Children for Ransom: Reading Ibeji as a Catalyst for Reconstructing Motherhood in Caribbean Women's Writing

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CHILDREN FOR RANSOM: READING IBEJI AS A CATALYST FOR
RECONSTRUCTING MOTHERHOOD IN CARIBBEAN WOMEN’S WRITING

By

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For my nanny, Ramdoolarie Ragoonath and my mother Samdaye Samaroo, and for all the Caribbean mothers who bequeath to their daughters a legacy of strength in the face of adversity.
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ABSTRACT

This study is an attempt to provide a new alternative to understanding the way that motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship are drawn and conceptualized in Caribbean Women’s Writing in connection to propertied relationships that concern land ownership and the female body. I argue that by invoking the metaphysical powers of the ibeji, the Yoruba belief that twins are spirit children that possess certain powers, we are provided with a new understanding of motherhood and are more fully able to comprehend the complexities that motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship entail in relation to the material world. In the selected works, the ibeji serve as a catalyst to spur the women of the texts to restructure Caribbean constructions of the propertied relationships dealing specifically with the land and the female body, as well as to create a new space forged through the possibilities of diaspora. Thus, the way motherhood and twins intersect is that they bring into dialogue the manner which African slavery in the Caribbean was constructed around various propertied relationships such as those of land and body.

The authors and text under study are unique in that they seek to recover and refurbish the Yoruba belief in the ibeji as a means of reconstructing motherhood by overturning and subverting propertied relationships that have been maintained even after the abolishment of slavery and through epochs of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and revolution in the Caribbean. Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell, in her novel *When Rocks Dance*, seeks to recover authenticity of the African beliefs in the ibeji to propose a new propertied relationship to the land for Afro-Caribbean women by supplanting Western economic power with that of an African pro-creative power. Edwidge Danticat’s use of the ibeji in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, serves as a connection between mother and daughter and the United States and Haiti that must be reconfigured for the women of Haiti to reclaim ownership of the female body and black female sexuality. In Cristina García’s
Dreaming in Cuban, the ibeji represent the need to create a third space free from socialist model of Cuba as well as the imperialist model of the United States. Rather, a more broadly defined reterritorialized space in diaspora, that is yet to be determined, must be created and allowed to exist outside of the confines of domesticity.
INTRODUCTION

We do not actually know much about what power may have meant in the hands of strong, prepatriarchal women. […] We know far more about how, under patriarchy, female possibility has been literally massacred on the site of motherhood.
--Adrienne Rich
*Of Woman Born*

They are Two-at-a-Time in the eyes of their mother. Generous children who bring good luck to their father. Generous children who bring good luck to their mother. Slight me and I will follow you, Praise me and I will part from you.
--Yoruba praise song for twins

Although motherhood is traditionally viewed as an institution worthy of great respect and honor, for many women motherhood has become an institution that derides female individuality and female potentialities. Motherhood resonates with the lack of control that women experience not only over their lives, but over their bodies as well. For many women, motherhood is not chosen by them, but for them. In saying this, I am not only referring to traumatic events such as rape and other forms of victimization, but also motherhood within the confinements of marriage as well. Even in the sanctity of marriage, motherhood is often viewed as an obligation that women must fulfill. Likewise, the inability to become a mother can be equally debilitating to women and often results in society rendering them invisible. In the context of the Caribbean, motherhood becomes a site of trauma and oppression largely because it is an institution that is denigrated by certain propertied relationships in the region, specifically those concerning the land and the female body. The texts and authors at the center of this study address the manner in which motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship become consumed by these propertied relationships, and at the same time, seek to procure a panacea that will allow the women of the text to renegotiate these propertied relationships. Through the trope of the ibeji, the marked Yoruba belief that twins are supernatural beings attributed with special powers, Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell, Edwidge
Danticat, and Cristina Garcia explore the complexities that motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship entail in relation to the material world. I will argue that in the selected works, the ibeji serve as a catalyst to spur the women of the texts to restructure Caribbean constructions of the propertied relationships dealing specifically with the land and the female body, as well as to create a new reterritorialized space forged through the possibilities of diaspora.

Motherhood as a patriarchal institution is the primary concern of Adrienne Rich’s text *Of Woman Born*. She defines motherhood as an “institution, which aims at ensuring that [...] all women –shall remain under male control” (13). Rich argues that most women meet the role of mother with great resistance and resentment as it indicates an end to the freedom to explore individual potentials as well as freedom of movement. Rather than being able to define themselves, women instead become defined by motherhood. Susheila Nasta contributes to this discussion in *Motherlands* where she notes in her introduction that, “the role of mother, with all that it implies, is universally imposed upon women as their main identity, their proper identity above all others” (xx). Nowhere is this phenomenon perhaps better demonstrated than in the Caribbean where patriarchal domination historically has been harshly meted out through the unequal distribution of power in various propertied relationships.

In the Caribbean, motherhood has been construed negatively due to such upheavals as slavery, colonialism, neocolonialism, and political unrest. Not only have many women in the region been denied the ability to choose motherhood, but also the conception of children is often for the benefit of the father as children advance a patrilineal inheritance. This negative construction of motherhood began with slavery. In *Slavery and Women in Africa and the Diaspora*, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn discusses evidence of the attempts of slave women to limit reproduction. She writes, “Enslaved women [...] in the Americas had little control over their offspring, which may have determined women’s strategies to limit child bearing” (224). In *Family in the Caribbean*, Christine Barrow extends this conversation when she writes, “[F]emale slaves were fundamentally resistant to bearing and raising children and to that end, were extending lactation for up to three years in order to postpone pregnancy and even inducing abortion or practicing infanticide” (250). Terborg-Penn notes that these abortive practices became
progressively more prevalent after the abolition of the slave trade. As the commodification of slaves from Africa became increasingly difficult, slave holders began to breed their slaves in order to sustain their slave population. Women were used as breeders to produce new slaves and were denied the opportunity to love, nurture, and raise their children. Even when slave holders began to encourage the formation of slave families to prevent the suspected abortive practices, on slaved women were painfully conscious of the fact that their children could be sold at any time. In *Slave Women in the New World*, Marietta Morrisey notes that “[n]ew world slavery violated the basic human right to bear children and raise them” (81). These children became commodified, much like their mothers, for the benefit of the sugar, cocoa, and other agricultural-based economies in the region. Caribbean women adopted a detached attitude towards their own children, understanding that their offspring ultimately did not belong to them. As a result, mothers were divided and torn between cultural variances, specifically between that of their indigenous heritage and that of their oppressors. They became interpolated by these calamities and were effectively unable to raise their children.

By the time slavery was abolished and the colonized islands of the region began to push for independence, the institution of motherhood in the Caribbean had been irreparably damaged. In a region marked by debilitating poverty and political unrest, the burden of motherhood is magnified for women who are already embroiled in a daily struggle for survival. Ensnared in a struggle to liberate themselves from the economic, sexual, and political oppression that manifests itself in the forms of an unequal distribution of the material world, Caribbean women are forced to assign motherhood a subsidiary role. Caught between the opposing thrusts of motherhood, which Rich coins as “anger and tenderness,” the Caribbean mother remains in a state of disillusionment, torn between her yearning to be mother and her desperate need for individuality and purpose. This conflict becomes a source of great consternation and often results in a tenuous relationship between mother and child, especially between mother and daughter. This strained relationship compels women of the Caribbean to reassess their status as mother and eventually come to the realization that to reconcile “anger and tenderness,” they must overturn and subvert the propertied relationships that remain intact centuries after the birth of the slavery. They must accept ownership of their status as mothers and
reconfigure and reconstruct motherhood in the region, a task that has been taken on by many Caribbean women writers.

Forerunners of Caribbean women’s writing such as Paule Marshall, Maryse Condé, and Jamaica Kincaid have challenged the Caribbean construction of motherhood in their works. Their pressing need to address motherhood in the region is telling of their stance against patriarchal colonial systems as well as neocolonial powers. As Simone James Alexander notes in *Mother Imagery*, these writers demonstrate the manner in which the mother-daughter relationship becomes a didactic illustration of the oppressive relationship between the mother country and the motherland. James Alexander argues that the mother in Caribbean literature often represents the colonizer, and the daughter comes to represent the colonized, relationship in which is “powerful” and the daughter “powerless.” Although James Alexander’s work contributes greatly to the exploration of the mother-daughter relationship in the Caribbean, as it has been shaped by colonialism, I argue that she bestows the mother with an imagined sense of “power.” In doing so, she posits the daughter as the fragmented and divided self, and overlooks the manner in which the mother is defined and confined by her status in the region. I seek to invert and complicate James Alexander’s assessment of the mother-daughter relationship in the Caribbean and extend her use of the mother-daughter relationship further as a paradigm for the oppressive relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. I argue that for the mother, the daughter actually represents the colonizer, and not the colonized. Just as the position of the colonizer signifies or entails the manipulation of motherhood for its own purposes, the daughter implies the effacement of her mother’s potentialities as an individual. Essentially, she parallels the male domination that has confined, restricted, and disparaged the Caribbean mother. Furthermore, I am not only configuring the mother-daughter relationship in terms of the colonizer and the colonized. I am extending beyond this preoccupation to a new configuration that includes the unequal distribution and possession of property, both material and corporeal.

Nasta contributes greatly to this mother-daughter discourse as she recognizes that the affirmation of self-identity by both mother and daughter fosters great complexities within the relationship. If we adhere to her argument that “in countries with a history of colonialism, women’s quest for emancipation, self-identity and fulfillment can be seen to
represent a traitorous act, a betrayal [...] of traditional codes of practice and belief” then we can clearly understand how the prescribed role of mother not only “becomes a site of struggle” but is also incongruent with the need for fulfillment of female individuality and potentialities (xv). James Alexander’s and Nasta’s discussions of motherhood in Caribbean Women’s writing lacks, however, a proposed model for reconstructing motherhood in the region by restructuring long-standing propertied relationships.

In The Daughter’s Return, Carolyn Rody addresses the need of Caribbean women writers to reformulate the history of their traumatic past through the metaphor of the mother-daughter relationship. She asserts the importance of the “magic black daughter” who returns to rewrite a history that has denigrated her own history, a history of her people. Rody argues:

The mother-daughter figural mode must be seen to reclaim reconnections to maternal origins in the face of the historical destruction of families and lineages, in particular slavery’s systematic separation of mothers from their children. This is to say that texts that retell [...] Caribbean women’s history in this mother-daughter vocabulary suggest a will to reverse the rupture of these intimate bonds and claim a historical family… (7)

Continuing in the spirit of Rody’s argument, Caribbean women writers Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell, Edwidge Danticat, and Christina Garcia participate in a “daughterly engagement with the maternal past” (6). In their respective works When Rocks Dance; Breathe, Eyes, Memory; and Dreaming in Cuban, they insightfully add to this discussion by asserting the need to reconstruct motherhood and repair the mother-daughter relationship by reconfiguring propertied relationships in the region. They do so by turning to the African heritage that undeniably pervades Caribbean culture. By juxtaposing Africa and the Caribbean, African beliefs and traditions that are encompassed in their Caribbean religions become the model that the women of these texts must embrace to redistribute ownership of the material, thus inverting the hierarchal structures of power and ultimately repair the splintered mother-daughter relationships and the divided self torn between the often suffocating role of mother and that of personal autonomy. In addition to addressing the manner in which the possession of the material order relates to motherhood, mother-daughter relationships, as well as the relationship
between the Caribbean and Africa, and migration to disparate locales, these writers seek to fill a gap left unattended, created by the omission of the ibeji (Yoruba word for twins, which comes from the words Ibi “born” and Eji “two”) from critical discourses concerning motherhood. Specifically, Nunez-Harrell, Danticat, and Garcia these writers employ the Yoruba belief in the metaphysical powers of the ibeji by drawing implicitly upon certain nuances germane to the beliefs and myths surrounding them to emphasize the manner in which women’s status in the region is further aggravated by motherhood. Precisely, motherhood must be understood in relationship to the rich Yoruba traditions of the ibeji because without this understanding, we are unable more fully to comprehend the complexities that the mother-daughter relationship entails in relation to the material world, specifically concerning that is the land and the female body, as well as to a new creation of a third space, which is forged through the possibilities of diaspora. Thus, the way motherhood and twins intersect is that they bring into dialogue the manner in which slavery in the Caribbean was constructed around various propertied relationships, specifically those of the land and the body. In other words, the connection between motherhood and twins engages the larger history of slavery, colonialism, and the emergence of an independent Caribbean.

However, to situate the ibeji within the context of motherhood creates some difficulty. Although the ibeji in the selected works serve as a connecting link back to Africa, we cannot ignore the fact that in the Caribbean these traditions have been broken and fragmented. What we are left with is fractured memories that have been preserved as lived traditions for Afro-Caribbean women.

Drawing upon these lived traditions, the authors and texts are unique in that they seek to recover and refurbish the Yoruba belief in the ibeji as a means of reconstructing motherhood by overturning and subverting propertied relationships that have been maintained even after the abolishment of slavery and through epochs of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and revolution in the region. In When Rocks Dance, Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell seeks to recover the authenticity of the African beliefs in the ibeji to propose a new propertied relationship to the land for Afro-Caribbean women by supplanting Western economic power with that of an African pro-creative power. Danticat’s use of the ibeji in Breath, Eyes, Memory serves as a connection between mother and daughter,
as well as the bridges the divide between US and Haiti, that must be reconfigured in order for the women of Haiti to reclaim ownership of the female body and black female sexuality. In Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban*, the ibeji represent the need to create a new or third space that is free from the socialist model of Cuba, as well as to the imperialist model of the United States.

The ibeji become important to this discussion of motherhood in the Caribbean for several reasons. Scant attention has been given to the fierce belief in the powers of the ibeji and the manner in which the belief has matriculated in the works of Caribbean women writers. Moreover, recent scholarship concerning the distortion of motherhood has overlooked the role that the ibeji play in proposing new models for reconstructing motherhood. In order more fully to comprehend their significance as a modality for redefining motherhood in the Caribbean, a thorough understanding of the fierce belief in the powers of the ibeji and the role that they play in African folklore, specifically that of the Yoruba, is necessary.

In Yoruba societies of West Africa, twins hold a privileged position, for they belong to both the world of the living and the world of the spirits, or what John Mbiti, in his book *Introduction to African Religion*, refers to as the visible and invisible realm. This fragile position earns the ibeji an awesome reverence and fear as it is a fundamental principle of the Yoruba religious beliefs that the cosmological balance of the visible and invisible worlds must be maintained for the preservation of their way of life. It is distinctly due to the ibeji’s ability to navigate both worlds that the Yoruba have developed one of the most elaborate systems of worship dedicated to twins. In fact, the Yoruba cult of the ibeji has received considerable attention from scholars and anthropologists around the world. The explanation for this phenomenon is undoubtedly linked to the fact that the Yoruba have the highest birth rate of twins in the world. In “Magical Powers of Twins in the Socio-Religious Beliefs of the Yoruba,” Taiwo Oreune places the birth rate at four times that of Europe. According to Fausto Polo and Jean David in *Catalogue of the Ibeji* “twins occur once in every twenty-two births” amongst the Yoruba (13). It is then no surprise that then, the ibeji are viewed by the Yoruba to be supernatural beings that possess great powers. So powerful are the ibeji to the Yoruba that they have their own deity that protects them, the Orisha-Ibeji. There have also been
connections drawn between the ibeji and the Yoruba deity Shango.\(^4\) Like many other regions of Nigeria, the Yoruba once practiced twin infanticide. They believed that they were malevolent omens often attributed to some wrongdoing on the part of the mother. The practice of twin infanticide is indeed a salient illustration of the burden of motherhood as the birth of twins was said to be the result of a mother’s infidelity or a malevolent omen that entered the mother’s womb as a result of some wrongdoing by her. It was also considered a sign of bestiality that was also often considered to be a fault of the mother. As a result, the mother was at times immolated with her twins or banished from the clan.

Their praxis of twin infanticide, and at times immolation of the mother for the protection of the clan, speaks volumes of their trepidation for a phenomenon that could not be easily defined in their normal register of understanding of childbirth.\(^5\) Mbiti suggests that the stigma surrounding twins had much to do with the fact that the chances for survival were significantly less for children of multiple births. In a society where children are held in high esteem, in that they ensure the continuance of life, any force that threatens this continuance is considered to be taboo. In his book, *A Treasury of African Folklore*, Harold Courlander speaks of “the existence of an enormous number of ibeji carvings” which reifies this supposition of a high infant mortality rate among twins (235).\(^6\)

Although Oreune speculates about the causality of the ibeji’s shift from evil to deity, T.J.H. Chappel investigates the historical authenticity of the evolving philosophy concerning the ibeji.\(^7\) Even though he acknowledges the various myths that give rise to the cult of the ibeji, he cites what he believes are historical facts that support the abandonment of twin annihilation. It is his belief that the migration of Yoruba tribes into the Dahomey region could explain this alteration.\(^8\) In the village of Ishokun, which is widely accepted as the birthplace of the cult of the ibeji, twin infanticide was not practiced because the region had not yet become part of the Oyo kingdom, which demanded the disposal of twins. Chappel also refers to a decree that the *Alafin* (ruler) is said to have made banning twin infanticide after his wife gave birth to twins. Although the details of this decree vary, it is clear that the *Alafin* had a change of opinion in regards to twins. Chappel also credits the arrival of Christian missionaries in Yorubaland for
further diminishing the practice, which subsequently resulted in the demonization of indigenous religious practices.

There are several myths in Yoruba folklore that support Chappel’s findings and lend understanding to the significance of the ibeji in the cosmological balance of Yoruba religious belief and culture. These myths are vital not only in understanding the practices associated with the worship of the ibeji, but they serve as a critical key to the trajectory of this project as they help to elucidate the representations of the ibeji in the selected texts. There are two key myths, as well as various characteristics and practices, surrounding the ibeji that inform my argument. Thus, it becomes necessary to elaborate on them in some detail before we return to the overarching concern of this project.

A popular myth concerning the ibeji involves a couple residing in the Ishokun region of Dahomey that gave birth to a set of twins. Because Ishokun was not yet a part of the kingdom of Oyo, the parents were unsure if they should immolate the ibeji. They consulted the Ifa oracle, which said that they should keep the twins, but they must dance with them in town every five days. Whenever the parents danced in town, the people felt sorry for them and gave them money. The family eventually became rich, and their fortune was credited to the birth of the twins. The alms dance was a common practice among the Yoruba that brought wealth to the families of twins. It is said that a person who refused to give money to the twins would anger the Orisha-Ibeji (twin-deity) and bring bad luck upon himself.

The most common myth concerning the ibeji is about a farmer in Ishokun who killed monkeys that were eating his crops. Despite his exhaustive efforts to prevent the monkeys from diminishing the harvest, they still managed to feed off of the crops by devising tactics to elude the farmer. The monkeys, whose magical powers also included the ability to make rain, even went as far as to alter the weather so that the farmer and his sons would abandon their watch. After his wife became pregnant, a Babalawo (a diviner) came to warn him that the monkeys possessed great power and could turn themselves into abiku (children believed to be born to die) and enter the womb of his wife. The farmer ignored his warning and his wife gave birth to twins that died shortly after only to repeat their vicious abiku cycle of death and rebirth. The farmer then sought out a Babalawo who informed him that he must make peace with the monkeys. The farmer returned to
his farm and ceased his campaign against the monkeys. Soon after his wife gave birth to
twins who lived, the farmer became prosperous. He again sought the Babalawo who
informed him that this set of twins was not abiku (children born to die), but they also
were not ordinary children. They were of divine origin, protected by the Orisha-Ibeji.
He explained to the farmer that if all of their desires were granted, they would bring good
luck to their families. The farmer’s wife continued to give birth to twins, and they
continued to bring them good fortune.

These myths of origin establish not only the beliefs that twins bring fortune to
their family, but also that twins are abiku in origin, children fated to die only to repeat
their orbicularity as a means of torturing their parents. They attempt to explain the origin
of the belief in the powers of the ibeji, which include but are not limited to, the ability to
bring wealth to parents of little means, give children to barren women, avenge those who
have been wronged, and act as rain-makers. These Yoruba myths also lend
understanding to the practices associated with the ibeji that I will briefly discuss.

From the time of birth the ibeji are treated with special care both out of reverence
and fear. It is believed that if the desires of the ibeji are met and sacrifices are made to
the Orisha-Ibeji, in their honor, they will bring their family good luck and prosperity.
However, if for any reason the twins become unhappy, they can cause illness and even
death to befall the members of their family or themselves. As a result of their awesome
powers, it is the custom of the Yoruba that the parents of twins consult a Babalawo
immediately after their birth to learn their desires to avoid misfortune befalling the
family. It is also a common belief that the ibeji share one soul, which becomes a
destructive force if they should ever become separated. As a result, many Yoruba,
particularly of Benin, dress their twins alike and ensure that they are treated in an
identical manner. The Idowu, the single child who comes after the ibeji also holds
special significance to the cult of the ibeji. This child is often associated with the deity
Eshu and is considered by some parents to be more powerful than the ibeji. This child
also holds special significance to the parents of ibeji, because the Idowu symbolizes a
return to normalcy.10

Ritual practices of the cult of the ibeji deserves special mention here as it is
indicative of the ibeji’s ontological significance in Yoruba cultures and their ability to
inhabit both the world of the dead and of the living. The death of an ibeji or a pair of ibeji requires certain prescriptions to be performed by the family immediately after the death. The family will have a carving made of the ibeji, an ere ibeji, often in adult form with tribal markings. This statuette signifies much more than a memorial to a deceased child. It is in actuality, a receptacle used to receive the soul of the ibeji. Marilyn H. Houlberg discusses in her article “Ibeji Images of the Yoruba,” the significance of the ere ibeji to the cult of the ibeji. They are treated as if they are living ibeji. They are clothed, offered food associated with the ibeji, and special sacrifices are made in their honor. The mother of the ibeji cares for the statue until the surviving ibeji reaches the proper age to care for it. If both ibeji die, the mother is responsible for both ibeji statuettes. This practice becomes crucially important because “those who do not follow this prescribed procedure are threatened with a number of misfortunes…. a woman may not be able to bear more children or a twin may die of his own accord” (Houlberg 21).

These beliefs in the ibeji and their metaphysical powers are vital to my argument as Nunez-Harrell, Danticat, and Garcia draw upon their powers and marked characteristics to redefine motherhood by reconstructing propertied relationships in the Caribbean. The twins bring into consciousness their mother’s alienation. Just as twins were historically cast out, their mothers are also alienated. The ibeji appear in the text in various forms, each representation is menacing in its own unique way. In When Rocks Dance, the ibeji come to Emilia as abiku, castigating her with barrenness for valuing economic security over motherhood. The ibeji in Breath, Eyes, Memory are not so explicit. Rather the ibeji is represented in its Haitian manifestation as the marassa, wreaking havoc in the lives of the women who dare to separate the ibeji as a means of escaping sexual trauma. In Dreaming in Cuban, the ibeji torture their mother for her relationship to the Idowu and ultimately for her complacency to the political oppression of women in Cuba. In the selected works, the ibeji act within the capacity of the powers attributed to them by the Yoruba. Functioning as evil, they compel the women to embrace African religion and reward them with economic empowerment, give children to seemingly barren women, avenge wrongdoings, create a space conducive to survival, and ultimately reconstruct notions of motherhood by re-inscribing material ownership.
To understand the function of the ibeji in this project, it is important to elucidate the significance of the metaphysical powers of the cult of the ibeji—a rumination of twins’ ontological properties of both “good” and “evil.” This emanates from the absence of spiritual dualisms in African religion. In “An Overdue Divination” Christopher Okonkwo writes that the Western world’s “propensity toward phenomena dichotomy and irresolution is fundamentally incongruent with African traditional philosophies that insist on interplay, interdependencies and an organic universe” (11). If we continue with this line of thought, then traditional African religion, in its ability to permeate the realms of a rhythmic, infinite, and eternal universe, is able to defy the Western binaries of good and evil, visible and invisible, fact and myth, innocence and guilt, spiritual and corporeal. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the Yoruba pantheon where the orishas are capable of both good and evil. In Tales of Yoruba Gods and Heroes, Harold Courlander asserts that in Yoruba religion there is not a desire to “play down the unpardonable side of an orisha’s character” or to paint them as righteous or saintly (8). It is the conviction of the Yoruba that if an orisha castigates a subject it is not because he/she is evil but because that person has offended the orisha.

In his foreword to Luis Nunez’s Santeria, Michael Ventura emphasizes this belief in Cuba’s practice of their Yoruba-based religion. He writes, “[I]f the gods are destructive and irrational at times that doesn’t mean they’re ‘evil’; it means that destructive and irrational things happen in life, and they are to be lived with, guarded against, fought, healed, forgiven, understood, and remembered, but not stigmatized as coming from the source of all darkness” (vii). In the numerous deliberations of the rejection of Western truisms concerning good and evil in African religion, Eshu, known as the trickster orisha, undoubtedly emerges as an archetypal example. His fondness for mischief, which could be read as “evil,” results, more often than not, in his “tricking” men into offending the orishas, thus requiring them to make sacrifices to please them. Although often portrayed as devilish, Eshu is also capable of “good,” bringing good to those who supplicate him and proving himself loyal to others as in the case with Orunmila.13 The ibeji continue in this tradition. Their lack of binarisms and dichotomies firmly situates them as powerful forces in the cosmology of the universe. Okonkwo insightfully adds to this discussion in recognizing that “almost always, our determinations
of either phenomenon are a matter of perception” (12). This observation becomes
integral to my exegesis of the selected texts, as it is this very “perception” of good and
evil that takes a gripping hold of the female characters in the texts. Indeed, it is not until
the women’s perception of the various nuances of the ibeji as “evil” make a decided shift
to a perception of “good” that they are able to restore balance and attain self-
actualization. Thus, the ibeji become the critical interpretative key for the move of evil to
good. It is also important to note that good is not necessarily a utopic state. For the
women of these texts, good does not represent liberation, but rather survival. This is
different from other models such as that of Caroline Rody, Nada Elia, and Myriam
Chancy, where “good” is read as resistance. My cautious hesitation to read Caribbean
women’s writing as resistant will be further elaborated later in this introduction.

Through the influxes of the mid-Atlantic slave trade, African culture was
undoubtedly transplanted in the New World. This transplantation and preservation of
aspects of African cultures is clearly evident in the Caribbean. Even though the people of
the Caribbean trace their connection back to Africa through many generations, the
presence of West African, religion, culture, and customs has an undeniable impact in the
region. Its marked survival in the New World has been the focus of extensive research,
particularly that of Melville Herskovitz, who has paid special attention to the remnants of
African culture in the United States, Brazil, Guiana, Trinidad, Haiti, and Cuba. In The
Myth of the Negro Past, he relates that the purest survivals of African culture were indeed
found in the religious practices of African-based epistemologies in the Caribbean such as
the Shango, Voudoun, Candomblé, and Santería. Admittedly, the religions of West
Africa, particularly that of the Yoruba, remains instrumental in the polemic discussion of
the creation of a Caribbean identity free from the stains of colonization.

If we continue in the vein of Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s notion of repetition in the
Caribbean, a connecting thread or a “repeating factor” that runs throughout the Caribbean
is the undeniable presence of the Yoruba religion. Despite its unavoidable mingling with
Christian religions such as Catholicism and Protestantism, it has intrinsically maintained
its fundamental practices and beliefs. This preservation of the Yoruba religion in the
Caribbean has drawn the attention of many scholars such as Metraux (1972), Nunéz
(1992), Brandon (1993), Henry (2003), and Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert (2003). They
cite Yoruba retentions such as the use of the Lucumi language of the Yoruba, the practice of the Yoruba Ifa divination, and the inextricable use of drums, music, and dance “in Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, and Trinidad, [where] Yoruba religious rites, beliefs and music and myths are evident at this late day” (Courlander, *Tales of Yoruba Gods* 3). As Benítez-Rojo mentions, there is no island in the Caribbean that has been colonized by only one colonizer. This fact would seem to emphasize difference among the islands but, instead, it speaks to the indestructible potency of the Yoruba religion. Although Trinidad, Haiti, and Cuba have different colonial histories that have varied the surface of these islands, the primordial presence of the Yoruba is deeply etched in the Caribbean religions of the Orisha (Trinidad), Voudoun (Haiti), and Santería (Cuba). These retentions are not only found in the African based religions of these islands, but in popular culture as well. In Trinidad, the drums of the Orisha are indeed the very heart and soul of Trinidad’s greatest spectacle, Carnival. The steel bands are said to have found their place in Trinidadian culture after the banning of the Orisha drums in 1950. In *Reclaiming African Religions in Trinidad*, Frances Henry writes that Orisha practitioners “search[ing] for... new method[s] of percussive expression” turned to the oil drums left by the Americans during World War II, “thus many of the early participants in steel bands [...], who brought the skills and rhythms learned [first] on the Orisha drums” (182).

In Haiti, Voudoun has remained a great source of pride and strength for the Haitian people as it directly connects them to the cultures of their ancestors. Voudoun is an intrinsic belief system that is traced back to the Dahomey region of Africa, the east coast of what is known today as Benin, once occupied by the Yoruba. It is greatly credited for the country’s independence of 1805 and has continued to play an integral role in Haitian politics. This was probably best demonstrated during the dictatorship of Francois Duvalier. Voudoun not only served as a tool for political power, but as George Lipsitz notes in *Dangerous Crossroads*, but also continues to serve as a motif of resistance for such popular Haitian musical groups as Boukman Eksperyans who “invoke [...] ancestral spirits, natural forces, minor deities, and the Supreme Being to predict a dangerous future for those who abused the Haitian people” (7).

The preservation of the Yoruba religion in Cuba’s practice of Santería is discernable in its implementation of *Ifa*, “the Yoruba corpus of wisdom in the form of
parables and proverbs” (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 31) and the Lucumi (language of the Yoruba) lexicon in their religious practices. Much like Trinidad and Haiti, the popular culture of Cuba is infused with Santería. With Fidel Castro’s encouragement of Afro-Cuban culture and his declaration of Cuba as an Afro-Latin country, Santería “was [no longer] relegated to a subaltern status” (78). As a result the Babalawos hold a privileged position in Cuban society and are sought by foreigners from around the world.

Just as the Yoruba religion has been preserved in the Caribbean, so has their integral belief in the powers of the ibeji. In the Orisha religion of Trinidad twins are referred to as Da Lua and Da Logee, in Voudoun of Haiti as the Marassa, and in Santeria of Cuba as the Ibeyi (Taebo and Kehinde). As do the Yoruba of West Africa, the practitioners of these religions believe that the ibeji bring fortune, prosperity, and fertility. They hold also that if the ibeji are angered, separated, or neglected they can cause grave misfortune. So powerful are the ibeji in the African-based religions in the Caribbean that they are often “invoked after Legba(Eshu), [and]sometimes before” (Olmos 116). Herskovitz even argues that in Haiti “twins are stronger than the saints (the loa) […]they] are the mothers of the saints” (Life in a Haitian Valley 200). The belief in the ibeji has also continued to thrive in Caribbean popular culture. As demonstrated in Danticat’s Breath, Eyes, Memory, the marassa represents a relationship or a bond that is inextricable. Twins are also highly valued in the Caribbean because they “represent[…] the sacredness of all children” (116).

I would like to return briefly to Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s concerns with identifying repeating factors that exist throughout the Caribbean. In The Repeating Island he posits the Caribbean as a meta-archipelago and discusses the “chaos” that exists in the region. He defines chaos as “the (dis)order that swarms around what we already know as nature, [making] it possible to observe dynamic states or regularities that repeat them globally” (2). Benítez-Rojo concerns himself with the action that takes place in the midst of this chaos, the “repeating” factor, the “opening [of] unexpected corridors” (3). Where he stops short is in addressing the restoration of balance that this chaos necessitates as well as the manner in which gender increasingly complicates this “repetition.” Through this chaos created by the ibeji, it becomes possible for the women of the text to observe and recognize the “dynamic states and regularities” that confine them in their subordinated
role as mother. To expand upon his argument, that becomes fertile in areas that concerns women’s experience that he briefly mentions, I assert that the repeating or consolidating factor, as demonstrated in the works of Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell, Edwidge Danticat, and Christina Garcia, is the transplantation of African religious beliefs, specifically the emphasis on ritual, sacrifice, and the communal in the effort to establish and maintain the balance of a chaotic region. This repeating factor becomes vital in the discussion of the configuration of motherhood in the region. In the texts selected under study, the ibeji create chaos for the women characters, specifically the mothers, by further subjugating them, for they are already doubly subordinated on the basis of race and gender. In order to restore balance in their lives, the women must turn to the African-based religions in the Caribbean, performing ritual sacrifices to diminish the chaos created by the presence of the ibeji. This is by no means a call for Africanism or an African identity, as the failures of such movements as the negritude movement have demonstrated the improbability of “African unity” in the region, nor is it a triumphant notion of hybridity as its significance has been firmly established in preceding scholarship. Caribbean activists such as Aimé Césaire called for an identity that would inextricably link Afro-Caribbean identity to that of an African identity. They encouraged the avocation of what E. Bolaji Idowu, in his introduction to *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, refers to as “African personality…a certain God-given heritage which has its own intrinsic values with which is bound the destiny of their racial soul…values seeking to recover or refurbish” (x). The negritude movement called for those of African consanguinity to immerse themselves in a culture and idiom that was undeniably African. This included, but was not limited to, a resurgence of West African religion, which its praxis has probably been best illustrated in Haiti with the ascension of François Duvalier, a firm advocate of negritude. However, it would not be long before the problems or failures of the negritude movement would become apparent. The movement’s call for identity would fail to devise a plan for action that would liberate the colonized people of the Caribbean. Although it helped to create an identity that would distinguish the colonized from the colonizer, it in no way rid those of African descent from their ascribed status as Other. Instead, it called for the recovery of an identity that although traces were still existent, was all but irretrievable. Much like Garvey’s call for a return to Africa, the negritude movement would be ephemeral. Even
after the countries of the Caribbean began to gain their independence, they were still subject to the overwhelming influence of their colonizers and later to the neo-colonial power of the United States, despite the call to return to their African roots. In the case of Duvalier, the call for negritude was instrumental in bringing the Haitian people under a new form of subjugation. Instead, I seek to emphasize a reconnection or a return to Mother Africa as a medium for redefining motherhood. By virtue of the ibeji, motherhood is restored to an Africanist tradition that is intrinsically Caribbean.

I would like to take a moment to mention my reasoning for not referring to the works that I have selected as fitting into the genre of Afro-Caribbean women’s writing. Although the first two authors I have selected, Nunez-Harrell and Danticat, fit into this classification of Africana or Afro-Caribbean women, my inclusion of Cristina Garcia, however, complicates this criterion of cataloguing. Garcia is not of African descent yet, like the other authors chosen for this project, she re-writes and preserves the presence of African culture and religion in the Caribbean, particularly the transference of belief in the restoration of balance to a chaotic region through ritual, sacrifice, and the construction of communities. Garcia’s “Daughters of Chango,” much like herself, do not hail from southwestern Nigeria, the east coast of Benin, the Gold Coast, or from any other region of Africa. Essentially, they do not fit into the category of Africana (or Afro-Caribbean) women —, or do they? The significance of Garcia’s *Dreaming in Cuban* to the cartography of this project is that it is exemplary of the manner in which African culture has pervaded every realm of Caribbean life regardless of race or ethnicity. It plays a crucial role in affirming African beliefs and customs as the “repeating factor” of a meta-archipelago that has been scattered and fragmented by various colonizers, ethnicities, and languages. The women of Garcia’s novel are not Africana women, as commonly defined, but they are all undoubtedly “Daughters of Chango.”

I demonstrate throughout how the ibeji’s ontology of good and evil, its functioning as evil that ironically coerces others to do good, its ability to restore order to chaos, become paramount in making a gendered argument for the Caribbean women’s need to construct communal space as a survival mechanism against their subordinate role as mother. The need to restore balance in the texts of Nunez-Harrell, Danticat, and Garcia is resonant of the African religious belief in the equilibrium of the cosmological
universe. In the case of the works in review, the emphasis on the need to restore cosmic symmetry is significant for two reasons. First, it signifies the need to reconstruct motherhood in the region as previously discussed. Secondly, this restoration is paramount for the survival of these women.

Furthermore, I contend that instead of qualifying these texts as “resistance narratives,” I will instead rather read them under the rubric of survivability. In our haste to classify the writings of oppressed peoples within the discourse of liberation, we often overlook their innate desire simply to survive. Although these texts undoubtedly possess elements of resistance, namely in the fact that these texts are written by Caribbean-American women who now occupy a privileged position in which the patriarchal systems of their native countries can be resisted, survivability lies at the core of these works under study. Edwidge Danticat illustrates the significance of being able to write a novel such as *Breath Eyes Memory* in an interview in *Essence* magazine. She acknowledges that while living in Haiti “most of the writers [she] knew were either in hiding, missing, or dead. Silence was the law of the land” (Two Blacks 111). The women of these texts are struggling to survive and as a result are not organizing to resist political forces. They do not have the luxury to resist because resistance will further alienate these women. Moreover, resistance as triumphant is often idealized and does not represent an ongoing struggle. Survivability more adequately recognizes the oppressive patriarchal system in which the women still find themselves entangled.

Patricia Hill Collins and Farah Jasmine Griffin have addressed this issue in their exploration of the need of Black women to create safe spaces that are conducive to survival. Collins writes, “when Black women’s very survival is at stake, creating independent self-definition becomes essential to that survival” (112). Her acknowledgement of self-definition as an imperative to survival is a theme that runs concurrently throughout the texts selected for this project. The women must redefine themselves as mothers to ensure their own survival as well as that of their children. Where I depart from Collins, as does Griffin, is in her assertion that by creating safe spaces within the realms of relationships, community organizations, and art, these women have created sites in which they can “resist” hegemonic ideology. Rather my argument for survival is akin to that of Griffin who asserts that “these sites are more often the locus
of sustenance and preservation than of resistance, [...] they are potentially provincial spaces which do not encourage resistance but instead help to create complacent subjects whose only aim is to exist within the confines of power” (9). Griffin’s assessment is crucial to my argument. The women of the texts are not necessarily trying to resist ibeji-implicated hegemonic structures. Instead, they are actively seeking avenues that will allow them to survive or exist in a society that denigrates their worth. They accomplish this by “developing survival strategies and encouraging self-reliance through female networks” (Terborg-Penn 217-8). Their reconfiguration of motherhood in the Caribbean allows the mothers of these texts to transform motherhood from site of ibejist oppression to a safe space that allows them to survive the economic, sexual, and political oppression that is pervasive in the region, and thus to restore balance to their lives.

Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell’s *When Rocks Dance* was selected for its explicit presence of the ibeji, as well as the text’s assertion of Nigerian culture as a seminal influence for that of the Caribbean. Nunez-Harrell draws upon the belief of the ibeji as abiku as a means of illustrating the economic oppression faced by Caribbean women in colonial Trinidad. In Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the presence of the ibeji is more implicit. Danticat draws upon the Haitian belief in the marassa, which comes to represent the stifling nature of sexual oppression in the Caribbean. The ibeji impel the women to unite together to survive in the midst of a political dictatorship that encourages the sexual abuse of women. The political climate of Danticat’s novel serves as a segue into Garcia’s *Dreaming Cuban*. In this text, the ibeji’s castigation of their mother is symbolic of the political authority that subjugates women in Cuba. Through the use of the ibeji, Garcia sheds light on the dictatorial regime’s alienation of women and its forced allegiances that tears families apart. Although these authors seemingly address varying aspects of the women’s oppression in the Caribbean, they work in a synergy, participating in an ongoing discourse that addresses the distortion of motherhood in the region and the manner in which it magnifies their subordination. That is, the economic, sexual, and political oppression that these texts address are all interconnected but marked specifically. As individual texts they mark specific struggles within a dominant discourse that are ultimately intertwined. The introduction delineates the trajectory of this project, indicating its cultural and theoretical possibilities. It will outline the use of the ibeji and
its various nuances as a paradigm for reconstructing motherhood in the region and will make the argument for reading Caribbean women’s texts as those of survival rather than resistance. Chapter One, “Remembering How to Dance: Reclaiming a Spiritual Inheritance in Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell’s *When Rocks Dance*” will pay special attention to the manner in which the institution of motherhood is threatened as a result of the unequal distribution of land. Chapter Two, “A Soul Divided: Breaking the Cycle of Sexual Trauma in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*” will extend this examination by emphasizing the additional pressures that sexual oppression manifested in the lack of ownership of one’s body adds to the status of mothers in the region, and Chapter Three, “Dissolving Nations: Reuniting the Diaspora in Cristina Garcia’s *Dreaming in Cuban*” will focus on the political oppression that also derides the importance of motherhood in the region, forcing the creation of a space in which a new understanding of materiality reterritorialization and globality can take place. The interconnectivity of these issues will be embedded throughout this thesis, making it abundantly clear that these factors work in a synergy to oppress women in the Caribbean and continue to distort the institution of motherhood. The epilogue outlines the implications of this project and the methodologies employed to advance the theoretical issues addressed in Caribbean women’s writing in relation to motherhood, mother-daughter relationships, and the presence of Yoruba-based religions in the region. It will also include a discussion of possible avenues of expanding this project.
It is important to note that children were also considered undesirable for slave women because they usually were not provided any additional means, such as food and clothing, in which to provide for their children by their slave owners. See Barrow’s *Family in the Caribbean.*

In *Developing Diaspora Literacy and Marassa Consciousness,* Vévé Clark discusses the Marassa as trope, but only in relationship to the slave/master binary. In *Re-membering Hispaniola,* April Shemak discusses Danticat’s use of the Marassa in her novel *The Farming of Bones.* She plays close attention to the manner in which Danticat’s utilizes the marassa to symbolize the tenuous relationship between the “twin” islands of Hispaniola, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Both Nancy Gerber and Marie-Jose N’Zengou-Tayo examine Danticat’s use of the Marassa in *Breath, Eyes, Memory,* however in very different ways. In *Binding the Narrative Thread,* Gerber identifies to Danticat’s use of the marassa as a “psychic merging of mother and daughter” (195). In *Rewriting Folklore,* N’Zengou-Tayo expands on Gerber’s argument by addressing Danticat’s alteration of the Haitian beliefs in the marassa by employing psychoanalytic theories on mirror imaging and mimesis. However both fail to recognize the manner in which the marassa do act in the capacity of the powers attributed to the m by voudoun.

For more information and statistics on the birth rate of twins in Nigeria see Taiwo Oruene’s “Magical Powers of Twins in the Socio-Religious Beliefs of the Yoruba.”

It is said that King Ajaka, who is the brother of Shango, is the king who banned the practice of twin infanticide in Yoruba land. It is also rumored that the first ruler of the Oyo region, who begot nine sets of twins, was the son of Shango. The symbols of Shango can also be found on the ere ibeji. For more on the ibeji’s connection to Shango, see Mareidi and Gert Stolls’ *Ibeji.*

It was believed by many that twins were born only to animals.

The ibeji carvings represent twins that have died at an early age. They are crafted immediately following the death of a twin or pair of twins so that its spirit has a repository in which it can possess. This practice of the ibeji carvings will be discussed in further detail later in this chapter.

Although the privileged position of the ibeji in Yoruba society has been well established, this has not always been the case. Taiwo Oreune and T.J.H. Chappel concern themselves with the marked shift in the beliefs of the Yoruba concerning the ibeji.

See Chappel’s *The Yoruba Cult of Twins in Historical Perspective* pp. 253-255.

Abiku is the Yoruba belief in a spirit child who returns cyclically to the same mother to torture her.

Eshu is a major deity of the Yoruba pantheon that is commonly known as a trickster figure. He resides over transitional places such as entrances and crossroads.

For a more detailed explanation of the ere ibeji see Henry John Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal’s *Gelede: Art and Female Power Among the Yoruba,* Fausto Polo and Jean David’s *Catalogue of the Ibeji,* and George Chemeche’s *Ibeji: The Cult of Yoruba Twins.*

The term marassa comes from the Fon word for Ibeji. It is commonly accepted that a large number of slaves brought to Haiti were of the Yoruba and Fon tribes located in Dahomey. See Metraux’s *Voodoo in Haiti* and Herskovitz’s *Life in a Haitian Valley.*

It is a tale of the Yoruba that Orunmila became best friends with Eshu because he was the only one who could prove himself to be a true friend.

For more information on expressions of the Orisha in Carnival mas and calypso see Frances Henry.
The term Marassa comes directly from the Fon language of the Dahomey region. The names used in Cuba for twins come directly from Yoruba practices. It is the custom of the Yoruba to name the first-born twin, who is considered to be the youngest, “Taiwo” (to taste the world) because it is believed that he is sent by the oldest twin “Kehinde” (he who lags behind) to see what the world is like (Oruene 211). The names given to twins emphasize “the Yoruban principle of seniority and the[ir] tradition of nomenclature” (Oruene 211).

See Catherine John’s *Clear Word and Third Sight*. 

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16 See Catherine John’s *Clear Word and Third Sight*. 


CHAPTER 1

REMEMBERING HOW TO DANCE: RECLAIMING A SPIRITUAL INHERITANCE

IN ELIZABETH NUNEZ-HARRELL’S WHEN ROCKS DANCE

Fine-looking twins, native of Ishokun,
Descendants of treetop monkeys.
Twins saw the houses of the rich but did not go there.
Instead they entered the houses of the poor.
They made the poor rich, they clothed those who were naked.
--Yoruba Praise Song

In her first novel, When Rocks Dance, Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell broaches the issue of the economic oppression of women in colonial Trinidad and the manner in which motherhood is perverted by the unequal and exploitative relationship that exists between women and the patriarchal order that determines the distribution of economic wealth through land ownership. The possession of land becomes symbolic of economic power and ultimately, as the women of the text come to believe unwittingly, a means of transcending their subordinate position. It also represents the great schism that exists within the text, the broad struggle between the forces of Western materialism and Indigenous spirituality. Nunez-Harrell places African religious beliefs at the core of her novel to emphasize the necessity of a return to and a preservation of African spirituality as a means of providing the women of Trinidad an alternative to their pernicious interpolation of the Western value of patrilineal economic inheritance.

In “An article of Faith,” Karla Frye writes that, “landownership serves in the novel as a tangible text onto which is inscribed the meaning and value of power in the lives of the various groups” (197). The displaced African women consent to the European belief of economic empowerment as a way of liberating themselves from their subordinated status. In doing so, they abandon their African heritage and beliefs as

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“landownership for purely economic gain is a non-African concept” (Thompson 35). Because of this denial of African heritage, their children become ransom for land. That is, they must give birth in order to obtain land. The men in the novel dictate the meaning of motherhood to the women, wielding land as a weapon as a way of expanding their wealth and ensuring their biological continuance. The children that these women so desperately need become elusive as an admonishment for abandoning their traditional African values and beliefs for that of the English colonizers.

In order to gain land, the women’s desire to have children is diametrically opposed to the African cultural beliefs that view children as blessings from the gods. In the novel, the ibeji become the driving force that reconnects these women to their African heritage and values, allowing them to reconstruct a new sense of motherhood through procreative power as opposed to economic power. They allow Nunez-Harrell to argue for the necessity of African retentions in Trinidadian society, specifically for the reconstruction of mother-daughter relationships that have been decimated by such historical upheavals as slavery and colonization since the eighteenth century. Essentially, I argue that through African religion, culture and spiritual renewal, Nunez-Harrell’s work rejects Western economic power in exchange for that of African procreative power, which configures a new propertied relationship to the land. By affirming the procreative power of the African women that is represented by the ibeji, the women of the novel acquire land and wealth through a new economic value system. Thus, motherhood is reconstructed from an institution that values children purely for economic gain to one that values children as part of an African spiritual inheritance that should not be forgotten but should be preserved at all cost.

The novel opens with Emilia’s discovery that she is again carrying twins. For Emilia, this affirmation confirms that she is indeed being punished for ransoming her unborn sons for cocoa land. Nunez-Harrell opens the novel with this scene to magnify the dire consequences that have befallen the women of Trinidad for abandoning their African heritage for the pursuit of Western conceptions of wealth. Sitting amongst the cocoa fields which she so desperately wants to call her own, Emilia knows with certainty that her four pregnancies and her inability to give birth to the twins she carries is no coincidence. Nunez writes:
For eight years, at intervals of two years apart, she has watched her belly rise slowly like yeast-filled dough, its surface growing rounder and rounder, smoother and smoother, and then stretching paper-thin, inflated by an insatiable energy beneath it that cracked her skin along its dry spots, drawing white long creases where the moisture was sucked into the hungry swelling. Finally, at the end of nine months within each of these intervals of two years, her belly fell suddenly, collapsing like under-baked bread, spitting out the center soft and harmless, still and lifeless. Not just one son, but two boys who fought to free themselves from the umbilical cord wrapped around their necks, twisting their bloodied bodies in rage, their faces distorted, their wrinkled fists clenched, their blind eyes rolling in their dull sockets…accusing her with anger…until the midwife released them and they lay stiff and cold and blue in their mother’s arms.

(12)
The death of the ibeji serves as a mirror for Emilia’s dire economic situation. Their repeated deaths are symbolic of the loss of her dreams of ever obtaining land. With each death it becomes more apparent that Emilia’s inability to bear children is a curse that moves her further away from this end.

The ibeji manifest themselves in the novel as abiku. As spirit children that return cyclically to torment their mothers, often as punishment for a particular transgression, this particular manifestation plays a significant role in the text. In The World of Ogbanje, Chinwe Achebe discusses the phenomenological characteristics of this striking child who is both of the human and spirit world. Although there are a number of signifiers or characteristics that indicate a child is indeed an abiku, “the most notable of these [signifiers] is that the ‘ogbanje’ will not be allowed to enjoy a full life cycle” (Achebe 27). Rather the abiku (iku meaning death) will repeatedly die and return in a tortuous cycle. It is a firm belief of the Yoruba, who both fear and respect this erratic and volatile child that the abiku chooses to die and be reborn again as a means of torturing its mother. The abiku/ibeji tortures its mother by effectively making her barren as she becomes unable to give birth to children who will survive. It is the belief of the Yoruba, moreover, as well as the Ibo that the abiku are born to mothers that are guilty of
moral transgressions. The repeated abiku births are often seen as evidence of wrongdoing on the part of the mother. The intricate worship ceremonies dedicated to the ibeji are often supplicated in hopes that it will assuage them to remain in their human form, to remain with their parents, as it is feared that if the ibeji become angered they will “choose” to die only to return and repeat their orbicular pattern. Achebe affirms this notable attribute when she writes that “one common characteristic of ‘ogbanje’ spirit beings is that they die….prematurely by choice” (30, my emphasis). Such is the case with Emilia’s eight ibeji sons. They torture their mother not only with physical pain but also, more importantly, with the threat of barrenness, an attribute associated with both the ibeji and the abiku. Timothy Mobolade writes, “If the Abiku child is a mother’s first-born, it is not impossible nor is it uncommon—that she eventually becomes childless in life should the Abiku prove implacable” (62). The ibeji inimically castigate Emilia with barrenness for sacrificing her Nigerian values to gain land from the English planter Hrothgarth, whom she serves as mistress. But for Emilia, barrenness also serves as “a paradigm for feminine desire itself, the longing for what is absent from [her] li[fe]” (Bryce-Okunlola 201). Nunez-Harrell thus weaves maternal desire with material desire. Because they are so inextricably linked, Emilia is unable to fulfill either one of these twin desires.

In relation to this material order that she covets, Emilia’s relationship to Hrothgar functions as an allegory for the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized in Trinidad or, more specifically, the slave owner and the slave. Hrothgar’s name, reminiscent of the Danish king in the Anglo-Saxon epic Beowulf who is under attack from the supernatural monster Grendel, asserts the oppressive Anglo-Saxon presence in Trinidad. Emilia agrees to share Hrothgar’s bed because even at the young age of twelve, Emilia understands the security that land ownership would provide not only for her self but also for generations to come. More importantly, she understands that as an African woman, she has no other means by which to secure economic stability for herself or for her future generations. When Hrothgar promises her land for the birth of a son, she readily agrees to adopt his European culture for her own, understanding that in colonial life “land ownership means power and security, respect, and survival” (Thompson 34). This is evident in the construction of society in colonial Trinidad. The English flourished
economically because they maintained possession of the land. The Ameri-indians were stripped of the land and literally pushed off the island, as Nunez-Harrell illustrates with the Warao and his dwindling tribe. The Africans, although comprising the largest percentage of the population, were denied the opportunity to own land and lived in perpetual poverty. Because of this fact, Emilia justifies her actions by convincing herself that by gaining land from Hrogarth, she will essentially be reclaiming land that was stolen from her people. Nunez-Harrell writes of Emilia:

She had wanted no more or less than every Trinidadian woman—a home that was hers, land she could pass on to her sons and to generations after. What right had Hrothgar have to the land? He and his people crossed the seas and claimed it from her people as though God had given them right…She stayed in Hrothgar’s bed to reclaim that land. And then…and then the babies began to die. (12-13)

Her relationship to Hrothgar is indicative, then, of how female reproductive power is expunged by capitalist relations. Her position is no different from the female slaves who were used as breeders to sustain the supply of slaves after the slave trade was abolished. Her union with Hrothgar is not blessed with the sanctity of marriage, but by the economic agreement of providing hands to continue his economic heritage. When she finally gives birth to live twins, Hrothgar is “so proud […] of his accomplishment and his future achievements” (my italics 18). Hrothgar even refers to his sons as “his cocoa planters. He made them his overseers” (18).

When Emilia becomes pregnant with her first set of twins, Taro, the most feared obeahman on the island, sends for her. She refuses his requests because she is convinced that she must immerse herself in the Anglo-Saxon culture if she is to obtain land, and as a result, her sons are stillborn. However, Emilia does not believe that Taro can alleviate her situation. She continues to immerse herself further in Hrothgar’s life and believes that their pact will deliver her from her current position in Trinidadian society. Throughout her subsequent pregnancies, she continues to refuse Taro’s demands even when she knows that the English doctor that Hrogarth hires, with all of his fancy European training, cannot help her. It is not until Emilia’s fourth pregnancy, when she can no longer stand the accusation and torture from her ibeji sons, that she goes to Taro, a
Nigerian born obeahman, whom her own mother often sought to continue and retain the legacy of their Nigerian heritage. Only then is Emilia able to comprehend the severity of her perfidious abandonment of her Nigerian legacy for material wealth. This action is significant because it marks Emilia’s return to her African heritage, and it is through this return that Nunez-Harrell asserts the need of the black women of Trinidad to return to their African values. It is clear through Emilia’s decision that she cannot transcend her status by adhering to Anglo-Saxon values, for her biological inheritance is not one of land ownership, but symbolizes a communal harmony between humans, earth, and the gods.

Emilia’s visit to Taro not only reconnects her to her African heritage, but it is through this journey that Emilia learns to embrace her procreative powers. Taro’s significance to the text is not defined solely in his standing as an obeahman, rather his greatest significance lies in the fact that he was born and raised in Nigeria. Nunez-Harrell informs us, Taro is “the son of an Ibo chief from Enugu in the eastern region of Nigeria…betrayed into slavery and brought to Trinidad…. [who] remember[s] it all. Africa and freedom, slavery and colonialism” (14). Because he is not born into slavery, like Emilia, Taro serves as a living memory of the heritage that Emilia and the other women of the text must reclaim. Furthermore, the circumstances of his birth establish an authenticity to the traditions of the ibeji implemented by Nunez-Harrell. It is because of his experiences that he is easily able to discern the cause for Emilia’s misfortune.

Through the power that Taro possesses as an obeah man trained in Nigeria, he is able to restore motherhood by convincing Emilia of the worth of procreative power. It is his knowledge of the Ibo ways that allows him to provide Emilia with the solution that will end the vicious cycle of her abiku/ibeji sons. When Emilia finally comes to him he rejects her and impetuously admonishes her for her denial of her African ancestry. He tells her, “But you spit us out. Obeah no good for you no more. That, that is why trouble follow you…You spit us out!” (17). He forces Emilia to acknowledge the conflict between economic gain and reproductive empowerment. Africa becomes significant to this text because it serves as a marker of the split among culture, nation, and the female body. Nunez-Harrell upholds obeah, brought to Trinidad by the African slaves, as the solution not only for Emilia, but also for all of the African women who embrace
European values. According to Karla Frye, she reaffirms the necessity of African traditions and values, specifically their belief in children as esteemed members of society, “by expand[ing] the literary treatment of Obeah through metaphoric connection to issues of power/subjectivity and its incorporation as a historically significant aspect of New World identity” as the model for disrupting the colonial model of propertied relationships in Trinidad which has disrupted positive constructions of motherhood by coveting children for the purpose of the advancing the empire (198).

Desperate for help, Emilia ignores Taro’s harsh treatment, for she realizes her error in abandoning her ancestral heritage. In an ignominious manner, she continues to beg the obeah man to alleviate her from the pain and torture that her ibeji/abiku children are subjecting her to, threatening her with barrenness. She describes their menacing to Taro, “I can’t take the pain no more. This time it’s worse than ever before. I can’t sleep. I can’t work. It’s their fingers. They claw at me and scratch me. I can feel their feet kicking, kicking. They know they are going to die and they want to kill me first. I know it. And it’s their brothers that died who are helping them” (13). Despite her appeal, Taro continues his diatribe against her. He is unwilling to help her until he is completely certain that she no longer wants children for the benefit of land but for the sake of being a mother until she has convinced him that she is indeed Africa’s daughter who can finally return home.

After performing a cleansing ritual for Emilia, Taro informs her that she must follow the tradition of the Ibo and immolate her ibeji sons. It is the belief of the Ibo of West Africa that twins are evil and must be sacrificed for the good of the community. By continuing this ritual, Emilia will effectively cleanse herself and ultimately restore the procreative powers that will allow the women of the novel to restructure propertied relationships formulated around land and repair the mother-daughter relationship that is negatively molded around this unequal distribution of the land. The immolation of the twins must be performed, not only to complete Taro’s cleansing ritual, but also to restore African values over those of the Anglo-Saxon, to replace Hrothgar’s economic inheritance with that of an African biological inheritance. It is not until she completes this aspect of the ritual that she will be able to give birth to a single child. Then the ibeji will be pacified and cease to castigate their mother. Emilia does exactly as Taro requests.
Two weeks after the ibeji are born; she takes them to the Warao, who leaves the newborns in the forest. He, the Warao, tells Marina of the sacrifice, “I took them deep in the rainforest […] There were no villagers where I took them” (86). The Warao disposes of the twins in the same manner that is customary for the Ibo. His method of immolation is important for numerous reasons. Namely, it aligns the Ameri-Indians with the African slaves. It is the Warao who ultimately completes the cleansing ritual that the Ibo obeah man began. Effectively, Nunez-Harrell is not only returning to specific African cultural traditions, but to Ameri-Indian cultural traditions as well. Moreover, she is vindicating the wrongs committed against both ethnic groups by the Anglo-Saxon colonizer. This is evident in the fact that shortly after the twins are sacrificed, by the combined efforts of the Nigerian-born obeahman and the Ameri-Indian chief, Emilia conceives her only child who will live, Marina. Tejani confirms this connection when he writes, “The ideological and artistic design in her novel is to make the pre-Columbian cultures present a united front against the onslaught of Western cultures” (53). One might add to this design the African-based traditions that too have been lost and “reborn.”

Despite the restorative effects of the cleansing rituals, Nunez-Harrell does not rectify the tension of the novel by redistributing the land. Instead the women of the text remain embroiled in a life of subjugation and subordination, indicating that their struggle against the formidable force of the British colonial power is far from over. This is demonstrated by the fact that Emilia gives birth to a girl child. The birth of Marina signifies that the economic oppression of women in Trinidad will indeed be perpetuated. Like her mother, she has no choice but to depend on the charity of her benefactor Tesler, an English landowner, and like her mother, she too will forsake her children for the possibility of land ownership.

The birth of Marina also confirms that Emilia will not obtain the land that she has so desperately sought. Hrothgar writes a new will taking the land away from Emilia for killing his twin sons that he so absolutely wants. Even though she is able to destroy the will, she is still denied the land because the English/Catholic priest, Father de Nieves, refuses to stand up for her and to confirm that Hrothgar bequeathed the land to her. He refuses ultimately because he believes that the land does not rightfully belong to a woman of African descent. When the priest finally comes to Emilia with the will after she has
been stripped of any claim to the land, she tells the him that he did not come to her aid “because [he was] one of them. Because [he] believed [that she] lived in sin with one of [them]. Because [she is] colored” (26).

The fact that a Catholic priest chooses not to restore the land to Emilia, a practitioner of obeah, deserves special attention. Although the will bestowing the land to Emilia is in his possession, he refuses to take the action that will overturn the propertied relationship of land that exists in Trinidad. The relationship between Father de Nieves and Emilia illuminates Emilia’s alienation on the basis not only of race and gender, but also of religion as well. Williams notes that by papal declaration it became a crime to enslave Indians who could be converted to Christianity. Negro slaves were considered a more feasible alternative as the Catholics “regarded the Negros […] as having no religion, and, therefore, free from the taint of idolatry or heresy” (Williams 42).7 Father de Nieves is able to prevent Emilia from laying claim to Hrothgar’s land because she is not a Christian. Like the Catholic priests that decided that it was justifiable to enslave heathen Africans, the priest felt it was justifiable not to present the will, granting Emilia the land because she too is a heathen African. It is only after he experiences a fit of consciousness that he finally decides to stand up for Emilia. However, it is too late and of no consequence. Emilia tells Father de Nieves, “They made up their minds…They believed me all right when I told them you had the will. […] But they said, No will, no land. I prayed you would come with the will, but even so I knew they would still find a way to take the land from me” (28). And they did. The colonial system has assessed exorbitant taxes on the land that Emilia is unable to pay, effectively stripping her of any claim to the land, a practice common in British colonies used to prevent newly freed slaves from obtaining land.8

Although Emilia extinguishes all hopes of obtaining land for herself, she instills in Marina the burning desire to own land and elevate her status in the hierarchal structuring of Trinidad. Her determination to be vindicated through her daughter is apparent in her decision to deliver Marina into the cradle of the cocoa land, a shallow bed of earth in the cocoa fields that were once promised to her for the birth of a son. Her attempts to keep the land after Hrothgar’s death prove futile, but Emilia does not abandon

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her dream of land. Instead, she preserves her burning desire for land in the bosom of Marina by:

    beat[ing] out for her the silent rhythms of her forefather’s love for the land—their age-old kinship with the earth […] Yes, a man who owned land was a sort of god. He walked with the gods. A man who owned land, owned a part of this earth. He was his own master. He belonged to no one. He could be no slave. He could grow his own food, make his own bed on his own land. Yes, land was his most valuable possession.

(30)

Nunez-Harrell draws a sharp distinction between the African value of land and that of its Anglo-Saxon counterpart. The African value of land is aligned with the African-based view of an organic universe. For Nunez-Harrell, possession of land is a means of providing for one’s self, for sustenance, a gift from the gods that is to be valued and worshipped. For its western counterpart, the possession of land means the expansion of wealth. Separated from her African homeland, Emilia accepts the fact that she must always play the role of mistress to the European men of Trinidad, but she does so willingly because she knows that this is the only way that she can provide for her daughter. She leaves Hrothgar’s home to enter Telser’s, to again play the role of mistress to an English planter so that her child can be provided for. The choices that Emilia feels that she is forced to make are evidence of her innate desire to survive in a land that does not recognize the kinship that her African people have to the land as she is denied the necessary tools needed to resist the European, patriarchal domination to which she is subject. Marina too desires land, embraces it as her birthright, and like her mother, Marina must ransom her children for the precious cocoa land that they crave so dearly as this is the legacy that her mother has left her.

Although seemingly Emilia is relieved of the torture and menacing of the abiku after her ritual cleansing, she will continue to suffer for ransoming her children for the benefit of land. Indeed, her daughter for whom she sacrificed her ibeji sons will continue to torment Emilia. The reader is constantly reminded that Marina is a special child, a spirit child. Hrothgar spurns her despite her undying love for him. Her presence haunts him, reminding him of the reality that he so desperately wants to erase, always aware that
she will live because his sons have died. For Hrothgar, his daughter is proof not only of the existence of the praxis and force of African religion that survived the journey across the violent influxes of the ocean, but of its potency, its survivability, a force that he inevitably and unwillingly succumbs to. After the birth of Marina, he can no longer dismiss the beating of the drums that are heard throughout the mountain ranges of Trinidad, and he can no longer deny the inevitable role that obeah plays in his own life. For Hrothgar, Marina is the undeniable evidence that Emilia has brought obeah into his own house. She is the undeniable evidence of the African belief in an organic universe where spirits can transcend both the spirit and human world. Marina is hence a spirit child.

Recognizing Marina as a spirit child is crucial to understanding the way she functions in the novel. However, I extend this analysis and assert that Marina is not only a spirit child but also an abiku. Bahadur Tejani is the only scholar, to my knowledge, to recognize Emilia’s four sets of ibeji as abiku, yet he ignores Marina’s abiku-like traits. Like her brothers, Marina is arguably an abiku. I make this assessment for several reasons. Nunez-Harrell cleverly empowers her with the spirits of her eight dead brothers, suggesting to the reader that their abiku spirits have indeed returned. Marina also possesses many characteristics of an abiku such as her stunningly good looks (Achebe “Literary” 32 see also Mbolade 62), her errant wanderings, her implied life cycle (Okonkwo), her cantankerous and unpredictable ways (Achebe “World” 31), and her ceaseless admonishment of her mother. Nunez-Harrell also bestows her with several appellations, such as “devil’s daughter,” “spirit child,” and “charm child,” all of which signify her dual occupancy of the spirit and human world. Indeed, the circumstances of Marina’s special birth come to represent a combined strength and a sustainability of the ibeji’s presence in the text. It becomes important to understand Marina’s status to the text as an abiku because it illuminates Emilia’s second betrayal of her African heritage.

Marina’s uniqueness continues to become elucidated as she begins school. Although the other children fall ill from diseases that spread through the village, she remains unafflicted. Marina remains the picture of health through such epidemics as whooping cough, the mumps, chicken pox, and consumption despite her efforts to contract these illnesses. Nunez-Harrell writes:
First it was the whooping cough. In the schoolroom, the children in the front row started to cough up blood. Then one by one, they disappeared from the class. Only she remained silent and healthy. They closed the four-room school and she still remained healthy. Then there was the mumps. […the chicken pox…] That year, Marina asked her mother why her skin alone, in that class of twenty-five girls, had remained flawless untouched. […] When she was fourteen, consumption struck the island and Marina prayed that she would get it. Not to die. Just a little consumption. So she’d be normal. The whole school district was closed that year in August, in the rainy season. Everyone who could afford it wore shoes that season to keep dry. When her mother was not looking, Marina would take hers off and jump in the puddles of water, letting the rain soak her. Still she did not get consumption. She cut her lip once, to show Emilia the blood in her mouth. […] But her mother saw through the fraud. (87-8)

It is at this time that Marina begins to learn that she is in fact special, and she begins to hear of her mother’s interactions with the obeahman and the Warao as the other children shout accusations that she is “the devil’s daughter” (87). Marina chooses to ignore the vicious rumors surrounding her existence, because she cannot accept the sacrifice that her mother has made.

It is not until adulthood that Marina’s abiku qualities become apparent. As Marina makes the transition from child to womanhood, her aberrant strength is apparent even in her physical description. Nunez describes her:

Tall and arrogant, her face framed by light, almost golden hair wild, unkempt, uncombed hair that at the same time seemed to be deliberately and artistically placed on her head strand by strand. The bridge of her nose was long, her nostrils wide and flaring. High cheekbones set off wild gray eyes. Her full-lipped mouth was warm and generous. Tamed. And her skin was pale, almost white…breasts projecting forward as though ready for argument, backside high and rigid, forcing her to lean slightly backward. (56)
It is no accident that Nunez-Harrell waits until Marina has reached womanhood to display her abiku traits, as it is not until Marina reaches the age suitable for marriage that Emilia commits her second betrayal of her African heritage. Much like she had earlier ransomed her ibeji sons for land, Emilia now also ransoms her daughter, Marina, for land. Despite the rumors that Antonio de Balboa kills his wives, Emilia is still willing to ransom Marina to obtain the fifteen acres of cocoa land that Antonio owns. When the Warao first comes to Emilia to propose the idea of a marriage between Antonio and Marina, she is resistant. But then “the Warao tells her what he knows will make her change her mind [...] that Antonio de Balboa owns fifteen acres of land. [...] By the time the Warao leaves Emilia her eyes have softened” (37). The Warao’s news stirs in her the desire for land and ultimately economic security.

It is certainly this appearance of wild, unbridled beauty that validates the Warao’s belief that she is empowered by the strength of eight men’s spirits and compels him to cross the Orinoco river to the shores of Moruga to seek the only woman that could bear children for his friend’s son, Antonio de Balboa. After the death of his three wives, all during childbirth, Antonio begins to believe his father’s prophecy that “[t]he sins of the father will be visited on the sons” (209). He refuses to remarry, giving up on the dream of ever having children, continuing his legacy, and affirming his immortality through his lineage. When the Warao first approaches Antonio concerning Marina, he is horrified by the tale of her birth. Much like Marina, “he can never understand why sometimes [they] must make sacrifice. Why sometimes [they] must return some spirits to [their] gods when they get angry” (54). He rejects and despises Emilia and the Warao for sacrificing and murdering the twins because, like Marina learns, he has not yet come to the realization that the chaos that exists in his life is a direct result of his rejection of his African heritage. His upbringing, firmly rooted in Catholicism, does not allow him to understand that he must make sacrifices to appease the angry spirits before balance can be restored to his life. Although he rejects obeah and its praxis, he is desperate for children and clings to the Warao’s story of the woman empowered by eight spirits. Antonio decides to meet Marina despite his loathing for obeah and spirits that are diametrical to the teachings of his European education and his Catholic upbringing.
because of his unexplained awareness that Marina can bear him children. Although he has been reared with Anglo-Saxon values, Antonio cannot deny his African blood. It is:

- his response to the not-so-distant rhythms of his mother’s buried culture…not curiosity, not reason, not even an acceptance of fate, that drive[s] Antonio to find Marina. It [is] a force within him stronger than himself. A will to live, an innate desire to reproduce, a muffled drumming from the world of his African ancestors that tell[s] him without logic or understanding that Marina will save him. (55)

Marina also turns to Antonio to save herself, to provide her with the land that she so desperately needs. Like Antonio, she is spooked at the prospect of their impending marriage because she has heard the stories of his dead wives. But when she learns that he is the owner of fifteen acres of cocoa land, Marina seizes the opportunity to get the land that she rightfully believes belongs to her. Like her mother, she ransoms her children for land at the command of her husband to be. Marina conveniently embraces the rumors surrounding her birth and believes that she can bear the children that Antonio so desperately wants despite her rejection of obeah. This becomes clear when she taunts her mother the day of her wedding, after Emilia warns her that Antonio killed his three former wives. When Emilia tries to convince her to forget the land in order to save her life, much like her brothers, Marina mocks her mother:

> Look at my breasts, Mother. Look at my hips. I can carry babies, Mother.
> I can carry babies and babies forever… How that shuts you up, Mother?
> How that makes you silent? Because you could have only me? Is that what makes you always so silent when I tell you that I can have babies?
> That I will have many children? (71)…. I made you a woman. You were barren, Mother. Oh, you could get pregnant, but you were barren. (172)

Refusing to give up on the land even after Antonio’s mother decides to sell it, and unable to forget the Warao’s prediction that the land will make her rich, Marina wanders errantly around the island looking for the answer that will help her to secure her land.

Marina first turns to obeah to bring Antonio under her power. Much like she embraces the history of her birth, which she once rejected, she now embraces obeah after chastising her mother for practicing in “ignorant superstition” (177). Her convenient use
of obeah is clearly disjunctive from her “habitual scorn for her mother’s ways” (118), for Marina was brought up in the customs and traditions of her Catholic father. However, like Antonio she cannot deny her African blood. She is still subject to her mother’s desires that are made tangible in her body. When she realizes that she cannot convince her husband to keep the land, she decides to use the manumust to cast her husband under her spell and convince him to sign over to her five acres of land. But Marina, like her mother, miscalculates the power of land ownership in Trinidad. She falsely believes that by having her name on the deed Antonio cannot take her land away from her. She “[has]… forgotten the power that he ha[s!] That in Trinidad he need[s] no more than his manhood to dispose of her property as he wishe[s!]” (267). Moreover, Antonio is rendered powerless when it comes to the English doctor who wishes to steal his inheritance. Even though Dr. Glentower is unable to save Marina, he still seizes claim to her oil-soaked land. He ignores Antonio’s pleas because he knows that the Americans are drilling in the southern region of Trinidad for oil. Although he views the “Americans as inferior, the mongrels of England or Europe, he nevertheless believed that they had an uncanny sense of knowing how to make money—‘sniffing out wealth’ as his father had put it” (221). Dr. Glentower intends to profit from the Americans, as he is certain that they will establish themselves as a neo-colonial power in Trinidad.11 This shift in the economy means that the new oil-based economy will continue to oppress the African women of Trinidad just as the sugar and cocoa plantation economy in colonial times governed their lives and bodies. This becomes apparent when Dr. Glentower cons Antonio out of Marina’s land when he learns that it is soaked in oil.

At the same time that Antonio signs over the five acres of land to Marina, she discovers that she is pregnant, completing their economic transaction: children for land. Marina, much like her mother, thinks that she has succeeded in usurping economic power by obtaining land, but like her mother, this is not the case. She unwittingly feels that nothing can harm her, callously tossing aside her mother’s warnings that she will die in childbirth. As Marina’s pregnancy progresses, she gradually begins to swell just as Harrison says she will. Like her mother, Marina is tortured by the ibeji that she carries in her womb. Just as her ibeji brothers tortured her mother for turning her back on her African ancestry, so does Marina’s ibeji torture her for “us[ing] obeah for [her] selfish
self” (206). The ibeji continue to castigate Marina for her rejection of obeah ultimately driving her to obeah for redemption. When Marina is in her greatest thrusts of pain and can no longer bear the torture the ibeji are inflicting upon her, she screams out for Emilia, she screams out for obeah. Emilia comes to her daughter for she knows it is time to “repeat[…] to her the lesson the old Ibo taught her, the chastisement he had given her for her rejection of the old ways, the faith of her ancestors” (228). It is at this very moment that Marina accepts and, in fact embraces her African ancestry, and at this very moment “[t]he pain, the once unbearable tenderness around her swollen joints, her fingers, her wrist, her ankles, the violent headaches [left her]” (228). It becomes clear that the African women in Trinidad must embrace their African heritage and reject their Anglo-Saxon heritage. Indeed, the healing of obeah serves superior over that of the English trained doctor. His medicine fails to save Marina or her twin children. Ultimately, he fails to provide a means in which the Afro-Trinidadian women of the text can reconstruct motherhood and reorder their propertied relationship to land as he lays claim to Marina’s land although he does not save her. This can only be obtained through the practice of African cultural retentions. African traditions clearly reign superior over Western hegemony. It is also at this moment when Marina returns to her African traditions that she leaves her body and her implied abiku death begins to take place. Through the intercession of the practices of Yoruba worship and healing, Emilia is able to do what the European doctor is unable to do, she is “able to separate [Marina from]… the ‘[abiku]’s’ [(her eight brothers)]…collective pact and so sever [her] link with the others” (Achebe “World,” 29). 

Marina is saved from her premature abiku death and gives birth to a healthy set of ibeji, a boy and girl, ultimately reconstructing the institution of motherhood from one under patriarchal control to one that is autonomous and fulfilling. That is, she has learned that procreative power is more powerful than economic power. Reminiscent of the first set of twins born in Ishokun, the ibeji bring their mother wealth and a new beginning, but do not liberate her from her subordinated role as mother. After destroying the deed, restoring ownership of the land to Marina, Antonio leaves her to raise their children alone because he is unable to reconcile his defilement of the Catholic sacrament (communion) for the sake of obeah. Unlike Emilia and Marina, Antonio is never able to embrace his African heritage.
Like Marina and Emilia, Virginia, Marina’s mother-in-law, is also unable to choose motherhood, rather it is chosen for her. Virginia is impregnated with Antonio on her wedding night when de Balboa ravishes her, never to touch her again. Much like Father de Nieves, as a Jesuit priest, de Balboa sees his wife as a heathen African. He agrees to marry Virginia, not because he desires her as a wife but because he sees her as a way of pacifying his guilt for not helping the slaves who traveled on his ship from Portugal. In fact his attitude towards Virginia reveals his true feelings towards the “African race.” De Balbao “blame[s] [her] for making him desire flesh” (209). As a result, he neglects her, “dry[ing] de beauty out of Virginia” (104), refusing not only to touch her but to acknowledge her or their son’s presence for twelve years. Virginia is forced to earn a living for her and her son, for de Balboa refuses to do anything other than read and walk along the shores of Moruga, speaking only to the Warao. When Antonio tries to defend his father, she reminds him that they lived because “[she] managed. [She] sold chickens, ducks. [She] taught school. [She] managed” (67). Even though de Balboa gives Virginia the “diseased” land that the Smiths gave him for her dowry, she is still not free from economic oppression. She must still forge a life for her and her son’s survival, despite the fact that she has both husband and land. This is a direct result of her status as an African woman. She is sent away from her home because as she blossoms into womanhood, Mr. Smith becomes increasingly attracted to her. Effectively, she is sold off as a common slave. The fact that the Smiths give the land to de Balboa as a dowry instead of giving the land directly to Virginia is indicative of her economic status as an African woman. De Balboa gives the land to Virginia because he recognizes that the Smiths cannot see past Virginia’s color. He tells her, “I’ll not have her sell you to me like a lump of coal. I’ll have no hand in her slave traffic. Your color offends her” (60). Despite the fact that Hilda Smith insists that de Balboa marry Virginia, to keep her honorable, it does not conceal the fact that it is an economic transaction. Nunez-Harrell uses Virginia’s story to demonstrate that the position of the African women in Trinidad has not changed much since the abolishment of slavery. Like Emilia’s, Virginia’s white “master” sees her as a sexual object.

Virginia’s ability to be a mother to her son is crippled by the shameful manner in which he was conceived. Her relationship with her son, Antonio, borders on incestuous.
She uses her son to fill the void that de Balboa has left in her life by refusing to perform the duties associated with being a husband. Even on Antonio’s wedding night Antonio must go to his mother’s room before he goes to his impatient bride. Virginia’s sense of motherhood is as perverted as her marriage to de Balboa. For her, Antonio is something to possess and control rather than to love and nurture.

Like the other women in the text, Virginia rejects her African heritage. Her white surrogate mother has taught her to hate her heritage and has effectively raised her in the customs of the European, convincing Virginia of her “whiteness.” When Virginia learns to braid her hair in a style reminiscent of an African princess, she habitually covers it in the presence of Mrs. Smith as not to offend her with the “African” style. Although Virginia passes on her belief in the superiority of the English to her son Antonio and reduces the Africans’ belief in obeah as “[a] jumbie hiding behind every bush” (62) she shares a kinship with her African sisters that are “oddly familiar.” Along with Marina, Virginia is tortured by the ibeji that her daughter-in-law is carrying. They too castigate her for abandoning her African heritage. The ibeji force Virginia to acknowledge the “odd feeling [that] now course[s] its way through her, a strange emotion, familiar and yet foreign—as if she had known it once, but forgotten, and yet as if she had never known it, never experienced it” (233). They return her to an African ancestry that she was never taught, and Virginia becomes an active participant in obeah to save the lives of her grandchildren and to free herself. It is important to note that for Virginia, this moment does not liberate her from her status as an African woman suffering from economic oppression. Rather it allows her to return to her roots and ultimately provide her with a value system that will allow her to survive in an economic system that seeks to oppress her, thus freedom becomes understood as survival. It is through the ibeji that Virginia realizes that she cannot benefit from the land like the white planters from England. This is apparent when she fails to sell her diseased land to Ranjit. The ibeji literally save Virginia.

Virginia insists on selling what she believes to be diseased land as a way of escaping the folkways of the Afro-Trinidadian women. Rather she desires to leave Tabaquite and move to Port of Spain where the people are more westernized. It is only through the birth of the ibeji that Virginia learns to embrace her African heritage and
reject her imposed British heritage. As Thompson notes, just as her grandchildren are
born, Virginia is “reborn” (37). The birth of the ibeji mark new beginnings not only for
Marina, but for Virginia as well. It is not until this rebirth that Virginia is able to free
herself from the ignominious shame inflicted on her by de Balboa, abandon her unnatural
dependence on her son, and seek the comfort offered by Ranjit.

The African women in the text are not the only women defined and confined by
motherhood. Indira, Ranjit’s wife, also falls prey to the distorted role of mother in
colonial Trinidad. Five years after the Africans were emancipated from slavery in 1833,
East Indians were brought to Trinidad to take over the production of agricultural goods.
They occupied a space more privileged than that of the African. The Indian was
promised land for five years of indentured labor. Williams observes:

the sugar planter who, […] after emancipation, tried to prevent the
purchase of land by former slaves, found himself obliged in the nineteenth
century to grant land to the indentured immigrant. […] Indian
immigration, designed to compete with the Negro landowners, ended in a
competition with European landowners. The Negro peasantry was
reinforced by the Indian peasantry. (353)

The role that the Indian has played in Trinidad’s economic system is exemplified through
the character of Ranjit. Inscribed in his role as an expert planter, he is able to own the
land that is stripped from the Africans. His wife, Indira, benefits from this system as
well. Her status as a mother is indeed chosen for her and firmly established as her
primary role. Indira indeed acquiesces to her role as mother, aware that her “job [is] to
bear children” (131). She never questions her husband about his daily escapades with
Virginia. She simply trusts that he will find his way, believing that her husband’s affairs
are none of her business. However, the similarities between Indira and the African
women cease at this juncture. Unlike the African women, Indira is not forced to forge a
life for her and her children. She is secure in the fact that her Indian husband owns acres
of land that will not be stripped away from her or her children. Unlike Emilia and
Marina, she will never have to worry about where her family will live.

Like Indira, Mrs. Smith does not have to worry about her position in Trinidadian
society. Nor does she have to concern herself with the struggle for economic power
through land ownership. As a British woman her relationship to the island is based on land ownership. However, Mrs. Smith is still is also defined in Trinidad society by her inability to be a mother. Desperate to become a mother, she decides to raise Virginia, the daughter of a free slave who dies in childbirth. Mrs. Smith’s sense of duty is clearly distorted. She believes as Virginia’s mother it is her duty to raise her in the ways of the European, “culture[,] civilization[,] and intelligence” (130). All of these things, coupled with education, are the tools that Mrs. Smith believes will help her to “gut all the African [out of Virginia] …[and] kill the savage beast [in her]” (240). Ironically, despite Mrs. Smith’s loathing for the African race, she “can not resist the drums….She protect[s] Virginia from the drums, but she love[s] them” (191). In fact, Mrs. Smith does not turn to her educated European doctors to reverse her barrenness. Instead, she turns to the steady beating of the drums. Rather than place her faith in the Catholic religion that she inundates Virginia with, Hilda Smith turns to obeah for the child that her fruitless body cannot bear. Marina notes that she is like most “English people[…] [When they] have problems, they find their way to the same obeahman they want to destroy” (134). As the direct result of obeah, Mrs. Smith gives birth to her only biological child well after her childbearing years. Like Emilia, her turn to obeah requires her to atone for her past grievances. She has to give the land to Virginia and offer her hand in marriage, not as a slave, but as a daughter. Just as the African women of the text must return to their ancestral heritage to reconstruct a more life-affirming version of motherhood in Trinidad, Mrs. Smith has to turn to the beating of the drums to rectify her perversion of motherhood and do her part in upholding the procreative power over that of economic power in colonial Trinidad, not only for the colonial subject, but for the colonizer as well. Nunez-Harrell cleverly uses Hilda Smith to illustrate the manner in which the colonizer also suffers as a result of his crimes against the colonial subject. By depicting her as a barren woman her body serves as a testimony of the consequences that the colonizer must bear for his injustices. Like the African women, Mrs. Smith must not only turn to African religion and culture, but she must play an equal role in restoring the African legacy to the people of Trinidad.

In her novel, Nunez-Harrell employs the ibeji to menace and torment the women ultimately as a means of urging them to embrace their procreative powers and to reject
Western concepts of economic power. Through the ibeji, the women learn the costly lesson that they cannot liberate themselves from economic slavery by abandoning their ancestral heritage and accepting motherhood as a cost for economic freedom. Through the implementation of procreative powers, the women are not only able to subvert colonial constructs of land ownership in order to survive in a system that has been devised to oppress them, but they are able to positively reconstruct motherhood and repair the splintered mother-daughter relationship. Although Nunez Harrell’s novel is set in colonial times, she clearly upholds African traditions and procreative power, not only as a means of obtaining land, but as a model for modern women’s survival. Only by embracing the traditions of their African heritage can the Afro-Trinidadian women finally remember how to dance!
1 Bahadur Tejani observes, “For the Igbo people, from whom she gets her bloodline, children are gifts of the gods and are regarded as a manifestation of the divine (54). See also John Mbiti’s *Introduction to African Religion.* In his discussion of the beliefs surrounding twins throughout the African continent, he stresses the importance of children in African societies.

2 The Yoruba and Igbo of Nigeria refer to the marked belief in this phenomenon as abiku or ogbanje respectively. For the purposes of this study we will refer to these spirit children as abiku since this project is largely concerned with the Yoruba system of beliefs and religious practices, however there will be times when it will become necessary for the term to be interchanged with that of ogbanje.

3 As noted in the introduction, there exists substantial conversation surrounding the proposed belief that the ibeji originated as abiku. Courlander suggests that although talk was indeed generated concerning this phenomenon, “the connection seems to have become vague and uncertain” (Courlander African Folklore 235). The research of both Courlander and Oreune, that concludes that the Yoruba population has the highest birth rate of twins in the world, substantiates the correlation made between the ibeji and the abiku by many people of Yorubaland. In a region where twins are born one out of every twenty-two births, it would not be uncommon for women to give birth to multiple sets of twins. This argument is further corroborated by Houlberg who addresses the practice of the Yoruba to place “…Abiku brass anklets [on the ere ibeji] to prevent the twins from being lured to their deaths by Abiku spirits” (26). She also cites a Yoruba father of twins who speaks of the similarities between the ibeji and the Colobus monkey and their capricious nature. In his contemplation of the manner in which the monkey darts in and out of the trees, he likens this act to the ibeji/abiku “who come[s] down again and go[es] up again…being reborn and dying again” (Houlberg 23).

4 See Christine Barrow’s *Family in the Caribbean,* as well as Rosalyn Terborg-Penn’s *Slavery and Women in Africa and the Diaspora.* Both discuss the manner in which the African woman coerced and manipulated into producing slaves who would help to preserve the institution and further the economic wealth of the colonizers.

5 Although Nunez-Harrell names the Igbo culture as the ancestral culture of Emilia and the African descendants in Trinidad, it is important to note the fact that she pulls from the belief systems of several African tribes including the Igbo, Yoruba, and Dogon. By incorporating the beliefs of several African tribes, she acknowledges the presence of the various tribes of Africa in colonial Trinidad. She seems to draw largely from the traditions of other West African tribes, namely the Yoruba. Although the Igbo did in fact immolate twins, the Yoruba did at one time also follow this practice. The fact that the last set of twins in the novel is not immolated, coupled with the fact that they symbolize new beginnings and bring their mother wealth seems to align the ibeji with the Yoruba beliefs surrounding twins rather than the Igbo. Research also concludes that the African slaves brought to Trinidad were from the Yoruba tribes. As a result, Yoruba traditions have been greatly preserved in Trinidad (See Oreune and Chappel).

6 See Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart.* In his novel, Achebe specifically addresses the Ibo practice of twin infanticide and the belief behind the practice.

7 For more on the role that the Catholic Church played in determining the coloured labor force in the Caribbean, see Williams Chapter 4 “White Capital and Coloured Labour.”

8 Recall the legislation addressed at the beginning of the chapter. See Williams *From Columbus to Castro* pp. 328-9.

9 Christopher Okonkwo makes a similar argument, namely that the death of an abiku/ogbanje, in literature is not always a physical one, but can be implied as well. In his exploration of Morrison’s title character Sula, Okonkwo argues that although Sula only has one physical death in the novel, she also has several implied deaths and rebirths, clearly marking her as an ogbanje.
According to Chinwe Achebe, an abiku can choose to delay the manifestations of its abiku traits until adulthood. Christopher Okonkwo also makes this assertion in his reading of Toni Morrison’s titled protagonist Sula as ogbanje.

Nunez-Harrell includes the encroaching presence of the United States in Trinidad, not just to codify them as a neo-colonial power but also to emphasize the manner that the discovery of oil on the island propelled Trinidad into the global market.

Although Nunez-Harrell refers to the practices of Emilia, Alma, and Harris as obeah, their practices are much more complex than that. The playing of the drums, the ritual, and sacrifice are not elements of Obeah, which is not a religion. Rather they are elements of the Spiritual Baptists or Yoruba-based religions. See Frye, Henry, and Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert.

It is important to note that in many West African societies, particularly that of the Yoruba and the Dogon, it is believed that the birth of both a girl and a boy ibeji, is the sign of new beginnings. This particular ibeji birth is greatly welcomed as it is the belief of some of creation myths that the first humans came from two pairs of ibeji, both pairs consisting of a girl and boy.
Even though the action of Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* takes place almost two centuries after Haiti has procured its independence from France, the legacy of slavery and colonialism remains a formidable twin force in the lives of the Cacos women. Set during the reign of Jean Claude Duvalier, the Cacos women suffer greatly under a regime that utilizes sex as a means of brutally oppressing the women of Haiti. Danticat uses Sophie’s narrative to illustrate the devastating effect that sexual abuse has on the women of Haiti and more poignantly on the mother-daughter relationship. Like the women of Nunez-Harrell’s *When Rocks Dance*, the women of the novel suffer from propertied relationships in Haiti that deny women ownership over their bodies. Through her use of the *marassa*, the disconnection of the mother-daughter relationship is exposed as well as extended to address the disjointed relationship that exists between Haiti and the United States. Unlike Nunez-Harrell, Danticat feels the ibeji relation to motherhood is not procreative but rather represents black female sexuality and self-autonomy. She implements the *marassa* to illustrate how the mothers of Haiti bestow on their daughters a double-edged birthright of sexual abuse and oppression. In this chapter I will argue that Danticat uses the trope of the *marassa* to restore motherhood from a site where women actively participate and perpetuate the ideologies of male domination that is central to maintaining the control and power of Jean Claude Duvalier through a perpetual reign of
fear and terror to a site that is nurturing and protective and serves as a safe space which
the oppressed women of Haiti can find refuge from a brutal dictator and reclaim
ownership of their bodies and their sexuality.

The devalued status of women in Haiti did not begin with Jean Claude Duvalier or
even with his father. Rather, it has been firmly established in the long-standing customs
and traditions of Haiti as exemplified at the birth of a child. The devalued position of a
girl child in Haitian society is emphasized by the darkness into which she is born.
Sophie’s grandmother speaks of the significance of the lantern at the birth of a child. She
tells Sophie, “If it is a boy the lantern will be put outside the shack. If there is a man he
will stay awake all night with the new child […]. If it is a girl, the midwife will cut the
child’s cord and go home. Only the mother will be left in darkness to hold her child.
There will be no lamps, no candles, no more light” (146). This absence of light is
symbolic of the position that Haitian women are expected to assume but, more
importantly, it is symbolic of the agency that these women are denied. Tante Atie
impresses upon Sophie, very early, the desperate situation of Haitian women, making it
clear that “in [their] country there are many good reasons for mothers to abandon their
This observation is significant for numerous reasons, namely because it marks the Haitian
female body as a material possession. It also sets the stage not only for elucidating
Sophie’s relationship to her estranged mother, but also for understanding the
circumstances that mar the mother-daughter relationship for many Haitian women.

In an interview with Renee Shea, Danticat addresses the separation of Haitian
children from their mothers. She states:

Sometimes it’s forced separation, other times separation due to the
problems that have to do with dictatorship; sometimes, it’s abrupt
separations, like death, often violent death […]. People who grew up
without their mothers for one reason or another and then find themselves
reunited with them is a very strong theme in the lives of Haitian women
my age who were separated from their mothers early on. (Shea 382)
These women are stripped not only of autonomy over their bodies, but of their ability to
be mothers to their children as a direct result of Duvalier’s regime. As in the case of
Danticat, many Haitian mothers had to flee the island in order to be able to provide a stable life for their children free of the oppression of a murderous tyrant. This selfless act often required mothers to be separated from their children for many years as they tried to obtain the resources necessary to provide their children with a better life. In the case of Sophie, she is separated from her mother for twelve years before she sends for her.

The treatment of women by the macoutes demonstrates the victimized status of the women in Haiti. Duvalier’s father, Francois Duvalier, bequeathed to his son the Tonton Macoutes, the brutal militia that he organized in order to maintain power. Not only did the macoutes serve as watch guards for Duvalier, but they also instilled fear in the masses as a means of repressing sentiments of insurrection. As demonstrated in Danticat’s novel, the macoutes accomplish this through methods of lawlessness, specifically their victimization of women in Haiti. The treatment of women by Duvalier’s regime punctuated the women’s body as a male possession in Haitian society. She exemplifies their viciousness by portraying her heroines in her novel not as revolutionaries brandishing weapons, rather as subjugated women victimized and silenced by the murderous regime. Danticat relates to her reader the mystical history of the Tonton Macoute, who “in the fairy tales, […] was a bogey man, a scarecrow with human flesh. He wore denim overalls and carried a cutlass and a knapsack made of straw. In his knapsack, he always had scraps of naughty children, whom he dismembered to eat as snacks” (138). It is from this mythical figure that Duvalier’s regime received their name, instilling fear from their very conception. Our first introduction to the macoutes is of them verbally and physically abusing the coal seller Dessaline. Sophie’s grandmother pulls her away noting that “[she] already know[s] the end” (118). Although Danticat uses Dessaline’s murder to set the stage for her criticism of the macoutes, her most scathing critique concerns their treatment of women in Haiti.

When Sophie returns to her country before she can make it home, a macoute makes an obscene gesture and blows her a kiss. As degrading as this behavior is, it is nothing compared to the more heinous crimes that they act out against Haitian women, protected by the knowledge that they will never be held accountable for their actions. Danticat illustrates their brazenness toward women. She writes:
Ordinary criminals walked naked in the night. They slicked their bodies with oil so they could slip through most fingers. But the Macoutes, they did not hide. When they entered a house, they asked to be fed, demanded the woman of the house, and forced her into her own bedroom. Then all you heard was screams until it was her daughter’s turn. If a mother refused, they would make her sleep with her son and brother or even her own father. (139)

This behavior is manifested in the rape of Martine. Although it is not known who rapes Martine, Sophie notes that it could have easily been a macoute.

After the rape, Martine is traumatized. She begins to show signs of mental instability that is intensified with her impending pregnancy. Martine loses her grasp on reality and is haunted by her nightmares that never cease. Her mother tries to free her of her burden by “[making her] drink all kinds of herbs, vervain, quinine, and verbena, baby poisons” (190). Martine also tries to rid herself of the baby. She tells Sophie, “I tried beating my stomach with wooden spoons. I tried to destroy you, but you wouldn’t go away” (190). Because they cannot destroy the unwanted baby, Martine continues to slip away from reality, triggering her mother to send her to a family friend’s house to work and live in hopes that the baby will not destroy her. Eventually her mother seizes the opportunity to send her daughter to the United States in hopes that she will be liberated of her nightmares.

It is not by accident that Martine begins to regain her sanity when it is time for her to leave Haiti. Her migration affords her the opportunity to flee Haiti, which she inextricably ties to her traumatizing rape. By fleeing, she is able to reclaim her life and escape the political system that is responsible for her brutalization. Her site of exile, the United States, is important to the text because the relationship between Haiti and the United States serves as an extension of the marassa relationship. It is a twin affiliation that much like the marassa is fraught with the tension that exists between nurture and torture. Much like the United States occupation of Haiti, for Martine, the United States is a site of nurture as it rescues her from her impending break from reality that is inevitable in Haiti. However, her exile leaves her utterly fragmented, as she remains disconnected from her Haitian culture. Even though Martine still suffers from her nightmares, she is
able to maintain her sanity and create a life for herself. Her love for daffodils is testimony to Martine’s ability to survive. Martine loves daffodils because like her they must change and adapt to their surroundings in order to survive. Atie explains to Sophie the history of daffodils in Haiti. She tells her:

[She] loved daffodils because they grew in a place that they were not supposed to. They were really European flowers, French buds and stems, meant for colder climates. A long time ago, a French woman had brought them to Croix-des-Rosets and planted them there. A strain of daffodils had grown that could withstand the heat, but they were the color of pumpkins and golden summer squash, as though they had acquired a bronze tinge from the skin of the natives who adopted them. (21)

Like the daffodils Martine must adjust to New York, to life after the rape, if she is to survive. Survival becomes an important theme in the novel. Martine’s strength and ability to reclaim her life is evident when she sends for her daughter, who has the face of her rapist. Sophie’s presence makes the nightmares “stronger […] because [it is] the first time [she is] seeing that face” (170). Despite the fact that her daughter’s presence intensifies her nightmares, Martine is able to make a life with her daughter. In fact her life depends on it.

We are first introduced to the **marassa** when Martine begins to test Sophie. In the Haitian voudoun culture, the **marassa** are marked by their unwillingness to be separated. Twins in Haitian culture are often dressed alike and treated in a like manner to indicate that they should never be separated because it is believed that should the **marassa** become divided, they can wreak havoc in a most devastating manner. In the novel, Danticat utilizes the **marassa** to illuminate the tension that exists in the mother-daughter relationship, the struggle to find a balance between nurture and torture. Representing the connection between mother and daughter, there are several implied ibeji throughout the text: Martine and Sophie; Grandma Ifé and Martine; Grandma Ifé and Atie; and Sophie and Brigitte. However, the **marassa** relationship that exists between Martine and Sophie is the most didactic. When Martine tests Sophie for the first time, she tells her the story of the **marassa**:
The Marassas were two inseparable lovers. They were the same person, duplicated in two. They looked the same, talked the same, walked the same. When they laughed, they even laughed the same and when they cried, their tears were identical. When one went to the stream, the other rushed under the water to get a better look. When one looked in the mirror, the other walked behind the glass to mimic her. What vain lovers they were, those Marassas. Admiring one another for being so much alike, for being copies. When you love someone you want him to be closer to you than your Marassa. Closer than your shadow. You want him to be your soul […] You and I we could be like Marassas. (84-5)

It is not until Martine begins to subject Sophie to the tests that it becomes overwhelmingly clear that Martine’s sanity hinges on her relationship with her daughter. In Binding the Narrative Thread, Nancy Gerber observes “Martine’s invocation of the Marassas, […] signifies her inability to distinguish the boundaries between herself and Sophie and inscribes her fear that Sophie will abandon her for Joseph” (194). Danticat employs the use of the marassa to magnify the tension that exists within the realm of the mother-daughter relationship, as the oppressive marassa “leav[es] indelible emotional and psychological scars as its victim[s] can no longer distinguish between maternal nurture and maternal torture” (Mardorossian 25). For Martine, the marassa represents the restoration of her relationship with her daughter. And true to the nature of the marassa, when she learns that Sophie is seeing Joseph behind her back, she becomes furiously jealous and invokes the marassa as a means of securing her bond with Sophie, ultimately extending her rape and sexual oppression onto Sophie.4

Danticat alludes to the oppressive nature of the marassa very early in the text. As a young child, Sophie’s dreams provide the reader with a preview of the stifling relationship that she will experience with her mother. She says of her mother in her dreams, “She would chase me through a field of wildflowers as tall as the sky. When she caught me, she would try to squeeze me into the small frame so I could be in the picture with her. I would scream and scream until my voice gave out, then Tantie Atie would come and save me from her grasp” (8). After moving to New York, Sophie would understand the significance of her dreams, but Tantie Atie would not be there to save her.
The night before she leaves Haiti to be reunited with her mother, her dreams change. Her mother is still chasing her, but this time “Tantie Atie […]can not see [her]” (28).

Although the tests are implemented to preserve the marassa bond between mother and daughter, it has cultural implications as well. The tests serve as a cultural marker for Haitian attitudes towards female body as a propertied or material object. Through the tests, it becomes undeniably clear that the value of a Haitian woman lies in her ability to attract perspective Haitian husbands. This obsession with virginity identifies the Haitian woman’s body as an object to be possessed. Even though Martine flees from Haiti, she does not flee from these cultural identifiers. In Brooklyn, she immerses herself in a Haitian community and raises her daughter with Haitian values and ideals. For Sophie, living in a state of hybridity is a difficult task. Like many children of immigrants, it is very difficult for Sophie to adjust to Haitian customs in a foreign land. Danticat speaks of this in her interview with Shea when she comments:

> When parents come from another country and are living in a place where their role is so different, then they have extra barriers to this friendship [with their children] because you have not only generational problems but these cultural things. Then conflicts arise. A lot of parents want to live the way they did back home, but the children are living in a different time. (Shea 384)

Such is the case for Martine and Sophie. Martine is determined that Sophie will not be like American girls. She tells Marc, “She is not going to be running wild like those American girls” (56). Indeed, she has greater plans for her daughter. Martine looks to Sophie to avenge the Cacos women for the wrongs that were committed against them. She tells Sophie, “You are going to work hard here […]. You have a chance to become the kind of woman Atie and I have always wanted to be. If you make something of yourself in life, we will all succeed. You can raise our heads” (44). But for Sophie, living in America, it becomes difficult to make sense of certain aspects of her Haitian culture, particularly the custom of testing their daughters. Sophie feels degraded by these tests and as a result, re-appropriates the marassa as doubling “someone [who] is doubly a person but really one person—as opposed to the twins who are really two people” (Shea 385). This act of doubling allows her to endure her mother’s tests and later, sex with her
husband, affirming, “people make separations within themselves to allow very painful experiences” (Shea 385). This understanding of doubling becomes essential not only in her quest to survive her tests but in understanding the painful history of Haiti as well. By making separations, the phenomenon of doubling lends to Sophie an alternative corpus for understanding how Haitian dictators such as Jean Claude Duvalier can terrorize and murder their own people. However, the desired effect of the doubling is ephemeral. In a violent attempt to free her self from the tests, she tears away her “veil” and begins her quest towards liberation for herself and all Haitian women. When her husband is incapable of understanding why she would inflict such pain on herself, Sophie notes, “I could not explain to him that it was like breaking manacles, an act of freedom” (130). However, shortly after, Sophie learns the wake of disaster and pain that results from separating the marassa, from splitting the soul in two, because although this act rescues Sophie from her mother’s tests it does not free her from her shame. When Grandma Ifé questions whether her mother tested her, Sophie angrily replies, “I call it humiliation […] I hate my body. I am ashamed to show it to anybody, including my husband” (123). Her disdain for her body is discernable not only in her inability to have sex with her husband but also in her bulimia as well. As Gerber observes, “Sophie internalizes Martine’s fear and self-hatred, the twin legacies of her mother’s rape” (188). Indeed, it is this fear and self-hatred that she is struggling to overcome.

Although Joseph is unable to comprehend his wife’s violent act, Martine clearly understands her desperation. When Sophie questions her as to why she tests her, Martine’s only defense is to return to Haitian custom. Expressing her disdain for the practice, she tells Sophie, “I realize standing here that the two greatest pains of my life are very much related. The one good thing about my being raped was that it made the testing stop” (170). Martine’s tests and rape are related because they are the direct result of female domination by a patriarchal society. They represent the “double” subjugation of the Haitian female body. The tests symbolize the manner in which women must be kept pure for the honor of their husband and the rape represents the female body as a pleasurable object for Haitian men. As disturbing as Martine’s rape is, the testing of Haitian daughters by Haitian mothers is equally disturbing. The mothers of the text are interpolated into the patriarchal dominated society in such a manner that they become
accomplices in the female subjugation and sexual oppression of Haitian women. As Carine Mardorossian notes, “the traditional way of life depicted in Breath, Eyes, Memory [is...] unequivocally oppressive” (25). This becomes abundantly clear as Grandma Ifé tries to explain the Haitian culture’s obsession with virginity, imparting to Sophie that a daughter’s virginity is a symbol of honor for her family. She tells Sophie, “If a child dies, you do not die. But if your child is disgraced, you are disgraced” (17). In Haiti, an honorable mother will preserve her daughter’s chastity to assure that her daughter will one day become an acceptable Haitian wife. She stresses to Sophie, “From the time a girl begins to menstruate to the time you turn her over to her husband, the mother is responsible for her purity. If I give a soiled daughter to her husband, he can shame my family, speak evil of me, even bring her back to me” (156 my emphasis). As Mardorossian notes, “It is as if the characters are watching themselves perpetuate a cultural practice they know to be problematic and can comment on it but not stop it” (27). In Rewriting Folklore, Marie- José N’Zengou-Tayo asserts that the women in the novel do nothing to stop this vicious cycle because they lack “the strength to devise a new model” (130). The fact that the mother is responsible for her daughter’s chastity, and not the father’s responsibility, is telling of the manner in which the Haitian mother is victimized by the oppressive patriarchal society. As determined by cultural traditions imposed by the men of Haiti, the women must actively concede to participate in the degradation of their daughters to ensure that the hierarchal power structure of Haiti does not shift. In essence, by internalizing the values of Haitian men, Haitian women are powerless to break the yoke of sexual oppression. The Haitian mother bears the burden of sexual oppression not only for her self, but for the future generations of Haitian women as well.

Even though Danticat explains the significance of a women’s virtue in Haiti, she makes it very clear that she rejects the “virginity cult” and the degradation that its daughters are subjected to by telling the story of a virgin who did not bleed. She writes:

[She was] chosen […] out of hundreds of prettier girls because she was untouched. For the wedding night, he bought her the whitest sheets and nightgowns he could possibly find. […] Then came their wedding night. The girl did not bleed. The man had his reputation to defend […] So he
took a knife and cut her between her legs to get some blood to show. […] The blood kept flowing […] it wouldn’t stop. Finally drained of all of her blood, the girl died. Later, during her funeral procession, her blood soaked sheets were paraded by her husband to show that she had been a virgin on her wedding night. (155)

This story demonstrates that in Haiti, a women’s worth is measured by the honor that she bestows upon her husband.⁵

The marassa relationship that exists between Grandma Ifé and Atie also deserves special attention. Similar to the other marassa relationships in the novel, Grandma Ifé and Tantie Atie’s relationship is torn apart by the dual nature of the ibeji, torture versus nature and loyalty versus duty. Although it does not play as large a role as Martine and Sophie’s mother-daughter relationship, it contributes greatly to the mother-daughter discourse. Like Martine and Sophie, Grandma Ifé and Atie’s relationship is marked by separation. Atie leaves La Nouvelle Dame Marie to live in Croix-des-Rosets for the benefit of Sophie’s schooling. When she returns to live with her mother, great conflicts arise. Grandma Ifé resents the relationship that Atie has with Louise. She views Louise as an obstacle that lies between their marassa relationship. So much that she belittles Atie’s desire to learn to read and write and to register herself in the village’s archives so that people will know she lived there. Ifé’s opposition to Louise is not solely based on the fact that she monopolizes Atie’s time, but also based on the fact that she encourages Atie to no longer define her by a patriarchal value system. Although Grandma Ifé claims that she does not want Atie to remain with her out of duty instead of love, her actions show differently. Interpolated by a Haitian patriarchal society, Ifé takes every action to prevent the separation of their marassa bond, and ultimately prevents Atie from liberating herself from her subjugated position. This is evident in the manner that she raises Atie. Atie tells Sophie that early on she was taught the purpose of her ten fingers. Sophie recounts:

The men in this area, they insist that their women are virgins and have ten fingers.

According to Tantie Atie, each finger has a purpose. It was the way she had been taught to prepare herself to become a woman. Mothering.
Boiling. Loving. Baking. Nursing. Frying. Healing. Washing. Ironing. Scrubbing. It wasn’t her fault, she said her ten fingers had been named for her even before she was born. Sometimes, she even wished she had six fingers on each hand so she could have two left for herself. (151)

Ifé teaches Atie at a young age that she is a possession of a male-dominated Haitian society. Even the unpleasant childhood stories, told by her mother, contradicted her father’s stories that encouraged her to dream. When Martine tries to rationalize the reasoning for her mother’s dismal tales, Atie quickly responds, “Young girls, they should be allowed to keep their pleasant stories” (165). She resents Ifé for robbing her of her youthful innocence to prepare her to be an oppressed woman in Haitian society. And just like Martine and Sophie, Atie resents the tests that she is subjected to in order to keep her pure. Indeed, Ifé is so angered by Atie’s refusal to except her position as subjugated woman, that she buys Louise’s pig to ensure that their bond will not be broken, making it clear that the only acceptable reason for Atie to leave her, to separate the marassa, would be marriage. Ifé tells Sophie, “If she had married there, would she not have stayed?” (192). Gerber suggests that “her reference to marriage implies that she cannot accept Atie’s failure to marry” as that is what she raised her to do (192-3). It is not until Sophie’s return to Haiti that Grandma Ifé begins to recognize the worth of her daughters.

Mimicking her mother’s journey, fleeing from her site of trauma, Sophie has to return to Haiti. Although she understands that “some people need to forget […] she need[s] to remember” (95). Sophie is able to return to Haiti because, unlike her mother, her trauma is not linked to her native land, rather the answers are. Sophie returns to Haiti in search of the answer that will allow her to reconstruct the mother-daughter/marassa for her daughter Brigitte, the women of her family, and the women of Haiti as well. Even more so she wants to ensure that her daughter will not be scared of the night like she and Martine. Sophie’s journey is a journey that ultimately brings the four generations of Cacos women together and begins the process that will repair the torn soul of the marassa. It reunites the family after being dispersed by Martine’s rape. This is evident in the retitling of the family land. Grandma Ifé insists on having the deed redone so that all of the Cacos women will own a piece of the land, to ensure that she will bequeath her daughters a new inheritance. Ironically, just as Sophie’s grandmother has passed down
the legacy of sexual trauma and oppression, she also bequeaths to her daughters the legacy of African ancestry that is instrumental in their healing and ultimately their ability to rewrite the mother-daughter discourse by transforming the marassa from oppressive to nurturing female bonds.

Grandma Ifé’s significance to the novel is indicated by Danticat’s choice for her name. She is named after the first Yoruba state “Ife, a town in southwestern Nigeria. […] According to Yoruba legend, Ife is the site of humankind’s genesis, the place at which land was created from the flooding waters” (Gerber 191). It also invokes the Ifa divination that is the basis for the Yoruba religion. Thus, Sophie is not only returning to Haiti, but she is returning to Africa as well. When Grandma Ifé becomes fully aware of the pain and trauma that she has caused in her daughter’s lives, she turns to Africa through the religion of Voudoun. Voudoun brings the Cacos women together by re-connecting them to their African heritage and creating a space that is more conducive to surviving spatial restrictions and spatial regressions imposed by men that ultimately silence their voice. Paradoxically, the Cacos women invert Duvalier’s use of Voudoun and their African heritage by invoking Africa for the strength necessary for survival.

Knowing that Sophie has returned to Haiti to break the perpetuated cycle of sexual trauma enacted against the daughters of Haiti, Ifé gives her a statue of the Loa Erzulie, not only to make amends for her humiliation caused by the tests, but also to inspire her to carve out a new inheritance. The invocation of Erzulie is symbolic of the fruition of the reconstruction of the mother-daughter relationship. When Sophie returns to America with her mother and the statue of Erzulie, she is finally able to embrace the marassa, which she so desperately wanted to destroy. She reflects, “Even though she had forced it on me, of her sudden will, we were now even more than friends. We were twins, in spirit. Marassas” (200). Sophie finally acknowledges and accepts that the marassa is one soul that cannot be divided. Thus, just as she embraces Erzulie she must accept the marassa as part of her Haitian/African heritage. By upholding the marassa, Sophie takes ownership of her body and her sexuality, effectively subverting this propertied relationship of the female body in Haiti. It is also at this time that Sophie is finally able to call Haiti “home” (195).
For Martine, her return to Haiti is much more distressing than that of Sophie’s. Living in America, she longs for the Haiti of her youth and feels displaced. Her sense of displacement is apparent when she sings the lyrics of her favorite spiritual, “Sometimes I feel like a mother less child […] A long ways from home” (215). In fact, she never gives up on the “feeling that Haiti will get back on its feet one day, but [she’ll] be dead before it happens” (66). Her pessimistic attitude is indicative of her strong desire not to return to Haiti. Because she so closely connects her rape to her native land, she cannot revisit her home without revisiting her trauma. She tells Sophie, “There are ghosts there that I can’t face, things that are still very painful for me” (78). For Martine, Haiti represents everything that she lost on that fatal day. She is reminded of this when she is forced to return to Haiti in pursuit of Sophie. As she and Atie reminisce about their childhood, their father, and their innocent hopes and dreams, she cannot escape the pain of her robbed innocence. She dismisses their nostalgia by reminding Atie that “[they] come from a place […] where in one instant, you can lose your father and all of your dreams” (165). Martine is unable to be restored to the Haiti of her innocence until her death, a moment that she looks forward to.

Martine often reminds her mother and Sophie that she wants to be buried in Haiti, viewing her death as a means of reconciling her to her native land and her native ancestry. Martine desires to return to Haiti just as the African slaves desired to return to Guinea. Her need to return to Guinea is also indicative of the fact that Martine’s vindication from the sexual abuse imposed on her by a brutal regime, can only be realized in her death when she can finally return to Haiti without fear. It also emphasizes, as indicated earlier, the marassa relationship between the United States and Haiti. Despite the fact that the United States grants her amnesty she can never reconcile it as home as it will always symbolize her displacement. Danticat makes it abundantly clear that Martine’s death, although tragic, restores her to Guinea and frees her of her pain. Joseph describes the Negro spirituals that Martine loves so much, as “ha[ving] to do with freedom, going to another world […] that other world meant home, Africa. […] More often it meant freedom” (215). Martine’s death liberates her not only from her nightmares, but frees her from the abiku child she is carrying, a child that symbolizes the man that raped her, that is still lashing out to destroy her. For Martine, her unborn child
represents her body as a possession for lustful Haitian men. Her rape has not only stripped her of ownership of her body but also denied her the power of her sexuality as well. Martine makes it very clear that she does not enjoy sex with Marc but complies with his desires so that he will stay with her during the night, to protect her from her nightmares. Her relationship to Marc extends her rape, which is manifested in her pregnancy. She tells Sophie that carrying the baby “[is] like getting raped every night” (190). That night in the bathroom, her final act liberates her and allows her to finally return to Haiti, to Guinea and to reclaim ownership of her body from oppressive Haitian men.9

Understanding the significance of her mother’s death, Sophie dresses her in a ghastly red outfit, a color representative of the Loa Erzulie. Sophie knows that “it [is] too loud a color for burial […] She would look like a Jezebel, hot-blooded Erzulie who feared no men, but rather made them her slaves, raped them, and killed them. She was the only woman with that power” (227). When Marc comments on her mother’s attire, she responds, “She is going to Guinea […] or she is going to be a star. She’s going to be a butterfly or a lark in a tree. She’s going to be free” (227). By referencing the butterfly and the lark in the tree, Sophie is referencing the stories that her grandmother told her. They are stories of women who suffer greatly at the hands of a patriarchal-dominated society, yet somehow they manage to survive, much like her mother.

Sophie’s final journey to Haiti, to bury her mother, completes the rewriting of the history of the Cacos women, no longer threatened by the torturous marassa. Instead they have learned to embrace the marassa by learning to value their daughters. As Sophie runs from her mother’s grave site, she no longer “runs past” the site of her mother’s rape, rather she runs to the site. As she beats the cane with her shoes, bystanders watch as if she is a woman possessed. Only Grandma Ifé and Tantie Atie understand that she is confronting the spirit that kept the marassa divided, split their souls in two. Together, bonded as mother and daughter, Grandma Ifé and Atie signify her “breaking of manacles” by shouting, “Ou libere? Are you free?” (233). It is not until Martine passes into Guinea, that Sophie can confront her demons and embody the characteristics of the mighty Erzulie, bequeathing Brigitte and the future generations of Cacos women, a new legacy to inherit.
Under Jean Claude Duvalier, the Tonton Macoutes would be renamed the *Volontaires de la Sécurité National* in attempt to disassociate themselves with the heinous acts they performed at the request of Francois Duvalier. However, the name change in no way altered the crimes they committed against the people during the reign of Jean Claude.

In 1825 the Haitian government reached an agreement with France to pay 150 million francs in order to be recognized as a sovereign state and avoid further invasion. In 1838, the debt would be reduced to 60 million francs, an exorbitant amount that they still could not afford to pay. The United States helped to relieve Haiti of their financial burden paving the way for a US occupation. The occupation began in 1917 as a mission to build a stable financial infrastructure for the country but it quickly became apparent that the United States was imposing themselves upon the Haitian people as a neo-colonial presence.

In an interview with Bonnie Lyons, Edwidge Danticat speaks of experiences that motivated her to write the story of the Cacos women. She says, “Among some of the women I have met who have suffered profoundly, like during the dictatorship, there is a feeling that they should be grateful just to have survived, because there are others who didn’t survive” (Lyons 196).

In *Rewriting Folklore: Traditional beliefs and Popular Culture in Edwidge Danticat’s Breath, Eyes, Memory and Krik? Krak!* Marie-José N’Zengou-Tayo asserts that in *BEM*, Danticat’s “retelling of the Marassa story has nothing in common with the Voudou representation of the Iwas as children, nor with traditional stories surrounding twin’s behavior and power” (130). Although there is not a physical set of ibeji in the text, Danticat does rely on the traditional beliefs of the ibeji, namely the destructive wake that results from efforts to separate the ibeji. In her interview with Renee Shea, Danticat tells a brief history of the African belief in the ibeji. She also speaks of her use of the ibeji in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* “I wanted to use all connotations of the twins” (385). Even though at times she does appropriate the beliefs surrounding the marassa to serve various purposes in the text, she also allows the ibeji to function in accordance with Yoruba/Voudoun beliefs.

The man’s honor was clearly more important than his wife’s life. Thus virginity becomes a form of dowry paid to the Haitian man to receive his bride.

Erzulie is a goddess that is often described as coquettish and symbolizes the empowerment of women, as she possesses great power over men. She is directly derived from the Dahomean goddess Ezili.

The African slaves often referred to Africa as Guinea and often saw death as the only way to return to Africa.

I refer to the child she is carrying as an abiku, because it is indeed a spirit returning to her. She compares the unborn child to Sophie and the torture she felt while carrying her. She also states the child has a man’s voice, suggesting that he is the spirit of the man that raped her.

Although Martine’s suicide is described in liberatory terms, it is problematic to read her death under the discourse of liberation. Her death, although symbolic, is testimony that she cannot be liberated of her subjugated status in Haiti.
CHAPTER 3

DISSOLVING NATIONS: REUNITING THE DIASPORA IN CRISTINA GARCIA’S
DREAMING IN CUBAN

I resent the hell out of the politicians and the generals who force events on us that structure our lives, that dictate the memories we’ll have when we’re old. Every day Cuba fades a little more inside me. And there’s only my imagination where our history should be.
--Cristina Garcia Dreaming in Cuban

In this quote, Garcia’s protagonist, Pilar, expresses her outrage with El Líder and the manner that his revolution has negatively shaped the lives of Cuban women, both those who remain on the island as well as those in exile. Garcia uses Pilar, as well as the other women of the del Pino family, to illustrate the effects of Castro’s revolution on the women of Cuba. She is specifically concerned with the division that arises between mothers and daughters as a result of the “force[d] events” that occur in their lives, the forced migrations that seem to permanently scatter the del Pino women. The women of the novel have been dispersed and scattered in their native land and across oceans by sexual trauma, opposing national allegiances, and racial attitudes that are a direct result of Fidel Castro’s revolution. The del Pino women are clearly suffering under this complex political system of patriarchal domination created in the aftermath of Castro’s triumph.

In her novel, Garcia is concerned not only with the effect that separation from exile has on the Cuban family, specifically the mother-daughter relationship, but she is also heavily invested in procuring the remedy that will rectify the damaging legacy of a revolution that divided a nation. Thus, in my exploration of Dreaming in Cuban, I will argue that Garcia employs the ibeji and Santería as a call for a new kind of birth that shapes a new form of independence outside of the domesticity that plagues the women of When Rocks Dance and Breath, Eyes, Memory. She emphasizes the need to create a new space that will allow for an alternative or material and maternal construct of (post)nation to exist free of Cuba’s socialism or the imperialism of the United States. Through her implementation of Santería and the ibeji, Garcia instigates ritual sacrifice to reunite the del Pino women who are dispersed as a result of opposing national allegiances that have been imposed upon them by a political system that hinges on the effective meting out of
patriarchal control. It provides the del Pino women with a means of survival in an oppressive patriarchal order that is Cuba and brings together the fragments of people and places that are associated with the Cuban diaspora.

The success of Castro’s revolution in 1959 thus serves as a pivotal point in the lives of the del Pino women. Although Castro’s revolution and consequent dictatorship is best known for his re-appropriation of land, there is another facet of Castro’s revolution that is often overlooked.\footnote{Castro’s revolution was not only an economic revolution but a cultural revolution as well. He encouraged the promotion of Afro-Cuban culture, music, language, and religion. But he did not stop there. He forged ties with Africa and declared Cuba an Afro-Latin country. Like Francois Duvalier, he placed the Yoruba religions of Cuba at the forefront of Cuban culture and society. Castro was even initiated as a \textit{Santero (babalawo)} in the Santería religion. As a result, Santería \textit{was [no longer] relegated to a subaltern status} (Ayorinde 78).} Castro’s revolution was not only an economic revolution but a cultural revolution as well. He encouraged the promotion of Afro-Cuban culture, music, language, and religion. But he did not stop there. He forged ties with Africa and declared Cuba an Afro-Latin country. Like Francois Duvalier, he placed the Yoruba religions of Cuba at the forefront of Cuban culture and society. Castro was even initiated as a \textit{Santero (babalawo)} in the Santería religion. As a result, Santería \textit{was [no longer] relegated to a subaltern status} (Ayorinde 78).\footnote{His promotion of African culture and religion were crucial to the goals of his revolution for numerous reasons. The success of the revolution hinged on Castro’s ability to rally the masses to fight for his cause. The disenfranchised masses were largely comprised of African descendants. Castro was able to win their support by elevating their status in a society that had previously turned a blind eye to their suffering. Herminia Delgado expresses the sentiments of the African descendants:}

\begin{quote}
Things have gotten better under the revolution, that much I can say. In the old days when voting time came, the politicians would tell us we were all the same, one happy family. Every day though, it was another story. The whiter you were, the better off you were. Anybody could see that. There’s more respect these days. I’ve been at the battery factory almost twenty years now, since right after the revolution, and I supervise forty-two women. It’s not much, maybe, but it’s better than mopping floors or taking care of another woman’s children instead of my own. One thing hasn’t changed: the men are still in charge. Fixing that is going to take a lot longer than twenty years. (185)
\end{quote}

Herminia clearly marks the progression of African descendants in Cuba, who in the War of 1912, “were hunted down day and night like animals, and finally hung by their genitals
from the lampposts in Guáimaro” (185). Her narrative is in stark contrast to that of Lourdes, who clearly lived a privileged life before the revolution. They represent the opposing sides of an internal struggle that Castro has set into motion. By elevating the status of Africans in Cuba, Castro was successful in driving out the upper- and middle-class Spanish descendants, the faction of the Cuban population that posed the most perilous threat to his rise to power. His willingness to be rid of dissenter is indicated in Garcia’s re-enactment of the fleeing of Cubans to the Peruvian Embassy on April 4, 1980 when Castro allowed the embassy to open their doors to those who desired to leave. 

Despite the differences, where Herminia and Lourdes’ narratives intersect is the lack of control and authority Cuban women have not only over their personal autonomy or their bodies too, but also in contributing to the task of nation-building. Even though Lourdes attempts to rebel against El Líder’s dictatorship, she is quickly reminded that a woman has no say in the political affairs of the country. Her lamentation for the loss of land and status juxtaposed with Herminia’s narrative of the treatment of African descendants before the revolution, places the tensions between the Spanish and African descendants of Cuba at the forefront of this discussion as the issue of race not only divides the country, but it also plays a central role in the competing ideologies that keep the del Pino women divided.

Unlike the previous two novels under study, Garcia chooses to add to the complexities of the mother-daughter relationship. She achieves this by developing father-daughter, husband-wife, and mother-son relationships. That is, the men, who are ostensibly absent from When Rocks Dance and Breath, Eyes, Memory, play a central role in Dreaming in Cuban. Rocio Davis suggests that Garcia chooses to include the male family members to emphasize the devalued role of women in Cuban society. This is demonstrated in the mother-son relationships depicted in the novel. Both Celia and Felicia seem to love and nurture their sons more than their daughters. Even Lourdes mourns for her son who “would have helped her in the bakery without complaint. He would have come to her for guidance, pressed her hand to his cheek, told her he loved her. [She] would have talked to her son the way Rufino talks to Pilar, for companionship” (129). In Back to the Future, Davis describes the role of sons in Cuban families. She writes:
Sons tend to be revered over daughters in these families […]. Sons traditionally enjoy preferential treatment […], though fathers are also inclined to pamper their daughters. The latter are, nevertheless viewed by the mothers as extensions of themselves and are therefore treated more harshly, for they have to learn to be prepared for life. On the contrary, mothers openly indulge their sons, the future of the family and country. (8)

Although the value of the son in Cuban families undoubtedly adds to this strained mother-daughter relationship, there are many other factors that contribute to this discourse. The women of the del Pino family are victimized not only by El Líder’s regime, but also by the men in their lives.

Lourdes’ daughter, Pilar, tells the reader that she “know[s] what her grandmother dreams. Of massacres in distant countries, pregnant women dismembered in the squares” (218). The fact that Celia relates her dreams to Pilar “suggests that the women are bound to one another in part by a mutual commitment to record and rectify cultural injustices” (Leonard 194). Their desire to rescue these women is an undeniable act of mothering, further supporting my argument that mothering is not limited to the biological act. Celia, the matriarch of the family, desires to save these women from the fate that she cannot protect herself from. This is demonstrated several times throughout the book. When Celia is on the train and witnesses a man molest a young girl, she “cri[es] out” scaring the man away (54). But Celia’s most significant attempts are her attempts to rescue her own daughters from patriarchal control. This is evident in the life-altering decision she makes when she learns that she is pregnant. Celia decides that if she has a son, as she desires, she will leave and go to Spain to find Gustavo, her lost love. However, if the child is a girl, “[s]he [will] not abandon a daughter to this life, but train her to read the columns of blood and numbers in men’s eyes, to understand the morphology of survival” (42). Ironically, although she sacrifices her happiness to protect Lourdes from patriarchal domination, Lourdes will reject her for failing as a mother. In fact, Lourdes comes to serve as an extension of the domination Celia faces at the hands of her husband, Jorge.

Early in her marriage, Celia’s husband sets out to punish her for loving the Spaniard. He is angered by her pining and leaves her with his viscous mother and sister
as a way of torturing her. This torture ultimately leads to her indifference towards Lourdes and her consequent stay at a mental institution. Jorge admits to Lourdes, in one of his nightly visits, “A part of me wanted to punish her. For the Spaniard. I tried to kill her, Lourdes. I wanted to kill her. I wanted to break her, may God forgive me. [...] it was done” (195). Despite her father’s confession, Lourdes still rejects her mother for failing to nurture her as a child. In *The Journey Home*, Ibis Gomez-Vega observes that his “admission of his attempt to destroy his wife reinforces the notion that the malaise of Cuba’s past is deeply rooted in the Cuban man’s treatment of women, in the Cuban society’s silent acceptance of male dominance” (80).

Celia is all too familiar with the Cuba’s “silent acceptance of male domination.” Her marriage to Jorge is not her first experience with male domination and female subjugation. Celia’s early childhood is absorbed with the knowledge of her father’s two families. The fact that her father has sired two families that live less than a mile away from each other is telling of the freedom and control Cuban men have over the lives of Cuban women. But what is most disturbing for Celia is the complacency in which the women accept and participate in their subjugation. She states, “[T]hey never acknowledged one another, not even in the village church, with its six splintering pews” (92). Her mother’s status in her relationship with Celia’s father also contributes greatly to her abandonment by her mother. When her parents finally divorce, they disperse their children between various relatives. Celia describes the lack of emotion displayed by her mother the last time she sees her. She writes, “Of my mother I remember next to nothing, only hard eyes that seemed to float like relics in her forehead, and her voice, so queer and feathery. When she put me on the day-break train to Havana, I called to her from the window but she didn’t turn around. I watched her back in a striped blue dress round a corner” (100). Celia’s abandonment by her mother leaves her a legacy of troubled mother-daughter relationships shaped by the subjugated role that women possess in a male-dominated Cuban society. Indeed, on her journey to Havana, at the age of four, Celia “los[es] her mother’s face, the lies that complicated her mouth” (92).

The fissure between Celia and Lourdes is exemplified by their individual relationships to El Líder. Celia is devoted to the revolution and the goals of the dictatorship. Lourdes is vehemently opposed to the dictator. In fact, Lourdes is one of
the wealthy Spanish who is stripped of her land and ultimately the son she so desperately wants. Lourdes miscarries her child while being attacked by a soldier of the regime. He rapes her and carves an illegible message on her stomach. At first glance, this scene seems to echo the rape of Martine in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. They are both raped by a soldier of a dictator’s regime that leads to their exile and loathing towards their native land. However, there is one major difference that exists. Lourdes is a Spanish woman raped by a man from the Oriente. She recognizes the accent in his voice. Gomez-Vega informs us, “Oriente is populated among the lowest of the low-class Cubans. Oriente is populated by descendants of slaves, of Taino Indians who survived the Spaniards, and of Haitian blacks who come into the country illegally and mix in with the rest of the mulatto population in that province” (92). Considering the history of Oriente, it is safe to assume, a man of African descent rapes Lourdes, a man who subsequently is reclaiming land from the Spanish landowner to restore it to the African and Indigenous populations of Cuba. But what is even more striking about this scene is that even in the thrusts of her rape, Lourdes concerns herself with class and race distinctions. Her attitude towards blacks is very similar to that of her father. Jorge refuses to go to his daughter Felicia’s wedding to a black man and ultimately severs all ties to his daughter, further magnifying the racial tensions that exist in Cuba.

When Celia gives birth to Felicia, she decides that she will rectify the errors that she made with Lourdes. She recognizes that Lourdes’ resentment towards her is a direct result of her unwillingness to be a mother to her, “to remember her name.” More importantly, Celia understands that her inability to nurture Lourdes is inextricably connected to her abandonment by her mother. She knows first hand the pain that Lourdes has experienced at her hands, and she clearly understands that the oppressive relationship with her husband Jorge has had the greatest impact on her failed ability to be a mother. For Celia, the birth of her daughter resigns her to a life in a marriage that is emblematic of the patriarchal order of Cuba. She describes her pregnancy, “A fat wax grows inside me. […] The baby lives on venom” (50). It is at this time that Celia first expresses her desire to give birth to a son. Understanding the hierarchy of gender in Cuba, Celia knows that a son can thrive and be successful, even without his mother. Thus, it is the birth of a daughter that ends Celia’s dreams of escaping the suffocating patriarchal oppression of
Cuba. When Felicia is born, Celia realizes that she must break the legacy that her mother has bequeathed her if her daughters are to have any hope of escaping the vicious cycle of male-domination. She writes to Gustavo, “I’ll be a good mother this time” (52). Celia names Felicia after her friend in the asylum who burns her husband. Celia admires her because “[s]he is unrepentant” (51). Thus, “it is clear that Celia applaud[s] her companion’s successful effort to free herself of a tyrant” (4). She bequeaths Felicia this legacy because she too will have to be unrepentant against her husband.

Felicia’s views on the political climate of Cuba vary from both her mother and her sister. She is not a nationalist like her mother. If anything she is anti-nationalist but not for the same reasons or with the same fervor as Lourdes. Unlike Lourdes, she is not stripped of land or wealth, but she simply resents being oppressed by her male counterparts and by El Líder. Felicia rejects El Líder’s revolution. Exasperated by her mother’s incessant defense of the revolution, she tells Celia, “We’re dying of security!”(117). Her views concerning Castro are not the only factor that distinguishes Felicia from her sister. They also have differing attitudes towards race. Herminia, Felicia’s best friend, states, “Felicia is the only person I’ve known who [doesn’t] see color” (84). This becomes apparent when she meets Hugo Villaverde, the son of “a descendant of slaves” and the man she marries(79). Felicia’s madness stems from her husband’s treatment of her. From their first meeting, Hugo forces Felicia into a subjugated role in their violent and degrading sexual encounters. Hugo leaves Felicia immediately after their wedding and returns sporadically only to bring more pain and suffering into her life. Her relationship with her husband mars her ability to be a mother to her children. Luz and Milagro are born shortly after the wedding. As a result, they are neglected because Felicia is consumed and defined by her abusive marriage. It is during these formidable years that the twins begin to take their hard stance against their mother that will forever shape Felicia’s destiny. They are unwillingly to forgive her even though they are fully aware of their father’s treatment of her. The abuse that Felicia experiences at Hugo’s hands leads her to her demise both literally and figuratively. His physical abuse, abandonment, and infidelity lead her to her madness, manifesting itself, at its worst in the form of syphilis, and ultimately leading Felicia to burn her husband just as her namesake does. Mary Vasquez discusses the significance of Felicia’s name. She
notes, “Felicia will also suffer madness and, like her namesake, will endeavor to take her husband’s life” (4). Felicia is also unrepentant for burning her husband because she has suffered greatly at his hands. She sees his burning as a vindication for the women of so-called Third World countries who suffer at the hands of male domination. Felicia clearly sees her burning of her husband as a victory, “she laughs when she recalls her husband’s screams, the way he bolted out the door, his head a flaming torch” (82). Like her mother, Felicia also “grieves in her dreams for lost children, for the prostitutes in India, for the women raped in Havana last night. Their faces stare at her, plaintive, uncomplaining” (82). She questions what they want from her, what she can do for them. Felicia is aware that these women expect something from her, but she is unsure what.

As tortured as Felicia is by her husband, she will face her worse accusations from her twin daughters. For Felicia, Luz and Milagro come to represent a physical manifestation of the hegemonic structure of Cuba as they symbolize the control that Hugo has over her life. They ensure that Felicia is still susceptible to Hugo’s abuse even in his absence. The relationship between Felicia and her daughters, Luz and Milagro, is the most dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship in the novel. The ibeji undoubtedly serve as an extension of their father’s abuse against their mother. As previously stated, the ibeji in the text operate specifically in the realm of the powers that are attributed to the ibeji by the religious beliefs of the Yoruba and Santería in relation to their jealousy of the Idowu, their impenetrable bond, and the power to bring death to a family member with whom they are displeased. These attributes clearly extend the significance of the twins beyond the mother-daughter relationship and situate them as the critical key for interpreting the action of the novel. Luz acknowledges their closeness when she says that “we’re a double helix, right and impervious. That’s why Mama can’t penetrate us” (120). Celia knows that the twins are “double stones of a single fruit […] speaking in symbols only they can understand” (38). This language that is all their own is indicative of their status as ibeji, as well as their anger toward Felicia for failing to be a mother. From their first introduction, it is apparent that Luz and Milagro intend to torture Felicia for failing to nurture and love them. This is crucial to my argument because it further demonstrates that the twins are indeed functioning beyond the complexities of the mother-daughter discourse and are asserting the powers attributed to the ibeji by African religions.
Houlberg verifies my reading of their position in the text in her exploration of the ibeji. She notes, “while twins can benefit those who honor them, they can with equal alacrity wreak havoc if neglected” (23). Celia is aware of the twin’s determination to punish their mother. She is wary of her granddaughters, just as she is wary of Santeria, because she “fears that both good and evil may be borne in the same seed” (90). Celia

Fears their recollections—the smashed chairs that left splinters in their feet, the obscenities that hung like electric insects in the air. Their father, Hugo Villaverde, had returned on several occasions. Once, to bring silk scarves and apologies from China. Another time, to blind Felicia for a week with a blow to her eyes. Yet another, to sire Ivanito and leave his syphilis behind. Despite this, Luz and Milagro insist [...] on keeping their father’s name. Even after he left for good. Even after Felicia reverted back to using her maiden name. (47)

They side with their father because they cannot forgive Felicia for neglecting them. This is exemplified by the nickname they give her, “not-Mamá.” Luz castigates her mother for her “[p]retty words. Meaningless words that didn’t nourish us, that didn’t comfort us, that kept us prisoners in her alphabet world” (121). Just as they refuse to play their mother’s games, sing her songs, or eat her coconut ice cream, they remember the birthday party she ruins by putting eggs in the piñata and the time she burned their father’s face. Unlike Ivanito, they remember the craziness and hard times and have decided that Felicia should be punished, castigated for her perfidious betrayal of her daughters. Instead, they embrace their father because “in his sagging eyes [they] f[ind] the language [they’ve] been searching for, a language more eloquent than the cheap bead necklaces of words [their] mother offer[s]” (124). Their father speaks their language because he too has suffered at the hands of Felicia. When they are reunited with their father, they finally receive the love that they so desperately want. Their willingness to embrace their father magnifies their rejection of their mother. He is also connected to his daughters by the African blood that they share. Like his daughters, Hugo has always been an outsider to the del Pino family. As a result of Felicia’s neglect, acting in the capacity of the ibeji, the twins exhibit an anger that is unwavering. Even when Felicia changes her ways and finds
clarity through Santería, they continue to reject her as they have “reach[ed] their hard conclusions” (46). They know even before the santero that Felicia must be sacrificed.

Sacrifice plays an extremely important role in African religion as it serves to appease the gods that will in turn bestow blessings upon their practitioners. And as observed in the introduction, through the example of the orisha Eshu, the supernatural beings must sometimes bring sorrow and pain into the lives of their practitioners to extract supplications from them. True to the nature of the ibeji, the twins are indeed both good and evil. They are extremely jealous of Ivanito and his position as an Idowu, who is often valued highly by its parents. Felicia undoubtedly has an unnatural connection to her son that she does not share with her daughters. She feels comfort in the fact that Ivanito will never leave her and refuses to “find meaning in her life outside of her son” (107). As a result, the twins harbor a great resentment towards him. When their father asks to see Ivanito they try to talk him out of it because they are jealous and do not want to share their father with Ivanito, especially when they realize that Ivanito will never abandon their mother. Indeed, “Ivanito senses[…] that something has come between them. He will never speak his sister’s language [..]. He is convinced although he cannot say why, that they’re united against him, against his happiness with Mamá” (86). Despite their feelings toward Ivanito, they take him to meet his father in hopes to turn him against their mother because they know that Ivanito’s rejection of Felicia would be an ultimate torture. Luz describes their desire to win the loyalty of Ivanito not in terms of familial love, rather in political terms. Ivanito recalls that Luz informs him “families are essentially political and that he’ll have to choose sides” (86). The fact that she expresses their familial relationship in terms of politics suggests that the reconstruction of the mother-daughter bond is emblematic of a reconstruction of the political system in Cuba to one that is free of patriarchal domination and dictatorship. Garcia clearly places the women of the novel at the center of the political storm that is battering the island of Cuba, requiring a sacrifice to restore balance to the island.

It is the anger of the twins that ultimately leads to Felicia’s sacrifice. Their cold rejection of her, their refusal to participate in her rituals of madness, their unwillingness to forgive her even after she is transformed, is a punishment too harsh for Felicia to endure. They decide that Felicia must be punished for her inability to be a mother. But it
is important to recognize that their sacrifice of their mother, however horrific it may seem, is the catalyst that will reunite the del Pino women and place them in a viable position to reconstruct notions of motherhood for themselves and for the women of Cuba.

Celia’s observation of the twins’ propensity for both good and evil continues to establish them as ibeji, supernatural beings that transcend both the spiritual and human worlds. As discussed in the introduction, this marked characteristic of the ibeji is vital in understanding how they function in the novel. Like Herminia, her father, a Santería priest who is “black as the blackest Africans,” and to a lesser extent Hugo Villaverde, the twins represent the central role that African religion plays in the text as well as in creating a space that allows for the restorative action of the novel to take place. By extending Hugo’s torture of Felicia, functioning as evil, the twins simultaneously set in motion the necessary events that allow the del Pino women to break out of their subjugated roles, thus functioning as good. That is, they execute Felicia’s ritual sacrifice that will ultimately result in uniting the del Pino women. Although Garcia expresses her antipathy for Fidel Castro and the revolution through Pilar, she clearly upholds African religion, through the implementation of the ibeji, as the force that will reunite the scattered women of the Cuban diaspora. I also contend that for Garcia, their status as ibeji emphasizes her assertion of the re-connection to Africa that will allow the dispersed del Pino women to rectify the mother-daughter relationship as well as rearrange the hegemonic structure that exists in Cuba.

Early in Felicia’s life, there are signs that she will be sacrificed. Her namesake is killed in an unexplained fire, but there are signs that are much more telling of Felicia’s impending sacrifice. When it is time for Felicia to be confirmed, to the dismay of the nuns, she chooses Saint Sebastian as her saint. She is fascinated with the fact that: He’d been shot through with arrows and left for dead, how he’d survived his murder only to be beaten to death by the Roman Emperor’s soldiers and buried in the catacombs. Sebastian’s double death appeal[s] to Felicia. She studie[s] his image, his hands tied above his head, his eyes rolled heavenward, arrows protruding from his chest and sides, and fe[els] a great sympathy for him. (77)
Her attraction to Saint Sebastian is telling of her own future. In fact, when she first meets Hugo at the restaurant where she works, “she remove[s] her apron as if commanded by Saint Sebastian himself and follow[s] Hugo Villaverde out the door” (78). Saint Sebastian leads her to her sacrificial death by leading her to the man who will infect her with syphilis that ultimately causes her death. At the height of her madness, Felicia hears him speaking to her, reminding her of her betrayal of her love for him. This is telling of the fact Felicia too must have a double death. Her first death occurs when she tries to take her life as well as that of her son. Her second death comes at the end of the book when she is sacrificed for the greater good of her family and ultimately the women of Cuba.

Felicia’s disdain for live sacrifice is also indicative of the fact that she will indeed become a live sacrifice. She cannot stand the blood of the sacrifices made during the Santería rituals. However, these rituals are crucial to the novel because they lay the foundation of a great sacrifice that must be made to reform Cuban concepts of motherhood, rituals that are made ultimately to maintain the balance of the universe and community. John Mbiti notes that in African religions, sacrifices and offerings represent the place where man and God meet (59). Sacrifice is restorative, as it restores the balance of the cosmic universe and appeases for wrongs committed. If we continue with this vein of thought, then Felicia’s sacrifice is indeed of divine will and is larger than herself and the other women in her family.

Felicia’s role in the larger scheme of divine will is apparent in that fact that her deepest desires will never be fulfilled. She wants a husband who will not dominate her but will grant her equal status in her marriage. She wants something that according to Garcia, she cannot have in Cuba. Just like her mother, who also remains in Cuba, she cannot have a marriage that is void of male domination and control. The santero tries to explain to her that “what [she] wish[es] for, […] she cannot keep. It is the will of the gods” (148). Although Felicia will marry two more times following her divorce from Hugo Villaverde, both of her husbands die a tragic death. It is after this period in her life that Felicia turns completely to Santería and goes through the initiation process to become a priestess. Her friend Herminia observes that, “Felicia surrendered and found her peace” (186). However, this peace does not change her destiny. All of the rituals and
sacrifices made by the *santero* and even by Celia at the Cebia tree cannot change her destiny, nor can they alter the forces of the ibeji. They cannot change the fact that she must be the ultimate sacrifice. Felicia must be sacrificed for several reasons. She is the archetypal example of women in Cuba who suffer from patriarchal oppression and as a result reject Castro’s revolution. She is also the only member of the family that truly embraces Santeria, and her death will ultimately brings Pilar to the religion. Moreover, out of all the mothers of the del Pino family, she has the most dysfunctional relationship with her daughters. However, the most important reason why Felicia must be sacrificed is the fact that she is the only woman in the family that actively rebels against patriarchal domination, a characteristic that situates her as a martyr figure.⁴

After Felicia completes her transformation to a Santería priestess and ultimately begins the ritual of her sacrifice, her body does not make the physical change normally associated with this transformation. Herminia notes:

> I’ve seen other santeras during their first year. They are radiant. Their eyes are moist and clear, their skin is smoothed of wrinkles, and their nails grow strong. When you make a saint, the saint takes good care of you. But Felicia showed none of these blessings. Her eyes dried out like an old woman’s and her fingers curled like claws until she could hardly pick up her spoon. Even her hair, which had been as black as crow’s, grew colorless in scruffy patches on her skull. Whenever she spoke, her lips blurred to a dull line on her face. (189)

Her inability to transform corporeally into a priestess also foretells her impending sacrifice. It is not until Felicia’s sacrifice is complete, not until her death that she takes on the appearance of a saint. The rituals performed at her funeral help to cleanse her body by removing the lumps, smoothing out her skin and returning her eyes back to her natural color. She is finally restored to her full vibrancy and elevated to the status of martyr. It is at this time that it becomes clear what the “lost children, […] the prostitutes in India, [and…] the women raped in Havana […]” want from Felicia. They want her to avenge them through her death.

I have stated several times that Felicia’s death is a sacrifice meted out by the ibeji in the text. It is important to understand that her sacrifice does not have a physical
manifestation like the goats and other animals that are immolated during the Santería rituals. Rather her sacrifice comes at the intercession of the ibeji. The ibeji’s ability to transcend both the worlds of the spirits and that of the humans means that Felicia’s immolation defies Western understandings of sacrifice and martyrdom. There is no large audience or ritual destruction of the body, yet her body does indeed become a spectacle. It is also crucial to my argument that the witness of Felicia’s sacrifice is Herminia. As a descendant of Africa, Herminia witnesses her death/sacrifice because unlike the members of Felicia’s family, her belief in Santería gives her the understanding, the lexicon, in which to comprehend the significance of her death and the power that the ibeji and other entities of the spirit world have. The practitioners of Santería, although they put forth a valiant effort to save Felicia, know that once the spirit world has decided death there is nothing they can do. They understand that sacrifices must be made to maintain the balance between the two worlds, a fact that Celia does not comprehend. Herminia observes:

Just as the babalawos were about to leave, Felicia’s mother entered the house on Palmas Street. She was wild-eyed, like a woman who gives birth to an unwanted child. “Witch doctors! Murderers! Get out all of you!” she cried, and swept the image of Obatala off its altar. We pulled back, afraid of the god’s response. Celia overturned the tureen with the sacred stones and crushed Felicia’s seashells under the heels of her leather pumps. Suddenly, she removed her shoes and began stamping on the shells in her bare feet, slowly at first, then faster and faster in a mad flamenco, her arms thrown up in the air. (190)

Just as Celia does not understand the rituals or beliefs of Santería, she does not understand that her daughter’s death is indeed a sacrifice. She does not understand that in death Felicia is able to do what she herself has always wanted to do. Felicia’s sacrifice is for the prostitutes of India, the women raped in Havana, the young girl molested at the train station, and pregnant women dismembered in the square. Her sacrifice is for all women who suffer at the hands of patriarchal control, those who are unable to be mothers to their daughters.
Celia also passes her desire to transcend women’s suffering under patriarchal dominance to her granddaughters as well. Ironically, the only women in the novel who seem to have a viable plan for escaping the conundrum of male domination is Felicia’s daughters, Luz and Milagro. Luz, who speaks for both twins, writes:

We’re studying hard so when we grow up we can get good jobs and go wherever we please. Abuela Celia tells us that before the revolution smart girls like us usually didn’t go to college. They got married and had children while they were still children themselves. I’m glad we don’t have to worry about that. I’m going to be a veterinarian and operate on the biggest animals on the planet—elephants, rhinoceroses, giraffes, hippopotamuses. I’ll probably have to go to Africa for that, but Milagro says she will come with me. She wants to be a mycologist specializing in tropical fungi. (121)

The twins seem to be the only ones that can articulate the force that they are struggling against and the manner in which to defeat it. The fact that their occupations will require them to live in Africa is very important. Their “return” or “reconnection” to Africa is symbolic of the return to African values and beliefs that the women of the del Pino family must make. Furthermore, it asserts that for the del Pino women a materiality cannot be constructed in Cuba but rather in diaspora. Their desire or necessity to live in Africa also indicates that the capitalist society of America is not conducive to the identification of a global future, as demonstrated through Lourdes, emphasizing the need for a third space that allows for an autonomy that cannot be realized within the realms of domesticity. This construction of a third space will allow the women to venture out as independent women equipped with a new set of rules.

Celia’s granddaughter, Pilar, questions the histories that are written by patriarchs of the world. She writes, “If it were up to me, I’d record other things. Like the time there was a freak hailstorm in the Congo and the women took it as a sign that they should rule. Or the life stories of prostitutes in Bombay. […] Who chooses what we should know or what’s important?” (28). Her questioning of history is unequivocally a questioning of the roles ascribed for women in oppressive male-dominated societies, such as that of Cuba. Pilar’s choice of histories, which to record, is a clear rejection of the roles deemed
suitable by the revolution. Her desire to record a different story is at once an act of rewriting as well as an act of mothering. Garcia continues to question these gendered roles through Felicia and Celia, whose contributions to the revolution include cutting sugar cane, building nurseries, caring for sick children, and serving as lookouts for another Bay of Pigs, undoubtedly roles that do not contribute to the shaping of the ideologies of the new government. Even Celia’s supposed illustrious position as a judge in the People’s Court is mocked by the subject matter in which she deliberates over; the theft of a pig and the lecherous acts of a lascivious husband. Garcia establishes Pilar, very early in the novel, as the one who will “rewrite” the story of the del Pino women. Indeed, Pilar’s birth marks the cessation of Celia’s letters to Gustavo, in which she records the story of the del Pino women. In her last letter, Celia writes to Gustavo, “My granddaughter, Pilar Puente del Pino, was born today. It is also my birthday[…] I will no longer write to you, mi amor. She will remember everything” (245). The last letter that Celia writes to Gustavo is important for a myriad of reasons. It is a passing of a legacy. The letter is anachronistically placed at the end of the novel because it is at this time that Garcia makes it abundantly clear that Pilar will bear the responsibility of reconstructing the mother-daughter relationships for the family. It is also a sign that Celia will experience a rebirth through her granddaughter. Pilar aligns herself with her grandmother as opposed to her mother, but as the novel progresses Garcia chooses to align Pilar with her aunt Felicia.

Pilar’s relation to Santería beliefs is demonstrated almost immediately. As a baby she draws on supernatural powers to menace the nannies she has in Cuba. She tells Minnie, “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). In her dreams she imagines herself in the middle of a Santería ritual. She does not understand the language the people are chanting during the ceremony yet she “do[esn’t] feel scared” (34). She does not understand the language because in the Santería rituals of Cuba, the Lucumi lexicon has been retained. Pilar’s evolution in the text is centered on her relationship to Santería. Pilar speaks of her religious beliefs when she states, “I’m not religious but I get the feeling that it’s the simplest rituals, the ones that are integrated with
the earth and its seasons, that are the most profound” (199). Her belief in rituals that encompass the elements of nature aligns her directly with the Yoruba belief that emphasizes the interplay between earth and cosmos. It is my contention that García’s protagonist must seek her answers through Santería because of the religion’s emphasis on balance. Cuba is a nation that has been constructed around extreme ideologies. Pre-revolutionary Cuba is marked by the control of the wealth by a small Spanish upper-class, whereas post-revolutionary Cuba is marked by the obliteration of the upper class and the progression of the African and Indigenous populations. García’s characters are undeniably searching for a space that upholds balance not just of the cosmic universe, but also of the political climate of Cuba. Pilar’s search for balance leads her to a botanical shop where an older man recognizes her as a daughter of Chango. He gives her a bag of herbs in which she must bathe and perform rituals for nine days and then she will know the direction of her course. At the end of her Novena, Pilar knows she must return to Cuba, to Santería. She takes charge and informs her mother that they are going to Cuba.

Pilar’s epiphany occurs at the same time as Felicia’s, which although tragic, is successful in bringing the del Pino women back together. Felicia’s necessary sacrifice creates a space for Pilar to act. Without it she would not be able to reconstruct motherhood. It signifies that now that the sacrifice has been made, Pilar must take control and reshape the legacy of the del Pino women. In fact, it is when Pilar is in Cuba that she is the most decisive about the future of her family. When she arrives in Cuba, the state of the family is magnified by the condition in which she finds Abuela Celia. Pilar finds her “sitting motionless on her wicker swing, wearing a worn bathing suit, her hair stuck haphazardly to her skull, her feet strangely lacerated […] Abuela is missing a breast. There’s a scar like a purple zipper on her chest” (217-18). Pilar not only nurses her grandmother back to health, but she works hard to bring the remaining family members together as the beginning steps of rewriting their legacy. This is crucial to my argument because for the del Pino women to be able to come out from under the control of Castro’s government, they must be united by a symbiotic action. Pilar also takes action by seeking Herminia so that she can “learn the truth about [Felicia and] to learn the truth about herself” (231). When she and Ivanito go to Herminia’s house, Herminia is wearing the same red and white beads of Chango that Pilar had chosen in the botanical
shop, bonding them instantly as daughters of Chango and completing Pilar’s journey. By affirming the women of the novel as “Daughters of Chango,” Garcia is clearly rejecting the racial attitudes of the upper- and middle-class Spanish of Cuba, as represented by Lourdes. Just as she challenges the patriarchal presence that dominates the political system of Cuba, with equal ardor she rejects the power structure of pre-revolutionary Cuba that is drawn directly along the color line as well as class. By invoking the orisha of war, Garcia cleverly empowers her female characters. It is after meeting with Herminia that Pilar performs her most significant and defining act. She assists her mother in effecting Ivanito’s exile from Cuba. It is at this very moment that Pilar is certain where she belongs. Like Ivanito, she must return to the US “not instead of [Cuba], but more than [Cuba]” (236). She comes to the realization that she can be more effective in the struggle against Castro’s regime in a land that is free of his oppressive regime.

Although it is abundantly clear that Felicia’s sacrifice is supposed to make a way for the women of the del Pino family, Cuba, and countries around the world where women suffer at the hands of brutal patriarchy, the women are not liberated from their subjugation and motherhood seemingly has not been reconstructed. At the end of the novel, Felicia is dead, Celia succumbs to the blue of the ocean, the twins have completely estranged themselves from the family, and Pilar and Lourdes have not fully repaired their relationship. Garcia’s decision not to resolve the mother-daughter relationships in the text is indeed a calculated one. It is symbolic of the struggle that they must continue to fight. Celia tells Pilar, “Women who outlive their daughters are orphans […] Only their granddaughters can save them, guard their knowledge like the first fire” (222). Celia’s granddaughters will undoubtedly forge a new inheritance for the future generations of del Pino women by creating a third space, through diaspora, that exists between the polar societal constructions of Cuba and the United States that exists outside the realm of domesticity. Luz and Milagro will rely on their education to ensure that they are able to control their own lives rather than be controlled by men. Armed with Santería, Pilar is now better equipped to survive in a male-dominated society and reconstruct motherhood by reuniting these women and dissolving the emphasis on national allegiances, the mother-daughter relationships are repaired.
Immediately after Castro’s successful overthrow of Batista, Cuba entered a new epoch of turmoil. He stripped wealthy citizens of their land and redistributed it to the poor. His drastic actions caused great dissention among families that were irreparably divided on the basis of class, race, and their stances on the revolution. It is also important to note that the aims of Castro’s seizure of power not only concern issues of class but also issues of race. Castro stripped wealth from the upper class, the Spanish, and redistributed it to the poor, the black and indigenous populations.

For more on the role of Santería and African retentions in Castro’s revolution, see Regla de Ocha: Ifa and the Construction of Identity.

Over ten thousand dissenters flooded the Peruvian embassy. As a result, Castro opened the port of Mariel to allow those opposed to his political ideologies to leave Cuba. In a span of five months, over 123,000 Cubans fled the island. For more information, see Felix Masud-Piloto’s With Open Arms: Cuban Migration to the United States.

The argument can be made that Lourdes actively rebels against patriarchal domination, particularly during the seizure of her land and subsequent rape. My reasoning for identifying Felicia as the only one who actively rebels against male control lies in her decision to remain in Cuba. I interpret Lourdes’ decision to exile to America and to go to a region of the country that least reminds her of Cuba as a acquiescing to the desires of Castro.

Homi Bhabha asserts the need for a Third Space in The Location of Culture where he asserts that “The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference and ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code” (37).

The Lucumi language is the language of the Yoruba.

Chango is the God of war and thunder. It is also rumored that the first ruler of the Oyo region, who begot nine sets of twins, was the son of Shango. The symbols of Shango can also be found on the ere ibeji. For more on the ibeji’s connection to Shango, see Mareidi and Gert Stolls’ Ibeji.
EPILOGUE

Throughout this project, I have demonstrated how the ibeji function in overlapping and distinct ways in selected Caribbean women’s texts to suggest alternative and resistant forms of motherhood that sharpen the meaning of African or Afro-Caribbean connection to land and the female body. The authors of the texts hail from varying geographic locations that are separated by colonial history, language, culture, and ethnicity. However, these factors of difference that exist between Trinidad, Haiti, and Cuba allow for readings that span across discrete geographical or national borders that shift toward a larger concept of black female subjectivity that is not just limited to mother-daughter relationships, as traditionally construed, but to the ways that such fraught and unstable bonds between parent and child reflect the complex and varied intersections of race, gender, and class in the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa. that have yet to be fully explored. The field of African studies opens up these possibilities that have yet to be fully explored. Through the implementation of spiritual elements that define traditional folkloric knowledge and power, of which the power of the ibeji is one such example, are thus not outside the realm of everyday life as some ethereal concept of another world from the land of dead ancestors to a remote mythic Africa as is often the case in reading these literary works in a bipolar or dichotomous fashion. Rather in the Caribbean context, they represent a process of violent negotiations over land and propertied ownership, political dictatorship and exile, and sexual trauma, and embody the constant violations of neo-colonial regimes.

In the selected works, the twins become a catalyst to critique certain kinds of maternal relationships or value systems that are related to the land and body as property. The texts engage and build upon each other to explore the possibilities that exist through Afro-Caribbean spirituality. For Nunez-Harrell twins represent the split between the material and the spiritual. By embracing the ibeji, the women of the text must remove the curse off from the blood-stained land, understanding why land ownership has been
negatively constructed and turn to folk knowledge to establish a new value system that upholds procreative powers. These powers become associated with propertied relationships, as it is through creative powers that these relationships are subverted and reconstructed in colonial history. By replacing an economic value system with that of a procreative value system the women of the novel are able to obtain land and economic wealth.

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the use of the ibeji is not as explicit as in *When Rocks Dance*. Rather their use is more general and represents the separations and connections that exist in the mother-daughter relationship. Although the women of the text are land owners, unlike the women of Nunez-Harrell’s novel, they lack ownership of their bodies. Essentially, the black female body becomes a site of materiality rather than a nurturing site that emphasizes reproduction. By restoring ownership of the body to the Haitian women by connecting to indigenous values the mother-daughter relationship as well as the relationship between the United States and Haiti is repaired.

For Cristina Garcia, Santeria and the ibeji serve as a catalyst for a different kind of reproduction. She extends the dialogue that exists between Nunez-Harrell and Danticat to erect a panacea that will allow a space of materiality to be determined by Caribbean women. Garcia uses the twins to draw attention to capitalized and socialist economies that reinforce the impoverishment of the women of the novel that is accentuated by alienation and separation. Thus, the twins represent possibilities of reunion and the creation of a new space that allows for a new form of reterritorialization beyond the “nation” to be defined or identified. What is acquired by migration is the possibility of life in diaspora. It is through diaspora that the women find their lives are more broadly defined than within the confines of domesticity which plagues the women of all three selected texts. Garcia, like the other authors under study, emphasizes the decolonizing of the mind to find a new model or child that is made possible by venturing out as independent women with a new set of values.

Possibilities for expanding this study would inevitably include the expansion of issues that directly effect motherhood in the Caribbean as well as to widen the geographic mapping to include a further exploration of the Caribbean basin and the diverse locations of exile. Texts of interest include, for instance, Edwidge Danticat’s *Farming of Bones*.
and Zee Edgell’s *In Times Like These*. Danticat’s use of the *marassa* extends that of her first novel as its scope expands to include the complex issues of race, colonial history, and language that exist on an island, a *marassa* that has been violently ripped into two separate nations. The issue of space and place is central to this narrative, as the Haitian characters must learn to negotiate intangible borders that forge the twin islands of Hispaniola. Edgell’s novel addresses emigration to Belize’s mother country, England. The protagonist must return to Belize and to her estranged husband with her twin daughters as the country is being torn by the struggle for independence. The ibeji magnify the fissure that happens as a result of opposing ideologies concerning the building of a newly emerging independent nation. These two novels will undoubtedly be invaluable in the expansion of my exploration of the use of the ibeji in reconstructing motherhood in the Caribbean as they continue to map the ever-changing face of Caribbean history and Caribbean women’s relationship to this history.
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