Ghost (Hi)stories: Fiction as Alternative History in Brodber, Valdés, Cisneros, and Condé

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GHOST (HI)STORIES: FICTION AS ALTERNATIVE HISTORY
IN BRODBER, VALDÉS, CISNEROS, AND CONDÉ

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS........................................................................................................ ii

ABSTRACT............................................................................................................................ iv

INTRODUCTION
Ghosts, Fiction, and Alternative Histories ........................................................................ 1

CHAPTER ONE
Phantom Ache: Ghosts in New World Literature ............................................................... 25

CHAPTER TWO
“Anthropology of the Dead:” Ghosts, Subaltern Knowledge, and Alternative History in Erna
Brodber’s *Louisiana* ........................................................................................................... 58

CHAPTER THREE
Haunting and Affect: Ghosts and Nostalgia in Zoé Valdés’s *Te di la vida entera* and Sandra
Cisneros’s *Caramelo: or Puro Cuento* ............................................................................ 84

CHAPTER FOUR
“Rêvons:” Haunting, History, and Imagination in Maryse Condé’s *Victoire, les saveurs et les
mots: récit* .......................................................................................................................... 121

CONCLUSION......................................................................................................................... 159

WORKS CITED.................................................................................................................... 164

VITA...................................................................................................................................... 172
ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyzes the role that female ghosts play in recuperating memory and filling the gaps of official history in the following four contemporary novels: Erna Brodber’s *Louisiana* (1994), Zoé Valdés’s *Te di la vida entera* (1996), Sandra Cisneros’s *Caramelo: or, Puro Cuento* (2002), and Maryse Condé’s *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots: récit* (2006). The ghosts in these novels disrupt a linear temporality and present a matriarchal mode of remembering, leading readers to reconsider the past outside of the dominant historical discourse. In this way, the novels become alternative histories that oppose the monologic historical paradigm and recuperate marginalized voices silenced by History with a capital H. The novels trouble the boundary between truth and fiction, asking the reader to consider the moral value of art. The reader is obliged to relinquish certain assumptions about history and its creation and processes in order to understand how fiction can be an alternative history. My introduction explores the historical paradigm that these novels destabilize, including a Hegelian concept of history that is based on reason. The introduction also sets up the feminist methodology that drives my analysis and presents the geographic scope of my dissertation. Chapter One explores the tradition of the ghost in the literature of the Americas, especially how ghosts confront traumatic pasts and destabilize a linear temporality. In Chapter Two I analyze Brodber’s *Louisiana*, which employs two female ghosts to resist hegemonic historical discourse via spirit possession. In the third chapter I discuss ghosts’ affective nature in Valdés’s *Te di la vida entera* and Cisneros’s *Caramelo*. The spirit narrators in these novels recreate memory via nostalgia and the affective nature of music. Chapter Four explores imagination’s role in filling the gaps of history through an analysis of Condé’s *Victoire*, whose narrator is haunted by the ghost of her grandmother and compelled to reconstruct her history. My conclusion draws out the specific
similarities between the four novels and further explores the way in which these novels not only use the ghost figure to comment on the past, but also employ it to initiate healing within individual relationships between women.
INTRODUCTION
Ghosts, Fiction, and Alternative Histories

“In literature, the ghost is almost always a metaphor for the weight of the past.”
—Tabitha King

“Toi tu dis l'Histoire, moi je dis les histoires.”
“You say History, but I say (hi)stories.”
—Patrick Chamoiseau, Texaco, 102

Michael Ondaatje’s novel Anil’s Ghost, published in 2000, invokes the figure of the ghost in its title; however, no literal ghost appears in the narrative. Anil’s “ghost” is figurative and ambiguous; it represents victims of political killings, traumatic events, and personal disappointments that haunt the main character, Anil Tissera. Originally from Sri Lanka, Anil lives in the U.S. and works as a forensic pathologist for the Centre for Human Rights at the UN. The novel begins when Anil is called on to return to her home country and contribute to a UN human rights investigation during the Sri Lankan civil war. The war began in the 1980s and involved three main groups: the government, insurgents, and separatists. The scale and horror of the violence is summarized early in Ondaatje’s narrative:

[T]he darkest Greek tragedies were innocent compared with what was happening here. Heads on stakes. Skeletons dug out of a cocoa pit in Matale. At university Anil had translated lines from Archilochus—*In the hospitality of war we left them their dead to remember us by.* But here there was no such gesture to the families of the dead, not even the information of who the enemy was. (11, emphasis in original)

The victims’ families are not able to mourn over the physical bodies of their loved ones. They had simply disappeared. Those left behind are surrounded by uncertainty. They are uncertain of the fate of their friends and family and also uncertain of the perpetrators’ identities. All three combatant groups work in the shadows. Anil’s task is to discover the identities of the bodies that have been hidden by all sides, including the government. During her investigation, she becomes

1 Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.
attached to one skeleton in particular whom she names “Sailor,” a male who was recently murdered and most likely killed by the government.

Sailor comes to represent the countless unknown, nameless victims of war crimes in Sri Lanka. By discovering his unique story, Anil claims a kind of justice for the thousands who have disappeared during the war. Although their names, and even the dates and times of their disappearances, are known, their bodies have not been found. They have become ghosts whose absence haunts the nation, requiring an investigation into the past that will not remain “buried.” They are revenants, returning, in a way, from death to demand justice. The novel’s title, though not referring to a specific ghost, establishes haunting as a theme to address political and traumatic history. The effectiveness of Ondaatje’s figurative “ghost” reinforces the literary value of the ghostly figure.

There are numerous literary works that invoke figurative and literal ghosts to address many of the themes established in Ondaatje’s novel, including trauma, effaced history, and marginalized characters. This dissertation specifically analyzes the role of female ghosts in four novels from the Americas, namely Erna Brodber’s *Louisiana* (1994), Zoé Valdés’s *Te di la vida entera* (1996), Sandra Cisneros’s *Caramelo: or Puro Cuento* (2002), and Maryse Condé’s *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots: récit* (2006). The female ghosts in these novels recuperate memory and inspire female authorship which produces the novels themselves. In this way, the novels confront the official history which is often, to borrow Derrida’s term, phallogocentric in that it privileges the masculine in the making of meaning. As redeemers of memory, and as maternal figures, the female ghosts establish a matriarchal lineage of knowledge opposed to the patriarchal hegemony in history and in literature. These novels assert a matriarchal mode of remembering and writing that does not necessarily follow a patriarchal and linear temporality.
The writing is playful, imaginative, and—through the supernatural and uncanny elements—transcendent. Through their (re)creative efforts these authors achieve communion via artistic creation, transforming the nightmare of history into an artistic and communal experience that builds bridges across time and space.

This is not the first project to explore literary ghosts as a means to recuperate memory. In *Haints: American Ghosts, Millennial Passions, and Contemporary Gothic Fictions*, Arthur F. Redding interrogates the ways in which contemporary American fiction uses ghosts and other gothic tropes to recover forgotten histories from the perspective of minorities, including (but not limited to) Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Lee Smith’s *Oral History*, Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*, and E.L. Doctorow’s *City of God*. Redding begins his project by establishing America’s “lack of history,” explaining that many Americans ignore the often violent national past in order to feel a sense of innocence. The national rhetoric focuses on the future—Manifest Destiny—and the hope of starting life in the U.S. with a clean slate. However, the history of the U.S. is far from innocent. From slavery, to the Civil War, and the Trail of Tears (to name just one instance of Native American trauma) the history of the U.S. is incredibly violent.

The contemporary narratives that Redding analyzes confront the traumatic past of the Americas in a different way—not from the perspective of the white majority, but from the perspective of minorities. As Redding states it, his purpose is to “highlight the importance of constructing and elaborating ‘haunted’ narratives—and even fictional narratives—in the aftermath of persistent violence” (4). Redding’s work focuses on a perspective from the United States, but these issues are relevant throughout the Americas. This dissertation will move beyond Redding’s work as a comparative analysis of inter-American works from the United States and the Hispanophone and Francophone Caribbean that highlight issues of memory and gender.
through the supernatural. Moreover, my analysis is driven by the fact that the ghosts in my corpus motivate female authorship and creativity as an alternative to History with a capital H.

This introduction presents the important issues that frame and direct this dissertation, beginning with a discussion of the gothic and the uncanny as means to negotiate the past. It will also introduce the Hegelian concept of linear and total history which must be confronted to broaden a historical consciousness. Additionally, this chapter will establish the feminist methodology that will drive the analysis of the corpus. Women’s place in the historical archive, and specifically women of color, has often been silenced and overlooked. The ghosts in my corpus are women who have been doubly marginalized not only because of their gender, but also because of their race. I close the introduction with an explanation of the geographic scope of my project and brief chapter summaries.

**Defining the Gothic**

Since emerging onto the British literary scene during the Romantic period, the gothic has flourished over the centuries and across the globe, and although this diffusion complicates how the gothic can be defined, the physical setting continues to be an important aspect of the genre. Jerrold E. Hogle explains that gothic narratives usually take place in “antiquated or seemingly antiquated space[s],” such as the cliché castle or foreign palace (2). However, “a large old house” or “primeval frontier or island,” two specific settings that appear again and again in literature of the Americas, are also prime settings for a gothic aesthetic (Hogle 2). “Within this space, or a combination of such spaces,” writes Hogle, “are hidden some secrets from the past (sometimes the recent past) that haunt the characters, psychologically, physically, or otherwise” (2). In this way the gothic serves a profound sociological role, as it allows for authors and readers to confront their deep seated anxieties about the past. Monsters, ghosts, and other supernatural
beings “manifest unresolved crimes or conflicts that can no longer be successfully buried from view” (Hogle 2). As I discuss in Chapter One, literature from across the Americas, including the Caribbean, implement the figure of the ghost and other supernatural elements to comment on the horrors of slavery, war, and historical traumas in general—unresolved crimes that can no longer be buried from view.

Contemporary criticism relates the gothic to the trauma of conquest, colonization, and slavery. In *Gothic American: Narrative, History, and Nation* Teresa Goddu specifically explores how U.S. American author transformed and the gothic from its European origins to address a unique American experiences. She argues for the need to look beyond the gothic as an escapist genre that is disconnected from reality; rather, it is necessary to analyze the gothic within a historical and cultural context. “[G]othic stories,” Goddu asserts, “are intimately connected to the culture that produces them” (2). She specifically looks at the trauma of U.S. history and how authors rely on gothic conventions to address that past. As Goddu writes, “the horrors of history are…articulated through gothic discourse” (2). Through the gothic, authors are able to speak the unspeakable—the historical traumas that have been repressed and willfully forgotten (Goddu 10). The gothic resurrects these events and “disrupts the dream world of national myth with the nightmares of history. Moreover, in its narrative incoherence, the gothic discloses the instability of America’s self-representations; its highly wrought form exposes the artificial foundations of national identity” (Goddu 10).

*Tropical Gothic in Literature and Culture: The Americas* edited by Justin D. Edwards and Sandra Guardini Vasconcelos likewise explores gothic tropes as a means to revisit the trauma of specific historical events, focusing on the American “tropics,” including the U.S. South, the Caribbean, and Latin America. This volume of essays explores the seemingly
contradictory nature of “tropical” and “gothic”; yet, the paradise of the New World was a site of violence and dehumanizing brutality. It has a “haunted history” (2). Like Goddu, the authors of the essays contained in *Tropical Gothic* reveal a dark political and social reality that is confronted and reiterated in gothic narratives, as is the case in zombie narratives. As Edwards and Vasconcelos summarize in the introduction, zombies “haunt the sub-tropical American South and the Caribbean and [have] been mythologized as part of a culture of death and conjure rituals that seek to settle accounts with these regions’ black heritage and the haunting history of slavery” (6). Slavery is just one legacy that haunts the tropical regions of the Americas; there are also the histories of conquest and colonialism—violent histories that are prime for gothic interpretations and representations.

As Goddu’s *Gothic America* and the essays collected in *Tropical Gothic* illustrate, the violence, darkness, and fear invoked in gothic texts are frequently implemented to call attention to societal anxieties and historical traumas, like colonization and slavery. Although the novels in this corpus employ ghostly figures, I would not categorize them as “gothic.” These ghosts do not necessarily reflect anxieties or inspire horror or fear. Rather, they are spiritual guides—restorative figures—that allow for reconciliation and healing to occur.

**Traumatic History and the Uncanny**

In addition to the gothic, the uncanny is another term that can be applied to this discussion of ghosts in literature. As theorized by Sigmund Freud in his 1919 essay, “Das Unheimliche,” the uncanny helps us further to understand how supernatural elements disrupt narrative expectations and resist official history. Freud’s theorization of the *unheimlich*, or “uncanny,” led him to an etymological interrogation of the term and its opposite, *heimlich*. Whereas *heimlich* describes something that feels domestic and familiar, *unheimlich* destabilizes
expectations. *Unheimlich* can be used to describe a thing or event that is familiar yet simultaneously strange, like ghosts who are familiar but do not belong to this corporeal sphere, and so their appearance is strange and resists our expectations.

Freud clarifies that *heimlich*’s etymological ambiguity reinforces the uncanniness of *unheimlich*. He writes, “*heimlich* is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which are not mutually contradictory, but very different from each other—the one relating to what is familiar and comfortable, the other to what is concealed and kept hidden” (132). This clarifies that the uncanny is not only the strange familiar but the reappearance of what ought to be kept hidden. German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling’s definition of *unheimlich* enriches this second layer to Freud’s theory of the uncanny. Freud cites Schelling’s assertion that the “uncanny is what one calls everything that was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come into the open” (132). In this way, the term can be applied to the many atrocities committed in the Americas that persist in haunting the margins of history.

In *La isla que se repite* Cuban author Antonio Benítez Rojo pursues this line of reasoning, applying the uncanny to New World violence in his analysis of Bartolomé de Las Casas’s *Historia de las Indias* (1561). Benítez Rojo argues that Las Casas’s history, which describes a plague of ants that tormented Hispaniola from 1519 to 1521, is an uncanny text. In Benítez Rojo’s analysis the ants represent Las Casas’s subconscious guilt regarding slavery. Benítez Rojo points out that the plantation, and the presence of African slaves altogether, are markedly absent from Las Casas’s text; yet, the plague of ants is given uncommon emphasis. The guilt Las Casas attempts to repress by omitting the presence of the plantation system and the African slaves from his history resurfaces through the metaphor of the ants. Benítez Rojo asserts:

Entonces, en la narración *uncanny* de Las Casas, las hormigas (negras como “polvo de carbón”) son los negros fugitivos que arrasan con cuanto hallan en el camino y se
proponen la muerte y la ruina de sus amos por la fuerza. Podemos suponer que Las Casas, que redactó el capítulo uncanny casi medio siglo después de la plaga, vio, al describirla, un retorno de hechos familiares (la presencia africana en La Española y la rebelión de 1522) que habían permanecido ocultos, reprimidos, porque significaban una seria transgresión de la que se sentía culpable y, por lo tanto, temeroso del castigo de Dios: el infierno, la castración escatológica. (94)

[Therefore, in the uncanny narrative of Las Casas, the ants (black as “coal dust”) are the black fugitives who destroy everything they find in their path and propose the death and ruin of their masters by force. We can suppose that Las Casas, who wrote this uncanny chapter almost half a century after the plague, saw, upon describing it, a return of familiar facts (the African presence in La Española and the rebellion of 1522) that had remained hidden, repressed, because they signified a serious transgression of which he felt guilty and, consequently, fearful of God’s punishment: Hell, eschatological castration.]

As Benítez Rojo’s analysis demonstrates, the past does not remain buried, especially the traumas and wounds of the past. These traumas haunt either the national or individual subconscious, as in the case of Las Casas.

Haunting, by its very nature as a repetitive occurrence, is an uncanny act. The ghost is a figure of constant return because of an unresolved past and is thus uncanny. Nicholas Royle explains that the uncanny “would appear to be indissociably bound up with a sense of repetition or ‘coming back’—the return of the repressed, the constant or eternal recurrence of the same thing, a compulsion to repeat” (2). The female ghosts in the four novels by Brodber, Valdés, Cisneros, and Condé share memories that have been silenced or forgotten. Their uncanny return and the stories they share challenge the monologic historical discourse.

**Hegelian History, Colonial Epistemology, and Subaltern Knowledges**

“History is the fruit of power,” writes Michel-Rolph Trouillot in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, and as the fruit of power, history is “a story about those who won” (xix, 5). More often than not the victors of modern history have been white European males who not only imposed their culture, language, and religion on others, but through the politics of the writing of history continue the cycle of oppression by imposing their “history” of
triumph and conquest and defining it as “official”—becoming History with a capital H (one, singular, history to eclipse plural histories); this history approaches the absolute, leaving no room for other histories. Official history reinforces hegemonic discourse that marginalizes other voices—those of the conquered and oppressed, while claiming epistemological supremacy.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s Philosophy of History reflects the Western conceptualization of history that is not only linear and progressive, but exclusive. His definition of history is rigidly set and defined against artistic or creative traditions that are not born of “reason.” He asserts, “Legends, Ballad-stories, Traditions, must be excluded from such original history. These are but dim and hazy forms of historical apprehension, and therefore belong to nations whose intelligence is but half awakened” (2). According to Hegel, nations that draw upon stories and legends to make sense of their past are disqualified from a participation in a “rational” discourse. Hegel’s historical context clarifies his ethnocentric (and nationalistic) world view. At the time that Hegel gave his lectures on the philosophy of history, European powers had long established their imperial and aggrandizing desires. It follows then that Hegel’s conception of history will privilege European civilization while using enlightenment ideals to celebrate the progress of Europe within “Universal History,” a term which Hegel frequently employs and which represents the Western ideal of an absolute and total history (1).

The keystone to Hegel’s definition of history is reason, which “governs the world, and has consequently governed its history” (25). He proclaims, “Reason is the Sovereign of the World;…the history of the world, therefore, presents us with a rational process” (9). Thus, Hegel conceives of a universal/single History that has a clear linear direction ruled by reason. Moreover, reason, according to Hegel, also defines reality: “Reason is the substance of the
universe...that by which and in which all reality has its being and subsistence” (9). Reason not only rules the Western concept of history but of reality as well.

Moreover, Hegel’s concept of history is rooted within a patriarchal paradigm; women are not relevant to his discussion of history. In Resisting History Barbara Ladd addresses the patriarchal bias of official history, asserting that its “functionality is for empire, and it excludes. Its most fundamental exclusion, and the exclusion upon which others rest, is the exclusion of women” (2). Feminist theorist Hélène Cixous also attacks the patriarchal bias of history, written literature, and reason. She asserts:

Presque toute l’histoire de l’écriture se confond avec l’histoire de la raison dont elle est à la fois l’effet, le soutien, et un des alibis privilégiés. Elle a été homogène à la tradition phallocentrique. Elle est même le phallocentrisme qui se regarde, qui jouit de lui-même et se félicite. (44)

[Almost all the history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is both the effect, support, and one of the privileged alibis. It has been homogenous to the phallocentric tradition. It is the phallocentrism which it regards itself, which enjoys itself and congratulates itself.]

According to Cixous, if women desire to resist phallocentrism they must act (and write) against reason. Of course, male authors are also capable of confronting hegemonic histories; yet, Cixous’s essay focuses on the way in which, historically, women’s voices and creativity have been silenced by the patriarchal bias in literature, history, and reason. Cixous’s and Ladd’s arguments easily pertain to the corpus of this dissertation, as the female characters and narrators use personal histories that defy reason (through spiritual, supernatural, and affective elements) to react against the effects of colonization and dominant historical discourse, the kind of absolute history promulgated by Hegel.

Although it would seem that we have long since moved beyond Hegel’s concept of history, it is still important to include him in my discussion. As Patrick Hutton explains in
History as an Art of Memory, although the “Hegelian notion that history unfolds logically from primordial beginnings” has been overturned by most historians, Hegel’s legacy continues to perpetuate itself (112). Hutton continues, “Traditions, for example, lay beneath the national histories written in the nineteenth century and around which the curriculum of historical study continues to be organized into our own times. More profoundly, historians tend to accept the conventions of the historiographical traditions within which they receive their training” (112). Moreover, colonial world views (dating back as far as to the sixteenth-century) are still relevant in the twenty-first century as many post-colonial nations and peoples continue to resist those world views and de-colonize their psyches and their minds. Epistemological colonization remains a significant issue.

In his book An Intellectual History of the Caribbean Silvio Torres-Saillant asserts that Caribbean intellectual discourse and history has been eclipsed by Western (i.e. dominant) epistemology. He cites Drew Milne’s 2003 anthology, Modern Critical Thought, as a specific and contemporary example of the West’s exclusionary and authoritative claim on knowledge. The anthology, which presents “theorists writing about theorists,” is markedly limited to European thinkers, mostly French and German (4). Torres-Saillant traces this Eurocentric thinking to the early periods of conquest, colonization, and the demonization of the non-European other. During a discussion of Sir Walter Raleigh’s expeditions in the New World Torres-Saillant discusses the “cognitive politics of the conqueror” (119). He asserts that the conqueror “recognizes the existence of knowledge only when he possesses it. Only what the winner knows constitutes knowledge. Knowledge acquires cognitive reality only when it inhabits the consciousness of the conquering ‘us’” (119). According to Torres-Saillant, this mindset has persisted through the centuries, as apparent in Milne’s 2003 anthology.
Similarly, in *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization* Walter Mignolo addresses a hegemonic Western epistemology which he traces to the colonial period. He explores the ways in which European colonial powers used language and, consequently, a Western epistemological framework to colonize and subjugate the colonial subject. Colonial systems relied on their conception of language (i.e. the innate superiority of *their* language) to establish not only their inherent civilization, but also their epistemological dominance. The colonial subject’s illiteracy (in Western terms) signaled their fundamental inferiority and called into question their ability to reason and to access knowledge. They did not know how to read the Western alphabet, and so they did not know how to know; they were incapable of scientific knowledge. Their epistemological inferiority justified conquest and abuse. In this way, language was used as a tool to subjugate the other further.

Without language the colonized were considered a people without history, which further established their inferiority and justified the colonial endeavor. Mignolo writes:

‘People without history’ were located in a time ‘before’ the ‘present.’ People with history could write the history of those people without. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Max Weber transformed this lack (of alphabetic writing, of history) into a celebration of the possession of true knowledge, an Occidental achievement of universal value. (*Darker Side* 3)

Armed with history and alphabetic writing as proof of their intrinsic civilization, Western colonial powers secured their epistemological dominance. Moreover, as Mignolo explains in *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledge, and Border Thinking*, “coloniality of power” (here Mignolo uses Anibal Quijano’s phrase) constitutes itself as “[a]n epistemological perspective from which to articulate the meaning and profile of the new matrix of power and from which the new production of knowledge could be channeled” (17). As colonial expansion increased so too did Western knowledge. That knowledge was imposed on
the colonies: “From the epistemological perspective, European local knowledge and histories have been projected to global designs, from the dream of an *Orbis Universalis Christianus* to Hegel’s belief in a universal history that could be narrated from a European (and therefore hegemonic) perspective” (Mignolo, *Local* 17). Where is the place for other kinds of knowledges and other histories within this colonial epistemological system? The simple answer is that it does not exist within the Western colonial framework.

Moreover, this paradigm has persisted into the contemporary era. Western expansion, with modern epistemology rooted in the eighteenth century, has “framed hegemonic forms of knowledge” that privileges Western thought and dismisses other epistemological models (Mignolo, *Local* 22). Working from Michel Foucault’s use of “subjugated” and “disqualified knowledges” and Darcy Ribeiro’s concept of “subaltern knowledges,” Mignolo contributes his concept of “border thinking,” which, although a result of colonialism (inasmuch as it grows out of conflict and syncretism engendered by colonialism), works to resist colonialism (*Local* 19-20). In his theorization of border thinking Mignolo aims “to displace the ‘abstract universalism’ of modern epistemology and world history, while leaning toward an alternative to totality conceived as a network of local histories and multiple local hegemonies” (*Local* 22).

Mignolo cites Rigoberta Menchú as an example of “border thinking.” The tension between fact and fiction in her “memoire” has sparked intense controversy; her critics denounce her mémoire’s worth because it lacks “truth.” However, Mignolo argues that the value of her narrative is not dependent on “truth.” He asserts, “Rigoberta Menchú’s story is no less ‘fact and fiction’ than any other known narrative from the Bible to *The Clash of Civilizations*” (*Local* 25-26). Mignolo stresses the importance of understanding the opposing epistemological perspectives of Menchú and her critics: “Rigoberta Menchú argues from an enactive [performative] and
border epistemology. Her critics are located instead in a denotative and territorial epistemology” (Local 26). Whereas Menchú’s way of knowing is enactive, i.e. creative, performative, and imaginative, her critics’ epistemological system is denotative, i.e. literal and rational. Mignolo continues, “This tension between hegemonic epistemology with emphasis on denotation and truth, and subaltern epistemologies with emphasis on performance and transformation shows the contentions and the struggle for power” (Local 26). The force behind Menchú’s (hi)story is found within its performative, enactive elements. The novels analyzed in this dissertation illustrate subaltern epistemologies from the doubly othered: female racial minorities. In many ways they provide an enactive epistemology that illustrates the multiplicity of possible experiences. In this way the novels assert the value of imagination and creativity.

Mignolo’s defense of Menchú’s testimonio recalls Aristotle’s assertion that poetry is superior to history. In The Poetics Aristotle states, “Thus the difference between the historian and the poet is not that the historian employs prose and the poet verse…rather the difference is that the one tells of things that have been and the other of such things as might be. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history, in that poetry tends rather to express the universal, history rather the particular fact” (54). Margaret V. Allen expands on this concept when she makes the following related claim: “[T]he artist may be the better historian, for it is only he who can imaginatively recreate the past in a living form so that it stands revealed as it was, unfolding itself to those who wish true knowledge of it—not factual knowledge alone, but moral knowledge vitalized by the imagination” (435). There is power in fiction, an aesthetic power that is not limited by recorded history. It can lead readers to a “moral” knowledge that is not restrained by “facts.”
Although many endow history with a kind of reverence, it is vital to remember that history is always a narrative. The past is always mediated; by its very nature of being past it cannot be experienced. As Michel de Certeau asserts in *L’écriture de l’histoire*, “[L]e passé est-il fiction du présent ([T]he past is a fiction of the present)” (17). The boundary between history (supposed fact) and story (fiction) is indistinct. This is apparent in the Spanish *historia* and the French *histoire*, which can both mean history and story. The novels discussed in this dissertation play with the ambiguity inherent in these terms, causing the reader to question what is really true and whether it really matters. Perhaps fiction can better serve in our exploration of the past.

In *Le discours antillais* Édouard Glissant asserts the value of creativity over history. He describes how for Caribbean people history is a rupture; it is not the continuous, progressive phenomenon described by Hegel. For the people of the Caribbean a European concept of history is inadequate. Glissant’s solution is art and creativity. He writes, “Le trouble de la conscience collective rend en effet nécessaire une exploration créatrice (The trouble of the collective consciousness in effect renders the necessity of creative exploration)” (223). He goes on to state that historical schemas can create “un handicap paralysant (a paralyzing handicap)” (223). This is especially true for the people of the Caribbean, who, according to Glissant, do not benefit from a European historical paradigm. For their history is characterized by rupture, violence, and dislocation which cannot be processed by “une philosophie souvent totalitaire de l’histoire (a totalitarian philosophy of history)” like that in Europe (223). Fiction, on the other hand, is not totalitarian. It allows for multiplicity and possibility. In this way the novels by Brodber, Valdés, Cisneros, and Condé, although fiction, serve as alternative histories that recuperate the voices and histories of individuals that have been effaced by history.
Feminist Methodology

I implement a feminist methodology to explore how the novels of my corpus recuperate not only memory, but specifically feminine experience, which has often been silenced and overlooked. In her essay “The Blank Page’ and the Issues of Female Creativity” Susan Gubar asserts that woman has traditionally been viewed as a blank page on which the male artist projects his creative vision. She writes, “Woman has been defined symbolically in the patriarchy as a tabula rasa, a lack, a negation, an absence” (89). Women have historically been the subject of art, not its creators. Gubar writes that there is a “long tradition identifying the author as a male who is primary and the female as his passive creation—a secondary object lacking autonomy, endowed with often contradictory meaning but denied intentionality. Clearly this tradition excludes woman from the creation of culture, even as it reifies her as an artifact within culture” (77). The novels analyzed herein challenge this tradition. The female ghosts may be the subjects of the novels, but they are the ones that have inspired female authorship and the production of those novels. As they narrate their experiences, their female interlocuters transcribes their words. Thus, both the ghosts and the narrators/author personas participate in the creation of (hi)stories, allowing for a more complex understanding of the past. In the case of the novels by Brodber, Valdés, and Cisneros, the narratives resemble testimonial literature. The ghosts function like witnesses and the narrator/author personas serve as ethnographers.

The fact that as readers we read (or “hear”) this verbal exchange invokes an oral tradition of literature. Although in the Western canon oral forms of literature may not have been traditionally valued, they are key forms in various indigenous literary traditions. Many contemporary indigenous authors invoke elements of orality in order to subvert the hegemony of literary discourse. As Elvira Pulitano asserts in “Writing in the Oral Tradition: Reflections on the
Indigenous Literatures of Australia, New Zealand, and North America,” “The concept of writing in the oral tradition inevitably involves the idea of subverting Western literary genres” (217). Orality questions the authority of written literature and leads readers to consider other literary forms.

Significantly, oral forms are also key to a feminine literary history. Gubar writes, “The art of producing essentials—children, food, cloth—is woman’s ultimate creativity. If it is taken as absence in the context of patriarchal culture, it is celebrated within the female community by the matrilineal traditions of oral storytelling…Existing before man-made books, their [female storytellers] stories let us ‘hear the voice of silence’” (89). The female ghosts do just this, allowing the silenced and marginalized voices and experiences to be recuperated through the stories the ghosts perpetuate. In the novels of my corpus the ghosts represent maternal figures, or are literal ancestors to the narrators. They are storytellers who reinforce a matrilineal succession of knowledge and history.

Margaret Higonnet, in her essay “Weaving Women into World Literature,” likewise establishes that orature is an important part of the feminine literary tradition. She asserts, “[W]omen have always been verbal artists” (234). Higonnet cites the lullaby as an early oral form. However, feminine oral forms have been overlooked or considered inconsequential. She explains that an interrogation of oral forms is vital to tracing women’s literary history: “To weave a fuller history of women’s writings, we must connect the threads of oral cultures to those of written cultures, at the same time that we trace the legacy of one woman to the next” (242). The novels discussed in this dissertation, via orality, resist hegemonic patriarchal history on two levels, by invoking indigenous and feminine literary traditions.
The ghosts in these texts also resist a hegemonic history by disrupting a linear temporality, which can also be explored via a feminist methodology. The ghosts’ uncanny returns create a cyclical temporal space, which, as noted by Julia Kristeva in her essay “Le temps des femmes” is an example of “women’s time.” This cyclical time is maternal, rather than patriarchal. It disrupts a masculine linear temporality that is progressive and forward-moving, projecting into the future. In her essay “Maternité selon Giovanni Bellini” Kristeva further explores how maternity is part of a cyclical temporality. She writes, “En enfantant, elle touche à sa mère, elle la devient, elle est elle, elles sont une même continuité se différenciant (By giving birth, she touches her mother, she becomes her, she is her, they are the same differentiating continuity” (411). Here Kristeva describes a collapse of linear temporality. The birthing process dissolves the barrier between past and present as a mother becomes “one” with her own mother, becoming a new link in a matrilineal chain that paradoxically moves forward while turning back, like a woven garment whose threads must loop backwards in order to complete its design. Kristeva’s theories help to make sense of the ghosts’ return, which allows for the female ghosts to connect with their female relatives to nurture and heal. The fact that this process is captured by authors from Jamaica, Cuba, the U.S., and Guadeloupe reinforces the wide-spread significance of this process, leading us to a discussion of the geographic scope of my dissertation.

**Geographic Scope**

The geographic scope of my project is influenced by New World studies, which takes a comparative approach to explore the shared history of conquest, colonization, and slavery throughout the Americas. There are obvious differences between the colonial experience in the United States, which has emerged as a First World power with neo-imperial desires of its own, and that in Caribbean, for example, where several islands have not yet claimed sovereignty; yet
when we consider the ambiguous space occupied by the U.S. South these differences appear less pertinent. As Deborah Cohn and Jon Smith, editors of *Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies*, assert, “[T]he U.S. South comes to occupy a space unique within modernity: a space simultaneously (or alternately) center and margin, victor and defeated, empire and colony, essentialist and hybrid, northern and southern (both in the global sense)” (9). Cohn and Smith wish to extend Southern studies to include discussions of the Caribbean and Latin America. Similarly, in their volume *Just Below South: Intercultural Performance in the Caribbean and the U.S. South*, Jessica Adams, Michael P. Bibler, and Cécile Accilien, attempt to extend Southern studies to include discussions on the Caribbean in order to “to think about the Caribbean and the U.S. South within the same framework” (4). The South (which has come to be understood implicitly as the southern United States) thus extends to include other “souths.”

One of the keys to this new paradigm is to consider the South not just as oppressor, but also as the oppressed, which further clarifies similarities between the U.S., the Caribbean, and Latin America. Even before the Civil War, plantation colonialism “most benefited white men in distant metropoles” (Cohn and Smith 2). The South during and after the Civil War held more similarities with other colonial territories than it did with its northern counterpart. Cohn and Smith write, “[I]f we define ‘America’ hemispherically…. [it then becomes clear that] the experience of defeat, occupation, and reconstruction—particularly if this historical trauma is broadened to include the African American experience of defeat under slavery—is something the South shares with every other part of America” (2). Cohn’s and Smith’s position allows us to relate U.S. literature that deals with the history of slavery and its attendant racial issues to Caribbean and Latin American texts with similar themes. This will be especially pertinent to
Brodber’s *Louisiana*, which seeks to illustrate the forgotten similarities, both historical and social, between the U.S. and Jamaica.

The authors of my corpus represent the geographic range of New World studies. Born in 1940 in St. Mary, Jamaica, Erna Brodber is a sociologist and author whose academic work influences her fiction. *Louisiana* was likely inspired by her field work in rural Jamaica collecting oral histories from the older generation. In addition to highlighting folk traditions in her fiction, she often traces the issues related to the African diaspora. She is the author of several sociological articles and five novels, including: *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (1980), *Myal* (1988), *Louisiana* (1994), *The Rainmaker’s Mistake* (2007), and *Nothing’s Mat* (2014).

Zoé Valdés is a Cuban author who currently lives in exile in France. Valdés was born in 1959, the year of the Cuban Revolution; however, she was disillusioned with it early in her life. Her father was imprisoned under Castro’s regime, and Valdés herself was sentenced to exile in 1995 after denouncing Castro’s rule in her first novel, *La nada cotidiana*. She settled in Paris, where she has lived ever since. She continues to write about Cuba and continues to criticize Castro’s government from a distance. Valdés has written over twenty novels, including *Te di la vida entera*, which illustrates her anti-Castro sentiments.

Sandra Cisneros, born in Chicago in 1954, is a Mexican-American author who has published books of poetry, a collection of short stories, and two novels, including *Caramelo*. Cisneros’s work often centers on life in the borderlands—the liminal space that produces a hyphenated identity. This is apparent in her use of both English and Spanish in her works. This bilingual element in her literature illustrates the hybrid nature of Mexican-American experiences. She currently lives in Mexico.
Maryse Condé was born in Guadeloupe in 1937, yet has lived all over the globe, including France, Senegal, and the United States. She currently divides her time between the U.S. and Guadeloupe. Although Condé can be defined as a cosmopolitan author, Guadeloupe and its history is still a part of her identity. This is apparent in her decision to return figuratively to her island in her 2006 novel _Victoire_, a deeply personal and intimate text that also comments on the broader Guadeloupean experience. She is the author of several novels and essays that address Caribbean identity, the African diaspora, and the search to understand one’s personal history and a reconciliation with the past. A comparative analysis of the novels by these Jamaican, Cuban, Mexican-American, and Guadeloupean authors promises to be fruitful as it draws out the similarities that emerge between seemingly different ethnic backgrounds and cultures while keeping in mind that these cultures have a shared history of conquest, colonization, slavery, and political upheaval. It goes without saying that these atrocities have been experienced throughout the world, yet they have greatly affected the shaping of the American continents.

**Chapter Summaries**

Because of my hemispheric approach Chapter One, “Phantom Ache: Ghosts in New World Literature,” addresses the larger tradition of the “ghostly figure” in the literature of the Americas. It focuses specifically on the following texts from the U.S., Caribbean, and Latin America: William Faulkner’s _Absalom, Absalom!_ (1936), Dulce María Loynaz’s _Jardín_ (1951), Carlos Fuentes’s _Aura_ (1965), Isabel Allende’s _La casa de los espíritus_ (1985), Toni Morrison’s _Beloved_ (1987), and Leslie Marmon Silko’s _Almanac of the Dead_ (1991). These six texts not only theorize the concept of history, destabilizing the notion of a linear and absolute history, but also implement the ghost, or a ghostly character, to address and confront a horrific past. These
twentieth-century texts present a broad spectrum of the use of ghosts in literature and help to contextualize the corpus that I will analyze in the dissertation as a whole.

The second chapter, “‘Anthropology of the Dead:’ Ghosts, Subaltern Knowledge, and Alternative History in Erna Brodber’s *Louisiana*,” analyzes spirit possession as a means to recuperate “subaltern” knowledge. This is accomplished as Brodber positions other kinds of knowledge and other kinds of histories against the dominant historical discourse. Although others have commented on the role of spirit possession in *Louisiana* to resist colonial desires, this chapter aims to provide a more in-depth textual analysis that reveals how this resistance is accomplished, focusing on the ways in which the gender of the ghosts and the gender of the protagonist subvert the historiographic hegemony.

Chapter Three, “Haunting and Affect: Ghosts and Nostalgia in Zoé Valdès’s *Te di la vida entera* and Sandra Cisneros’s *Caramelo: or Puro Cuento*,” explores the novels’ affective tendencies and how affect, through the novels’ use of *boleros* to create a sense of nostalgia, reinforces the ghosts’ power to link past and present. As sociologist Avery Gordon explains in *Ghostly Matters* (1997), ghosts allow us to access a different kind of knowledge, not the “cold” facts, but a “transformative recognition”—a kind of remembering that links the past to the present through affect (8). *Te di la vida entera* and *Caramelo* pull the reader into a “structure of feeling” that exists outside of a rigid temporal space. These novels subvert a hegemonic historical discourse by destabilizing linear temporality and resisting reason.

The fourth and final chapter, “‘Rêvons:’ Haunting, History, and Imagination in Maryse Condé’s *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots: récit*,” explores the role of imagination in writing about the past. This chapter begins with an analysis of Condé’s 1986 novel *Moi, Tituba Sorcière* . . . *Noire de Salem*, another work inspired by a female ghost that subverts the dominant, patriarchal
historical narrative. However, whereas Tituba is inspired by a historical figure, Victoire is a more intimate work inspired by the author’s grandmother. Like the three novels analyzed in chapters two and three, Victoire is the result of a haunting. Again, a female ghost, Condé’s grandmother, Victoire, inspires female authorship and the production of an alternative discourse to the dominant historical narrative. Although Victoire’s ghost is a silent apparition (in contrast to those vocal spirits in Louisiana, Te di la vida entera, Caramelo, and Tituba), her haunting presence is just as effective in motivating Condé’s narrator to mediate her history and reclaim her grandmother’s subjectivity. Condé’s narrator is identical to Condé the author. The character names, setting, and events match the details of Condé’s personal history. For example, the narrator’s mother is named Jeanne (same as Condé’s) and the narrator’s maternal grandmother is named Victoire (same as Condé’s). Moreover, the narrator has the same profession as Condé; she is an author. Thus, this novel is deeply personal and reflects Condé’s struggle with her own understanding of the past. Instead of being dismayed by the gaps in her knowledge of family history, Condé plays with (and within) the empty spaces to confront history and rewrite the past.

Although various literary works use the ghostly figure to address the weight of the past, what makes the four texts by Brodber, Valdés, Cisneros, and Condé unique is the fact that their female ghosts inspire female creation that confronts the official and patriarchal history. These particular texts not only demonstrate how literature can reclaim memory and (re)construct history, but also illustrate how this imaginative process asserts the place of a female author against the hegemonic paradigm of History with a capital H. The novels analyzed in this dissertation confront Western and patriarchal historical constructs as they oppose not only the idea of a rational, linear, and universal history, but also resist a rational reality. The female ghosts in these texts, by their very ontology, defy such rational desires; consequently, their
narratives become alternative histories and illuminate an alternative reality that disrupts dichotomous thought. Through the figure of the ghost, these novels reclaim marginalized women’s voices and experiences and broaden historical consciousness.
CHAPTER ONE
Phantom Ache: Ghosts in the Literature of the Americas

In literature, the supernatural is a productive means to resist official history as it subverts the binary logic upon which history is predicated. Supernatural figures occupy a liminal space that is “betwixt and between” opposing realities. In *The Anthropology of Performance*, Victor Turner explains the decentering function of liminality:

> Just as the subjunctive mood of a verb is used to express supposition, desire, hypothesis, or possibility, rather than stating actual facts, so do liminality and the phenomena of liminality dissolve all factual and commonsense systems into their components and ‘play’ with them in ways never found in nature or in custom. (101)

Liminal figures dissolve a hegemonic system of history. The liminality inherent in the supernatural genre breaks the dialectical logic of linear history and allows for multiplicity and polyphonic voices. In *Spectral America* Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock explains the liminal qualities of ghosts when he writes that ghosts “are unstable interstitial figures that problematize dichotomous thinking…Neither living nor dead, present nor absent, the ghost functions as the paradigmatic deconstructive gesture, the ‘shadowy third’ or trace of an absence that undermines the fixedness of such binary oppositions” (4). Because ghosts escape the polarities represented in the categories of “dead” and “alive” they subvert dichotomous thought. They represent a gray area of thought, which contributes to the horror and anxiety they often inspire.

Simply put, the gothic eludes categorization. As Arthur F. Redding states, the gothic “undermine[s] ontological and epistemological certainties” and is “overly indulgent of surface and play on affects,” preferring “archaic fantasies to *historical rationalism*” (2, emphasis added). In this chapter and in this dissertation as a whole, I explore how literary ghosts often challenge historical rationalism by disrupting a linear historical narrative. Weinstock also addresses this point. He asserts, “The ghost is that which interrupts the presentness of present, and its haunting
indicates that, beneath the surface of received history, there lurks another narrative, an untold story that calls into question the veracity of the authorized version of events” (5). Much of the literature of the Americas that conjures ghostly figures does so in order to invoke those other narratives, those untold stories, and in this way this literature questions the veracity and authority of the hegemonic historical discourse. Although Redding and Weinstock focus strictly on U.S. fiction, similar narrative elements with analogous effects are also found in Latin American and Caribbean literature.

The focus of this dissertation is to explore how ghosts specifically disrupt the binary logic of linear temporality in order to provide us with alternatives to the dominant historical discourse. Of course, the authors analyzed in this project are not the first to use ghosts or supernatural themes to this end. This chapter addresses the larger tradition of the “ghostly figure” in the literature of the Americas as a whole. In most cases ghosts, spirits, and other supernatural figures reveal specific societal and cultural anxieties regarding—but not limited to—race and history. Many of the works discussed in this chapter theorize the concept of history through the figure of the ghost, which disrupts a linear historicity and causes a cyclical return to the past. This cyclical return allows for multiple (hi)stories to destabilize an official and hegemonic History with a capital H.

**Ghosts in U.S. Literature**

The tradition of literary ghosts in the United States is rich and varied. Many well-known authors who employ the supernatural and ghostly figures include: Washington Irving (1783-1859); Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864); Edgar Allen Poe (1809-1849); Henry James (1843-1916); Edith Wharton (1862-1937); William Faulkner (1897-1962); Shirley Jackson (1916-1965); Toni Morrison (1931-); Leslie Marmon Silko (1948-), and many more. From the New
England Gothic to the Southern Gothic, the figure of the ghost is repeatedly invoked to confront historical issues that have haunted and continue to haunt the national imagination. New England Gothic literature often “reflects the guilty secrets and unwholesome traditions that characterize the Gothic vision of New England’s history” (Ringel 139). The authors of this category are concerned with a past from which “come[s] horror and evil” (Ringel 139). As the editors of *Undead Souths* express, Southern U.S. literature likewise implements ghostly figures in order to comment on the trauma of the past: “To see dead people is to face the past and its many cultural irruptions in the present” (4-5). Although ghosts appeared in U.S. literature before the rise of the gothic novel in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Europe, as apparent in the writings of the seventeenth-century New England minister Cotton Mather, supernatural themes progressively emerged parallel to the increase in European gothic texts (Ringel 140).

During the nineteenth century there was a growth of interest in the supernatural, as apparent in the emergence of the Spiritualist movement, a “new religion” originating in New York that promoted séances and an interest in the existence of spiritual beings (Ringel 143). Supernatural themes persisted into the twentieth century and, in the case of the Southern Gothic, often dealt with the guilt and traumatic history of slavery. There are too many works from the U.S. to discuss in a single chapter, but for the purpose of this project I will focus on three, including: William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* (1991). These twentieth-century texts provide examples of the effect of literary ghosts and help contextualize the corpus that is analyzed in the dissertation as a whole.
Although Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* is complex enough to demand nuanced and varied interpretations, it has often been cited as a gothic romance.² There are no literal ghosts in the novel; yet, it is a haunted text. The novel itself is a result of storytelling. It represents the conscious construction of a history, a history of the South through the mystery and legacy surrounding one man, Thomas Sutpen, who “came out of nowhere and without warning… [and] built a plantation,” or as Miss Rosa, his sister-in-law, asserts “Tore violently a plantation” (9). Miss Rosa relates Sutpen’s story to the young Quentin Compson, who is about to leave the South to attend Harvard University. Miss Rosa’s version of Sutpen’s history, full of mystery and intrigue, reads like a ghost story. Max Putzel calls this meeting between Miss Rosa and Quentin a “séance,” and in a way it is (70). During their meeting, Miss Rosa recreates “the deep South dead since 1865 and peopled with garrulous outraged baffled ghosts” (*Absalom* 9). Together Rosa and Quentin invoke the memory of ghosts to make sense of the past.

Significantly, Miss Rosa, is a ghostly storyteller. As Quentin listens to her story he realizes that Miss Rosa herself is “one of the ghosts which had refused to lie still even longer than most had, telling him about old ghost-times” (9). Moreover, Faulkner describes the old maid in grotesque, ghastly terms: “Her voice would not cease, it would just vanish. There would be the dim coffin-smelling gloom sweet and oversweet with the twice-bloomed wistaria [sic]” (8). Even her voice has a haunting quality, it does not cease, but rather vanishes. Faulkner also evokes the scent of decaying flesh and mold through his description of the “coffin-smelling gloom.” Miss Rosa is described as a zombie-like figure, more dead than living:

the rank smell of female old flesh long embattled in virginity while the wan haggard face watched him above the faint triangle of lace at wrists and throat from the too tall chair in

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² See Malcolm Cowley’s “William Faulkner’s Legend of the South,” Michael Millgate’s *The Achievement of William Faulkner*, and Philip Goldstein’s “Black Feminism and the Canon: Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* and Morrison’s *Beloved* as Gothic Romances.”
which she resembled a crucified child; and the voice not ceasing but vanishing into and then out of the long intervals like a stream, a trickle running from patch to patch of dried sand, and the ghost mused with shadowy docility. (8)

Although virginity would usually imply potential for fertility, in the case of an old maid virginity is more closely linked with death. At her advanced age, Miss Rosa’s virginity represents a finality; her womb has become a kind of tomb, which is emphasized by the claustrophobic setting of Rosa’s parlor, “a dim hot airless room with the blinds all closed and fastened for forty-three summers,” (7). This macabre setting and Miss Rosa’s ghoulish presence set the right tone for discussing the fatal events that take place at Sutpen’s Hundred.

Sutpen also is a ghost-like figure, a “demon,” who emerges out of thin air without a history, without an established identity (9). As Miss Rosa asserts, “he was not articulated in this world. He was a walking shadow. He was the light-blinded bat-like image of his own torment cast by the fierce demoniac lantern up from beneath the earth’s crust and hence in retrograde, reverse; from abysmal and chaotic dark to eternal and abysmal dark” (171). This romantic and gothic description of Sutpen reminds the reader of Wuthering Heights’ Heathcliff (a Gothic anti-hero). The two men have many unsavory traits in common. Sutpen is an outsider, barbarous, and a threat to the “civilized” inhabitants of Jefferson, Mississippi. Like Heathcliff, he seeks to rise socially and economically by asserting a place for himself among the landed gentry. He marries Ellen Coldfield and has two children by her. However, Sutpen’s Hundred is the opposite of Heathcliff’s Thrushcross Grange; his plantation is a site of potential incest, fratricide, arson, and other violent acts.

Although Sutpen has been dead for years at the time that Miss Rosa relates his story to Quentin, the consequences of his actions are still being felt. After Miss Rosa’s visit with Quentin she asks him to come with her to search for her nephew Henry at Sutpen’s Hundred, a place
which she has avoided for years. They set out in a buggy at midnight and find Sutpen’s illegitimate black daughter, Clytie, Charles’ grandson, Jim Bond (the last of Sutpen’s line), and, Henry, who has been hiding in the house for years, waiting for death. Miss Rosa later returns to the plantation to retrieve her nephew, but she is too late. When Clytie sees the ambulance approaching, she rushes to set fire to the house:

it would be a good three minutes before [they] could reach the house, the monstrous tinder-dry rotten shell seeping smoke through the warped cracks in the weather-boarding as if it were made of gauze wire and filled with roaring and beyond which somewhere something lurked which bellowed, something human since the bellowing was in human speech, even though the reason for it would not have seemed to be. (375)

In full gothic mode now, Faulkner describes Miss Rosa’s attempt to run into the burning house to save her nephew and paints a grotesque and horrific image: “struggling and fighting like a doll in a nightmare, making no sound, foaming a little at the mouth, her face even in the sunlight lit by one last wild crimson reflection as the house collapsed and roared away, and there was only the sound of the idiot negro left’” (376). Faulkner’s description of Miss Rosa in this passage is dehumanizing and frightening. She is like a doll and is foaming at the mouth as the house collapses in red flames. This tragic and macabre ending underlines the nightmare that is the history of the South—a site of violence and inhuman cruelty that can never be absolved.

Slavery’s legacy, as Quentin’s Canadian roommate at Harvard deduces, will always haunt the South. The roommate asserts:

it’s something my people haven’t got. Or if we have got it, it all happened long ago across the water and so now there aint anything to look at every day to remind us of it. We dont live among defeated grandfathers and freed slaves (or have I got it backward and was it your folks that are free and the niggers that lost?) and bullets in the dining room table and such, to be always reminding us to never forget. What is it? something you live and breathe like air? (361)

As a Canadian, Quentin’s roommate’s geographic distance from the history of the South intensifies his psychological distance from that past; yet, in his questioning he illuminates the
problem faced by southerners. How can they escape the horrors of the past when it is something they live and breathe like air? *Absalom, Absalom!* is a novel haunted by slavery, by Sutpen, and by the tragic consequences of his actions. Through a gothic aesthetic Faulkner is able to convey in harrowing detail the trauma of that history. Moreover, Faulkner’s novel troubles official discourse. Quentin, and the reader, pieces together Sutpen’s history as he listens to various versions of it told to him by Miss Rosa and his own father, who had received the story from his father, General Compson. The novel is an example of vernacular discourse; it is a product of various versions of the same story. In this way, it transcends official discourse and approaches myth. In the analyses that follow, we will see how ghostly figures and narrators challenge or revise official historical discourse to broaden historical consciousness.

Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, written half a century after Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* is another literary work that invokes haunting in order to address the harrowing history of slavery. However, whereas Faulkner’s novel focused on the haunting effects slavery had on a white Southern young man, Morrison’s illustrates the uncanny return of slavery in the form of a literal ghost who haunts a female ex-slave. Faulkner explores the effects of symbolic haunting whereas Morrison embodies that traumatic past in a ghost who returns in the flesh.

*Beloved* is inspired by the true story of a runaway slave mother, Margaret Garner, who killed her young daughter to spare her from life as a slave. Margaret had fled from a plantation in Kentucky to Ohio with her family, but slave catchers quickly discovered them and tried to capture Margaret and her family. When Margaret realized that she and her family were surrounded with no chance of escape, she slit the throat of her three year old daughter and attempted to kill her remaining three children. Although Morrison changes the names of the historical figures, she is able to give a psychological and emotional reality to this gruesome tale.
This imaginative reality transcends the official narrative discourse, including the first person narratives of slaves themselves.

This fictional text attempts to do what many slave narratives could not, or would not, do. As Morrison writes in her essay “The Site of Memory,” “In shaping the [slave] experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they [the authors of the slave narratives] were silent about many things. There was a careful selection of the instances that they chose to describe” (91). So as not to offend the sensibilities of the white (often female) readers, the authors of slave narratives would gloss over the worst of their experiences in slavery. In rewriting the story of Margaret Garner, Morrison imagines and reproduces one woman’s particular experience in slavery, horrible and dehumanizing as it is. Morrison does not shy away from the gruesome truths as did the authors of the slave narratives by “pull[ing] the narrative up short with a phrase such as, ‘But let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate’” (Morrison, “The Site of Memory” 90-91). As Morrison recreates Margaret Garner’s history, she forces the reader to question: which is more monstrous, a mother who kills her child or the institution of slavery which not only tortures and murders but also erases culture? Morrison heightens the sense of horror one ought to feel at her descriptions of slavery and the Middle Passage by detailing the gruesome and infamous history of infanticide. This horror is further emphasized by the haunting of the spirit of the murdered baby, Beloved, and her uncanny return as a grown woman with flesh and blood.³ Although slavery is abolished, it continues to haunt the nation, like the spirit of Beloved.

Sethe, Margaret Garner’s fictional counterpart, lives in post-emancipation Ohio with her daughter Denver in house number 124; yet, the memories of slavery continue to haunt her as

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³ Although Beloved has returned in the flesh, there is still something extremely uncanny about her physical form. She has smooth skin, completely devoid of any lines (Beloved 47). This detail underlines Beloved’s unnatural regeneration.
does the ghost of the baby she murdered to protect from that cruel existence. The novel begins with a declaration that marks the tone of Beloved’s haunting presence: “124 was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom” (3). Although Sethe is safely in the North and has lived to see abolition, her quotidian existence is anything but peaceful; her baby’s spite and venom prevents her from unloading the burden of her past at Sweet Home, the plantation in Kentucky where she was a slave.

Morrison asserts a firm connection between slavery and haunting in the first chapter when Sethe declares, “I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house” (14). Both the “tree” on Sethe’s back, scars from the whip which had created a “decorative work of an iron-smith too passionate for display,” and the haunting spirit represent the uncanny past of slavery—a trauma that cannot and will not be repressed (17). As Avery Gordon observes, “Sethe knows through the powerful mediation of haunting that as a proclaimed fact abolition is not emancipation” (162). Slavery may be abolished, but its haunting presence represented by Beloved’s ghost restricts Sethe from accessing true freedom.

The connection between slavery and Beloved’s ghost is even more decisively established when the baby’s ghost takes on human form, emerging fully dressed out of a nearby pond (47). Her return via water no doubt parallels an infant’s entry into the world via amniotic fluid; however, the water from which Beloved returns also conjures the history of the Middle Passage. During the slave trade, the waters of the Middle Passage opposed the life giving waters within a mother’s body. Édouard Glissant addresses this juxtaposition when he theorizes the belly of the slave ship as a perverse womb. He explains:

Le terrifiant est du gouffre, trois fois noué à l’inconnu. Une fois donc, inaugurale, quand tu tombes dans le ventre de la barque. Une barque, selon ta poétique, n’a pas de ventre, une barque n’engloutit pas, ne dévore pas… Le ventre de cette barque-ci te dissout, te précipite dans un non-monde où tu cries. Cette barque est une matrice, le gouffre-
matrice…Cette barque est ta matrice, un moule qui t'expulse pourtant. Enceinte d'autant de morts que de vivants en sursis. (*Poétique de la Relation* 18)

[What is terrifying is the abyss, three times tied to the unknown. First, when you fall into the belly of the boat. A boat, according to your poetics, does not have a belly, a boat does not swallow, does not devour…The belly of this boat will dissolve you, it rushes you into a non-world where you scream. This boat is a womb, the abyss-womb…This boat is your womb, a matrix that nevertheless expels you. Pregnant with as many dead, as those living on borrowed time.]

The belly of the slave ship is a womb, but it is also an abyss; it is pregnant not with life but with the dead and the living whose deaths are already made certain and imminent. Beloved’s rise from the water is a kind of rebirth, but it is not natural and it is not intended to be. Like the belly of the slave ship, this water has given birth to death.

Moreover, Beloved carries memories of the Middle Passage, through which she has passed in search of her mother. Whereas Sethe is haunted by plantation slavery, Beloved is haunted by the collective memory of the Middle Passage. She narrates these harrowing memories stating, “We are not crouching now we are standing but my legs are like my dead man’s eyes I cannot fall because there is no room to the men without skin are making loud noises I am not dead” (201). Her final statement implicitly points to the argument made by Glissant that the belly of the slave ships was as pregnant with the dead as with the living. Beloved’s slave ship persona feels compelled to affirm her own existence; she is not dead, although she is surrounded by death and the threat of death, like those “vivants en sursis” noted by Glissant. The lack of punctuation in this particular passage of Morrison’s novel captures at a formal level the delirium of the Middle Passage and also points to a fragmented, ghostly memory. The visual effect of the unusual spacing reminds the reader of the empty spaces in the history of slavery—the silences that make up what Glissant calls “une non-histoire (non-history)” (*Le discours antillais* 224). This non-history can only be recovered by a ghost, which further stresses its own etherealness.
Although Beloved is herself a “haint,” she is also haunted by memories that she could not have experienced. Her memory of the Middle Passage points to a collective memory of past trauma. Significantly, Morrison theorizes memory’s ghost-like elements and its effect on a collective imagination by positing that individual memories persist through time to haunt specific places; even if the landscape is altered, those memories will remain. In a conversation with Denver, Sethe explains this concept, which she terms “rememory:”

Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened…Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it’s you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. (34)

The haunting persistence of memories affect more than the individual—they affect a collective consciousness; “the picture of it stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world.” Individual trauma does not remain individual. This explains how the trauma of slavery in the U.S. can haunt the nation. It is “out there, in the world,” as Sethe asserts. It is possible to encounter other people’s trauma and hear or see something when you “bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else.” In this way Sethe explains the persistent haunting of the past. For this reason she warns Denver, stating that she can never return to Sweet Home. Sethe exclaims, “[Y]ou can’t never go there. Never. Because even though it’s all over—over and done with—it’s going to always be there waiting for you” (34). If Denver were to return to the plantation, she would be overwhelmed by Sethe’s “rememories” of her suffering in that specific landscape. Sethe had killed Beloved in order to protect her from this suffering and Sethe realizes that she will have to protect Denver from her memories of that existence. Slavery, the unnamed “it,” will always haunt Sweet Home.
Sethe’s attempts to “[beat] back the past,” however, are not successful (68). The past threatens to consume her as Beloved’s demands grow beyond her abilities to fulfill them. Sethe is initially overwhelmed with joy when she realizes that her baby has come back to her and attends to Beloved’s every whim. However, the ghost cannot be satisfied with these acts of restitution: “Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that” (238). It becomes clear that although the past cannot be repressed, it ought not to be indulged. It must be confronted. However, this is too immense of a task for the individual. In fact it is a community of black women that comes together to exorcise Beloved from 124. Thirty women approach the house and begin singing: “the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees” (247-48). It is the women’s communal, unified voice that dismisses Beloved from this world, allowing Sethe finally to live facing the future. Although Morrison takes up an individual true story, via the ghostly figure she is able to comment on the larger issue of slavery’s legacy. The ghost in Beloved represents the ghost of slavery, a memory that is too much for an individual to handle and which can only be confronted by a community.

Faulkner and Morrison use the ghostly figure and haunting to demonstrate the effects of slavery, but ghosts can also represent other national traumas and problematic histories as apparent in Leslie Marmon Silko’s Almanac of the Dead. Silko’s novel connects the history of the oppressed, colonized, and enslaved, uniting the stories of indigenous peoples from North and South America and Africa: “Indians flung across the world forever separated from their tribes and from their ancestral lands—that kind of thing had been happening to human beings since the
beginning of time. African tribes had been sold into slavery all over the earth” (88). Although this passage highlights the ubiquitous practice of conquest and slavery, it is no less pardonable. The spirits of these enslaved and conquered peoples threaten to destabilize the present.

In this novel, spirits and ghosts subvert an official historical discourse by representing the voice of those who have been silenced by the dominant history. Spirits (of the ancestors and of the exploited earth) play an important role in the process of reclaiming tribal histories: “All at once people who were waiting and watching would realize the presence of all the spirits—the great mountain and river spirits, the great sky spirits, all the spirits of beloved ancestors, warriors, and old friends—the spirits would assemble and then the people of these continents would rise up” (425). In Silko’s text, spirits create community, inspire action, and also play subversive roles in history. In a particular case, a spirit of an anonymous Apache warrior prevented Mexican and U.S. authorities from discovering the true identity of Geronimo.

According to the official history, Geronimo, the Apache outlaw who was a nuisance to both the U.S. and Mexican governments, died while a prisoner of war at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. However, in Silko’s novel a group of tribal elders relate an alternate history to a member of the younger generation, explaining that the real Geronimo was never caught. In this way the tribal elders (and Silko’s novel) rewrite the official history. Moreover, the elders’ version of this history is not linear, further subverting the concept of official (or absolute) history: “The story they told [about Geronimo] did not run in a line for the horizon but circled and spiraled instead like the red-tailed hawk” (224). They explain that at one time there had been at least three (possibly four) Apache warriors who had been called Geronimo: “To whites all Apache warriors looked alike, and no one realized that for a while, there had been three different Apache warriors called Geronimo who ranged across the Sonoran desert south of Tucson” (225). The photographs
taken of each “Geronimo” further confused U.S. officials. A single figure consistently appeared in the various photographs, standing in place of the different Apache warriors who had been called Geronimo. Even the so-called Geronimos when comparing their photographs were perplexed by this figure’s appearance in place of their own image: “The puzzle had been to account for the Apache warrior whose broad, dark face, penetrating eyes, and powerful barrel-chested body had appeared in every photograph taken of the other Geronimos. The image of this man appeared where the faces of the other Geronimos should have been” (228). One of the more poignant theories put forth by the tribal council was that the soul of a dead Apache warrior was attempting to return through the photographs. The spirit of this Apache warrior not only helped guard Geronimo’s true identity, but also subverted the dominant discourse by providing the U.S. authorities with misleading evidence.

Silko’s novel also resists the dominant discourse by deconstructing the logic of borders at multiple levels; they are only “imaginary lines.” One of her indigenous characters exclaims:

We don’t believe in boundaries. Borders. Nothing like that. We are here thousands of years before the first whites. We are here before maps or quit claims. We know where we belong on this earth. We have always moved freely. North-south. East-west. We pay no attention to what isn’t real. Imaginary lines. (216)

The verb tense is in this passage is especially noteworthy as it blurs the difference between boundaries of space and time: “We are here thousands of years before.” Uniting the present tense conjugation of the verb “to be” and the preposition “before” in the same phrase undoes the logic of linear history. This intriguing passage also connects to the liminal quality of spiritual beings. Ghosts know no boundaries because they elude dichotomous systems. They freely move through space and time. The arbitrary borders and boundaries reinforce the arbitrariness of the historical narrative.
In addition to challenging official history, the novel decenters American exceptionalism by uncovering the ugly side of U.S. history, presenting a different version of history than that promoted in U.S. text books. Marginalized voices are allowed to speak and share their history of suffering at the hands of the U.S. government and its soldiers. One character relates the cruel and gratuitous murder of Yaqui women and children:

In 1902, the federals are lining Yaqui women, their little children, on the edge of an arroyo. The soldiers fire randomly. Laugh when a child topples backwards. Shooting for laughs until they are all dead. Walk through those dry mountains. Right now. Today. I have seen it. Where the arroyo curves sharp. Caught, washed up against big boulders with broken branches and weeds. Human bones piled high. Skulls piled and stacked like melons. (216, emphasis added)

Again, the verb tense destabilizes a rational and linear temporality. Although describing an even in the past (1902), the speaker uses the present tense form of the verb “to be:” “In 1902, the federals are lining Yaqui women, their little children, on the edge of an arroyo.” The speaker further destabilizes temporal logic by stating, “Right now. Today. I have seen it.” The present verb tense collapses a linear concept of time and, therefore, of history. This traumatic past persists to haunt the present; it is a cyclical trauma that continues to repeat.

The novel’s characters also question the legitimacy of U.S. nationalism: “There was not, and there never had been, a legal government by Europeans anywhere in the Americas. Not by any definition, not even by the Europeans’ own definitions and laws. Because no legal government could be established on stolen land” (133). The effectiveness of this passage is seen in how it states that even by European standards, there has never been a legal government by Europeans in the Americas. Moreover, *Almanac of the Dead* also subverts the dominant historical discourse by revealing the fraudulent claims of “discovery” by Europeans:

From the first moment Spanish ships scraped against the shore, they had depended on the native Americans. The so-called explorers and ‘conquistadors’ had explored and conquered nothing. The ‘explorers’ had followed Indian guides kidnapped from coastal
villages to lead them as far as they knew, and then the explorers kidnapped more guides. The so-called conquerors merely aligned themselves with forces already in power or forces already gathered to strip power from rivals. (220)

The dominant historical discourse has celebrated European ingenuity and bravery in their conquest of the New World. Yet, this revision of that history undoes Western exceptionalism and writes the indigenous person back into the story.

Through the supernatural genre Silko allows marginalized “voices” (like the dead Apache warrior) to assert their place within the historical discourse. As Silko’s indigenous characters well know, history is “alive with spirits” (517). Spirits of the dispossessed play an important role in resisting further oppression. Silko, Morrison, and Faulkner rely on the ghostly figure and haunting to address the wrongs in U.S. history; yet, similar tropes are also apparent in other literatures of the Americas. As discussed in the introduction, there is an important connection and relation between the U.S. South, the Caribbean, and Latin America, which share common histories of conquest, colonization, and slavery.

**Ghosts in Latin American and Caribbean Literature**

Literatures from Latin America and the Caribbean may not form as rich of a ghostly tradition as those produced in the United States, yet ghosts and spectral figures do appear in these literatures for the same reason—to address the nightmare that is history. In her analysis of gothic motifs in Caribbean literature Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert explains that Caribbean fiction from the nineteenth century enacted gothic conventions to “[unveil] the atrocities of the slave system” (232). Across the Caribbean and Latin America supernatural tropes are implemented to comment on the past as seen in the ways in which the following authors use ghosts or ghostly figures to deal with relevant historical and societal issues surrounding slavery and political

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Paravisini-Gebert names Mary Prince’s *The History of Mary Prince* (1831), Juan Francisco Manzano’s *Autobiography* (1840), and Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda’s *Sab* (1841) as specific examples within this tradition.
upheaval, including: Dulce María Loynaz (1902-1997); Juan Rulfo (1917-1986); Carlos Fuentes (1928-2012); Gabriel García Márquez (1927-2014); Isabel Allende (1942-); Daína Chaviano (1957-); Cristina García (1958-); and many others. For the purpose of this dissertation I will analyze the following: Dulce María Loynaz’s *Jardín* (1951), Carlos Fuentes’s *Aura* (1965), and Isabel Allende’s *La casa de los espíritus* (1982), all of which also illustrate the temporal effects of spirits and use ghosts to confront a horrific past.

Like the novels by Faulkner, Morrison, and Silko, Cuban author Dulce María Loynaz’s *Jardín*, written in 1935 and published in 1951, also implements gothic conventions to address the burden of history. *Jardín* illustrates how the traumatic history of slavery continues to haunt Cuban society even in the twentieth century. Loynaz’s novel has many similarities to Faulkner’s, which reinforces the fact that the paradigm of ghostly figures who challenge official historical discourse is not geographically limited. These authors wrote during the same period, the late 30’s, and both of their works highlight slavery and an elite planter class in ruin. However, Loynaz’s allusion to slavery’s haunting effect is less obvious than Faulkner’s.

In the prologue Loynaz describes her “lyrical novel” as “la historia incoherente y monótona de una mujer (the incoherent and monotonous history of a woman)” (9). The incoherent history of this woman (Bárbara) is something that the reader and the protagonist herself must work through in order to make sense of a nebulous past. Orphaned at a young age, Bárbara grows up in an abandoned mansion at the turn of the nineteenth century in Cuba. She is heir to a diminishing aristocratic legacy and represents the precarious position of the white Cuban elite at the twilight of their (in)glorious reign. However, Bárbara has difficulty making sense of her present because of the weight of the past and its many specters.
The narrative begins with a *memento mori* as Bárbara sorts through old portraits of deceased relatives and attempts to identify the individuals, wondering at the specifics of their everyday lives. This opening scene not only establishes the girl’s preoccupation with death, but also sets the dark and mysterious tone of the novel. Although no literal ghosts appear in the text, the house is full of “los fantasmas del pasado (ghosts of the past)” (125). Bárbara is haunted by the persistence of the past through these family portraits, letters, and other historical relics that she discovers throughout the abandoned house and its garden.

The crippling weight of the unknown past seizes Bárbara’s individual identity and autonomy; she feels that she cannot escape the past and that nothing really belongs to her. Everything she possesses and is has been inherited from the dead. She is only filling the vacancy of their absence; she is not living her own life:

Nada nos pertenece, nada es nuestro de un modo absoluto y original. Ni nuestro amor, ni nuestro dolor, ni nuestra alegría. Vivimos de lo que nos dejan los muertos, ocupamos el sitio que ellos han tenido que dejarnos; nada tenemos que ellos no hayan tenido antes; les copiamos hasta las facciones y los nombres. (139)

[Nothing pertains to us, nothing is ours in an absolute or original sense. Neither our love, nor our pain, nor our happiness. We live off of what the dead have left us, we occupy the space that they have had to leave us; there is nothing that we have that they did not previously own; we copy everything from them including our features and names.]

This passage highlights the uncanny repetition of the past as it creates an uneasy relationship to the present. It is highly unnerving to think that the present is merely an echo of the past, that the present is merely comprised of shadows. Even Bárbara’s name is not her own; it is also inherited from the dead. She realizes this when she discovers love letters from the previous century addressed to “Bárbara.” She learns that this other Bárbara is her great aunt. This uncanny repetition affects Bárbara’s sense of self as she reads the letters addressed to her namesake and finds herself becoming infatuated with their now deceased author.
The letters have a powerful effect on the young woman who has spent her entire life within the confines of her house and its grounds. The letters blur the boundary between her sense of self and the other Bárbara. She has to remind herself that she is the one who is still living: “Ella ha muerto, ella ha muerto… Ella no es ella (She is dead, she is dead…She is not her)” (137). Bárbara has unusual difficulty separating her own identity from that of her deceased ancestor. She constantly has to assert her own individual identity that is separate from the dead Bárbara. Despite her efforts to claim her difference from her great aunt, Bárbara falls in love with the dead woman’s lover, a man who has been dead for decades. This unnatural desire warps Bárbara’s conception of love, which becomes inextricably bound with death: “Las cartas desprenden un letal perfume de amor y de muerte. Las cartas dan la muerte vestida de amor (The letters give off a lethal perfume of love and death. The letters offer death clothed in love)” (138). This macabre romance is just one example of how the past—that which ought to remain buried and suppressed—tends to resurface in the novel. Bárbara realizes that it is impossible to escape the dead: “no podemos escapar de los muertos. No podemos (We cannot escape the dead. We cannot)” (139). To a large extent, the novel is about the way in which the dead—and the past in general—revisit the living, as apparent in slavery’s implicit presence.

As in Absalom, Absalom!, Jardín is haunted by the memory of slavery. However, it is never explicitly acknowledged, which only heightens its uncanniness. During one of her many meditations on death, Bárbara thinks to herself that the ocean, more than anyone, understands death because it is full of corpses. She muses, “El mar lo sabe porque él también está lleno de muertos. No hay nadie que sepa tanto de la muerte como el mar (The sea knows because it is also full of the dead. There is no one else that knows as much about death as the sea)” (26). It is impossible to think about the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean without thinking of the
Middle Passage. As Derek Walcott puts it in his poem titled, “The Sea is History,” within “that grey vault” that is the sea lies “Bone soldered by coral to bone” (137). The Atlantic carries the weight of thousands of dead slaves who died in route to the New World. Their bodies are now one with the sea.

Although Loynaz does not specifically mention the Middle Passage, Bábara’s meditation evokes that particular historical trauma. This interpretation is reinforced as Bábara compares the sea to an infinite nightmare: “[E]s también como un sueño largo, interminable, que sueña el mundo mismo. El mar es la pesadilla de la tierra ([The sea] is also like a long, endless dream that dreams the world itself. The sea is the nightmare of the earth)” (26). The Middle Passage was a literal nightmare. Hundreds of Africans were packed tight in ships without room to move, covered in blood, urine, and other bodily fluids. This is also represented in Walcott’s poem “The Sea is History:” “Then there were the packed cries, / the shit, the moaning” (137). Bábara evokes a vision of the Middle Passage and the trauma of slavery in general by calling the sea both a tomb and a nightmare.

In addition to this allusion to the Middle Passage, slavery haunts the text through Bábara’s only living companion in the abandoned mansion, her black maid, Laura. Yet, Laura seems to live in another world and appears to be haunted by ghosts of her own. Bábara frequently catches her maid gesticulating as if in conversation with an invisible companion:

Parecía ya vivir en otro mundo; a veces gesticulaba extrañamente, como discutiendo con alguien que era invisible, y en otras, más escasas, pronunciaba entre dientes palabras entrecortadas. (92)

[It seemed as if she [Laura] lived in another world; sometimes she would gesticulate strangely, as if she were arguing with an invisible subject, and at other times, less often, she would utter short words between her teeth.]
Laura’s otherworldliness is emphasized by her conversations with invisible figures. It would seem as if she is not fully living in the present. The ghosts of the past continue to torment her.

Laura’s strange behavior is matched only by her appearance. Her intense blackness and rigid body language dehumanize her to such an extent that if it were not for the sound of her rosary beads, she could easily be mistaken for a statue:

[Es] tan rígida y tan negra que, a no ser por el ligero temblor de su rosario de semillas de aguaribay, se la hubiera confundido con uno de los figurines de tallada cantería que, enmohecidos por la humedad, sostenían angustiosamente los arquitrabes del portón. (91)

[She is so rigid and so black that, except for the slight trembling of her rosary made of aguaribay seeds, she would have been mistaken for one of those figurines of carved stone that, moldy from humidity, in anguish support the architraves of the doorway.]

This passage is rich with detail about Laura and her place in the mansion. Not only is her humanity denied by her blackness, but it is also denied by her statue-like rigidness. What anguish has caused her to turn to stone? By imagining her as a statue whose purpose would be to hold up an architrave—the main beam that lies horizontally across two supporting posts—Loynaz invokes a great burden that Laura cannot escape. The burden appears to be slavery.

Laura appears inhuman, not only because of her statue-like black body, but also for her lack of human connection with Bárbara. However, this lack of rapport suggests a deeper issue. When Bárbara asks Laura a question, the maid refuses to answer her, let alone acknowledge her presence. She sits silently: “Ella [Bárbara] vio las redondas pupilas muy opacas, muy duras, vueltas hacia ella, asestadas en ella; pero no sintió la mirada sin luz y sin expresión ([Bárbara] saw her [Laura’s] very opaque, round eyes, very hard, turned towards her, aimed at her; but she [Bárbara] did not feel the dull and expressionless gaze)” (93). The phrase “asestadas en ella” indicates severe hostility, even violence. “Asestar” can mean to aim or to deal a heavy blow. In this case, Laura’s eyes are aimed at Bárbara, as if her eyes could administer physical harm. Laura
obviously holds great resentment towards Bárbara; her intense sentiment escapes from her hardened, lightless eyes. When Laura eventually responds to Bárbara it is not to answer her question, but to curse the girl. She exclaims, “Tienes el diablo dentro del cuerpo; lo tuviste siempre... desde hace cien años (You are full of the devil; you always have been...for a hundred years)” (93). It is clear that Laura’s spiteful words are not necessarily aimed at Bárbara (at the most, she would be in her early twenties), but towards Bárbara’s ancestors, members of the white Cuban elite.

A tempting interpretation is that Laura’s curse is directed at the “other” Bárbara, the protagonist’s namesake and great aunt who would have been alive before the abolition of slavery. Most likely Laura would have belonged to this other Bárbara, or at least to her family. This interpretation is even more compelling when we consider an earlier scene in which Bárbara, while exploring the garden, finds questionable artifacts in a hidden pavilion. There she finds “un latiguillo de caña de Indias, en cuyo puño, tallado en una sola piedra de color, alcanzaba a ver una B de turquesas incrustadas (a whip made from sugar cane from the Indies [Caribbean] with a handle carved out of colored stone and the initial B encrusted in turquoise)” (81). The fact that this whip is made from sugar cane, a Caribbean resource that made slave-owners and Europeans wealthy at the cost of African slaves, is a cruel irony since it would have been used to abuse and torture those slaves. The weapon used against them was made from the same resource they cultivated, often losing fingers, hands, and arms in the machinery used to refine the sugar.

The jewel encrusted B adds another, more personal layer to the mystery of the pavilion and its forgotten treasure. Could the whip have belonged to the great aunt, and would she have used it to beat her slaves? If so, this could explain Laura’s resentment towards Bárbara and her curse. Despite her innocence, the initial on the whip makes Bárbara complicit in the crimes of the
past. As explained earlier, Bárbara has inherited everything that she owns, and everything she is, from her ancestors. This includes their guilt. Moreover, when Bárbara entered the pavilion the whip, which hung from a nail in the wall, was swinging as if it had recently been placed there: “oscilaba aún, como acabado de poner” (81). This detail reinforces the temporal collapse between past and present, further implicating Bárbara in the sins of her ancestors. This is reinforced by the symbolism of the other items she finds in the pavilion, including antique weapons, “armas anticaudas,” and aged ears of corn that have long since turned black and hard: “cientos y cientos de mazorcas de maíz con la paja ya negra, y negros y secos los duros granos” (80, 81). These items clearly point to the conquest and colonization of the New World. As Elizabeth Christine Russ explains, whereas the antique guns and swords represent the violent arrival of the Spanish conquistadors, the corn represents the indigenous past and those of African descent who gave corn “an important place in the religious rituals of Santería” (79). Clearly, these objects carry profound historical significance—connecting the young Bárbara to not only the traumatic past of her island, but also to Cuba’s variegated ethnic and cultural heritage.

However, Bárbara suffers from a form of amnesia, which complicates her relationship to the past. She cannot remember her own childhood very well, and even the memory of her mother, “la más muerta de todos los muertos (the most dead of them all),” is vague (26). Her memories are enveloped in a fog so thick that she cannot distinguish them from dreams. She even begins to question whether there is a difference between reality and dream:

[N]o se sabe si son [los recuerdos] de la vida vivida o de los sueños soñados; es lo mismo. La vida vivida se vuelve, a veces, tan inconsciente como un sueño; es quizás un sueño largo. La vida futura es el sueño que soñaremos esta noche. (26)

[She does not know if her memories are from her lived experience or from dreams; they are one and the same. Life becomes, sometimes, as inconsistent as a dream; perhaps it is one long dream. The future is a dream that we will dream tonight.]
Bárbara’s living reality so easily blurs with her dreams that she cannot tell them apart. This will complicate her ability to process the information that she discovers about the past.

When she first enters the pavilion she has the uncanny feeling that she has been there before, but cannot remember a previous visit or motive for such a visit: “¿Por qué todo aquello se le aparecía revestido de ese aire singularmente familiar con que volvemos a encontrar las cosas que estuvieron alguna vez en nuestra vida (Why did all of that seem to her to be cloaked with this singularly familiar air with which we again find the things that were once in our life)” (82)? This feeling of *déjà vu* reinforces how the traumatic past continually haunts the present. Although Bárbara did not participate in slavery or the conquest, those traumas are part of her identity, not as a descendant of the victims, but of the perpetrators. Bárbara’s amnesia reflects the flaw in the memory of the wealthy Cuban elite—heirs to the planter class—who repressed the violent deeds of their predecessors. However, through a gothic aesthetic Loynaz shows that the past persists, haunting the present imaginary until the amnesia is cured and the horrors of history confronted.

Mexican author Carlos Fuentes’s *Aura* likewise treats the issue of the past and the supernatural; however, his ghostly figure does not represent a specific burden of the past. Rather, it illustrates the disruption of a linear narrative history. As previously stated, the liminal quality of a spirit interrupts a dichotomous system. In this case, history is that dichotomous system inasmuch as it is defined by the binaries of past and present. More specifically, in Fuentes’s novel it is a feminine ghostly figure that threatens a masculine linear temporality.

Through the juxtaposition of a ghostly feminine character and an academic male protagonist, Fuentes contrasts a conception of femininity that is inclined to the supernatural with a type of masculinity that is dominated by logic and reason. This is apparent at the outset from
the epigraph—an excerpt taken from the French historian Jules Michelet’s history of witchcraft, “La Sorcière” (The Sorceress)—in which the two sexes are defined by opposite roles. Fuentes translates Michelet’s text into Spanish:

El hombre caza y lucha.
La mujer intriga y sueña;
es la madre de la fantasía,
de los dioses.
Posee la segunda visión,
las alas que le permiten volar hacia
el infinito del
deseo y de la imaginación…
Los dioses son como los hombres:
nacen y mueren sobre
el pecho de una mujer…

[Man hunts and struggles.
Woman intrigues and dreams;
she is the mother of fantasy,
of the gods.
She possesses the second vision,
wings that permit her to fly towards
the infinite realm of
desire and imagination…
The gods are like men:
they are born and die atop
a woman’s breast…]

This epigraph primes the reader with a vision of woman that is mysterious and magical. With this frame established, Fuentes sets up a dichotomy between the two sexes to emphasize further woman’s seductive “witchcraft.” Whereas his male protagonist is a historian—an academic interested in facts and a linear temporality of which he can make sense, his female characters, Aura and Consuelo Llorente, are a beautiful, mysterious phantom and an elderly sorceress, respectively.

The narrative is written in second person and directly addresses the protagonist, Felipe Montero. The novel begins with Felipe finding an advertisement placed in the paper by a
hundred and nine year old woman, Consuelo, who seeks an historian to organize and complete her deceased husband’s memoirs. Felipe answers the advertisement and moves into Consuelo’s house where he is enchanted by her niece Aura, a beautiful yet mysterious young woman. Aura’s name communicates her otherworldliness and implies her true nature. Aura can have several meanings, including a gentle breeze and a person’s spiritual essence. Aura’s name simultaneously evokes the ethereal and mysterious. Despite his intense attraction towards Aura, Felipe is often disconcerted by her consistently odd behavior. At times she seems completely oblivious of his presence, yet she enters his room uninvited to initiate a sexual relationship.

Initially, Felipe believes that Aura is being controlled, in a psychological sense, by Consuelo and tries to convince her to run away with him. It is not until Felipe discovers an old photograph of Consuelo that he realizes Aura is a spiritual projection of Consuelo’s younger self. The narrator explains, “Sabes…que por eso vive Aura en esta casa: para perpetuar la ilusión de juventud y belleza de la pobre anciana enloquecida (You understand…that for this purpose Aura lives in this house: to perpetuate the illusion of the youth and beauty of the poor, crazy old woman)” (42). Aura is kept in the house to function like a mirror for Consuelo: “encerrada como un espejo (shut away like a mirror)” (42). However, at this point Felipe only understands part of Consuelo’s motive.

Through ritual Consuelo conjures Aura with the objective to seduce Felipe, hoping to transform him into a surrogate for her dead husband. Felipe realizes the old woman’s plan when he finds another photograph with a young Consuelo and her husband. He is startled to see that the man in the photograph looks exactly like him. Felipe is a doppelganger of Consuelo’s dead husband:

La foto se ha borrado un poco: Aura no se verá tan joven como en la primera fotografía, pero es ella, es él, es . . . eres tú. Pegas esas fotografías a tus ojos, las levantas hacia el
tragaluz: tapas con una mano la barba blanca del general Llorente, lo imaginas con el pelo negro y siempre te encuentras, borrado, perdido, olvidado, pero tú, tú, tú. (58)

[The photo had become a bit faded: Aura did not look as young as she did in the first photograph, but it is she, it is he, it is…it is you. You look closer at the photographs, you raise them up to the skylight: with one hand you cover the white beard of General Llorente, you imagine him with black hair and can only see yourself, faded, lost, forgotten, but you, you, you.]

Like Aura, Felipe is a strange double. His individual identity is swallowed up in Consuelo’s desire to draw him back into the past. The repetition of the second person familiar pronoun “tú, tú, tú” emphasizes Felipe’s uncanny resemblance to the General, but it also creates a sense of horror as Felipe confronts his own disappearance into the past. He sees himself in that picture faded, lost, and forgotten. It is strange and familiar all at once; and, as the repetition also emphasizes, it is also undeniable.

Despite this disturbing discovery, Felipe surrenders to Aura’s seduction and falls under her spell to such an extent that he appears not to mind that Aura is merely a spiritual projection or that, in effect, Consuelo is the real seductress. The novella ends with him physically and figuratively embracing Consuelo. He chooses to live out the rest of his life with her. Fuentes illustrates this surrender through a disconcerting description of Felipe and Consuelo making love:

[You touch those sagging breasts when the light softly penetrates and surprises you, obliging you to pull your face away and look for the crack in the wall through which the moonlight has begun to enter,…the silver light that falls on Aura’s white hair, over the broken face, composed of layers of onion, pale, dry and wrinkled like a cooked plum.]

Instead of enhancing a romantic atmosphere, the moonlight reveals Aura’s true identity as Consuelo no longer has the strength to sustain the spiritual projection. Fuentes emphasizes the
grotesque quality of Consuelo’s aged body by describing in detail her sagging breasts ("senos flácidos"), and her pale, dry and wrinkled ("pálido, seco y arrugado") skin. However, this does not trouble Felipe because he is no longer himself. The narrator asserts towards the end of this description: “[T]ú has regresado también (You have returned also)” (62). There is no longer a clear distinction between past and present; Felipe is now General Llorente.

Consuelo has successfully pulled Felipe back into the past, illustrating a cyclical, feminine sense of time that opposes a masculine temporality. This disruption of a linear temporal progression is an immense threat to a masculine sense of projection, as apparent in the male need/urge to plant his seed and establish a future progeny that will carry his legacy into eternity. By contrast, Fuentes emphasizes the feminine nature of a cyclical temporality by describing Consuelo’s house in womb-like terms; it is insular, dark, and humid. Felipe is overwhelmed by darkness (“oscuridad”) and dankness: “puedes oler el musgo, la humedad de las plantas, las raíces podridas, el perfume adormecedor y espeso (you can smell moss, humidity from plants, rotten roots, a perfume numbing and thick)” (14). By entering the house and living in Consuelo’s house Felipe figuratively re-enters the womb. However, this regressive movement back into the womb does not offer the option of life or future posterity. It solidifies a kind of death for Felipe. He will be erased from history, which is highly ironic considering his vocation as a historian.

However, before his final submission to the past, Felipe had already begun to question linear temporality. He realizes that linear, progressive time is merely an illusion. The narrator asserts:

No volverás a mirar tu reloj, ese objeto inservible que mide falsamente un tiempo acordado a la vanidad humana, esas manecillas que marcan tediosamente las largas horas inventadas para engañar el verdadero tiempo, el tiempo que corre con la velocidad insultante, mortal, que ningún reloj puede medir. Una vida, un siglo, cincuenta años: ya no te será posible imaginar esas medidas mentirosas, ya no te será posible tomar entre las manos ese polvo sin cuerpo. (59)
[You don’t look at your watch again, that useless object that falsely measures time according to human vanity, those hands that tediously mark the long hours invented in order to disguise true time, time that runs with an offensive, mortal velocity, which no watch could measure. A life, a century, fifty years: you can no longer imagine these dishonest measurements, it is no longer possible for you to take that bodiless piece of dust between your hands.]

Felipe has surrendered to the mystical feminine that thrives in a cyclical temporal space.

Fuentes’s text illustrates a masculine view of the female supernatural that is at once threatening and seductive. The horror of the story is not necessarily Aura’s ghostly presence, or even Consuelo’s grotesque aging body; rather, the true horror is that Felipe’s masculinity and individual identity is erased as he is pulled back into the past and relinquishes the chance to project his lineage into the future. Whereas Fuentes conceives of a cyclical feminine temporality as threatening and morbid, the authors analyzed in this dissertation use female ghosts to disrupt linear temporality and establish a cyclical, maternal temporality in order to heal the wounds of a violent history.

La casa de los espíritus, by Chilean author Isabel Allende, provides a view of the supernatural feminine that differs from Fuentes’s text. The spiritual figures in Allende’s novel are more similar to those analyzed in this dissertation; they function as guides to the female protagonists and ultimately aid in the recovery of a would-be forgotten history. Moreover, like several of the literary works examined in this chapter, the ghosts underscore the novel’s treatment of historical trauma, namely the 1973 coup initiated by General Augusto Pinochet, during which Allende’s cousin and then President of Chile, Salvador Allende, was killed. Isabel Allende, who worked as a journalist before the military coup, wrote her novel while in exile in Venezuela, and, as in the case of her protagonists, she was inspired by spirits to confront the terror of the coup and recover a lost past. Allende explains, “I had the need to recuperate the beneficent spirits of the past…I thought that if I would write down what I wanted to rescue I
could reconstruct what I had lost, revive the dead and hold onto the memories. I bought paper and began to write a story” (qtd. in Agosin 15). Her writing becomes an act of conjuring as she “recuperate[s] the beneficent spirits of the past” and “revive[s] the dead.” In the novel, the spirits of the past have a special connection with the female characters. Similar to Fuentes’s novel, La casa de los espíritus illustrates a feminine connection to the spiritual realm.

La casa de los espíritus is a family saga that is often compared to Gabriel García Márquez’s Cien años de soledad because of its broad scope and magical realist style. However, La casa de los espíritus is a female centered text. The novel focuses on three women of the del Valle and Trueba family and their relationships with each other, beginning with the otherworldly experiences of Clara the Clairvoyant. Since childhood Clara could read the future, interpret dreams, and conjure spirits. Although many expected her unusual abilities to fade as she grew into womanhood, her powers only became more exact as she aged. As Clara the Clairvoyant passes on her mystical knowledge to her daughter, Blanca, and granddaughter, Alba (the novel’s main narrator), a strong connection is made between matriarchal knowledge and the supernatural.

As noted above, La casa de los espíritus is similar to Fuentes’s Aura inasmuch as it posits a unique connection between women and the supernatural. This is apparent when Clara’s powers become more accentuated after menstruation, the initiation into womanhood (73). Moreover, as Ruth Y. Jenkins points out, because Clara is a woman her supernatural powers pose a threat to the patriarchal status quo represented by her childhood priest—who declares that she is possessed by the devil, her father—who worries his daughter’s powers will cost him a political career, and her husband (62). Clara’s powers make her into a subversive figure, even more so after she dies and returns as a spirit.
Clara’s ghost is neither threatening nor seductive, unlike Aura in Fuentes’s male fantasy. Rather, she rescues Alba from a mental breakdown and also saves history from being lost.

Clara’s spirit appears to her granddaughter after Alba is imprisoned by the Pinochet regime. Her captors, after raping, torturing, and beating her, lock Alba in the doghouse (“la perrera”), a tiny cell resembling an airless, dark, and frozen tomb (“como una tumba sin aire, oscura y helada”) (347). Just as Alba is ready to surrender to death, her deceased grandmother appears and inspires her to fight for life through writing:

Clara trajo la idea salvadora de escribir con el pensamiento, sin lápiz ni papel, para mantener la mente ocupada, evadirse de la perrera y vivir. Le sugirió, además, que escribiera un testimonio que algún día podría servir para sacar a la luz el terrible secreto que estaba viviendo, para que el mundo se enterara del horror que ocurría paralelamente a la existencia apacible y ordenada de los que no querían saber, de los que podían tener la ilusión de una vida normal. (348)

[Clara brought the saving idea of writing through thought, without pencil and without paper, in order to keep her mind occupied, escape from the doghouse, and live. She suggested, moreover, that Alba write a testimonial that one day might serve to shine a light on the terrible secret that she was living, so that the world would hear of the horror that had occurred parallel to the peaceful and ordered existence of those that didn’t want to know, of those that could keep the illusion of a normal life.]

Although Alba is physically imprisoned and unable to write conventionally, she is still able to go through the mental exercise of writing as a kind of therapy, just as writing the novel was a therapeutic act for Allende to “revive the dead” and “reconstruct what [she] had lost.” However, there is a further point to Alba writing other than saving her sanity. Her record will act as a testimonial of the horrors of the coup. It will shine a light on the terrible secret that she was living (“para sacar a la luz el terrible secreto que estaba viviendo”).

After Alba is released from prison she sets about to write the history of the coup and the histories of her mother and grandmother. The result is *La casa de los espíritus*. Alba relies on her own memory (and that of her grandfather Esteban Trueba), but also turns to her grandmother’s
notebooks, which the spirits had saved from being destroyed by the Pinochet regime. Alba narrates:

Mi abuela escribió durante cincuenta años en sus cuadernos de anotar la vida. Escamoteados por algunos espíritus cómplices, se salvaron milagrosamente de la pira infame donde perecieron tantos otros papeles de la familia. Los tengo aquí, a mis pies, atados con cintas de colores, separados por acontecimientos y no por orden cronológico, tal como ella los dejó antes de irse. Clara los escribió para que me sirvieran ahora para rescatar las cosas del pasado y sobrevivir a mi propio espanto. (363)

[For fifty years my grandmother wrote in her notebooks of life. Rescued by certain complicit spirits, they were miraculously saved from the infamous pyre where so many other family documents perished. I have them here, at my feet, tied with colored ribbons, organized by event and not by chronological order, just as she had left them before leaving. Clara wrote them so that they would serve me now, enabling me to recover the things of the past and survive my own terror.]

The spirits of the novel are helpful and do not inspire horror. As Clara counseled her daughter, Blanca, there is no reason to fear the dead, only the living: “no debía temer a los muertos, sino a los vivos” (219). The coup and its aftermath prove the truth of her words.

The connection between the supernatural and the female characters reinforces the way in which spirits can bridge the gulf between the past and present and heal the wound of history. The subversive spirits described in the above passage, like Clara, are redeemers of the past. They rescue Alba’s family history, but more specifically they rescue a family history written from a woman’s perspective. This feminine, supernatural, and spiritual point of view is an important aspect of the corpus that will be analyzed in this dissertation.

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, the ghostly figure is a rich tradition in literature from all parts of the Americas. Whether the ghosts are threatening or consuming, as seen in Morrison’s Beloved and Fuentes’s Aura, vengeful and subversive, as in Silko’s Almanac of the Dead, or nurturing and protective, as in Allende’s La casa de los espíritus, they share the common function to explore the traumas of the past. One of the more interesting points to arise
out of this analysis has been the unique role of a female ghost. In the case of Fuentes’s text, which represents a male conception of the female supernatural, a female ghostly figure threatens masculine vitality. However, the female ghost in Allende’s text presents a nurturing, maternal figure that disrupts a linear temporality not to trap man in the past, but rather to rescue repressed histories from being forgotten. This conveys a matriarchal mode of remembering that is not linear but rather cyclical. The chapters that follow explore in greater detail how female ghosts specifically nurture memory while subverting the status quo and inspire an alternative history of the past. A male ghost could easily address the same violent past and its uncanny return. However, the female perspective stresses an added layer of otherness and marginalized identity. Moreover, because the female ghosts in the texts by Brodber, Valdés, Cisneros, and Condé are related to the protagonists they emphasize a matriarchal mode of remembering that opposes the often hegemonic patriarchal discourse. In this way, the fictional texts allow for a greater understanding of truth, reminding the reader of Aristotle’s preference for poetry over written history. As these novels illustrate, poetry, or the creation of art, is key to resisting and illuminating the consequences of historical trauma.
CHAPTER TWO

“Anthropology of the Dead:”
Ghosts, Subaltern Knowledge, and Alternative History in Erna Brodber’s *Louisiana*

“[S]pirit possession often implies being possessed with the power of grace, the transformation of a bad situation into a good situation.”
—Michael Taussig

Erna Brodber’s *Louisiana* employs tension between fact and fiction, leading the reader to consider power structures that shape the conceptualization of history and epistemology. The novel resists hegemonic forms of knowledge perpetuated by the Hegelian concept of official history and Western epistemology in general. This is accomplished as Brodber positions other kinds of knowledge and other kinds of histories against official history. June Roberts’ article “Erna Brodber’s *Louisiana*: An Alternative Aesthetic, or Oral Authority in the Written Text” argues that spirit possession is an act of resistance against colonialism and the effects of Hegelian historicism on the colonial subject. She writes, “*Louisiana* becomes a platform for the performance of spirit revelations containing not only the possibility of, but also providing the conditions for, recasting and recuperating the colonial orientation of canonical imperializing historiography” (81). Shirley Toland-Dix likewise asserts that Brodber, in *Louisiana*, “identifies spirit possession as a strategy of resistance to oppression as it constitutes a realm that colonial powers cannot control” (205). Although others have commented on the role of spirit possession in *Louisiana* to resist colonial and hegemonic desires, in my project I provide a more in depth textual analysis that reveals how this resistance is accomplished, focusing on the ways in which the gender of the ghosts and the gender of the protagonist subvert the historiographic hegemony.⁵

As they commune with the novel’s protagonist, the female spirits in Brodber’s novel engender reconciliation with the self, community, and ancestral legacy. This becomes apparent as the

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⁵ See also Angeletta K.M. Gourdine’s “Carnival-Conjure, *Louisiana*, History and the Power of Women's Ethnographic Narrative.”
reader recognizes the emphasis on spiritual epistemology, the significance of orality, and the importance of folklore.

At a basic level, *Louisiana* treats the spiritual and cultural journey of Ella Townsend, a Jamaican born African American anthropologist studying at Columbia University who is hired during the 1930s by the U.S. Government—via the Works Progress Administration (WPA)—and supplied with a recording machine by her university to interview Sue Anne King (Mammy)⁶ and record the black oral history of Louisiana. Mammy dies before Ella is able to record anything substantial; yet, Mammy (and her deceased friend Louise Grant [Lowly]) has chosen Ella as a “horse.” In Voodoo, *Santería*, and other Afro-Caribbean religious practices a “horse” is a person who is possessed (“ridden”) by spirits and deities. A “horse” is a vessel through which these spirits can communicate and inhabit the physical world.⁷

Mammy’s and Lowly’s spirits “mount” Ella in order to communicate from beyond the grave, providing specific histories of slavery in the United States, the post-emancipation experience for black Americans, and Lowly’s experiences as a Jamaican immigrant in the U.S. Through spirit possession the ghosts also facilitate Ella’s recuperation of memories as an infant in Jamaica, allowing her to reconcile her complex identity as a Jamaican American.

Although not biologically related to Ella, Mammy and Lowly act as maternal figures and assert a matriarchal and spiritual alternative to the patriarchal historical hegemony. Lowly uses birthing metaphors to describe Ella’s initiation as a horse. Lowly exclaims, “The baby is turning.

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⁶ Sue Anne’s nickname, Mammy—the name by which she is most often referred in the novel, reminds the reader of the racist and sexist stereotypes that persisted throughout the post-emancipation period and into the twentieth-century. See Jessie W. Parkhurst’s “The Role of the Black Mammy in the Plantation Household,” Christopher J. P. Sewell’s “Mammies and Matriarchs: Tracing Images of the Black Female in Popular Culture 1950s to Present,” and Angelo Rich Robinson’s “‘Mammy Ain’t Nobody Name’: The Subject of Mammy Revisited in Shirley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose.*” This name initially conceals Sue Anne’s autonomous power from the reader and from Ella. Once Ella gains respect for Sue Anne’s subjectivity (after being possessed by her spirit) she learns about Mammy’s participation in the Garvey movement. Sue Anne is anything but the stereotypical “Mammy.”

⁷ See Nathaniel Samuel Murrell’s *Afro-Caribbean Religions.*
You push, sensible Anna…Our headwater is breaking” (22). Paradoxically Mammy’s death completes Ella’s “rebirth” which is concluded when Ella hears a voice, although no one around her has spoken. At this point, Lowly—the mid-wife of this process—announces, “There is no question about it; it is as clear as a bell. Somebody spoke. A voice very familiar and it isn’t her Mammy’s. The ears are hearing other frequencies. The child has come through. Anna, she’ll make it” (28). Ella has been reborn of the two female spirits. As Lowly exclaims earlier, “Two places can make children! Two women sire another” (17). Ella’s initiation cements an adoptive relation between the two female spirits and herself, which is apparent in Ella’s new appellation, Louisiana, a nominal link between Lowly (Louise) and Mammy (Anna). Ella expounds on this at a later point in the novel: “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. Or you could be Spanish and speak of those two venerable sisters as Louise y Anna” (124). Ella’s new name and the birthing metaphors establish a matriarchal mode of knowledge. Ella owes her spiritual and intellectual rebirth (her epistemological framework is completely changed) to these two women. Ultimately, she abandons her assignment to write the official (patriarchal) history commissioned by the government in order to record Mammy’s and Lowly’s matriarchal histories that reconnect her to her own people.

These alternative histories are products of the tension between history (facts) and story (spiritual truth). This tension is explicitly established with the novel’s prologue, an editor’s note from the (fictional) Black World Press. The non-traditional and fragmented form of the novel (it is comprised of spirit voices, transcriptions, field notes, and Ella’s personal diary) further
destabilize the fact/ fiction binary. Although initially readers may assume that this is an editor’s note to accompany Brodber’s novel, they eventually realize that this note is also part of the narrative. As the fictional editor explains, the press received the manuscript, also entitled *Louisiana*, unsolicited from Ella’s husband via his lawyer. This playful beginning disrupts expectations and establishes a tension between truth and fiction that will persist throughout the novel.

Although the work’s title, *Louisiana: A Novel*, denotes the genre, preparing the reader to have certain expectations in relation to a work of fiction, the prologue/fictional editor’s note asks readers to suspend their disbelief and approach the text as ethnographic material, even if it deals with spirits and other inexplicable subjects. The editors at Black World Press, though lacking concrete evidence, accept the veracity of the manuscript, declaring it a “social history and out of body experience” (4, emphasis added). In this instance the supernatural and historical are joined without question or qualification. Ella also defends the veracity of the spirits’ testimony in one of her field entries. She addresses her concern that she will run out of time before completing a transcription of Mammy’s and Lowly’s histories. Ella writes:

> I feel that things are going to happen which are going to take me away and away and away from the analysis of those ladies’ testimony and from writing that history. I fear that I might only be able to put down the facts that come to me from them. They are facts. I defend that, though I can’t prove them to be so. I must commit them to paper while there is still time. (102)

Ella’s word as an anthropologist and a scholar reinforces the text’s ethnographic weight; yet, this is a work of fiction. Readers find themselves caught between truth and invention, but ultimately either categorization is inconsequential. As Ella affirms, “I do not doubt you Mammy, nor any of the things you said and for me, even if what you relate did not happen to you, it happened to someone’s granny, someone’s mother. Someone. Some baby was hurt” (139). This thought
process reminds us of Mignolo’s defense in *Local Histories/Global Designs* of Rigoberta Menchú and his differentiation between denotative and enactive knowledges discussed in the introduction. Indeed, Brodber’s novel recuperates a collective history, unifying the singular and communal experience.

As previously stated, readers must suspend their disbelief in order to appreciate how fiction can serve as an alternative history. This suspension of disbelief begins with the first chapter titled, “I heard the voice from Heaven say,” whose initial narrator is a ghost. Lowly begins the chapter from the “other side,” preparing Mammy for her own imminent death. She wants to ensure that Ella will be ready for the transition that will take place when Mammy dies and Ella becomes their “horse.” Lowly’s narration reinforces the tension between truth and fiction, history and story. A spectral narrator disrupts all kinds of Western and modern expectations regarding knowledge and history—suggesting that both can be passed on through supernatural conduits. The spirits in this novel, then, do not function like ghosts in gothic texts whose frightening presence is often sensationalized; rather, because of their liminal qualities, they provide an alternative mode of being and knowing that disrupts Western dichotomous thought and creates a space through which an alternative history can emerge.

Brodber establishes the need for alternative histories by illustrating the dangers of official history. Brodber writes about the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), a project that created official government mediated history, in order to comment on the problem with such a history. The project—sponsored by the Works Progress Administration during the 1930s—was initiated in order to preserve the history of former slaves. Field workers were dispatched to interview members of the last generation of African Americans born into slavery. However, this project was not as altruistic or benign as it may now seem. Marie Jenkins Schwartz makes the point that
“the Writers’ Project was about creating jobs as well as collecting American memories” (89). The project was part of President Roosevelt’s New Deal, which was designed to pull the U.S. out of the Great Depression. The collection of ex-slave narratives would create jobs for mostly white field workers and government bureaucrats (Musher 101).

There were, however, black writers employed by the Federal Writers’ Project. According to Brian Dolinar, “The WPA sustained numerous black poets and fiction writers after the collapse of the Harlem Renaissance and jumpstarted a younger generation struggling to get their writing careers underway” (27). He also explains that “WPA put black writers in touch with one another and helped them to survive during the Depression” (30). The famous folklorist and author Zora Neale Hurston was one of those black writers.

Like Ella, Hurston was a young black female anthropologist recruited by the FWP to research African American folk traditions and history. Jenny Sharpe sees Hurston as a model for Ella’s character. She writes, “The Ella of *Louisiana* is a Zora Neale Hurston-inspired character, a literary move by Brodber signaling the novel’s exploration of the fact/fiction interface, since Hurston is known for transforming folklore through a writing style that blends the creative function of fiction with the scientific one of ethnography” (92). Hurston began working for the WPA in the “Negro Unit” of the Federal Theater Project in New York in 1935. However, she left the project after six months when she received a grant through the Guggenheim Foundation to do field work in Jamaica and Haiti. After returning to the U.S., she took a position as a junior interviewer for the Florida state office of the Federal Writers’ Project in 1938. Eventually, she became the “Negro Editor” at that office, but faced great antagonism from her white superiors (Plant 80).
Although the WPA hired black field workers, like Hurston, to work one-on-one with the black community, their writings and the subsequent edited versions of those writings do not, and cannot, adequately represent the black experience. They are mediated histories. Sharon Ann Musher writes, “The WPA interviews might appear to have come literally out of the mouths of ex-slaves, but they do not represent unmediated reality. Instead, it might be more accurate to consider them third-hand or even fourth-hand accounts” (106). Musher goes on to enumerate the various levels of mediation from the typists who interpreted the handwritten notes of the field workers to the scholars and folklorists who consciously selected certain interviews and often further edited those interviews before publishing them. She thus concludes, “[A]t least some of the WPA interviews may represent interviewers’ biases and editors’ agendas more than the ex-slaves’ actual memories” (106). In her novel, Brodber consciously illustrates the questionable function of the FWP; its authenticity is suspect.

Although Ella’s government assignment would have preserved black (subaltern) history, ultimately it would have reinforced the power of the state (run by the elite) by enlarging the national archive and asserting an epistemological dominance. Walter Mignolo likewise explains how a Western and colonial concept of history asserts one group’s power as it simultaneously confiscates it from the “other” (Darker Side 3). This process is similar to that which Mignolo addresses when he describes how “coloniality of power” constitutes itself as “[a]n epistemological perspective from which to articulate the meaning and profile of the new matrix of power and from which the new production of knowledge could be channeled” (Local 17). This new “matrix of power” came from Europe’s discovery and categorization of the New World. Rather than approaching the New World and its inhabitants on their terms, European explorers
and colonizers documented it/them according to European epistemological world views, increasing their power and justifying their actions.

Lowly alludes to the racist, colonial desires of the Federal Writer’s Project throughout the novel’s first chapter. The following excerpt is just one example: “Anna sighed another sigh that leaked from our history and the girl made a note to be sure to find some way of transposing those sighs and those laughs and other non-verbal expressions of emotions into the transcript she would submit to her masters” (14, emphasis added). Ella’s masters are obviously her supervisors at Columbia and the WPA. Lowly uses the rhetoric of slavery—illustrating that its legacies are persistent and relevant even more than half a century after emancipation—to expose Ella’s subservience to the elite. This passage also critiques the motives of the WPA. Ella is not an autonomous writer at this point in the narrative. She is a cog in the grand American machine, given the task to write, the “white people’s history of the blacks of South West Louisiana” (14, emphasis added). This history of the blacks will belong to the white people, not to the blacks themselves. Although it is their history, it is not theirs to own.

Ella feels the pressure to produce for the white elite and grows frustrated with herself and Mammy after using a whole side of recording tape with nothing substantial to send back to her supervisors:

One whole side gone—, she thought,—and not a thing to give to the white people. How would it look? This woman [Mammy] they say has important data to give; is important data; she has seen things; had done things; her story is crucial to the history of the struggle of the lower class negro that they want to write. I was chosen to do her. It was an honour. Because of my colour, I could get her to talk. (21, emphasis added)

“They” stands for the white American intellectuals who would mediate and benefit (either financially or academically in terms of status) from the history of the struggle of the “lower class
negro.” The African American’s history is no longer her own, if it is written by the faceless, yet supposedly white, “they.” Race remains an important issue.

Ella was chosen for this particular project because of the color of her skin; “they” believe a black woman would be more successful in her efforts to coax Mammy to tell her story. Moreover, Mammy’s humanity is diminished; she is important “data.” Her individual story and history is not what the government is after; rather, it is interested in the data, which will add to the official history they are attempting to archive. At this point Ella is complicit in the chosification (“thingification”) of Mammy. Ella’s initial attitude toward Mammy and the data that she is and has to give illustrates a problem within anthropology. In *The Archive and the Repertoire* Diana Taylor explains Western anthropology’s colonial heritage. She writes, “The ‘us’ studying and writing about ‘them’ was, of course, a part of the colonialist project that anthropology had come out of” (8). Early anthropologists fashioned a “paradigm that fetishized the local, denied agency to the peoples they studied, and excluded them from the circulation of knowledge created about them” (Taylor 8). Taylor notes that to move beyond this colonial heritage, anthropologists must treat “the people with whom [they] seek to interact…as colleagues rather than as informants or objects of analysis” (10). At this point in the narrative Ella only sees Mammy as an object of analysis—“data.” She is blind to Mammy’s spiritual power. Eventually Ella begins to see Mammy as a colleague, a sister in spiritual work, and also as a model to follow; this is apparent in the final product of Ella’s ethnographic project.

Although originally intended to be an official government record, Ella’s finished manuscript, which ironically ends up in the hands of a small black press, is completely subversive and antithetical to an official state document; it is an “anthropology of the dead” (61).

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8 Here I use Aimé Césaire’s French term for the Marxist notion of reification. Césaire’s term specifically reflects the colonial subject’s predicament, as apparent in his *Discours sur le colonialisme*.
Not only has a ghost possessed the first chapter, but the narrative does not follow a clear (or linear) style expected within Western historiographic practice. The first chapter is comprised of a dialogue between Lowly and Mammy that is initially difficult to follow. This is due in part to the fact that the two women address each other using various names and nick-names, making it difficult for the reader to discern who is speaking. Moreover, little context or background is given, and there are many gaps left in the novel. The pervasive narrative gaps and lack of clarity prevent Ella from submitting the manuscript to the University, which she feels compelled to do as recompense for not returning the expensive recording machine, which was her initial mode of contact with the spirits. She laments (briefly):

I do hope she [Mammy] does talk about herself and her times because I would love to send some information of this kind back to Columbia in expiation of my crime. I am unhappy about keeping this machine. Perhaps I could extract from the manuscript the relevant pieces, make a collage of the data and send this to them...Mammy is the key. Would she be so kind as to give me a narrative plain and straight of her life and doings in South West Louisiana that I could send in this way to them? (108-109)

Ella understands that Mammy’s stories do not fulfill the WPA’s expectations and so would not likely be accepted. Unlike the ex-slave narratives, Lowly’s and Mammy’s do not pass through a bureaucratic mediation, and so although they may be difficult to decipher, they provide necessary alternatives to official history. As Shirley Toland-Dix writes, “The passing on of history through spirit possession is deeply subversive because it circumvents all the checkpoints at which censorship takes place” (205). Through spirit possession Lowly and Mammy introduce Ella to a spiritual mode of knowing that resists the hegemonic historiography dominated by reason.

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9 Louise Grant is also known as Lowly and Green Island and Mammy is Sue Ann King, Anna, and Suzie Anna.
Spiritual Epistemology

Mammy’s and Lowly’s ghosts convey knowledge through spiritual conduits, reclaiming the value of a spiritual epistemology that opposes the kind of reason privileged by colonial powers. The importance of spiritual illumination for Ella is represented in a description of Ella’s memory of her mother’s West Indian church in New York, specifically a memory of a stained glass window:

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. (57)

What is initially striking about this description is that it is an inaccurate explanation of the creation of stained glass windows. Individual pieces of broken glass are arranged to create a whole; the whole is not broken and then reassembled. Yet, the way that Ella has described the process in this passage is pertinent to the overall theme of the novel. This passage becomes a commentary on a knowledge (and a history) that was at one time whole, but is now fragmented. The only way that the reassembled/fragmented whole can be “read” is through the illumination of God’s light, i.e. spiritual knowledge. As Toland-Dix writes, “Ella cannot begin to use her divinely gifted powers until she understands that she must surrender to the Holy Spirit and trust Divine Guidance in order to be an effective channel” (204). Ella’s surrender to spiritual knowledge allows her to transcend the limits of academia. Her academic training has taught her to rely on the concrete and a scientific process. The spirits initiate her into a higher knowledge that is not restrained by materiality.

To borrow Mignolo’s opposing terms, spiritual knowledge is not a denotative knowledge; rather, it is an enactive, performative knowledge (Local 26). This is apparent in Ella’s new role
as a spiritual medium patronized by African American and Afro-Caribbean sailors. To describe her first prophetic experience Ella says, “I was pushed centre-stage” (87). She was compelled to perform, so to speak, without warning or preparation. The sailors begin to sing a Jamaican folksong (“Sammy Dead”), which throws Ella into a spiritual fit. She unwillingly taps into an extra-worldly bank of knowledge. She recounts, “Then it was prophesying. I went on with the weak no-go body into prophesying. I looked at the faces of the men sitting around me and I saw stories. I saw long deep stories, stretching back and back” (89). Interestingly, Ella does not prophesy the future, which would be expected of a prophet(ess); rather, her prophecies regard the past. This inversion of a prophet(ess)’s role underline’s Brodber’s objective to recuperate the past, however disturbing it may be. The future does not matter if the past, and its traumas, is not confronted and resolved.

Moreover, this act of prophesying is a performance, complete with a captive audience. It is not an act (i.e. artificial and deceitful), but it is enactive. Ella describes it using the language of the theatre: “I was pushed centre-stage.” She is able to heal her patrons, addressing their emotional and psychological wounds as she conjures the past. One particular relationship, with the Jamaican sailor Ben, becomes “mutual therapy” (103). Ella explains, “We would help each other. I would help him through that memory and he would help me find some memories” (87). Within this reciprocal remembering Ben and Ella validate the other’s emotional and psychological pain, allowing for catharsis to take place. This is in part accomplished through Ella’s ability to embrace the role that sentiment plays in her new calling as a spiritual medium.

Ella’s journey from an intellectual to a spiritual medium is a process that has little to do with reason; it is based on feelings: “Feeling is knowing,” and “He who feels it knows it” (116, 148). As Jenny Sharpe explains, emotion and feeling transcend the rational mode of
understanding to “elicit a more intuitive, rather than rational, response to a misrepresented or hidden past in order to break an archival violence enacted against the dead” (94). Ella understands that her emotions will help guide her to new understanding when she writes, “my emotions embark upon some intense work” (100). Ella is discovering a different kind of epistemology—one that is in opposition to rational thought, which is possible because of her new spiritual intuition. Her seemingly radically and irrational actions—deserting her WPA assignment, moving to New Orleans, and working as a spiritual medium—distance her from the intellectual and rational world from which she came and her academic career. The Black World Press editors of the novel’s prologue state, “The text argues persuasively that Ella came under the influence of psychic forces. 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” (4). Ella addresses this issue in the manuscript: “It would have been difficult to explain the contents of the reel, but I could have found a story and remained in academia if I had wanted to. Jung! Parapsychology! Pah” (90)! Although Ella could have created a narrative to fulfill her task and further her academic career, it would not have been the truth. She had become a spiritual medium. This spiritual process is a “journey into knowing,” albeit a different kind of knowing than Ella had been trained to embrace at university (38). Not only does this spiritual journey into knowing defy reason, but it also disrupts temporal boundaries.

One of the important things that Ella learns (or re-learns) through the spirits is her Jamaican past, rescuing a forgotten memory of her Jamaican grandmother. At this point spiritual knowledge disrupts a linear concept of time. As Sharpe writes, “Louisiana presents a temporal logic in which historicism’s clean break between past and present is muddied or ‘confounded’” (99). Temporal boundaries are broken as Ella re-inhabits a particular memory of her grandmother.
combing and braiding her hair as an infant. Ella, as an adult, recovers a past that she did not know was her own. In this memory (Ella calls it a dream) she speaks to her grandmother, but her grandmother does not hear because she does not expect a baby to speak. Lowly narrates:

“‘Chicken I was sure you were sleeping’, the old one says every time. ‘No Granny’ she says, ‘just flying with my eyes shut’, but Granny doesn’t hear. She knows her baby can’t talk” (25).

Ella is pulled back to the present when she hears herself speak in the dream: “The girl heard herself say, ‘I’m flying’, jerked herself into the present and said to herself, ‘That serial dream of the old lady again’…Strong-willed girl, she had stopped in flight by pushing herself into the present and had missed the chance of knowing that the time was here when we would keep her afloat with our knees” (25). At this point Ella is too entrenched in the reality of Western academia and resists this process of remembering—which as Lowly notes would have initiated her transformation into a spiritual medium: “[she] had missed the chance of knowing that the time was here when we would keep her afloat with our knees.” Ella does not recognize that the old lady is her beloved grandmother, or that the dream is her own memory; she is not ready to cope with the trauma this spiritual journey would cause her to revisit. At this point Ella cannot comprehend that Lowly and Mammy could help her to inhabit the past, holding her steady as her grandmother did when she was a baby with her soft, yet supportive maternal knees through a spiritual mode of understanding.

Orality

Like spiritual knowledge, orality shapes Brodber’s text into an alternative history that subverts a hegemonic framework of history and epistemology that privileges written language.

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10 This particular act is significant for many cultures, but has specific resonance for women of African descent, whose traumatic history has affected their hair care, as chronicled in Willie L. Morrow’s 400 Years without a Comb. bell hooks, in “Straightening our Hair,” explains how hair care is part of a ritual and communal process that affects identity for black women.
Orature is a performative narrative that, as Taylor notes regarding performance, “challenge[s] the preponderance of writing in Western epistemologies” (16). Various scholars have recognized that Brodber’s novel addresses orality as a cultural practice; however, they fail to analyze how the narrative is affected at a formal level by orality. This recreates, for the reader, the sense of orality that is experienced between the characters in the novel. Initially the ghosts connect with Ella aurally, establishing their role as storytellers. The oral elements in the text refer to an African heritage and cultural system that is based on an oral literary tradition. Lucie Pradel explains how oral cultural systems preserved folklore and spiritual knowledge for African slaves. Pradel writes:

[F]or the most part, [West African slaves came] from societies with oral traditions, where the preservation of oral lore takes on a particular, and even a sacred character. They did not bring along the material supports of their worship; rather they buried other essential infrastructures in their minds: memories of gods, of myths, rites, rhythms, tales, legends, proverbs, songs, dances, sculpture—all fundamental vectors of their religious thought. (viii)

Through orality the novel recuperates subaltern knowledges and traditions that undermine the written official history of the government (i.e. The Federal Writers’ Project).

It may appear contradictory to analyze the orality of a written text; yet, Brodber allows tension between these two literary traditions to exist in her novel. There is a distinct aural quality to the first chapter, which is comprised of an extended verbal exchange between Lowly’s spirit and Mammy. Lowly begins the chapter: “Anna do you remember? Can you still hear me singing it” (9, emphasis added)? The lyrics to a song are printed with unique formatting to illustrate the way that it should sound:

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It is the voice I hear
That calls me home
     calls me
I hear them say ‘come unto me’
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11 See Roberts’s “Alternative Aesthetic,” Gourdine’s, “Carnival-Conjure,” and Sharpe’s “When Spirits Talk.”
It is the vooice that calls me home… (9)

This formatting encourages the reader to “hear” the song (especially with the way “voice” has been spelled), and also “hear” Lowly’s voice from beyond the grave. Additionally, this particular song is self-referential, it is a song about a voice and calls attention to its own orality. Considering the communal quality of oral literature, this emphasis on aurality at the beginning of the novel invites the reader to be more active in their engagement with the text.

The importance of listening is stressed throughout the first chapter, as is apparent in the chapter’s title, “I heard the voice from Heaven say.” This could be interpreted as a reference to Revelation 14:13: “And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them” (KJV). This Biblical reference emphasizes the value of spiritual knowledge and sets up the important role Lowly and Mammy will play as spirits (“blessed are the dead”). This reference also emphasizes the role of a spirit medium, like John the Revelator who becomes a medium for the Holy Spirit to write the words which the voice from Heaven utters. This allusion to the Book of Revelation, and John the Revelator, underlines Ella’s prophetic status as a spirit medium who gives history back to the African American and Afro-Caribbean sailors who frequent her New Orleans parlor. Moreover, the heavenly and disembodied voices in this opening chapter create a sense of timelessness and destabilize a sense of physical locality. Linear history has no function in this aural space. The voices come from another realm that eludes rational understanding.

It is significant that Ella does not see apparitions of the ghosts; rather, she hears them. Ella first hears Mammy’s voice after her informant dies. Ella had over-slept and was late for their appointment. She says out loud to herself, “If only I hadn’t overslept; if I had had my
priorities right” (27). Mammy’s spirit responds: “No problem...Just tell the white people the old lady has died” (27). Needless to say, Ella is shocked. Lowly relates to Mammy, “You frightened her deep down this time. Have the child thinking she’s spoken aloud, for your lips aren’t moving” (27). As explained earlier, this event signals Ella’s initiation. She is reborn as a “horse:” “The ears are hearing other frequencies. The child has come through. Anna, she’ll make it” (28). Ella’s spiritual rebirth occurs through an aural process, and her relationship with the spirits is nourished through orality. Initially they speak to her through the tape recorder that Ella was given to capture Mammy’s oral history. However, eventually Ella becomes strong enough to hear the spirits without the device. Ultimately, she takes the place of the device, becoming a mouthpiece for the dead—a bridge between the material and spiritual worlds as well as the present and the past.

Folklore

Oral culture is deeply connected to folklore as the latter is often perpetuated through oral forms. Jan Harold Brunvand defines folklore as “the traditional, unofficial, non-institutional part of culture. It encompasses all knowledge, understandings, values, attitudes, assumptions, feelings, and beliefs transmitted in traditional forms by word of mouth or by customary examples” (4). Like oral culture, folk culture is not accorded much value within a hegemony precisely because it is constitutes “unofficial knowledge” that is “informally learned” (Sims and Stephens 8). In Knowledge/Power Michel Foucault explains that “local popular knowledges”—which includes folk knowledge—are “subjugated” and “disqualified knowledges” (82). Brodber addresses the assumption that folk knowledge does not count as knowledge and argues for a reconsideration of the value of folk culture and its role in creating and maintaining a unified community.
The ghosts enable Ella to reconnect with her Jamaican heritage by exposing her to Jamaican folk knowledge and culture. Although born in Jamaica, Ella was raised in New York by Jamaican parents who had rejected their island heritage and willfully repressed their Jamaican identity. This appears to be common practice among the West Indians of Brodber’s novel who have established themselves in the North. Although they did not assimilate into North American culture, neither did they perpetuate their own. Ella explains, “You would think for instance that having segregated themselves from their neighbours and from America in general, they would be glorifying their islands and swopping tidbits about home, but this was not so…Each was a history book, separate, zippered and padlocked. Some like my own parents had even thrown away their keys” (58)! Her parents also kept Ella’s early history repressed. They never told her about her Jamaican grandmother; her mother “dismissed those days: she never talked about them” (92). Ella did not know how to grieve for her deceased grandmother because she did not know she existed. This is why Ella did not recognize her in the recurring dream/memory described in Louisiana’s first chapter.

Her parents’ desire to forget the past affects Ella’s personal history. This is apparent when they seek to erase her from official records after her disappearance into the South. Her parents go to great lengths to pay for the recording machine so that “there was no record of a missing recording machine at Columbia…. [M]y parents had somehow paid for that first-edition-and-difficult-to-replace gadget and had paid off whatever else was necessary to expunge me and my history from their records” (134). Ella’s parents preferred to whitewash and erase the past rather than face the discomfort and difficulties that accompany certain histories. Clearly, without the intervention of the Lowly and Mammy, Ella would have never had the opportunity to recuperate her peoples’ history. Her parents were an obstacle to this knowledge.
As a teenager Ella attempted to reach out to other Jamaicans in New York to learn about her history, but as she explains, “getting details on how ‘they did it back home,’ was as difficult for me and as painful for them as pulling teeth” (58). It is unclear why the West Indian community of Ella’s youth resisted assimilation as they simultaneously resisted a recovery and continuation of their collective history. The implicit reason may be that their past was too painful to confront. The novel illustrates that despite the pain that accompanies a consideration of the past, there is no possibility for growth, there is no future, without dealing first with the past. Ella’s personal journey towards healing begins with her discovery of her Jamaican identity.

One of the avenues through which Ella connects with her Jamaican roots is music, another key to understanding folk traditions. The spirits use a refrain from the Jamaican folk song “Sammy Dead” to elicit Ella’s spiritual experiences. Not only does Ella “hear” the repetitive phrase “Ah who sey Sammy dead,” but she also catches herself saying it aloud:

They had placed that message in my head. It was my voice that kept saying it, though nowhere was that phrase in my consciousness at the time. 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)

Although Ella did not have a distinct memory of this folk song, it summons specific images of her grandmother and her grandmother’s house in Jamaica. This song becomes the “signature tune” between Ella and the spirits, and in certain instances it triggers visions and other spiritual experiences for Ella (115).

The U.S. sailors and the West Indian sailors who visit Ella in her New Orleans home frequently engage in arguments about the origins of the songs they sing, each side claiming ownership. Ella, who at this point goes by Louisiana, heals the strife between the two parties: “No need for argument. The songs are equally ours now. We just sing” (129). Through folk
music the black American sailors and those of the Caribbean are able to find a shared heritage, a “common chord” (129). Upon hearing the sailors sing “Sammy Dead” Ella taps into her prophetic powers: “I felt my head grow big, as if someone thought it was a balloon…my body slid from my chair to the floor, fluttering like a decapitated fowl. And I spoke. I was seeing things as if on a rolling screen, a movie screen” (88). In this particular instance folk culture is connected with the spiritual realm. It also pulls Ella back to a cultural authenticity that she did not realize was lacking until she met Mammy.

Jazz is another musical form pertinent to folk culture and is woven throughout the narrative in order to reinforce key themes, like aurality and community. Moreover, having emerged from African traditions it also represents subaltern experience. Thom Holmes writes:

The roots of jazz music go back to the 19th century. It began with music brought from Africa to America during the time of the slave trade. It grew as a fusion of diverse musical and cultural elements, galvanizing aspects of work songs, church music, folk songs, classical, and popular songs. The common thread binding these elements together is that jazz arose noncommercially as an expression of those who were oppressed by poverty and racism. (xxii)

Henry Louis Gates Jr. explains how jazz represents an element of “black vernacular discourse” and clarifies how it pertains to the theory of signifyin(g) (55). Signifyin(g) refers to the ways in which black discourse plays with the gaps between literal and figurative meanings of words, turning “on repetition of formal structures and their differences” (57). Regarding jazz specifically, Gates asserts that it “is based on the art of riffing, on repetition and revision, the very definition of signifyin(g) in the tradition” (xxx).

Jazz—in its lack of form and transgression of form—supports the novel’s objective to resist hegemonic systems. As Holmes explains, “Jazz is highly interpretive music and every work of true jazz includes IMPROVISATION, in whole or in part. You cannot experience jazz by reading a score. You have to listen to it” (xxi). Holmes’s description of jazz reinforces the
argument of this chapter. Reading a score would give someone an idea of how the music ought to sound, but it would fail to capture the soul of jazz. Mammy’s and Lowly’s alternative oral history, which resists the regulating process of the Federal Writers’ Project, attempts to get at the soul, the spiritual essence, of their experiences.

Jazz is like the history that Mammy and Lowly recuperate and pass on to Ella. As Lowly tells Mammy, “My song Anna. It has no written score. Succeeding generations of us, on each of our occasions have, like you, simply appointed their own tenor, their own alto, their own timing to descant and fill out gaps built into a score by those who wrote it” (9). Lowly’s song, her story, will fill in the gaps within the archive, which was compiled by history’s victors and, because it ignores, or fails to represent, the subaltern experience fully, is incomplete. This description of Lowly’s concept of history is a description of jazz. The music (i.e. history) evolves; it is not static. It is full of individual personalities, yet works harmoniously as a whole.

Moreover, jazz in its repetition with difference destabilizes a linear concept of temporality. Gates writes, “[W]hen you repeat a prior work of art, you bring it and all its connotations back, so that there are always two dimensions, past and present, repetition and revision, working at the same time” (xxxii). The novel, like jazz, evokes two dimensions while blending the two into a complete, although polyphonic, whole. In Ella the past and the present converge, and in order for her to make sense of this “other” history, she must attune her “ear,” like any jazz novice. She asserts, “My ears had become accustomed. There were no new players so all I had to do was to concentrate on hearing the words” (62). The “players” are the spectral storytellers—her spiritual guides.

Not only does jazz repeat and quote old works, as apparent in Jelly Roll Morton’s 1938 “Maple Leaf Rag (A Transformation),” an example Gates cites, which “signifies upon” Scott
Joplin’s 1916 “Maple Leaf Rag,” but it is also based on the synthesis of various sounds and rhythms from different cultural traditions, connecting the U.S. with the rest of the Black Atlantic (Gates 69). Roger Abrahams, Nick Spitzer, John Szwed, and Robert Thompson cite the “reciprocal influences” between the Caribbean and New Orleans in the early formation of jazz: “The complexity of the borrowings and the rapidity of the adaptations are perhaps the clearest examples of how complicated the process of creolization can become for those in search for cultural origins and influence” (29). Although Abrahams and his collaborators argue that “parallel and independent invention” of jazz was occurring in the U.S. and in the Caribbean, New Orleans has long been the accepted birthplace of jazz (35). This connection between jazz and New Orleans underlines the significance of Louisiana within the novel—as a site of diverse cultural exchange, as Ella’s new name, and as the novel’s title.

Like jazz, which unifies various forms and musical traditions, Louisiana (especially New Orleans) acts like a bridge between the Caribbean and the United States. Moreover, Louisiana’s history reflects the colonial history of the Caribbean; before becoming a part of the United States it was ruled by the French, the Spanish, and the British. Its history is unlike any other state in the U.S. Cécile Vidal writes:

Located at the junction of North America and the Caribbean and at the crossroads of the three main empires that established colonies in the New World, Louisiana experienced a succession of sovereignties in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The lives of Louisiana’s inhabitants, whether they were Native Americans, European settlers, or slaves of African descent, were all impacted by this geography and history. (2)

New Orleans has been called a Caribbean city and has had reciprocal relationship with Caribbean islands through trade, but also through migration. As Toland-Dix asserts, New Orleans is a Caribbean port with a “significant position in the African diaspora and in physical, cultural, and

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12 For one example, during the Haitian Revolution, white landowners fleeing Haiti found refuge in New Orleans.
psychic proximity to the Caribbean” (203). Louisiana may have unique ties to the Caribbean, but it also indicates a broader relation between the U.S. South and the Caribbean.

*Louisiana* accomplishes what New World studies scholars, like the editors of *Look Away!* and *Just Below South*, seek to achieve at a theoretical level, by emphasizing the commonalities between African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans via folklore. As Toland-Dix asserts, “Brodber has...created an experimental novel that performs the intercultural story it tells. Each of its six section headings is an excerpt from a song of saying or custom that Louisiana blacks and Jamaican blacks share” (203). Brodber emphasizes the shared folk traditions by stressing the significance of place—bringing us back to a discussion of Louisiana. Brodber creates a link between the U.S. and the Caribbean through an uncanny repetition of place-name. Ella begins her field work interviewing Mammy in St. Mary, Louisiana, and Lowly is from a parish called Louisiana in St. Mary, Jamaica. This mirroring reinforces the shared traumatic history of African slaves and their descendants in the United States and in the Caribbean islands, including, but not limited to, Jamaica. This duality is clarified in Ella’s thoughts: “So this was somehow about the dead. Two different women. Two different places. Two different times. Buried in similar rites. Was that it? So why was I there? Why was I in their conversation and how and why was I moved in this my other self—I obviously had two—to say this, ‘Ah who sey Sammy dead’” (51)? Like the repetition in jazz that allows for two dimensions to exist simultaneously, the uncanny repetition of “Louisiana” conjures two dimensions that overlap and comingle through shared history, trauma, and personal relationships. As Ella eloquently states, “I felt her [Lowly’s] country, my country, Mammy’s country, our country” (116).

It is highly appropriate that Ella’s new name is Louisiana (a site of crossroads and synthesis) not only to show how she has been reborn of two women (Louise and Anna) and how
she connects the history of the U.S. and the Caribbean, but also to show how she now too is a bridge between the living and the dead. By becoming Louisiana she comes into her authentic self: “I am Louisiana. I give people their history” (125). In this way she is also a bridge between the past and the present. To explain her new function, Ella asks the reader to consider a diamond with a hole pierced through its center: “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” (124). As one of the minor characters asserts, “[E]verything is related” (157). Indeed, Ella describes a “poetics of relation,” to borrow Édouard Glissant’s term from his work Poétique de la Relation, on three separate levels: cultural, spiritual, and temporal.

Drawing upon the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Glissant establishes his theory of the poetics of relation by juxtaposing two systems: “the root” and the “rhizome.” Whereas the root (insular and homogeneous) kills everything that surrounds it, the rhizome (expansive and polyphonic) is an interconnected root system. Glissant writes:

La notion de rhizome maintiendrait donc le fait de l’enracinement, mais récuse l’idée d’une racine totalitaire. La pensée du rhizome serait au principe de ce que j’appelle une poétique de la Relation, selon laquelle toute identité s’étend dans un rapport à l’Autre.

(23)

[Therefore, the notion of a rhizome maintains the fact of rootedness, but rejects the idea of a totalitarian root. Rhizomatic thought would be the principle of what I call Poetics of Relation, according to which every identity extends in relation to the Other.]

Glissant applies the concept of the root to imperial expansion, and his answer to that hegemonic system is rhizomatic relation.

On a cultural level, Brodber reveals a rhizomatic relation between folk traditions, especially music, as the African American and Afro-Caribbean sailors realize that they both lay claim to the same folk songs. The novel demonstrates a spiritual poetics of relation as Ella is
born of two women from different, yet connected, cultural backgrounds (St. Mary, Louisiana, U.S. and Louisiana, St. Mary, Jamaica). Moreover, Brodber illustrates how history is more rhizomatic than root-like. Hegel’s Universal History supports the concept of the root that conquers and silences the “other.” However, history has many stories, branching out in all directions, like the yam vines from her grandmother’s Jamaican home that Ella sees during her spiritual trances (Louisiana 88). Through a cultural, spiritual, and temporal poetics of relation Ella blurs differences. She shows the African American and West Indian sailors that they are two hands of the same body while blurring the boundaries between spiritual and material, past and present.

This is visualized within the novel by the rainbow, another “bridge” that reappears throughout the text. Its appearance marks death. The rainbow appears during Lowly’s, Mammy’s, and, ultimately, Ella’s transition from this world to the next. Reuben describes Ella’s death with the image of a rainbow and the aurality of music:

My wife’s voice was there too. Different chords, different tunes, different octaves. Sheer jazz. One sound. From one body. A community song: It is the voice I hear, I hear them say, come unto me...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 nor his men her tale for it was not hers; she was no hero. It was a tale of cooperative action; it was a community tale. We made it happen. (161)

This passage concludes the “original” manuscript and connects all of the important themes discussed in this chapter: spiritual knowledge, oral culture, and folk culture. Additionally, the rainbow serves as a physical representation of the synthesis and connection that jazz represents in the novel.

Louisiana opposes official history and Western epistemology dominated by reason and written literary practices by providing an alternative history that draws upon other kinds of
knowledges, namely, spiritual knowledge, orature, and folk culture. Moreover, the female ghosts in this text provide a matrilineal succession of subaltern knowledge that is reclaimed through female production—Ella’s transcription of the oral histories. In this way, the novel offers a matriarchal mode of knowing that opposes the patriarchal and hegemonic systems. This feminine tradition, supported by spiritual knowledge, oral culture, and folk culture, moves toward a multiplicity that is inclusive, communal, and creative, confirming Michael Taussig’s observation that “[S]pirit possession often implies being possessed with the power of grace, the transformation of a bad situation into a good situation” (55). Brodber highlights these elements to illustrate how fiction as alternative history has the potential to heal and unify: “Two places can make children!”
“Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition.”
—Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 8

Sociologist Avery Gordon suggests that ghosts allow us to access a different kind of knowledge: not the “cold” facts, but a “transformative recognition.” Moreover, this is knowledge that one “experiences.” In Zoé Valdés’s *Te di la vida entera* (1996) and Sandra Cisneros’s *Caramelo: or Puro Cuento* (2002) this “transformative recognition” links the past to the present through the affective nature of spirit possession and haunting. Even the term “re-cognition” emphasizes a *return* to a past knowledge that has been repressed or forgotten. Although emerging from distinctly different geographical locations and cultural traditions, *Te di la vida entera* and *Caramelo* treat similar issues using the figure of the ghost as a vehicle to address the past and transcend temporal boundaries. A comparative reading and analysis reveals how the ghostly figure disrupts the Hegelian concept of reason and history, specifically through affect. The two novels invoke female spirits who, like Mammy and Lowly in Brodber’s *Louisiana*, recuperate memory and inspire the production of alternative histories (i.e. the novels themselves) written by female authors. Temporal boundaries collapse and “history” is re-evaluated and written anew from a different perspective as the spirits pass on their narratives to a living narrator (as in Brodber’s *Louisiana*) via oral discourse to create a link between the past and present. The past is also bridged through the trope of nostalgia, specifically the way in which the novels utilize music to conjure the past and affect the senses.

The novels reconsider the past from a female perspective, centering on the intimate suffering of lovelorn women as a means to comment on the larger social and political issues of
their respective Cuban and Mexican-American cultures. The novels confront the traumatic past on both a national and familial level. The ghosts narrate historical events (the Mexican and Cuban Revolutions of the twentieth-century) from a woman’s point of view. In this way the novels connect the personal/feminine experience to national history. As liminal beings, the female spirits facilitate movement from an intimate to a communal experience, connecting the singular to the plural. This process validates the (female) individual experience, which is often lost and/or excluded from the official archive. The result is a matriarchal alternative to the male dominant, hegemonic historical discourse, the “cold knowledge” that Gordon cites.

Like Mammy and Lowly in *Louisiana*, the female ghosts in Valdes’s and Cisneros’s novels provide an alternative knowledge, specifically an alternative perspective of history. The ghosts are witnesses, an important distinction that will be analyzed shortly. The stories/historias they relate are not invented fictions; rather, they are presented as accounts of their lived experiences. As discussed in the introduction, *historia* is an ambiguous term that can mean both story and history, blurring the difference between fact and fiction. Moreover, these accounts are transmitted orally; the narrator-author *hears* voices of the spirits and transcribes their words. Like *Louisiana*, *Te di la vida entera* and *Caramelo* contain elements of orality and re-present oral traditions of discourse that subvert a hegemonic framework of history that privileges the official archive.

Although the spirits, as witnesses, are motivated to recount a truthful narrative, the stories they relate are more effective because they are told by spirits. The narrator-scribe in *Te di la vida entera* (the Valdés persona) explains, “[L]os espíritu cuentan mucho mejor las historias que los vivos, porque lo hacen con nostalgia, con dolor, luchando contra la impotencia” (360). Spirits tell better (“mucho mejor”) stories than the living because of their “nostalgia,” pain (“dolor”), and
struggle against powerlessness (“luchando contra la impotencia”). Nostalgia, from the Greek nostos and algos, is a key affective tool in both novels.

Certainly the feeling of nostalgia has always existed; yet, the term by which it is known today was coined in the seventeenth century by Johannes Hofer. Hofer diagnosed nostalgia as a disease in his 1688 thesis, Dissertatio medica de nostalgia, and created a medical term by combining two Greek words: nostos (return to home) and algos (grief) (Starobinski 85). Svetlana Boym explores nostalgia in the twentieth century and defines modern nostalgia as “a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy;” it is “an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world” (xiii, xiv). Boym’s definitions illustrate how nostalgia can be simultaneously personal (“a romance with one’s own fantasy”) and communal (“yearning for a community with a collective memory”). Boym clarifies how nostalgia works as an “intermediary between collective and individual memory” as it “characterizes one’s relationship to the past, to the imagined community, to home, [and] to one’s own self-perception” (54, 41). The novels analyzed in this chapter work at both levels. They simultaneously explore the loss experienced by women who have suffered emotionally because they loved too much and recreate a Cuban and Mexican past that no longer exists. In this way the novels connect the intimate experience to the collective and cultural history.

Boym further complicates the concept of nostalgia by differentiating between two types: restorative and reflective. Whereas restorative nostalgia is the drive to recuperate a homeland physically and is established on the ideals of “truth and tradition,” reflective nostalgia dwells in the feeling (and aesthetics) of longing; it does “not follow a single plot but explores ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones” (xviii). Restorative nostalgia
characterizes a fanatical nationalism and aims to reconstruct the past physically and ideologically. Reflective nostalgia is ironic, humorous, and playful. This is especially the case in Valdés’s text, which employs irony and humor to address the nostalgic longing for a pre-Revolution Cuba. The nostalgia in *Te di la vida entera* is especially reflective since the author seeks to recreate a version of Cuba that she never knew, since Valdés was born in 1959, the year of the Revolution.

*Te di la vida entera*

Zoé Valdés’s *Te di la vida entera* follows the life of Cuca Martínez, foregrounding her private suffering within the turbulent political upheavals of twentieth-century Cuba. Valdés exploits affective discourse in recounting Cuca’s history; it is at once tragic and comedic. Although Cuca is our heroine, the narrator’s descriptions also make her the butt of a pathetic joke. The novel is a parody of a fairytale or, as the narrator notes, a Jane Austen novel. This is apparent in the narrator’s brief summary of Cuca’s story:

Una mujer soltera, habitante de una isla musical y pretenciosa, más sola que la una, y mil veces más pobre que Cenicienta, lo que necesita es un tronco de bolero para ponerse a soñar. A soñar con el príncipe azul, acompañado de su correspondiente bolista repleta de monedas de oro. (166)

[A single woman, living on a musical and pretentious island, more alone than the number one, and a thousand times poorer than Cinderella, who needs only to hear a bolero to throw her into a dreamy state. To dream of a prince charming complete with a purse filled with gold coins.]

Cuca is a thousand times poorer than Cinderella and (unsurprisingly) dreams of a prince to save her from her solitude and from her financial difficulties. As a teenager, Cuca leaves the rural countryside to make a better life for herself in Havana. Finding herself out of place in the flamboyant pre-Revolution capital, Cuca falls in love with the first man to notice her, Uan—a notorious playboy whose name suggests to Cuca that he is the only “one” for her. However, their
romance is short lived. Uan is forced to flee Cuba at the beginning of the Revolution and leaves Cuca pregnant and alone in a dramatically changing political landscape. The narrative then follows Cuca’s pathetic and lonely life up until the nineties when Uan returns to Cuba in search of an encoded dollar bill that he had entrusted to Cuca before leaving decades earlier.

Cuca’s story is transmitted to the narrator-author via spirit possession. The Valdés persona is “mounted” by a spirit, Cuca’s and Uan’s daughter María Regla; however, the spirit’s identity is not revealed until the novel’s final chapter. The voice of the disembodied subject begins the first chapter with the following destabilizing announcement:

No soy la escritora de esta novela. Soy el cadáver. Pero eso no tiene la más mínima importancia…Ahora, paren las orejas, o mejor, zambúllanse en estas páginas a las cuales, no sin amor y dolor, en tanto que espíritu he sobrevivido. (13)

[I am not the author of this novel. I am the cadaver. But this is of little importance…Now, lend me your ears, or better yet, dive into these pages where my spirit has survived not without love or suffering.]

“I am not the author of this novel,” María Regla asserts, “I am the cadaver.” Her spirit then directs the readers to listen closely, or better yet, to immerse themselves in the pages of the novel where her spirit has survived, not without love or suffering (“no sin amor y dolor”). In this final statement she establishes the affective discourse that will dominate her narrative.

Orality, Witnesses, and Testimonial Literature

The aural language used by the spirit (“paren las orejas,” “lend me your ears”) indicates that this text will be extra-literary, moving beyond the expectations of written literature, and therefore has potential to transcend the constraints of a conventional novel. The written text held in the readers’ hands is a product of an oral communication transmitted from the spirit to the narrator-author. Readers are invited to participate in the oral storytelling, by figuratively/imaginatively “lending their ears” (“parar las orejas”), a phrase that Valdés uses
more than once throughout the novel. Thus, readers are permitted to transcend the solitary act of reading and participate in a kind of cultural communion. In this way, Valdés (and Cisneros, as we will see) connects the readers’ very private experience of reading with a larger communal experience, facilitated by the collaboration between the spirit and the narrator-author. This reinforces the connection that the novel makes between personal suffering and national trauma within the narrative.

By utilizing certain elements of oral storytelling, the novel approaches ritual, creating communion between the storyteller and listeners. In her article “Spirit Possession, Havana, and the Night: Listening and Ritual in Cuban Fiction,” folklorist Solimar Otero argues that through the trope of a disembodied narrator, *Te di la vida entera* mirrors rituals performed within Afro-Cuban religious traditions. She explains that this ritualized kind of storytelling creates a “continuum between folk religious practice and literature” (46). In this way the novel creates a ritualistic narrative space. Otero continues:

> This connection serves as a ‘witness’ to history and experiences of dislocation and being left ‘behind’ for an imagined community of Cubans. The ‘muerto,’ or ancestor as narrator of the tale, helps create a textual bridge between the multiple Cuban communities, past and present, dispersed and separated from each other due to politics, geography, and time. (46)

Valdés consciously invokes the religious rituals of *Santería*, a syncretic religion originating in Cuba that combines Yoruba religious practices with Catholicism (Barnet 84).

The novel begins with an epigraph that includes a prayer in the Yoruba language. This invocation establishes the beginning of a ritual that the book will enact (Otero 50-51). Otero argues that Valdés “uses the sacred language in a manner that is consistent with the socio-cultural, religious contexts of Afrocuban religion. That is, she *begins* the text, (as you would begin a ritual), in the style of a traditional Yoruba responsorial liturgy” (50, emphasis in
original). This prayer not only establishes the importance of the Cuban folk religion, as Otero explains, but also establishes the importance of voice and aurality, as the prayer is something that is supposed to be spoken aloud. The ritual prayer prepares the readers to hear the voice of the spirit who, as the readers learn in the final chapter, is Cuca’s and Uan’s daughter, María Regla, whose name is full of religious significance. She was born on the day of Yemayá, the Yoruba deity whose Catholic counterpart is the Virgin de Regla. By invoking Santería and the rites associated with spirit possession, Valdés creates a ritualistic narrative space that is based on oral discourse, as is apparent in the opening prayer and the voice of the spirit narrator.

The spirit possession that drives this text, like that in *Louisiana*, is meant to create an avenue for communication, via orality, between the living and the dead in order to provide an alternative understanding/view of history. This is also a feature of testimonial literature, a genre that emerged out of the Latin American literary tradition. It is significant to discuss how the fictional works resemble testimonial literature because both of the spirits in *Te di la vida entera* and *Caramelo* serve as witnesses; their credibility is privileged above that of the narrator-author personas. Testimonial literature, as defined by George Yúdice in his article “Testimonio and Postmodernism,” is:

> an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g., war, oppression, revolution, etc.). Emphasizing popular, oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as an agent (rather than a representative) of a collective memory and identity. Truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation or exploitation and oppression or in exorcising and setting aright official history. (17)

Three of Yúdice’s points regarding testimonial literature directly relate to the narratives analyzed in this chapter. First, he emphasizes oral discourse. Testimonial literature is rooted in an oral tradition of storytelling; the *testimonialista* (witness) tells his/her story and the anthropologist becomes the listening audience. Just as the *testimonialista* collaborates with an anthropologist,
the spirit in Valdés’s (and Cisneros’s) novel collaborates with the narrator-author, who like an academic field worker “must record, transcribe, and edit” the testimonialista’s story (Brooks 182). This relates to Brodber’s *Louisiana*, in which Ella consciously uses her training as an anthropologist to transcribe the histories of Lowly and Mammy as ethnographic material, “setting aright official history.” Additionally, similar to *Louisiana* and testimonial literature, which bring to light the voices of those who have been silenced, the spirits in *Te di la vida entera* and *Caramelo* assert their own stories (and those of their families) to validate their subjectivity.

Second, testimonial literature connects collective memory and identity with an individual agent. It moves from the personal to the public: “[the] personal story is a shared one with the community to which the testimonialista belongs. The speaker does not speak for or represent a community but rather performs an act of identity-formation which is simultaneously personal and collective” (Yúdice 15). This allows for the witness to retain autonomy and individuality while still relating their specific experience within the larger collective one.

Finally, testimonial literature sets official history “aright.” In the case of Valdés’s novel, the text highlights the problems of the Castro regime and questions the idealized historiography of the Revolution. In *The Structure of Cuban History: Meanings and Purpose of the Past* Louis A. Pérez, Jr. explains how many Cubans desired to imbue the Revolution with a sense of “historical authenticity” by declaring the Revolution the climax of a century long struggle for independence and sovereignty (238). In this paradigm, history is seen as a forward projection, and the Revolution is the climax of that historical progression.

This view reinforces an idealized vision of the Revolution, which is conceived as a “fulfillment of the past” as it continued in the struggle for independence that Cubans had begun in the nineteenth century with the Ten Years’ War (1868-1878) and the War of Independence
from Spain (1895-1898) (Pérez,  Structure 239). Pérez explains that this idealization has a direct impact on the historiography of the Revolution:

The claim of the revolution as continuity and consummation gained discursive ascendancy in an all-encompassing historical construct of *cien años de lucha*: one hundred years of struggle. The narrative of the revolution as culmination of *cien años de lucha* did indeed purport to fashion a new founding narrative, with 1959 consecrated as the realization of the historic project of nation. (Structure 239)

In this way, the Revolution is imbued with a kind of historicity which elevates it to an almost sacred sphere. Fidel Castro capitalized on this historical construct and romanticized the continual struggle of the Cuban people (Pérez,  Structure 239). The fact that Cubans historically had struggled and suffered for over a hundred years validated their continued and anticipated struggle. This logic romanticized suffering and personal sacrifice for the common good and a glorious future. Valdés confronts this historical idealization of the Revolution and its aftermath by describing in gruesome detail how the average Cuban would experience sacrifice and suffering.

As the novel progresses into the Special Period, Cuca’s material suffering increases, matching the emotional suffering she endures because of Uan’s prolonged absence. The Special Period, or *El período especial en tiempos de paz*, was an era inaugurated by the fall of the Soviet Union—Cuba’s greatest political ally and economic support—which brought about an economic crisis in Cuba. The Government officially declared the Special Period in the summer of 1990 and initiated a “series of contingency plans conceived originally as a response to conditions of war. The *período especial* established a framework within which to implement a new series of austerity measures and new rationing schedules to meet deteriorating economic conditions” (Pérez,  *Cuba* 293). During this period food was scarce and many Cubans suffered from the various cuts to the gasoline and oil supply. Subsequently, many factories were closed, leading to
loss of jobs; twenty percent of the population was displaced (Pérez, Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution 294). Valdés parodies this period in order to further censure the Revolution and Castro’s regime.

Cuca’s material and emotional suffering reflects Cuba’s “hopeless decay” during the Special Period (Whitfield 37). Although the American dollar was accepted as legitimate currency, and foreign tourists were encouraged to exploit Cuba’s exotic locality, Cubans had to endure harsh food shortages. Paul B. Miller writes that the Special Period was “a time of unprecedented austerity of Cuban citizens with the concomitant development of a luxury tourist industry for foreigners” (195). Cuca is directly affected by this austerity:

Intenta acordarse de lo que comió ayer. No, no comió. Ingirió tajada de aire y fritura de viento. Hoy puede que se haga un bistecito de la frazada de piso vieja que adobó hace quince días. (178)

[She tries to remember what she ate yesterday. No, she didn’t eat. She swallowed a slice of air and fried wind. Perhaps today she would make a steak out of the old floor mop that she had been marinating for fifteen days.]

Valdés’s tone in this passage is deeply sardonic. Cuca represents the many Cubans who starved or were forced to eat the inedible.

Food shortages caused Cubans to become especially inventive with their recipes. Valdés highlights this in a particularly affective scene when at a party Cuca is served meatballs made from boiled shoes, quicklime, rubber bands, and cod liver oil. She pointedly states that no one throws up after because that is a luxury they cannot afford: “Nadie vomita, no pueden permitirse ese lujo” (230). The harsh experiences of the Cuban majority sharply contrast with the experiences of foreign tourists and their access to luxurious accommodations.

In descriptions of the everyday experiences of Cubans Valdés undermines a historiographic project that would idealize the Revolution. Not only does she shed light on the
horrible living conditions in Havana; but Valdés also illustrates how the Revolution destroyed an important element of Cuban cultural identity, that is the music and vibrant nightlife. Moreover, at a personal level the Revolution disrupted Cuca’s family. It kept María Regla from knowing her father and strained her relationship with her mother. In this way, *Te di la vida entera* fulfills the third element of testimonial literature, which is to set official history aright.

The three points of testimonial literature also relate to my analysis of Brodber’s *Louisiana* in Chapter Two. In the same way that Mammy and Lowly spoke to Ella, a trained anthropologist, who transcribed their histories, María Regla transmits her knowledge, her experiences and those of her mother Cuca, to the Valdés persona, who becomes a kind of ethnographer. However, this is a fictional work of art and so the question of truth, and/or reliability, as it was in *Louisiana*, is again a focal point.

To reiterate a key aspect of Yúdice’s definition, in testimonial literature “truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation.” María Regla is a self-proclaimed lover of truth, and she strictly establishes her disapproval of the embellishments her scribe has added to her story. Her initial speech, “No soy la escritora de esta novela. Soy el cadáver,” summarizes María Regla’s preoccupation with truth. It is imperative for her to clarify that she did not invent the narrative; she is evidence of it. She is the cadaver. Her body is physical proof of what has transpired—i.e., the events that will unfold for the readers as they move through the text. Moreover, within the folk religious context that Valdés establishes through *Santería*, María Regla, as the “muerto” (deceased ancestor) in this ritual, is a “‘reliable’ voice” (Otero 47).

Although her spirit appears to fade into the margins after her opening remarks, it re-emerges in the sixth chapter with a declaration similar to the book’s introduction; however, in
this passage she addresses the tension between truth and fiction, establishing herself as a credible
witness to the historical events:

No soy la escritora de este libro. Ya lo anuncié al principio. Soy el cadáver. La que ha
ido, e irá, dictando a esta viva lo que debe escribir…La verdad me pertenece, la fantasía
la pondrá quien transcribe mis sentimientos…He puesto confianza en la elegida. Pero no
toda, no estoy como para confiar demasiado en los vivos a estas alturas de mi muerte.
(166)

[I am not the author of this book. I already stated this to begin with. I am the cadáver. The
one that has been, and will be, dictating to this living one what she should write…The
truth belongs to me, fantasy will be added by the one who transcribes my sentiments…I
have put my trust in her, the chosen one. But not all of it, I am not about to trust too much
in the living at this stage in my death.]

María Regla boldly asserts, “the truth belongs to me” (“la verdad me pertenece”). It is the Valdés
persona, the one who transcribes the spirit’s feelings (“sentimientos”), who adds the fantasy (“la
fantasia”). The spirit expresses her reticence to put all of her trust in the living (“no estoy como
para confiar demasiado en los vivos”). Whereas the living are fallible and cannot be trusted
completely, the spirit, by asserting the living’s unreliability, reinforces her own trustworthiness.
However, she must rely upon the living to share her story, to make it public and accessible.

To reiterate, Te di la vida entera appears to echo the objectives of testimonial literature as
it establishes “truth,” provides an alternative to the dominant historical discourse, connects the
private to the public, and emerges out of oral discourse. In this way the novel creates a bridge not
only between the individual and communal experience, but also between the present and the past.
History becomes less absolute and hegemonic, and more inclusive of multiple voices. Nostalgia,
likewise, allows for a reconsideration of history, especially reflective nostalgia, which allows for
multiple planes of consciousness (Boym 50).
Nostalgia and Music

Valdés relies on the affective weight of nostalgia to engage her audience, especially the Cuban reader, who, whether still living on the island or a part of the Cuba diaspora, carries a unique nostalgia of his/her own. The epigraph to Te di la vida entera’s first chapter, a quote from the Cuban author Guillermo Cabrera Infante, emphasizes affect and nostalgia in the novel: “Recordar es abrir esa caja de Pandora de la que salen todos los dolores, todos los olores y esa música nocturna.” To remember is to open a Pandora’s Box (“caja de Pandora”) of pain (“dolores”), smells (“olores”), and nocturnal music (“música nocturna”). Unlike an official historical account that deals with “facts,” Valdés’s novel explores the affective pull of memory. In a way Te di la vida entera is a “Pandora’s Box” of pain, smells, and nocturnal music. Valdés’s narrative recreates the past via color, smell, and perhaps most effectively, sounds.

Valdés’s use of nostalgia is indicative of the literature of the Special Period (during which Te di la vida entera was published). According to Paul B. Miller, literature during this era is set apart because of its “particular brand of nostalgia” that often uses music from before the Revolution to return to the past: “Cuban music from the forties and fifties represents one of the portals or apertures which conveys them back to an idealized pre-revolutionary Habana” (198). Music, like ghosts, collapses the boundary between past and present. Through the affective force of listening to (or remembering) a particular song one can (figuratively) re-inhabit the past, as the novel makes clear through Cuca’s fascination with the bolero—a especially affective genre that allows Cuca to return to the past figuratively. This is apparent in the following quote: “Cuca Martínez escucha como se escuchan los boleros a su edad, como a cualquier edad, como la primera vez (Cuca Martínez listens to boleros like all people listen to boleros at her age, or at any

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13 Although the genre originated in Southern Spain, it underwent important changes in Cuba during the late colonial period and so it has a distinct Cuban sound influenced by African rhythms (Bensusan 604).
age for that matter, as if it were the first time)” (174, emphasis added). Cuca Martínez listened to boleros always as if it were the first time. Their nostalgic quality transports Cuca via sensory memory to an earlier time.¹⁴ Through music, Valdés invokes rich and complex feelings to recreate the past while also reinforcing the novel’s affective weight.

Valdés invokes nostalgia via boleros from the pre-revolutionary era, weaving their lyrics and sentiments into the narrative structure of the text and the narration of Cuca’s personal life. She begins each chapter with lyrics from a bolero to set the tone and provide the theme for the chapter. These lyrics not only remind the reader of a unique Cuban past, but also reinforce Cuca’s personal suffering. The melancholy lyrics of the boleros, which mostly deal with abandonment and disillusionment, reflect the heartache Cuca feels because of her lost love, but also “[translate] into a commentary on life in Cuba in the Special Period” (Miller 199). By relying on a musical form that is defined by nostalgia, Valdés’s novel’s affective force is dramatically heightened.

The bolero is an especially sentimental genre that effectively evokes nostalgia through the theme of absence. In his study Tropics of Desire José Quiroga explains, “Boleros are all about erasure. What other musical genre can be so invested in its own sense of disappearance that it seeks to proclaim absence by belting out songs claiming that the only thing that remains is disappearance itself” (152)? The following “bonito y triste bolero” (beautiful and sad bolero) from the novel reflects Quiroga’s point:

Qué te importa que te ame
si tú no me quieres ya,
el amor que ya ha pasado
no se puede recordar.
Fui la ilusión de tu vida

¹⁴ Sensory memory defines the way in which we can recall certain sensory experiences with similar effects (and affects) without engaging those senses.
This particular bolero speaks to the many issues addressed in the novel. The speaker in this song is like a ghost who is trapped in the past and has also become a symbol of the past. Yet, her voice continues to haunt the present. This particular bolero haunts Cuca, but interestingly it also haunts other Cubans. The text clarifies that Cuca hears this song over the radio, once again (“una vez más”), indicating that this particular song is popular and is played on the radio often. In this way music, through the affect of a pretty and sad bolero, connects all Cubans, despite their different forms of suffering and loss. The radio is the medium that transmits the musical affect, creating a link between Cuca’s intimate personal suffering and the rest of Cuba.

In general, music via radio transmission creates an imagined community of listeners, but Quiroga argues that boleros specifically create a communal space, an objective that Valdés also attempts to achieve through orality. Writing about the reappearance of the bolero inside and outside of Cuba, Quiroga explains, “the bolero as a recuperated genre [it regained popularity during the 1990s] demands that we break the tenuous border between the self and the other, between objective and subjective discourse” (151). The fact that the bolero is a “recuperated” genre means that its contemporary status bridges a link between the present and the past and thereby creates a link between contemporary and past listeners. The contemporary listener is able to tap into a collective past experience. In her essay “Ranchera Music(s) and the Legendary
Lydia Mendoza,” Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez makes a similar observation regarding Mexican ranchera music. She explains that ranchera music “performs and evokes collective memory and knowledge” (198). Although Broyles-Gonzalez analyzes a different musical form than the one used in Valdés’s novel, the principle is the same.¹⁵

Broyles-Gonzalez further explains how elements of music can be linked with an oral tradition of storytelling:

The sensory nature of oral tradition is little understood; it requires all the senses for its transmission. Beyond words, its beats and melodies evoke deep memory and transfer subtle essences that flow and travel—like wind, water, and fire—from one person to another. That flow moves within the physical and spiritual universe. The musical beats, harmonies, melodies, and words produce sublime effects: laden vibratory and auditory fields of memory, collectively validated and cherished musical fields that help define social relations and social movement. (196)

Like the bolero and the oral tradition of storytelling, Valdés’s writing style is full of the sensuous, in all of the term’s meanings. She relies on detailed descriptions that invite the reader to engage all of their senses imaginatively. The novel is a “Pandora’s Box” of pain, smells, and nocturnal music. Through a musical form that is defined by nostalgia, Valdés emphasizes the affective force of her novel.

Although boleros recall a past that is seemingly impossible to recover, in a way it is recovered, through the very nostalgia that it evokes. This is supported by Boym’s claim that nostalgia disrupts a linear concept of temporality. She writes, “The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition” (xv). This is perhaps why an early symptom of nostalgia, which was diagnosed as a disease in the seventeenth century, was to hear voices or see ghosts (Boym 3). As I have stated earlier, and a key point of

¹⁵ Quiroga acknowledges a link between the two genres: “[T]he ranchera is certainly more nationally inflected than the bolero, but I think… the feeling engages a relationship between the two genres” (159).
this dissertation, ghosts collapse the temporal boundaries that separate the living and the dead, the present and the past. If a symptom of nostalgia is to hear or see ghosts, then the individual plagued by nostalgia participates in an obliteration of history, seeing and hearing the past in the present temporal space.

*Te di la vida entera*’s use of ghosts illustrates this attempt to destabilize linear historical progression. María Regla is not the only spectral presence in the novel; literal and figurative ghosts abound. One of Cuca’s friends, Fax, becomes a spirit medium as a result of electroshock therapy. This treatment was meant to cure her depression after her lover was executed by the government without just cause. Although the electroshock therapy does not cure her grief, she gains the ability to communicate with Lenin, Marx, Engels, and other dead communists (182). Although Fax is a minor character, her experience reinforces the trauma of the Revolution and her new abilities as a spirit medium highlights the significance of spirit possession.

As for figurative ghosts, Cuca imagines that Uan’s ghost follows her throughout Havana: “el fantasma del Uan me perseguía a todas partes (Uan’s ghost pursues me at every turn)” (118). At other times she pursues his “ghost” and leaps from moving cars when a man resembling Uan rounds a corner. She narrates, “A veces iba colgada en una guagua, y tenía que lanzarme antes de que ésta parara, porque de pronto había creído verlo doblar por una esquina (At times I would be hanging from a bus and would have to jump off before it stopped because suddenly I had thought I had seen him [Uan] turn a corner)” (118). Cuca is haunted by Uan’s memory; she imagines that she sees him all over Havana. Uan’s figurative haunting reinforces Cuca’s inability to let go of the past.

Another key scene with “ghosts” is when Cuca and Uan finally reunite after thirty-something years. Their accidental reunion takes place, of all sites, in a graveyard. Both assume
the other is a ghost. Cuca wonders if the figure approaching her could be Uan’s spirit. Could it be that he had died in Miami and had decided to come to see her?: “¿Será una aparición, habrá muerto allá en Miami, y decidió venir a verla?” (235). Although Uan does not recognize Cuca initially, he too wonders if she is a ghost: “[E]spero que no sea un espíritu burlón (I hope that you are not a mischievous spirit)” (236). Despite the unusual and macabre setting for this romantic reunion, for which Cuca has been waiting the majority of her life, it seems as if no time has passed at all: “[P]arece que fue ayer (It’s as if it was yesterday)” (235). Past and present dissolve in the graveyard, a liminal space where the dead and living meet.

Whereas in the graveyard scene it is as if past and present have collapsed into one temporal space, towards the end of the novel past and present actually do converge, providing an odd kind of closure to a distressing narrative. In the final chapter, the Valdés persona writes María Regla back into the text, bringing her back to life within the reality of the novel. However, she is revived in 1959, the year of the Revolution and the year of María Regla’s birth. María Regla, who had become a journalist, was killed when her apartment complex collapsed as she left the building to conduct an interview. When María Regla is revived, she “wakes up” in the back seat of a car on the way to her work assignment. She is confused as to how she could still be alive after the collapse of her apartment building, and although she cannot make sense of what has happened to her, she is determined to fulfill her assignment. That is all she has left after losing everything: “[S]e da cuenta de que lo perdió todo. Lo único que le queda es su reportaje. Y lo hará (She realizes that she lost everything. The only thing that remains to her is her duty as a reporter. And she would do it)” (346). As she and her co-workers drive further and further into the rural part of the country, she notices that the billboards begin to change. Eventually they all appear to be advertisements from the 1950s. It seems that they are traveling into the past. Even
her hair and dress have changed to the style of the 50s. The car, a ’58 Chevy, also undergoes a transformation, reverting to the condition that it would have been circa 1959. María Regla intuits that she is in another era: “Intuye que no está en su época” (352). When they finally reach their destination she is startled to see a pregnant woman, around her age, with such similar features to her own that it is uncanny. They only have the opportunity to speak briefly, but María Regla promises the woman that she will return to do a special interview with her.

Two days later she makes the journey back to the rural village; however, this time the billboards, her dress, and the condition of the car do not change. Upon her arrival she asks some girls playing outside about the pregnant young woman she had met outside of a blue house two days previous. They don’t know of a young pregnant woman, but they tell her about a crazy old woman named Cuca who lives in the blue house. When María Regla asks them what year it is, they respond: 1995, a poetic and appropriate inversion of 1959. When she sees an old woman sitting outside of the blue house, María Regla recognizes her mother, but Cuca does not recognize the revived María Regla as her daughter. Rather, she recognizes the journalist she had met decades earlier. After her daughter’s death Cuca moved back to her home in the country to wait for the journalist to return so that she could finally share her story. Cuca speaks to María Regla as if it were 1959: “Pero Cuca Martínez se dirige a la periodista del año mil novecientos cincuenta y nueve” (360). The concept of temporality is completely disoriented in this scene.

This complex and compelling ending illustrates an uncanny return to the past, illustrating the novel’s obliteration of a linear phallocentric history. This episode marks the novel as a model for cyclical time, an example of Kristeva’s concept of women’s time (le temps des femmes). Although up to this point the novel has stressed Cuca’s longing for Uan, making their impossible love the presumed focus on the narrative, this touching closing focuses on the relationship
between mother and daughter. Uan is not mentioned again. This ending emphasizes the relationship between women in a temporal space other than the linear masculine time. It allows the two women to connect really for the first time. Throughout the novel Cuca’s relationship with María Regla is quite strained. Whereas Cuca resented the Revolution because it took Uan and Havana from her, María Regla was a product of the Revolution (she was born in 1959) and as a child and adolescent could not understand or identify with her mother’s sense of loss and longing for the past. With this collapse of time the two women are able to connect in a maternal, feminine, cyclical time. Only now, in this deconstructed historical space, can María Regla understand and appreciate the history she is about to hear:

María Regla escucha, piensa que lo único que queda es eso: grabar. Más tarde se ocupará de buscar a una persona con vida de verdad que pueda escribirlo por ella. (361)

[María Regla listens, thinking that the only thing that remains is this: to record her mother’s story. Later she’ll worry about finding someone who is truly living who could write it down for her.]

It is significant that Cuca shares her story (via oral discourse) within a cyclical (feminine) temporal space; both orality and the cyclical temporality disrupt a hegemonic discourse. The novel’s resolution comes about because of a collapse of linear temporality, which the novel had been leading up to because of its use of orality, nostalgia, and, of course, ghosts.

Through the use of ghosts, nostalgia, and orality, Valdés bridges the past and the present while also linking the personal to the public. She connects the intimate suffering of Cuca with Cuba’s national deterioration. It cannot be a coincidence that those two subjects, Cuca and Cuba, are, except for one letter, almost identical in spelling, reinforcing the connection between the two. The feminine, personal subject is allowed to give voice to their unique experience (an alternative to the dominant historical discourse). The same is also true for Cisneros’s Caramelo.
Caramelo: or Puro Cuento

Sandra Cisneros’s *Caramelo: or Puro Cuento* likewise employs a female spirit, who at times acts as a narrator and also collapses the boundaries between present and past through oral discourse and nostalgia. Unlike *Te di la vida entera*, however, whose protagonist is wholly fictional, *Caramelo* is loosely based on the biography of its author. Cisneros’s fictional counterpart is the young narrator-author Celaya Reyes, called “Lala” by her family. She recounts her family’s history and some of her ancestor’s individual experiences migrating from Mexico to the United States and her own personal migratory experience crossing the border every summer to visit her father’s family in Mexico. The novel seems straightforward enough, until the ghost of Lala’s *abuela*, Soledad Reyes, also known as “the Awful Grandmother,” interrupts the narration to assert her own version of events. Soledad’s retelling of her past collapses temporal boundaries which allows for a reconsideration of the past from a different (feminine) perspective, serving as an alternative to the hegemonic and patriarchal historical narrative. Like *Te di la vida entera*, affective discourse via communion with a spirit is key to accessing a “transformative recognition” of the past.

Just as Cuban culture is affected by the spiritual tradition of *Santería*, Mexican society is also marked by a distinct worldview regarding the dead and their relationships with the living. This is most apparent in the way that Mexicans and many Mexican Americans honor and remember their deceased relatives during the holiday *Día de los muertos* (Day of the Dead). Although Cisneros does not specifically refer to this holiday in *Caramelo*, an understanding of this *fiesta* will highlight a unique Mexican view of death and will clarify the significance of Soledad’s return to the sphere of the living.

*Día de los muertos* covers multiple days, marking the return of the souls of deceased ancestors and relatives between the evening of October 31st until November 2nd. These holy days
are known as All Saints’ and All Souls’ days, and although these days are important throughout the Catholic world, Día de los muertos is specific to Mexico and illustrates a specific and unique Mexican attitude towards death and ancestors. According to Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloë Sayer in The Skeleton at the Feast, this particular holiday is “the most important celebration in the yearly cycle” (14). Carmichael and Sayer explain that Easter and Christmas, of course, are also very important holidays; however, they are “less distinctive in form” (14). In Skulls to the Living, Bread to the Dead, Stanley Brandes writes that Día de los muertos “is indisputably Mexico’s most famous holiday, the holiday that Mexicans invest most time and money in celebrating” (6). He further clarifies that “[f]or Mexicans, foreigners, and peoples of Mexican descent, the holiday has come to symbolize Mexico and Texicanness” (7).

Día de los muertos is famous for the unusually cheerful depictions of death in a variety of unexpected media. From papier-mâché skeleton dolls, to candy and breads in the shape of skulls and skeletons, death is presented as a common and inevitable phenomenon. Día de los muertos really is a fiesta, a celebration of life that acknowledges the universality and certainty of death. Perhaps for the present discussion the most important aspect of Día de los muertos is the fact that its purpose is to honor and remember family. This is not a public ritual, although decorations and festivities can be seen in public spaces. Essentially, it is about the intimate familial relations that persist beyond death. As Brandes states, Día de los muertos creates “conditions which promote a kind of spiritual communion with them [deceased ancestors]” (8). Living relatives and descendants lovingly prepare an offering, including food and drink, for their deceased family members, whose spirits are expected to visit during the first two days of November. This offering is “an obligation, a vital part of maintaining good relations with the dead” (Carmichael and Sayer 24). The rituals surrounding Día de los muertos are centered on nourishing the spirits
of the dead and ensuring that the spirits do not become stuck in this world. If souls are unable to rest in peace, they will surely “trouble the living,” as is the case with Soledad (Carmichael and Sayer 18).

Soledad’s narrative voice, set off by bold font, is strong and assertive, making her, as Heather Alumbaugh puts it in her article “Narrative Coyotes: Migration and Narrative Voice in Sandra Cisneros’s *Caramelo,*” a co-narrator with Lala (64). Soledad’s voice is first “heard” in Part II, *When I Was Dirt,* meaning the time before “I” (Lala) existed. Lala begins this section by addressing the early years of her grandmother’s sad life writing, “Is there anyone left in the world who once heard her call out ‘Mamá?’ It was such a long, long time ago” (91-92). At this point, in a stylistic shift from the first part of the novel, an anonymous speaker interjects in bold font, “¡Qué exagerada eres! It wasn’t that long ago” (92)! Readers eventually realize that the voice belongs to the “Awful Grandmother,” although at this point in the narrative they do not know that she is the reason why Lala is writing her family’s story. Throughout this section Lala and her grandmother’s ghost discuss, or argue rather, about how best to tell Soledad’s story; Soledad continually interrupts Lala’s narration. Although at first these disruptions seem annoying and halting, the co-narration is mutual therapy for Lala and her deceased grandmother. The two come to depend on each other to improve their individual situations. Soledad’s soul is able to find peace as she shares her history, and Lala is better able to understand her complex family dynamic, leading to an increased capacity to cope with the difficulties of her own life.

Like the spirits in *Louisiana* and *Te di la vida entera,* Soledad asserts her spectral presence by speaking. Lala first hears her grandmother’s voice at a pivotal point in her adolescence just after being chased by school bullies into the middle of the Interstate. She is frozen by fear, unable to move forward or turn and face her tormentors, until she hears a voice
say her name: “Celaya. Something says my name in a hard whisper.—Celaya. The voice is so sharp and clear and close to my ear, it hisses and sizzles and makes me jump. Celaya” (357). From this point on Lala is aware that her grandmother is “haunting” her, although she does not know why.

Similar to Cuca and María Regla, Lala and her grandmother did not have a good relationship while Soledad was alive (hence her nickname “the Awful Grandmother”), but Soledad chooses to appear to Lala because she needs her story to be told; she needs her voice to be heard. Before Soledad dies “she suffers a terrible seizure that freezes her,” leaving her “without words, except to stick the tip of her tongue between thin lips and sputter a frothy sentence of spit. So much left unsaid” (91). Soledad’s inability to speak before her death is a literal manifestation of her figurative muteness throughout her life. Her visitations to her granddaughter make Lala into a kind of spirit medium, like Ella in *Louisiana* and the Valdés persona in *Te di la vida entera*, who can recuperate her marginalized voice and memories.

The importance of Soledad’s story is not fully understood until the final section of the novel when the reader learns the motive behind Lala’s account of her family history. While visiting her father who is recovering from a heart attack in the hospital, Lala sees the ghost of her grandmother who is eager to have her son, Inocencio, join her. Even in death Soledad cannot escape the weight of her name, solitude. She laments: “I’m halfway between here and there. I’m in the middle of nowhere! *Soy una ánima sola*” (406). Unable to pass on peacefully, Soledad attempts to make a deal with Lala, promising that if Lala writes her story—which would release Soledad from the solitary limbo in which she is trapped—she will preserve Inocencio’s life. Soledad needs her story to be told in order to find peace in the afterlife. Soledad explains, “I need everyone I hurt to forgive me. You’ll tell them for me, won’t you, Celaya? You need to tell them
for me, I’m sorry Celaya. You’re good with talk. Tell them, please, Celaya. Make them understand me. I’m not bad. I’m so frightened. I never wanted to be alone, and now look where I am” (407). Lala’s skill with “talk” (i.e. storytelling) will allow Soledad to progress peacefully.

Cisneros, like Brodber and Valdés, relies on oral traditions, including the use of proverbs and common Mexican sayings, to address the need for an alternative voice to supplement and/or challenge the written, official archive. Storytelling itself is an important theme in the novel. Cisneros elaborates on the tension between official written documentation and oral history in a particularly distressing scene when Lala’s father is detained by INS officers. The officers ask for Inocencio’s papers, and since he does not have them on hand he gives them what he thinks would be just as valid: stories. He recounts his time spent serving in the U.S. Army, where he earned his U.S. citizenship. But the INS officers respond by saying, “We don’t need stories, we need papers” (375). Inocencio’s willingness to fight and risk his life for the U.S., in his mind, is more proof of his citizenship than papers; however, the officials cannot recognize, or trust, the truth of his stories. The power of the written word trumps lived experience. This scene succinctly encapsulates one of the issues at the center of Cisneros’s narrative—the value of a story, specifically related via oral culture, in spite of an absolute written authority.

Orality, Witnesses, and Testimonial Literature

The importance of orality to Cisneros’s project is clear early on, with the following epigraph: “Cuéntame algo, aunque sea una mentira (Tell me a story, even if it be a lie).” This opening creates an atmosphere that is informal and communal (typical of oral literature), while also establishing the tension between truth and fiction (similar to Brodber’s and Valdés’s texts). On a following preliminary page the author states that her objective in writing the novel is to continue in the family tradition of storytelling, “telling healthy lies.” She writes, “The truth, these stories are nothing but story, bits of string, odds and ends found here and there, embroidered
together to make something new. I have invented what I do not know and exaggerated what I do to continue the family tradition of telling healthy lies.” This invention and exaggeration transforms family history into art. The particular stories remain an important foundation, but the exaggeration, or embroidery, allows Cisneros to move beyond the particular to the collective experience.

This emphasis on the art of storytelling is also apparent in the novel’s title *Caramelo: or Puro Cuento*. It would appear that the phrase “puro cuento” is deliberately ambiguous. *Puro* may mean pure, as in true, but it could also mean pure, as in absolute. Either the novel is a true story or absolute *cuento*—complete fiction. In fact, it is simultaneously both. Moreover, the first part of the title *Caramelo*, has several layers of meaning, but the most prominent is found in its connection to the unfinished caramel colored *rebozo*, a shawl-like garment worn by Mexican women, which Lala inherits from Soledad.

When we consider the etymology of the word “text,” from the Latin *texere*, to weave, it becomes clear that the novel’s title connects directly with the theme of storytelling, a legacy Lala metaphorically inherits through Soledad who was born into a family of weavers, los Reyes, “famed *reboceros* from Santa María del Río, San Luis Potosí, where the finest shawls in all the republic come from” (92). Cisneros thoughtfully fashions the *rebozo* into a symbol of storytelling (“bits of string, odds and ends found here and there, embroidered together to make something new”) that transcends her personal family history.

Although the *rebozo* is specifically connected to Lala’s family’s legacy, it also connects to a larger Mexican national identity. All women, regardless of class or ethnic background, wore a *rebozo* (*Caramelo* 93). In an end note to the chapter on Soledad’s family, Cisneros includes the following information: “The *rebozo* was born in Mexico, but like all mestizos, it came from
everywhere. It evolved from the cloths Indian women used to carry their babies, borrowed its knotted fringe from Spanish shawls, and was influenced by the silk embroideries from the imperial court of China” (96, all end notes are originally in italics). The rebozo is an important cultural artifact that is uniquely Mexican and represents the diverse origins of Mexican identity; it represents indigenous, Spanish, and Chinese influences and traditions. The rebozo, as a symbol of storytelling, connects Lala’s personal family history to the larger cultural history of Mexico.

The male members of the Reyes family contributed to the production of the rebozos; yet, the women were the ones to add the embellishments and designs—the affective elements. The connection between weaving the rebozos and the art of storytelling places emphasis on the value of women’s voices and their ability to express themselves. History and knowledge is passed on and shared between women as mothers teach their daughters the art of weaving. Cisneros describes this matrilineal process, which Soledad should have learned from her mother, Guillermina, in the following passage:

Guillermina’s mother had taught her the empuntadora’s art of counting and dividing silk strands, of braiding and knotting them into fastidious rosettes, arcs, stars, diamonds, names, dates, and even dedications, and before her, her mother taught her as her own mother had learned it, so it was as if all the mothers and daughters were at work, all one thread interlocking and double-looping, each woman learning from the woman before, but adding a flourish that became her signature, then passing it on. (93)

This “folk” knowledge is not to be found in the archive of official knowledge; rather it represents the repertoire. Diana Taylor explains that the repertoire “stores” knowledge passed down through performance, oral traditions, and cultural practices of memory—things that the archive cannot “capture” (xvi). The rebozo is an alternative female production of a historical record; not only
does it demonstrate women’s artistic talent and creativity in the designs and naming, but it also contains important information like names, dates, and dedications.

Moreover, the way that the Reyes women create the designs (by “double looping” the threads) illustrates a cyclical rather than a linear progression in the artistic creation of the rebozo and in a narrative style. As in Valdés’s text, Caramelo does not follow a linear progression. The narrative jumps back and forth in time and space (between Mexico and the U.S.). In this way the narrative is embellished and embroidered with “double looping” like the rebozo, making Cisneros’s novel another example of women’s writing, exemplifying Kristeva’s concept of women’s time. This is especially apparent in the scene when Soledad takes the caramel colored rebozo out of storage. Lala narrates:

The Grandmother snaps open the caramelo rebozo. It gives a soft flap like wings as it falls open. The candy-colored cloth unfurling like a flag—no, like a hypnotist’s spiral. And if this were an old movie, it would be right to insert in this scene just such a hypnotist’s spiral circling and circling to get across the idea of going into the past. The past, el pasado. El porvenir, the days to come. All swirling together like the stripes of a chuchuluco. (254)

By combining the past (“el pasado”) and the future (“el porvenir”) within the body of the rebozo (representing women’s textile art and women’s storytelling), Cisneros emphasizes that feminine time is not linear or progressive, as reflected in both the garment and the narrative. However, the fact that this rebozo is unfinished illustrates Soledad’s trouble with the past.

As Soledad’s descendant, Lala is an heir to this art of weaving (figurative and literal); yet, Soledad does not have much knowledge to offer her, since her mother, Guillermina, died before being able teach her. However, Soledad shares with Lala what little knowledge she does have. She instructs Lala on the delicate process of telling a story, repeatedly interrupting Lala’s narrative with the admonition, “Careful! Just enough, but not too much…”—the same

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16 Rebozos are given specific names because of their color and designs, like watermelon, lantern, pearl, rain, snow, and others (93).
instructions, verbatim, Soledad’s father gave for dyeing the family’s famous black rebozos (92). The repetition of this phrase, “Just enough, but not too much,” in regards to dyeing the rebozos and telling a story, illustrate that the same principles are used in the creation of a story and the making of a rebozo (95).

Since Soledad never learned the feminine art of embroidering and embellishing the rebozo, her voice was silenced at a young age, until heartache and betrayal forge her into the possessive and perpetually critical “Awful Grandmother.” By exploring her grandmother’s early life and marriage to her grandfather, Narciso (whose name—a variant of Narcissus—reflects his character), Lala learns to empathize with Soledad and comes to understand how she could evolve from a timid mestiza orphan girl into the “Awful Grandmother.” Although it was Soledad’s birthright to continue in the tradition of her rebocero family, she did not have the chance to fulfill it, leaving her figuratively mute. Lala narrates, “It is only right, then, that she should have been a knotter of fringe as well, but when Soledad was still too little to braid her own hair, her mother died and left her without the language of knots and rosettes” (94). The fact that Soledad was too young to learn how to braid hair emphasizes that she was too young to learn to weave cloth, let alone words. Soledad’s latent gift for weaving, for storytelling, is apparent in the way that she handled the unfinished caramel colored rebozo, the only thing Guillermina left her when she passed away: “All she had was the caramelo rebozo, whose fringe she plaited and unplaited, which was a kind of language” (151). Although this action becomes a “kind of language,” it is forever stalled; Soledad’s repetitious plaiting and unplaiting never results in the completion of the garment.

Lala emphasizes Soledad’s muteness by creating a parallel between her grandmother and Soledad’s father-in-law, Eleuterio, who after suffering from a stroke “turned into a half-mad
invalid whose drooling speech everyone ignored except Soledad” (150-151). However, even though Eleuterio could not physically speak, he was able to express himself through music:

Fortunately, Eleuterio Reyes retained the ability to play the piano, if only with his right hand, and this perhaps saved him from jumping off a church tower. He composed some uncomplicated, entertaining pieces, and it was here he found solace from the world that did not understand him. His music was quick, elegant, lithe, and as overly romantic as ever. It didn’t matter if he wasn’t. (148)

Eleuterio’s music could be everything that he could not be, i.e. “quick, elegant, lithe” and romantic. In this way music was a valuable consolation for his muteness. Soledad, however, did not have a similar means of expression: “Poor Soledad. She understood Eleuterio because she was as mute as he was, perhaps more so because she had no piano” (151). Eleuterio is physically mute and Soledad’s muteness is only figurative, but he is at least capable of self-expression. Although Soledad was left figuratively mute when her mother died before passing on the “language of knots and rosettes,” as a spirit Soledad is able to give voice to her painful past and reclaim a sense of subjectivity.

Just as the spirit of María Regla functioned as a testimonials and the Valdés persona served as her transcriber, Soledad is also a witness and her granddaughter fulfills an ethnographic role. In her book Troubling Nationhood in U.S. Latina Literature, Maya Socolovsky observes that Cisneros plays with the concept of authorship by shaping Lala at once to be an “autobiographer, biographer, ethnographer, historian, and fiction writer” (90, emphasis added). As an ethnographer Lala “tell[s] her own and others’ testimonials, give[s] voice to and inscribe[s] their histories and fictions, and unearth[s] residual memories that lie beneath the usually unspoken family narratives” (Socolovsky 90). In this role Lala provides a platform for the voiceless, a key function of testimonial literature.
According to Yúdice’s definition of testimonial literature, *Caramelo*, like *Te di la vida entera*, shares many similar traits to that tradition by emphasizing oral discourse, as has previously been explored, connecting the singular to the collective experience, and setting history “aright.” As Alumbaugh writes, Lala changes “the form of her Grandmother’s story from a private, solitary narration to one that is public and communal” (62). This movement from the private to the public is reinforced through Soledad’s name, which translates to *solitude*, making her into an allegorical figure with potential to represent any Mexican (woman) who has felt abandoned in love or any other life circumstance. This is apparent as Lala comes to understand her grandmother and subsequently learns that she is more like Soledad than she had imagined: “I am the Awful Grandmother” (424). Lala’s sense of solitude stems from a continual feeling of unbelonging, especially within her family. As the only girl out of seven children, Lala is a perpetual outsider. Moreover, despite being the only girl, she is unable to connect with her mother, further accentuating her feelings of alienation, her sense of *soledad*.

Soledad’s narrative serves as a means to set official history “aright” through her testimony. Although Soledad’s narrative is not confronting a specific historiographic process, it provides another perspective. That is to say, it fills in the gaps of the official history. Soledad moved to Mexico City just before the Mexican Revolution began in 1910, and as Lala transcribes her grandmother’s experiences at that specific time she provides a female perspective to the Revolution, not as a *soldadera* who accompanied men into combat and sometimes even fought alongside them, but from the point of view of a woman who stayed home. However, Soledad’s experience of war in the capital is no less traumatic. She is a witness to many horrors: “A dog carrying away a human hand. A Villista shot dead while squatting to put on his *guaraches*...She saw a dismembered head mumble a filthy curse before dying” (135). The tragedy of the
Revolution is a constant thread throughout the narrative and Soledad’s memory of it illustrates how that tragedy affected every Mexican. Soledad’s testimony adds to the historical understanding of the Mexican Revolution, providing an oft overlooked female perspective.

Cisneros also confronts the official historical record by compiling a kind of history of her own within the detailed endnotes to many of the chapters. These endnotes give additional details to Lala’s personal family history, but also include historical and cultural information, including translations to common Mexican sayings in Spanish, explanations of important Mexican historical figures, descriptions of items from material culture, and notes on popular icons. The novel thus serves a double function as a family history and as an encyclopedic endeavor cataloguing telenovelas, the history of the rebozo, the Mexican Revolution, the U.S. invasion of Tampico in 1914, and popular music and dance, like the Charleston. In this way, Cisneros subverts the place of official history by placing it in the margins, so to speak, of her family history.

Although the use of endnotes may seem like an academic move on Cisneros’s part, they are at times ironic and playful, illustrating rather a critique of academic and official writing. This is in part apparent in her whimsical descriptions of Latin American pop culture icons, like Libertad Lamarque:

*Libertad Lamarque was an Argentine singer and film star with a voice like a silver knife with a mother-of-pearl handle. Supposedly she was Perón’s lover, and for this they say Eva had her ousted from the country. Libertad settled in Mexico, where she had a long and flourishing career. She died in 2001, working till the last on a Mexican telenovela, una señora grande y una gran señora, as beautiful and elegant in her old age as ever, perhaps more beautiful.* (335)

However, the endnotes can be decidedly political and also function to set official history aright by filling in certain gaps. One such example is the end note that describes the expulsion of Mexican Americans from Texas by the Texas Rangers:
In 1915 more than half of the Mexican-American population emigrated from the Valley of Texas into war-torn Mexico fleeing the Texas Rangers, rural police ordered to suppress an armed rebellion of Mexican Americans protesting Anglo-American authority in South Texas. Supported by U.S. cavalry, their bullying led to the death of hundreds, some say thousands, of Mexicans and Mexican Americans, who were executed without trial. The end result was that Mexican-owned land was cleared, allowing development by Anglo newcomers. So often were Mexicans killed at the hands of the “Rinches,” that the San Antonio Express-News said it “has become so commonplace” that “it created little or no interest.” Little or no interest unless you were Mexican. (142)

In this particular endnote Cisneros addresses a history that has been largely ignored or forgotten. By including endnotes that are both playful and subversive Cisneros confronts an official and hegemonic historical discourse.

Nostalgia and Music

In addition to blurring the genre of Cisneros’s novel (making it into an alternative history), the endnotes also reinforce the novel’s theme of nostalgia. Soledad’s ghost may be the catalyst for Lala’s desire to return to her family’s past, but nostalgia also plays an important role. Lala is constantly aware of “[t]hat terrible ache and nostalgia for home when home is gone” (380). Part of her motivation to record her family history is to rediscover a Mexico and a past that always seems just out of her grasp. The question “where’s the border to the past…?” is a main concern for Lala (380). The novel documents the many trips that Lala and members of her family make across the border between Mexico and the U.S. with seeming ease (despite the psychological and social complications to this border crossing), yet a return to the past is not so accessible.

It would appear that this preoccupation with the past, and the endnotes specifically, confirm Boym’s statement that nostalgia is “an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world” (xiv). Like many Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans, Lala exists in perpetual exile—a displaced person on both
fronts. In Mexico she is not Mexican enough and in the United States she is too Mexican. She is like her grandmother’s ghost—floating in a liminal space, neither here nor there. Her desire to contextualize her family history within the larger Mexican history and cultural repertoire illustrates a “longing for continuity in a fragmented world.” Alumbaugh explains that Lala’s narrative rescues forgotten and repressed histories (creating a sense of continuity) by its encyclopedic nature. She writes:

Lala’s narrative consistently gives voice to those places and people that do not have one, ranging from her grandmother to her father, to Chicanos/as in the US, and to forgotten Mexican icons. Lala’s migratory narrative voice is *rascuache* [subversive] precisely because it excavates, reclaims, and preserves the concealed and forgotten memories of her grandmother, the Reyes clan, and *los de abajo* [“those from below”—i.e., the subaltern] in general. (63)

The endnotes (and the descriptions of Mexico and Mexican culture within the body of the text) illustrate a desire to connect the fragments of a Mexican identity that is complicated because of historical trauma and immigration. One of the most powerful tools to connect a fragmented Mexican community (whether displaced or not) is music, especially because of its affective potential.

Like in *Te di la vida entera*, music reinforces the nostalgic longing for the past and presents another example of the text’s affective force. Like Valdés’s novel, which began each chapter with song lyrics to invoke a specific mood, *Caramelo* begins with the lyrics from “María Bonita” by Mexican composer Augustín Lara: “Acuérdate de Acapulco, de aquellas noches, María bonita, María del alma; acuérdate que en la playa, con tus manitas las estrellitas las enjuagabas (Remember Acapulco, from those distant nights, pretty María, María of my soul; remember how at the beach you rinsed the stars with your hands)” (3). The imperative “acuérdate” (remember) establishes the novel’s central themes of memory, the past, and nostalgia. The narrator clarifies that the version the reader ought to have in mind is the one sung
by Lara “accompanied by a sweet, but very, very sweet violin” (3). This affective description allows the reader to feel (or imagine a feeling of) nostalgia.

In her article “Sandra Cisneros and Her Trade of the Free Word,” Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs asserts that Augustín Lara is himself a nostalgic figure, and that by using his lyrics Cisneros magnifies the novel’s nostalgia. She writes, “Lara is the perfect example of impossible nostalgic love, ‘a sufrido,’…a suffering musician who expresses in most of his work the metaphysical melancholy of displacement. He had been displaced by his culture, his family, and his lovers” (26). By invoking Lara, a figure that represents the “metaphysical melancholy of displacement,” at the beginning of her novel, Cisneros sets the mood for the narrative as a whole. This affective beginning underlines Soledad’s experience as an orphan and a victim of her husband’s infidelity, as well as her displacement in the U.S. after her husband’s death.

“María Bonita” is particularly appropriate for the beginning of Cisneros’s novel. She is about to delve into Lala’s family memory set in Acapulco, the subject of the song, and is about to comply with Lara’s imperative request, “acuérdate.” But at the same time those lyrics also gesture to a collective Mexican cultural memory and evoke a sense of nostalgia for a reader familiar with Lara’s work. The reader is thus affected and emotionally primed for this literary and cultural experience. Although the unique experiences of the Reyes family are the focal point of the novel, the narrative simultaneously serves to recuperate and heal a Mexican cultural identity.

Cisneros weaves together the personal and the communal in order to recover a sense of wholeness through mexicanidad (Mexicanness). Lala exclaims, “[E]ach and every person [is] connected to me, and me connected to them, like the strands of a rebozo” (389). Lala’s creative duty is figuratively to finish Soledad’s caramel rebozo and close the loop of her family history to
make it whole—to heal the wounds of the past on an intimate and communal level. Lala recognizes this familial and cultural obligation towards the end of the novel when she postulates, “Maybe it’s my job to separate the strands and knot the words together for everyone who can’t say them, and make it all right in the end” (428). By cataloguing Mexican history and popular figures, Cisneros creates an imagined community where Mexicans and Mexican Americans can share a space of belonging based on appreciation for cultural icons, artifacts, and mutual longing for a mythic past, whether it be pre-Columbian, colonial, or post-Revolution. This imagined community transcends geo-political borders and deterritorializes *mexicanidad*.

In *Caramelo*, *mexicanidad* is an affective locality. In other words, Cisneros makes it possible for readers to “feel” Mexico without having to be in the physical location. Cisneros creates this affective locality by establishing the richness of sounds, sights, and smells that are unique to, and representative of, Mexico. In Cisneros’s Mexico the sensory experiences are more intense than in the U.S.: “Sweets sweeter, colors brighter, the bitter more bitter” (17). Cisneros affectively recreates Mexico for the reader by describing its sounds, smells, and sights:

> The *scrip-scrapelscrip* of high heels across *saltillo* floor tiles…Roosters…Bells from skinny horses pulling tourists in a carriage, *clip-clop* on cobblestones and big chunks of horse *caquita* tumbling out of them like shredded wheat…The smell of diesel exhaust, the smell of somebody roasting coffee, the smell of hot corn *tortillas*…Little girls in Sunday dresses like lace bells, like umbrellas, like parachutes…Houses painted purple, electric blue, tiger orange, aquamarine, a yellow like a taxicab. (17-18)

These vibrant descriptions of Mexico create a nostalgic longing in the reader, but also reflect Lala’s own nostalgia, which is captured in the novel’s closing passage: “[F]or me these things, that song, that time, that place, are all bound together in a country I am homesick for, that doesn’t exist anymore. That never existed. *A country I invented*. Like all emigrants caught between here and there” (434, emphasis added). Lala’s nostalgia for a past Mexico echoes Boym’s definition of nostalgia as a “romance with one’s own fantasy;” the Mexico of the novel
is a “country I [Lala] invented.” This emphasis on invention demonstrates that through her storytelling Lala has not only recovered her familial past, but has also (re)invented Mexico through nostalgia. By reclaiming history through imagination, *puro cuento*, and transcribing her grandmother’s individual story Lala completes the unfinished caramel *rebozo*—thus looping back to the novel’s title, *Caramelo: or Puro Cuento*.

To conclude, Cisneros and Valdés create a narrative and affective bridge to the past via oral discourse and nostalgia. The instigators of liminal movement are the two female spirits that transmit their (hi)stories as well as an affective longing for the past. Both novels utilize a cyclical or maternal (and hence matriarchal) concept of time, rejecting a linear progressive model of history. These narratives continually loop back to the past, not to be trapped in the past, but to more fully explore its depth, resulting in a richer, more complex version of history—an alternative to the dominant (patriarchal) historical discourse. In this way the spirits, as Avery Gordon explains, draw “us affectively” towards a “transformative recognition” (8). *Te di la vida entera* and *Caramelo* pull the reader into a “structure of feeling” that exists outside of a rigid temporal space. Rather, the ghosts in these texts enable us to access an affective locality that is not physically or temporally defined. This allows for a “transformative recognition,” which in the case of *Te di la vida entera* and *Caramelo* is a return, a re-knowing, (engendered by a cyclical matriarchal process) to oppose the “cold knowledge” of a progressive, linear, and patriarchal narrative.
“Imaginons, c’est tout ce qui nous reste.”
(Let us imagine, that is all that remains for us.)
—Maryse Condé, *Victoire*, 129

Maryse Condé’s *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots: récit* (2006), like Cisneros’s *Caramelo: or Puro Cuento*, is a work dedicated to recovering a grandmother’s legacy. *Victoire* is Condé’s attempt to reconstruct the life of her maternal grandmother, Victoire Élodie Quidal, who died years before Condé’s birth. In this recuperative process Condé’s narrator (who resembles the author in profession and personal history) explores her own creative identity as an author and finds herself in a position similar to Lala’s in Cisneros’s *Caramelo*, walking the thin line between fact and fiction in order to validate her grandmother’s seemingly inconsequential existence. Like Lala, Condé’s narrator is haunted by her grandmother’s effaced history and by her grandmother’s ghost.

Similar to the three novels analyzed thus far, *Victoire* presents a female ghost who inspires female authorship and the production of an alternative discourse to the dominant historical narrative. Yet, this is not Condé’s first work inspired by a female spirit. In the epigraph to her 1986 novel *Moi, Tituba Sorcière . . . Noire de Salem*, Condé claims to have conversed with the spirit of Tituba Indian, a real historical figure who was forgotten by history. In transcribing that conversation, Condé attempts to recreate Tituba’s reality and imagine her unique subjectivity. In this way, both *Tituba* and *Victoire* confront the issues faced by Caribbean subjects, especially female subjects, who have been effaced from the dominant historical discourse. Despite this main similarity, there are intriguing differences that highlight the struggle Condé experiences when rewriting the history of an ancestor, which again connects *Victoire* and
Caramelo. Lala and Condé’s narrator both struggle with a lack of knowledge, and so they both must rely on imagination to complete their projects. In Condé’s novel, Victoire’s ghost represents more than the absence of her grandmother; the uncanny presence of her spirit points to the absence of historical memory. Through revising family history, Condé exorcises the traumas of the past and, as she did for Tituba, creates a reality for Victoire despite the lack of historical fact.

*Moi, Tituba Sorcière . . . Noire de Salem*

*Moi, Tituba Sorcière . . . Noire de Salem* treats the oft overlooked historical figure Tituba Indian, a slave owned by the Puritan minister Samuel Parris and one of the first to be accused in the infamous 1692 Salem Witch Trials. Consequently, *Tituba* has been classified as a historical novel. However, Condé rejects this designation. Condé asserts that although Tituba is a historical figure, the Tituba of the novel is her own invention. She explains, “For me *Tituba* is not a historical novel. *Tituba* is just the opposite of a historical novel. I was not interested at all in what her real life could have been…I really invented Tituba. I gave her a childhood, an adolescence, an old age” (Scarboro 200-01). Condé’s Tituba was conceived on a slave ship, born in Barbados, taken to New England by Parris, and then returned to her native island after surviving the Salem Witch Trials. The real life Tituba does not have such a detailed history. The last record of her existence is her ransom from prison. After this she disappears from the historical record.

Of course, Condé did not *invent* Tituba in the strictest sense of the word. Tituba was a real historical figure and was at the center of one of the most infamous events in early colonial American history, the Salem Witch Trials. However, she was still relegated to the margins of history. Condé’s “invention” allows the real Tituba to emerge from history’s borders as it gives Tituba’s life the attention and detail that had previously been lacking.
Although Tituba played an important role in the Salem Witch trials, she is often excluded from the history books and even from the original historical records. The primary sources give little information about her, other than she was “a slave originating from the West Indies and probably practicing ‘hoodoo’” (Tucker 624). With this small piece of information and Tituba’s court deposition from the trials Condé sets out to fill in the gaps of history. Zubeda Jalalzai writes that Condé “negotiates between imagined memories of events and the information available through official history” (415). However, as Jennifer R. Thomas affirms in her article “Talking the Cross-Talk of Histories in Maryse Condé’s I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem,” Condé does not mean to “declare fiction historical fact;” rather, she “is more concerned with chronicling her commitment to expanding historical consciousness through a dialogue that engages the (not always clear) convergences and divergences of various histories” (87). This reinforces Condé’s claim that Tituba ought not to be categorized as historical fiction. It is an invention, a fiction. Yet, there is still power in that fiction as it expands historical consciousness, guiding readers to consider alternative historical realities that are often repressed or effaced. Condé’s invention opens up other possibilities and alternatives to what is recorded in the archive.

Condé resists the totality of an official history by claiming a unique subjectivity for Tituba. Formally, she accomplishes this by way of first person narrative. Condé imagines and presents Tituba’s voice, which is skillfully nuanced in that it is at once incredibly potent and vulnerable. She does not sound like a caricature or a stereotype in how she expresses herself, though other authors portray her as such, as discussed below. Moreover, her individual identity is emphasized in the novel’s title, which begins with the first person pronoun moi, a disjunctive

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17 Despite this absence from the archive, Tituba does appear in various fictional accounts of the Salem Witch Trials including Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s Giles Corey of the Salem Farms (1868), Henry Peterson’s Dulcibel, a Tale of Old Salem (1891), William Carlos Williams’s Tituba’s Children (1950), Arthur Miller’s The Crucible (1953), and Ann Petry’s Tituba of Salem Village (1964).
pronoun, which is especially emphatic. This further reinforces Tituba’s claim to autonomy and subjectivity, a subjectivity that was not acknowledged during her lifetime. This is seen repeatedly throughout Condé’s text, but with more clarity and potency in the beginning of the narrative when Tituba narrates how she is treated by the dominant, slave-owning class in Barbados. This mistreatment is especially frustrating because within the invented world of Condé’s text, Tituba is not technically a slave.

Tituba chooses the life of a slave over her secluded, yet autonomous, existence in the woods in order to be with a man. By marrying John Indian, a half Arawak, half Nago slave, Tituba relinquishes her freedom, gaining not only a husband as a master, but also a white mistress, Susanna Endicott. In the following passage Tituba describes how Susanna and her friends spoke about her in dehumanizing terms:

Elles parlaient de moi, mais en même temps, elles m’ignoraient. Elles me rayaient de la carte des humains. J’étais un non-être. Un invisible. Plus invisible que les invisibles, car eux au moins détiennent un pouvoir que chacun redoute. Tituba, Tituba n’avait plus de réalité que celle que voulaient bien lui concéder ces femmes. (44)

[They were speaking about me, but at the same time, ignoring me. They were striking me from the human map. I was a non-being. An invisible. More invisible than the invisibles [spirits], for at least they have power that everyone fears. Tituba, Tituba had no reality other than that which these women wanted to concede to her.]

Although the women acknowledge Tituba’s existence, the way in which they acknowledge her erases her humanity (“Elles me rayaient de la carte des humains”), turning her into a non-being (“un non-être”). Her existence was defined by what they allowed her to be (“Tituba n’avait plus de réalité que celle que voulaient bien lui concéder ces femmes”). In this discursive act there emerges a definite power dynamic. In speaking about Tituba in such a degrading manner, the white women assert their superiority while defining Tituba’s inferiority. Tituba continues to explain the effect these women’s words had on her own conception of herself: “Tituba devenait
laide, grossière, inférieure parce qu’elles en avaient décidé ainsi (Tituba became ugly, crude, inferior because they had decided her to be so)” (44). Like many colonized subjects, Tituba begins to see herself through the eyes of her colonizer and master. She did not previously see herself in this light, as apparent from the key word “devenait” (became). Tituba became ugly (“laide”), crude (“grossière”), and inferior (“inférieure”). The women had transformed her through their words. As Tituba gets to know Susanna more, she becomes more terrified of this old woman who wields unusual power over her. Tituba explains, “Je n’étais plus que ce qu’elle voulait que je sois. Une grande bringue à la peau d’une couleur repoussante (I was only what she wanted me to be. A beanpole with a repulsive skin color)” (47). Again, Tituba is experiencing full force the dehumanizing effect of slavery.

This denial of Tituba’s humanity and her subjectivity would be repeated by the official history. The official documents acknowledged her existence while simultaneously ignoring her humanity and individuality. The passage quoted above describing how Susanna and her friends struck Tituba from the human map anticipates (anachronistically) when, or if, she is mentioned in consequent fictional works about the Salem Witch Trials, like Henry Peterson’s Dulcibel, a Tale of Old Salem (1891) or Arthur Miller’s The Crucible (1953). These works mention her existence while at once making her into a non-being, an invisible, as did Susanna Endicott and her friends.

In Peterson’s Dulcibel the other characters speak about Tituba. She is introduced by others’ biased and racist opinions of her. After the afflicted children accuse Tituba as their tormentor the narrator provides biased commentary: “‘Tituba!’ And who else? Why need there have been anybody else? Why could not the whole thing have stopped just there? No doubt Tituba was guilty, if any one was” (22). The narrator is unusually eager to accept Tituba’s guilt.
and questions the point in attempting to discover any other guilty persons. Tituba, because of her race and class, makes the perfect villain. In the one scene when Tituba has a voice, it comes out in broken English, further emphasizing her alterity. After being questioned whether she has ever seen the devil she responds, “Of course I’ve seen the debbil. The debbil came an’ said, ‘Serb me, Tituba.’ But I would not hurt the child’en” (51). Her response in form and content reaffirms her otherness and her guilt, if not guilt in hurting the children, then guilt in associating with the devil.

Miller’s *The Crucible* endows Tituba with a bit more individuality, but her representation is still problematic. In a description that sets up a scene with Tituba and her master, Miller writes, “The door opens, and his [Parris’s] Negro slave enters…She enters as one does who can no longer bear to be barred from the sight of her beloved, but she is also very frightened because her slave sense has warned her that as always, trouble in this house eventually lands on her back” (8). While he acknowledges the unfair treatment of slaves—they often become the scapegoats when there is “trouble”—Miller still denies Tituba full humanity. Noting her “slave sense,” makes her more animal-like than human—like a horse who can sense danger or imminent bad weather.

Unlike Peterson’s text, in which she rarely speaks for herself, in Miller’s play Tituba has a more vocal role. However, like Peterson’s Tituba, she speaks in broken English, showing an inability to express herself articulately. When Mrs. Putnam wonders if Tituba made Abigail drink human blood Tituba defends herself, “No, no, chicken blood. I give she chicken blood” (43)! And, “She beg *me* make charm” (44, emphasis in original). Tituba’s pidgin English in both Peterson’s and Miller’s works may be accurate based on the dialect of a seventeenth-century slave from the Caribbean, yet, it heightens her otherness. Condé’s Tituba, on the other hand,
speaks with eloquent self-awareness, providing her with a sense of humanity and subjectivity that are missing from Peterson’s and Miller’s works.

Condé’s novel also claims Tituba’s humanity by fleshing out the missing pieces of her history, giving her an existence before and after the Salem Witch Trials. Significantly, in Condé’s narrative Tituba’s experience in New England is only a small part of her story. Tituba returns to Barbados after the Salem Witch Trials and becomes involved in a failed slave revolt. Her conspiracy with her lover is found out, and they are both hanged. By imagining Tituba’s story to its completion, Condé allows Tituba to transcend her marginal designation in the history of the Salem Witch Trials. This becomes clear when Tituba narrates her own execution and then explains the role she continues to play as a spirit in the daily lives of Barbadians.

Death is only the beginning of her story. She asserts, “Mon histoire véritable commence où celle-là finit et n’aura pas de fin” (267). Her real story (“Mon histoire véritable”) begins where novel ends (“où celle-là finit”) and is without end (“n’aura pas de fin”) as she continues to heal, comfort, and also inspire her people to resist slavery and oppression. She exclaims:

Car, vivante comme morte, visible comme invisible, je continue à panser, à guérir. Mais surtout, je me suis assigné une autre tâche…Aguerrir le cœur des hommes. L’alimenter de rêves de liberté. De victoire. Pas une révolte que je n’aie fait naître. Pas une insurrection. Pas une désobéissance. (268)

[For, as in life so in death, as visible so invisible, I continue to heal, to cure. But above all, I have committed myself to another task…To harden the hearts of men. To nourishing dreams of liberty. Of victory. There is no revolt to which I have not given birth. Not one insurrection. Not one disobedience.]

By imagining Tituba’s active afterlife Condé allows her to transcend an identity as a victim of racism and Puritan fanaticism; in this manner, she becomes an agent who speaks for herself.

Condé not only confronts a hegemonic historical discourse by asserting Tituba’s subjectivity, but also by reversing the power dynamics between herself as author and Tituba as
character. As Lillian Manzor-Coats argues in “Of Witches and Other Things,” Condé destabilizes her own authorial position in order to establish the authority of Tituba’s voice (737). In her article “Giving a Voice to Tituba: The Death of the Author?,” Elisabeth Mudimbé-Boyi makes a similar claim when she explains, “Tituba unfolds a long monologic ‘conversation’ in which the writer becomes the simple listener of a narrating subject telling her own life story. The book is thus a fictional ‘autobiography’ from which the writer has completely disappeared, leaving Tituba to take preeminence and become simultaneously both the narrator and the narrated” (752). Condé’s “disappearance” from the text reinforces the primacy of Tituba’s word. Condé then becomes, like Brodber’s Ella, Lala, and the Valdés persona, a transcriber.

In Tituba’s epigraph, Condé explicitly states that she had conversed with Tituba’s spirit over the course of a year: “Tituba et moi, avons vécu en étroite intimité pendant un an. C’est au cours de nos interminables conversations qu’elle m’a dit ces choses qu’elle n’avait confiées à personne (Tituba and I, we have lived in close intimacy over the course of a year. It was during our endless conversations that she told me things which she had confided in no one else).” This epigraph serves several functions. One is to assert the authority of Tituba’s voice. Mudimbé-Boyi explains that formally epigraphs often assert the legitimacy of the text by referring “to a well-known figure or authority;” however, Condé’s epigraph “does not refer to a well-known author but rather to Tituba herself, thus granting her the status of an authority” (753). The epigraph not only establishes Tituba’s authority, but also establishes a supernatural encounter.

The novel’s epilogue, which Tituba narrates after her execution, clarifies that Tituba has been narrating the novel as a spirit, making Condé then a kind of spiritual medium. Condé, like the narrators/authors discussed in this dissertation, is like an ethnographer privileged to be the audience (“m’a dit”) of a valuable testimony—information that Tituba has not shared with
anyone else ("chose qu’elle n’avait confiées à personne"). The implication of the epigraph is that the novel is a result of endless conversations. However, the narrative is not composed of a two-sided conversation. There is no dialogue between Condé the author and Tituba the narrator/character. In this way the narrative is more like a witness statement—a deposition to counter the official court deposition, in which Tituba confesses her guilt. The fact that Condé inserts this piece of official history into the narrative without warning or explanation is perplexing.

As many scholars have noted, the inclusion of the official court deposition creates a disjointed effect. Its placement is chronologically accurate within the narrative, but it disrupts the style and flow of Tituba’s first person account. As Michelle Smith writes, the reader is meant to be startled by this insertion of official history. She asserts:

Tituba writes ‘around’ the only surviving historical record of her existence, the transcript of her witch-trial in Salem. By situating this snippet of history within her narrative, Tituba forces a recontextualization of History’s reading of her life. Now, the limits of the reader’s suspended disbelief are certainly exceeded here. It is in no way credible that Tituba herself should include the written record of her trial verbatim. (602)

There is no clear explanation for the deposition’s inclusion in the narrative, especially since Condé has developed such a rich imaginative recreation of Tituba. In her book The Daughter’s Return: African-American and Caribbean Women’s Fictions of History, Caroline Rody writes that the court document is devoid of “emotional authenticity” and “ironically, strikes a false, alien note in the narrative” (197). The fact that an official historical document “strikes a false, alien note” leads the reader to value the emotional authenticity of Condé’s fictional account.

Whereas the official court document fails to provide a motive for Tituba’s confession of guilt, Condé’s novel provides the reader with a possible why. In Condé’s text Parris coerces Tituba to lie and to denounce other “witches.” Her confession was an act of self-preservation, yet
as Condé’s narrative clarifies, Tituba was tortured by this decision. After Parris commends her for her performance (“Bien parlé, Tituba! Tu as compris ce que nous attendions de toi [Well said, Tituba! You understood what we expected of you]”) she comments, “Je me hais comme je le hais (I hate myself as I hate him)” (166). In this imaginative recreation Condé clarifies a motive for Tituba’s confession and endows her with subjectivity. Condé’s novel allows Tituba another chance to share her side of the story—to act as a witness, reminding us of the spirits’ roles as witnesses in Valdés’s and Cisneros’s novels. As a witness Tituba confronts official history in the same way as those spirits do. Condé’s role as a spiritual medium, like Lala and the Valdés persona, allows her to pierce the veil of history and subvert the “rational” assumptions of Western historiography, allowing for a nuanced re-writing of history, one that is imaginative while also providing a transcendent sense of truth in that it goes beyond official history.

Condé’s invention of Tituba’s mother, Abena, and Tituba’s violent conception is an example of how fiction can conduct readers to a higher, universal truth. Tituba’s mother’s name is the novel’s first word, acting like an invocation that conjures the existence of an unknown, forgotten, and nameless woman:

Abena, ma mère, un marin anglais la viola sur le pont du Christ the King, un jour de 16**, alors que le navire faisait voile vers la Barbade. C’est de cette agression que je suis née. De cet acte de haine et de mépris. (13)

[Abena, my mother, an English sailor raped her on the deck of Christ the King, one day in 16** while the ship was sailing towards Barbados. From this aggression I was born. From this hatred and contempt.]

Although Abena is an invention, Condé wants to establish firmly a time and place for Tituba’s conception, during the Middle Passage on a ship whose religious name illustrates the depth of hypocrisy in the practice of slavery by Christian nations. Despite the specific name of the ship, we are not provided with the complete date. Condé could have invented a specific date for
Tituba’s conception, but she purposely leaves this open to various possibilities. As Thomas writes, the asterisks fulfill a significant function and ought not to be overlooked. She explains:

Condé’s asterisks function like place holders in math. When doing multiplication, the placement of zeros in certain positions helps maintain an order while working to find the answer. Her asterisks are by no means zeros in the sense of total absence; they represent instead the range of temporal possibility, ninety-nine years, more or less, which must be accounted for to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the colonial encounter. (95)

The asterisks are, like ghosts, a presence that marks an absence, an absence that ought to be explored and understood. Although the asterisks mark uncertainty, they simultaneously point to a universal reality experienced by countless female slaves before, during, and after “16**.”

The novel’s abrupt and violent beginning also illustrates the bitter reality for (specifically) female African slaves: to be victims of rape and also its product. Although this aspect of Tituba’s history is an “invention,” it points to a pervasive truth, a truth that has haunted Condé herself. In her essay, “The Voyager In, the Voyager Out,” Condé describes a journey “que je n’ai pas choisi de faire et que j’effectuai bien avant de naître (that I never chose to make and that I made long before I was born)” (251). This compulsory “journey” is the Middle Passage. It is compulsory for Condé in the same way that it was compulsory for the slaves themselves, but the fact that this was a journey she never chose to make (“je n’ai pas choisi de faire”) also illustrates the uncanny nature of traumatic pasts, which refuse to remain buried and continue to haunt the present. Condé continues:

J’en garde le souvenir brûlant, malgré que tant de siècles m’en séparent. Je passai plusieurs jours dans un fort sans air ni lumière. Puis, on me jeta à fond de cale d’un navire qui tanguait roulait vers une destination inconnue. Dans la noirceur, je baignais dans mon urine et dans mes excréments. Une fois la semaine, des marins, à force de coups et de bourrades, m’obligeaient à monter sur le pont pour prendre de l’exercice en dansant. Autour du navire, l’éclat de la mer s’étendant à perte de vue blesssait mes yeux. Il me semble que le voyage fut interminable. Enfin, un matin, nous abordâmes à une terre riante et coloriée qui, dès l’abord, me consola des souffrances et de l’humiliation de tout ce temps. (251)
[A burning memory remains with me, despite the fact that so many centuries separate me from it. I spent several days in a fort without air or light. Then I was thrown to the bottom of a ship which was pitching and rolling towards an unknown destination. In the darkness, I bathed in my urine and in my excrement. Once a week, by force the sailors forced me to the deck to dance for exercise. The brilliance of the sea, extending beyond the ship as far as the eye could see, hurt my eyes. It seems to me that the journey was unending. Finally, one morning, we arrived at a pleasant and colorful land which at first consoled me for all the suffering and humiliation.]

Like Morrison’s character Beloved discussed in Chapter One, Condé could not have an individual memory of this horrific experience; this passage alludes to a collective memory and points to a universal suffering. Through fiction Condé is able to give voice to the countless forgotten and nameless women who suffered so terribly.

Condé’s novel works on two levels, addressing Tituba’s specific history and the universal suffering of female African slaves, as well as their female descendants. By giving Tituba a specific, although “invented,” beginning, Condé reveals the experiences of innumerable slave women, reminding us of Ella’s assertion in *Louisiana*: “[E]ven if what you [Mammy King] relate did not happen to you, it happened to someone’s granny, someone’s mother. Someone. Some baby was hurt” (139). By expanding Ella’s historical consciousness, Mammy illustrated a different kind of “knowledge”—a spiritual knowledge that transcends historical “fact.” Just as the ghosts in *Louisiana* allow for alternatives to knowledge, ghosts in *Tituba* likewise mark a shift from the Hegelian rationalism of History.

Although only hinted at in *Victoire*, the supernatural is at the core of *Tituba*. Not only is the text inspired by Tituba’s ghost, and narrated by her spirit, but the narrative also includes spectral characters. Tituba regularly turns to the spirits of her mother, her adoptive father, Yao, and her mentor, Man Yaya, who plays the role of a foster parent for Tituba after her parents die. Before Man Yaya’s death she initiates Tituba into a higher sphere of knowledge. Just as Mammy and Lowly introduce Ella to a different kind of knowing in Brodber’s *Louisiana*, Man Yaya
instructs Tituba on the medicinal use of herbs and plants and also teaches her how to commune with the dead: “Man Yaya m’initia à une connaissance plus haute. Les morts ne meurent que s’ils meurent dans nos cœurs. Ils vivent si nous les chérissons, si nous honorons leur mémoire (Man Yaya initiated me into a higher knowledge. The dead do not die unless they die in our hearts. They live if we cherish them, if we honor their memory)” (23). According to Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert in Literature of the Caribbean, Man Yaya is a practitioner of Obeah, “the African-derived magicoreligious practices of the British West Indies” and endows Tituba with an African spiritual worldview (59). Paravisini-Gebert further explains that “Central to this belief system [Obeah] is the veneration of the ancestors” (59). Tituba internalizes Man Yaya’s lesson that the dead never truly die. She conjures apparitions of her mentor and her parents even while a slave in New England, making her a spiritual medium. Whereas Condé conjures through her writing, Tituba conjures through African derived religious ritual.

The spirits also come without being summoned, as in the case when Abena’s spirit returns after Tituba decides that she wants to be with John Indian. Abena’s spirit appears to Tituba at the river while Tituba cuts her hair, which she does to appease John, who had commented on its tangled condition. She narrates:


[As the last woolly locks fell into the water, I heard a sigh. It was my mother. I had not called her and I understood that an imminent danger made her emerge from the invisible realm. She moaned: Why can’t women do without men? You will be dragged to the other side of the water.]

It is significant that as the last lock of her hair falls into the lake Abena appears with a warning. Tituba will only suffer as a result of her desire to please a man and it begins with this act of
changing her appearance. Her mother warns her that if she chooses John Indian, she will be taken away from Barbados. Tituba does not listen and her mother’s warning becomes a reality. Tituba is dragged to the other side of the “water” and ends up in New England where the horrible treatment she endures is only exacerbated because she does not have easy access to the spirits of her ancestors. The distance and the ocean between them create a barrier that is near impossible to overcome.

Although the spirits cannot communicate directly with her while she is in New England, they are able to give Tituba comfort. The warmth of the spirits sharply contrast with the darkness of the Puritans and their obsession with witches and the Devil. Tituba narrates how she felt the spirits of her ancestors despite the enormous distance that separates them:

Souvent le matin, une ombre frêle s’agrippait aux rideaux de ma chambre avant de venir se lover au pied de mon lit et de me communiquer, impalpable qu’elle était, une surprenante chaleur. Je reconnaissais alors Abena à la fragrance de chèvrefeuille qui se répandait dans mon misérable réduit. L’odeur de Man Yaya était plus forte, presque poivrée, plus insidieuse aussi. Man Yaya ne me transmettait pas de chaleur, mais donnait à mon esprit une sorte d’agilité, la conviction qu’en fin de compte, rien ne parviendrait à me détruire. Si l’on veut schématiser sommairement, on dira que Man Yaya m’apportait l’espoir et Abena ma mère, la tendresse. (133)

[Often during the morning, a frail shadow would cling to the curtains in my room before coming to coil at the foot of my bed and as intangible as it was, communicate a surprising warmth to me. I would then recognize Abena by her fragrance of honeysuckle which would spread throughout my miserable hole. Man Yaya’s scent was stronger, almost peppery, more insidious too. Man Yaya did not bring me warmth, but gave my spirit a kind of agility, the conviction that in the end, nothing would succeed in destroying me. To summarize, Man Yaya brought me hope and my mother, tenderness.]

The presence of her mother’s spirit gives her emotional support, and Man Yaya gives her hope for the future. She assures Tituba that she will survive the Salem Witch Trials. Man Yaya’s prophetic assurance illustrates how the spirits in this novel represent an alternative, spiritual knowledge.
As spirits, Abena and Man Yaya have prophetic vision because they exist “outside of time” (Simek 50). Just as Abena knew what the consequences would be if Tituba married John Indian, Man Yaya also knew that Tituba would survive the Salem Witch Trials. For these spirits the past, present, and future collapse. As is the case in many of the novels discussed in this dissertation, supernatural figures illustrate a disruption in a temporal concept of time. Nicole Simek explains how this is apparent in *Tituba* as a whole, not just in the case of the spirits’ prophetic knowledge. She writes, “Tituba’s story is not governed by an evolutionary logic; rather, her life unfolds cyclically, as a series of repetitions. The major events of her life reproduce those of her mother’s—both are raped, and both are executed by hanging for supposed crimes against whites” (50). The novel as a whole presents an alternative to a linear historicity. Tituba’s story is a cycle of violence and suffering, like the uncanny nature of traumatic history that continues to haunt the present. Because the spirits exist outside of time they can see and know what Tituba cannot while alive.

Once Tituba passes to the other side after her own death, she experiences this knowledge for herself; yet, while she is alive, it is still a mystery to her. This is apparent during a conversation she has with an Obeah man after returning to Barbados. He reminds her of her mortal limitations by asking her, “Tu oublies donc que tu es en vie (Do you forget that you are alive)” (231)? This leads Tituba to question, “Signifiait-elle que seule la mort apporte la connaissance suprême? Qu’il est un seuil indépassable tant que l’on est vivant? Que je devais me résigner à mon imparfait savoir (Did this mean that only death brings supreme knowledge? That as long as one is alive there is a threshold one cannot pass? That I had to resign myself to my imperfect knowledge)” (231)? As a spirit in the epilogue Tituba explains that she now has complete access to knowledge, which gives her a sense of joy: “Oui, à présent je suis heureuse.
Je comprends le passé. Je lis le présent. Je connais l’avenir (Yes, now I am happy. I understand the past. I read the present. I know the future)” (271). Tituba learns that total, complete knowledge is only found in the afterlife, outside of the material and temporal reality. However, this is not the only thing she misunderstood when she was living.

Although Man Yaya taught Tituba that death is not the end of one’s existence, while alive Tituba is plagued by the fear of being forgotten and erased from history, especially while living in New England separated from her people. She recounts:

[Un sentiment violent, douloureux, insupportable déchirait ma poitrine. Il me semblait que je disparaissais complètement. Je sentais que dans ces procès de sorcières de Salem qui feraient couler tant d’encre... mon nom ne figurerait que comme celui d’une comparse sans intérêt... On ne se soucierait ni de mon âge ni de ma personnalité. On m’ignorerait. (173, ellipses in original)]

[A violent, painful, insupportable feeling tore at my chest. It seemed to me that I would disappear completely. I felt that in the Salem Witch Trials about which much would be written... my name would appear as a side note without interest... No one would care about my age or my personality. I would be ignored.]

This condemnation to an historical abyss seems like a future that is crueler than death:

“Condamnée à jamais, Tituba! Aucune, aucune biographie attentionnée et inspirée créant ma vie et ses tourments! Et cette future injustice me révoltait! Plus cruelle que la mort (Sentence forever, Tituba! None, not one attentive or inspired biography to recreate my life and its torments! And this future injustice revolted me! More cruel than death)” (173)! Tituba anticipates the only phrase that would be recorded regarding her existence: “De moi, on ne parle pas. ‘Tituba, une esclave originaire de la Barbade et pratiquant vraisemblablement le hodoo’ (No one would speak of me. ‘Tituba, a slave from Barbados and a likely practitioner of hoodoo’)” (230). As Veta Smith Tucker records, this is the only statement regarding Tituba to be found in the primary documents on the Salem Witch Trials (264).
After returning to Barbados, even among her people, her sex alone precludes her from a place in history. She realizes that history favors men; it will favor the white man over the black, but nevertheless, it favors men. This becomes clear to Tituba during a conversation with Christopher, the leader of the maroons in Barbados. He ignores Tituba’s claim that she is not a “witch” and enlists her to cast spells so that the bullets of the white men cannot defeat his warriors. Christopher’s desire illustrates that he does not recognize her as an individual. He only views her as a resource to exploit; her worth is measured by what she can contribute to the common cause. As Kaiama Glover argues, the dynamic between Christopher and Tituba illustrates the stereotyped representation of women in Caribbean fiction. It seems as if Tituba will fall into the category of “auxiliary” and muse, a “romantic partner to a politically awakened man” (Glover 182). However, Tituba resists this marginalization.

Her desire to transcend her gendered role is apparent in her response to Christopher’s declaration of his secured immortality. He boasts that the black field workers already sing songs about him on the plantations, ensuring his figurative immortality. His name will be remembered and celebrated. Tituba desires the same honor and thinks that perhaps in Barbados, among her own people, she will secure her place in history. When she asks Christopher if there will be a song for her (“Et moi, y a-t-il un chant pour moi? Un chant pour Tituba? [And me, is there a song for me? A song for Tituba?]”), he responds with a firm “No:” “Non, il n’y en a pas (No, there is not)” (236).

He is, however, mistaken. Condé’s novel not only reclaims Tituba’s individual agency and history, but as Tituba narrates in the epilogue her people did compose songs about her. She does live on in her people’s memory. She is not erased from their history (even if she is from the New England records). She lives on through song. Tituba’s spirit declares: “Elle existe, la
chanson de Tituba! Je l’entends d’un bout à l’autre de l’île…A tout instant, je l’entends (It exists, the song of Tituba! I hear it from one end of the island to the other. At every instant I hear it)” (267). The language Tituba employs here covers space (“d’un bout à l’autre de l’île”) and time (“A tout instant”), affirming that despite her sex and race Tituba’s story cannot and will not be repressed.

Through fiction, Condé creates an imaginative alternative to the historical record—the court deposition and the single line about her origins and knowledge of “hoodoo.” Her inventive portrayal of Tituba’s life and legacy, including the spectral characters and ghostly voice of her narrator, allows for a marginal figure to assume agency. Condé has a similar objective for her reinvention of her grandmother’s personal history. Perhaps the process of writing Tituba prepared Condé to act as a medium for Victoire, whose personal history was also defined by its lack. As it did in Tituba, imagination will play a key role in Condé’s reconstitution of her grandmother’s life.

Victoire

What makes a figure worthy of History? What determines whether a person “counts” in that historical record? Tituba’s place at the center of the infamous Salem Witch Trials would seem to justify her status as a historical figure. The fact that the other accused during those trials were later officially excused and Tituba was not reinforces the injustice of Tituba’s historical effacement and the need for a recuperation. Unlike Tituba, Condé’s grandmother, played no role in an “important” historical event. Yet, the novel Victoire, by its very existence, asserts that her grandmother is no less worthy of being included in history. Condé’s motivation for writing both Tituba and Victoire would appear to be the same. Both novels assert the value of a black Caribbean woman’s individual story. In the case of Tituba, Condé explains why she felt
compelled to write her specific story: “This woman was unjustly treated by history. I felt the
need to give her a reality that was denied to her because of her color and her gender” (Scarboro
204). Condé’s self-explained reason for writing about Tituba could easily be applied to Victoire,
whose reality was also denied to her because of her color, her gender, and socio-economic status.

_Victoire_ is a personal and collective triumph as Condé gives a voice to a silenced family
member who has been marginalized by gender, ethnicity, and poverty, while also gesturing to the
countless number of Guadeloupian (and Caribbean in general) women who have been forgotten
and/or erased from history. In _Le cœur à rire et à pleurer, Contes vrais de mon enfance_ (1999), a
series of “true” stories from Condé’s childhood, Condé explains the reason for her grandmother’s
obscurity. She writes that her grandmother was “fragilisée par une vie d’exclusion et de tête
baissée (weakened by a life of exclusion and subservience)” (67). She did not own anything, not
even a grave: “[Elle] n’avait jamais rien eu à elle. Même pas une case. Même pas une bonne
robe. Même pas une tombe. Elle dormait son sommeil d’éternité dans le caveau de ses derniers
employeurs ([She] never owned a thing. Not even a home. Not even a good dress. Not even a
grave. She slept the sleep of eternity in the vault of her last employers)” (68). Even in death, her
individuality is not recognized; she remains under the shadow of her employers. The few times
that she mentions her grandmother in _Le cœur à rire et à pleurer_ helps the reader understand
Condé’s motive for writing _Victoire_.

Another interesting aspect about the reference to Condé’s mother’s mother in _Le cœur à
rire et à pleurer_ is that she does not refer to her as Victoire, but rather as “Bonne-maman Élodie”
(67). In fact, throughout _Le cœur à rire et à pleurer_ whenever Condé refers to her maternal
grandmother she calls her “Élodie,” Victoire’s second name. This would indicate that throughout
her life, and after her death, Condé’s grandmother was known by Élodie. It is telling, therefore,
that in her reconstitution of her grandmother’s life Condé deviates from this precedent; rather, she refers to her as Victoire—and chooses this particular name as the title of the novel. The significance of Condé’s choice of name cannot be overlooked. It is necessary to explore this shift. To refer to her grandmother as Victoire must have been a conscious decision, full of symbolic significance since Victoire means “victory.” In *Victoire* Condé recounts the first time she learned her maternal grandmother’s name, Victoire Élodie, a name which filled the young Condé with “admiration” (14). Although choosing to refer to Victoire by her first name may seem like a small detail, it is at the heart of Condé’s desire to reclaim her grandmother’s legacy, to elevate her importance, even though it seemed that she did not have any. This will be a difficult task, however, since there was little information available to Condé about her grandmother’s life.

This lack, this void, is reflected in the novel’s first sentence, which is heavy with a sense of profound loss, indicative of the loss of an unknown history for many Caribbean people. It is doubly painful to realize that one has lost something that was never fully possessed in the first place, like Lala’s nostalgia for a Mexico that she never knew and which perhaps never existed. Condé’s novel begins, “Elle est morte bien avant ma naissance, quelques années après le mariage de mes parents. Je ne connaissais d’elle qu’une photographie couleur sepia (She died long before my birth, a few years after my parents’ marriage. The only thing I knew of her was a single sepia colored photograph)” (13). Victoire’s only legacy was a sepia colored photograph, and although there is some comfort in the physical reality of this single photograph, it does not provide much information. Condé’s narrator explains, “Son image est malaise, difficile à cerner (Her image is unclear, difficult to discern)” (16). This particular photograph is the only concrete thing that Condé has of her grandmother, and yet it is not a clear image or easy to interpret. Like this
photograph, Victoire’s past is similarly indiscernible and out of focus. It will be Condé’s imaginative task as an author to recreate a more complete image of her grandmother’s past.

Additionally, the photograph’s lack of clarity reinforces Victoire’s paradoxical haunting absence in Condé’s childhood. Condé’s narrator asserts, “sa vue me causait un certain malaise (the sight of her made me feel uneasy)” (13). Victoire’s uncanny presence via the photograph, which itself caused the young Condé to feel uneasy, troubles her grandchildren’s perception of her. For Condé (and her siblings) Victoire was a ghost—an imaginary spirit that haunted their childhood:

Pour nous tous, cette grand-mère à l’étrange couleur, fut à moitié imaginaire. Un esprit. Un fantôme. Couché dans la nuit du temps longtemps. Tout au plus une photo énigmatique posée sur le dessus d’un meuble. (209)

[For all of us, this grandmother with a strange color, was half imaginary. A spirit. A phantom. Sleeping in a night of time long ago. At most an enigmatic photo placed on top of a piece of furniture.]

The indiscernible and enigmatic (“énigmatique”) photograph, in addition to Victoire’s strange color (“l’étrange couleur”) (her skin color has an Australian whiteness, “une peau d’une blancheur australienne”), makes her seem (to her grandchildren at least) like an imaginary (“imaginaire”) figure—like a spirit (“Un esprit”) or a phantom (“Un fantôme”) (13).

At the outset of her narrative, Condé clarifies that her mother Jeanne did not often talk about Victoire, further consigning Victoire to an “imaginary” sphere outside of an historical reality. When as a child Condé attempts to question her mother about the unknown grandmother, Jeanne gives just a few details and terminates the conversation before Condé is able to piece together the important aspects of her grandmother’s life story. That particular conversation was never resumed. However, it instilled in the young Condé a profound desire to uncover her grandmother’s history (16).
Victoire continued to haunt Condé as an adult, frequently appearing during the night in the corner of her granddaughter’s bedroom: “Parfois, je me réveillais la nuit et la voyais assise dans un coin de la chambre, semblable à un reproche, tellement différente de ce que je devenais (Sometimes, I would wake up in the night and see her sitting in a corner of the room, like a reproach, so different from what I was becoming)” (16). Condé imagines that her grandmother’s ghost reproaches her for traveling the world in search of herself instead of reorienting herself toward her roots in Guadeloupe and fulfilling her childhood resolution to research Victoire’s life. Throughout her adult life Condé traveled extensively, living in Paris, Guinea, Senegal, and the United States. Her grandmother’s reproach makes clear that Condé has been searching for herself in all the wrong places; she must come back, so to speak, to her island and return to the project of discovering Victoire’s story—a task she had been putting off for years. This voyage intérieur—is the only journey of any worth: “l’unique voyage qui compte (the only journey that counts)” (16). Although Condé never knew her grandmother, the idea of Victoire and her nighttime haunting pull Condé back to her island and back to a Guadeloupean identity. Although Victoire’s ghost is a silent apparition (in contrast to those vocal spirits in *Louisiana, Te di la vida entera, and Caramelo*), her haunting presence is just as effective in motivating Condé to mediate her history and reclaim her grandmother’s subjectivity.

Moreover, by (re)discovering her grandmother she will discover herself. In Condé’s own words, “To know one’s past, to dominate it, to know it in its reality without making of it an object of backwards-looking veneration, is one of the conditions of freedom” (Nesbitt 201). Just as the burden of the past kept Beloved’s Sethe in figurative bondage, Condé’s lack of knowledge of the past keeps her from “freedom.” This recuperation of her grandmother’s history is not only in service to her grandmother’s memory, but also in service to Condé’s personal growth.
Through her writing, Condé will make the elusive and ethereal concrete, ultimately establishing a link between herself and her lost grandmother, and in the process claim her own authority as a writer. Instead of being dismayed by the gaps in her knowledge of family history, Condé plays with (and within) the empty spaces to confront history and rewrite the past.

Just as she did for Tituba, Condé establishes a reality for her grandmother, a reality that was denied her because of her color and her gender, but also because of her socio-economic station and the circumstances of her birth. Her poverty excluded Victoire from receiving a formal education, which negatively affected her sense of self-worth throughout her life. She never learned to read or write, nor could she speak “proper” French, only Creole.

In Peau noire, masques blancs Frantz Fanon explores how language can either elevate the colonial/post-colonial subject to the status of civilized (that is if they speak “proper” French) or keep them in an subordinate station (if they speak Creole). Fanon writes:

La bourgeoisie aux Antilles n’emploie pas le créole, sauf dans ses rapports avec les domestiques. A l’école, le jeune Martiniquais apprend à mépriser le patois. On parle de créolismes. Certaines familles interdisent l’usage du créole et les mamans traitent leurs enfants de “tibandes” quand ils l’emploient. (15) 18

[The bourgeoisie of the Antilles do not use Creole, except in their conversations with domestic servants. At school, a young Martinican learns to despise patois. One speaks of Creolisms. Certain families prohibit the usage of Creole and mothers call their children “tibandes” when they use it.]

Victoire’s use of Creole marks her as inferior, even in the eyes of her daughter, Jeanne. Condé comments on this when she rhetorically asks, “À quoi servait cette grand-mère créolophone et illétrée (What was the use of this Creole speaking and illiterate grandmother)” (242)? The fact that Victoire does not speak proper French, but only Creole further disenfranchises her.

18 David Macey illustrates the irony in this statement explaining that mothers would scold their children in Creole in order to ridicule their children’s use of Creole. Mothers would use the term “tibandes,” which is Creole for petites bandes. This term referred to the “little gangs’ of children who worked in the cane fields, clearing up the pieces of cane missed by the women” (18).
Furthermore, Victoire rarely speaks in the novel; her silence is an important element in the text. It would seem that Victoire’s silence is a conscious choice to illustrate her alienation. As Condé explains in her essay “Mode d’emploi: Comment devenir une écrivaine que l’on dit antillaise,” this was a strategy she employed in the creation of the protagonist of her first novel, *Hérémakhonon*: “Afin de traduire son aliénation et sa confusion intérieure, j’avais éliminé toute énonciation verbale de sa part (In order to express her alienation and internal confusion, I had eliminated any verbal utterance on her part)” (48). Victoire’s lack of voice emphasizes the silence that will surround her legacy after her death and, by extension, reflects the way that many Caribbean family histories have been silenced and repressed.

This legacy of silence can be traced back to the slave trade, the horrors of the Middle Passage, and life on the plantations. As Édouard Glissant explains in *Poétique de la Relation*, as an institution, slavery suppressed the slaves’ oral culture, deconstructing their sense of community to curtail the urge to revolt (17). Not only did slavery deconstruct their sense of community by deterritorializing their language (“Les langues africaines se déterritorialisent”), but it also prevented them from constructing their own history; they were not allowed to speak their language and so not allowed to speak their history (Glissant 17). By silencing their oral tradition, their history was silenced. The effects of this particular act of cultural repression created a sense of amnesia for the Caribbean descendants of African slaves. It is impossible to understand one’s current situation when one does not know one’s past. As a character in Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Chronique des sept misères* (1986) states, it is difficult to understand the source of suffering when each man is a scab on a wound that is their memory: “Dans cette vie où chaque homme est la croûte d’une blessure, comme il est difficile de reconnaître les sèves du désarroi (In this life where each man is the scab on a wound, how hard it is to recognize the secret sources
of sorrow)” (123, Coverdale 101). Although Condé does not suffer physically like the characters in Chamoiseau’s novel, her lack of a family history is a kind of wound she seeks to heal. This is Condé’s motivation for recreating her family history—a way to cure her own amnesia by confronting her silenced past.

As a theme, silence also sets Victoire apart from the three main texts already discussed in this dissertation. The novels by Brodber, Valdés, and Cisneros are driven by orality and demonstrate the influence of oral traditions as ways to confront the hegemony of the dominant historical discourse. Orality is also an important aspect of Tituba. Mudimbé-Boyi argues that Tituba’s narrative is an oral performance. She explains that Condé’s role as the listener is set up by careful “textual strategies:” “The presence of the author of the book as an interlocutor is maintained not by a dialogic inclusive ‘you’ within the narrative, but rather by the oral mode involved in the narration” (753). This oral mode is sustained by “rhetorical questions” posed by Tituba which acknowledge “the writer’s presence on the scene” (753). Thus, Mudimbé-Boyi concludes, “The textual strategies used by Condé in shaping the narrative as an oral performance insert Tituba into the traditional cultural context of orality” (753). Whereas the spirit narrators in Louisiana, Te di la vida entera, and Caramelo often contend with the author personas, in Tituba there is no such dialogue. However, as Mudimbé-Boyi pointed out through rhetorical questions the author’s presence is implicitly acknowledged. Although Condé emphasized an oral tradition in Tituba, she does the opposite in Victoire.

Orality in Victoire “appears” through its noted absence. It is telling that even when Victoire does speak, it is not to speak of anything significant. She experiences terrible losses

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19 Maeve McCusker’s commentary on this particular quote is useful here: “The scab, a protective layer of oblivion, nevertheless prevents any easy reconnection with the vital source, the sap, of Caribbean collective memory, a memory described as ‘désarroi’, disturbance” (40). McCusker’s interpretation of Chamoiseau’s use of “les sèves” (sap), as “vital source” reinforces how, although it may be painful to remember the past, it is necessary; it is vital.
throughout her life, yet she never speaks about these events. Victoire’s mother had died in childbirth and she was then adopted by her grandmother who treated her better than she treated her own children; however, when this grandmother died, Victoire lost the one connection that really mattered to her and became as if mute, “murée dans le silence (walled within silence)” (166). Her response to loss and tragedy is silence. Throughout her adult life she kept her deep emotions buried inside of herself: “elle restait silencieuse et comme entravée intérieurement (she remained silent as if shackled internally)” (71). Condé reinforces Victoire’s characteristic silence throughout the narrative repeating phrases like “à sa manière habituelle, [elle] ne disait mot (in her habitual manner, she did not say a word)” and “elle se taisait comme à l’habitude (she kept silent as was her custom)” (178, 220). Moreover, the description of her death further reinforces the silent aspect of her character: “Victoire glissa sans doute dans l’au-delà sans mot dire, sans rien révéler d’elle-même, comme elle avait vécu sa vie (Victoire without a doubt slipped into the afterlife without saying a word, without revealing anything about herself, as she had lived her life)” (254). Although she is the title character, Victoire often seems like a secondary one, constantly in the background, already like a ghost.

Her silence and odd behavior set Victoire apart from the rest of her community to the point that they see her as a supernatural figure: “Elle était un mort vivant, un zombie. Parfois, elle arrachait une poignée d’herbes de Guinée et la mâchonnait. La plupart du temps, ses mains reposaient, paumes en l’air, sur ses genoux tandis qu’elle fixait un point droit devant elle (She was one of the living dead, a zombie. Sometimes, she would tear a handful of Guinea grass and chew it. Most of the time, her hands would rest, palms in the air, on her knees as she stared straight in front of her)” (27). Condé does not write that Victoire is “like” a zombie; she writes that Victoire is a zombie, which in the Caribbean has deeper significance than contemporary
representations of zombies in television and cinema like AMC’s *The Walking Dead* (2010-2016) or the 2016 film *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*. The zombie figure is key to a Caribbean gothic aesthetic, and Condé is most certainly aware of this significance. In her essay “Colonial and Postcolonial Gothic: the Caribbean” Paravisini-Gebert explains that Francophone Caribbean literature often utilizes the figure of the zombie to comment on traumatic history, specifically colonization and slavery. She cites the 1932 film *White Zombie*, Haitian author Jacques-Stephen Alexis’s short story “Chronique d’un faux amour” (1960), and René Depestre’s 1988 novel, *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*, as examples in which the figure of the zombie is used to critique colonialism. Paravisini-Gebert further explains, “Zombification conjures up the Haitian experience of slavery, of the disassociation of man from his will, his reduction to a beast of burden at the will of a master” (239). The zombie represents the way that slaves have been dehumanized and stripped of their agency and voice. Condé’s allusion to zombification implicitly connects her grandmother to slavery. Although Victoire was born after slavery was abolished, her silence and her work as a servant marks her as a kind of domestic slave. As discussed in Chapter One regarding Morrison’s *Beloved*, “abolition is not emancipation” (Gordon 162). Victoire is not technically a slave, but she is not necessarily “free,” and her silence emphasizes that. Whereas Condé asserts Tituba’s autonomy and subjective voice, she chooses not to do this for her own grandmother. In fact, she uses strategies opposite to those which she implements in *Tituba*.

*Tituba* is a first person narrative, which emphasizes Tituba’s subjectivity and individuality. In *Victoire* on the other hand, the use of the third person narration makes the reader consistently aware of Condé’s authorial presence and her efforts to write this narrative. Whereas in *Tituba*, as illustrated above, Condé the author disappears from the text. Additionally, there is a
clear difference even in the way that Condé describes her inspiration for the two texts. As she explains in the epigraph to Tituba, she and Tituba had endless conversations over the period of a year. In Victoire Condé’s narrator imagines that her grandmother’s ghost visits her while she sleeps, but she does not speak! It is her look that seems to direct Condé to write her story—it is a look of reproach and Condé interprets and translates that look into speech: “semblait-elle me dire (she seemed to tell me)” (16, emphasis added). Whereas Condé conversed intimately with Tituba, she can only interpret the imagined look of her deceased grandmother. This leads the reader to question: why does she endow Tituba with such a strong, authoritative voice, yet keep her own grandmother “murée dans le silence (walled within silence)?”

In an interview with Ann Armstrong Scarboro Condé explains why she felt so compelled to write Tituba’s story: “I felt that this eclipse of Tituba’s life was completely unjust. I felt a strong solidarity with her, and I wanted to offer her her revenge by inventing a life such as she might perhaps have wished it to be told” (199). Whereas, Condé allows Tituba a kind of “revenge,” the same cannot be said for Victoire. Victoire does not have the same self-awareness Tituba projects. Tituba’s character is hyperconscious of the historical record and her effacement from it. Victoire cannot worry about this because she does not even have a firm place in the present tense. The stylistic difference between Tituba and Victoire suggests a personal struggle with history and the legacies of colonialism and slavery.

Throughout the novel, Condé’s narrator frequently laments the lack of oral history within her familial legacy. As Condé states in Le cœur à rire et à pleurer, it was Jeanne’s custom to avoid discussing uncomfortable subjects with her daughter: “ma mère ne parlait jamais de rien (my mother never told me anything)” (94). However, from Condé’s perspective, if she had known about her grandmother, if she could have had some kind of connection with her, she
would have been able to connect more fully to her own Guadeloupean identity. Condé implicitly makes this point early in *Victoire* when the narrator imagines what it would have been like to have known her grandmother and to have had a relationship with her. It is curious, however, that the grandmother Condé’s narrator imagines in this first chapter is unrecognizable from the reticent Victoire that she will recreate in the body of the novel. She imagines her grandmother as a storyteller: “[U]ne grand-mère…me soufflant à l’oreille un mythe doucereux du passé (A grandmother… whispering in my ear a sweet myth of the past)” (17). How would a relationship with this imagined version of her grandmother, with a knowledge of oral culture, have affected her sense of identity and even her development as a writer? She asserts:

> Je me demande souvent ce qu’auraient été mon rapport à moi-même, ma vision de mon pays, des Antilles et du monde en général, ce qu’aurait été mon écriture enfin qui les exprime, si j’avais sauté sur les genoux d’une grand-mère replète et rieuse. (17)

[I often ask myself what would have been my relationship with myself, my vision of my country, of the Antilles and of the world in general, how would my writing have expressed these things if I had been bounced on the knee of a plump and joyful grandmother.]

However, this was not Condé’s reality, and she is left with the responsibility to invent a poetics of history, an imaginative version of history, by using imagination and creativity to bridge the gaps in her family history and rewrite the past.

In rewriting the past, Condé does not rely on reason or truth; rather, her text emerges from (feminine) imagination and creativity. By blending fiction with fact, Condé, like Brodber, Valdés, and Cisneros, writes against the phallogocentrism that depends on logic, linearity, and History with a capital H. Like the novels discussed in previous chapters, the tension between truth and fiction is palpable, and like Cisneros specifically, Condé plays with this tension, as is apparent in the title of her novel: *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots: récit*. Although it presents a family history and is to a certain extent (auto)biographical in its scope, imbedded within its title
is a key term that troubles the boundary between fiction and truth, story and history: récit. The French term for “story” illustrates the creative license that the author takes in chronicling her family history. On Victoire’s dedication page Condé calls the work a “reconstitution” and within the narrative itself she explains that she does not claim to paint the complete picture of her grandmother: “je livre le portrait que je suis parvenue à tracer, dont je ne garantis certainement pas l’impartialité, ni même l’exactitude (I offer this portrait which I have succeeded in tracing, but of which I can certainly not guarantee impartiality or even accuracy)” (17). Whether partial, or inaccurate, there is still value to this fiction, just as there was a value to the fiction of Tituba. Although Victoire is full of biographical elements Condé candidly relies on imagination and invention to fill the gaps in memory and in the official archive.

Condé purposefully reflects on her inventive mode of writing history and consciously weaves this into her storytelling. In a preliminary page, she highlights the tension between truth and fiction that will dominate her text, citing Bernard Pingaud’s essay Les anneaux du manège: écriture et littérature: “Il devient indifférent que je me souvienne ou que j’invente, que j’emprunte ou que j’imagine. (It is inconsequential whether I remember or I invent, whether I borrow or I imagine.)” It seems as if Pingaud has set memory and invention in opposition, yet according to Nick Nesbitt in Voicing Memory: History and Subjectivity in French Caribbean Literature, memory is an aesthetic concept, and so is not that different from imagination. He writes that memory is a “representational construction of the past in the present and thus to some degree an inherently aesthetic process” (4). This definition could also be applied to official history, which is also a construction, a narrative whose beginning, middle, and end has been thoughtfully assembled. Yet those who have earned the right to construct history have been the

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20 The same is true of Cisneros’s novel. Caramelo: or Puro Cuento. Cuento is the Spanish equivalent of récit and further blurs the works genre.
conquerors and colonizers. Condé subverts this aspect of history through her own imaginative construction, and, like Pingaud, she asks what is the difference, whether she remembers, invents, borrows, or imagines. By including this quotation from Pingaud, Condé advises the reader to expect tension between memory, invention, and history.

Additionally, like Cisneros, Condé acknowledges the flexibility of her story’s “truth” when, after being unable to cite any specific sources regarding a certain event in her grandmother’s life, she states, “Rêvons (Let us dream)” (95). This imperative statement questions what is the harm in imagining a past when the seemingly necessary facts are lacking? This is exactly what Condé does with Victoire and in the process she writes a poetics of history that allows for a healing process to take place. By revisiting and revising her family’s past, she is not only able to recover her grandmother’s story, but also learns, like Lala, how to negotiate her own place within the tapestry of her family history.

However, in many ways, the narrator’s task in Condé’s novel is more difficult than Lala’s, since Lala knows her lineage, and her talent as a storyteller is a direct product of that lineage. Lala inherits the Reyes family legacy as reboceros. Condé’s lineage is largely obscure—a problem, according to Nesbitt, specific to slavery and to the Caribbean. Echoing Glissant, Nesbitt explains that the dehumanizing effects of the slave trade and colonialism impeded the slaves’ capacity for memory and communal history: “The sheer violence, first of slavery and then of colonialism and neocolonialist globalism, remains the driving impulse behind the French Antillean questioning of memory and history” (4). The horrors of the Middle Passage and the psychological distress of life on a plantation disrupted the slaves’ memory. By breaking up ethnic and linguistic groups and even families to avoid any resistance, the plantation system,
according to Nesbitt, “drove memory underground” (3). “This destruction and entombment of memory,” he continues, “occurred throughout the New World plantation societies” (3).

Condé’s personal knowledge of the slave trade was further hindered by her family’s silence regarding this past. In Victoire she writes, “personne dans ma famille ne m’instruisit ni de la Traité, de ces voyages initiatiques qui fondèrent notre destinée d’Antilles, ni de l’esclavage. Je dus négocier sans aide le poids de ce terrible passé (no one in my family instructed me about the slave trade, of those initial voyages that founded our Antillean destiny. I had to negotiate the weight of this terrible past on my own)” (117). It is clear that Condé resented her family’s silence and the way in which this past was kept from her.

This is further explained in Le cœur à rire et à pleurer, in a chapter aptly named “Leçon d’histoire (history lesson).” In this chapter Condé recalls an encounter she had with Anne-Marie de Surville, a white little girl, who wanted to play with her. However, the play quickly turn into abuse. Anne-Marie would spank her, slap her, pull her hair, ride her like an animal, and verbally abuse her. Eventually the young Condé resisted and told Anne-Marie to stop hitting her. Anne-Marie’s response was Condé’s first “history lesson:” “Je dois te donner des coups parce que tu es une négresse (I have to hit you because you are a negro)” (42). This excuse made no sense to the young Condé, who didn’t understand this racial dynamic. She asked both of her parents to explain the correlation between being black and physical violence, but neither one could or would adequately answer her question. Her mother dismissed the question, yet seemed embarrassed and was obviously keeping something from her. Her father, on the other hand, came close to giving her an answer when he said, “On nous donnait des coups dans le temps. Va trouver ta maman, veux-tu (They used to beat us long ago. Go find your mother, would you)” (44)? This reference to “long ago” alludes to the traumatic history of the slave trade, but at this
point Condé was still ignorant of that history. These interactions taught the young Condé not to ask certain questions.

However, she was able to learn something about the past. She narrates:

Je devinais qu’un secret était caché au fond de mon passé, secret douloureux, secret honteux dont il aurait été inconvenant et peut-être dangereux de forcer la connaissance. Il valait mieux l’enfouir au fin fond de ma mémoire comme mon père et ma mère, comme tous les gens que nous fréquentions, semblaient l’avoir fait. (44)

[I guessed that a painful, shameful secret was hidden deep in my past, which would have been inappropriate and perhaps dangerous to force to come to light. It was better to bury it in the depths of my memory like my father and my mother, like all the people we knew, seemed to have done.]

Without knowing the details of the history of slavery, as a child she learns from others’ silence that it is not only painful, but shameful. She also implicitly learns to own this shame and pain. She writes, “mon passé (my past)” and “ma mémoire (my memory)”. She is a part of that collective memory—a part of the scab on the wound that is history. Her parents and others may want to forget the horrors of the past because it is too painful, but Condé illustrates that it is also painful to not know the past; ignorance is not freedom. By refusing to acknowledge the past, one would deny the existence of the ancestors, of their specific and unique story.

The story about Anne-Marie affirms the uncanny return of traumatic events. After she stands up to Anne-Marie, the girl disappears from the town and Condé never sees her again, leading Condé to wonder whether this meeting was not supernatural—an example of slavery’s uncanny legacy. She comments:

Aujourd’hui, je me demande si cette rencontre ne fut pas surnaturelle. Puisque tant de vieilles haines, de vieilles peurs jamais liquidées demeurent ensevelies dans la terre de nos pays, je me demande si Anne-Marie et moi, nous n’avons pas été, l’espace de nos prétendus jeux, les réincarnations miniatures d’une maîtresse et de son esclave souffre-douleur. Sinon comment expliquer ma docilité à moi si rebelle? (44)

[I now wonder if this encounter was not supernatural. Since so many old hatreds and fears that were never resolved remain buried in the earth of our country, I wonder if Anne-Marie and I within the space of our so-called games, had not been miniature.
reincarnations of a mistress and her slave scapegoat. If not, how else to explain my
docility towards her when I was usually so rebellious?]  

Condé imagines how a landscape, haunted by the history of slavery, could have created a reenactment of an abusive master-slave relationship. In this way, this particular passage reminds the reader of Beloved and Sethe’s concept of “rememory” — a traumatic memory that is connected to the landscape. It haunts a particular landscape long after the events have transpired. Although as a child Condé was completely ignorant of slavery, its memory is still able to haunt her in the form of a white little girl.  

Victoire is a conscious effort to deal with the past, despite the lack of knowledge. Condé addresses the “Antillean amnesia” early in the novel (Nesbitt 14). Victoire’s history, like those of many in the Caribbean, lacks paternal legitimacy. Condé’s narrator asserts:

À cette époque, posséder un père, être reconnu de lui, partager ses jours ou simplement porter son nom était l’apanage de rares privilégiés. Il ne me choquait nullement que mes parents surgissent, à l’instar de tant d’autres, d’une espèce de brouillard. (15)

[At that time, to have a father, to be recognized by him, share his days or simply bear his name was the prerogative of privileged few. In no way was I shocked that my parents emerged, like so many others, from a kind of fog.]

Victoire is Condé’s attempt to write against the obfuscating of Caribbean identity and history. However, rather than seeking to explore and establish a patriarchal lineage, Condé pursues her matriarchal legacy.  

Condé realizes that in this herculean task, fiction and imagination will be her most useful tools — a lesson she learned from her father who would tell several varying (and fantastic) stories of his own history to Condé as a child, causing her to ponder:

Où était la vérité? Je crois qu’il la recréait à volonté, prenant plaisir à prononcer des syllabes qui le faisaient rêver: Paramaribo. Sumatra. Grâce à lui, j’ai compris depuis petite que les identités se forgent. (16, emphasis added)
[Where was the truth? I believe that he created it at will, taking pleasure in pronouncing syllables which caused him to dream: Paramaribo. Sumatra. Thanks to him, I understood from a young age that identities are forged.]

This is an important concept that Condé establishes early in the novel and will shape how she chooses to tackle the complex undertaking of writing Victoire’s history. When faced with lack of information about her grandmother’s life Condé will rely on imagination to construct Victoire’s identity.

Although there is no documentation to confirm the details of her grandmother’s life, Condé is unfazed: “Imaginons, c’est tout ce qui nous reste (We imagine, that is all that remains for us)” (129). Imagination is crucial to reclaiming Victoire’s legacy—an objective that Condé explicitly states and connects to her own identity as an author: “Ce que je veux, c’est revendiquer l’héritage de cette femme qui apparemment n’en laissa pas (This is what I want, to claim the legacy of this woman who apparently did not leave any)” (85). Whereas, the female spirits in the texts by Brodber, Valdés, and Cisneros work as witnesses and storytellers, Condé’s narrator has to imagine her grandmother’s story and must step into the role of storyteller to rescue Victoire from being forgotten, from fading away into obscurity.

However, she does have one important resource, her grandmother’s recipes which were supposedly published in L’Écho pointois. Food, like music in Te di la vida entera and Caramelo, functions as an important affective connection between Condé and her grandmother. Specifically, in the way that Condé seeks to establish a link between her identity as a writer and her grandmother’s identity as a cook. This is apparent even from the title: Victoire, les saveurs et les mots (flavors and words). Unlike Moi, Tituba Sorcière . . . Noire de Salem with its emphatic pronoun moi and descriptors specific to Tituba (Sorcière . . . Noire de Salem [black witch of Salem]), Victoire’s full title is about the link between Condé as an author (words) and her
grandmother as a cook (flavors). *Victoire* may lack the emphasis on the individual which is dominant throughout *Tituba*, but it stresses a personal and profound link between Condé and her grandmother.

Throughout *Victoire*, Condé’s narrator stresses the parallel she sees between her grandmother’s craft and her own. She explains how her grandmother’s gift for cooking leads her to find a mode of self-expression similar to writing. Although she was merely a cook for a white family in an upstairs-downstairs house, Victoire discovered her place in the world in “le temple de sa cuisine (the temple of her kitchen)” (85). Through the art of cooking Victoire found a means to express herself and escape the burden of her illegitimacy, low social status, and mixed racial identity:

> Quand elle inventait des assaisonnements, ou mariait des goûts, sa personnalité se libérait, s’épanouissait. Cuisiner, c’était son rhum Père Labat, sa ganja, son crack, son ecstasy. Alors, elle dominait le monde. Pour un temps, elle devenait Dieu. Là aussi, comme un écrivain. (100-101)

[Her personality was liberated and flourished when she invented seasonings or married flavors. Cooking was her Père Labat rum, her ganja, her crack, her ecstasy. In this way she dominated the world. For a time, she became God. Again, just like a writer.]

Not only does Condé compare her grandmother to a writer, but she compares her to God. In fact, her language is more powerful than a mere comparison. She *became* (“devenait”) God, not a god, but God.

This divine association is repeated throughout the novel, and in one particular passage this allusion is further emphasized through the evocation of a famous work from art history. Condé imagines the final meal Victoire cooked for her family and her employers and she calls this particular meal the Last Supper, using the Italian “Ultima Cena,” the title of da Vinci’s famous mural of Christ’s final meal with his disciples. Speaking of the scene she is about to describe, the narrator asserts, “Ce pourrait être le sujet d’un tableau dont le personnage central
serait Victoire, entourée des êtres qui lui avaient été chers tout au long de sa vie (This could be the subject of a painting whose central character would be Victoire, surrounded by those who had been dear to her throughout her life)” (247). In this passage Condé places Victoire in the space reserved for Christ at the center of the image, the focus of the painting. Although Victoire is not written as a vocal and assertive character like Tituba, Victoire is a God in the kitchen.

Condé makes no similar declarations about Tituba. In this way her grandmother fulfills the calling of her name, Victoire.

Additionally, although Victoire was illiterate, Condé imagines how the legacy of her cooking could act as a written document. Referring to this last supper, the narrator asserts, “À sa manière, elle rédigeait son testament (In her own way, she wrote her will)” (247). In a way, this final meal that she prepared for those whom she loved was a kind of last will and testament, reinforcing a connection between “les saveurs et les mots.” In this way, Condé’s narrator makes a connection between herself, her grandmother, and God. Whereas Condé the author disappears in *Tituba*, she uses *Victoire* to reinforce the power of her craft and her identity as a writer. By recuperating her grandmother’s legacy Condé gives fuller meaning to her own craft as a writer, not only in the imaginative nature of that process but also in the three-way comparison between her own art, that of her grandmother’s, and god-like creativity.

Condé’s imaginative reconstitution of her grandmother’s history is not necessarily a direct challenge to the dominant historical discourse in the same way that Brodber’s *Louisiana* is. However, it does provide a necessary alternative to a hegemonic historiography, in the same way that she imagined Tituba’s personal history to broaden historical consciousness. And like that novel and the novels by Brodber, Valdés, and Cisneros the figure of a ghost is the source of inspiration for the written text. The female spirits in these novels provide an alternative to the
official archive and inspire female creativity, illustrating the importance of imagination to allow for a multiplicity of voices and experiences to be represented. Victoire’s ghost is an invitation, not only to write, but also to discover the often overlooked women of the past.
CONCLUSION

The ghost is a powerful literary figure. Whether literal or figurative, it leads readers to contemplate mortality and their relationship to the past. Although ghosts are often employed to invoke fear and suspense, as the novels of my corpus show, they can also serve a different role, a restorative role. These ghosts practice what Annette Trefzer in her essay “The Indigenous Uncanny: Spectral Genealogies in LeAnne Howe’s Fiction” calls “‘healthy’ haunting” which “reinstates memory” (201). The ghosts exist in an in-between liminal space, allowing them to serve as bridges not only between the material and the immaterial, the living and the dead, but also between the past and the present. In this way they recuperate histories that have been repressed and effaced. Throughout this dissertation I have demonstrated how female ghosts reclaim marginalized voices and histories while inspiring the production of alternatives to history that often subvert the hegemonic, dominant discourse through orality, spirit possession, and cyclical temporality. Additionally, imagination plays a central role in this recuperative endeavor.

In similar ways Louisiana, Te di la vida entera, Caramelo, and Victoire make an argument for the value of fiction in the process of recovering obfuscated experiences, especially feminine experiences. Like ghosts who make the absent present through their haunting, fiction enacts events that may not be “factual” in a denotative sense, yet, represent a transcendent truth that covers the broad range of experience, like Menchú’s testimonio, Mammy’s history, or Tituba’s conception. Fiction has the power to conjure forgotten histories to enlarge our understanding of the past. History, on the other hand, marks a definitive break between past and present. As Michel de Certeau asserts in L’écriture de l’histoire, “L’écriture ne parle de passé que pour l’enterrer. Elle est un tombeau en ce double sens que, par le même texte, elle honore et elle élimine (Writing speaks of the past only to bury it. Writing is a tomb in the double sense
that, in the same text, it honors and it eliminates)” (199). Writing is like a tomb that keeps the
dead in the past. The novels of my corpus, however, do the opposite. Through writing Brodber,
Valdés, Cisneros, and Condé revive the past via the figure of the ghost, imaginatively blurring
the line between dead and living, past and present.

These novels, as discussed in Chapter One, follow a rich tradition of fiction in the
Americas that implements the ghostly figure to highlight various issues that haunt these regions.
*Louisiana* establishes the importance of orality and spiritual epistemology, which are important
themes in the novels by Valdés and Cisneros, especially the way in which the spiritual
epistemology of *Louisiana* is based on feelings rather than reason: “Feeling is knowing”
(Brodber 116). We see this developed further in *Te di la vida entera* and *Caramelo* in the way in
which the ghosts inspire a “transformative recognition,” a return to knowledge, through nostalgia
and affect (Gordon 8). Condé’s *Victoire*, on the other hand, explores the theme of silence.
Victoire’s ghost does not impart directly to Condé’s narrator any transformative knowledge.
Rather, the silence surrounding Victoire, inspires Condé’s narrator to reclaim her history and
assert her subjectivity. Although these novels have distinct differences, a strong unifying element
is the figure of the ghost who inspires an interrogation into the past in order to reclaim
marginalized voices and histories.

Moreover, via the figure of the ghost these novels also explore the complexities of female
relationships, specifically focusing on the reconciliation between mothers and daughters and
grandmothers and granddaughters. In the case of *Louisiana* Mammy’s and Lowly’s spirits
engender Ella’s reconciliation with her Jamaican grandmother, who died when Ella was an
infant. The spirits allow Ella to access a memory of her grandmother that she had forgotten. In
this memory she can feel her grandmother’s warmth as she plays with Ella’s hair. This spiritual
reunion is important for Ella’s own self-discovery, leading her to discover her Jamaican roots and her family history in the Caribbean. This reconciliation with her lost grandmother is even more poignant because of Ella’s tense relationship with her own parents. She was never particularly close to her parents, in part because they were so reticent about their past. Her parents kept their history “zippered and padlocked” and had thrown away the keys (58). This makes the recovery of Ella’s memories of her grandmother all the more valuable to her.

*Te di la vida entera* also centers on the reconciliation between female relatives, specifically between a mother and daughter whose relationship had always been strained. The novel ends with a reunion between María Regla and her mother, Cuca, after María Regla’s death. When she was alive María Regla and Cuca constantly were at odds over key issues, including the Cuban Revolution. Whereas Cuca was disillusioned with it, María Regla was inspired by the Revolution and sought to be an obedient fighter. Because of this political division and Uan’s absence, they were unable to connect on any level. María Regla kept her mother at a distance. The seed of their reconciliation is planted when the Valdés persona writes María Regla back in the narrative after her accidental death. María Regla returns to the narrative in the year 1959. In this time she meets her mother as a young pregnant woman. With this collapse of linear temporality Cuca and María Regla are able finally to meet as equals.

*Caramelo* follows a similar path to reconciliation. As a child, Lala did not like her “Awful Grandmother.” In fact, the two were mutually frustrated with each other, even after Soledad’s death. At one point Lala, exasperated, asks Soledad’s ghost, “Grandmother, why do you keep haunting me” (406)? Soledad responds, “Me? Haunting you? It’s you, Celaya, who’s haunting me. I can’t bear it. Why do you insist on repeating my life? Is that what you want? To live as I did” (406)? This is an unusual logic to suggest that the living can haunt the dead; yet,
this passage illustrates how connected the two women are, whether they want to be or not. However, grandmother and granddaughter work through their relationship by collaborating on Soledad’s history, and ultimately Lala comes to know herself better. She realizes that she has more in common with Soledad than she does which her own mother. Towards the end of the novel Lala declares, “I am the Awful Grandmother” (424). At this point she comes to have compassion for her grandmother and understand how she became “awful.” Their reconciliation is just one aspect of healing in the novel.

As I discuss in Chapter Four, Victoire is Condé’s attempt to assert her grandmother’s legacy, but part of that process involves an exploration of her own mother’s development. Condé explores the strained relationship between Jeanne and Victoire, and although they do not come to mutual understanding like Cuca and María Regla or Soledad and Lala, Condé is able to probe their possible motives and reveal the unspoken love between them. Condé attempts to mend the past and Jeanne’s and Victoire’s strained relationship through imagination. The force of Jeanne’s love for her mother finally becomes apparent after Victoire’s death: “La douleur de Jeanne fut sans limites (Jeanne’s suffering was without limits)” (254).

In a way Condé bridges the rift between Jeanne and Victoire, by asserting her creative relationship to her grandmother, Victoire. Although she never knew Victoire, Condé establishes a connection with her through creativity, through Victoire’s cooking and Condé’s writing. Condé’s autobiography, Le cœur à rire et à pleurer, Contes vrais de mon enfance, helps to clarify Condé’s desire to heal the rift between between her own mother (Jeanne) and her maternal grandmother (Victoire). In this autobiography, Condé recounts that when she was a child her mother used to chastise her for spending too much time in the kitchen visiting with their cook. She would tell her, “Tu ne feras jamais rien de bon. Les filles intelligentes ne passent
pas leur temps dans la cuisine (You will never do anything good. Intelligent girls do not pass
their time in the kitchen)” (Le cœur 69). Clearly, Jeanne carried a deep-seated disappointment in
her mother’s identity as a cook and was humiliated by her mother’s status as a servant. However,
Condé explains that this criticism was Jeanne’s way of expressing regret for the distance between
Victoire and herself: “[C]’était sa manière à elle de déplorer la distance qui, au fil des années,
s’était creusée entre sa servant de mère et elle (It was her way of mourning the distance that, over
the years, had widened between her servant mother and herself)” (Le cœur 69). Despite Jeanne’s
embarrassment, Condé comes to value her grandmother’s work and creativity. She finds beauty
in her grandmother’s craft and a personal connection with the need to
create and invent.
Whereas Jeanne saw the kitchen as a place of inferiority,
in Victoire Condé elevates it to a
“temple” of creativity (85).

Like Louisiana, Te di la vida entera, and Caramelo, Victoire explores the complicated
dynamics of female relationships within the family. These novels explore the common
misunderstandings that cross generations and address the difficulty of coming to terms with
choices made by the women that have come before. In all four novels, reconciliation between
female relatives reinforces how the ghostly figure can bring healing, not just in regards to
history, but also on a small, intimate level. In this way, they bridge the past and present to allow
for mothers, daughters, grandmothers, and granddaughters to have understanding and
compassion for one another. The ghosts in the novels of my corpus facilitate connection,
connection between the past and the present and the living and the dead. They heal the rupture
indicative of a history that definitively marks the past from the present. Within these novels, the
past and present co-exist, in the figure of the ghost, allowing a restorative process to take place.
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VITA

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