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# The virgin's daughters: Catholic traditions and the post-colonial south in contemporary women's writing

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THE VIRGIN'S DAUGHTERS:  
CATHOLIC TRADITIONS AND THE POST-COLONIAL SOUTH  
IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S WRITING

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by  
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To Willard, Benjamin, and Charles

my *cannes à sucre*

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## Abstract

This dissertation analyzes the texts of contemporary women writers who consciously engage dominant Catholic, American, and southern ideologies in their narratives and who posit Louisiana as a liminal, hybrid space. Building upon postcolonial concepts of hybridity and performance of cultural memory, I trace a “pathway” to feminist recovery and reclamation of ancestral memory and spirituality in Valerie Martin’s *A Recent Martyr*, Rebecca Wells’ *Little Altars Everywhere* and *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, Brenda Marie Osbey’s *All Saints*, and Erna Brodber’s *Louisiana*. The authors enact spiritual and cultural reclamation through the written expression of key components of postcolonial reconstruction of history, including ancestral memory, hybridization of cultural narratives, and performance of folk ritual and beliefs. The texts’ engagement of Louisiana as a place which blurs national and ethnic boundaries posits this liminal zone as both a site of historic trauma and oppression and also a position of possibility for cultural reconstruction.

The urgent call to reclaim and revalue the subverted “other” within dominant myths is essential to both feminist Catholic theology and postcolonial theory. Writing through the paradox of female deity as virgin and mother, these texts reconnect women to strong, sensual female deity in hybrid, creole traditions – values of femininity which have been hidden and whitewashed in a de-sexualized, sterile image of the Catholic Virgin Mary. A common theme in these writings involves a particularly feminine perspective on the paradox of sacrifice required for belonging and redemption – a search for mothers in religion and tradition and for the “mother” within oneself. This search involves coming to terms with the central conflict of establishing one’s individuality versus the sacrifice of individuality required to be a mother and to belong to religious and cultural communities. Akin to this central theme is a feminist desire to



revalue and reshape the paradigms that have traditionally subverted the female body and reinforced racial oppression.

**Chapter One**  
**“O! Lead Me to the Pathway”:**  
**Reclaiming an Inclusive Heritage of Spirituality in Louisiana Catholic Traditions**

Gods always behave like the people who make them.

-- Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*

In Brenda Marie Osbey’s “Faubourg Study No. 3: The Seven Sisters of New Orleans,”  
the speaker prays:

hail mary full of grace  
                    érezulie, mother of women  
blessèd art thou  
                    there is truth to be made here  
blessèd art thou  
                    dreams, mother, to be dreamt  
blessèd art thou  
                    visions to be told  
blessèd mother  
            o!      lead me to the pathway  
blessèd mother  
                    over the barred footing  
holy holy  
                    érezulie  
                    érezulie  
                    mother  
mother  
                    mother of women. (7:1-15)

This syncretic hoodoo/Catholic prayer – in which the Catholic Blessed Virgin Mary is “holy holy” and “full of grace” while the hoodoo goddess Érezulie holds the “truth,” “dreams,” and “visions” which will lead her followers “over the barred footing” – shows both holy women as one mother, the “mother of women.” This image of female deity manifests the *creolité* of Catholic traditions in Louisiana which empowers and reclaims its daughters.

Zora Neale Hurston’s claim that “Gods always behave like the people who make them” has particular relevance in the liminal space of Catholic Louisiana where women and non-whites have historically been denied public access to the power to “make gods” – to name and claim

official deity in their own image, deity who celebrate vernacular, “colored” ancestry and the particular experiences and wisdom of real women. The dominant Catholic deity of the Louisiana south (as in other patriarchal cultures) look and act like those in cultural power: white, male, and patriarchal. Official Catholic doctrine and literary tradition tend to present the Church as “one, holy, ‘catholic’/universal church,” positing it as ahistorical and universal; these official texts obscure the human construction and vernacular influences that work within, work against, or simply vary the practices of Catholic tradition(s) across times and places to reflect the needs of communities. The literary texts which I explore in this project posit dissenting narratives that (re)construct hidden or subversive religious traditions to celebrate inclusive, feminist spirituality.

Louisiana’s position as a zone of postcolonial contacts establishes a complex paradox for women and minorities. Positioned as the “other” within official narratives, women and minorities are marginalized within the confluence of dominant, patriarchal southern and Catholic paradigms. But, the “chaos” of a pluralistic culture with cultural ties to the Caribbean and other transatlantic influences also establishes a liminal position within the South and the nation, the very fluidity and hybridity of which provides a potential space to effect shifts in cultural narratives. Osbey’s poem, which celebrates the Catholic Virgin Mary only in her convergence with Érzulie, enacts this revaluation of cultural symbols: its syncretic deity, reflective of the rich, maternal, Creole culture of the poet who made her, is the “pathway,” a model, of how historic “truth” can be made from/within the heritage of Catholic Louisiana. Building upon postcolonial concepts of hybridity and performance of cultural memory, particularly as posited by Antonio Benitez-Rojo and Paul Gilroy, I trace this “pathway” to feminist reclamation and recovery of ancestral memory and spirituality in Osbey’s *All Saints*, Valerie Martin’s *A Recent Martyr*, Rebecca Wells’ *Little Altars Everywhere* and *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, and Erna Brodber’s *Louisiana*.

## Creole Region and Religion as Postcolonial Territories

As Louisiana works through a period of economic, political and social reconstruction following the devastation of hurricanes in the early twenty-first century, cultural theorists respond to the impetus to (re)define and understand the state's cultural positionality within national and global paradigms. Vernacular cultures are also tasked with holding out against commoditization as tourist spectacles – challenged to maintain a reliable sense of self against what Bill Marshall dubs the capitalist urge to “Disney-fy” (36) the state's unique heritage in response to public awe and horror awakened by media coverage in the aftermath of hurricanes. In these respects, the work of defining and revising state and national narratives is not unlike an earlier period of Reconstruction when national fascination with narratives, such as George Washington Cable's *Strange True Stories of Louisiana* (1888), Grace King's *Tales of a Time and Place* (1892) and Kate Chopin's *Bayou Folk* (1894) among others, placed Louisiana in a national and global perspective. Analyzing Cable's narrative construction of New Orleans in *Strange True Stories*, Owen Robinson asserts,

Cable's New Orleans is effectively a Caribbean city as much as a US one, and European imprints are strong in both these strands of identity... While constructing a more or less chronological overall narrative of the city and the wider region(s), Cable presents a multitude of voices merging and clashing with each other, blurring the lines of fact and fiction as they blur boundaries of identity... The city's identity is unstable in terms both of its historical contingency and its representation in a shifting, sometimes wonderful shifty text. (98)

Both Robinson and francophone studies scholar Bill Marshall position New Orleans and Louisiana as a “nodal point” of the French Atlantic, a key zone of intersection and confluence of transatlantic, international cultures. A fundamental aspect of the “difference” that defines Louisiana is its French and Spanish colonial heritage, its non-Anglo and Catholic cultural roots; for, although Louisiana is very much connected to the colonial plantation system which characterized much of the US South, its history is even more closely aligned with colonial

Caribbean and South American plantation culture in terms of its colonial history. Close attention to the lasting effects of Louisiana as a “nodal point” of transatlantic history which blurs national and cultural identities makes it a significant space for exploring postcolonial theories of identity formation and cultural influence.

This exploration of contemporary Louisiana (particularly Catholic south Louisiana) as postcolonial territory has global implications. According to Marshall,

The destruction of New Orleans in August 2005 by Hurricane Katrina and by man-made policy failures focused attention on the fragile heritage of a city unlike any other in the United States, as well as underlining the continued economic and institutional marginalization of much of [the US’s] population of African descent...A terrain of struggle has for long extended into popular and scholarly historiography, posing the question of how to place – how to assimilate – Louisiana and especially New Orleans into a master national American narrative, and responding with a peripheralization and exoticization outside of the New England mainspring of 1776 and the manifest destiny of westward expansion. Paradoxically, it is only the recent “Atlanticization” of American history...that has permitted Louisiana to find a more rightful place in this narrative, partaking of an interconnected Atlantic history, and even constituting one of its nodal points. (35-36)

Marshall’s use of descriptors to depict the narratizing of Louisiana as a “terrain of struggle,” a place which problematizes “assimilation” into a “*master* national narrative,” clearly positions the cultural studies of Louisiana within the zone of postcolonialism, citing its liminal position as “un-American” in relation to the dominant, New England Protestant ideology of US national identity. In “Creoles and Americans,” Joseph G. Tregle, Jr., similarly depicts the suppression of a Creole culture in Louisiana within the “master” American narrative so that the dominant ideology assimilates, marginalizes – in effect, colonizes – the creole/hybrid history of Louisiana within the national narrative. Tregle describes the clash of cultures which occurred in the Louisiana territory after its purchase from France in 1803, contrasting this cultural shift to the earlier transfer of governance of Louisiana from France to Spain in 1763:

The events of 1803 provided no such soft edges [as had the transfer to Spain]. Now the new partners in the community derived from a democratic republic, children of English common law and the language of Shakespeare, heirs of the Protestant Reformation. In

almost every conceivable way they represented a tradition utterly unknown to the indigenous population<sup>1</sup>. And unlike the Spaniards, they came in ever-growing numbers, vigorous, assertive, demanding, often boisterous and domineering. There could be no escaping awareness that they represented a deadly threat to the way of life of the [previous] inhabitants or that their presence made conflict for control of the community an inevitability. (134)

In terms of economic and political structure, “*les Americains*” won this conflict, though as Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon note in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, the American cultural “takeover was neither easy nor complete” and “creole resistance to Americanization thus survived’ well into the twentieth century (91, 100). According to Hirsch and Logsdon, white Creoles “rallied around color” as a means of collective resistance to Americanization; thus one important result of the Americanization of Louisiana culture was the diminishment of a complex racial structure that acknowledged the status of free Creoles of color as a distinct, privileged group (98). The “three-tiered Caribbean-type society” was “at odds with the polarizations of American racism” and was largely dissolved into the bi-racial, white/black code of Anglo-America during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Marshall 41; see also Tregle 175 and Haddox 20).

The persistent struggle to interpret southern Louisiana within US national or southern frameworks hinges on its continued Catholic identity. According to geographer Cécyle Tréplanier, Catholic south Louisiana can be divided into three major subgroups: white Creoles (descendants of the first French and Spanish colonists), black Creoles (some of whose ancestors came to Louisiana from Africa directly and some via the Caribbean), and Cajuns (descendants of Acadians who were deported from their homeland, present-day Nova Scotia, in 1755). White Creoles were the dominant cultural group in colonial Louisiana. Free black Creoles held a

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<sup>1</sup> Tregle’s use of the term “indigenous” in this context is problematic, as his study focuses on the clash of ideologies between Creole inhabitants and the new American population. Though “indigenous” can mean simply “local,” or native-born, it carries the connotation of “original,” and Tregle is not describing a Louisiana Native American population in this context. The terms “local” or “Creole” better suit Tregle’s meaning.

distinct, privileged status above slaves, whose baptism into the Catholic faith was compulsory under French and Spanish rule (Haddox 20). French Cajuns, though technically classified as white, were deemed rural and backwards by the dominant white Creole and then American standards, and until a cultural revival in the 1970s and 80s, “Cajun” was viewed as a “derogatory” social status (Tréplanier 161). These intersections and conflicts of class and race within the subgroups of Catholic, Louisiana culture further complicate issues of status and power, including a subculture’s access to self-definition within a dominant narrative.

The specific strategies for understanding historical and current networks of cultural influence in the specific region of Louisiana can be drawn from the body of postcolonial texts which emphasize the hybridity and *creolité* of transnational cultures; specifically, the concepts of Paul Gilroy and Antonio Benitez-Rojo provide constructs and metaphors for theorizing the strategies which inform the literary texts in this study. While I remain very alert to feminist postcolonialist Sara Suleri’s caution against the “abstraction” of postcolonial theory into a practice which almost “inevitably leads to the simplicities that underlie unthinking celebrations of oppression, elevating the racially female voice into a metaphor for ‘the good’” (757), I maintain that close examination of the positionality of racialized women in the literary texts of this study raises our responsible awareness of repetitive patterns of class, race, and gender performance which construct the basic patterns that underlie the large, complex culture of Louisiana past, present, and future.

Specifically, Gilroy’s image of the ship, the locus of movement between and within official boundaries, is a construct for understanding the motion and “pathway” which the woman writers in this study enact. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Gilroy posits the “image of ships” as the metaphor for movement between cultures:

The image of a ship – a living, microcultural, micropolitical system in motion – is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons...Ships immediately

focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artifacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs. (4)

Gilroy's image of ships necessarily invokes the horror of the middle passage, the terror that Gilroy posits as a central, shared experience of all transatlantic, diasporic communities. Gilroy locates modern culture within a "webbed network, between the local and the global" and asserts that search for the "roots and rootedness" of identity is "more appropriately approached via the homonym routes" – cultural identity is a "process of movement and mediation" (29, 19).

Specific to this study, the concepts of border-crossing and movement between and within nations, regions, and systems of values invokes Gilroy's metaphor of ships and routes as ways of learning/remembers one's ancestry. The spiritual possession of Brodber's protagonist by maternal mentors who freely cross boundaries of time and space between the US north and south and Jamaica employs this "route" to recovery of roots which enable the student/protagonist to rectify the terror, the psychic scars resulting from severed ancestral ties and from the "whitewashing" effect of American/European academia and religion.

Benitez-Rojo's concept of Chaos theory as a means for recognizing basic patterns of interaction that exist within large, complex processes of culture formation likewise provides key strategies for interpreting the cultural work of the literary texts in this study. Chaos, according to Benitez-Rojo, means that

within the (dis)order that swarms around what we already know of as Nature, it is possible to observe dynamic states or regularities that repeat themselves globally...Chaos looks toward everything that repeats, reproduces, grows, decays, unfolds, flows, spins, vibrates, seethes...[its] end is not to find results, but processes, dynamics, and rhythms that show themselves within the marginal, the regional, the incoherent, the heterogeneous, or, if you like, the unpredictable that coexists with us in our everyday world. (2, 3)

When, then, the protagonist of Martin's novel comes to celebrate her connection to the growth and decay, the patterns of life and death, the convergence of old- and new-worlds in New



Orleans, she asserts her identity in relation to the chaos of her “everyday world”: it is her “greatest mistake” and also the recognition which saves her, which allows her to keep her “head above water” (204).

Survival and self-definition is a “dynamic state,” as Benitez-Rojo explains – it involves repeated performance of ritual and connection. When literary texts celebrate the repetition and performance of folk ritual, prayers, and reconnection to place and ancestors, this repetition necessarily involves improvisation, creative expressions which signify on rhythms and rituals of the past and synthesize them into present “ways of knowing” self and culture. Benitez-Rojo uses the folk expression “that certain kind of way,” a Caribbean way, to emphasize the pattern of knowing that manifests in folk culture – that acknowledges the diverse roots of Caribbean culture and the seeks to sublimate the violence “organized by slavery, despotic colonialism, and the Plantation” (23). When the constructed editor of *Louisiana* asserts, “Today the intellectual world understands that there are more ways of knowing than are accessible to the five senses” to describe Ella’s psychic possession by ancestral spirits, Brodber’s affirmed “ways of knowing” align with Benitez-Rojo’s assertion: “In the Caribbean...unlike what happens in the West, scientific knowledge and traditional knowledge coexist as differences within the same system” (17).

Essential to avoiding the over-simplification of Caribbean “ways of knowing” to mean any vernacular “ways of knowing” – of overly abstracting and extrapolating postcolonial concepts – is the close examination of texts within a particular, regional locus: examination of the network of privilege, power, and influence that operate within that specific zone, acknowledgement of the global impact and give-and-take networks of influence that act in this cultural place, and recognition of the patterns of assertion and resistance to cultural identification. In other words, the confluence of national and religious influences in Louisiana

calls for a *place-specific* theory of power and influence within its connected but multiple subcultures and populations. In her linguistic study, “The Translation of Louisiana into the South,” Anne Malena very clearly states this need:

Louisiana is both a part of the South and, because of its plural colonial history, distinct from it, and, although its link to the Caribbean is very strong, how it differs from it is equally important. In terms of theory, Louisiana also requires special formulations just as, in the realm of Caribbean Studies...Edouard Glissant’s theories emerge out of the very landscape of Martinique and the colonial constructs particular to the French while Paul Gilroy’s theories are informed by the experience of English colonialism. (85)

A place-specific theory of history and culture, then, will help us to tease out the complicated networks of power, influence, and resistance operating within specific cultures of the Louisiana south. Using the texts of contemporary women writers who consciously engage dominant Catholic, American, and southern ideologies in their narratives and who posit Louisiana as a liminal, hybrid space, provides a key vantage point – a “nodal point” of intersection and confluence, as Marshall and Robinson suggest – for postulating a postcolonial theory of Louisiana as a transnational space. This locus of study (where myths of the Catholic Blessed Virgin/Mary and the idealized Southern Lady/Matriarch converge) is particularly relevant to querying the position of women within the paradigms of religious and regional power.

In this study, I posit that literature by Martin, Wells, Osbey and Brodber can be read as postcolonial texts which forge routes to the reclamation of a hybrid, feminist spirituality within and against dominant cultural narratives of Catholicism and southernism. The authors enact this reclamation through the written expression of key components of postcolonial reconstruction of history, including ancestral memory, hybridization of cultural narratives, and performance of folk ritual and beliefs. Also, the texts’ engagement of Louisiana as a place which blurs national and ethnic boundaries posits this liminal zone as a position of possibility for cultural reconstruction. Ancestral memory is shown as vital in these texts which reclaim the creole past

in Louisiana; folk memory reveals a reaching toward a past that is always, already hybrid even though the dominant narratives work to “whitewash” or erase their hybridity. Citing the urgent need to reread history and cultural memory, Kelly Oliver asserts: “we need to find the conditions of the possibility for justice – for the impossible to become possible in the future – in the past” (qtd. in Gwin 1). The “performance” of hybrid, ancestral memory in a (re)vision of Louisiana’s history, then, is vital to its (re)construction.

### **Demystifying Icons of Womanhood in Catholic and Southern Cultures**

In his recent study of Catholicism and southern writing, *Fears and Fascinations: Representing Catholicism in the American South*, Thomas Haddock demonstrates that uses of Catholicism in the tradition of southern letters have been multiple, that there are Catholicism(s) in literature much like the multiple experiences of south(s) now recognized by critics. Haddock argues that responses to Catholicism in the southern region range from fear of its complicity with miscegenation, to ideological adoption of its patriarchal hierarchy, to fascination with its decadent ritual and cultural manifestations. However, by implication, the very diversification of Catholicism in contemporary practice dilutes the tradition: in modern literature, that of Walker Percy, John Kennedy Toole, and Rebecca Wells specifically, Catholicism becomes a “lifestyle” rather than a religion, claims Haddock. By promoting the “micronarrative” – literature which “does not seek to establish a new and totalizing framework of identity” (12) – postmodern writing is based on an impulse at odds with the Catholic tradition. Thus, Catholicism is “transformed” into, as Haddock asserts:

a practice that can be either working-class and cheerfully tacky – as in John Kennedy Toole’s *A Confederacy of Dunces* – or middle-class, feminist, and multicultural – as in Rebecca Wells’s *Little Altars Everywhere* and *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* – but which in both cases signifies as a solipsistic, consumer-driven practice that contributes to little more than the accumulation of goods on the one hand and smug, therapeutic self-satisfaction on the other. (12)

I want to explore the implications behind the critique that “working-class,” “multicultural,” “feminist” Catholicism is not really, after all, Catholicism – that those narratives which distrust absolutism lack a promise of salvation. Haddox critiques Allen Tate’s impulse to impose Catholic structure on the south as a futile attempt to save a collapsing worldview. Still, Haddox’s bemoaning of modern consumerism seems strikingly like the Vanderbilt Agrarians’ declensionist narrative of “industrialist” America seventy-five years prior. It also parallels Fred Hobson’s critique of postmodern southern literature, which has lost its real force, its “high tragedy,” notably when it becomes feminized – that is, when Thomas Wolfe and William Faulkner are succeeded by Bobbie Ann Mason and Lee Smith. The literature is fine, Hobson implies, just not great. According to this narrative, the era of great, truly southern literature, like that of real Catholic literature, is over.

What strikes me is that these critical narratives are very “southern” in their longing for a former, better era. They are also very “southern” in that they are damning for both women and minorities. It is an impossible paradox: if one revises the “official,” written tradition to be inclusive, that tradition is diluted and less authentic – not a viable route to *real* salvation. For many women, southern communities and Catholic traditions (in many vernacular forms) is essential to concepts of self, home, family, and community that they refuse to or cannot relinquish as a potentially powerful and affirming part of their identities. As Tina Beattie explains, “from the perspective of human reason, Catholic Christianity is an impossible paradox” which “must be read simultaneously as a narrative of damnation and redemption, of poison and cure” (5). Beattie further explains the psychic paradox of religious belief:

Outside of this story, one is neither saved nor damned, neither poisoned nor cured, any more than one is poisoned or cured by a drug that one does not swallow. It is only from within that one recognizes redemption and damnation, cure and poison, as the two sides of the fabric out of which faith is woven. It is through accepting the promise of redemption that one risks damnation, and through seeking the cure

that one risks being poisoned. That is faith's mystery, and it means that the Christian story is the locus of a dynamic, transgressive and dangerous volatility.  
(5)

This is the basic nature of religious narrative: if a soul can be saved, it can also be damned. Too often, however, the “dynamic” and “dangerous volatility” of religious myth has been manipulated in favor of the dominant group – the “sin” which puts the mortal soul at risk of damnation is defined in terms of resistance to mainstream, the “sin” is questioning dominant values rather than humbly accepting one's “lot” as does the patient, suffering allegorical soul with a long lineage in western culture: the Virgin Mary, Griselda in Chaucer's “Clerk's Tale,” the Victorian “angel of the house,” the idealized southern matriarch, the devoted slave or servant.

In this way, ideals of both the south and Catholicism have historically appropriated women's bodies and voices as symbols and standards of virtue through overlapping, idealized images of the Blessed Virgin/Mother Mary and the Southern Lady/Matriarch. Both paradigms traditionally raise women to a pedestal of “honor,” which actually seeks to remove them from self-realization, voice, and cultural power. As Marina Warner describes, young Catholic girls were taught to dedicate themselves to the Virgin Mary as the “culmination of womanhood” and to “emulate her in thought, word, and deed: her chastity, her humility, her gentleness” (xx). As Warner grimly asserts, Catholicism was thus conveniently “a good religion for a girl” (xx) in a male-dominated church and culture because it bound women to a vision of wholeness and holiness only attainable as the “Virgin (and) Mother” – an impossible feat for mortal women (337). The foundations of this ideal are “laid in fear and loathing of the female body's functions, in identification of evil with the flesh and flesh with woman” (Warner 77). Thus, to obtain holiness in this paradigm, women are urged to neglect and reject the flesh, as evidenced in the aesthetic practices suggested for young girls in the early Church by St. Jerome: “to fast unceasingly, to avoid wine, and to seek as companions ‘women pale and thin with fasting’”

(Warner 74). According to radical spiritual feminist Mary Daly, the ideal of Virgin Mother and the split imposed between spirit and flesh in this traditional version of Catholicism catches women in the “self-contradictory bind of shrinking our being to avoid non-being,” of accepting the subordination of the female body and the superiority of male religious and cultural authority in exchange for “security” from the threat of non-being through “very limited and undifferentiated identities” (23). The “identity” for women recognized within a traditional Catholicism, according to Warner and Daly, is that of pale, thin, humble, and chaste perfection – silent and inactive except in their emulation of the ideal.<sup>2</sup>

Patriarchal southern myth ascribes a similar paradoxical standard to women’s role: the ideal southern *matriarch* is also the “modern-day vestige of the *virgin* archetype, the incarnation of loving-kindness, nurturing, and passivity” (Warren and Wolff 1, emphasis added). Rather than sacrificing her body to spirit, as in Catholic ideals of womanhood, the southern lady sacrifices her body to the community. For instance, in 1859, Caroline Merrick wrote of her role as a Southern mother: “We owe it to our husbands, children, and friends to represent as nearly as possible the ideal which they hold so dear” (Warren and Wolff 5). The image of a stable, natural, unquestioning matriarch is central to the preservation of an agrarian myth of order and stability – women’s individual bodies are sacrificed to the ideal and are ascribed symbolic identity by the dominant culture. Both traditional Catholicism and southern myth appropriate women’s bodies and voices as symbols and standards of virtue, and in both paradigms, white women function as silent representatives of the purity and sanctity of the institution.

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<sup>2</sup> In *Beyond Patching: Faith and Feminism in the Catholic Church*, Sandra Schneiders claims there is a direct connection between the patriarchal structure of the Catholic Church and the current scandal of clerical sexual abuse. According to Schneiders, “Many people do not yet see the intimate connection between the sexually-based oppression of women by powerful males and the sexual domination and exploitation of children by powerful males. Feminists, however, do see the connection...Children share women’s vulnerability to the powerful, and in both cases, male-controlled religion is used to legitimate abuse of the vulnerable” (v).

The link between the Virgin Mary and the ideal Southern woman is made explicit in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. Mitchell's novel portrays Ellen O'Hara as the epitome of the Southern "great lady;" her life, for instance,

...was not easy, nor was it happy, but she did not expect life to be easy, and, if it was not happy, that was woman's lot. It was a man's world, and she accepted it as such... She had been reared in the tradition of great ladies, which had taught her how to carry her burden and still retain her charm, and she intended that her three daughters should be great ladies also. (41)

Mitchell's implicit critique of women's role in the agrarian order points to three key aspects: in order to be a "great lady," a woman must (1) recognize her "lot" and accept it without complaint, (2) "bear the burden" of the "man's world," and (3) take responsibility for molding future generations of daughters, thus ensuring the continuity of the tradition. Like the training of Catholic girls Warner describes, Ellen's daughter Scarlett is trained in the tradition of the southern lady, "the arts and graces of being attractive to men" (41). Further, Scarlett imagines a parallel role for the ideal Catholic matriarch and the Southern lady: "When Scarlett was a child, she had confused her mother with the Virgin Mary, and now that she was older she saw no reason for changing her opinion" (42). During the family prayer hour, Scarlett venerates her mother rather than the Blessed Virgin, calling attention to the parallel function woman's image serves to the stability of religion and region:

Sacrilegious though it might be, Scarlett always saw, through her closed eyes, the upturned face of Ellen and not the Blessed Virgin, as the ancient phrases were repeated. "Health of the Sick," "Seat of Wisdom," "Refuge of Sinners," "Mystical Rose" – they were beautiful words because they were attributes of Ellen. (50)

The realm of womanly perfection serves as a refuge and corrective to the "ills" and "sins" of the world, thus working as a stabilizer of community order. Scarlett is acutely aware of the self-sacrifice necessary to become like her mother, that "by being just and tender and truthful and unselfish, one missed most of the joys of life," and she recognizes that Ellen's seemingly perfect

embodiment of the ideal makes Ellen “different... holy and apart from the rest of humankind” (42). Still, Scarlett is compelled to adopt the “vener” of southern ladyhood to wield its influence – “appearances were enough, for the appearances of ladyhood won her popularity and that was all she wanted” (41). Scarlett’s “choice” to wear the mask of ladyhood alludes to self-actualization and agency, but her acknowledgement that it was necessary to maintain the signs of ladyhood in order to be recognized and have influence within the southern order points to the power of the myth to shape social expectations and define women’s realized identity.

Further problematic within these narratives of idealized womanhood are their whitewashing effect. Minority women were likewise obligated to the code, to accept their “lot” and suffering unquestioningly, as Harriet Jacobs and Mitchell point out, but their “natural” place was always secondary and subservient. The “ideal” servant is Mammy, as Mitchell writes, for in her fulfillment of the duties of a “devoted” mammy, she is such an enforcer of propriety that she is paternalistically seen (by white code enforcers) to “own the O’Haras, body and soul” (38). In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs describes the slaves’ religious lessons: “’Tis the devil who tempts you. God is angry with you, and will surely punish you if you don’t forsake your wicked ways. You that live in town are eye-servants behind your master’s back. Instead of serving your masters faithfully, you are idle and shirk your work. You tell lies. God hears you... If you disobey your earthly masters, you offend your heavenly master” (397-398). Texts which write back to these limited narratives that view the oppressed only in relation to their role in the dominant social structure, therefore, reclaim the influence, vigor, and diverse experiences of women and minorities. These revised versions of Catholic and southern history posit the “opening up” and revaluation of dominant narratives as acts of renewal, not declension.



## **Beyond the *One Holy Narrative*: Catholicism and Literature**

The tradition of Catholic literary theory posits post-modernism as the antithesis of Catholicism. For instance, in *The Catholic Imagination in American Literature*, Ross Labrie focuses on writers born before Vatican II, those who “experienced the atmosphere of the preconciliar church, a formation that, though giving rise to diversity, also produced an underlying unity of outlook that is now more difficult to identify in the increasingly fragmented American Catholic Church” (267). He, like Haddox, notes the “comfort” of American Catholics, who “feel free to differ with their church on certain moral issues, primarily involving sexuality, while remaining more or less contentedly Catholic” (268). Citing Jon Hassler as “one of the most important Catholic writers of this generation,” Labrie observes that Hassler,

developed the stratagem of taking his characters to Ireland, the virtual home of American Catholicism and a bastion of Catholic culture...to offset the increasing mood of decline and fragmentariness that had become attached to Catholic America and to suggest that if dialogue is no longer possible between Catholicism and American culture...nevertheless by its very universality the lamp of Catholicism would always be burning in some part of the world. (282)

Labrie cautions modern Catholic writers and readers against an ‘unbridled individualism’ that could give rise to an ‘idiosyncratic Catholicism that has little relation to the Church of history and tradition’” (Labrie 268). Naming Ireland as the “virtual home of American Catholicism” (it is also Scarlett’s ancestral homeland) points up the marginalization within the national imagination of French and Spanish Catholic culture and its southern Louisiana stronghold.

Narrow, white-washed ideologies defining womanhood, southern culture and Catholicism are the constricting paradigms to which the deliberately creole texts in this study respond. Their works reflect the movement of contemporary feminist theologians to make mothers in Catholic tradition more available, to uncover the equality and inclusiveness demanded by a (re)reading of the “authentic” Catholic Church of “history and tradition.” Of particular relevance to understanding new directions in contemporary feminist theology are Sandra Schneiders’ *Beyond*

*Patching* and Tina Beattie's *New Catholic Feminism*. Schneiders explores the metaphor of scripture as "word of God," concluding "if we really believe that the word of God is not bound (cf. 2 Tim 2:10) and that the God of universal liberation and *shalom* cannot endorse the oppression of any of God's creatures, then we must find a way to allow God's word to promote and enhance the full personhood of women" (71). Schneiders cites feminism and postmodern theory in its reclamation of "other-ness" in "people of color, children, the mentally and physically disabled, the laity, immigrants, the poor, and all those in society who are, for some reason, 'other' to the hegemonic group of white, western, affluent males" (xi) as vital tools for moving Catholic faith toward "justice and dignity for all God's people" (xviii). Rather than being irreparably rent by the relativity of postmodern theory, Schneiders claims, Catholicism can be redeemed through it.

Similarly, Beattie's "primary concern," is "to discover the potential of theological language to inform a bodily, sacramental performance of faith, and that means that language must be supple, capable of sculpting itself to the body's grace, porous enough to allow its meanings to be expressed in gesture, speech, and touch, and open to as many translations and interpretations as there are bodies to perform them" (8).<sup>3</sup> Both theologians demonstrate careful, acute probing of religious doctrine which provides a useful framework for analyzing the reworking of religious tradition in the primary texts I study – the religious visions, the reworking of prayers and rituals, the spiritual experiences, and the understanding of relationships to the divine and human – which enact the inclusiveness and "bodily," "porous" language and spirituality that Beattie and Schneiders describe.

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<sup>3</sup> Beattie's bodily metaphor for language speaks to what she sees as the Church's continued fear of women's bodies and sexuality, an anxiety which thwarts social purpose: "There is a profound fear of female sexuality that infects the celibate Catholic imagination, and I believe this lies behind many of the Church's other failings, not least her failure to challenge war and violence with the same unyielding absolutism with which she challenges abortion and contraception" (4).

## **The Virgin's Daughters: Writing a Miraculous (Re)birth**

The urgent call to reclaim and revalue the subverted “other” within dominant myths is essential to both feminist Catholic theology and postcolonial theory. Writing through the paradox of female deity as virgin and mother, these texts reconnect women to strong, sensual female deity in hybrid, creole traditions – values of femininity which have been hidden and whitewashed in a de-sexualized, sterile image of the Virgin Mary. A common theme in these writings involves a particularly feminine perspective on the paradox of sacrifice required for belonging and redemption – a search for mothers in religion and tradition and for the “mother” within oneself. This search involves coming to terms with the central conflict of establishing one’s individuality versus the sacrifice of individuality required to be a mother and to belong to religious and cultural communities. Akin to this central theme is a feminist desire to revalue and reshape the paradigms that have traditionally subverted the female body and reinforced racial oppression. Each text emphasizes recovered feminist narratives as connecting links – as umbilical cords of sustaining spiritual life blood between spiritual mothers and their daughters. The texts in this study enact a move from a feminist, post-modern revaluation of traditional Catholicism to a radical, peripheral religious fusion of creole beliefs. In following the arc of this movement, starting with Valerie Martin’s *A Recent Martyr* and ending with Erna Brodber’s *Louisiana*, I want to show the overall movement toward reclamation of hybrid, postcolonial spiritual myths – a movement that seems to have begun in literary and theological studies as a feminist awakening and then progressed with a continuing opening up to a revaluation of hybrid vernacular spirituality.

Chapter Two examines Valerie Martin’s *A Recent Martyr*, first published in 1987. This text can be read not only as a gothic “replaying of unconscious desires that are pretty dark” (Martin, qtd. in Rob Smith 10), but also as a modern-day Catholic allegory. Set in contemporary

New Orleans, the novel places everywoman Emma Miller in a moral dilemma, the boundaries of which are represented by Claire D'Anjou, a postulant nun ("the light"), and Pascal Toussaint ("the flesh") with whom Emma is involved in an increasingly masochistic affair. Emma is drawn to both characters to the point of obsession, and in this way, the novel portrays an almost medieval battle of spirit versus flesh. Of further importance to this study are the novel's questioning of a medieval Catholic ideal of womanhood and its affirmation of human motherhood, the body, and liminality. Further, Martin's text emphasizes the work of official narratives as code-enforcers; the text deconstructs narratives created to canonize ideals in religion, literature, and culture, as depicted in the "canonization" of Claire after her murder. It also reveals a parallel between sexual and mystical experience, the eroticism of desire to mortify the flesh and to move beyond the body's "normal range of sensation" to experience sensations "beyond those compatible with psychic organization" (R. McClure Smith 408). Martin's text engages and revises literary precursors, including Camus' *La Peste* and Catholic hagiography of female saints.

Chapter Three analyzes Rebecca Wells' novels *Little Altars Everywhere* (1992) and *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (1996). Each novel opens with the daughter character, Siddalee Walker, expressing deep longing for maternal love and guidance. The novels show Sidda's movement from her role as a needful daughter to her immersion into "sisterhood" with her mother's generation. In *Divine Secrets*, a scrapbook serves the function of narratizing and revealing to Sidda the empowering history of her mother(s). By uncovering the "secrets" of her mother Vivi's life and her sustaining spirituality, Sidda becomes one of the sisterhood, and moves her expectations for Vivi from the model of idealized motherhood to the recognition of common womanhood. The texts directly engage southern and Catholic ideals of womanhood in references to *Gone With the Wind* and Catholic saints. These icons are revised in hybrid re-

visioning of Catholic ritual to draw upon local, folk tradition and strong creole goddess imagery. While I examine the problematic use of black culture by privileged white women in their reclaimed spiritual narratives, I posit that the spiritual sisterhood enacted by the Ya-Yas begins to expose the colonizing narratives of patriarchal and southern codes and forces recognition of positionality within them.

In Chapter Four, I look at how Brenda Marie Osbey's *All Saints* (1997) enacts the naming and claiming of mothers and blackness to resist the damaging effects of a "whitewashed" religious tradition and to assert the powerful essence of *creolité* in New Orleans Catholicism. Poems in *All Saints* posit that learning to remember the dead, our individual and collective history, is essential to identity formation. Osbey's poems fully demonstrate the theory of hybridity and essential blackness of contemporary culture, and they map out routes to recovery of and reconnection to the blackness and strong matriarchs which are carried in our "deepest places," our subconscious memory. By moving the reader through a cycle of initiation into Creole cultures (through ancestors, place, and spirituality), the text asserts the importance of performing culture, of learning to connect to and reenact the important rituals of one's vernacular culture in order to maintain a rooted sense of self and community in postmodern culture, to establish, as Paul Gilroy theorizes, the "roots/routes" of one's personal history – a history with transnational implications, particularly in Catholic, Creole New Orleans.

Chapter Five is a study of Erna Brodber's *Louisiana* (1994), which examines the deep, transcontinental connection between southern and Caribbean cultures, between Catholic doctrine and creole Caribbean spirituality. The novel valorizes unofficial, community history as a validating source of identity and calls for social action; it moves from "white" tradition and the American academy into local culture which does not define itself within the borders of a nation-state. Brodber's prose is circular, lyrical, and metaphorical. She weaves a multitude of voices,

settings (including New York, Chicago, St. Mary Parish, New Orleans, and Jamaica), and sources (including folk songs, ceremonies, and religious belief) into the narrative. She “doubles” characters, bodies, landscapes, and events. The text is both frustrating and absorbing in its seeming abstractness: it “tutors” readers, as Shalini Puri says of Brodber’s writing, to “develop an ethical reading practice” for hybridity (14). It also powerfully reclaims feminine Caribbean spirituality as a redeeming tradition for women and minority culture.

The “hybrid Catholicism” in the texts emphasizes the impact of physical and cultural space on spirituality, resulting in a celebration of the redemption offered by multicultural influences – for instance, Cajun, Creole, and Caribbean Catholicism, hoodoo, and conjuring – which celebrate the female body, female religious authority, and direct mystical experience. Catholicism is part of the characters’ psyches, but they work to shape the inherited spirituality into something that is inclusive, viable, and locally relevant. In *The Caribbean Postcolonial: Social Equality, Post-Nationalism, and Cultural Hybridity*, Puri posits Erna Brodner’s novel *Myal* as an instance of literary instruction for reading difference: “*Myal*’s form of textual practice... filters out readers who are not willing to perform... interpretative and solidarity labor... in terms of faith, participation, and deliberation” (169). The novel does not, as versions of postmodernism and post-nationalism sometimes seem to do, “surrender the notion of truth” Puri claims, “but it radically transforms the context of the truth as well as the reader’s means of access to it” (170). Brodber’s text, enacting hybridity theory as Puri defines it, locates answers within a specific, local, community “that exists in and of itself, not solely as a strategy for working against cultural hegemony” (168). Hybridity in cultural or religious identity is not, therefore, relativity without end or simply a strategy for resistance against hegemony; it is a viable solution that “exists in and of itself.”

This fear of relativism spiraling down to nihilism – the worry that when we become everything, we become nothing – seems to be a root of vehement resistance to multi-cultural, tolerant, feminist Catholicism. Many critics pretty much argue that insipid relativism is the current status of both Catholicism and southernness. When, for instance, a character in Wells’ *Divine Secrets* is “saved” from both self-doubt and poverty by the correct shade of lipstick (she is a door-to-door cosmetics salesperson) that kind of critique might seem right on target. But, I contend this sort of “store-bought salvation” is not the final answer offered by the texts. What the works in this study evidence is, in short, the quintessential quest for meaning – not a lifestyle, not a “solipsistic buffet” of satisfaction, but a continued grappling with a modern world which sells quick fixes, a seeking for something more real and tangible. It is an implosion of a set of rules that seemed to shut people out, a yearning for the path to redemption that is inerasably part of the psyche. It is the struggle to regenerate and renew life – for a community, a child, the self – when life seems shut out by both consumerism and traditional definitions of religion and nation.

Academic and theological studies of Catholic tradition in America and in the south have most emphatically presented an official, linear, masculine version of Catholicism. Regional, vernacular traditions within Catholicism have been dismissed as primitive, marginal, quaint, or heretical. But the female authors in this study enact a postcolonial shift of this marginal, potentially heretical zone – centering it as a zone of re/discovery, of possibility for vital, vibrant, inclusive spiritualism. In these works, Catholicism does not trump, or enclose and tame, hybrid/Creole religious tradition: rather, these texts use Catholicism as an official, public fixture which provides a “mainstream,” sanctioned starting point for the exploration of co-existing vernacular, matriarchal spiritualism within/without it. Enlightened women within these texts embrace elements of Catholic tradition – including elements which have historically been forced

upon them or have been used to malign or marginalize them – to claim and reshape/manipulate them as rightful values of their spiritual inheritance.

These women writers in southern and Catholic traditions, then, can be read as negotiators of paradox, as virgin matriarchs: they conceive/write/enact sustaining, feminized belief systems within dominant institutions that have historically cut off access to that reproductive power. And, they are virgins' daughters: their spiritual mothers have been hidden within official religious narratives and they have re-created lifelines – umbilical cords – to strong, nurturing matriarchs. Recovering and reclaiming regional, oral, and folk elements within Catholicism reconnects them to their roots in religious tradition and allows them to spew the poison of narrowly-defining, damning codes for women and minorities. Invariably, the ethic of each work promotes an opening up and out – an opening up to diversity and otherness, even within the self. This opening up also invariably involves a commitment of self to others: to accept responsibility for the renewal and protection of life as a parent, marital partner, daughter – the commitment to a community of humans in desperate need of social change and the promise of spiritual redemption.



**Chapter Two**  
**“The Fault Line”: Masochism and Reclamation in Valerie Martin’s *A Recent Martyr***

All the boys you date dump you. You beg. You get on your knees on the floorboard. You dial his number, drive by his house, fantasize his apology. You – caught in the drama of the pending earthquake – beseech him: Trample me. Cut the core from me. Rearrange my tendons, nerve endings, blood cells. But what if one day that becomes a prayer to God rather than to a man?  
-- Vicki Covington, “Why Jesus Loved Whores” in *All Out of Faith: Southern Women on Spirituality*

...the transmission of original sin is a mystery that we cannot fully understand. But we do know by Revelation that Adam had received original holiness and justice not for himself alone, but for all human nature. By yielding to the tempter, Adam and Eve committed a personal sin, but the sin affected the human nature that they would then transmit in a fallen state. It is a sin which will be transmitted by propagation to all mankind, that is, by the transmission of a human nature deprived of original holiness and justice.  
-- *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (article 404)

*A Recent Martyr*, first published in 1987, is a dark and twisted gothic tale – an apocalyptic novel of plague and death that can be read as a new, medieval Catholic allegory of human suffering and temptation. In the novel, Valerie Martin exposes the vulnerable fault lines within Emma Miller, an everywoman ordinary secretary, mother and wife, as she is pulled between the two obsessive forces of sexual and religious passions. The moral parameters of Emma’s temptations are drawn by Claire d’Anjou, a postulant nun, and Pascal Toussaint, an intellectual skeptic and Emma’s lover. Allegorically, these characters offer Emma the “light,” the otherworldly, or the “flesh,” the earthly.

In Martin’s new Catholic allegory, both paths result in crucifixion. The ethic and form of her allegory negotiate the crucifying constructs of both traditional Catholicism and modern skepticism to provide a model of spiritual resurrection and survival in the postmodern environment. Martin positions her novel in debate with modern skepticism by excerpting Blaise Pascal’s *Pensées* in the epigraph: “That we are in ourselves hateful, reason alone will convince

us; and yet there is no religion but the Christian which teaches us to hate ourselves; wherefore no other religion can be entertained by those who know themselves to be worthy of nothing but hatred.” This is, thus, the paradox of modern human experience which Martin negotiates through Emma: both the “enlightenment” of traditional religion and the “enlightenment” of modern skepticism compel us to despise and distrust human nature. Emma’s spiritual evolution toward real “sympathy” for the common suffering of humanity and her willingness to “entertain...possibilities” is the symbolic creation of a liminal space, a space of fluctuation and potential positioned simultaneously within/without the parameters of the traditional spiritual allegory.

The New Orleans, Louisiana setting for *A Recent Martyr* is likewise positioned as a liminal zone. The subtropical city, with its “florid, natural cycles that roll over the senses with their lushness” (204), dramatizes constant tension between growth and decay, civilization and nature, life and death. Martin uses this setting as the external manifestation of her narrator’s psyche, vacillating between hope and despair. This vulnerable “fault line” in Emma’s psyche parallels the masochistic connection between sexual and spiritual obsession as Vicki Covington writes in “Why Jesus Loved Whores”: she describes “the fault line, the place in the internal landscape of our bodies, that vulnerable shifting plate that is irreparable” (27). Covington continues, “Jesus loved whores. He knew the fault line. He saw it as a stripe, like the ones he’d have someday” (28). A geographic fault line represents a liminal point, a tentative, possibly “shifting plate” with the potential to disrupt or divide seemingly whole entities. In the feminine psyche, as depicted in Covington’s essay, the fault line is the vulnerable, shifting point between salvation and despair, joy and pain. This “fault line” also connects to the traditional Christian narrative which “faults” Eve for bringing sin upon humankind, the fallen state of being deprived of original holiness and justice. Because Christ, like women, takes on the sinfulness of the

world, Covington depicts his familiarity with this feminine, masochistic desire to be scourged, humiliated, and punished for weakness and impurity.

The feminization of the Christ-experience and the masochistic desire in these texts reflects an early Catholic dictum to purify the soul by detaching it from the body. Indeed, the female characters Emma and Claire are congruent with medieval women mystics who seek religious ecstasy and spiritual purity. According to Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, medieval visionaries express desire for violent purgation, for “true contrition [which] expresses itself in fantasies of self-punishment, degradation, and public humiliation” (6). Angela of Foligno, a thirteenth-century Italian mystic, for example, fantasizes revealing the impurities of her soul to the world and bringing humiliation upon herself:

I did not blush to recite before the world all the sins that I ever committed. But I enjoyed imagining some way in which I could reveal those deceptions and iniquities and sins. I wanted to go through the squares and the towns naked, with fish and meat hanging about my neck, saying, “here is that disgusting woman, full of malice and deception, the sewer of all vices and evils... behold the devil in my soul and the malice of my heart. Hear how I am... an abomination of God” (Petroff 7).

Angela’s desires for humiliation are clearly erotic and masochistic: she wants to be naked, to be a spectacle, a piece of dead flesh for public consumption like the fish and meat she imagines draping herself in. She depicts her soul as depraved, defined by flesh and rot, a “human nature deprived of original holiness,” as the fallen human condition, the result of original sin, is depicted in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (article 404). According to Petroff, female medieval mystics routinely express a desire for illness to weaken and punish the body, to prepare the soul for spiritual visions, and to participate fully in the suffering of the crucified Christ, a physical and psychological experience often depicted in erotic terms of penetration and psychological ecstasy.

Martin's protagonist's intense sexual, masochistic desire which both belies and parallels an innate compulsion for spiritual fulfillment, set in a New Orleans south portrayed as a conglomerate of new- and old-world influences, aligns Emma's spiritual dilemma with Catholic tradition as experienced and recorded by medieval female visionaries. Yet, in spite of these ancient, allegorical outlines of the narrative and the dark depiction of human depravity, Martin's novel ultimately voices a decidedly feminist, life- and world-affirming reconstruction of Catholicism – a Catholicism aligned with what feminist Catholic theologians such as Anita Gandolfo see as vital for reclaiming and renewing post-modern religious belief and culture.

In her study of modern Catholic fiction in America, Gandolfo calls for a “new model of Church for Catholicism,” a new model of spiritual development and religious worldview as imagined in literature that reflects “postconciliar theology [which] is it not the arbitrary imposition of rule and law but the experience of the People of God in light of the gospel message that should serve as a guide in life” (208, 209). Gandolfo refers to *A Recent Martyr* as a text which explores the “interpenetration of the Divine and the human” and approaches spiritual truth “from life rather than from dogma” (162). She argues that women writers like Martin are particularly poised to imagine and enact this paradigm in contemporary fiction:

Among writers of fiction, males most commonly project a sense of loss in relation to Catholicism... Their typical narrative stance is encapsulated in the “visions of experience,” an expression of grief occasioned by the loss of certitude and stability that the preconciliar Church provided... For women writers, the story of Catholicism is not the saga of the institution because historically women have been marginalized by the Church. They did not identify with its patriarchal structure in the same way as men. However, their very lack of status within the institutional Church provides women with a more perceptive angle of vision in the dynamics of paradigm change. (162)

Gandolfo reads Martin's novel as a critique of traditional Catholicism which sanctifies the “avoidance of intimacy,” a “destructive spirituality that is essentially anti-Christian in its denial of value in the human” (176). She specifically aligns *A Recent Martyr* with the impetus to

redefine spirituality in contemporary literature, to locate spiritual meaning within human relationships.

I contend that the form through which Martin achieves this redefinition of spirituality provides a model/method for deconstructing traditional, canonized ideals in religion, literature, and regional culture and for reclaiming the bodily, maternal, and temporal aspects of women's experience. *A Recent Martyr* certainly depicts human beings as sinful, broken, and damaged, but also as redeemable in their connection to others, not – significantly – in their detachment from the sinfulness of the world. The true, dangerous fault line is the death-wish, the desire for removal from this world, the novel asserts. Salvation lies in connection to our own particular climate and to others who need us. In the final verdict of *A Recent Martyr*, the protagonist Emma understands herself to be a survivor of the plague and of a life-threatening affair, and she is recommitted to herself, to life, and to her daughter Christine, who can, in fact, be read as a new Christ – a young, female, and life-affirming.

The ethic of the novel moves between traditional, other-worldly Catholicism and postmodern relativism by hybridizing the traditional allegorical form, by moving within and between the old and new worlds which co-exist in the landscape of New Orleans and within post-modern spirituality. Martin's renegotiation of a traditional form to shape a contemporary ethic aligns with the impulse toward fluidity and hybridity in self-realization which Gandolfo and others describe as vital to a healthy, sustainable post-modern spirituality. Though Martin's novel does not overtly reconceptualize historical, racial, or national narratives, reading Martin's allegory of the postmodern psyche through the lens of postcolonial theory best opens up the work's ethic as it (re)defines cultural and spiritual space. By reading the internal and external conflicts of Emma's experience through the framework of Antonio Benitez-Rojo's concepts of postcolonial paradox, for instance, we can see that both Emma's psyche and the cultural space of

New Orleans (the ancient/modern new world city colonized by old world culture) work as a postcolonial “islands” – paradoxical spaces kept vital by the tension between order and disorder, between ancient and new. In *A Recent Martyr*, the interplay of conflict (mediated within Emma’s psyche) between traditional Catholic religion (Claire), traditional western skepticism (Pascal), and the un-subdued natural energy of place and human relationship (New Orleans) illustrate Benitez-Rojo’s analysis of conflict between “Name-of the-Father” and “Image of the Mother” as evidenced in Caribbean postcolonial literature (276). Benitez-Rojo cites Alejo Carpentier’s line in *The Harp and the Shadow* as emblematic of this “unsolvable dilemma”: “Swimmer between two waters, shipwrecked between two worlds” (274). In the protagonist’s search for self-definition, Carpentier depicts his movement between the ideals and values of France, associated with the father, and Caribbean nature and folk tradition, associated with the mother (275). The postcolonial psyche must be understood in the negotiation of multiple spaces and narratives, Benitez-Rojo claims.

In the denouement of *A Recent Martyr*, Emma comes to understand her role as a “swimmer” between cultures, as the “performer” who keeps a spiritual culture vital through her continued performance and reconnection to place. Speaking of her place in New Orleans, Emma concludes:

Our city is an island, physically and psychologically; we are tied to the rest of the country only by our own endeavor. The river from which we drink drains a continent; it has to be purified for days before we can stomach it. We smile to ourselves when people from more fashionable centers find us provincial, for if we are free of one thing, it’s fashion. The future holds a single promise. We are well below sea level, and inundation is inevitable. We are content, for now, to have our heads above water. (204)

The depiction of New Orleans residents as unfashionable, provincial and primitive, and the contaminated water (refuse from more “fashionable” northern regions of the modern, first-world continent) connect New Orleans to the postcolonial, tropical south whose populace, natural

resources, and culture have historically been exploited for economic gain. The “single promise” of the end-times to which Emma’s claim alludes can be read on several allegorical levels: the inundation, or death, of the individual, of a marginal culture, of all culture – all of which, according to Catholic and western culture, are inevitable and represent the paradox of simultaneous fear of death (something to be kept at bay by actively holding one’s head above water) and yearning for death as the end of conflict (a innate desire for peace and rest).

In the novel, the setting of New Orleans figures simultaneously as the city of death and as a subtropical clime swarming with uncontrollable life. During the month of August, while the quarantine is still in effect, for instance, Emma describes the city:

It was mercilessly hot; the daylight hours were unbearable...The sun took our breath away by day; the mosquitoes took our blood by night. They descended on our weakened resistance with the fury of an invading culture. Mothers struck their children for leaving a screen door ajar. In my neighborhood the children who could not be kept in at night ran about with legs and arms swollen with bites, some bleeding and open from their constant scratching. (101-102)

The hellish heat and plague-like insects read like God’s judgment upon the citizens of the city.

The unstoppable life-force of the tropical clime also connects to Jon Smith’s reading of the jungle or swamp as a postcolonial liminal space: “the sheer heat experienced by much of the Caribbean and the U.S. South (indeed, the global South), with its attendant disease, vegetative profusion, biodiversity, and long growing season (eventuating in plantation culture)” are fascinating and fearsome in their contingency and irrepressibility, much like indigenous or colonized cultures, he argues. The tropical south is “tropable” in literature, Jon Smith claims, because it represents “a nature forever threatening to engulf culture” (110). Through the setting of New Orleans, then, Martin is able write in liminal territories – a volatile point of existence on the edge of being engulfed or overcome *and* a point of possibilities for change and renewal.

Indeed, the city and its populace are threatened with extinction, as Martin writes. There has been an outbreak of the bubonic plague, a particularly medieval disease, and the death tolls

increase in parallel with the increasing intensity of Emma's masochistic affair with Pascal. This aspect of plot in *A Recent Martyr* is a direct literary allusion to Albert Camus' 1947 novel *La Peste* (*The Plague*) in which thousands of rats infest the Algerian City of Oran. The horrific spectacle of multitudes of rats dying in the streets incites public hysteria and signals the onset of the bubonic plague which results in quarantine of the city's population. The novel traces collective and individual reactions to human suffering and to the absurd, and reveals moments of selflessness and noble action in individual responses to catastrophe but largely critiques the self-absorption and emptiness of the social conscience of the masses. Camus also depicts a mass turn to religion during the crisis, largely due to the Jesuit Father Paneloux's public sermons which attribute the plague to the sinfulness of its victims.

Camus' critique of public ignorance and self-serving use of religion is similarly reflected in *A Recent Martyr* when a mother brings her daughter in for medical care at the charity hospital only when she is beyond medical help. When the woman recognizes Claire by reputation as "a saint," who "saved Lottie Pratt's girl," she exclaims, "You can save my little girl...Go down there and pray over her now. Go and touch her...Her name is Jane, Jane Leary...You go and pray over my girl now. I know you can save her when those doctors can't. I know you can" (145-146). Emma responds to Mrs. Leary with a "wave of revulsion" as she contrasts her own reaction to the growing threat: "Many of us rationalized our hysteria bravely every day. My own concession to it had been to have my daughter sleep with me, so that when I woke in the night overpowered by the fear of losing her, I could take her in my arms, feel her cool forehead, breathe her innocent breath, and assure myself that she was still well, still my own" (144). In *A Recent Martyr*, Emma comes to voice the humane position that Camus depicts in his principal character Dr. Bernard Rieux: simultaneous acceptance of the absurd and resistance to absolute despair. R. McClure Smith argues that Martin's literary re-vision of *La Peste* in *A Recent*



*Martyr* are a means for entering a literary “debate...about choices” (409) and for questioning the canonization of established literary and cultural values, as when Martin names her unreliable narrator, an adulterous wife, Emma in reference to Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. I contend that the particular force of Martin’s revision of literary precursors and, as important, “traditional” Catholicism, effects this revision through form as much as content: her narrative positionality is not a “universal,” “rational” male perspective but is a feminine, maternal, culture-identified psyche, and her revision of literary and religious ideals reflects this.

Throughout the novel, Martin writes in the threat of apocalypse – an ever-constant and increasingly dark reminder of a death-ridden culture. Her depiction of the pervasive threat of death is written in terms of human perversity and bestiality, descriptions which are reflective of Jon Smith’s reading of the jungle as a threat to ordered civilization, rationalism, and modernity. The city is experiencing a gas shortage, for instance, that threatens to isolate its populace from the outside world, and a garbage strike that has filled the air with an almost-intolerable stench of rot. The church rectory’s sewer has backed up, and when the priest reports it to the city, he is told that sewers in public buildings all over town are backing up (62). At dinner at the Toussaints’ house, the priest’s pants are “inexplicably covered with animal hair” (60) and, when the group moves outside, they discover “among the exposed gray roots of the family oak” the “rapidly and relentlessly advancing head of a large black snake” (65). Emma describes the landscape of New Orleans in terms of corruption and perversion: she describes the trunks of crepe myrtles as “so like twisted human limbs” (77) and explains that in New Orleans, “three pumping stations, which, for reasons no one could adequately explain, had stopped pumping out the filthy water beneath whose natural level our city, for hundreds of years, has prospered” (80).

Emma sees herself in kind with her dark, plagued environment: diseased, perverse, and set apart from the potential for divine grace. She, as does the reader, views Claire as a foil to

herself, a double with a similarly obsessive nature, with Claire's desires directed toward an otherworldly relationship to the divine rather than toward physical, sexual escape. In her narrative reflection while sitting with Claire on a park bench in the Vieux Carré, the historic core of the city over which the Cathedral presides, Emma makes this parallel explicit:

As we sat there I thought that perhaps we had something in common. When a girl I too had nurtured a great love of God. I communicated my thoughts to Him regularly and asked for His help in forming good resolutions. I hadn't the courage to ask for more than that. I fancied that He was always with me, though I didn't make the necessary extrapolation of looking for Him within myself. I knew my interior was not a habitation anyone would choose. I had, among the general run of souls, I thought, something decayed, something riddled with unpleasantness. I could feel the thing within me, my soul, and the genuine disorder of the place, its potential for havoc, made me reticent to expose it to light. (76-77)

Emma's description of her soul as a zone of "disorder" and "havoc" are indicative of the inadequacy of traditional religion's construct of the soul (as an ordered system in which reason and spirit govern bodily desire and passion) to make sense of the postmodern experience. Her description of the "decay" of her soul mirrors Angela of Foligno's thirteenth-century disgust toward the "sewer of all vices and evils" that she saw as her interior state, an abhorrent nature deserving punishment (Petroff 7). The postcolonial and feminist theological reclamation of "disorder" and "havoc" as potential sources of spiritual redemption and renewal is the movement toward enlightenment which Emma eventually undertakes in the novel.

Emma's bleak portrayal of her interior landscape is directly connected to her depiction of the physical landscape of New Orleans in which the tree branches are "so like twisted human limbs" (77) and the stench of rot is overwhelming. In an interview with Rob Smith, Martin describes the modern "fear of nature," of the untamed interior and exterior spaces of human experiences, as indicative of the modern impulse to reconstruct, and thereby contain, the chaos of our environments and psyches in false, truly "unnatural" terms. She describes "the ways in which we refuse to see the world as a real world, insist on romanticizing it, and by romanticizing

it connect it to ourselves in fake ways” (9) thus ensuring our disconnection to the natural forces of life and death and to the “animalistic impulses” within ourselves which Emma initially sees as signs of her “hopelessly perverse” nature.

Continuing her self-accusation in stark, nihilistic language, Emma describes herself and the saints of the Church, depicted in the stained glass windows of a chapel, as participating in a “great withdrawal of light,” a withdrawal of hope for life and grace:

I knew I was handicapped by this dark spiritual landscape and that without light no healthy growth was possible. I remembered once throwing myself on the cold tile floor in the chapel where I prayed, alone and at the close of day. I had watched the sunlight failing to illuminate the stained glass windows (how each figure faded from the heart outward), and it seemed to me that I was next in the great withdrawal of light. Struck by this, I threw myself over the last rays upon the floor, but no sooner had I touched the spot where they fell than there were gone.  
Nor was I ever enlightened. (77)

Because of its disconnection to the natural chaos of worldly experience and desire, the traditional faith has “faded from the heart outward” – traditional saints and icons of Catholicism are, to Emma at this point in the narrative, empty and damning images of spiritual darkness. Even in her despair, however, Emma shows her instinctive desire to reach for the light of spiritual enlightenment, though it eludes her in her belief that her “decayed” and “disordered” soul is not a “habitation” for divine grace.

Similarly, in her conversation with Claire, Emma instinctively defends human society when Claire expresses her desire to be removed from it, to be safe in the convent school and away from the temptation for “preferences” for “all the wrong reasons” (73) and from “persons of the opposite sex” who “present a real danger for the soul” to anyone “inspired with a love of God” (74). In a gut reaction, much like her desire to throw herself on the fading sunlight in the chapel, Emma asserts: “The world isn’t so bad...though [she] had told [her]self the night before...that the world wasn’t worth living in” (74).

Emma's declaration is directly connected to motherhood, the iconic life-giving role, and she asserts this in surprisingly conventional terms as she watches Christine feed pigeons:

“It's a good thing to have a child.” I looked at my daughter, who held her bag upside down now, spilling the last of the seeds on the bobbing heads of her admirers. “In fact,” I said, “having a child is a miracle. It makes everything else narrow and trivial.” (74)

Earlier, Emma had reflected, “The beauty of my child was the consolation of my life. Every night before I went off to my own troubled, guilty sleep beside my husband, I stood next to Chris's bed and watched, with renewed wonder, her innocent, beautiful sleep, her fair skin, the long, dark shadow of her eyelashes, the delicate pink flesh of her earlobes; this sight never failed to refresh me” (72). Emma's inherent commitment to Christine, the child's “innocence,” “beauty” and miraculous nature, deconstructs her earlier claim that her interior, her “spiritual landscape” is uninhabitable: Christine is, literally, a product of Emma's womb, her interior; she is a regeneration of life/light that is a natural, biological extension of Emma. Following the allegorical implications of *A Recent Martyr*, Emma has – in a profoundly feminine way – symbolically given birth to her own female Christ, her Christine, who again and again calls Emma to (re)connect to life, to a “renewed wonder” and spiritual “refreshment.”

This reconnection between mother and daughter is a subtle but recurrent motif in the novel. As Christine fed the pigeons in the square, “she looked up at her mother, her face smudged with dirt, her hair awry, and then, attentive to her birds, she looked away” (72).

Similarly, in the opening scene of the novel, Emma and Christine are waiting to ride a streetcar to Audubon Park. Emma narrates:

I held Chris's hand as we stood before the open doors of the car and watched the crowd pouring out. She looked at the people and I looked at her. Her expression was tense; she worried that getting on the car might prove more difficult than she had anticipated. She didn't want me to drag her on behind me, but she wouldn't release my hand for fear of being separated from me. When she saw her chance, she stepped forward and I followed. We accomplished the two steps in unison, without bumping anyone or pulling at each other. As she dropped the coins I had

given her into the clanging machine, she cast me an approving look. Sometimes I couldn't please her, I was an embarrassment to her, but at the moment we were a fine, graceful pair and even her critical eye could find nothing to censure...Once she was in [her seat], and I at her side, she relaxed and gave herself over to the intense pleasure of being on the streetcar. (1-2)

These scenes depict the give-and-take of separation and reconnection, the necessary separation of a parent and child as distinct individuals and their simultaneous interdependence. The child wants to act on her own will, not to be passively “dragged behind” but fears separation from her mother. In the park, she is fully, bodily consumed in her task of feeding birds (nourishing worldly creatures), as evidenced by her smudged appearance, but she periodically “look[s] up at her mother,” seeking maternal connection and protection. This movement from individualism to immersion/protection in a parent is symbolically reflective of the individual soul's relationship to the Church, what Gandolfo describes as the “personal spiritual journey,” the necessary mediation of individual experience and Catholic tradition that “must be accounted for in any new model of church for Catholicism” (208).

The mediation of self and other reflected in the mother and child relationship of Emma and Christine directly contrasts to Claire's commitment to virginity. Claire confesses to Emma: “I know I'm probably the last virgin my age on the continent...It's my greatest vanity” (95). When Emma responds, “Losing one's virginity isn't all that important,” Claire counters “hotly”: “I don't want to lose it...It's part of me. It's the best thing about me, as far as I can tell” (95). Claire's belief that virginity is the “best thing about her” reflects traditional Catholic focus on the other-worldly and the denigration of sexuality and reproduction. In her adamant defense of celibacy, Claire mirrors medieval mystics such as St. Thecla for whom, according to Patricia Wilson-Kastner, “Virginity, in both its physical and spiritual manifestations, its most perfect form, is the highest form of the deifying life” (108). Like the virgin-saints who are “near-fanatic” in their “defense of virginity,” Claire voices an “idealization and an affirmation of the

female commitment to spiritual life” (Petroff 60). Ironically, the virgin-saints’ insistence on virginity has the cultural effect of “invit[ing] attack and elicit[ing] rape and violence,” according to Petroff (61). In the novel, Claire’s image of purity and innocence, her “promising liquid eyes” (60), “damp, pale neck” (64) and “very white” hands with “her fingers long and slender” (75) arouse sexual desire in both Emma and Pascal. Emma fantasizes, “I had a mental picture of [Claire] submitting to one of Pascal’s more devastating caresses, a picture that developed before my eyes like a snapshot. My throat and chest ached” (95). At the conclusion of Pascal’s meeting with Claire, he reflects,

...on the possibility that he was speaking to a virgin, and he thought that he had never made love to a virgin, having imagined, on those rare occasions when he knew himself to be attracted to such a creature, that it wouldn’t be worth the effort. But Claire, he thought, as she brushed away a few drops of moisture that had collected above her mouth, might well be the exception to that rule. (66)

On Claire’s return trip to the convent, where she intends to be once again safe in cloistered religious devotion and removal from the city, she is attacked, raped, and killed by two men on a wooded road. Allegorically, Claire’s commitment to virginity can be read as a path to martyrdom – the desire for righteous and early death. Claire does, in fact, become a candidate for canonization, and she is imagined in the public response to her murder as a saint and holy woman, but Martin depicts this public response as shallow and misinformed. The “testimony” to Claire’s saintliness is a collection of false and exaggerated stories submitted in letters by people who have little acquaintance with Claire while she is living (199).

Virginity is also an absolute denial of physical regeneration, as Martin emphasizes. The traditional Catholic dualism of body and soul which denigrates sexuality as a temporal, worldly desire that detracts from one’s devotion to God is, according to Rosemary Radford Ruether, the very heart of the suppression of women in Western religion and culture. Because women’s sexuality and birthing power connect them powerfully to nature and to the cycles of life and

death, the denigration of sexuality and reification of virginity have circumvented women's "natural" access and right to full spiritual affirmation (Ruether 44). When Emma, whose conscience/character has negotiated the extremes of life and death as represented by Claire and Pascal, stands in the space of Claire's murder, she reflects:

I understood Claire's horror of human intimacy, though I did not entirely share it. Even as I had these thoughts, I experienced a physical longing for Pascal, the sweetness I had sometimes enjoyed in intimacy with him, so acute that I pushed all my imaginings away, consulted my watch without marking it, and continued on my journey. (196)

Similarly, when standing at her gravesite, Emma graphically and morbidly imagines Claire's brutalized remains:

I thought of her body, torn, rotting, and empty of her, and I had the sensation I often experience at the sight of a dead animal. Where, I wondered, had that animating force gone? What form would it take next? I remembered my daughter's birth and how, moments after her delivery, I had seen in her face an unexpected willfulness, exerting all her small strength to be free of me. This memory made me long for her small hand, her innocent eyes, her childish confidences, and I turned away and began to walk back to the city. (202)

As negotiated in Emma's psyche, Martin's critique of the traditional Catholic valuation of celibacy and its constricting, narrow images of female holiness is explicit. Emma's reflection on death makes her instinctively reaffirm her commitment to life – first in sexual intercourse, then in childbirth and childrearing. Confronted with the path to martyrdom, Emma deliberately "turn[s] away" and continues her "journey" toward "the city" of full human experience.

In their conversation on the bench in Jackson Square, Claire's immediate response to Emma's rejoicing in her daughter is the question: "Doesn't it make life awful complicated?" (74). Her bewilderment at Emma's attachment to Christine reflects a conventional Catholic mandate for a willing detachment from worldly things and for an acceptance of suffering as

Christ suffered, as John A. Hardon, S.J., depicts in *A Contemporary Catechism of the Teachings of the Catholic Church*:

Effective self-knowledge goes beyond the awareness of inordinate attachments and then taking resolute measures to cure them. There is further need to look into one's generosity toward God, in order to test and inspire the will for complete dedication to the service of God...[Generosity] also requires detachment from creatures, and not only those which are sinful but to a certain extent also from such as may legitimately be used without sin. This doctrine is in full accord with Catholic tradition, that our fallen human nature requires not a few practices that are not strictly obligatory, hence of counsel, if we are to avoid mortal sin, and a fortiori venial offenses against God.

Is there a still more generous response to God's will? Or does holiness stop with merely avoiding sin? Christian holiness aspires to nothing less than the willingness to suffer out of love for Christ...This is done simply out of love for Christ, in order to be more like him in poverty, humiliation, and the cross. Unlike the lesser degrees of generosity, the reasonableness of my attitude here is not so apparent, and except for the light of faith it would be quite unintelligible. (430-431)

Fully aligned with this depiction of Catholic traditions toward detachment and suffering, Claire expresses an extreme desire for self-knowledge, for complete devotion to God, as she confesses to her spiritual advisor, Fr. Paine, in the "wholesale destruction of [her] ego" so that the "world and Claire go away" (181); she desires that her own being be absolved into the godhead, the only means to spiritual perfection in a traditional Catholic construct.

This issue of suffering, its role in human spirituality, is a recurrent motif in the novel, a point of particular concern in the theological conversation which Emma and Claire undertake in Jackson Square. While Emma asserts that "there's no satisfactory explanation for suffering," particularly the suffering of children, Claire maintains that suffering is "the only way we ever learn" (93). The Christian's acceptance of suffering, in the traditional Catholic paradigm, is an act of generosity and selflessness toward God, and act of faith which, as Hardon asserts is "quite unintelligible" outside of this religious construct.

Emma, Claire and Christine witness a scene of death and destruction which signals the onset of the plague in the French Quarter and allegorically reflects the grotesque suffering of



worldly beings. They walk down to the river, where they witness the “dead and dying bodies of thousands of rats” which “lay in every possible contortion of an agonizing death, and some, still living, writhed among the stones or clawed frantically at the bodies of their companions” (78). In Emma’s response to the scene, she expresses pity and an ominous awareness of impending crisis, an apocalyptic time of ultimate suffering and judgment:

I couldn’t explain to myself the nature of my shock at the sight. I was appalled first to think that there had been that many rats alive. To see them dying in such agony aroused a series of emotions: pity to see such suffering even in creatures one can’t help despising, a sense of horror at the ugliness of the animals, and a suspicion that I understood more than I wanted to understand and that this dark, convulsing underside of our rotting city would soon cause an upheaval that we could not ignore. (80)

Emma’s pity for the suffering of the creatures (detestable as she has likewise described herself) and her anticipation of common suffering, that the lot of the multitude of rats reflects her lot as well, signals her ability to connect with mortality and with worldly beings in an understanding of common experience. By contrast, Emma reports that Claire’s experience of the scene moves her to spiritual ecstasy: “the sight of the dying animals had shocked her as nothing ever had, with a clean, cold shock like a knife blade, a sensation that was pure, exhilarating, and in which pain and joy had so mingled as to be indistinguishable” (84). The image of the knife blade both foreshadows Claire’s brutal murder by two men with a “gleaming knife as long as her own arm and as sharp as the pain in her constricted lungs” (187) and reveals her masochistic desire for death, for the full participation in crucifixion.

The knife blade which penetrates with mingled pain and joy is also clearly a phallic symbol, and Martin uses the recurrent image of the knife to align the spiritual and sexual masochism in her characters’ experiences. A key scene which directly parallels Claire’s experience of ecstatic response to suffering is Pascal’s introduction of a knife as a masochistic

prop in his lovemaking with Emma. As Emma relates,

I closed my eyes and sighed, holding the knife tightly in my fist. It was silly, I thought, to get such a thrill from something so simple as holding a knife, but somehow it worked. I opened my eyes and looked at the blade, which I held near my face on the pillow, and the sight of it, combined with the sensations Pascal aroused, resulted in an orgasm that lasted many seconds. (68)

Afterwards, Pascal has Emma open her mouth and he places the blade of the knife against her tongue, then throws the knife across the room. Emma takes his penis into her mouth, “pressing against him so that he would he go deep into [her] throat” (69).

According to R. McClure Smith, the masochistic aesthetic of *A Recent Martyr* reflects the “yearning of the characters to transcend the boundaries of isolated individualism”:

For Emma and Claire, pleasure and pain are both experienced as sexual pleasure when they are strong enough to shatter a certain stability or equilibrium of the self. The pleasurable excitement of sexuality occurs when their bodies’ normal range of sensation is exceeded and when the organization of their selves is momentarily disturbed by sensations “beyond” those compatible with psychic organization. (408)

This impulse toward ecstasy, to move beyond the “normal” limits of the body and psyche, can be directly seen in Claire’s and Emma’s passionate spiritual and physical desires, drawn in lines so parallel that the two obsessions are ultimately understood to generate from a singular source, so that Claire and Emma can be read as analogous versions of the same post-modern feminine psyche compelled to negotiate overwhelming paradoxical desire for death and salvation.

Emma’s and Claire’s parallel fascination with knives and physical penetration, their orgiastic response to suffering and humiliation, aligns with medieval experiences of ecstasy in response to mystical experience of the crucifixion. Petroff describes medieval Italian mystic Angela of Foligno’s visionary participation in the crucifixion of Christ:

Another time I was meditating on the great pain which Christ endured on the cross, and imagining those nails, which I had heard said drove the flesh of his hands and feet deep into the wood. I wanted to see at least that little bit of Christ’s flesh that those nails forced so deeply into the wood. Then I felt such pain at that punishment of Christ that I couldn’t stand on my feet. But I bent

down my head and sat on the ground. And then Christ showed me his throat and his arms; suddenly my previous bitter sorrow was transformed in joy so great that I could not show anything of it. *And it was joy unlike all other joys.* (Petroff 11, emphasis added)

Petroff explains the intense desire of the female visionary to mystically participate in the crucifixion in this way: “She desires not merely to bring her own suffering to Christ as she shares his suffering; she wants to lose herself in that pain, hoping that in this way her suffering may have some redemptive value for herself and others” (12).

The Catholic paradox of longing for simultaneous crucifixion (death) and redemption (spiritual life) are evident in Claire’s visions of the penetration of Christ’s flesh. During one such scene, Claire is in the cathedral with Pascal whose uninvited presence annoys her. During Scarlatti’s *Stabat Mater*, Claire closes her eyes:

[She] banished everything but the mental picture of Christ’s suffering. Her hands lay clenched at her sides...Her fingernails dug into her palms. Then the music became more powerful, the voices begged to share in the passion of their Maker, and Claire’s inner voice rose with them. She thought of His hands, how the broken nerves and flesh must have throbbed from the shock of the nails. Her throat contracted and from it issued a sigh, almost inaudible, such as escapes with the onset of anticipated pain. Then she was catapulted to consciousness by something unthinkable: a strong hand had taken her own and gently pried the fingers from the palm. Her eyes flew open; she was nearly in a swoon. (113)

Claire’s innate impulse to join the “voices” in the eighteenth-century Italian choral music which “beg to share in the passion of their Maker” and her vision of the penetration of Christ’s flesh are direct allusions to a traditional Catholic impulse. Claire desires, “anticipates,” the pain associated with her spiritual vision, an impulse also revealed in her answer to Emma’s question upon discovering evidence of self-flagellation: “Why are you torturing yourself?” (94) Claire’s response echoes Petroff’s assertion of the “redemptive” value of physical suffering: “I do it...to make up for my miserable nature, for my inability to do something so simple and necessary as caring for people who don’t love me” (94). When Emma continues, “And whom you don’t love,” Claire affirms, “Especially for that.” The unwanted presence of Pascal, who represents

both the flesh and rational skepticism in Martin's allegory, is what prevents Claire from fully lapsing into the vision, into the "swoon" that is an approximation of death. Claire's vision expresses her death wish for removal from the annoyance and temptation of the physical world; ironically, it is Pascal's "strong" and "gentle" hand which prevents her removal, forcing his presence upon her and substituting his human hand for Christ's.

The critique of traditional Catholicism which underpins this scene and others in *A Recent Martyr* hinges upon Martin's depiction of the psychological and spiritual dangers of isolation. Claire's annoyance with Pascal results partly from his accusation that the gratification of religion is akin to masturbation. Upon entering the cathedral, for instance, Claire informs Pascal, "I intend...to spend any time we have to wait in praying...You may prefer not to sit with me" (111). Pascal responds in a voice "harsh with contempt": "And your hands...I've no doubt you'll have them in your lap" (111). In response, Claire "pulled deliberately away from him" (112), further aligning herself with the charge of self-gratifying isolation.

An explicit correlation between the eroticism of mystical ecstasy and sexual intercourse opens up both compulsions to an exploration of their function in the feminine psyche. Similar to the medieval desire for public humiliation, such as Angela of Foligno's fantasy of exposing her nakedness and inequities in public spectacle, Emma's memory returns again and again to "startling and vivid" encounters with Pascal, which are "complete and irresistible" (2). In one such memory, when the reader is first introduced to Pascal and to the nature of his relationship with Emma, the pair waits for the bus outside Pascal's downtown apartment. Pascal begins to kiss her, and Emma describes,

Pascal held me so tightly I couldn't move. He had pulled my blouse free from my skirt and pushed it up so that, in another moment, my breasts would be exposed. I laughed and pushed him away. He redoubled his hold on me and put his mouth over mine, muffling my weak protest. Pascal had his tongue halfway down my throat and showed no sign of relenting. I struggled, but to no avail. Now the bus had pulled up to our curb and I heard the doors snap open at my back...Pascal

pulled my skirt up quickly, gathering it in around my waist. I heard the driver's sudden intake of breath, but then for a moment he was silent...Pascal lifted his head and looked at the man. His fingers were so deep inside me that he touched the wall of my womb and I forgot where I was. (4)

When the two go back into the apartment, Emma explains, "I was sad and excited and so completely humiliated that I found myself hoping he would hurt me" (5). Pascal's aggressive treatment of Emma's body, his exposure of her as his possession, his stifling of her "weak protest," and Emma's simultaneous sadness and excitement in response all clearly reflect a masochistic relationship. Emma's claim, "I forgot where *I* was" (emphasis added) is analogous to Claire's desire to "make the world and Claire go away;" in Pascal's possession of her body, Emma has lost possession of her sense of self. She, like Claire in her quest for spiritual purity who wishes the "wholesale destruction" of her individual ego and her absorption into the godhead, explores the limits and pleasures of masochistic longing:

[Claire] described to me her realization that her Lover wanted more than her service. He wanted her entirely; He wanted her soul for His own and His desire was not diminished by her fear of being owned. Which was exactly the position I found myself in with Pascal...when he penetrated the secret passages of my body I gave myself up to the pleasure of being explored. (100)

R. McClure Smith aligns Emma's compulsion for Pascal with the "Romantic longing for annihilation": "As it offers her the only available liberation from the repetition of desire, Emma does not fear death but actively invites it...The closer the approach to death, the more irresistible it seems" (397-398). Indeed, Emma confesses,

In the midst of his embraces I found I sometimes longed for death; I felt I was ready to go beyond the limitations of my sense if only I could take him with me. There is something to be said for a lover with whom one can be united *only* in death. I thought of Claire's spiritual love when I saw Pascal's face looking down at me. (138)

The psychic depth of Emma's masochistic desires is revealed in the allusions she makes in her narratives of the events: she marks the limits of Pascal's possession of her in references to her

womb and to spiritual love. These forces, which deny Pascal/skepticism's full consumption of her, are ultimately what provide Emma with access to spiritual reclamation.

Emma reaches her psychic limit in a scene that mimics the crucifixion. During the worst of the plague, when the French Quarter and surrounding areas have been quarantined from the rest of the city and beyond, Emma and Claire work with other volunteers to provide medical and sustenance care to the ill and needy. Pascal is outside the quarantine, and Emma claims, "I thought of my own soul, which, like my body had healed a little since the quarantine began" (157). When Pascal breaks the quarantine and he and Emma restart their affair, their sex act builds to an unprecedented level of aggression, and Emma has a new awareness of its impact on her body and spirit:

I couldn't understand what was wrong with me, for though I was often aching after leaving Pascal, I didn't remember ever being conscious of his hurting me in this way. It was always a surprise to me afterward that in my excitement I hadn't noticed, and I surveyed bruises at my throat or on my thighs with the sweetest regret. Now I struggled to lift my shoulders, for they were fast being rubbed raw against the carpet. Pascal held me down... Suddenly, everything hurt, every place where our bodies touched was a zone of pain, my arms and legs ached, there was a dreadful ringing in my ears, but most of all, deep inside, there was a dry, throbbing, agonizing pain that made me want to scream. (162)

Where her "weak protests" were once stifled, Emma now struggles to find her voice, to scream out in agony. To save herself from what she now understands to be painful persecution, Emma thinks/prays: "Christ, let him come" (164), the double-voiced, life-saving prayer that solidifies Emma's psychic and spiritual shift in the novel, her prayer for final release from Pascal and for her own salvation. Emma passes out, "surrender[s her] consciousness...to this blackness" (164) and when she comes to, she describes, "My shirt lay in a heap on the floor, and when I picked it up I noticed two spots of blood on the carpet. The sight filled me with such sadness that I stood looking at it" (168). Portraying the experience as a cycle of persecution, near death, and awakening, Martin clearly depicts this as a crucifixion experience and it has the effect, as does

Christ's crucifixion in the Christian narrative, of saving Emma from her original sin, her fallen death-ridden nature, and reclaiming her into holiness and justice.

The scene of Claire's murder is a similar gruesome parody of the crucifixion. Directly parallel to the sexualized scene of crucifixion that Emma experiences, Claire is "knocked to her knees on the pavement" and held by her two attackers so that she was "choking" her "hands pinioned behind her" (187). When she is found, her "clothes lay torn and scattered all about, on the road and on the grass. She had been left face down, her pale skin covered everywhere with a mat of dirt, grass, and blood" (189). Claire is buried at the convent cemetery, and following her death and the "titillating" news coverage of the trials that follow (193), the mother-general of the convent receives stacks of letters from people testifying to miracles performed by Claire "publicly in her life and through her intercession now that she is dead" (199). The letters are a public attempt to canonize Claire, to claim her as a modern-day saint who has, among other "miraculous" deeds, healed a near-death child and saved another from the "threatening, vicious, and deadly poisonous fangs of a snake" (201).<sup>4</sup> Emma admits to the mother-general, "She never performed any miracles when I knew her" (201) but comments, rather, on Claire's lasting effect on her life in terms of human intimacy: "without ever trying to, without probably any consciousness of having done so, simply by traveling for a little time through the same narrow atmosphere in which I traveled had made [going back to Pascal] impossible for me. Claire was in my life now, as permanently as Pascal was out of it" (203).

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<sup>4</sup> As R. McClure Smith briefly points out in his mention of Martin's literary allusions in *A Recent Martyr*, Claire's life story is analogous to the story of St. Therese of Lisieux, whose canonization was largely prompted by a public outpouring of testimony after her death at age 24. Therese was born in France in 1873, sought early to enter the cloistered order, and lived as a Carmelite for less than ten years. She earned the public's devotion and the nickname "The Little Flower" for her ideas about "little ways" of serving God, as explained in her brief, edited journal "Story of a Soul": "Great deeds are forbidden me. The only way I can prove my love is by scattering flowers and these flowers are every little sacrifice, every glance and word, and the doing of the least actions for love" ("St. Therese of Lisieux," *Catholic Online*, [www.catholic.org](http://www.catholic.org)). Though the sentimentality of Therese's theology is not reflected in Martin's portrayal of Claire, Martin's depiction of deified Catholic attitudes toward female fragility, suffering, and absolute devotion as evidenced through Claire and the public's impulse to label her a "saint" are clearly a critique of the process of canonization. When Claire last speaks with Pascal in the French Quarter, they "stood before a statue of St. Therese of Lisieux" and Claire "looked like a statue herself" (151, 152).

According to Gandolfo, “Claire’s death in the novel is less the destruction of good by evil than the symbolic consequence of her life-denying spirituality” (176). Emma reflects after leaving Pascal that “what Claire said she wanted, I had: a lover who would consume me entirely” (167). Fr. Paine, Claire’s confessor at the cathedral in New Orleans, responds to her death with a denunciation of this traditional, consuming spirituality: “[Fr. Paine] thought of Christ, Claire’s beloved, Who had tantalized the world with her and called her back too soon, and he knew that he hated Christ, had always hated Him, that any service was better than His thankless, endless service, that His love was the hectic, worrying love of a despot” (190). Caught within the paradox of traditional Catholic valuation which teaches one to detach from the world and seek the other-worldly, Fr. Paine has no construct for dealing with his sense of injustice at Claire’s death; he is unable to accept this suffering willingly, to “learn from it” an ethic of detachment from worldly things, and so his hatred is channeled toward the godhead who ever demands more from the human psyche than is humanly possible. His depiction of the traditional Catholic Christ as a “despot” labels the traditional narrative as a colonizing text within the human psyche that is bound in obedience to a self-serving and possessive deity.

Emma sees her compulsion to follow the road from the north shore of New Orleans to the convent that was the route of Claire’s last walk as a “pilgrimage” (197), but she ultimately rejects Claire’s path to martyrdom, the “indomitable will turned inward” and her desire to escape the “horror of human intimacy” (196). The patterns of imagery that predicate the final scene in the Emma’s affair with Pascal reveal her preparation for spiritual renewal and enlightenment. As Emma waits for Pascal, she watches rain from the hotel window, and she imagines the rain as a connector between her own plight and the plight of others:

The rain drummed on outside the window and on the wide stones of the hotel patio, heavy, with a sweet insistence, the kind of rain that brings cooler air with it, that is, in tropical climes, welcomed by everyone whether it inconveniences them or not. It was falling, I imagined, in my yard, beating down the big plantain trees,



ripping their leaves so that they looked like tattered flags in the wind, and it was beating a few blocks away, at my husband's house, where my daughter might hear it, sitting up in her bed, thinking of me. (162)

The rain, after the long duration of hellish heat and infestation, brings with it a promise of renewal and rebirth. This forges a link in Emma's imagination to her daughter, her *Christine*, who is the impetus for Emma's resistance to death. It is a reminder that not only is Christine, Emma's source of renewal and consolation but also that Emma is undeniably needed and fundamentally connected to life – that not only is Emma thinking of her daughter but also that Christine is thinking of and longing for her. Through Emma's narrative point of view, Martin enacts a reevaluation of Catholic womanhood. Whereas Emma asserts that Claire “never performed any miracles when I knew her” (201), Emma comes to more fully understand what has been subdued in her conscious all along: while she does not aspire to “saintly” perfection in traditional Catholic ideals of womanhood which idolize the detached, other-worldly, and virginal, she has in fact participated in a Christian miracle, for, as she instinctively and positively asserts to Claire on the park bench, “having a child is a miracle. It makes everything else narrow and trival” (74).

Emma's resistance to her masochistic desires in the final sex act with Pascal is strengthened by her experience of suffering, her learned ability for true compassion. Just as she thinks of the rain and imagines “thousands of faces looking out of windows, all with the common intention of observing the rain” (162), she likewise imagines her connection to others in a sudden vision of the “dying army of rats” and she reflects: “I thought of my daughter's innocent hand in mine, of Claire's innocent figure at my side. The sight of so much suffering had shocked me into innocence, so that we were leveled by what we saw” (168). When Emma parallels her “innocence” with that of Christine and Claire, she expresses recognition of herself as redeemable, as someone capable of renewed innocence. Her vision also works to level the

hierarchical Catholic ideal of womanhood which privileges the childlike, cloistered virgin over the worldly wife and mother.

Emma's vision of renewed innocence contrasts directly to the "abiding cynicism" which Emma learns is the "real quality about Pascal" that she "couldn't tolerate" (172). Having been symbolically crucified by this unrelenting skepticism and mistrust of human nature, Emma narrates her release from this power with a sense of "peculiar, unexpected freedom":

I'm not suggesting that without Pascal I became idealistic, or that I began to cherish even the vaguest optimism about the future of our poor planet. I felt only that I could entertain all sorts of possibilities, that I was not so eager to dismiss every idea that threatened me, that I could contemplate the enormous suffering of all living things with something approaching the real sympathy that they deserve, the awful, deep sadness that must precede our release from this fascinating life. (172)

The real sympathy that Emma develops in response to death and suffering also reveals her ability to imagine herself as possessing a nature worthy of salvation. Emma becomes in this allegory of the reclaimed "fallen woman," a redeemed Eve. She is acutely aware of her own sinfulness, of her recurring desires for escape, for Emma admits: "Though I had banished Pascal from my life, I couldn't escape him in my dreams. I dreamed of him constantly, and as I fell asleep, I often felt myself descending to the dark, airless chamber of my imagination, where he sat permanently enthroned, forever petulant and brooding, a king who rested his chin in his hands as he surveyed his ruined kingdom" (203). The image of Pascal as ruler of darkness, as a satanic king surveying his "ruined kingdom" parallels Fr. Paine's depiction of Christ as a demanding "despot" who can never be satiated. The image of recurring psychic attachment to sin and darkness is further explored in the masochistic description of attachment to place in the denouement of the novel when Emma describes her "inability" to live anywhere but in the "swamp" of old New Orleans:

So I have left this city again and again and thought myself lucky to escape its allure, for it's the attraction of decay, of vicious, florid, natural cycles that roll over the senses with their lushness. Where else could I find these hateful, humid, murderously hot afternoons, when I know that the past was a series of

mistakes...I can't do without those little surges of joy at the sight of a chameleon, of a line of dark clouds moving in beneath the burning blue of the sky. I am comforted by the threatening encumbrance of moss on trees, the thick, sticky plantain trees that can grow from their chopped roots twenty feet in three months, the green scum that spreads over the lagoons and bayous, the colorful conversation of the lazy, pleasure-loving populace. I don't think I will leave the city again. (204)

R. McClure Smith reads Emma's attraction to the clime of the city as part of her masochistic aesthetic, her attraction to death and decay. But it is the very liminality of this "physical" and "psychological" "island" space that provides its impetus for spiritual renewal. "We are well below sea level and inundation is inevitable," Emma admits, but "we are content, for now, to have our heads above water" (204). The tropical images of death that attract Emma to the New Orleans terrain are inseparable from renewed life: the changing chameleon, the regenerative plantain, the succulent moss. As in the Christian narrative of crucifixion, death provides the potential for renewed life.

In an interview with Rob Smith, Martin depicts masochism as a "masquerade" of resistance to patriarchal oppression:

Masochism is never empowering for my characters. The question is what you can do to confront male aggression, that male desire to control things, to see things in a hierarchical way. You can either fight it and try to get the control yourself, or you can say, 'Have control. Control me as much as you want. And see what good it does.' And I think my characters try to keep something of themselves inside this masquerade, this front they put up, that can't be gotten at...Emma is in a masochistic relationship. But she also leaves it of her own free will and feels pretty good about it. (15)

Martin's analysis of a masochistic strategy of resistance to patriarchy is potentially problematic, but her overall narrative structure in *A Recent Martyr* can be likewise seen as a masochistic move – a move which, according to Martin's claim, can be a means of resistance. As R. McClure Smith points out, Martin positions her text within the constructs of canonized texts, specifically the modern works of Blaise Pascal, Albert Camus, and Gustave Flaubert (410). She also positions her female protagonists within the patriarchal construct of canonized womanhood:

medieval saints and mystics, who, like Claire, paradoxically seek spiritual fulfillment through self-denial and martyrdom. R. McClure Smith contends that the “masochistic” relationship of an author to literary precursors opens up canonized texts and ideals to the “possibility of a reorganization or a redistribution of that power”:

The deliberate evocation of the prior text is Martin’s explicit acknowledgement that to write is to place oneself in the shadow of a more powerful other, to sign (quite literally) the equivalent of a masochistic contract with the precursor author. The central thematic question raised by *A Recent Martyr* is the authority of narrative in the process of canonization... What the textual appropriations of *A Recent Martyr* establish is precisely what all the other elements of Martin’s masochistic aesthetic finally establish – the reaffirmation of equivalence, the leveling of assumed hierarchy, the paradoxical control that emerges from submission. (410-411)

A canon is, ultimately, a construct of ideals. By engaging precursor literary texts and Catholic narratives, but by locating the site of the negotiation of power and within the female psyche and the postcolonial tropic, Martin deconstructs traditional narratives created to canonize ideals and she shifts the locus of power. The detachment and isolation resulting from postmodern skepticism which teaches us to despise human nature as hopeless and from traditional Catholicism which teaches us to despise the sinful world are deconstructed through the motif of longing and reconnection. The ethic or movement of the renewal in *A Recent Martyr* is enacted in a pattern that represents not a static ideal but an on-going performance of revitalization. Emma reflects on the necessity of longing: “I saw how the ties people stretch one to another, with language and with emotion, only echo the fragility of all ties nature forges... And it seemed to me that longing was everything, longing is all we are. We long for a life we never had but of which we seem to have a clear memory; a life in which there is no longing (97). The postcolonial model of learning to live fully in the old/new city which is the simultaneous locus of life and death provides a model of a new, hybrid spirituality. Within constructs of Catholic, literary, and postcolonial culture, the searching soul must deliberately choose to “forge” connection to others

“though language and emotion” (97), must choose to be “tied to the rest of the country” by one’s “own endeavor” (204). In the paradoxical constructs of modernity and traditional Catholicism, which urge self-knowledge though self-denial and despair, this deliberate movement betwixt and between boundaries, as Emma learns, is the only way to keep “our heads above water” (204).

**Chapter Three**  
**“Strong Muscles and a Merciful Heart”:**  
**Earthly and Divine Motherhood in the Novels of Rebecca Wells**

At its best our age is an age of searchers and discoverers, and at its worst, an age that has domesticated despair and learned to live with it happily.

-- Flannery O'Connor, “Novelist and Believer” in *Mystery and Manners*

Life ain't no Baltimore Catechism, Pal.

-- Caro, in *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*

Rebecca Wells' novels, *Little Altars Everywhere* (1992) and *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (1996), captivated readers with their vivacious female characters. Ya-Ya clubs, modeled after the foursome of rambunctious friends in the books, sprang up everywhere – Mississippi, Pennsylvania, Vermont, London, you name it. The good-looking, hard-drinking group of Louisiana women in the novels is compelling, Wells says, because the Ya-Yas radiate strength and spirit, a real give-'em-hell attitude: “The common denominator seems not to be the Southern thing. What readers tell me they are responding to,” she says, “is the girl power the Ya-Yas have kept intact for so many years. They have kept their souls intact. Our culture wants to trim back that essential girl power as soon as we bud breasts. Keeping it powerful is something that transcends any region” (Paulson).

Much of the “essential power” underlying Wells' narratives is her negotiation of a border space among a multitude of cultural tensions, including the dichotomies of male/female, North/South, Protestant/Catholic, spirit/body and patriarchy/sisterhood. In her novels, Wells consciously engages the legacy of the Catholic South through three generations of women whose experiences reflect the feminist movement within Catholicism. The often-comic style and content of Wells' novels differ drastically from Valerie Martin's dark, allegorical novel *A Recent Martyr* discussed in Chapter Two. And, the central Louisiana setting of Wells texts is much less cosmopolitan and more “typically” southern in its largely-agricultural economic and historic

base than the port city of New Orleans which figures so strongly in *A Recent Martyr* and (as will be discussed in chapters four and five) texts by Osbey and Brodber. In this setting, the ideals of southern propriety and ladyhood figure strongly in the social expectations for white female characters. Wells' novels, which focus on white, middle-to-wealthy class girls and women in social positions that both privilege and stifle them, make an excellent point of study for the experience of white, Louisiana southern womanhood, revealing multiple, hybrid cultural influences which are largely suppressed in this southern context. Through these characters, Wells depicts the ennui, consumer-culture, domesticity, and narrow social and religious codes that work against women's self-realization and spiritual fulfillment. In each of her novels, the women convey a desire to claim both the Catholic church and Louisiana culture as "home," but to render that home affirming and empowering for women.

Though not written as chronological sequels, the novels overlap time and events in telling the stories of three generations of women: Buggy Abbott, a strict Catholic housewife, her daughter Viviane Abbot Walker (Vivi), who is leader of the Ya-Ya's (a rambunctious sisterhood of four lifelong friends), and third-generation Siddalee Walker (Sidda), a successful New York playwright. *Little Altars Everywhere* is written as a series of connected, but not sequential, chapters narrated from the first-person viewpoints of eight characters connected to the Walker family, though the primary focus is on the mother and daughter characters of Vivi and Sidda. *Divine Secrets* is written in third-person narration, and is framed by Sidda's experience of quarreling with her mother Vivi, her reservations about getting married, and the Ya-Yas' "intervention" in both the fight and the marriage decision via a scrapbook of "Ya-Ya-rabilia" which details the founding and experiences of the sisterhood.

The box-office movie *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* was released by Warner Brothers in 2002 and featured an A-list cast of women including Ellen Burstyn, Ashley

Judd, Sandra Bullock, and Maggie Smith. The movie, like the novels, was wildly popular with female audiences.<sup>5</sup> Its depiction of southern Louisiana culture is breathtakingly picturesque, a gorgeous rendering of the pecan plantations, rural creek camp, and small-town-larger-than-life female characters of the novel. The portrayal of a Cajun *fais-do-do*, complete with a guest appearance of renowned Cajun musician Anne Savoy (who assisted T. Bone Burnett and David Mansfield with the musical selection for the film) is particularly spell-binding – everything in this scene is golden, romantic, and beautiful. Still, the movie, as with many box-office translations of literary works, softens the darkness of the characters and conflicts. In doing so, it also softens the revisionary work of Wells’ novels within religious tradition. The plot of the movie is the story of reconciliation between strong-willed mother and daughter characters – certainly a major theme in Wells’ novels – while the spirituality of the Ya-Yas is largely portrayed as a colorful part of their regional eccentricity and mystique.

The “real” merit of religious critique within Wells’ novels has been questioned in relation to their popular appeal. What is it, exactly, that scores of women are responding to in these texts, critics ask. Thomas Haddox argues that though Wells’ novels are “degraded” consumer commodities, they are possibly a reflection of Frederic Jameson’s theory of humans’ “ineradicable drive towards collectivity”:

[T]he popularity of Wells’ novels might function as the expression of thwarted utopian impulses. For although recent southern history has been a story of success – the triumphs of the civil rights movement, the establishment of new opportunities for women, the rise in the general standard of living – many southern women seem to have also perceived a loss of community that probably has much to do with the expansion of a consumer-driven capitalism, and Wells’ novels offer, in response to this loss, an image of women’s community as a commodity. (179)

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<sup>5</sup> I had to try four times before getting tickets to the movie *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* in Baton Rouge, LA, a week after its opening. Even then, the movie theater was packed. I saw only women in the audience, mostly white and middle-aged or older, who responded audibly and laughed out loud during the film. It was a fascinating experience – not only because of the gorgeous scenery, acting, and musical score of the movie and its rendering on the widescreen and in surround sound, but also because of the tangible energy of the audience.



Haddox continues, bemoaning the treatment of Catholicism in contemporary culture as a “lifestyle” rather than a religion:

It is ironic that even Catholicism, with its ability to embody a universal ideal while incorporating enormous heterogeneity within it, has become susceptible to commodification in recent decades, attenuating its political potential. What was initially, for Walker Percy, a creed that affirmed human equality through its very ordinariness, has become, in Wells’s work, a kind of fashion accessory, with just enough aesthetic and emotional frisson to make one forget, temporarily, how empty it has become” (179).

Haddox’s critique of a commodified Catholicism and what he reads as women’s overwhelming response to the depiction of a “therapeutic” sisterhood is aligned with mainstream declensionist narratives of Catholicism and “the southern way.” The “enormous heterogeneity” of the Catholic tradition which Haddox champions does not, in his text or in other mainstream versions of Catholic tradition, include contemporary Creole, Latino/a, Caribbean, African, or feminist theological influences within this tradition – the heterogeneity, in other words, is very narrowly defined. As depicted in the film of *Divine Secrets*, Catholicism might indeed be read as a “fashion accessory” for the characters, as I have argued above. But – while Wells’ novels *Little Altars Everywhere* and *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* are comic and vibrant, no doubt contributing to their popular appeal – the ethic of the works does not stop at the level of “smug, therapeutic self-satisfaction” (Haddox 12). For, though the Ya-Yas are often smug and flippant in their remarks on religion, they are rarely convincingly self-satisfied. Dark moments of doubt and despair plague the characters, particularly Vivi and her daughter Sidda. Their flamboyant attitudes and insistence on “high drama” are self-defense mechanisms of survival, much like Scarlett O’Hara’s pragmatic adoption of the veneer of ladyhood. In each text, Wells reveals a deeper yearning – a seeking toward moments of pure, religious grace and of a sustaining connection between flawed human beings. These moments – as in Flannery O’Connor’s famously-depicted encounters with divine grace – are rare and fleeting, but powerful and

redeeming. The texts reveal a sacramental vision of the world and a hybrid, feminized Catholic spirituality that reclaims ancient precedents from within the patriarchal, Catholic belief system, deconstructing its seeming “homogeneity” and opening up its prayers and symbols to renewed meaning for female believers.

In light of their critique and revision of Catholic tradition, then, the conclusions of Wells’ novels are potentially problematic from a feminist perspective. *Little Altars Everywhere* closes with the baptism of a newborn girl into the Catholic faith. *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* ends with the return of the protagonist from the North to the South and her marriage ceremony. Beyond this surface plot structure, however, Wells’ novels undertake a profound revision of the traditional paradigms of “Southern ladyhood” and “Catholic womanhood.” In fact, the conclusions of both novels, with the enactment of what are traditionally Catholic/patriarchal sacraments, point to the deep cultural critique of Wells’ works. In her novels, Wells explores and negotiates the tension between fascination and horror between male-dominated religion and culture and feminine identity and community – to enact an empowering feminist spirituality for her female characters, effecting a “womanchurch” which revises traditional deity, Catholic spirituality, and womanhood.

The distinct Southern and Louisiana cultural flavor of the works seems to be a key point of their appeal, drawing the reader into a unique cultural experience. In the opening line of *Divine Secrets*, “Sidda is a girl again in the hot heart of Louisiana, the bayou world of Catholic saints and voodoo queens.” Wells determines to provide her reader with the taste of the Louisiana they might expect, with references to *River Roads Recipes*, Tabasco hot sauce, crawfish etouffee, and gumbo. Southern Louisiana is distinct as a Catholic stronghold in the largely-Protestant South, and the novels reflect the ethnic setting through imagery of the Virgin Mary and saints, baptism, Catholic schools, penance, and purgatory. Wells’ works are set in the

fictional town of Thornton, which is based on Alexandria, a modest-sized city in central Louisiana with its economic roots in agriculture. Alexandria is in a unique position on the cusp of Catholic southern Louisiana and the Protestant “Bible Belt,” and, therefore, is in a border area of religious tension. For instance, when the Ya-Yas and their children (“the Petites Ya-Yas”) vacation at Spring Creek – a bit north of Alexandria and thus deeper into Protestant territory – their decision to “pass a good time” by skinny-dipping provokes the sheriff to yell: “You’re in Spring Creek! We don’t act like heathens here. Women like yall shouldn’t be allowed to have children!” (48).

Though set in a distinct regional context, Wells’ novels connect to issues within the larger feminist movement through their portrayal of female characters. Both texts open with a focus on Siddalee’s yearning for a mother’s nurturing. In the prologue to *Little Altars*, for instance, Sidida dreams that she has been the center of attention, dancing wildly and spontaneously to a Little Richard record for her mother and the Ya-Yas. Upon waking, Sidida is “laughing,” though her “face is streaked with tears,” and she explains: “I roll over in bed and I’m 33 years older than in my dream, and I still want to hold Mama’s hands. I’m crying and I’m laughing and I still want my mother to come and take me in her arms” (xii). Similarly, in the prologue to *Divine Secrets*, “Sidida is a girl again” and “she wakes with a gasp from a mean dream. She tiptoes to the side of her mother’s bed, but she cannot awaken Vivi from her bourbon-soaked sleep” (ix). Wandering out into the hot Louisiana night, Sidida finds solace in a vision of the “Holy Lady, with strong muscles and a merciful heart” who sits in the “crook of the crescent moon” and “kicks her splendid legs like the moon is her swing and the sky, her front porch” (1). Sidida “stands in the moonlight and lets the Blessed Mother love every hair on her six-year-old head. Tenderness flows down from the moon and up from the earth. For one fleeting, luminous moment, Sidida Walker knows there has never been a time when she has not

been loved” (2). These opening passages point to a key connection in the texts between images of “perfect” divine motherhood and “imperfect” human motherhood. Reflecting the feminist movement and the women’s movement within the Church, the novels explore generational differences in the experience of Catholicism and womanhood through the three female characters of Buggy, Vivi, and Sidda.

Buggy Abbott is a devout adherent to the strictures of pre-Vatican II Catholicism: she attends mass and says the rosary daily, does penance because she has only “offered three children to the Lord,” and turns off “Itsy Bitsy Teeny-Weeny Yellow Polka-Dot Bikini” whenever it comes on the radio because she says it’s a sin for such impurity to be on the airwaves (*LA* 16). As Lori Rowlett notes, Buggy’s images of motherhood and religious doctrine overlap in integral ways:

She remakes the Virgin Mary in her own image, both literally and theologically. She often says that the Virgin would like to see the Ya-Yas [Buggy’s daughter and friends] performing certain actions that please her, as though she and Mary share the same viewpoint. Her Mary seems to enjoy the suffering of the girls. At the same time, Buggy limits the Virgin’s importance, just as she confines herself within the boundaries of acceptable feminine piety. Buggy’s invocations of Mary as divine are always subordinate to male religious power... Although she makes frequent references to the Virgin Mary, real power for Buggy is always masculine. (119)

What Rowlett here claims as Buggy’s “remaking” of the Virgin Mary is actually in direct line with the Catholic tradition of feminine divinity as Marina Warner and Mary Daly describe, the ideal of ‘pale, thin and chaste’ perfection, of “shrinking oneself to save one’s soul.” The subjection of feminine flesh is evident in Buggy’s appearance; she is depicted as wearing either a communion veil or a headrag that likens her to a housekeeper. A young Vivi reflects, “If Mother would take the kerchief off her head and the dust rags out of her pockets, I just know she’d be

beautiful” (DS 81). This clash between generations is explicit in a conflict between Buggy and the Ya-Yas over the proper imaging of Mary. An 11-year old Vivi narrates the scene:

Mother won't let Caro and me play in the new hammock until we rub the face off the Blessed Virgin statue Father brought back from the island of Cuba...The statue was gorgeous, with brown skin! She had earrings and a necklace, and the brightest colors of any Mother Mary I had ever seen. Big red lips and a violet color on her eyelids like she was ready for a fiesta. Mother just hated her. The first thing Mother did after Father left for the office this morning was to unscrew the gold hoop earrings and take all those pretty red and yellow necklaces off the Virgin's neck and drop them in a pile over by the hen-and-chicken planter. The whole time she was doing it, she shook her head like that statue had gone and done something bad. (DS 80-81)

After the girls have finished their chore of wiping all the paint off the statue with turpentine, Vivi reflects: “we all genuflect in front of the statue that looks like she saw something scary and lost all her color” (DS 83). Vivi's comment echoes the Ya-Yas' disillusionment with traditional religion, with its colorlessness and lack of vitality, and reflects their fear of becoming washed out, thin and frail, as they enter womanhood and face the expectations of becoming like the statue.

Significant in its critique of religious symbols, this scene of the girls being forced to bleach the colored Madonna is a succinct narrative of female deity within the Catholic Church. The Mary with “brown skin” is directly connected to the Cuban deity Ochún who is syncretized in Creole Catholic culture as Cuba's patron saint, the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 45). As described by Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, Ochún is the goddess of “rivers, fresh waters, and gold” and she represents “female sensuality, love, beauty and sexual desire...She is usually represented as a beautiful, light-skinned *mulata*, who charms and attracts like her favorite food – honey” (45-46). The strength and sensuality of women, particularly “colored” women, is threatening to an anti-body, white spiritual tradition which teaches – as explicitly depicted by Augustine – that bodily desires are a

threat to spiritual purity. As Leigh Collins and Richard Collins narrate, the Catholic Church appropriated ancient pagan myths, but actively worked to “tame” and “de-sex” them:

As the early Christian spirit became institutionalized, and as the Church gained power as a notably male institution, it found Mary a useful replacement for the too powerful and too sexual Aphrodite...For the Church, a highly structured and centrally controlled institution dominated by males who had renounced sex, Aphrodite could only be seen as a threat. The goddess of desire (*cupiditas*) had to be replaced with the queen of spiritual love or charity (*caritas*). (150)

When the young Ya-Yas internally resist the bleaching and de-sexing of the Virgin Mary and celebrate the Cuban Virgin Mary, they identify with a syncretic, feminized Catholicism that recognizes and celebrates sensuality as a particularly feminine power. This is the spirituality which is hidden, bleached from their official catechism lessons, and which they must sustain and reinforce within their sisterhood, rediscovering and reclaiming the narrative of feminine strength and holiness.

The bleaching of the Cuban Virgin reveals “man’s attempt to impose artificial control over the forces of a feminized nature” (Collins and Collins 147). The compulsion to de-sex and disempower Catholic girls is again narrated in Buggy’s and the nuns’ attempt to “de-vivify” Vivi at a Catholic boarding academy. As Buggy explains to the Mother Superior, Viviane is in spiritual jeopardy because “she thinks she does not need to prostrate herself at the feet of the Mother of Mercy, Advocate and Refuge of Sinners...[she] needs to learn self-sacrifice, she needs to be near others who are chaste and pure in body and soul” (*DS* 243-4).

The effects of Vivi’s stay at St. Augustine are representative of the Catholic Church’s historical treatment of women, as Rowlett explains:

St. Augustine, after whom the school in the novel is named, represents a particularly anti-nature strand of Catholic tradition. The theologian Augustine of Hippo was a proponent of a dualistic worldview in which the ‘flesh’ (the body) and all material reality (the earth, nature) were considered an evil snare that endangered the soul...Vivi, whose name indicates her connection with the life force, with loveliness, is sent to St. Augustine’s, where she is subjected to a

regime that almost kills her in an attempt to disembody her symbolically, to de-divify her, and thereby allegedly save her soul. (119)

Significantly, the point of conflict is woman's body, which – according to Buggy's version of Catholicism – is to be remade into an otherworldly, statue-like image, devoid of sexuality.

The threat of the flesh and the shrinking of feminine identity bring about a host of purification and self-mortification practices among the female characters, and this “disembodying” effect reaches a crisis when the adult Vivi has determined to sober up and “get all the way holy” under the direction of a “pig-faced priest” (*LA* 135). As narrated by her maid, Willetta, Vivi (as her own mother had) starts “listin sins for the children” and she ultimately lashes out violently against the children's bodies: “all four of [her children] lined up against the wall of that brick house and every one of them buck naked. Miz Vivi out there with a belt, whuppin them like horses” (*LA* 140-41). This episode of Vivi's violence toward her children is the most shocking scene in *Little Altars* and is an event that haunts the characters throughout both novels, culminating in *Divine Secrets* when the Ya-Yas describe Vivi's horrific actions to Siddalee. Through the Ya-Yas' narrative, Wells depicts Vivi's abuse of her children as a response to severe religious penitence, reflecting “the all-pervasive guilt-feeling” which Daly identifies with the strict (anti-woman) interpretation of the myth of the Fall from paradise into original sin (46). The pervasive guilt associated with extreme strands of Catholicism “becomes self-accusation and aggression against the self,” and ultimately is “transformed into aggression against others” (Daly 46).<sup>6</sup> In Willetta's depiction of Vivi's religious fervor, guilt is connected with the “eyes” and image of the Virgin Mary: “Miz Vivi she gone to the Catholic bookstore and bought herself a big old huge picture of that same Mary, with them eyes following you all over

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<sup>6</sup>Self-hatred produced by internalized guilt is manifested also Valerie Martin's characters Emma and Claire in *A Recent Martyr* and linked to their masochistic desire, as discussed in Chapter Two. Claire, the Catholic postulate who seeks a cloistered spiritual life, expresses abhorrence toward detachment to human life: “Human love,” Claire said coldly, “is hell. I want nothing to do with it” (151).

the place. I don't care where you standin in that bedroom – that old virgin be lookin at you” (*LA* 137). This image of the white Virgin Mary, and the guilt-inflicting religion she represents, is unsettling, inescapable, and destructive.

The effect that the myth of the Blessed Mother has on the mind of a Catholic girl “cannot be but disturbing” (Warner 337), as evidenced in Vivi’s damaging lapses into rigid penitence outlined by the images of the Virgin Mother. But the Virgin’s promise of blessing and nurture, of refuge as a divine, healing mother is compelling. Vivi, who is born in 1926 and whose life experience spans the Depression, World War II, Vatican II and Vietnam, is the female character who most explicitly represents the awakening female consciousness and who most internalizes the conflicting desires for revolt and consolation. Painfully aware of the oppressiveness inherent in the images of womanhood offered by Catholicism and by southern culture, Vivi faces a reality in which her choices are nonetheless limited, as she asserts in *Little Altars Everywhere*:

Hell, I was just trying to stay alive. Four kids in four years and eight months, and a husband who did nothing but farm and duck hunt. Even when he was home, he wasn't really here. Cook, clean, wash crappy diapers, wipe runny noses, listen to him run on about goddamn drainage ditches. That's not what I was raised for, that's not why I was created!” (205).

Vivi’s experience of a split identity – between the one culture provides her and the one she intuitively feels as her own – leads her to create with the Ya-Yas a new vision of wholeness and transcendence, what Daly terms a “new wave of feminism.” This feminism is “cosmic and ultimately religious in its vision,” a feminist spirituality which is a “reaching outward and inward toward the God beyond and beneath the [Christian] gods who have stolen our identity” (29).

Further exploring the specific cultural space that her female characters occupy, Wells connects her characters directly to the cultural icon of southern ladyhood, Scarlett O’Hara. The young Ya-Yas attend the *Gone with the Wind* movie premier in Atlanta, and Siddalee imagines her mother’s response: “it was as if she had been watching [*Gone With the Wind*] every day of



her life in some hidden screening room of her own” (*DS* 140). As Siddalee pieces together the information she finds in her mother’s scrapbook, she thinks about the lasting effect the film – the image of Scarlett O’Hara – has had on her mother and the Ya-Yas:

Mama did not think; Mama just felt. Her palms sweated in the palms of her girlfriends. Her eyes moistened, her heart beat fast, her eyes tracked Vivien Leigh. Unconsciously, Mama began to raise her own right eyebrow and believe that every man in the world adored her. Without knowing, Mama stepped into the tiny tight boots of Scarlett O’Hara. And Mama would do anything for the rest of her life to keep that drama going... There, with Gable’s lips two feet tall, Mama couldn’t pause, rewind, or fast forward. She was at the mercy of the myth. (*DS* 141)

Sidda, the new generation, is conscious of this myth – how “tight” and “tiny” its boots are – but in Sidda’s memory and imagination, she sees her mother as “at the mercy” of the popular construction of womanhood. Sidda reflects that she has grown up in the same myth: “as a teenager she used to worry constantly whether the boy she was in love with at the time was a Rhett or an Ashley. If he was an Ashley, she’d want a Rhett. If he was a Rhett, she’d long for an Ashley” (*DS* 140). Importantly, the icon of Southern ladyhood that Vivi and Sidda emulate is always, already a generation removed from the “ideal” of womanhood (Ellen O’Hara), signifying the impossible actualization of that ideal. In Margaret Mitchell’s novel, Scarlett is acutely aware of the self-sacrifice necessary to become like her mother, that “by being just and tender and truthful and unselfish, one missed most of the joys of life,” and she recognizes that Ellen’s seemingly perfect embodiment of the ideal makes Ellen “different... holy and apart from the rest of humankind” (42). Scarlett is compelled to adopt the “veneer” of southern ladyhood to wield its influence – but “appearances were enough, for the appearances of ladyhood won her popularity and that was all she wanted” (41).

Like Scarlett, much of the Ya-Yas’ ability to “keep that drama going” springs from their insistence on maintaining the “veneer” of ladyhood – being beautiful, thin, and laughing – in the face of intense suffering. By adopting the “Scarlett ideal,” Vivi and the Ya-Yas could

experience a freedom in rising above the mundane reality of the southern housewife into the realm of myth, but they were also limited by this myth in their acts of rebellion. They proclaim diva rules and guidelines for Ya-Ya living, such as the motto borrowed from a Billie Holiday song, “Smoke, drink, never think!” and Vivi marches through a Girl Scout hike with a “Super-8,” demanding: “Yall *do* something! This is a movie camera!” (*LA* 10). Sidda comes to recognize that her mother “lived in a world that could not or would not acknowledge her radiance, her *pull* on the earth” (*DS* 43). Though the Ya-Yas seem to make up their “own solar system...and lived in its orbit as fully as [they] could” (*DS* 43), Vivi’s “relief” comes socially through “her small acts of rebellion, her escalating excesses, or the solid, unfailing friendship of the other Ya-Yas” (Gantt 168).

Wells has the Ya-Ya sisters rework a spiritual worldview, then, that does acknowledge powerful, sensual femininity, and their initiation ceremony is a symbolic re/creation myth, a hybridized narrative with elements borrowed from Catholic, African, and ancient traditions. In renaming themselves and their origins, the Ya-Yas enact the “death of God the father” and the resurrection of the female Mother Goddess. As eleven-year-olds (significantly on the brink of puberty and entry into womanhood), Vivi and her friends “exorcise the evil” ascribed to their bodies by traditional Catholicism by renaming themselves, “saying [their]own names” (Daly 47). Through the construction of a creation myth and a ritual celebration of their sacred commitment to one another in a blood sisterhood, the Ya-Yas enact a “cosmic covenant,” as Daly describes: “the deep agreement that is present within the self and among selves who are increasingly in harmony with an environment that is beyond, beneath, and all around the nonenvironment of patriarchal splits and barriers” (159). Many of their rituals reflect traditional Catholic sacraments, which are not simply “borrowed,” but which are given new meaning. Necie baptizes the “just born” Ya-Yas, pronouncing their new names (Queen Dancing Creek, Countess Singing

Cloud, etc.) and sprinkling them with water from an old RC bottle with a hole punched in the top that she borrowed from her Mama's ironing board – an act which simultaneously signifies on Catholicism, paganism, domesticity, and material culture. They recite a marriage oath to one another, swearing a commitment to sisterhood rather than “patriarchal” marriage: “I do solemnly swear to be loyal to my sister Ya-Yas, and to love and look out for them, and never forsake them through thick and thin, until I take my last human breath” (DS 93). Tensie affirms the reclamation and centrality of the woman's body to this new religion with wordplay, substituting “last human *breast*” for “breath” (DS 93). After pricking their thumbs and rubbing their blood together to seal their sisterhood, the Ya-Yas lick their thumbs, swallowing the tiny drops of each other's blood, “Like Holy Communion,” as Vivi says, “but it's *our* blood, not Jesus Christ's” (DS 94). This act confirms a “cosmic covenant” among (human) sisters and (divine) goddesses, and it denies the male gods that have “stolen their identity” (Daly 29). The separate feminist spirituality which Daly imagines and which the Ya-Yas effect occupies a space “on the boundary” of mainstream culture, a “new space, in which women are free to become who we are, in which there are real and significant alternatives to the prefabricated identities provided within the enclosed spaces of patriarchal institutions” (Daly 40).

Further, in the creation narrative, “The Secret History of the Louisiana Ya-Yas,” Wells enacts a revision of spirituality and female deity for the young girls in this southern, Catholic tradition. The narrative rewrites time and history, claiming a more ancient authority and spirituality than the “white man's” narrative of a “bleached” Virgin/Mother which has been forced upon them:

Long before the white man showed up, the Mighty Tribe of Ya-Ya's, a band of women strong and true and beautiful, roamed the great state of Louisiana. Leopards slept with us and bears fed us honey from their paws and fish jumped up into our hands because they wanted to be our food...

Our mother was a black she-ape named Lola, who found us in a cave at the beginning of time as raised us like her very own children. We loved her like a mother. People didn't mess with the tribal Ya-Ya sisters.

But then Hurricane Zandra, the hugest hurricane known to man, came and ripped all the trees out by their roots and turned all the streams into rivers and killed everybody, including our mother, Lola. Only four of us survived. Everywhere we turned, evil alligators tried to eat us...Finally we were so weak we just gave up.

The alligators rejoiced and crawled up to where we lay helpless. They crawled so close that we looked right into their ugly old eyes and saw the light of the moon reflected. We tried everything we knew, but our strength was gone. Then from behind the moon came a gorgeous lady...And the Moon Lady shot silver rays from her eyes so hot and mighty that those alligators were burned to a crisp right in their sleazy tracks!

...And the Moon Lady said, "You are my daughters in whom I am well pleased. I will always keep my Divine Eyes peeled for you."

We, the Ya-Yas, had lost our jungle home, and our town does not realize we are royal, but secretly we all know our history and we will be loyal to our tribe forever and ever, in sickness and in health. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. (89-90)

The Ya-Ya creation myth reveals multiple critiques of official Catholic/western narratives of femininity, and it models the action of resistance. For instance, when the young girls look "right into [the] ugly old eyes" of the tradition which threatens to consume them, they see "the light of the moon reflected." By confronting and fully seeing the patriarchal tradition, they can also discover within it the routes/roots of an ancient, feminized belief system which it has hidden from them. The Ya-Yas see reflected in the eyes of the beast a powerful, saving Moon Goddess. According to religious historian Marina Warner, "In the thought of late antiquity, the light of the moon not only dispelled the shadows of night, but also had all-important life-giving powers. The grace of God, mediated through Mary, as the light of the sun reflects off the disc of the moon, also gives life and quickens and nourishes and purifies, like water" (259). Further, in ancient Greek thought, "the moon was believed to retain the sunlight, to preserve it for the following day, and thus to mother each new sun into being" (Warner 257). Thus, the association of a female deity with the moon connects to iconography of the Virgin Mary and to more ancient pagan goddesses, specifically Isis and Diana who are associated with the beginning,

regeneration, and sustenance of life. In New World mythology, the pattern of reclamation in the Ya-Ya creation myth echoes the Cuban Orisha tradition of Ochún. According to Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, one story of Ochún “tells about the sadness of the goddess of love as she watched her children forced from their home to be taken to a new land named Cuba” (46). Ochún’s sister, the deity Yemayá, assures her that “Our children will now go through the world spreading our wonders and millions will remember us and worship once again” (46). Ochún decides to leave Africa to join her suffering children in the New World and asks her sister to make her hair straighter and her skin smoother so that “all Cubans see some of themselves” in her (46). The Moon Lady in the Ya-Ya narrative, who is “well pleased” with her daughters and swears protection of them, likewise reclaims her daughters after an apocalyptic threat of extinction.

This reclamation story of the primal, maternal, regenerative powers of the moon deity is an umbilical narrative which provides spiritual life-blood to the young girls. Significantly, the divinity and spiritual power of the young, Catholic, southern girls is a “secret” within public discourse – the town does not know their true origins. Also, the conclusion of the narrative includes a revision of the *Gloria Patri*, a doxology of the Catholic Church which states: “Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.” The re/creation narrative written here names an alternative, more ancient beginning than the “white man’s myth” and claims a feminine origin, an alternative world “without end” within the blood sisterhood.

In this vein, the adult Ya-Yas occupy a provisional “space set apart” (Daly 156) from male domination when they are at their summer retreat Spring Creek, which one of the *Petites*

*Ya-Yas* dubs “heaven on earth” (LA 39). Here, the *Ya-Yas* live how they were “meant to live” (LA 43), according to *Vivi*’s son *Baylor*:

They don’t wear make-up when we’re at Spring Creek, just a dab of lipstick and toenail polish. And they don’t use hairspray at all. They wear men’s big shirts and short-shorts and ratty old tennis shoes, and at night they sleep in tee shirts and panties. They only cook when they feel like it, they read tons of paperback books, and if one of them farts, they laugh their heads off and yell out: Kill it! Step on it! Don’t let it get away! (LA 40)

Dressing in men’s clothing, forgoing make-up, and celebrating vulgar defiance of the codes of ladyhood, the *Ya-Yas* enjoy a temporary retreat – a retreat that is seasonal (summer only), supported by male structures (economically available to the wealthy only), and surrounded by masculine culture, as evidenced by the intrusions of a male sheriff on their skinny-dipping episode and of the husbands on weekends.

Tension between the “border territory” and the traditional “place” of women permeates the *Ya-Yas*’ retreat, as *Baylor* continues to narrate: “when Daddy and the other men come out for a weekend, the *Ya-Yas* start getting ready on Friday morning. Fixing little appetizers and tweezing their eyebrows, and Mama gets all nervous...and she tells us exactly what we can and can’t tell Daddy about what we’ve been doing” (LA 40). Even in the creation myth, the structures of traditional domesticity intrude upon the *Ya-Yas*: when *Necie* uses the water bottle “stolen” from her mother’s ironing board, she is at once “liberating” the *Ya-Yas*, but also foreshadowing their entrapment, as in *Vivi*’s “staying alive” speech detailing the dirty diapers and cooking and cleaning of their lives as wives and mothers.

The paradox of their inherited cultural definitions of motherhood is that by liberating themselves as “goddesses” from the confining roles of human motherhood, the *Ya-Yas* condemn themselves to the position of “bad” human mothers. But in selflessly confining themselves to the cultural role of “good mothers,” the *Ya-Yas* would negate their individuality and claim to spiritual transcendence. The specific balance between tradition and innovation which the *Ya-*

Ya incorporate in their feminine spirituality, however, allows them to negotiate the double bind. Rather than affecting a complete split from tradition, an “exodus” from Catholicism, the Ya-Yas establish a “womanchurch,” which is directly related to Catholicism but which “borrows” and “revises” in response to specific cultural and social demands. Thus, the Ya-Yas are largely able to retain the elements of traditional religion that are specifically meaningful and empowering for them and rework those aspects which too narrowly define them. They expand and re-color the official Catholic narrative – the *Baltimore Catechism* official, written version – with borrowings from vernacular, feminized strains of Catholic tradition. Their spirituality is idiosyncratic and fluid, shaped by conflict and compromise, as evidenced by the following Ya-Ya conversation:

“All right,” Vivi said. “I stood there at the mailbox and began composing a prayer - an ‘ultra-tomato,’ as Sidida used to call ultimatums. I said, ‘Listen, Ole Padnah.’ Not ‘*Please* listen.’ Just ‘*Listen.*’”

“I thought you only prayed to Mother Most Merciful, *cher*,” Teensy said. “Didn’t you eighty-six the Old Fart?”

“Please, Teensy,” Necie said, “stop it. You do that just to shock me.”

“Well, that’s true,” Vivi explained. “I did give up on God the Father - the Ole Padnah - as Shep calls Him. But I just thought in this case I better cover all my bases.”

“Always a good idea,” Caro said.

“It can never hurt to keep praying to them all is what I say,” said Necie, the only one who still thought the Pope wasn’t senile. “Since the Holy Trinity does still exist, even though yall have reinvented the Catholic religion to suit yourselves.”

“Come on, Necie,” Teensy said. “Don’t get preachy. You know we’re still all Catholic girls *au coeur*.” (DS 16-17)

The Ya-Yas earlier consensus to “eighty-six the Old Fart” aligns with Daly’s call for women to liberate themselves from god the father, but by “covering all the bases” (and therefore remaining in the realm dictated by those bases), the Ya-Yas maintain a sense of religious sanction.

Teensy’s response to the charge that the group has “reinvented the Catholic religion to suit” themselves is key to the empowerment of the Ya-Ya spirituality: the labeling of religious identity takes place “*au coeur*” – in the heart of the individual woman. Thus, because of their attendance to individual needs, the Ya-Ya sisterhood, like the “womanchurch” movement, is

limited in its direct cultural and generational influence. As Sandra Schneider explains, womanchurch does not wait for the “institutional church to ask for [women’s] opinion,” is “not controlled by guilt” and is not directed toward immediate institutional reform, but is “busy being church” (106). It attends directly to the spiritual needs of women for “rituals which give them life and hope” – as with the formation of the Ya-Yas and their retreat to Spring Creek – and as a result, womanchurch is “practical and provisional” (106). The danger is that this type of individual reform allows and actually sustains the status quo in patriarchal structures, but the strength is that it does not demand a generation of women to sacrifice their “life’s blood” for institutional reform (Schneider 108). Sidda’s difficulty connecting to her mother’s experience is reflective of this tension between generations of women in Catholic tradition; the inheritance of daughters of an official Church doctrine which is still damaging to women necessitates the unofficial “scrapbooks” and passed-down oral narratives which hold the stories of matriarchs in the faith. In *Divine Secrets*, Sidda intuits this narrative and the Ya-Ya’s coven-like, separatist worldview: “It was as though the Ya-Yas occasionally channeled themselves through her in spite of all the barriers she’d tried to place between their coven and herself” (35).

The claim that the Ya-Yas are essentially “Catholic girls *au coeur*” also signifies on the historical construction of the doctrines of Roman Catholicism – a process which disappears into the mythologizing of the “always, already” appearance of truths of the Church and papal authority. The juxtaposition of (Roman) Catholicism with the French vernacular “*au coeur*” hints to The Great Schism, the split in the late fourteenth century when two “popes” claimed authority – Urban VI in Rome and and Clement VII in Avignon, France. Catherine of Siena (later to be canonized a saint) was influential in moving the Vatican permanently back to Rome (Hofmann 11). The allusion to the Church’s historical construction and the largely unrecognized



influence of women in its development points to a (largely unwritten) legacy of women changing and directing the Church and asserts a precedent for the Ya-Yas' restructuring of tradition.

The blending of French idiom and Catholic doctrine in the Ya-Yas' conversation also indicates their merging of the strict, "Baltimore Catechism" tenets of Catholicism with the vernacular Catholicism of Cajun culture. Through the character of Genevieve, Teensy's mother (who is from Marksville, a Cajun community twenty-five miles south of Alexandria), Wells provides a model of a sustaining balance between the "vivaciousness" of the world and religious belief. The entry for Louisiana in the *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South* is certainly an idealized portrait of Cajuns but makes clear the religious values associated with that culture:

The Cajun[']s...church teaches him that life can be lived in a "state of grace," sustained by contrition and then confession to his friendly priest, who provides penances to counterbalance his moral lapses and offers the serene certainty of absolution. He does not brood about the mysteries of life and death, mortal and venial sins, which he leaves to his church...He laughs a lot, enjoys his distinctive culture, and does not take himself too seriously. In other words, for the Cajun the sacred and secular tend to merge into a single way of life. (415)

Embodying the merging of sacred and secular, flesh and spirit, Genevieve is the most complete mother figure for the Ya-Yas. She enters them in the Shirley Temple Look-Alike Contest as children, teaches the girls about make-up, hosts countless sleep-overs, introduces them to the high-spirited get-togethers of her Cajun family in Marksville, and rescues Vivi from the harsh St. Augustine Academy. Genevieve's "catechism lessons" as she drives Vivi home from the Academy echo a "healing" balance between woman's body and soul: "God don't like ugly, *Mes Petites Choux*. *Ça va?* No matter what they'll try to tell you, *Bebes!* God don't make ugly, and God don't like ugly. *Le Bon Dieu* is a god of loveliness, and don't yall forget it!" (DS 230).

Though Genevieve's religion provides a model of nurturing spirituality, her Cajun ethnic distinctiveness places her in the border, at the point of cultural tension in central Louisiana. Further, Genevieve's culture is also distinctively an "other" within the larger southern and

national ideologies, and is therefore vulnerable to intrusions by the dominant patriarchy. Her son Jack – written as the “*terra firma*” of masculinity, “born with a well of tenderness that was a curse in his father’s world” (DS 157) – responds to the masculine, patriotic call of duty during World War II, and his death leads to Genevieve’s retreat into mental illness and eventual death. Jack was also Vivi’s high school sweetheart, the “one who was meant to be” (DS 157), and Vivi and the Ya-Yas are permanently wounded by his death. Years later, Teensy admits that she has “never forgiven” Jack’s death, declaring that “patriotism is a crock,” and Vivi affirms her sentiment: “The Catholic Church and the United States military really ought not to mess with the Ya-Yas” (DS 317). The bitter irony of Vivi’s statement acknowledges the vulnerable position of minorities – women, Cajuns, and men with a “well of tenderness” – within dominant patriarchal institutions.

Sidda’s initial response to the Ya-Yas’ personal spirituality – her perception of a lack and her longing for the complete and perfect mother – parallels traditional Catholicism’s paradox of expectations for women: the union of the Virgin and Mother deified in traditional Catholicism but impossible for human mothers. Sidda’s grappling with blame also points to a key issue in third-generation feminism – the paradoxical desire for the “good mother” and the “liberated goddess” at once. Coming to recognize the paradox and her (and dominant society’s) tendency to “blame mother,” Sidda questions: “Do I expect Mama to be responsible for my life? Because she gave me physical birth, do I expect her to give me spiritual birth as well? Have I not forgiven her for being ripped from the womb of innocence and flung screaming into the raw, cruel, glorious demands of this world?” (DS 219). *Divine Secrets* shows Sidda’s movement from her role as a needful daughter to her immersion into “sisterhood” with her mother’s generation. As Schneider asserts, the womanchurch empowers future generations through “the narratizing and sharing of the experience of women which has been largely excluded from the history of

mainline religion” (87). The scrapbook that holds the “Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood” serves the function of narratizing and revealing to Sidda the empowering history of her mother(s). By uncovering the “secrets” of Vivi’s life and her sustaining spirituality, Sidda becomes one of the sisterhood, and moves her expectations for Vivi from the model of idealized motherhood to the recognition of common womanhood. Thus, when Sidda returns “home” to the Catholic sacrament of marriage and to her mother, she realizes that her mother “did more right than wrong” (*DS* 434) and she “sat next to her mother, and felt the power of their combined fragility. She returned home without blame” (*DS* 437).

The space of Spring Creek also provides a metaphorical link between the mother figure and symbolic, spiritual associations of water. As Warner explains, the same ancient symbolism which connects female deity (syncretized in Catholic tradition as the Blessed Virgin Mary) to lunar imagery also connects to water, the sea: “one interpretation of her name derives it from *mar*, Latin for sea” (262). Whereas the sun was hot and dehydrating, the moon was associated with moisture, with the tides, with the life-sustaining fluids of female menstrual cycle, with the replenishing dew which was called “moonwater” by the Greeks. Therefore, according to Warner, “In this pattern of symbolism, Mary – like classical goddesses before her – emerged the eternal mistress of the waters, the protective deity of life, and especially the patroness of women in childbirth” (262). In Wells’ texts, Vivi and her Ya-Ya sisters are likewise associated with water. They are avid swimmers; Vivi and Caro were high school lifeguards – a significant occupation in their call to be life-giving, life-guarding maternal figures. In *Divine Secrets*, Sidda reflects:

My mother was a beautiful swimmer. Her stroke was the Australian crawl. Watching Mama swim was like watching a woman who knows how to waltz perfectly, only her partner was not a man, but creek water. Her kick was strong, her stroke fluid, and when she rolled her head from side to side to breathe, you could barely see her mouth open...I

marveled at her beauty, all wet and cool, her hair slicked back, her eyes shining, proud of her strength. (40-41)

Sidda's pride in her mother's strength and beauty is reflective of imagery associated with the Creole goddesses Ochún and Ézúlié who are associated in Orisha and Vodou traditions with sensuality, beauty, rivers and fresh waters (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 45). Further, the Ya-Yas enact a drowning and rescue scene, a symbolic ritual much like a baptism/resurrection ritual, in which the capable, goddess-like mother performs the symbolic rescue of her child from danger and death. Each year, Vivi "tests" her lifeguard skills by having a *Petit Ya-Ya* pretend to drown. After pulling the child safely to shore, Vivi would "begin the most dramatic component of the rescue: mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. The Kiss of Life" (45). Through this dramatization of the mother as the "life breath" of her child, Wells also depicts the vulnerability of the human mother – her human shortcomings and mortality prevent her from being the source of eternal salvation.

Sidda reflects:

For days after Mama saved you from a watery death, you would recall over and over again the thrill of such a close call. You would remember how confidently she pulled you through the water, and you would recollect the taste of her mouth and the smell of her breath. For days you felt unsafe venturing near the deep end, because the "near-drowning" was so vivid... You would wonder, What would happen if you were drowning and Mama wasn't around to dive in and save you? (46).

The awe and fear reflected in Sidda's response to Vivi's ritual rescue open the human spirit to a reconfigured divine grace.

In Catholic tradition, grace is the spiritual link which acts as a bridge between human fallibility and divine perfection. Human beings are imprinted with the desire to seek grace, fulfillment in God. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "Man is in search of God. In the act of creation, God calls every being from nothingness into existence... Even after losing through his sin his likeness to God, man remains an image of his Creator, and retains the

desire for the one who calls him into existence. All religions bear witness to men's essential search for God" (675). In the closing scene of *Little Altars Everywhere*, Sidra participates in the baptism of her goddaughter, and she realizes the sacrament fully in its spiritual, life-giving force. Standing with the infant in her arms, Sidra reflects:

I make myself breathe slowly. I begin to feel the beating of my heart. I feel [the baby's] young heartbeat... Then I begin to feel the beating of each one of their hearts: Baylor's, Little Shep's, Lulu's, Daddy's, Mama's, Letta's, Chaney's. All of our hearts beating in concert... And I realize for the first time in my life: All their longing was pure!... All their longing was pure. All the longing was for the Spirit. It got trapped in the bottle, but some of the pure longing got through. That is why we are standing here in the sacrament of this moment... And I feel it: the sweet pure longing of each of us, still intact. (220)

The vision of "intact" human spirituality is developed as a hybrid, collective narrative in Wells' novels: "Ya-Ya," the name given to the group of young girls by their Cajun matriarch Genevieve, means "everyone talking at once." The multiple voices – Cajun, Cuban, pagan, African – which are recovered in moments of "pure longing" and reclamation of wholeness in the texts provide an umbilical cord of life-stories between generations and of grace between human and divine.

Wells' novels are a narrative of southern white Catholic girls in the unique cultural environment of central Louisiana – in spite of their popular reading, the texts resist being *the* southern narrative of womanhood. However, the hybrid nature of the Ya-Ya's spirituality can possibly be read as an appropriation of minority cultures in service of the dominant group. This is an issue which Wells addresses and problematizes in her texts, particularly in the relationships of Vivi and Sidra to their black caretakers, their "other mothers." And this is a problematic element of the texts that is not fully resolved. Throughout both texts, the Ya-Ya's use material from black blues and soul culture as part of their resistive definition of self. They quote Little Richard, Billie Holiday, and Aaron Neville. Willetta and her husband Chaney rescue the

children from Vivi's physical abuse. Young Sidda prays to St. Martin de Porres, "the patron saint of the poor" (83) – historically, the mulatto son of a Spanish don and his slave mistress – for intercession. Chaney and Willetta are depicted as sexually intimate and fulfilled as opposed to Shep and Vivi. Willetta reflects upon the privileged Walker residence: "That brick house is gotta be the saddest place in the state of Louisiana, I tell Chaney when I get home. That place ain't nothing but a big air-conditioned house of sadness" (137). This attention to the economic and social inequities between southern white and black families does not "solve" the problem of racial inequality within the texts or fix the imbalanced dependence of flawed white characters on morally-strong black characters and culture for their redemption.

Both novels critique unsympathetic actions of white characters toward their black caretakers. In *Little Altars Everywhere*, for instance, Willetta reports that when Buggy picks up her grandchildren from Willetta's home after their physical abuse, Buggy "never thought to send back my own two babies' clothes what I had dressed them four Walker children in" (143). Likewise, in *Divine Secrets* when Ginger, the caretaker, corrects Sidda when she mistakenly assumes her family is Ginger's home: "'Your grandmother ain't my family,' Ginger said. 'I got me my husband, and two daughters. They a lot you don't know'" (131).

In this way, the novels do fall short of fully redeeming themselves from the sin of cultural appropriation, but they also enact an acknowledgement of diversity "hidden" within the cultural texts that does open up dominant culture to a re-visionary critique. When Sidda is home in central Louisiana and hears Aaron Neville's "Tell It Like It Is" on the radio, she thinks of New York's special "Delta Nights" categorization of such music; by contrast, she reflects that Louisiana culture recognizes this as "music from deep in the heart – and they don't label it anything, they just play it" (223). Again, white Sidda's declaration that a black singer's music is

from “deep in the heart” of her traditionally-segregated culture is problematic. Still, the novels, like the music, reflect a cultural reality: the intimate intertwining of traditionally “dominant” and “peripheral” influences in the southern culture of the central Louisiana. In the “ya-ya” of everyone speaking at once, it is impossible to fully separate out whiteness from blackness, as Paul Gilroy argues in his theory of hybridity and essential blackness. Though the narratives are clearly told from a white woman’s perspective, the cultural narrative is not just a white woman’s story. It is always, already and necessarily multi-colored and hybrid. In her autobiographical text *Killers of the Dream*, published in 1949, Lillian Smith analyzed the psychological damage that white southerners enacted on self and other when they segregated themselves from their black neighbors:

Something was wrong with a world that tells you that love is good and people are important and then forces you to deny love and to humiliate people. I knew, though I would not for years confess it aloud, that in trying to shut the Negro race away from us, we have shut ourselves away from so many good, creative, honest, deeply human things in life. I began to understand slowly at first but more clearly as the years passed, that the warped, distorted frame we have put around every Negro child from birth is around every white child also. [...] Minds broken. Hearts broken. Conscience torn from acts. A culture split in a thousand pieces. That is segregation. (39)

The “thousand pieces” which are always, already parts of a single community (but have unequal access to power and privilege) begin to be reconnected when we celebrate rather than conceal the diversity of place, culture and conscience. In a similar critique of the representation of black women’s spirituality as a salvation for a young white girl in Sue Monk Kidd’s *The Secret Life of Bees*, Laurie Grobman posits the dilemma of a teacher of such literature in this way:

Does Kidd – or any non-black woman – have the “right” to give voice to the “many gifts” of black women characters? [...] No doubt, the U.S. culture is already hybrid, and both high and popular artists continue to cross and to blur racial boundaries in their creative work. Our students need the tools to navigate the culture in which they are immersed” (22-23).

Working from Toni Morrison's charge to "search for and mine a sharable language" in *Playing in the Dark*, Grobman argues that such texts be read as ways of opening the conversation and blurring the traditional boundaries of racial influence (23). In reading and interpreting the spiritual work of these texts, then, it is critical to recognize the colonizing nature of "white man's myth" and to acknowledge one's positionality within that myth.

The ethic of Wells' novels is a deliberate bastardizing of dominant southern and Catholic traditions; it parodies these traditions and exposes the hybrid elements within them. As girls, for instance, the Ya-Yas disrupt a public pageant of the American ideal of girlhood, a Shirley Temple Look-Alike Contest, by "pooting" and laughing uncontrollably. Their parody of girlhood innocence earns them the parental warning: "You all have got to start acting like ladies if you expect to get along in this town" (*DS* 75). Like her literary predecessor Scarlett O'Hara, Vivi acknowledges, "But...it's so much *fun* being a bad girl" (75, emphasis in original). By engaging and critiquing the images of women traditionally recognized within southern and Catholic institutions – the Virgin Mother and the southern lady – Wells points to the cultural influence of ideas of home and tradition and explores the tensions between individual and social construction of identity.

In the closing image of *Divine Secrets*, the Virgin Mary joins in the celebration of earthly love at Sidda's wedding:

From her perch on the crescent of the harvest moon, the Holy Lady looked down and smiled at her imperfect children. The angels attending her that night felt little twinges of longing to be in human form, if for only a few minutes. They wanted to rock, they wanted to roll, they wanted to feel the peculiarly human feeling of having a perfect night in an imperfect world...So it is when the umbilical cord of love flows up from the earth and down from the sky...when the divisions between heaven and earth crack open a little and spirits gather from all over. (448-9)



The “umbilical cord” vision of blessing implies a two-way communication between the spiritual and the secular: grace flows not only “down from the sky” but also “up from the earth.” In this explicitly maternal, bodily metaphor, the splits between human and divine motherhood, between women’s body and spirit, are reconciled: human “imperfection” becomes empowering and – “if only for a few moments” – analogous to divine “perfection.” Further, the “umbilical cord” metaphor illustrates the relationship of religious symbol to culture: in order to wield power, the image of divinity must be given life by believers. As Daly asserts, “religious symbols fade and die when the cultural situation that gave rise to them and supported them ceases to give them plausibility...clinging to [symbols] as fixed and ultimate is self-destructive and idolatrous” (15). Working within the inheritance of Catholic and southern traditions, Wells’ female characters move beyond confining ideals of womanhood, and beyond blame for the past generations who did not fully break down those ideals, to claim their traditions and to reshape their inherited symbols of divinity into an empowering, life-giving spirituality.

**Chapter Four**  
**“Hoodoo Saints and their Little Catholic Cousins”:**  
**Multi/colored Creole Spirituality in Brenda Marie Osbey’s *All Saints***

Something was missing from Western religion. The slaves had to reshape Christianity to make it fit their own. They hid beneath Mary’s skirts and continued to worship their own deities.

-- Luisah Teish, *Jambalaya: The Natural Woman’s Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals*

Anything and everything that comes through New Orleans is black in spirit. Traditional African religions colored Catholicism so that you have a variety of cults of individual saints, so that you have all kinds of seemingly bizarre practices going on in Catholic churches. I think all that points to the strength of our basic Africaneity. The spirituality here is uniquely African in nature. When we look at voodoo, what we’re looking at is a series of principles that have primarily to do with balance, that have to do with how the world is structured, and how you keep, or create, or search out, a balance in your personal life and affairs, and how you equate that to the balance that exists in nature. So the two greatest sins I can think of are forgetting and self-denial. If you do those things you live and die in constant turmoil and confusion.

-- Brenda Marie Osbey, interview with John Lowe

As Wells and Martin’s works illustrate, New Orleans and much of south Louisiana is uniquely southern and non-southern at once, a place on the seams between American and non-American culture which both magnifies and ruptures the structures of southern social, economic, and religious codes. The figure standing at or for the seam in much Louisiana writing is the Creole, a hybrid figure that ritualist Luisah Teish and New Orleans poet Brenda Marie Osbey ground firmly in strategies of remembering and embodying African religion and Louisiana Catholicism. While generations of “white” Creoles have worked to disassociate their culture from blackness, Osbey claims that everything in New Orleans is “African in nature.” In 1916, Alice Dunbar-Nelson attempted to balance conflicting definitions of Creole by employing a distinctively Creole food metaphor:

The Caucasian will shudder with horror at the idea of including a person of color in the definition, and the person of color will retort with his definition that a Creole is a native of Louisiana, in whose blood runs mixed strains of everything un-American, with the African strain slightly apparent. The true Creole is like the

famous gumbo of the state, a little bit of everything, making a whole, delightfully flavored, quite distinctive, and wholly unique. (8-9)

Dunbar-Nelson's depiction of the performance of cultural definition is revealing: whites shun, try to distance themselves from and erase, the "Africaneity" of the Creole in order to distance themselves from racial "blackness," and the "person of color" uses this ethnicity to identify him/herself as racially mixed and "un-American" in origin.

The definition of Creole as a culture made up of "mixed strains of everything un-American" is a particularly useful angle for studying Creole women's spiritual expression as hybrid, vernacular, deliberately "un-American," unfixed, and fluid. Gumbo is soul food, after all, comfort food, mother food; it is also a material commodity made meant to be made, consumed, and then remade with the ingredients on-hand, never in exactly the same way. In both ways, gumbo is an apt metaphor for a living culture and the religious beliefs that emanate from that culture. Thinking of a culture and its spiritual expression as something to learn, consume, and remake is a way of understanding Osbey's claim that the "two greatest sins" are "forgetting and self-denial" (Lowe).

New Orleans Creole culture is home to Brenda Marie Osbey and her poetry. In a post-Katrina interview, she says, "My own family goes back to slavery and freedom in this city – perhaps farther. New Orleans isn't just in my blood; it's in the soles of my feet, my skin and teeth. While I can always work and take up residence anyplace, I can't imagine belonging to any other place" (Simmons). Osbey's 1997 *All Saints: New and Selected Poems*, her fourth and most recently published collection of poetry, does the work of remembering in contemporary culture and literature the far-reaching heritage of Creole Louisiana. This collection is composed of three sections: "live among your dead, whom you have every right to love," "in the faubourg," and "*ex votos*." These sections take the reader through the cycle of initiation into Creole hoodoo/Catholic spirituality and culture, with the importance of learning to "remember" the dead

“our saints who continue to live among us,” as the invocation to the volume indicates), to the materiality of place (the *Faubourg Tremé*), to prayers and offerings for Creole saints and legends. Through this movement to name the influence/importance of a particular place and past within the present, Osbey’s poems enact a model of reclamation of the vibrant, hybrid Catholicism which celebrates its vernacular “peculiarities”— its essential *creolité* – and empowers rather than whitewashes its believers.

In the content and form of her poems, Osbey engages and critiques dominant culture past and present, exposing the complexity of power and identity in a hybrid, multi-racial culture. The “whiteness” of mainstream culture and religion is a deliberate forgetting of our multi/colored ancestry, a bleaching which threatens to weaken and silence women and minorities in particular, Osbey’s poetry maintains. Giving voice to Creole women in published, written art while writing elements of orality into her verse, Osbey complicates and deconstructs traditional, hierarchical dichotomies including spirit/body, male/female, Church/State, and American/foreign. Simply put, her poems enact a hybrid/*creole* spirituality and literature, placing a community seemingly on the margins between cultures at the center of power and possibility for modern spirituality.

Osbey’s emphasis on living memory, hybridity and the amorphous presence of black culture forges a solid connection between the work/action of her poetry and Paul Gilroy’s postcolonial concept of Africaneity. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Gilroy reconceptualizes the idea of tracing cultural (particularly black) roots as instead tracing “routes” – “seeing identity as a process of movement and meditation” (19). He employs the metaphor of ships to show the necessary movement involved in comprehending identity – “moving to and fro between nations, crossing borders” (12). Binaries which have been invoked to discuss and comprehend race, nation, and influence are not sufficient, Gilroy explains, for comprehending culture and the “webbed network” (29) of influence and

connectedness between the local and the global, black and white, for instance. Hybridity and fluidity between borders can be seen in examining the writing and thinking of both colonizer and colonized, Gilroy claims, which exist in a complex, syncretic web of influence. Definitions and borders belie the constant tension between self/other, insider/outsider that is always in flux within them.

Gilroy's work is fundamental in reclaiming black culture not as apart from but as always, already essential to concepts of modernity and nation, for instance, and this postcolonial idea of constant movement "to and fro" can be seen in Osbey's idea of cultural sin as "forgetting" or "self-denial," in insistence on remembering and re/naming as active works of claiming and naming the self. Osbey's poems are like Gilroy's metaphorical ships that inhabit the territories between countries and continents, speaking of New Orleans and the cultural experience of it in context of its syncretic relationship to northern US cities, Europe, Africa, the US south, and the Caribbean. The Creole culture which Osbey depicts is very much a Caribbean-informed, postcolonial space.

*All Saints* demonstrates a particularly feminine perspective on the postcolonial, expressly through its syncretism of Catholic and hoodoo religions and matriarchs. A fundamental aspect of Osbey's call to remember is the importance of remembering mothers, especially the unromantic remembrance of the realities, work conditions, strengths and difficulties of matriarchs in family, faith, and community. According to Simone A. James Alexander, contemporary Caribbean women writers "resist zombification" by dominant culture, or whitewashing, by learning to "call their nations," to reclaim mothers and motherlands. This "call" involves the written word, naming oneself and one's heritage within the public discourse:

The conflict between the real and the supernatural worlds is symbolic of the struggle between the mother country, the metropole, and the motherlands, Africa and the Caribbean. This struggle is also an indirect war of the oral versus the written, for the supernatural is embedded in orality and the real world claims

authenticity as a result of its literary representation. Thus, the motherlands are engrossed in an ongoing struggle for recognition by the colonial mother country, whose agenda is to discredit the supernatural, rejecting the oral, the so-called undocumented, while authenticating the written. This discrediting distances the supernatural world from the real, and often the supernatural is seen as oppositional. It is this very distancing and rejection of the supernatural by the so-called real by mainstream European theorists that have perversely stimulated interest in many black women writers. (Alexander 137)

Fahamisha Patricia Brown, in her text *Performing the Word: African American Poetry as*

*Vernacular Culture*, similarly points out the traditional hierarchy of written over spoken, text

over voice. Contemporary black poetry is often performative, Brown says, opening up the space

of written text to engage multiple voices through a hybrid art form:

Contemporary discussions of orature tend to focus on the verbal expressive arts of preliterate or nonliterate cultures. Literature assumes literacy and print. African American orature, however, exists in a realm of duality, a kind of double consciousness. Much of African American literature is written to be read aloud (preferably to an audibly responsive audience). The African American writer centers a speaking voice in a written text very often through the presentation of a dramatic scenario. Similarly, African American vernacular culture manifests itself simultaneously in the realms of orality and literacy. (Brown 28)

The binaries that Alexander and Brown identify as the ideological framework which suppresses black culture and denies its influence are reworked/unwound in literature that credits the oral and supernatural as essential elements of the real. In *All Saints*, Osbey blends orality and literacy through multiple techniques: the dramatic scenario, multiple voices and perspectives in narrative poems, elements of Catholic novena prayer structure, and folksong. Also, the poems emphasize naming and narrative, often calling attention to the group creation of a cultural legend – how the stories of a culture and religion are shaped, told, and retold. Blending the oral and written, spiritual and real as inseparable parts of a complex cultural narrative, Osbey is “calling her nation,” as Alexander describes the written act of taking ownership of stories of one’s ancestry.

Bias in religious studies (as in literary studies) has always sided with the written text over ritual tradition, Carol Christ claims, and this has had detrimental effects on non-written religions

such as matriarchal hoodoo/voodoo. According to Christ, “More is at stake here than simple inherited prejudice toward the study of texts. Ritual embodies in a fuller way than text, the nonrational, the physical side of religion” (71). Luisah Teish narrates the colonial attempt to “tame” slave religion as follows:

[T]he Christian church, and specifically the Catholic Church, demanded that we Blacks be baptized, take Christian names, and worship the saints. The Vatican practically sponsored the slave trade, and the deified ancestors of the Catholic Church (the saints), holy water, and Latin invocations became familiar magical tools to the African. The slaves saw in Mary, Star of the Sea, their own Ocean Goddess, Yemonja, and they embraced Her. They drew parallels between the saints and their own deities in order to worship them with impunity. (105)

The hybrid religion which Teish describes, the creative and powerful way that believers “hid beneath Mary’s skirts” without relinquishing the vigor of female deity (as in mainstream Catholic depictions of Mary as meek and subservient), testifies to the potency of vernacular spirituality. It is this spiritual tradition that is reclaimed and repossessed in the act of writing, naming and “calling one’s nation,” mothers and motherlands.

In her recent autobiographical essay, “Writing Home,” Osbey asserts the importance of the dead to her spirituality and her writing. In her inherited value system, particularly as it has been “narrated” to her by her mother and grandmother, Osbey explains that “[b]oth tradition and faithfulness require that we acknowledge Our Dead in our day-to-day lives...In this way, they remain among us through our own active reverence and remembrance. It is because they do remain with us that we are free to move about the wide world. Should we dare to neglect, forget or forsake them, tradition teaches us, they will likely do as well by us” (36). This belief structure aligns closely with official Catholic theology of the dead, belief in the intercession of departed souls and celebration of the Feast of All Saints, as outlined in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

So it is that the union of the wayfarers with the brethren who sleep in the peace of Christ is in no way interrupted, but on the contrary, according to the constant faith of the Church, this union is reinforced by an exchange of spiritual goods. Being more closely united to Christ, those who dwell in heaven fix the whole Church more firmly in holiness...[T]hey do not cease to intercede with the Father for us, as they proffer the merits which they acquired on earth through the one mediator between God and men, Christ Jesus...So by their fraternal concern is our weakness greatly helped. (271)

When Osbey titles her collection of poems which celebrate and remember Creole culture *All Saints*, then, she signifies the complex body of deity and deceased who are the ancestors and shapers of this distinct culture and spirituality. In the invocation to her text, she calls out to “personal gods and ancestors; musicians and street dancers; / Hoodoo saints and their little Catholic cousins... / our saints who continue to live among us.” Osbey’s invocation succinctly enacts the syncretic spiritualism which Teish and Alexander describe, and it reflects African/Caribbean, Catholic, and southern value systems which all emphasize ancestors and honoring the dead as essential to knowledge of self and present and also emphasize physical space/place as inseparable from the spirit/self. Her invocation performs a shift of power which is maintained throughout the text, however: the hoodoo saints are predominant; they assimilate the little Catholic semblances within them – they are the “brick of which our / homes, our streets, our churches are made” who “hold together the Old City and its attachments” and not vice versa.

The shift of power also manifests in Osbey’s formal structures: *All Saints* is a hybrid/creole literary text, a blend of oral and written texts which – in its use of multiple voices and narrative perspectives, songs, chants and vernacular expressions – challenges the hierarchy of print over oral, as Alexander describes. For example, the volume of *All Saints* includes a “Glossary of New Orleans Ethnic Expressions, Place Names, and Characters” to illuminate a reading public who are likely illiterate in the oral histories of Creole culture – it serves as a tourists’ guide of sorts to essential, vernacular knowledge. This act of translating important knowledge of an informed culture for an uninformed reading public again performs a



redefinition and revaluation of insider and outsider, center and peripheral. But the glossary and Osbey's poems which emanate from a "peculiar" vernacular spirituality and culture invite the reader to learn and to hear, a vital act of crossing and blurring borders that forces public recognition of authenticity (Alexander 137) and reinforces the Creolization/hybridity of public discourse (Gilroy 29).

### **Honoring the Dead in Creole/Catholic Custom: Section One**

In section one of *All Saints*, Osbey shows the struggle of learning to "live among your dead, whom you have every right to love." Mourning, aging, and sexual desire are common threads throughout this section: human responses to the cycles of life and death. These themes manifest the attitudes and customs for honoring the dead, all saints who have gone before us, which are essential to sustaining both the Catholic and hoodoo religion in modern culture and to forging a vital link to the past and one's *own* ancestors.<sup>7</sup> Many of the poems are "funeral poems" in honor of a specific deceased person but emphasize the impact of death on the living. The opening poem, "For Charles H. Rowell, On the Death of His Father," for instance, alternates speaking voices of father and son to narrate the intertwined experience of the dead who is "still a living man" (1.15) and the living who claims:

it is over now.  
people are calling me long-distance.  
writing on postcards  
telling me how best to grieve.  
they do not know that the young do not mourn.  
they do not know that my hands are empty buckets  
easily weighted to the ground with such stones. (4:1-7).

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<sup>7</sup> Osbey's use of ancestral knowledge and community ritual in *All Saints* serves a similar function to the socialization process of "catching sense" as anthropologist Patricia Guthrie observes among African American Sea Islanders on St. Helena, South Carolina. Osbey depicts the process of learning to remember and honor ancestors and traditions which are tied to a specific community/location. According to Guthrie, "catching sense" denotes the cultural maturation of a child within the St. Helena community, a kinship based more on community/location than on direct kinship. This process "exemplified a creative strategy, developed by enslaved people in the Americas, to ensure that all children, regardless of the circumstances of their birth, belonged to a community" (275). During the process of "catching sense," a child came to understand the "guiding principles" of his or her community and to participate in that community as an adult (282).

Images of distance, emptiness, and heavy burdens such as the ones here are common in this opening section. Learning to remember, learning to mourn and to realize the importance of the burdens one carries, the connection of those burdens to one's own, specific history, is the task of claiming one's inheritance and finding spiritual peace.

In "Stones of Soweto," Osbey depicts the creole hoodoo/Catholic practice of calling out to the dead, to all souls of one's heritage, for intercession. Here, the speaker feels displacement from his motherland, feels lost in the anonymity of modernity, and he calls out/prays for reconnection to his heritage. The stones connect to inter-continental black experience, as the speaker asks the dead:

how will you know me  
-- any of us --  
from all of the others  
calling out to their dead  
among the clamoring stones and dust of soweto? (20-24)

Further establishing his sense of disconnection from African roots, the speaker reflects that he is "oceans and oceans / away from home" (48-49). His grief, he says, is "like a train whistle in the night -- / if you sleep soundly / you will never know how it came or went" (72-74). The sleeping voice, who would let grief pass anonymously without claiming or naming it, begins to awaken as the speaker recalls "the living face" of his mother, weeping, which he has "carried in [his] deepest places all these years" (83-84). The image of her crying over an unnamed sorrow is what prompts the speaker to awaken to his own grief. Standing "on some anonymous bridge / above some body / of cold and moving water" (108-110), the speaker reflects:

it could be any time of year.  
i could be any man.  
i am your son nonetheless.  
i carry your face in my deepest places.

Here, Osbey makes the point that while grief and loss are universal – death, of course, happens to anyone in anyplace – allowing the universal to consume us in anonymity is like “zombification” as Alexander defines it. The living carry their ancestors in their “deepest places,” and the stones/burdens of mourning which we inherit from the dead are particularly our own responsibly and give us the right to mourn our losses and to affirm the self. Recognizing one’s own particular space within the universal narrative (of modernity, globalization, and Catholicism) and naming it is a resistance to internal whitewashing; in this case it is the recognition of the “stones of soweto” and the particular black experience of suppression and resistance which those stones signify that the speaker must carry with him to “the streets of new england and new york” (52). Finally, he claims, “I believe in my own name/ and the many clamoring stones / of soweto” (129-131). The speaker’s belief/faith in his *own* name reflects the restorative power of ancestral intercession in syncretic hoodoo/Catholic faith: by reconnecting to his particular, black transnational heritage, the speaker can maintain faith in himself and his cultural heritage.

In the autobiographical narrative poem, “Alberta (Factory Poem/Variation 2),” Osbey remembers and claims the women whose history she shares. The poem speaks of the particulars of sacrifice that women made in a New Orleans garment factory:

the any number of needles sewn through flesh  
to put food on the table  
to keep children in school  
or a husband home  
to avoid the indignity of government “relief”  
to protect a mother or father  
from the old folks home. (1:8-15)

Osbey writes in graphic detail of the bodily demands of the factory: “women bleeding through triple-layered toweling / afraid to leave their machines the length of time it took / to wash and change the wadded cloth between their legs” (1:21-23). In pointed irony, she contrasts the

“white mannequins / who would not say *thank you*” (1:6-7) to the bloodiness of black life in factory labor:

a woman sprawled against the white commode  
the dark fluid slipping across the floor  
and the two or three other women  
standing guard against the door  
hiding away the solution:  
quinine and castor oil  
to bring on the quick violent abortion  
that might let you stagger back to a machine  
to stand and stitch together  
collars and lapels  
welt pockets to decorate white mannequins  
propped up in better stores  
throughout the southern region. (1:29-41).

Traditionally viewed as a modest domestic art, sewing becomes a potent metaphor in Osbey’s poem. Through it, Osbey shows that the “propped up” façade of the southern region rests on the sacrifice of black labor and life.

The metaphor of sewing does reflect the quaint iconic imagery of domestic art within a generation, however, and in the second section of the poem, Osbey recounts her own girlhood experience of being taught to embroider by her mother:

i sat cross-legged on the hard floor  
bunching upon the coarse cloth  
that would become  
dishcloths  
tea cozies  
for my grandmother  
who surely had enough of one  
and small use for the other.  
.....  
i learned to fashion  
elaborately flowered pillowslips  
dresser scarves  
lace edgings she loved to store up  
to show off to relatives (2:5-12, 15-19).

The use of “hard” and “coarse” seem ironic here – empty in contrast to the goriness described in the previous stanza, innocuous in an image which could be drawn from any quaint ideal of

American girlhood. The granddaughter's learning to embroider, however, is akin to the speaker in "Stones of Soweto" remembering his mother's face. She is a surviving daughter, in contrast to the lives that were "dropped," and she is the "last remaining evidence" of her grandmother (4.12,37). Through the narratives of her grandmother's experience, the speaker is able to realize the distance between the public façade of propriety and the sacrifice which underlies it and also the distance between her own experiences and those of her foremothers. The speaker can hear even "the last words / the words my grandmother alberta / did not say to me" (4:19-21), a song of solidarity between the factory women:

We stood together.  
We worked together.  
.....  
We cursed the cloth we stitched together  
And the lives it cost us to stitch it. (4:1-2, 5-6)

The particulars of her matriarch's experience convey the message of the poem. Osbey describes the grandmother's "slightly yellowed middle finger" with a split "where the machine tore flesh and nail / and after all those years / the nail refused ever to grow together" (4:29, 32-34). This is a certain image of defiance, inviting the reader to imagine the grandmother and her stubborn middle finger "flipping off" her violators. It also again sets up definite contrast to the granddaughter who imagines herself in the closing lines of the poem as the "smooth / straight / seam" (4:38-40). This pleasing image of the granddaughter, like the one of her learning to embroider, is pointed in its prettiness: how deceptive would it be to read these descriptions out of the context of the poem, how falsely tame and sweet would they seem? In this poem, Osbey connects that which appears to be a "smooth straight seam" to that which refuses to seam, to be smoothed over, thus making the point that, if in modernity we gloss over and forget the gory specifics of history, we are in danger of whitewashing or bleaching our history, becoming part of the dominant, "safe" façade of universality.

Osbey's "House of the Dead Remembering (House of Mercies/Variation 2)" draws out the connections between physical place, memory, desire and spirituality. The female body and the house are both containers, repositories, of memory:

this bone-sack you see  
held together with twine worn almost smooth  
once danced and shook the bamboula.  
.....  
this chamy bag holds together the past  
of the house where I was born  
house of mercies  
made of dry rot and tenpenny nails  
house of mercies  
holding up the sky  
keeping it from falling  
into the swampy earth (1-3, 18-25).

The "chamy bag," as defined in the glossary of *All Saints*, is a hoodoo/spiritist item to hold "one's personal medicine or juju" (124), and here the "juju" which the aging body and home hold is memory of the dead. Living and deceased generations intertwine in the space of the house, their presence is tangible: the speaker was born in the house (19), the grandfather strode "upright" into death "through the front-room window / of the house he built" (30, 31-32), the grandmother insists that children learn "the many proper ways / to honor the dead / *because memory is everything*" (35-37, emphasis added), the aging lover remembers making love "in the bed mama left me" (68), and the speaker's memory of dancing the bamboula (3) and her looking out on the "slave-bricked street below" (86) physically connect her to African and Creole ancestors in the place of New Orleans.

The living presence of the dead within the house and within the memory is heavy, the speaker claims. The lovers want "some proper antidote / to the pasts we have accumulated" (90-91), "some guarantee against forgetfulness / in the way we go about our lives" (60-61), and "some hope against the awesome forgetting / when we go into the ground" (65-66). Recalling that her lover had begged for her to "loose" him in sexual intercourse, she does not, and cannot

“set [him] free” (81) because “memory is everything” (82). “Memory is everything” in several contexts here: memory of sexual fulfillment, memory of their own and their inherited pasts which surround/consume them, and memory as their bequest to the future as, the speaker says, “my body...carried no children to remember us by” (79).

The first section of *All Saints* closes with “Peculiar Fascination with the Dead,” which includes the lines from which the section title is taken, “live among your dead, / whom you have every right / to love” (23-25). In six parts, the poem describes various scenes of mourning and learning to tend to the dead, including caring for gravesites, preparing for and attending funerals, and dressing in mourning. The speaker describes her mother’s prayer in her bedroom altar, lit with rows of yellow votive candles: she

remembers the dead  
with bits of paper  
white carnations  
a glass of water  
on empty earthen dish. (5:5-9)

The prayer altar and the mourning ritual seem “peculiar,” perhaps, juxtaposed against the “normalcy” of the child’s activities: playing in the doorway with rubber animals while “few cars go by” (5:21). The speaker describes that her mother “turns to look at [her]” (5:28), and immediately following is the final section of the poem, part six, which describes the speaker’s own “peculiar fascination / with the dead” (6:26-27):

i carry silver coins  
in the pockets of all my clothes.  
photographs of my dead follow me  
to each new residence.  
votive candles and st. john’s wort  
go near the head of my grocery lists.  
.....  
i forget nothing  
and carry the grudges of my dead  
like bowls of ash. (6:1-6, 19-21)

Osbey's use of the term "peculiar" in describing the reclamation of spiritual heritage engages the idea of Creole New Orleans as a tourists' destination of spectacle and awe, of New Orleans – particularly its Creole communities – as an exotic place which both is and is *not really* American and is therefore a useful outlet and/or scapegoat for mainstream culture's lusts and fears.<sup>8</sup> The notion of New Orleans heritage as "peculiar" also makes naming and claiming one's regional heritage problematic, especially for women and minorities, and connects the "peculiar" inheritance of the Creole speaker to the south's "peculiar institution" – slavery – and its particular/peculiar cultural and religious burden to the region's conscience and custom.

Osbey's insistence through this first section of her text that remembering can "[hold] up the sky," "keeping it from falling into the swampy earth" ("House of the Dead Remembering" 23, 24-25) posits memory as the antidote to apocalypse – memory is world-saving.<sup>9</sup> These

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<sup>8</sup> For instance, Robert Tallant first published his *Voodoo in New Orleans* in 1946; it has been reprinted at least six times. The book opens with an almost bizarre self-awareness of race and gender: "Sometimes a white man in New Orleans takes a walk along South Rampart Street, one of the famous Negro thoroughfares of America. He turns at Canal Street, the city's most important business street, and immediately he finds himself in a new world, with its own particular sights and sounds and smells" (3). He continues his excursion, stating his positionality as outsider again and again:

The white man will never forget the smells of South Rampart Street. [...] The white man walking on South Rampart Street is a foreigner. [...] The white man may feel he is an intruder here, but when he comes to a group of Negroes on the *banquette* – the New Orleans word for what is called a "sidewalk" elsewhere in the country – the Negroes step aside to let him pass. [...] Another thing the white man walking on this street soon observes is that these people have fun. [...] But the white man will soon notice other things [...]. And the white man will [...] find himself walking away, without looking back, almost always until he is away from this street and is back in his own white world. It is almost as if some metaphysical force had driven him out of a place in which he did not belong. (3-6)

Still, Tallant does, of course, go on to describe what he believes is the essence of black Voodoo culture and the legend of Marie Laveau. Martha Ward rebukes Tallant's account as contributing to the stereotype of Voodoo as "devil worshipers who added Catholic statues of saints, prayers, incense and holy water to their sacrifices of snakes, black cats, roosters in rituals of blood drinking and group sex" (17). Likewise, Barbara Duggal asserts that most of Tallant's observations are "recorded through a lens of fear, awe and disgust" but they "certainly aroused widespread interest" (174). Tallant's written work reflects the bias of the official "white world" that sees itself as foreign to black New Orleans but has had the authority of printed text behind it.

<sup>9</sup> This view of the importance of memory/remembering is key throughout Osbey's corpus, particularly her post-Katrina long poem, "History," published in *Atlantic Studies* in April 2008. Like Paul Gilroy, Osbey uses the ocean – the "red red red red sea" – as a space of understanding the centrality of the black experience: "there is no history of this world that is not written in black." In "History," Osbey writes of the sea as the common human experience, in this case, a world that is doomed through greed and exploitation:

the looming sea is all about the wide wide world.



“mourning” poems, reflect syncretic hoodoo/Catholic belief in honoring the dead and calling out for intercession from departed souls, a belief system in which traditionally-drawn lines between past and present, living and dead, supernatural and real are blurred in a pluralistic vision of reality and presence. Through a succession of particulars – a mother’s meaningful look, a grandmother’s scarred finger, the “living face” of a deceased mother – the movement of her poems here is toward the *peculiarities* of one’s own familial history, so that one carries the particulars of history and place, not as a tourist in a strange land, but as a living repository of tradition that is, therefore, also living and fluid.

The speaker’s awareness that this type of memory and spirituality is, indeed, peculiar in modernity connects directly to Gilroy’s concept of the black Atlantic as a redefinition of modernity in which “different sets of ideas about the relationship of past and present, living and dead, traditional and modern, coexist and conflict” (197). According to Gilroy, the history of the black Atlantic is a “living memory,” a “non-traditional tradition, irreducibly modern, ex-centric, unstable, and asymmetrical cultural ensemble” which cannot be understood through the “manichean logic of binary coding” (198). Osbey’s re/definition of “living memory” destabilizes not only those binaries listed above, but also those of insider/outsider and spectator/spectacle. The heavy insistence on “forgetting nothing” and on learning to honor the dead as a vital part of the present in part one prepares the way for entering and appreciating Creole tradition and the

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and it is wide  
oh yes it is  
the world is wide and wide and full of evil ideo  
and the history of the world if we would tell it  
would strike us all down dead upon the spot marked  
with  
its greenish stain like money in the poker-man’s upturned pot. (23-30)

Condemning modern nations as “archipelagos of death” (11), the poem blends multi-national legends, specifically narrating the horror of the West African “castles” which were significant as fortresses in the slave trade and condemning white interpretations of the black African/Caribbean experience. The poem expresses heavy, deep weariness with a civilization that refuses to learn its harsh “history lessons” and so is damned to repeat cycles of evil. This is the personal sentiment of her response to the death and destruction following the Gulf Coast hurricanes that Osbey expressed in her “After the Storm” reading in Baton Rouge, LA, in October 2006.

particular hoodoo/Catholic spirituality in the New Orleans *faubourg* less as a tourist/spectator and more as a participating citizen of this particular/peculiar world.

### **Faubourg, “Carrying the “Parcels” of Religious and Cultural History: Section Two**

Section two of *All Saints* shows an intimate, mutually defining connection between place/space and the female body. Poems in this section repeat a concern with naming women, with knowing, seeking, or withholding one’s name. The opening poem, “Faubourg,” creates a sense of timelessness, of repeating cycles. It spirals inward to describe the concreteness and particularity of place and people: the faubourg is a “city within the larger city” (1), much like the syncretic Creole Catholicism which emanates from this particular/peculiar community is a vernacular religion within a religion, a subverted but vital spirituality within/without what is ostensibly the “universal” Catholic Church. The women, who “walk in pairs and clusters” (2), move “along the slave-bricked streets / wearing print dresses / carrying parcels / on their hips and heads” (3-6). The subjects are at once anonymous and specific: “a cook / a seamstress / a day’s-work-woman to find or be found” (19-21). Customs of the faubourg which connect it to West Indies culture are referenced as part of the routine, part of the everyday:

          rags must be burned in sulphur to ward off mosquitoes  
          and slave brick crushed and scrubbed across doorways.  
          there is love to be made  
          conju to be worked. (35-38)

The poem specifically describes women’s work, women’s daily sustenance living, and ends with Osbey’s acerbic questions: “in such a city / what name is good for a woman?” and “what good is any woman’s name?” (41-42, 44). Here, the idea of naming a woman connects to “name-calling” – the negative, pejorative labels which women have worn throughout the centuries – particularly Creole women in New Orleans – mulatto, mistress, servant, temptress, whore,

Virgin, voodooienne, witch.<sup>10</sup> Also, the double-voiced questions ask the reader to consider a name's function to individuate, a complicated endeavor in a place swarming with history. How does one name, label, call, what it means to be part of this heritage, to walk those brick-lined streets carrying the inherited "parcels" of history on one's own hip and head, within one's own body?

Other poems in this section further emphasize the importance of naming women.

"Speaking of Trains" portrays a masculine domestic space in a New York barbershop. Here, the "older brothers talk trash" in the male world of "razor cut / trim-and-shave / pomade" (54-56).

Their "trash" talk is, predictably, about women:

"what was her name?"

"man, i never did know.  
but she only ever wore blue.

*hell.*  
i just called her baby." (57-61)

The speaker<sup>11</sup> in the poem, who is "incorporate[d ...] into the rituals" of the Negro barbershop (52) is studying the blues, writing the "most critical essay of [his] career" (27) on the "cultural

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<sup>10</sup> Historically, Joan M. Martin explains, Creole women were renowned as exotic objects of desire: "Stories about the grace, charm, and legendary beauty of Creole women – identified collectively in the popular imagination as 'quadroons' – abound. For centuries the term *quadroon* (meaning one-quarter Negro blood) has been nearly synonymous with 'seductress.' This idea is based primarily on the fact that the very existence of the quadroons is bound up with the notion of illicit sex and forbidden love" (57). Many Creole women existed between cultures in the historic system of *plaçage*, whereby "women of color – the option of legal marriage denied them – entered into long-standing, formalized relationships with white European men" (Martin 58). While *plaçage* certainly originated to benefit white men, Martin argues that Creole women of color pragmatically used this system as the most expedient way to secure a degree of wealth and status. The lure of Creole women's charms, or white men's willingness to indulge in them, were, in fact, felt to be so "threatening" to "decent society" and white women that on June 2, 1786, Louisiana enacted the "*tignon* law," which decreed that women of color were to refrain from elaborate dress and adornments and were to have their hair covered with kerchiefs in public (Martin 62). Also, because the women involved were not officially married, they did not have the legal and social protection of the white men's names (Martin 69). Therefore, the arrangement of *mariages de la main gauche*, "left-handed marriages," put many Creole women, literally, in a marginal space between names – a historical situation which complicates and adds depth to the concept of owning one's own name or identity.

<sup>11</sup> Osbey identified this speaker as fellow University of Kentucky graduate student Moses Nkondo in her keynote address at the Creole Connections: Linking Louisiana and the Caribbean conference at Louisiana State University on April 1, 2005, and in other readings. This poem is dedicated to Nkondo.

*memory / canonization of despair*" (15-16) as he seeks to define the blues. Segments of traditional blues songs are part of the poem, pieces of songs interwoven with scenes from the student's "studies" which build a blues motif of train stations, desire, and darkness – "lyrics that tell of train whistles / of men standing alone/ in vacant lots" (8-10) and "trains heading south into the night / trains that never return" (12-13). The speaker/student stands on the perimeter of the culture he seeks, he "interrogate[s] the blues / for something like fullness of meaning" (36-37) but finds that "there are codes here / dark men / and darker women" (38-40). Osbey critiques a rational/academic approach to folk culture, to a "living memory" holding essential codes which cannot be fully interpreted rationally but which must be absorbed and understood experientially and sub-rationally.

In the final section of the poem, "Incognito: Woman in Blue," the speaker is, presumably, the woman in blue, the woman who has "some place in your dead remembrances/ and [...] will not set you free" (6-7), the quintessential blues woman. Still, her name is elusive: "you may not touch me / or speak to me / or discover my name" (8-10). And, she warns the student of black culture in search of authenticity: "there is strange *conju* afoot, / brother [...] watch your step" (51-52) and even more threateningly, "negro men in every time [...] have been known to lose / life and the dream of life / in safer streets than these" (53, 55-57). Echoing the sort of anywhere/everywhere as the speaker feels in "Stones of Soweto," Osbey's use of train imagery connects to its use in modern literature such as Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" as symbols of disconnect, perpetual transition, impermanence. A person can catch the train and "disappear," become anybody and nobody. But as depicted in "Speaking of Trains," the *conju* of inheritance is embedded in the subconscious, part of one's deepest places and "dead remembrances." This poem emphasizes both the intense pull and elusiveness of the communal "living memory" which is vital to understanding the blues and vital to connection with

community. The student/speaker feels drawn in, under the spell of it but he, like the reader, is withheld from full knowledge of the woman/culture, who exists “incognito” but who claims him/them, insisting “remember: / i know who you are” (50-51).

The poem “Elvena” makes an explicit link between the Creole woman’s experience of alienation and knowledge (“truth-telling”) and the creation of art, material (public) artifact which names and reclaims truth and woman’s experience. It opens with a depiction of common experience among women: “there is a house down on old roman street / *all* the women pass through” (1:1-2, emphasis added). The poem depicts Elvena as a spiritual crier, a hoodooienne, who speaks out publicly against a collective sense of loss, seemingly the injustices forced upon women who have had to “pass through” the historical experience of Creole womanhood: “*have you lost anything today?/ tell me, neighbor / what have you lost today?*” (1:7-9, italics in original).

The poem asks, “do you see elvena? / she got that way toughing neighbor-women / on the edges of their fingers” (1:15-17). The passing of knowledge and spiritual connection through touch reflects voodoo belief in “contagious magic which follows the law of contact, namely that things which have once been in contact continue to act upon each other at a distance” (James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, in Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 10). Also, belief in the passing of spiritism through bodily contact, finger-tip touching, for instance, demonstrates the voodoo engagement of the body in the realm of the spirit, as Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert describe: “In creole religions...spiritual power is internalized and mobilized in human beings who become, through the experience of possession, a real live altar in which the presence of the supernatural can be invoked” (11).

Still, the “neighbor women” who presumably have also “passed[ed] through the house on old roman street” and share Elvena’s cultural heritage pretend not to see Elvena (1:22) and pretend that “nothing has been lost” (1:23):

no one speaks her name.  
the neighbor-people have difficulty recalling her –  
and no one remembers a woman  
as she once was (2:2-5).

The poem asks, who will “be a witness” (1:29), “who will touch her now? / who?” (2:10-11), specifically claiming a vital connection between Caribbean/African spiritism, naming and claiming the truth of one’s past, and the vitality/veracity of women’s present culture. While the neighbor women shun Elvena with their Christian “prayer-bands / wound tight about their wrists and waists” (2:12-13),<sup>12</sup> Elvena and the “bone-step women” move “along the broken road / that leads to bayou st. john,” the legendary, historical site of voodoo ritual ceremony.<sup>13</sup> The song of these women is, “tell the truth / tell the truth and do right” (4:8-9, 18-19).

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<sup>12</sup> A prayer band is the “term applied to any ‘renegade’ (usually Christian) religious group organized by women,” as defined in the glossary to *All Saints* (126).

<sup>13</sup> According to Barbara Duggal, who reclaims the legacy of the Voodoo priestess in “Marie Laveau: The Voodoo Queen Repossessed,” much of what the white public knew of Voodoo was performed for their benefit: what Laveau did, according to Duggal, was to make “certain aspects of Voodoo public, available, and even attractive to an audience of outsiders” (168). Duggal revalues Voodoo as a viable, matriarchal religion that was marginalized and feared by the mainstream because it could not be understood in terms of Anglo/American social or religious constructs. But Duggal also points to the power in Marie Laveau’s legacy in the mainstream imagination: she was revered, feared, and empowered because she marketed herself and Voodoo/Catholic culture that way. One “chief source” of the public’s “witness” of the performance of Voodoo were “the Sunday afternoon gatherings in Congo Square, presided over by Marie Laveau; while many believed these to be Voodoo rituals, they were in fact no more than pleasure dances held for the amusement of slaves and the white people who came to watch” (175). According to Duggal, “More important ceremonies were held on Lake Ponchartrain and Bayou St. John every year on St. John’s Eve, June 23. One of the innovations Laveau introduced was to invite the press, public, and police to her ‘secret’ meetings out by the lake” (175). Further, “by the 1850s, newspaper articles and editorials were defending Voodoo ritual gatherings and questioning the right of police to interfere in them,” indicating a degree of public comfort with Voodoo, but “the most important religious rituals were entirely secret” (175). These layers of public and private access to Voodoo ceremony indicate image control among a perceived “colonized” group, the ability to use the attraction of spectacle and fascination as a means of defense and distance. In her narrative history of Marie Laveau’s legacy, the story of two Voodoo women – mother and daughter both called Marie Laveau – Martha Ward claims that much of the Maries’ powers were aimed at securing freedom for slaves and improving social and legal conditions for women and Creoles of color.

In the third section of the poem, the center/core section of the five-part poem, Elvena speaks as a woman with a voice and a name. Her house, the house on old Roman Street, is “where the blues clung to the ceilings / to all the doors and the side-porch / and all around my garden” (3:3-5). In her self-narrative, Elvena describes herself as a seeker and singer of the blues that grow naturally in her surrounds:

i used to go to that garden  
and sing all the blues i could find.  
you’d be surprised how much blues can grow  
between the hidden-lily and the monkey-grass  
overnight. (3:7-11)

She describes a neighbor, a weaver, who hears her songs, who is “standing back in the shadows” and “listening” (3:16, 17), and Elvena wonders “if he put my song into that cloth / and what he might have lost besides” (3:28-29). In this description of her visionary connection to place and history, Elvena can be read as an artist, a collector of community narrative.

The final section of the poem elaborates upon the image of weaver/artist as the collector and shaper of a culture’s collective song of loss and truth. The weaver sits on his front porch and acknowledges Elvena and her call to him:

i see elvena when she steps down from the banquette.  
i see her step  
into the empty street  
ash-black hands turned out  
palms facing toward me. (5:5-9)

Elvena’s “ash-black” hands connect to the hoodoo art of reading ashes, foretelling the future, and to the ashes of death, the past. She holds out her palms to the weaver/artist who must receive her “touch” in order to weave her song into his “unfinished cloth-piece” (5:10), in order to receive her “contagious magic” and vision of the truth. The artist, as the weaver of cultural narratives, is “working colored cloth” (5:3) from the “cuts of used strings” (5:4); he is working/reclaiming the collective colored/Creole truth of Elvena’s blues from the many “cuts” and losses of present

memory. Like the speaker in “Speaking of Trains,” the weaver/artist recognizes Elvena’s/the blues’ mystical claim on him:

and her madness is a conju  
slung like a rope about the heart.  
i said i feel her madness like a conju  
like a rope  
slung around my heart. (1:10-14)

The weaver translates this into material art, a tangible art form. Here, the weaver is a metaphor for the poet – for Osbey’s poems and the written text’s power to translate the oral narratives, the blues songs, of a culture and place into a lasting, public narrative. When the bone-step women demand “*tell the truth and do right*” (4:9), they command that the poet acknowledge the unwritten, visionary, experiential truth of the collective history of place – that the poet write what has been unnamed and unknowable in public discourse: “there are things a woman will do / can’t be learned / and won’t be understood” but “*somebody’s got to be a witness / somebody ought to call her name*” (1:26-28, 2:23-24, emphasis in original).

Osbey’s poem “Faubourg Study No. 3: Seven Sisters of New Orleans” shows an explicit connection between this place-specific cultural memory/truth and spirituality. It also narrates a syncretic hoodoo/Catholic lineage of holy women. The thirteen-part poem is a collection of community narratives of the “seven sisters of New Orleans,” defined in the text’s glossary as “a family of holy women said to have lived in and around New Orleans at the turn of the twentieth century” (126). Catherine Yronwode describes the far-reaching mystical allure and subversive energy of the sisters’ spiritual legend and connects the folk mythology of these sisters to the constellation of Pleiades and to the Seven African powers, West African “natural forces” or deity which are syncretic with Catholic saints in hoodoo tradition.<sup>14</sup> Osbey’s poem particularly

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<sup>14</sup> In 1931, J.T. “Funnypaper” Smith recorded “Seven Sisters Blues, Parts 1 and 2” which includes the following verses:

The tell me Seven Sisters in New Orleans



attributes holy powers, “dreams” and “visions” to the youngest sister, the “baby sister” named Eulalie.

The first six sections of the poem record community perspectives on the legend of the sisters, ostensibly collected by a student of folk culture with a “satchel and...camera,” (13:2).<sup>15</sup> The multiple community narrators reveal both fascination and skepticism and make explicit connections between transgressive figures in race, sex, and spirituality. For instance, the speaker in the first section casts doubt on the sisters’ intentions: “run-down whores is what i took the lot of them for / ... and most likely come down into the city / to pass” (1:2, 12-13). Another neighbor projects:

people say they wasn’t even *from* here.  
come from way off somewhere.  
foreigners or nations.  
island people most likely.  
reading and healing and getting full of spirit.  
old-time hoodoo is what it sounded like to me  
and I never did go in for all that. (5:3-9)

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that can really fix a man up right [repeat]  
And I’m headed for New Orleans, Louisiana  
I’m travelin’ both day and night.  
.....  
They tell me they’ve been hung,  
been bled, and been crucified [repeat]  
But I just want enough help  
to stand on the water and rule the tide.  
.....  
The Seven Sisters sent me away happy,  
‘round the corner I met another little girl [repeat]  
She looked at me and smiled, and said,  
“Go, Devil, and destroy the world.”  
[spoken] I’m gonna destroy it, too.  
[spoken] I’m all right now.  
  
Seven times a year  
The Seven Sisters will visit me all in my sleep [repeat]  
And they said I won’t have no trouble,  
And said I’ll live twelve days in a week.

This transcription is by Chris Smith, posted on *The Lucky W Amulet Archive*, <[www.luckymojo.com](http://www.luckymojo.com)>.

<sup>15</sup> The student in “Faubourg Study No. 3: Seven Sisters of New Orleans” closely aligns with the protagonist of Erna Brodber’s *Louisiana*, anthropology student Ella Townsend. See chapter five of this study.

This speaker's mistrust of foreign "island people" and their hoodoo is aligned with her personal narrative of structured work and Catholic duty, including "saturdays i baked all day / and sunday was mass and visiting the ailing and the dying" (5:29-30). But her rigid narrative of boundaries is belied by the contents of her garden: "misbelieve, collards, banana, / date palm, / melon here and there" (5:23-25). Misbelieve is Creole vernacular for "a Japanese plum tree common throughout the area" and "a mild table wine, sometimes used as a curative, is made from the bright orange fruit," according to the text's glossary (125). The date palm originates in the Persian Gulf. Collard greens are an ancient leafy vegetable, and "though greens did not originate in Africa, the habit of eating greens that have been cooked down into a low gravy, and drinking the juices from the greens is of [new world] African origin" (Stradley). Melons are of Asian and African origin, but are commonly known as tropical island fruits. Thus, this neighbor's "domesticated" garden is a creole assimilation of "foreign" and local, much like the hoodoo she rejects but which is nonetheless part of her cultural surrounds.

Her rejection of claims for the sisters' holiness perhaps derives from her resistance to the use of black women as saviors, as redeeming "others" for white culture:

and how come it's always got to be some *negro* woman  
got to heal everybody?  
what kind of colored woman *did you* ever meet  
had time or inclination  
to sit on a chair all day  
dreaming and healing?  
me, i had to work too hard. (5:11-17, emphasis in original)

Here, the speaker succinctly critiques white culture as both a spiritual and physical exploitation of black women.

The collective sense of loss, suffering, and exploitation is recorded within the poem in italicized blues lyrics. The poem's introduction references "the quintessential blues mama" and the first half of the poem, the collected narratives of neighbors, concludes with the blues lyrics:

i'm going down into the big city, baby  
gonna leave all ya'll behind  
getting' out before this mis'ry  
make me up and lose my mind  
i said i'm gone (6:3-7).

The blues function as a public, recorded voice of black women's experience, (an)other women's voice/perspective essential to an understanding of the legend of the sisters. In his review of an early collection of Osbey's poems, Calvin Hernton asserts that her use of multiple, individual voices and song lyrics "draws on the chorus-like cadences of the 'call and response' common in African tradition and in blues music" and that her preference for moving from an "omnipotent, communal narrator's voice to a more individual voice," as in "Faubourg Study No. 3" is a "throwback to the folk method of Tall Tale narratives in the black community." Indeed, the effect of the narrative is collaborative and ongoing.

Centered in the collaborate, complex "study" of the sisters – as the student seeks to study and record folk narrative and as the academic writer/poet seeks to study and record a culture – is a syncretic prayer to a holy mother, explicitly asking for her blessing and guidance of women. The prayer blends the traditional Catholic "Hail Mary" with appeals to the hoodoo/voodoo *loa* Erzulie, the spirit of femininity and sensuality (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 2, 45). The prayer/poem is formatted as overlapping but distinct appeals to the mother who is simultaneously the Blessed Virgin Mary and Erzulie:

hail mary full of grace  
                    éruzlie, mother of women  
blessèd art thou  
                    there is truth to be made here  
blessèd art thou  
                    dreams, mother, to be dreamt  
blessèd art thou  
                    visions to be told  
blessèd mother  
            o!      lead me to the pathway  
blessèd mother  
                    over the barred footing

holy holy	érzulie	
		érzulie
	mother	
mother		
	mother of women. (7:1-15)	

Significantly, the structure of the poem reveals the balance of power believed to be held by the female deity, represented by the overlapping but separated appeals for her blessing: the Catholic mother is “blessed” and “holy” and “full of grace,” while the hoodoo mother holds promise of constructive, revolutionary visions of conflict resolution; Erzulie will lead her daughters “over the barred footing” and “to the pathway” of “truth” through “visions” and “dreams.” Still, she is one “mother,” one syncretic deity, though the figure of Erzulie is aligned more specifically as the “mother of women” (7:15), as the promise of “truth” for womankind.

Maternal imagery, the yearning for a mother’s guidance, is further developed in the last half of the long poem, which moves from the skepticism of community narrators to the narratives voiced by the holy women themselves. Explicit desire for a mother, for a “mother of women” and a mother for “motherless children” is recurrent in the final eight sections of the poem. The sisters come to New Orleans, we learn in the first sections, after the death of their mother. Similarly, Josephina says “my mother died after birthing me/ with the veil across my eyes” (11:24-25), and she is brought in to be a companion for the young “baby sister” Eulalie in the House of the Seven Sisters. Josephina reflects on her connection to Eulalie:

it was me she wanted to touch.  
 she believed I could feel what she felt, you see.  
 i was just a motherless child my own self.  
 .....  
 and you know, daughter,  
 it’s true what they say:  
*a womanchild without her mother journeys a far piece of road.*  
 (11:72-74, 77-79, emphasis in original)

The search for a mother leads along the “*pathway,*” the “*road,*” to the “*shallow water loa-mama,*” where, the song excerpt explains, “*i find my mother / along the shallow shallow water*” (11:114,115, 124-125, emphasis in original). As with Elvena, who follows the bone-step women along the pathway to the ritual site of Bayou St. John, Josephina is lead by her spiritual revelation and longing for maternal guidance along the pathway into vernacular, internalized spiritual wisdom. Her body becomes the repository of the “magical touch” of spiritual wisdom, and the physical touch between women becomes an umbilical cord, physically connecting women to one another and to their spiritual mothers, and giving future generations of women life through this touch. The young student persona in this poem is sent to Mother Josephina as a source of information for “some authentic study / some record of their lives” (13:4-5) but the student, who saw herself as an outsider/recorder of a minority culture comes to recognize that “you can not go without learning much / when you are not the stranger / you have so counted on being” (10:10-13). Mother Josephina claims a universal heritage for New Orleans – the creole city as the origin/birthplace/home – and claims the student as a direct descendent:

you might not be from here.  
 but one time  
 some of your people  
*had* to be from the city  
 .....  
 sooner or later  
 everyone comes to the city.  
 it’s an old saying. (9:1-4, 13-15, emphasis in original)

The path to revelation in this poem – that someone who initially identifies with mainstream/official/academic culture comes to identify with the “minority other” and recognizes a vital kinship between herself and this culture as, in fact, one’s birthplace and origin – is a direct enactment of Gilroy’s theory of “routes” (journeys, pathways) to discovery of self and heritage, the universal, necessary and vital hybridity of culture. Indeed, when the student recognizes that

she is not a stranger, she effectively reclaims and resurrects her lost/whitewashed culture, her lost origin/mothers.

Ultimately, Mother Josephina extends the dream-giving touch to the student, calling to her, “come over closer, baby / come where *mother can touch* you” (11:134-135, emphasis added) and the student “puts away” her “satchel and ... camera” (13:2) and becomes an other/mother. The poem ends in the voice of the former student who now lives in the house as a holy woman, but also implies threat to the continuity of her dreams/visions in future generations:

i live here.  
i see few people  
except for the handful of elderly neighbors  
who still come to tell me their remembrance.  
.....  
but i keep my own counsel  
and i touch nothing  
no one. (13: 26-29, 43-45)

In this way, the poem functions as a challenge to the reader of the literary text to recognize oneself within the culture before that lifeline is lost, to recognize one’s colored heritage and origins, and to accept the “touch” of connection, the truths of our mothers which have been whitewashed and unnamed within recorded tradition. Osbey’s poem, a written literary text which is on the surface an “official” record of a culture, is in fact a hybrid of oral narrative, old folks’ sayings, blues song, and literary text, which challenges the reader to recognize its “mixed strains” (Dunbar 9) as pathways to the truth of our origins and salvation.

### **Saints and Legends: Section Three**

The final section of *All Saints*, “*ex votos*,” are prayers and offerings to the deceased, to legendary holy and secular saints who maintain their concreteness, human qualities and limitations. This section continues its emphasis on remembering and naming vernacular tradition as a way of resisting official, whitewashed religion which silences women and minorities. Poems in this section rewrite the canonization of saints, particularly showing how

official narratives of holy figures dis-empower and ostracize those who are deemed threatening to the mainstream and reclaiming the spiritual power of syncretic hoodoo/Catholic saints.

“Mother Catherine,” for instance, is the narrative of a holy woman who is identified within the poem as having a following of “a hundred of more” negroes. The historical basis for this persona is Mother Catherine Seals, a Spiritual holy woman who founded the Temple of the Innocent Blood in New Orleans as a church and community hospital in the 1920s. According to religious historian Yvonne Chireau, Seals was a benevolent and sought-after leader, and her following was “one of the most famous charismatic ministries in New Orleans” (308). Her temple was a place of refuge particularly for unwed pregnant women who might otherwise have sought abortion, the procedure of which was crude and dangerous for women, hence the name Temple of the Innocent Blood, signifying both the women and the unborn (Chireau 308). Seals was a healer and a teacher of healing spirituality – quite the mother who could lead her followers to the “pathway” of cure and redemption. The Spiritist church in New Orleans, a hybrid of West African, Native American and Catholic beliefs, was strongly matriarchal. The male image of Jesus as deity is replaced in prayer and ritual with the non-gendered spirit. When Zora Neale Hurston visited a service led by Seals, she recounts Seals as preaching: “It is right that a woman should lead. A womb was what made God in the beginning, and out of that womb was born time and that fills up space. So says the beautiful spirit” (Chireau 308).

This dramatic situation of this poem, however, puts Mother Catherine in confrontation with the “blessed congress of saints” of the Catholic Church – this strong, healing, matriarchal person/saint and social activist must answer to dominant/authoritative religion. The poem is set up in dialogue, with Mother Catherine answering questioners as in an official tribunal or inquisition. It begins simply in Catherine’s voice: “my name is catherine. / some call me mother / some saint” (1-3). The questioners demand to know:

and do you claim sainthood?  
do you admit to having duped  
these poor ignorant negroes  
into believing you are holy? (4-7)

Mother Catherine is maternal and forthright in her answers, eliciting laughter from the chorus within the dramatic poem as a “wise darky”-type figure who humors her over-wrought accusers: she chastises – “it is not a good thing to point, you know, my child? (24) – and she amuses, claming, for instance, “negroes do faint you know / but only on special occasions” (61-62). In her performance, Mother Catherine exposes race as marker of mainstream religious authority: the “poor ignorant negroes” who apparently have been informers for the tribunal are, as Mother Catherine responds, “white men’s negroes anyway.../ and so their fate is sealed” (27-28).

The admission which “damns” Mother Catherine is her description of what happens in the chapel. She says:

we stand.  
we kneel.  
sometimes we faint.  
.....  
sometimes we sing  
or else we chant or speak in tongues.  
sometimes when the spirit moves us so  
we dance. (58-60, 64-67)

And the questioners respond, “aha! there! / dancing in chapel! / can this be any but the work of the very devil?” (68-70). Here, Osbey narrates the workings of official tradition to redirect the potential power of such a holy woman into subservience: the authority has found confirmation of her deviance from their practice, and Mother Catherine is relegated to a “common lavatrice” (97) washing the robes of the “blessed congress of the saints” (104), a position deemed to be “something fitting for her age and temperament” (79).

The dramatic scenario of the poem condemns official, specifically Catholic, tradition in its exposure of racism and sexism. It exposes mainstream fears of bodily participation in





blessings upon themselves by remembering and naming what has been washed from official tradition.<sup>16</sup>

In the poems “St. Martin” and “Sor Juana,” the figures of St. Martin de Porres and his sister Juana, who were born to a slave mother and Spanish don in Peru in the 1570s, are depicted as subservient saints within the hierarchy of South American Catholicism. Martin is commonly known as patron saint of the poor, “called on for miraculous healing, deliverance from want and restoration of lost and stolen possessions” (“Osbey Says a Prayer” 18). When his life of piety and charity earned him admittance into the Dominican monastery, Martin was first named caretaker of animals and almoner for the monastery, then given control of the monastery’s provisions and working as a healer and physician. Osbey explains, “one of his primary duties was to go out to meet the many slave ships entering Peru, to catechize the recently enslaved – all residents, free or enslaved of countries or territories under Spanish rule being required to accept the Catholic faith upon pain of death” (“Osbey Says a Prayer” 18). The poetic situation for this poem is again a questioning of the sainted figure, but in this case, questioning the “view of the man through the eyes of the enslaved whom he served during his lifetime” (“Osbey Says a Prayer” 18). Here again, the poem suggests a threat to real salvation for those who deny or distance themselves from black spirituality and heritage. And here again, in the eyes of the slaves, the black saint has been positioned as a humble caretaker of a white heaven:

they say you are sainted.  
they say you are holy.  
they say you are merciful, pious, good.  
they say that you gave to eat to the very rats of lima and for *this*  
    you were made holy in the sight of heaven.  
but we see you ever with your little broom of pampas  
and we know they have sent you to sweep the floors of their heaven. (13-19)

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<sup>16</sup> “Mother Catherine” was originally published in 1997, but the warnings of danger inherent in reliance on authority is uncannily prophetic. With Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, the levees of the Ninth Ward did tragically flood and authorities were disastrously ill-prepared to protect the populace of this area.

The slaves pray for Martin to remember them, for the little “negrito santo” (21) to relieve some of their misery while laboring in the fields, but the speakers also imply a threat to Martin who is so humbled within the white Catholic tradition that he can offer little relief to his own people:

forgive us because we know that you yourself sinned mightily  
when you took on their white robes and their heaven  
for the price of a meal.  
we are not an evil race, martin  
but a tortured one.  
nor do we forget the many ways of torture.  
remember  
little black saint:  
the day of the drum is yet to come  
remember benissimo:  
that the ancestors do not die. (51-61)

Martin, depicted as perhaps “selling out” to the white religion, risks “being barred from the true kingdom of the dead of [the slaves’] spiritual world” (“Osbey Says a Prayer” 18). Still, the slaves call upon Martin to bless them from within the religion of their oppressors and to use the multiple signification of his position to resist their common tyranny: “benisimo negrito santo / take up your broom and sweep confusion into the eyes of those other saints” (70-71). As Osbey explains, “In New Orleans, the broom and the cross are used to ward off evil. And so I have the people call out to him to take up those weapons against their condition, at the same time that they remind him of his precarious position as both ‘saint of slaves’ and ‘slave of saints’” (“Osbey Says a Prayer” 18). When the slaves finally call out “do not forget us” (73), they are asking simultaneously to save both themselves and Martin: by remembering the subversive, black power of his broom and cross, Martin can “confuse” and open up Catholic tradition to the more ancient traditions it would subsume, offering a space of salvation for the slaves to this tradition – Martin and others who would forget the revolutionary potential of their black inheritance and beliefs.

In these prayers to saints, Osbey calls her readers to remember their saints on their own terms, to rediscover and to rename the healing and transformative power of these black saints rather than to accept the official relegation of such figures to subservient positions of caretaking and obedience. This is a powerful move, a re-shifting in the “official” written word of the poetic text of the values of canonization and reclamation of the potential salvation and healing such vernacular saints offer to their followers, to those who will remember them in full color against the white narratives.

The final poem in *All Saints* is “Suicide City;” the death-threat suggested in its name is not the threat of self-inflicted death but of belonging to a place whose history and whose dead are tangibly present, who claim and hold its citizens unrelinquishingly. The city, New Orleans, is ahistorical, an amalgam of repeated cycles and voices:

we wander through the slick the dark the foul-sweet streets  
in all this darkest black of night  
where some round-headed boy  
centuries younger than he knows  
clasps hands to keyboard or to horn  
to microphone or congo-cheek  
and says so softly  
*someone gave this song to me?* (177-184).

In this place which claims its residents, the speaker says: “in this city nothing has been forgotten. / that one great sin we cannot claim” (199-200).

### **Reclaiming “Colored” Spirituality**

Brenda Marie Osbey’s poems in *All Saints*, with their emphasis on remembering and naming hybrid spirituality – particularly matriarchs within tradition – provide a literary “magical touch,” the umbilical cord which links generations to one another and to the spiritual power in narratives which have been subverted within official texts. Osbey names and celebrates deified women, strong matriarchs whose daughters can honor them “behind Mary’s skirts,” as Luisah Teish explains. In her poems, the lines between deity and humanity are intentionally blurred:

Erzulie, Sor Juana, and Mother Catherine were one of us, the poems claim, from among us – holy women who are “the dirt, the bricks, the stones” of our vernacular spirituality and reality. The creole spirituality which the poems depict is not exclusive, but a model of life-giving hybrid spirituality, for the reader of poetic texts – the student of literature and the seeker of “roots/routes” – can come to learn that he/she is “not the stranger” after all.

Dunbar-Nelson wrote of the “Caucasian” who shudders at the idea of colored blood; *All Saints* works to recover and celebrate the life-giving “mixed strains within us” and to recover the damage of colorless, white religion, particularly to women and minorities in southern culture. In Spiritist tradition, this is recovery of the power of the rainbow serpent:

Magical work is a rainbow serpent, ancient, beautiful, and whole. Magic touched us with its tongue in the beginning of human consciousness; it slithers through the quiet places in our psyches. It encircles every land, every culture, and every person. It connects our past with our present, and casts before us a spectrum of future possibilities as high and wide as the rainbow. Then it swallows its own tail, causing authenticity to meet originality. (Teish 244)

When Osbey claims in her interview with John Lowe that “traditional African religions *colored* Catholicism” (emphasis added), her use of the active verb transposes traditional assumptions of power and influence and rewrites the official narrative of Catholic religion so that the real potential for salvation lies in recovering the multi-colored, diverse strains and naming oneself within the complex, life-affirming amalgam of what has officially/traditionally been written as one, white whole.

**Chapter Five**  
**“I am the Link between the Shores”:**  
**The Hole of Meaning in Erna Brodber’s *Louisiana***

I have crossed an ocean  
I have lost my tongue  
From the root of the old one  
A new one has sprung.

-- from Grace Nichols, “Epilogue,” *Fat Black Woman’s Poems*

The student/speaker in Brenda Marie Osbey’s “Faubourg Study No. 3: The Seven Sisters of New Orleans” who learns that she “is not the stranger / [she has] so counted on being” has a sister protagonist in Ella Townsend.

In Jamaican sociologist and writer Erna Brodber’s third novel, *Louisiana*, Ella is a Columbia University anthropology student sent in 1936 with a tape recorder to “retrieve the history of the Blacks of South West Louisiana using oral sources” (3). Once there, she is reclaimed into a Creole cultural heritage and she becomes the “conduit” of its expression, particularly through her psychic possession by two deceased “venerable sisters,” Anna (Mammy) King from St. Mary Parish, Louisiana, and Louisa (Lowly), from St. Mary, Louisiana, Jamaica. The narrative form of *Louisiana* is fragmented, circular, metaphorical and complex: the novel opens with a fictional “Editor’s Note” to preface the “discovery” of the text of *Louisiana* long believed to have disappeared along with Ella herself. What immediately follows this preface is the first section of what is ostensibly Ella Townsend’s record: “I Heard the Voice from Heaven Say.” This section is a jumbling of unnamed speakers, the description of a “translation” (funeral ceremony), and fragments of songs, of experiences, of interchanges between characters. At this point, the reader does not have the context to make sense or meaning of the narrative; the reading defies interpretation and is, likely, experienced as disconcerting and puzzling. The remainder of

the text of *Louisiana* is a “translation” of this opening section, a widening and deepening of Ella’s and the readers’ understanding of the transnational Louisiana black spiritual experience.

In the context of this study which explores the confluence of Louisiana and the culture of Catholicism as a postcolonial zone of contact between dominant and suppressed cultures, *Louisiana* represents the most radically Pan-African point on the continuum, very clearly asserting the transatlantic roots/routes of Louisiana’s heritage and reclaiming a matriarchal, vernacular spirituality. The ethic of *Louisiana* reflects Brodber’s determination to bring together the cultures of “shipmates,” Brodber’s term for people of African descent in the Americas, because, as she contends, “black initiative is weakened by the misunderstanding between Caribbean and U.S. blacks and both and Africans” (qtd, in Feng 150-151). The novel celebrates Africanist religion, specifically the politically-conscious Rastafarianism of Marcus Garvey, and critiques white European religion as an explicitly colonizing force, but it also moves beyond religious essentializing to demonstrate the code-mixing that Ella employs to unify her inherited religious beliefs in a community-oriented, healing spiritual practice.

The fragmented narrative and circular prose that Brodber develops in this and other texts serve the purpose of instructing readers in an ethical, non-essentializing practice of reading postcolonial texts, according to theorist Shalini Puri. Puri compellingly argues that Brodber’s second novel, *Myal*, is a text that does not “surrender the notion of truth” but that “radically transforms the context of truth as well as the reader’s means of access to it” (170). The novel’s bold textual practice is a “strategy” that effectively “filters out readers who are not willing to perform the kind of interpretative and solidarity labor” of reading to understand authentic truth “in terms of faith, participation, and deliberation” (Puri 169). *Louisiana* shares many of *Myal*’s textual strategies, and Brodber’s doubling of protagonists’ names in her second and third novels further aligns their purposes: as Ella O’Brady in *Myal* must be cured from the “spirit thievery,”

the exploitation of white, capitalist America, by immersing herself in the culture of her motherland, similarly Ella Townsend, an academic student of history and culture must reclaim the authentic history/roots of her own and her (transnational) community's culture by opening herself to "ways of knowing" that are not acknowledged in the official academy. Both the access to historically-suppressed knowledge (content) and the textual strategy for enacting that access (form) in Brodber's *Louisiana* are central to this study's exploration of the networks of region and religion in the Louisiana south. The "faith, participation, and deliberation" required of Brodber's reader is precisely the cycle of learning and revelation that Ella Townsend must perform in order to recreate an authentic history, not only of the "Blacks of South West Louisiana," but also of the intricately-connected histories of race and culture in Jamaica, Louisiana, and Chicago.

*Louisiana's* construction from fragmented narratives, refrains of folk songs and sayings, allusions to canonized Western texts, reconstructed memories, conflated use of time and place, shifting narrative perspectives, and "twinning" of characters, events and places force the reader to alter the "means of access" to a notion of "truth" concerning history and culture – to willingly engage the chaos of experiential narrative and to seek patterns of meaning, a reading practice that enacts Antonio Benitez-Rojo's Chaos theory of the postcolonial Caribbean. Brodber claims the same hybrid, heterogeneous construction that manifests in her text for Louisiana as a region and culture. The name "Louisiana" functions as a multi-layered metaphor within the text: it is the U.S. state, the community in St. Mary, Jamaica, the union of the sister/matriarchs "Louise y Anna," the seer/psychic conduit that Ella Townsend becomes, and the written text which records the black communal vision of authentic history. All of these entities bear the name Louisiana, and this repetition of the name underscores the patterns of experience that connect the Louisianas



in shared/linked histories; it also provides a map for reading a more ethical present and future into these linked Louisianas.

As Brodber develops the ethic of her text, she invokes the readers' gesture and speech. Just as Ella Townsend becomes Louisiana, the conduit of communal knowledge, her body the space/theatre in which an authentic history of the multiple Louisianas is played out, she directs the bodily and oral participation of her readers in interpreting the text(s) of Louisiana. Describing a "solid pendant with a hole through the center" which her husband/scribe has given her and that becomes the medium through which the dead channel their knowledge of/to Louisiana, she instructs the reader:

Stand if you will. Let your arms hang loose in front of you. Now put the tips of your index fingers and the tips of your thumbs together. Your extremities now form a diamond. Imagine the diamond to be solid, three dimensional. Now pierce a hole through the centre of this. That hole, that passage, is me. I am the link between the shores washed by the Caribbean sea, a hole, yet I am what joins your left hand to your right. I join the world of the living and the world of the spirits. I join the past with the present. In me Louise and Sue Ann are joined. Say Suzie Anna as Louise calls Mammy. Do you hear Louisiana there? Now say Lowly as Mammy calls Louise and follow that with Anna as Louise sometimes calls Mammy. Lowly-Anna. There's Louisiana again, particularly if you are lisp-tongued as you could well be. (124)

By invoking the repetition of the name, the multiple convergences and word-plays which all make Louisiana, Brodber destabilizes multiple boundaries – the "hole" becomes a link which connects the "shores" of Louisiana and Jamaica, but also the "hole" through which we can experience a more authentic, more fully "whole" understanding of the interplay/links between living and dead, first world and third worlds, male and female, present and past, metropolitan and rural, worldly and spiritual. When Louisiana claims, "I look through this hole and I can see things...I am Louisiana. I give people their history. I serve God and the venerable sisters" (125), she posits both herself (the psyche of the black Caribbean/American woman) and the space of Louisiana(s) as crucial, liminal zones of postcolonial contact and meaning-making.

The experience of Afro-Caribbean spirituality as a realm of contact, of negotiation between colonizers' Catholic-based faith system and black vernacular spirituality, is a crucial theme to understanding Brodber's vision of the postcolonial experience. In her spiritual transformation, Ella/Louisiana negotiates the symbols of the Anglican Church<sup>17</sup> her mother attends in New York and the experiences of the rural black community in southwest Louisiana. Explicitly calling attention to the connection between official religion and the colonization of Africans, Ella refers to the Anglican church as "my mother's church [which was] called by those around us the West Indian church and West Indians were called King George's negroes" (58). Like the protagonist of Martin's novel as discussed in Chapter Two of this study, Ella reads the icons of the "official" church as emblematic of her spiritual state:

My mother's church had a stained glass window with a thorn-headed picture of Jesus the Christ, his head slightly leaned to one side, his arms open and his fingers delicately cocked reminding me somehow of the proper way of drinking tea. You could see his heart – it was heart shaped and had, I think, a dart going through it. At his feet in halos were women, the Marys I presumed. The picture was a mosaic, like a jigsaw puzzle. Someone must have painted it on glass, broken it into pieces of uneven sizes then stuck the parts together in that large window sited over the altar. How did they do this and why? The picture responded to light, so that bits of it or the whole were only visible as it was directed towards them. There was no street lamp or beacon close by, revelation had to depend on God's natural light...

The services my mother attended began at six a.m. ... It was more often than not dark then and no picture to be seen for the whole hour and a half at that church but as the days grew longer I could watch parts individually revealing themselves and I'd leave the church with the whole picture in my head. (57)

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<sup>17</sup> The Anglican Church historically broke from the Roman Catholic Church in the sixteenth century when Henry VIII was denied an annulment by the Catholic Church and formed the Church of England. The liturgy, sacraments, and theology of the Anglican Church remain largely similar to that of the Roman Catholic Church, with two key theological points of difference being the Catholic belief in the transubstantiation of the Eucharist (the Eucharist bread and wine *are* the body and blood of Christ) and the American Episcopal Church's ordination of female priests and bishops. The Churches are alike in that, in order for a person to become a member of a local parish, he or she must receive the sacraments of baptism and confirmation. For the purposes of this study, the aligned sacramental theology, European origins, and complicity with the colonization of the Caribbean islands and the US south show the Anglican Church functioning in *Louisiana* in analogous ways to the Catholic Church in the texts by Martin, Wells, and Brodber in its suppression of women and Pan-African culture. Even so, as argued in the body of this chapter, the metaphors and scriptural revelation of the Anglican Church figure into Ella/Louisiana's spiritual enlightenment.

The European Christ, an image produced by colonizing culture and connected to servility and niceties (“the proper way of drinking tea”), and the colonizing church He represents, “couldn’t hold me” (59), Ella asserts: “I wasn’t confirmed – I dropped out of church-going before I entered high school” (58).

Brodber’s play on the sacrament/word “confirm” reveals layers of “truths” in the relationship of official Catholic/Anglican religion to the spirituality of black women. Like the “hole” that is Ella/Louisiana, a translating “link between shores,” Ella’s *not* confirmed becomes a “hole” through which to translate the sacrament/word “confirmation.” Ella rejects the Catholic/Anglican sacrament of confirmation, described in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* as a “making fast or sure,” a sacrament which completes the baptism of infant souls through a ceremonial ritual in which “the Holy Ghost is given to those already baptized in order to make them strong and perfect Christians and soldiers of Jesus Christ.” By rejecting this sacrament of the official church, the European image of “perfect” Christianity, she also rejects this religion’s ability to authenticate/validate/*confirm* her as a young black, Caribbean-American woman.

In addition, Ella’s experience of “King George’s church” calls attention to the public suppression of women’s experiences and influence within the Catholic/Anglican church by focusing on the image of the acolytes’ and priests’ garments: “Those over-shirts bothered me. Who did that delicate embroidery? It had to be a woman. Not my mother; she didn’t have the time though she could have had the skill...I ruled her out and searched the napes of the necks of those sitting before us and the faces of those returning from communion for that angel” (58). The reality that the young Ella is searching for, the angel/woman who has labored to construct the “delicate” symbols, is likely an unrecognized woman in an underdeveloped country whose labor is exploited. In both iconic images of the Catholic/Anglican religion – the stained glass window and the clergy’s garments – Brodber emphasizes the act of construction, asking the

pivotal questions: “How did they do this and why?” These questions – linking the *how* and *why* of official religion to a colonizing impulse and to the suppression of women’s influence – are crucial to translating/understanding and then revaluing vernacular, black spirituality.

The complex spirituality that Brodber develops in the text is not a simple value reversal, a rejection of all things European and celebration of all things black. It is an enactment of hybridity theory, of code-mixing, that performs the movement between European/American and Caribbean/American codes. Benitez-Rojo posits the “shores” of hybrid Caribbean culture as such: “On the one hand lie nature and folk tradition – the Mother, the Imaginary, the round’s absence of violence...[o]n the other lie the languages and episteme of Europe – the Name-of-the-Father, the Symbolic, history, modernity” (275). The Caribbean identity “oscillates forever” between these shores, this oscillation and code-mixing being the strategy/place of the truth-finding of one’s identity and culture. The “whole picture” of spirituality which Ella works to perform in *Louisiana* is made up of piecing together the “mosaic/puzzle” from this hybrid heritage. For, through she claims that the Anglican church “couldn’t hold” her, its teachings constitute a key part of her spiritual revelation.

Ella is initially unaware of her psychic participation in this spiritual revelation. Having grown up in New York, the only child of parents who have disassociated themselves from their Caribbean past, Ella comments, “Each [of her parents] was a history book, separate, zippered and padlocked” (58). While a student at Columbia University in New York, Ella is recruited into the WPA project to “retrieve” the oral history of Mrs. Sue Anna King because, as Ella understands, her “colour” would “get [Anna] to talk” (21). Using a recording machine, “an approximation of today’s tape recorder” (3), Ella attempts to get the elderly, ill Mammy King to tell her story. Instead, Mammy/Anna dies before Ella believes she has recorded anything of worth on the reel: “not a thing to give to the white people” (21). Upon listening to the tape, however, Ella hears the

voices of Mammy, who dies before Ella can complete her interviews, and Lowly, who had died years before in Jamaica. Ella's own voice is in the recorded dialogue: she repeats the refrain, "Ah who sey Sammy dead," though she initially does not comprehend her knowledge of that Jamaican folk chorus: "I now know that it is the refrain of a folk-song from home but I didn't know the song, having left there at an early age and my parents, wishing to dissociate themselves from some aspect of their past did not/would not have sung such a song nor would they have kept company with people who would sing such a song" (31). Within even her "whitewashed" psyche, then, Ella has stored bits of ancestral knowledge that manifest in her contact with the "Venerable Sisters"; they build upon these core memories to pull Ella into the black community, to rebirth her into her heritage.

Pieces of the European influences of her experience likewise manifest in Ella's subconscious. Unable to follow Mammy's psychic revelations rationally, Ella nevertheless responds instinctively, putting together the pieces which constitute what resurfaces/develops as her spiritual heritage. Ella reflects upon the interaction between the Anglican Church and Mammy's revelations:

I didn't know that more was happening for me at my mother's church than my meditation on the stained glass window and the men's over-shirts but there obviously was! ...And here now I want to talk about sugar cane and find myself pulling from that past and saying: "For I thy God am a jealous god." Cane is a jealous god. It needs every ounce of energy of every man, woman and child. (59)

In the Anglican church services with her mother, Ella absorbed scriptural and theological knowledge, narratives and images whose spiritual truths were part of Ella subconscious though she had not yet found the context which could reveal their meaning to her. Reflecting on the illumination of the stained glass window, Ella had observed: "revelation had to depend on God's natural light." Here, the code-mixing that occurs between the Biblical scripture and the experience of the southern black community reveals the "whole picture" of what it means to

serve a jealous god – a revelation illuminated by the concrete experience of nature and black life, circumscribed by white oppression in the sharecropping system of the 1930s south.

The practice of scriptural reading depicted here reflects the Jamaican Rastafarian practice of conducting “reasonings.” In *Creole Religions of the Caribbean*, Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert summarize Rastafarianism as an “Afro-Jamaican religious movement that blends the Revivalist nature of Jamaican folk Christianity with the Pan-Africanist perspective promulgated by Marcus Garvey, and Ethiopianist readings of the Old Testament” (154). The spiritual/social activist leader Marcus Garvey figures significantly in Brodber’s *Louisiana*, as will be discussed later. The practice of scriptural (re)reading that Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert describe as central to Rastafarian religion is largely undertaken in “reasonings,” small, informal gatherings in which practitioners smoke marijuana (a sacred weed and means to spiritual enlightenment to Rastafarians) and have spiritual debates (162). In this setting, the revelations of scriptural exegesis are radically altered:

Rastafarians’ acceptance of the Bible is conditional, and the text is subject to interpretations that harmonize it with the Rastafarian principles and ways of life. Central to the Rastas’ relationship to the Bible is the notion that much of the Bible’s original content was distorted when it was translated into English, and that it needs to be subjected to minute critical readings so that elements of the existing narrative whose meaning and relevance have been altered or distorted can be recognized. Rastas prefer allegorical as opposed to literal readings of the Bible that explore its metaphoric and symbolic content and unveil hidden messages and directives. (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 164)

When Ella rereads the metaphor of a jealous god to extend its meaning in the context of southern black culture, she is rereading scripture to correct constructed errors in the translation of divine revelation. Likewise, she responds subconsciously to Mammy’s funeral by quoting 1 Corinthians 15:55, again “from my mother’s episcopalianism,” she acknowledges: “Death where is thy sting / Grave where is thy victory?” (52). St. Paul poses these questions as celebration of the Christian promise of resurrection and renewed life. Ella poses these questions – though at this

point in the narrative she is not consciously aware of it – as an exploration of the blurred boundaries between life and death that she has experienced through her spiritual possession.

The trope of spirit possession in Caribbean literature manifests many of the elements of postcolonial theory which posit a new, radically different way of knowing from the objective, scientific study of history, such as the anthropological oral history which Ella is sent to “retrieve” from her source. In the representation of spirit possession, boundaries – between individuals and individual knowledge and experience, between living and dead, male and female, times and places—are intentionally blurred and complicated. As Carolyn Cooper notes,

Spirit possession, that ecstatic moment of displacement central to the religious practices of Africans in the diaspora, literally embodies the transmission of cultural values across the Middle Passage. As metaphor spirit possession doubly signifies both the dislocation and the rearticulation of Afro-centric culture in the Americas; divine possession mirrors its subversive other – zombification – that diabolical ownership of the enslaved in the material world. The ubiquitous tales of flying Africans miraculously shedding the weight of slavery to reclaim the freedom of African space testify to the authority of metaphors of transport in Afro-American/Caribbean iconography. Possessed of divinity, the believer dares to make that liberating leap from fact and history into myth and metaphor. (64)

Cooper’s explanation of the metaphorical work of spirit possession illuminates at least three key components in Brodber’s *Louisiana*: its resistance to zombification within oppressive paradigms, its mode of transport which defies boundaries (“flying Africans”), and its sublimation of the terror/violence of the diaspora experience, the “weight of slavery.” Brodber employs each of these components of spirit possession in her narrative of Ella’s transformation into Louisiana.

Zombification as spirit-thievery is a recurrent metaphor in Brodber’s writing, an assertion of the spiritual effects of a colonizing cultures’ appropriation of an oppressed groups’ access to “other ways of knowing” outside the bounds of official discourse, to definitions of oneself and ones’ community beyond the labels/roles given by the dominant group. Spirit-thievery and its analogy to rape are a central element in her novel *Myal*. In *Louisiana*, Brodber also, though less directly, explores the ramifications of zombification, aligning it in this text with an impulse

toward upward mobility in Pan-African black communities. In her essay “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” Toni Morrison depicts the paradoxical position of black Americans between “social mobility” and heritage:

We are a very practical people, very down-to-earth, even shrewd people. But within that practicality we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things. But to blend those two worlds together at the same time was enhancing, not limiting. And some of those things were ‘discredited knowledge’ that Black people had; discredited only because Black people were discredited therefore what they *knew* was ‘discredited’. And also because the press toward upward social mobility would mean to get as far away from that kind of knowledge as possible. (342)

The “press toward social mobility” that encourages removal from ancestral heritage can be read in the actions of Ella Townsend’s parents who sever their ties to Jamaica and “lock” this past away from their daughter, who send their daughter to a prestigious college and then turn away from her when she marries a black activist, relocates to New Orleans, and transforms into a spiritual seer. Ella’s initial adoption of her parents’ “white” values can be read in her impatience with Mammy/Anna’s interview, in her desire to have something of record to “give to the white people” (21), something she considers a “bread and butter matter” because her “name and [her] job are at stake” (22).

The metaphor of spirit possession also allows Brodber to cross boundaries of time and place in her reconstruction of history. In piecing together the fragments revealed to Louisiana/Ella by Anna, Louise, and later Silas (Anna’s husband whom she met in Chicago), the narrative freely traverses spatial divides, moving unrestrained among locales including Chicago, Jamaica, southwestern Louisiana, and New Orleans, and time periods ranging from the antebellum event of a slave lynching to 1954. The opening section of the novel, “I heard the voice from Heaven say,” which is the transcription of the “taped” psychic conversation between Mammy, Lowly and Ella is narrated largely by Lowly/Louise who is “the voice from Heaven,” conversing with Mammy/Anna from “over the rainbow’s mist” (11) and describing her funeral



years before in Jamaica. The “flight” of “being translated” deconstructs boundaries between experiences of life and death:

The voice calling me home truly did come in a whirlwind, Anna. Shepherd taking your hand on the moaning line and twirling on and on until every face is nothing but the vapour rising from your asphalt road on a hot wet day. Then only the voice, Suzie Anna, carrying you now in the chute, the voice with you now in the chute, keeping you company through the waters, over the rainbow’s mist, into seventh heaven and back to fete through days of dinkie mini, to see this thanksgiving and the nine-night to come and without a tired muscle. Back with every faculty – all hands, feet, eyes, ears a body could need for higher service” (10-11).

When Ella tries to cajole Mammy into talking by “reading [her] face,” she pleads: “Mammy I’m reading your face. You’re back there already. Didn’t need to ask you to go back. Now take me with you. Tell me what you see, tell me what you hear and what you feel” (13). And Ella’s request conflates with Lowly’s, reconstructing the memory of the two older women working together in a Chicago kitchen, and the young, homesick Lowly pleading for Mammy to take her with her in her imaginative flight home, away from the cold northern city. Mammy reflects, addressing Lowly in her memory:

“Your face my thane is a book where men may read strange tales.”  
“What you talking ‘bout little green island,” I would say. “Your face Miss Anna. You are nowhere here. You run away from this cold. Take me with you Miss Anna.” (13)

Here, Lowly code-mixes – quoting the Shakespeare she learned in a convent school in Jamaica and speaking in vernacular idiom; her speech succinctly crosses the borders she’s asking Mammy to traverse in spirit.

The psychic traveling of Brodber’s characters heightens the readers’ awareness of a connected, transnational experience and is related to her pervasive use of “doubling,” a literary strategy that also deconstructs borders between seemingly isolated individuals and places. Throughout the text of *Louisiana*, Brodber repeats characters, place names, and events. Ella Townsend, the young anthropology student, can be seen as a literary twin to Zora Neale Huston

who collected folk knowledge under the WPA project, but fell out of literary circles until her text was “rediscovered” in the 1970s. As the “Editor’s Note” reveals, “In the early 1970’s, nearly forty years after Ella Townsend’s descent into the unknown, this manuscript called *Louisiana*, then as now, appeared on [the] desk” of a “small black woman’s press” (3). Further character “doubling” occurs in the opening section which transcribes the recorded psychic conversation between Mammy and Lowly (and sometimes Ella); here, the older women conflate Ella with younger versions of themselves. Mammy asks Lowly: “who is this gal with some bits of me and some bits of you?” (17). Ella’s black lover/husband Reuben Kohl is conflated in the imaginations of blacks and whites in the Teche community with a Reuben Cole, a white activist who had tried to organize laborers ten years earlier and was “kicked out” of the community by whites (65). The funerals of the three psychic/holy women (Lowly, Mammy, and then Ella) are detailed as parallel ceremonies, two in southwest Louisiana and one in Jamaica. Reuben makes the connection between his birth in the African Congo and his work with the black community surrounding Congo Square in New Orleans. International newspapers which circulate in the Chicago Garvey unit parallel events worldwide: when Lowly recoils at the racial violence in Chicago, Silas shows her the news accounts of racial violence happening near her home community in Jamaica: “rioting on estates in my island, the names of which were familiar to me, if not exactly ‘my home town.’ We meditated on the similarities – all three of us. Me, Sue Ann, and Silas” (156).

This pervasive doubling and tripling that Brodber employs through her novel works toward her purpose of connecting the experiences of the “shipmates” in the Americas, past and present. Reflecting on the Garvey unit that Louise, Silas, and Anna organize while in Chicago, Ella/Louisiana asserts:

I don’t think...that the nature or extent of the influence of black Americans on the Caribbean and vice versa has been explored as it should. I have no doubt that the

acculturating relationship of those three in that Chicago kitchen was duplicated all over the place. (154)

Brodber's literary use of "twinning" and doubling in the text replicates the patterns which emerge from the "chaos" of the Caribbean postcolonial experience as Benitez-Rojo posits it: the "dynamic states or regularities that repeat themselves globally" within the "swarm" of "(dis)order" (2).

The unrestrained movement across borders of time and space, the trope of "flying Africans" accessed through spiritual possession, provides a route to healing, to sublimating the violence "organized by slavery, despotic colonialism, and the Plantation" the underlies the diaspora experience (Benitez-Rojo 23). After her initial spirit possession experience, Ella moves from the Teche community of Louisiana to New Orleans and serves as a seer/holy woman in a boarding house near Congo Square, where her clientele consists largely of black shipmen from the many transatlantic ports of the black diaspora. In her role as spiritual seer, Louisiana serves as a healer by speaking the "truth" of violence and trauma of the black experience in the Americas. Among the stories she hears – puts into words and records to for her community, therefore providing a route to healing – is the story of Anna's Grandpappy Moses, a slave, who had spoken the "word like the gospel" of injustice: "Massa sleep in a featherbed and we's on the moss" (81). His speaking unsettles his plantation community in south Louisiana and ends in his lynching and his master's suicide: "Old Grandpappy hanging like black moss, like a gypsy-style earring hanging from one tree lobe. That never happen before. Massa Sutton so shame, he do away with himself. Do away with himself. And that never happen before neither. He and Grandpappy move together from they small" (83). Anna's mother had likewise been an activist in the rural Teche community, organizing a strike of cane workers, a "Disturbance in the cane field" in 1878, and Louisiana relates: "This young woman's end is not really known. It is the general assumption that she was disposed of by the planters because of her political activities"

(151). Ella/Louisiana likewise recovers the act of violence which prompts Lowly/Louise to political action in Chicago: a fourteen-year-old black boy “swam out a little too close to the white side of the beach and they killed him” (156).

In one session, a seaman recounts the horrors of the traders’ journey, “another middle passage as unfathomable as the first, a middle passage that you consent to taking” because of the necessity of “taking food to their islands” (118). The seaman Lionel Campbell describes to Louisiana and others gathered in the New Orleans parlour:

Hundreds of men squeezed on to a ship, a kitchen too small to feed more than the fifty for which it had been built; men stepping on each other’s heads to get within reach of a ham sandwich; sleeping in the cold hallways in order to make it to tomorrow’s supper, a young teacher opting for the sea for whatever reason and finding it too rough for him, jumps into it.

The act of replaying of the horrors of the middle passage is the work of “defusing the violence, the blind violence” of the black diasporic experience (Benitez-Rojo 23). After Lionel Campbell’s narrative, Louisiana says, “We give them their past and they take it from there. ‘There is balm in Gilead,’ we said, putting our arms about each other’s back” (118). Louisiana’s powers to bring “balm” and healing to her Pan-African community, with its locus in the port city of New Orleans, are worked through her ability to “speak the word” of what has been an unsayable past and to access this authentic “word” through “ways of knowing” including crossing borders of time and place to pull together the connected threads of experience of the black diaspora.

A common theme in the trauma revealed to and through Louisiana is abandonment and broken families, a theme which calls attention to severed ties between family generations in the diaspora experience. Mammy’s father had abandoned her impregnated mother. Ella was left to live with her grandmother in St. Mary, Jamaica; at eighteen months she was left alone for days in the house with her dead grandmother and then left with a neighbor family for weeks or months

before her parents retrieved her and took her with them to New York. One of the seamen who visits the parlour in New Orleans is Ben, who is from St. Mary, Jamaica, and becomes Ella/Louisiana's physical link to that community. Ben, a former schoolteacher, had impregnated and forsaken a student, abandoned her and the pregnancy "for a life that had spelt foreign travel, further study" (104). The student, Lilieth, dies in childbirth, and Ben is haunted by guilt of his abandonment and denunciation of her, saying "What bothered my most was the nightly fornication with that dead child" (105). Louisiana helps Ben "re-live his painful past" through her psychic experience of the birthing scene. By speaking and re-performing the painful seen, Louisiana has helped him "destabilize" and then begin to "reassemble" himself (92), a function she performs for the larger black community as well.

In the recreation of the experience of childbirth that Ella/Louisiana performs as a healing ritual for Ben, Brodber employs the image of childbirth as a powerful link to spiritual healing. Through the metaphor of childbirth, Brodber is able to explore a paradox central to this study: women writers' search for mothers in religion and cultural tradition and for the "mother" within oneself, a negotiation of the central conflict of establishing one's individuality versus the sacrifice required to be a mother/communal matriarch. In *A Recent Martyr*, Emma Miller sees her daughter Christine as "the consolation of her life" (72); her relationship to Christine reconnects Emma to her own potential for spiritual innocence and redemption. In Rebecca Wells' novels, Siddalee Walker's career in theatre and the unhealed emotional scars of her abusive relationship with her mother make her reluctant to have a child; still, she celebrates the baptism of her niece and goddaughter Lee (named for Siddalee), who serves as a surrogate daughter, a symbol of Sidda's own potential for spiritual rebirth and renewal. The speaker in Brenda Marie Osbey's "House of the Dead Remembering" expresses grief that her

“body...carried no children to remember us by” (79). These female characters posit motherhood as a path to self-discovery, as a legacy of the individual woman’s knowledge and nurturing.

Like Siddalee Walker and Osbey’s speaker, Ella/Louisiana mourns that she has not borne a child: “Ten years of marriage to this lover and no need for maternity wear” (129). Expressing her unfilled desire to have a child in relation to her spiritual work, Louisiana claims, “Come to think of it, I am really doing a lot, as my husband says. ‘What you do is the matrix of many things’, he tells me. It doesn’t spell ‘mother’ though” (130). In her depiction of Ella/Louisiana as childless, Brodber emphasizes the individual sacrifice required by her protagonists’ commitment to the community, her willingness allow her body to become the conduit of collective history and a medium for the spirits compelled to “speak the true word.” In “A Suffering Savior: The Trials of Ella in Erna Brodber’s *Louisiana*,” David P. Lichtenstein rightly asserts that Reuben’s use of the term “matrix” as a metaphor for Ella/Louisiana’s spiritual work signifies as “womb.” I suggest that he misreads Brodber’s purpose in doing so. Lichtenstein claims, “Reuben ironically bestows an undeserved status on Ella, for despite her community achievements she never (to her discontent) produced a child. And thus Brodber has characterized one of the foremost challenges to women, even today: the clash between spheres of the public and private world, between the drive to achieve and the drive to bear children” (np). Brodber does posit the individual sacrifice required of Ella/Louisiana in her willingness to become a holy woman/savior as an essential paradox of the diasporic female experience, but she does not present Ella/Louisiana as childless.

In this deeply metaphorical text, the child that is the legacy of both Louisiana (the holy woman) and Louisiana (the collective community) is the body that is her/their namesake – the text *Louisiana*. This text/offspring has a lineage that mirrors the transnational cultural heritage of Louisiana (the US state) with ancestral roots in Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, and the US

North. In a deft gender-reversal, Brodber positions Reuben as the text's midwife, attending to Ella/Louisiana particularly in the final, laborious stages of the text's production when Ella is weak and bed-ridden, her body presumably weakened by her intense psychic activity. Reuben claims, "I am so afraid. I wish I could share the pain or that it would all end... It is my privilege to hold her hand, my duty to write. We both see that. I do both. So I am an extension of the bed. In this way I can switch from lover to scribe as necessary" (146). Reuben's role as Ella/Louisiana's scribe when she becomes too ill to write mirrors the practice of medieval Catholic women mystics whose visions were recorded and published through scribes, often their priest/confessors.

The co-progenitors of the text are the spiritual sisters/matriarchs Anna and Louise; their engagement with Ella is written in explicit images of child-rearing and sexuality. After Ella's recovery from the initial shock of hearing the voices on the recording machine, she finally commits to "opening the recording machine gently and reverently as if I was cleaning my baby daughter's private region. I listened, back-tracked, listened and wrote" (50). As discussed above, the transcription on the tape does become the genesis of what is Ella's narrative, her metaphorical "baby daughter." But Ella back-tracks from her transcription to describe the "baby-making" scene (her decision to listen to the voices and to transcribe them) as a lover's encounter between herself and the voices/spirits:

That first morning with the box, I had pulled it tentatively towards me. Having moved it, I began to feel like a lover pulling his love to him and asking why. A why they both understood in all its nuances. "Why did you forsake me?", "Why did you go off with another?", "Why wouldn't you let me in?", "Why did you scratch me?", "Why can't you like my mother?", "Why did you lock me out of our pregnancy?", "Why will you not speak eh?", "Why are you now so cold with me?", "Why?". I felt a softness in that box, the-about-to-cry phase and tell-all phase and I could sense the reconciliation coming. I, the lover, pressed on to opening and to fingering, to locating the essentials, the paper and pencil and to getting ready for the profound intimacy.

I depressed the button. With that touch my head grew large, suffused by my liquefied body. "Let go," I heard myself say to myself. I let go and was all ears. I listened. (50-51)

The result of this liaison between reunited lovers – between a daughter who has been severed from her mothers’ land(s) and between the spiritual medium who was coy in her acceptance of the spirit transfer – is the collective, communal history *Louisiana*. In “‘The Bloodstream of Our Inheritance’: Female Identity and the Caribbean Mothers’-Land,” Ann R. Morris and Margaret M. Dunn claim:

In the works of [Caribbean women writers], the island itself becomes both mother and text. The land and one’s mothers are therefore co-joined. If a woman is able to claim a connection to both, she is well prepared for the journey toward self-identity, but if she has been denied this developmental bond with her own mother, then the “mothers’-land” itself may provide a surrogate. (219)

In their reclamation and spiritual possession of Ella/Louisiana, Lowly and Anna are both the surrogate spiritual mothers and her place of origin/mothers’-land (“Louise y Anna,” which simultaneously figures as the US south and Jamaica). Ella’s psychic spirituality is a miraculous (re)birth, an explicit defiance of patriarchy, as Lowly testifies: “Two places can make children! Two women sire another?” (17) Using similar imagery to depict the communal origin of the text of *Louisiana*, Reuben describes Ella/Louisiana’s funeral:

Sheer jazz. One sound. From one body. A community song... Louisiana, my wife, Ella Kohl, the former Ella Townsend, was smiling and singing. She was going over the rainbow’s mist with her knowing smile. I know now what she knows: Mammy would not tell the president or his men her tale for it was not hers; she was not a hero. It was a tale of cooperative action; it was a community tale. We made it happen. (161)

Reuben’s celebratory tone reflects the miraculous nature of the textual production, a subversive (re)production within and against official/colonizing cultures. The “president or his men” cannot have Mammy’s narrative without distorting it from a Western perspective that celebrates individualism. Within the Anglican/Catholic church, the labor and influence of mothers have been hidden: Ella cannot find the “face” of the women who embroider its emblems. The holy woman whom Ella Townsend becomes and the collective narrative that she gives birth to



through her spiritual powers represents a miraculous (re)birth of black culture and spirituality, a child/text that is both the confluence and regeneration of its multiple ancestries but which is also the connecting link. Like the daughter/Christ(ine) in Martin's *A Recent Martyr*, the sisters' scrapbook in Wells' *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, and the "touch" which passes between holy women in Osbey's "Faubourg Study No. 3: The Seven Sisters of New Orleans," the text of *Louisiana* functions as an umbilical cord, passing on the spiritual life blood of recovered feminist, vernacular, spiritual religion.

The paradox of this collective vision of spirituality, of "birthing" a true communal history through the black woman's body, is that in functioning as the connecting "umbilical cord" of spiritual life blood, Ella/Louisiana seems to literally "give up her spirit" to the presence of the supernatural. However, Brodber's narrative of spiritual possession contrasts to that expressed by the Catholic postulate Claire in Martin's *A Recent Martyr*, as discussed in Chapter Two of this study. Claire seeks to devote herself entirely to God "so that the world and Claire go away" (181). Martin critiques this other-worldly orientation through her protagonist's vow to continually reconnect to the chaos of the world, particularly as symbolized by the tropical landscape of New Orleans and the protagonist's young daughter. Brodber instead aligns Ella/Louisiana's spiritual possession and transformation with a key concept of Rastafarianism. In contrast to the Western ideology of *either I or other*, (i.e., *either I serve myself or God*), Rastafarianism celebrates *I and other*; this distinction is clearly manifested in Brodber's text. When Ella first declares her transformation into Louisiana, she maintains a strong sense of self, as revealed in her repetition of the subject statement *I + verb* and a listing of the particulars of her experience which individuate her within the collective:

*I am Louisiana. I wear a solid pendant with a hole through its centre. I look through this hole and I can see things. Still I am Mrs. Ella Kohl, married to a half-caste Congolese reared in Antwerp by a fairy godfather. I wear long loose fitting white dresses in summer and long black robes over them in winter. I am*

Louisiana. *I give* people their history. *I serve* God and the venerable sisters.  
(125, emphasis added)

According to Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, “The unifying element in Rastafarian narrative is the notion of the self as a subject that comes to know itself only in relationship with others. The basic logic of Rastafarianism, the ‘I-and-I’ that stands for the plurality, for ‘we,’ represents the unifying connection to the deity – Rastafar-I, Selassie-I, the unifying one” (165).

The “I-and-I” as an essential spiritual concept signifies on the founding “avatar” of the Rastafarian faith, Haile Selassie, who was crowned as Emperor of the Ethiopian Kingdom in 1930. Jamaican black nationalist leader Marcus Garvey celebrated the crowning of Selassie, whose titles included Ras (prince) Tafari (of the Tafari family), as the return of the Savior, the Black Messiah. Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert explain that “Rastas believe that God revealed himself first through the person of Moses, the first avatar or savior, and later through the prophet Elijah. In this reading of the prophets as avatars, Christ emerges as the third avatar, who prepared the way for the climax of God’s revelation, the advent of Haile Selassie as Ras Tafari” (164).

Rastafarianism is a radical religion in its celebration of the Black Messiah; Brodber positions her protagonist as a Black *Woman* Messiah, as an avatar, who is not only a (re)newed image of the mother/Madonna but is also the “suffering savior,” a Christ figure. Avatars are “linked to the importance of visions and dreams” which can be “rich in symbolic meaning and open to readings and interpretations” (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 164). Mammy’s Grandpappy Moses certainly functions as an avatar/prophet figure in the Louisiana cane farming community, speaking the “word like the gospel” (81), opening up the pathway to social justice and being

crucified for it. Ella/Louisiana's illness and bodily weakness that ultimately lead to her early death (in her 40s) are directly linked to her spiritual possession:

Pain. Bone breaking pain, shooting from my bones, silver bullets dead set on freedom, liberated, fill my room with lightening bugs and I am become Christmas, starlights, fireworks holidays, no flesh. I have become a hot silver tree melted to a single conduit that courses through the gap above my temples from left to right, bending and fitting itself and doubling back to the centre of my pendant. I am a silver stethoscope. Anyday now that line will be a silver thread, a strand, will slip through my pendent, be a streak of lightening. What a relief then to be making my way over the rainbow's mist! Til then, I am a metal aerial conductor tuned to the rainbox and this is the day of pentecost. Must be. (161)

In Christian tradition, Pentecost is the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles, fifty days after the celebration of Christ. According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, the Holy Spirit is the "Third Person of the Blessed Trinity," and though the Spirit is "distinct, as a Person, from the Father and the Son" It is "consubstantial with Them." Ella/Louisiana's assertion that "this is the day of pentecost" reflects her spiritual possession by the two Venerable Sisters – the distinct voices of the trinity – Louise, Anna, and Louisiana – who are "distinct" but "consubstantial" ("of one essence"); Ella/Louisiana and the New Orleans spiritist culture refer to this aspect of spirit possession as "hegemony of the spirit" (98). The Holy Spirit is the essence of divinity that "reveals to the Church mysteries known only to God" and "is the giver of supernatural life" (*Catholic Encyclopedia*). Certainly, the Venerable Sisters reveal to Ella/ Louisiana mysteries "known only to them" – mysteries withheld from the dominant culture ("the president and his men") and revealed to the pan-African diasporic community through Ella/Louisiana, mysteries whose revelation/truth can be realized only through "other ways of knowing." Ella/Louisiana's transfer "over the rainbow's mist" represents this anticipation of the "supernatural life," the realm of spirit possession which defies the boundaries of life and death, spirit and body, as Lowly had described of her "translation": "into seventh heaven and back...Back with every faculty – all hands, feet, eyes, ears a body could need for higher service" (11).

Brodber positions Ella/Louisiana in the text as participating in the lineage of avatars, specifically the prophet Elijah and Christ. Reflecting on her connection to Elijah and his “passing” of spiritual powers to Elisha, Ella/Louisiana reveals,

[M]e and the Elijah/Elisha story: here is definite recorded proof that what has been happening to me has happened to someone else before. A mantle has been passed before...And the passage just ups and hit me right between the eyes. The Bible opened itself to that passage and it jumped right from the page and just hit me right between the eyes. It was meant for me (100).

The Biblical Elijah is a ninth century BCE prophet who warns the people of Israel that they will suffer years of famine and sorrow for their sin of worshipping false gods. In the Transfiguration, Elijah appears with Moses to Jesus and the apostles, and the Apostle Paul determines to build three tabernacles, one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah (Luke 9:28-36). Applying the Rastafarian process of “reasoning” through the scriptural representation of Elijah, reinterpreting it from an African rather than a European perspective, Ella/Louisiana has the following revelation:

Earlier I had met the transfiguration – ‘Let us build three tabernacles’. Two dead people talking to a live one, just like Mammy and Lowly and me...Nobody turns on prophets nor do they turn on themselves. They wait for God’s orders. That makes the difference and I saw Peter, poor ‘winjie’ human – mother’s word – making an effort to be useful, practical and controlling – “Let us make three tabernacles”, when the higher authority had already made those tabernacles and put people in them.(100)

Ella/Louisiana’s spiritual reasoning, mixing the codes and symbols of scripture with the culture of Jamaican folk knowledge, moves the place of spiritual worship from the white, “winjie” tabernacle to the “people”/avatars Moses, Elijah, Jesus – Mammy, Ella, Louisa.

In the sickbed scene described above, the image of Ella/Louisiana’s “bone breaking pain” that is paradoxically “liberating,” and allows her to “become Christmas” signifies on the crucifixion of Christ, His birth and death which permit the Christian’s everlasting spiritual life. Ella admits just after her recognition of the spiritual calling, “I ... wished that my cup could

pass from me” (73). Twice, the spirit voices urge Ella/Louisiana, “Don’t say you are not the Christ!” (100, 141). In Christ’s death is the promise of renewed life; the text of *Louisiana*, for which Ella/Louisiana “gave up her spirit” holds the promise of (re)newed life for the diasporic community – reconnection to the mysteries of a communal past which permit healing and growth.

Reflecting the foundational “self in other” philosophy of Rastafarianism, spiritual leadership (in the religion and in Brodber’s writing) necessarily involves social activism. The impetus to political action in *Louisiana* – a direct link between spiritual awakening and social responsibility – is more explicit in this text than in any other in this study. Martin critiques other-worldly Catholicism; Wells and Osbey – from different cultural positionalities – syncretize “official” Catholic religion with vernacular, inclusive rituals and beliefs to “open up” inherited spiritualities to women and minorities. In Brodber’s text, spiritual revelation unveils the “truth” of pan-African history and also the “pathway” to social justice. A pivotal revelation in the text is Mammy and Lowly’s involvement with the black nationalist/Rastafarian movement led by Marcus Garvey. Mammy and Lowly had cryptically hinted at their involvement with “Mr. G,” and in one of the last scenes of spirit possession of the novel, Lowly “whispers”: “G = Garvey.” Their psychic revelations tell the story of Lowly returning to Jamaica after joining the UNIA<sup>18</sup> in Chicago, of her coordinating rallies, delivering speeches, and organizing marches in early 1920s Jamaica. Mammy returned from Chicago to Louisiana, moving between the farming community in southwestern Louisiana and the port city of New Orleans. Lowly describes Mammy, “Organizing in the dead of night, sneaking here, setting up meeting there, carrying all those quarters people on your head... This woman... wanting to pull the sides of the sea together,

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<sup>18</sup> Universal Negro Improvement Association, founded by Garvey. Ella/Louisiana states in her record of the life of Mrs. Sue Ann Grant-King that the UNIA provided an organizing “framework within which to do concrete work” of black activism and social reformation (153).

wanting to sew them little islands together and tack them on to New Orleans” (148). Reuben reflects upon this revelation, “That was Mammy and how she came to be of interest to those looking for the history of the black people of South West Louisiana” (148).

Reuben’s remark acknowledges the paradox of “surveillance” associated with narrative: sharing your story (your hidden past) with someone allows them to know your secrets, to have the power of surveillance/knowledge over you. This partially explains why Mammy will not share her story with “the president or his men” when they send an anthropology student to “retrieve” it in 1936. The gradual revelation of Mammy’s narrative coincides with the growth of the black nationalist and civil rights movement; her final revelation is in 1954. The secrets of Louisiana (the person, the text, and the transnational region) “disappear” for nearly twenty years, until in the early 1970s, when, during the cultural revival of black arts and letters, the manuscript “appeared on the desk” of a “small black woman’s press” (3). The editor notes: “Its arrival was well timed, perhaps well planned” and further comments, “Today the intellectual world understands that there are more ways of knowing than are accessible to the five senses; in 1936 when Ella Townsend received her assignment it was not so. This world is ready. We are” (3, 4). In the early 1970s, Alice Walker “rediscovered” the writings of Zora Neale Hurston, Ella’s literary “twin.” In her 1979 essay, “Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View,” Walker writes, “*We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. And if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists and as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children, and if necessary, bone by bone*” (92).

In Brodber’s highly religious text, Ella Townsend was a “lost” person: lost from public record for over forty years, lost from her mothers’-lands and her cultural heritage, lost from connection to a shared, pan-African black experience that was suppressed in her memory. In this narrative of her reclamation, the “hole” which was the “loss” in Ella’s memory and identity

becomes the medium for her (and the transatlantic community's) narrative of reclamation and redemption. Brodber requires active participation of her readers, the enactment of non-essentializing, complex postcolonial reading practice, as Puri asserts. For example, in order to understand *Ella/Louisiana*'s function as the "hole" of meaning, Brodber directs her readers to "stand" and to put the tips of their fingers together to form a diamond (124). The ethic of the text – with its emphasis on reclaiming black, matriarchal spirituality from within the context of white, patriarchal religion and its direct link between this spiritual enlightenment and social activism – likewise invites action on the part of its readers. In 1978, Brodber's fictional narrator claimed that the "world is ready." In 1994, when *Louisiana* was published, Brodber implicitly asked her readers – then and now – "are *you*?"

## **Chapter Six**

### **Conclusion: Literary Umbilical Cords to Spiritual Matriarchs**

“Liz, you’ve got to read this – you’re going to laugh your ass off and cry your eyes out.”

This was from Julie Bergeron, my mentor teacher in the National Writing Project at LSU-Shreveport the summer of 1998. She and I had forged a real connection, both recently “transplanted” from south Louisiana to this northwestern corner of the state (it was more like east Texas than Louisiana, we agreed), both reared in big, rural, strongly-Catholic households, both teaching in public schools and passionate about our work. Julie taught third grade; I taught high school English. She had daughters my age, and she had this soft, beautiful New Roads-southern accent that was warming and lovely. She is the kind of person who is always good to be near – how fortunate are her students, I always thought, and I was one of them.

She was handing me a copy of Rebecca Wells’ *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*. Of course, I did read it and I did laugh my ass off and cry my eyes out. Then I read *Little Altars Everywhere*, the prequel – this was the order in which Julie said to read them. *Little Altars* was dark, she said, and it was better to understand the characters this way.

Though I read avidly, I never forgot those books. They had a sort of pull on me – as though I was reading about a mystery within myself that I had to label. My upbringing was not “ya-ya” – the women in my life knew how to live, sure, but they were more grounded, less dramatic. The women in my life – my mother, grandmothers, aunts, sisters – could drive tractors and kill snakes when necessary, could cook for crowds, quilt, assist with any size school project, teach catechism, earn a living, could and did read and travel and engage the world fully in their living. I pondered the “consumer” appeal of the Ya-Ya sisters, as Trysh Travis and Thomas Haddox do. I knew that was part of the Ya-Ya phenomenon but did not fully explain why I or Julie found these novels so compelling.



The image that particularly stayed with me is from “The Elf and Fairy” chapter in *Little Altars*. Ten-year-old Sidda has been preparing for a piano recital, practicing a “difficult” piece with her piano teacher at Our Lady of Divine Compassion Parochial School. Sidda narrates:

The first time Sister Philomena plays “The Elf and the Fairy” for me, I close my eyes and go somewhere else. To a place in another state that doesn’t have all the hot white light of Louisiana. There are waterfalls there and the air is so sweet and easy to breathe. There are actually fairies darting around, and when you see them you can’t tell if they are working or playing – it’s all the same thing to them... I am determined to take myself to that same magic place by learning my recital piece perfectly. I practice for hours and hours, alone in the tiny practice room in the music building. The room is like a monk’s cell and I enjoy it – just me, the piano, and one window where the afternoon light comes in and tries to make me sleepy. (92)

The night before the recital, Sidda has laid out everything in perfect order – her pencils, her school clothes, her book sack, art supplies, and papers. But then all hell breaks loose – her parents Vivi and Shep have a “knock-down, drag out.” Vivi loads her four kids into the car and squeals out of the driveway, leaving for good, she tells the kids. Moments later, she u-turns and squeals back into the driveway.

In the chaos of this back-and-forth, Sidda’s school supplies “fly everywhere” and her “crayons roll under the car” (95). At the recital the next day, Sidda feels that “somebody else’s hands – wild, shaking, ignorant – take over” (97). Rather than “Elf and Fairy Land,” the piano produces awful “crazy frantic noise” (97). Sidda thinks, “Inside myself, I can hear all the beauty, but my body can’t respond” (97).

This is the poignant image that haunts me – little Sidda desperately trying to organize her life, to reach that place of grace and peace where she can breathe easily, thwarted by the absurd chaos of our everyday, broken lives. Sidda reminds me so much of myself, of my precocious goddaughter/niece, of my mother – all of us trying to so hard to hear the beauty and respond to it. All of our longing is pure, as Wells writes (*LA 220*), pure and necessary.

In April 2005, I heard Brenda Marie Osbey's keynote address at the Linking Louisiana and the Caribbean Annual Conference at LSU. Osbey's speaking presence is powerful, consuming. She read from "Faubourg Study No. 3: The Seven Sisters of New Orleans," praying to mother Érzulie. She spoke of her "*cannes à sucre*," her life-love, the living dead who are with her, the strong holy women in her world. I first had culture envy – why couldn't I be born into such a powerful worldview, I wondered? – but my response changed during her reading. I was eight months pregnant at this time, and I suppose I felt particularly maternal. As Osbey read her poetry from *All Saints* – which I had read before – I felt her pulling me into her, pulling me into her world/womb of strong, hybrid spirituality. As a scholar, I know about the risk of appropriation of culture; as a reader/listener, I knew I was being called home, that it was real and right.

Traditional academia is uncomfortable with emotional and instinctual responses to literary texts. The work of this study of contemporary women's writing in Catholic traditions is largely to place these texts in literary and theological contexts, to show the revisionary work they enact within the contexts of Catholicism and southernness. But part of the cultural force of these texts is in women's gut response. The "pull" that I was responding to as a daughter of Catholic and southern traditions was the pull of an umbilical cord of (re)connection to empowering, feminist religious myths – myths that had been part of the cultural environment of my Louisiana mothers'-land but which had been practically invisible to me, sublimated, marginalized, erased within official narratives.

Too often, the academic literary/theoretical study of literature that explicitly queries Catholicism and the US south has participated in this sublimation and erasing of "other" myths within patriarchal, white "official" readings; these readings assert "authority" and "authenticity" through close alignment with an official/traditional Catholic Church. In *Fears and*

*Fascinations: Representing Catholicism in the American South*, for instance, Haddox very astutely analyses the multiple functions of Catholicism in southern literature but also bemoans its modern declension in practice from an “authentic” religion into something that, while representing “working-class,” “middle-class,” “feminist,” and “multicultural” values, becomes “smug, therapeutic self-satisfaction” (12). Ross Labrie, in *The Catholic Imagination in American Literature*, and Kieran Quinlan, in *Walker Percy: The Last Catholic Novelist* make similar theoretical assertions, assuming a position of authority on what counts as “real” Catholicism and what does not.

Feminist theology and post-colonial theory deconstruct this monolith, so carefully constructed and maintained by “official” cultural and religious traditions. The literary texts examined in this dissertation clearly demonstrate this deconstruction of patriarchal myth, and they work within this redefined/rediscovered liminal space to (re)generate literary (cultural, historical, spiritual) narratives. These narratives are explicitly concerned with re-evaluating the racial history of a transnational US south, particularly Louisiana, and with redefining the sexuality of women: they are literary umbilical cords connecting generations of strong, racialized matriarchs in cultural and spiritual expression.

In contrast to traditional religious narratives that seek to define themselves as “universal” (race-less) but which use universality as a mask for white oppression of racial difference, the trajectory of the literary texts in this study toward a more inclusive, empowering narrative of spirituality foregrounds issues of race and ethnicity and revises traditional valuations of “whiteness” and “blackness” in cultural expression. African Diaspora anthropologist Sheila S. Walker records an Afro-Cuban woman’s evaluative comparison of Catholicism to Orisha tradition: “We understand that their spiritual beings are content with just prayers. But ours like to dance” (48). In *African Roots/American Cultures*, Walker analyzes the “everyday African”

presence in American culture, which she asserts, “is an inextricable element of the fabric of the American nations and often a major definer of their popular cultures and collective identities” (49). Hence, Walker continues, Africanity “is an integral part of the cultural repertoire of the populations of non-African as well as of African descent. This is especially true of the expressive culture by which individuals and societies enjoy themselves, declare their specificity, and celebrate their uniqueness – through their spirituality, language, cuisine, music, and dance” (49).

The (unfavorable) comparison of European-originated Catholicism to new-world-African Orisha tradition that Walker records reflects the Diaspora theory valuation of cultural tradition: valorizing New World black religion over white religion. The woman quoted above is akin to Brenda Marie Osbey’s speaker in “Mother Catherine,” a holy woman who danced in the chapel and who urges her followers to remember her by continuing to do so, thus urging modern believers to remember their African roots, to (as Walker describes) “enjoy themselves” and their cultural inheritance, “declare their specificity” as a vernacular culture, and “celebrate their uniqueness” even in modernity.

Close attention to the depictions of spirituality in the literature of this dissertation reveal a fundamental hybridity of practice, the complex and generative intertwining of white, black, Cajun, Indian, and Latino/a traditions in the religious expressions of Louisiana women. Contemporary recovery and revaluation of hybrid, region-specific religious practices in literature and theory opens the potential in religious studies for reclamation of the “other-ness” that has been subverted in white, patriarchal, dominant tradition, specifically Catholicism, as Sandra Schneiders describes (17). Even so, examination of the hybrid, creole religious practices depicted in these literary works also reveals a general segregation in religious practice. In other words, the religious expressions are creole and hybrid, but they are (still) practiced in ethnic

segregation, cultural expressions which reflect the historical legacy of colonial powers which benefit from and perpetuate racial segregation.

Notably, for instance, even though Martin's *A Recent Martyr* is set in historic, deeply-racialized New Orleans, the narrative voice makes no mention of race except to observe the intensity of the Catholic postulant Claire's paleness (60, 64, 75). The young Ya-Yas in Rebecca Wells' novels celebrate their descendance from a "black she-ape named Lola" (*DS* 89), signaling an "inextricable" Africanaiety (Walker 49) in their subconscious narrative of origin; likewise, they rewrite the "bleached" Catholic Virgin Mary as a strong and mighty "Moon Lady" reflective of Orisha tradition. But, while they and their children, the *petites ya-yas*, recognize and celebrate a creolized heritage, drawing strongly on Louisiana Cajun spirituality, Wells' novels also clearly reflect segregation in the expression of religious belief: the black character Willetta goes to her black church, Vivi Walker and her white friends and family go to theirs; though these women's experiences are intimately connected and intertwined, their lifestyles and religious expressions are practiced separately. In Osbey's *All Saints*, white Catholic culture is depicted as clearly oppositional to black practitioners of syncretic spirituality. The white Congress of Saints in "Mother Catherine" ban the black holy woman to the role of "lavatrice," and white, European religious authorities in "St. Martin" denigrate Martin's role within official church narratives, positioning him as a humble caretaker and "token" black saint in white tradition. In *Louisiana*, Brodber depicts Ella Townsend's move from the colonizing white tradition of the Anglican Church in New York to the apparent exclusively-black spiritual community of south Louisiana. White characters only enter this black community as the nameless "white boots" which threaten to run labor organizers out of the community (65), the white master who hangs himself in guilt over the death of his slave (83), the white murderers who shoot a young black boy in 1920s Chicago (156), and the white lawyer in New York who

views Ella/Louisiana as no better than “something the cat had deposited on the mat. A chewed up rat” (133).

Thus, though hybrid/creole spirituality is reclaimed and revalued in these literary texts, their depiction of the practice of this spirituality reveals the deep-rooted racial tensions and segregation which gird transatlantic culture. The overall movement of the narratives of race and culture in the texts of this study reflect the direction of transatlantic studies toward valuation of blackness and New World African culture as independently valuable, not simply as a revision of American culture from what was still an essentially white, European vantage. Douglas B. Chambers contrasts this contemporary move toward a theory of the Black Atlantic to comparative concepts of African Diaspora theory. Chambers states this contrast between the theoretical positions as a shift to recognize “heterogeneity (Black Atlantic) versus homogenization (African Diaspora); transnational (or circum-Atlantic) versus North American-centric (or simply comparative); agency as bounded rationality versus agency as resistance; Africa as generative versus Africa as background (that is, creolization as Africanization rather than as Americanization)” (152). In other words, studies of the transatlantic world and its cultural expressions, including the “nodal point” of Louisiana and its vernacular religions, have shifted to emphasize contingent communities of “punctuated equilibria” (Chambers 152) which exist “in and of” themselves, not “solely as a strategy for working against cultural hegemony” (Puri 168). In the specific examples of the texts, for instance, Mother Catherine in Osbey’s poem is revalued as a strong, healing holy woman, not as an eccentric, but humble “lavatrice”/caretaker of white religious tradition. Likewise, the “hole” which figures metaphorically in Brodber’s *Louisiana* as black, feminine, southern/Caribbean culture, as when Ella/Louisiana declares, “That hole, that passage, is me. I am the link between the shores” (124),

becomes the “hole” through which one can voice/hear a contingent but essential, generative history and present of transatlantic culture.

Like the texts’ deconstruction of dominant racial myths, the texts’ depiction of female sexuality resists patriarchal definitions of women in terms of their relationships to men. A key identifying feature of the Catholic Mary is her virginity – the status of her sexuality. The female friendships, mother-daughter kinship communities, and homoerotic sensuality of the narratives in this study resist patriarchal sexual boundaries but are also depicted as existing “in and of” themselves, not simply as strategies for resistance to patriarchal codes. Haddox explores the “decadence” of Catholicism in southern literature, describing a homoeroticism that is frequently manifested in its expression: the Catholic Church in literature is often portrayed as “bulwark of beauty and nobility against a sordid, commercialized world. Yet decadence adds to this nostalgia a distinctly homoerotic element, and gay and lesbian writers associated with decadence have frequently been drawn to the church because despite its prohibition against homosexual activity, its aesthetic affords congenial space for homoerotic performance” (85). Haddox references Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s description of the appeal of a Church which is “famous for giving countless gay and proto-gay children the shock of possibility of adults who don’t marry, of men in dresses, of passionate theatre” (85). Martin’s depiction of her narrator Emma’s highly-eroticized fascination with the virginal postulant Claire and of Pascal’s homoerotic exhibition of sexuality, as in the scene in which he exposes his probing of Emma to a male bus driver, are clearly reflective of decadence as Haddox describes it. Other writers in this study posit female homoeroticism as a corrective to compulsory, patriarchal conscription of women and their sexuality, much in the way that Adrienne Rich posits the lesbian continuum of sexual expression as a way to resist the totalizing definitions of women’s sexuality asserted by enforced heterosexuality. The Ya-Ya’s in Wells’ novels celebrate their female bodies in homoerotic

expressions of community and solidarity, dancing naked in their “initiation” ceremony and skinny-dipping at Spring Creek. The young girls snuggle together in a hammock on the porch, “laying on top” of each other like they are one another’s “pillows” (84). Osbey’s and Brodber’s texts portray lineages of women who nurture, “touch” and “massage” one another in cultural and spiritual awakenings, expressions which are clearly erotic as in Brodber’s narration of Ella’s “fingering” the “black recording box” (here, a clear vaginal metaphor) like a lover, getting ready to “open” it to expression (50).

The texts in this project present exciting possibilities for studying the historical, current, and future expressions of spirituality in Louisiana as a “nodal point” of transatlantic cultural study. They posit compelling, liminal cultural spaces for exploding dominant myths of homogeneous white, patriarchal religion to recover inclusive, vernacular, feminist spirituality. As discussed in this chapter, the spiritual equilibrium manifested in these texts is necessarily contingent and fraught with racial barriers. Still, the texts in this study reveal a pathway to reclamation, more powerful because of its contingency and circuitousness, to realizing the redemptive promise of religion as Sandra Schneider defines it: “justice and dignity for all” (xviii).



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