence and liberty, up until the first decades of twentieth century with the struggles for racial equality. We observe, for example, in the fourth part of *Changó, el gran putas* a narrative

on Simón Bolívar through the “memoria del olvido”. Narrating from the otherworldly realm of the dead, the deceased narrator offers the reader a beyond-the-grave vision, which is very much influenced by the spirits, and Orishas that inhabit the region. In the second half of the fourth section of the novel, the historical narrative transports us to the state of Minas Gerais in Brazil during the *Inconfidência Mineira* of 1789, and we are presented with the historical figure of African descent, El Aleijadinho.

Continuing with the representation of historical moments within the work, we cite the fifth section of *Changó, el gran putas* with its innumerable references of utmost importance to the Black Civil Rights movements of the twentieth century. In this part of the novel, entitled “Los Ancestros Combatientes”, the themes of memory and rememory take on an important role in the narrative. The narrator affirms: “Lo que rememoro ahora con toda claridad me explicará lo que me perturbó toda la vida” (445). The concept of “rememorar” takes us back to the ideas of Toni Morrison previously cited in chapter four of this study on “rememory” as the conscious filling in the gaps with fragments of memory in an attempt to achieve wholeness or to overcome a certain traumatic event in the past. As such, rememory serves to lead an individual on an interior journey that fuses time and place in a personal reconstruction of past events.

In the fourth part of *Changó, el gran putas*, the narrator, Zaka, who claims to be the first African ancestor to have been buried in the land of “profundos rios” of the character Agnes Scott, invites the reader to listen to his story about the *ekobios*, or descendents of Changó in exile, who disembarked in the Carolina sea islands. The narrator affirms: “Ancianos ekobios que han perdido la memoria se acercan a los barcos y preguntaban sobre la tierra que no volverán a ver, alejándose sin escuchar la respuesta”

(453). Still in the same section, Agnes Scott points out a search to “recuperar la memoria real” and further affirms: “todo cuanto recuerdo no es más que la memoria prestada”

(457). According to this idea of borrowing memories in a personal search for identity, the ancestors are the ones who provide knowledge to and guide the character.

Turning our focus back to Allende’s work, the importance of memory appears in Zarité’s testimonials in the chapters narrated in the first person. In addition to her own memories and thoughts on events that comprise the present, Zarité offers information about recollections of other characters, such as in the previous quote on Gambo.

Likewise, she proves herself to be a reliable narrator through phrases at the end of each chapter such as “tengo buena memoria”, “así lo recuerdo”, “así fue”, “así era” and, at the end of the last chapter narrated by the protagonist, “así es”. The chapters narrated in the first person by Zarité and her memories connect past and present events through which the protagonist attempts to create a new meaning for both herself and the greater diasporic community to which she belongs under the dark cloak of slavery.

The Spirits Dance Mambo: A Double Diaspora

The final section of our chapter on crossing, dislocation and rootedness in the African Diaspora focuses on spirituality as it relates to the double diaspora portrayed in *The Spirits Dance Mambo* by Marta Moreno Vega. In this work, we note the manner in which traditional African religion underwent a first diasporic crossing from Africa to various countries of the Caribbean, and a subsequent second diasporic crossing from the Caribbean into the United States. After both crossings, the religion undergoes certain changes to fit the new cultural and social settings into which the diasporic communities

have transported it. I had the opportunity to conduct a personal interview with the author of *The Spirits Dance Mambo* and the spiritual memoir, *The Altar of My Soul*, Dr. Marta Moreno Vega. The points raised and analyzed in this section of the chapter regarding both works, as well as the continuation of these ideas in chapter 5 of this study, are fruit of the author's thoughts on and responses to the questions raised on the same.

As presented in the first chapter of this study, diaspora refers to the dispersion of groups of humans who abandon their places of origin. Generally speaking, this abandonment is an unwanted or forced one, in which these individuals restart their lives in countries and makeshift communities far from their homelands and age-old cultural traditions. Recalling the words of Homi Bhabha on the precarious and curious position of living a life as neither one thing, nor the other, we note: "...the hybrid moment outside the sentence – not quite experience, not yet concept; part dream, part analysis; neither signifier nor signified" (181). The possibility of people in diaspora as being "almost" being one thing, but not fully an integral part of either of the two parts. It suggests that the diasporic individual is constantly lacking in something that they are unable to attain in their diasporic condition.

Continuing with the idea of a "double-diaspora", Santería is a religion that, after undoing the syncretic amalgamation of elements of Spiritism, Catholicism and Traditional African Religion, underwent another diasporic change upon arriving in the United States along with the various ethnicities and nationalities of Caribbean immigrants migrating to the country. Recalling the words of Cuban American journalist and writer Achy Obejas in *Days of Awe* on the need of translating not just languages when moving from one country to another, but also culture and religion, we note: "I think immigrants

and, particularly, exiles are always translating, not just language but culture and circumstance” (Obejas 375). In some cases, these cultural “translations” are more fluid. Other times, the diasporic individual is left with the feeling that something “got lost” in the cultural translation or diasporic process.

Santería and the religion of the Orishas are represented *When the Spirits Dance Mambo* through music, spiritual practices and rituals and the worship of the Orishas that comprise the spiritual belief of the family. On a number of occasions, Moreno Vega makes reference to the Orishas in her work such as, for example, Shangó, Yemaya, Elegguá and Oshún: “songs to Yemayá, the sea goddess; Eleguá, the god of the crossroads; and Ochun, the goddess of love filled Abuela’s apartment” (*Spirits* 9). Even though the narrator receives communication through her grandmother about who her spirit guides are, we do not witness a direct and continuous presence throughout the narrative of any one Orisha in particular as having a direct presence on the characters such as in Llanos-Figueroa’s work, for example. We also note how the Orishas serve as a cultural and social identifying factor within the neighborhood, as well as in the country of origin of the family.

The influence of spirituality in *When the Spirits Dance Mambo* can be noted from the very title of the book. The reader immediately questions who the spirits are and why are they carrying out such a mundane and human activity such as dancing mambo. On the first page of the novel, the author initiates the narrative with an epigraph referencing one of the most important Orishas within the Santería belief: Shangó. The author refers to placing red roses on an altar to worship this African deity: “Yo traigo mis flores acabaditos de cortar de varios colores mis flores para tu altar: príncipes de pura sangre

para Changó” (Vega 1). Then, through the syncopated words of the narrative, we can actually hear the beat in the diasporic representation of the sacred African drums described by the author: “Listen to your heart and to the *ta-ta-ta, ta-ta* of the *clave*... Know that if you do not move to the beat, you will burst. That’s mambo” (Vega 1). From the onset of the narrative, the author establishes a strong connection between music (mambo) and religion/spirituality (the Orishas), and the importance of the two in her own life. Music and the rhythm of the African drums are a representation of the most sacred and intimate aspect of human nature.

Shangó is one of the most popular deities of the Yoruba Orishas. In African belief, he is the symbol of power, war, masculinity, and strength. He is the Orisha of drums and dance, of masculine virility and bodily pleasures. He was the original owner of the *Opón Ifá* (Ifá divination board) before selling it in order to buy Orumila’s drums. A polar opposite to Oshun, who personifies all of the phases of female life, Shangó is the essence of masculinity. His *patakis* or myths tell of his love of woman, and excessive drinking and merrymaking. In the Americas, Shangó was syncretized as the Catholic Saint Barbara. In the opening pages of the work, we note various references to this particular Orisha and the distant spiritual connections with Africa:

And my grandmother, cleaning her alter to the spirits of our ancestors, played songs to the gods and goddesses... In Abuela’s world, our hearts beat to the drum of the thunder god, Changó... Behind the front door, a red candle for the African warrior gods also stayed lit, protecting her home... Abuela adored Celina’s song for Changó, the divinity who, in

ancient times, was king of a place even farther away...Oyo in West Africa.
(*Spirits* 2-9)

The author affirms that, while observing her grandmother performing her spiritual rituals, she remembered the deceased members of her family now in the spirit world, and worshipped the Orishas. By observing her grandmother's actions, the author begins to form an idea and clear identity of both who she is in her diasporic condition and her ancestral roots. We note how spirituality becomes an integral part of her identity. At one point in the narrative, after witnessing the spirit of Juango manifested in her medium grandmother, the author tries to deny the influence of the Orishas in her life and over her future or destiny, stating: "What did the spirits know? I wanted to determine my own path" (*Spirits* 199).

This particular quote highlights the strength of the Orishas in the life of the main character. We also note that, as African descendants and practitioners of an African diaspora religion, that within the life of the women in the work, turning once more to the words of John Mbiti, "The invisible world presses hard upon the visible: one speaks to the other, the African peoples 'see' that invisible universe when they look at, hear or feel the visible and tangible world...The physical and spiritual are but two dimensions of one and the same universe" (73-74). The spiritual rituals performed by *Abuela* in Moreno Vega's novel speak to the importance of ancestral experience within the life of the family and greater diasporic community in the passing down of spiritual traditions.

The theme of destiny in *When the Spirits Dance Mambo* is depicted in the narrator's comments on and attitude towards deciding to change her life and not become "just another" immigrant girl in *El Barrio*: "Whatever happened, I vowed not to let others

determine my future” (199). She observes the other people in her family following the same path as so many other Puerto Rican immigrants *El Barrio*: leading lives in which education played no role and survival on a week-to-week basis meant working hard in low-paying, futureless jobs. She realizes, through the intervention of her grandmother’s spiritual practices, that art is the doorway to a better future: “I began to feel how much the power of creativity mattered. If I were a creative person, I might matter in the world. I understood the love my brother and *Abuela* had for this music, how essential it was to the soul, how it made my soul come alive. I, too, would be an artist” (247).

African diaspora religion or African diasporic spirituality is a factor of cultural and social identity within *When the Spirits Dance Mambo* for both the narrator and many other people who comprise the extended Nuyorican family within *El Barrio*. As such, it becomes impossible to separate religion from the society and the lives that the people of the community as, echoing the previously cited concepts of Durkheim, religion is society itself and the ritualistic practices serve as the cohesive glue which binds the members of the same.

The interconnectedness of religion and society is visibly present in the narrator’s comments about the images of the saints in her grandmother’s apartment, and how she compares them with other people who make up the extended diasporic family within the neighborhood: “Abuela’s sacred room was covered by large murals of Catholic saints. Shelves were filled with statues of Africans and Native Americans that came alive when she played the special music that called the power of the divinities. The statues looked to me like people in El Barrio – neighbors, friends, and family members” (*Spirits* 9). For Cotito, the everyday people of the neighborhood were converted into the Black deities

with invisible powers and brighten the restricted space of the economically challenged neighborhood in which the Puerto Rican immigrants lived. The sacred and the profane intermingle in the lives of the people who make up Cotito's world, and keep the diasporic Afro-Cuban and African religions alive for the members of the community.

In *When the Spirits Dance Mambo*, Moreno Vega uses her own childhood memories of her family and *El Barrio*, and her work and leisure time activities to paint the image of a "typical" Nuyorican family. African diaspora religion and contact with the realm of the spirits are juxtaposed with the visible mundane elements of life such as her father's job and her mother's life as a stay-at-home mom. In grandmother's world, however, she is transported to far-removed extemporal time and place. The Orishas appear as an invisible force or spirit, but at the same time are very present in both her and *Abuela's* life. Such that, the spirits have a significant impact on Cotito's personality. According to *Abuela*, spirit is, "what makes you see, feel, taste, and understand more (...) it is the intangible, what you don't see, that is spirit. But you know it is there" (*Spirits* 257).

Music is another theme that weighs heavily in the narrative, and serves as a connection between the visible world of the people in *El Barrio*, and the invisible spirit realm of the African ancestors. In *When the Spirits Dance Mambo*, through rememory music serves to connect the characters with their ancestors and to create a new reality in the diasporic community of *El Barrio*. The religious experience can be invoked many times through elements of nature, ritual practices, and music. In the novel, music is present throughout the narrative, with numerous references to renowned mambo singers such as Celia Cruz, Tito Puente, Machito, Graciela, Tito Rodriguez and Ramito. The

Orishas appear intertwined in the lyrics of the songs sung by the great mambo signers, and pervade both Cotito's life as well as that of her family through the songs that they listen to and that can be heard played daily in *El Barrio*.

The ancestral drums are present in the music in the form of merengue and mambo rhythms found in the narrative of *When the Spirits Dance Mambo*. The instruments connect the narrator in her new life and Nuyorican community with the culture of the country of origin of her family, and to the more remote rhythms of the Yoruba people in Africa. In the theatrical piece by Cuban playwright Carlos Felipe, *Tambores*, we encounter an image of the soul of the African drum and its role in the New World:

I am The Soul of the African Drum. My voice can sing out in various tones, from those of life to those of death. I will be the ancestral consolation to your children. Their sorrow will be eased by my beat. When the wise hands of a Black musician strike my drumhead, I will speak in words of life and hope, of joy and love to whoever will listen...I will go with your children across the sea, to the colonies, through the centuries.

They will find their salvation in me, Africa. (Lima 38)

Moreno Vega uses music as an artistic bridge between the spiritual and the secular worlds negotiated by her family as immigrants in New York, and their country of origin Puerto Rico. In his chapter "Crafting the Sacred Batá Drums" in *Afro-Cuban Voices: On Race and Identity in Contemporary Cuba*, Juan Benkomo comments on the religious and cultural significance of the sacred drums in the African Diaspora:

From various parts of West Africa, cargoes of Congo, Carabalí, Arará, Mandinga, and Lucumí slaves were brought to Cuba. They brought to the

Caribbean their language, religion, dance, music, and instruments to celebrate their beliefs and their traditional festivals. An early manifestation of African art in the Antilles was the crafting of those instruments by men skilled in their making. And the drum, more than any other of those musical instruments, became the collective, tellurian sound of a race determined not to disappear...The largest and main drum is the Iyá (the word for mother in Yoruba)...The Itótele, or medium drum...The Okónkolo, the smallest...According to Yoruba belief, there is an Orisha in all three, but especially Iyá. Therein lies its secret, or *añá*...The secret of making the sacred drums of the Orishas has been passed on from generation to generation. (140-41)

When we analyze the role of the sacred drums and music, as well as African diaspora religion within the new community that sprouted in *El Barrio* as a result of the immigration of Puerto Ricans to the neighborhood, we perceive that the new collective Nuyorican identity arises as a hybrid element within the ampler context of the North American society. As is the case with all of the forced migration and diaspora settings depicted in the other literary works object of our study, cultural hybridity speaks to the religious syncretism and the confronting zones of differing beliefs and practices within a sociological discourse.

As presented by in her chapter on “Colonialism, Citizenship, and Community Building”, Carmen Teresa Whalen comments on the unique social position faced by Puerto Ricans in the United States during the early twentieth century. Although they were officially declared U. S. Citizens in 1917, for many Puerto Ricans who moved to

diasporic communities in New York, for example, they oftentimes “...confronted a racial binary that defined people only as white or black, leaving little room for Puerto Ricans, a multiracial group with significant degrees of racial mixing” (228). As Puerto Ricans did not fit the traditional racial “molds” of the United States:

Puerto Ricans confronted racism and discrimination alongside economic exploitation. This racial binary continued to define Puerto Ricans and shape their experiences, as migration and dispersion increased in the post-World War II era. Confusion abounded with the arrival of a group that did not fit neatly into a white or black category. (228-229)

It is precisely this hybrid identity that envelopes the religion, music and collective identity that we observe in the new Nuyorican identity described by Moreno Vega in her work.

As such, Moreno Vega points to a hybrid identity and a collective double-consciousness of the Puerto Rican to remember her homeland of Puerto Rico and to bring life to rememories of loved ones, “...*jíbaro* songs of praise transporting Puerto Rico’s Green slopes to our gray tenement” (*Spirits* 10). The Nuyorican identity blossoms like a third space to be navigated by Cotito and the rest of the Nuyorican diasporic community. In the same manner in which cultural hybridity and identity arise in the Nuyorican “third space” in *When Spirits Dance Mambo*, religion itself undergoes a form of hybridity in leaving one religious context and being uprooted and replanted or reconstructed within another reality and new religious context.

In observing the spiritual rituals practiced by *Abuela* within the new cultural and social space of *El Barrio*, we note “toda religião enfrenta um duplo desafio: conservar o

melhor de seu passado e ao mesmo tempo acomodar-se ao presente. Equilibrar estes fatores não é fácil” (Crawford 32). *Abuela*, as the most spiritually aware figure in the novel, through her use of music and her spiritual practices connects the land of the ancestors in Puerto Rico with the new diasporic reality in New York. In doing, she establishes a spiritual connection with her roots in Puerto Rico and, more remotely, with her roots with the Yoruba people in Western Africa.

In *When the Spirits Dance Mambo* religion, through its relationship with the female characters in the novel, in combination with music contributes to an individual and collective identity in the novel. Through ancestral worship, and the belief in spiritual beings as part of the Santería religion, we highlight the important role this religious belief plays in the formation of identity within the new diasporic setting. Throughout the work, the narrator/author arrives at a deep understanding of her own identity and place in the microcosm of *El Barrio* through her interaction with African Diaspora Religion and rituals, and demonstrates how music and spiritual guidance of the Orishas can lead to a greater personal and spiritual understanding for diasporic and double diasporic communities.

As previously stated, in *When the Spirits Dance Mambo* we note how the sacred drums come to life in the syncopated words of the text, and how music is not merely a cultural production, but rather a bridge to the most sacred and intimate aspect of human nature. It is on this last point that I focused in constructing the questions posed to Dr. Marta Moreno Vega during my interview with the author. Reverting to Jacqui Alexander’s ideas on Black cosmological systems as manifestations of locatedness, rootedness and belonging that map the individual and collective relationships with the

Divine, although the importance of community is overwhelmingly evident in *When the Spirits Dance Mambo*, it comes through even stronger in Moreno Vega's *The Altar of My Soul*.

Throughout the entirety of the spiritual memoir, the experiences shared with various members of religious communities in countries such as Cuba, Brazil, and Nigeria speak to the true meaning and importance of community. In each of the countries, it is through the author's connection with Santería, and other African Diaspora Religions, that she attains the acceptance of the various spiritual leaders and initiates. In *The Altar of My Soul*, Moreno Vega speaks to the "all-embracing" nature of the Orishas, and affirms that the strength of the New World Yoruba religions lies in their ability to embrace us all (210). As someone who has witnessed firsthand the complicated negotiations of identity and belonging throughout the African Diaspora, speaking to the role of spirituality in the reconstruction of new collective bonds and in bringing "wholeness" to the individuals within the new diasporic setting, Dr. Moreno Vega offers a contrasting view of the "somewhat confusing" nature of the idea of "reconstruction of new collective bonds".

According to the author, as opposed to individuals finding the need to "reconstruct" new collective bonds, the diasporic experience is, moreover, "...a continuum that is connected to our memory and retelling of our stories via family, elders, etc." (Moreno Vega 2014). Citing the "continuous changes throughout history" that the African traditions have undergone "due to natural exchanges, internal mobility, civil wars and colonization", the author points out that what has served as the underpinning strength of Africa Diasporic Religions has historically been "creation and innovation", as well as the "fluidity" of the religion:

The process of forced enslavement over centuries, mis-education, invisibility, racism, discrimination also fueled creation and innovation. Therefore, we understand that spirituality is fluid and evolving addressing the needs and realities that allow for addressing solutions, hope and promise for the known, desired and unknown. To me the fluidity of our spirituality is at the core of sustaining the ethic, moral and values that honor our sacred connection to nature wherever we find ourselves and our people. (Moreno Vega 2014)

We have demonstrated in this chapter through our analysis of the main literary texts for this study how African cosmological systems are complex manifestations of crossing, dislocation and rootedness, as proposed by Jacqui Alexander in *Pedagogies of Crossing*. In *When the Spirits Dance Mambo*, Santería appears in *El Barrio* as part of the cultural hybridity resulting from the encounter of not just the African Orishas and Catholic saints in the Americas. It is, moreover, the appearance of these syncretic and diasporic religious beliefs within the new diasporic setting of *El Barrio* and the new Nuyorican community. Based on ideas of double-consciousness and liminality presented in our introduction, frequently individuals in diasporic conditions occupy hybrid or marginalized positions within the dominant society. As such, they oftentimes turn to spirituality and the communal aspect of worship to build and reconstruct new collective bonds in the new diasporic setting.

Although mentioning briefly in this chapter the role of language and orality in the creation of new diasporic cultures in the Americas, in Chapter 5 we intend to expound our discussion on myths and storytelling by focusing on the woman as a divine

intermediary and walking library of universal truths, uprooted and implanted within the African diasporic context. Additionally, we seek to explore the role of the woman as a mediator or medium between two worlds, and the idea of embodiment as both the manifestation of the divine, as well as a process of cultural identification.

CHAPTER 6

THE DIVINE WOMAN: MEDIUM OF WORLDS AND GUARDIAN OF
UNIVERSAL KNOWLEDGE

VOZES – MULHERES

*A voz da minha bisavó
Ecoou criança
Nos porões do navio
Ecoou lamentos
De uma infância perdida.*

*A voz de minha avó
Ecoou obediência
Aos brancos-donos de tudo.*

*A voz de minha mãe ecoou baixinho revolta
No fundo das cozinhas alheias
Debaixo das trouxas
Roupagens sujas dos brancos
Pelo caminho empoeirado
Rumo à favela.*

*A minha voz ainda
Ecoa versos perplexos
Com rimas de sangue
e fome.*

*A voz de minha filha
Recolhe todas as nossas vozes
Recolhe em si
As vozes mudas caladas
Engasgadas nas gargantas.*

*A voz de minha filha
Recolhe em si
A fala e o ato.
O ontem – o hoje – o agora.
Na voz de minha filha
Se fará ouvir a ressonância
O eco da vida-liberdade.*

- Conceição Evaristo (*Poemas de Recordação* 1990)

To initiate a dialogue on the subject of women as guardians of knowledge and mediums between the spiritual and secular world, I choose to introduce this chapter with the poem “Vozes – Mulheres” by Brazilian author and poet, Conceição Evaristo. This poem is a beautiful representation of the passing down of stories and experiences through the voices and echoes of the various generations of women of African descent. Likewise, it exemplifies the liminal silence, or silence found in the margins of dominant discourse, and marginalized voices of women of African descent as forces of resistance present in many works representative of black women’s literature in the Americas. It is precisely this idea of the power of stories and women as intermediaries and walking libraries of universal truths, uprooted and implanted within the African diasporic context that I intend to explore through the works included for analysis in this chapter.

Furthermore, I seek to touch on the healing power of women and the traditionally intuitive nature of “divine” women as manifestations of belonging and identity as depicted in the literary works I have chosen to analyze in this chapter. As such, our focus is not entirely spiritual, but rather delves into the fluid rivers of oral tradition as demonstrated by the Black female protagonists in *Um defeito de cor*, *Daughters of the Stone* and *Beloved*. Once again, I have chosen to include an additional literary text in this chapter that exemplifies the spiritually and culturally liminal world inhabited by its Black female protagonist: *Sortes de Villamor* (2010) by Nilma Lacerda.

The critical texts chosen as a theoretical springboard for the analysis of the literary works in this chapter can themselves be viewed as liminal or marginal, in that they stand on the threshold among a variety of fields. *The City of Women* (1947) by Ruth Landes, for example, is an anthropological text that explores questions of gender through

the presence of matriarchal communities within the Candomblé houses in Salvador. The critical text *Between the Lines: Literary Transnationalism and African American Poetics* (2011) by Monique-Adelle Callahan examines the imagined literary communities of *afrodescendentes* throughout the Americas. In defining this term and providing the scope of her study, Callahan explains that she uses the term *afrodescendente* to refer to an imagined literary community of writers of African descent, as well as to describe the category of literature which “...elicits the symbolic presence of an imagined, transnational community designated by the tracings of transatlantic and transhemispheric slavery to and throughout the Americas” (12).

It is through this lens that I propose to examine the role of the woman as a mediator or medium between two worlds, and the *griot* as an embodiment of universal knowledge. My interest is in analyzing the myths and legends of the African diaspora religions not just as sacred oral texts, but also as living evidence of *afrodescendente* literature in the New World and to explore, in the words of Callahan, “...the power of words to imagine new histories and new forms of identity” (41). I explore the idea of embodiment as both the manifestation of the divine, and question how myths contribute to this divine manifestation.

I intend to demonstrate that, in the context of the literary texts, self-expression and the retelling of memories and “herstories” can be peaceful moments of shared words, as well as resounding moments of sound, and even of unspeakable silence. The women protagonists navigate and negotiate the various moments in an attempt to establish spiritual dialogues and sacred bridges. Additionally, in the last part of this chapter I highlight the spiritual memoir *The Altar of My Soul* by Dr. Marta Moreno Vega in this

chapter, as well as her thoughts on questions posed during a personal e-mail with the author regarding her personal experience as a Santería priestess. In the themes of orality, myth, resistance and healing chosen for the interview, I focus not just on the author's spiritual role as a priestess, but also in her role as a modern-day storyteller, as well as her choice of memoir as a literary genre for her spiritual self-expression.

Embodiment and Healing Practices: Women between Cities and Worlds

Um defeito de cor, Daughters of the Stone and Beloved.da terra
Dobrai o joelho para a mulher.
- Canto de Obtatalá

I begin this section by exploring anthropological and sociological texts that establish a framework with which to examine the role of women of African descent as spiritual leaders and healers within the context of the African diaspora, as depicted in the *Um defeito de cor, Daughters of the Stone, Beloved*, and *Sortes de Villamor*. Using the critical texts of Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert on African diaspora religions and spiritual healing, I contrast their ideas with those of other theorists on the subject of Santería and Candomblé, Edson Carneiro, George Brandon, and Ruth Landes. I intend to demonstrate that, although spirituality served as a cohesive factor in African diasporic communities both during slavery and the post-abolition era, the participation of women in the spiritual realm did not occur in a monolithic fashion throughout the Americas.

As previously discussed in this study, the African diaspora religions whose presence can be found today throughout the New World are the syncretic amalgamation of folk Catholicism, Spiritism, and Native American belief systems. In Cuba, *Espiritismo*,

Regla de Palo, and Santería emerged as diasporic versions or adaptations of traditional African religious beliefs. Fernandez Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert in their introduction to *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santeria to Obeah and Espiritismo* highlight that these “creolized” religious systems not only provided the most oppressed sectors of colonial Caribbean societies with tools with which to manifest their spirituality, but also served to protect the health and well-being of the community (3). As such, it becomes easy to perceive how this syncretic process was more than a mere tool for survival. It demonstrates, moreover, an appreciation for change, rootedness and (re)creation within the new cultural system.

In “La Regla de Ocha: The Religious System of Santería”, Miguel Barnet expounds on the notion of an extended spiritual familial relationship within the larger community, and positions the religion of the Orishas as being linked to one sole ancestor, encompassing both the living and the dead. According to Barnet, “Out of this system of tribal or familial lineage emerges a religious brotherhood involving godfather and godchildren in a kinship that transcends blood connections to form an all-inclusive and compact horizontal lineage. This family system has been one of the most genuine characteristics of Santería in Cuba” (81).

On the subject of the Santería family system mentioned by Barnet, in her spiritual memoir *The Altar of My Soul*, Dr. Marta Moreno Vega demonstrates how the extended religious family system has the ability to take in and welcome the new spiritual godchild into that particular community, and across political and physical boundaries that extend across countries and even continents. The author comments: “My experiences in Africa, Brazil, Trinidad, Haiti, Cuba, and New York taught me that the power of the orishas

resides in each of us....For me, this is the strength of the New World Yoruba religions – their ability to embrace us all” (210). Through her retelling of accounts of her spiritual journey from the United States, to Cuba, and to Africa, the author explains how in each of the places she visits, she is accepted by the other members of the community on account of her participation in the Santería religion.

Envisioning a later discussion of orality and healing in the communities of women, I mention Rachel Elizabeth Hardings’ ideas on the communal nature of the African diaspora religions. This communal nature spills over into the spiritual healing practices of these syncretic religions, primarily through the influence of communities of women. In the case of the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé, as commented by Rachel Elizabeth Harding, “At the heart of Candomblé is the ritual cultivation of connection between the children of the African diaspora and the spiritual energies (*orixás, nkisis, voduns*) they inherit from their ancestors” (3). As such, traditional African religion can be viewed as the common denominator that allowed creolized or diasporic religions to blossom in the Americas, notwithstanding regional-specific or cultural-specific differences to the base set of beliefs (Orishas, rituals, amongst others).

It is possible, therefore, to highlight a number of shared characteristics among the various Creole religions. One such similarity amongst all of the African diaspora religions, as pointed out by Fernandez Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert and echoing the findings and ideas of Roger Bastide, is that of magic as a syncretistic variant. As they observe, this supernatural communication presents itself in the form of music and dance in the various religious ceremonies, with sound as a key factor in transmitting action:

Consecrated drums and the polyrhythmic percussion they product, along with classing, the spoken or sung word in related changes and dance (rhythms and dance are coded to the identities of the gods that are summoned in ceremonies and rituals), produce an altered focus of consciousness that beckons the supernatural entities and communicates between worlds. Music and dance are also instrumental in strengthening the conscious sense of community and an institutionalized regrouping of Africans and their descendants, and a transference of African ‘space’ into houses, temples, or rooms. (*Creole Religions of the Caribbean* 11)

This state of “altered consciousness” produced by the ritual drumming, dance and music is of particular significance when we consider the various manifestations of possession or trance witnessed in Santería and Candomblé. Initiates of these two diasporic religions manifest trance-like states as the embodiment of the divine, bringing to mind the words of Dos Santos, that “During the experience of possession, the entire religious system, its theogony and mythology, are relived. Each participant is the protagonist of a ritualistic activity, in which Black historic, psychological, ethnic, and cosmic life is renewed” (78). Likewise, in *Candomblés da Bahia* Edson Carneiro speaks to the personal nature of the Orishas and trance-like states of possession, and highlights the overwhelming female presence involved in the possessional act: “A possessão pela divindade, que torna inconfundíveis os cultos de origem Africana, se exerce não sobre todos os crentes, mas sobre alguns eleitos, especialmente do sexo feminino” (17).

Drawing on this last idea of Carneiro regarding the strong female presence involved in possessional and trance rituals, and to focus briefly on gender-specific

differences and restrictions encountered within the Santería and Candomblé traditions, we mention one common legend of Yemanjá in Cuba and the use of the sacred *Batá* drums during ceremonies. One legend in particular surrounding this Yemanjá, in one of the *Patakís*, or Santería sacred myths, explains the underlying reason for women being prohibited from carrying out Ifá divination practices or using the Ifá divining table or chain within the Santería belief system. I will explore this legend in greater detail in this first part of the chapter.

Myths or legends are, as to be expected when dealing with texts that have been orally passed down from one generation to the next, intrinsically imperfect mediums of communication. Although the myths may hold spiritual or cultural significance for the individuals who keep the stories alive, inevitably, human interference and possible bias and personal interpretation of the messages contribute greatly to which parts are “kept alive”, and which parts are left along the memorial wayside. In the case of the *Patakís*, although we are able to detect slight changes in the texts, the underlying message or truth of each legend is largely maintained by those telling and retelling the stories.

As a comparative view of the *Patakís*, and in order to demonstrate the effects of orality on the slight changes present within the variants of the sacred texts, I first offer the myths as presented in *Patakís Teachings of the Santería Gods* by Ócha’ni Lele, two widely shared myths appear as retold by the author. The first has to do with how Ochún came to the New World. This particular myth, mentioned briefly in the second chapter of this study, explains how many of the Orishas made the voyage from Africa to the New World “...with their priests, either secreted in their hair or bellies. Some that could, sailed through their elements... Yet one Orisha could not leave: Oshun” (Lele 98 – 99). Oshun

decides to consult with Yemanjá about her dilemma, and the sister Orisha explains the situation that has led to the mass exiting of worshippers, as well as the reason that prevents Ochún from making the crossing:

Our people are being stolen away to a place called Cuba, and those of us who are able are going with them in spirit to watch over them, to protect them as best we can. Some of us are already there, for our realms extend to theirs. Others are carried in the bodies of the priests and priestesses, for their faith in us is great. Yet you, sister, cannot go. Your followers have traded their diloggún¹ for iron out of greed for gold, and your river ends at the sea. (Lele 99)

In this particular version of the sacred story, Lele presents a variety of themes that are linked to the African diaspora, such as the transmission of identity, the importance of priests and priestesses and slavery. The theme of race or color also appears in this myth in the form of Oxum.

Ultimately, though, the goddess of the sea decides to aid Ochún in her voyage to Cuba. In an interesting show of “racial mixing” and syncretism, Yemanjá also grants her sister’s wish to look “...not only like our people, but also like theirs” (Lele 99), and Oshun reappears in the text as a beautiful “mulatta” with straightened hair and lightened skin, but who had retained her African features. Yemanjá cautions her, “This is only illusion, my sister. Those that look upon your beauty will see those things that they find most beautiful” (Lele 100). From this short legend taken from the Pataakis, I would like to

¹ The system of cowrie divination by which a priest or priestess of Santería learns the will of the Orishas; also, the eighteen or twenty-one cowrie shells that contain the soul of an Orisha also, the set of sixteen shells a diviner casts to perform divination. The exact meaning of the word depends on the context in which it is used. (Lele 249)

point out a mythical explanation for the difference in skin color and appearance between the two most important feminine Orishas in the Americas: Oshun and Yemanjá. This is why, in the Americas, Oshun is venerated as a voluptuous, “lighter” in skin pigmentation version of her former African self. Yemanjá the eternal mother, however, overwhelmingly maintains her darker-skinned original African form.

Another myth that has been widely told and retold throughout the New World is that of why women are forbidden from using the Ifá diving system. When we consider the theme of our study, this particular myth and the restriction presented in the same are of particular interest with regards to negotiation of reidentification and gender for women of the Black diaspora. According to this particular myth about the goddess of the sea, Yemanjá, who was married to Orúnmila the Orisha of creation and babalao priest at the time, decided to use her husband’s divining table during his absence:

The next morning, as clients lined up outside Orúnmila’s home, Yemanjá realized that she had an opportunity to test out the òpèlè² and its powers. She was well practiced with the diloggún, and seeing that the mechanics of the two systems were similar, she felt secure that she could wield it as effortlessly and skillfully as her husband. She seated her first client on the mat and began divining. (Lele 244)

Upon his return to his village on the next day, however, Orúnmila became outraged and tricked Yemanjá when he arrived at his home and found his wife in his

² A divining chain used by *babalawos*; it has eight concave disks made of varying materials (gold, silver, lead, iron, coconut shells, etc.), connected together on a single chain. (Lele 257)

divination room. He becomes outraged at the betrayal of his wife, and banishes her from his house not before cursing her and forbidding her from using the *ebó de estera*³:

For your treason, I curse you and your knowledge. I curse you through the very *odu*⁴ open on the mat *Òtùrùpónméjì*⁵...This shall be your curse: You and all like you empowered to divine with the *diloggún* are powerless to make any *ebó*⁶ beyond Ejila Shebora⁷ on the mat. Work with your *diloggún* if you must; take the knowledge you have learned here and share it with the world if such is the depth of your treason. But know that when any letter beyond Ejila Shebora falls in your own *diloggún*, you have lost the power to help that client with *ebó de estera*. The power to make *ebó* with those signs rests with me! (Lele 245).

It is for this reason, according to Santería tradition, that to this day women are prohibited from carrying out divining practices within the Santería religion. In Excilia Saldaña's collection of *Patakís* entitled *Kele Kele* (1987), the author retells the same age-old stories or myths, but in a much different manner than Lele. This restriction is important as it speaks to the negotiation processes of gender and identification required of Black women of the African diaspora.

³ It is a function of the *oriaté*, and it is a special set of rituals done on the diviner's mat. It cleans the client of the *odu's* *osogbo* using the same elements that the *odu* once used to remove *osogbo* from their own lives. (Lele 250)

⁴ The many patterns that fall when using the divination system known as the *diloggún*. There are a total of sixteen *parent odu* and 256 *composite odu*. Each of these has its own proverbs, *patakís*, meanings, and *ebós*. (Lele 250)

⁵ One of the 256 *odu* in *Ifá*. (Lele 258)

⁶ Na offering made to an Orisha. (Lele 250)

⁷ One of the sixteen *parent odu* in the *diloggún*. (Lele 250)

Although the content of the two versions is practically identical, Saldaña's rendition of the Santería texts is both lyrical and poetic, and makes the reader feel as though she/he is listening to a skilled storytelling singing or orally reciting the words of sacred wisdom. Invocations to the Orishas are intertwined in the narratives, as well as African proverbs that lead the reader on both a poetic and spiritual literary journey. At the beginning of the first myth, Saldaña starts the legend by alerting the reader that, "Ayer me contó mi Abuela" (19). At the end of the same myth, the author concludes the tale: "Así termina la historia que hoy te vine a contar; ayer me la dijo mi abuela, mañana tú la repetirás" (41). It is precisely this respect for the knowledge of the elders and the passing down of oral traditions that is of utmost importance within the African diaspora and that contributed to the intergenerational worship of the Orishas.

Likewise, Lydia Cabrera's work *Yemayá y Ochún: Kariocha, Iyalorichas y Olorichas*, presents various versions of the same myth on why women are not allowed to practice Ifá divination. In one of the versions, Cabrera tells how Yemanjá was married to (Ifá, but they separated because the Orisha "no quería mujer que supiese más que él" (1996 42). This final separation took place after Orula (Orúnmila) returned from a trip and found Yemayá using his diving mat. Another version tells of how Orula (Orúnmilá), after witnessing Yemanjá trying to save a man's dying son through divination, becomes furious with the Orisha saying: "Es increíble que te hayas atrevido a trabajar con mi tablero siendo mujer y habiéndotelo prohibido terminantemente. Más que yo, Orula Agbamiregun, no puede saber una mujer; aquí en esta casa no cabe más que un sabio y ése soy yo" (1996 43 – 44). It is this retelling or handing down from one generation to the next of cultural and spiritual knowledge that we intend to explore in the next section of

this chapter with the “Herstories” passed down intergenerationally by the Afro-Boricua women in Llanos-Figueroa’s *Daughters of the Stone*.

The second gender difference and restriction we encounter within to the Santería religion is related to the use of the *Batá* drum by women and homosexuals. Again, according to Santería belief, women and homosexuals play important roles within the religion, but are excluded and prohibited from playing the sacred drums. As pointed out by Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, the sacred *Batá* drums are rare in the Diaspora and are the ones who actually “communicate” with the Orishas, and not the drummer:

The drums imitate the sound and tone of the Lucumi language and communicate with the Orishas in the *oru*, a sequence of liturgical rhythms and chants, musical phrases that serve as a nonverbal means of communication to honor, greet, and entice the Orishas and their children, as during the presentation of the *iyawó* or neophyte to the *batá* in the initiation ritual and in celebrations where the Orishas are invited to transform a secular space into a sacred one. (*Creole Religions of the Caribbean* 71)

In her text, *The City of Women*, Ruth Landes also comments on the strictly male presence within the drumming activities at the Candomblé temple, *Engenho Velho*, in Salvador. Despite the overwhelming female presence at *Engenho Velho*, the drummers were obligatorily men: “Drummers had to be men, and it was they who summoned the gods with the voices of their drums to descend into the heads of the women. The voices of the drums were the active agents, and the women moved in accord with their

commands” (Landes 48). Although certain ritual activities, such as animal sacrifice and drumming, are depicted here by Landes as being “strictly male” in nature, the overall hierarchy of the Candomblés in Bahia is dominated by women.

Turning once again to the ideas of Edson Carneiro, he observes that the division of hierarchy within the Candomblé religious system is thought of as primarily a woman’s occupation, as all rituals take place within the primarily domestic and enclosed setting of the temple and its grounds, and are carried out overwhelmingly by women (125). Carneiro further highlights that the female dominance within the spiritual and secular realm of the Candomblé solidifies women’s roles as permanent fixtures within the ever-changing community-based religious system, whereas the men’s position is temporary in nature. As he states:

Esse esquema de hierarquia revela, sem sombra de dúvida, que as mulheres detêm todas as funções permanentes do candomblé, enquanto os homens se reservam apenas as temporárias e as honorários. Com efeito, a chefia espiritual e temporal da casa de culto está entregue a uma mulher (a mãe), que escolhe para sua assistente imediata, seu braço direito, outra mulher), para dirigir a massa de mulheres (as filhas) que deve contribuir para o melhor entendimento entre os homens e os orixás...Outras mulheres, ainda, se encarregam de funções administrativas dentro da comunidade. (*Candomblés da Bahia* 124)

Carneiro’s descriptions of the female presence and dominance within the Candomblé religion, as well as Landes’ depiction of Salvador as a “city of women”, brings to mind another documentary of the same name and on a related subject matter by

Lázaro Faria: *A Cidade das Mulheres*. In the film, Faria presents interviews with both “mothers” and “daughters” of the Candomblé spiritual family. In the various filmed images, he demonstrates the overwhelming presence and importance of women to the continuation of the ritual practices and spiritual tradition. The traditional “woman’s role” within Candomblé and other African diaspora religions is questioned and to a certain extent challenged by the presence of homosexual male priests, as well as lesbian female priests. I intend to explore in the final chapter of this study the themes of maternity, gender and sexuality within the context of African diasporic spirituality.

I shift briefly to the themes of music and ritual as nonverbal means of communication that serve as spiritual bridges between practitioners and the orishas with African diaspora religions. Music, dance and possession are not superfluous or purely aesthetic elements common to many of the African diaspora religions. They are, moreover, integral parts of the belief system and lead to a deeper personal and collective understanding of ancestral knowledge, as well as the myths and legends of the Orishas. Later in this chapter, I intend to explore the importance of orality and healing through sound and music as manifestations of the Divine. Specifically, I will examine how these factors serve as cohesive elements within the African diasporic communities in the United States, as depicted in the novel *Beloved*.

To initiate my discussion on healing and ritualistic practices common to the African diaspora religions in the Americas, I begin by first affirming that more than simply religious groups, ritual communities re-create the type of family ties and obligations to the deities and to each other that would have existed in African. Although the various forms of these religions offer initiates the ability with which to construct an

individual sense of identity through the belief in the various Orishas and the rituals performed, the bedrock for the African diaspora religions such as Candomblé and Santería is, echoes the previously-stated ideas of Durkheim regarding community-based worship.

In *Santería from Africa to the New World*, George Brandon speaks to the presence of Santería in Cuba and its influence on the Cuban community, positing that African religion has historically served as a coping mechanism for people in dealing with the everyday problems of illness and financial hardship. According to Brandon:

Believers created and maintained important social networks, which were useful in themselves, and a means for such upward mobility as Cuba's underdeveloped economy allowed for those who were a notch above blackness and poverty. Those who did not find enough fulfillment and recognition in work, play, or family could find it in the high prestige that believers gave to their priests and priestesses. (99)

This last point made by Brandon is of particular importance and interest to our study considering the liminal or marginalized positions of many individuals of African descent within the dominant Eurocentric societies of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Brazil. Under the oppressive yoke of slavery, participation in the, oftentimes secretive, community-based diasporic religions provided the practitioners with a playing field upon which to exercise their personal and ancestral knowledge, and to earn the respect of fellow community members by occupying positions of hierarchical prestige within the belief system.

The curative practices of the African Diaspora and the healing metaphor, as presented by Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert in *Healing Cultures*, have become one of the most effective and most commonly used tools of retaliation against the colonial discourse of illness and healing (xx). In a region where European colonizers sought to represent the colonies and their natives as “diseased bodies – inferior in race, deficient in intellect, indolent in body, insalubrious in climate” (*Healing Cultures* xxi), healing and more specifically, the type of healing offered by the African diaspora religions to their practitioners, appears as a tool for individual and collective recovery. The power of healing is, however, much more than the mere recovery of memory. As pointed out by Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, the healing power of African diasporic religions offers adherents “the reclaiming of memory as the remedy for rootlessness, of the elaboration of myth as a cure for history-lessness at the core of these emerging diasporan cultures” (*Healing Cultures* xxi).

The cure for the dislocation and loss of identity endured by the individuals throughout the diaspora has its roots deep within the thickly entwined jungles of Africa or, as posited by Cabrera in her renowned work on Afro-Cuban religion, magic, superstitions and folklore, *El Monte*, in the natural settings of the mountains and hilltops:

Persiste en el negro cubano, con tenacidad asombrosa, la creencia en la espiritualidad del monte. En los montes y malezas de Cuba habitan, como en las selvas de África, las misma divinidades ancestrales, los espíritus poderosos que todavía hoy, igual que en los días de la trata, más teme y venera, y de cuya hostilidad o benevolencia siguen dependiendo sus éxitos o sus fracaso... Todo se encuentra en el Monte... El monte encierra

esencialmente todo lo que el negro necesita para su magia, para la conservación de su salud y de su bienestar; todo lo que le hace falta para defenderse de cualquier fuerza adversa, suministrándole los elementos de protección – o de ataque – más eficaces. (15)

The connections of nature and knowledge of the African diaspora are presented in Cabrera's ideas in *El monte*. The power of nature in the mountain forests comes not solely from the medicinal plants and herbs found in the areas. Moreover, it comes from the connection of the space of the forest location with the Africans' Orishas and homelands.

Continuing on the importance of the *monte*, from a more socio-historical vantage point, the mountainous regions also served as the perfect hiding places for “fugitive slaves” that escaped from the horrors of life on the plantations. The “*palenques*” in Cuba and “*quilombos*” in Brazil, fugitive or maroon slave communities, grew in the heavily forested hilltops and mountaintops of not just in these two countries but also throughout the Americas during the time of slavery in the continent. These sacred spaces of nature provided the individuals with both protection from the plantation owners, as well as the herbs and plants necessary for their healing and ritual practices.

Turning to a work previously explored in this study, *La isla bajo el mar*, and the narrative of Zarité de Saint-Lazare, an enslaved young woman during the end of the 18th Century to the first decade of the 19th century in Saint-Domingue, the novel depicts the importance of “*el monte*” to the feared Black leader Mackandal “Al fin se largo a las montañas y desde allí inició la sublevación de esclavos que habría de sacudir la isla como un terrible ventarrón. Se unió a otros cimarrones y pronto se vieron los efectos de su furia

y su astucia” (65). At another moment at the beginning of the novel, Zarité, still a child, spends the night in the wild and fears the noises that, “No eran voces humanas, así me lo había explicado; provenían de las sombras, la jungla, el subsuelo, el infierno, África, no hablaban con palabras sino con aullidos y risas destempladas” (*La isla bajo el mar* 72).

The “mambo” or female Vodou priestess Tante Rose explains to Zarité that she does not have the ability to listen to spirits, since she was not from Africa like the priestess. Tante Rose, the elderly African *mambo*, is called upon, however, for curing and performing other ceremonies that had the power to both help and harm, depending upon the individual involved or invoked in the ceremony. The fact that Zarité is unable to listen to spirits is significant as she is younger and was not born in Africa. Tante Rose, however, is from Africa and maintains stronger ties to traditional African beliefs, which explains her ability to hear the voices.

Likewise, speaking to the unifying capability of Candomblé, Mikelle Smith Omari-Tunkara states, “For many persons of African descent in Brazil, *candomblés* are critical and dynamic arenas of resistance that psychically balance their marginality in Luso-Brazilian circles” (11). As Smith Omari-Tunkara observes, the Candomblé religion, rooted in African values and rituals, provides African Brazilians with alternate routes by which to achieve social solidarity and status, as well as personal self-esteem and prestige (12). Another work that speaks to the importance of nature and the spiritual connection with the elements is *Daughters of the Stone* by Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa. At one particular moment in the narrative, Mati, the “daughter” with the gift of healing, finds herself drawn to a hill where she was surrounded by “*yerba Buena, anamú, menta, rompe zaraguey*, and other plants of healing” (Llanos-Figueroa 69). In a moment of trance or

spiritual oneness with the elements, Mati feels herself absorbing the energy of everything around her:

She could hear the plants rustling, smell the rain that was about to fall, feel the movement of the clouds on her skin. She became a part of them...Looking into swirling water, she saw images, a series of moving pictures evolving one into the next...Here were her ancestors, the long-ago Africans, the world the Lady had spoken about in her dreams.

(Daughters of the Stone 69-70)

In the scene, we observe not only the spiritual connection of Mati, the healer, with nature, but also the indisputable connection between an African descendent at the ancestral presence of the Orishas. In fact, it is through her connection with nature that the link is made. The link is also important for her to remain in Puerto Rico. Mati is the binding presence within the greater community of formerly enslaved Africans, and ultimately chooses her to commitment to the community as a healer over her own personal happiness. The new community roots that sprout up in the once-feared slave quarters and the spiritual relationship that is rekindled is owed in great part to the healing practices of Mati.

Culture and information can be handed down, changed or even lost over time, and how individual and collective memory are of utmost importance in these processes. Speaking to the manner which allows for both individual and collective memory, Brandon highlights a four-part mechanism through which these memories are passed down from one generation to the next: “The mechanism through which these forms of

memory are transmitted collectively are interpersonal linkages, strategies for memory encoding, performance, and strategies of repetition” (129).

When we consider the repetitive nature of performance and the embodiment of the Divine through the community-based spiritual rituals, the involvement of the group and collective collaboration of all of the members of the extended religious community are of vital importance to the wellbeing and prosperity of African diasporic religions. The undercurrent of the Candomblé tradition, as is the case of Santería is undoubtedly the mutual aid system of the greater spiritual community as opposed to the individual. In *Black Atlantic Religion*, J. Lorand Matory points out that “The protocols of Candomblé also create ‘houses’ or ‘homes’ (*casas* or *ilês*) where their members and wards find an alternative to, and sometimes refuge from, the nation-state” (6). Within these spiritual “refuges”, diasporic communities were able to flourish in the Americas.

Continuing with the theme of nature in the African diasporic religions and the communal nature of the sacred practices and rituals associated these religions, we focus momentarily on the cultural and religious aspects inherited from traditional African beliefs. One particularly important factor is *axé*, as it is known in Brazil, and *ache*, as it is referred to in Cuba. According to Mikelle Smith Omari-Tukara, we observe that the sacred energy that is of utmost importance in both African Diaspora Religions is rooted in the Tradition African belief of Àse:

Àse is conceptualized as residing in all living beings and inanimate things and operates on many levels – divine, metaphysical, social, and political. *Àse* as sacred energy and power is found in spiritual entities and human

beings as well as in spoken words, secret names, thoughts...ritually prepared clothing...and other natural phenomena. (35)

Within the sacred realm of the Candomblé belief system, the sacred is manipulated by art, as ritual clothing and other objects are viewed as both ritualistic tools, and as sacrificial offerings to the various Orishas. As such, “African Brazilian art forms operate as multi-voiced systems of figuration that signify mythology, values, history, and ideas originating both in Africa and Brazil” (Smith Omari-Tunkara 63). The culmination of these transcontinental ideas can be observed in the community-centered African diaspora religion, Candomblé.

The community-centered African diasporic religions such as Candomblé and Santería lead to varied manifestations of embodied knowledge throughout the Americas. By embodied knowledge, I refer to a type of knowledge in which the body knows how to act. The concept of embodied knowledge is attributed to Maurice Merleau. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, the French philosopher speaks to the concept of “embodied knowledge” using the example of touch-typing. He comments:

To know how to touch type is not, then, to know the place of each letter among the keys, nor even to have acquired a conditioned reflex for each one, which is set in motion by the letter as it comes before our eye. If habit is neither a form of knowledge nor an involuntary action, what then is it? It is knowledge in the hands, which is forthcoming only when bodily effort is made, and cannot be formulated in detachment from that effort. (144)

Drawing on Merleau’s term to relate to spirituality and the religious experience, “embodied knowledge”, to initiate a dialogue on the subject of women between worlds

and their relationship to embodied knowledge, I turn to the ideas of Rachel Elizabeth Harding.

In her text, “É a Senzala: Slavery, Women, and Embodied Knowledge in Afro-Brazilian Candomblé”, Harding positions women within the socio-spiritual realm of Candomblé as the primordial link between the memory of slavery and the engagement of its relevance and meaning in the present lives of Candomblé initiates (12). She notes how the women, “the *mães-de-santo* who founded and led many of the oldest existent *terreiros*, their successors, and the initiates and devotees who form the rising generation of caretakers of the religion,” struggle with the memory of the experience of slavery, as well as the “survival that created and sustains an ancestral connection to Africa at the heart of Candomblé” (Harding 12).

The embodied knowledge of the women of the African diaspora can manifest itself through possession in the religions of Santería and Candomblé, “shouting” in African American religion, as well as many other forms of spiritual manifestation in which the women’s bodies automatically understand and react without even thinking. Similarly, the embodied knowledge contained in dance enables the adherents to connect not just with their own bodies, but also to ancestral history and the Orishas through memories contained deep within their spiritual and physical being. It is both a form of communication with the spirits or Orishas, and women are, according to Harding, the “primary source of this embodied engagement with the forces of the universe” (16). Dance, as is the case with Santería, plays an integral role in worship practices within the Candomblé tradition.

In many of the works chosen for this study, religion functions as a tool of resistance for the female protagonists. The communal nature of African Diasporic Religion provided the structure that grounded the disperse groups of individuals of African descent, and the syncretic religious systems empowered them with an alternate form of social recognition outside of the mainstream dominant society. Speaking specifically to the Candomblé religion, there are other resources that speak to the memory of slavery in Candomblé, such as clothing, food, music and dance used in the rituals, and highlight the role of women as the center of these continuities due to their contribution to preparation of items such as ritual food and clothing.

In keeping with the Pan-American scope of our study, we observe the power of Black women's leadership throughout the Anglophone, Hispanophone and Lusophone countries of the Americas. Speaking to the religious agency and connection among African American women, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes highlights the communal and religious relationship shared by these women during their enslavement throughout the colonial societies of the Americas. According to Townsend Gilkes,

During slavery, black women participated in all of the activities that fostered survival and generated resistance...Women slaves organized themselves for survival, resistance, and leadership, and their autonomous, concerted action redounded to the benefit of the entire community. Women worked to make sure that their sisters, their brothers, and their families were properly cared for in sickness and death. Among themselves, away from white masters and mistresses and even their menfolk, black women worshipped and prayed together. Slave women's

religious life included powerful women prophets who were respected leaders, listened to not only by women but by the entire community. (183)

The role of spirituality in the daily lives of the slave women served not only to provide support to the other members of the community, but also to connect the women of the African diaspora with their more distant spiritual origins in Africa.

Initiating a dialogue on the subject of Black women's writing and oral tradition, I turn to the ideas of Ana Rita Santiago da Silva on the discourses created in "afro-feminine" literature, which allow for a lyrical approach to (re)constructing identities, histories and stories as forms of resistance within the lives of women of African descent in the Americas. For Santiago da Silva, "afro-feminine" literature is an ongoing process in which there is a dynamic return to the past:

A literatura afro-feminina, neste íterim, pode ser considerada como um processo contínuo de (re)invenções de memórias, histórias e narrações sobre identidades, femininos e feminismo negros. Há nela um "retorno" dinâmico ao passado, ou seja, há um reconto de memórias ressignificadas, aliado a cenas de histórias, sonhos, vivências e resistências, no passado e no presente, vislumbrando cenas e agendas que gerem sonhos e conquistas no futuro. (100)

Applying Santiago da Silva's thoughts to the works in this study, I point out the connection between the "reinvention of memories, histories and narrations" with those presented in *Um defeito de cor*, *Beloved*, *Daughters of the Stone* and *La isla bajo el mar*, to name a few. In these novels, the narrators and protagonists are forced to give new

significance to memories and past events in order to assure their own presents and futures.

As previously cited in the introduction to this chapter, in *Literary Transnationalism and African American Poetics*, Monique-Adelle Callahan addresses the comparative process involved in analyzing various transnational literary works, and discusses the historical relevance of the larger discourse of colonial rule surrounding these narratives. Speaking to the meaning of a poetic text and its interconnectedness Callahan affirms,

The meaning of a given poetic text and its relationship to other poetic texts is always inextricably linked to the interpretive influence of the accepted historical narratives that surround it. A poem, then, is always at once integral and interconnected at all times. We can say that it mirrors the flux and ideas and tropes throughout the Americans and the multiple imagined communities that inhabit African diasporic space. (5)

In the same manner as the poetic text mentioned by Callahan, myths and oral traditions also “mirror the flux and ideas” of the “multiple imagined communities” of the African diaspora in the Americas. Depending upon the historical moment, political and social situation, amongst other factors of the particular diasporic community, certain elements of the myths can be omitted, enhanced or even mutated to serve their spiritual need at that point in time. This syncretic process is reminiscent of the one undergone by the various forms of traditional African religion and the Orishas venerated within each syncretic form of the religion to suit the social and spiritual needs of the Africans in the New World.

In regards to Ifá divination practices in Cuba and the sacred oral texts that accompany the divination, Eugenio Matibag posits, “In Ifa, one performs a discursive, intertextual act in which myth and personal history are made to interact through the medium of language” (150-151). The sacred language of spiritual connection with the Orishas, the oral language of myths such as the Patakís, and the secular language of personal history rely upon language as a medium in order to communicate and convey meaning to the sacred practices. As such, according to Matibag, “the corpus of Ifá in particular contains a wealth of narrative materials for the literary manifestations of poetic divination: motifs, themes, pharmacopeia, therapeutic utterances, and practical wisdom in the forms of fables and proverbs” (151 – 152). Relating the previous thoughts on language to the protagonists in *Daughters of the Stone*, *Beloved*, and *Um defeito de cor*, I point out the importance of the various forms of language to the women’s sacred practices and negotiations of identity within the narratives.

Regarding the healing power of social-religious discourse and how it can transmit a unified body of knowledge, Matibag affirms that Ifá “also addresses human needs by fulfilling a therapeutic function in the community because prescriptions of medicines and of specific sacrifices are designed to solve the problems arising in the relationship between the individual and the community” (166). As we can observe in *Daughters of the Stone*, Mati fills the therapeutic role of both spiritual adviser and natural healer in the community of freed slaves. The people of the community look to her for remedies and solutions to everyday problems, such as illness, financial, and family-related ones, as well as for a higher connection with the spiritual realm and a continuation of spiritual traditions. Similarly, I will develop in greater detail later in this chapter, in *Beloved*, Baby

Suggs is both a spiritual leader as well as someone who offers social assistance to the people of the community. Likewise, in *Sortes de Villamor*, the protagonist Ismê is both a medium and healer, as well as a social assistant who offers spiritual guidance to the members of the community and mundane care for the girls of her community house.

In pinpointing a common thread or “trope” in *afrodescendente* literature, we highlight colonialism, the institution of slavery, community ties, spirituality, rememory and motherhood. Reverting to the ideas of Callahan, although she focuses specifically on the literary genre of the poem, we can expand her ideas in order to analyze the historical novels selected for this study. As Callahan notes, “... they project a kind of transnational ‘nation’ of African descendants that is tentative and fluctuating in shape and is in constant negotiation with the postabolition nation-state... This ‘history’ is an amalgam of narratives, a collaboration of stories in persistent flux, constantly being told and retold” (Callahan 5). Poetry, and other forms of literature, question and create discourses on the history of slavery in the New World.

It is on this point, the telling and retelling of stories over time, which I will focus in the next section of this chapter and my analysis of the two works selected to highlight the transmission of stories by females from a woman’s perspective within the African diasporic context: *Daughters of the Stone* and *Beloved*. In the first work, the handing down of spiritual knowledge comes in the form of storytelling and the figure of the elderly and wise *griot*. While the stories do undoubtedly serve for the spiritual and personal healing of the characters, in *Beloved*, the passing on of stories takes on a much painful form. In Morrison’s novel, we observe that the stories are actually inscribed on the body of the protagonist. As such, in *Beloved* the storytelling process is very painful,

and serves more as a catharsis than a passing down of ancestral memories from one generation to the next.

Beloved and Daughters of the Stone: Embodied Inscriptions and the Passing on of “Herstories”

In this portion of the chapter, I will focus on the ideas of language and storytelling. As I will demonstrate in the following section, orality is an integral part of traditional African religions, and is passed down from the elders to the younger members of society as a means of maintaining traditions, customs and ancestral myths. The stories and the act of storytelling can be tools with which to heal fragmented communities, and can help piece together the broken memories of individuals who have endured unspeakable trauma. The two literary works chosen to depict these concepts are *Daughters of the Stone*, by Llanos-Figueroa and *Beloved* by Morrison. Both texts are set, at some point in the narratives, in the nineteenth century with the institution of slavery as the backdrop and women of African descent as the protagonists. They also make use of language, both oral and unspoken, in an attempt to pass on “herstories” and to create a sacred dialogue with the spirit realm.

In *Beloved*, we are faced with a novel, which in the words of Callahan, is “...the literary critique of race, gender, and nationhood during the second half of the nineteenth century” (7). In Callahan’s text, she references the translation theories of Edwin Gentzler and, specifically, those relating to the process of translation onto the body. In *Translation and Identity in the Americas: New Directions in Translation Theory*, Gentzler raises the idea of memory as a “scarring” upon the body, affirming:

The story, the memory is translated into a semiotic sign system that extends beyond language, a scarring upon the body...the 'rememory' provides a kind of identification, a sense of one's roots and one's past, and offers a kind of healing, recreating history despite the massive oppression, and creating possibilities for a new inscription for the future. (181)

Gentlzer's point about memory as being translated into a "scarring upon the body" is of utmost relevance and importance to the analysis of *Beloved*, as the protagonist, Sethe, wears the memory of Sweet Home and the horrors she endured at the hands of the masters as an actual physical deformation of scarring on her back. Sethe refers to the scar tissue as resembling a "chokecherry tree", and explains how someone had told her that the mangled tissue resembled the "trunk, branches, and even leaves" of the chokecherry tree (Morrison 2004 18). After experiencing a moment of sexual pleasure that "...was over before they could get their clothes off" (Morrison 2004 24), in the light of the skylight, however, Paul D actually sees the scar tissue for himself, and refers to it as "...a revolting clump of scars. Not a tree, as she said. Maybe shaped like one, but nothing like any tree he knew because trees were inviting; things you could trust and be near; talk to if you wanted to as he frequently did since way back when he took the midday meal in the fields of Sweet Home" (Morrison 2004 25).

The memory of the cruel whipping and the other physical assaults she endured while enslaved on the Sweet Home farm is so much more than a mere remembrance for Sethe. It is the memory of slavery physically engraved onto her skin. The protagonist wears the inscription of her former life as an enslaved woman in the form of a hideous clump of tree-bark scars on her back. Speaking to the religious and ritualizing practices

of marking the flesh of followers, Jacqui Alexander points out that “Far from being merely superficial, these markings on the flesh – these inscriptions – are processes, ceremonial rituals through which practitioners become habituated to the spiritual, and this habituation implies that requirements are transposed onto the body” (297). The practitioners embody the sacred through these physical markings and gain a deeper connection with the underpinnings of sacred understanding in much the same way that Sethe’s markings transpose the horrors of slavery onto her very being.

One of the key elements that Alexander highlights related to the bodily transposition is that the follower must remember their source and purpose. As such, “...the body thus becomes a site of memory, not a commodity for sale, even as it is simultaneously insinuated within a nexus of power. Body and memory are lived in the same body, if you will, and this mutual living, this entanglement, enables us to think and feel these inscriptions as process, a process of embodiment” (Alexander 297). The memories of Sweet Farm cannot be swept under the carpet, or merely forgotten in Sethe’s life. They have taken on a much deeper traumatic meaning and have “become one” with the protagonist.

Developing my analysis of the importance of language and sound as spiritual manifestations within the context of *Beloved*, I first turned to the ideas of Roxanne R. Reed on the relevance of oral tradition within the African diaspora community in the United States. According to Reed, “Oral traditions (storytelling, prayers, spiritual autobiographies, prose, poetry, personal stories, and musical expression) rather than written traditions shaped the spiritual and religious identity of both black men and women in slave culture” (58). Speaking to the role of women as vital contributors to the

oral tradition culture, Reed affirms, “For women, oral forms such as storytelling and singing remain within the domain of informal expression, and from Emancipation on, women were the primary purveyors of these practices” (58).

In *Beloved*, as well as the other main works analyzed in this study, storytelling is of great significance in the lives of many of the women protagonists and serves as both a binding element within the new community, as well as a factor of “rememory” that connects past and present times across geographical and spiritual boundaries. Reflecting on how the dominant historical discourse has incessantly depicted the Black woman as a non-subject, as an object to serve others or, in other words, as an object without thoughts, words or a voice, Serafina Ferreira Machado points out, “A linguagem como instrumento de poder sempre teve lugar privilegiado na sociedade. O marginalizado, através da palavra, pode disseminar o inconformismo, revelar o invisível, refletir sobre a condição do subalterno” (137). The narratives used by women in their spiritual dialogues enable them both to articulate their experience as Black women, and also serve as tools with which to serve the greater spiritual and diasporic community.

Storytelling and the primal nature of sound over written text are depicted in *Beloved* as tools of defense and survival that the protagonists use to deal with the various traumas and situations that arise out of their condition as slaves. Reed points out that “Sound serves as a kind of discourse in the novel, even though it is unarticulated, unformed, and undefined. The legitimacy of this sound is anchored in the ancestral heritage, in their African foreparents’ art and practice of storytelling, which incorporated both sound and word” (57). Sound in this context, as described by Reed, is a word-less

and melody-less space inhabited by cries, hollers or wailing, and affirms that these liminal noises are the same ones that gave root to African American vernaculars:

Presaging the music of slave culture, utterance is integral to the development of its subsequent African American vernaculars, including work songs, sacred spirituals, and the blues. The same type of utterance comes through women's voices in the re-created worship setting of the Clearing. Through their voices, sound and utterance take on life and meaning, coming fully into music and song when their voices join at the end of the novel. The music becomes the vehicle for communal restoration and is the means by which the women in the novel demonstrate spiritual authority and feminine theological practice. (57)

Considering the scene cited by Reed in *Beloved*, the women perform not just a type of spiritual exorcism to rid Sethe of Beloved, but rather a musical embodied performance that unifies the women and brings a returned sense of unity to the community.

Returning to Bhabha's concepts of "third space" and "liminality," as well as my own use of "liminality" as not merely the marginalized social and gender position of the Black female protagonists within the patriarchal slave-driven society in which they find themselves, but also the position of women of African descent within the religious scope of the African diasporic religions, I argue that in *Beloved*, Baby Suggs Holy is able to negotiate her marginalized position through the geography of the "third space" of the spiritual realm.

Echoing the concepts of "third space" and "liminality", Reed posits that the rhetorical act of preaching is in itself contested, gendered space (60). When we consider

the open “liminal” space of the clearing used by Baby Suggs for her spiritual practice of “calling”, we observe how women have historically been “liminal” spaces in order to carry out their sacred rituals. According to Reed, these alternative open, natural environments have allowed “women (to) exercise more control and inevitably success in achieving the goals of community” (60). Narrative in the form of personal stories is presented as intrinsically related to the spiritual practices of women in the form of the personal tales and storytelling they use to preach to their informal congregations. The spiritual practices that are part of these informal congregations contribute to the sense of community and provide the believers with a greater sense of control over their own lives, as well as with a form of resistance to the dominant slave-owning society.

Considering the personal and informal narratives used by women to preach or provide spiritual guidance to the members of their community, in binary opposition to the preaching practices of male preachers, Reed affirms that, “the tendency of male preachers to use abstract or nonpersonal narrative and biblical sources of narrative text to advance their sermonic message...Women’s reliance upon alternative spaces and narratives results when other avenues are restricted, as they often are in patriarchal systems” (60). Baby Suggs Holy’s spiritual role can therefore be seen as a challenge to the male-dominated space found within both the patriarchal system, as well as within the traditional Black church.

Baby Suggs’ narrative in the form of “calling” suggests a feminine approach to professing the Word, as both a factor of retaliation against those who took that right away from her during slavery, and her post-slavery self-identification within the greater community of freed slaves: “The Word. The Word. ‘That’s one other thing they took

away from,’ she said...The Word had been given to her and she had to speak it. Had to...” (*Beloved* 210). Here I point out the use of the term “the Word” by Morrison, as it refers both in the Biblical sense of preaching the “Word of God”, as well as to the “word” or discourse regained by Baby Suggs during the act of preaching. It also is the right of Black woman to be heard within the dominant society. Discourse is power, so by appropriating herself of the Word, Baby Suggs is asserting her own power within the community and greater Post-Abolition society.

In Morrison’s *Beloved*, although Sethe is the main character representative of the themes of motherhood and maternity denied enslaved Africans during the period of slavery in the Americas, as well as the choices made and defensive actions taken so as to shield her children from the brutality of slavery, Baby Suggs can also be viewed as an important mother figure within the narrative. Besides acting as a surrogate mother to Sethe after she survives the journey to Ohio, Baby Suggs transforms into a mother for the community at large, offering her assistance and spiritual guidance to the members of the community.

Although not specifically mentioned in the African American narrative, the Goddess Yemanjá comes to mind as an appropriate Orisha to characterize Baby Suggs in her role as a communal mother. As Teresa N. Washington points out in “The Sea Never Dies: Yemoja – The Infinitely Flowing Mother Force of Africana Literature and Cinema”:

Baby Suggs is Yemoja for her community and the neo-Gèlèdè she oversees in the clearing is a personal cum communal gender-balance gender-blending juba of love and empowerment. ...The community directs

a silent rage at Sethe and Suggs, who have the audacity to revel in a “thick love”. The community’s vindictiveness facilitates the rebirth of Yemoja. Beloved walks right “out of the water and similar to other Water Gods who sojourn on land, Beloved craves water, her signifying force. (221)

When we consider other factors that are traditionally linked to the Orisha that appear in the narrative such as the number seven as the house number and the name of the street address of the haunted house where Sethe lives: Bluestone Road. We are told on the first page of the narrative that “124 was spiteful” (*Beloved* 3). The number of the house 1 – 2 – 4 can be viewed as the sum of the three numbers: seven. Besides being the number associated with the Goddess Yemanjá, the number seven is symbolically associated with the concept of totality or, in the case of diasporic individuals, wholeness. According to Chevalier, the number seven, “Simboliza um ciclo completo, uma perfeição dinâmica...o sentido de uma mudança depois de um ciclo concluído e de uma renovação positiva...Ele simboliza a totalidade do espaço e a totalidade do tempo...representa a totalidade do universo em movimento” (826). This “totality” can be viewed as the cyclical nature of experience, as well as the nature of renovation as presented in the text.

The second part of the street address, the name of the road, has a direct link to the color associated with the Goddess Yemanjá. The colors blue and white are the colors of the Orisha, as well as of the waters over which she reigns. Symbolically, according to Chevalier, the color blue represents otherworldliness and heightened spirituality: “Impávido, indiferente, não estando em nenhum outro lugar a não ser em si mesmo, o azul não é deste mundo; sugere uma ideia de eternidade tranquila e altaneira, que é sobre-humana – ou inumana...O azul e o branco, cores marianas, exprimem o desapego aos

valores deste mundo e o arremesso da alma liberada em direção a Deus” (107-109). As such, the house, possessed by the spirit of Beloved, is a manifestation of the number and color traditionally associated with Yemanjá. The spirit ultimately attains physical representation, thus culminating in the embodiment of the Goddess Yemanjá in the figure of Beloved.

Reverting to the theme of embodiment and ideas of totality and renovation, I point out that Jacqui Alexander’s concept of embodiment as a tool of knowledge comes to mind when considering the physical manifestation or reincarnation of the spirit of the murdered baby Beloved into the body of the young woman Beloved. According to Alexander:

In the realm of the secular, the material is conceived of as tangible while the spiritual is either nonexistent or visible. In the realm of the Sacred, however, the invisible constitutes its presence by a provocation of sorts, by provoking our attention. We see its effects, which enable us to know that it must be there. By perceiving what it does, we recognize its being and by what it does we learn what it is. (307)

The idea of seeing in order to believe with regards to the Sacred is interesting, as it is one of the arguments that many non-believers use to justify their non-belief in the Divine. It is not always easy to believe in a spiritual entity without physically seeing it. However, by, as Alexander points out, observing and recognizing what it does, we are able to learn from it without actually seeing it. The manifestation is what makes us believe. Reverting to *Beloved*, it is only after Beloved makes herself known in physical form, and interacts with Sethe and shares in the recreating of lost (re)memories that the

protagonist is able to fully understand and learn from the otherworldly experience and knowledge of the incarnate spirit.

As the spiritual leader and healer of the diasporic community, Baby Suggs presents characteristics reminiscent of other healers in the works analyzed in this study. Although Baby Suggs does not herself go into a trance or possessional state, she does have a heightened “sixth sense” or intuitive capacity that serves as a forewarning of impending doom. In one particular moment in the narrative, as Baby Suggs is working outside in nature, she senses the “smell” of something dark and sinister:

Baby Suggs leaned back into the peppers and the squash vines with her hoe...She was accustomed to the knowledge that nobody prayed for her – but this free-floating repulsion was new. It wasn’t white-folks – that much she could tell – so it must be colored ones. And then she knew. Her friends and neighbors were angry at her because she had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess. Baby closed her eyes. Perhaps they were right. Suddenly, behind the disapproving odor, way way back behind it, she smelled another thing. Dark and coming. Something she couldn’t get at because the other odor hid it. (*Beloved* 163).

The “excess” to which Baby Suggs refers as the root of the anger of the other members of the community towards her, is in reference to a scene reminiscent of the Biblical scene in which Jesus feeds the five thousand with a mere five loaves and two fish. At this particular moment in the narrative, Baby Suggs manages to coordinate a feast large enough to feed ninety people, “Ninety people who ate so well, and laughed so much, it made them angry” (*Beloved* 161) from a few pies and two hens:

Baby Suggs' three (maybe four) pies grew to ten (maybe twelve). Sethe's two hens became five turkeys. The one block of ice brought all the way from Cincinnati – over which they poured mashed watermelon mixed with sugar and mint to make a punch – became a wagonload of ice cakes for a washtub full of strawberry shrug. 124, rocking with laughter, goodwill and food for ninety, made them angry. Too much, they thought. Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always the center of things? How come she always knows exactly what to do and when? Giving advice; passing messages; healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, cooking, loving, preaching, singing, dancing and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone...it made them mad. Loaves and fishes were His powers – they did not belong to an ex-slave who had probably never carried one hundred pounds to the scale, or picked okra with a baby on her back. Who had never been lashed by a ten-year-old whiteboy as God knows they had...it made them furious. (*Beloved* 161-62)

This scene is particularly telling. Despite benefitting from Baby Suggs' assistance and spiritual guidance, many people in the community resent the fact that her son bought her freedom. They wear the (re)memories of their time as enslaved individuals as traumatic embodiments. Although spirituality works in this context as a binding element amongst the members of the diasporic community, and particularly as a liminal representation of female preaching through Baby Suggs' "Calling" in the Clearing, the

deeply rooted pain of the memory of slavery blinds them as to the good deeds and intentions of Baby Suggs.

Reverting once more to the question of sound and its importance in *Beloved* as a closing theme for this chapter, I would like to turn to the moment at the end of the narrative in which the women of the community come together in the clearing. In this powerful scene, the women use their voices to Call and spiritually cleanse Sethe. In the open natural space typically reserved for Baby Suggs and her alternative calling sessions with the rest of the community, the women congregate to provide spiritual healing to Sethe:

For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (308)

At this particular moment of the narrative, sound takes on a meaningful significance in the life of both Sethe and the women of the community, serving as what Reed calls, a “metaphorical baptismal pool”. However, as Reed notes, “...the necessity of collective action to save the individual also makes Sethe’s baptism a test of communal wholeness. The community’s success is determined in the initial utterance made by the collective of women; for in that moment, Baby Sugg’s transition is complete and communal restoration becomes” (*Beloved* 71). The wordless sacred communal language

permeates the otherworldly realm, ultimately contributing to the salvation of Sethe and the cohesiveness of the greater community as a whole.

Diverging slightly from the wordless communal language mentioned above in *Beloved*, I now turn to the orality and the passing down of stories, as depicted in *Daughters of the Stone*. The idea of history or stories written from a female perspective or “herstories” stems from a critique of the phallogentric historiography or his-story telling present in traditional historical discourse that arose in the late 1960’s and 1970’s. Robin Morgan is credited with coining the term “herstory” in her 1970 work *Sisterhood is Powerful*.

In considering works for this study, I made a conscious effort to prioritize ones with strong female protagonists, or in which historical events and personal stories are narrated from a female perspective. As such, one of the main works chosen for this chapter on the power of the telling of “herstories” is *Daughters of the Stone*. Focusing on the importance of orality and storytelling by the women in the novel, I begin by revisiting John Mbiti’s thoughts on religion in African societies being written “...not on paper but in people’s hearts, minds, oral history, rituals and religious personages like the priests, rainmakers, officiating elders and even kings” (4-5).

As we note in Mbiti’s words on the oral tradition, in African societies orality is something that exceeds mere words on paper; it touches the very soul of the people and the heart of the community. Echoing Mbiti’s ideas on orality, Irene Dias de Oliveira speaks to the base of African narratives as being oral in nature, and positions orality as being the most significant vehicle for the transmission of power. De Oliveira posits that these legends or stories are handed down from one generation to the next, and

continuously recreated depending upon specific historical circumstances. With regards to the elders and their role in maintaining alive the flame of myths and histories, De Oliveira highlights orality as being registered in the “living memory” of the elders:

A oralidade também diz respeito àquilo que não se fala, não se revela, ao ‘não-dito’. A oralidade é o berço regenerador das literaturas sagradas africanas. Literaturas estas registradas nos corpos, nas canções, na arte e na memória viva dos anciãos. Os anciãos na diáspora diante das situações históricas selecionam os ritos, os mitos que melhor respondem à situação de servidão, de dor e sofrimento e de ruptura; recriam novos ancestrais e dão vida a um corpo mitológico possível de dar sentido ao ‘sem-chão’ a que estão submetidas milhões de pessoas em situação de diáspora. (19)

The idea of orality also being something that is not spoken, or whose silence inhabits the liminal realms outside of the dominant discourse, is of great significance when considering Black women’s literature and the silencing of discourse traditionally imposed by the male-dominated society. In *Daughters of the Stone*, one of the “daughters”, Mati, comments on this orality and ancestral language, “I’ve been told that I speak the language of the ancestors, the tongue of the old ways. I don’t choose the words. They come to me from long ago. I don’t think we ever forget the past. We may misplace the memories, but *they* find *us*” (142).

The notion of us “misplacing the memories” takes us back to Toni Morrison’s term “disremembering” presented in *Beloved*, and the oftentimes-intentional act of choosing which memories from the past enter into the present. In one scene where Sethe is talking to Beloved, and is asked about her own mother, she is overcome by memory

and the violence of slavery associated with both the memory and her mother. Sethe comments:

She must of nursed me two or three weeks – that’s the way the others did. Then she went back in rice and I sucked from another owman whose job it was...One thing she did do. She picked me up and carried me behind the smokehouse. Back there she opened up her dress front and lifeted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, ‘This is your ma’am’...She was remembering something she had forgotten she knew. Something privately shameful that had seeped into a slit in her mind right behind the slap on her face and the circled cross. (73)

We note how for most of her life, Sethe had consciously (or unconsciously) chosen to shut the memory of her enslaved mother, as well as her death, out of her mind. It is a “privately shameful” memory that she chooses to “disremember”. However, when the memory floods back into her mind, its presence is a violent affront to her present.

Reverting to *Daughters of the Stone*, on another occasion, Mati talks about the importance of memory and stories: “That’s one way we pass down the souls of old ones. We keep them alive in the stories, which never die as long as someone tells them” (161 – 162). This elderly figure is an example of a *griot* who not only keeps stories alive from one generation to another, but also serves as an adhesive force within the African Diasporic community. The *griot*, however, is used in the New World context in a different manner in which the *griot*’s role is traditionally viewed in West African society.

As B. Omolade points out in *The Rising Song of African-American Women*, the *griot* in the Americas in the form of Black women speaking and creating an historical language all their own takes on the role of historian and keeper of memories and histories: “The Black woman *griot* historian is not a reflection of the ‘*griot*’s’ historical role in West African society where they were usually male and attached to the courts to praise royal lineage. Here the ‘*griot*’ is a symbolic conveyor of African oral and spiritual traditions for the entire community” (105). In considering the women storytellers in *Daughters of the Stone*, *Beloved*, and *La isla bajo el mar*, amongst others, the *griot* joins the community through the use of African orality and spiritual traditions.

Omolade uses to term “*griot* historian” to refer to any scholar in any area or academic discipline who “...connects, uses and understands the methods and insights of both Western and African world-views and historical perspectives to further develop a synthesis” (105). As such, according to Omolade, the “*griot* historian” is comparable to an intellectual warrior who “...carves out new lands of the mind while reaching back to her spiritual and cultural sources, the major one, of course, being Africa with its rivers and memories. One river named for the African *Orisha*, *Oshun*, a symbol of female power and sensuality, is a guiding power for the *griot*-historian’s quest” (105).

In *Daughters of the Stone*, the first page of the work demonstrates the importance of the themes of memories and histories when the narrator announces:

These are the stories. My stories, their stories – just as they were told to my mother and her mother and hers...These are the stories of a time lost to flesh and bones, a time that lives in dreams and memory...these stories

have carried me, and deposited me on the morning of today. They are the stories of how I came to be who I am, where I am. (1)

The importance of the stories of the individuals of African descent in the creation of a collective memory traverses the narrative in *Daughters of the Stone*. In another part of the text, the grandmother Mati tries to explain to her granddaughter, Concha, about the role of stories in our lives, “That’s why the stories are so important, *m’hija*. That’s one way we pass down the souls of the old ones. We keep them alive in the stories, which ever die as long as someone tells them...as long as you pass them on, too, those people will never really die” (161 – 162). In Mati’s words, we observe the importance of ancestors and stories that are important tools that lead us back to a common past and far-removed times in a cyclical and timeless process of remembering and belonging.

Myth can function within the greater diasporic community as a unifying factor. As Brandon points out, due to the African beliefs that accompanied the enslaved individuals arriving in the Americas:

The role of maintaining the habits and the images of past religious experience was probably largely performed by adult women, older men, healers, and diviners. Adult women, whether or not they were priestesses before importation, passed the lore on in the course of child care and rearing...Healers and diviners on the plantations and in the cities could function as religious specialists who worked on behalf of their own relatives and friends and on behalf of others to give guidance, to advice, heal, and settle disputes within the slave community. All of them, adult

women, adult males, healers, and diviners, were in a position to transmit their memory to a younger generation. (135)

In *Daughters of the Stone*, the grandmother Mati also exemplifies the role of elders in the community life, and the temporal interconnectedness of stories what we tell, which join both past, present, and future time.⁸

Mati talks to the importance of the griot, or elderly storyteller of the community, and explains:

The most important thing I learned from Mother Oshun is that stories make us stronger. She told me a whole work in stories and asked me to pass it on to the children so that they wouldn't forget...You know, the most important person in their village was the *griot*. You know why? Because it was the *griot*, an old woman, who collected and held the stories of the people. The people believed if their lost their stories they would lose

⁸ Cyclical time is very prominent in the African cosmological system and is reflected in the timelessness of the stories and myths told by the elders in the society. We can note this same timelessness of African myths in two Cuban works based on the *Patakís*, or sacred stories of the Santería religion: *Kele Kele* (1987) by Excilia Saldaña and *Afro-Cuban Myths: Yemayá and Other Orishás* (1938) by Romulo Lachatañeré. Other themes previously cited in this study such as memory, orality and history are easily noted throughout the various interpretations and versions of the *patakís* such as, for example, in the statement: “Así termina la historia que hoy te vine a contar; ayer me la dijo mi abuela, mañana tú la repetirás”.

their path, their way of knowing themselves. They believed that if you forgot where you came from, you wouldn't understand where you were or where you were going. (163)

In traditional African community, the elders therefore are the ones who maintain the oral tradition: keeping histories alive in the collective imaginary of their community, which explains the African proverb: “every time an elder dies a library burns to the ground”. In *Daughters of the Stone*, the Orishás and the Afro-Cuban religion Santería serve as forces that lead to the creation of a diasporic collective identity. As such, the religion works as both a bridge with the ancestors and narrators as well as a path along which they travel on their search for their own identities in the world. The spiritual and cultural elements of a community are kept alive in the memories of the group through intergenerational transmission; or rather, by being handed down from one generation to the next.

The last part of this particular section of the chapter reflects on the passing on or intergenerational transmission of stories amongst the women of *Daughters of the Stone*, as well as the role of the “curandera” or spiritual healer within the diasporic community as depicted in the novel. The points raised and analyzed in this particular section are fruit of a personal interview conducted with *Daughters of the Stone* author, Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa. Continuing with the idea of “passing on” of stories, in the novel the stories are so much more than ways in which to keep the memories of family or larger community alive. Drawing on the figure of the *griot* as an embodiment of universal knowledge, I contend that, in the context of the novel, they can be understood as both manifestations of

the Divine and defining elements of cultural identification. According to Llanos-Figueroa:

In many societies, storytelling is of paramount importance because it provides an intimate and self-sustaining reality in the face of the opposing and often destructive dominant narrative of the society as a whole, whether this is a community of ethnic Russians or shtetl Jews or Basque freedom fighters or Native American shamans or gypsy travelers or African slaves. (2014)

Within the African Diaspora, memory and the retelling of myths, stories and histories contribute to communal cohesiveness and connect individuals with both their pasts as well as with the Divine. However, some cultural elements, such as certain religious practices and beliefs, serve as cohesive elements within the marginalized diasporic communities, are ridiculed or even persecuted by the dominant society. Turning once more to the ideas of Llanos-Figueroa on the subject of myths and their ability to serve as tools of resistance in the novel, the author affirms:

Because these stories are introduced at an early age, they become a foundation on which to build before the oppressive society intrudes to place its own definitions on a given sub-culture. In the presence of racist or classist or xenophobic forces, these stories provide a strong sense of self and appreciation for the cultural markers that may not be appreciated by the dominant culture. (2014)

Speaking specifically to the case of the African Puerto-Rican community in the context of *Daughters of the Stone*, Llanos-Figueroa highlights, “In this case, the Afro-

Boricua community was under attack. Their beliefs were, and in many ways are still, considered superstitious, backwards and heathenous. By telling the stories, the women in the novel engage in another type of resistance, a weapon to reinforce their survival on many levels” (2014). Echoing the ideas of Llanos-Figueroa on the role of storytelling as an alternative form of resistance, we return to Santiago da Silva’s thoughts on “afro-feminine” literature as textual protest and denouncement:

A literatura afro-feminina, semelhante ao processo histórico de consolidação da literatura negra, se destaca não só com um tom de protesto e de denúncia, mas, sobretudo, por reescrever, cantar e ficcionalizar mundos, dramas, sonhos, experiências pessoais e socioculturais que lembram as memórias literárias de antepassada/os e recriam novas palavras e escritas femininas negras. (200)

Speaking to the importance of the women storytellers, *griots* and mentors in *Daughters of the Stone*, Llanos-Figueroa cites the chapter entitled “Old Friends,” when two elderly figures, Mrs. Goldberg and Mrs. Jackson, share their stories, and insist that Carisa share hers. In this act, according to Llanos-Figueroa, “they are speaking to the universality of this storytelling ritual. They are also teaching her to honor her past and situate herself within it” (2014).

The author also points out the chapter called “Porch Stories,” in which women sit telling stories in a circle and one of the daughters, Carisa, absorbs the ageless tales. The circular form of the rockers in which the women sit can be viewed as, in the words of Llanos-Figueroa, “...a womb from which the child draws nourishment and can start piecing together a clear sense of whom and what she is” (2014). After listening to stories

on such themes as love, death, and community, Carisa comes to the realization that, “...she has a responsibility to pass on the stories to others that they may learn as she has. In a sense, they have shared her past and now it was time for her to start constructing her future” (Llanos-Figueroa 2014).

Departing slightly from the theme of stories and myths, the last topic we consider in this section on *Daughters of the Stone* is the response of women of African descent, such as in their roles of curanderas, to their positions as slaves within patriarchal societies of the Americas during the centuries depicted in the novel. Specifically, in the case of curanderas or other “spiritually gifted” women, we observe an even deeper level of transmission through the passing on of collective knowledge in the form of cultural memory. The *curanderas* use collective healing, both spiritual and physical, for their own empowerment, as well as in response to the oppression of the institution of slavery. Focusing in particular on the character of Mati and the idea of her representing a “liminal” character, I will examine the role of women of African descent as mediators or mediums between “two worlds” in the narrative.

In *Daughters of the Stone*, spirituality and the spiritual gifts of healing, intuition and mediumship are intertwined in the narratives of the five generations of Afro-Boricua “daughters”. According to Llanos-Figueroa, “Within the context of the *Daughters of the Stone*, spirituality is the bedrock of individual and collective resistance to the institution of slavery”. For many Africans, especially women, spirituality offered, in the words of Llanos-Figueroa, “...a more internal, individual and underground method of resistance” (2014). Through the process of syncretization previously explored in chapter three of this study, the use of spirituality as a resistance movement “...was effective in not only

maintaining tradition and therefore, self-identity, but also in uniting the Africans on emotional and psychological levels against their oppressors.” (Llanos-Figueroa 2014).

Unfortunately, though, modernization lead to questioning of age-old traditions and knowledge, causing “...members of the black communities (to) begin to assimilate the western notions and to doubt the very traditions that have helped them survive the system that has robbed them of their freedom” (Llanos-Figueroa 2014). The author highlights two main elements in the narrative that speak to the influence of spirituality: the stone and the Goddess Oshun. According to Llanos-Figueroa,

The stone is symbolic of the spiritual tradition that is literally passed on from one generation to the next, coming to the aid of each character as she faces major crises in her life. It accompanies Carisa on her final voyage. The character of Mother Oshun inhabits the lives of all the protagonists whether or not they are entirely aware of her presence. At the end of the novel, we see a total integration as Carisa leaves to find the source of the stories. The last image is one of her recognizing her own face in the face of The Lady, a manifestation of Oshun, who has always lived in Carisa’s dreams throughout. (2014)

When we consider each of the five daughters in the novel, varying factors determine the depth or type of relationship to spirituality of each woman. The author pinpoints seven key factors that contribute to the different sacred relationships:

“...proximity to African life, length of time in western society, decline of plantation society, rise of cities, level of education, need to be accepted by the larger society and the need for self-identity”. As women of African descent, the daughters are forced to

navigate the turbulent waters of diasporic spirituality, which is in constant conflict with the opposing monolithic blanket of the colonial religion spread over the various societies of the Americas. As such, we observe how the characters occupy liminal positions between the two opposing worldviews or as Llanos-Figueroa observes, “The characters stand at the line of demarcation between the traditional African ways of knowing (intuitive, abstract and spiritual realm) and the superimposed European world view (objective, concrete, physical reality)” (2014).

Fela, the original daughter and only one of the women born in Africa, brings within her the binding connection to the Goddess Oshun. Throughout Fela’s narrative, the struggles she faces within the institution of slavery in Puerto Rico, as well as her own personal conflict related to conception and heeding the Goddess’s warning and decisions made ultimately lead to her demise. Speaking to the opposing forces that constitute the complex relationships amongst the various women in the novel, the author affirms:

These opposing forces create the contention that drives the mother/daughter relationship as well as the relationships of these women to their communities. Each character experiences this struggle in a very different way. But ultimately, it is the glue of this spirituality that sustains each one in her hour of need and it is this glue that provides for continuity over the generations. (Llanos-Figueroa 2014)

In analyzing each of the “daughters” and her own relationship with the sacred, as well as her negotiation of personal and spiritual identity, we note that the Goddess Oshun enters the lives of each of the five women following the death of Fela, and simultaneous birth of her daughter, Mati. Her child lives, but Fela passes away after giving birth next to

the river. The author points out that of all the women protagonists, “Mati is perhaps the strongest example and proponent of the African tradition in the novel. She follows the rituals and devotes her life to using her gift to help others. Eventually she risks beloved husband and adored daughter to her overriding faith in her role as *curandera* and spiritual leader” (2014).

It is Mati, who exemplifies my concept of liminal figure previously established in this study. As a *curandera*, she is a woman “between worlds”: both the physical and the spiritual, as well as the old world beliefs of Africa and those of the New World. The complicated waters Mati is forced to navigate as a spiritual healer are deeply rooted in the beliefs of her ancestors and in her interactions with the older and younger generations of the diasporic community in which she lives. Llanos-Figueroa points out:

While Mati is respected for her gifts by the older generation, some in her community are suspicious and fearful of the gift that they don’t understand. Young *Ladinos*, who never knew the freedom of life in their mother country, only see through the lens of slavery. They increasingly look to the ‘modern’ western paradigms for answers to their problems, turning to Mati only when all else fails. Her passing is symbolic of the passing of the old ways. While spirituality survives, it will have a very different face in the future. (2014)

Without going too deeply into a character study on the remaining “daughters” in the novel, I highlight that each daughter has her own level of spiritual awareness and acceptance or willingness to embrace and embody the ancestral knowledge and teachings of the African diasporic religion practiced by Mati. Concha is the character who, “turns

her back on her mother's teachings," which she considers "superstitious and backwards" and that "represent the African ways of knowing that she totally rejects" (Llanos-Figueroa 2014). After her own personal struggles, Concha comes to the realization that the remedy for her "years of alienation and the resulting mental illness" is the traditional African spirituality of her ancestors. According to the author, "Concha realizes that until she makes peace with the rejected tradition, she can't move forward in her healing. With the help of western treatment, she begins to see that much of her illness comes from the denial of part of her essential self" (2014). By not being willing to accept her traditional African spiritual "roots", she develops a mental turmoil which is only healed once she accepts this integral part of her African diasporic identity.

Elena and her daughter Carisa are the last two generations of daughters and equally represent the influence of modern life on traditional beliefs in the context of the African diaspora, and the different ways of looking to the past to give meaning of the present. Elena, whom the author positions as "the ultimate crossover character who builds her life on science and modernity", ultimately looks to the "dormant tradition" of African spirituality to bring her back from the brink of a nervous breakdown. Llanos Figueroa describes this modern retake on traditional spirituality as a "morphing" in to a "consistent stream of dreaming". It is through Carisa's onirical visions, reminiscent of the trance-like state into which mediums frequently enter while channeling messages or knowledge from the spirit world, that she is able to "provide the answers that have been forgotten by Elena's conscious mind. The ways of knowing aren't lost; they are reconfigured into a different form for a new generation. And when this is presented to Elena, she recognizes it as quickly as she would have recognized Mati's face".

Carisa faces similar rejection or criticism of modern society inasmuch as her spiritual “ways of knowing”. Llanos-Figueroa points out that it is only when this modern *griot* decides to return “...to Concha’s world to seek answers and finds that the answers are a combination of the traditional and the western” that she is able to “...reconcile the two and....become whole—an educated, bilingual, bicultural storyteller who fully embraces and celebrates all aspects of herself”.

In their own particular manner, each of the “daughters” in *Daughters of the Stone* negotiates her identity and place in society through varying levels and manifestations of the Sacred. Turning to the act of storytelling to keep traditions alive, the various generations of daughters in the novel search for their own diasporic identities, with traditional African beliefs as their guide. As women of the African diaspora, the daughters are forced to recover missing elements of their past in order to reconstruct new identities in their present diasporic settings. As such, African Diaspora Spirituality serves as the root or, turning to ideas previously set forth on the baobab tree, the many root-like branches from which new spiritual identities and meaning blossomed in the New World through the intertwined connections of the skyward reaching upside-down roots of the Sacred African tree.

***Um Defeito de Cor* and *Sortes de Villamor*: Echoes of Spirits and Spiritual Healing**

In this third section of the chapter, we turn to two narratives related to crossings, embarkations and journeys: *Um defeito de cor* by Ana Maria Gonçalves, and an additional text chosen for this chapter, *Sortes de Villamor* by Nilma Lacerda. In addition to engaging with themes such as spirituality, slavery and the importance of education in

the lives of both female protagonists, the factor of greatest prominence in both works is the strength of the self-sufficient, resolute and intelligent female protagonists. In one of the works, the first-person narrator relates the events of her life through the power of memories that span over eight decades and the American and African continents. In the other, the narrator narrates the history of one of the protagonists, in an attempt to fill in the gaps and holes in the memory of the stranger whose destiny or “fortune” took her to Brazil during the nineteenth century.

In regard to the theme of orality, I would like to point out that orality and the power of oral tradition transcends mere words on a page. It is, within the African religious worldview, a human truth that penetrates much deeper into the hearts and minds of Africans. It is the basis of African narratives, and is comprised of knowledge handed down from one generation to the next. Parrinder comments on the role of memory in the intergenerational passing down of spiritual knowledge and beliefs: “But where there is no literature there is commonly a retentive memory, and many modern practices repeat the traditions of generations” (17). The reference here is to orality as opposed to written literature as the medium through which memories and ancestral beliefs are traditionally shared in African society. Oral tradition not only provides African women in Diaspora with a path upon which to seek out their ancestral roots, but also provides them with a canvas upon which they can create their own collective existence. The importance of this oral tradition can be noted in the form of, as previously discussed in this study, the *Patakís* or sacred myths, spiritual healing remedies, as well as in stories told and passed down intergenerationally within the community.

Sortes de Villamor, published in 2010 by Nilma Lacerda, narrates the story of Branca, a French woman at the beginning of the 19th Century in Bahia. After surviving the shipwreck of the voyage that was to bring her family to Brazil, Branca is taken in and cared for by Ismê Catureba, an African woman who is also the owner of a “healing and predictions” house in Salvador. The narrator of the story is Caim de Node, who is a fugitive slave who earns his keep with his “writing stand”. The themes of destiny, gender, memory, history, race and spirituality are very prevalent throughout the narrative, especially that of spirituality. The work also highlights the question of oral tradition versus written word in the manner in which Ismê and Branca understand the correct manner to spread or propagate the messages or predictions received by the spirit guides. In Branca’s European worldview, the written word is the way in which to pass along messages, whereas Ismê relies on her traditional African worldview of orality.

Blanche de Villemaur, or Branca de Villamor as she became known in Brazil, comes from a noble Family in France that left the country for Brazil in a possible attempt to flee from the French Revolution. Brazil has historically been a place of interest for the French due to the natural resources such as *pau-brasil* that A Terra de Santa Cruz offered during that time. As such, *Sortes de Villamor* depicts the Brazilian colonial society and the struggle of the unjustly treated and the paths that lead to destiny: each person’s personal destiny or fortune in life.

In a study of the French imaginary and the historical context of the story, but not on the story specifically, Marisa Midori Deaecto comments on the importance of travel literature of French explorers and religious figures such as André Thévet in the construction of the image of a “savage” Brazil: “Assim, a imaginação do europeu era

tomada por homens nus com a pele carmim, envoltos em uma natureza tão exuberante quanto perigosa, por abrigar cobras enormes, monstruosas, propensas a engolir um navio inteiro com todas as pessoas dentro” (142).

It is through the conversations between Branca with Caim that we discover that her Family had an *imprimerie* in France, and that books and written knowledge comprised a vital part of her life. It is from her contact with books, such as the previously mentioned travel narratives, that Branca constructed her own ideas about Brazil that were very representative of those of many French people of her day: “Branca sabia onde ficava essa terra que aparecia em vários dos livros de viagens que tinha lido com o pai. Tinha visto muitos desenhos de nossos animais e de nossas plantas, sabia do calor, da luz que perturbava os estrangeiros” (*Sortes* 25).

Branca comes from a lettered world in which knowledge is handed down in the form of the written word. It is from this need to communicate and to express herself through the written word that Branca makes the decision to write the “fortunes” on strips of paper to sell to the people of the community. In *O negro na civilização brasileira*, Arthur Ramos speaks to the importance of Africans in the Brazilian culture following their forced arrival in Bahia around the middle of the 16th Century:

Supõe-se que os primeiros Negros chegaram a Bahia por volta de 1538, o que prova que o Negro, cedo, tornou-se um elemento na evolução do povo brasileiro. A exploração das minas, a criação da economia agrária e a conquista do interior, tudo dependeu da colaboração do Negro. Desde o início, o Negro tornou-se um fator decisivo na existência do Brasil” (20-21).

Ramos' comments are both telling and indicative of realities portrayed in the narratives analyzed in this study. Focusing primarily on the historical moment upon which Ramos comments, the presence of the African was fundamental to the success of the patriarchal societies in the Americas.

In the first part of *Sortes de Villamor*, Caim briefly mentions the subject of race and feelings of dislocation in the first chapter of the narrative. The narrator, while recounting the story of the French woman, comments on the racist ideas present in the society in which he lives stating:

Os brancos não consideram que nós, os de pele negra, tenhamos nossas histórias d'além-mar, se quer consideram que sejamos d'além-mar. Na ideia deles viemos para cá sem raízes, que plantas não somos. Mas o corpo está plantado na terra, de todo jeito, e é lá que procura o sustento da alma, a música para acompanhar o trabalho, a dança que a natureza desenha.

(Sortes 28)

Continuing with his discussion on discrimination of the Africans in Bahia within the context of the novel, Caim affirms that the slave-owners refuse to admit that Blacks are foreigners in the country, stating:

Mas nós o somos, e assim continuamos após três, quatro gerações. Somos almas arrancadas do corpo. Deixamos para trás o corpo da mãe, a África que nos deu a negrura da pele, esse nariz tão largo, o colchão de ar nos cabelos, e fomos depositados em terras que não careciam de filhos como nós. Somos estrangeiros em trânsito, dispersos pelo mundo, vagando por

terras alheias, sabendo que não voltaremos a nosso lugar de origem.

(*Sortes* 27 – 28)

We note in Caim's words feelings of uprootedness and a desire for belonging, while at the same time a longing for the homeland of African.

The feeling the narrator expresses of having been literally “uprooted” from a place of origin to wandering aimlessly in foreign lands is depicted even more clearly in the second work of this chapter *Um Defeito de Cor*. In this text, we intend to demonstrate how the narrator/protagonist narrates with the greatest care and detail her brutal capture in her home country in Africa, her horrific and inhumane crossing on the slave ship, and the many paths that she chooses or “is chosen” to follow in search of her own destiny both within and outside of Brazil. Likewise, in *Daughters of the Stone*, *Beloved*, and *La isla bajo el mar*, all of the main protagonists are forced to confront situations of uprootedness and the search for or recreation of personal identity in the New World.

Another factor that is very prominent in *Sortes de Villamor*, as well as in *Um Defeito de Cor*, is the city and the participation of individuals of African descent in the day-to-day activities that take place around the city. The narrator offers not just images of the city and the scenery, but details that portray the cultural richness and presence of the African culture within the city of Salvador through the cultural celebrations, typical foods, and even smells that invites the reader to embark on her/his own literary journey into the world of the characters: “Os batuques dos campos mais próximos escorregam pelas bordas da noite, chegam à alma de quem sente saudade da liberdade que não conheceu. Os cheiros dos engenhos nos dias de feira, melado, rapadura, e o suor, o suor dos escravos melado ao sangue” (*Sortes* 36).

The “gift” or spiritual talent of the protagonist in *Sortes de Villamor*, Ismê Catureba, is related to nature and, above all, the power of the wind. Ismê is a freed slave who decides to open a home to assist the many children who live on the streets around the city of Salvador. In addition to her social work of caring for the neglected children, Ismê offers healing and “fortune readings” for the people of the neighborhood and the greater city of Salvador. Caim comments: “Ismê conhecia a erva para cada mal ou para cada bem. Colhia folha ou raiz na hora certa, sabia dos preparos adequados, da forma de macerar, secar ou ferver. Não cobrava pelos serviços, as pessoas pagavam conforme o valor do bem recebido. Mas Ismê também ouvia os ventos. Ouvia os ventos e ditava destino da gente” (43). Like Mati in *Daughters of the Stone*, Ismê also relies on her traditional healing powers as a *curandeira* to help the people of her community.

The gift of “hearing the winds” to predict people’s fortunes represents something even more significant for Esmê, as it is a way in which for her to maintain a connection with her ancestors in Africa: “Os ventos de adivinhar abriam-se como um presente do mar que separava os dois mundos, o mar entre Brasil e África. A voz de nossa mãe chegava, firme e baixa, no meio do destino de quem estava na frente dela” (43). Ismê, in a similar fashion to the way in which Kehinde in *Um defeito de cor*, is enslaved and taken to Brazilian shores. The narrator comments on Ismê’s “gift” that appeared in her life when she was still a child in Angola, and how she was unable to use her gift to hear or predict her own future:

Cria de Angola, Ismê aprendeu com a avó a conhecer a força e o saber dos ventos. Diziam tudo que se perguntasse a eles, era só saber ouvir. Os ventos vinham, entravam pelos ouvidos, deixavam lá dentro a voz do

destino...Ela não ouviu seu destino de ser arrancada da terra e da família, e enfiada, ainda mocinha, no navio negreiro. E os ventos falavam e ela ouvia tanto, naquela época! A avó saberia? Teria ouvido a sina da neta e guardado para si, calada na dor do que não se aguenta, e não se pode mudar? (*Sortes* 44)

With the arrival of Branca at Ismê's home, the healer is advised by the spirit voices in the winds that the French woman is to inherit her home and to continue with her services of helping people by predicting and giving words of advice on their futures. Branca, in her Eurocentric thinking, does not show the least bit of interest in developing the spiritual gift of listening to the voices of the wind, and even uses the word "witch" against Ismê to describe her supernatural gift. Branca explains that she is scared of becoming a "witch", because in her homeland witches were condemned to death for practicing their secret and spiritual gifts of nature:

Não queria ser como Ismê, na terra dela muita gente era queimada na fogueira porque mexia com essas coisas. Não acreditava em bruxas, *les sorcières* eram apenas mulheres que sabiam dos segredos da natureza e os usavam para curar uns males, para causar outros, talvez. Mas a maior parte das pessoas via um perigo nessas mulheres e por isso muitas eram presas, condenadas à morte. Não queria isso, de jeito nenhum. (*Sortes* 49)

Branca believes that the destiny or "fortune" that Ismê wishes to bestow on her is not hers to keep. She does not accept Ismê's suggestion that perhaps it was her destiny to end up in Brazil. Branca wishes to create her own destiny, instead of following the one that Ismê insists is hers to be followed. Caim narrates a conversation with Branca on the

subject of destiny and creating one's own destiny: "Vosmecê quer inventar sua sorte? O destino quem faz é Deus. Ela me respondeu: Não, nada de Deus. Sorte é a gente que faz. E eu, eu preciso inventar uma sorte" (*Sortes* 55).

Branca's idea is to use her knowledge of books and the written word to pen phrases or poems offering words of inspiration or advice on small pieces of paper, and sell these "fortunes" to the people of the community and greater city of Salvador. Upon hearing about Branca's idea, Caim responds: "Vosmecê não quer seguir o trabalho de Ismê, e o que quer fazer não é muito diferente" (*Sortes* 57). Branca even uses the word "barbaric" or "savage" to refer to Ismê's gift which, according to the French woman: "eram dons das divindades e da natureza, costumes do povo dela" (*Sortes* 59). In the French woman's opinion, the fact that she uses book knowledge to offer advice in written form to people is something very different from and more dignified or civilized than the type of advice handed out by Ismê using her gift of hearing spirit voices in the wind and her knowledge of traditional African healing practices. This tension between oral tradition and other forms of transmitting knowledge is reminiscent of the tensions between Mati, Cheo and Concha in *Daughters of the Stone*.

Branca does not have the gift of hearing spirit voices in the wind, but she does have another gift that allows her to offer premonitions about the future: the gift of dreams. From the day that the French woman arrives at Ismê's home, she suffers from terrible nightmares that torment her nights, as well as those of the other members of the household. In the same manner in which Ismê receives warnings about future happenings from the winds, in Branca's dreams she receives the premonition of Ismê's death. In one

particular scene, that depicts the reality of African-inspired religious practices and customs on the *terreiro*, Ismê goes into a trance and receives the spirit of an ancestor:

“Tinha muita gente esperando quando ela chegou, já vestida com as roupas brancas, de rendas e fitas, o turbante também branco na cabeça. O atabaque soava forte, e assim que mãe entrou na roda a dança foi acontecendo, no ritmo que os ventos davam, a areia cegando, batendo nas caras e nos corpos. Mãe entrou na roda, sacudida de tremuras. De repente, ela levantou o corpo, pôs os braços para o alto, a cabeça ficou mole como folha de palmeira, e entrou a girar forte, um pião na roda de gente. Caiu logo em transe, os olhos esbugalhados, a voz um ouriço-do-mar, espetando palma e pé. A mãe era outra, a fala também, misturada à voz que vinha da entidade. Receitou ervas, disse respostas para as pessoas que se ajoelhavam de cabeça baixa. (*Sortes* 61- 62)

We observe the importance of music and dance, as well as sound and voice, in this depiction of the spiritual possessional trance into which Ismê falls while healing people of the community.

The narrator explains that “os encantados” or spirit voices are the voice of the past and the future. They help people to open paths and show the path to be taken: “Estão em todo lugar, e dentro da gente. Vieram antes de nós, nos deixaram no lugar deles. Por isso, têm o poder de ver a sina, têm o direito de ditar a vontade” (*Sortes* 63). Returning to the ideas of Edson Carneiro previously cited in this chapter, and mentioning also other works of this study such as that of Marta Moreno Vega, and Mayra Montero, we observe how in African Diasporic Religions, the spirit “takes over” or “possesses” the adherent, using

her/him as an instrument with which to communicate with humans, particularly women practitioners. This spiritual connection serves as the bridge with which to penetrate the realm of the ancestors, and helps to solidify the role of the medium as a mediator of worlds and someone who is able to (re)establish connection with cultural roots and long-lost cultures in Africa.

The location where Ismê carries out her sacred activities is particularly interesting, as it is not within the traditional enclosed space of the “*terreiro*”. It is, moreover, an open space near the beach where the breezes from Africa and the voices of the ancestors are able to flow more easily across the same oceans of the Atlantic that brought the African ancestors to Brazil, “O calundu de Ismê não se dava em terreiro fechado, mas em um canto recolhido da praia, com cerca baixa de bamboo e no abrigo da vegetação” (*Sortes* 61). We learn that Ismê does not charge anything for her spiritual services to help the other members of the community. However, she does accept other items in exchange for her curing abilities, such as fruits and vegetables. In this act, we note the traditional African bartering system at work amongst the members of the community, but also the community’s role in cementing African-inspired beliefs and practices in a New World environment.

At one point in the narrative, Ismê is arrested and charged with being a “witch” and for practicing “black magic” on her sacred land. The narrator ironically makes the point that the same police officials who arrest Ismê have also sought out her “services” on the sacred land and have received her spiritual help in resolving their problems. With this observation by Caim, we note the inference to the religious persecution suffered by many Blacks during the same period in Brazil. In an attempt to subjugate and repress any

“pagan” or “low” religion, the government took necessary measures to prohibit both the worship sessions and even group meetings (non-religious in nature) of individuals of African descent. As we can observe in *Sortes de Villamor*, *Daughters of the Stone* and *La isla bajo el mar*, the possessional act and ritual practices in themselves both affirm the mediator’s spiritual importance within the confines of the specific diasporic religious environment, and bestows upon the individual the voice and subjectivity oftentimes negated within the larger patriarchal and Eurocentric society.

Caim is a member of the Brotherhood of Saint Benedict the Moor and dreams of joining a “*quilombo*”, or fugitive slave community, and, even though he is a free man, to fight for the rights of other enslaved Africans. He ultimately joins the *quilombo* of the Kalunga who, according to the narrator, were a people to whom ancestral worship and freedom were of utmost importance: “um povo que era sempre elogiado pela consciência da liberdade e reverência aos ancestrais. Vindos quase todos do Congo ou de Angola, consideravam que se render à escravidão era trair a memória dos que os antecederam e procuravam preservar costumes e ritos da terra deixada para trás” (*Sortes* 116).

Caim’s reference to this particular Brotherhood highlights the significance of the “*Confrarias*” (fraternal orders), and “*Irmandades*” (brotherhoods) for individuals of African descent within the patriarchal colonial society of the 19th Century in Brazil. As important religious-based groups within the Catholic Church, Roger Bastide affirms:

The Negro or mulatto brotherhoods, modeled on those of the whites...reflect the church’s policy of uniting the Africans, or their descendants, within its bosom and beneath the Cross in order to incorporate them as a distinct entity in the vast religious community of

Brazil. It was within these organizations, the Brotherhood of São Benedito (Saint Benedict the Moor) or of Our Lady of the Rosary, that assimilation and religious syncretism would develop. But it would be a multilevel syncretism...By permitting the blacks to unite in brotherhoods, the church promoted the syncretism of Catholicism with African religion rather than the Catholicization of the blacks. (53-56)

It is out of this separate space that syncretism occurs, transforming Catholicism into a new African diasporic version of both traditional African and traditional Catholic beliefs and practices.

At the end of the narrative, Caim returns to Ismê's home after having a vision of her in a flash of lightning in the middle of the forest. Instead of finding the mother-like figure Ismê in the house, he finds Branca. She tells Caim about Ismê's death, and how she expanded the reach of the school by offering to teach children "de todo tipo", or all kinds of children. She gives Caim a book as a present: the first one he has ever received in his entire life. In these scenes, we observe the question of alphabetization and the importance of reading and writing in the lives of individuals of African descent in *Sortes de Villamor*, which also appears as a topic of great significance in the lives of the protagonists and narrators of other works included in this study, such as *Um defeito de cor* and, to an extent, *Daughters of the Stone*.

Turning once again to our main text, *Um defeito de cor* by Afro-Brazilian author Ana Maria Gonçalves, we now focus on the presence of spirit voices and the echoes of spirits that resound in the dreams of Kehinde throughout the length of the narrative. In addition to the spiritual healing afforded by the presence of spirit voices in the dreams of

Kehinde, in this section we also explore Black women's writing as a tool with which to give a voice to histories, tales of resistance, identities and ancestral ties previously untold or absent from the dominant discourse.

As previously noted in this study, in *Um defeito de cor*, the main protagonist Kehinde constructs the memorialistic narrative based on her own personal experiences that take place over a span of eighty years and two continents. Primarily, in spite of her human defects, errors committed, and paths taken by the protagonist throughout her life, Kehinde is a strong Black woman, who can be viewed as a role model due to her resilience, determination and intelligence that served as guiding posts throughout her long and productive life.

The protagonist is never depicted as a seductive or physically beautiful woman. Moreover, her intelligence and character transform her into a "seductive" character within the context of the novel. As Santiago de Silva notes on Black women's literature and the characters commonly encountered within these narratives "É constante, na produção literária de autoria feminina negra, o desenho de vozes e personagens negras sedutoras, não pelos seus aspectos físicos, mas pela sua força, coragem e decisão pela conquista da emancipação feminina negra individual e coletiva" (100). In considering the innumerable acts of courage, strength and resolution demonstrated by the main protagonist throughout the narrative, it is the seductiveness of this fascinating African woman who keeps us eagerly turning the pages of this nearly thousand-paged novel.

In the prologue to the novel, the author narrates that *Um defeito de cor* is the fruit of historical documents and texts and legends, as well as the author's own creativity on

the subject of the possible life of the enslaved mother of one of the greatest Brazilian poets, Luís Gama:

Esta pode não ser uma simples história, pode não ser a história de uma anônima, mas sim uma escrava muito especial, alguém de cuja existência não se tem confirmação, pelo menos até o momento em que escrevo esta introdução. Especula-se que ela pode ser apenas uma lenda, inventada pela necessidade que os escravos tinham de acreditar em heróis, ou, no caso, em heroínas, que apareciam para salvá-los da condição desumana em que viviam. Ou então uma lenda inventada por um filho...O que você vai ler agora talvez seja a história da mãe deste homem respeitado e admirado pelas maiores inteligências de sua época...Mas também pode não ser. (7)

The author alerts the reader to the fact that even though her text may not be the history of the great Brazilian poet, there are in fact many dates, names, and coincidences that invite the reader to ponder on the veracity (or falsehood) of the work. The name of the great poet in question is that of the Brazilian poet of African descent, Luís Gama, and the history is contended to be that of his mother, the enslaved African Luísa Mahin, who was thought to be a princess in her homeland. According to Authur Ramos:

Luísa Mahin, que se julga ter sido princesa na África, era mãe do poeta negro Luís Gama...Não há documentos precisos a seu respeito. Sabe-se que seus pais eram reis no Continente negro. Arrancada violentamente do seu meio e transportada para o Brasil, como escrava, Luísa foi um destacado elemento de conspiração entre os negros oprimidos. Sua casa, na Bahia, tornou-se um dos fortes redutos de chefes da grande revolta de

1835. Ninguém sabe o seu fim. Mas o seu nome permaneceu na história e na lenda como um grande símbolo do valor da Mulher Negra no Brasil.

(59)

At one point in Kehinde's memorial text, she is sold to José Carlos to serve on his plantation in Itaparica, Bahia. When she arrives on the plantation, she is told to sleep in the smaller slave quarters with the other enslaved individuals who work in the plantation house. The first task she is given is to accompany José Carlos' daughter, Mistress Maria Clara. The Mistress of the plantation, Ana Felipe, is a cruel and vindictive woman whose attitude to education and the intellectual capacity of Blacks is that "cabeça de preto mal dava para aprender a falar direito, quanto mais para ler e escrever" (*Defeito* 56).

This statement by the plantation Mistress is somewhat ironic or contradictory, however, as the person responsible for teaching the mistress is an African Muslim, Fatumbi. He is someone who ends up being of great importance in the life of Kehinde after she earns her freedom. After meeting the serious and academic man, the narrator comments that Fatumbi was, "...o primeiro preto que vi tratando branco como um igual" (56). It is interesting to note, as pointed out by Gilberto Freyre, that: "É que nas senzalas da Bahia de 1835 havia talvez maior número de gente sabendo ler e escrever do que no alto das casas-grandes" (382). The narrator also learns how to read and write with Fatumbi, and values reading as a door to other worlds and realities. Kehinde shares her knowledge and love of reading by offering classes to children, always with the understanding that education makes an individual better equipped to defend her/himself against the wrongs oftentimes imposed by society.

According to Viana Filho: “Nos sobrados, nos engenhos, nos campos, toda atividade seria absorvida pela massa escrava, importada da África, e cuja inteligência facilmente apreendia os conhecimentos necessários ao serviço para que era designada... Os senhores de engenho amoleciam preguiçosamente, enquanto o negro trabalhava” (184-85). In *Um defeito de cor*, Kehinde echoes the ideas of Viana Filho and affirms that “mais valia a inteligência do que a força. Mesmo porque inteligência era algo que os senhores de escravos não imaginavam que fôssemos capazes de possuir” (Defeito 152). This statement regarding the mental capability and intelligence of Africans who arrived in conditions of slavery in Brazil is particularly significant considering the amazing achievements of Kehinde throughout the novel as both a slave and a free woman.

In a similar fashion to Branca, in *Sortes de Villamor*, Kehinde also has the gift of intuition or premonitions in her dreams. Likewise, in the *Daughters of the Stone*, onirical premonitions are of great significance in the lives of the daughters. The deceased members of her family appear in onirical images, mainly her grandmother and twin sister, and offer her warnings or advice on situations that might arise in her life. Contrary to the manner in which Caim narrates the happenings of Branca and Ismê in *Sortes de Villamor*, in *Um Defeito de Cor* Kehinde constructs her own personal memorialistic narrative, based on her own experiences, thoughts and fears. Spirituality, as presented by Kehinde, serves as both as source of inspiration and rememory.

The Altar of My Soul and The Spirits Dance Mambo: Orishas, Pataki's and Identity

The focus of fourth and final section of this chapter is the figure of the divine woman within the context of the African Diaspora, and the role of spirituality in the negotiation of her self-identity. Specifically, I focus on one of the main authors of my study, Dr. Marta Moreno Vega, and explore her fascinating journey to spiritual self-discovery from a little girl surrounded by the spiritual influence of her *Abuela* as a child living in El Barrio in New York, as depicted in *The Spirits Dance Mambo* and cited in chapter four of this study, to her initiation as a Santería priestess in her spiritual memoir, *The Altar of My Soul*. As mentioned in my previous chapter, some of the ideas presented in following are fruit of a personal interview conducted with the author on themes of spirituality, storytelling and identity within the context of the Santería religion and the greater African Diaspora.

As described in great detail by Dr. Marta Moreno Vega in her spiritual memoir *The Altar of My Soul*, Santería focuses on the intricate relationship of initiates with the Orishas, as well as with the extended spiritual and communal family of godmothers and godfathers in spirit. According to Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, “Spiritual growth is manifested by stages of initiation, complex and symbolic ceremonies of death and rebirth that are the source of ritual knowledge, development, and evolution” (2003 50). In considering this concept of symbolic death and rebirth, in Moreno Vega’s memoir we witness firsthand the complex evolution of the author and her ultimate “rebirth” as an initiate and priestess in the Santería religion.

Concentrating on the concept of embodiment as it relates to African Diaspora Religions, and the role of the “divine woman”, some of the most powerful and

memorable moments in *The Altar of My Soul* are when the author does the impossible: she puts the Sacred into words through her descriptions of otherworldly trance experiences and her own interaction with guardian spirits. As readers, we are guided through the complexities and varieties of embodiment as experienced by mediums when they are used as spiritual vehicles of communication by the Orishas. Focusing on the role of the woman as a mediator of two worlds: the secular and the sacred, and embodiment as both the manifestation of the divine, and a process of cultural identification, Moreno Vega comments that, in her opinion, "...we are all embodiments of the sacred".

Speaking to the existence of a greater "divine intelligence" and citing the influence of societal systems as a reason for the dominant feminine presence as bridges to the spiritual realm, Moreno Vega attests: "there exist a greater divine intelligence that is accessible if the recipient is open to the communication. The societal systems that make it more acceptable for women to embrace their spirituality and divine communications skills certainly make it easier for women to embrace this part of their divine path". The Santería priestess cites the family environment in which she was raised as another contributing factor in her own access to matters of the spiritual realm:

I was fortunate to have been born into a family that embraces divine knowledge. Although my father and brother believed, I think their "machismo" training didn't allow them to follow a path that would appear to soften their maleness in public or private spheres. I believe that the freedom for spiritual inquiry was open to women in my life and less so to men. The central role of the women in my life, specifically my mother and Abuela were to understand that I had value, we had value, and all that we

did was of value to others and us. Our spiritual practices remained behind closed doors because my Abuela and parents didn't want us to be devalued for our beliefs by others.

Diverging slightly from spiritual identity within the African Diaspora, I call attention to the highly personal experience shared by Moreno Vega in *The Altar of My Soul* of initiating as a Yoruba Priestess in the Santería religion, and the literary genre of a memoir chosen by the author to narrate this experience. Drawing on the ideas of Lesley Feracho regarding the memoir as “a form of autobiographical narrative that has proven especially useful in understanding women's reconstruction of the self” (17), throughout the author's spiritual memoir, the reader is granted a glimpse into both the rituals and beliefs that comprise the Santería religion, and the author's own thoughts on her personal spiritual journey from somewhat of a skeptic to becoming a Yoruba Priestess. Elaborating on her choice of this particular genre for approaching the subject of the Sacred, the author comments:

I used memoir because so many young people on a journey to their understanding of themselves have asked me to describe how I do whatever they perceive I do. Our society compartmentalizes roles as if our lives were shelves in a department store. We are many pathways within ourselves that connect if we allow ourselves to multi-identify and embrace the many ways that we exist in the world and value each facet. (2014)

Moreno Vega's decision to share the intimate details of her initiation into the Santería religion using the more “private” genre of the memoir can also be viewed as dialoguing with the imbued secrecy regarding the Lucumi system as perceived by many

people with certain preconceived notions about the diasporic spiritual tradition. Speaking to the different perceptions associated with Santería and how her work was received by the public, the author attests:

When I initiated it was informative to witness the many ways people reacted whether positive or negative there was always the shadow of doubt indicating that a “professional” would not be public about being in the Lucumi system. Practitioners would come to the book signing of *Altar of My Soul* with the book covered, hand it to me quickly and share their African name in a whisper for me to sign their book. (2014)

We note in the previous comments by the author the possible discrimination or preconceived notions regarding Santería that she faced in her professional life as an initiate in the African Diasporic Religion. However, through her memoir, and by “telling her own story”, Moreno Vega not only embodies the role of a modern-day *griot*, but also helps to reveal some of the secrets of the Sacred and to dispel certain myths or fallacies related to the Lucumi practice. Focusing on this last point of the power of the word or oral myths and ancestral traditions and the role of women as “walking libraries” of universal knowledge or modern *griots* with the African diasporic context, in *The Altar of My Soul* the author presents not only her own spiritual thoughts and experiences, but also the timeless teachings of the *Patakís*, or sacred stories of Yoruba-origin used in the Santería religion, throughout the course of the narrative.

In *The Altar of My Soul*, Moreno Vega explains that these myths or parables are used to “explain the complexities of both the spirit and secular worlds, providing initiates with explanations and solutions for the problems afflicting them” (114). In addition to the

patakís, the author also highlights the importance of ancestor worship to help guide initiates' daily lives, and to preserve the memories of African descendants. One of the points raised by Moreno Vega is regarding the different "versions" of the *patakís* that can arise depending upon the person retelling the story. The subjectivity present in the act of retelling parallels to a certain extent what or how history is (re)told by the dominant discourse.

Within the framework of storytelling and the retelling of history, memory, or reverting to the idea of Toni Morrison of "re-memory", inevitably plays an integral part of what is told or passed on from one generation to another. As previously mentioned in this study, Morrison's (re)memory involves the conscious and unconscious remembering and "disremembering" of painful or traumatic events from the past. One person may remember a certain event that is of particular importance or that has a specific meaning to his or her life, while another may choose to focus on a completely different happening or memory. On the subject of "(re)memory", Moreno Vega offers a contrasting view regarding the power of and the retention of ancestral memory. In the words of the author:

We can create labels to try to understand the power of spirit, ancestral memory, (Re)memory etc., however I prefer to believe that as intentional beings with the intent of impacting the both worlds we live in that we seek to be integral forces in the lives of others and ourselves as social beings and will do the extraordinary to sustain that which has sustained and valued our being present.

We have seen how, within the African Diaspora, the physical act of "the passing down" of ancestral knowledge from one generation to the next has contributed greatly to

keeping the myths and beliefs of the ancestors alive in the New World. Speaking to the role of memory and the retelling of myths, stories and histories within the African Diaspora, and how they contribute to communal cohesiveness and connect individuals with both their pasts as well as with the Divine, Moreno Vega affirms, “Acknowledging the past is integral to the present”. On the subject of the importance of storytelling, the author points out:

Go into a room with five people. Tell one a story without the others hearing the story. Have the second person tell the story to the third without the fourth hearing, and so on. Know that the story will be different by the time it gets to the fifth person. The telling of stories, the retelling will change because we each bring our particular perspectives and voice deciding what is more or less important. Imagine then the journey that we have made as a people under the most adverse conditions over generations. The wonder is that the stories (patakis) continue to exist carrying the core values intrinsic and integral to the sacred principles of spirit and nature. (2014)

The ideas shared by Moreno Vega are testimony to other concepts presented in this study related to the importance of seeking knowledge from the past or in ancestral voices in order to move forward in the continuum. In this chapter, I have demonstrated how storytelling and myths are both factors of universal truth, uprooted and implanted within the African diasporic context, used overwhelmingly by Black women in their preaching and serve as a spiritual link or bridge to ancestral knowledge. Furthermore, we have explored the healing power of women and the traditionally intuitive nature of

“divine” women as manifestations of belonging and identity as depicted in *Sortes de Villamor*, *Um defeito de cor*, and *Daughters of the Stone*. We have shown how, through written, oral, and bodily-inscribed language, the protagonists negotiate shared memories and “herstories”, ultimately turning to spirituality to forge sacred bridges between past, present and future times.

In a continuation of my discussion in this chapter, in Chapter Seven I will expound on the subject of the divine woman by exploring the related themes of gender, maternity and sexuality within the context of the literary works chosen for analysis in the chapter: *Beloved*, *Um defeito de cor*, *Daughters of the Stone*, *O jogo de Ifá*, and *Del rojo de su sombra*. I will investigate how the lines of sexuality, gender, and maternity intersect and intertwine in the various diasporic conditions and societies within which the enslaved African woman find themselves in each of the literary texts. Focusing on trance and possessional states, I will investigate sexual ambiguity and blurred gender lines within the scope of spirit possession in African diaspora religions.

CHAPTER 7

GENDER, MATERNITY, SEXUALITY, AND SPIRITUALITY UNDER THE YOKE
OF SLAVERY AND BEYOND

A CANÇÃO DO AFRICANO

*Lá na úmida senzala,
Sentada na estreita sala,
Junto ao braseiro, no chão,
Entoa o escravo o seu canto,
E ao cantar correm-lhe em pranto
Saudades do seu torrão...*

*De um lado, uma negra escrava
Os olhos no filho crava,
Que tem no colo a embalar...
E à meia voz lá responde
Ao canto, e o filhinho esconde,
Talvez pra não o escutar!*

*“Minha terra é lá bem longe,
Das bandas de onde o sol vem;
Esta terra é mais bonita,
Mas à outra eu quero bem!*

*“O sol faz lá tudo em fogo,
Faz em brasa toda a areia;
Ninguém sabe como é belo
Ver de tarde a papa-ceia!*

*“Aqueles terras tão grandes,
Tão compridas como o mar,
Com suas poucas palmeiras
Dão vontade de pensar...*

*“Lá todos vivem felizes,
Todos dançam no terreiro;
A gente lá não se vende
Como aqui, só por dinheiro.”*

*O escravo calou a fala,
Porque na úmida sala
O fogo estava a apagar;
E a escrava acabou seu canto,
Pra não acordar com o pranto
O seu filhinho a sonhar!*

.....
*O escravo então foi deitar-se,
Pois tinha de levantar-se
Bem ante do sol nascer,
E se tardasse, coitado,
Teria de ser surrado,
Pois bastava escravo ser.*

*E a cativa desgraçada
Deita seu filho, calada,
E põe-se triste a beijá-lo,
Talvez temendo que o dono
Não viesse, em meio do sono,
De seus braços arrancá-lo!*

- Castro Alves (*Os Escravos* 1883)

This penultimate chapter in my study continues the dialogue initiated in the previous chapter on the subject of the “divine” woman. Its focus, however, leads us into new uncharted waters outside of the realm of the spiritual previously set forth in this study. My choice of the poem by Castro Alves as the introductory text for the chapter stems from the scene tragically depicted by the poet of maternity or motherhood denied within the scope of the institution of slavery. In the second and final stanzas, we observe not just the marginalized position occupied by the enslaved Black woman depicted in the poem of “De um lado, uma negra escrava,” but also the sadness and fear of having her own son ripped from her loving arms by the very person responsible for her enslavement: the plantation master. Likewise, it brings into question the additional “roles” of breeder and sexual object forcibly thrust upon black women in the institution of slavery.

It is through this lens that we seek to expand our analysis of the literary works in this study, encompassing issues of gender, maternity and sexuality. The first portion of the chapter focuses on the topics of gender and maternity under the yoke of slavery. As an extension of these themes, I intend to analyze the complex negotiations of maternity, sexuality and gender faced by the female protagonists as presented in our main texts *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, *Um defeito de cor* by Ana Maria Gonçalves and *Daughters of the Stone* by Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa, as well as in the additional text *Las negras* by Yolanda Pizarro. We also analyze the physical and sexual abuse suffered by many of the female protagonists in the works of this study. Likewise, we question how, despite many times being victims of sexual abuse inherent to the institution of slavery, the protagonists of the works are able to surpass the horrors and traumas of systematic rapes, and reveal their own forms of sexuality and sexual desire.

Returning to some of the previously discussed themes of spirit possession and the various “*caminos*” or paths of the Orishas, in the final part of this study I explore the subject of gender, liminal sexuality, and sexual ambiguity within African Diasporic Religions, as depicted in Mayra Montero’s *Del rojo de su sombra* (1992). Additionally, I include in this section of *O jogo de Ifá* (1980) by Sônia Coutinho, in order to investigate the presence of the themes of religion, gender and sexual ambiguity within a narrative that offers both a masculine and feminine point of view, thus encompassing an androgynous narrative. I explore how, just as many of the Orishas are androgynous in nature, so too are many of the mediums that embody the Orisha during a trance, blurring gender and sexuality lines during a possession trance when an Orisha of the same sex possesses a medium.

As previously stated in the introductory chapter of this study, I include in this chapter as well as in the concluding chapter the thoughts and comments of two of the authors of the main works chosen for this study: Ana Maria Gonçalves and Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa. Responding to questions posed during personal interviews conducted with both authors, they provide invaluable insight into the themes and topics raised in this study, as they relate to their respective literary works. I recognize that, in the same manner in which relying on the veracity of a first-person narrative can be risky, relying on an author to provide information about her own literary text can possibly offer its own inherent risks. However, as an academic and literary critic it is fascinating to have the opportunity to explore the reasons and motivation behind a writer’s choice of a particular subject, or her approach to handling a specific concept or historical moment. At times,

the motivation is very personal and the narrative flows as an extension of the author's own experiences as a woman of African descent.

Maternity Sought and Maternity Denied: *Beloved*, *Daughters of the Stone*, and *Um defeito de cor*

*Ser mãe não é uma profissão; não é nem mesmo um dever:
é apenas um direito entre tantos outros.
Oriana Fallaci*

Motherhood and maternity are two recurring themes in both historical and fictional texts related to the institution of slavery in the New World, as well as the mythical sacred texts of the Orishas that survived the crossing to become integrated in the new African Diaspora Religions. The mother figure is one who can be found in the main texts selected for this study as the protagonist caring not only her children but, more commonly, caring for the children of her masters. It is on the point of being forced stopped from caring for their own children, while having to care for the children of others that we intend to focus in the first part of this last chapter: slavery and its effect on motherhood. When we consider the enslaved African woman in the patriarchal societies of the Americas, as portrayed in *Beloved* and *Daughters of the Stone*, *La isla bajo el mar*, and *Um defeito de cor*, we observe how the female protagonists are deprived of the very “natural” right that defines them as women, according to Simone Beauvoir: the right to motherhood (*O segundo sexo* 1967).

The symbolic importance of the mother figure, and her relationship to the elements of nature, can be associated with the sea, as they are both vessels and sources of life. Chevalier notes that, within various religious beliefs, women play an even more

important role as messenger of the Other World. The mother is, according to Chevalier, “...a primeira forma que toma para o indivíduo a experiência da alma, isto é, do inconsciente” (580-81). Drawing on the concept of the mother as embodiment of the unconscious for an individual, we turn to a similar idea of Gaston Bachelard, which also places the mother and her divine life-giving and life-sustaining capabilities in dialogue with the unconscious, “para a imaginação material todo líquido é uma água.....toda bebida feliz é um leite materno...dois graus sucessivos de profundidade inconsciente: primeiro, todo líquido é uma água; em seguida toda água é um leite” (*A água e os sonhos* 122). The importance of maternal milk as it relates to motherhood or motherhood denied, as we intend to demonstrate in the case of the text chosen to exemplify this theme *Beloved*, is intrinsically connected to the unconscious and to the protagonist’s personal maternal desire to provide for her own children.

When we consider the significance of maternity in the life of a woman, turning to the words of French writer and feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, we note, “É pela maternidade que a mulher realiza integralmente seu destino fisiológico; é a maternidade sua vocação ‘natural’ porquanto todo o seu organismo se acha voltado para a perpetuação da espécie” (248). One word in particular stands out in the previous quote regarding the vocation of maternity for a woman: natural. Reflecting upon the incessantly unnatural condition under which enslaved African women were forcibly maintained throughout the Americas, or, in the words of Venetria K. Patton, the “inherent characteristics of this ‘peculiar institution’ that accepted the rape of female slaves and the fathering of slave children as matters of course” (57), it becomes increasingly clearer that maternity was not a “natural” vocation for these women by any sense of the word. Nor

was motherhood “a right”, as mentioned in the epitaph of this section. Enslaved African woman’s lives were devoid of rights in the New World. As such, stripped of their own rights to bear children and to build their own, loving families, these women were likewise subjected to the physical, psychological and sexual abuses of the plantation masters.

In *O segundo sexo*, Simone Beauvoir speaks to the similarities of the condition of the woman and enslaved blacks affirming, “Há profundas analogias entre a situação das mulheres e a dos negros: umas e outros emancipam-se hoje de um mesmo paternalismo e a casta anteriormente dominadora quer mantê-los ‘em seu lugar’, isto é, no lugar que escolheu para eles” (17-18). But where does the black woman figure in this analogy? Not only did the enslaved black woman have to endure being “kept in her place” by the dominant patriarchal society, she was also subjected to a second marginalization in being denied her innate right to choose to be a mother.

The Black woman’s basic right to freedom was stripped away from her, as was her basic right to bear and raise her own child. This right, as pointed out by Itai Muwati, is of extreme significance to the African woman and greater African community:

The acknowledgement of the mother as supreme is a continent-wide phenomenon...motherhood stands at the center of African life as a major organizing rubric around which life is constructed, sustained, and fulfilled...the Shona people acknowledge the close connection between mothers and the spirit world. (4- 5)

This last point made by Muwati is of particular interest to my study, as it corroborates my assertions that women, as pillars of traditional African beliefs and connection with the

spiritual realm, are an integral part of the creation and sustaining of the community both in African and in the diasporic communities of the Americas.

As previously expounded in this study, the Eurocentric patriarchal societies of the Americas were constructed on the building blocks of indifference and alterity, with the master as the dominant and domineering figure with omnipotent control over everybody and everything on the plantation. The paternal right to property, including slaves who were considered by the plantation owners to be nothing more than chattel, substituted and overrode the enslaved women's traditional maternal rights. This contributed to, according to Beauvoir, a dislocation of the mother/clan dynamic:

O direito paterno substituiu-se então ao direito materno; a transmissão da propriedade faz-se de pai a filho e não mais da mulher a sua clã. É o aparecimento da família patriarcal baseada na propriedade privada. Nessa família a mulher é oprimida. O homem reinando soberanamente, permite-se, entre outros, o capricho sexual: dorme com escravas ou hetairas, é polígamo. (75)

As I shall demonstrate through my analysis of the literary works chosen for this chapter, this self-imposed "right" of the masters to sexually abuse the female (and at times male) slaves provoked both far-reaching effects and deep psychological trauma within the plantation microcosm.

Focusing primarily on the subject of motherhood or, more specifically, motherhood denied, in the first portion of this chapter I bring to light the complexities of gender and family within the scope of slavery in the Americas. For many enslaved women, rape was a part of their daily lives; an additional "task" they were expected and

forced to perform by the plantation owners after toiling all day like their male counterparts in the fields on the plantation house. As a result of the sexual assaults, pregnancy was both commonplace and, many times, desired by the plantation owners in order to maintain and replenish the ever-depleting “stock” of enslaved individuals.

The children, who were born as fruit of the rapes systematically committed on the women, were likewise considered the property of the plantation owners, and could be bought and sold as easily as any other item belonging to the owners without any concern for their enslaved mothers. As such, their status of “property” took precedence over their biological position as sons or daughters of their enslaved mothers. Or, in the words of W.E.B. Du Bois: “Upon this African mother-idea, the westward slave trade and American slavery struck like doom...The crushing weight of slavery fell on black women. Under it there was no legal marriage, no legal family, no legal control over children. (*Darkwater* 113-114). As pointed out by Du Bois, this had a profound effect on the mother/child dynamics within the slave communities, and stripped the African women of their very right to motherhood.

Echoing the ideas of Du Bois on the long-lasting effects of slavery on motherhood, Patton points out: “Mothering in the slave community is disrupted so that the child does not belong to the mother, but is owned by the slave master who may or may not be related to it. This is part of the larger kinlessness of slavery, in which family members were often separated without regard to familial ties” (12). Drawing on Patton’s ideas on the “kinlessness” of slavery, and the way in which enslaved Africans were forced to endure forced separations of family members, I turn my focus to the literary works chosen for analysis in this chapter and the way in which the female protagonists

negotiate motherhood and maternity in each of the works, as well as the corresponding relationships that evolve out of these negotiations.

I begin my analysis with Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which narrates Sethe's personal struggle with the demons and memories of enslavement and maternity denied within the institution of slavery. As previously explored in Chapter 4 of this study, (re)memory is the bridge that connects Sethe with her past and ultimately allows her to come to terms with the act of motherly desperation committed in resistance to returning to her former life as a slave on Sweet Home with her children. Both Sethe and Baby Suggs experience motherhood or, more appropriately, are denied the experience of true motherhood while enslaved on the Sweet Home plantation.

We learn that Baby Suggs, although not subjected to the systematic raping that was commonplace on so many of the plantations, did endure the hardship and heartache of having her children moved around and taken away from her like "pieces on a checkerboard":

In all of Baby's life, as well as Sethe's own, men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. So Baby's eight children had six fathers. What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children...To make up for coupling with a straw boss for four months in exchange for keeping her third child, a boy, with her – only to have him traded for lumber in the spring of the

next year and to find herself pregnant by the man who promised not to and did. (*Beloved* 28)

This last part of the narrative that describes how Baby Suggs' child was "traded for lumber" is, while undoubtedly tragic, just one of the many examples we see in Morrison's work of the objectification or, as previously cited in this study, the "thingification" of enslaved Africans by the dominant patriarchal society.

For us as readers engaging with the text through a modern-day lens, the idea of a person, a child having the same worth as lumber is utterly unfathomable. However, from an eighteenth and nineteenth century perspective as depicted in the narrative, it was not only a common practice but, to the slave-owners participating in the dealing of "human chattel", it was a just another business transaction. As pointed out by Patton,

Motherhood...is not about women's desires, but the patriarchy's...the mother is an untenable position, particularly for the already marginalized female slave...slaves are not supposed to be troubled by family bonds; female slaves are not expected to experience mother love...For slaves, family and motherhood must have different meanings because they are first and foremost slaves; their masters may or may not observe kinship relations. (125)

We know from Nan's retelling or rememory in *Beloved*, that Sethe's own mother threw away all of her children except for Sethe, as she was the only real "child" of a "black man". The remainder of her children were all the offspring of the "whites," which she threw away in an attempt to rid herself of the memory of the rapes she had suffered at the hands of the crew on the slave ship, as well as other white men on the plantation.

Nan survived the middle passage with Sethe's mother and tells Sethe: "She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she didn't put her arms around" (*Beloved* 74). Sethe's own mother committed unthinkable acts with her children, as a direct result of and retaliation against the institution of slavery. The only child she wished to have any type of relationship with was the one child whom she had presumably conceived of her own free will with a black man. Sethe was the only child worthy of a name, as she was the fruit of a relationship that was not based on domination, cruelty and abuse.

Similarly, in one of Baby Suggs' accounts of life on Sweet Farm, she reminisces on the fact that the Garners were not like most of the other slave owners. To Baby Suggs, the Garners "...ran a special kind of slavery, treating them like paid labor, listening to what they said, teaching what they wanted known" (*Beloved* 165). Likewise, the grandmother recalls how Mr. Garner "...didn't stud his boys. Never brought them to her cabin with directions to 'lay down with her,' like they did in Carolina, or rented their sex out on other farms" (*Beloved* 165). These two affirmations by Baby Suggs are both testimonies to the unthinkable situations the enslaved women were forced to endure, as well as to the warped worldview of the Garners, who believed they were in some manner treating their slaves better or differently than those of other slave owners, without acknowledging the fact that any form of slavery is inhumane, unjust and unnatural.

Drawing on the previously cited narrative of Baby Suggs and looking towards the way in which slave-owners moved slave mothers' children and family members around

like “chess pieces”, we observe how female slaves were used for the reproductive and sexual needs of the master, with little if any thought given by the masters to the mothers’ feelings towards her offspring. Motherhood as a remembrance of African traditions and the reclaiming of this biological right by women within the African Diaspora are resounding testimonies to the strong female and “mother-like” presence within religions such as Candomblé, Santería and Vodou. As we shall explore in the following sections of this chapter on sexuality and gender ambiguity within the African diasporic religions, the mother figure took on an overwhelmingly significant role in these religions, particularly in Candomblé. As Diane Watt comments: “Mothering throughout the Black diaspora is thus regarded as the way in which the community organizes to nurture itself and future generations” (195-96). The new spiritual communities afforded women with the recognition, respect and extended family in the New World that were destroyed during the Middle Passage.

While Patton refers to motherhood under slavery in the United States, Camillia Cowling in her article “As a Slave Woman and a Mother”, speaks to the question of motherhood in Brazil and Cuba during the time of slavery. Following the abolition process in both countries, Cowling comments on “free womb” measures that were introduced in the early 1870’s that:

Created specific new opportunities for women to make legal claims on the basis of motherhood...such petitions chimed not only with official legal rights but with broader Atlantic abolitionist discourse that sought emotive ‘feminine’ responses to slaves’ plight and appealed particularly to particular notions of maternal love. (295)

As is the case of the “Free Womb Law” of 1870 in Brazil, measures were taken to protect the integrity of the family, but with the emphasis falling on the role of the Black woman.

In her article “O candomblé e o poder feminino,” Teresinha Bernardo comments that the “Free Womb” Project in Brazil legitimated the Black Family as consisting of the woman and her children (9). Echoing the words of W. E. B. Du Bois on the weight of slavery that fell on black women, and speaking to the way in which the Law accentuated the already fragmented diasporic family, Bernardo affirms:

Nada mais fez do que acentuar uma forma alternativa de família que tem suas origens na diáspora e desdobramentos na escravidão e no pós-abolição. Se na África as mulheres viviam com seus respectivos filhos em casas conjugadas à grande casa do esposo, num sistema polígínico, no Brasil rompeu esta relação, permanecendo a chefia da família com a mulher, florescendo a matrifocalidade. (10)

The matrifocal Family arose from the waters of the African Diaspora as both an imposition of slavery and a part of the incessant flow of dislocation and recreation of families within the New World.

During the time of slavery, the “Mammy” figure as the iconic figure of motherhood was undoubtedly ironic as, according to Patton, “...in breast-feeding the white mistress’ children, she is often unable to perform the same duties for her own children, which is what keeps her from attaining the title of ‘mother’ within the rubrics of the cult of true motherhood” (33- 34). By caring for the master’s children and fulfilling their needs, the “Mammy” figure was forced to neglect her own children and the needs of

her own family. As such, according to Patton, “In creating Mammy, slaveholders interfered with the slave family’s conception of motherhood. Motherhood is in a sense perverted by removing it from the affective realm and transforming it into a service performed against one’s will” (33-34). Not only, as attested to by Patton, did the creation of the darker skinned, matronly “Mammy” figure by the slaveholders directly interfere with the conception of motherhood, it ironically stripped her of yet another right: that of gender.

In the case of Cuba, as Elizabeth Pérez points out in her chapter “Nobody’s Mammy: Yemayá as Fierce Foremother in Afro-Cuban Religions,” the timing of the “Mammy” figure emergence in Cuba was no coincidence. According to Pérez:

The mammy enabled whites to downplay the frequency of interracial rape and other forms of sexual exploitation by insisting on Black women’s unattractiveness, associated through enslavement with masculine brawn, dirt, and bodily impurity. The African-born mammy in particular was ideologically constructed as essentially ‘non-feminine’ insofar as primacy was placed upon her alleged muscular capabilities, physical strength, aggressive carriage and sturdiness...Yet while the North American mammy figure was depicted steadfast and sexless, the Cuban version was lusty, even wanton, in her appetite for food and men. (18)

One of the main responsibilities of the “Mammy” was to provide milk for the master’s children, and to care for them after they were born. This ideology and the “Mammy” phenomena can be observed throughout the Americas on all the plantations to which enslaved African women were taken.

We include in following images of wet nurses in the United States of America (see Figure 1), “amas-de-leite” in Brazil (See Figure 2) and “amas de leche” or “nodrizas” in Cuba (see Figure 3) to demonstrate the Pan-American phenomena of the “Mammy” figure throughout the period of slavery in the Americas, who served as a source of milk production and childrearing for the white offspring on the plantations, at the detriment to her own children. In all three images, the stern, proud looks and haunting eyes of the enslaved women pervade the telling photographic representations of the “mammies” and the masters’ offspring.



Figure 2 Mammy Figure in United States of America. “Mommy-Mammy Issue”.

A Critical Review of the Help Wordpress.com. Web. 28 March 2013.



Figure 3 Mammy Figure (Ama de Leite) in Brazil. “João Ferreira Villela com Ama-de-Leite Mônica, 1860.” Museu Afro Brasil (São Paulo). Web. 28 March 2013.



Figure 4 Mammy Figure (*Nodriza*) in Cuba. “Variaciones sobre el discurso de la histórica”. Hotel Telegrafo Blogspot. Web. 28 March 2013.

The act of breast-feeding, which is only performed by women and linked to motherhood and self-definition as a mother and woman, was yet another right denied to the enslaved women, as well as distorted by the institution of slavery itself. Instead of having the right to breastfeed only their own children, “Mammies” were essentially robbed of their milk by the babies of their masters. Or, in the words of Patton, “In Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, breast-feeding figures as the primary means by which Sethe defines herself as a mother and a woman...Mammies were to be milked, warm bodies to serve white needs – an image with its own sexual subtext” (35). The sexual subtext referred to by Patton becomes glaringly obvious during the milking “rape” of Sethe by the nephews of School Teacher.

Sethe recounts the horrific “milking” scene to Paul D affirming, “After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That’s what they came in there for. Held me down and took it” (*Beloved* 20). When Paul D expresses his horror and disbelief that in addition to taking her milk, School Teacher’s nephews were capable of beating a pregnant woman he questions, “They used cowhide on you?...They beat you and you was pregnant?” (*Beloved* 20). Responding to Paul D’s questions that focus merely on the physical abuse suffered by a pregnant woman, however, Sethe reiterates the fact that she was robbed of her milk affirming, “And they took my milk...And they took my milk!” (*Beloved* 20).

Sethe’s only concern was fulfilling her motherly right to provide milk for her baby girl, whatever the cost. The protagonist explains to Seth D, “I had milk...I was pregnant with Denver but I had milk for my baby girl...Anybody could smell me long before he saw me. And when he saw me he’d see the drops of it on the front of my dress.

Nothing I could do about that” (*Beloved* 19). Breastfeeding her child was a way for Sethe to reclaim a small fragment of her identity as a woman and as a mother, that had otherwise been denied and ripped away from her by her position within the patriarchal society as an enslaved woman.

What was so heartbreaking for Sethe, and scarred her more possibly than the physical inscriptions of slavery in the form of a clumped mass of scars that resembled tree bark on her back, was knowing that she had milk but was unable to get it to her daughter and care for her in the way that only a mother knows how to do. Sethe affirms:

All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn’t know it. Nobody knew that she couldn’t pass her air if you help her up on your shoulder, only if she was lying on my knees. Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her milk but me. (*Beloved* 19)

Motherhood is what contributes to Sethe’s desire to leave Sweet Home to give a better life and freedom to her children; also, it is what causes her to commit the unspeakable act of killing one of her children to save her from slavery.

When Paul D tells Sethe “Your love is too thick” as a criticism of this all-consuming motherly love she has for her children, she responds, “Love is or it ain’t. Thin love ain’t love at all.” (*Beloved* 193-4). This statement by Sethe dialogues with the idea of motherhood within the institution of slavery. For Sethe, either you are a mother and are able to provide for your children wholeheartedly and as a whole woman, or you do not provide for them at all. The “half” or “thin” type of motherhood offered to slave

women under the yoke of slavery was not suitable or acceptable to Sethe. If she could not offer her “thick” or “full” love or whole self as a mother to her children, she preferred not to offer it at all and chose death over returning to her former life as a slave for her children.

Turning our focus now to Llanos-Figueroa’s *Daughters of the Stone*, we note how themes of sexuality, gender and maternity are interwoven in the narrative, and depicted in a variety of different ways in the “stories” of each of the female characters. In Fela, for example, we note the complexities surrounding the themes within the context of the institution of slavery in Puerto Rico during the 1800’s. Of all of the characters, Fela is the one who best exemplifies the intertwining of the Sacred (presence of the goddess Oshun) and the secular (sexual exploitation) in the life of an enslaved African woman in the New World.

In one scene in particular, after having been “wooed” by her new *patrón* Don Tomás, Fela has “consensual” intercourse with him by the river. The sexual act brings the horrific memory of the brutal rape endured at the hands of *el Patrón* on the previous plantation flooding back to Fela, as she remembers the maiming at the hands of the vindictive *patrona*. In my personal interview with Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa, the author points out that the relationship between Fela and Don Tomás is both “complex and difficult”. This is due to the fact that:

She allows, in fact welcomes, him to have sex with her but turns the table on the usual master/slave rape narrative. While Tomás is the initiator, Fela manipulates the situation to suit her own needs. Soon enough he

realizes that his ‘affection’ for Fela is not reciprocated. He is merely a pawn in a game he doesn’t begin (to) understand. (Llanos-Figueroa 2014)

What allows Fela to complete the sexual act with Don Tomás, which she needs to fulfill the childstone promise made while still in Africa in order for her to become pregnant, is her guiding Orisha, Oshun and the memory of the ancestors and Africa.

In a desperate search for her own identity as a woman within the community in her homeland of Africa and her desire to be a mother, which, as previously stated, is held in such high esteem within the African world vision, “Fela is ready to risk everything to rectify her barrenness turning to Mother Oshun, the goddess of love, sexuality and fertility for help” (Llanos-Figueroa 2014). In a scene during which Fela remembers waiting for her husband Imo by the river and dreaming of Mother Oshun, the narrator explains, “Four planting seasons had come and gone and still her flat belly proclaimed her failure. She was tired of the sidelong glances of the younger women with fertile wombs, the whispered words that followed her when she attended every child naming” (*Daughters* 11). We note the frustration and disappointment of “motherhood denied” in Fela, and how within a traditional African world vision, maternity and motherhood not only affirm a woman’s “worth,” but also her position within the larger community.

Within the narrative, however, Fela decides to go against Mother Oshun’s wishes and to complete the fertility ritual with the childstone based on “her need for maternity (which) blinds her to the possible consequences of her delay” (Llanos-Figueroa 2014). Ultimately, though, Fela’s selfish actions fueled by her motherly desire to bear children and build a family with Imo, “...results in the destruction of the village and everyone in it. Her penance for this act of hubris is that she ultimately loses the very thing she so

values the most—her child” (Llanos-Figueroa 2014). The day after giving birth to her daughter, Mati, by the river, the other slaves find Fela curled up and dead, next to her beloved child who, in turn, was holding the childstone that had made its way from Africa to the New World. The birth of Mati can be viewed as the culmination of the spiritual, sexual and maternal forces within the original daughter, Fela. As we shall explore in following, Mati, in turn, is born with spiritual powers to heal others, and grows into a mother-like figure for the rest of her diasporic community.

From an early age, spirituality and healing are integral parts of Mati’s life and self-identity. In one scene when Mati, still a little girl, and she uses her healing powers to cure a pig’s wounds, she is cautioned by an elder slave, *Tía Josefa*:

You can do things other little girls can’t. But there are things you should not do...The same power that gives you the gift gives all of us life. When that power takes life back, you cannot interfere...Listen to the voice inside. The same power that gave you that gift will let you know how to use it...Mati began to listen for the power that directed her gift...She dreamed about the Lady Oshun...The lady spoke in a language Mati had never heard before, and yet Mati understood everything she said.

(Daughters 66-67)

As Mati grows and turns into a more powerful healer and spiritual woman, she begins to use her gift of knowing and healing for the good of her community.

At one point in the narrative, however, she goes against her inner voice to resolve a case of land ownership involving the land she received from Don Tomás, and some of

the landowners of the region. Commenting on Mati's actions, Llanos-Figueroa highlights that:

In the face of her property being stolen by surrounding *hacendados*, she doesn't hesitate to use her powers to get back the land left to her by Don Tomás. Well aware of the fact that she will have to pay for this misuse of her gift, she sets out to not only right a wrong, but to go further and exact revenge on these men who had always abused her people. (2014)

Mati's decision to act of her own free will or, in the case of the powers bestowed on the daughters by Mother Oshun, "goddess", and take matters of life and death into her own hands, disrupts the natural order of life surrounding her community.

By using her curative spiritual powers for contrary means, Mati tampers with the landowners' ability to produce offspring, affirming her role as "goddess" and "mother" or giver (and taker) of life, but also reverses the birthing selection and control dynamic typically in the hands of the white male landowners. Inverting the traditional role of the male plantation owners fathering children with slave women, with little to no concern as to the slave mother's desire for motherhood, Mati uses her powers to deny the men their right to father children. As stated by Llanos-Figueroa, "While we never see her act openly, the planters who cheat her out of her inheritance fall ill by some mysterious disease that only Mati can cure. In the same mysterious way, none of them was ever able to father any children after their encounter with her" (2014). It is through her acceptance and exercising of the spiritual gifts of the African Diaspora goddess Oshun that Mati is able to affirm her power over the community.

When asked how she views the complex negotiations of sexuality, gender and maternity under the yoke of slavery for African women and their descendants, Llanos-Figueroa affirms that these three themes are “inextricable in the novel” (2014). According to the author, “Perhaps the most complex treatment of these themes can be seen in *Mati*” (2014). This daughter with the spiritual gifts of intuition and healing is a strong female character with no apparent need for a man in her life. As such, in the words of Llanos-Figueroa, “In her mid-twenties, she turns away all suitors who come to her door. Polite but firm, she seems to have no need of them. The young men think her haughty and resent her aloofness and her power, a power they don’t understand and of which they become increasingly suspicious and fearful” (2014). Within the narrative, we observe how *Mati*’s relationship with *Cheo* is both liberating while at the same time complex, due to the complicated gender roles and dynamics between the two protagonists, as well as the influence of spirituality and *Mati*’s dedication to her spiritual calling and the greater community.

Similar to the way in which the “spiritual mothers” or “*mães de santo*” in Candomblé religion occupy positions of prominence within the greater spiritual community and lead independent lifestyles, *Mati* also proves herself a self-sufficient woman. Her strength and independence resulting from her spiritual gifts are the underlying reasons for the ultimate dissolution of her relationship with *Cheo*, as well as a rift between herself and her daughter, *Concha*. According to Llanos-Figueroa, “*Mati*’s gift and her use of it placed her beyond the men in her community. Even *Cheo* who loves her deeply is put off by her independence. The one thing he wants to secure for her, her

freedom, she has already achieved on her own. He sees her strength as a constant attack on his ability to provide and protect, to be a man” (2014).

Considering the recollections by the author, it becomes possible to view the complex negotiations of gender and spirituality that Mati confronts. By choosing to follow her calling as a healer, Mati ultimately relinquishes her right to family and motherhood. She leads the solitary life of a *curandera*, or healer, tending to the needs of the community on at *Colectiva Las Mercedes* after gaining back her rights to the lands. As the narrator comments, “Mati had never met a *curandera* who didn’t live the solitary life...Mati didn’t choose to become a healer. It was not something she could choose, but rather something that chose her” (*Daughters* 105).

Although for different reasons than those of Cheo, Mati’s daughter, Concha, resents her mother’s gift and dedication to the people of the community. In the words of the author, “Concha comes to resent Mati’s role as a *curandera* as sees it as supplanting her role as mother (in much the same way that Cheo sees it as taking away from her role as wife)...These...issues of maternity create a huge rift that isn’t resolved for many years” (2014). While Mati’s mother, Fela, was denied both motherhood and a family with Mati’s “soul father” Imo within the institution of slavery, Mati chooses her own fate as a free woman, and negotiates her spiritual gift that is both a blessing and a burden.

Manifestations of Sexuality and Spirituality: A Literary Perspective

Turning now to *Um Defeito de Cor*, we are able to highlight complex negotiations of motherhood and sexuality throughout the narrative. After surviving the treacherous middle crossing, Kehinde is bought at the slave market by Sinhô José Carlos and taken to

the plantation where she first serves as a playmate and caretaker for his daughter in the *casa grande*. Life in the plantation house, as well as in the slave quarters, encompasses relationships and communal living with people who become integral parts of her life, and accompany her long after her eventual departure from the place. Likewise, life as an enslaved woman in the plantation house brings Kehinde a great deal of suffering, aggression and sexual exploitation.

Many of the descriptions of the day-to-day routines of the individuals in the slave quarters and the actions of the masters mirror the images depicted by Brazilian sociologist and historian Gilberto Freyre in his masterpiece *Casa-Grande e Senzala*. At the tender age of thirteen, Kehinde is forced to have sexual relations with Sinhô José Carlos. As pointed out by Freyre, “Não há escravidão sem depravação sexual. É da essência mesma do regime...Negras tantas vezes entregues virgens, ainda molecas de doze e treze anos...Não era a ‘raça inferior’ a fonte de corrupção, mas o abuso de uma raça por outra” (399 – 402). Sexual abuse suffered by Kehinde, according to Freyre, was inherently interwoven in the very fabric of the institution of slavery. The slave and master power dichotomy placed the masters in a position to “naturally” expect the “willing participation” of the slave women. Kehinde is told by the overseer, Cipriano, that the master “...não era nada bobo de misturar uma preta tão bonitinha com o resto dos escravos, correndo o risco de ela ser inaugurada por qualquer um” (*Defeito* 152). The virginity of the adolescent slaves was part of the master’s “privilege”, and he did not want her to lose her virginity in the slave barracks before he had a chance to claim what was “rightfully his” as slave owner.

After noticing the Kehinde's maturation, Sinhô José Carlos begins to sexually harass her, ordering her to show her breasts. He then rubs against the young girl whenever possible in overt demonstrations of his position as her master. These sexual advances continue to escalate, until one day Cipriano is ordered to take Kehinde to a remote cabin in order for Sinhô José Carlos to "tomar posse" or "claim" what is "rightly his": Kehinde's body and subsequent virginity. Kehinde narrates the tragic scene, in which she expresses pain, sadness and remembrance of her mother's rape and death:

Ele conseguiu ser muito mais vingativo do que eu poderia imaginar, ao entrar no quarto e dizer que a virgindade das pretas que ele comprava pertencia a ele, e que não seria um preto sujo qualquer metido a valentão que que iria privá-lo desse direito, que este tipo de preto ele bem sabia o tratamento de que era merecedor...O sinhô levantava a minha saia e me abria as pernas com todo o peso do seu corpo, para depois se enfiar dentro da minha racha como se estivesse sangrando um carneiro. Não me lembro se doeu, pois eu estava mais preocupada com o riozinho de sangue que escorria do corte na minha boca, provocado pelo tapa, e me lembrava da minha mãe debaixo do guerreiro, em Savalu...Eu queria morrer e sair sorrindo, dançando e cantando, como a minha mãe tinha feito. (*Defeito* 170-71)

Kehinde's memory of her mother's act of smiling, dancing, and singing is particularly telling for a number of reasons. It uses rape to connect Kehinde to the last image she has of her mother being sexually abused in her homeland of Dahomey. However, unlike her

mother who died during the rape, Kehinde must live with the emotional scars of her own rape.

Following the rape by Sinhô José Carlos, Kehinde becomes pregnant and gives birth to his son, whom she names Banjokô, and who dies at a young age. The rape scene, while understandably horrific, is even more shocking as it depicts not just the rape of Kehinde by José Carlos, but also the rape and castration of her fiancé, Lourenço. As punishment for trying to help Kehinde escape, Lourenço is forced to watch her being raped:

Quando percebeu a minha presença, o Lourenço ergeu os olhos, e o que pude ver foi a sombra dele, os olhos vazios mostrando o que tinha por dentro: nada. Enquanto que, por fora, tinha a pele preta toda nua e coberta por crostas de sangue e cortes feitos pelo chibata. Senti vontade de pegar o Lourenço no colo e cantar para ele a noite inteira, como a minha avó tinha feito com a minha mãe e com o Kodumo. Eles estavam mortos, tal como os olhos do lourenço observando a raiva com que o sinhô José Carlos me derrubou na esteira, com um tapa no rosto. (*Defeito* 171)

Understandably distraught and humiliated by the situation, Lourenço breaks down and cries at his incapacity as a man and as Kehinde's fiancé to react or to save her from being raped. When Sinhô José Carlos sees his emotional reaction, he calls Lourenço “*maricas*” and violently rapes him in a disturbing display of “de-masculinization” of the male slave in front of Kehinde:

Foi então que tirou o membro ainda duro de dentro de mim, mesmo já tendo acabado, chegou perto do Lourenço e foi virando o corpo dele até

que ficasse de costas, em uma posição bastante incômoda por causa do colar de ferro. Passou cuspe no membro e possuiu o Lourenço também...O monstro se acabou novamente dentro do Lourenço, uivando e dizendo que aquilo era para terminar com a macheza dele, e que o remédio para a rebeldia ainda seria dado...pediu que dois homens do Cipriano o segurassem e cortou fora o membro dele. (*Defeito* 172)

Dialoging with the scene from the narrative, and drawing on the ideas of Brinda Mehta on the threats to their manhood suffered by enslaved African men, we note how traditional African life and spirituality was:

Disrupted by the intrusion of the male principle concretized by the colonial experience...women were particularly vulnerable to this rupture, they had to deal not only with the inequities of the white master but also with the destabilized psyche of their menfolk, anxious to re-member their threatened manhood by replicating their own humiliations (suffered at the hands of the oppressor) and projecting them onto their women...Healing space is vital to any process of female selfhood because it provides the essential locus of reintegration for women who have been as alienated from themselves as from others as a result of...the ‘male dispersion’ of the female. (239)

During my interview with Ana Maria Gonçalves, I commented on the various sexually traumatic scenes from the narrative such as, for example, the previously described rape of Kehinde’s mother and Kehinde’s own sexual abuse as a child in Dahomey, as well as the narrator’s rape by Sinhô José Carlos as an enslaved woman on a

plantation in Brazil. In my interview, I raised the point of Kehinde using natural African herbal practices so as not to give birth to children who would be born into the same position as she found herself at the time: a slave. Kehinde's attitude toward preventing unwanted pregnancies, as well as the use of herbs as a natural form of abortion used by many subjugated woman, is reminiscent of that of the drastic measures taken by Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in an attempt to "save" her children from the institution of slavery.

While not limited to slaves of African descent, all can be seen as drastic measures taken by women living in extreme conditions of degradation to in some way regain control over a portion of their lives: their ability and right to bear children. Regarding slaves' decisions to terminate unwanted pregnancies through the use of herbal practices, Gonçalves commented: "Filho de mulher escrava nascia escravo, independente da condição do pai, se livre ou escravo também. Por isso, boa parte das escravas evitavam – através de beberagens e ervas – ter filhos" (2014). The protagonist understands that any child born to her while enslaved would automatically belong to the master. By taking control over the termination of the unwanted pregnancy, the slave was able to regain, ever so slightly, ownership of at least a part of her own body.

After giving birth to her first son, Banjokô, Kehinde does not have milk to breastfeed him during the first days of his life. As a result, the mistress summons another slave who belongs her friends and breastfeeds the children of three white women and whose own son had already passed away. When Kehinde's milk finally comes in and she is able to breastfeed her own son, Banjokô, the narrator affirms: "...nada no mundo se compara a dar algo de nós para um filho" (*Defeito* 190). With these few examples from

the text, we note how maternity and the possibility of motherhood were both denied and forced upon the black woman due to her condition within the slaveholding society.

When I questioned the author on how she views the complex negotiations of sexuality, gender and maternity within the institution of slavery for African women and their descendents, Gonçalves pointed out that one of the cruelest acts committed within the institution of slavery was that of depriving, controlling and distorting a woman's right to maternity and motherhood. In her own words, "Acredito que uma das maiores crueldades feitas à mulher escrava é em relação à importância dada a seu ventre, ou seja, o seu poder de criação e perpetuação da escravidão" (2014). When, as is the case of Kehinde, enslaved women did have children, Gonçalves proposed that "...talvez nascesse ali também a sensação de possuir algo, a ilusão de ter posse e controle sobre esse filho. Ilusória, claro, mas talvez necessária para se continuar vivendo" (2014).

We note in the ideas of the author that by choosing or willingly consenting to sex, the enslaved woman in effect was able to attain the wholeness sought and take control of at least over the life of her future child, even if she was unable to control her own:

A mulher, nesse caso, o da maternidade, é a perpetuadora do destino, a causadora do mal destino dos próprios filhos, mesmo não tendo controle algum sobre o próprio corpo. Não seria então, o sexo consentido, o único momento em que ela tinha posse do próprio corpo também? Não sei, nunca parei para pensar direito nisso, mas talvez sim. Ao se entregar, por prazer e/ou amor, a um homem escolhido, não poderia ser caracterizado como o único momento em que se possuía também? (2014)

Likewise, we observe how even though the enslaved woman many times was forced to give up her own milk to the detriment of her own children, the milk itself was something she could claim as her own. It was, according to Gonçalves, “algo que o corpo dela produziu, e apenas porque tinha tido um filho” (2014). From this perspective, bearing children and physically providing for those children is something only women can do. The unnatural and inhumane conditions that slavery imposed upon women stripped them of freedom, but did not release them from childbearing and producing nourishment. It should never, however, be forced as in the case of slavery.

Reverting to the narrative and revisiting the concept of the healing space required for the process of female selfhood previously by Mehta, we can see the importance of traditional African spirituality in the life of Kehinde. It is what keeps the memory of her deceased family members alive in her dreams, and serves as a healing space for her after many of the tragedies suffered throughout the narrative. However, these scenes that speak to the cruelty of the plantation masters during the time of slavery are repeated in that of the plantation mistress Sinhá Ana Felipa and another slave woman Verenciana.

After discovering that Verenciana is carrying Sinhô José Carlos’ child, and following numerous failed attempts at pregnancy of her own, Sinhá Ana Felipe decides to take revenge on the unsuspecting enslaved woman. Verenciana is described as:

Linda, alta, com um corpo que parecia ser cheio de curvas mesmo sob a roupa larga. Tinha pele lisa e castanha, os cabelos escuros e longos, pelo menos o que mostravam os cachos que escapavam por baixo do lenço amarrado na cabeça. Muito mais jovem e bonita que a sinhá. (*Defeito* 106).

In a vindictive and calculated attack, Sinhá Ana Felipe cuts out Verenciana's eyes so that the enslaved mother will never be able to see her child who is the fruit of the rape committed by her own husband:

A sinhá disse que sabia que a criança não tinha culpa e que apenas comentara que a mãe nunca veria o filho, e era isso que ia acontecer. Mandou que os homens segurassem a Verenciana com toda a força, arrancou o lenço da cabeça dela, agarrou firme nos cabelos e enfiou a faca perto de um dos olhos. Enquanto o sangue espirrava longe, a sinhá dizia que olhos daquela cor, esverdeados, não combinavam com preto, e fazia a faca rasgar a carne até contornar por completo o olho, quando então enfiou os dedos por dentro do corte, agarrou a bola que formava o olho e puxou, deixando um buraco no lugar...Examinou o olho arrancado, limpou o sangue no vestido e disse que era bonito, mas que só funcionava se tivesse um par. Fez a coisa com o outro olho, guardando os dois no bolso.

(Defeito 106-07)

The cruel act carried out by the mistress is telling in that it points out her powerlessness within the patriarchal society. In an attempt to assert agency, by cruelly maiming the seduced slave woman, we note how both women suffer in different yet similar positions of inferiority within the dominant society.

In a haunting tribute to historians such as Gilberto Freyre, who attest to the cruelty of the plantation mistresses during the times of slavery, we note, “Sinhás-moças que mandavam arrancar os olhos de mucamas bonitas e trazê-los à presença do marido, à hora da sobremesa, dentro da compoteira de doce e boiando em sangue ainda fresco”

(421), Sinhá Ana Felipa orders the slaves to prepare a special breakfast for her husband following the horrific maiming attack on Verenciana, and serves a pot of jam to him with his lover's eyeballs floating in the sweet jelly:

O Sebastião serviu os dois e ela perguntou se o marido queria geleia do reino para acompanhar os pães. Quando ele respondeu que sim, ela entregou o pote ainda fechado, que ele abriu, remexeu com a colher e tirou de lá, junto com a geleia vermelha, um dos olhos da Verenciana. Quando o sinhô deu um grito e um salto da cadeira, a sinhá, como se nada de mais estivesse acontecendo, disse que se ele não gostava daquele sabor podia mandar trocar, mas que era para olhar bem, pois aquela geleia era especial, das preferidas dele. (68)

The mistress, in an attempt to gain revenge on her husband, serves him jelly with the eyes of his mistress swimming in the sweet mixture which was, “one of his favorites”. This scene is representative of the complex power dynamics present within the plantation system between the master, mistress, and abused slave woman.

After barely surviving the brutal maiming, Verenciana is taken back to the slave quarters where, as is narrated in the following section of the narrative entitled “Acordando Orixás”, it is the slave community and traditional African religious practices and beliefs that save the mutilated young woman. While praying and singing in Yorubá, some of the elders such as Valério Moçambique, Esméria, Rosa Mina and Pai Osório call upon the Orishas to save the life of Verenciana. Just as in *Daughters of the Stone*, by using traditional African healing herbs and divining practices, the spiritual elders call upon the Orisha Ogum to save his “spiritual child”. As we observe throughout the

entirety of the Gonçalves' narrative, spirituality serves as both a form of resistance as well as the cohesive element that binds the members of the diasporic communities, primarily the women who are more commonly relegated to positions of caring and healing.

We now shift our focus slightly from the cotton plantation in the United States and sugar cane plantations of Bahia in Brazil to the plantations of the Caribbean as depicted in the remaining two works chosen for this section of the chapter: *La isla bajo el mar* by Isabel Allende and *Las negras* by Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro. In an attempt to establish a comparative dialogue between the two Spanish language works and the works analyzed in the previous section, we posit that although the geographical locations and time periods vary among the works, there are commonalities we can highlight as inherent to the institution of slavery throughout the Americas, mainly those relating to gender, maternity and sexual exploitation. At the same time, we point out the importance of community and spirituality to the women in all the works.

Las negras is a three-part narrative that also pays homage to African women and the horrors they were forced to endure during the centuries of enslavement. In our chapter on "crossings", we examined the Middle Crossing as depicted in the first part of the narrative entitled "Wanwe". In the section part of the narrative entitled "Matronas", the female narrator affirms her powerful maternal role in taking care of the master's offspring, commenting:

Curandera, yerbera, sobadora, comadrona. He impersonado todas las faenas de una esclava doméstica para acercarme primero a niños blancos recién nacidos. Siguiendo las directrices de la gran negra bruja apostada en

la hacienda de la catedral de los dominicos Porta Coreli, los he santiguado y medicado contra los dolores de panza. Embadurno mis manos de mejunjes y coloco yerbas anestésicas en sus encías cuando le están saliendo los dientes. Los he puesto a mamarme los senos hasta que sale leche, para convertirme en su nodriza. (*Las negras* 88-89)

In this particular section, the narrator comments on the communal power of the resistance of the enslaved women who gain the confidence of the masters, while secretly using the herbs and traditional practices against this control: “Voy ganando confianza. Todas las que hacen lo mismo que yo, y somos muchas, vamos ganando confianza” (88). When, after being found guilty of various infractions such as disobedience, insolence, inciting revolts and planning to escape, the protagonist is sentenced to death. It is at this moment that she recalls the shaman in her native village chanting to invoke protection against pain. Throughout all three parts of the narrative, we note the strong female ties through medicinal and midwife practices, with spirituality acting as the underlying force among the enslaved African women.

In the third and final narrative entitled “Saeta”, reminiscent of the scenes analyzed in the previous section in *Um defeito de cor*, we observe the systematic rape of Black women as part of their “duties” as enslaved “chattel” on the plantation. Drawing on the comments of Mayra Santos-Febres in her text “El color de la seducción”, we highlight the statement that, “Existen ciertos elementos históricos que pueden explicar por qué las culturas de occidente sexualizan la negritud. Definitivamente la esclavitud fue fundamental en darle de tierra fértil al estereotipo para que creciera” (118-19). Likewise, Eduardo de Assis Duarte echoes the ideas of Santos-Febres about “the color of

seduction” in his text “Mulheres marcadas: literatura, gênero, etnicidade”, in which he states, “Chama a atenção, em especial, o fato dessa representação, tão centrada no corpo de pele escura, esculpido em cada detalhe para o prazer carnal...uma semântica erótica obcecada pelos corpos de pele morena, sempre desfrutáveis, segundo tal ponto de vista, aos olhos e às fantasias sexuais do homem branco” (64).

These ideas of Santos-Febres and Assis Duarte on the Eurocentric imaginary as it relates to the hypersexualization of black women are highly visible throughout this part of the narrative, in which we observe the master repeatedly sexually abusing Tshanwe and the other enslaved woman, Jwaabi:

El amo camina con aire vacilante alrededor de las dos esclavas...Luego, más decidido, termina por tocarle los abundantes senos a Tshanwe y ella baja el rostro. La llama Teresa, pero ella no sabe por qué...Con todo, él parece disfrutar la diferencia de carnes firmes y joviales que ya no porta su mujer, pero que sí encuentra al ras de esta piel oscura...El amo desprende la falda manchada de barro de Tshanwe, y con una mano, le abre las piernas. La vuelve a llamar Teresa. Palpa su pubis, y lo estudia con ávidos ojos...Empuja a la negra hasta el lecho...entonces entre y sale de ella; entra y sale. La otra esclava, Jwaabi, se ha quedado de pie, en mitad del aposento, con las manos entrelazadas a la espalda. Espera sin pudor su turno. (*Las negras* 101-03)

While the scene above speaks to the sadistic sexual practices of the Europeans in the Americas, we do not witness any comments about the feelings of the abused slaves. As such, we affirm that the scene is a testimony of not just the patriarchal attitude of

superiority, ownership and sadistic sexuality, but also the physical representation of Eurocentric mentality and colonization that took place throughout the Americas.

The enslaved African is relegated to the marginalized position of sexual object. She loses her identity when the slave-owner renames her and changes her religion. When Tshanwe is purchased by the master in the slave market, she does not speak the Spanish language, and, as stated above by the narrator, does not understand why her name is changed to Teresa, “La llama Teresa, pero ella no sabe por qué”. Like the majority of the African slaves, the masters impose forced baptisms and adherence to Catholic religious beliefs in an attempt to domesticate or tame the “savage” African slaves.

As we see at the end of the narrative, however, resistance for the women comes in the form of communal ties and traditional African spiritual beliefs. Despite suffering sexual and physical abuse, Tshanwe is visited by a “chamán invisible (que) la hace despertar” (129) and her beaten body magically disappears before it can be buried “en el lugar de los perros y los negros” (129). The final revenge and show of resistance by the women comes in the form of an inexplicable “encantamiento”, which causes an arrow to magically turn around like a boomerang and kill the master Don Georgino in the middle of the forest. The only possible explanation professed in the text: “los espíritus”. The presence of an invisible shaman and magical “spirits” of nature within Caribbean religious cosmology, serve according to Brinda Mehta, “as valuable storehouses of myth, folklore, sociocultural values and practices, and the healing arts. Constituting the fabric of cohesion and self-consciousness, especially in rural communities” (231).

Mehta points to the strong West African influence on spirituality in Antillean society, which is based on a holistic culture united by a primeval Mother spirit in which

the participation of women has traditionally been favored. This stems from the fact that “they are located in an atemporal, mythical time before the imposition of hierarchy and categorizations” (Mehta 237). As such, we observe a stressing of or preoccupation with the “...reassertion of female space within the community, a space that is not confined or reduced solely to the task of acting as a satellite to the male partner’s hopes, fears, dreams, and ambitions” (Mehta 237). In *Las negras*, we observe the search for a reassertion of female space by the women protagonists through spirituality and camaraderie with the other women of the community.

The feminine resistance portrayed in *Las negras* is one, which, according to the author in the introduction to her work, is frequently omitted from the traditional history of Puerto Rico, “A los historiadores, por habernos dejado fuera. Aquí estamos de nuevo...cuerpo presente, color vigente, declinándonos a ser invisibles...rehusándonos a ser borradas” (7). This oral history turned written documentation through the words of the narrators in *Las negras* serves, “as a rite/write of passage for female individuation and self-affirmation, calling for a reinsertion of the feminine in literary expression to rectify the traditional exclusion of black women from literary production” (Mehta 235). The work is a testimony to the power of both feminine resistance and resilience and the importance of female camaraderie and traditional African religious beliefs, but also to the marginalized voices of these women that now speak through the words of modern-day *griots* of African descent such as Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro.

The final work chosen for this section is *La isla bajo el mar* by Isabel Allende. Set in the Antilles in Santo Domingo during the eighteenth century, and Santo Domingo and Louisiana during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the narrative

recounts the events of the lives of the enslaved African Zarité and her French master Toulouse Valmorain. The first part of the narrative paints an overview of patriarchal on the sugar cane plantations in the Antilles to which Valmorain arrives at the end of the eighteenth century. The Frenchman finds his father, who had previously moved to the island in the Caribbean Ocean to make his fortune with sugar cane production, dying from syphilis and in the constant company of a pair of barely adolescent black girls: “...estaba siempre en una hamaca con sus mascotas, un par de negritas que apenas habían alcanzado la pubertad” (*Isla* 17).

The descriptions in the first few pages of the book set the tone for the remainder of the narrative, in which sexual relations and patriarchal power displays dominate the scenes between Valmorain and Zarité. The enslaved woman is forced to negotiate complex situations relating to motherhood, maternity, and sexuality throughout the course of the narrative. As previously noted in other works in this section, the master Valmorain “claims” what is rightfully his as soon as Zarité reaches adolescence, and impregnates her. So as not to upset his wife, who suffers from frequent miscarriages and stillbirths, the master takes the newborn child away from Zarité and she, in turn, is determined to find out what happened to her son. While forced to ultimately care for the masters’ offspring, Zarité is denied her own right as a mother.

When the protagonist decides to talk with a colleague of Valmorain about the situation, the only solace she receives is, “Seguramente tu amo deseará recuperar a tu niño, Tété. Después de todo es de su propiedad, ¿no?” (*Isla* 113). The response is a verbal affront, as not only is her child her master’s “property”; he is also her master’s offspring: his biological son. After Zarité becomes pregnant with her second child, she questions

her master about getting back her first son. The narrator comments that Valmorain had never thought about Zarité actually having feelings for her son as:

Había oído que los negros tienen menos capacidad de sufrir, la prueba era que ningún blanco aguantaría lo que ellos soportaban, y así como se les quitan los cachorros a las perras o los terneros a las vacas, se podía separar a las esclavas de sus hijos; al poco tiempo se reponían de la pérdida y después ni se acordaban. Nunca había pensado en los sentimientos de Tété, partía de la base que eran muy limitados. (*Isla* 137)

The previous comments by Valmorain are a testimony to the ingrained and monolithic fallacy that many white slave-owners used throughout the Americas to justify or appease their consciences concerning the mental and emotional capacity of the enslaved blacks. The sexual dynamics between Zarité and Valmorain are also complicated, as they are hinged in a liminal “gray” area between perversion and domination and desire and caring. On the subject of the “chore” of giving in to the demands of her master or, in more aptly, of accepting the systematic rapes as an inherent part of the institution of slavery in which she found herself, the narrator comments:

Para Tété era una tarea más, que cumplía en pocos minutos, salvo en aquellas ocasiones en que el diablo se apoderaba de su amo, lo que no ocurría a menudo, aunque ella siempre lo esperaba con temor... Tété había aprendido a dejarse usar con pasividad de oveja, el cuerpo flojo, sin oponer resistencia, mientras su mente y su alma volaban a otra parte, así su amo terminaba pronto y después se desplomaba en un sueño de muerte. (*Isla* 123)

The previous comments by Valmorain mirror other situations already discussed in this chapter, and demonstrate how he never thinks about Zarité's feelings, nor does he do anything to appease his own conscience. At worst, her feelings never even occurred to him.

Reminiscent of the cruel and sadistic scene previously explored in *Um defeito de cor*, where the master commits both heterosexual and homosexual rape on his slaves, the narrator comments that Zarité, “Agradecía su suerte, porque Lacriox, el dueño de la plantación vecina a Saint-Lazare, mantenía un serrallo de niñas encadenadas en una barraca para satisfacer sus fantasías, en las que participaban sus invitados y unos negros que él llamaba <<mis potros>>” (*Isla* 123). We note in the narrative that Valmorain considers Zarité more a mistress than a mere slave. The precarious position of concubine/mistress itself can be viewed as liminal in the sense that it is not quite one thing or another. After studying Zarité's bronze-colored skin, generous hips, and sensual lips after one of their “encounters”, the narrator affirms that Valmorain “concluyó que (ella) era su más valiosa posesión” (*Isla* 138). Although Zarité can never occupy the position of a wife or true partner in the life of Valmorain, because she is not white and European like his deceased wife, she is “good enough” to satisfy his sexual and, to a certain point, his emotional needs as his complacent and obedient “property”.

While Valmorain seems “comfortable” with their relationship, the narrator affirms: “Valmorain nunca se preguntó qué sentía ella en esos encuentros, tal como no se le hubiera ocurrido preguntarse qué sentía su caballo cuando lo montaba” (*Isla* 124). Although oblivious to her feelings towards being forced to satisfy his sexual needs,

Valmorain maintains a mostly monogamous “relationship” with his slave/concubine:

“Estaba acostumbrado a ella y raramente buscaba a otras mujeres...Tété ya no lo excitaba como antes, pero no se le ocurría reemplazarla, porque le quedaba cómoda y era hombre de hábitos arraigados” (*Isla* 124). As Ana Beatriz R. Gonçalves and Clara Alencar V. Pimental point out regarding the masters’ attitude towards the sexual activities they sustained with the slaves:

A escravidão transformou a mulher negra em servente, trabalhadora braçal, amante, prostitua, algoz e vítima de sim mesma por não encontrar justiça que olhasse por ela. Os senhores, em seus desejos, gostavam de acreditar que as escravas que levavam para a cama iam por vontade própria, ou por aceitarem certos ‘agrados’ que eles ofereciam como pagamento pelo serviço a ser prestado: vestidos, doces, promessas de alforria, laços de fita. Com esses ‘subornos’ eles acreditavam estar livres da culpa ou do estigma de estupradores, pois, para recebe-los, elas tinham que permitir a relação sexual. (119)

Valmorain’s failure to acknowledge or question Zarité’s willingness to participate in the years of sexual relations he maintains with her, while constantly promising her freedom and that of her child is testimony to the ideas of Gonçalves and Pimental regarding the “guiltlessness” of the master and his attempt to legitimize the act of rape.

In one of the intertwined first person narratives or memorialistic texts, Zarité comments on the difference between making love with her soul mate, Gambo, and being forcibly raped by her master. Although the enslaved protagonist endures both physical

and sexual abuse at the hands of Valmorain, she is able to overcome the pain and to find her forms of affection and sexuality with her lover, Gambo:

Yo no conocía el amor. Lo que hacía conmigo el amo era oscuro y vergonzoso, así se lo dije, pero no me creía. Con el amo mi alma, mi *ti-bon-ange*, se desprendía y se iba volando a otra parte y solo mi *corps-cadavre* estaba en esa cama. Gambo. Su cuerpo liviano sobre el mío, sus manos en mi cintura, su aliento en mi boca, sus ojos mirándome desde el otro lado del mar, desde Guinea, eso era amor. Erzuli, loa del amor, sálvalo de todo mal, protéjelo. (*Isla* 131)

This separation or distinction between the physical body and the spiritual body or soul in order to detach oneself from a traumatic situation is also a testimony to the belief in African diaspora religions of the temporality of our bodies and a stronger spiritual connection of our souls with the spiritual realm. Ultimately, in the narrative, Zarité gains her freedom from Valmorain and begins a new life in Louisiana. The subject of marginal or liminal sexuality does make a final appearance in the text, though, in the form of Maurice and Rosette. Both offspring of Valmorain are raised as brother and sister, the two fall in love, marry and have a child. Maurice is Valmorain's legitimate white son, while Rosette is his illegitimate black child with Zarité.

When Maurice confronts his father to inform him of his intentions to marry Rosette, Valmorain focuses on the fact that Maurice and Rosette are related by blood, saying, "El incesto es muy grave, Maurice" (462), to which Maurice replies, "Mucho más grave es la esclavitud...Sin la esclavitud, que le permitió a usted abusar de su esclava, Rosette no sería mi hermana" (462). This complex display of affection and sexuality is a

testimony to the negotiations of identity and belonging of the illegitimate offspring fruit of rapes during slavery. Conversely, we can view this relationship as offering somewhat of a solution and a show of the power of love.

We note how, drawing on the ideas of Wallace Best, the body, "...is a historically inscribed site of physical experience. African American history reveals that women's bodies have long been contested terrain. Power relations between slave owners and the enslaved were often enacted, resisted, and subverted in physical, sexualized form" (103). Throughout the narrative, Zarité calls upon the *loas* or Vodou deities to provide her with the guidance needed to handle each of the situations she is required to face. She is "mounted" by the *loa* Erzuli on numerous occasions during the narrative and taken in trance to "la isla bajo el mar", primarily during times of great trouble or when she is in need of guidance. As such, and echoing the ideas of Best, we can affirm that embodied experience is the bridge between the sacred and the sexual within the realm of African Diaspora religion.

Liminal Sexuality and Religious Gender Ambiguity: *O Jogo de Ifá* and *Del Rojo de su Sombra*

*Everyone is partly their ancestors;
Just as everyone is partly man
and partly woman.
- Virginia Wolf*

I begin this final section of the chapter with a quote by Virginia Wolf, also cited by one of the critics whose ideas we draw upon in this final portion of the chapter, Susan C. Quinlan, to analyze a work that problematizes the question of gender and sexual ambiguity, *O jogo de Ifá*, published in 1980 by late Brazilian author Sônia Coutinho. Our

intent in this final portion of the chapter is to investigate the ways in which displays of liminal sexual and religious gender ambiguity can be found throughout the religions of the African diaspora, and how they are depicted in the literary works chosen for this chapter. As such, we explore manifestations of bisexuality in the Gagá religious tradition in Mayra Montero's *Del rojo de su sombra*, as well as gender ambiguous narration in Coutinho's *O jogo de Ifá*.

We initiate our analysis of the two literary works with a brief perspective on sexuality and sexual ambiguity within the realm of African Diaspora Religion. As previously mentioned in this study, one factor of life that appears quite frequently throughout the *Patakís* or sacred myths is sexual desire and varied gender manifestations of the deities depending upon their particular path or representation. The deities fall in love, have affairs and present many of the feelings common to humans here on Earth. Where our interest lies in this particular section is in the “liminal” or “in between” space or line between the secular and the sacred, as well as between the masculine and the feminine as presented in African Diaspora Religions. Whether it is in the cross-dressing of possessional mediums, being “ridden” by Orishas of the same gender, or taking on an asexual persona in an attempt to desexualize the perceived “hypersexual” feminine body, we intend to demonstrate that many times engendered performance is central to an individual's religious identity or spiritual practices.

Turning to ideas set forth by Moshe Morad in “Invertidos in Afro-Cuban Religion” on the subject of liminality in the African diaspora religion of Santería, “In *Santería* both good and bad have a place and exist as legitimate powers. Some of the

deities are mischievous, and sexuality in all its varieties takes place in its cosmos, both in the ‘heavenly’ sphere (the *orichas*) and in the ‘earthly’ one, and even in between” (27).

It is in the “in between” space commented on by Morad that liminal representations of sexuality can negotiate meanings of belonging such as, for example, in *Del rojo de su sombra*.

Drawing on the ideas of Morad, we note how the Santería religion is the perfect place for these liminal representations of sexuality to conquer their space noting, “*Santería* practice is about daring to cross the borders between the human sphere and the *oricha* sphere. Transvestites and transsexuals are known to cross the border between male and female, thus making them most suitable to ‘cross the borders’ during ceremony and communicate with the *orichas*” (Morad 27). While in the many “traditional” religions homosexuality, bisexuality, and other manifestations of “liminal sexuality”, or forms of sexuality that are not readily accepted by the hegemonic society, have traditionally been ostracized and pushed to the margins of society, within the African Diaspora Religions these alternate forms of sexuality have found the acceptance sought by practitioners (Morad 27).

When we think about religious institutions and gender equality within these institutions, we recall the ideas of Simone Beauvoir that, “Nenhuma instituição homologa a desigualdade dos sexos; mesmo porque não há instituições, nem propriedade, nem herança, nem direito. A religião é neutra: adora-se algum totem assexuado” (*O Segundo sexo* 86). The idea of worshipping an asexual totem and the need to maintain an asexual appearance as a way of affirming a greater connection with the spiritual realm can be seen, for example, in the traditional figure of the Roman Catholic nuns and priests. Using

Catholic priests as an example, Wallace Best comments, “The Catholic Church has for centuries predicted an all-male, celibate priesthood on the idea of asexual male ministers, or a male clergy beyond speculation about the body and sex” (111). The Catholic priests and nuns are required to take vows of chastity in order to “wed” God in order to better minister and worship God.

Shifting our focus briefly to black female theologians and African American religious practices and to the question of matriarchal and matrilineal families within the larger African American society, we turn to the ideas of Wallace Best regarding the paradoxical situation of churches being considered the “domain of men” and women facing resistance to holding positions of clerical authority, while in actuality the majority of their members are women. (102) Recalling the liminal spiritual practice of Baby Suggs in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* explored earlier in this chapter, and how she uses the open space of the clearing to Call and minister to the people of the community, we turn to the ideas of Best on the difficulties faced by migration-era black preaching women:

Migration-era black preaching women developed inventive strategies to subvert and manipulate conventional gender expectations and to deflect attention away from their bodies, sex, and sexuality. They rendered themselves sexually ambiguous or entirely ensconced in a female sacred world beyond the reach of male perspectives or male power. (102)

Once again, we draw attention to the “sexually ambiguous” or sexless nature of the “performance” required of the black preaching women in order for them to gain acceptance as healers. In considering the historically-based cultural perceptions about women, their bodies and sex, according to Best, “Women’s bodies, the gender of the

Holy Spirit, and the gendered relationship between God and the preacher all figure centrally in these discussions of women in ministry (105). White women became the safeguards of the home and exemplars of Christian virtue. Extending certain stereotypes of white and black women concretized by the institution of slavery, Best points out that during this complex time in United States history, only white women were depicted as being naturally virtuous and pious:

The dominant American culture did not recognize black women as embodying moral virtue or pure spirituality; indeed, in the ideology that had developed under slavery, black women did not qualify to the exalted status of natural womanhood...By the late nineteenth and early twenties centuries, the stereotype of the lascivious, promiscuous, and morally corrupt black women had congealed in the white mind...Because they could not justify their ministerial calls with claims of feminine virtue, black women, more so than white women, based their right to preach on dramatic experiences of divine inspiration. (107 – 108)

In his chapter “The Spirit of the Holy Ghost is a Male Spirit”, Best cites an interview conducted with the pastor of an independent Pentecostal church. Mrs. Williams believes that, according to the bible, the spirit of the Holy Ghost is a male spirit. In an interesting display of transgendered spirituality similar to that found in African Diaspora Religion possessional experiences, Mrs. Williams affirms that, “when a woman receives that spirit she is no longer a woman – then she has the right to perform the duties of a man like preaching...The word of God is a ‘he’ and women are the flesh of the world” (Best 104). Throughout Best’s interview with Mrs. Williams, we note how in order to

perform her spiritual tasks as a black female preacher, she was required to, in the words of Best, “deny herself, her gender, and the ‘the flesh of woman’, and embrace the Holy Spirit and the superior spirituality of maleness. She had to incorporate the power and authority that comes with ‘maleness’ into her female body” (Best 106).

While in other African Diaspora Religions “embracing” the spirit involves effectively giving oneself over to the spirit, as the spirit enters the spiritual medium and uses the body as a tool from where to pass along her or his message from the spirit realm. In the case of Mrs. Williams, we see that she embodies not the spirituality of the divine spirit, but rather the “maleness” of the spirit in order to be able to preach. She does not undertake a gender transition, as is the case of male mediums receiving the spirit of a female Orisha such as Yemanjá, but in effect removes any ties to sexuality and “transcends gender altogether” as part of a “complex strategy employed by black preaching women who aimed to detract attention from their bodies and sexuality by rendering themselves sexually ambiguous or by complicating the very notion of ‘femaleness’” (Best 113).

The reason behind black female preachers traditionally detracting from their own “femaleness” is deeply rooted in complex issues of embodied sexuality. While some might argue that a male minister might also have to negotiate issues of sexuality in the pulpit, it is not equitable to the social constructs placed upon a female preacher’s sexuality, as according to Best, “a female minister’s sexuality is written in her body. She cannot be understood outside sexual terms...the woman minister’s body is sexually marked primarily because of her role as child bearer and all that entails and implies about her body” (111). Reminiscent of the “mammy” figure explored earlier in this chapter,

many African American female ministers took on the role of community or congregational “mother”, especially in urban areas. This ability to “mother” the congregation was, in the words of Best, “one of the ways black preaching women authenticated their calls to ministry” (117).

Reverting to the figure of Baby Suggs in *Beloved* as the marginalized spiritual leader and mother figure to the community, we turn once more to *Pedagogies of Crossing*. In her text, Jacqui Alexander draws on the ideas of Akasha Gloria Hull regarding the “union of politics, spiritual consciousness, and creativity that gave rise to a new spirituality among progressive African-American women at the turn of the 21st Century”, and attests, “This fusion helps to explain why black female theologians use Baby Suggs in Morrison’s clearing as Sacred Text” (322-23). The unconventional female sacred worlds that the women of the Diaspora created both reimagined femaleness and understandings of womanhood, as well as created spaces in which they were able to negotiate wider-reaching issues relating to gender, identity and rights within the dominant society.

In African diasporic religions and negotiations of gender and sexual identity within the Candomblé, Santería and Vodou religions, we draw attention to the fact that, according to J. Lorand Matory, most possession priests in West Africa are women, but men also participate in the rituals. What is interesting about their participation, however, is that the majority of the male possession priests cross-dress. In the words of J. Lorand Matory, “their cross-dressing requires a culture-specific reading. They dress not as ‘women’ but as ‘wives’ or ‘brides’ - a term that otherwise refers only to the women married to worldly men” (210). We shall later explore how this term carried over

transnationally to now represent the possessional priests who are possessed by the Orishas in the New World religions.

Speaking to the same cross-dressing or transgender quality of spiritual mediums in Africa, in *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions*, Randy Conner affirms that belonging to one gender or another does not negate the opposite gender “energy” inherently carried or embodied by each gender. Alternatively, in the words of Conner, “Vaginas and penises are not the only things that define our sexual nature. Our lives are influenced by the presence within us of both feminine and masculine energies” (39). Citing the Lugbara people in Africa as an example of complex displays and negotiations of gender, Conner points out that possessed priests have frequently been viewed as “marginal...and more specifically as transgender; these qualities promote their serving as messengers between the human and spirit worlds. Transgender male-to-female mediums are name *okule* (‘like women’), and transgender female-to-male mediums are called *agule* (‘like men’). (36).

The fact that the society views these transgendered individuals as “like” one gender or the other, and not concretely one specific gender or another attests to the liminal quality of negotiating between both genders in order to act as a bridge between the physical and the sacred realms. Citing another African people and its cosmology, Conner points out that in the Dagara culture, the words ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ do not exist for the members of the village. However, they do employ a very interesting word to refer to “gender ambiguous” or “gender alternative” people within their society: gatekeepers. According to Conner:

Gatekeepers are people who live a life at the edge between two worlds – the world of the village and the world of spirit....The gatekeepers stand on

the threshold of the gender line. They are mediators between the two genders. They make sure there is peace and balance between women and men...liminal beings bridging 'this world and the other world' who 'experience a state of vibrational consciousness which is far higher, and far different, from the one that a normal person would experience...They come from the Otherworld...they were sent here to keep the gates open to the Otherworld. (39-40)

In line with our assertions in the introductory chapter of this study, we note how possessional priests negotiation meanings of gender and belonging both in the secular as well as the sacred realm. Not only do these individuals cross traditional gender boundaries, they act as gatekeepers to other worlds and bridges across spiritual time and geographies. Speaking to this point, and citing a member of Adé Dudu, a gay liberationist/African-Brazilian organization, Conner attests: "In our religion (Brazilian Candomblé), these persons (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender practitioners of Brazilian Candomblé), are respected as *uma ponte dos Orixás*, a bridge of the orixás" (99).

It is interesting when we consider how within the hegemonic society of the West, expressions and manifestations of alternate gender have traditionally been met with resistance and ridicule, with many bisexual, homosexual and transsexual individuals finding themselves excluded from traditional religious settings; whereas in the African cosmology these individuals are more commonly accepted due to the complex gender dynamics of the deities themselves within traditional African religious beliefs. Citing examples of bisexual and androgynous manifestations of sexuality in representations of

the Orishas in both Africa and the New World, Conner highlights the deity Danbala: “In Dahomey, Danbala (as Da or Dan) appears to have been served in the past by both female and androgynous male hierodulic, or perhaps transgender, priests...Danbala is a bisexual entity containing both the male and the female...a unified force of sexuality” (57).

Speaking to the gendered and sexual representation of Yorubá divinities in the African-Brazilian religious iconography, Conner highlights that in the Candomblé religion: “Spiritual privileging of androgyny among indigenous practitioners may have influenced the shaping of a gendered and sexed representation of a Yorùbá divinity...This is how Brazilian Oxumarê turned androgynous – to refuse homosexuals in Candomblé was to refuse the god him- or herself (48). Similarly, on the subject of homosexuality and the intricate spiritual and sexual interactions that take place between deities and practitioners in the Santería religion in Cuba, Moshe Morad points out:

The unique space for homosexuals in Santería is not to be seen as an isolated phenomenon of the religion but as part of a holistic system of philosophy and faith based on a cosmology where the spheres of gods and humans interact in different levels, including spiritual and sexual ones. This system also allows interaction of the sacred and the secular, gender ambiguity, and cross-gender manipulation. Performance (music, dance, possession) is an essential component of the system and provides the medium for contact between gods and humans; in which effeminate passive homosexuals play an important role. (29)

The American anthropologist Ruth Landes in *The City of Women* comments extensively on the gender dynamics she encountered within the Candomblé religious

practices while in the state of Bahia. With regards to spirit possession and the engendered quality of being possessed or “ridden” by an Orisha, Landes affirms: “A temple woman becomes possessed by a saint or god who is her patron and guardian; they say that he – or she – ‘descends into her head and rides her,’ and then through her body he dances and talks. Sometimes they call a priestess the wife of a god, and sometimes she is his horse” (37). The actual word choice of “montar” or “to ride” to refer to the possessional act during which a particular deity or Orisha descends and takes over a priestess’ head and body has undoubted sexual connotations. Depending on the particular god descending on the head or “riding” a person, such as the figure of Shangó, the possessional act can be quite violent.

While attesting to the great influence of the priestesses among the greater religious community, labeling them as the “pathway to the gods”, Landes also cautions that spiritual possession by an “upright” or non-homosexual man would be an unthinkable act, “But no upright man will allow himself to be ridden by a god, unless he does not care about losing his manhood...some men do let themselves be ridden, and they become priests with the women; but they are known to be homosexuals” (37). Also interesting is the way in which Landes contrasts the possessional priests and the way in which “In the temple they put on the skirts and mannerisms of the women, and they dance like the women” (37), with the appearance of the “unattractive” and “unfeminine” female practitioners.

Landes describes the women practitioners as “black-skinned, strong and big, and had none of the mincing ways that the upper class considers feminine and alluring. In fact, they seemed to me like men dressed in the skirts of the Bahian women” (Landes 48).

This androgynous or gender ambiguous description of the Candomblé women is reminiscent of the asexual “mammy” figure previously explored in this chapter. Citing Edson Carneiro, Landes concretizes the non-sexual aspect of the Candomblé matriarchs, affirming, “The African woman is supposed to bulge, she is supposed to look comfortable, like one who carries children and loves men. That’s why she’s a mother!” (159). The juxtaposition of the desexualized black mother image and the hypersexual black female image within African Diaspora Religions is, as we explore later in this chapter, imbedded in classic Western female archetypes.

Speaking to the “mammy” or Black Mother figure and how black women have managed to use this figure to carve out a space for themselves within both the Candomblé religion and the greater society, Lorand Matory attests: “The Brazilian bourgeois sentimentalization of the Black Mother has indeed opened up a symbolic space for black female assertion in Candomblé...and those black women who have successfully exploited it did so only by way of their own genius at pushing its boundaries” (204). Similar to the gender and sexual dynamics involved in the negotiation of space faced by African American female preachers previously cited in this chapter, we observe how African Brazilian women have traditionally embodied the Black Mother figure as a form of gendered empowerment within the Candomblé tradition.

Attesting to the asexual or desexualized nature of the Black Mother in Candomblé, Landes points out that “A ‘serious’ priestess is supposed to be above interest in sex, and the famous mothers discipline themselves in this respect...there are few romances of the sentimental or desperate sort that we know. Maybe it is because most have little to offer these women” (147). As we see in the character of Mati in *Daughters*

of the Stone, it is not necessarily the fact she does not have a sexual interest in men that cements her solitary position as curandera. It is the fact that she does not need a man in her life, as she is fully capable of taking care of and providing for herself in her position as community spiritual leader and healer. Speaking once more to the self-sufficiency of the Candomblé “mothers”, Landes points out: “The women have everything: they have the temples, the religion, the priestly offices, the bearing and rearing of children, and opportunities for self-support through domestic work and related fields” (147).

In his chapter “Sex, Secrecy, and Scholarship”, Lorand Matory cites Mãe Stella, the first Candomblé priestess to publically explain women’s preeminence in her religion, who depicts Candomblé as a “matriarchate”. Mãe Stella characterizes Candomblé in this manner, mentioning three historical and psychological reasons:

First, the Candomblé was initially ‘brought’ [to Brazil] by three ladies, Iyás Deta, Kala and Nassô, three people from the kingdom of Xangô, who had the courage, even with all the repression, to do their Candomblé.

Second, since female domestic slaves had free time and both the competency and the option to cook, they were uniquely able ‘to continue practicing their original religion...I think that a woman always has a special little maternal way of taking care of things. Men too take care, but it is not the same thing...That doesn’t mean that the man lacks the capacity to be a priest; it’s that the woman is the mother figure, and when people come into Candomblé temple, they are looking for more of that snugly embrace. Women have the capacity to offer more tenderness. It’s just that. (Matory 205)

The fact that the woman is the mother figure and the Candomblé mães-de-santo represent the archetypal mother figure to the practitioners and members of the larger terreiro community, indicates the importance of the two principal female Orishas in the Americas: Oshun and Yemanjá. As previously set forth in chapter two of this study, while Oshun underwent the “sea change” to become the more sexualized persona in the Americas, Yemanjá continues to be viewed as the Great Mother of all the Orishas. However, Allison P. Sellers in her chapter “Yemoja: An Introduction to the Divine Mother and Water Goddess” cautions us, “The conceptualization of a deity rarely, if ever, results in a monolithic interpretation. Yemoja is certainly no exception” (137). Sellers points out that:

In the Americas, some of the greatest divergences in the understanding of Yemojá’s nature and her relationship to other òrìsà can be found in Cuba. These differences primarily concern sex and sexuality. For instance, in Cuban mythology, Yemayá is often said to be hermaphroditic. This is not terribly surprising. In Yorùbá tradition, many òrìsà are depicted with ambiguous sexualities. While Yemoja is most often referred to as female, she is no exception to this tendency. In Santería, she has a *camino* called Olocun or Olòkin. Generally recognized among the Yorùbá outside Cuba as a separate deity and the god of the sea, Olucun in this case is essentially an alternative, male personality of Yemajá” (Sellers 137).

Dialoguing with the disparity in myths regarding the separate Deity Olucun and Yemayá’s own connection to the depths of the ocean, in one of the Santería *Patakís*, Yemanjá has an intense sexual relationship with the beautiful androgynous figure Inle.

She captures him, takes him to the bottom of the ocean, and has her way with him until finally tiring of her lover, then takes him back to the realm of the mortals. However, as Inle has seen what no other human or divine creature has seen in the profound depths of the ocean, Yemanjá decides to cut out his tongue to prevent him from telling the secrets of the deep. This is why Yemanjá talks with Inle in the *Dilogún*. (Cabrera 45).

Commenting on Cabrera's positioning of Yemanjá's love for and infatuation with "queerly gendered and sexualized spiritual beings", Solimar Otero posits that for Cabrera, "writing as a queer (and lesbian) subject herself, her text gives the character of Yemayá access to a kind of power that transforms static notions of gender and sexed bodies, as well as the kinds of love and affection that can be expressed through these performances of embodiment" (98). When we consider the myriad of Greek and Roman goddesses, or those of other mythologies, we can likewise point to the same type of transformative characteristic of the dieties.

In another, version or *camino* of the Santería goddess, Yemanjá is portrayed as being a very beautiful and highly feminine black woman married to the oftentimes-violent Orisha Ogún. However, she is said to be, "más mujer que todas las mujeres juntas, más madre que todas las madres, puede ser tan varonil como el macho más macho...En este camino es marimacho y viste de hombre" (Cabrera 45). This particular myth is intriguing as it positions the Great Mother Yemanjá as the supreme mother, supreme woman, yet at the same time as manly as the "most manly of men". We note how within the spiritual realm of the Orishas, gender and sexuality are, similarly to the nature of the water realm of Yemanjá, highly fluid. Otero comments that Cabrera's use of the term "marimacho", masculine woman, in this particular retelling of the myth is

significant because “it has been appropriated by Chicana/Latina queer theorists like Gloria Anzaldúa...to represent a kind of lesbian location that signals a performance of what we could call a ‘butch’ aesthetic” (98).

In yet another and perhaps the most interesting of the *Patakís* inasmuch as gender ambiguity is concerned, we come across the *camino* or path/representation of the goddess in which Yemanjá does not merely embody manly attributes as in the previous myth. Moreover, she transforms into a man in a transgendered representation of her female self, “es a veces varonil hasta volverse hombre...se hundía en el mar y se transformaba en hombre...Yemayá tiene siete sayas pero nadie sabe lo que esconde debajo cuando se enoja y reacciona como un varón” (Cabrera 46). Commenting on the fluidity and changing conceptions of Yemanjá as seen in the previous examples of sacred Santería mythology within the African diasporic context, Sellers attests: “All of the preceding Santería tales illustrate a dramatic shift in the understanding of Yemojá nature, and in particular, the perception of her as a woman. This shift was exemplified dramatically in the Americas among the Yorùbá enslaved by the Spanish, and especially so in Cuba.” (141).

Sellers also highlights that, due to the influence of slavery on the Yorubá religious traditions brought to the New World, the female Orishas “came to embody several classic Western female archetypes: the mother...the temptress...the wife....and the once ‘pure woman’ who is corrupted and ultimately suffers as a results” (141). This change or evolving role of Yemanjá, for example, is one that is more complex than, in the words of Sellers, “a simple case of stereotyping” (141). Commenting on the effects of colonial

rule and the institution of slavery on the representation of Yemanjá in Yorubá mythology, Sellers points out:

In precolonial West African tales, as a wife and mother, she is distinctly feminine. However, she is not dominated by masculine will, nor are her strengths subordinate to masculine endowments...she chooses to transform herself...Yemoja is even capable of reproduction without male interference, as when she gave birth to many of her fellow gods. Enter colonial authority and slavery, and we find that the situation changes. Although still capable of independent action, Yemayá's choices more consistently revolve around preserving or securing relationships with male figures, frequently in spite of their abuse. (141)

Drawing on representations of the evolution of the female Orisha Yemanjá in the Patakís cited in this section, as well as on the ideas of Sellers concerning the gender norms of Western culture, we affirm that not only were these norms and Eurocentric beliefs asserted in the traditional African myths, but also contributed to an underlying shift in how African women's roles in society became viewed as an entirety within the African Diaspora. Based on the assertions by Sellers, we posit that while Yemanjá continues to be the ultimate "great mother" both in Africa and throughout the New World, she has been essentially stripped of her wholeness as a woman and mother, in order to adhere to patriarchal authority.

Turning now to the first of the two works chosen for this final part of our chapter, *O jogo de Ifá* by Sônia Coutinho, we note that the narrative offers both a masculine and a feminine point of view: that of both Renato and Renata. In her chapter "Divination: The

Possibility of a New Order”, Quinlan points out: “The melding of the two protagonists into a single androgynous character who reflects the author’s knowledge of history and of women’s place in the history is the purpose of the work” (149 – 150). The backdrop is the loneliness of people living in Rio de Janeiro and Salvador, with the element of African Brazilian religion, the “*jogo de Ifá*” or divining board serving as a bridge between old beliefs and chaotic modern life of the twenty-first century in Brazil.

As pointed out by the narrator in *O jogo de Ifá*: “Sua vida é uma busca permanente, jamais conseguiu preencher essa lacuna, o espaço vazio, uma falta de contato com algo que pressente vital, mas não consegue identificar” (12). The idea of women searching for their identity within the Brazilian society dialogues to a certain extent with the previously discussed idea of *Rootedness* within the African diaspora. We witness a very strong relationship between the city and the space that the woman occupies within this space. According to Quinlan:

O jogo de Ifá is an attempt to document the history of Brazil from a female point of view...Based on the myths and religious traditions overtly and covertly present in Brazilian society, Coutinho demonstrates how ritual, divination and ecclesiastical traditions have contributed to and continue to inform women’s history...She also challenges the reader to participate in the author’s struggle to define female discourse. (139 – 141)

In her work *The City of Women*, Ruth Landes explores the African Brazilian religious traditions in Salvador, as well as questions of gender, which are of relevance in the work due to the role that the man and woman perform within society, “Father Bernardino, who has an Angola temple...dances in the woman’s way, sensuous and

aloof...the mothers have almost forgotten his original sex... Then who is his god?’ I asked curiously. ‘Just what you might expect...it is Iansã, the bisexual goddess’ (205).

Continuing with our discussion on the Orisha Iansã, in *Fazer Estilo Criando Gêneros*, Patrícia Birman comments on the qualities or “paths” of Iansã, a deity who simultaneously encompasses both the male and the female. Birman believes that the feminine is not specifically a “women’s domain”. What the critic considers to be “feminine” is that, “possui fronteiras dadas por oposição ao que dele se exclui – a masculinidade plena dos ogãs. Admite, dessa forma, no seu interior, a possibilidade de se engendrarem várias identidades de gênero” (95).

When we consider *O jogo de Ifá*, the narrator encompasses the male and female vantage point in an androgynous narrative. According to Quinlan, “The androgynous nature of Coutinho’s dual protagonist Renato/Renata, and by extension the discovery of a dual (masculine and feminine) narrator is intrinsic to the understanding of the book and to the implementation of a new narrative voice” (151). The divination table itself, *o jogo de ifá*, which is the traditional African source of knowledge used for predicting future events, offers both self-knowledge and change. We note, as highlighted by Quinlan, that by “Simultaneously experiencing maleness and femaleness, the past and present, this character is able to sense the collective whole. His/her destiny is that of sharing this knowledge with others and forgiving them when they do not understand. The androgynous author/narrator is the symbol of self-awareness” (174).

Quinlan goes on to say that the androgynous narrative and the textual wholeness achieved by the protagonists’ understanding of the bisexual narrator demonstrates that:

The only way Renata and Renato come to know anything about each other is through the bisexual author/narrator. The voyages to the past undertaken by both protagonists indicate the need to understand the self through history. The repetitive cycles of domination and enslavement can only be altered by hindsight...Harmony comes from understanding and accepting the known and the unknown side of the self, masculine and feminine the conscious and subconscious. (*Female Voice* 173)

Drawing on these ideas, and making reference to the epitaph of this section of the chapter which states that just as we are *partly* our ancestors, so too are we *partly* man and woman (my emphasis), we observe that the only path to true wholeness is by accepting or embodying both halves of our spiritual and sexual selves. This bisexual quest for spiritual and sexual wholeness is also the theme of the last work in this section of our chapter, *Del rojo de su sombra* (1992) by Mayra Montero. In this text overflowing in mystical sexuality, we enter into the world of Haitian Vodou, while at the same time penetrate a world where lines of sexuality, gender and race intersect and intertwine within African diasporic spiritual practices. From an historical vantage point, Patrick Bellegarde-Smith points out that in addition to serving as a reunifying force, religion also served to pave the way to a national identity:

The Vodou religion brought solace, courage, and theoretical explanations to persons, two-thirds or three-fourths of whom were born in Africa at the time of the Haitian Revolution of 1791. Language and religion provided common idioms in which uprisings took root, flourished and prospered. These were the building blocks of nationality. (53)

Montero's work recounts the story of a Vodou priestess or "mambo" Dueña Zulé and a Vodou priest or "houngán" Similá, and the crime of passion that took place between the two powerful spiritual leaders in La Romana. According to Fernández Olmos, "Of all her novels *Del rojo de su sombra* most clearly affirms Montero's trans-national and trans-Caribbean reputation. Its subject is Gagá, a socioreligious practice followed by Haitians and their descendants in the sugarcane regions of the Dominican Republic" (*Sacred Possessions* 273). We observe that, according to Fernández Olmos, Gagá is a cult dedicated to the *loas* known as the *guedé* or "spirits of the underworld and death as well as of eroticism, sensuality, and fertility" (274). Speaking to the social-religious structure of the Gagá, Fernández Olmos highlights:

The organization structure of the Gagá follows that of the support societies surrounding the *humfo*, or religious community in Haiti, modeled in turn on the Haitian governing hierarchy. The Gagá is likewise modeled closely on the Dominican governing hierarchy, with a *dueño*, or maximum leader...They offer an identity which is far removed from the possibilities of these individuals in society in general...the social structure of the group reflects the values of the larger society...the Gagás have created their own social structures and their own means of dealing with their world. (274-75)

In the narrative, we observe that the religion of the Haitians experienced a type of double diaspora when the Gagá Religion was introduced into the cane fields of the Dominican Republic by the Haitian workers who went in search of work cutting cane on

the plantations. Speaking about the roots of the Gagá religion, and the double diaspora it experienced, Fernández Olmos affirms:

Gagá is a specific religious society with roots in *rará*, the Haitian traveling groups who dance, play music, and display their rituals and traditions in neighboring villages during the Christian Holy Week before Easter Sunday. Brought to the Dominican Republic by emigrating Haitian sugarcane workers, these *rará* rites were later transformed and reinterpreted by Dominican folk practice and beliefs. Gagá is therefore an interesting example of nontraditional Caribbean syncretism: instead of a hybridity between the European and the colonized, Gagá exemplifies a secondary type of syncretism, one between (ex) colonized peoples.

(Sacred Possessions 273)

From the onset of the novel, we note elements of racism or discrimination by the Dominicans towards the Haitian immigrants, in addition to numerous scenes depicting trance or Vodou spiritual practices. On the first few pages of the narrative, we meet Zulé's uncle's wife, the Dominican Anacaona who, different than most Dominican woman who "se resistían a juntar sus carnes mejoradas con la polvorienta negritud de aquellos bichos de cañaveral" (22 – 23), married Jean-Claude Revé, a Haitian who worked cutting sugar cane on the Colonia Engracia plantation. After the death of Jean-Claude, Zulé suggests that Anacaona marry her father. After agreeing to the suggestion, Zulé makes the uncommon request to Anacaona for them to allow her to watch their lovemaking: "Yo quiero verlos – le dijo, pasando apenas sus palabras por el cedazo fértil

de un mandato” (42). After watching from afar the sexual exploitations of her father and his new bride, Zulé tells Anacaona that she will go and live with Coridón.

From the early age of twelve, Zulé displays a spiritual gift, and catches the attention of the Vodou priest, or *Houngan*, Coridón: “Zulé miró a Coridón y Coridón la miró a ella, tal como si estuviesen jurados” (26). The priest calls her to undergo initiation in the practices of Vodou, and the protagonist goes to live with the spiritual leader and his wife. During her time spent with the couple, she ends up concluding her initiation into the spiritual realm of the Vodou religion, but also undergoes an intense sexual initiation with the couple that borders on the liminal lines of sexuality, due to the fact of both age and gender: “Coridón, más empequeñecido que nunca, se durmió tarde e como atolondrado por la satisfacción terrible de haber gozado de las dos mujeres” (72).

According to Randy P. Conner, the sexual initiation mentioned above is quite common within the Vodou religion, as are same-sex relationships for the female priests: “*Mambos...and hounsis...are often lesbians...Hougans ...are said to sleep with novices*” (91). The theme of sexuality transverses the narrative through the sexual relations that Zulé maintains with both men and women. Zulé grows into a strong, independent woman who personifies the question of bisexuality or lesbianism many times cited by critics or academics when referring to Vodou and Candomblé priestesses. As Conner points out, “In numerous African cultures and African and African-Diasporic spiritual transitions, same-sex intimacy and transgendered behavior or identity have been linked to spiritual role” (143).

We posit that out of all of the works included in our study, the one whose protagonist best exemplifies the “liminal figure” presented in the introductory chapter of

this study is that of Dueña Zulé. Not only does the powerful priestess enter into the “third space” of the ancestral realm of the spirits or *guedé*, she also negotiates marginalized gender positions within the dominant society. As previously stated, it is through this contact with their ancestral roots and the sacred that, from their liminal positions, these women are able to negotiate meaning and belonging both as individuals and as members of a larger diasporic community.

Dueña Zulé, who is described as displaying both male characteristics by the narrator in such descriptions as “la obstinación machuna de Zulé” (18), and “la viuda marimacho del difunto Coridón” (89), is a powerful spiritual leader, a mambo, whose desire to descend to the realm of the dead as well as to partake of sexual pleasures with various male and female partners in the world of the living places her in a position of liminality with relation to the dominant society. The choice of a female spiritual leader by the author is, according to Fernández Olmos, significant as it confers respect and status denied women in the larger society. As such, it can be seen as, in the words of Fernández Olmos, “a locus of feminine strength. As a mambo Zulé commands an authority in spiritual and earthly matters that includes not only the role of spiritual and physical healer but also negotiator with the spiritual world...crucial in preserving the collective’s cultural traditions” (277 – 278).

The narrative flows in and out of the trances and the language of the spiritual realm of the *loas*, thus creating a very mystical journey into the practices and beliefs of the Gagá practitioners. The trance scenes are of particular interest, as we witness both the ease with which Dueña Zulé enters into the world of the dead or realm of the spirits, as well as the psychological and emotional effects of the experience suffered by the mambo

in the days and weeks following the possessional states. Speaking to the communal importance of the spiritual leader or shaman, Brinda Mehta points out:

The shaman specializes in a trance during which his soul is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld. This definition brings to light three prerequisites essential to the shamanic experience: a position of distinction, an altered state of perception, and the powers of transformation. These exceptional qualities have been vital to the shaman's role as preserver of the cohesiveness and structure of communities that have been faced with several historical and socioeconomic crises that have threatened the general well-being of the group. (232)

In one particularly profound trance, Dueña Zulé, not content with the gift of being able to see into mysterious underworld, demanded to know how the elder Houngan had managed to attain this second or alternate spiritual vision. At this moment in the narrative, Zulé falls into a trance, which has a tremendous impact on her life and spiritual development:

Ella cayó en un trance de revolcadero, lleno de gritos de animal salvaje y de ronquidos. Fue un trance largo que los asustó a todos, menos a Cordon...Fue en ese preciso instante, al abrir los ojos y enfrentarse a la trampa eterna del batey, cuando la hija de Papá Luc comprendió que había dado el paso más espantoso y miserable de su vida. (*Del rojo de su sombra* 73-74).

Throughout the narrative, the powerful priestess experiences both spiritual and sexual growth. Like her guiding deity, Erzulie or Ezuli, Zulé is ruled by dualities. According to Fernández Olmos, “At once promiscuous, passionate in love, and attracted to both sexes like Erzulie-Fréda, militant and vengeful like Ezuli-gé-rouge, and victimized like the long-suffering Erzulie-Danton, Zulé confounds and reinvents herself throughout the novel” (*Sacred Possessions* 279). This “reinventing” of her spiritual and sexual self, in the words of Fernández Olmos, “dramatizes a specific historiography of women’s experience in Haiti and throughout the Caribbean” (*Sacred Possessions* 279).

Likewise, speaking to the characteristics of the Haitian *lwa* or spirit of the sea, Randy Conner highlights the dual nature of Ezili, especially in her sexuality. According to Conner, Ezili Lasyrènn is a *lwa* of the sea. Like another camino associated with this goddess, Ezili Freda, she “presides over aesthetics of love; her love, however, is often more maternal in character than that bestowed by Ezili Freda. One might compare Ezili Freda to the Yorùbá-diasporic orishá Oshún, while Lasyrènn more closely resembles the orishá Yemayá. Lasyrènn might be described as bisexual or pansexual” (59). In yet another “camino” or representation of this deity, we note an even stronger connection to bisexual and lesbian tendencies associated both with the deity herself, as well as with those over whose “head” she reigns.

When we consider the duality of Dueña Zule’s own sexuality as portrayed in the narrative, we affirm that she embodies the fierce, strong female image, is heterosexual in her relationships with the men in the narrative, but is undoubtedly lesbian in her relationship with Christianá. During the night spent together in the forest, Zulé takes the dominant position as the women “que más ordena” during their sexual encounter:

La dueña la besa más fuerte...Christianá deja de preguntar y empieza ella también a lamer los labios de la que más ordena. El barracón huele a tabaco y a calor de vientre...y huele, sobre todo, al aguardiente largo que se bebió la dueña...Zulé trata de no hacer ruido, pero los dulces pechos de aquella reina suya coletean y saltan dentro de su boca como pescaditos de orilla. (*Del rojo de su sombra* 139)

According to Conner, “Homosexual women are considered very often to be under the patronage of Ezili Dantò, who, while heterosexual in the sense that she has a child, is a fierce and strong female image. Many people think of Dantò herself as a lesbian woman, although she is also the wife of both Ti-jean Petro and Simbi Makaya” (61). Similar to the fluid nature of Yemanjá in her various representations, Ezili Dantò also changes and adapts depending upon the situation and what the particular person needs to see.

Speaking to this transmutable capability of the deity, Conner affirms: “Dantò, she’s a lesbian...She loves men, yeah, but she’s a lesbian...she is a hermaphrodite. She has both parts and will show you whichever one you need to see. She can come as a man or a woman...a woman, a man, straight, gay, bisexual. She loves everybody” (61). Once again, we note that the complexities of sexuality and gendered identity within the religious traditions of the African Diaspora are as difficult to navigate and define as the hybrid communities and identities that have arisen out of the various encounters of cultures, peoples and religions in the region. We also observe the flexibility and fluidity of the *caminos* or representations of the various deities, which attests to the adaptability of the African Diaspora Religions themselves within the Americas.

Throughout this chapter, we have explored the intersections of themes of sexuality, gender, maternity and spirituality relating to the Divine Woman of African Diaspora. Likewise, we have demonstrated that gender and sexuality are fluid concepts within the spiritual realms of the Orishas, as are the nature of the priests or mediums that embody or “are ridden” by these deities during a possessional trance. Reverting to the ideas of Solimar Otero on the performance of possession, we note, “There is a dislocation and relocation of gendered, racialized, and transgendered subjects in performances that reinscribe the body through possession” (99). In moving forward into our seventh and final chapter, we intend to deliberate on, in the words of Otero, “the fluidity of gender, race, and sexuality found in experience-centered religious traditions” (100) of the African Diaspora, as well as present conclusions reached based on our discussions raised throughout the remaining six chapters of the study. Finally, we hope to highlight possible points of interest for future research on the themes set forth in this study.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

Fêmea-Fênix

*Navego-me eu-mulher e não temo,
 sei da falsa maciez das águas
 e quando o receio
 me busca, não temo o medo,
 sei que posso me deslizar
 nas pedras e me sair ilesa,
 com o corpo marcado pelo olor
 da lama.*

*Abraso-me eu-mulher e não temo,
 sei do inebriante calor da chama
 e quando o temor
 me visita, não temo o receio,
 sei que posso me lançar ao fogo
 e da fogueira me sair inunda,
 com o corpo ameigado pelo odor
 da queima.*

*Deserto-me eu-mulher e não temo,
 sei do cativante vazio da miragem,
 e quando o pavor
 em mim aloja, não temo o medo,
 sei que posso me fundir ao só,
 e em solo ressurgir inteira
 com o corpo banhado pelo suor
 da faina.*

*Vivifico-me eu-mulher e teimo,
 na vital carícia de meu cio,
 na cálida coragem de meu corpo,
 no infindo laço da vida,
 que jaz em mim
 e renasce flor fecunda.
 Vivifico-me eu-mulher.
 Fêmea. Fênix. Eu fecundo.*

- Conceição Evaristo

Final Considerations

In this final chapter, I have chosen to include a poem by Conceição Evaristo to introduce my final thoughts and concluding ideas on the themes developed in the previous six chapters of the study. The poem entitled “fêmea-fênix” is a fitting tribute to the women protagonists to whom we have paid homage and analyzed in the remaining chapters. The phoenix, mythical creature who is the symbol of resurrection, is considered by many, according to Chevalier, “um pássaro sagrado e símbolo de uma vontade irresistível de sobreviver, bem como da ressurreição e do triunfo da vida sobre a morte” (422). When we consider the unspeakable hardships faced and overcome by so many African women and their descendants, it becomes easy to understand why Evaristo chose this mythical bird to symbolize the female capacity for survival and metaphoric rebirth in the context of the New World.

As such, in this final concluding chapter, I would like to revisit some of the themes relating to slavery, gender, spirituality cited in the first few chapters of this study, focusing particularly on the figure of the woman. In particular, I draw attention to the literary work that has served as our primary source for analysis: *Um Defeito de Cor*. Citing one of the most memorable scenes, in my opinion, of the nearly thousand-paged narrative, that of the crossing or Middle Passage. During this scene, Kehinde narrates how the enslaved Africans were placed “deitados no chão sem que houvesse espaço entre um corpo e outro” (*Defeito* 47). As such, they resembled “um imenso tapete...um imenso tapete preto de pele de carneiro” (*Defeito* 47). It is during this horrendous moment of the crossing at their darkest hours that the Africans seek solace in the Orishas and Voduns of their places of origin. Spirituality and the memories of their ancestors and family

members forcibly abandoned in African accompany Kehinde not only during the moment of the crossing, but throughout her life-long journey.

Reflecting once again on the ideas of Jacqui Alexander in *Pedagogies of Crossing* (2005) presented in the introductory chapter of this work, with regards to the way in which African cosmologies can be viewed as manifestations of location, rootedness, and belonging that map both individual and collective relationships with the Divine. In *Um Defeito de Cor*, we observe how African religious traditions intertwine with the daily routines and events in the lives of the protagonists in a fusion of the secular and the sacred worlds. Kehinde not only seeks to maintain her religious traditions alive in the New World, but also has the gift of premonitions through the dreams she receives with appearances of the spirits of her grandmother and sister. In addition to the personal significance of the Orishas in the life of Kehinde, the African religious and cultural traditions also serve as unifying forces that offer the protagonist with a diasporic Family and community within which to belong.

When I interviewed the author of *Um Defeito de Cor*, Ana Maria Gonçalves, I asked her to speak to the way in which she views the spiritual connection between the people of the African Diaspora and the religious traditions left behind in their countries of origin as “manifestations of localization, rootedness, and belonging”. I also questioned as to how these traditions contribute to the creation of new collective cultural roots in the Americas. As a writer of African descent, Gonçalves comments that faith or spirituality is something “in the DNA”:

Estava outro dia conversando com um amigo e reparamos que é raro encontrarmos ateus negros (descendentes de escravos). Acreditamos que

ser ateu é um luxo a que muitos de nós não pode se dar, pois a fé, algum tipo de fé, ou espiritualidade que nem precisa estar ligada a uma religião específica, está entranhada no nosso DNA. (2014)

We observe in the words of the author how faith or spirituality, along with the Orishas, was the only thing the enslaved Africans were able to bring in the “luggage” of their collective imaginary. After being re-implanted in the New World setting, however, this spirituality in Brazil, in the words of Gonçalves, “transformou-se em outra coisa, dentro de um conceito que hoje chamamos ‘afro-brasileiro’, tendo alguns deuses e deusas, inclusive, também se modificado para atender às novas necessidades de seus fiéis”. According to the author, it is this complex process of deconstruction and reconstruction of traditional African religious beliefs that new connections are strengthened and recreated to replace those torn down and destroyed by the Middle Passage and the institution of slavery:

Essa manutenção, desconstrução e reconstrução da “espiritualidade africana”, além de ser algo em que se agarrar para suportar os males da escravidão, é também uma certa novidade, um certo rearranjo de tradições que, embora enraizadas lá, dão outros frutos aqui, comuns a quase todos. O principal fruto disso é a Família de Santo, com pai, mãe e filhos, que estabelece e fortalece as novas conexões, em substituição às que foram desmanteladas.

Reverting to the themes explored in chapter three of this study on slavery and memory in the African Diaspora, and recalling the ideas of African American writer Toni Morrison on “re-memory” and those of African Brazilian writer Conceição Evaristo

related to the “ação criadora-rememorativa” of African Diaspora Religions, we note that for many of the protagonists of African descent depicted in the works of our study, the act of remembering is something that serves both as a bridge amongst diasporic communities and their countries of origin, but also as a factor that brings to the forefront many difficult remembrances of the cruelty and abuse suffered at the hands of the plantation masters.

In *Um Defeito de Cor*, Kehinde constructs a memorialistic narrative based on decades of her own experience both in Africa and in Brazil. We note that the narrator and main protagonist recreates events from her past and reveals her most intimate of thoughts, while simultaneously repositioning or selecting which pieces of information she should keep locked up in her own memory, and which ones she should share with the reader. It is in this selective sharing and keeping of memories and secrets that Kehinde manages to “give a voice” to her own past, as well as the past of other people from her community, while attempting to survive as an enslaved woman in the New World.

Considering the way in which the memories shared by a group or a community can drastically change the official history with regards to which events are passed down from one generation to the next, we post that Kehinde’s narrative appears as a discourse that challenges the dominant discourse and official history of the country. The protagonist recounts her memories and her version of the past from a marginalized position within the Brazilian patriarchal society of the eighteenth nineteenth century. When questioned as to how memory contributes to the cohesiveness of individuals in the African diasporic context with their pasts and, more remotely, with the Divine, and how history shared through collective memories functions as a kind of “collective sisterhood”

of past events, Gonçalves comments that memory functions for Kehinde as both a burden and a gateway. Speaking to the first point of memory as a shared burden amongst individuals of African descent, the author affirms:

Acredito que a memória, no caso de Kehinde, é um fardo e um portal. Sujeitos infantilizados e sem voz, os escravos foram acostumados a se adaptarem às narrativas/memórias de seus senhores, até mesmo como estratégia de sobrevivência. A memória, então, era algo que estava guardada, até mesmo borrada pelo tempo. Digo então que é um fardo, um peso, quase palpável mesmo, que eles tinham que carregar porque às vezes era doloroso compartilhar, da mesma maneira que continua sendo doloroso, para os descendentes de escravos, nos dias atuais, compartilhar histórias e experiências em relação aos resquícios da escravidão, como o racismo.

The last point made by Gonçalves is highly pertinent, as even today racist mentalities and practices fruit of years of colonialism and patriarchal domination in the Americas continue to plague communities with heavy populations of individuals of African descent. We only need look to the newspapers in Brazil over the past couple of weeks to corroborate our claims with the news of the death of the African Brazilian woman Cláudia da Silva Ferreira and cries by social activists of “a carne do mercado mais barata é a carne negra” in the streets of Brazil and on the pages of social media sites denouncing the racist and senseless killing of the mother of four.

According to the author, in *Um defeito de cor*, memory serves as cultural heritage to be passed down from one generation the next. Kehinde selectively recounts the

discrimination and racism faced in her own life as an enslaved black woman in Brazil in the form of a testimony or letter in the form of a monologue. As such, in the words of Gonçalves, memory functions as the “inverso ao Portal do Esquecimento – através do qual os sobreviventes devem passar para conseguirem continuar com suas vidas”. While the author does not view memory as a tool with which to collectively bind the members of the greater diasporic community, she does agree that the shared experience serves as the cohesive glue for the individuals of the African diaspora:

Não sei se concordo com a irmanização através da memória. Através da experiência, sim. Mas acredito na memória como algo mais individual, com cada um tendo a sua, dada a seletividade natural que fazemos dos processos traumáticos. Por causa disso, da seletividade, nem sempre a experiência se transforma em memória acessível e acessada.

Drawing on the ideas explored in the last few chapters of this study on race, sexuality and maternity, and focusing specifically on *Um defeito de cor* to guide our analysis in this concluding chapter, we note how the three themes are intrinsically intertwined in the narrative and are depicted in a number of different manners throughout Kehinde’s memories. As the work itself is an historical novel that narrates the life of an elderly African woman from the moment of her capture, the time spent in captivity on plantations in Brazil, and her post-slavery life and achievements conquered in both countries, it is of no surprise to us as readers that the question of race and racial discrimination can be clearly observed throughout the narrative.

Using the title of the work itself as a springboard for discussion, we approach the reading by questioning in what way might color be seen as a “defect” or “fault”, and what

role questions of race might have in the life of the narrator. One of the endearing qualities of Kehinde is her decisive capacity and her strong will. Her determination is noted not merely in her actions and attitude towards the various events of her life, but rather in her own words in the final chapter of the narrative when, as an elderly woman, she comments on the “defeito” of her color. Kehinde affirms that she does not have “defeito algum”, and comments: “talvez para mim, ser preta foi e é uma grande qualidade, pois se fosse branca não teria me esforçado tanto para provar do que sou capaz, a vida não teria exigido tanto esforço e recompensado com tanto êxito” (*Defeito* 572).

When I first read Kehinde’s affirmation, I mentally questioned “And what if she were white in the narrative?” How is Kehinde’s “color” a “defect” or flaw? I came to the realization that one of the (many) things that makes the text so truly remarkable and memorable is the fact that it is the memorialistic story of a black young girl/adolescent/woman/elderly woman within the patriarchal and slave owning society of nineteenth century Brazil. As previously shown in this study, we know that historically enslaved women suffered “doubly” in the institution of slavery by being exploited not just for their physical force in working in the fields, but also for their breeding capacities and as sexual objects. In order for Kehinde to achieve her goals in life, she faced many barriers that a white woman living during the same historical moment in Brazil would undoubtedly not have faced, as the white woman would not have had to contend with a “defeito de cor”.

Therefore, my final question posed to Ana Maria Gonçalves is related to how she views the question of Kehinde and, on a larger scale, women of African descent in the Americas, having to historically “prove” themselves within the dominant Eurocentric

society. I instigate whether how, if at all, the author feels that spirituality and community have contributed as factors that support or provide women of African descent with a way in which to “find themselves” or to develop their own sense of personal identity within the dominant society. Gonçalves comments that one of the most interesting studies that has read on the subject, was one in which it discussed how racism and abuse towards black women increased in places and historical moments during which white women were introduced:

Quando chegavam as mulheres brancas, porque os senhores se casavam, imediatamente se estabelecia, por parte desses senhores e dessas senhoras, uma necessidade de “comparação”, de diferenciação. Estando já a mulher branca um degrau abaixo do homem branco, na sociedade patriarcal, a mulher negra precisava ser rebaixada, para que não houvesse comparação entre as duas. Portanto, mesmo que o senhor continuasse se servindo sexualmente dela, era com mais crueldade, e para isso estabelece-se o mito da mulher negra que aguenta tudo – desde o estupro, até horas extenuantes de trabalho e a separação dos possíveis filhos, que dela poderiam ser arrancados a qualquer momento, através de venda ou redistribuição de herança. (2014)

This last point made by the author is of particular relevance to not just the narrative in *Um defeito de cor*, but also in other narratives analyzed in this study, such as *Daughters of the Stone* and *La isla bajo el mar*, in which the presence of the white plantation mistress has a direct and detrimental effect on the treatment of the black protagonists. The idea of having to “prove oneself” was one that the author believes is

tied to personal pride: “Acho que é esse o “provar-se”, o não dobrar-se, o fazer-se de forte e aguentar, quase que apenas por orgulho mesmo” (2014). Unable to find a suitable answer as to how these women were able to withstand the horrors of slave life, Gonçalves cites spirituality or a “feminine sacred” as a form of support for the individual woman and the greater community: “Uma pergunta que eu nunca consegui responder, nem quando escrevia o livro e nem agora, é: como elas aguentaram? Por isso, acredito que sim, que a espiritualidade (um sagrado feminino?) e uma rede de apoio formada por outras mulheres deve ter sido fundamental” (2014).

Although we recognize the impossibility for our study to encompass and successfully answer all of the questions raised in the same, we believe that we have offered possible paths to be explored at a later moment concerning the complex navigation and negotiation of intersections of spirituality, race, gender and sexuality within the African diaspora. Notwithstanding, we have proven that, within the scope of the African diaspora depicted in the literary works chosen for analysis in this study, the female protagonists find themselves in positions in which they are required to negotiate marginalized gender positions within the dominant society.

Likewise, within the spiritual realm during trances as mediums, as spiritual healers, or as women practitioners of African diaspora religious beliefs in the New World, we have shown how they negotiate complex gender and spiritual identities. It is through this contact with their ancestral roots and the Sacred that, from their liminal positions, these women are able to negotiate meaning and belonging both as individuals and as members of a larger diasporic community. These women and matriarchs, turning to their spiritual beliefs as a tool of resilience and, at times, resistance, fight for a better

future not only for themselves and for their immediate families, but also for their community and negotiate issues of crossing and dislocation by means of (re)memory and the sacred.

In closing, and reverting to the words of the critic with whom we began our study and initiated our dialogue on dislocation and “pedagogies of crossing”, those of Jacqui Alexander, in which she questions what would taking the Sacred seriously mean for transnational feminism. According to the critic:

It would mean wrestling with the praxis of the Sacred. The central understanding within an epistemology of the Sacred is that of a core/Spirit that is immortal, at once linked to the pulse and energy of creation. It is that living matter that links us to each other, making that which is individual simultaneously collective. (328)

As such, and echoing the words of Alexander on the theme of “pedagogies of crossing”, we conclude that the men and, in particular, the women who survived the Middle Passage with the Orishas relied on the individual collectivity of the souls who held the power of making community, who held the power of words and, ultimately, who held the power of holding onto what held them up (320). The embodiment of the sacred empowered the women of the African diaspora to not only keep alive the traditional religions of their homelands, but to carve out places and time in which in the Orishas imbued them with the strength to withstand hardships and to create new and vibrant manifestations of New World religions.

I pay tribute to the many women and mothers explored in this study, and close with a prayer to the “Great Mother”: “*Iyá nlá, Iyá Oyibó, Iyá erú, Iyá, mi lánú.* (Madre Grande, Madre de los blancos, Madre de los negros, misericordia.)”. Que assim seja. So be it.

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APPENDIX 1

Interview with *Um Defeito de Cor* Author, Ana Maria Gonçalves

March 31, 2014 – Via E-mail

Pergunta 1

Tonia: Em primeiro lugar, gostaria de agradecer-lhe, Ana Maria Gonçalves, por conceder-me esta entrevista. É uma honra ter esta oportunidade para interagir diretamente com você sobre a sua obra *Um Defeito de Cor*. Quando comecei a pensar sobre as perguntas que gostaria de lhe fazer durante essa entrevista, percebi que eram tantas que quase teria que escrever outra dissertação apenas sobre a sua obra! Brincadeiras à parte, confesso que a sua obra afetou significativamente a minha vida. Por ser tão rica em elementos históricos e espirituais, e por ter uma protagonista tão complexa e dinâmica, *Um defeito de cor* convida o leitor a embarcar numa viagem meta-histórica durante uma das épocas mais escuras da história brasileira: o tempo da escravidão.

Ao entrar um pouco nos temas da escravidão e da espiritualidade como retratada na sua obra, uma das cenas que mais se destaca na narrativa no meu ponto de vista é a da travessia ou *middle passage* no barco negreiro. Nessa cena, Kehinde narra como os africanos escravizados “deitados no

chão sem que houvesse espaço entre um corpo e outro” pareciam “um imenso tapete...um imenso tapete preto de pele de carneiro” (47). Dentro do momento terrível da travessia, os vários povos africanos buscam consolo nos Orixás e Voduns dos seus países de origem. A espiritualidade e as memórias de ancestrais e familiares abandonados na África acompanham Kehinde não só no momento da travessia, mas durante a sua longa vida no Brasil e na África.

No meu trabalho, tomo como base as ideias de Jacqui Alexander em *Pedagogies of Crossing* (2005) sobre a maneira pela qual os sistemas cosmológicos afrodescendentes podem ser vistos como manifestações de localização, enraizamento e pertencimento que mapeiam as relações individuais e coletivas em conjunção ao Divino. Em *Um defeito de cor*, as tradições religiosas africanas se intercalam aos acontecimentos diários dos protagonistas, numa fusão do mundo secular e do mundo sagrado. Kehinde não somente procura manter suas tradições religiosas, mas tem o dom de fazer premonições oníricas através das aparições dos espíritos da sua avó e da sua irmã. Além do significado pessoal dos Orixás para Kehinde, as tradições religiosas e culturais africanas também servem como forças unificadoras que proporcionam à protagonista uma comunidade e família diaspórica.

Ao pensar especificamente no caso de Kehinde, queria pedir que você comentasse um pouco sobre a maneira como vê a conexão espiritual entre os africanos em situação diaspórica e suas tradições religiosas deixadas para trás em seus países de origem como “manifestações de localização, enraizamento e pertencimento”. Além disso, como essas tradições funcionam para criar novas raízes coletivas culturais nas Américas?

Ana Maria: Estava outro dia conversando com um amigo e reparamos que é raro encontrarmos ateus negros (descendentes de escravos). Acreditamos que ser ateu é um luxo a que muitos de nós não pode se dar, pois a fé, algum tipo de fé, ou espiritualidade que nem precisa estar ligada a uma religião específica, está entranhada no nosso DNA. Essa fé, ou espiritualidade, junto com os deuses, foi a única coisa que eles conseguiram trazer na bagagem, e que, mais tarde, no Brasil, transformou-se em outra coisa, dentro de um conceito que hoje chamamos “afro-brasileiro”, tendo alguns deuses e deusas, inclusive, também se modificado para atender às novas necessidades de seus fiéis. Essa manutenção, desconstrução e reconstrução da “espiritualidade africana”, além de ser algo em que se agarrar para suportar os males da escravidão, é também uma certa novidade, um certo rearranjo de tradições que, embora enraizadas lá, dão outros frutos aqui, comuns a quase todos. O principal fruto disso é a Família de Santo, com pai, mãe e filhos, que estabelece e fortalece as novas conexões, em substituição às que foram desmanteladas.

Pergunta 2

Tonia: Dando continuidade ao tema da escravidão, a minha segunda pergunta diz respeito a um tema muito ligado à escravidão e à diáspora africana: a memória. Ao pensar nas ideias da escritora afro-americana Toni Morrison sobre “re-memory” e da escritora afro-brasileira Conceição Evaristo sobre a “ação criadora-rememorativa”, vemos que para muitos protagonistas afrodescendentes o ato de rememorar é algo que serve tanto como uma ponte entre as comunidades diaspóricas e seus países de origem, quanto como um fator que traz muitas lembranças difíceis sobre a crueldade e maus-tratos sofridos às mãos dos sinhôs e sinhás.

Em *Um defeito de cor*, Kehinde constrói uma narrativa memorialística baseada nas suas próprias experiências. A questão da memória é muito presente ao longo da obra com comentários da narradora tais como: “Justo eu, que tanto me orgulho de ter boa memória” e “Acho que posso confiar na memória”. Vemos que ela recria eventos do seu passado e dos seus pensamentos mais íntimos, ao mesmo tempo os reposicionando ou escolhendo quais deles ela deveria guardar ou não na memória dela. É assim que consegue “dar uma voz” ao seu passado e ao passado das outras pessoas da sua comunidade numa tentativa de lidar com sua situação como pessoa em condição de escravidão.

Uma vez que as memórias compartilhadas por um grupo ou comunidade podem mudar de forma drástica a história oficial a respeito de quais eventos serão passados de uma geração para a outra, podemos dizer que a narrativa de Kehinde aparece como um discurso que desafia o discurso dominante e a história oficial do país. Ela conta suas memórias e a sua versão do passado desde uma posição marginalizada dentro da sociedade patriarcal brasileira dos séculos XVIII e XIX. *No seu ponto de vista, em Um Defeito de Cor e dentro do contexto da Diáspora Africana como um todo, como a memória contribui para a coesão dos indivíduos com seus passados e, mais além, com o Divino? Você vê que, uma vez que compartilhamos uma história através da lembrança construída pela memória, a memória funciona como uma espécie de “irmanização” do passado também?*

Ana Maria: Acredito que a memória, no caso de Kehinde, é um fardo e um portal. Sujeitos infantilizados e sem voz, os escravos foram acostumados a se adaptarem às narrativas/memórias de seus senhores, até mesmo como estratégia de sobrevivência. A memória, então, era algo que estava guardado, até mesmo borrado pelo tempo. Digo então que é um fardo, um peso, quase palpável mesmo, que eles tinham que carregar porque às vezes era doloroso compartilhar, da mesma maneira que continua sendo doloroso, para os descendentes de escravos, nos dias atuais, compartilhar histórias e experiências em relação aos resquícios da escravidão, como o

racismo. E um portal – inverso ao Portal do Esquecimento – através do qual os sobreviventes devem passar para conseguirem continuar com suas vidas. No caso do *Um defeito de cor*, o livro sendo um monólogo, é também uma carta. Uma carta testamento, tendo a memória/história/experiência o bem mais precioso possuído por Kehinde, a única coisa que ela quer e pode deixar para o filho perdido. Memória tratada como herança. Não sei se concordo com a irmanização através da memória. Através da experiência, sim. Mas acredito na memória como algo mais individual, com cada um tendo a sua, dada a seletividade natural que fazemos dos processos traumáticos. Por causa disso, da seletividade, nem sempre a experiência se transforma em memória acessível e acessada.

Pergunta 3

Tonia: Minha última pergunta se diz respeito aos temas de raça, sexualidade e maternidade dentro de *Um defeito de cor*. Na sua obra, os três temas se entrelaçam na narrativa e se demonstram numa variedade de maneiras nas memórias da protagonista, Kehinde. Por tratar-se de um romance histórico que narra a vida de uma africana desde o momento da sua captura na África, passando pela escravidão no Brasil, e sua vida pós-escravidão no Brasil e na África, não é nenhuma surpresa para o leitor que as questões de raça e discriminação racial se apresentem de forma clara ao longo da narrativa. Começando pelo próprio título da obra, o leitor já inicia a sua

leitura da obra questionando de que maneira a cor poderia ser vista como um “defeito”.

Uma das qualidades que se destaca na personagem Kehinde é a sua capacidade decisiva e força de espírito. Sua determinação é percebida não só nas ações e atitudes dela, mas também nas suas próprias palavras no último capítulo quando, já anciã, fala sobre o “defeito” da sua cor.

Kehinde afirma que não tem “defeito algum” e que “talvez para mim, ser preta foi e é uma grande qualidade, pois se fosse branca não teria me esforçado tanto para provar do que sou capaz, a vida não teria exigido tanto esforço e recompensado com tanto êxito. (572)

Ao pensar nessa fala de Kehinde, a primeira parte desta última pergunta é sobre o “defeito de cor” propriamente dito. Quando eu li o apontamento de Kehinde, me pus a pensar sobre a questão de “e se fosse branca” no contexto da obra e percebi que realmente uma das (muitas) coisas que faz com que a obra seja memorável e tenha tanto impacto no leitor é o fato de ser a história de uma menina/adolescente/mulher/anciã negra dentro do ambiente patriarcal e escravista do século XIX no Brasil. Sabemos que historicamente as mulheres em condição de escravidão sofreram de forma dobrada ao serem exploradas não somente por sua força física nos engenhos, mas também por suas capacidades reprodutivas e como objetos sexuais. Para que Kehinde conseguisse alcançar o que almejou na vida, ela

teve que enfrentar muitas barreiras que uma mulher branca do mesmo momento histórico no Brasil não teve que enfrentar, pois não tinha seu “defeito de cor”. *Gostaria de saber como você enxerga a questão de ter que historicamente “provar-se” perante a sociedade dominante e se, de algum modo, a espiritualidade e a comunidade contribuem como fatores que apoiam a mulher afrodescendente a se identificar ou “se encontrar” dentro da sociedade?*

Ana Maria: Uma pergunta que eu nunca consegui responder, nem quando escrevia o livro e nem agora, é: como elas aguentaram? Por isso, acredito que sim, que a espiritualidade (um sagrado feminino?) e uma rede de apoio formada por outras mulheres deve ter sido fundamental. Um dos estudos mais interessantes que li, já não me lembro onde, foi como, por exemplo, o racismo e os maus tratos em relação à mulher negra aumentavam nos lugares/momentos em que a mulher branca era introduzida. Ou seja, em ambientes – fazendas ou residências - , por exemplo, onde havia só homens e mulheres escravas, elas viviam um pouco melhor. Quando chegavam as mulheres brancas, porque os senhores se casavam, imediatamente se estabelecia, por parte desses senhores e dessas senhoras, uma necessidade de “comparação”, de diferenciação. Estando já a mulher branca um degrau abaixo do homem branco, na sociedade patriarcal, a mulher negra precisava ser rebaixada, para que não houvesse comparação entre as duas. Portanto, mesmo que o senhor continuasse se servindo

sexualmente dela, era com mais crueldade, e para isso estabelece-se o mito da mulher negra que aguenta tudo – desde o estupro, até horas extenuantes de trabalho e a separação dos possíveis filhos, que dela poderiam ser arrancados a qualquer momento, através de venda ou redistribuição de herança. Acho que é esse o “provar-se”, o não dobrar-se, o fazer-se de forte e aguentar, quase que apenas por orgulho mesmo.

Queria te indicar um texto antigo meu, mas que talvez fale um pouco sobre esse assunto também:

<http://www.revistaforum.com.br/idelberavelar/2011/08/17/sistas-por-ana-maria-goncalves/>

Pergunta 4

Tonia: Focando agora na questão da sexualidade, vemos como desde uma idade muito nova Kehinde é forçada a lidar com situações e cenas sexualmente traumatizantes. Nas primeiras páginas do romance, a protagonista presencia o estupro de sua própria mãe e sofre abuso sexual de guerreiros no seu país natal de Daomé. Depois de sobreviver a travessia e ser vendida para o sinhô José Carlos, ao completar trezes anos, Kehinde é obrigada a “se entregar” ou, em outras palavras, a ser estuprada, pelo sinhô José Carlos. Kehinde, como era muito comum na época, fica grávida como resultado do estupro e tem um filho do sinhô José Carlos, Banjokô.

Apesar de ter passado por tantas atrocidades antes e durante o período em que ficou escravizada, Kehinde consegue se tornar uma mulher livre capaz de sentir amor e prazer sexual com outros homens durante a sua longa vida. Logo, a maternidade, assim como também aconteceu com a experiência sexual, é algo que a protagonista experimenta primeiro em condição de escrava após o estupro e depois como uma mulher livre. Por um lado, como escrava, Kehinde pensa em tomar algum remédio natural para que seu filho não nascesse na mesma situação que ela: escravo. Ela sabe que, ao nascer um filho enquanto era escrava, o filho também seria escravo e pertenceria ao sinhô.

A atitude de Kehinde remete-nos ao romance de Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, e a atitude drástica tomada por Sethe numa tentativa de “salvar” seus filhos da instituição da escravidão. Em outro momento, após dar à luz ao seu primeiro filho Banjokô, Kehinde não tem leite para amamentá-lo durante os primeiros dias de sua vida. Em decorrência disso, a Sinhá mandou chamar a escrava dos seus amigos, a qual já amamentara os filhos de três mulheres brancas e cujo filho havia morrido, para amamentar o filho de Kehinde. Quando finalmente o leite de Kehinde brotou, ela afirma: “...nada no mundo se compara a dar algo de nós para um filho” (190).

Com estes poucos exemplos, vemos como a maternidade e a possibilidade de ser mãe eram negadas à mulher negra devido a sua condição dentro da sociedade escravocrata. *Portanto, minha última pergunta está relacionada às questões de sexualidade e maternidade. Dentro do contexto retratado em Um Defeito de Cor, como você vê as complexas negociações de sexualidade, gênero e maternidade sob o jugo da escravidão para as mulheres africanas e seus descendentes?*

Ana Maria: Acredito que uma das maiores crueldades feitas à mulher escrava é em relação à importância dada a seu ventre, ou seja, o seu poder de criação e perpetuação da escravidão. Filho de mulher escrava nascia escravo, independente da condição do pai, se livre ou escravo também. Por isso, boa parte das escravas evitavam – através de beberagens e ervas – ter filhos. Quando os tinham, talvez nascesse ali também a sensação de possuir algo, a ilusão de ter posse e controle sobre esse filho. Ilusória, claro, mas talvez necessária para se continuar vivendo. A mulher, nesse caso, o da maternidade, é a perpetuadora do destino, a causadora do mal destino dos próprios filhos, mesmo não tendo controle algum sobre o próprio corpo. Não seria então, o sexo consentido, o único momento em que ela tinha posse do próprio corpo também? Não sei, nunca parei para pensar direito nisso, mas talvez sim. Ao se entregar, por prazer e/ou amor, a um homem escolhido, não poderia ser caracterizado como o único momento em que se possuía também? Ao amamentar também: o leite é

dela, embora muitas vezes a mulher escrava tivesse que cedê-lo ou partilhá-lo com os filhos das mulheres brancas. Mas o leite era algo que o corpo dela produziu, e apenas porque tinha tido um filho.

Tonia Wind: Ana, na verdade gostaria de estender esta entrevista para poder lhe questionar sobre uma dezena de outros temas, tais como o processo criativo pelo qual você passou para criar um romance tão grande – tanto em tamanho quanto em conteúdo histórico e literário – mas sei que sairia do foco do meu trabalho atual. Então, para concluir, eu só queria agradecer-lhe mais uma vez pela sua participação nessa entrevista informal sobre o maravilhoso romance, *Um Defeito de Cor*. Realmente foi uma honra muito grande para mim ter acesso a você e aos seus comentários. Desejo-lhe muito sucesso nos seus projetos literários futuros, e espero ter a oportunidade de ler uma nova obra da sua autoria em breve. Que assim seja!

APPENDIX 2

Interview with *Daughters of the Stone* Author, Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa

March 14, 2014 – Via E-mail

Question 1

Tonia: I would first just like to thank you, Mrs. Llanos-Figueroa, for your agreement to participate in this informal interview about your novel *Daughters of the Stone*. I cannot tell you how much of an honor it is for me to have this opportunity to ask you a few questions about your novel. As a wife, mother and daughter myself, *Daughters of the Stone* really “spoke” to me. I was drawn into the narrative by the various inter-generational relationships among the women, as well as the strong presence of spirituality as a binding cultural component. When we consider the marginalized position women of African descent occupied within the patriarchal societies of the Americas during the centuries depicted in your novel, in the case of *curanderas* or other “spiritually gifted” women we observe an even deeper level of marginalization stemming from religious discrimination. Focusing particularly on the character of Mati and the idea of her representing a “liminal” character, I would like ask that you please talk a little about how you view the role of

women and, more specifically, women of African descent as mediators or mediums between two worlds in your novel.

Dahlma: Within the context of the *Daughters of the Stone*, spirituality is the bedrock of individual and collective resistance to the institution of slavery. In response to the brutality and ruthlessness of that system, some Africans presented a physical and for the most part, futile resistance against the heavily fortified oppressors. Many women, as my protagonists, chose a more internal, individual and underground method of resistance. This movement, cleverly disguised through syncretization of the Catholic religion that was super imposed on the slaves, was effective in not only maintaining tradition and therefore, self-identity, but also in uniting the Africans on emotional and psychological levels against their oppressors. As time passes, members of the black communities, begin to assimilate the western notions and to doubt the very traditions that have helped them survive the system that has robbed them of their freedom.

Each of the female protagonists in the novel has a very different relationship to spirituality or traditional ways of knowing depending on a number of factors—proximity to African life, length of time in western society, decline of plantation society, rise of cities, level of education, need to be accepted by the larger society and the need for self-identity. These characters, especially Mati (ironically, the first woman born outside

of Africa and having no direct knowledge of this spiritual base), stand at the line of demarcation between the traditional African ways of knowing (intuitive, abstract and spiritual realm) and the superimposed European world view (objective, concrete, physical reality). These opposing forces create the contention that drives the mother/daughter relationship as well as the relationships of these women to their communities. Each character experiences this struggle in a very different way. But ultimately, it is the glue of this spirituality that sustains each one in her hour of need and it is this glue that provides for continuity over the generations.

For Fela this contention manifests in the recurring internal struggle between her own needs and desires and the demand of the Goddess Oshun. Initially, Fela's need for maternity drives her to ignore the Goddess and proceed with her own plans for conception, thus setting in motion the destruction of the society, as she knew it. As she maneuvers her journey through slavery in Puerto Rico, she comes to understand the dimensions of her hubris and begins her penance. However, as she comes to the critical moment in this reparation, the relinquishing of her baby, she once again finds herself in opposition to Oshun. There is little doubt as to who will win this struggle. Fela perishes, finally fulfilling her promise to the Mother. Thereafter, Oshun inhabits the lives of successive women in the family in a variety of manifestations.

Mati is perhaps the strongest example and proponent of the African tradition in the novel. She follows the rituals and devotes her life to using her gift to help others. Eventually she risks beloved husband and adored daughter to her overriding faith in her role as *curandera* and spiritual leader. While making enormous sacrifices to maintain her beliefs, even Mati can see the inevitability of change. While she is keenly aware of the dangers of adopting the ways of the white folk, she realizes she is unable to stop what is surely coming their way. At the same time, while she is respected for her gifts by the older generation, some in her community are suspicious and fearful of the gift that they don't understand. Young *Ladinos*, who never knew the freedom of life in their mother country, only see through the lens of slavery. They increasingly look to the 'modern' western paradigms for answers to their problems, turning to Mati only when all else fails. Her passing is symbolic of the passing of the old ways. While spirituality survives, it will have a very different face in the future.

Concha, seduced by the new and different and in desperate need to fit into the larger society, turns her back on her mother's teachings. She hungers for the western ways and sees Mati's traditional ways as superstitious and backwards. The stories and their accompanying spiritual teachings, represent the African ways of knowing that she totally rejects. In the face of Mati's unwavering faith and the loss of her father, Concha begins to retreat and finally the mother/daughter relationship breaks under the strain.

After many years of alienation and the resulting mental illness, Concha realizes that until she makes peace with the rejected tradition, she can't move forward in her healing. With the help of western treatment, she begins to see that much of her illness comes from the denial of part of her essential self. While she, Concha, has rejected Mati's worldview, her daughter Elena is the keeper of the flame who helps guide her mother back to wellness.

Elena is the ultimate crossover character who builds her life on science and modernity. She's a well-educated, bilingual professional who is self-actualized and chooses to immigrate rather than submit to the desires of a hostile mother-in-law. While she doesn't have Mati's unshakable faith nor Concha's rediscovered spirituality, she too is rescued by the tradition that seems to lay dormant in her life. In her depression, she doesn't have the wherewithal to find her way back. But her daughter Carisa has inherited the legacy of the gift of knowing. And when her mother languishes in depression, it is this gift that revives her. The African spirituality of the past has morphed in the modern, urban world into an active and consistent stream of dreaming. Carisa's revelations come in her sleep to provide the answers that have been forgotten by Elena's conscious mind. The ways of knowing aren't lost; they are reconfigured into a different form for a new generation. And when this is presented to Elena, she recognizes it as quickly as she would have recognized Mati's face.

Carisa herself falls on difficult times when her modern world refuses to recognize her ways of knowing. Her attempts at sharing the stories and the worldview of which she is a product result in a journey that is essentially, the total opposite of Concha's. Carisa has to walk away from an educational system that negates everything she believes in. While she has succeeded in assimilating into this complex and challenging world in NYC, she finds that the answers provided are insubstantial and superficial. She chooses to go back and claim the stories she has heard about over the years. She returns to Concha's world to seek answers and finds that the answers are a combination of the traditional and the western. Her task is to reconcile the two and those become whole—an educated, bilingual, bicultural storyteller who fully embraces and celebrates all aspects of herself.

There are two elements in the story that represent the influence of spirituality in the book. The stone is symbolic of the spiritual tradition that is literally passed on from one generation to the next, coming to the aid of each character as she faces major crises in her life. It accompanies Carisa on her final voyage. The character of Mother Oshun inhabits the lives of all the protagonists whether or not they are entirely aware of her presence. At the end of the novel, we see a total integration as Carisa leaves to find the source of the stories. The last image is one of her recognizing her own

face in the face of The Lady, a manifestation of Oshun, who has always lived in Carisa's dreams throughout.

Question 2

Tonia Wind: The idea of “passing on” of stories is an integral part of *Daughters of the Stone*. In the narrative, we observe how stories serve not just as a way in which to keep memories alive. Moreover, by drawing on the figure of the *griot* as an embodiment of universal knowledge, they can be understood as both manifestations of the Divine and defining elements of cultural identification. From your perspective, within the African Diaspora, how do memory and the retelling of myths, stories and histories contribute to communal cohesiveness and connect individuals with both their pasts as well as with the Divine?

Dahlma: In many societies, storytelling is of paramount importance because it provides an intimate and self-sustaining reality in the face of the opposing and often destructive dominant narrative of the society as a whole, whether this is a community of ethnic Russians or shtetl Jews or Basque freedom fighters or Native American shamans or gypsy travelers or African slaves. Because these stories are introduced at an early age, they become a foundation on which to build before the oppressive society intrudes to place its own definitions on a given sub-culture. In the presence of racist or classist or xenophobic forces, these stories provide a

strong sense of self and appreciation for the cultural markers that may not be appreciated by the dominant culture. In this case, the Afro-Boricua community was under attack. Their beliefs were, and in many ways are still, considered superstitious, backwards and heathenous. By telling the stories, the women in the novel engage in another type resistance, a weapon to reinforce their survival on many levels.

In *DOS*, it is important that these storytellers are women, *griots* and mentors for the young girl. Elena had told Carisa some of the old stories as a child. She knew about Fela and Mati and Concha. But now she was ready to experience storytelling on another plane. In the chapter *Old Friends*, when Mrs. Goldberg and Mrs. Jackson share their stories and insist that Carisa share hers, they are speaking to the universality of this storytelling ritual. They are also teaching her to honor her past and situate herself within it. In the chapter called *Porch Stories*, the setting, a small porch in the countryside, sets the stage much as a dark room where children are told bedtime stories. The women sit in a circle on their rockers and tell stories. Carisa is the child thirsting for the tales. Their circle is a womb from which the child draws nourishment and can start piecing together a clear sense of whom and what she is. The women speak of love and loss and death and friendship and community—major concepts and conflicts which Carisa will have to face in her life. It is only after these experiences that Carisa realizes that she has a responsibility to pass

on the stories to others that they may learn as she has. In a sense, they have shared her past and now it was time for her to start constructing her future.

Question 3

Tonia: My last question is related to the themes of sexuality, gender, and maternity. In your novel, these three themes are interwoven in the narrative and depicted in a variety of different ways in the “stories” of each of the female characters. In Fela, for example, we note the complexities surrounding the themes within the context of the institution of slavery in Puerto Rico during the 1800’s. Of all of the characters, Fela is the one who best exemplifies the intertwining of the sacred (presence of Oshun) and the secular (sexual exploitation) in the life of an enslaved African woman in the so-called New World. In one scene in particular, after having been “wooded” by her new *patrón* Don Tomás, she has “consensual” intercourse with him by the river. The sexual act brings the horrific memory of the brutal rape endured at the hands of *el Patrón* on the previous plantation flooding back to Fela, and the maiming at the hands of the vindictive *patrona*. What allows Fela to complete the sexual act with Don Tomás, which she needs to fulfill the childstone promise made while still in Africa in order for her to become pregnant, is her guiding Orisha, Oshun and the memory of the ancestors and Africa. Within the context portrayed in *Daughters of the Stone*, how do you view the complex

negotiations of sexuality, gender and maternity under the yoke of slavery for African women and their descendants?

Dahlma: The themes of sexuality, gender and maternity are inextricable in the novel. Perhaps the most complex treatment of these themes can be seen in Mati. In her mid-twenties, she turns away all suitors who come to her door. Polite but firm, she seems to have no need of them. The young men think her haughty and resent her aloofness and her power, a power they don't understand and of which they become increasingly suspicious and fearful. She uses that gift of knowing and healing for the good of her community. However, in the face of her property being stolen by surrounding *hacendados*, she doesn't hesitate to use her powers to get back the land left to her by Don Tomás. Well aware of the fact that she will have to pay for this misuse of her gift, she sets out to not only right a wrong, but to go further and exact revenge on these men who had always abused her people. While we never see her act openly, the planters who cheat her out of her inheritance fall ill by some mysterious disease that only Mati can cure. In the same mysterious way, none of them was ever able to father any children after their encounter with her. And when Cheo comes back, he has many questions and Mati offers few answers. How exactly had she acquired the land? What was it about all those childless men? What exactly had Mati done to achieve this? What hold did she have over these planters that would result in these changes in their lives?

Mati's gift and her use of it placed her beyond the men in her community. Even Cheo who loves her deeply is put off by her independence. The one thing he wants to secure for her, her freedom, she has already achieved on her own. He sees her strength as a constant attack on his ability to provide and protect, to be a man. She seems to need no one and nothing. Her strength and independence is at the heart of their eventual break up.

Fela is ready to risk everything to rectify her barrenness turning to Mother Oshun, the goddess of love, sexuality and fertility for help. The goddess asks for a simple task in return. However, so intent is Fela in completing the fertility ritual that she postpones Oshun's mandate. Her need for maternity blinds her to the possible consequences of her delay. Putting her needs before her task ultimately results in the destruction of the village and everyone in it. Her penance for this act of hubris is that she ultimately loses the very thing she so values the most—her child.

The coupling of Fela and Tomás is another complex and difficult relationship. She allows, in fact welcomes, him to have sex with her but turns the table on the usual master/slave rape narrative. While Tomás is the initiator, Fela manipulates the situation to suit her own needs. Soon enough he realizes that his 'affection' for Fela is not reciprocated. He is merely a pawn in a game he doesn't begin understand.

As much as Mati loves Concha, she can't stop the distance that grows between them. Their final fight brings to light Concha's unspoken grievances of their relationship, which have been festering for years. Although initially close, Concha comes to resent Mati's role as a *curandera* as supplanting her role as mother (in much the same way that Cheo sees it as taking away from her role as wife). As a teenager, Concha blames her mother for Cheo's departure and as an adult, she begrudges Mati's closeness to her own daughter Elena—an expression of love that Concha feels Mati has never offered her. These involved issues of maternity create a huge rift that isn't resolved for many years.

Pablo feels Elena deals a blow to his manhood when, against his will, she leaves for NYC and takes the children with her. This is the beginning of her making major life choices without his input. She proves much more adaptable to their new environment and he never accepts their life in this new and alien city. Although he follows her to NYC to fulfill his duty as husband and father, his heart isn't in it. He holds her responsible for their baby's death and turns away from her in her time of need. Ultimately, he can't forgive her for her strength and resilience much like Cheo never forgives Mati for the same qualities.

Tonia: Mrs. Llanos-Figueroa, thank you once again for your time and invaluable insight into the novel. I wish you much success on your future writing endeavors and hope to have the opportunity of reading another one of your works in the very near future. ¡Luz y amor!

APPENDIX 3

Interview with Dr. Marta Moreno Vega,

Author of *When the Spirits Dance Mambo* and *The Altar of My Soul*

April 01, 2014 – Via E-mail

Question 1:

Tonia Wind: I would first just like to thank you, Dr. Marta Moreno Vega, for agreeing to participate in this informal interview about your memoir *When The Spirits Dance Mambo* and your spiritual memoir *The Altar of my Soul*. I cannot tell you how much of an honor it is for me to have this opportunity to ask you a few questions about both works. As someone who has a great respect not only for your work, but also for African Diaspora Religions and the ways in which spirituality and, more specifically, the spirits can manifest themselves in the lives of people who may or may not be intentionally seeking their intervention, I found your works both intriguing and enlightening.

If I could, I would like to first talk a little about *When the Spirits Dance Mambo*. I actually read the work prior to reading your spiritual memoir, and was captivated by the relationships and cultural practices of the diasporic community of Puerto Ricans living in *El Barrio* depicted in your

narrative. I particularly enjoyed the way in which you weave music and the Orishas into the mundane secular world of both your family, as well as those of the members of the greater Puerto Rican community within *El Barrio*. The sacred drums come to life in the syncopated words of the text, and we note how music is not merely a cultural production, but rather a bridge to the most sacred and intimate aspect of human nature.

It is this last point that I would like to focus on for my first question. In my study, I explore Jacqui Alexander's ideas on Black cosmological systems as manifestations of locatedness, rootedness and belonging that map the individual and collective relationships with the Divine. Although the importance of community is overwhelmingly evident in *When the Spirits Dance Mambo*, it comes through even stronger in your spiritual memoir, *The Altar of My Soul*. Throughout the entirety of the text, the experiences shared with various members of religious communities in countries such as Cuba, Brazil, and Nigeria speak to the true meaning and importance of community. In each of the countries, it is through your connection with Santería, and other African Diaspora Religions, that you attain the acceptance of the various spiritual leaders and initiates. In *The Altar of My Soul*, you speak of the Orishas being "all-embracing" and affirm that the strength of the New World Yoruba religions lies in their ability to embrace us all (210). As someone who has witnessed firsthand the complicated negotiations of identity and belonging throughout the African Diaspora,

what role do you believe spirituality has historically played in the reconstruction of new collective bonds and in bringing “wholeness” to the individuals within the new diasporic setting?

Dr. M. Vega: The words reconstruction of new collective bonds – new diasporic setting are somewhat confusing. Our experience is a continuum that is connected to our memory and retelling of our stories via family, elders, etc. Our African traditions on the continent have gone through continuous changes throughout history due to natural exchanges, internal mobility, civil wars and colonization creating and innovating that that was. The process of forced enslavement over centuries, mis-education, invisibility, racism, discrimination also fueled creation and innovation. Therefore, we understand that spirituality is fluid and evolving addressing the needs and realities that allow for addressing solutions, hope and promise for the known, desired and unknown. To me the fluidity of our spirituality is at the core of sustaining the ethic, moral and values that honor our sacred connection to nature wherever we find ourselves and our people.

Question 2

Tonia Wind: Diverging slightly from the importance of community and the collective identity within the African Diaspora, I would like to focus on the very personal and individual experience you share in *The Altar of My Soul* of initiating as a Yoruba Priestess in the Santería religion. In my study, I turn

to Lesley Feracho's ideas on the memoir and diary as "...a form of autobiographical narrative that has proven especially useful in understanding women's reconstruction of the self" (17). Throughout your spiritual memoir, the reader is granted a glimpse into both the rituals and beliefs that comprise the Santería religion, and your own thoughts on your personal spiritual journey from somewhat of a skeptic to becoming a Yoruba Priestess. The first part of this question has to do with the choice of literary genre for both texts. If possible, I would ask that please elaborate on your use of the memoir for approaching the subject of the Sacred, and comment on how, if at all, this genre contributed to a greater personal understanding.

The second part of my question is related to the theme of embodiment. For me, some of the most powerful and memorable moments in *The Altar of My Soul* are when you do the impossible: you put the sacred into words through your descriptions of otherworldly experiences of trance and interaction with guardian spirits. As readers, we are guided through the complexities and varieties of embodiment as experienced by the mediums when they are used as spiritual vehicles of communication by the Orishas. We also witness your own interaction with the spirits of your grandmother, *Abuela*, your great-grandmother, *María de la O*, and your mother, *Mami* in your spiritual journey to becoming a Yoruba Priestess.

In my study, I explore the role of the woman as a mediator of two worlds: the secular and the sacred. I also contemplate the idea of embodiment as the manifestation of the divine, and a process of cultural identification. Based on your own personal experience and interactions with women mediums in the various African Diaspora Religions in The Americas, I would ask that you please talk a little about the role of women as “mediators of worlds” and your views on “embodiment” within this particular spiritual context.

Dr. M. Vega: In my journey, the many paths have made it clear to me that we are all embodiments of the sacred. Witnessing men and women mediums connect with the spiritual realm is to understand that there exist a greater divine intelligence that is accessible if the recipient is open to the communication. The societal systems that make it more acceptable for women to embrace their spirituality and divine communications skills certainly make it easier for women to embrace this part of their divine path. I was fortunate to have been born into a family that embraces divine knowledge. Although my father and brother believed, I think their “machismo” training didn’t allow them to follow a path that would appear to soften their maleness in public or private spheres. I believe that the freedom for spiritual inquiry was open to women in my life and less so to men.

I used memoir because so many young people on a journey to their understanding of themselves have asked me to describe how I do whatever they perceive I do. Our society compartmentalizes roles as if our lives were selves in a department store. We are many pathways within ourselves that connect if we allow ourselves to multi-identify and embrace the many ways that we exist in the world and value each facet. When I initiated it was informative to witness the many ways people reacted whether positive or negative there was always the shadow of doubt indicating that a “professional” would not be public about being in the Lucumi system. Practitioners would come to the book signing of *Altar of My Soul* with the book covered hand it to me quickly and share their African name in a whisper for me to sign their book.

The central role of the women in my life, specifically my mother and Abuela were to understand that I had value, we had value, and all that we did was of value to others and us. Our spiritual practices remained behind closed doors because my Abuela and parents didn’t want us to be devalued for our beliefs by others.

Question 3

Tonia Wind: My last question for you, Dr. Moreno Vega, is related to oral myths and ancestral traditions and the role of women as “walking libraries” of universal knowledge or modern *griots* with the African diasporic context.

In addition to your own thoughts and spiritual experiences, your memoir *The Altar of My Soul* presents the timeless teachings of the *Patakís*, or sacred stories of Yoruba-origin used in the Santería religion, throughout the course of the narrative. In the text, you explain that these myths or parables are used to “... explain the complexities of both the spirit and secular worlds, providing initiates with explanations and solutions for the problems afflicting them” (114). In addition to the *patakís*, you also highlight the importance of ancestor worship to help guide initiates’ daily lives, and to preserve the memories of African descendants.

One of the points that you make is regarding the different “versions” of the *patakís* that can arise depending upon the person retelling the story. The subjectivity present in the act of retelling parallels to a certain extent what or how history is (re)told by the dominant discourse. Within the framework of storytelling and the retelling of history, memory, or to use the idea of Toni Morrison “re-memory”, inevitably play an integral part of what is told or passed on from one generation to another. (Re)memory involves the conscious and unconscious remembering and “disremembering” of painful or traumatic events from the past. One person may remember a certain event that is of particular importance or that has a specific meaning to his or her life, while another may choose to focus on a completely different happening or memory. Within the context of the African Diaspora, and the persecution so many practitioners have

faced throughout the centuries while trying to practice their beliefs, the physical act of passing down of ancestral knowledge from one generation to the next has contributed greatly to keeping the myths and beliefs of the ancestors alive in the New World. From your perspective, within the African Diaspora, how do memory and the retelling of myths, stories and histories contribute to communal cohesiveness and connect individuals with both their pasts as well as with the Divine?

Dr. M. Vega: Go into a room with five people. Tell one a story without the others hearing the story. Have the second person tell the story to the third without the fourth hearing, and so on. Know that the story will be different by the time it gets to the fifth person.

The telling of stories, the retelling will change because we each bring our particular perspectives and voice deciding what is more or less important. Imagine then the journey that we have made as a people under the most adverse conditions over generations. The wonder is that the stories (patakis) continue to exist carrying the core values intrinsic and integral to the sacred principles of spirit and nature.

We can create labels to try to understand the power of spirit, ancestral memory, (Re)memory etc., however I prefer to believe that as intentional beings with the intent of impacting the both worlds we live in that we seek

to be integral forces in the lives of others and ourselves as social beings and will do the extraordinary to sustain that which has sustained and valued our being present. Acknowledging the past is integral to the present.

Tonia Wind: Dr. Moreno Vega, thank you once again for your time and invaluable insight into your two memoirs. This has truly been an honor for me. I wish you much success on your future literary, cultural and spiritual endeavors.

¡Luz y amor!