

“LIKE A DIALECT FREAKED BY THUNDER:” Spiritual Articulations of Survival and Identity in Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban* and *Monkey Hunting*

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*Drawing upon religious studies, literary analyses, and performance studies, this essay analyzes how ancestral African spiritual practices connect to issues of nation and racial identity; this argument focuses on the processes of religious, racial, and gender identification for the Afro-Cuban. In *Dreaming in Cuban* and *Monkey Hunting* by Cristina García, several key characters are connected to the faith of Santería. Their participation in Santería bestows upon them capabilities greater than they have ever known and permit incisive evaluations of the nation-state. Moreover, in both texts, Santería comprises a large part of the racial identity and history of certain characters. García demonstrates Santería to be a means of agency, national critique, and a way to maintain a sense of racial identity. In this analysis, the works of Coco Fusco, José Esteban Muñoz, and Antonio Benítez-Rojo will elucidate how race, performance, and the nation-state can be major factors in the literary imaginings of Santería.*

Critical discussion about spirituality in Latina/o cultural production has been generated from multiple perspectives. To begin, Miguel A. de la Torre and Edwin David Aponte comprehensively acknowledge the many theological lenses to be applied to Latina/o culture from Curanderismo to Liberation Theology in *Introducing Latino/a Theologies* (2001). Outside of a singular focus on theology, some of the first substantial studies that address the role of religion in Latina/o culture and its production are conducted in the following essay collections edited by Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert and Margarite Fernández Olmos: *Sacred Possessions* (1997) and *Healing Cultures* (2001). Paravisini-Gebert and Fernández Olmos also authored *Creole Religions of the Caribbean* (2003).

All three of these texts primarily examine the variety of Creole or ancestral spiritual practices of the Caribbean; the analyses here have a particular anthropological bent and explicate diverse methods of cultural resistance to oppression. Recently, Margarite Fernández Olmos penned an essay entitled, “Spirited Identities: Creole Religions, Creole/U.S. Latina Literature, and the Initiated Reader,” which addresses the relationship between spiritual practices and identity from a more literary perspective; this work is published in the collection, *Contemporary U.S. Latina/o Literary Criticism* (2007) edited by Lyn Di Iorio Sandín and Richard Perez. This turn to a more literary approach fits the recent pattern of critics examining the role of various types of spiritual practices in U.S. Latina/o literature. *Strangers in Our Own Land* (Avalos 2005) and *Profane & Sacred* (Kevane 2008) are single-author texts that detail literary, cultural, and theological studies of major spiritual practices such as Protestantism, Pentecostalism, Catholicism, Spiritism, and Santería in the works of U.S. Latina/o authors like Ernesto Quiñonez, John Rechy, Judith Ortiz-Cofer, Achy Obejas, Loida Maritza Perez, and Julia Alvarez. Both authors work to convey spiritual distinctions in the U.S. Latina/o community and how religion facilitates yet complicates communal formation. Other texts have prepared the way for these major analyses executed by Avalos and Kevane. *New Latina Narrative* (McCracken 1999) and *Show and Tell* (Christian 1997) both have chapters that address the impact of spirituality on U.S. Latina/o literature, particularly in terms of articulating identity and a feminine space in a postmodern ethnic narrative. Moreover, Frances R. Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman’s edited collection *Tropicalizations: Transcultural Representations of Latinidad* (1997) features María Teresa Marrero’s essay, “Historical and Literary Santería: Unveiling Gender and Identity in U.S. Cuban Literature,” which often gets noted as the text that began the conversation about the interrelationships between identity, Creole religion, and community formation. Consequently,

critics like Avalos and Kevane owe much to their predecessors Marrero, McCracken, and Christian.

To turn to how religion is discussed in Chicana/o cultural production, two works emerge as the most central. *Borderlands/La Frontera* (Anzaldúa 1987) and *Loving in the War Years* (Moraga 1983, 2000) both address the individual and communal value of the Aztec and Mayan spiritual practices of the Chicana/o community. In these texts, the authors Gloria E. Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga blend memoir, poetry, fiction, and essay in order to critically and creatively examine the power of spirituality in fomenting sentiments and methods of multi-faceted resistance to societal oppression. Specifically, these writers have utilized allusions to indigenous spiritual heritages in order to recognize and include feminist and queer members into the Chicana/o community. Other works address the significance of folk Catholicism in Chicana/o cultural production. Ana Castillo edited the collection *Goddess of the Americas* (1996), which contains various stories about the cultural importance of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Furthermore, other authors such as Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Norma Alarcón emphasize the value of indigenous spiritualities, especially in connection to traditional practices of Catholicism in the Chicana/o community; these writers' essays have analyzed a range of spiritual icons, from Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz to Coatlicue, and can be found in Carla Trujillo's edited collection, *Living Chicana Theory* (1998).

Overall, in Latina and Chicana Studies, various writers have illuminated the complexities and histories of numerous spiritual practices in the Chicana/Latina community. A majority of these texts have shown the intricate and significant relationships between concepts of religion, identity, and resistance; such connections have great ramifications for both the community and individual, especially for the female subject as she is often the one linked to the

home and thus spiritual sustenance. In this vein, Chicana authors Anzaldúa, Moraga, Castillo, Alarcón, and Gaspar de Alba have been pivotal in the feminist project of making the cultural roles and lives of Chicanas/Latinas into crucial experiential knowledge and theory, information which has been too often dismissed as embodied, thus non-intellectual and negligible; notably, these writers have been central in stressing how methods of resistance and agency can be found in the ancestral and hybrid qualities of various faiths. Cristina García's work extends this critical analysis of spiritual practices in the Latina/o community. In particular, *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) and *Monkey Hunting* (2003) illustrate the force of spirituality in the empowering of self and coming into a critique of power, from patriarchy to nationalism; these novels demonstrate how Santería empowers Latinas, Afro-Cuban, and Cuban women to survive tragedies, articulate their racial identity, and critique the patriarchal governance of their nation-states.¹ Indeed, García's major contribution to the analytical conversation about the representation of spirituality in U.S. Latina/o literature is the attention her works pay to racial identity and the necessity of formulating a critique of the nation-state in consolidating and asserting a strong sense of self as citizen-subjects for Latinas/os.

By highlighting the influence of the ancestral in spiritual practices, be it through a focus on indigenous heritage in the Chicana/o community or through recognition of African heritage in the Creole religions of the Latina/o community, particularly the Latina/o Caribbean, my theoretical analysis centers on the distinctive concept of performance and its abilities of transformation and recollection of memory. The power of performance to recall embodied memories, what is often the denied and thus lost memory and knowledge of a community, bestows critical worth to the study of ancestral spiritual practices in U.S. Latina/o literature. In order to execute this examination, I turn to central critics of Performance and African Diaspora Studies.

Performance Power of Santería

Coco Fusco discusses various pieces of performance art that address the topic of cultural fusion in the Americas in *English Is Broken Here*. The topic of Santería comes up in her discussion of Ana Mendieta, a Cuban American artist who often touches upon the practices of Santería in her pieces. To be precise, Fusco states, “Santería is essentially performative, integrating process and objects, and singling out the transformative power in the act of making meaning out of natural materials and human gestures” (1995, 122). Fusco focuses on how Santería has a transformative power and creates new meaning. José Esteban Muñoz also discusses powers of transformation through performance in *Disidentifications* (1999). He names and explains Richard Schechner’s work based on the two modalities of performance: “performances of transportation and performances of transformation” (Muñoz 1999, 196). To be clear, “[p]erformances of transformation include bar mitzvahs and other initiations into adulthood. Transformation performances do not merely ‘mark’ a change, they effect a change through the performative act” (Muñoz 1999, 196–97). Muñoz labels this change as worldmaking and then elaborates on what he means by this: “The concept of worldmaking delineates the ways in which performances—both theatrical and everyday rituals—have the ability to establish alternate views of the world. These alternate vistas are more than simply views or perspectives; they are oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of ‘truth’ that subjugate minoritarian people” (1999, 195). Following this work, I read Santería as a performative act that has worldmaking potential. The implication of viewing Santería as a performance is significant because performance has a long and specific history within African Diaspora culture. The relationship between performance and spiritual practices for the African community extends back into the days of slavery.

In his essay, “The Dissident Forms of Black Expressive Culture,” Paul Gilroy writes that “[s]urvival in slave regimes or in other extreme conditions intrinsic to colonial order promoted the acquisition of what we might now understand to be performance skills, and refined the appreciation of mimesis by both dominant and dominated” (1995, 14). Besides being able to feign inferiority and the guise of servitude in order to maintain their sense of individual identity, slaves found triumph in mimicking their masters and mistresses; some slaves even evaded slavery by performing whiteness meticulously (Gilroy 1995). Obviously, performance has a profound and specific role within African Diaspora culture. Whether or not performances have taken place in the spiritual realm, they have provided for the physical and psychic survival of the black community. Moreover, Margaret Thompson Drewal narrates that “Yoruba religious practices are heterogeneous ensembles of acquired, embodied knowledges that, when performed in combination, reconstitute and transform themselves and social situations” (2000, 116–17). Indeed, other powerful aspects of ancestral African spiritual practices lie in how they can represent historical/cultural knowledge and how they can change the social situations in which they are performed. Santería has the power to change its initiates and its surroundings, because it is a spiritual practice based on the performative act, which conveys the denied memory of a people.

The distinction between performance and performativity should be noted here. Drewal explains,

At this point I would like to reclaim performance as a powerful concept and invert one of [Judith] Butler’s earlier assertions (1993: 234) to claim: one would err to reduce performance to performativity... performativity does not account for the capacity of performers to embody skills and techniques alien to normative social conventions. Nor can it explain bodily excess. (2000, 118)

It is precisely the nuance of performance to depict skills that are alien to social convention; these very skills constitute an active evoking of forgotten history. Moreover, bodily excess and memory, most evident in all types of performances but especially spiritual ones, “liberate the body for insurrection without recourse to either misappropriation or expropriation” (Drewal 2000, 119). In performance, not performativity, lies true critical verve; thus literary enactments of Santería are worthy especially of in-depth analysis. Ultimately, in her work, Drewal accounts for “the production of discursive agency through ritual conventions forged from heterogeneous ensembles of embodied knowledges and ways of operating to improvise on new, foreign, and oppressive conditions” (2000, 119). Drewal’s work explicates how agency and empowerment can be derived through different aspects of ritual performance.

Traveling Through the Flesh: Worship for Survival in *Monkey Hunting*

In *Monkey Hunting*, García explores the African and Asian Diasporas through the slave trade on the island of Cuba, and how the audio performance aspect of drumming in Santería fortifies a sense of racial identity. García’s exploration centers on the character of Chen Pan, who unknowingly sells himself into slavery when he ventures from China to Cuba. In time, Chen Pan becomes a runaway and takes a slave woman as his life-partner, an Afro-Cubana, whom he has purchased, and has three children with her. These children are the ones who begin the complex and rich cultural legacy of the Afro-Cuban with Asian ancestry. When these children and their progeny become transnational, their diverse cultural identity and ancestry encounter resistance. The latest descendant of Chen Pan’s family, his great, great-grandson Domingo Chen, confronts this resistance when he is in exile from Cuba in the United States. Sentiments of alienation dominate Domingo’s life and are assuaged only when he honors his familial connection to the art of making and playing drums, for both secular and sacred purposes;

remembering the connection to his musical heritage allows him to be content with his complex ancestry.

Published in 2003, *Monkey Hunting* has yet to receive extensive critical coverage. As of the writing of this essay, there have been four major essays that address García's third novel. In these essays, critics take vastly different approaches to examining this text: Xiomara Campilongo (2007) historicizes the presence of Chinese Cubans and complicates theories of orientalism; Marta Lysik (2007) argues that *Monkey Hunting* can be viewed as a transnational neo-slave narrative; Raquel Puig (2009) writes of the intricate structure of the imagined nation through the main character of Chen Pan in Cuba; finally, Sean Moiles (2009) discusses the connection of ethnic identity to utopia and the sublime. There has yet to be sustained analysis of ancestral spiritual practices and their enabling of survival, identity-formation, and empowerment. This is the critical gap that my essay fills. In *Monkey Hunting*, through the practice of drumming in Santería, García facilitates the articulation and acceptance of a diverse racial identity for those from Cuba and evokes a history of survival.

Through the story of Lucrecia, Chen Pan's mate, the reader sees how credence and a relationship with the African deities can produce survival. After Chen Pan escapes slavery, he manages to become a successful storeowner in Cuba. Eventually he falls in love with Lucrecia, a slave woman he buys based on an advertisement. Although she is suspicious of his motives in buying her and her son, she discovers Chen Pan is a decent man and has three children with him. Lucrecia came to be sold in the first place because she was born in slavery.

Once Lucrecia's mother was sold to Don Joaquín in Havana, she soon became more than just a handmaiden, cook, and cleaning woman for Don Joaquín's wife; she was subject to Don Joaquín's sexual urges, as so many black female

slaves were to their masters. Lucrecia was confused by Don Joaquín's late night visits to her mother: "The master used to visit her mother every night. Mamá would cover Lucrecia with a sheet, teach her to still her breathing. A terrible pig groaning, the bed shuddering with fleas, then the master would leave for another day" (García 2003, 127–28). Lucrecia believed this was just another one of her mother's household duties; she did not know the full ramifications of what she witnessed, her mother's nightly rape, until much later. Nevertheless, Lucrecia recalls some pleasant moments of her childhood with her mother. She remembers how they would give offerings to Yemayá: "Mamá had been devoted to Yemayá, goddess of the seas. She used to dress Lucrecia in blue and white and together they'd take offerings to the beach on Sundays, coconut balls or fried pork rinds when she could make them" (García 2003, 127).² It is significant that these Sunday outings to deliver offerings constitute many of the good memories that Lucrecia managed to extract from her childhood; it appears that these days gave hope and strength to both mother and daughter in a subtle but effective way.

This observation is proven to be especially true when Don Joaquín starts raping Lucrecia a month after her mother dies of yellow fever. It is then that Lucrecia realizes the truth about her relationship to Don Joaquín and what happened to her mother every night:

It took Lucrecia many years to realize that she was his daughter (her resemblance to him was unmistakable). That what her mother had suffered, she was now suffering. That Mamá had loved her in spite of her hatred for him. That Yemayá had helped them survive. (García 2003, 133)

The significance here is twofold. First, this scene not only depicts the realization of truth for Lucrecia but it also demonstrates how belief in an

African deity enabled survival. The offerings that Lucrecia and her mother gave to Yemayá on the beach facilitated a mother's love for her daughter and ensured some peace and rest at least for Lucrecia. In this way, credence in Yemayá, an African deity and orisha of Santería, not only verifies and signifies African heritage, but it also functions as a form of survival for Lucrecia and her mother. Second, this scene presents the heavily-embodied figure of the Afro-Cubana and how she parallels the existence of the black female enslaved body. Similar to the family lineage of the black female character named Ursa in *Corregidora* (Jones 1975), Lucrecia's own father rapes her and forces her to bear her own brother/son. During the time of slavery, black women survived these tortuous social and physical conditions by invoking the power of the African deities. Moreover, the bodies of the entire diasporic Afro-Cuban community across the generations carry and enact these ancestral African spiritual practices. These beliefs can be recalled not only through communal ceremony; they are evident in the everyday culture of Cuba and presence of Cubans. In addition to Lucrecia's and her mother's tales of survival, García narrates other stories of endurance through ancestral spiritual practices in her first novel, *Dreaming in Cuban*.

Surviving Through Santería

Dreaming in Cuban presents the multi-genre, anachronistic, and polyphonic story of Celia del Pino and her children. Most criticism on García's *Dreaming in Cuban* has focused on the concepts of gender and identity, with particular attention paid to motherhood, politics, and language (Viera 1996; López 1996; Herrera 1997; Gómez-Vega 1997; Davis 2000). The most pervasive topic in articles about García's works is the concept of nation and nationhood. Maya Socolovsky (2000) has argued that the Cuban nation in García's novels is a highly individualized and personal matter. Stressing this personal perspective on nation, David

Mitchell (1996) describes how the fictional family is a parallel structure to the larger, more political, and socio-cultural conception of nation; he contends that the nation is a pretense for the familial. Recently, in terms of examining García's first novel, critics have diversified their perspectives: Shuli Chang (2006) has written of transnationalism and hybridity; Karen E. H. Skinazi (2003) addresses food and national identity; and lastly, Elena Machado Sáez (2005) analyzes the global baggage of nostalgia. In all the critiques of *Dreaming in Cuban* thus far, little focused attention has been given to ancestral spiritual practices like Santería and how they can facilitate survival and empowerment of self.

The highlighted characters of this novel are Celia, her daughters Lourdes and Felicia, her granddaughter Pilar, and Felicia's best friend Herminia. In the early years of her life and marriage, due to an unrequited love and monstrous in-laws, Celia had difficulty fulfilling her maternal duties. As such, Lourdes, her eldest daughter, becomes estranged from her mother; this situation coupled with the seizure of her husband's ranch and a brutal rape force Lourdes to leave Cuba when the revolution starts. She and her husband Rufino take their daughter Pilar to resettle in New York; in the end, Lourdes manages to turn her exile period into a successful tenure as a small business owner. Pilar, however, never feels at home in the United States; she wonders constantly if she truly belongs to Cuba and works out her young adult angst through her painting and music. Meanwhile, Felicia, the younger sister, feels more warmth and love for their mother since Celia was more capable of being a mother later in her marriage. However, a lack of revolutionary support separates Felicia from her socialist mother Celia. Felicia's life has been filled with unhappiness, illness, and violence—until she becomes an initiate into Santería through the assistance and support of her best friend, Herminia. Pilar also comes to embrace Santería in New York, and this conversion gives

her the strength to announce the impending and long-awaited trip to Cuba when her Tía Felicia dies. Besides the specific cases of Felicia and Pilar, there are moments in the novel when other characters utilize Santería in a way that is demonstrative of agency and empowerment, particularly in overcoming immense loss.

In this family of characters, Celia first employs Santería as a young woman, and the practice proves to ensure her survival. After her Spaniard lover, Gustavo, abandons Celia in order to return to his family in Spain, Celia becomes ill, physically and mentally, to the point of being near-death; she loses her hair and weight, her menstrual cycle stops, and her nails yellow. Celia's great-aunt Alicia becomes desperate with concern after seeking assistance from many local healers—to no avail. As a last resort, she summons a santera from the east to help Celia. Once the santera examines her, she announces Celia's fate:

Desperate, her great-aunt called a santera from Regla, who draped Celia with beaded necklaces and tossed the shells to divine the will of the gods. “Miss Celia, I see a wet landscape in your palm,” the little santera said, then turned to Tía Alicia. “She will survive the hard flames.” (García 1992, 37)

After the santera completes her examination, Celia does recover from her deadly love-sickness and eventually marries Jorge del Pino and starts a family with him. It appears that the mere pronouncement of survival from this santera ensures that Celia will heal from her illness. It is no mere coincidence that Celia improves after the santera utters her curative words which gives strength to Celia in order to recoup her health and will to live. This power achieved through the spiritual is portrayed as highly potent.

Women of color writers have noted elsewhere the utility of spiritual belief. In the poem/prose entry, “No Rock Scorns Me as Whore,” in the collection *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981), Chrystos connects the sacred with survival: “We have lost touch with the sacred[.] To survive we must begin to know sacredness” (1981, 244). Thus, power through the sacred or at least an attempt to extract power through the sacred is what Santería offers to Celia and the other women of this text who are open to ancestral African spiritual practices. The memory of this healing stays with Celia; she recalls this moment in the first few pages of the novel when she guards the coast of Cuba from Yankee invaders (García 1992, 7). This illness and subsequent interaction with the santera affects Celia and makes her as well as the readers aware of the positive potential of Santería. This ancestral African spiritual practice can function as an indirect method of agency as it facilitated Celia’s recovery. Nevertheless, Felicia is the character of note in tracing the prowess of Santería in this text.³

After the attempted murder/suicide of herself and her son, her stay at the labor camps, and the mutilation or deaths of all of her husbands, Felicia embraces the spiritual practice of Santería as a method of agency, introduced to her by her best friend, Herminia. When Felicia returns from Cienfuegos, the town where her most recent husband has died, she arrives at Herminia’s doorstep and asks to become an initiate. Herminia complies with Felicia’s request and helps her to begin the intricate and lengthy initiation, which the novel covers in accurate and precise detail (García 1992, 185–88). Felicia participates in elaborate baths, rituals, possessions, and the shaving of her head. Once Felicia becomes a santera, a noticeable and positive though brief change has come over her, and Herminia makes due note: “She sat on a throne surrounded by gardenias, her face serene as a goddess’s. I believe to this day she’d finally found her peace” (García 1992, 188). Herminia observes that Felicia appears to be self-possessed and confident, at peace with herself.

When Felicia comes home, her mother and children are not there to welcome her; this is upsetting but she takes this disappointment as a test that she must pass in order to prove to the deities of Santería, the orishas, that she is a true believer, and she continues to adhere to the rules for a new initiate. In an interview with Allan Vorda, García details how she believes Santería becomes significant in Felicia's life: “So in a quest to find some satisfaction in her life, I think she was drawn to Santería through her friends and into love affairs. I think that was her way of giving meaning to her life” (1993, 67). Clearly, Santería bestows meaning to Felicia's life, but the question remains as to how this happens exactly.

Santería gives meaning to Felicia's life through the idea of performance. Coco Fusco's work is pivotal to thinking about the performative force of Santería. Felicia provides a particularly instructive example as she portrays how ritual can bring forth self-determination. Santería is a performance of transformation that creates change in its practitioners by enabling them to have alternate views of the world. These views, as Muñoz explicates, are often oppositional ideologies that are critical of hegemonic regimes of truth and government. It is this worldmaking potential that Felicia seizes upon and implements in her life; after the initiation, her face appears “serene as a goddess” and she looks as if she has “finally found her peace.” Felicia is confident and now part of a larger and more accepting community than just her family and her nation; a larger system of meaning and interpretation of the world becomes accessible to her. She re-envisioned the world as bigger than herself; she understands the disappointment caused by her unsupportive family as a test of her will and beliefs by the orishas. Her life becomes infused with spiritual discourse, beliefs, resolve, and thus becomes meaningful in various new ways. In this manner, the performance critiques and theories of Fusco, Muñoz, and Drewal explain the positive change that Santería enables in Felicia. This is how the performance of

Santería can provide access to personal empowerment. Notably, Felicia is the character who experiences the productive nature of Santería for the shortest amount of time in this text.⁴ Nevertheless, for no matter how brief a time, Felicia benefits personally from her involvement in Santería. In the Caribbean, the benefits of religion permeate, even into the realms of music and racial identification, and this effect of religion is evident—especially through the analysis of Domingo Chen in *Monkey Hunting*.

Drumming for an Expansive and Complicated Racial Identity

Drumming, whether in a secular or sacred context, evokes a sense of racial identity for Domingo Chen. Thus, when he hears the rhythm of drums, his racial identity is intact. After his exile from Cuba, Domingo and his father live in New York City during the 1960s. At this time, Domingo has no direction in his life; he works as a dishwasher at the Havana Dragon and spends all his earnings on clothes and concerts. One particular night, he heads downtown to a nightclub to see El Watusi Man perform, the drummer known as Ray Baretto. When seated before the stage, letting the music pour over him, Domingo registers the awe and effect the music has on him:

El Watusi Man was hitting the skins like a dialect freaked by thunder.... Domingo felt the timba as if the Man were playing his own bones.... He closed his eyes and let loose, felt the groove, a deep reverie, the pulse of his own peculiar birth. (García 2003, 46–7)

The drumming of Ray Baretto resonates with and in Domingo's physical body, as if Baretto were playing his bones. It also seems to call out his complex racial heritage, "his own peculiar birth," a reference that alludes to Domingo's African, Asian, and Cuban backgrounds. The language of drumming describes his birth, a "groove" and "pulse." In this context, the drumming is secular but

it still functions as a way for Domingo to identify himself as a Cuban with African and Asian ancestry. The ways drumming works in both the sacred and secular realms often intersect in this novel. When reflecting on his ancestry and listening to the drums, Domingo appears relaxed and free; the drumming creates an expansive atmosphere. In this scene, the art of drumming predisposes Domingo to be open and accepting of his own diverse racial identity.

Since drumming demonstrates itself to be such a critical part of Domingo Chen’s person, some explication on the significance of drumming in Cuban culture and New York City is necessary, especially in terms of race. John Amira and Steven Cornelius explain how, when Cubans started immigrating to the United States just prior to the 1959 revolution in Cuba, they brought their religious beliefs and practices with them—and this includes ritual drumming. In *The Music of Santería*, they write: “Batá drumming was introduced into the New York community by Cuban drummers in the late 1950s” (1992, 13). The transmission of drumming practices from Cuba is tied intricately to Santería. In this spiritual practice, drumming became a popular method of communicating with the orishas, the deities, for the purpose of spirit possession. However, when Domingo hears those drums on that night, he is not hearing specifically batá music but that does not matter. The rhythms of the drums make him recall his complicated heritage. Drumming invokes a racial identity for Domingo in that it connects him to Santería and its African heritage. This racial implication unsettles his family but completes him.

During an afternoon break from his job, Domingo takes a walk to the Hudson River and contemplates how he feels about having left Cuba. At this moment, Domingo reminisces about his family’s connection to drumming:

On Domingo's mother's side, most of the men were congueros [conga drummers] and batá drummers from way back. In Cuba, the name Quiñones was synonymous with rhythm. His uncles and cousins were in demand for the toques, holy ceremonies that coaxed the gods down from heaven. When their drums started talking, all available deities would stop their celestial bickering and drop in for dancing and good times. Domingo had no aptitude to play but he was an ardent listener. (García 2003, 56)

Domingo remembers his mother's familial connection to drumming; members of his mother's family were famous for their talent, especially in ritual ceremonies. In this brief memory, the reader sees how important the drums are in Santería as an integral part in calling the gods down to be with their followers. This remembrance connotes a racial identity for Domingo, much to his mother's dismay:

His mother said that drumming was for blacks who didn't work and drank too much, meaning of course, her brothers and uncles. But Domingo paid her no mind.... When he listened to the drums, he felt right in his own skin. (García 2003, 56-7)

Domingo's mother not only associates drumming with black people but she also has a negative stereotypical conception of what being black means, especially for men. It is important to note here that Domingo exhibits common phenotype attributes of being black; he has dark skin and at certain parts of the novel, hair grown out into an Afro. As for his mother, a physical description of her, especially one inclusive of race, is not given. Drumming allows Domingo a certain measure of personal and bodily acceptance that he cannot find anywhere else.

This implicit racial identity that is evoked in complicated yet comforting ways by drumming continues to be relevant when Domingo does a tour of duty in Vietnam. After his father’s death, Domingo enlists in the army. Near the completion of his first tour, Domingo describes his hands as not being his since they “hadn’t touched a conga” (García 2003, 104) in nearly a year. Again here exists an intimate connection between drumming and Domingo’s own sense of personal integrity; when he is away from the drums, he does not feel like himself. Not long after this description, Domingo experiences a moment of racial identification during a week of R&R in Vietnam:

His last night at China Beach, Domingo had hung out by the jukebox with the black Marines, drumming along on the tables and doing his Otis Redding imitation (“I’m a Changed Man,” “Groovin’ Time”). Then he’d returned to the jungle, refreshed, for another killing round. (García 2003, 111)

At this moment of openness and relaxation, Domingo physically moves himself into this community of black men and participates in drumming while imitating a very famous black male singer. Domingo’s actions here are the only incident of public racial identification in this novel. Even the songs he imitates connote the “groovin” rhythm of the drums and emphasize Domingo’s racial identification of this moment as black; he is “a changed man.” The significance of this identification stands out when considering Domingo’s accounts of the various racist incidents he has endured as a member of the United States army: being refused service at the officers’ club and being treated poorly in the hospital after being wounded in battle (García 2003, 209). All these racist encounters of Domingo’s past only make this moment of drumming and joining the black Marines all the more significant.⁵

Nevertheless, there is the problematic assertion in the previous quote that listening to the music and joining this community of black men refreshed Domingo for “another killing round.” Indeed, what is the significance of pride in racial identification, if a person’s ability to uphold the value of human life is not enhanced? At this moment, García articulates a critique of blind and unreflective membership in a racial or national community, regardless of whether or not such membership is initiated by recognition of spirituality through music. Based on this reading, what is at the heart of *Monkey Hunting* is a demonstration of the limits of identity politics. Clearly, a life comprised of unexamined action and beliefs on the topics of race, nation, and spirituality is not desirable. The character of Domingo Chen, however, is not the only case study that García creates on the topic of racial identity.

Santería: Enabling Cultural Memory and Restoring Racial History

In *Dreaming in Cuban*, for Herminia, the practice of Santería fosters a connection to the racial heritage of her community in Cuba. Although Herminia speaks for only a few pages of the text, she takes this time to criticize the historical narratives and structures in Cuba that skew and obviate the presence of black people on the island. Her father, a priest of Santería, openly tells Herminia the story of her people:

But my father spoke to me clearly, so that I would understand what happened to his father and his uncles during the Little War of 1912, so that I would know how our men were hunted down day and night like animals, and finally hung by their genitals from the lampposts in Guáimaro. The war that killed my grandfather and great-uncles and thousands of other blacks is only a footnote in our history books. Why, then, should I trust anything I read? I trust only what I see, what I know with my heart, nothing more. (García 1992, 185)

Indeed, what Herminia’s father refers to here is the Race War of 1912 in Cuba; exact numbers vary but many Afro-Cubans were killed when they protested the government’s prohibition of political parties based on race and its denial of the voting rights of those involved with such groups.⁶ The fact that this major travesty and injustice of Afro-Cuban history merits little if any mention in Cuban historical narratives infuriates Herminia and makes her question the narrative structure of her Cuban nation; she can only trust what she sees for herself, what she knows to be true in her heart. Part of this truth known to her heart is her adherence to the faith of Santería. Her father, a leader in the faith, reminds her of her racial heritage, and the basis and practice of Santería itself prompts Herminia and others to remember the history of the black community.

Earlier in the novel, when Felicia endures a long and lonely night at her labor camp, she recalls how Herminia explained the power and significance of the African gods to her: “Herminia told her once of the gods that rule the night, but Felicia cannot remember their names. It was to these gods that the slaves had prayed to preserve a shred of their souls. It had strengthened them for the indignities of their days” (García 1992, 109). Black slaves in Cuba worshipped these African gods, the same deities of Santería, in order to secure their physical, psychic, and cultural survival. It is the formation and the performance of the spiritual practices of Santería that evoke the memory and history of the Afro-Cuban community. Spiritual belief and performance form community and can recall the lost knowledge for Afro-Cubans. According to Carolyn Cooper, fictional works of the African Diaspora that utilize some aspect of ancestral African spiritual practices is often about recuperating identity by “re-appropriating devalued folk wisdom” (1991, 65) and reclaiming “[d]iscredited knowledge” (1991, 65). This “discredited knowledge” according to Toni Morrison is what “could be called superstition and magic,

which is another way to know things” (quoted in Cooper 1991, 65). Santería, a ridiculed and discredited knowledge, is another way to know things, another framework by which to process and interpret the world. When Herminia utilizes Santería, she seeks an alternative way to know and be in the world and to restore her historical memory and racial heritage. Consequently, readers can see how Santería enables characters to attain an integral sense of racial identity and thus achieve personal empowerment. A state of empowered self, granted through spiritual connection, however, entails great responsibility for these characters. For example, García critiques how Domingo Chen demonstrates his racial identity and exercises his state of personal empowerment, especially as his actions resonate with the topics of gender and patriarchy.

In one of the final scenes of *Monkey Hunting*, drumming, in addition to its connotations of Santería and African heritage, also creates larger implications for the issue of gender, thereby complicating matters of racial identity. On one specific night of duty in Vietnam, Domingo recalls all that he misses of his Cuban home. He reminisces about making drums with his uncle and explains how they looked for cedar for the drums but mahogany was acceptable at times. Domingo also describes their specifications for skins: “The skins came from billy goats because the drums were cosa de hombres” (García 2003, 116). He further explains how his uncle would examine the skins for imperfections, clean them, and test the skins’ vibes (García 2003, 116–17). In this scene, besides the great detail in which Domingo remembers this process, these drums are called the objects of men; hence, the skins of only male goats are used to make them. So drumming not only implies a sense of racial identity, it also implies a very strong sense of masculine identity.

Indeed many cultural anthropologists and ethnomusicologists attest to the fact that within Cuban culture, women who desire to play the drums are dissuaded

often, especially within the context of Santería. In fact, Katherine Hagedorn explains the effort she exerted in getting the lead drummer of the Cuban National Folkloric Ensemble, named Alberto, to teach her this art-form: “I had worked hard to get him to teach me (he rejected my initial requests because, he said, I ‘played like a girl’), and had worked even harder to establish a solid repertoire of Havana-style batá patterns” (2002, 34). When addressing the issue of gender, drumming implies a sense of patriarchy; this is an important critique of this practice. This analysis of gender becomes more pronounced when Domingo falls in love with a Vietnamese sex worker named Tham.

Domingo’s actions and character conflict with those of his new love, and this scenario places him in the position of the dominant male and music again becomes an important factor in analyzing gender. Domingo visits Tham on the recommendation of a friend. After spending an afternoon with her, Domingo falls in love. He stays with her when she tells him that she is pregnant. After some time, however, the cultural differences between the two prove to be overwhelming, and these differences manifest themselves in terms of music. When Domingo buys all types of things to appease Tham during her pregnancy, she refuses them all, including a radio that irritated her. This refusal to listen to music bothers Domingo:

Domingo couldn’t get used to the silence, to the monotony of her sleeping. Soon he was hearing music everywhere—in the ping and hiss of the new teapot; in the percussive rumble of his stomach.... Who was he without a little rhythm? (García 2003, 204)

Domingo cannot live without music. When he cannot hear it directly, his mind creates it from the ambient noises that surround and are in him. He describes his search for music with the words “ping” and “percussive rumble;”

he especially cannot live without drums. In fact, he even asks who he is without a little rhythm. He bases his own identity on rhythm.

Many theorists who work in the field of Caribbean studies find rhythm to be a meaningful component of Caribbean identity. In *The Repeating Island*, the author, Antonio Benítez-Rojo, narrates succinctly the major dynamics of Caribbean culture:

The peoples of the...[Caribbean] proliferate incessantly while differentiating themselves from one another, traveling together toward the infinite. Certain dynamics of their culture also repeat and sail through the seas of time without reaching anywhere. If I were to put this in two words, they would be: performance and rhythm. (1996, 16)

Benítez-Rojo sees rhythm as a major component of Caribbean culture; it is how the people transmit and represent the vitality and multiplicity of their race and culture. Domingo views rhythm in a similar way; through the rhythms of the drums and music, Domingo understands who he is, no matter where he is. He comprehends his history and all that it entails in terms of spirituality, race, and gender through rhythm. However, what must be noted here is that his link to gender identity through music places him in the position of the patriarch. In this scene with Tham, he imposes his love of music on her with his gift of the radio. Earlier, he called drums the objects of men. Although drumming and rhythm connote the intricacies of Cuban identity and racial heritage, a critical assessment as to how drumming comments on issues of gender cannot be avoided. Moreover, the connection between drumming and racial identity should also be examined further as it alludes to what African heritage and history necessarily imply.

Soon after contemplating who he is without a little rhythm, Domingo remembers stories about drumming that his uncle would tell him and how they reflected ideas of resistance and rebellion. His uncle explains what drumming meant to the slaves on the sugar plantations:

[D]uring slavery days, drumming had been forbidden altogether. The sugar mill owners hadn't wanted their "property" getting overly excited and sending messages to slaves on other plantations. In those times, to own a drum, to play a drum, were acts of rebellion punishable by death. And so the drums and the drummers learned to whisper instead. (García 2003, 204–5)

To Domingo, drumming not only indicates a racial identity, it also reminds him that his ancestry implies a history of rebellion. In *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*, Esteban Montejo explains how drumming during mayombe (a sect of African faith that focuses on “magic” for some specific, usually negative, purpose) ceremonies fulfills requests for health, safety, and protection of slaves from their physically abusive masters (1973, 26); drumming is, as García points out, “a question of communicating in silences. Slaves could be shackled for two months for drumming. It was a very subversive act. To play a drum was akin to insurrection, it's another language” (2002, 47). Resistance is the basic premise of drumming for the enslaved African community in Cuba. In Domingo's last section of the novel and at the last moment when he mentions drumming, he emphasizes rebellion and how drums and drummers have had to learn how to whisper this message. This message was heard through drums in the days of slavery in Cuba and can still be heard today by Afro-Cubans and their communities. Such implications are essential for Domingo as an Afro-Cuban man who must confront racist attitudes everyday. Hence, drumming, either sacred or secular

reminds him of his racial identity and allows him to sustain it, as he becomes a diasporic subject, traveling from Cuba to America to Vietnam.

This last connection between drumming and rebellion partially explains why Domingo leaves Tham at the conclusion of *Monkey Hunting*. Although Domingo stays with her for some time after he finds out about her pregnancy, he departs before the baby's birth. Maybe Domingo's desertion of Tham is a final assertion of his own identity, his endorsement of the rhythm of Cuban drums over silence. To his own admission, he cannot find himself or be himself in the absence of drums desired by Tham, so his departure ensures his survival and secures his identity as an Asian Afro-Cuban transnational subject. It is more likely, however, that Domingo leaves Tham because, like so many of his American soldier peers, he has no intention of forming a permanent relationship with his Vietnamese paramour and becoming a father. His involvement with Tham is just another exploitative inevitability of the United States' imperialistic relations with poorer nations of the east and west; he colonizes Tham's body through pregnancy and leaves her alone to deal with the costly process of raising a child. Moreover, it is almost certain that he cannot handle passing on the racial and cultural complexities of Asian Afro-Cuban ancestry to his child. Either reading still depicts the Asian Afro-Cuban man, cultured in American bravado, as a patriarchal figure that discards women, for whatever reason, when they become inconvenient. This misogynist implication of Domingo's identity cannot escape critique when evaluating how drumming in either the secular or sacred realm validates and sustains a sense of racial identity. *Monkey Hunting* clearly depicts the intricacies of how the drumming in Santería articulates complex formulations of racial identity for those from and in Cuba, while also illustrating the great responsibility demanded of those who reach a state of true personal empowerment. Furthermore, in *Dreaming in Cuban*, García demonstrates

direct participation in Santería to be a means to arrive at a critique of the nation; such ability is crucial in developing personal empowerment.

Pilar’s “initiation” into the faith of Santería comes about in a very informal and organic manner but results in newfound abilities and a sense of belonging. Pilar herself says that she enters the botánica (a store that sells the paraphernalia of Santería) on Park Avenue one day when she feels that there is nowhere else for her to go (García 1992, 199). Once in the botánica, Pilar selects a red and white beaded necklace and picks up “an ebony staff carved with the head of a woman balancing a double-edged axe” (García 1992, 200). Because of these selected objects, the storeowner labels Pilar a daughter of Changó (a main deity of Santería) and explains to her how she must complete what she has already begun:

“Ah, a daughter of Changó.... Begin with a bitter bath,” he says, lining up the ingredients on the counter. “Bathe with these herbs for nine consecutive nights. Add the holy water and a drop of ammonia, then light the candle. On the last day, you will know what to do.” (García 1992, 200)

When Pilar motions to pay for these objects, the storeowner puts up his hand and states, “This is a gift from our father Changó” (García 1992, 200). The rituals and objects prescribed in this scene are far less extensive and intricate than the description of the ceremony which Felicia goes through in Cuba, but in the end, this series of baths makes Pilar an initiate.

After completing the nine days of bitter herb baths, Pilar does know exactly what she must do; she calls her mother and tells her they are going to Cuba (García 1992, 203). Besides this decision to return to Cuba, a visit she has

always wanted to make but, until now, never dared to suggest because of her mother's hatred for her native country, Pilar also becomes aware of her heightened sensibilities:

I can hear fragments of people's thoughts, glimpse scraps of the future. It's nothing I can control. The perceptions come without warnings or explanations, erratic as lightning.... Four fresh bodies are floating in the Straits of Florida. It's a family from Cárdenas. They stole a boat from a fisherman. It collapsed in the current early this morning. A boatload of Haitians will leave Gonaïves next Thursday. They will carry the phone numbers of friends in Miami and the life savings of relatives. They will sail into the Tropic of Cancer and sink into the sea. (García 1992, 216–17)

This initiation into Santería has bestowed acute abilities of perception unto Pilar; she can envision the future and see the tragedies that await various people. Notably, this access to divination takes on political overtones as it allows Pilar to see the high human cost of economic impoverishment and prohibitive immigration policies. Pilar can now acknowledge what desperate measures people go to in order to secure better lives and she can question the governments that permit and even instigate such atrocities to occur. Her newly enacted spiritual membership gives her great power that she can use for the welfare of the people around her. Ultimately, the spiritual practice of Santería proves to be productive for Pilar. It gives her the agency to make decisions that she never thought possible, thereby enabling her to see the tragic and critical futures of Caribbean nations and citizens. Through Santería, Pilar becomes more proactive and aware about the significant social issues in her world. Moreover, Pilar's involvement with the performance power of Santería allows her to resolve her issues about the nation-state and national belonging.

In *Between Woman and Nation*, the editors Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón, and Mino Moallem discuss the potentially disruptive role performance has in the unique relationship between woman and nation:

“Between woman and nation” refers to a particular situated space of the performative and performativity where woman and nation intersect in specific ways...the performing subject is key to a political imaginary that displaces the “pedagogy of the nation,” that is, its efforts to produce citizen-subjects who mirror its political desire. (1999, 6–7)

According to the editors of this text, the space of the performative that lies between woman and nation can interrupt the pedagogy of the nation-state, which would dictate the formation of proper functioning citizens. In *Dreaming in Cuban*, Santería functions as a performative practice that can disrupt the nation-state as it allows Pilar to critique Cuba and the United States.

Since early in the novel, Pilar has felt a longing for her native Cuba. Though she was only two when her parents fled, she feels still as if she belongs to Cuba rather than the United States and often wonders what her life would have been like if she stayed there. Pilar has never felt like a member of the national community in the United States; she has always felt like an outsider. Once when she was thirteen, she even ran away from home with the intention of going to Cuba but only got as far as her cousins’ house in Florida. Finally, when she does return to Cuba with her mother in order to bury her Tía Felicia, Pilar views the impoverished, oppressive, and limited reality of the Cuban people. Thus, Pilar resolves finally the issue as to where she belongs: “But sooner or later I’d have to return to New York. I know now it’s where I belong—not *instead* of here, but *more* than here” (García 1992,

236). In this way, the performance of Santería in Pilar's life allows her to be in Cuba, see the condition of the people for herself, and thus enable her to settle her quandary of national belonging. However, this assertion does not paint the United States to be preferable naturally; Pilar has those sentiments of unbelonging and rejection still from the United States. This is evident when Pilar utters her reasoning for belonging: "not *instead* of here but *more* than here." As such, the performance of Santería engenders the critical but thorough evaluation of all the nation-states that are a part of her subjectivity. The way that Pilar utilizes the performance of Santería to question national belonging and the nation-state becomes a key practice for her; she becomes empowered through a critical realization of how she negotiates and understands herself in her multiple national memberships. The ability to decide on and evaluate her status in national communities constitutes agency and empowerment in her life. If Santería functions in this manner for Pilar, it can work in this same way for other women.

Conclusion

In both of her novels, *Dreaming in Cuban* and *Monkey Hunting*, García consistently utilizes the performance and sounds of Santería to demonstrate how it can ensure survival and empowerment. Pilar and Felicia both procure some measure of confidence, determination, and integrity from their outright participation in Santería. The practice of Santería in these literary imaginings also proves to evaluate keenly the condition and oppressive structure of the nation-state. Pilar and Herminia are enlightened by their spiritual faith. They can critique both the United States and Cuba; neither nation escapes a realistic appraisal. Moreover, the ancestral African faith of Santería and all its relevant rituals facilitate the formation of a dynamic, complex, and fluid historical trajectory for the Afro-Cuban. Herminia and Domingo can find no better method of recording and remembering their African and Afro-Asian

Cuban heritages, respectively, than through their direct and indirect familial connection to Santería. This spiritual practice embodies the history and knowledge of slavery in the Caribbean. Herminia accesses her family’s past, the Race War of 1912, through her connection to Santería ritual; meanwhile, Domingo draws strength from sacred and secular rhythms in order to honor his complex Asian, African, and Cuban ancestry, remember his family’s spiritual beliefs, and feel a more complete sense of being. Both methods result in the same positive view and use of Santería.

The power of Santería ensures the perseverance of cultural memory and racial history in order to facilitate its practitioners’ futures. Indeed, the power of Santería to record and overcome spiritual and bodily violations astounds one. Lucrecia and her mother survived nightly rape and torture for many years through the worship of Yemayá. This is the greatest gift Santería, as a practice and a literary production, has to offer readers and practitioners: the ability to make one whole after extreme violation and fragmentation; in other words, the ability to make one diverse yet unified people out of many.

Notes

¹ For thorough and exhaustive studies on Santería, please refer to any one of the following works: Joseph Murphy’s *Working the Spirit* (1994), Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert’s *Sacred Possessions* (1997), George Brandon’s *Santería from Africa to the New World* (1993), or Michael Atwood Mason’s *Living Santería* (2002). Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert give the best working definition of Santería: “A complex religious system whose beliefs and rituals rest on the veneration of the orichas of the Yoruba pantheon of Nigeria as identified with their corresponding Catholic saints. Santería is founded on a concept of a superior triumvirate of Olofi, Olodumare, and Olorun, who have authority over the rest but are not the object of direct adoration or worship, as are the orichas, who are their subjects and messengers on earth” (1997, 288).

² Consult Joseph Murphy’s *Working the Spirit* (1994) to learn more about Yemayá and her main character attributes.

³ Indeed, Felicia’s initiation into Santería can be read as a clear acceptance of interracial identity and heritage. Her family does not support her utilization of Santería because of its connections to

African culture, but that does not stop Felicia from making use of her spiritual faith in order to obtain agency. She is the character of note in tracing how Santería is employed in the text and all the ramifications of this use in terms of race and agency.

⁴ Shortly after her initiation as a santera, Felicia falls ill. Her spiritual community gathers around her and tries various healing remedies, both holistic and spiritual, but nothing seems to work. Felicia does die; her last wish is to be buried as a santera and her fellow practitioners and mother comply: “In the mortuary, her friends from the casa de santo dressed Felicia in her initiation gown, her crown, and her necklaces” (García 1992, 214). They also prayed and grieved over Felicia and when the “hearse” broke down, they carried Felicia’s body the rest of the way to the cemetery. Her death and burial as a santera validate her new-found and strong identity as a practitioner of Santería.

⁵ American society, even when transplanted to military bases in Vietnam, forces Domingo into the white/black binary conception of racial identification, and mistreats him accordingly. During his last night of R&R, he adopts a black identity instead of having this identity foisted upon him. The racial taxonomy in the United States is binary in structure and deals solely with the visual economy of race; thus, Domingo lives in a world where he must choose one label of racial identity, and he chooses a black identity, which is how he is classified anyway according to racial categories at large. His choice however to take on this identity can be seen as an assertion of personal empowerment, a position of strength.

⁶ Refer to any of these following sources to ascertain further information on the Race War of 1912 in Cuba: *African-Caribbeans* (2003) edited by Alan West-Durán or *No Longer Invisible* (1995) edited by the Minority Rights Group.

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