

MYTH AND MEMORY:
RECONSTRUCTING THE FEMININE IN CARIBBEAN-AMERICAN FICTION

by

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Introduction:

Myth and Memory:

Reconstructing the Feminine in Caribbean-American Fiction

By creating a new mythos—that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave—*la mestiza* creates a new consciousness.

— Gloria Anzaldúa¹

“I think we carry more within us than we can ever imagine. If bone structure is passed on, why not memory?”

— Michelle Cliff, *Free Enterprise*

For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.

— Audre Lorde

Mythology stems from the universal human need to explain life and its unknowable counterpart, death. Sexuality ranks among the primal motivational forces of our species. What more compelling topic than a combination of the two?

In order to facilitate a discussion of mythology, I must first define it. This task has proven to be more elusive than I initially assumed because everyone—scholar and layperson alike—seems to have a different notion of what “myth” encompasses. The words “myth,” “archetype,” “folklore,” “legend,” “religion,” and even “fairytale” are often but not always used interchangeably. *The Feminist Companion to Mythology* defines “a mythology” as

¹ “*La conciencia de la Mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness.*” 1987. *Feminism and ‘Race’*, ed. Kum-Kum Bhavnani (New York: Oxford UP, 2001) 96.

a collection of stories belonging to a single cultural group – often though not always synonymous with a language group – which frequently feature both anthropomorphic or theriomorphic [having an animal form] divine figures . . . heroes or animals. Often there is a sense that the narrative has a subtextual meaning – perspicuous to, if not explicitly expressed by, the culture which formed it. (xi)

Myths, then, regularly feature animal godheads or superhuman figures that display animal qualities. The tales' explicit meanings belie other or deeper significances. As I stated above, mythology stems from the need to explain life and death, but the same might be said of any human communication—that it attempts to elucidate some aspect of our existence. Many scholars, from the early twentieth century through today, consider myth to be the domain of primitive peoples. Mythographers like Joseph Campbell view myth as the immature cousin of religion, which, in turn, prefigures the more enlightened intellectualism. In a similar rhetorical move, common vernacular employs “myth” synonymously with “falsehood.” A person's understanding of myth usually includes a sense of its “otherness,” if not its fictitious nature. In other words, if someone believes a story or concept to be true, then she is not likely to consider this concept to be a myth. Other people's beliefs are myths, not our own. However, even if we do not consider the mythological principles of our cultures to be factual, they inform our thought processes nevertheless. For example, when the majority of Western people think about the origins of the universe, they probably imagine the words “Let there be light” whether or not they are practicing Jews or Christians who believe in the Genesis creation story. This same demographic likely does not question the “fact” that God is male, yet many Western

intellectuals have come to consider the Judeo-Christian creation story and its gendered god to be complementary aspects of a patriarchal mythological system.

For the purpose of this thesis project, I will employ “myth” and “mythology” not only according to the above definition of the terms but also consistent with the ancillary definitions expressed in *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*: “**2 a** : a popular belief or tradition that has grown up around something or someone; *especially* : one embodying the ideals and institutions of a society or segment of society <seduced by the American *myth* of individualism -- Orde Coombs> **b** : an unfounded or false notion **3** : a person or thing having only an imaginary or unverifiable existence.” These additional significances incorporate legend, folklore, and fictionality as well as religion and originary accounts, and my larger thesis draws upon each definition.

Jean Markale posits a plausible theory for the origin of myth in *The Great Goddess: Reverence of the Divine Feminine from the Paleolithic to the Present*:

When humanity considered the woman the sole possessor of procreative—and thus, creative—powers, it could not imagine divinity in anything but a female form. But beginning from the moment when the male’s role in the phenomenon of life transmission was realized, the woman’s primacy could no longer be accepted. Having lost her mystery and her sacred nature, the woman saw herself reduced to the subordinate role of “surrogate mother” to a masculine line that, believing itself to be cuckolded since the beginning, thought only of revenge. Now, as consciousness is not transformed at will by a simple decision of the ruling authority, it is clear that humanity was, over the centuries, the victim of an ongoing struggle

for influence between those who held a gynocratic view and those who held an androcratic one. (7-8)

While I do not believe that *all* Neolithic males “thought of only revenge” and, therefore, systematically subordinated women, I find Markale’s theory otherwise compelling. This viewpoint provides an arguably valid base from which to understand the role of myth in sexuality. Markale’s theory applies to all racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.

Therefore, although countless different religions and mythological beliefs now exist, their origins can theoretically be traced to the same process. This hypothetical transition from a gynocentric spirituality to an androcentric religiosity may well signal the first consciousness of myth *as* myth.

The belief systems of patriarchal cultures (in other words, all “classic” and “modern” cultures—any society not “primitive” [although most contemporary tribal structures are also patriarchal]) typically portray women as either malignant or—more insidiously—weak figures. Feminists recognize that myth influences public perception. Because of this key recognition, one of the main goals of feminism is to effect a change in voiced and unvoiced popular opinions about women. In *The Magic Mirror: Myth’s Abiding Power*, Elizabeth M. Baeten writes, “If it is the case that the images of women and the constellations of traits and attributes that we associate with women determine in some way or another our concepts of self, then changes in the dominant motifs offered in the publicly accessible arena of artistic production may be a positive way of reshaping the vicissitudes of gendered life in our culture” (8). Toward that end, some feminist writers have joined a movement to rework the mythologies of patriarchal cultures into more female-friendly plots. One high-profile author active in mythmaking and rewriting myths

is Canadian Margaret Atwood. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood creates a world in which many women, regardless of race, live as slaves whose existences are justified by their abilities to bear their masters' children. She also revises classic mythology. In her "Circe/Mud Poems," Atwood writes the Greek story of Odysseus's encounter with the "witch" Circe from Circe's perspective to produce a radical departure from the patriarchal tradition.

In her article "'Somebody Forgot to Tell Somebody Something:' African-American Women's Historical Novels," Barbara Christian points out that revisionism holds special relevance for African Americans. Some aspects of slave reality were simply too disturbing to be discussed by antebellum black authors of both slave narratives and novels. Christian asserts, for example, that Toni Morrison's character Sethe would have been unpalatable to the mostly-white antebellum literary audience not only because of her dark skin and uneducated mannerisms but also because of the violations she suffers as a slave and her protective child-murder. Mainstream abolitionists needed to concentrate on the evils of the institution of slavery as a whole, and this need relegated the individual autonomy of fictional characters to an ancillary status. Christian writes, "[Nineteenth-century novelists] therefore had to sacrifice the subjectivity and, therefore, the *memory* of their [black] characters" (226; my emphasis). Not only did this obliteration of memory occur in fiction, but slave owners also deliberately prevented their slaves from learning about their ancestors because the slaveholders recognized the importance of memory in the development of cultural pride. Slave pride comes before an owner's fall and, therefore, must be quashed at all costs. This appalling loss of past subjectivity has led contemporary black authors to embrace

“cultural memory,” or the historical experiences shared by a cultural group, such as African Americans and Caribbean Americans.

The Caribbean presents a unique avenue of study for those interested in issues of race and ethnicity. Carib, Arawak, and other tribal nations populated the islands before Columbus made his fateful transatlantic voyage in 1492. The arrival of the Spanish heralded the wholesale destruction of the native peoples via enslavement and disease. Native Americans proved to be poor slaves, as the backbreaking labor required by their captors often caused the natives’ early deaths. As a result of the decimation of the “New World” labor force, Europeans began to import captive Africans, who turned out to be more hardy manual laborers. Conveniently for plantation owners, these blacks did not die as quickly as their Carib counterparts, so African slavery quickly gained “institutional” status. Indentured Chinese workers rounded out the islands’ racial and ethnic equation: Native American islanders + European colonizers + African slaves + indentured Chinese + other minorities = the Caribbean demographic. Immigrants inhabit unique standpoints on both their country of origin and their adoptive nation. In her discussion of African-Caribbean immigrants to the U.S., Heather Hathaway describes “the fundamental transformation of the individual that often occurs upon the act of migration—a transformation that can leave one forever distanced and different from the land and people of one’s origin, if also from the land of one’s adoption” (2). This psychological distance from the places they live and physical distance from the places where they were born gives immigrants distinct literary positions.

I choose to focus on Caribbean migrants to the United States because I am interested not only in the way that issues of race and ethnicity impact identity but also in

the representations of subjectivity and culture in discussions of sexuality and myth systems. I discern a pattern in which Caribbean and Caribbean-American women novelists use variations on a number of myths as metaphors to promote feminist causes and the promulgation of cultural memory. The application of myths to ends other than their original meanings has ample precedent in the Caribbean, even within everyday life and politics. For example, although he criticized vodoun and its practitioners prior to his life as a politician, Francois “Papa Doc” Duvalier took on the persona of the loa (or vodoun god) Baron Samedi to solidify his psychological, and thus political, grip on the Haitian populace. Haitian novelist Jean Rhys also revised vodoun myths, using zombification as an extended metaphor in her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966).

The purpose of this study, then, is to determine how and why Caribbean and Caribbean-American women writers appropriate mythological tropes for use in their novels. How does their application of these myths depart from the original cultures’ uses of the myths? What does the departure from the norm signify? How can these novelists’ treatment of mythology help readers understand Caribbean-American women’s sexuality and culture? I will focus my study on revisionism in the work of four U.S. Caribbean-American women novelists: Barbadian American Paule Marshall, second-generation Mississippi native Gloria Naylor, Cuban American Cristina Garcia, and Jamaican American Michelle Cliff.

Gloria Naylor’s parents were sharecroppers from rural Mississippi. While not technically part of the Caribbean, Naylor’s Mississippi heritage fits into Immanuel Wallerstein’s definition of the “extended Caribbean,” described by Stelamaris Coser as “those societies developed on the basis of cotton, sugar, or coffee plantations that were

supported by slave labor” (3). To Coser’s use of the extended Caribbean as a “‘unifying alibi’ for a discussion of novels by [Paule] Marshall, [Toni] Morrison, and [Gayl] Jones,” I add the works of Gloria Naylor. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, she creates a character named Mattie Michael who, though not a vodoun (“voodoo”) initiate, seems to have a natural vocation as a mambo, or vodoun priestess, who can heal zombification in others.

Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) is the story of the cultural and sexual reawakening of a middle-aged African-American woman in the spiritual atmosphere of the Caribbean. Because of my reading in sex and myth traditions, I have a unique angle on her work. Although she does not explicitly characterize her as such, Marshall (a Caribbean American whose parents hail from Barbados) has created a character, Avatara “Avey” Johnson, who not only becomes a zombie but also recovers from her zombified state.

Cristina Garcia, Cuban-American author of *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), also works within and around mythic systems. *Dreaming in Cuban*, her first novel, concerns the lives of three generations of Cuban women. Her female characters experience cycles of cultural and sexual deadness and revivals of their healthier sexualities and perceptions of their heritages. Thus, Garcia reworks the phoenix myth with figurative cycles of death and rebirth.

Michelle Cliff, a Jamaican of mixed (African and Anglo) heritage living in the U.S., constitutes yet another novelist reworking myth. In her historical novel *Free Enterprise* (1993), Cliff pointedly revisits the relatively contemporary legend of John Brown, known as the leader of the October 16, 1859 raid on Harper’s Ferry, Virginia.

Pro-slavery Southern whites reified Brown into an insane rabble-rouser who incited the “cold-blooded” murder of slaveholders. Whites in the U.S. also dismissively mythologized Brown’s contemporary Mary Ellen Pleasant, naming her “Mammy.” Cliff revises conceptions about Pleasant and Brown. In addition, she creates a character that Pleasant dubs “Annie Christmas” after the Southern folkheroine—a powerful, black longshorewoman on the Mississippi. Cliff’s Annie Christmas behaves significantly differently from the legendary woman—another instance of Cliff’s revisionist mythology. Cliff also uses the zombification trope in *Free Enterprise*, explicitly classifying Mary Ellen Pleasant, one of her main characters, as a zombie in the bigoted opinion of popular gossip.

Because my work centers on women’s writing, gender studies ranks among my primary methodological influences. Noted feminist Audre Lorde’s celebrated “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” relates directly to both feminist and ethnic mythmaking and revision even though she does not address myth in her essay. She writes that all women—from privileged whites to poor women of color—need to embrace one another’s differences if we are to overcome gender inequalities,

For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master’s house as their only source of support. (91)

That last sentence constitutes a derogatory reference to the privileged majority of the women who participated in the feminist conference where Lorde first delivered this

address, at which only one panel included either black or lesbian panelists. However, it also functions as a call for “kept” women and others to develop new tools so that they might liberate themselves. If classic and patriarchal myths are tools that reify subordinated positions, then women and people of color must write their own myths in order to level the gendered and racialized playing field.

Susan Sellers is another feminist author whose critical approach will inform my technique. Sellers’s *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women’s Fiction* provides inspiration for my writing. She declares that “[f]eminist rewriting can . . . be thought of in two categories: as an act of demolition, exposing and detonating the stories that have hampered women, and as a task of construction – of bringing into being enabling alternatives” (30). My methodology is also greatly aided by Carine M. Mardorossian, the author of *Reclaiming Difference: Caribbean Women Rewrite Postcolonialism* and Isabel Hoving, author of *In Praise of New Travelers: Reading Caribbean Migrant Women’s Writing*. Mardorossian’s concept of “relation identity” explains how disparate aspects of contemporary Caribbean-American fiction communicate with one another, while Hoving’s tome elucidates issues associated with the postcolonial theory of cultural hybridity.

The novelists I have chosen for this study perform both of these functions: both exposing harmful mythological structures and creating new, female- and minority-empowering mythic stories. Chapter One focuses on a discussion of Paule Marshall’s novel *Praisesong for the Widow* and Gloria Naylor’s novel *The Women of Brewster Place*. In Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*, protagonist Avey Johnson experiences a rebirth on Carriacou, a small Caribbean island, where she reconnects to her

cultural heritage. Mattie Michael, Gloria Naylor's protagonist in *The Women of Brewster Place*, helps Ciel, her neighbor and old friend, regain her spiritual health. While neither of these novelists explicitly names her character's malaise "zombification," each uses the zombie myth as a metaphor for a common societal problem: for Naylor, the zombie state signifies spiritual deadness, while for Marshall zombies represent cultural death.

Conversely, coming out of a zombie-like state signals a character's reconnection with her cultural history and spirituality in these novelists' interpretations of this familiar, racially- and sexually-charged mythological trope.

What both Marshall and Naylor borrow from Caribbean culture and history is the sense that zombies serve as a metaphor for the loss of African-American cultural memory. Generally, zombies are created by bokor, or black-magic sorcerers, and recalled by them to perpetual servitude. Thus, *Praisesong* and *Brewster Place* constitute rewritings of the popular zombie myth. Avey and Jay become zombies due to their shift in priorities from cultural memory to material gain. Although Ciel seems to, in a measure, have been zombified from birth (due to the existence of the sliver under her skin), her daughter's death exacerbates this latent condition. Mambos Rosalie Parvay and Mattie Michael restore Avey and Ciel to good health, both spiritually and culturally. These novelists use rocking and the "laying on of hands," maternal responses to illness, to cure their characters' zombified states. More importantly, Naylor's and Marshall's messages convey hope. Because their zombified characters' conditions are reversed, these African-American novelists persevere in their optimism about the possibility of cultural healing for black women and, by extension, for all hyphenated Americans.

In Chapter Two, I will analyze the mythological referents in Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*. In *Dreaming in Cuban*, the cyclical experiences of three generations of Cuban women reveal Garcia's use of an overriding metaphor based on the phoenix myth. The sequences of death and rebirth exhibited by the phoenix constitute an especially feminine metaphor, as these phases mirror women's menstrual cycles. Celia del Pino, family matriarch, becomes the first to live through these disruptive sequences after her first love (and lover) leaves Cuba to return to his wife and family in Spain. As she mourns this loss, she initiates the unfortunate precedent of mental instability that will plague her and her progeny throughout the novel. Her daughter Felicia, her son Javier, and to some extent her other daughter Lourdes all suffer from periodical psychological problems, and the novel foreshadows the continuation of these difficulties to a third generation—Felicia's son Ivanito.

Chapter Three will concentrate on Michelle Cliff's *Free Enterprise* and the multiple mythological revisions therein. Although the "known quantity" John Brown helps readers unacquainted with Mary Ellen Pleasant to situate her role in history, the most significant legend/myth revision in *Free Enterprise* concerns Pleasant herself. "Mammy Pleasant" disavowed her given nickname since that stereotype conjures visions of complaisant, white-nurturing, slavery-loving black women. In fact, Pleasant collaborated with Brown on the Harper's Ferry raid and claimed this legacy in death, insisting that her tombstone declare her to be a "Friend of John Brown." Cliff's Annie Christmas is a Creole Caribbean immigrant who also participates in the Harper's Ferry raid, but, unlike Pleasant, her participation in the raid is recognized. Confederates apprehend Annie dressed as a man in blackface and shackle her to a black men's chain

gang. When the rain washes away her face tint and her monthly blood comes, her true gender and skin color become obvious. Instead of releasing or re-classifying Annie, however, her jailers make a regular public entertainment of her enforced rape by her fellow prisoners. Due to this trauma, as opposed to acting like her Amazon-esque namesake and somehow exacting revenge, Annie retreats from public life to keep company with a colony of lepers. Cliff also uses the zombification trope in *Free Enterprise*, explicitly classifying Mary Ellen Pleasant, one of her main characters, as a zombie in the bigoted opinion of popular gossip. Other characters describe themselves in zombie terminology—as being undead or as having turned their backs on their cultures in one form or another. For example, Annie rejects her *gens inconnu* (French for “unknown people”) Jamaican heritage, one in which her parents celebrate their “deadwhiteness”—a clear analogy for my concept of cultural zombification (13).

By employing gender and ethnicity theories, mythological criticism, and close readings to the novels of Gloria Naylor, Paule Marshall, Cristina Garcia, and Michelle Cliff, I hope to illuminate the ways in which these women use mythology to further feminist and ethnic agendas, the influence of the Caribbean on mythmaking and revision, and the ways in which these particular revisions speak to the sexualities of women of color.

Chapter One:

Zombies, Sex, and Cultural Reconstruction:

Caribbean-American Women Novelists Rewriting Vodoun

Novelists Paule Marshall and Gloria Naylor participate in the feminist project to overhaul traditional and more recent cultural myths to portray women and femininity more positively. These black Caribbean-American women take this mission a step beyond feminism to promote the propagation of black cultural memory as well. Susan Sellers, an expert on mythology and feminism, metaphorically describes the logic behind this scheme, declaring that “[r]epeating Homer verbatim will only ensure that violent tales of warfare and rape are wired into the brains of each new generation” (32). By rewriting Anglo myths and misconceptions about predominantly black culture, African-American novelists hope to readdress notions about the paucity of culture and spirituality in the black experience. Black Americans have yet another motive for using myth in their fiction. According to Jaqueline de Weever, “[t]he [pain of] experiences of black people in the New World . . . is too great to be faced and confronted in a realistic mode” (4). Working within and around mythological systems allows black writers to address the painful history of slavery and subjugation in the Americas in a format that lets metaphor stand in for the literal violence and hardship faced first by slaves and later by blacks from the Jim Crow era through the present-day inequality of opportunity for social and financial advancement.

In Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*, protagonist Avey Johnson experiences a rebirth on a small Caribbean island, where she reconnects to her cultural

heritage. Mattie Michael, Gloria Naylor's protagonist in *The Women of Brewster Place*, helps Ciel Turner, her neighbor and old friend, regain her spiritual health. While neither of these novelists explicitly names her character's malaise "zombification," each uses the zombie myth as a metaphor for a common societal problem. In Naylor's characters, zombification equals spiritual death, while, in Marshall's work, zombification represents a cultural deadness. In each novelist's work, recovering from a zombie state signals a character's reunification with her cultural history and spirituality in these interpretations of this racially- and sexually-charged trope. Significantly, my study is the first to trace a connection between these novels and metaphorical zombification.

The Zombie Myth

To explain my findings concerning a zombification trope in *Brewster Place* and *Praisesong*, I will first demonstrate the difference between zombies in these novels and zombies in popular culture and religion. Hollywood filmmakers and vodoun practitioners advocate very different notions of zombies.

Hollywood Zombies

Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert ably details a category of Hollywood zombie in her article "Women Possessed: Eroticism and Exoticism in the Representation of Woman as Zombie." While the instance of "sexy" zombie movies has diminished in recent years, the legacy of older films, such as *White Zombie* (1932) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), persists. Paravisini-Gebert describes a common plotline in which a black or dark-skinned predator turns an innocent, beautiful white woman into a zombie in order to "slake his filthy lust," as the filmmakers might have termed it (42-45). These beautiful zombies almost invariably wear diaphanous lingerie. Hired *bokor*, or black-magic

sorcerers, steal these zombified virgins' souls while their victims are yet living, and these women regain their souls upon the deaths of the bokor or the patrons who enthrall them. Although Naylor's and Marshall's characters also recover from their zombified states, their maladies result not from magical imposition but from cultural and spiritual processes.

The concept of zombies forwarded by more recent Hollywood movies and popular literature usually runs along these lines: Zombies are reanimated corpses—rabid eaters of human flesh—and being bitten by a zombie will result in the victim's death and subsequent zombification. Max Brooks's *The Zombie Survival Guide* (2003), classified as “humor,” and novel *World War Z* (2006) warn readers against the “horde of walking dead” of the “flesh-eating” variety (*Guide* 84). Zombification, according to Brooks, results from contamination by the virus Solanum, which co-opts human brains to work after all other bodily functions—heart, lungs, cell regeneration—cease, albeit in a radically altered, limited capacity. *The Zombie Survival Guide* has a section entitled “Living in an Undead World” that instructs human survivors of a worldwide zombie plague to “find a remote, uninhabited corner of our planet (there are more than you think), and rebuild your life from scratch” (158). Filmmaker George A. Romero popularized the flesh-eating-zombie genre beginning in 1968 with his first such film, *Night of the Living Dead*. The *Dead* sequels, 1978's *Dawn of the Dead* and 1985's *Day of the Dead*, also became instant horror classics.² Romero's films “received much critical acclaim for . . . the subtext involving American consumerism and materialism, as well as comments on news media and racism” (“Dawn”). While Romero's commentary on

² *The Women of Brewster Place*, published in 1982, and *Praisesong for the Widow*, published in 1983, may have (in small measure) been responses to Romero's 1968 and 1978 *Dead* classics.

consumerism, materialism, and racism carries over into Marshall's and Naylor's fiction, these novelists differentiate their zombie characters from this category of Hollywood zombies in respect to their culinary habits and the causes of their zombification.

Haitian Zombies and Vodoun

The popular Hollywood images of zombies may borrow superficially from misguided notions of Haitian vodoun, but the Haitian version of zombification is far more religiously and historically complex. Vodoun resembles Catholicism in its pluralism. *Loa*, lesser vodoun gods and goddesses, function almost like saints in that they can affect the fates of their petitioners (Hurston 151; Deren 55-56). Practitioners pray to the Catholic God, whom they believe to be the creator of the universe, but they also pray to the lesser loa that their ancestors—both ancient and modern—have fashioned from the spirits of the dead (Deren 27-33; Dayan 16). *Houngans* and *mambos* are male and female vodoun shamans—priests, healers, therapists, and mediators—on whom vodoun initiates call to intercede in their favor with loa and against bokor (the aforementioned black-magic sorcerers).

Zombies represent a different type of vodoun appropriation of the dead. Zora Neale Hurston, the first outsider to document Haitian vodoun practices, introduces the Haitian concept of zombies to a U.S. audience with the following, oft-quoted line: “[I]n Haiti there is the quick, the dead, and then there are Zombies” (179). Actually, two major types of corporeal zombies exist in Haitian lore: reanimated corpses and living bodies with absent souls. Both categories are created by bokor. In the first type of zombification, described by Wade Davis in his book *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1985), the bokor can steal the souls of people who die as the result of supernatural

interference, regardless of who (or what) initiates these people's deaths (185). The second type of zombie, described by Davis more recently in his *Passage of Darkness* (1988), is generated through the administration of a "zombie poison" (consisting in most cases of human remains and an extract from the puffer fish), which makes those who ingest it appear to be dead (124). After their burials, bokor exhume these people and administer an antidote, which enthralls the newly-created zombies to the bokor (122). Haitians are not afraid of zombies; instead, they fear becoming zombies themselves. In *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, her classic treatise on vodoun, Maya Deren attributes this fear to "the deep-rooted value which the Haitian attaches to powers of consciousness and the attendant capacity for moral judgement [*sic*], deliberation and self-control" (42-43fn). Davis briefly mentions that the soul of a zombie may be restored either when its master dies or if it is "inadvertently fed salt," when "his or her apathy is said to explode into rage" in a reversal of the unconsciousness which enslaved it³ (60-61). Although their embodiments of zombification come nearer that of Haitian vodoun than Hollywood's, Marshall's and Naylor's characters yet diverge from the Haitian tradition in the causes of their zombification and in its cure to make a statement about the possibility for cultural healing.

Mattie as Mambo: Healing Spiritual Zombification

In her first novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*, Gloria Naylor appropriates the zombie myth by creating a mambo, Mattie Michael, who can heal zombification. In a 1991 interview, Gloria Naylor says she started writing creatively as a belated response to

³ In an interesting counterpoint to the role of salt in undoing the slavery of zombification, many authors, including Ewart C. Skinner and Nicole Waller, cite the role of salt ingestion in the Americas in perpetuating slavery by preventing Africans who were once able to fly from returning to their homelands via flight.

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination. She “decided that I would try to make a difference inside of the system” as an author of reform-promoting fiction (Naylor, “Interview” 221). She reworks a variety of mythological systems to accomplish this goal. Adriane L. Ivey asserts that Naylor “uses biblical allusion to critique foundational myths of Western, and specifically American, culture” (86). Not only does Naylor work with biblical sources, but critics have also commented on the importance of vodoun in Naylor’s novel *Mama Day*, in which the title character functions as a mambo (Howard 134). However, *Mama Day* is not Naylor’s first mambo character. Mattie Michael, the unifying factor in Naylor’s debut novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*, also acts as a spiritual leader who, in addition to her role as counselor and moral touchstone, heals psychic wounds via the everyday miracle of the laying on of hands. While never calling Mattie’s magical spirituality “vodoun,” Naylor emphasizes vodoun’s centrality to her project by making her central character a mambo who can assuage the zombie state.

Goddess Worship

Mattie experiences her initiation into sexuality just as a vodoun practitioner is initiated into the worship of the loa, or vodoun Goddess of Love, Erzulie. Naylor furnishes the scene of Mattie’s and Butch’s lovemaking as if it were an altar to Erzulie: with wild basil and sugarcane. Maya Deren’s *Divine Horsemen* includes a section on Erzulie’s behavior and requirements. Erzulie loves basil: “Basil leaves, which are understood as a purifying agent, are especially associated with Erzulie and are steeped or rubbed in the water for her bath” (Deren 139fn). She also has a sweet tooth: “Above all, she favors desserts, decorated cakes and confections of all kinds” (140). Therefore, making love on a bed of wild basil after eating sugarcane is a rite of purification for

Erzulie's worship on the young couple's part. Mattie names her son Basil, dedicating him to the continued worship of the goddess of love. This very intense, fulfilling, first (and only) sexual encounter leaves Mattie an experienced, yet still innocent, woman—just as Erzulie is thought to retain her innocence while entertaining multiple lovers (141-42). In this way, Mattie's sexuality transgresses Christian tenets yet remains sanctified in the more erotically permissive vodoun.

Mattie the Mambo

Mattie experiences a rebirth on a bus to Asheville, North Carolina, from her sexualized self to her incarnation as a mother/mambo. She wants to “suspend time, pretend that she had been born that very moment on that very bus, and that this was all there was and ever would be,” but she realizes that her unborn “child would tie her to that past and future as inextricably as it was now tied to her every heartbeat” (Naylor, *Brewster* 25). Mattie suddenly intuitively connects her pregnancy—part of the ancient and future cycle of reproduction—connects her to all people that have come before her and to all that will come after. This passage is essential to an understanding that Naylor universalizes her message—that the lives of a few black women living in the U.S. South hold relevance for society as a whole.

Mattie becomes apprenticed to an experienced mambo, Miss Eva, who teaches her by example to develop her power for empathy and to use this power to heal others. In another act of universalism, these women “[blend] their lives so that what lay behind one and ahead of the other became indistinguishable” (34). In later years, after Eva's death, Mattie's memories of Eva resemble those of a worshiper of a loa. It seems that, in the manner of all vodoun practitioners, Mattie turns Miss Eva's spirit into a loa to whom she

can turn in times of need. Mattie's religious worship, therefore, is an exercise in pluralism: "She felt guilty about missing church that day, but if God were everywhere, surely He was here among so much natural beauty and peace. So Mattie sat there and prayed, but sometimes her supplications for comfort were to the wisdom of a yellow, blue-eyed spirit who had foreseen this day and had tried to warn her" (43). Mattie not only believes in the power of the Christian God, but she also believes in the power of Miss Eva, the spirit of the woman who mentored her as a mambo.

Healing a Zombie

Mattie repays her mentor's kindness and tutelage by rescuing the older mambo-cum-loa's granddaughter, Ciel, from a zombified state and imminent death—the result of spiritual disillusionment induced by the death of her young daughter. Ciel, in turn, prays for death. God does not answer that prayer, "[s]o she was left to do what God had chosen not to" (101). She decides to die. A suicidal mindset presents an aberration to the mind of the vodoun practitioner. Deren explains, "In the final analysis human consciousness, with all its attendant powers and potentials, holds the highest position in Voudoun [*sic*] metaphysics" (43fn). Deren explicitly contrasts consciousness with the zombie state, claiming, "A zombie is nothing more than a body deprived of its conscious powers of cerebration; for the Haitian, there is no fate more terrible" (43fn). Ciel has attained just such a zombified state. Her eyes repel her well-wishers because "raw fires had eaten them worse than lifeless—worse than death" (Naylor 102). In other words, Ciel is experiencing her own "personal hell" (102), and "there is no fate more terrible" than being a body without a soul.

In true vodoun fashion, rather than approaching God as a humble supplicant, Mattie commands him to help Ciel. She does not wait for him to intervene, however. She saves Ciel from death through mystical intervention and bodily contact, rocking her like a baby. As a result of this nurturing touch, “[s]omewhere from the bowels of her being came a moan from Ciel, so high at first it couldn’t be heard by anyone there, but the yard dogs began an unholy howling. And Mattie rocked” (103). Just as zombies moan in popular culture, Ciel moans during her return to consciousness. The mambo and her patient take a journey through time, visiting grieving mothers whose children have been killed. Last, “[t]hey flew past the spilled brains of Senegalese infants whose mothers had dashed them on the wooden sides of slave ships. And she rocked on” (103). Mattie ushers Ciel through her childhood:

And she rocked her back, back into the womb, to the nadir of her hurt, and they found it—a slight silver splinter, embedded just below the surface of the skin. And Mattie rocked and pulled—and the splinter gave way, but its roots were deep, gigantic, ragged, and they tore up flesh with bits of fat and muscle tissue clinging to them. They left a huge hole, which was already starting to pus over, but Mattie was satisfied. It would heal. (103-04)

Why does Naylor envision the ultimate source of Ciel’s pain to be this small piece of silver? Perhaps it is because Erzulie’s adepts, or cult members, employ silver in their initiation rites. Hurston explains that Erzulie’s male adepts wear silver rings “because silver is a metal that has wisdom in it” (Hurston 125). Maybe the sliver of silver imbedded in Ciel’s skin from her conception is related to the cultural memory of the

horror of slavery, so recently visited by Mattie and Ciel. What other “wisdom” could an African-American girl be born with that could cause that much pain?

After Mattie removes the silver splinter, Ciel’s zombie state gives way. She becomes physically ill, but it is a cleansing illness: “After a while she heaved only air, but the body did not seem to want to stop. It was exorcising the evilness of pain” (104). “Exorcising the evilness of pain” recalls exorcising the evil of the existence without consciousness which Ciel has so recently embraced and from which fate Mattie has rescued her.

Mattie then ritually bathes Ciel. This nurturing rite functions as a baptism into Erzulie’s cult and echoes Mattie’s own vodoun initiation: “Ciel stood there, naked, and felt the cool air play against the clean surface of her skin. She had the sensation of fresh mint coursing through her pores. She closed her eyes and the fire was gone. . . . So Ciel began to cry—there, naked, in the center of the bathroom floor” (104-05). The coolness of the air and the fresh mint, doubling for fresh basil, signal Erzulie’s presence. Ciel continues to cry until she falls asleep, just as Erzulie does when possessing her worshippers⁴ (Deren 145). Thus, through Mattie’s baptismal intervention, Ciel is reborn from zombification into consciousness. Paule Marshall’s protagonist Avey Johnson, on the other hand, must rely on the mystical intercession not only of her deceased aunt but also of a father/daughter houngan/mambo team to rectify her zombie state.

Avatara’s Zombification and (Re)culturation

Avey Johnson’s skin emits its own light. It emanates a “subtle aura, unbeknown to her, which her dark skin had given off since birth” (Marshall, *Praisesong* 11). This

⁴ One explanation vodoun adepts give for Erzulie’s habitual weeping is that she once had a daughter who drowned, although this story is disputed (Deren 310).

atypical detail, positioned at the novel's beginning, cues readers of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* that they must check their notions about reality at the front cover. Marshall employs a subtle form of magical realism, never quite specifying whether or not the protagonist Avey's many visions are instead flashbacks and/or hallucinations. In fact, readers might easily dismiss the "magical" aspect of Marshall's realism, except for this first clue: Avey Johnson's glow-in-the-dark skin. Later in the story, readers learn that Avey and her husband Jerome Johnson grow apart in their sexual and emotional lives—several years into an initially happy marriage and several decades before his death. They isolate themselves not only from each other but also from the struggles, triumphs, and historical memories of African Americans in general, thus becoming culturally and metaphorically Anglicized—white-washed. These details signify that Avey Johnson, true to her name, is an avatara—a manifestation of a goddess—and that Marshall re-envision the phenomenon of zombification.

Avatara—Manifestation of the Goddess

"Avey" is a nickname, short for her given name, "Avatara." Her paternal great, great aunt Cuney christens Avey after her own (Cuney's) grandmother in accordance with a dream concerning her great-nephew's yet-unborn child (42). Hindu theology originated the concept of avatars and avataras, "divine incarnations" (Cornille 133). Catherine Cornille says that "this belief . . . involves a deliberate act of descent of God to the world to destroy evil, restore righteousness, and save the world" (133). In the Hindu tradition, the main God Vishnu (rather than the lesser gods) generally "descends" to manifest himself in the form of a human, animal, or mythical creature (133-34). However, all of the gods in the vodoun pantheon make their presences on earth physical

realities by inhabiting avatars. The vodoun loa visit these possessions, mostly temporary in nature, on their human hosts, called “horses.” As readers learn early in the narrative, though, Avey’s skin has glowed supernaturally since her birth. Therefore, Avey more significantly resembles the Hindu concept of an avatara as the permanently manifested “descent” of a vodoun goddess.⁵

What sort of goddess does *Praisesong*’s heroine represent? In the early, happy years of her marriage, Avey loves to return home from work. It literally “grounds” her:

Freed of the high-heels her body always felt restored to its proper axis. And the hardwood floor which Jay had rescued from layers of oxblood-colored paint when they first moved in and stained earth brown, the floor reverberating with “Cottontail” and “Lester Leaps In” would be like a rich nurturing ground from which she had sprung and to which she could always turn for sustenance.

Avey Johnson hadn’t thought of that floor in decades. (12)

Readers can see Avatara as a particularly earthy goddess, standing in for an Earth mother or even Mother Earth. Modern fashions like high heels hinder her connection with the land. Avatara’s primary devotee, her husband Jay, lovingly cleans off the oxblood paint, sacrificial offerings made by other worshippers to any of the multitude in the vodoun pantheon, and prepares her an altar of hard-packed, “nurturing” dirt. This time the floor/altar is stained rather than painted, a seemingly more organic process that better displays the natural beauty of the wood. Yet, she has forgotten the earth “from which she had sprung” when readers meet her. How can an earth-mother goddess forget the land?

⁵Because Marshall’s project is based on feminist strategies, I use the female-gendered “goddess” instead of the gender-neutral “god” when referring to Avey’s deity.

That she has neglected the memory of her originary land comes as a clue that something is amiss in Avey's consciousness—she has been in a zombie state.

This neglect of land and memory is all the more blasphemous because Avatara's goddess is one of memory and inherited vision. Avey also “descends” from another Avatara, her great-great-great-great-grandmother who was a slave in the U. S. South. Avey's ancestor's community thought she was crazy because of her mambo-like vision concerning the landing and miraculous escape of a boatload-full of kidnapped, shackled Ibos who were newly arrived from the horrific Middle Passage. Avey's ancestor's story descends to her via the long-dead woman's granddaughter, Cuney. This connection of the novel's protagonist with African resistance of slavery exemplifies Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson's claim that “the geography of the Caribbean is less important than its society and culture, and these link clearly with an African past” (83). Not only does Avey share an “African past” with the Ibos due to her genealogy, but she also shares a divine connection to vodoun, a Caribbean religion derived from African roots.

In fact, *Praisesong's* narrator suggests multiple specific identities for the loa that Avatara embodies. When she and Jay make love, he experiences what seems like a sampling of the female vodoun pantheon:

He would lie within her like a man who has suddenly found himself inside a temple of some kind, and hangs back, overcome by the magnificence of the place, and sensing around him the invisible forms of the deities who reside there: Erzulie with her jewels and gossamer veils, Yemoja to whom the rivers and seas are sacred: Oya, first wife of the thunder god and herself in charge of winds and rains . . . Jay might have felt himself

surrounded by a pantheon of the most ancient deities who had made their temple the tunneled darkness of his wife's flesh. (127)

Because all of these female loa “reside” in Avey's body, it may be safe to call her an avatara of the Goddess, the deity from which some cultural and religious historians consider all religion to be derived. As myth and feminism expert Jean Markale claims, “When humanity considered the woman the sole possessor of procreative—and thus, creative—powers, it could not imagine divinity in anything but a female form. But . . . from the moment when the male's role in the phenomenon of life transmission was realized, the woman's primacy could no longer be accepted” (7-8). Someone forgot to inform Jay that the Goddess no longer exists. He still worships “the most ancient deities” embodied in his wife, Avatara.

As a young couple, Avey and Jay celebrate life. Jay is an African-style trickster. At work, he acts like any other businessman. At home, however, he stages dances for two in their living room, recites Harlem Renaissance poetry, and makes love to Avey with reverential gusto. The older Avey Johnson remembers that

[s]omething vivid and affirming and charged with feeling had been present in the small rituals that had once shaped their lives. . . . They had been as much a part of them as Jay's wing-flared nose and his seal-brown color, and her high-riding Bantu behind (Gulla gold he used to call it, his hand coming to rest there) and the deep earth tones of her skin. (137)

Lovemaking is a ritual that affirms Avey's deity. They also experience sex as a link to their cultural heritage. The older Avey “sense[s] . . . in the dimmest way” that

something in those small rites, an ethos they held in common, had reached back beyond her life and beyond Jay's to join them to the vast unknown lineage that had made their being possible. And this link, these connections, heard in the music and in the praisesongs of a Sunday: ". . . *I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were/young . . .*," had both protected them and put them in possession of a kind of power. (137; emphasis in original)

This passage echoes the one in *Brewster Place* in which Mattie realizes that, as a result of her own sexuality and pregnancy, she is inextricably connected to the eternal cycle of death and rebirth. Avey and Jay seem even more connected to their African roots with these "small rites." The couple relinquishes that ancestral, spiritual power, however, by ceasing their intimate cultural practices in favor of the pursuit of material goods and social "advancement."

The Zombie "Avey Johnson"

Avey's and Jay's first symptoms of "zombification" manifest when Avey begins to feel alienated from her own body and becomes convinced that Jay must be having affairs with the white women at his work. Their constant bickering on the subject alienates them from one another, and they forego the intimate rituals that connect them to their cultural heritage. They come to focus, instead, on material gain. Mythographer Marina Warner thinks that materialism is the reason that zombies hold a fascination for contemporary culture. She writes, "The zombie's currency thrives today, because a zombie exemplifies . . . an alarming, ever-present possibility that can be dwelt in. In common parlance, work turns people into zombies" (123). When Jay and Avey begin to

worship “the almighty dollar” and abandon the worship of the loa in Avey, these loa abandon them in turn. They become zombies, the living dead. The goddess Avatara becomes the zombie “Avey Johnson:” “The names ‘Avey’ and ‘Avatara’ were those of *someone who was no longer present*, and she had become Avey Johnson even in her thoughts, a woman whose face, reflected in a window or mirror, she sometimes failed to recognize” (141; my emphasis). The goddess Avatara is “no longer present.” She has been replaced by this new entity, Avey Johnson. Simultaneously, her once-trickster husband Jay tragically transforms into the zombie “Jerome Johnson.” Jerome has a “strange pallid face, whose expression was even more severe than Jay’s” (131). Avey thinks that someone has “slipped in when he wasn’t looking and taken up residency behind his dark skin” (131). That they lose “touch” with their African heritage is reinforced by their symbolic new uniforms: white gloves. Avey Johnson and Jerome Johnson experience physical contact with the world through the mediation of whiteness. Jerome is buried in his Masonic white apron and white gloves. Avey still wears her white gloves, white hat, and constricting long-line girdle when she disembarks from the cruise ship.

Aunt Cuney’s recent haunting of Avey’s dreams causes Avey to alter her plans when she and two friends are on a Caribbean cruise—overwhelmingly Anglo in demographics and in cultural implication. During a stop at port in Martinique, Avey hears a Patois language like Cuney’s, but “[s]he hadn’t even realized what had happened, that a connection had been made, until two nights later when her great-aunt had appeared. She had stood there large as life in the middle of her dream, and as a result there was a hole the size of a crater where her life of the past three decades had been” (196).

Elsewhere, the narrator reiterates that Avey cannot remember the last three decades. This forgetfulness extends to the time when Avey and Jay became zombies. Her lack of consciousness during her period of zombification causes Avey's amnesia.

Jerome dies before his soul, "Jay," can be restored. Luckily, though, "Avatara" is reinstated through the intervention of a houngan, Lebert Joseph, and the "laying on of hands" of a mambo, his daughter Rosalie Parvay (217). Avey Johnson meets the old man in his saloon near the beach in Grenada. He convinces her to take a boat trip with him and other natives to his birthplace, a smaller island named Carriacou. They call this yearly pilgrimage "the Excursion" (75). When she boards the boat, she sits between two elderly women. These mambos remove Avey's trappings of whiteness—her hat, gloves, and huge pocketbook—so that she can "exorcise" the cause of her zombification, manifested as the lump of something unknown (not food) in her middle that will not go away. She can feel this lump because her zombified state begins to alter when Cuney invades her dreams.

As in *The Women of Brewster Place*, a rocking motion is integral to the healing of a zombified state. Due to the rocking of the small boat during this journey, Avey becomes extremely ill, suffering both vomiting and diarrhea. The mambos on either side of her approve of this purgation, reiterating "*Bon*," meaning "good" in their Creole Patois (205-09).

When she awakes in Rosalie Parvay's house on the island of Carriacou, Avey is no longer ill. She is weak, however, and still soiled with the contents of her own body—both intestinal and spiritual. Rosalie, an experienced mambo, ritually bathes her. Then, in an act of "[a] laying on of hands" (also mirroring Naylor), she completes the work begun

by Cuney and taken up by Lebert Joseph and the elders on the boat (217). She accomplishes the healing of Avey's zombified body. While massaging Avey's thighs, Rosalie affects a spiritual orgasm in her patient:

The warmth, the stinging sensation that was both pleasure and pain passed up through the emptiness at her center. Until finally they reached her heart. And as they encircled her heart and it responded, there was the sense of a chord being struck. All the tendons, nerves and muscles which strung her together had been struck a powerful chord, and the reverberation could be heard in the remotest corners of her body.

“*Bon.*” (224)

Rosalie utters this last “*Bon*” because she knows that her work has been fruitful. She has successfully prepared Avey's body to receive its absent soul, the loa that resided there at her birth.

Avey undergoes a gradual process of reawakening to her “true self.” Her loa reinhabits her body, and she performs a dance that she remembers from her time spent with aunt Cuney. Joyce Pettis, who traces the impetus in Marshall's fiction toward “spiritual wholeness,” represents Avey's dance as the pinnacle of this journey (131). In the end, Avey remembers her real name, “Avey, short for Avatara,” that echoes her divinity (251). She accepts the mission of memory that Cuney has bestowed on her in her childhood: “[I]n instilling the story of the Ibos in her child's mind, the old woman had entrusted her with a mission she couldn't even name yet had felt duty-bound to fulfill. It had taken her years to rid herself of the notion” (42). Instead of ridding herself of this remembrance, Avey now decides to embrace it. She will tell the story of the Ibos

who walked home across the Atlantic to her grandchildren in a perpetuation of cultural memory.

Zombification and Cultural Healing

In a 1991 interview with Donna Perry, Gloria Naylor claims that the “rocking scene” was her first story. She says, “It began with the ending, the woman healing the other one by rocking her. I wrote that as a catharsis for myself, to get myself over a moment of pain” (“Interview” 222). So, Naylor’s character Mattie is initially imagined as a mambo who is capable of healing women’s heartaches. Naylor creates Mattie’s mythological qualities to answer her own need for healing. Mattie ministers to a large community of black women, eventually supervising the therapeutic destruction of the wall that divides Brewster Place from its neighbors. In this act of synecdoche, Naylor metaphorically and mythically addresses female and minority needs for cultural healing in a white man’s world.

In telling Avey’s story, Marshall also participates in the strategy of rewriting classic and newer myths to encourage readers to rethink race and gender roles. Avey’s healing doubles to heal readers as well—to “[restore] them to a sense of themselves and [reaffirm] their self-worth” (“Poets” 704). Marshall describes her commitment to cultural memory and its capacity for healing in a 1990 interview:

History—that long look back—is central to nearly all of my characters and this is reflective of my own life, my need to define, to create a self. The fact that so many unflattering and fraudulent images of black women have been projected in the literature, I see as a positive challenge to create a true-true self. It’s what I’ve been about in my life and in the work. And

part of that process is looking back into history and taking from it what one needs in this creation. (288)

Marshall, then, recognizes the power of the written word to create reality. She uses history in her literature to heal black women's cultural wounds.

What both Marshall and Naylor borrow from Caribbean culture and history is the sense that zombies serve as a metaphor for the loss of Afro-American cultural memory. Generally, zombies are created by bokor, or black-magic sorcerers, and recalled by them to perpetual servitude. Thus, *Praisesong* and *Brewster Place* constitute rewritings of the popular zombie myth. Avey and Jay become zombies due to their shift in priorities from cultural memory to material gain. Although Ciel seems to, in a measure, have been zombified from birth (due to the existence of the sliver under her skin), her daughter's death exacerbates this latent condition. Mambos Rosalie Parvay and Mattie Michael restore Avey and Ciel to good health, both spiritually and culturally. These novelists use rocking and the "laying on of hands," maternal responses to illness, to cure their characters' zombified states. More importantly, Naylor's and Marshall's messages convey hope. Because their zombified characters' conditions are reversed, these African-American novelists persevere in their optimism about the possibility of cultural healing for black women and, by extension, for all African Americans.

Chapter Two:

Myth in Cristina Garcia's Fiction:

Phoenixes, Santeria, and the Feminine

Just as Gloria Naylor and Paule Marshall rewrite myth in their novels, Cristina Garcia, Cuban-American author of *Dreaming in Cuban*, *The Agüero Sisters*, and *Monkey Hunting*, also works within and around mythic systems. Her first novel, *Dreaming in Cuban*, concerns the lives of three generations of Cuban women. Her female characters experience cycles of cultural and sexual change. This cyclicity coupled with fire imagery indicates that Garcia reworks the phoenix myth with figurative sequences of death and rebirth. Garcia also makes liberal use of symbols associated with different *orishas*, or Santeria deities, to characterize her female characters. The diversity of myth referents from classical mythology to Santeria may seem puzzling until readers consider the hybrid nature of the Caribbean as part of the postcolonial world. The islands have been colonized in one form or another by many cultures and nations. Isabel Hoving addresses Caribbean hybridity in terms of language, stating that “all languages are hybrid. There is no such thing as a pure, uncontaminated language. And all discourses are built from heterogeneous elements. This inescapable hybridity is one of the main tenets of postcolonial theory, but also—and in a more specific manner—of Caribbean theory” because of the islands’ Creole “nation languages” (*Travelers* 18). She goes on to explain that this hybridity prevents a binary understanding of difference, writing that “no avid close reader will ever be able to surprise this alterity as a pure, undiluted difference within an otherwise hybrid text” (21). Carine M. Mardorossian takes this argument a step

further to declare the denial of alterity to be a conscious new trend in Caribbean literature with her idea of “relation identity.” In *Reclaiming Difference: Caribbean Women Rewrite Postcolonialism*, Mardorossian describes her notion of “third phase” postcolonialism. She claims that postcolonial literature and theory is moving away from polarizing discussions of difference toward an inclusive “relation identity”—that is, because of the hybrid nature of race and experience in the Caribbean, contemporary novelists look for commonalities rather than only differences when dealing with “others.” Mardorossian says that

the writers of the third phase of rewriting transform such [alienating] approaches to identity (and correlatively our reading strategies) by making them more attuned to the contingent workings of difference. . . . They challenge the idea that racial and cultural identities function as stable points of reference in our unstable world and represent subjects as constituted by a network of interdependent identities that cannot be adequately accounted for by identity-bound differences. (3)

Instead of an either/or dichotomy in relation to difference, postcolonial authors of the third phase embrace a both/and attitude. Related to the postcolonial third phase is Patrick Colm Hogan’s concept of “universalism” as “the view that all people and all human societies share fundamental cognitive, emotive, ethical, and other properties and principles. Clearly, all forms of racism and colonialist ethnocentrism are anti-universalist, for they necessarily assume profound and consequential differences between peoples and/or between cultures” (xv). Third phase authors and critics, then, embrace a universalist perspective in actively seeking commonalities not only between cultures but

also within their own sets of identities. Hogan also contrasts “syncretism,” which he defines as the “synthesis of metropolitan and indigenous cultures,” with “alienating hybridity,” defined as “[a] partial internalization of and adherence to both indigenous and metropolitan cultures, which ultimately leaves one disjoined from both cultures—emotionally, intellectually, practically” (320).⁶ “Relation identity” proves beneficial in analyzing Cristina Garcia’s third phase fiction.

Contemporary readers are, of course, familiar with the phoenix myth, which is even featured in the *Harry Potter* series. Fawkes, the phoenix, aids Harry in some of his exploits, even saving Harry’s life with its healing tears. In classical contexts, the phoenix is prominent in Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Early Christian mythologies. The basic myth is that the phoenix, a long-lived bird, renews itself after a fixed time period (sometimes 500 years) by gathering a pyre of aromatic materials and subsequently bursting into flames in an act of self-immolation. From its ashes, a new phoenix emerges. In a more holistic version, the aging bird dies and decays in the same aromatic nest, and a new phoenix, beginning as a worm, grows from its corpse (Van den Broek 146). This mythological bird correlates to the Egyptian *benu*, “linked with the Egyptian cult of the Sun [Ra or Re]” (Brisson 111). Even modern-day cryptozoologists seem to judge the phoenix a nonentity. Its actual existence proves irrelevant, however, because the phoenix primarily acts as a human phenomenon. R. Van den Broek explains, “In most cases the discussion or mention of the phoenix is concerned not with the animal world but with the human world; and it can only be concluded that the phoenix fulfilled an important function with respect to the meaning of human existence” (9). According to Luc Brisson, the bird also has a place in discussions of sexuality: “Because the Phoenix

⁶ I use “hybridity” and “syncretism” synonymously unless I specify the damaging “alienating hybridity.”

is its own mother and father, it is both male and female. . . . Behind the myth of the Phoenix, in which dual sexuality plays a primordial role, we can detect a whole pagan mystique” (113). I believe, though, that the sequences of death and rebirth exhibited by the phoenix comprise an especially feminine metaphor, as these phases mirror women’s menstrual cycles, which each hold the possibility to create a completely new life in the form of a human child. The phoenix’s rebirth constitutes merely a return to its former pattern, yet the phoenix continues to generate hope with its promise of renewal. Thus, when modified as in Garcia, it also becomes a particularly Caribbean metaphor, because “[i]nstead of ‘freezing’ identity into racial, cultural, or gender difference, [contemporary Caribbean novelists] open [identity] up to re-imagination by representing it as in constant flux rather than fixed, as multiple rather than dualistic” (Mardorossian 3). This study is the first to assert that the phoenix stands as a concrete symbol for Caribbean and feminist revisionism.

In *Dreaming in Cuban*, the cyclical experiences of three generations of Cuban women reveal Garcia’s use of an overriding metaphor based on the phoenix myth. Rather than returning invariably to previous patterns, though, Garcia’s characters undergo different incarnations. Celia del Pino, family matriarch, becomes the first to live through these disruptive sequences after her first love (and lover) leaves Cuba to return to his wife and family in Spain. As she mourns this loss, she initiates the unfortunate precedent of mental instability that will plague her and her progeny throughout the novel. Her daughter Felicia, her son Javier, and, to some extent, her eldest daughter Lourdes all suffer from periodical psychological problems, and the novel foreshadows the continuation of these difficulties to a third generation—Felicia’s son Ivanito. Garcia’s

phoenix is a particularly female phenomenon, however. Although Javier becomes subject to mental problems, his psychosis demonstrates no cyclicity. Neither do any of her other male characters. The feminist theory about the Goddess presents a hypothetical Ur-deity whose pattern pervades literature. The goddess pattern (lower case) here is not a historical truth but, rather, a useful analytical tool. Garcia uses the goddess pattern as well, creating characters who are avatars of *orishas*, or Santeria gods, (some resemble multiple deities) and reshape themselves like phoenixes. Santeria functions according to Carine Mardorossian's theory of the postcolonial third phase. Like her "relation identity" that "challenges the separatism of identity politics, cultural purism, and ethnic absolutism in favor of mappings of identity that emphasize the deep interconnectedness of our lives across the globe," Santeria fuses the concepts of many different cultures, chiefly African Yoruba and European Catholicism, to create pluralistic identities not only for its gods and goddesses but also for its practitioners (Mardorossian 3). With its phoenix pattern, ghostly visitations, and Santeria rites and goddess figures, *Dreaming in Cuban* has "pagan mystique" (à la Brisson).

Celia del Pino

Celia Almeida's first rebirth comes as her *campesina* (rural-dwelling) mother sends a newly-shod Celia via train to live with her unmarried aunt in Havana. She transitions from an infancy of barefoot poverty to a girlhood of patent-leather plenty. As a young camera salesperson, Celia meets Gustavo Sierra de Armas, a married Spanish lawyer. They become lovers. When Gustavo inevitably leaves, Celia enters a period of intense mourning: "Celia took to her bed by early summer and stayed there for the next eight months. That she was shrinking there was no doubt. Celia had been a tall woman,

a head taller than most men, with a full bosom and slender, muscled legs. Soon she was a fragile pile of opaque bones, with yellowed nails and no monthly blood” (36). Her decline echoes that of an aging phoenix. Her subsequent infertility is a symbolic death. A well-wisher making a baked Alaska to tempt the invalid to eat even sets her kitchen on fire, and—to confirm the phoenix pattern—Celia’s neighbors take the fire as a sign that she ““is determined to die”” just as the phoenix determines when it will die (37). During Celia’s convalescence, a *santera* predicts, ““Miss Celia, I see a wet landscape in your palm”” and further states, ““She will survive the hard flames”” (37). The *santera*’s prophecy encapsulates two parts of this archetypal argument: that Garcia employs a phoenix pattern and that Celia regenerates as an avatara of the Santeria goddess of the sea, Yemayá.

Jorge del Pino “resurrects” Celia by loving and marrying her. She “blossoms” during their honeymoon, as symbolized by the orchid bloom Jorge gathers for her. Thus, her husband restores her fecundity—only to abandon her in favor of extended business trips. He leaves Celia with his mother and sister, whom he knows will abuse his new wife, as a punishment for her preference for Gustavo. When Celia becomes pregnant with their first child, she decides that if her baby is female she will teach her to “outlast the hard flames” (42). Instead, having been ridden mercilessly by her in-laws, Celia displays her most serious mental instability. After Jorge names their new daughter Lourdes, Celia announces, “I will not remember her name” (43). Jorge sends the recalcitrant new mother to a rehabilitation facility. Celia’s psychiatrists recommend seaside living as part of her ongoing recovery, so, when they release her, she and Jorge move to a sturdy home by the beach. A lasting period of relative calm ensues, in which

Celia, a pianist, is forbidden from playing her favorite music by Debussy because of the unhealthy effect of his “restless style” on her delicate sanity (8). Having stifled her creative outlet, Jorge is yet perturbed when Celia turns to the burgeoning “Revolución” for a sense of purpose.

Revolutionary fervor is not the only change in Celia. Gradually, she transitions into an avatara of Yemayá, described by Miguel Barnet as “the model of the universal mother and queen of the sea and of salt water” (92). Celia either does not realize or will not acknowledge her connection to this goddess, however, until Jorge dies. He has been in New York with their daughter Lourdes, seeking a cure for his stomach cancer. His ghost appears to Celia one night while she scans the beach in performance of her revolutionary night watch duty. The apparition mouths incomprehensible words, then disappears. Celia runs to the beach in an attempt to communicate with her husband, but to no avail. In this section, Garcia’s rhetoric associated with Celia resembles that of Yemayá. Fully clothed, she goes for a swim in the dark ocean. She remembers the *santera*’s prediction for her of a wet future and realizes that “it was true. She had lived all these years by the sea until she knew its every definition of blue” (*Dreaming* 7). Celia watches the ocean for so long that she integrates it into her psyche. She looks at her porch on the shore and thinks “that another woman entirely sat for years on those weathered cushions, drawn by the pull of the tides. She remembers the painful transitions to spring, the sea grapes and the rains, her skin a cicatrix” (8). Celia experiences this disconnect from her former life because she has been reborn, phoenix-like, into the realization of her specific deity— Yemayá —during her transformational swim. Although “tempted to relax and drop,” thereby joining Yemayá permanently, Celia

instead remembers her commitment to the Cuban revolution (8). She will fully merge with the goddess another day, in another incarnation.

Two days later, Celia attends a speech by “El Líder,” or Fidel Castro, where she “makes a decision. Ten years or twenty, whatever she has left, she will devote to El Líder, give herself to his revolution. Now that Jorge is dead, she will volunteer for every project—vaccination campaigns, tutoring, the microbrigades” (44). Her reincarnation as “Compañera del Pino” begins. Celia cuts sugarcane every season and acts as a civil judge, ruling on local minor cases and interpersonal disputes. Then, in quick succession, Javier and Felicia die, Lourdes and Pilar return to Cuba for a visit, and her grandson Ivanito leaves in the Marielito mass exodus, a historical wave of Cuban emigration that began in 1980. After she learns of his defection, Celia no longer demonstrates some traits particular to her deity, the “scent of salt or violet water” that usually accompanies her (242).

When Lourdes and Pilar have departed Cuba for New York, Celia drowns in the ocean near her home. Is her “death” an act of suicide? Or, does it simply constitute another rebirth? The latter seems to be case: “The water rises quickly around her. It submerges her throat and her nose, her open eyes that do not perceive salt. Her hair floats loosely from her skull and waves above her in the tide. She breathes through her skin, she breathes through her wounds” (243). That Celia can breathe through skin and wounds is reminiscent of the development of gills, of a return to her nature as the goddess of the sea. She returns the pearl earrings that she has worn for over four decades—since her Spanish lover gifted them to her—to the ocean. After all, pearls are the natural jewels of the sea, therefore the rightful property of Yemayá. Celia releases one pearl, then the

other. In the last sentence of the novel, “Celia closes her eyes and imagines it [the pearl] drifting as a firefly through the darkened seas, imagines its slow extinguishing” (244). Celia’s act of “suicide” is ostensibly her last, as her phoenix-fire “extinguishes.” But, is it truly her last act? As the sea enfolds her, she merges fully with her true nature—the goddess Yemayá. In “extinguishing,” Celia is reborn immortal.

Felicia del Pino

Felicia, Celia and Jorge’s second daughter, has a lifelong association with Santeria. Indeed, symbols associated with her indicate that, like her mother, Felicia begins life as an avatara of Yemayá, but her final manifestation comes as a devotee of Obatalá, the *orisha* of purity and justice. Perhaps this attachment to the Afro-Cuban religion is the reason Felicia remains in Cuba while her siblings establish lives elsewhere. Felicia, like Yemayá, loves the color blue, but she paints her house yellow because in Cuba’s stilted economy ““you could die waiting for the right shade of blue”” (39). When Felicia is nine years old, a hurricane looms off the Cuban coast. While her mother packs, Felicia goes to the nearby beach to marvel at “[t]he stranded dolphin towed out to sea by the Muñoz brothers, and the majestic shells, thousands of them, with intricate mauve chambers, arranged on a cemetery of wet sand. Felicia set aside pails of them but selected only one, a mother-of-pearl shell, a baroque Spanish fan with which later to taunt her suitors” (11). In this way, she comes to associate shells and the sea with her own sexuality. Felicia first meets her best friend, Herminia Delgado, while collecting shells. Herminia tells Felicia that her father is a *babalawo*, a high priest in the Santeria religion, and that shells are sacred to Yemayá. Felicia asks Herminia, “Will you save me?,” (presumably from her Christian upbringing) and Herminia replies, “Sure” (183). Thus

begins a relationship to this mystic religion that will only end with Felicia's early death. Ironically, Felicia may have set her own chronic misfortune in motion by discounting her mother's admonitions. Celia, as previously demonstrated, is herself an avatara of Yemayá. Against her mother's orders, Felicia brings seashells into her family's home: "Felicia laughed when she remembered how her mother had warned her not to bring shells home. After the tidal wave, the house was full of them" (11). Shells are sacred to Yemayá, and Celia may know that removing them into the home for personal use constitutes a heretical act (Barnet 92). Of course, bringing home shells is not the only reason for Felicia's bad luck. In an interview with Allan Vorda, Garcia elaborates on her character's ill-fated life: "It's a panoply of factors that have worked against her in her life. . . . [I]n a quest to find some satisfaction in her life, I think she was drawn to santería through her friends and into love affairs. . . . I don't think there was just one thing. I can't really agree that she is cursed" (Garcia, "Fish" 67). Even though she is not actually "cursed," Felicia proves to be an undeniably unlucky woman.

Readers learn of Felicia's cyclicity after the death of her father. First, readers find that she seeks the help of a local *santera* to heal the estrangement that rankled between father and daughter since her first marriage. Readers later learn that Jorge del Pino disavows Felicia for refusing to leave her husband, Hugo Villaverde, after Hugo beats her and disrespects him. Before the narrator reveals this contentious past between Jorge and Felicia, though, readers find out about Felicia's cycles of coconut ice cream: "Store-bought ice cream is cheap, but for Felicia, making ice cream from scratch is part of the ritual that began after her husband left in 1966. Felicia's delusions commence suddenly, frequently after heavy rains. She rarely deviates from her original pattern, her

hymn of particulars” (*Dreaming* 39). Felicia fixates on coconut specifically because it is the food of Obatalá, the god of “purity and justice,” whose favored color is white and whom she later comes to serve as an initiated *santera* (Barnet 93). She “believes that the coconuts will purify [her and Ivanito], that the sweet white milk will heal them” (*Dreaming* 85). In her psychotic frenzy, she seeks the purity of a sane mind and the justice of fair treatment from her father (who favors her sister, Lourdes) and her abusive and unfaithful husband, Hugo. Of course, her fragile mind, somewhat inherited (or learned) from her mother, does not improve when the cheating Hugo infects Felicia with syphilis.

Felicia’s phoenix cycles seem to be based mostly on her relationships with men in general but specifically on her marriages. She is a “thunderclap” lover: She falls in love at first sight. This “romantic” tendency serves Felicia poorly. Her first husband, Hugo Villaverde, proves to be a chronic abuser. Not only does he beat her but he also, as mentioned, infects her with syphilis. Ironically, Felicia’s main saving grace in her first marriage is that Hugo, a merchant marine, stays away from home for extended periods of time. One day, when Hugo is home during the hurricane season, Felicia snaps. In a moment of “clarity she could not ignore,”

Felicia carefully brought the blue flame to the tip of the [grease-soaked] rag. She smelled the quick sulfur and the plantains frying in the kitchen. She watched until the delicate flames consumed the rag, watched until the blaze was hot and floating in the air. Hugo awoke and saw his wife standing over him *like a goddess with a fiery ball in her hand*.

“You will never return here,” Felicia said and released the flames into his face. (82; my emphasis)

In a studied act of renunciation, Felicia reincarnates herself—phoenix-like—with fire. She will no longer be Hugo’s wife. She will no longer suffer abuse quietly. Felicia becomes an independent single mother by burning her husband/abuser with lighted kitchen grease, “like a goddess with a fiery ball in her hand.”

Felicia fares not better but differently with her second husband, Ernesto Brito. She visits a *santero* for advice about a second marriage. He tells her that she will marry twice more but that these relationships will not last long. En route home after this consultation, Felicia meets Ernesto: “Felicia approaches the bleached, crumpled heap that will be her husband. He looks like a colorless worm, writhing on his stomach in a synthetic tan suit with precisely matching socks, his steel glasses smashed against the pavement. Felicia is smitten” (149). Felicia marries this “colorless worm” according to her newly expressed desire for another husband. Just as the *santero* told her, though, this marriage does not keep: “Four days later, . . . Ernesto dies tragically in a grease fire at a seaside hotel” (149). Ernesto is a “scrupulous” restaurant inspector who cannot be bribed, and Felicia smells a conspiracy (149). In her grief-stricken, psychotic state, Felicia decides that Graciela Moreira, a troublemaking client at the hair salon where Felicia works, has plotted Ernesto’s death. She lures Graciela to the salon by promising her a free permanent wave. Then, “[s]he mixes lye with her own menstrual blood into a caustic brown paste, then thickly coats Graciela’s head. Over it, she fastens a clear plastic bag with six evenly spaced hairpins, and waits. . . . That is the last thing Felicia remembers for many months” (151). Felicia burns another person, not with fire but with

a mixture of lye and menstrual fluid (itself a phoenix symbol as described above), then completely changes her life. This change presents as temporary amnesia, yet it also perpetuates Felicia's overriding phoenix pattern.

Felicia returns to consciousness as the wife of an amusement park worker named Otto Cruz. They live on the park grounds in Cienfuegos, Cuba. In Spanish, "*cienfuegos*" literally translates as "hundred fires." Otto wants to abandon Cuba in favor of an ice-skating rink in Minnesota. She slowly pieces together the details of her life. When she finally remembers her son, Ivanito, she seems to seek an escape from her incarnation as Otto's wife. She entices her husband to join her on a nighttime roller coaster ride. He stands, unzipping his pants to facilitate the oral sex Felicia must have promised him. This inherently unsafe act proves to be his last. The car pauses at the first drop, and "Felicia closes her eyes as the car begins to fall. When she opens them, her husband is gone" (155). Later in the novel, Herminia relates a more sinister version of these events: "I don't know if this part is true, but Felicia said that she'd pushed this man, her third husband, from the top of a roller coaster and watched him die on a bed of high-voltage wires. Felicia said his body turned to gray ash, and then the wind blew him north, just as he'd wished" (185-86). Once again, Felicia takes charge of her own transformation via fire. She burns her first husband with kitchen grease. Her second husband dies in a grease fire, and she burns the woman she deems responsible with lye. Finally, she pushes her third husband onto high-voltage wires, where his body burns to ash.

Felicia then begins her final incarnation as a *santera* and devotee of Obatalá. During her initiation, *santeras* introduce her to the mysteries associated with the "white" deity. Dressing exclusively in white, Felicia, like other initiates, changes her clothes

every day of the weeklong ceremony to retain her purity. Felicia loses consciousness a last time and is “possessed by Obatalá” (187). All the hybridity and “relation identity” in the world cannot save her life, though. Cliff describes Felicia’s declining health like the death of an old phoenix: “[H]er fingers curled like claws . . . Even her hair, which had been as black as a crow’s, grew colorless in scruffy patches on her skull. Whenever she spoke, her lips blurred to a dull line in her face” as though she had a beak instead of a mouth (189). Despite the interventions of her fellow *santeros*, her health fails, and she dies a few short weeks after the initiation in which she “finally found her peace” (188).

Lourdes Puente del Pino

Lourdes Puente is the eldest child of Celia and Jorge del Pino. Her cycles are of binge eating, excessive dieting, and extremes in sexual desire, associated with posttraumatic stress and psychosis. These cycles manifest themselves in her body as rapid weight loss and weight gain. In the beginning days of the insurrection, revolutionary soldiers rape Lourdes. As a consequence, she is fervently, almost maniacally, anti-Castro. Lourdes is (or views herself as) a force of nature, as her introduction to the reader makes plain: “The continents strain to unloose themselves, to drift reckless and heavy in the seas. Explosions tear and scar the land, spitting out black oaks and coal mines, street lamps and scorpions. Men lose the power of speech. The clocks stop. Lourdes Puente awakes” (17). Pilar’s boyfriend Max admiringly dubs Lourdes a “bitch goddess” (137). In fact, Lourdes strives to create a disarming public image: “Lourdes is pleased with her uniform’s implicit authority, with the severity of her unadorned face and blunt, round nose” (17). Emily Culpepper, a myth critic, reflects on women’s need to repulse men at will. A would-be rapist attacked her in her home. She

fought him off, frightening him into flight. After her assailant bolted from her presence, Culpepper looked in the mirror: “As I felt my face twist again into the fighting frenzy, I turned to the mirror and looked. What I saw in the mirror is a Gorgon, a Medusa, if *ever* there was one. . . . I knew then why the attacker had become suddenly so petrified” (qtd. in Caputi 431). Similarly, Lourdes needs to take control back from her attackers, if only figuratively. She seeks the “implicit authority” of an outward show of asexuality, remaining intentionally “unadorned” in her makeup-free face, tight hair bun, and plain white uniform. Culpepper’s Medusa stands for the ultimate bitch goddess, a formidable and avenging deity. Readers learn that Lourdes also lusts after vengeance, when she returns to the site of her rape and “hungers for a violence of nature, terrible and permanent, to record the evil. Nothing less would satisfy her” (227). Garcia emphasizes the futility of this understandable wish. Lourdes will never be satisfied.

As mentioned, Lourdes’s phoenix cycles physically manifest as extreme fluctuations in weight: “She remembers how after her father arrived in New York her appetite for sex and baked goods increased dramatically. . . . The flesh amassed rapidly on her hips and buttocks, muting the angles of her bones. It collected on her thighs, fusing them above the knees. It hung from her arms like hammocks. . . . Lourdes had gained 118 pounds” (20). With her weight gain comes a concomitant period of hypersexuality:

Lourdes’s agility astounded Rufino. The heavier she got, the more supple her body became. Her legs looped and rotated like an acrobat’s . . . And her mouth. Lourdes’s mouth and tongue were like the mouths and tongues

of a dozen experienced women. . . . Lourdes was reaching through Rufino for something he could not give her, she wasn't sure what. (21)

Lourdes's and Rufino's lovemaking becomes more a rote act than a response to actual sexual desire. Lourdes wants "something" from Rufino, but it is not sex *per se*. That he can give her. She acutely feels her powerlessness in the face of her father's impending death, which may evoke the powerlessness she felt during and after her rape. She truly can do nothing to stop the march of mortality. Instead, she wants to reclaim her control over her own sexualized body. Rufino cannot give her this feeling of control; she must take it for herself.

Similarly, Lourdes takes charge of her body in a cycle of extreme dieting after her father's death and reincarnation as her unseen companion. Jorge's ghostly visitations may be Garcia's appropriation of magical realism or her effort to offer a cultural picture of a Latin world in which the dead appear as a normal function of life. After his first postmortem visit with her, Lourdes comes home, "opens the refrigerator, finds nothing to her liking. Everything tastes the same to her these days" (65). Lourdes begins to control everything that enters her mouth, eventually subsisting solely on a diet of "liquid protein . . . a bluish fluid that comes in tubes" (170). The narrator claims that "Lourdes did not plan to stop eating. It just happened, like the time she gained 118 pounds in the days her father was dying. This time, though, Lourdes longs for a profound emptiness, to be clean and hollow as a flute" (169). Although rapid weight loss may seem to be the binary opposition of rapid weight gain, the principle of relation identity reminds readers that the two are inseparably linked. For Lourdes, both represent control over her body. Just as she loses all one hundred eighteen pounds that she had gained, Lourdes also loses her lust

for sex: “It’s as if another woman had possessed her in those days, a whore, a life-craving whore who fed on her husband’s nauseating clots of yellowish milk” (169). The term “possessed” echoes her related conviction that Cuba (meaning her rapists) never possessed her. Then, on Thanksgiving Day, Lourdes decides she will eat again. She cannot and/or will not stop binging from the first mouthful, eating everything in sight: “In a moment her mouth is moving feverishly, like a terrible furnace. . . . Lourdes eats, eats, eats, like a Hindu goddess with eight arms, eats, eats, eats, as if famine were imminent” (173-4). Thus begins another phoenix-esque cycle of ballooning weight gain and likely hypersexuality.

Because of the disconnect with Cuba caused by her rape at the hands of revolutionary soldiers, Lourdes welcomes the reincarnation offered by her flight to the United States: “Lourdes considers herself lucky. Immigration has redefined her, and she is grateful. Unlike her husband, she welcomes her adopted language, its possibilities for reinvention. . . . She wants no part of Cuba, no part of its wretched carnival floats creaking with lies, no part of Cuba at all, which Lourdes claims never possessed her” (73). Indeed, she embraces her status as an American citizen, allowing capitalism and democracy to delineate her new existence. She must deny that Cuba ever “possessed” her in order to reinvent herself not only as an American but—much more saliently—also as a woman who has never been raped, never been forcibly “possessed.” Of course, Lourdes deceives herself in thinking that the English language will decontaminate her. First of all, her Cuban identity remains, albeit tempered with the addition of the hyphenated “American.” Second, Lourdes does not consider what Isabel Hoving calls language’s “inescapable hybridity” (*Travelers* 18). Lourdes cannot escape the Cuban

dialect because it has become part of the language of her adopted home in New York, “[f]or all languages are hybrid. There is no such thing as a pure, uncontaminated language. And all discourses are built from heterogeneous elements” (18). Therefore, not only is Lourdes bound to the Cuban dialect, she is also tied to the “heterogeneous elements” of her past experiences.

Pilar Puente del Pino

Pilar Puente’s cyclicity is the most difficult to discern. Perhaps this is because Garcia writes Pilar’s sections in the first person. Patterns of behavior are easier to see from a distance. Celia senses one of Pilar’s phases even during their separation: “For many years, Celia spoke to Pilar during the darkest part of the night, but then their connection suddenly died. Celia understands now that a cycle between them had ended, and a new one had not yet begun” (119). Their extra-sensory link is typical of Pilar’s experiences; of all the principle female characters in *Dreaming in Cuban*, Pilar demonstrates the most supernatural ability. She remembers (or believes that she can recall) everything that has happened around her beginning with her birth. She relates a recurring incident from her childhood, saying that “back in Cuba the nannies used to think I was possessed. . . . They called me *brujita*, little witch. I stared at them, tried to make them go away. I remember thinking, Okay, I’ll start with their hair, make it fall out strand by strand. They always left wearing kerchiefs to cover their bald patches” (28). This systematic campaign against her nannies is the first chronological memory that Pilar recounts in her narrative. In her twenties, she is accosted in a park by a group of pre-pubescent boys who hold a knife to her throat while they suckle her breasts. During her visit to Cuba, Pilar reflects, “Since that day in Morningside Park, 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" (216). She uses this knowledge in her decision to let Ivanito leave Cuba during the Marielito exodus in opposition to her grandmother's wishes.

Pilar is an independent thinker. Her cycles consist of her experimentation with different cultures and activities, such as listening to protest music, painting, and playing the stand-up bass. Pilar gets in touch with her sexuality at an early age: "I like to lie on my back and let the shower rain down on me full force. If I move my hips to just the right position, it feels great, like little explosions on a string. Now, whenever I'm in the bathroom, my mother knocks on the door like President Nixon's here and needs to use the john" (26-27). She continues to be in tune with her sexual self, not engaging in intercourse with her high school boyfriend, Max, despite her mother's beliefs to the contrary. She feels extraordinarily assured of her sexual relationship with her college boyfriend, Rubén, until she catches him cheating on her. On impulse, she purchases a used acoustic bass and starts to play: "I don't know what I'm doing but I start thumping that old spruce dresser of an instrument for all it's worth, thumping and thumping, until I feel my life begin" (181). This disturbance in her sexual and emotional life initiates one of the most sharply delineated phoenix cycles of which she demonstrates cognizance, when she "feels [her] life begin."

Pilar taps into the worship of the *orisha* Changó to decide to go to Cuba with her mother. She enters a *botanica*, a market for Santeria supplies, and overhears the owner of the shop instructing a woman in the performance of a love ritual. Pilar "env[ies] this woman's passion," thinking that once she had a similar drive to see her grandmother, but

her failure to reach Cuba left her feeling powerless (199). The shopkeeper immediately recognizes her to be “a daughter of Chango” and tells her to “finish what you began,” giving her herbs to add to her bath “for nine consecutive nights” (200). As she leaves the *botanica* and walks through the nearby park, the adolescents accost Pilar. Her violation and near-rape reinforce Pilar’s need for power, so she begins the bathing rituals to summon Changó, a brave warrior and the god of sexuality and lightning who, in a phoenix connection, “throws flames from his mouth” (92). She paints flaming, red-and-white canvases every night, then Changó gives her clarity. Pilar fears that, with distance and the passing of time, she will lose not only her closeness to Celia but also her cultural memories about the family and Cuba. Elena Machado Sáez says that “[i]n the absence of this authentic connection to Cuba, Pilar finds herself attempting to recapture an alternate history via imagination” (132). After bathing on the ninth night, Pilar realizes that this fading memory is not sufficient to her role as historian. She knows that she and Lourdes must return to Cuba in a (however temporary) completion of the cycle of immigration and to reclaim what she has lost: her Cuban memory. The relationship between Pilar and her grandmother exemplifies the phoenix myth. As Celia “dies” her life is reborn in the memory of her granddaughter.

Syncretism

Only Garcia’s female characters exhibit the phoenix cyclicity. In this way, Garcia claims a greater level of malleability for women than men. She writes, “It became clear to Lourdes shortly after she and Rufino moved to New York that he would never adapt. Something came unhinged in his brain that would make him incapable of working in a conventional way. . . . He could not be transplanted. So Lourdes got a job” (129-30).

Women immigrants, then, sometimes become the heads-of-households, the breadwinners. When the men cannot, Cuban women transform themselves and the next generation into Cuban-Americans. This increasing flexibility of gender roles, signaling a new era in gender relations, echoes the position of the phoenix in discussions of sexuality:

Because the Phoenix is its own mother and father, it is both male and female. This idea is indissociable from that of the bypassing of the death/life opposition, for the personal identity of the dead Phoenix and its successor is beyond doubt. This theme, in turn, is inevitably associated with that of a *renovation temporum*, a renewal of time. At the moment when the Great Year dies and is reborn, everything must change, be renewed, so that a golden age can dawn. (Brisson 113)

Garcia's conceives her new "golden age" as the syncretism inherent in hybrid identity, encompassing shifting gender roles and cultural melding. Therefore, although Garcia paints Lourdes in ridiculous terms, her oft-misguided character asserts herself as a heroine of cyclical change.

The ultimate in cyclicity comes at the novel's end when Celia passes the torch of memory to Pilar. Before her return to Cuba, Pilar recognizes that she neglects her role as cultural and familial historian. She laments, "Every day Cuba fades a little more inside me, my grandmother fades a little more inside me. And there's only my imagination where our history should be" (138). This passage partakes in Patrick Colm Hogan's "alienating hybridity." Because she unavoidably participates primarily in American culture, Pilar is losing her memories of Cuba and her ability to act as family historian. Pilar's two identities are at war. To remedy this alienation, Celia gives her

granddaughter the unsent letters she has written to her Spanish lover. In the final letter, she writes, “My granddaughter, Pilar Puente del Pino, was born today. . . . I will no longer write to you, *mi amor*. She will remember everything” (245). That Pilar is designated as the receptacle of memory is significant, as she inhabits the hyphen in “Cuban-American.” Despite its pitfalls, then, cultural hybridity holds the key to the past and the promise for the future.

Chapter Three:

From John Brown to Annie Christmas:

Revising “History” in Michelle Cliff’s *Free Enterprise*

“In fact, . . .”

“Fact?”

“Fact. As much as anything is fact.”

– M.E.P. to Annie Christmas

Michelle Cliff, a Jamaican of mixed (African and Anglo) heritage living in the U.S., is yet another contemporary Caribbean novelist concerned with reworking myth. Like Gloria Naylor, Paule Marshall, and Cristina Garcia, Cliff revises notions about race and femininity; unlike the others, she focuses primarily on the issues concomitant with factuality in history. In her historical novel *Free Enterprise* (1993), Cliff pointedly revisits the relatively contemporary legend of John Brown, known as the leader of the October 16, 1859 raid on Harper’s Ferry, Virginia. Pro-slavery Southern whites reified Brown into an insane rabble-rouser who incited the “cold-blooded” murder of slaveholders. Whites in the U.S. also derogatorily mythologized Brown’s contemporary Mary Ellen Pleasant, nicknaming her “Mammy.” Cliff revises conceptions about Pleasant and Brown. In addition, she creates a character that the fictional Pleasant (M.E.P.) dubs “Annie Christmas” after the Southern folkheroine—a powerful, black longshorewoman on the Mississippi. The novel’s Annie Christmas’s behavior departs significantly from that of the legend—another instance of Cliff’s revisionist mythology.

Cliff’s aims mirror those of the activist women she imagines and creates. Instead of fighting for the abolition of slavery, though, she attempts to alter perceptions about the

historicity of history and the ways in which certain histories perpetuate cultures of bigotry. In *Mythic Black Fiction: The Transformation of History*, Jane Campbell maintains that myths control the power to transform cultural understanding. She writes, “Myths, by definition, voice a culture’s most profound perceptions, and, when given fictional form, can awaken the audience’s strongest impulses. Thus black artists who rely on myth have the potential to provoke whatever response they wish: to move the audience to consciousness, to attitude, even perhaps to action” (Campbell 1). Cliff wishes not only to raise readers’ awareness about a possible historical inaccuracy but also to provoke readers to step away from their comfortable identities. Isabel Hoving describes this de-centering tendency as black and Creole Caribbean immigrants’ challenge to their predominantly white adopted cultures to alter society: “Caribbean migrant women’s writing can be seen to entice white women to leave their confining cultural and racial homes, and, perhaps, to help create less exclusive, less violent spaces and contact zones: sites of new coalitions and communities” (*Travelers* 320). The creation of these “new coalitions and communities” holds the potential to reverse colonial patterns because the affected groups actively shape their own resultant societies. The product of this activist pursuit, Cliff shows, is the promulgation of a culture of intentional “relation identity.” Relation identity, a concept forwarded by Carine M. Mardorossian, holds that contemporary Caribbean writers “challenge the separatism of identitarian thought by highlighting not only the interconnectedness of the cultures and races that came into contact through colonialism but also the representational interdependence of race, gender, sexuality, and nationality” (8). Mardorossian connects relation identity to the idea that any given model of history, instead of being “factual,” constitutes simply

one point in a continuum of truth. Hoving agrees, asserting that “[i]n theorizing, it may be useful to oppose notions such as “authenticity” or “purity” to the more sustainable argument that all aspects of culture are formed through contact with others and are therefore hybrid” (*Travelers* 318). In *Free Enterprise*, Michelle Cliff problematizes the conceptions of authentic history and racial/cultural purity via her mythic characterizations of the historical Mary Ellen Pleasant and Pleasant’s friend and cohort, the Creole namesake of the legendary Annie Christmas.

John Brown and “The Official Version”

Historians recognize John Brown as the leader of the Harper’s Ferry raid. He was the one whom Virginia authorities apprehended, identified as the most culpable party, and executed accordingly. Southerners dubbed him a madman, while abolitionists praised him as a martyr for the cause. But should he be given such exclusive credit and blame? When he was seized, soldiers found Brown to be in possession of a handwritten note, promising additional money, signed “M.E.P.” Cliff explores the connection, previously speculated by historians, between “M.E.P.” and the historical Mary Ellen Pleasant. She begins this exploration with an ambiguous “they”:

They drew up a constitution for a separate African-American state, and took up arms, beginning their war of independence in October 1859.

And when the smoke cleared the name officially attached to the deed was John Brown.

Who has ever heard of Annie Christmas, Mary Shadd Carey, Mary Ellen Pleasant?

The official version has been printed, bound, and gagged, resides in schools, libraries, the majority unconscious. Serves the common good. Does not cause trouble. . . . Is the stuff of convocations, colloquia; is substantiated—like the Host—in dissertations. . . .

The official version is in everybody's mouth. On the lips of toastmasters, chairwomen of garden clubs, . . . remembered in prayers.

This is what happened; this is how it was. (16-17)

This is history—literally “his” story. Not only does this passage relate the story of John Brown; it also reflects the slowly-changing tendency for men to record and remember events in particularly masculinist terms. In the antebellum period, bloodshed encouraged by (free) women would have been a truly revolutionary concept, due to the prevalence of the “angel in the house” female stereotype. But, as gender theorists have proven time and again, this angelic female ideal simply does not add up. Neither (as Pleasant makes plain) does the slaveholders’ concept that Africans will not “use any means necessary to liberate [themselves]” (145). Cliff combines the questionable historicity of “history” with the Pleasant/M.E.P. connection to produce a new narrative.

So much for history. What about her story?

Cliff's Mary Ellen Pleasant relates her perception of John Brown in a letter to Annie Christmas. Discussing her disillusionment with white control over the portrayal of history and the continued disparity of opportunity for the financial and social advancement of newly-minted African Americans, she writes,

The failed revolutionary is claimed by them as one of them. A prodigal son. Profligate dreamer who instigated an American nightmare. What

else are they to do with captain Brown? Their wild-haired, wild-eyed boy determined to save the darkies, at the expense of family and fortune, and general social standing.

What a farce!

J. B. was a splendid ally; no more, no less. (141)

Pleasant believes that Brown does not really understand the plight of enslaved Africans. A communist, Brown wants to fashion “an African state as a christo-utopia, a heaven on earth for colored folks” (143). Pleasant disagrees, explaining that “our people knew capitalism intimately, *historically*. Albeit from the wrong end—at least in the New World” (143; my emphasis). Slaves, then, know how to sustain a capitalist economy, both from their former lives in Africa and from their experiences as commodities in a commodity culture, yet Brown reifies them as noble savages, belonging in a natural state. Neither a hard-headed realist nor an insane idealist, Brown instead falls somewhere in between, in the interstitial spaces, according to Cliff’s Pleasant. Perhaps because of his utopian vision and for all his centrality in the discourses of history, Brown plays a liminal role in *Free Enterprise*.

The Reconstruction of Mary Ellen Pleasant

Although John Brown, as the “known quantity,” helps readers unacquainted with Mary Ellen Pleasant to situate her in history, the most significant legend/myth revision in *Free Enterprise* concerns Pleasant herself. Historians agree that Pleasant remains an enigma, largely of her own making. In a 1902 autobiography, Pleasant cites her birth to a native Hawaiian and a free black in Philadelphia in 1814 (Hudson 21; Taylor 117). However, Lynn M. Hudson asserts that because Pleasant’s autobiography focuses

specifically on the “race and physical characteristics” of her parents, she was anxious to subvert the “multiplicity of tales that surface regarding [her] birthplace and slave status,” and that she was likely born into slavery (22). Pleasant married twice. Each husband was a known abolitionist. She and second husband, John James Pleasant, moved to San Francisco in 1852, where she built an empire based on high-class, high-rent boardinghouses (Taylor 118; Hudson 25). However, Pleasant’s contemporaries speculated that her boardinghouses were, in fact, brothels and that she was the “madam” of these establishments. She was dubbed “Mammy Pleasant,” possibly because she posed as the servant of Thomas and Theresa Bell, when Pleasant actually owned the home in which they all lived. “Mammy Pleasant” disavowed her given nickname since that stereotype conjured (and still conjures) visions of complaisant, white-nurturing, slavery-loving black women. On the contrary, many historians believe Pleasant to have financed and collaborated with Brown on the Harper’s Ferry raid, and she claimed this legacy in death, insisting that her tombstone declare, “She Was a Friend of John Brown” (“San Francisco’s”). Until Cliff took an interest in Pleasant, popular opinion predominantly labeled the pioneering black woman a madam and “voodoo queen.”

Cliff’s Mary Ellen Pleasant speaks in a reconstructed voice. After researching her topic, Cliff imagines what this highly intelligent woman must have privately thought and writes her narrative accordingly, without the mediation of Pleasant’s public persona. Cliff’s story about Pleasant’s heritage departs from the historical figure’s autobiography. In *Free Enterprise*, Pleasant’s parents are Captain Richard Parsons, a free black ship captain who rescues Caribbean slaves, and a runaway slave named Quasheba, who trains as a blacksmith. Captain Parsons tells his daughter stories that she perpetuates even

though she suspects he bowdlerized them for her: “He needed to pass his version on. He needed to protect her from the world” (113). Pleasant’s father is only one of a cast of supporting characters, almost all of whom demonstrate the principle of historical revision.

Cliff also retells history because the official versions are too dry, too sanitized, even if they are “factually” correct. For example, in the novel, a Harvard lecturer describes the historical event portrayed in a painting, saying, ““Turner based the painting on a ship named the *Zong*, an infamous case in which the traders threw slaves, living and dead, overboard, to collect the insurance money and not lose their investment”” (72). This story satisfies the white, male professor of art history, but at least two of the women present think of the painting’s story much differently. The (white) hostess, Alice Hooper, considers its history in terms of white culpability in the African slave trade. In an apology to Pleasant for the man’s cultural obliviousness, Alice describes her own interpretation of the Turner painting. She writes “[a]bout the white flash of typhoon at the center of the work, surely comparable, in foreboding and whiteness, to Melville’s white whale and Coleridge’s albatross—emblems of that belief which allowed and supported something like the slave trade” (78). Similarly, M.E.P. sees the painting in the light of her own cultural heritage. She recalls, “I could feel my emotions rising. My eyes were locked on the foreground of the painting, where a few brown arms, some lengths of chain, and one brown leg glanced through the waves, alongside magnificently colored fish. . . . I was grateful that the artist had portrayed it thus, indicating the horror of the thing aslant . . . It got to me, all right” (73). Pleasant responds to Hooper’s letter by saying, “I think the difference between us may be reduced to the fact that while you focus

on the background of the Turner painting, I cannot tear my eyes from the foreground. It is who we are” (80). Cliff presents three equally valid versions of the same event. Her sympathies are clear, though. The academic’s fraud-based history misses the point. While Cliff understands and tolerates Alice’s white-guilt positionality, the novelist presents Pleasant’s slavery-based argument in a more authoritative manner. Pleasant’s viewpoint, then, is more accurate than the others, even if Cliff eschews an absolute truth, using Turner’s painting as a measure of how academic and personal views of history can be embattled sites.

Like Gloria Naylor and Paule Marshall, Cliff uses the trope of zombification, explicitly classifying Mary Ellen Pleasant as a zombie in the bigoted opinion of popular gossip: “‘Didn’t she come back as a zombie?’” (18). Pleasant remains resentful that she is thought of as a madam and a “voodoo queen.” She reflects, “Lord Jesus, they take one look at a successful black woman, and they think she’s either a whore or a voodoo queen. Either she got her money by sucking white cocks, or by putting spells on them” (101). Zombies, phenomena found in voodoo (properly *vodoun*), manifest as the living dead. As I discussed at length in Chapter One, Caribbean-American writers use zombies as metaphors for cultural and spiritual deadness. In this instance, the patriarchal white culture uses the rumor of Pleasant’s zombification as a tool of cultural, racial, and social control, to keep the memory of the successful—therefore dangerous—black woman in conformity with “history.”

In a departure from the slander she endures, Cliff’s M.E.P. usually acts with overt dignity. However, at times she finds that playing the part of “Mammy” helps her “pass.” Pleasant does not attempt to pass as white—the normal identity claimed by a “passing”

woman of color—but instead she passes herself off as either a servant or as servile to attain her societal and financial goals:

She began her empire building by embodying Mammydom, as much as she grated against the word, the notion, taking care of the guests in her hotels . . . To further quell any unease that she was stepping across, over, and through, Mary Ellen Pleasant dressed as a dignified, unobtrusive houseservant . . . So she could move among them easily, in and out of any station they required. Disguised. (105)

Isabel Hoving addresses Cliff's use of passing, stating that "Cliff's ability to speak in many different voices necessitates the adoption of the voices of others. Cliff reappropriates the strategy of passing by applying it to her endeavour of expressing her highly multiple identity" ("Love" 157). About M.E.P.'s nickname, "Mammy," Alice Hooper thinks, "That awful word engraved in my brain could not be further from the truth. I hate that it is there. She is her own woman. What an extraordinary thing to be!" (96). Although Alice is right, of course, that M.E.P. is no "Mammy," after all, Pleasant exploits the menial stereotype to her advantage, as well as to benefit the runaway slaves she employs. Her Mammy image proves to be convenient when she converts \$30,000 worth of railroad stock into the quintessential liquid currency—gold—to finance the raid on Harper's Ferry. She and John Brown rendezvous in Canada, where she gives him the gold to finance the revolt. She wears another "disguise;" this time, the livery of a jockey (106). Finally, on the way to deliver rifles to the fight in Harper's Ferry, then in flight from the rout, Pleasant passes as a male "itinerant blacksmith" in tribute to her mother (138).

Even though Pleasant has eluded detection and punishment—a likely execution—for her complicity in the Harper’s Ferry raid conspiracy, in Cliff’s novel, she craves recognition as a force to be reckoned with. In an 1874 letter to her friend Annie Christmas, she writes,

I get very fed up with everyone referring to our enterprise as ‘John Brown’s Raid on Harper’s Ferry.’ I get very fed up with the engravings in history book. J. B. as a stark raving mad Moses; to do what he did, you’d have to be ‘teched,’ I guess.

I do not crave notoriety, God knows. If they’d been able to put two and two together I’d have swung alongside the captain and the others. I do not want fame, truly, or ownership of history, for that matter, but the official version is a cheat. (137)

Despite her repeated protests of disinterest in notoriety, Pleasant goes on to reveal that the public perception of her—as only “Mammy” and not a revolutionary—does bother her. However, Pleasant transcends both personal disillusionment and popular opinion by claiming her rightful heritage in death. Cliff’s Pleasant, like her historical counterpart, resolves that “SHE WAS A FRIEND OF JOHN BROWN” appear on her tombstone (18). With this request, Cliff’s Pleasant reclaims her deliberate act of rebellion from the oblivion of history.

The Legend of Annie Christmas

Michelle Cliff’s Annie Christmas is a Creole Jamaican immigrant to the U.S. who also participates in the Harper’s Ferry raid, but, unlike Pleasant’s, Annie’s participation in the raid is recognized. Also unlike Pleasant, Annie seems to be entirely fictional. She

takes another name in an attempt to revise her own history. She is born into a *gens inconnu* (French for “unknown people”) family who name her “Regina (pronounced with a long *i*), which she later discarded. Queendom was not hers” (20). Annie not only “discards” her given name, she also rejects the heritage her parents have labored to construct—one that denies their African ancestry. The *gens inconnu* are Creoles that petition to be declared officially “white.” Therefore, becoming *gens inconnu* constitutes an act of historical revision in itself. Families must somehow erase the “darker races” from their family trees. By doing so, Annie’s parents and siblings are able to pass as whites, even though this racial categorization is not based in historical fact. Annie’s family members throw a party in honor of this disavowal of their African roots. This epic celebration is a perfect illustration of metaphorical cultural zombification. The festivities include “a huge cake covered all over by the finest slivers of *coconut*, like the hairs of an *old white man*. . . . The ladies wore gowns decked with *albatross feathers*, which would have horrified Coleridge, but the islanders had no such taboo. The *French* doors were flung wide and *deadwhite* gowns fought the *deadwhiteness* of a full moon for *paleness*” (13; my emphasis). I cannot think of a better synonym for cultural zombification than “deadwhiteness.” Not only do these “zombies” reject their African roots, but they also rewrite all of the history that those roots entail.

Pleasant describes the legend of Annie Christmas to the erstwhile “Regina,” whose name “M.E.P. said sounded too much like the royal orifice” (25). Pleasant says that the legendary figure, who “lived around revolutionary times,” was an Amazon of a woman: well over six feet tall, stunningly beautiful, and a prodigious fighter (26). Pleasant tells Annie the story of this female John Henry or Paul Bunyan: ““She worked

the river, the Mississippi, and when she kissed its waters in gratitude for her livelihood, she drained the river fourteen miles in each direction. She once towed a keelboat, a great flat-bottomed boat, from New Orleans to Natchez at a full run. No one would have dared slap any chains on her, believe you me” (26). Annie refuses to believe the tall tale, but Pleasant insists that this tall tale is as “real” as another, more widely disseminated story:

“She was, of course, African—born there, I mean.”

“Of course. And imaginary.”

“Why can’t you allow yourself to believe in her?”

“Because she’s unbelievable.”

“If so many can believe in that other twelve and their divine center, water into wine, . . . why can’t you believe in her?”

“It’s too much; that’s all.”

“A messianic sister with the physical power of John Henry; too much to hope for, maybe.” (27)

To make her point, Pleasant also juxtaposes the story of Jesus’s role in Lazarus’s resurrection with Annie Christmas’s “thirty-foot-long necklace, on which each bead signified eyes, noses, and ears she had gouged out or bitten off in fights” (26). The newly-christened Annie persists in her disbelief of her namesake, however. M.E.P. and Annie also discuss Nanny, a Jamaican folk heroine. Cliff joins the Jamaican folk community in valorizing this historical figure, a Maroon fighter who has been elevated to mythological levels. Nanny may be part myth, part real, but in the eyes of the Maroon community—viewed by colonial powers as lepers because they could not be erased or defeated—Nanny is a powerful image.

Perhaps in homage to Nanny, after the Harper's Ferry conspiracy falls apart, Annie escapes to a Maroon settlement. Soldiers raid the encampment several days later, capture Annie dressed as a man in blackface, and shackle her to a black men's chain gang. They kill all the "women" and Native Americans in her company, sparing the black men because "[w]e were judged useful" (196):

It saved her life.

That blackened skin.

Saved her skin.

That blackened life. (9)

Performing blackness and masculinity together saves Annie's life but soon positions her to endure a "fate" arguably worse than death.

Rain washes away her face tint, her monthly blood comes, and her true gender and skin color become obvious to her captors. Instead of releasing or re-classifying Annie, however, her jailers make a regular public entertainment out of her misery. They force the other members of the chain gang to rape her one by one for the edification of their white guests. Due to this trauma, as opposed to acting like her Amazonian namesake and somehow exacting revenge, Annie retreats from public life to a ramshackle house on the Mississippi. She finds kindred spirits in a nearby colony of lepers:

She loved these people, once she found them, hidden away as she had hidden herself. Many from her part of the world.

They had not always been leprous.

They spoke of families, mothers, fathers, lovers, friends—with whom contact was forbidden, on each side.

They wondered if their names were called at holiday gatherings. When candles were lit; noisemakers rattled; wishbones split. . . .

In the colony, new kinship was forged. (42-3; my emphasis)

This passage illustrates Cliff's categorization of slavery as a disease. Cliff describes the lepers almost like post-bellum slaves, with undeniable second-class-citizen status. They are forcibly removed from their homes and forbidden to communicate with their families. First the Catholic Church then the government regulates their sexual activity. Merely substitute the word "slaves" for "leprous" in the above passage, and the quote becomes about people abducted from their African homes who forged new kinship structures with their fellow slaves: "They had not always been slaves." The lepers even live in the slave quarters on the grounds of an old plantation, while the nuns live in the big house, like the lords of the manor.

Cliff not only equates slavery with a disease like leprosy but also critiques the public notion of outsideness with this connection. In a discussion of the relation of race to sexuality, Hoving writes, "To inscribe this many-voiced history into her own texts, and thus to inscribe herself into the tempestuous colonial past and present, Cliff makes an eager use of historical voices and narratives. She borrows tongues from both dominant and marginalized discourses" ("Love" 157). Ewart C. Skinner and Nicole Waller agree that Cliff has a vested interest in reimagining Caribbean history as a collective story. They claim that "[i]t is through [Caribbean mythology and oral histories] that Cliff finds a means of self-justification and self-representation, of inscribing the self into history, in a tough postcolonial world increasingly relying on demarcations of nationalist essentialism" (99). Cliff, then, personalizes universalism and synecdoche in her portrayal

of the lepers' storytelling circle. Though the healthy majority views lepers as freaks of nature, the colony's residents hold history together by forming a community of cultural memories extending from the expulsion of the Jews from Spain to the Middle Passage. Thus, Cliff depicts wretchedness—both of illness and of slavery—as a source of revising and drawing strength from history. Annie finally comes to appreciate the power of alternative histories through her interaction with the leper colony's storytelling group. Members take turns relating stories from their pasts and stories handed down in their oral cultures. Annie tells the tale of a Jamaican healer who is imprisoned for the fervor caused by his portrayal of the role of Caliban in a production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. She prefaces the story by saying, “It is my belief . . . that the history of my people, the history of my part of the world, is of the one-step-forward, two-step-back variety. I realize that's not confined to my part of the world. I am by nature, as you know, a historical pessimist. But it seems to me . . .” (52). She directs her audience to infer from her story how “it seems” to her. Perhaps she means, echoing a sentiment formerly expressed by M.E.P., that white civilizations spread hatred of things and people (like “others”) and ideas (like freedom) that may threaten their cultural, social, and financial hegemony—hatred and hegemony the subaltern must struggle against.

The lepers (slaves) of the world's cultures and nationalities join together to tell their own stories. Cliff depicts their hybridity as strength and their storytelling circle as a coming to “voice” of the formerly unheard. But how valuable are these “voices” to their speakers? They remain in the leper colony, still “hidden away from the world”—actually segregated from the rest of the world, similar to the plight of Southern blacks under Jim Crow restrictions, but with greater severity. If they, alone, tell the “true” stories, only

they will know the truth, and it will die with them—just as it almost did with Mary Ellen Pleasant. Pleasant got the recognition she requested carved on her tombstone—in 1976, almost seventy-five years after her death (“Mary Ellen Pleasant”). And, although fictional in the context of *Free Enterprise*, the lepers’/slaves’ stories live on because others, like Michelle Cliff, take the trouble to share them with a wider audience. Their stories, then, function just as Isabel Hoving describes, “entic[ing] white women” and others to “leave their confining cultural and racial homes” and participate in the creation of a larger hybrid community.

Conclusion:
Myth and Postcoloniality
in Caribbean-American Women's Fiction

My assessment of contemporary Caribbean-American women novelists who integrate myth revision as a literary motif incorporates writers from vastly differing stages of naturalization. Gloria Naylor, for example, qualifies as one extreme on the immigration spectrum, as a second-generation migrant from the extended Caribbean—in her case, the rural U.S. South. Paule Marshall is a second-generation Caribbean-American whose parents hail from Barbados. Cuban-American Cristina Garcia is a first-generation immigrant who came to the U.S. as an infant. Finally, Jamaican-American Michelle Cliff is the author with the most immediate immigrant consciousness, as she came to the United States as an adult. Although they come from divergent backgrounds, these authors, like many Caribbean-American women writers, share a commitment to revising historical and patriarchal myths.

Naylor, Marshall, Garcia, and Cliff accomplish this revisionary goal with a variety of strategies, including single and multiple mythological system revisions and the reformation of the historical canon. I explore the novels *The Women of Brewster Place* by Naylor and *Praisesong for the Widow* by Marshall in the context of a single myth system: vodoun. These women rework the specific vodoun myth about the existence of zombies as a metaphor for spiritual and cultural death and rebirth. Little scholarship exists on the connection between these novels and vodoun, and even less scholarship examines a zombification trope. The imagery and rhetoric of death and rebirth associated

with the characters Ciel Turner in *Brewster Place* and Avey and Jay Johnson in *Praisesong* illustrate the reference to the vodoun myth and the zombification trope. The first chapter of this study begins with an elucidation of the role of zombies in Hollywood and popular literature and in vodoun, then outlines not only evidence for Naylor's and Marshall's zombie characterizations but also the disconnection between the experiences of Ciel, Jay, and Avey and normative zombie tropes. Healing stands out as the most striking departure accomplished by Naylor and Marshall in their uses of the zombification trope. Ciel, although partially zombified from birth, worsens in her zombie state due to her mental abuse by her husband and, finally, due to the death of her daughter. Her friend Mattie heals Ciel's zombification via the maternal responses of rocking and the laying on of hands. Avey and Jay become zombies when they abandon their Africanized rituals in favor of the pursuit of a suburban lifestyle. Members of a Caribbean community with close ties to African roots cure Avey's zombification with the rocking motion of a boat and the power of touch, similar to the cure employed by Mattie in *Brewster Place*. Unlike Naylor, Marshall applies a more complex version of the single myth form. She not only features the maternal forces working against zombification, but she also extends this healing power to a masculine figure. In Lebert Joseph, Marshall employs the iconic vodoun figure of Legba, the guardian, beckoning Avey back to the names of the African nations to which Avey might belong, thereby furthering Avey's healing process.

In contrast to the analysis of a single mythological system revision in the first chapter, my second chapter investigates the melding of compound mythological systems in Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*. Garcia's novel is also concerned with images

of death and rebirth; however, these experiences prove to be cyclical events for Garcia's female characters, as opposed to the apparent permanent transformation implied by Naylor's and Marshall's uses of cultural rebirth tropes. Additionally, Garcia's characters experience cyclicity as the result of their cultural hybridity, in opposition to Naylor's and Marshall's more unified concepts of a cultural memory that every black woman in the Americas (North, South, and the Caribbean) share and can access. The cycles demonstrated by Garcia's female main characters are reminiscent of the fiery deaths and subsequent rebirths of the mythological phoenix. In fact, fire imagery and rhetoric usually accompany both Celia del Pino's and her daughter Felicia's death cycles. These main characters also demonstrate qualities of different Santeria goddesses.

Michelle Cliff dedicates her primary revisionary efforts to providing venues for alternative histories. In her novel *Free Enterprise*, Cliff revises "historical" conceptions about John Brown and Mary Ellen Pleasant. Cliff's narrative about Pleasant provides a fictional account of Pleasant's thoughts on her marginality in history—both as a black woman in the post-Civil-War United States and as an unknown "prime mover" in the antislavery movement and in the events at Harper's Ferry. Cliff's Annie Christmas, who differs from her legendary namesake, also supplies Cliff the opportunity to integrate a panoply of "non-historical" tales about the interaction of white explorers and colonizers with the natives of these colonies and "new worlds." These stories are "non-historical" because the colonized "subjects" inevitably remember notorious events differently from the history recorded in Western texts and tales. In addition, Cliff tells the stories of two white female cousins who experience a fleeting period of freedom during the Civil War and its aftermath.

The four texts in this study demarcate the transition between what Carine M. Mardorossian defines as second- and third-phase postcolonialism. Second-phase theorists include Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak. Naylor's, Marshall's, Garcia's, and Cliff's works illustrate the change between the second phase, which emphasizes difference, and the third phase, which continues to accentuate commonalities among cultures and identities. *Brewster Place* (1982) and *Praisesong* (1983), published during the early 1980s, represent second-phase fiction. For example, each posits nostalgia for an unproblematic conception of a more idyllic cultural heritage. Naylor and Marshall, then, hypothesize a fairly unified cultural memory that black women can access. A unified cultural memory indicates a definite and definable history, one that leaves little space for the constant negotiation of syncretism and hybrid viewpoints. Additionally, both Marshall and Naylor imply that the adoption of elements of the majority "white" culture by black women is not only a disavowal of black heritage but also the life-threatening "illness" of the zombified state. With this representation of illness, these black writers accomplish a forceful rejection of the culture of the white "other," and such a rejection locates them as second-phase authors.

In contrast, *Dreaming in Cuban* and *Free Enterprise* are situated within the third-phase tradition. Isabel Hoving, Patrick Colm Hogan, and Mardorossian exemplify third-phase theorists and critics. Mardorossian explains that "the writers of the third phase of rewriting transform such [alienating] approaches to identity (and correlatively our reading strategies) by making them more attuned to the contingent workings of difference" (3). In Mardorossian's "relation identity," authors and critics seek commonalities rather than emphasizing differences as in second-phase fiction and scholarship. Mardorossian also

describes a third-phase tendency to discount emphases on nostalgia and discourses of a unified theory of “home.” Cliff and Garcia, while they portray their characters’ nostalgia for their roots, present both a pre-defined heritage and its accompanying nostalgia as problematic concepts. The constant change exhibited by Garcia’s female characters defies the definition of stable identity in favor of hybridity. Echoing Mardorossian’s title, *Reclaiming Identity*, Cliff “reclaim[s] difference” by giving voice not only to the stories of people of varying ethnic backgrounds and “colors” during the period after the U.S. Civil War; she also writes about the lives of white U.S. American women during that time period with equal sensitivity.

I chose to work with Caribbean-American women writers because of my complementary interests in mythological literary tropes, sexuality in literature, women’s writing, and multiethnic texts. The narrow focus of this thesis study leads to additional questions that other scholars should approach: How do representations of mythology in the fiction of Caribbean-American authors differ from such representations used by Caribbean writers? How do they differ in works by unhyphenated (or white-identified) Americans? How does Caribbean-American women’s writing differ from that of Caribbean-American men? These topics are too broad to adequately explore under the aegis of this thesis project, but these issues certainly deserve critical attention. Cristina Garcia briefly addresses the question of national identity and difference in a 1993 interview with Allan Vorda. In response to his query, “[A]re the American-born and/or raised Hispanic writers offering a different perspective of their ethnicity than their South American counterparts?,” Garcia responds, “I’m sure we all draw on our reading and from such writers as Borges and Garcia Marquez. It’s part of our literary heritage, and I

think, for those of us who grew up in the U.S., we are talking about a different experience entirely” (Garcia, “Fish” 66). Tellingly, Garcia goes on to explain that the concept of “America,” both popular and academic, becomes increasingly syncretic. She states, “I also think [Hispanic-American writers are] not so much on the periphery. I think what’s happening in what was once considered mainstream ‘America’ is changing, and I think American literature is reflecting that.” This question of national identity—and its relevance (and problematic existence) in contemporary literature—may provide the impetus for a future study of multiethnic writers in the United States.

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ABSTRACT

MYTH AND MEMORY: RECONSTRUCTING THE FEMININE IN CARIBBEAN-AMERICAN FICTION

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This study of myth and sexuality in the novels of Caribbean-American women includes works by Gloria Naylor, Paule Marshall, Cristina Garcia, and Michelle Cliff. The first chapter elucidates previously unpublished correlations between Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* and Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* and a zombification trope. Similarly, Chapter Two delineates a formerly unremarked phoenix pattern in Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*. In contrast to the previous chapters, Chapter Three outlines Cliff's characterization of historical production as mythmaking in *Free Enterprise*. The selected novels' uses of myth illustrate Carine M. Mardorossian's views about the changing nature of contemporary postcolonial fiction from an aesthetic of difference to one of an inclusive "relation identity."