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(Re)Writing History in Maryse Condé, Femi Euba, and Reinaldo Arenas

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(RE)WRITING HISTORY IN MARYSE CONDÉ, FEMI EUBA, AND
REINALDO ARENAS

A Dissertation

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Louisiana State University and
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in

The Interdepartmental Program of Comparative Literature

by

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to Nereyda, Gianni, Kenny, and Gloria Anzaldúa

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ABSTRACT

This comparative study asserts the centrality of spirituality to literature that explores life in the African Diaspora. Specifically, it emphasizes the importance of spirituality both to the authors and to the lives of their characters in the novels *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots* (2006) by the Guadeloupian author Maryse Condé, *Camwood at Crossroads* (2007) by Nigerian author Femi Euba, and *El color del verano* (1991) by Cuban author Reinaldo Arenas. A close reading of the three novels shows that they are representative of *autohistoría* literary works, which represent the spirituality of the writer, as well as the people written about. Importantly, this comparative study identifies narrative strategies and techniques in African Diasporic writing, such as the expression of collective memory, satire, and *choteo*, as modes of analysis, recognition, and resistance to oppression. Each novel is, therefore, an example of subaltern self-representation that resists cultural hegemony and gives voice to groups that have been historically silenced. Each author's spirituality informs the will to understand, to redefine, and to transform oppressive social relations in societies inhabited by the characters. Uniquely, this comparative study avoids universalizing characters experiences with oppression and demonstrates that many forms of oppression are unique to specific groups of people and may not be experienced universally. The implication of this finding is that advocates of human liberation must listen, understand, and dialogue across groups to achieve their goals.

KEYWORDS: *autohistoría*, spirituality, collective memory, satire, and *choteo*, subaltern, self-representation

CHAPTER I

(RE)WRITING HISTORY FROM THE MARGINS OF SOCIETY

This comparative study asserts the centrality of spirituality to literature that explores life in the Atlantic Diaspora. Specifically, it emphasizes the importance of spirituality both to the authors and to the lives of their characters in the novels *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots* (2006) by the Guadeloupian author Maryse Condé, *Camwood at Crossroads* (2007) by Nigerian author Femi Euba, and *El color del verano* (1991) by Cuban author Reinaldo Arenas. A close reading of the three novels shows that they are representative of literary works that can be considered examples of *autohistoria*. They represent the spirituality of the writer, as well as the people written about.

Autohistoria novels link individual to collectively shared experiences by contextualizing personal stories and history within material and cultural history (Anzaldúa 2012). Each novel is, therefore, an example of subaltern self-representation (Gramsci 1953; Spivak 1985) that resists cultural hegemony and gives voice to groups that have been historically silenced. Through each novel, the author's spirituality informs the will to understand, to redefine, and to transform oppressive social relations in societies inhabited by the characters.

Uniquely, this comparative study avoids universalizing characters' experiences with oppression. Experiences, of subjugation understood here as oppression, are felt in a variety of ways that are variable across nations and groups of people. This comparative study demonstrates that while some forms of oppression are experienced nearly universally, such as economic exploitation, material poverty, or the denial of self-representation, many forms of oppression are unique to specific groups of people and may not be experienced in the same way across groups.

Condé describes class, race, and gender oppression while Euba focuses on the clash of Yoruba and Western cultures. Arenas delineates restrictions on sexual and creative expression in Cuba.

Importantly, this comparative study identifies narrative strategies and techniques in African Atlantic Diasporic writing, such as the expression of collective memory (Falola 1994), satire (Euba 1989), and *choteo* (frank social mockery) (Ortiz 1923; Mañach 1991), as modes of analysis, recognition, and resistance to oppression. In the work of Condé contradiction is the point of departure for one to gain a deeper understanding on which to base one's actions and choose one's future path in the context of community. Euba relies on satire to emphasize the grotesque features of modern Nigeria and Arenas mocks and ridicules official nationalist narratives in Cuba in his formulation of *choteo*.

Understanding literary forms, such as novels, as counter-histories, and as examples of the self-representation of subaltern groups, is important to a conceptualization of agency for social transformation. Condé, Euba, and Arenas guide readers to reflect on the characters' subaltern life which link to the authors' auto-history in order to promote ongoing dialogue about the possibility of a more just and human-centered future. Writing is essential to foster an understanding of collective memories and spirituality; of teaching recognition of who we are and resistance for liberation from oppressive systems invented and reinvented by the hegemonic power of dominant groups (Alexander 2005; Anzaldúa 2012; Euba 1989).

The three novels in this comparative study are from the African Diaspora, and/or the Caribbean region. Both the authors' and their characters' lives are structured and contextualized by histories of slavery, colonization, imperialism, and modern nation building. Condé focuses on the experiences of her grandmother and mother with intersecting systems of racial and gender oppression in Guadeloupe and Martinique. Euba writes about characters confronting social and

interpersonal tensions due to the conflictual mix of both traditional and modern cultures in Nigeria. The characters in Arenas exemplify and expose the contradictions between the freedom of individual expression, censorship, and restrictions on sexual behavior in the nationalist narrative of revolutionary Cuba.

Scholarly Context

This comparative study is informed by the larger scholarly context of transnational and African and Caribbean Diaspora literature that examines cultural hybridity, cultural hegemony, domination, and subordination. The notion of “transnational” refers to historical patterns of socio-cultural, economic, and political relationships across group and national boundaries. Particularly relevant to this notion are the movements of groups of people from their homes and/or nations of origin to other places. For example, African Diaspora studies provide an understanding of nations and cultures throughout the Atlantic and Caribbean as well as their connections to the transnational slave trade and the forcible displacement of African people (Gilroy 1993; Irele 2001; Benítez-Rojo 1996). Further, these studies delineate strategies members of displaced populations create for survival, adaptation, and resistance.

Interculturation (Kapchan and Strong 1999, 243) is a focus on culture within the ‘transnational’ and views nations as constituted by hybrid cultures; shaped by the mixing of two or more groups of people with distinct languages and cultures. However, within the fields of African Diasporic and cultural studies there are varying and opposing views as to what constitutes cultural hybridization and how the process really unfolds in the daily lives of people. In Post-colonial studies specifically, the notion of hybrid varies among scholars such as Néstor García Canclini (1995), Raymundo Mier (1993), Homi Bhabha (1994). Notions of hybridity are

particularly relevant to informing an understanding of the tensions faced by Olumofin and Difala in *Camwood at Crossroads*.

Rather than accepting the notion that the hegemony of dominant colonial cultures completely shapes the oppressed, who passively assimilate and adopt the values and worldviews of the oppressors, scholars of the African Diaspora have documented more complex processes of cultures merging and being reshaped, which is often referred to as the process of creolization (Chamoiseau, Confiant, Bernabé, and Taylor, 1997; Léotin and Houyoux 1992; Sarnecki 2000; Murdoch 2012), or hybridization (Canclini 1995; Benítez-Rojo 1996). These studies focus on those who are oppressed and subordinated as subjects who act to shape their destinies rather than as merely objects of colonial power.

Particularly influential is the work of Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz (1940) who used the term transculturation to describe what he saw as a dynamic process in which dominant and subordinate cultures shape and influence each other at points of contact. He recognized that during the transatlantic slave trade many diverse groups of Africans from Congo, Senegal-Guinea, and North African were enslaved in Cuba. These groups brought their cultures with them, and Ortiz maintained that these cultures hybridized among themselves and with the dominant Spanish culture, which was already hybridized by contact with Arabs from Morocco.

This historical mixing of multiple groups in Cuba, he argued, formed a new and distinct culture, *lo cubano* (the culturally Cuban). This concept has been related to Cuban identity and nationalism and has been extended to incorporate many other cultures that have come to the island. Language plays a key role in this process of transculturation as Silvia Spitta (1997) explains, “... Cubans take the language of the colonizer – Spanish- and infuse it with African and Asian elements, creating *cubanismo* or a vernacular ‘Cuban’ different from peninsular Spanish”

(164-165). The formation of a uniquely Cuban culture is useful in understanding the power of *choteo*, (frank social mockery) in *El color de verano*.

However, the relative influence of dominant versus the subordinate cultures on the formation of *lo cubano* and any continuing conflicts between distinct cultural groups are often overlooked in this conceptualization of culture. Other scholars specifically focus on the general differences between dominant and subordinate cultures. Bhabha (1994), for example, views cultural hybridity as continuous, connected and occurring at the borders of modernization where marginalized people are. Hybridity, in fact, refers to subordinate group members' relation to the culture of the colonial power. Particularly in *Camwood at Crossroads* the tension between Yoruba traditions and Western culture in the formation of contemporary Nigeria is apparent.

Similarly, Canclini (1995) sees culture as contested due to the tension between the traditional and the modern. He conceives *culturas híbridas*, not as continuing hybrid transculturation, but as “escenas de disputas por el sentido de la modernidad” (scenes of dispute over the meaning of modernity) (110). For example, Canclini argues that in Latin America the traditional and the modern coexist in the same period of time and form two opposing cultural positions of tension. For Euba this tension unfolds around religion and the impact of evangelical Christianity on the Yoruba belief system.

Another such tension discussed in the work of Benz (1997), illustrates how language is contested along this ‘border’ of modernization. Tropicalization, an example of cultural hybridity, illustrates how language and signifiers shape the image of the tropics held by those from the north but can also be re-employed by those from the south to contest those images (Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman 1997). In both *Victoire*, with French creole, and *Camwood at Crossroad*, with

an English and Yoruba mixed, the hybridity of language is apparent and shapes how characters view each other.

Other scholars have emphasized processes of tropicalization (Flores 1997) and orientalism (Said 1979) as attempts by the dominant culture to create and perpetuate ideological fictions and representations that influence these complex cultural constructions in their hegemonic interest. However, of specific interest to this comparative study is the creative resistance / agency by the subjugated and processes by which these ideological fictions are recognized, transformed, and used to resist systems of domination and frame the dialogue of liberation struggles (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 2012; Smith 1987; hooks 1984; Alexander 2005; Scott 1985). Arenas in particular, inhabits stereotypes perpetuated by dominant groups and breaks them down through ridicule.

Beverly (1998) posits that the notions of both cultural hybridity and/or transculturation are used as part of nationalist ideology designed to secure the material hegemony of the dominant group(s). He notes, “the appeal to nationalism and its achievements stabilizes the ‘people’ around a certain narrative (of common interests, community, tasks, sacrifices, historical destiny) that its class or group components may or may not share collectively. Hegemonic nationalist discourse rhetorically sutures the gaps and discontinuities of the people, producing the subaltern as its ‘remainder’ (Beverly, 308). The material and cultural hegemony of the dominant groups stems from the oppression of other groups and is legitimated by nationalist narratives. This process is described in varying forms in *Victoire*, *Camwood at Crossroads*, and *El color del verano* and characters are subalterns in their respective societies.

Considering questions of oppression and agency, Paulo Freire (1974) saw oppression as dehumanization, which he defined simply as, “a distortion of the vocation of becoming more

fully human” (28). The oppression of one social group by another, which results in their dehumanization, is sustained by economic exploitation, political violence, social and cultural subordination, and the ideologies that legitimate these social relations. Subaltern subordination is related, particularly, to cultural hegemony as well as economic domination (Gramsci, 1953). Social and cultural relations in different nations, create distinct subaltern groups whose members experience specific forms of oppression. Members are from groups whose identities are not class specific including, caste, race, ethnicity, age, gender, and sexuality.

Intersectionality is an analytical framework that blurs the boundaries among subaltern groups and the systems of oppression they experience. It shows how distinct systems of oppression, which are designed to subordinate members of specific subaltern groups, intersect in the daily lives of individuals who are members of two or more subaltern groups. African-American women, for example, inhabit the intersection of systems of racial and gender oppression informing both their experiences with and knowledge of oppression (Collins, 1991). While oppression is ‘generally’ experienced across subaltern groups, specific social relations create forms of subordination among those subaltern group members who inhabit unique intersections of subordination. In *Victoire* especially it is demonstrated how systems of class, race, and gender oppression intersect in the lives of Victoire and Jeanne in distinct ways.

Members of oppressed groups internalize dehumanization and they learn to participate in the daily reproduction of oppressive social relations (Sheroover-Marcuse, 1986). Oppressive relations are portrayed as natural, the destiny of the nation as inevitable, and the lives of subaltern group members as irrelevant. Importantly for this comparative study, Gramsci identified one effect of subordination as the denial of the power of self-representation (Beverly, 1998). Members of subaltern groups, therefore, may not understand the systems that oppress

them and, if they do, have not been permitted to participate in shaping national dialogue or sharing their own stories. Characters in *El color del verano* in particular fight against government repression to express themselves both artistically and sexually.

Throughout history, however, oppression has been met with resistance. Paolo Freire (1974) maintains that, “struggle is possible only because dehumanization, although a concrete historical fact, is not a given destiny” (28). Agency, the notion that one’s actions shape social relations and the world, is linked to experience with oppression and the recognition that dehumanizing relations can be transformed by conscious action. Self-representation through writing is a form of agency. Mohanty (2003) notes that, “resistance inheres in the very gaps, fissures, and silences of hegemonic narratives. Resistance is encoded in the practices of remembering, and of writing” (82).

Because agency is informed by consciousness and dehumanization is internalized, Sherover-Marcuse (1986) emphasizes how Western Marxists, Third World and Feminist scholars maintain that the transformation of consciousness is essential to the liberation from oppression. Many of these scholars, she argues, “understand that this transformation requires both “spiritual” and “emotional” work which brings to awareness feelings, memories, experiences that may have appeared to have only a personal meaning but whose broader social significance can be discovered precisely through the sharing of “individual” life stories and experiences” (136).

However, there is a lack of agreement. For example, despite their recognition of intersecting systems of oppression and their awareness of strategies of recognition and resistance developed by members of subaltern groups, Patricia Hill Collins (2008) and Michele Rowley (2007) deny that spirituality is an essential feature of subaltern people’s struggle. They tend to take a ‘secular’ Eurocentric approach that emphasizes rational thinking and knowledge

production as key to the fight for freedom from material want and to the struggle for self-representation. Rowley (2007) argues, for example, that, “pedagogy as politics is not abstract; teaching for justice is a project that requires us to put our body in the fray (148).

Many feminist scholars argue that spirituality is not clearly formulated and remains at the level of an abstract, disembodied ideal and has no useful or practical purpose in the struggle of subaltern groups against both material and internalized oppression. They are, therefore, critical of scholars, like Gloria Anzaldúa and Jacqui Alexander, who emphasize the importance of spirituality to social transformation and minimize their contribution to the larger subaltern people’s liberation movement. However, both maintain that experiences with subordination may be linked to the beginning of personal and collective consciousness and an understanding of domination. Such awareness, driven by a sense of spirituality, may motivate personal and collective efforts for social and cultural transformation for a more just and humane society.

Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa was a queer Chicana theorist who wrote *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza* in 1992, a book that inspired the lives of many scholars and activists such as Sandra Cisneros, T. Jackie Cuevas, and Cherríe Moraga (Alarcón 232; Cuevas 242; Cisneros 241). Anzaldúa explains her experiences living on the U.S.-Mexican border where Anglo-Americans “consider the inhabitants of the borderland transgressors, aliens -whether they possess documents or not, whether they’re Chicanos, Indians or Black” (*Borderlands*, 25). She describes the U.S.-Mexican border as “una herida abierta” (an open wound) where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” and shapes the experiences of subaltern people (25). Her theories are central to this comparative study as they guide an understanding of how characters’ awareness may lead to understanding, which informs personal and social transformation in each of the novels.

For her, “consciousness of the borderlands comes ... from the ability to see ambiguities and contradictions clearly, and to act collectively, with moral conviction ... this is a notion of agency born of history and geography” (Mohanty 81). Anzaldúa’s *autohistoría-teoría* is the idea “that all social change begins through a technique of spoken-word-art-performance-activism” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 247). She developed the concept *autohistoría*, “to describe the genre of writing about one’s personal and collective history using fictive elements, a sort of fictionalized autobiography or memoir; an *autohistoría* is a personal essay that theorizes” (Anzaldúa, *now let us shift* 578). This conception allows an understanding of *Victoire*, *Camwood at Crossroads*, and *El color del verano* as varying examples of this genre.

Importantly, more than just a fictionalized autobiography that is merely subjective and personal, *autohistoría* unites the personal with the collective to share stories left unwritten in the official history of the national narrative. It is a genre designed to give voice to the collective memories of subaltern people. Anzaldúa recognizes the importance of employing dominant culture forms, like novels and poetry, to delineate the operation of systems of oppression, promote dialogue, resist, and create a better, more spiritual and humane society. The primary texts explored in this study resonate with this approach in terms of form, content, and context.

Furthermore, all three novels in this comparative study are varied examples of this genre. Condé (2006) specifically draws on the collective memories of the subaltern in Guadeloupe, which allows her to illustrate the complex operation of race and gender oppression. This narrative form permits her to unite the personal with the collective and counter dominant ideologies and histories written about the island. Euba, through the use of satire (as proposed by Esu), demonstrates in *Camwood at Crossroads* how individual choices and fates are always intertwined with the choices and fates of others, thereby expressing the collective experience of

oppressive systems and relations. Arenas links his spirit to that of the Cuban people and ridicules oppression through *choteo*.

The sharing of these stories may catalyze subaltern group members to understand the contradictions that shape their lives and become aware of an existential site Anzaldúa calls *nepantla*, a Nahuas term meaning ‘in-between space’ in which a woman or a man experiences great confusion, anxiety, and loss of control. It is a realm of creativity and liberation as well. As s/he realizes that s/he is divided by multiple worlds, *nepantla* “indicates liminal space where transformation can occur” (Keating 2011, 8). This space can connect all women --women of color, Chicanas, Mexicanas, non-heterosexuals of color, and even Anglo women-- and every male as well through a new understanding of racist, heterosexist, and classist institutions that potentially forms the basis for social, personal, and cultural liberation.

This *nepantla* process may lead to *la conciencia*, which is an understanding of one’s immobile position in *los intersticios* (Anzaldúa, 42). The realization of the intricate relation between the recognition of who we are and how the others see us allows these cracks to be recognized as existing between multiple worlds. For Anzaldúa this process begins with *la facultad*, which is an awareness or immediate perception that something is not how it should be. This may occur without intentional thought or conscious reasoning. Both Victoire and her daughter Jeanne are painfully aware of their race and gender while Olumofin and his father Difala sense that Yoruba belief systems are withering in the face of Christianity. Likewise, Arenas feels trapped and his characters feel the impact of government corruption and hypocrisy.

If one begins to be aware, they may continue to look for information to arrive at a greater understanding, which for Anzaldúa, is *el conocimiento* (knowledge). This process of understanding how one is negatively viewed and treated may be painful. However, Anzaldúa

argues that one should not fear knowledge of not being accepted into one's culture, which is also suffering from misunderstanding and facing possible extermination. She argues that what is taken for knowledge is in fact fabricated by the dominant cultures to foment division between her and her people. She notes, for example, how separation and duality are reflected in the dominant culture through the concept 'nos/otras' in which *nos* means us/we/me, the subject, while *otras* means them/they, the object. In Anzaldúa's words, "the Euro-American, the European wants to keep out anything that disturbs it: languages, whole ideas about reality, about race matters. And so there's a pressure on their part for us to assimilate, to give up our heritage, our language, our culture" (*Borderlands* 90).

In *Victoire*, *Camwood at Crossroads*, and *El color del verano* awareness becomes understanding to characters that reflect on oppressive relations and systems. Victoire fights so that Jeanne is not illiterate and exploited like she is. Olumofin refuses to accept his father's hybrid religion that he sees as corrupted. Arenas's characters continually imagine and survive; they create and share their longing for freedom with others. This personal, as well as collective, "self-awareness is employed in the service of social justice work," explains Keating in her e-book *Entre Mundos/Among Worlds* (2011, par. 4).

Anzaldúa believes that the Eurocentric part in us must be suffocated in the deep room of our consciousness while the understanding of one's alienated, subaltern status is important in order to obtain a new *mestiza* consciousness, which promotes action for social transformation. Similarly, each of the three novels in this comparative study reflect the social consciousness of the authors by focusing on characters experiencing a cultural collision, a struggle of borders, an inner war in the *intersticios* of their respective societies. *Victoire*, *Camwood at Crossroads*, and *El color del verano* each employs a unique narrative technique to spark consciousness and

transformative action such as collective memory, satire, and *choteo*, but each relies on the author's sense of spirituality to unite the individual to the collective and promote a common sense of humanity.

Anzaldúa's theory and concepts have served as a guide for the formation of other theories and approaches to liberation. Her notion of the 'borders' separating groups of people, who experience general forms of oppression that manifest in very specific ways within the borders, as well as the necessity to recognize and overcome these borders to create a more just future, is a seminal idea within the current "third-world" feminist movement (Mohanty 52-53). Her work demonstrates that though subaltern groups across the Atlantic and Caribbean face specific national and cultural forms of domination, which make them seem very different from each other. However, they share a common history, a sense of spiritual strength, and a desire for liberation. This idea is the central focus of this comparative study and informs the reading of the three novels.

There are clear theoretical links between the work of Anzaldúa and Jacqui Alexander in terms of how spirituality is central to creating new worlds. Through *Victoire*, Condé challenges readers to think about a world free of poverty, racism and gender oppression. Euba chooses a path of creolization in which Yoruba traditions survive while Arenas promotes a world of unlimited beauty and imagination free of censorship. Much of their work delineates, in some fashion, the relationship between oppression, recognition of that oppression, and transformation for liberation from that oppression. Specifically, Anzaldúa informs Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing* (2005), and in particular her notion of the 'pedagogy of the sacred', which emphasizes the spiritual dimensions of experience, the meaning of 'sacred' subjectivity, and how both inform one's knowledge of the world and one's agency in the world.

Jacqui Alexander is a devotee of the Yoruba spiritual system of Orisha and *Ifa* in which her work is centered on the global vision of social justice for all within the recognition of who we are and how we became what we now are. She points out:

The source of our connection is a deeply spiritual one. ... The fact that you are reflected in me and I in you. And the source of that, I believe, is a source that is divine. That source is the source of spirit... what we could call the sacred. And we could call it anything. And for folks who don't necessarily want to call it divine, that's fine too. But at the very least, we recognize our interconnectedness, that sense in which we meet at a certain place. That meeting place is crucial for who we are, how we think, what we do. There is a lot at stake in that meeting.¹

For Alexander, the 'sacred' intersects longing for recognition of who we are and where are we going with memories, voices, spirituality and agency. She argues that, "transnationalism, gender, and sexuality, experience, history, memory, subjectivity, and justice" are contained in the person's spirituality as well (Alexander 15). In her view the sacred and spiritual must not be dissociated from the social and the political. She argues that the, "spiritual, is very much lived in a domain that is social in the sense that it provides knowledge whose distillation is indispensable to daily living" (295-296). In the three novels the importance of Yoruba spirituality throughout the African Diaspora and the Caribbean is demonstrated as characters communicate with the dead, rely on guidance from both ancestors and deities, and understand that the spiritual gives them purpose in life.

The 'pedagogy of the sacred' revolves around an understanding that people all over the world rely on spirituality every day to make choices and decisions that affect their lives. The characters in the three novels examined in this comparative study act on their sense of spirituality in the way that Alexander describes. Particularly in *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots* by

¹ Quotes from Signified Web: <http://latierraspirit.org/>

spirituality not only informs the lives of the author and her characters, but also inhabits the geography and nature that contextualizes the stories.

Alexander notes that it is the sacred, “through which a great number of women in the world make their lives intelligible. It is at the crossroads of subjectivity and collectivity, Sacred knowing and power, memory, and body, that we sojourn so as to examine their pedagogic content” (299-300). The linking of individual stories to collective experiences with oppression is essential and Alexander emphasizes the need to remember and know about one another in order to see the mirror that reflects colonization and slavery in each other (266-267).

Through the spirituality of Yoruba descendants, Alexander sees the importance of teaching us to recognize ourselves as reflexive human beings whose will and character can shape the paths of our lives. The spiritual is embodied in daily life and “divine guidance has to be intuited and projected as desire, injected into the very conviction of the choice of one’s spiritual path” (311). Alexander thus emphasizes the importance of recognizing spiritual paths at the ‘crossroads’ of experiences with intersecting forms of oppression to achieve personal and collective liberation.

In *Archetypes, Imprecators and Victims of Fate: Origins and Developments of Satire in Black Drama* (1989), theatre director, playwright, novelist, critic, and cultural theorist Femi Euba also draws on Yoruba traditions to promote the ‘satiric concept of ritual awareness’ and the notion of the ‘drama of epidemic’ as analytical concepts, both of which “primarily seek to legitimate satire in the black tradition” through Esu Elegbara or Elégbá(a), the Yoruba Orisha of the crossroads and fate². By doing so, Euba promotes a specific understanding of the importance

² Esu is also, in terms of satire, considered a “trickster” messenger who can change the natural course of the individual’s fate/destiny according to his or her character and will. Among his devotees exists the belief that Esu is of all orishas the first to exist, created by the High Orisha,

of Esu Elegbara to daily life in *los intersticios* of societies throughout the African Diaspora. Esu's satire also influences the form and content of literary styles that emerge from subaltern group members to describe their lives and aspirations.

In this comparative study the authors of and characters in the three novels are influenced to varying degrees by African spirituality. However, the crossroads of Esu specifically informs Euba's *Camwood at Crossroads* and satire is employed throughout the novel. Satire also influences the narrative form of Arenas's *El color del verano*, as will be discussed in greater depth below. Euba (1989) maintains that in Africa and in the African Diaspora one of the most profound and lasting effects of European domination is that European Missionaries used Christianity to shape and demonize the perception of African religions.

This historical process negatively impacts worshippers of traditional African religions; the ways in which others view them and the ways in which they see themselves. Euba argues that the identification of the devil with African religions has allowed the ideology of black people as savages to flourish and this explains why he consciously focuses on Esu, who has been identified as the devil by European Missionaries. Euba rejects the hegemonic narrative and lets Esu, "speak for the endurance and solidarity of the black in the face of such misconceptions" (*Archetypes* 11).

Esu, "is not the one that endows fate, but one who has knowledge of one's fate by virtue of his being a witness to its endowment ...; therefore he is the source of one's own knowledge of it, or one's guide toward achieving one's destiny" (30). This allows Esu to be understood as the agent and the medium of satire who guides the actions of people who are ultimately responsible

Oludumare (*Archetypes*, 20). The course of fate of the devotee and the orishas is affected by the individual's character and will in life.

for their own decisions and destinies. As in the work of Anzaldúa and Alexander, spirituality is omnipresent in this conception.

As does Alexander, Euba illustrates the centrality of Yoruba spirituality to conceptions of personal and group freedom throughout the African Diaspora. Further, by emphasizing the satiric concept of Esu Elegbara, he demonstrates how Esu's guidance helps to determine future paths and why satire is "an inevitable and essential factor of survival" (121). Satire in this tradition is used to describe and represent the grotesque features of life in oppressive systems and thereby may forge awareness among witnesses, and/or readers. The actions of Esu, the satirist, are witnessed as grotesque images and events through unfolding satiric event(s). Importantly, since the satire implicates one's fate-process, satirized subjects of the 'drama of epidemic,' are victims of their own fate; of their own choices and actions.

Satire, therefore, may spark recognition and awareness among those exposed to the satiric event, image, or message, including the audience of a play or the readers of a novel. By calling attention to one's or society's wrongdoing, erring, crime, etc., satire brings public awareness to the transgression and serves as a redefinition of traditions and moralities, or, in the context of an individual, a redefinition of his or her life. Euba emphasizes that the drama of Esu, "is committed to expose a social disease and by so doing affect the sensibilities of the afflicted society or culture" (12). Antonin Artaud, in 1958, noted in *The Theater and Its Double* that exposing social diseases is related to the conception of 'epidemic' in black drama, which is meant to challenge viewers, "disturbs their senses' repose, frees the repressed unconscious, incites a kind of virtual revolt ... and imposes on the assembled collectivity an attitude that is both difficult and heroic," (28).

Similar to Anzaldúa's concept of *el conocimiento*, the recognition of oppression, Euba's concept of 'drama of epidemic', posits the importance of awareness of injustice by using satire to catalyze collective reflection on grotesque situations. This awareness may have an epidemic effect that can promote creative agency as well as personal and social transformation with Esu's guidance at the crossroads of life. In fact, epidemic refers to both the disease and its cure and Euba discerns two processes during the satiric event(s): destructive and restorative. These are processes where victims first have the opportunity to be aware of the grotesqueness and seriousness of the event (crime, erring, etc.) and then to reflect and take action to redefine their path or identity. Euba illustrates how, "the 'epidemic' power of Esu...not only satirizes but also prompts the mind to take cognizance of its willed fate or destiny in a world of uncertainties" (*Archetypes* 10).

More generally, Euba's work demonstrates the importance of satire as a counter-hegemonic narrative form that allows audiences to see the absurdities of dominant ideologies, signifiers, and tropes as contradictions in their daily lives that can be overcome. Euba's notion of the 'Drama of Epidemic' can therefore be understood, in its application to literary forms, including the novel, as a process of awakening and transformation for both the characters in the novel and the readers of the novel.

The influence of African cultures and religions throughout the African Diaspora is well documented but much work remains on, for example, specific literary styles with African origins. Similarly, the origins of *choteo* vary and its links to other narrative forms and techniques like satire remain to be fully delineated. Mañach (1991) wrote that it might come from the term *choto* of Andalusia, Spain (25); however, Ortiz (1923) pointed out that *choto* might come from *Gitano* or African origin as well (36). Though a direct connection has not been established by

scholarly research, there may be a general link between the Yoruba satiric tradition as described above and the emergence in Cuba of a specific form of mocking authority to expose contradictions and spark awareness known as *choteo* (99).

According to *The New World Spanish- English and English –Spanish Dictionary* (1991) *chotear* means “to mock; jeer; banter and *chotearse de* means to tease; pull the leg of”. However, as with satire, mainstream definitions do not fully convey the power of *choteo* to name, to critique, and to promote reflection that may spur individual and / or social transformation. The term *choteo* was presented for the first time at an academic conference by Jorge Mañach y Robato in 1924. He was an important Cuban sociologist who analyzed the *choteo* from his personal observation and experience in Cuban society during that time period. His work was pioneering even though other scholars of the time like, Fernando Ortiz (1923), and today like, Narciso Hidalgo (2012), similarly discuss the importance of ‘choteo’ in Cuban culture. Mañach’s study gives a clear understanding of the *choteo* as part of Cuban idiosyncrasy and national character (47). Within the notion of *choteo* there is a *choteador(a)* – the person who mocks the other(s), and a *choteado* – the subject of *choteo*. The action of *choteo* will bring a *reputacion precaria o falsa* to the *choteado* (precarious and false reputation to the mocked subject³) (Mañach 36).

Choteo is unique to Cuban and Cuban Diasporic culture; it is a specific way to mock high authorities (33). Mañach noted the freedom and spontaneity of the form while linking it to a critique of institutional and cultural control that would deny Cubans the ability to be free and spontaneous. *Choteo*, he argues, is, “un recurso de los oprimidos” (a recourse for the oppressed) (85). For Mañach, there are various types: the *escéptico* (skeptical), *meramente jocoso* (merely

³ Translation mine

funny) and *el sistematico* (the systematic). It is a singular Cuban cultural manifestation and “it is a repugnance to everything around,” operates at the psychological level and fosters an external attitude of skepticism (19, 21, 23). For Mañach, the Cuban culture likes honesty the majority of the time and this explains why *choteo* is not like any other ironies, such as those that contain double meaning, for example. On the contrary, *choteo* is a *mofa franca* (frank mockery) without double meaning that perturbs because it shows all its hopes and illusions (70).

Mañach explains that *choteo* laughs at what is ‘normally’ considered to be very serious. It does not respect anything, including death; everything is a *relajo* (to mock) (18). The object of *chotear* (to make fun of) is “disfigured and grotesque. It seems to be *una burla* (a trick) without a purpose... laughter without apparent reasons,” explains the Cuban erudite (29). The *choteo* is the enemy of order (31). It is confusion, subversion, disorder, extreme freedom for the *choteador(a)* and a lot of *bochorno* (embarrassment) for *choteado(s)/a(s)*. *Choteo* simultaneously creates an atmosphere of familiarity and intimacy while it goes against prestige and hierarchy (36).

The *choteador (a)* finds a reason to laugh where there is seemingly none. However, viewed as a counter-hegemonic response to oppressive social conditions, *choteo* tends to manifest in the very serious situations of life. Mañach explains that *choteo* “por eso siempre fue la burla un recurso de los oprimidos –cualquiera que fuera la índole de la opresión” (this is why mocking was always the recourse of the oppressed – regardless of the type of oppression⁴) (40).

Importantly for this comparative study, everything authoritarian is funny and fair game for the *choteador (a)*. The notion of *choteo* is particularly relevant to an analysis of *El color del verano* by Arenas as it allows readers to grasp the complexity of both his admiration for the Cuban revolution and his critique of the treatment of homosexuals in post-revolutionary Cuba. A

⁴Translation mine

cast of characters and shifting identities engage in absurd interactions and situations, which make clear the grotesque logic underlying anti-homosexual laws and policies.

Choteo will never admire authority (Mañach 36). The spirit of *choteo* is *libertinaje* (extreme freedom). *Choteo* manifests against everything that is opposed to *expansión individual* (individual expansion) because of its spirit of independence and affirmation of the subject *yo* (I) (40). It originates against control but makes the participants laugh and reflect on the absurdity and grotesque nature of the *choteado*. *Chota* also means the individual who divulges a secret. When s/he divulges the secret it loses its authority and value. With the action of *choteo* everything private becomes public; it is a mode of resisting all forms authority and oppression by naming it and ridiculing it publically.

Other scholars have emphasized the relation between *choteo*, identity, and the possibility of new social relations to replace oppression. For José Esteban Muñoz, in his 1999 study *Disidentifications*, *choteo* is a mode of disidentification practice in which the person disidentifies from the system that oppresses her or him (Muñoz, 119). Muñoz argues that *choteo* “mediates between a space of identification with and a total disavowal of the dominant culture’s normative identificatory nodes” (136).

Disidentification performance uses humor and techniques like *choteo* to critique and disrespect political normalcy through the performances (8). For example, Muñoz details a performance in which the character Carmelita was visited by the Cuban patron saint, *la Virgen del Cobre* (Virgen of Regla). The Virgin told her, “Cuba will no longer be your home, her revolution will not be your revolution” (137). Muñoz regards this *choteo* as a powerful disidentification with the Cuban revolution.

Disidentification is a concept from the work of Muñoz who, by reading Stefan Brecht critiques of Jack Smith's *Queer Theater* (xi), understood that Smith's performance could not be described as "orientalizing" or "tropicalizing" work, since Smith "instead worked through Hollywood's fantasies of the other" (x) which allowed him to "disidentify with that world and perform a new one" (xi). Smith's performances were social critiques of the Capitalist system from a Marxist materialist orientation. In Smith's queer performances, Muñoz saw not only "'good humored' fun" but "the scathing antinormative critiques that Smith's performances enacted" (x).

Disidentification is seen as a complex "political act that not only resists dominant ideology but also embodies 'a disempower politics or positionality that have been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture'" (*Disidentifications: Queers of Color* 507). For Arrizón, disidentifications further disempower specific ideologies perpetuated within intersecting systems of oppression such as racist and heteropatriarchal systems, ... through the body and the self of the marginal non-heterosexual women and men of color (507). For this comparative study, therefore, disidentification is seen as the embodiment of the *nepantla* signifying the potential for a more just future. As with *choteo*, it will be applied specifically to a reading of Reinaldo Arenas's *El color del verano*.

This comparative study promotes an insightful understanding of the central importance of spirituality in Maryse Condé's *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots*, Femi Euba's *Camwood at Crossroads*, and Reinaldo Arenas's *El color del verano*, to redefine and resist intersecting systems of oppression in African Diasporic and Caribbean societies. This approach defies Collins's and Rowley's view that spirituality is an unessential feature for liberation. Further, this

comparative study identifies narrative strategies and techniques, such as collective memory, satire, and *choteo*, as modes of recognition, analysis, and resistance for liberation.

By writing, the three authors not only depict subaltern realities, they aim to shape them. Guided by an understanding of *autohistoria*, this comparative study demonstrates how spirituality may play an awakening and guiding role that can spark the development of what Gloria Anzaldúa calls *la conciencia de mestiza* (a conscious understanding that informs transformative action) in the active reader by fostering a connection between the authors' stories, the characters' lives, and the experiences and spirituality of the reader. This understanding views spirituality as an essential feature for social, personal, and creative liberation.

Oppression in this study is linked to both material exploitation and its legitimization through the dominant groups' ideologies, which are internalized and reproduce oppressive social relations through the actions of the oppressed. Agency for individual and social transformation is, therefore, dynamically linked to the recognition and understanding of the daily operation of intersecting systems of oppression faced by the subaltern who inhabits and navigates *los intersticios* of society. Awareness may lead to deeper understanding that informs a character's choices and agency.

The body of this work consists of three main chapters in which I analyze, compare, and contrast the novels listed above. Following this introductory chapter, which discusses the scholarly context that informs this comparative study, chapter II introduces each novel as an *autohistoria* by linking the authors to their characters and their experiences throughout the novels. Chapter II further introduces the subaltern characters in the novels and describes how they live and navigate *los intersticios* of their respective societies. The focus will also be on how the characters in the novels encounter systems of oppression that promote economic exploitation,

discrimination, and negative ideologies that inform the attitudes of those they encounter in their daily lives. Importantly, the chapter demonstrates how each character's life is shaped by specific intersections of oppression within their respective societies.

Victoire and Jeanne in Maryse Condé's *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots* face varying intersections of race, gender, and class oppression in Guadeloupe. Femi Euba's *Camwood at Crossroads* centers on Olumofin and his father, Difala, who are navigating Esu Elegbara's spiritual path of understanding in the 'in between' of the modern Nigerian nation, the vestiges of Western culture and power, and the continuing influence of Yoruba cultural traditions. Reinaldo Arenas's *El color del verano* presents characters in *los intersticios* of hetero-patriarchal, yet revolutionary Cuba, which was homophobic and committed to the censorship of counter-narratives, which dispute the official state accounts, including literature.

Chapter III continues with a discussion of the characters' recognition of oppression; the recognition that they inhabit *los intersticios*. As these three novels unfold, the characters, to varying degrees, demonstrate an awareness of how oppression, both material and ideological shapes the course of their lives and their identities. As they begin to demonstrate that they understand and are conscious of the systems and relations that oppress them, they struggle to express their creative agency and redefine their destiny; to liberate themselves and gain a sense of humanity as described by Freire.

In *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots*, Victoire's awareness of her subaltern status leads her to understand the importance of educating her daughter, Jeanne, who experienced racial subordination but negated its existence to her children. Olumofin in *Camwood at Crossroads* witnesses satiric manifestations of culture and society, particularly through the actions of Difala, during his trip to Nigeria, which informs his understanding of which path he should take.

Characters in *El color del verano* act out and draw attention to the absurd contradictions of homophobia and state censorship in revolutionary Cuba.

In chapter IV, we explore how each novel comes from the authors' sense of spirituality, is developed through specific narrative techniques related to the authors' spirituality, and exemplifies the self-representation of subaltern groups. Each novel thereby serves as a counter-history of the national narrative of the society navigated by the characters of the novel. The authors rewrite history from the characters' experiences, their hopes and fears, and their sense of how the spiritual and material worlds are intertwined. Therefore, all three writers re-write and re-present history through the everyday lives, daily experiences, and voices of the subaltern characters in their novels.

Importantly, the characters' memories of who they were, how their present experiences shape what they can be, and the longing for what they want to be are framed by spirituality. This spiritual road is shown as intersecting everyday life in order to create alternate *mundos* (worlds), which can be anti-racist and anti-sexist as in *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots*, or a modern society informed by the sensibilities of traditional cultures as in *Camwood at Crossroads*, or of a revolutionary society that does not impose compulsory heterosexuality as in *El color del verano*.

Further, in chapter IV, we discuss how narrative techniques such as 'collective memories' in Condé, Esu Elegbara's satire in Euba, and the Cuban aesthetic of *choteo* in Arenas can be understood as modes of expressing the authors' experiences and spirituality, specifically, and those of subaltern group members, generally. To inform readers and raise awareness, each technique uniquely exposes contradictions that exist between how nations, their cultures, and their institutions are ideologically represented, and the reality of daily oppression experienced by members of subaltern groups. Condé challenges readers by identifying contradictions between

nationalist narratives and the experiences of her characters. Euba challenges readers through satire, which illustrates the grotesque features of modern Nigeria, while Arenas relies on *choteo* to ridicule government hypocrisy and corruption.

We conclude this comparative study, in chapter V by discussing its implications for scholars of transatlantic, Caribbean, and African Diasporic literature. Specifically, the relation between the characters' experiences and actions and those of the authors' is linked and writing is viewed as a form of resistance for liberation from oppressive relations. This allows scholars to view these three novels not as individual fictional histories but as *autohistoría*, which links individual stories to collective experiences with oppression in order to promote understanding and transformative action.

Through their creativity and imagination, authors can help redefine race, class, gender and sexuality, and subaltern identities through varying narrative techniques in order to promote the creation of new social relations and cultural contexts. This comparative study concludes by reinforcing that the recognition of spiritual paths can unite subaltern communities at the crossroads of their common experiences with slavery, colonialism, and the present intersecting systems of oppression. This promotes the possibility for the realization of a world that allows us all to be fully human.

To summarize, this comparative study illustrates that Condé's *autohistoría* of Guadeloupe is rooted in a subaltern perspective and links it to literature from the African and Cuban Diasporas. Her work delineates an ongoing history of oppression, which counters the hegemonic national narrative, by drawing on the personal and collective accounts and memories of subaltern group members in Guadeloupe. In her interviews, novels, and specifically in her essay *The Story of the Cannibal Woman*, Condé encourages other scholars to study the Antilles,

particularly Guadeloupe, which is an Island seldom mentioned in the world history, and argues passionately that, “Guadeloupe and Martinique actually exist!” (82).

Neither *Camwood at Crossroads* nor Euba’s notion of the ‘Drama of epidemic’ have been given the attention they deserve in understanding the importance of this work within the corpus of work on the transatlantic African Diaspora. This comparative study posits a perspective that connects spirituality and the use of satire to the *nepantla* process and the recognition of oppression and action for liberation. Euba’s novel and his notion of the Drama of Epidemic are examples of how Western theories and conceptual frameworks of African, or for that matter Cuban and Guadeloupian people can be challenged and transformed to promote fuller understanding of oppressed people and their continued resistance to oppression within the Diaspora. Many scholars have discussed the experiences of marginalized people within the African-Diaspora using Western theories and conceptual frameworks that do not readily correlate to the experiences of the subaltern people in this hemisphere (Mohanty 53-55; Spurlin 12-14).

Finally, many scholars view Reinaldo Arenas as a writer who uses erotic scenes to free the act of writing or ‘exorcise’ his demons through the action of writing erotic scenes (Schulz-Cruz 1999; Jiménez 1999). For others, Arenas is related to postcolonial studies in which he is compared with Caliban (Morales-Díaz 2009) or suffers from the absence of the father (Olivares 2000). Even those scholars who acknowledge the use of *choteo* in Arenas’s work, like Andrew Hurley (in *El color del verano*), a professor at the University in San Juan and translator of Arenas’s novels, who briefly explains the use of *el choteo* in Arenas’s work, but neglects its counter-hegemonic importance as a technique for recognition and liberation. This comparative study examines Arenas’s *El color del verano* as a form of *choteo* that allows him to denounce the

abuses of the homophobic Cuban system and promote his vision for a more just future. It is a unique idea that will allow for a different perspective of one of the many layers of Arenas's novels.

This comparative study examines subaltern self-representation through literature. The novel form is employed in a manner of cultural opposition via creative agency, which informs readers' recognition of racist, sexist, and homophobic oppression. Importantly, these three novels illustrate how, in varying degrees and forms, that spirituality is essential for freedom from oppression and the promotion of social transformation. It is demonstrated throughout this comparative study that the spiritual can inform subaltern people at the crossroads of their common experiences with general and specific systems of oppression and can shape their paths to liberation.

CHAPTER II

SUBALTERN CHARACTERS NAVIGATING *LOS INTERSTICIOS* OF GUADELOUPE, NIGERIA, AND CUBA

This chapter introduces and compares subaltern characters in *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots* (2006) / *Victoire, My Mother's Mother* (2010), *Camwood at Crossroads* (2007), and *El color del verano* (1991) / *The Color of Summer* (2000) and provides a description of the world(s) they inhabit and *los intersticios*, “the spaces between the different worlds” they navigate in order to survive and express themselves as human beings (*Borderlands* 42). This discussion focuses on the specific patterns of societal marginalization, which the characters confront in each of the three novels, that is to say within *los intersticios* of their respective societies.

As examples of *autohistoria*, the characters in *Victoire*, *Camwood at Crossroads*, and *El color del verano* are informed by the life experiences of each respective author. Each author relies on his or her sense of spirituality to critically understand the characters and share their stories with readers. The individual experiences of characters are linked to societal and cultural transformations collectively experienced by many offering critical insight of life in the margins of the respective societies. Through his or her varying narrative styles, each author writes an unofficial, counter-history of the societies they know and which their characters traverse. This chapter will delineate how each author acknowledges the complexity of the many forms of oppression and alienation characters experience within the family, social institutions, and culture that confirms her or his position in *los intersticios*.

Maryse Condé's *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots* illustrates the social systems and interpersonal relationships that form *los mundos* (worlds) inhabited by her grandmother Victoire and her mother, Jeanne. Both navigate *los intersticios* of Guadeloupean society trying to express their sense of self and their humanity. Condé weaves rich descriptions of the socio-historical

context of each of their lives and illustrates how contradictions that emerge from specific frictions between the worlds that shape their individual experiences and the paths they choose to travel.

These oppressive *mundos* are supported by specific ideologies that make them seem natural and legitimate. Members of dominant groups promote an ‘official’ historical narrative, which censors descriptions of the daily experiences of those who inhabit *los intersticios* of society. In fact, official narratives tend to recount national history from the experiences and perceptions of dominant groups while rendering subaltern groups invisible. Through re-telling the experiences of Victoire and Jeanne, Condé’s novel is an example of *autohistoría* and is a counter-hegemonic account of Guadeloupe’s history, which gives voice to the subaltern by describing historical events from point of view of those who are socially excluded.

Femi Euba’s *Camwood at Crossroads* centers on Olumofin and his father Difala, they navigate Esu Elegbara’s spiritual path of understanding the *in between* of Nigeria formed by the contradictions between Western culture and Yoruba traditions. As Olumofin moves through his childhood hometown, his interactions with friends and family take the form of satiric encounters that illuminate the societal and cultural ruptures begun by colonial rule that have continued to fester since independence. Returning to the United States he continues to reflect upon his life and experiences in Nigeria. He forms mind exercises to contemplate the absurdity of the events he recalls and imagines and by so doing comes to terms with his current path in life.

The narrative leads the reader to the understanding of Elegbara, the fateful/fatal teacher and complex guide at the crossroads of the characters’ memories and everyday lives. The novel can be considered an example of *autohistoría* as the life story of the main character Olumofin somewhat parallels the life and experiences of the author, Euba, and is further linked to the

experiences and stories of Nigerians in general. Further, by using Yoruba spirituality to guide the novel's action and satiric events to expose contradictions in Nigerian society and culture, *Camwood at Crossroads* serves as a counter-narrative to both Western and nationalist narratives of modern Nigeria.

Reinaldo Arenas's *El color del verano* illustrates life in *los intersticios* of hetero-patriarchal, yet revolutionary Cuba. Homosexuality was criminalized, contradictorily, by a 'new' society committed to the promotion of human rights, yet equally committed to the restriction of individual liberty and the censorship of counter-narratives. The stories of the characters, all of whom represent a part of Arenas's spirit, provide insight into life in the margins of Cuba for those who do not conform to authority or fit within the nationalist narrative. Arenas juxtaposes the oppressive regime's power and nationalist ideology against the hypocrisy and corruption of government institutions which rule an impoverished and crumbling island.

El color del verano can be considered as an *autohistoria* that serves a counter narrative of Cuban society by using fictive elements to link the author's biography to collective experiences of those who inhabit similar subaltern positions. The novel is constructed within the many complexities of the characters that participate in the carnival that Arenas created from his memories. Arenas's life, experiences, and perspectives of Cuba are shared with readers through the stories of characters who have fluid gender identities and whose actions are not restricted in space or time.

Further, the novel is counter-hegemonic as Arenas relies upon the narrative style of *choteo* to disidentify with those aspects of Cuban society and culture that marginalize him and many other Cubans. Events and interactions in the novel seem absurd and farcical but serve to draw attention to those aspects of life in Cuba since the revolution not included in the national

narrative. The humor exposes the illogic of homophobic ideologies and provides insight into daily life in the margins of Cuban society.

The following discussion will first link each novel to the respective author's *autohistoría* and then examine the specific forms of subordination and marginalization faced by characters in each novel. The specific intersections of oppression in each society is described through the author's *autohistoría*. These novels illustrate that Guadeloupeans, Nigerians, and Cubans share a common, yet distinctly complicated, history of slavery and colonialism in the transatlantic Diaspora. However, each novel also documents how intersecting systems of oppression, create unique and varying *los intersticios* inhabited and navigated by subaltern groups.

Maryse Condé, Victoire, and Jeanne

« *La vie, c'est un cheval arabe.* »

(“Life is an Arab stallion”)

Victoire, 130 trans. 55

In *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer contes vrais de mon enfance/Tales from the Heart: True Stories from My Childhood*, Condé tells readers that she was born in 1936 during Mardi Gras to a forty-three year old mother who was an elementary school teacher and a sixty-three year old father who was a banker. Driven to understand her family's past Condé wrote *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots* as a way of finding herself after living for ten years in Africa. The novel is a very personal account of the spiritual life of her family, which is linked to the people of Guadeloupe.

It recounts the sad but enchanting life of Condé's pale skinned grandmother, Victoire, and the life of her rigid 'black' mother, Jeanne, Victoire's daughter. Condé describes how both inhabit what I am calling *los intersticios* of Guadeloupean society past and present. In particular,

she demonstrates how the prejudices and stereotypes that shaped her grandmother's experiences in the past continue to obscure and misinform accounts of her life to those in the present. She reminds the reader mid-way through the novel, « Je l'ai dit, Victoire marquait dans tout son maintien qu'elle était la subalterne » (As I have already said, Victoire clearly signified in her comportment that she was the subaltern) (*Victoire* 90 trans. 63).

As an *autohistoria*, Condé's narrative is constructed from collective memories, personal experiences, and a sense of spirituality. It is an 'unofficial' or 'counter-history' in that the experiences of the characters and the meanings they derive from those experiences can be differentiated from the Guadeloupean national narrative of history, which reinforces and legitimates the interests of the dominant groups. For example, regarding the dominance of men, Condé notes that « La sociologie, la littérature sont remplies d'histories illustrant ce machisme » (Sociology and literature are full of stories illustrating this machismo); machismo that presents men as "sowers" and creators of the nation (116 trans. 83). Concentrating less on the differences between the people of Guadeloupe and their French administrators, Condé focuses on the many forms of material and ideological oppression people experience and internalize within Guadeloupean society.

Throughout the novel, Condé describes how both her grandmother's and mother's paths in life were shaped by the contradictions they faced at the intersection of class, race, and gender systems of oppression. For example, Victoire was poor, uneducated, not-white yet not-black, and a woman dominated by men of all classes and colors. As Condé recounts:

Pourtant, cette classe-là à laquelle elle appartenait, l'avait rejetée depuis l'enfance. A cause de sa couleur. La couleur sans la fortune ou, à défaut, l'instruction n'est que malédiction. Une fois poussée la porte d'un de ces bouges, un *nèg nwè*, séduit, ne manquerait pas de l'enfourcher comme un *tambouyé*, son tambour. Après il lui tournerait le dos comme Dernier l'avait fait. (But this class to which she belonged had rejected her from early childhood. Because of her color. This color, without money or, failing that,

without education, is nothing but a curse. Once she pushed open the door of one of these dives, a niggerman would be bound to mount her like a tambouyé, his drum. Afterward he would turn his back on her like Dernier did.) (94 trans. 66)

Throughout both private and public spaces Victoire and Jeanne are dehumanized; treated as objects. Condé illustrates that this was the case with her grandmother who worked as a cook long after slavery in Guadeloupe had ended, «En ce temps-là, les domestiques circulaient, s'échangeaient comme des piécettes de monnaie. Les bonnes maisons se les prêtaient et se les rendaient sans que jamais leur avis soit sollicité et que leur versé le moindre salaire » (In those days servants were passed around and exchanged like coins. They were borrowed and returned and never asked for their opinion or paid the slightest wage) (100 trans. 70).

After three years of searching the past for information about her unknown grandmother in Marie-Galante, Guadeloupe and Martinique, Condé found that her grandmother was:

Pour les uns, elle fut belle. Pour les autres, blafarde et laide. Pour certains, ce fut une créature soumise, illettrée, sans intérêt. Pour d'autres, un véritable Machiavel en jupon. Pour en parler, ma mère utilisait ces clichés galvaudés aux Antilles et qui ne signifient plus rien : - Elle ne savait ni lire ni écrire. Pourtant, c'était un poto-mitan, une matador. (For some she was lovely. For others, pale and ugly. For some she was a downtrodden creature, illiterate and of no interest. And some as a real Machiavelli in a petticoat. When describing her, my mother would use those worn-out clichés of the Antilles that no longer mean anything. She could neither read nor write. Yet, she was the mainstay of the family, a formidable woman). (16-17 trans. 5-4)

Drawing on people's memories and documents such as letters, Condé discovered the life of her mother's mother on the island of Marie-Galante *entre mundos* (between worlds) oppressed by both her family and the Creole people on the island due to her poverty, the color of her skin, and her gender. Condé found out that her grandmother, Victoire Élodie Quidal, worked as a cook. Quidal was the last name of the master, Antoine de Gehan-Quidal, who owned the sugar plantation in La Treille on the island of Marie-Galante.

Though poor, like many other Guadeloupeans, by being mixed-race with very pale skin, Victoire was not only an alien to the dominant culture but also to her own people. Because the majority of Guadeloupeans are exposed to and learned ideologies that define both dominance and subordination in terms of race, they perceived Victoire as a rare being; neither black or white and belonging to neither group. She was ignored and seen as an ambulant ghost. Further, due to poverty, lack of education, and the limited opportunities afforded women, she worked all of her life cleaning and cooking for others.

For Condé, whose parents were part of the Guadeloupean middle-class in the early twentieth century, this news was a contradiction to all she knew about her family, about their lifestyle, opportunities, and values. She could not understand how her educated mother could be « fille d'une cuisinière! » (the daughter of a cook!) (14 trans. 2). More painful for Condé, however, was not having a written record of the experiences and memories from her grandmother's view point because she, « ne savait ni lire ni écrire » (did not know how to read or write) (17 trans. 4).

It was not enough that Condé's taciturn mother told her how Victoire, at a very young age, became a peerless cook who first lived with and worked for her grandmother, Caldonia, and then also cooked for 'les Jovials', who were among her relatives. She was also interested in all aspects of her grandmother's life, not just her employment. Condé learned that Victoire became pregnant with Jeanne and later traveled to La Pointe where she again worked as a cook for the Walbergs, a family of white Creoles, until her last days on earth. However, Condé wanted to know why her grandmother was treated as a pariah. Also, she hoped to uncover why her own mother was strange and cold to both her and to her neighbors and never discussed her family history.

In *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots*, the reader shares Condé's search for answers and encounters both her past and Guadeloupe's history. Victoire was born and grew up in a historical period of economic crisis, labor exploitation, violence and injustice at the end of nineteenth and the beginning of twentieth century in Marie-Galante and spent time in Guadeloupe and Martinique. Slavery was abolished twenty years earlier; however Condé notes that, « [l]a Liberté est une notion abstraite, une rêverie de nanti. Esclave, ces hommes, ces femmes, étaient moins démunis » (Freedom is an abstract notion. As free men, what did they own except their poverty?) (22 trans. 8). Through collective memories Condé found that these men and women were in many ways less free after the abolition of slavery because of the lack of jobs, housing, and other opportunities. They could starve on the streets without a job or a home to live in.

Victoire's societal marginalization began to impact the course of her life before she was born due to circumstances far beyond her control. Eliette, her mother, as was the case with many poor, darker-skinned women who lacked institutionally granted rights and legal protections, became pregnant at the age of thirteen. It was not the pregnancy that bothered Caldonia, Victoire's grandmother, and Oraison, Victoire's grandfather, as much as the « peau colorée en rose » (skin tinted pink) of the newborn (21 trans. 6). To their surprise, Victoire was born with «[u]ne tête garnie d'épais cheveux de soie noire» ([a] full head of thick black silky hair) and «[d]es prunelles d'eau claire » ([e]yes the color of clear water) (21 trans. 6). Caldonia wondered how Eliette could have had love relations with a white man. Oraison debated where to throw away this « ce funeste objet » (fateful object) (21 trans. 7) in the pond or off the nearby cliff.

Because of Eliette's early pregnancy, she passed away of a hemorrhage at the age of fourteen. Already a victim of sexual abuse, further violence from her family in the form of a good leather belt whipping never broke her to confess who the father was, explains Condé.

However, Victoire's appearance not only determined her place in Guadeloupe's racial hierarchy but further betrayed the identity of her father.

The gossip of the people of Marie-Galante identified Victoire's father as Father Lebris who came to the island in 1870, twenty-two years after the abolition of slavery. In fact, there was not a white person in La Treile except the priests. Father Lebris named his daughter « Victoire! Car, cette naissance en etait une en fin de compte » (Victoire! Because her birth in fact was a victory) (22 trans. 6). But once again, before the age of one, Victoire was abandoned when her father perished from malaria.

As is the case with many orphans who do not end up on the streets or in orphanages, Victoire lived with and was raised by her grandparents, Caldonia and Oraison Quindal. Condé describes Caldonia Quindal, as interpreted through dreams, as a woman who worked at a washhouse at the Espiritu at La Croix with a dozen other washerwomen. They gathered up the dirty clothes of the people from the town and washed and ironed them at this washhouse, which does not exist today. Oraison was « nègre bleu pétrole, long comme un jour sans pain, possédait un stock de contes que les chercheurs qualifiés du CNRS qualifieraient d'érotiques. » (a petroleum blue Negro, as long as a day without bread, had a stock of tales that any qualified research specialist would describe as erotic) (19 trans. 5).

Caldonia loved Victoire so much that she isolated her rare, pale skinned, granddaughter in an attempt to protect her from others. This desire to protect through social isolation and segregation contradictorily promoted hurtful myths about Victoire that furthered her negative treatment in public and shaped the course of her life. At the age of five, the little girl hardly smiled and was not allowed to go to the school; the only education that she received was in religion at Aurora Quindal's cabin.

Victoire's life was one of absolute poverty and she frequently went without enough food to sustain her health. In fact, Victoire did not wear her first pair of shoes until the age of almost sixteen. In the kitchen, she was assigned only the thankless jobs but, « comme les esclaves qui, de peur d'être punis » (like a slave, who was scared of being punished) Victoire learned to cook to perfection in secrecy (38 trans. 22).

Although poor and not regarded as 'white', she was never accepted by other darker-skinned people similarly situated in society. In fact, most Guadeloupeans, whether suffering from poverty and hunger or aspiring members of the middle-class, saw her pale color with superstition and further pushed Victoire to *los intersticios* of society. She was isolated, in large part, because of racism that had been injected into the veins of Guadeloupeans' first by slavery and then during colonial rule.

In Guadeloupean society, Condé narrates that mysticism is also racialized and, « [à] la majorité des gens, elle faisait peur, Victoire, avec sa peau trop blanche et ses yeux trop clairs » (for most people Victoire was scary, with her skin too white and the eyes too light) (27 trans. 11). At the age of seven or eight, Condé relates that Victoire disappeared from her grandparent's cabin and was found sleeping at her mother's grave. After this alarming incident her grandmother did not lose sight of her again.

Victoire began to cook for the Jovial family while very young. In fact, the mayor, Fulgence Jovial, was Caldonia's cousin. He owned a huge house equipped with the most beautiful mahogany furniture but he did not share his prosperity with Victoire. There she was « En fait, chez les Jovial, Victoire fut traitée en paria, un esclave. Jamais en parente, même pauvre et peu reluisante » (In fact, in Jovial's home, Victoire was treated like a pariah, like a slave. Never like a family member, not even a poor or disreputable one) (36 trans. 19).

The Jovials idolized their only daughter, Thérèse, but were too busy struggling for social ascension to take a genuine interest in Victoire, Condé assumes. Every morning from six to eight with Caldonia, Victoire was ordered to « Balayer, épousseter, récurer le plancher, battre les tapis, cires le mobilier, faire briller l'argenterie, laver les draps, les mettre à bouillir, à blanchir, avec les chemises, les jupons, aider à la cuisine, tel était son lot » (sweep, dust, scrub the floor, beat the rugs, wax the furniture, shine the silverware, wash the sheets, boil and starch them with the shirts and the petticoats, as well as help in the kitchen) (36 trans. 18).

After Caldonia's death, Victoire slept in the Jovial's attic, alienated and forced to live as an outsider. Her life became harder while living with this relatively wealthy black family. While those in the dominant culture may regard both Victoire and the Jovials as members of the same race, her pale-skin and her poverty distinguished her from the Jovials, who treated her very badly. Her age and gender further rendered her defenseless and Victoire, like her mother and so many other women before and after, was sexually victimized and became pregnant.

The father of Victoire's child was Dernier Argilius, a Socialist who was a tireless advocate for the rights of black workers and whose humanitarian interests included schooling peasant girls. He was the fiancé of Thérèse, the daughter of the Mayor Jovial, and disappeared from town soon after impregnating Victoire. Rumors soon confirmed that, « Dernier était un foutu coureur. Sous couvert d'alphabétisation, c'était chez lui un défilé de paysannes » (Dernier was an incurable womanizer [.]) Under the guise of literacy lessons, Dernier received a constant stream of peasant girls) (61 trans. 39).

Victoire, though a victim of sexual abuse, was blamed for her pregnancy and the Jovial's, overlooking the actions of Dernier Argilius, « l'avaient jetée dehors comme une malpropre » (threw her out like a slut) from their house (70 trans. 47). Victoire had to return to live with her

grandfather, Oraison, who beat and kicked her because of the pregnancy and her offensive status. Condé explains: « [m]is au courant de son forfait, il se jeta sur Victoire et lui administra un tel soufflet qu'elle tomba, le sang à la bouche. Alors il se rua sur elle à coups de pied et de poing » (Informed of her crime, he flung himself on Victoire and gave her such a slap that she fell to the ground, her mouth covered in blood. He then vented his anger by kicking and punching her) (62 trans. 40).

Victoire first tried to work in the fields and quickly realized that she must look for other work in order to survive. She returned to cooking and prepared a meal so wonderful that she was hired to cook for Rochelle Dulieu-Beaufort, the wife of the owner of the sugar factory. Almost immediately she became very close to and began a lifelong relationship with the eldest daughter, Anne-Marie, who was engaged to marry Boniface Walberg, a trader in La Pointe. Victoire gave birth to her daughter, Jeanne Marie Marthe, on April 28, 1890 at the age of sixteen. The scandalous circumstances of the pregnancy, and the influence of the Jovial family, led the local leaders of the Catholic Church to refuse to baptize Jeanne.

Furious, Victoire decided to leave La Pointe for good. She and Anne-Marie took Jeanne and left without telling anyone except Anne-Marie's mother. Condé summarizes that, rather than being supportive, Rochelle Dulieu-Beaufort, cursed her, called Jeanne a bastard and reminded Victoire that, « ah oui, elle était vraiment la scélérate, la raclure d'Enfer qu'on haïssait à Marie-Galante! » (She was truly a wretch, a dreg from hell who was hated by everyone on Marie-Galante) (74 trans. 40).

Condé recounts, « Ce fut ainsi que Jeanne dit adieu à ses origines marie-galantaises. Elle ne devait jamais plu revenir dans son île natale. Elle ne devait fréquenter aucun membre de sa famille maternelle » (That was how Jeanne said farewell to her origins of Marie-Galante. She

never returned to her native island. She never knew any member of her mother's family) (79 trans. 54). Conceived from the relationship between an influential 'black' leader and her poor, pale-skinned mother, considered a bastard and denied baptism, separated from her family soon after birth and raised in the house of a white Creole family, Jeanne inhabited a different position in *los intersticios* than Victoire.

Soon after her arrival, Victoire, Anne-Marie, and Boniface began a strangely intimate relationship that continued for most of their lives. Boniface and Victoire were lovers while Anne-Marie and Victoire were inseparable companions, although Victoire was always a cook and a servant before all else. Boniface Wahlberg treated Jeanne like a daughter and provided for her well-being and education. Though she learned middle-class expectations, she was still the 'black' child of a servant and these contradictions became apparent from early on.

For example, during dinner parties, Victoire put on an apron and worked in the kitchen with the other servants. Meanwhile, Jeanne would go and sit with the guests of the evening. However, because of her skin color, she was not accepted as an equal and treated as a curious object. Condé recounts that some guests censured the Walberg for considering Victoire as an equal (90). Victoire was illiterate but education paved the way for Jeanne's path to the middle-class. Jeanne worked hard to succeed but was always reminded that her color held her back. She believed her teachers when they told her that Europe was the height of civilization and Africa was full of savages. One day her teacher M. Roumegoux, marveled at Jeanne's intelligence, said « Tu pourrais aller loin. Dommage que tu sois si noire ! » (You could go far. Pity you're so black!) (107 trans. 76).

Throughout school other students reinforced her racial difference and marginalized Jeanne as well. They nicknamed her « Blanchette » (Little Whitey) (119 trans. 86). Condé

recounts that their salutation to Jeanne « en guise de salutation matinale à faire la ronde autour d'elle en chantant la comptine: *Une négresse qui buvait du lait, / Ah se dit-elle si je le pouvais / Tremper ma figure dans un bol de lait / te deviendrais plus blanche / Que tous les Français, ais, ais, ais* » (every morning was to dance round her, singing a nursery rhyme: '*A little Negress who was drinking some milk/ Said to herself, oh if only I could dip my head in a/ bowl of milk/ I'd become whiter/ Than all the French, my, my, my*') (120 trans. 86). Jeanne took the continuous abuse but became increasingly withdrawn and a stranger to all who spent time with her. She completed her education and in 1909, at the age of twenty, became an elementary school teacher with a salary high enough to support herself. Unlike her mother, Jeanne was able to gain skills that would allow her to exercise an occupation where she would ultimately earn enough money to move into the middle-class. However, despite some economic stability, race and gender continued to shape her choices in life.

Jeanne and her friends dressed and behaved to show their newly acquired privilege. Politically they were very aware of their skin color and were suspicious of both whites and white-creoles. Being, « d'une des première institutrices noires, investissait Jeanne d'une lourde charge. Malgré sa jeunesse, elle l'inscrivait d'emblée dans l'embryon de la bourgeoisie » (one of the first black elementary school teachers invested Jeanne with a heavy responsibility. Despite her young age, she was now enrolled in the embryo of the bourgeoisie) (163 trans. 120). Jeanne realized that for her social mobility she had to form alliances with the members of this prestigious club, which could open doors for her and help her achieve a sense of social and financial security.

Jeanne was aware that her gender further influenced her future options. Condé remembers that her mother, « nous persuada enfin de la vulnérabilité de la femme. D'après elle,

si les gens du Moule s'étaient tellement acharnés sur sa mère, l'avaient pareillement salie, c'est parce qu'elle n'était qu'une femme vivant avec fille» (convinced us of the vulnerability of women. According to her, the reason why the inhabitants of Le Moule hounded her mother and sullied her reputation was because she was nothing but a woman living alone with her daughter) (168 trans. 124). Jeanne believed that a man was necessary to protect and guide the family, but she also believed that the man must be successful and socially acceptable.

So, not trusting men, including black men, but aware of her social responsibility as a middle-class, 'black' woman teacher, Jeanne married a 'grand nègre' and he was her 'protecting tree.' Auguste Boucolon was wealthy, considered handsome and intelligent, and he was the principal of a boy's school who had such a good reputation with his supervisors that he also oversaw teachers' training. However, he was balding with gray hair and was uncertain in love, Condé recounts. Auguste was a forty-two year old widower with two sons and an illegitimate daughter. Everyone in the town knew that he was giving up a ten-year sexual relationship with his mistress for Jeanne, for whom he was about to take his life if she refused to marry him.

Condé narrates that despite his wealth and influence, Auguste could not protect Jeanne from the painful memories of her childhood. Jeanne's relationship with Boniface and Anne-Marie was painful and confusing due to the sexual relationship between Boniface and Victoire and Victoire's continuing close relationship with Anne-Marie. Sixty years later during her research, Condé found a letter from Anne-Marie to Jeanne in which Anne-Marie coerced Jeanne to bring her fiancé, Auguste, to Anne-Marie's home to announce the engagement. At the engagement party Anne-Marie publically reminded Jeanne that without her, Master Boniface, and Madame Walberg she would not obtained « la position peu commune » (uncommon status)

of elementary teacher and would be working as a servant similar to her cook and servant mother, Victoire (179 trans. 69).

Jeanne worked as a schoolmistress for 37 years and her relationship with Auguste, a man who talked for hours and had sexual relation with other women, made Jeanne « plus taciturne et hautaine » (more taciturn and haughty) (*Victoire* 180 trans. 133). Jeanne was very stern and treated those beneath her status in life with little compassion or tolerance. In return, almost everyone who knew her talked about her behind her back. Her mother's demeanor and her lack of desire to discuss her past, in part, inspired Condé to search for her grandmother. Condé listened to stories, read old letters and documents, examined old photographs for clues, and followed up on leads by visiting places described to her by others. While writing *Victoire*, Condé found out much about how her grandmother's life was shaped by poverty, racism and sexism and gained some insight as to the real cause of Jeanne's suffering and aloof attitude toward life.

The Guadeloupean writer paints a complex portrait of her grandmother, « prisonnier de son analphabétisme, de sa bâtardise, de son sexe, de toute sa condition asservie » (prisoner of her illiteracy, of her illegitimacy, of her gender and of her station as a servant) (100 trans. 71). Condé further shows that despite being educated and middle class, Jeanne also suffered in life from the pains of racism and gender ideologies. « Victoire et Jeanne étaient identiques. ... Des écorchées vives que l'alentour effrayait » (Outwardly so different, Victoire and Jeanne were identical. ... Both tormented souls scared stiff of their surroundings" (184 trans 136). Both mother and daughter were similarly trapped in *los intersticios* of society due to their race, gender even though Jeanne obtained the social mobility, as an educator, that her mother never had.

In conclusion, Condé's imagination is connected to the everyday reality of the past and present creating a narrative of awakening that guides the reader to an understanding of her

autohistoria. She rewrites the history of the people of Guadeloupe through the story of her grandmother and mother's lives. Condé delineates *los intersticios* of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Guadeloupe and offers a counter-history, which represents the experiences of those whose voices have been unheard.

Throughout her work, Condé links the personal and familial to the social and collective to illustrate the social complexity of race and gender and how both intersect with class to determine economic and educational opportunities within Guadeloupean society. Condé does not specifically focus, in this novel, on the historical domination of Guadeloupe by France and the impact of Western culture and religion on people's lives. However, Femi Euba's novel does almost the reverse and illustrates another facet of oppression by examining the impact of English economic and political domination and Western cultural hegemony on identity and interpersonal relations in Nigeria.

Femi Euba, Olumofin, and Difala

A chicken is being sacrificed
at a crossroads, a simple mound of earth
and mud for Eshu,
Yoruba god of indeterminacy,
who blesses her choice of path.
She begins her journey.

G. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands La Frontera*, 102

This section describes how the characters in Femi Euba's *Camwood at Crossroads* inhabit and negotiate the social and cultural in *los intersticios* of present day Nigeria. Euba's experiences and the questions he confronts in life inform those of the main character, Olumofin

Falashe, who reconsiders his past and contemplates the direction and meaning of his life.

Olumofin's reflections on life in Nigeria and on the interpersonal encounters he has throughout the novel are juxtaposed with his memories to illuminate *los intersticios* he navigates. Satiric encounters he witnesses and satiric events he imagines further demonstrate how Western culture and religion continue to clash with traditional Yoruba cultural expectations to propel Nigerians into an uncertain future.

As an *autohistoria* novel, Euba writes a counter-history of the 'new' Nigerian nation through the spirituality and daily experiences of subaltern characters like Olumofin and his father, Difala. Confronting the disruptions of tradition and daily life, both are guided along their intertwined but distinct paths by the Yoruba god Esu Elegbara, "the short-tall god, magical master of irony, embodiment of good and evil, traversing intercessor for mankind" (*Camwood at Crossroads* 21). Euba posits that Nigerians find themselves in-between what is traditional and what is Western and that individually and collectively they must choose a path forward with the guidance of Esu.

Camwood at Crossroads unfolds from the memories and interpersonal encounters of Olumofin during his journey back to Nigeria, after a period of absence, and his return home to New Orleans. He travels to Nigeria on behalf of the American CIA to help gain the release of an American reporter who had been detained as a spy. While in Nigeria, Olumofin reads an account in the newspaper of his father's scandalous religious practices and begins a journey over the next couple of days in which he encounters friends and family members and reflects on the transformations he witnesses. He returns to the United States and becomes engaged to marry Savannah Goudeau, a middle-class African American Creole artist (90, 156). Olumofin achieves

a sense of balance and freedom after ‘mind exercises’ in which he defends his father in an imaginary trial (222).

Memories and experiences intersect at the crossroads of Elegbara to illustrate *los intersticios*, which shape the life choices of Olumofin. He confronts the contradictions of Nigeria that form from the differences between African tradition and dominant Western ideologies and religions. This tension is displayed as Olumofin first greets his father, Difala, “[k]nowing full well what tradition expected of him, Olumofin prostrated himself to the ground like an obedient son, although he did the short version, going only halfway” (56).

The system in Nigeria, since independence, is corrupt and corrodes the people’s daily lives but legitimates itself with nationalist ideology and denies those like Olumofin the capability of self-representation. Olumofin feels that since independence, Nigeria is more corrupt and corrodes the quality of people’s daily lives. The powerful legitimate the status quo with nationalist ideologies and deny those like Olumofin the capability of self-representation, so Olumofin can’t easily share his perceptions of his country with others and is restricted from participating in the formation of the Nigerian nation and culture. Olumofin sees that violence and corruption are internalized and breed future violence and corruption, which make life in Nigeria impossible for him. Olumofin asks, “[y]et again, what intoxicated the men of arms to soon divide in several camps, gunning one another down in the name of power, which breeds corruption that breeds power that breeds multiple corruptions...on and on and on, the repetitive cycle, till it rolled to the present stagnation of the brain drain, the disease, the despair?” (25). Olumofin laments the seemingly endless cycles of civil war and military coups in which new leaders take power and steal from the nation. Nigerians become silenced and disenfranchised. The grotesque

behavior of rulers affects the fates of many Nigerians who become similarly corrupt to survive, suffer despair and die, or leave.

Olumofin is representative of the brain drain of talented Nigerians to the West, which he justifies to himself as being due to violence and corruption at home. His father rejects that view and dismisses Olumofin and others of his generation as, “Westernized sons of the soil” (56). In his view, these ‘sons’ choose to leave Nigeria and not return and thus turn their backs on those like him who are similarly struggling to find meaning to life, but in Nigeria. Difala asks his son pointedly, “[a]re we so repulsive to you? Mother hen cannot smell so bad that its chick refuses to roost under its wings” (60).

Olumofin was an only child and he attended the Baptist Central High School in Nigeria. He worked hard, made good grades and at the age of twenty-one earned a scholarship to study in England. Afterwards, his plan to return home to help build the ‘new’ nation was delayed by civil war so Olumofin, like so many others of his generation, left Nigeria behind. He finished his studies at the Yale International Law School in the United States and decided not to return back home. He became a lawyer in New Orleans where he lived and worked for a period of fifteen years before the events of this novel.

In his first trip back to Nigeria, three years earlier, Olumofin was more committed to working to build Nigeria that was emerging from colonial rule. He had considered the possibility of staying in Nigeria, re-establishing his work as a lawyer, and living with his auntie, who had raised him after his mother’s death. “She was his mother’s sister and she had no children of her own.” Thus, “Olumofin had taken to her, and she to him, like mother and child” (17). In Nigeria, he took the Nigerian Bar Examination and passed it, setting the stage for his coming back, but the sudden illness and eventual death of his auntie altered his decision.

The present time of the novel was his second trip home, but it was for business; and he was ambivalent about seeing family and friends. However, while reading a newspaper he saw a public account of his father's religious exploits and his reflection on his life begins.

Remembering his past between smiles and sadness, Olumofin understood the satire in the notion that a prodigal son of a former *babalawo* (a male *Ifa* Priest in Yoruba religion) would make the decision to live abroad and reject traditional expectations. Many Yoruba people did not often accept this type of decision and saw people like him as "rebels and reprobates" (10).

From Difala's eyes a good son was one who followed his father's religious practices, which help his people maintain their traditions. Difala explains that he did not give his son the name Olumofin for nothing while lamenting his son's current path, "True to the moment and the signs that gave him his life and name - Mofin. Olumofin (God knows the law). Who would have thought that the insightful wisdom of the chameleon would be turned around and used against him?" (61). To Prophet Jeremiah (Difala), Olumofin's behavior brought shame to the family. Similarly for many others in the town, Olumofin is not a good son or a good lawyer since he is living abroad and cannot defend his father in the up coming trial in which he and his religious practice, satirically called a 'pashanga' by the media, is being attacked. For example, Walrus, his father's disciple directly told Olumofin, "You should come back to work for your own country. That's what I say" (59).

However, after so many decades of British rule, what was really traditional and not just some hybrid outcome of cultural conflict was increasingly less clear to Olumofin. For example, Olumofin viewed his father contradictorily as the "oracle priest, apostolic prophet, mystic, philosopher, herbalist, and miracle healer, minister of faith" but also as a "sexual pervert" (14). In fact, the title 'Jesus of the Well' was proof of the confused mixture of Christian and Yoruba

faiths -- since Jesus stands for the Jesus Christ, the son of the Christian God, Jehovah and the Well stands for Esu Elegbara, the Yoruba god of fate whose shrine is at the Cowrie Well, which is the center of the market place in the novel.

Olumofin's decision to leave and not follow expectations was due in part to this cultural transformation and his particular disagreement with the Prophet Difala's sexual relations with female members of his congregation. After whipping them with branches from the *Iroko*, the sacred oak tree in Yoruba religion, Difala would engage in this adulterous behavior. Without fully understanding his father's motivations Olumofin's awareness of the break in traditional customs by his father, 'Jesus of the Well', made him experience moments of shame and fostered his desire to choose a different path.

The impact of his father's fate on Olumofin's path illustrates how the judgments and actions of others shape his everyday life and inform his choices at the crossroads. The transformations he witnesses, which unfold as satiric encounters, illuminate the transformations in Nigeria that he experiences as social and spiritual contradictions. For instance, standing at the street corner of his past and the present, Olumofin remembers Iya 'Takose⁵ and the fried bean balls she sells called *akara* and wonders whether she is still around. His eventual encounter with her, however, is not what he had imagined.

Regarding the old neighborhood, he notes the changes around him. "Indeed, it was difficult to remember where anything had been. The demolition of some houses around the square, to give way to the widening of the roads and the construction of office buildings, had changed the layout. Yes, the whole neighborhood, Olumofin thought, had taken on a new look" (13). Despite being pushed to the side by the construction, Iya 'Takose was still selling *akara* in

⁵ Single quotation mark by the novelist

her neighborhood after all these years. The newspaper Olumofin was reading blew out of his hands directly to her. When he attempted to get it back her attitude towards him was a reminder of his contradictory position in-between Yoruba tradition and Western culture, which Iya ‘Takose comically pointed out, “it’s people like you who spoil our ‘natural gutters’ with foreign dumps!” (31).

Olumofin does not see himself as corrupt, wealthy, or a foreigner, despite his relative wealth, the way he speaks, and his appearance. In his memories he is still part of the neighborhood. In his mind, he is really no different from those he encounters. He faces many of the same social and cultural conflicts they face; he is just travelling a different path with the guidance of the fate god. However, Iya ‘Takose, the *akara* seller, does not recognize him or understand him and insults his lawyer clothes. She treats him with disrespect because he asked her to give him the newspaper that had led him to her.

Olumofin was hurt that she did not recognize him and he was stung by her words. More than anything, Olumofin was bothered that Iya ‘Takose saw him in a way that he did not see himself. He accepted that, “he might have appeared to her as an exploiting neocolonial spook, [but] he was only the middleman in a political game of ‘gutters’ and ‘dumps’ -and crude oil had to do with it” (33). Olumofin knew that he was not a corrupt national official or an exploiter from the West. He was simply trying to make a life but caught in the middle of political and economic power games over oil and gas.

Similarly, the corrupt taxi driver who tried to give him a “rip off price” because of his lawyerly appearance treated Olumofin as an *oyinbo*⁶. Rather than seeing him as a fellow countryman and charging him a fair price, the cab driver identifies Olumofin as a representative

⁶ Euba illuminates *oyinbo* as “[a]n appellation, sometimes used derogatory, for a white person or foreigner; literary, a person with bleached skin” (*Crossroads* 228).

of neo-colonial rule and tries to take more of his money. When Olumofin asked the driver why he wishes to cheat him, the driver answered:

Ah, no be so o, Oga. Me sheat you? Never. Dis our country i' hard o. If I can get one meal a day, I for be t'ankful. An' I have a wife and four little *pickins* to feed also. I tell you, man be lucky to even get common gari for chop dese days. Dat na what you people done do to us o. (36)

The taxi driver responds in a creolized mix of Yoruba and English illustrating the hybridization of cultures and the shifting identities in *los intersticios* of Nigeria. However, his manner also shows exaggerated deference, which creates more social space between him and Olumofin. The taxi driver does not take responsibility for his actions and shifts the blame on Olumofin, who he sees ““you people””, - rich and influential. Though bothered that someone would believe that he could be the cause of poverty and general despair throughout the country, Olumofin knew that it was not he who guides the country's fate.

Interpersonal interactions along his path allow him to see the extent of corruption throughout Nigeria today and how far from tradition the country has moved. Olumofin remarks how greed and corruption have replaced a sense of collective balance: “It was only a question of seeing the right people, talking to effective ears, and mingling in powerful circles. Somewhere in the process, there would be palms held out, as stiff as steel, waiting to be greased into action. The process is a foregone conclusion in all walks of life in this country, military regime or civilian (51).” Olumofin sees the link between daily, individual acts of corruption by individuals and the corrupt state of his country. An example is his encounter with Karako, now a commissioner of the road, which allows him to understand more clearly that car accidents have become epidemic throughout Nigeria due to the attitudes and choices of government officials. Though Iya ‘Takose and the taxi driver may not see the difference, Olumofin knows that he is not like Karako who is corrupt and cares only about money and power and not about public safety.

The encounter began when Olumofin returns to his hotel quite hungry but finds only cold leftovers for him to eat under the “waiter’s withering stare” (49). Olumofin, again the outsider, understands the waiter’s dishonesty and acknowledges that “a few naira could do much to stir any waiter into activity, making food appear by some miracle from the kitchen – perhaps food that had been set aside by the waiters for their own consumption” (48). He prefers to eat cold leftovers than bribe the waiter.

It is in the process that Olumofin encounters Karako, once “a soldier-turned-civilian-turned-military politician” (49) and now Brigadier General Karako, “commissioner for the roads,” (50) eating in the company of “his parasites” a banquet of fresh and hot food on his birthday at the same hotel (51). Karako invites Olumofin to eat and also implies that he can help Olumofin’s father, the Prophet Difala, with his current problems, but Olumofin declines both offers.

Informed by the satiric quality of these experiences with corruption on many levels, Olumofin understands that there is no professional life for him in Nigeria. He does not want to live where he could find people like Karako, “an academic failure and a military failure for that matter”, who is no doubt a, “corrupt nation builder” today, he reflected with sarcasm (53). For Olumofin this encounter reinforces that his choices and actions and those of the people he knows are related to larger social and cultural contradictions, which shape the lives of many Nigerians.

Conversations with family and intimate friends also allow him to see how there is no personal life for him in Nigeria. His fate (his Esu) is at odds with both traditional and current ideologies of family, race and gender. Olumofin’s auntie, for example, whom he loved like a mother, did not want him to marry a white woman. It is why she made him promise “for the sake of his dead mother, never to return to Lagos with a ‘bleached skin woman with a pointed nose

and fleshless lips” (90). Olumofin saw that, for his auntie and others, being from a different race meant being from a different culture and, therefore, being outside the traditional community.

Similarly, Simisola, Lakija’s wife, advises him to marry, “as long as she’s not white” (84). Having internalized these views throughout his life, and despite having previously dated white women, Olumofin realizes he is torn, “Although his long hesitation to marry had vanished, he admitted that the reason for the delay rested ultimately on fact of color” (90). The tradition of marriage framed by culture and race informs his decision to marry and makes his sense of being in-between worlds even more profound.

Many others who knew him like Walrus, the chief inspector of police, shared the view that Olumofin was wealthy enough and was supposed to be married and living in Nigeria with a culturally acceptable wife and a number of children. With no hesitation he looked Olumofin up and down and said bluntly, “A big man like you not yet married, with children?” (67). The custom of having a family with many children was clear to Olumofin. He just does not want to follow the culturally expected path of those like his friend Lakija, who was a doctor with three children, or his former schoolmate Santos, who had ten children. Olumofin asks himself, “Why bring a child into a world that threatened its very existence?” (92).

Olumofin navigates *los intersticios* of traditional and Western ideologies of family and love and attempts to choose the correct path forward with the guidance of Esu. He inhabits an in-between position in Nigeria and chooses to live abroad, but his life in the United States is not any less marginalizing. His future wife shares his fate as she has shared his, “years of disenfranchisement, years of exploited acculturation in an insensitive world of survival” (225).

Sometimes, Olumofin is unnerved by his sense of social and cultural displacement in both Nigeria and the United States, “Far, far away from one country’s culture shocks to another’s

shock cultures, six thousand miles away from the cacophony of one city's taxi honks to the street rage of another's, one set of problematic realities transforming to another" (111). Olumofin's path has always been intertwined but distinct from that of his father even though both confront similar social and cultural contradictions.

Difala had his own path to navigate through *los intersticios* formed by conflicts between the religious and cultural views of Christian evangelicals and the traditional religious practices of his Yoruba ancestors. Difala saw himself as a guardian of Yoruba religion against the invasion of Christianity yet he mixes the two with scandalous results. Before Olumofin was born, Difala was a poor coffin maker who one day made a spiritual decision to change for good. His choice impacted not only his fate but that of his son as well. Olumofin recounts how, "His father's transcendence from a carpenter to a prophet, as the story went, occurred sometime after the invasion of Lagos, by a Johnny "Moral" Braggs as they called him, with his Moral Rearmament Evangelical Crusade" (67). Olumofin has no proof of a direct connection but believes the crusade had an impact his father's spirituality.

Affected by the 'Word' of evangelical Christianity but still embedded in Yoruba tradition Difala disappears into Esu's well in the town square, which had been condemned as infested by the colonial government. As people wondered what had happened to him and where he had gone, he was torn between two cultures, "There as he sat, propped on a ledge, he felt the glory of Jehovah. Or was it of Esu. What of it and why not? He meant Esu, not the devil the white missionaries had naively labeled him, the traditional Esu, the fateful fatal intermediary. Jehovah and his avenging emissary Esu, an African Saint Peter, Why not?" (27).

Difala's religious practices mix elements of both religions to point out that they are indistinguishable, yet he still claims to defend tradition. As the *babalawo*, full of contradictions,

‘Jesus of the Well’ (Difala) believes he guards and saves Yoruba religion from disappearing within the Christian invasion of Africa. In his memory as he recalls, Olumofin sees his father insist with one of his divination clients:

I am the light and the connection between the Word and the oracle of our ancestors. Believe in me. I am the interpreter of the total Word, the combination of the Testament and the Ifa oracle. Believe in it. I am the healer of divergent faiths. Believe in me. I am he... (15)

However, his interpretation of how to preserve tradition was attacked in the newspapers and his actions were framed by Western ideologies as sexual pathologies. For example, Difala’s whipped members of his congregation and used medicinal herbs to make them drowsy and docile to the point that he could take advantage of them sexually. Difala generally engaged in sex with married women since their husbands were members of the congregation and would be hesitant to question his authority and interpretation of the ‘total Word’.

Many people in the town labeled him a sexual deviant and his religious practices became the punch line for jokes (34). While true that many laughed at the ‘Jesus of the Well’, many others continued to look beyond newspaper accounts and view him as one who defends traditional culture. In fact, rather than universally rejected by all, some saw him as a spiritual leader resisting the domination of Christian evangelicals and their goal of demonizing African deities while ‘helping uncivilized’ African people find Christ.

Difala built a congregation of worshippers and was respected by many like Walrus, the chief inspector of police, Moses, his servants, and Abel, who followed his orders and respected him as a ‘lord’. In fact, the former army colonel and police chief became the ‘Walrus’ only after his “baptismal subduing” in which Difala beat him, “to total submission and obeisance under the camouflage of making him his aide-de-camp” (63). From that point on he was loyal to Difala and served his whims.

However, regardless of the views of those who hated him and the views of those who loved him, Difala was hurt deeply by his son's rejection. For Olumofin, his father's actions were perverted and, from very early on in life, he defined his father's behavior as immoral. Difala believed that Olumofin would ultimately follow his wishes or could be convinced to do so. However, his son, who he thought misunderstood him, would not listen and ran away from him and his home in Nigeria for good.

In conclusion, Euba's novel presents a counter-history of Nigeria by illustrating the social and cultural contradictions faced by Nigerians rather than presenting a supportive nationalist narrative. The new state that emerged after the end of colonial rule has experienced war, famine, and rampant corruption along with great wealth. The contradictions have caused those like Olumofin to follow a path that leads them abroad though their fates remain rooted in Nigeria.

Those like Difala and many of the other characters in the novel continue to struggle to make sense from their lives in Nigeria. Both the son's and father's social positions lie in-between the cultural and religious expectations of traditional Yoruba and Western societies. However, though similar social and cultural forces generally shape their lives, at the 'crossroads' of Elegbara the father and the son decide on very different paths to free themselves from *los intersticios*. The following interaction shows their inability to understand each other's choice:

"Am I any different from who you are and what you are?" The Prophet maintained his calm. "In fact, I have one advantage over you, and this may be a case of maturity. Just because you have failed woefully to apply your cultural heritage to your white man's education, do you then turn around to blame our efforts to adapt? I have no problems with that," Olumofin said. "It's the corrupt way you go about it." "What corrupt way?"⁷ (65)

Femi Euba's novel details how colonial domination of a previously free people in Africa, and continuing Western cultural hegemony after national independence, create '*los intersticios*' in

⁷ Quotation marks by the novelist

which Nigerians struggle to find their paths in life; a sense of meaning and identity with the guidance of Esu, their fate. *El color del verano* by Arenas also examines identity, the struggle for freedom, and meaning in life. It is a novel, which illustrates how revolutionary Cuba destroyed the vestiges of Spanish colonial rule, American imperialism, classism, racism, and sexism, but, contradictorily, created *los intersticios* for non-heterosexuals, artists, writers, and all Cubans who seek the freedom of individual expression.

Arenas and his carnival of characters ‘in-between’

“La vida es un carnaval”

(“Life is a carnival”)

Cuban saying

El color del verano / *The Color of the Summer* is an imaginative, powerful, and complex novel centered around Reinaldo Arenas’s memories of his life and the experiences he and other Cubans shared after the revolution during the 1960s to the 1980s. The novel is written in “la manera de no tomar nada en serio” (in a way of not taking anything seriously⁸), which allows readers to remember the past that made us who we are today and consider what we want to be tomorrow (Mañach 246). This is the fourth novel of Arenas’s *pentagonía* (five agonies) that begins with *Celestino antes del alba/Singing from the Well* (1996), *El mundo alucinante/The Palace of the White Skunks* (1993), *Otra vez el mar / Farewell to the Sea* (1987), and concludes with *and El Alto/The Assault* (1995).

During an absurd and grotesque carnival for Fifo, the island’s dictator, Arenas guides the readers through life in revolutionary Cuba with stories in the form of *choteo*; laughing at what is ‘normally’ considered to be very serious. The novel presents the injustices experienced by

⁸ Translation mine

Cubans who desire individual freedom and the power of self-representation juxtaposed against the maddening celebration of power and dictatorial rule.

Many of the guests invited to the carnival are important cultural figures resuscitated from the dead by Fifo or themselves. Popular poets, writers, artists, dictators, and presidents from Latin American countries and many other nations perform for Fifo's entertainment. The water is patrolled by *triburones* (sharks) so no one can leave the island and *enanos* (midgets) spy who worked for Fifo. Longing for a different life and resisting the power of Fifo, Cubans gnaw away at the base of the island, which eventually becomes free and floats away. As the island's inhabitants continue to argue and disagree about where they want to go and what kind of government and society they want, the island sinks in the ocean.

El color del verano can be considered an *autohistoria* novel constructed through the complexities of the many characters that participate in the carnival of Arenas's memories and imagination. Arenas creates exaggerated stories to capture the essence of his spirit, which he presents to readers to awaken their consciousness; to change their understanding of the contradictions faced by Cubans. Arenas emphasizes that, “[p]ero todo lo poco que he hecho, desde mis poemas, cuentos, novelas, piezas de teatro y ensayos, está unido por una serie de ciclos históricos, autobiográficos y agónicos; por una serie de angustiosas transmutaciones” ([b]ut all the things I've done—poems, stories, novels, plays, and essays—are linked; they form a series of historical, autobiographical, and agonic cycles, a series of anguished transmutations) (*El color del verano* 345 trans. 315).

Throughout the body of his work the Cuban writer illuminates the many forms of marginalization experienced by Cubans due to political power, religion, culture, the family, and the hypocrisy and corruption of numerous state organizations. Similar to Condé (2006) and Euba

(2007), it is through *autohistoria* that Arenas rewrites history based on the experiences of the subaltern. Further, his stories deviate from the official nationalist narrative of the Cuban revolution and suggest that Fido's rule must end if Cubans are to be truly free.

Arenas creates a new form of writing Cuban literature in which he talks with readers and guides their journey through the carnival they're reading. For example, at the beginning of novel, in "Al juez" (To the Judge⁹), Arenas tells readers that what they're about to read could have him thrown in jail and to remember that it is fiction (9 trans. vii). The novel is comprised of overlapping and intertwined plays, tongue twisters, short stories, and letters written by one of his selves to the others. *Choteo*, absurd situations, and public ridicule make the novel irreverent as Arenas uses direct language and vulgarity to challenge the contradictions Cubans encounter daily.

El color del verano covers Arenas's early life and many of his experiences in Cuba as well as some of his life in the United States. His individual, subjective experiences and aspirations are connected to those of Cubans who similarly inhabit *los intersticios*. Rather than regarding each character as an individual or the Cuba of his novel as a collection of individuals, Arenas emphasizes, "Todos ellos podrían integrar un espíritu burlón y desesperado, el espíritu de mi obra que tal vez sea el de nuestro país" (All of my characters form a single mocking, despairing spirit, the spirit of my work, which is also, perhaps, the spirit of our country) (345 trans. 315).

Throughout the novel Arenas is directly represented through three distinct characters used to illustrate fluid aspect of his identities. Arenas asks in one of the letters: "¿Era la Tétrica Mofeta, loca de atar? ¿Era Gabriel, el guajiro de las lomas de Holguín? ¿Era Reinaldo el

⁹ Translation mine

desdichado escritor?” (Was it Skunk in a Funk, the screaming queen? Was it Gabriel, the farm boy, the country bumpkin from the hills of Holguin? Was it Reinaldo, the ill-fated and forever luckless writer?) (334 trans. 305). Arenas rather than forming a duality of opposites in the same person resulting in identity confusion, each is a creative component of a dynamic and defiant whole. Regarding the three Arenas clearly states that, “todos formamos una sola persona dispersa” (we are all, still, part of a single scattered person) (345 trans. 315).

Since life is a carnival, the cast of characters in *El color del verano* is numerous, varied and chaotic. All of Arenas’s characters defy gender norms and often are described as both he and she in the same sentence; sexuality is celebrated and regarded as dynamic and fluid. Characters include the famous and powerful guests resurrected by Fifo for his entertainment and the amazing variety of subaltern inhabitants of the Hotel Monserrate. Hotel Monserrate is one of the places where Arenas lived in Cuba. Crumbling down, it appears in his novel as a place in which “un constante trasiego de putas, bugarrones, maricones, traficantes y escritores inéditos (a constant stream of whores, tops, bottoms, dealers in anything you could imagine, unpublished writers) lived subaltern lives in *los intersticios* of Fifo’s Cuba (292 trans. 265).

Arenas describes Cuban society as a place where both ‘whores’ and unpublished writers inhabit the ‘in-between’. In general, the characters navigate *los intersticios* formed by the contradictions between the nationalist revolutionary project, and its ideology, and the daily struggle of life and self-expression in Cuba. More specifically, characters are oppressed for their sexuality and free imagination in his writings. Characters symbolize the longing for individual liberty and freedom from government censorship while struggling to survive.

Arenas describes Cuba as a land founded and governed by thieves and murders. His novel “es la historia de una isla que nunca tuvo paz” (is a story of an island that has never known

peace) and the main thief and murderer is Fifo, a character who represents the aging Fidel Castro (163 trans. 149). Fifo's power is so enormous that he changed time to turn what really should have been a celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the revolution into a fiftieth-anniversary celebration.

Arenas sees him as a cruel and ignorant dictator who satisfies his hunger for power and recognition through an absurd carnival around which the novel revolves. Famous cultural figures and writers, such as Gertrudis Gomez de Avellaneda, Jose Martí, Alejo Sholekhov, Nicolás Guillén, and Julián del Casal, all known for their literary work and social analysis, are resurrected by Fifo for his entertainment. If they do not satisfy his demands, Fifo feeds them to his lover, *Tiburón Sangriento* (Bloodthirsty Shark), or sends them to be tortured and executed in the dungeons of El Morro.

Arenas illuminates Fifo's desire to control art, beauty, and humanity through the stories revolving around important historical personages resurrected to celebrate Fifo's power. The characters, however, end up in absurd situations, which contradictorily, emphasize the poverty and lack of individual freedom experienced by Cubans. Each story rewrites historical accounts and exposes the hypocrisy of the nationalist narrative. These stories further lament restrictions imposed by the government on individual expressions of self-representation in Cuba.

One such example is the play that begins the novel. Gertrudis Gomez de Avellaneda, the famous Cuban poet, runs away in a small boat after being resuscitated by Fifo's orders. She refuses to be used to legitimate his rule and is determined to paddle the boat to Key West, Florida. Fifo sends his sharks and *enanos* (midgets) to stop her. He also calls for the poet's public repudiation and forces the other resurrected writers to shoot enormous rotten eggs at Avellaneda from the Malecón (18). At the same time on the opposing shore, others gather on a

beach in Key West (Key West) and cheer for her escape from Cuba. They throw chocolates and other goods at her boat in a show of support.

This peculiar and cruel scene shows how many Cubans, including the author, are torn between the love of their homeland and the promise of a better, freer life in the United States. Specifically, it represents the *actos de repudio* (acts of repudiation) experienced by Arenas and others who left Cuba during the Mariel Immigration of the early 1980s. The government allowed thousands of Cubans to throw eggs, old shoes, sticks, etc. People shouted at those who were leaving and called them *gusanos* (worms) and ‘*scorias*’ (trash) for leaving the new ‘just and fair’ Revolutionary Cuban society.

During Avellaneda’s escape from such a scene, she encounters José Martí, escaping Key West on a horse. They discuss freedom, idealism, and national politics while going in opposite directions. She asks him why he would return to Cuba rather than staying in the United States. Poetically, Martí answers her question by saying that he was leaving Key West, “porque un mundo donde sólo cuenta el dinero no es precisamente lo que quiero” (Money is all anybody cares about, and that is not what I think life’s about) (53 trans. 46).

Avellaneda and José Martí represent those located ‘in-between’ societies and nationalist definitions of freedom and liberty. In the novel, Cubans gathered on Havana’s Malecón consider Avellaneda as an “¡Agentes del imperialismo!” (Capitalist –imperialist apostle!), and the people in Key West regarded her as a “¡Fóviles del marxism! (Commie Marxist fossil!) (61 trans. 54). Martí is a national hero best left in the past and as his horse nears Cuban shores gunshots are heard. Soon after, Avellaneda’s boat fills with both rotten eggs and chocolates and sinks beneath the sea. FIFO and the capitalist market attempt to rewrite history and submerge artistic, creative,

and intellectual expressions under the power of nationalist narrative. However, absurd stories within *choteo* resist such power and redefinition.

For example, in another humorous and tragic story, Fifo resurrects Alejo Sholejov specifically to conduct a walking tour of Old Havana to celebrate its glory. However, the old Alejo Sholejov begins his tour *se lanzó por la calzada de Jesús del Monte*” (down the Calzada de Jesus del Monte) which is very far from Old Havana (87 *trans* 80-81). As the tour passes through many colonnades it finds “en su mayoría apuntalados” (most of them shored up by two-by-fours and piles of rubble) and Cubans living in small places in ruins with “barbacoas de madera” (improvised wooden sleeping lofts) growing “un conuco aéreo que los habitantes de la habana vieja habían plantado sobre las azoteas con el fin de mitigar el hambre que producida por cuarenta años de racionamiento” (aerial truck farm, where they grew what food they could to mitigate the hunger produced by forty years of rationing) (88 - 89 *trans*. 80 - 81). The glory Sholejov describes contrasts with the misery experienced by Cubans. The tour ends when Sholejov leans against a column and creates a domino effect in which all columns collapse and entomb him.

In *El color del verano*, Arenas further weaves imaginative tales of artists and poets to describe the extent of censorship in Cuba and the violence experienced by those with the talent to create beauty in the world. He clearly sums up his understanding of the reasons for the suppression of individual expression in Cuba, “Fifo en realidad no le gusta ningún tipo de literatura, salvo la que el mismo hacia” (Fifo didn’t like any kind of literature, except the literature that he produced himself) (218 *trans*. 199).

To illustrate this point, Arenas created characters like Clara, a Mulata artist who lives in poverty in a small room in Habana Vieja (Old Havana) although her paintings are masterpieces

more breathtaking than any painting found in museums around the world. People stare at her creations and are transfixed by the depth and breadth of their beauty. For instance, regarding her portrait of Luisa Perez de Zambrana, Arenas emphasizes that “[h]aber podido contemplar aquella obra era un privilegio que enaltecía cualquier pena” ([t]o look upon that painting was a privilege that transformed any pain, any grief, any calamity) (363 trans. 332).

In the chapter “El hueco de Clara,” Arenas addresses her poverty, her marginalization, and criticizes the hypocrisy and corruption that flourishes in Cuban institutions designed to uphold the values of the revolution. In particular, he ridicules the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), which is comprised of groups of people who monitor the movements and behavior of the citizens who live in their community. However, for money they’ll allow people to do anything.

Clara’s tiny room fills with guests and heats up during a rainstorm in Old Havana. She decides to make a window for air but ends up digging a tunnel that leads to an abandoned and forgotten convent. All the subaltern residents of Havana descend through the tunnel and start to sell all of its riches on *la bolsa negra* (the black market). When the chairwoman of CDR comes to investigate, she instead fills her hands and pockets with all the objects she can carry and leaves saying to Clara, “Yo no he visto nada. Que eso quede bien claro” (I haven’t seen a anything, I want that clear) (371 trans. 340).

All relics disappear from the abandoned convent, the wood and bricks are stripped from the walls and sold, and water found in a cistern is sold to thirsty Cubans. Clara becomes inspired and paints over 300 masterpieces, which are displayed throughout the convent in a show that lasts three days; until all the candles burn out. All sorts of people visited the show and are amazed by the beauty. Clara covers the hole in the wall and leaves her paintings hanging in her

new gallery. One day, state agents break in to steal a painting to use in the assassination of Virgilio Piñera and rip all of her paintings to shreds. Upon discovering the devastation, Clara pours kerosene over herself, lights a fire, and the entire convent went up in flames.

The character Virgilio Piñera further delineates censorship and the violence of the Cuban government. He is both a renowned poet whose voice must be silenced by Fifo's agents and a homosexual who must be driven to the margins of society. Fifo's agents always follow him, every one of his spoken words is recorded, informers infiltrate his inner circle of friends, and his life is in constant danger. His poetry is so beautiful that it can transport readers to another realm not controlled by Fifo, which makes him a danger to the state. Towards the end of the novel, state agents kill him by shocking him into a heart attack with vivid portrait of a vagina stolen from the artist Clara.

To illustrate the control of freedom of individual expression in Cuba and the desire of the people for beauty, the character Piñera writes despite his fear. In one chapter all of his friends and admirers gather in his apartment to listen to his newest masterpieces. Everyone is prepared for the reading and sit around anxiously waiting to absorb the beauty they are about to hear. Piñera begins to read the poems he had written yesterday and the crowd erupts in tears by the realization that they are in the presence of a great writer. Once the first poem ends, and while the audience applauds, Piñera tosses the poem into the fire and destroys it despite the protests.

Piñera reads another poem and then another, each more masterful than the previous, and each time upon the completion of the reading, he burns the poem. The audience howls their disapproval and by the end most have to be bound and gagged so the great poet can continue to read his masterpieces before destroying them. Piñera tells the audience that "toda escritura es una venganza" (all writing is a revenge), which is only meaningful if the words are read by the author

and heard by others (129 trans. 118). However, he must leave no proof of his writings or Fifo's revenge will obliterate him. Piñera is a central character in *El color del verano* who is found at the intersection of governmental restrictions on individual written expression and the Cuban system of sexual oppression.

Arenas links the two systems of oppression through Piñera and illustrates the brutality and inhumanity of life in Cuba from 1960 to 1990. Individual liberty is destroyed in the interests of power and ideology but hope for freedom is constant. In the novel, Piñera is linked to the spirit of the Cuban people. During his funeral near the conclusion of novel, the casket is lowered into the grave and water splashes upward. Those watching realize that finally Cuba has been gnawed free of its base and will float away, “que aquel chapuzón fúnebre era un aviso de una liberación total” (that the funeral splash was the first notice of total liberation) (432 trans. 399).

Throughout the novel Arenas not only describes poverty and decries limits on creative expression, he portrays the hopes and dreams of non-heterosexual Cubans inhabiting worlds omitted from nationalist narratives. In *Before Night Falls* Arenas acknowledges that *El color del verano* “deals openly with homosexuality, a forbidden subject for most Cubans and for almost the whole human race” (xvi). However, rather than apologizing for his sexuality and rather than silencing his voice, Arenas defiantly challenges readers to understand that individual expressions of creativity, love, and sexuality bring beauty into the world despite organized attempts to suppress them.

The organized oppression of Cuban homosexuals began shortly after the triumph of the revolution. The *Quinquenio Gris* (Gray Quinquennium) was a period of sexual repression and institutionalized homophobia (Fornet 2007). In 1965 the Revolutionary Cuban system created the ‘Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción’ (UMAP) camps in order to ‘cure’ homosexuality.

The young Cuban revolutionary government ideologically created ‘El Hombre Nuevo’ (the ‘New Man’), who was heterosexual, and every male who acted ‘*amanerado*’ (with feminine manners) could be detained. Arenas explains the origin of this form of repression by simply emphasizing that Fifo, “odiaba a muerte todos los maricones” (hated and *despised*¹⁰ maricones) (*El color del verano* 199 trans. 182).

UMAP had a broad reach and ultimately impacted any person who did not conform to compulsory heterosexuality, those members of the Jehovah Witness faith, or any other religion that was considered a threat to the nation and ‘the Marxist materialist project’ (Guerra 2010, Bejel 1990, Lumsden 1996, Ocasio 2003). Though this history remains unknown to many Cubans, the impact of the camps, associated ideologies, and the repression of non-heterosexuals negatively impacted the lives of Cubans like Arenas.

In *El color del verano*, Arenas ridicules Cuban culture in general and Fifo in particular on behalf of those who are marginalized in *los intersticios* by an overtly heterosexual world.

Weaving stories from the experiences of characters such as Aurélico Cortés (St. Nelly) and Rubén Valentín Díaz Marzo, better known as the Aereopagita, Arenas exacts his revenge. Their stories describe the extent of homophobia throughout Cuban society and its impact on the lives of the characters. Arenas’s ridicule implicates both political and religious institutions as well as the family in the perpetuation of this system of oppression.

Arenas further shows how violence and hatred are internalized and shape the characters’ path in life. Aurélico Cortés, for instance, was both a devoted son and clearly a little ‘fairy’ from an early age. Both parents, however, were terrified by the possibility that their son would prefer to sleep with other men. “‘¡Un hijo pájaro, y me pego candela!’”, aseguro la madre cuando Cortés

¹⁰ Emphasis by translator

cumplía doce años” (A fag for a son, and I’ll set myself afire! swore the mother on Cortés twelfth birthday” (*El color del verano*, 197 trans. 180). Not wishing to disappoint his parents, who lived to be very old, Aurélico ultimately died a virgin never being able to give meaning to his life by making love with another man. Arenas sums up the depth of the repression Aurélico internalized throughout his life, “a medida que envejecía su virginidad se le hacia cada vez más insoportable, pero el temor a pecar era más potente que todos sus anhelos fálicos” (as she grew older, her virginity became ever more unbearable - but the fear of sinning was stronger than all her homoerotic yearnings) (198 trans. 181). Upon his death as a virgin, his friends pushed for him to be canonized a saint.

Ultimately, both Fifo and the Catholic Church tested and certified his virginity. The Pope canonized him St. Nelly in front of the world by shoving the papal staff up his anus. However, the immense pleasure brought the virgin Aurélico back to life. Realizing that the Pope had made his secret homosexuality public, and that all of his years of sexual repression due, in part, to the church were for nothing, he began to smash the Pope with the papal staff. That his sainthood was a reward for internalizing sexual repression and denying the true expression of his humanity was a contradiction he could not bear.

The distressing story of Rubén Valentín Días Marzo, the ‘Aereopagita’ (the one who masturbates in the air), also demonstrates how homophobia, sexual violence, and corruption intersect to drive characters to the margins of Cuban society. Everyone who met him sexually abused Rubén during his childhood and adolescence. First, when Rubén was a child, his parents would put him outside while they would have sex. Rubén always had to wait on the porch where his parent’s moaning and, frequently, insults could be heard.

While Rubén was an adolescent waiting for his mother to finish having sexual relations with a neighbor, he was raped on the porch by “un vagabundo, luego por un negro, y después, ... por una bruja de tetas descomunales que por poco lo asfixia no solamente con aquellas tetas sino también con el bollo que se lo ponía en la cara y obligaba al pobre Rubencito a que lo lamiese” (a vagrant, then by a black man, and later, ... by a witch with very big tits that almost asphyxiated him not only with her tits but with her cunt also, since she put it in his face and obliged him to lick it¹¹) (302).

When he was a young man, Rubén’s parents migrated to United States and he was sent to the mandatory military service for Fífo’s regime. Sadly during his military service, everyone including the high superiors sexually violated Rubén. This dehumanizing sexual violence left the young Rubén “[a]terrorizado y medio muerto” (terrified and half dead¹²) (302). Rubén managed to escape the military but while negotiating a ‘permuta’, changing houses with another, he was scammed and did not receive the money or the housing promised him.

He ended up with a ‘suite’ in the Hotel Monserrate with the varied subaltern and was continually raped by all the ‘locas’ living there. Even a foreign spy for Fífo, who was actually a military officer dressed as a woman, forced him to have sex relations. Due to a lifetime of sexual violence and being treated as a sexual object for the desire of others, Rubén developed a sex block; he could not have sex with anyone. Arenas testifies that, “[t]riste producto del horror y del envilecimiento contemporáneo” ([h]is is a sadness born of the horror and baseness of the present age) (303 trans. 275). Rubén never learned how to love and experience sexual pleasure with others. He, like Aurélico, internalized repression and lost his sense of what it means to be human. In fact, Rubén could only achieve an orgasm by climbing trees in Havana’s parks and

¹¹ Translation mine

¹² Ibid.

masturbating while spying on others who were engaged in sexual acts. Only when others were the objects of his desire could he be the subject of his sexuality.

He became famous due to his aerial masturbation and everyone knew him as Aereopagita. He spent long hours hidden in the foliage of trees waiting for new lovers to make love or for impotent sailors finally to have an ejaculation. He often lost his grip and fell while masturbating and frequently had to run for his life. Once, his ejaculation hit a woman's face and her enraged boyfriend beat Rubén. The police working for Fico finally caught him when he fell from the rafters, where he was masturbating, onto the stage during a performance of the ballet *Giselle*. Rubén expected to receive a sentence of eleven years in prison and be obliged to pay for the damages. However, at the end of the story, Tétrica Mofeta decided to keep Rubén out of prison by doing sexual favors for Blas Roka, an influential militant of the Central Communist Party. In corrupt and hypocritical Cuba, she knew from experience that a sexual act with a powerful man could keep pathetic Rubén from being sent to prison for his sexual acts.

The bizarre and crazy stories of the Aereopagita illustrate the contradictions of power and sexual expression in Cuba. Rubén was ignored by his family and sexually violated throughout life, often times by the same powerful people who present themselves as heterosexual. The contradiction is similarly illustrated by a State Security officer who continually rubs his crotch while lecturing Reinaldo, “-A la verdad que con ustedes, los maricones, no hay posibilidades de rehabilitación” (‘There’s just no way to rehabilitate you faggots, is there?’) (324 trans. 296).

Arenas was denied a life in his homeland because of his sexual preference, his desire for individual freedom, and his demand for unlimited creative expression. He lived in the margins of Cuban society and culture and describes, “having nowhere to live: having to be on the move all the time, having to live with the fear of being forced out at whim, never having a place I would

call my own” (no tenia lugar donde vivir, mudándose todo el tiempo, viviendo con miedo a que lo voten, nunca tuvo su propia casa¹³) (*Before Night Falls*, 310). He left Cuba for the United States but his new life was difficult and New York was not what he expected. He refers to this time as a period of exile.

Arenas explains his disappointment with the capitalist system in the United States when he realized “that it is country without soul: everything revolves around money” (este es un país sin alma: lo que más importa es el dinero¹⁴) (310). He could finally publish without fear of arrest but he saw how the creativity of other Cuban authors in exile was suffering from market demands. Like the character José Martí in the opening play of *El color del verano*, Arenas never agreed with the commercialization of art and literature and the euphoria for money he found in the United States. Arenas never felt at home and, like the character José Martí, wanted to die “en medio del color / del verano natal” (in the color of the summer I was born in) (59 trans. 52).

However, like the character la Avellaneda, Arenas is stuck between two shores and does not have more than a “pluma” (fictions) (61 trans 54) to write about his dreams and experiences. Arenas was marginalized in socialist and capitalist social systems, both of which sought to bind the human spirit and restrict the possibilities of freedom. Torn between worlds Arenas cries out in pain, “¿[c]ómo poder seguir viviendo así, en ningún sitio, con un pedazo de mi alma allá y otro aquí, con la vida partida en dos o en mil pedazos?” (How can I go on living like this—nowhere—with one piece of my soul here and another piece there, with my life split in two (or maybe a million)¹⁵ pieces?) (289 trans. 263).

¹³ Translation mine

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Brackets by the translator

In summary, historical (and future) events of Cuba are presented as absurd stories in *El color de verano* delineating how intersecting systems of oppression in Cuba inform the author's *autohistoria*. Arenas specifically addresses the suppression of creative agency through art and literature, the suppression of individual liberty and sexuality, and further shows the intersection of the two in his life as well as the lives of other Cubans.

All of Arenas's characters, in some sense, represent his experiences, his hopes, his aspirations, and share his vision for a world in which creativity and imagination are not bound by political and economic power. Characters resurrected for Fifo's carnival and the subaltern characters inhabiting *los intersticios* of life in Cuba are described in stories that juxtapose their oppression to the power of Fifo and the Cuban government. *El color de verano* vividly describes oppression while showing the unbreakable spirit of humanity to be truly free.

Chapter Conclusion

The discussion in this chapter demonstrates how *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots* / *Victoire, My Mother's Mother*, *Camwood at Crossroads*, and *El color del verano* / *The Color of Summer* can be viewed as *autohistoria* novels. Each novel is informed by the life experience of the respective author and then links individual to collective experiences to rewrite the nation's history from subaltern positionality. As counter-hegemonic narratives all three novels refuse to repeat nationalist narratives but instead describe daily life experiences of characters that survive by navigating social contradictions while trying to find meaning in their lives.

Condé, Euba and Arenas do not generalize oppression and strategies for liberation but choose instead to delineate the specific and unique contours of *los intersticios* encountered by characters in each nation described in the three novels. Through comparison it is clear that these novels demonstrate that Guadeloupeans, Nigerians, and Cubans share a common history of

slavery and colonialism in the transatlantic Diaspora, but also experience specific intersecting systems of oppression, which create *los intersticios* of their daily lives.

Maryse Condé's *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots*, centers on the authors' search for information about her grandmother and her mother. Her findings delineate how interlocking systems of class, race, and gender oppression in Guadeloupe marginalize, in varying ways, both Victoire and Jeanne. Both are similarly defined in terms of gender and skin color but each is different due to the specific ways gender and race ideologies intersect to shape their experiences and their opportunities.

Victoire's poverty and lack of education relegated her to being a cook and a servant, her gender left her unprotected from the violence of men, and her oddly light-colored skin was regarded with superstition. Jeanne on the other hand had much darker skin and was frequently the object of ridicule due to her color. Though educated and driven by middle-class manners and aspirations, she was ultimately dependent upon a man that she really had very little in common with to find a sense of stability and achievement in life.

Camwood at Crossroads is an *autohistoria* novel that reflects on social and cultural transformations from the viewpoint of a 'son-of-the-soil' who decides to live abroad rather than confront the daily corruptions of Nigeria. Euba writes a counter-history of Nigeria through an examination of the contradictions of spirituality and culture faced by Olumofin and his father, Difala, alias Jesus of the Well. Confronting the disruptions of tradition and daily life, Olumofin and Difala are guided along their intertwined but distinct paths by Yoruba spirituality.

Though Olumofin and Difala navigate the in-between cultural and religious expectations of Yoruba and Western societies and similar economic and social forces generally shape their lives, the son and the father decide upon very different paths. Olumofin and many of his

generation leave Nigeria behind and migrate to the West for economic opportunity. Olumofin, however, never really feels at home in the United States and his memories and imagination draw him to Nigeria. On the other hand, Difala and many of the other characters in the novel continue to struggle to make sense from their lives in Nigeria.

El color del verano, by Cuban Reinaldo Arenas, presents characters in *los intersticios* of the hetero-patriarchal revolutionary system in Cuba. Arenas illustrates poverty, the daily struggle of Cubans to live, eat, and survive. He discusses in great detail the lack of freedom of individual expression and is especially critical of state censorship of literature and art. The novel is an *autohistoria* constructed within many complexities of the characters that participate in the carnival of his memories and collectively represent his spirit of unfettered humanity.

Arenas weaves hilariously defiant stories around his many characters to illustrate life in *los intersticios* of revolutionary Cuba. Rather than accepting the mandatory nationalist narrative, Arenas uses historical characters like Avellaneda and Martí to illustrate the lack of freedom of expression and attempts by Fifo to rewrite history for his benefit. Characters, like Sholekhov, illustrate the absurdity of contradictions between revolutionary ideology and daily life in Cuba while Rubén represents those who are sexually victimized. The grand poet Piñera and the three characters that represent Arenas illuminate how the control of expression and the control of sexuality intersect in the lives of many Cubans.

Through their novels Condé, Euba and Arenas, in this study, illustrate the variability and complexity of oppression in each society as well as strength of their characters to survive and dream of a better future. *Los intersticios* is a very flexible analytical concept that represents a space or a crack between the dominant culture and the culture of those who are oppressed.

Characters navigate the ‘in between’ of their nations, and their experiences may form the basis of a deeper understanding of both oppression and liberation.

For transformation of *los intersticios* to occur, and liberation to result, authors must promote the development of *la conciencia de la mestiza* in their novels; they must awaken readers through their art. This realization of the intricate relation between who we are, how the others see us, and what we can be is central to any conception of freedom from oppression. Recognition of oppression in the three novels will be addressed in depth in the following chapter.

CHAPTER III AWARENESS, UNDERSTANDING AND AGENCY

The previous chapter illustrated how *Victoire*, *Camwood at Crossroads* and *El color del verano* can be considered *autohistoría* novels. Anzaldúa explains that she developed the concept *autohistoría*, “to describe the genre of writing about one’s personal and collective history using fictive elements, a sort of fictionalized autobiography or memoir; an *autohistoría-teoría* is a personal essay that theorizes” (*Borderlands* 578). It theorizes about the collective stories unwritten in the official history of the country from the eyes of the subaltern. This understanding creates new roads within the spiritual knowledge of authors ancestors silenced by oppressions.

The social relations and social conditions encountered by characters in the novels are related to those faced by the authors’ personal and collective history of their people. Chapter III will continue the discussion by illustrating how Condé’s, Euba’s, and Arenas’s awareness of social contradictions drives their desire for a greater understanding of their subaltern position. This process of understanding informs their agency, which is expressed, in part, through literary narratives. Each author challenges readers to reflect critically on the operation of oppression in general and its unique features in the specific societies they write about. By sharing their understandings of oppression with readers, Condé, Euba, and Arenas’s may inspire readers to think about the possibilities of human liberation.

The discussion in chapter II also identified *los intersticios*, in which the characters in the three novels are at the intersections of systems that marginalize them. Chapter III furthers the discussion by illustrating the extent of the characters’ *facultad*, “the quick perception” that is “arrived at without conscious reasoning” of *los mundos* they inhabit. This process may lead to *el conocimiento*, which is the painful knowledge of who they were and are in the social system that they live (*Borderlands* 60). Characters such as Victoire, in *Victoire*, Olumofin, in *Camwood at*

Crossroads, and Tétrica Mofeta, in *El color del verano*, for instance, at different life stages and to varying degrees, demonstrate *la facultad* and *el conocimiento* that shape the course of their life and how they see themselves. This awareness informs their decisions, actions, and desire to be treated with humanity. Condé, Euba and Arenas further use a range of narrative techniques to question the characters' choices and show the contradictions of their actions. These techniques may force readers to think critically about the relationship between an awareness of different *mundos destruidos* (destroyed worlds) and the possibility of transforming them.

The conceptual framework of Gloria Anzaldúa informs the analysis in this chapter. She argued that *Nepantlas* or 'in betweeners' live inside and 'in between' numerous ruined *mundos* (worlds), which were discussed in depth in chapter II. This navigation of *los intersticios* between worlds allows some to become *Nepantleras*, those with the ability to see differing perspectives, understand social contradictions, and to develop the potential to engage in transformative agency. Therefore, explains Keating, *nepantla* is a term that "includes both radical dis-identification and transformation" (9). In other words, *nepantlas* may "dis-identify" with false ideologies, their subaltern status in society, and inflexible identities and may act upon *el conocimiento* (knowledge) of oppressive social relations to free themselves and transform society.

Anzaldúa posits that a *nepantla* is active and chooses her / his path at "the crossroads" of everyday life and acts in order to change the given destiny (*Borderlands* 43). Similar to Elegbara's crossroads, at the Nahuas' crossroads the oppressed have the *la facultad* to be aware, choose their actions, and (re)shape the systems that deny them their freedom. Anzaldúa explains that action to transform springs from *la conciencia de la mestiza*, which is the realization of the intricate relation between the recognition of who we are and how others see and treat us

(*Borderlands*, 42). In societies where the subaltern are marginalized and exploited, the awareness of one's alienated status may spring from these contradictions, fostering realizations like the new Mestiza consciousness, which informs action for social transformation. However, as human action is dialectically related to the cultural and social context in which it occurs, this consciousness building process will be named differently by distinct groups using their own languages. For this comparative study, the concepts developed by Anzaldúa inform the general analytical process of identifying awareness, understanding, and agency in the novels.

In each novel, as characters begin to demonstrate an awareness of the systems and relations that shape their lives, they struggle to redefine their identities, reshape oppressive social relations, and liberate themselves through their choices and their agency; to become more fully human as envisioned by Freire (1974). In *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots*, Victoire's awareness of her subaltern status leads her to express her agency through cooking; transforming her servitude into an art form, which draws praise from those who eat the fruits of her labor. Victoire further understands the importance of educating her daughter, Jeanne, and makes decisions and sacrifices to achieve that goal. Jeanne's awareness of racial and gender subordination informs her focus on education and social class advancement as well as her decision to insulate herself and her children from both. However, Jeanne becomes insular and attempts to hide the past from her children rather than engaging in transformative action. Condé guides readers' reflection on the choices of both by emphasizing the contradictory outcomes of those choices.

In *Camwood at Crossroads*, Euba describes how Olumofin, the main character, has been impacted throughout his life by the clash of traditional Yoruba and Western cultures, particularly religion. Olumofin's education and upward social mobility abroad allows others, in his hometown, to see him as an outsider. Therefore, Olumofin, throughout his reflections and

memories, understands how the Western cultural invasion and the internalization of western ideas continue to shape the Yoruba people in Nigeria. The main character ponders the positive cultural Yoruba traditions that he will add to his in New Orleans, the United States. While visiting his homeland, Olumofin witnesses satiric manifestations of culture and society that informs his understanding of which path he should take as he attempts to liberate himself from the chains of the cultural turmoil. His father, Difala, has also struggled to resolve the tensions between Western and Yoruba religions but for his own convenience – as ‘Jesus of the Well’, Difala has gained power and influence over religious, economic, politic relations in his town. Therefore, his choices create what Olumofin regards as a grotesque hybrid of the two religions with no redeeming qualities.

The mythical, magical, and grotesque experiences of characters in *El color del verano* draw attention to the absurdity of state-sponsored homophobia and censorship to offer readers a critical perspective of revolutionary Cuba from the 1960s to the 1990s. Arenas’s recognition of sexual oppression is omnipresent throughout the novel and he relies on *choteo* to delineate the contradictions of Cuban society through the experiences, actions, and perspectives of his carnival at the Malecón of Havana, Cuba. Arenas further employs *choteo* as a medium of recognition of how homophobia and censorship inhibit social and intellectual growth in Cuba. Writing is an expression of Arenas’s agency and time and space are meaningless as the Cuban writer recreates a similarly oppressive system to mock and criticize Fido and the political regime that destroyed the lives of many Cubans. The awareness of repression feeds characters desire for freedom and gives them the ability to transcend the physical, merge it with the magical, and express their humanity and spirituality.

Characters in each of the three novels struggle against different forms of oppression in distinct ways and some of the characters seem to fully recognize the totality and complexity of the oppressions, which shape their lives. Some characters like Difala, for example, can be aware of the post-colonialist exploitation but his action over his people is similarly exploitative to those of the Western perpetrators. On occasions, characters' goals and actions do not guarantee the desired outcomes and unforeseen consequences impede their paths.

That is why the authors' recognition of their own subaltern position must be considered in the analysis of works of literature that can be considered *autohistoría*. In such works authors can share their recognition of oppression with readers by describing how their characters may not be fully aware. Condé, Euba, and Arenas consider the choices of the characters against other possible outcomes by employing a questioning, satirical, or *choteo* oriented narrative style. These allow active readers to understand the contradictions that shape the characters' lives while perhaps still blinding them to an awareness of sources of characters' subaltern situation. These narrative techniques can force the active reader to critically reflect on the imperfect relationship between awareness, agency, spirituality, and liberation.

Anzaldúa hoped that transformation of existing social relationships could be achieved through non-violent dialogue. She envisioned exchanges between members of various subaltern groups about their experiences with specific forms of oppression and successful transformative strategies they've developed. Theoretically, authors of *autohistoría* novels participate in a transnational dialogue by describing how they and their characters become aware of the contradictions they face at the intersection of systems of oppression. *Victoire*, *Camwood at Crossroads*, *El color del verano* challenge readers to reflect critically on different kinds of oppression and the possibility of transformation as well. This chapter emphasizes how *la*

conciencia, the capacity to understand one's situation, in the active reader can be sparked by fostering a connection between the authors' stories, the characters' lives, their experiences and spirituality in the novels. Anzaldúa's concepts are particularly useful in understanding *autohistoria* novels as tools that teach the reader new paths, which may lead to *la conciencia* guided by a spiritual method of learning, *el dialogo* (dialogue), and the formation of a new epistemology that identifies the need for changes in the *mundos* that subjugate the subaltern.

Victoire: The Author Maryse Condé in Search of Her Inner-Self

« Souffrit-elle, dans cette société obsédée par la couleur »

(She suffered in a society obsessed with color)

--Maryse Condé, *Victoire et les mots*, 103.

Throughout her childhood Maryse Condé always felt unwanted. Due to her parent's relative wealth and social class Condé did not suffer from poverty; however, she lacked knowledge of who she was and who her ancestors were. In terms of Anzaldúa's theory, Condé was alienated from her true heritage and her ancestors by the negation of *el conocimiento* of who she was. The recognition of this negation leads Condé to seek « la vérité » (the truth). Her life's work is a search for answers that she shares with readers to foster a more complex understanding of history, oppression, and liberation. *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots / Victoire My Mother's Mother* (2006) and *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer Contes vrais de mon enfance* (1999) contain the Francophone writer's everyday experiences intertwined with the spirituality and collective memories of Guadeloupean people to write a counter history to raise awareness among readers of the contradictions of life between 'mundos' in Guadeloupe and France.

Condé's mother, Jeanne, had a unique understanding of the system of racism. However, Jeanne negated its existence to her children. In *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer Contes vrais de mon*

enfance, Condé tells us that from very early in her life she understood how her parents were treated differently. She saw how racism affected her and her parents, especially when they traveled to Paris, even though her parents never acknowledged it (19). For the adolescent Condé Paris « était une ville sans soleil, un enfermement de pierres arides, un enchevêtrement de métro et d'autobus où les gens commentaient sans se gêner sur » her « personne: -Elle est mignonne, la petite négresse ! » (was a sunless city, a prison of dry stones and a maze of Metros and buses where people remarked on" her "person with a complete lack of consideration: 'Isn't she adorable, the little Negro girl!') (97 trans. 38).

Reflecting on her experiences and the contradictions she faced while searching for her "inner self", Condé remembers how at the age of ten years old she could not understand « pourquoi doit-on donner des coups aux nègres? » (Why is it black people have to be beaten?) (44 trans. 369). Young Condé learned these words from the mysterious Anne-Marie de Surville, a badly dressed girl with an uncombed pigtail who told Condé, in her fine Parisian dress, that her mother must not see them playing together otherwise she will beat Anne-Marie. Young Condé could not understand how this poor ragamuffin of a girl talked down to her with such authority or why Anne-Marie's mother would beat her for playing. This girl was mysterious for young Condé since she only appears to her to show the absurdity of racism. When young Condé looked for her again, Anne-Marie had disappeared and she and her mother were never seen again, the author recounts in her novel *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer* (42).

Condé, in the process we can compare to *nepantla*, experienced a sense of great confusion, anxiety, and loss of control, and her parents and teachers saw her as a rebel. She was very young when her trusted brother Sadrino, told her that their parents « sont une paire d'aliénés » (are a pair of alienated individuals) (14 trans. 40). The young Condé did not

understand the meaning of this word and imagined it as a very bad disease, such as gonorrhea, which she did not want to contract. However, this strange word, « aliénés » (alienated), opened a new lens in young Condé. She became more curious about her ancestors, their past, and aware of her possible future.

Condé just needed more information to help her understand who she was and why she felt the way she did. We see, in chapter “Chemin d’école,” how Condé at the age of thirteen was a precocious student at Lycée Fénelon in the French metropolis where she met Mademoiselle Lemarchand who was renowned in the daily *L’Humanité* as a Communist teacher (98-99). Mademoiselle Lemarchand helped Condé to understand why she was behaving as a rebel at home and at school and opened a new point of view in Condé’s life.

Mademoiselle Lemarchand encouraged Condé to give a presentation about a book from her island home. Condé did not know of any but her older brother Sandrino once again helped her to understand the importance of reading the literature from their homeland by giving her “*La Rue Cases-Nègres/Black Shack Alley*” by Joseph Zobel. It is a story about a young boy named José who suffered from the poverty and misery in Guadeloupe. This book sparked greater interest and a determination to learn in Condé who, until that moment, did not know that poverty existed in her beloved islands (97-103). The actions of Condé’s teacher helped to open the young Condé’s eyes and allows her to understand that she felt furious at the world, in part, because she did know about her people and their everyday lives in Martinique and Guadeloupe.

Because of her many experiences with race as a child, Condé learned to view social life and her parents, and their views, critically. Through her experiences, particularly in Paris, she saw that she was regarded as ‘different’; as the ‘other’. Her experiences inform her agency, which she expresses through researching, investigating, and re-writing the history of her

homeland through the ‘collective memories’ of the experiences of her family, especially her grandmother and mother. Writing for Condé is a very personal search to understand where she comes from, why her parents are ‘alienated’, who she is, and why she is treated as the ‘other.’ Since Condé searches to discover and explain her findings to others, her work in general and *Victoire* in particular are more than descriptive accounts of family biographies. As *autohistoría* literature, Condé does not merely describe, but critically analyzes by linking individual stories to the collective history of her people and challenging readers to rethink what they may have taken for granted.

Throughout *Victoire*, Condé demonstrates how characters may feel oppression and recognize it in some sense but may not fully understand its origins or all of its dimensions. Condé is an active narrator who questions the decisions of her characters, wonders if they really recognize oppressive relations and, if so, to what extent. Condé further questions public opinion and historical accounts and contemplates alternative decisions by actors, which may have changed the course of history. This narrative approach undermines the authority of hegemonic narratives by showing that accounts of history are fluid and interpretations of events and outcomes may vary based on the social position, experiences, and the spirituality of the narrator.

Further, by illustrating contradictions in the actions and decisions of characters while questioning public judgments, relations of power, and official history, Condé is able to force her readers to be critical. Readers must first see both the author-narrator and her characters as contradictory actors who make decisions and not merely objects or ‘others’. Readers are then guided through an account of history which asks them to reflect, empathize, and fill in unanswered blanks in the story based on their shared experiences, spirituality, and understanding of the human condition. As an *autohistoría* the novel links the experiences of the author to those

of the reader in an attempt to foster greater awareness, promote dialogue, and encourage transformative action.

As discussed in chapter II through multiple examples, gender oppression in Guadeloupe is pervasive. For example, it is apparent in the many instances of pregnant young girls with nowhere to turn and no one to rely on; blamed for their condition and beaten into shame by her own family. However, it is unclear if women consistently recognize their oppression. Victoire's mother, Eliette, for instance, «courait barrer la route du facteur. Espérait-elle une lettre, elle qui ne savait pas lire ? » (would run to waylay the postman. Was she hoping for a letter, she who couldn't even read?) (*Victoire* 20 trans. 6).

Contemplating Condé's account and questions, readers recognize that Eliette may have had some understanding of her position in life, but she had no apparent ability or idea of how to change; she could only hope. Eliette's limited understanding of the causes of her suffering did not translate into transformative action and she died very young. On the other hand, during the search for her grandmother's past, Condé saw through the eyes of Guadeloupean community that Victoire understood her pariah condition; especially within her own upper class family, the Jovial. Further, Condé saw how Victoire attempted to express her agency and creativity through cooking, finding a sense of love with Boniface, and creating a different future for her daughter, Jeanne.

Condé discusses Victoire's early life in a manner that may force readers to consider the contradictions of class, race, and gender within Victoire's family and poor Guadeloupeans. Early in the novel it is uncertain if Victoire recognizes the systems of oppression at *los intersticios* that shape her daily life and experiences with others. However, Condé's questions and comments may make readers reflect critically on the complexities of those systems. For example, Condé

contemplates her grandmother's relationship with Thérèse Jovial and illuminates a particular intersection of class, gender and racial oppressions in which upper class; 'feminists' continue to treat poorer women as subordinates even if they share a similar background of race. Though sharing similar experiences with gender and race oppression, both women remain apart in terms of class. The 'feminist' Thérèse always treats Victoire as her subordinate.

Condé, the active narrator, bitterly notes the contradiction and wonders if action by Thérèse could have changed the course and quality of Victoire's life. «Moi, un point me blesse. Thérèse qui se targuait d'être militante pour la cause des femmes, et qui avait lu Mary Wollstonecraft dans sa traduction espagnole, ne songea jamais à apprendre à lire et écrire à sa protégée. Ainsi, elle l'aurait tirée de l'obscurantisme dans lequel elle vécut sa vie » (As for me, there is one thing I find hurtful. Thérèse, who boasted she was a militant feminist and who had read Mary Wollstonecraft in the Spanish translation, never thought of teaching her protégée to read and write. If she had, she would have removed her from the obscurantism in which Victoire lived all her life) (46-47 trans. 27). Condé guides the reader to think if Thérèse « lui aurait ouvert les portes d'un autre avenir. On peut même imaginer que son existence tout entière aurait été changée » (would have opened the doors to another future. We can even imagine that her entire existence would have changed) (47 trans. 27).

Condé's observation is a critique of gender theories, which see all women as essentially the same in terms of their experiences and treatment in societies around the world. She notes clearly that women may suffer from gender oppression generally but there remain many differences between women based on their lived experiences with class and race as well. Further, Condé challenges readers to reflect on their own choices and actions towards others when she

comments on both the lack of recognition and humanizing action by Thérèse. Similarly, Condé also recognizes that racial unity can be impacted by gender and class differences.

For example, Condé contemplates her grandmother's victimization by Dernier and discovers another intersection of class, gender and racial oppressions in which socialist men of color continue to treat women as subordinates even if they share a similar racial background and poor class position. Dernier is unfaithful to Thérèse, though the two share race and class positions, and sexually violates Victoire, leaving Victoire destitute as well as pregnant and abandoned. Indignantly, Condé asks the readers to consider contradictions in social conceptions of gender in the case of Dernier Argilius. Condé sadly writes « Dernier Argilius a profité dont on ne sait combien de femmes, gâché la vie d'au moins une d'entre elles, planté je ne sais combien de bâtards poussés sans père. Cela n'importe pas ? » (Dernier Argilius took advantage of I don't know how many women, wrecked the life of at least one of them, and engendered I don't know how many bastards who grew up without a father". Doesn't that count?) (50 trans. 30).

Noticing that Dernier is regarded by official history as a defender of newly freed and illiterate slaves, Condé shares her absolute disgust with readers that he was able to rape Victoire and avoid being blamed for it – just like so many men before and since. He was a black-skinned socialist who, after his death, 1899, became a « modèle, de ce martyr » (role model and martyr) (50 trans.30). Monographs and bibliographies describe Argilius as « un ardent défenseur des nègres opprimés » (an ardent defender of the illiterate oppressed Negroes) in Guadeloupean history books (50 trans. 30). Condé uses the experience of her grandmother to begin her analysis and is able to call readers' attention to the complexities of gender oppression in Guadeloupe as well by not merely individualizing the experience of her grandmother, Victoire.

Illustrating that both systems of race and gender oppression intersect in the lives of distinct individuals with different outcomes, rather than being totalizing systems of oppression that are experienced by everyone in the same manner (*This Bridge Called My Back*, 1983). Condé shares her recognition of the complex interaction of systems of oppression in Guadeloupe. She describes the daily operation and contradictions of these systems to actively challenge readers to contemplate oppression in relation to their own choices and actions. Similarly, recognition and action by the characters is also important to describe oppressive systems more fully to readers; however, characters lack of recognition or their incomplete recognition is also important. Condé is able to juxtapose lack of character recognition to events and contradictions in the novel in order to challenge readers to develop a more complete awareness of oppression than the characters.

For example, beyond challenging readers to consider the contradictions of race and gender oppression she has come to recognize, Condé ponders if it is possible that Victoire recognized her position in life and sought betterment for herself and her daughter. Condé imagines that Victoire cried for the first time in her life after the birth of Jeanne and, « jura à sa fille de veiller sur elle, de mettre toutes les chances de son côté afin que jamais personne ne puisse la piétiner comme on la piétinait, elle? » (swore to her daughter she would watch over her and give her every possible chance in life so that nobody would ever trample on her daughter like they had trampled on her?) (*Victoire* 70 trans. 46). If Victoire recognized that she was socially oppressed, her actions should follow from that awareness. In fact, Condé posits that from the moment of Jeanne's birth, Victoire sacrificed and dedicated her life to Jeanne's education and social advancement so Jeanne would not have to suffer as she did.

Victoire's recognition of her own racial oppression is specifically seen in her refusal to say goodbye to anyone before she left her home with Jeanne to never return. «Jamais au grand jamais, elle ne rentrerait chez des gens qui l'humiliaient et la détestaient depuis petite. Ti-Sapoti, Volan, elle pourrait jamais oublier leurs sarcasmes et les noms qu'ils lui donnaient » (Never, never would she step into the homes of people who had humiliated her and hated her ever since she was a little girl. She could never forget their sarcastic remarks and the names of *Ti-Sapoti* and *Volan*¹⁶ they gave her) (74 trans. 50). Although of African descent, the 'lightness' of her skin color relative to others of African descent contributed to her lifelong marginalization by Guadeloupeans regardless of their poor situation. It is not clear to what extent Condé's grandmother understood the historical and social complexity of racism.

However, Victoire's awareness of her color and how others viewed continued to impact her decisions throughout life. This impact can be seen in everyday social interactions such as when Victoire went to the river to cool off and her encounter with poor Guadeloupeans. Those working nearby the river did not see Victoire as part of their collective poor life because of her pale skin color. Condé recounts, that Victoire « aussi aurait aimé se baigner. Mais la pensée de dénuder son corps blanc la choquait comme une indécence » (would have liked to go for a swim. But the thought of baring her white body seemed shockingly indecent to her) (143 trans. 105).

Condé also imagines that Victoire's life experiences and limited opportunities allowed her to recognize gender oppression. For example, Condé contemplates how being unable to have children after Jeanne's birth had an impact on Victoire, « Je crois deviner ce que Victoire ressentit. Dans nos société, de nos jours encore, être mère est la seule vraie vocation de la femme. Le stérilité revient à traîner un corps inutile, privé de sa vertu essentielle » I think I can

¹⁶ Italic by the translator

guess what Victoire felt. In our societies, even today, to be a mother is the only true vocation of a woman. Sterility means nothing less than dragging around a useless body, deprived of its essential virtue” (71 trans. 48). Further illustrative of her recognition of gender oppression is her understanding of the place of women in a patriarchal society. After Dernier’s death in a fire, Victoire reflected on what her life would have become if he had educated rather than violated her; if he had treated her as a human and not as an object of his desire. The account further challenges readers to reflect on how their own actions may shape others and our collective future: « Elle se demandait ce que sa vie aurait été si la passion de Dernier pour les déshérités s’était concrétisée en intérêt pour son dénuement à elle. Si ce *vayan nèg*¹⁷, qui que battait pour que la gratuité de l’enseignement soit une réalité pour tous, avait pris sa main pour l’aider à tracer les lettres de l’abécédaire. Est-ce que se soucier de la forêt empêche de porter soin à chacun des fûts qui la composent ? » (She wondered what her life would have been like if Dernier’s passion for the disinherited had materialized into an interest for her own destitution. If this *vayan nèg*¹⁸, this valiant Negro, who had advocated free schooling for all, had taken her hand to decipher the letters of the alphabet. Does caring for the forest prevent you from looking after each and every one of its trees? What else does love for humanity signify if not love and respect for every human being?) (113 trans. 81).

Her understanding of class, race and gender oppression, in society as well as within her own family, informed Victoire’s choices and actions in life. Recognizing her subaltern situation, and in order to feel like a fully realized human being, she sacrificed everything for Jeanne’s social mobility. Victoire transformed her work as a cook into an expression of her creativity, where she found love with a man in a relationship regarded by many as exploitive and unnatural.

¹⁷ Emphasis by the novelist

¹⁸ Emphasis by translator

In terms of her actions to transform the unjust conditions and relationships that affect her life daily, Victoire seems to have had at least a limited awareness of her social position and a determination to be free, to actively shape her relationships with others in order to realize her humanity. Condé's account allows readers to see how even the most oppressed of us strive to define and control the conditions of daily life in order to feel more human and are not merely victims or objects of social control.

Race division, poverty and gender differences limited Victoire's economic opportunities and allowed her few options except cleaning and cooking for others. From very early on in life she had to live with others, attend to their needs, and cook for them in order to survive. However, as Victoire became more aware of her social position relative to others, she transformed the exploitation of her labor into an art form, which allowed her to feel alive and free to celebrate her humanity. For Victoire, cooking was not merely labor « c'était sa manière d'exprimer un moi constamment refoulé, prisonnier de son analphabétisme, de sa bâtardise, de son sexe, de toute sa condition asservie. Quand elle inventait des assaisonnements, ou mariait des goûts, sa personnalité se libérait, s'épanouissait » (It was her way of expressing herself, which was constantly repressed, prisoner of her illiteracy, her illegitimacy, her gender, and her station as a servant. When she invented seasonings or blended flavors, her personality was set free and blossomed) (100 trans. 71).

Her grandmother's ability to achieve a sense of freedom while being exploited is an important discovery for Condé. The realization that one's awareness and actions can shape the world and transform social relationships is a major theme throughout this novel that the author shares with readers. So important is this finding, in fact, that Condé claims Victoire's creative legacy and emphasizes how she sees her labor, writing, as an expression of her humanity.

« Établir le lien qui unit sa créativité à la mienne. Passer des saveurs, des couleurs, des odeurs des chairs ou des légumes à celles des mots » (I want to establish the link between her creativity and mine, to switch from the savors, the colors, and the smells of meat and vegetables to those of words) (85 trans 59). Clearly, to the extent that cooking was an expression of Victoire's human agency, writing serves the same purpose for Condé.

Finally, abused by men for their own desires throughout life, Victoire was able to find 'love' in her relationship with Boniface, although he was Creole, wealthy, and a married man. Everything about their relationship seems as if a more powerful man sexually exploited Victoire; however, she was able to make the relationship one that allowed her to feel safe, satisfied, and able to meet her goal of giving Jeanne more options in life. Condé notes the contradiction, « Tout laisse à penser qu'elle obéit d'abord à Anne-Marie et s'accorda avec elle pour la soulager d'un odieux devoir conjugal. Pourtant, peu à peu, elle s'attacha à Boniface qu'à mon avis, elle finit par aimer » (Everything leads us to believe that she first obeyed Anne-Marie and agreed to relieve her of a loathsome conjugal duty. Yet gradually she grew attached to Boniface and in my opinion ended up loving him) (95 trans 67). Victoire's grief after Boniface passed away is evidence of her love for him, Condé concludes.

Condé demonstrates how her socially marginalized grandmother gained awareness of her position in life and made choices to free herself from bonds of class, race, and gender oppression. Victoire made the choice to free her daughter from « la pauvreté abjecte » (abject poverty) that she faced with her own family, Jovial (143 trans. 105). Her actions did not change Guadeloupe, but she was determined that all of her actions would be dedicated to improve her and Jeanne's future paths in life. She was not passive in the face of oppression. Her determination that Jeanne would not suffer as she did, her creative ability to transform her labor,

and her ‘unnatural’ love for Boniface demonstrate that an individual sense of ‘liberation’ and the transformation of immediate oppressive social relations is possible although often with uncertain outcomes.

Unforeseen and contradictory outcomes of Victoire’s actions are seen in the attitudes and actions of her daughter, Jeanne. Victoire wanted better for Jeanne and her awareness of oppression informed her choice to do everything possible to ensure Jeanne’s education and upward social mobility. The personal sacrifices she made were great but, ironically, Jeanne felt that Victoire never understood exploitation. She was born from a very poor and uneducated mother and ultimately regarded the wealthy, Creole Walberg as « bons maîtres » (good masters) (188 trans. 75). Though Boniface regarded Jeanne as his daughter, transferred money to her bank account in times of need, helped to pay for her education, and included her in his will, Jeanne hated him for his relationship with her mother.

By demonstrating, for example, how a mother and her daughter can share a similar social background and status position yet experience the intersection of oppression very differently and choose very different paths in life, Condé intensely pushes readers to reflect on the complexity of how class, race, gender, systems shape people lives. Victoire and Jeanne’s everyday experiences illuminate their *conocimiento* of their life in *los intersticios* of Guadeloupean society. Condé illuminates, in *Victoire*, how although nationalist and essentialist narratives regard both as the same, as black poor women, they are very different from each other.

Whereas Victoire’s experiences and understanding of oppression culminate in some positive and transformative action on her part, Jeanne’s experiences and awareness of class, race, and gender oppression is individualized, manifests as rage and selfishness, and culminates in her social isolation. Further, her choices and actions work to negate those of Victoire and undermine

her agency and much of what Victoire has worked to accomplish. Condé's focus on the contradictions in her mother's thinking and action allows readers to reflect on the uncertain relation between awareness, understanding and agency.

Jeanne's experiences with race were profoundly hurtful. As we remember from the comparative analysis in chapter II, teachers, classmates, and family friends continually victimized Jeanne because of her very dark skin. Further, while taking advantage of educational opportunities that Victoire worked so hard to ensure for her, Jeanne contradictorily learned that Africa and its people were savage and that Europe was the height of civilization. However, rather than considering these experiences and ideological narratives critically, she tended to personalize experiences with race while accepting the dominant accounts of race relations. Her frustration and anger is seen in her rejection of both Boniface and Victoire. « Elle voulait s'éloigner de la maison Walberg, de ce cercle de bourgeois blancs pays qui la méprisaient à cause de sa couleur et qu'elle méprisait à cause de leur inculture » (She wanted to get away from the Walberg household, from this circle of bourgeois white Creoles who despised her on account of her color and whom she despised on account of their lack of education. Above all, she wanted to get away from her mother, a dull-witted vassal who obliged her to live in their midst) (133 trans. 97).

Each time Jeanne faced racial prejudice and discriminatory actions in life, she withdrew from others a little more, internalizing the pain, gained a different awareness. Jeanne ultimately became a person who most people despised and criticized for being aloof. Later in life, Condé's mother never shared her experiences of race, and poverty with her children; she hid the topic of race from them and pretended that her level of education and class position would always insulate herself and her children from such treatment. Jeanne's experiences in *los intersticios* of class, race and gender oppression furthermore demonstrated to her that no man, regardless of his

race and class, was worthy of her love. Once, witnessing the funeral of young woman who committed suicide because she was in love; Jeanne might reflect and protested – « Se tuer pour un homme? Quelle inanité ! » (Commit suicide for a man? What stupidity!) (115 trans. 82).

Since Jeanne's reactions to racial oppression were individualized and not fully thought out, her different level of awareness nurtured a will to survive in her. But in Condé, Jeanne's awareness does not foster a desire to know her past and transform oppressive social relations in the present. Very early on in life Jeanne decided that education would be the key to her survival and it became the only thing that mattered in her life; however, she seemingly accepted what she was taught uncritically. Jeanne's understanding of race informed her general dislike for 'white' people while she contradictorily accepted French culture. Her distrust of men, and apparent inability to love, drove her acceptance of marrying a man for his class and social position rather than a desire for happiness. Finally, as her class position improved, she attempted to control Victoire and her actions. Jeanne first refused to eat food prepared by Victoire; she then tried to stop Victoire from cooking, and she prevented Victoire from seeing her love, Boniface.

Witnessing the contradictory outcome of her life's efforts to secure a better future for Jeanne, Victoire realized: « En fin de compte, qu'avait-elle gagné à suivre les suggestions d'Anne-Marie et à s'installer *dèyè chèt*¹⁹ de blancs pays à La Pointe ? Ni elle ni Jeanne n'avait connu la faim. Un point, c'est tout. Mais la pauvre enfant portait des cicatrices qu'aucune chirurgie réparatrice n'effacerait » (When all is said and done, what had she gained by following Anne-Marie's suggestions and settling down with a family of white Creoles in La Pointe? Neither she nor Jeanne had gone hungry. And that's about it. But the child bore scars that no surgery could repair) (206 trans. 155). Victoire wanted better for her daughter and Jeanne

¹⁹ Emphasis by the novelist

worked for educational and social class elevation. However, her understanding of race and gender oppression remained mostly uncritical throughout her life and negatively impacted her attitude and interactions with others who saw her as hateful.

Condé recounts that her parents, Jeanne and Auguste, tended to accommodate to the social order by accepting French culture as ‘high’ culture. Condé’s parents were generally unforgiving to those that did not share their view of life or class position. Particularly in later life, they did not see themselves as alienated or oppressed. Condé remembered « [à] part cela, ils n’exprimèrent jamais aucune opinion politique, ne prirent part à aucun grand combat » (They never expressed a political opinion and never took part in any major cause) (208 trans.156). Insulated from much Guadeloupean daily poverty due to their social class position, Jeanne and Auguste saw themselves as very intelligent and outstanding in contrast with other people in Guadeloupe and France, Condé explains. They considered that evidence of this was their wealth and social mobility.

Condé pointedly notes that her father’s, « Son seul souci était de parvenir à faire de l’argent » (His only concern was to make money) (191 trans. 142). From the viewpoint of Condé’s parents, there was no better culture than French culture and they were « montrait reconnaissant envers la France qui leur avait permis de l’obtenir » (ever grateful to France for allowing them to obtain it) (*Le cœur à rire et à pleurer* 16 trans. 33). For Condé and her brothers and sister, their parents were greedy and selfish people who chose a path that suited their personal needs and desires. Further, they did not see themselves as racially oppressed and either ignored or accepted false ideologies about race. In fact, Condé remembers that her father never talked about Africa, and he never went to « la rue des Écoles où la revue *Présence africaine* sortait du cerveau d’Alioune Diop » (the Rue des Écoles, where the journal *Présence Africaine*

was the brainchild of Alioune Diop) (16 trans. 63-64). Observing her mother and father Condé concluded that « [u]ne personne aliénée est une personne qui cherche à être ce qu'elle ne peut pas être parce qu'elle n'aime pas être ce qu'elle est » ([a]n alienated person is someone who is trying to be what he can't be because he does not like what he is) (16 trans. 53-54).

Another example of her parents' emphasis on class position and their lack of desire to recognize race and gender divisions are recounted through Condé's childhood memories in *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer*. Condé describes Madame, her family's servant, as a woman, « Une grande chabine triste qui laissait ses six enfants se débrouiller comme ils pouvaient sur le morne Udol et qui, dès cinq heures du matin, faisait couler le café dans notre cuisine » (a tall, melancholic, high yellow woman who left her six children to fend for themselves on the Morne Udol in order to brew the coffee in our kitchen at five every morning) (29 trans. 155).

Madame's situation in life is similar to that of Victoire since she made sacrifices through her servitude to support her children as well.

As a young girl, Condé remembers one gray morning in which Madame missed cooking breakfast for her family and did not take the children to school. On this day Madame's daughter felt very ill and she took her to the hospital. Due to this family problem, Madame missed work and Condé's mother fired her without hesitation. Condé recounts that eventually Madame not only lost her job but her poor young daughter died at the Saint Jules hospice. The cause of Madame's daughter death is not illuminated in the novel. The contradiction of this event offered Condé a different lens, *la facultad*, on her upper-middle class life and sparked a desire to know about her ancestors' past. Within this search, Condé develops *el conocimiento*, a better understanding of her family and the different *mundos* people live in, navigate to survive, and shape through their actions.

In summary, Condé's childhood experiences and contradictions in between *mundos* open a new perspective. She sees *la vérité* (the truth) of her poor but beautiful islands. This shift in perception catalyzed a process of exploration of who she is and who her ancestors were. Aware that histories of the subaltern are erased and their voices silenced in official accounts, Condé relies on the memories of the people of Guadeloupe and Martinique. Condé wants to know « *la vérité* » about her pale grandmother, Victoire, who raised her mother, Jeanne, to be a respected teacher, even though she was an outcast to her own people. For Condé, *el conocimiento* of her pale pariah grandmother also exposed *la vérité* of her own middle class life.

Recounting her search with readers, Condé shares the complexities of subjugation which structure the lives of poor women in Guadeloupe and Martinique. Condé is aware that sociology and literature are full of misleading history illustrating how women and people of African descent in Guadeloupe live. Condé's *Victoire* can be considered an *autohistoria* that compels readers to reconsider the past of Guadeloupeans from the eyes of subalterns. Rather than portraying people of African descent as similarly situated in Guadeloupe, Condé shows how varying forms of oppression can come from your own people to create very different and contradictory outcomes in people's lives. The Guadeloupean writer further illustrates how other women marginalize women, even if they share an apparent common history of racial and class oppression. Condé's memories of her people defy simple analyses that see all women as 'sisters'. It instead demonstrates the complexity of specific intersections of systems of oppression in shaping the daily experiences of those in *los intersticios* between *mundos* (worlds).

Anzaldúa explains that inner-self delineates the necessity for reflecting on who we are and what we believe as true. She points out that the danger lies in the inner of her self where there is the shadow beast of the false ideologies that we learn in society. By searching for the

truth and sharing it with readers, Condé demonstrates *la facultad*; the awareness of oppression and the awareness that there are other paths we can choose to follow. Throughout the novel she presents contradictions, points out the shortcomings of people and their actions, questions if her characters really understand the forces that shape their lives, and thereby challenges readers to be active, critically reflective, and consider the role of individuals in transforming oppressive social relations. It is clear that both Victoire and Jeanne had limited awareness of oppression and engaged in actions with contradictory outcomes; however, their experiences inform Condé who shares memories of their lives so that readers may learn, understand, and become more aware of themselves, their relations with others, and the complex nature of oppressive social systems.

The following section analyzes Femi Euba's *Camwood at Crossroads* and Olumofin's search for his ancestors' history; he looks to the past for insight and answers. Similar to Condé, Euba researches written records and collective memories to write his novel and present the history of Lagos, Nigeria from the eyes of the subalterns. In *Camwood at Crossroads*, Olumofin's journey, the main character, is more of a reflection on youth and the transformations he has witnessed in order to come to terms with his father, Difala. Euba illuminates how Olumofin and Difala choose different paths in response to similar social and cultural forces. Through reflection and questions, Euba challenges readers to be aware of contradictions, as does Condé. Euba employs the satire of Esu Elegbara to guide readers to focus on the grotesque quality of social contradictions and people's choices.

Condé shows how both Victoire and Jeanne occupied similar social position but were quite different in their level of understanding and could not agree on how to act and transform oppressive social relations. Similarly, Euba's main character, Olumofin, and his father, Difala, are at odds with each other over how to respond to the impact of Western post-colonialism in

Yoruba culture and religion. Olumofin and Difala navigate a world in between Yoruba and Western cultures and both understand that they have to act to shape their futures; however, their choices, their roads, are very different. Each regards the other as having an incomplete understanding of circumstances and as choosing to follow a path that does not lead to autonomy.

La Facultad and La Conciencia at Esu Elegbara's Crossroads

“No hay mal que por bien no venga”

“Bad things happened for a good reasons”

Afro-Cuban Saying

The discussion in chapter II illustrates how Euba creates characters, Olumofin and Difala, who inhabit *los intersticios* between *mundos*- the transforming Yoruba society and the creation of a modern Nigerian by the imposition of Western notions of development. As conceptualized by Anzaldúa, Euba's characters can be viewed as engaged in a kind of *nepantla* process as they are torn between ways and engaged in processes of self-reflection, choice, and possible liberation. Chapter III continues the discussion by examining how Euba creates characters that have recognition and level of understanding of the conditions that impact their lives. Of specific importance will be the actions taken by them to transform oppressive conditions based on their understanding.

Camwood at Crossroads, by Euba, unfolds around the experiences, memories, and reflections of Olumofin Falashe during his business journey to Nigeria. Throughout the novel a series of satiric events and interactions drives Olumofin's reflection on his past and the cross-cultural contrasts between Yoruba and Western cultures. Olumofin's reflection on his youth sets the basis for his awareness, *la facultad* - a change in his perception that he has contemplated since he was seven years old. As he begins to make relational connections among distinct events,

people, experiences, and realities Olumofin gains *el conocimiento*, an understanding of how tensions between the traditional and the modern structure his life and inform his consciousness. This understanding, according to Gloria Anzaldúa, can inform agency and influence actions for social transformation. At the crossroads of his life, Olumofin considers what to do in relation to his father and gains a greater understanding of continuing transformations in Nigeria on which to base his actions.

Anzaldúa's theory and concepts are quite insightful in guiding a reading of *Camwood at Crossroads* as her work contains elements of both Nahuas and Yoruba spirituality, as can be seen when she notes that it is Esu Elegbara who "blesses her choice of path" (*Borderlands* 42-43, 100-102). Therefore, this novel can be considered an *autohistoria* since the main character, Olumofin, is representative of Femi Euba's life, experiences, and contemplations. Euba, in a personal interview on Aug 27, 2014, illuminates that he "created Olumofin based on" the "experience" that he "had from high school." He "had a friend named like this – Lakija," explains Euba. Euba "is not Olumofin," but people like Olumofin delineate the collective history of his town, the novelist concludes.

Therefore, Euba's theory of the Drama of Epidemic in *Archetypes, Imprecators, and Victims of Fate* (1989), more specifically informs readers' understanding of the central role of Esu Elegbara's satire in guiding the choices of one's future paths. Euba posits that the intensity of Esu's satire reflects the extent to which the contemporary society has wandered away from the traditional. Freedom from oppressive relations and conditions in modern societies is, therefore, conceptualized as a restoration of traditional values to guide transformations and maintain social equilibrium.

When people lose awareness of what is really important in life such as core cultural values, like a sense of communal balance, and a sense of social justice, Esu may employ satire in the form of a grotesque event or outcome in order to make one rectify the situation. Recognition of the departure from these norms by witnessing the satire of Esu Elegbara may inform one's choice of future paths in life. However, Euba emphasizes that what is at stake is the fate of the community and the fate of the society. Each individual moves through life interacting with and comparing her or himself against the fates of other individuals, thus; all individual fates are interrelated and conflicting forces. Esu's satire is a public indictment, which links the individual to the communal in an attempt to reorder society and restore good traditional qualities such as the love of life and respect for human dignity.

As an *autohistoría* which links individual experience to that of the community and society, the satire in Euba's narrative may have a collective or an 'epidemic' effect on readers by informing their understanding of life in *los intersticios* and potentially influencing their future choices. That listening and watching for signs from Esu is crucial to this process becomes clear early in the novel when Olumofin recalled Difala, Prophet and Diviner, telling a member of the congregation, "Those whose patient ears are tuned to the vibrating waves of the earth must sooner or later gain knowledge of the mysteries of their childhood and then make the most of their fate" (*Camwood at Crossroads*, 15). This idea is central to the ongoing process of awareness, understanding, and change for characters in *Camwood at Crossroads* as well as a challenge from Euba to his readers.

Femi Euba examines the impact of European post-colonialism on daily life in Nigeria as well as the movement of African people from their homeland to live and in work in the countries and cultures of the post-colonial powers. With Esu as a guide, Olumofin's recognizes the

contradictions in his father's and his close friends' lives and chooses his own path. Satiric encounters help Olumofin arrive at a greater understanding of his childhood and his choice of living abroad for good and continuing his 'camwood of creolization' with Savannah, the creole New Orleans artist. It is through the grotesquery and satire within Olumofin's encounters and memories that readers might understand his past (African ancestry), present (New Orleans and Lagos fused), and future (camwood of creolization) and use this understanding to influence their own choices. Euba calls *Camwood at Crossroads* a "philosophical novel about exploitation" (Euba).

From the beginning of *Camwood at Crossroads*, it is clear that, torn between worlds, Olumofin is on a journey of self-discovery that will lead him to make a choice concerning his future path. Standing at the crossroads, sudden rains before Harmattan season (*Camwood at Crossroads*, 9) point to the start of the festival of Esu, the deity who will guide Olumofin's reflection and inform his understanding as to which path he should take. In modern Nigeria, Yoruba cultural traditions clash with those of the West resulting in cultural transformations and societal disruptions. As a result, individually and collectively, Nigerians begin to ignore or misinterpret core Yoruba values. Aware of this tension, Olumofin navigates the in-between and wonders if one has, "to have physical ties with one's roots to function as a cultural human being" (10). By the end of the novel he becomes determined to choose a path in which elements of Yoruba culture such as 'camwood' and elements of African American Creole culture in New Orleans come together in hope of creating a better world.

Olumofin is determined his current visit to Nigeria will give him time to reflect on his youth and come to terms with choices he has made. He looks forward to spending time with old friends and sorting out the ways in which their fates are connected. Olumofin wants to avoid

family issues, but thinking about friends leads him to remember school and religion and his family again. He remembers that he was always sensitive to ambiguities, and how contradictions he perceived raised questions in his mind, which is what Anzaldúa refers to as *la facultad*. Olumofin further recalls how biblical stories, “troubled the querulous mind of his youth” and how education and the knowledge he gained in later life allowed him to, “come to certain conclusions about religion, evangelism, and his father” (17).

Although Olumofin always knew that his father’s actions would one day become public, while standing at the crossroads examining the morning paper, the *Daily Service*, he was stupefied by the news on the front page that his father, the Prophet Difala, was to face trial for using religion for his personal wealth and influence. Satirically, the *Daily Service* announced “‘The Panshaga of Jesus of the Well’” and called attention to his many sexual depravities such as using a whip to subdue women to have sex. The Yoruba word “Panshaga,” applied to his father’s sexual behavior gives a festive tone that makes the readers, including Olumofin, grin involuntarily and recognize the satire of Esu, its ridicule, in an otherwise tragic situation. This recognition begins a process in which Olumofin wrestles with being torn between worlds and tries to understand how his fate is intertwined with that of his father as well as Nigerians collectively.

The events Olumofin recalls are satiric and serve as a public indictment of his father’s behavior to illustrate how far Difala has exploited tradition. As he remembers his past, Olumofin smiles at how, as the prodigal son of a *babalawo*, a Prophet, his decision to live abroad was not widely accepted by the Yoruba people who saw people like him as rebels and reprobates. Many people knew Olumofin’s father as the ‘prophet’ called the ‘Jesus of the Well’ and held him in high regard. They believed that tradition demanded Olumofin follow his father’s path. However,

Olumofin sees the contradiction in this suggestion and challenges the notion that his father's religious practices are in line with tradition. In fact, he understands that Difala hybridized the Yoruba religion of his father Baba²⁰ Atiga, an herbalist *babalawo* who would whip and heal his clients with *iroko*²¹ branches, with Christianity brought first by British Christian missionaries and later by American evangelicals.

Olumofin began to reject his father's religious practices during childhood though it is not completely clear why until the end of the novel. He hid the knowledge of who his father was from others when he was young and he considers his mother a victim of his father's corrupt religious practices who "[d]ied perhaps of a broken heart" due to his father's perverse desires in the name of religion (14). In later life, he argues with his father every time they meet while criticizing his choices and behavior. Olumofin regards Difala as a victim of his own fate who has violated traditional Yoruba expectations; a corrupted *baba*, an evangelist who uses the religion as a medium of survival but who has corrupted it for his own convenience. Witnessing the satire of Esu in many events involving his father, Olumofin sadly understands that Difala's cultural transformation is based on bad and corrupt decisions, and he is determined not to make the same mistakes.

However, though he decides to not be like his father, Olumofin sees that his father's "response to Christianity was that of a man at the crossroads of the cultures" who intelligently and creatively weaved elements from two religions together in order to ensure his path for survival and serve the spiritual needs of many who believed in him (73). The knowledge of

²⁰ Baba means *babalawo* for male Priest in Yoruba religion. *Babalawo* means father ancient of wisdom, herbalist and diviner. See *Ifa* by Bascom, and Thompson Drewal and John Drewal for more information.

²¹ William W. Bascom explains "[t]he iroko or African Oak or African Teak (*Chlorophora excelsa*) is one of the largest trees of the West African rain forest" (*Ifa* 141). *Iroko* is viewed as sacred oak in Yoruba religion.

religion that Olumofin has gained in later life juxtaposed against the satire of Esu allows him to understand that his father also made a choice at the crossroads when faced with the imposition of Western culture and religion. Olumofin is aware that there, “was a special African touch to his father’s religious approach, a peculiar flavor that secretly amused him” (14); however, he disagrees with his father’s choice. Olumofin thus moves beyond mere recognition of life in *los intersticios* to develop a more complex understanding of the contradictions that shape people’s lives and informs their choices.

Continuing his journey through his childhood hometown, Olumofin’s reflection on interactions he has with others allows readers to see how he recognizes his ‘in-between’ position. Olumofin feels that he is culturally rooted to Nigeria despite his physical absence and is frustrated to be seen in a way that he does not feel is accurate or just. For example, Olumofin’s conversation with the taxi driver shows that he is able to separate himself from both Nigerians who he feels abuse traditional codes of behavior and white foreigners who grow rich while Nigerians suffer poverty. When quoted a fare by the taxi driver during a very satiric interaction, Olumofin firmly states:

I’m not your oyinbo that you could simply skin alive. I know the fares around town. What I’m offering you is quite adequate. More than adequate. (34)

The driver’s language is hybridized, while his actions and demands are more in line with Western individualism than the ideal of community within the Yoruba notion of the marketplace, in fact one of Esu’s habitats. The market is representative of the world that is full of interacting fates.

Similarly, drawn by the memory of eating *akara* Olumofin comes across the *akara* seller from his youth sitting in almost exactly the same spot she has always occupied. Despite new buildings that make the old neighbor unrecognizable and newly constructed roads that put her at

risk of being hit by a car, she seems to be an unmovable reminder of the way life once was. However, her rudeness and inability to see Olumofin in the manner he views himself, as a cultural Nigerian who just happens to live abroad, showed him that, like his father and the taxi driver, she was a bad product manufactured by colonial intervention; hybrid and at odds with traditional expectations of social behavior, a comment the *akara* seller ironically casts on him. Such satiric encounters help Olumofin construct a philosophical and satirical diastral on the grocer and the manufacturer; this helps him to clear his conscience about not becoming part of the “manufacturing culture,” in which the colonialist is the manufacturer and the exploited native is a bad product, the “grocer” (107).

Euba’s narrative and use of satire continually links individual fate to collective fate and challenges readers to reflect on themselves and their societies. In *Camwood at Crossroads* Olumofin is challenged by the satire he witnesses during interpersonal interactions to make connections between individual behavior and social conditions. Olumofin contemplates the political and economic situation in Nigeria continually to try to make sense of the collective fate of Nigerians, their deviation from Yoruba tradition, and their acceptance and/or hybridization of Western culture. He wonders if the repeated near collapses of the Nigeria state is a satiric warning from Esu about the dangers of forgetting traditional codes of behavior and social interaction. During one such moment of contemplation about the chaos of daily life in Nigeria, Olumofin asks, “Was this part of the inscrutable design, part of the long process of life’s experience for tradition to rediscover itself” (25).

Olumofin believes that we are each somehow responsible for our own fates due to the choices we make through our character traits. Therefore, rather than simply blaming the British for their colonial rule, he sees that political rulers, the economic elite, and all those who choose

to participate in the corruption are responsible for the collective fate of Nigerian society. For example, Olumofin recognizes the rampant corruption since independence in 1960 and refers to Nigeria as: "... the fucked-up phone system. He excused himself for his language but felt it was an appropriate phrase to express the totality of his exasperation about the conditions of the country, the economic waste, and undeserved hardship into which present rulers had plunged the people, a country where one continued to place one's life at risk at every turn" (46). Similarly, Olumofin views the escalating number of car accidents from 1967 until today as due to the neglect and corruption of the commissioners of the roads in Nigeria. He further links these accidents to the fatal power of Esu by noting that many Nigerians link car accidents on the Carter Bridge to the 'disempowering' of Esu by the colonialists. The accidents are a satirical reminder of the fate that Nigerians have chosen and can only be resolved by the recognition by Nigerians that they are losing touch with their traditional value system and way of life.

In novels displaying elements of *autohistoria*, the character's point of view often reflects that of the author. A review of Euba's previous work confirms this is the case with *Camwood at Crossroads*. For Euba, Nigeria's "stagnant economy, inflation, armed robbery are all manifestations of the fatal power of Esu generated to strike awareness of that imbalance and the necessity to maintain a balance" (*Archetypes* 89). This is why Euba challenges readers to contemplate how this horrible state of affairs can be understood and transformed. In *Camwood at Crossroads*, Esu Elegbara is the guide, messenger, and teacher capable of awakening consciousness in Olumofin, through the grotesquery of satire in terms of the political, economic, and social problems that have afflicted Nigeria. Similar to the conclusion drawn by the character Olumofin, Euba points out in *Archetypes* that these social problems can be seen as

“manifestations of the fatal power of Esu”, and “can be reduced by conscious efforts” of the Nigerian people (89).

Olumofin is not Euba, but represents the in-between experience of the novelist. Similar to Euba, the main character migrates to the United States in order to find a better life away from his father’s corrupted religion. However, he still struggles to retain a sense of balance and equilibrium in his life that is consistent with traditional Yoruba values. In fact, Olumofin’s realization about the negative aspects of neo-colonial culture in Nigeria does not inspire him to blindly accept Western culture and values by following, for example, the religious path of Bill Braggart, an evangelist living in New Orleans that was modeled after Jimmy Swaggart.²²

From very early on in the novel, Olumofin draws comparisons between the Prophet Difala and Bill Braggart to reflect on the grotesque quality of their religious orientation and practices, their mutual perversions, and to draw a lesson about his own future. When Olumofin seemingly forgets about the connection, something occurs which forces him to reflect and remember something that he may have forgotten. For instance, during his return flight to New Orleans Olumofin once again is reminded about Bill Braggart’s corrupt religious practice in a newspaper that Mr. Dewlap (a name concocted for him from his dewlap) is reading to Olumofin on the plane (*Camwood at Crossroads* 123, 137). Cowboy-looking Mr. Dewlap, knowing that Olumofin was living in New Orleans, told Olumofin, between laughs, “[t]his paper says he’s [Bill Braggart] been caught in a whorehouse in Bourbon Street!” and that Bill Braggart’s excuse was that “he was trying to win the soul of the whore to salvation!” (137). Initially, Olumofin can see how the satire points to contradictions between what religious leaders say and do.

²² Jimmy Swaggart, an American evangelist who had a TV program “watched by up two million families and donations raised amounting to about \$ 150m a year”. On February 21th of 1988, he resigned after confessing that “he had been consorting with a prostitute” in a “Louisiana motel,” BBC News, remembers on its anniversary in 2006.

However, once engaged in deep contemplation after returning to New Orleans, Olumofin remembers an earlier Evangelical scene in New York's Central Park, when he was at Yale. His name Bill Braggs is meant deliberately to recall Bill Braggart, as representative of evangelicals that dishonestly portray African cultures in a "ritualistic barbaric fashion," as native savages who "were always smiling and drifting in hordes, like animals, in a certain direction, sometimes even into throes of death" and with "souls that are easy to win over to Christ, ready, willing souls" (199, 200). It is during these "therapeutic mind exercises" towards the end of the novel, part of his mock defense of his father, that Olumofin makes the connection that has eluded him throughout his journey in the novel (222).

Olumofin specifically connects Western evangelicalism to the hybrid religion of Difa by remembering how his childhood friend, Tokosi, was offered a ride in the limo of the American "revivalist", Dr. Cox. Arriving at a deserted beach the car parked, Dr. Cox unzipped his pants, and asked Tokosi to play with his penis. This event allowed Olumofin to compare American evangelical approaches with that of his father. Despite the difference of his father's more creative hybridity, Olumofin reflects on the power relations and perversities common to both Western and modern Nigeria culture. Olumofin decided not to follow either set of religious or cultural practices, but consciously to attempt to understand his fate path at the crossroads of his life.

It is clear that, in spite of his choice to live in the United States, Olumofin has no interest in blindly assimilating to the dominant American culture. He is trying to understand how he can live abroad, receiving the privileges of education, money, and success, while remaining rooted to the traditional expectations of Yoruba culture, which emphasize community, sociability, balance, and social equilibrium. Responding to a comment from his father Olumofin makes the distinction

clear, “just because America breeds questionable religious fanatics does not mean I should be sympathetic to your exploitation” (65). Olumofin’s path in life will not include the acceptance of any religion or culture that breeds individualism, corruption, and results in violence and social chaos. He feels that there must be another choice to be made and a different direction he can travel to rediscover his sense of being whole; of being human.

Olumofin recounts and reflects on his interactions with the Creole family of Savannah and recognizes the ‘fibrous roots’ that tie African-American communities and cultural beliefs to those in Africa. Despite the Creolization of language, seen as Olumofin interacts with members of her family, biological mixing, witnessed in the range of skins colors among her family members, and their adaption of many American values, ‘Popsy’, Savannah father, concludes that “Black folks, same everywhere” (154). As his interactions with her family unfold, Olumofin sees links back to Africa of which he was not previously aware and comes to understand how those enslaved and brutalized for so long fought to keep African traditions and a sense of their humanity. Olumofin uses this understanding ultimately to inform his own choice, “seeing them a simple people, rooted in Africa the way they probably didn’t understand it, confirmed for him the genuine efforts of people, such as Savannah, to reinvent their roots, if only by instincts” (175).

Interactions and satiric events in Nigeria, on the plane, and in the United States show the reflective process that Olumofin is working through; awareness that something is not right, a search for deeper understanding of why, and a choice to be made going forward. Reflections on these and past experiences come together, overlap, and inform each other during Olumofin’s ‘mind exercises’ in the last chapter. The main character begins an imaginary trial in which he defends his father and comes to a realization of why he distrusts Western religion by

remembering his childhood friend Tokosi's experiences with Dr. Cox (185, 211). At the conclusion of these 'exercises,' Olumofin relates his conception of modern Nigeria, to a hollowed out and empty photo he views, and meditates on how far from tradition Nigerians have strayed. He realizes that the 'exploited' image had lost its body and thus became a hollow representation of the body. Seen by others, the hollow representation of the body was regarded as the truth. Adding fashion or other accessories, for example, could then alter the hollow image, but the altered image only becomes hollower as it moves further from the original body.

Olumofin believes that the image represents the soul of Nigerians seen only through the exploited body of Nigerians, so exploitation characterizes the truth of who they are. He sees how the soul is then altered by modern values and continues to move farther away from tradition. Olumofin concludes, "And so the hollowness deepens with the complex 'harvest' of sociopolitico religious beliefs that condition and confuse the body, and morality loses traits with its original soul and communal oneness" (224). However, he further understands that, with Esu as the guide, one can become aware, understand, and struggle for better life, "A soul, presumed terminated, may be after all only resting; it can become manifest, once again, on its dead body, with the mysterious, regenerative mystery of camwood" (224). Olumofin wrestles throughout the novel with his future path. 'Camwood of creolization', a term he repeats over and over, comes to mean a different path not related to his father's behavior or Western culture and evangelicalism.

Like the camwood powder that transforms according to the user's needs, Olumofin commits to a future life with Savannah with whom he will marry, but not have children. Olumofin chooses the word 'camwood' because it is a species of rosewood. Olumofin explains to Savannah that in Yoruba culture it is used, "for many things; principally the pink interior of its bark is used as a kind of rouge to accent a woman's beauty. ... It implicates values such as

virtue, character, or even one's fate," (160). "*Camwood of creolization!*²³", as Olumofin recognizes, is his new culture in continual transformation (155). At the end of the novel, Olumofin sees a new path for a creolization between his culture in Lagos and Savannah's culture in New Orleans. The path is uncertain but characterized by Olumofin's and Savannah's hopes for a more harmonious future. At the crossroads of his experiences, Olumofin chose a path that did not fit the Nigerian traditions, the expectations of Europeans, or the current hybridized and corrupted practices of people in Nigeria, such as that of his father.

Though Olumofin decided long ago that, "the matter about his father would be blocked from his mind thereafter" and was determined to avoid family problems on his current trip home, the newspapers brought all the memories, stories, and mysteries back to life (17). From the previous discussion, it becomes clear that much of Olumofin's contemplation on contradictions and transformations in Nigeria centered on Difala, his choices, and his fate. Neither Olumofin's mother nor his auntie, with whom he lived after his mother's death, really spoke to him about his father. Therefore, much of Difala's history remains a mystery that Olumofin is only able to piece together through a collection of stories Olumofin had heard based on the recollections of others.

Olumofin's reflections on his father's past in Chapter two, "Seed Concepts and Conflicts," shows how the young Difala was a very curious child driven to discover the secret of his father's spiritual powers. Euba writes "That his father, Awolesu, Baba Atinga, possessed some magical powers over lunatics could be taken for granted; he was the chief herbalist and oracle priest in the village" (68-69). Though Difala did not immediately follow his father's path, he learned the whip method of healing using the *iroko* branches from him. Young Difala was fascinated by the mystery of the '*iroko* acorns' that sank into the earth to be buried. Olumofin's

²³ Emphasis by the novelist

father grew up in a time in which traditions were under attack by the colonial authorities and he seemed aware of both the mysteries and contradictions that he and many other Nigerian people experienced in their daily life.

Ironically Jeremiah (Difala) Falashe, before he became “the Prophet, alias ‘Jesus of the Well,’” worked as a poor coffin maker who turned down advice from family and friends to find other work (15). Difala never married, not even the mother of Olumofin, and was declared ‘impotent’ by the town’s rumors because he had never been with a woman. Neighbors always joked and laughed about his lack of sexual relations with women and one day a rejected secret admirer began the rumor that he was impotent after she cornered him and “almost pulled Difala’s trousers down, after forcing herself into his bed chamber” (19). It became clear to those who knew him that Difala did not care what was said about him and never let it worry him.

Then one day Difala mysteriously disappeared, with no logical explanation, leaving his clients without a coffin in which to bury their deceased kin. Everyone looked for him and they discussed what might have happened to him. Olumofin recalls in a funny way that no one knew why but everyone began to link Difala’s disappearance with Esu Elegbara’s dried up and condemned cowrie well in the village. The village people believed that his mysterious disappearance into the dry Cowrie well at the center of the market could not have been done without the help of Esu Elegbara, whose shrine it was near. Interestingly, this shows how many Nigerians continue to believe in Yoruba deities despite the colonialist interventions in their daily lives. Many of Yoruba people seem to hope that Esu will once again rise and restore their religion and cultural traditions.

Olumofin recalls that the people of the town told of a time when the well’s water was used to cure everyone who needed it. However, since the time of the colonizers, who stole the

cowries out of the well to buy more slaves, the well became dry and had a stench. Euba draws a parallel between the impotence of Difala with the impotence attributed to Esu Elegbara who was, “disempowered” (22) by the Christian “white god. Colonial authorities insisted that the well was unhygienic, infested by water rats and mosquitoes, and that it was the very source of epidemic” and must be closed (23). The colonials closed the well and “imposed a curfew on rituals under the penalty of death” but Olumofin’s streaming meditation is clear that Esu “survives” like his devotees who clandestinely continue to worship him every year (22, 24). Through the satiric recounting of this story of impotence, Euba links the colonial effort to destroy the Yoruba religion and culture throughout Nigeria to the collective memory of the Yoruba devotees like Difala.

Difala was aware of the conflict between Western and Yoruba religions and recognized the confusion and chaos that gripped the daily lives of Nigerians. Mysteriously, he entered the well and was transformed into the leader of a hybridized religion that aimed for his control over the people of the town especially married women. Difala’s contradictory action is clear in the title he bestowed on himself as ‘Jesus of the Well’ and therefore hailed upon himself and by those who believed in his miracles and teachings. The name of ‘Jesus of the Well’ weaves Christianity with the Yoruba Pantheon. Difala chose his path at the crossroads of life and tries to transformed it into a false Prophet who pretended he could rescue Nigeria from its chaotic state. Olumofin describes Difala’s contradictory transformation by describing him in the well with rain water oozing through the cracks of the well, “and it was only then he realized the full meaning of his vision, a calling to be the leader of a new faith of Jehovah (or was it Esu?), for there was something about a whip that an archangel or a god handed to him in the vision” (28).

Euba describes this account very satirically to illustrate how our fates are intertwined and to illustrate how the contradictions of Difala's choice shaped Olumofin's path in life. It is possible, on the other hand, Difala's awareness of the impact of colonialism and Christianity on Nigeria drove him to the well. During a conversation with Olumofin, Difala appears to believe that his role in life led to an understanding that transformed him into a hybridized religious leader. Difala is trying to make Olumofin believe that his new role is essential to the survival of Yoruba tradition. The 'Jesus of the Well' makes this point clear to Olumofin when he argues: "But then will you allow such people [American evangelicals] to come here instead, come to our very own, and tell us about religion? Do we not have ours to hold on to, hold and explore even with their Christian doctrine, indeed, their questionable doctrine?" (16).

Difala decided to take elements of the Christian religion and unite them with the religion of his ancestors. In this way he believed that he could rescue Esu Elegbara from banishment by the laws enforced by the colonial authorities against the ceremonies and rituals for Esu Elegbara. The reader sees that Difala's transformation is for his benefit in the name of the Yoruba religion and culture. Therefore Difala can be seen in the *nepantla* process as one who understands that he is "torn in between ways"; however, Olumofin believes that a mixture of Christian and Yoruba religions does not have necessarily a positive "potential growth" (Keating, 19). In fact, in a second interview, on April 1st, 2015, the novelist Euba explains, "There once existed such an Evangelical as Difala existed in his hometown, Lagos. 'Jesus of the Well' was in trouble and appeared in the newspapers about the prevention of whipping people who convert "he was a corrupted Baba who healed others by whipping them" (Euba). "The novel in the beginning of the story was all only about 'Jesus of the Well'", then as he develops the story, over the years

Olumofin comes into view to focus it. Euba also states that Savannah of the novel was built on his wife “who comes from a creolized family near New Orleans” (Euba).

From Olumofin’s standpoint, Difala broke Yoruba traditions not only by mixing his religion with the one brought by the missionaries but by exploiting it for his sexual depravation and to implement control over people in the town. For example, Walrus, the police chief of the town called him “my Lord” and followed the Prophet’s orders with an assurance that “Everything has been take care of, my lord” with “his sheepish gazes,” (56). Olumofin could only grin at the irony of a strong political personality in the community bowing to his poor father turned prophet. Olumofin believed that despite his role as savior, Difala used his reputation as “Jesus of the Well” to control the political and economic network of the town while whipping married women and forcing them into sexual acts with him.

On the other hand Olumofin also understands that his, “father’s response to Christianity was that of a man at the crossroads of the cultures” and acknowledges that, in terms of his father’s religious exploitation, “it was clear in hindsight that the times were right for it” for Nigerians were searching for answers (73, 26). Olumofin understands that Difala recognized the imminent destruction of Yoruba religion and culture by the Christian Church, and took action by becoming ‘Jesus of the Well’ to save Yoruba orishas, songs, dances, vestments and cultural traditions. During the fictional defense of his father Olumofin, the defense lawyer, sums up his view, “... that’s all part of the attempt to understand his exploited victimhood, part of the quest to find an amicable equilibrium between the deep-rooted falsities of acculturation and the true essence of his root culture, trying, as it were, to make the best of a bad job” (213).

Nevertheless, from Olumofin’s standpoint there is no ‘restorative process’ for his father. For Difala made bad choices without any recognition or rectification of his mistakes. Unlike

Olumofin, Difala made decisions for his personal convenience. Within Euba's conceptualization of the 'drama of epidemic', this elevation of his own importance had a price at the crossroads of Elegbara and brought a period of destruction in which his only son, Olumofin, never wanted to follow his father's wrong religious practice. The satire of Difala's actions illustrate clearly to Olumofin that his father's path is not one that could save Yoruba culture or create a future of social balance and justice free of violence, corruption and exploitation.

Regarding awareness of oppression, Elegbara's satire in everyday life positions both characters within a *nepantla* process. Olumofin learns to understand the contradictions he experiences between worlds and attempts to create a new way in life called 'camwood of creolization' in which elements of Yoruba culture are reborn and mix with New Orleans African-American Creole culture to regenerate the "soul, presumed terminated" (224). Choosing a different path, Difala is also aware of the social disruptions caused by British colonialism and the introduction of Christianity in Nigeria. He understands the need to protect Yoruba traditions and thus fashions a new position, 'Jesus of the Well', in which he believes that he becomes a protector of his Yoruba community from Christian evangelicals. Difala and Olumofin can be seen as *nepantlas*; persons who can see different perspectives of the same situation spontaneously and decide a path at the crossroad of Elegbara. In Euba's conception of the 'Drama of Epidemic', it is clear that people's decisions determined their path while affecting the others at the crossroad of everyday life (*Archetypes*, 25).

Euba's novel emphasizes that one's recognition of the satire in events can impact one's identity and foster a greater understanding that there are other paths that can be chosen. As with the satire of Esu in Euba's notion of the 'Drama of Epidemic,' Olumofin's awareness is a process that is affected by his father's wicked decisions in life as well. Their fates are

intertwined, and one's choice affects the other, though each is responsible for their own actions. Traditionally a son must follow his father's religion in life but Olumofin would not follow his father's weak will for women and power. The ambitious and corrupt choices of Difala brought separation between him and Olumofin. Difala's corrupted decision, his break from tradition and morality, halted Olumofin from becoming a Prophet and herbalist, as was his grandfather.

Olumofin's reflections on his father, in particular, and on others are essential to his understanding of the past and present as well as his future decisions. At the crossroads, Olumofin sees his father as exploitative, though creative, understands his mistakes and thus becomes empowered to explore his own attitude toward creolization as a viable one. As such, he is able to come to terms with his past, his father, and decides to marry the African American Creole Savannah, whose history of exploitation in America somewhat parallels his own in Africa. Since decisions made at the crossroads of Esu do not necessarily lead to uncertain futures. Euba ends *Camwood at Crossroads* with Olumofin and Savannah's hope cast on the oracle board, asking if anything has been learned.

Freedom from oppressive relations and systems is therefore contingent and problematic and requires continual thought, action, and reflection in order to stay on the correct path. Esu guides those at the crossroads and informs choices of future paths. An exchange between Olumofin and Difala makes this point very clearly. Difala defends his actions by stating, "Culture cannot stand still in the face of earth's progress. We must continue to apply and adapt, continue to seek wisdom in the revelations of cultural signs on the oracle board," to which Olumofin replies ironically, "Well then, as I'm sure you've done, let the oracle board be your guide and defense" (*Camwood at Crossroads* 66).

The impact of his father's and Nigeria's communal satiric fate on Olumofin's path demonstrates how the actions of others informed his choice at the crossroads of his everyday life. Olumofin's encounters illuminate the role of grotesquery that Esu employs in his satire. These encounters help Olumofin arrive at a greater understanding of his choice of living abroad and continuing his 'camwood of creolization' with Savannah. As in the process of *nepantla*, Olumofin obtains *la facultad* and becomes aware of problems that afflict his family and the people of Nigeria. Olumofin's journey in *Camwood at Crossroads* deepens this understanding through an analysis of the satiric events and contradictions he witnesses and contemplates. The novel ends with a choice, Olumofin transforms his destiny by deciding not to be like his father, "a sexual pervert" prophet who sexually exploited married women and controlled the people of his community through religious practices that included whipping and examples of Western prophets like Bill Braggart (14, 73). Olumofin, navigating the in between of Western and Yoruba societies, decides to not follow Western culture or the post-colonial culture he finds in Nigeria, which has distorted Yoruba traditions and culture into a 'hollowed-out' image of what is was and what it could be.

Similarly, *El color del verano* by Renaldo Arenas posits that the promise of the Cuban Revolution was negated by 'Fifo's' desire for power at the expense of human rights and basic freedoms including the freedom of both written and sexual expression. The revolutionary social system thus thrives on ideologies of liberation that are actually 'hollow' promises of what could be if it were not for the violence, oppression, and poverty imposed on Cubans by their current political leaders. Arenas's spirit is omnipresent throughout the novel and infuses his characters with a passionate love of life and the longing for individual expression in the face of repression. His awareness and understanding of oppressive conditions in Cuba and the United States, as well

as his resolve that each system must transform to become more human-centered, becomes apparent to readers early on in the novel and continues throughout.

La facultad and Choteo in Reinaldo Arenas

“I change myself. I change the world.”

--Gloria Anzaldúa , *Borderlands* 2012, 92.

Chapter II demonstrates how *El color del verano* by the Cuban author Reinaldo Arenas presents characters in *los intersticios* of revolutionary Cuban society who struggle for the freedom to express themselves. Arenas argues that revolutionary Cuba is controlled by corrupt political leaders who are hypocritical, homophobic, and engage in the widespread censorship of ideas that do not reflect dominant views. As are Cubans, characters in this novel are trapped on the island between the reality of daily survival and the misleading ideologies of the Cuban government, which maintain that all is well. Further, trying to flee for a better life, many Cubans often find themselves ‘in-between’ Cuban and American systems and ideologies that never allow them to freely express their humanity.

Looking at Cuban literature, we find that life in Cuba for centuries has been oppressive but, nonetheless, full of the sunlight illuminating the humid and rigid cracks of the crumbling colonial life of “una Isla endiablada” (a diabolical Island²⁴) as Ena Luisa Portela describes it in one of her fascinating novel *La sombra del caminante* (53). In this tradition, Reinaldo Arenas’s *El color del verano* is about both the joy and suffering of life in revolutionary Cuba. It is a novel which makes readers laugh and reflect on the lessons embedded in its fantastic stories. As an example of an *autohistoria* novel, *El color del verano* links individual experiences to social conditions experienced collectively and challenges readers to understand inter-connected

²⁴ Translation mine

oppressive systems and work to transform them. It is a novel about the collective stories unwritten in the official history of Cuba and USA from the eyes of the subaltern.

Arenas's spirit is represented within the many complexities of the characters that participate in his carnival of memories and his joyful celebration of life under Fifo's tyranny. Throughout the novel Arenas's autobiography is intertwined with historical events and people, and stories in the novel in which characters, representing his distinct identities, continually talk of the "hope of escaping" but not without "saving my manuscripts". For Arenas freedom is not merely a physical escape from the Island, but the ability to write and express his creativity. Arenas repeatedly emphasizes the difficulties in writing this novel by referring to it by name on numerous occasions. For example, when contemplating whether Tétrica Mofeta (Skunk in a Funk) would leave Cuba, the answer is firmly, "Sí, abandonaría la isla pero con sus queridas patas de rana y su novela, *El color del verano*, ya terminada" (Yes, she would leave the island, but not without taking her swim fins with her and not before her novel, *The Color of Summer*, was completed) (*El color del verano* 156 trans. 141-142). Tétrica Mofeta found freedom in swimming and writing; determined not to be separated from her swim fins and equally determined to finish writing her novel.

From a space of in between worlds, *nepantla*, Arenas develops recognition of sexual oppression, *la facultad*, and realizes the hetero-patriarchal system in Cuba threatens his freedom of free sexual expression. Non-heterosexual behavior is ideologically portrayed as deviant and he faces the possibility of imprisonment or death for his actions. Arenas further understands the impact of censorship in restricting written expression and sees his novel destroyed numerous times only to be rewritten. Both restrictions are intertwined throughout the novel and work in harmony to deny Arenas and others their sense of freedom and consequently their humanity. In

his novel, Arenas maintains that the Cuban political leadership, during the 1960s to the 1990s, was corrupt and hypocritical because it presented Cubans as free while restricting individual liberties. In fact, Arenas sees Cuba as only “free” of homosexuality, imagination, and beauty.

Throughout *El color del verano*, Arenas’s spirit is omnipresent and demands freedom for all to live and to be respected as humans. Arenas feels that imagination should have free reign through individual self-expression, as this is where beauty comes from. Arenas sees freedom of expression as being under attack by the forces of oppression that he calls the ‘counter-country’, which work to ensure, “y que todo lo noble, hermoso, valiente, vital (el verdadero país) desaparezca” (that all things, noble, beautiful, brave, and life-enhancing-the true country-disappear) (131 trans. 120). Through writing and sharing his understanding of sexually oppressive, macho relations with readers, Arenas resists these ‘dark’ forces and works for social transformation.

That Arenas writes to promote the process of social transformation is clear in his description for the need for humor and irreverence in Cuban literature, “He aquí un buen punto de referencia para una nueva investigación del choteo, la parejería, la irreverencia, la frustración, el absurdo cubanos” (Here is a good point of reference for a new investigation on *choteo*, irreverence, frustration, and Cuban absurdity²⁵) (*Libro de Arenas* 174). To achieve his goal, Arenas structures his novel around memories, stories, letters, tongue-twisters, dreams, encyclopedia-style entries, etc; all the while employing the uniquely Cuban narrative form called *choteo*. This form allows Arenas to humorously illustrate to readers the contradictions between official ideologies and the reality of daily life in Cuba.

²⁵ Translation mine

Therefore, Arenas uses *choteo* as a medium of recognition of how homophobia and censorship inhibit the intellectual and social growth of Cubans. It is a mode of resisting all forms authority and oppression by naming it and ridiculing it publically. The spirit of *choteo* is extreme freedom and therefore it manifests against everything that is opposed to individual expression and human development. It is a form of writing which best represents the spirit of independence and an affirmation of humanity. So, for example, at various points throughout the novel characters humorously gnaw at the base of the island in hopes of freeing it since they cannot free themselves.

Disidentification performance uses humor and techniques like *choteo* to critique and disrespect political normalcy through the performances (Muñoz 8). Disidentification is a practice that allows Arenas to resist the world of dominant ideology, its stereotypes, repressive practices, and social contradictions and to perform a new one. The Cuban novelist, for example, attacks stereotypes by making identity and gender fluid rather than fixed categories. Similar to Anzaldúa's notion of *mestiza consciousness*, characters are continually portrayed as transgendered or multi-gendered allowing Arenas the opportunity to both critique gender stereotypes and propose an alternative to the oppression of sexuality and writing. Often multi-gendering occurs in one sentence as with Arenas's declaration of Tétrica Mofeta's desire to be free, "Por eso roía la plataforma insular, aunque ella también soñaba y hasta planificaba hacer uso de sus patas de rana hasta remontarse por lo menos hasta Cayo Hueso" (That was why he gnawed away at the island's foundation, although she also dreamed of using her swim fins to make it at least to Key West) (*El color del verano* 156 trans. 141).

Similar to the impact of Esu's satire discussed in the previous section, the awareness of these contradictions through *choteo* may foster greater understanding of oppression and catalyze

a desire to change among readers. Disidentification further allows Arenas to turn negative ideologies inside out and propose alternative possibilities to readers. As in an *autohistoria*, the experiences and choices of characters is representative of Arenas's struggle and their stories are central to his critique of oppressive systems, his desire for free expression, and the need to transform societies that limit our common humanity.

Arenas, a champion of human rights and individual freedom, shares many of the ideological notions of revolutionary Cuba, which seeks to promote human development through free education and health care, for example. However, Arenas specifically targets 'Fifo' and the Cuban political elite for what he sees as the country's poverty and crumbling infrastructure. Experiences have made him aware of the contradictions between official ideology and the reality of daily life. Arenas employs scathing humor through *choteo* to share his recognition of these contradictions with readers. There are brief chapters that can be seen as short stories spread out in the novel written in an honest voice that tells simple truths about Cuban institutions and cultural practices. In one such section, Arenas describes the state newspaper *Granma* as: "el único periódico del mundo donde la realidad nada tiene que ver con los acontecimientos que éste anuncia. ... También es el periódico que cosecha más papas y azúcar en todo el globo, aunque todos estos productos nunca los vemos por ningún lado" (the only newspaper in the world in which the events that the newspaper reports on have nothing whatsoever to do with reality. ... It's also the newspaper with the largest potato and sugar harvests in the entire world, although we ourselves never see those products anywhere) (232 trans. 211).

Such descriptions are clear, funny, and link his experiences with those of other Cubans. Furthermore, they generate awareness among readers of the contradictions and hypocrisy in specific Cuban institutions. Arenas's *choteo* generally rebels "contra la autoridad del

sentimiento” (against the authority of the sentiment²⁶) by illustrating examples of bureaucratic incompetency despite the stated goal of caring for the population (*Indagación del choteo* 68). Arenas’s description of the Cuban public transportation system and buses is a humorous example, “Es el único vehículo del mundo que una vez que se entra en él no se puede salir ni parar en sitio ninguno, aunque generalmente nunca pasa” (This is the only vehicle in the world which once you get in, you can’t get out of, and which doesn’t stop anywhere, ever, although it usually doesn’t come by at all” (*El color del verano* 232 trans. 211). Though the Cuban system attempts to provide low cost transportation for its citizens, chaos results from corruption and incompetency, the goal was never fulfilled, and the daily lives of Cubans were getting worse.

Arenas also weaves stories which describe the impact of this form of sentimental authority on individual characters and then links their stories back to an analysis of the Cuban system. For instance, Arenas creates a *choteo* of Oriente Churre who represents Arenas’s love for his “madre agónica” (mother in agony), and Cuba as well. Oriente Churre carries his mother on his back after he sells her house with all the furniture because he thought that his mother was dead after being in the hospital with a diagnosis of cancer. But she did not die after all and when she came back ‘home’ she did not have a house to live in (210). Oriente Churre is therefore obligated to carry his mother and all of her medicines on his back and care for her, until he flees to the United States and leaves a ‘double’ in his place to do the job. Oriente Churre’s mother symbolizes the Cuban socialist system and its humanist ideals, which act as a sentimental mother, but develop a lot of problems due to corruption and hypocrisy. She becomes a burden to its children, many of whom decide to flee.

²⁶ Translation mine

Arenas's *choteo* is thus a critique on the Cuban political elite and a simultaneous cry for freedom. For those, like Arenas, who believe in a truly egalitarian system for everyone with no exceptions, it is Fifo's hypocrisy, homophobic mentality, and violence that deny him and other Cubans their humanity. By creating characters such as *Tiburón Sangriento* (Bloodthirsty Shark), Arenas ridicules Fifo's authority in a time of social deterioration, and the Cuban system's heterosexual ideologies as well (*El color del verano* 75 trans. 68) The American shark, *Tiburón Sangriento*, works for Fifo who feeds him human meat, which causes *Tiburón Sangriento* to take his enormous penis out for pleasure. He, and many other sharks, follow and eat Cubans who flee to the U.S.

But the relation between Fifo and *Tiburón Sangriento* is a love relation as well which exposes the hypocrisy of Fifo caring for Cubans, but denying them the freedom of expression, and killing them if they try to leave. To illustrate the contradiction Arenas recounts that Fifo, "siempre estuvo enamorado de aquel tiburón (como estuvo una vez de una vaca lechera)" (had always secretly been in love with that shark (as he had once been with a very special cow)) (339 trans.310). The milk cow was part of the artificial insemination program in Cuba in which thousands of dollars were invested for the production of milk. These experiments created a cow named Matilda who produced more milk than normal cows. After she died, the Cuban authorities erected a monument to Ubre Blanca, 'la vaca lechera'. Arenas employs *choteo* to ridicule political decisions which express love for a cow, and its milk, while writers like him are silenced, thirsty for milk, and do not even have a modest place to live.

Arenas further recognizes the hypocrisy of the Cuban system that criticizes American culture as bourgeoisie and counterrevolutionary while marginalizing those who listen to the Beatles and wear jeans with flips-flops. They are considered homosexual and seen as supporters

of the American system. Arenas's *choteo* of the system shows how the Cuban government attacks 'bourgeoisie' ideologies, but plays American movies every Saturday because they are an important tool by which the Cuban mass media can reach Cubans. The creation of *tiburón sangriento* (Jaws) illustrates his understanding of this contradiction as this image comes from the famous American movie *Jaws* (1975) by Steven Spielberg, which was very popular in Cuba during the 1970s. Further, in *Color of Summer*, through the *choteo* of the American Shark working for his main adversary, Fidel Castro, Arenas shares the painful journeys of Cuban *balseros* (rafters) who find themselves stuck in-between the two countries and their ideologies.

That Arenas recognizes sexual oppression and yearns for freedom is also clear in a letter he writes to his three selves in the novel. He understands tyranny from his many daily experiences with it and shares how tyranny is dehumanizing. Passionately, Arenas asks "¿Acaso ya olvidaron que vivir bajo una tiranía no solo es una vergüenza y una maldición, sino también una acción abyecta que nos contamina pues, pues quieras o no, hay que cooperar con el tirano si se vive bajo sus leyes? (Have you forgotten so soon that living under a tyranny is not just a shame and a curse but an abject act that fills us with self-disgust because if we want to live, we have to play by the tyrant's rules whether we want to or not?" (344 trans. 314). Rather than living the humanist worker's dream of socialism, political corruption and hypocrisy transform Cubans into objects of political power. They must either struggle to survive in Cuba and somehow discover a sense of freedom, however possible, or they must leave in hopes of becoming free somewhere else. To the extent Arenas's spirit represents that of all Cubans the yearning for freedom is universal. He laments that the inhabitants are "no pudieron soportar aquella isla pero tampoco el vivir fuera de ella" (unable to stand the island yet equally unable to escape it) (442 trans 408).

Some readers may regard Arenas's stories as crude, almost pornographic, and thus overlook the critical approach Arenas takes to illustrate his awareness of oppression in revolutionary Cuba. As discussed in chapter II, non-heterosexuals were socially marginalized, ideologically defined as deviants, and often imprisoned by the revolutionary government. This created an atmosphere of repression and promoted fear among those targeted as deviant or criminal. Specifically, Arenas views the treatment of non-heterosexuals by the Cuban government as hypocritical in light of its ideology of liberation and goal of human development. More generally, Arenas regards any restrictions on sexual behavior as a denial of the right of free expression and, thus, is very critical of the United States as well.

Choteo is the narrative form that gives Arenas the flexibility to critique the political elite of Cuba while expressing his love for Cuba and for personal freedom. *Choteo* is central in many of the stories of characters that desire the freedom of sexual expression but are confronted by agents of state repression. One example of this occurs very early in the novel as the Cuban poet Avellaneda rises from the dead and recites prose that expresses the broken relation between her and Cuba. Immediately after reciting she, “comienza masturbarse frenéticamente con la flor de loto” (*begins to masturbation frenziedly with the lotus flower*²⁷) and fainted after this act (15 *trans* 25). This publically viewed private sexual act is an example of *choteo* (a crude and honest joke) that gives *lo choteado* a critical and analytical lens to look through and shock readers to awareness. Avellaneda's public masturbation contains a mixture of laughter and loathing that both delineates and defies sexual prohibitions.

Other characters in the novel are similarly aware of sexual prohibitions but continue to struggle to define and express themselves sexually. Clara the artist, for example, is also a

²⁷ Emphasis by translator

prostitute. She proudly states that her work allows her to eat, to help others, and gives her free time to paint as well. The individual freedom of expression and the ability to control her own body is important to her. Clara expresses her sense of freedom in the face of government control over sexual behavior when she declares, “Pero sobre todo he vivido en forma independiente y desenfadada, practicando la única profesión que aun no se ha prostituido: la de la putería” (But above all, I have lived independently and freely, practicing the only profession that has still not been prostituted: i.e., prostitution) (363 *trans* 333). With this statement she both embraces the freedom of sexual expression and critiques the government’s hypocrisy and repression.

As in the work of Euba, characters’ stories are intertwined to link individuals to each other and the society. Fifo’s agents using a painting that represents Clara’s artistic freedom of expression murder the homosexual poet Virgilio Piñera because of his desire to express himself both sexually and artistically. The use of *choteo* in the story of his murder hilariously points out Fifo’s hypocrisy and repression. One night, Fifo’s agents try several times in various ways to kill Piñera but without success. Finally, they decide to show him Clara’s fresh painting of a vagina “supuraba, emitía desesperados gorgoteos y chasquidos mientras enfilaba todos sus pendejos y su pepita abierta de par en par hacia la cama del poeta. Virgilio Piñera, no pudiendo tolerar aquella presencia inminente, murió de un infarto” (writhing on canvas, oozing sexual juices, and gurgling lasciviously. Piñera, unable to bear such a sight, died instantly of cardiac arrest” (349 *trans* 319). The homosexual artist dies from being overwhelmed, literally, by sexual repression and the government’s insistence on heterosexuality, represented here by a pulsating vagina.

Many characters throughout the novel experience state-sponsored repression of their sexuality and take steps to protect themselves from discovery and violence while testing the boundaries of free expression. Through the *choteo* technique identity is fluid in this novel, which

destabilizes gender and sexuality; often one character has different and shifting sexual identities in the same sentence. The spirit of Arenas infuses all characters; however, and he creates three main characters that are specifically representative of his experiences and his complex identity. Creating Gabriel, Reinaldo, and la Tétrica Mofeta, Arenas disidentifies himself from the homosexual and heterosexual stereotypes and then re-inhabits them in order to transform them (Muñoz, 127). This allows readers to understand the contradictions perpetuated by oppressive relations and ideologies as well as the possibility of their transformation.

Arenas's *choteo* is honest and functions as a *descongestionador* (decongestant²⁸) by releasing the contradictions between the stereotype and the truth through laughter. Arenas *se chotea* ('mocks himself'²⁹) by creating these exaggerated non-heterosexual characters. Tétrica Mofeta, for example, is a *pajara* (literally bird, an non-heterosexual male³⁰) who obtains her name because she mixes European perfumes with sweets, and this makes her stink. By re-inhabiting the negative stereotype Arenas deconstructs it and exposes absurdly funny but very real homophobic stereotypes in Cuba. In one story, Arenas describes a day at the beach for Tétrica Mofeta. He recounts how she would dive into the beautiful waters of Cuba and slowly swim around underwater looking for well-hung men enjoying the day with their friends and families. Feeling satisfied after anonymously performing oral sex on unsuspecting but pleased men, Tétrica Mofeta would, "se zambullía recto cerca de la costa y roía furiosamente la plataforma insular. ... la Tétrica Mofeta también quería abandonar el país" (dive straight down near the shoreline, and begin to gnaw furiously at the base of the island. ... Skunk-in-a-Funk was another one of those who wanted to flee the island" (155-154 trans. 141).

²⁸ Translation mine

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

This *choteo* of Arenas's sexual behavior challenges stereotypes. The unsuspecting heterosexual men enjoy the sexual act performed on them, for example. Further, it reinforces Arenas's notion that all Cubans desire for liberation from oppressive conditions and are willing to gnaw away the base of the island to be free. Linking sexual expression to freedom Arenas is clear that, "El sexo había sido para la Tétrica Mofeta un acto de desanfado, rebeldía, y libertad. Levantar un hombre era para Gabriel un acto heroico que lo enorgullecía. ... eso era un acto de libertad porque era un riesgo voluntario" (For Skunk in a Funk, sex had been an act almost of rebellion, certainly of freedom and *fun*. For Gabriel, picking up a man was a heroic act, and it made him proud. ... —that was an act of freedom because it was a risk that one *chose*³¹) (322 trans. 293). Not being beaten up, arrested, or killed after having sex with a stranger in a public place was a act of freedom for Gabriel only because the government and its ideology has turned non-heterosexual relations between consenting adults into a criminal act that should be punished. Importantly, Arenas emphasizes choice to counter the government's imposition of its power on Cubans.

Gabriel visits his mother in Holguín every year and, because of his homosexuality in the face of dominant homophobic ideologies, is a man who lives a frustrated life (100). He writes a letter to his mother to explain that she does not have to suffer for him because he has had the men that she could never have. After all he married and brought a kid "a sufrir a este infierno" (to suffer in this hell) for her. Gabriel explains the fluidity of his identities to his mother, "[p]ara ti sigo siendo Gabriel, para ellos que leen lo que escribo y que casi nunca puedo publicar soy Reinaldo, para el resto de mis amigos con los cuales de vez en cuando me escapo para ser yo totalmente, soy la Tétrica Mofeta" ([f]or you, I'm still Gabriel, for those who read what I write

³¹ Italics by translator.

but can hardly ever publish, I'm Reinaldo, for the rest of my friends, with whom I escape from time to time in order to be totally myself, I'm Skunk in a Funk) (101 trans. 93).

Arenas shows how Gabriel suffers from the contradictions between social expectations to be a heterosexual for his mother, who represents the society and Cuban culture, and a non-heterosexual for his friends, who represent his non-heterosexual clandestine life in Cuba. Letters serve an important function in *El color del verano* as they allow Arenas to communicate with different aspects of his identity and readers at the same time. The Cuban writer is able to share openly his understanding of oppression as well his desires and fears. While Reinaldo writes about how he suffers gender destabilization he refers directly to readers because he wants them to understand how Cuban institutions and political leaders have controlled both his body and his ideas, expressed through writing. Throughout the novel sexual and artistic expression intertwine to illustrate the beauty of human freedom.

Those unable to escape the island remain determined to express themselves freely and struggle to find a way to do so. In oppressive Cuba, which censors everything that does not reflect the will of Fifo, the characters in *El color del verano* creatively express themselves through a variety of forms. Aware that, if caught by Fifo's agents, they could be imprisoned or killed for their expression, they remain determined to express their humanity. Clara, for example, paints to express "las calamidades que padecía y todo lo que la rodeaba" (the horrors she was suffering, for all the things that she saw around her) (133 trans. 121). However, she was unable to display her art publically and could only do so in her room or, later, in the 'gallery' that the hole in her apartment wall led to. Arenas notes that the contrast of such beautiful art displayed in a poor hovel had an awakening impact on those who saw it: "El cuadro, escudándose en la imagen de la derrota, era un desafío triunfante, patético y atroz. ... Haber podido contemplar

aquella obra era un privilegio que enaltecía cualquier pena” (The portrait in this room that *breathed* defeat, was a triumphant, pathetic, and terrifying cry of defiance. ... To look upon that painting was a privilege that transformed any pain, any grief, any calamity) (363 trans. 332).

The character Clara expressed herself through her sexuality, as discussed in the previous section, and was a talented artist who defied authority with the subject matter of her paintings. Once, given the opportunity to make costumes for a ball, she was determined to laugh at power and authority by making costumes that were caricatures of important political and cultural figures. Arenas celebrates her creativity when he exclaims that the finished costumes were “tan irreverentes, tan implacables, tan irreales” (so irreverent, so *crushing*, so real,” but he is, of course, concerned for her safety) (301 trans. 273). Throughout *El color del verano* there is a constant tension between free expression and danger. All the characters are aware that many of their friends and associates are actually informers and that their acts of expression -defiance could be shared with Fifo. Ultimately, for example, the defiant Clara sets herself on fire after her paintings are destroyed by Fifo’s agents freeing her spirit to rise above oppression as smoke.

Arenas regards writing as key to his humanity and creativity. The stories in *El color del verano* continually intertwine with stories about his struggle to actually write *El color del verano*. In fact, many times throughout the novel the characters that represent Arenas lose the novel or witness the novel destroyed in some way. Each time, however, the novel is rewritten as his human spirit continues to struggle against censorship and oppression. Further, Arenas regards the act of reading as a necessity to feel free, which was capable of unifying his fluid identities. Describing the pleasure of going to a library, choosing a book, and sitting down to read it, he shares that they, “no tenían un libro en sus manos, sino todos los libros del mundo y por lo tanto todos los misterios posibles e imposibles. Entonces una sensación de plenitud total envolvía, a la

Tétrica Mofeta, Gabriel, Reinaldo fundiéndolos en un solo ser” (would hold in their hands not one book but all the books in the world, and therefore all possible and impossible mysteries. Then, a sense of utter plenitude would come upon Skunk in a Funk, Gabriel, and Reinaldo, and they would become one single being) (234 trans. 213).

Virgilio Piñera is a central character in the novel that represents a clear example of the oppressive relations Arenas wants to share with readers. Piñera was a great poet who was persecuted during *El Quinquenio Gris* (The Five Gray Years) because he was non-heterosexual; while others such as novelists Huberto Padilla, Antón Arrufa and Lezma were persecuted because of their support for non-heterosexuals in their novels. *El Quinquenio Gris*³² one of the saddest pages of our Cuban history expressed Ambrosio Fornet in a conference in January 30th, 2007. A period in which, for more than five years, young non-heterosexuals and Jehovah Witnesses were sent to UMAP to become part of ‘the New Man’ ideologies (Fornet 2007, Guerra 2010, Bejel 1990, Lumsden 1996, Ocasio 2003). Piñera’s words are beautiful and inspire all who read them so he is a threat to Fifo’s rule.

Aware of the danger he faces, in *El color del verano*, Piñera reads his work once and then burns it in front of the horrified witnesses. Describing the impact of the great writer’s creative expression, Arenas is convinced that, “La poesía los había devuelto a otra región, una región que casi ya no existía en ningún sitio y menos allí, en aquella isla condenada y a la merced de las locuras del Fifo” (Poetry has taken the listeners to another realm, a place that no longer existed almost anywhere, much less there, on that island accursed and at the mercy of Fifo’s insane and often cruel caprices) (*El color del verano* 129 trans. 117).

³² Emphasis mine

In the novel, Fifo's agents who used one of Clara's paintings to do the job ultimately killed Piñera. Interestingly, he was first killed for what he wrote and then, after Fifo ordered his resuscitation, he was killed for his sexual orientation, because he was a "maricón" (faggot) (17 trans. 8). Throughout this scene, Arenas demonstrates the depth of the homophobic system of oppression that he experienced in Cuba and how sexual expression is inseparable from freedom of expression in general. Arenas gives a voice to non-heterosexuals through the recounting of Virgilio Piñera's abuse and death in Cuba. Through *el choteo franco* (frank mockery³³) Arenas laughs at his pain and the pain of the alienated people in Cuba; like an aspirin to cure the profound pain of being a pariah in one's homeland.

The character Virgilio Piñera emphasizes the importance of writing in connecting with others to transform oppressive relations. Piñera declares that, "Uno escribe para los demás. Eso es indiscutible. Y toda escritura es una venganza" (One writes for others, there is no doubt of that. And all writing is revenge-to that rule, there can be no exception) (129 trans. 118). In the spirit of this declaration, Arenas gets his revenge on those who try to dehumanize and silence him and the collective history of non-heterosexuals in Cuba and USA. An example in *El color del verano* that employs *choteo* is the love relation between the President and the rabbit. It is a hilarious and grotesque scene that dehumanizes and disrespects the President of the United States through an erotic scene between him and the rabbit on national television while Odieo Ruego recited his poem:

El presidente se ha quitado toda la ropa; el conejo mete su cabeza completa en el ano presidencial. El presidente suelta un alarido de placer. El conejo sigue escarbando con los dientes y con las patas el ano como si tratara de hacer allí una madriguera. ... El presidente lanza altísimos gemidos de goce, brinca en la pantalla con el conejo en sus entrañas. (*The president has removed all his clothes; the rabbit has its entire head rammed up the president's ass. The president gives a shriek of pleasure. The rabbit*

³³ Translation mine

*gnaws and burrowa at the presidential rectum with its teeth and claws, as though trying to tunnel in. ... The president gives an ear-piecing shriek of pleasure, and begins to leap and hop about to scream with the rabbit up his ass.*³⁴) (40 trans. 30)

Arenas further gets revenge on Fifo as, humorously, the scene made Fifo more infuriated. He said to Paula Amanda in a poetic and *choteadora* way, “después del espectáculo del presidente/Necesitamos algo caliente/ que se masturbe la gente/ hasta que le salgan llagas.” (after the presidential hanky-panky/ we’re going to need something X-rated./ I want to see people spank their monkey/til they can’t see straight!) To his suggestion Paula Amanda responded “¿Llagas en las manos o en el culo?” (Spanking monkeys! Ooooh – I love it!) (41 trans. 31). The hands in the butt in this scene call attention to the ‘dirty’ component of politics and illustrate the absurdity of power and authority via *choteo*. It is critical of a time at the beginning of Cuban revolution when writers were compelled to write only using a realistic socialist genre otherwise their manuscripts were never published or published only one time. It did not matter if what they wrote did relate to the real experience of the people as long as they wrote something uncritical of the Cuban revolutionary system.

Many creative Cubans ultimately decide to leave Cuba in hopes of finding another society that will be more open and welcoming to their expressions of creativity. Arenas captures this dilemma in his description of the poet Avellaneda leaving the Malecón in a boat to go to Cayo Hueso. José Martí, returning to Cuba encounters Avellaneda and tells her that his life in Cayo Hueso is “Una herida/ que no acaba de sangrar” (Life here is a wound there is not cure for) (56 trans. 49). Avellaneda accepts that the people in Cayo Hueso do not follow reason but her mission is to, “Llegar al Niágara, publicar mi obra completa” (I going to publish my Collected Works) (57 trans. 50). Avellaneda’s wish is the same as Arenas’s who longs for a place that

³⁴ Emphasis by translator

respects written freedom of expression. He does not want to constantly have to hide, memorize, and destroy copies of his work like he has to do in Cuba because Cuban censors destroy writing styles that are not in the tradition of socialist realism.

Critical of Cuba and with no other choice seemingly available Arenas goes to the United States during the ‘Mariel Boatlift’ in the 1980s. However, his critique of the Cuban political system does not mean that he blindly accepted the American system. Arenas shares how he, like many Cubans who left Cuba to find freedom and a better way of life in the United States, became quickly disillusioned in America. Arenas is particularly critical of both widespread homophobia in the United States and a way of life that values profit more than human life. Uniting both themes in a comparison of the United States with Cuba he writes, “Aquí soy una sombra, allá por lo menos era un hecho real, aunque doloroso” (Down there, I was at least real, even though what you might call Painfully Real. Up here, I’m a shadow. Who the hell is going to care about my pain when all anybody is interested in up here is what’s called the Quick and Dirty) (167 trans. 152).

Arenas does not feel welcomed in either Cuba or the United States and his awareness of being torn in between the two is displayed early in *El color del verano* during the poet Avellaneda’s escape from Cuba. Attacked by Cubans for leaving, she is objectified in the United States and no one cares if she lives or dies. Comically, Avellaneda’s ‘estrambótica’ (extravagant) figure saves her from the sharks’ attack but not from the, “peters de chocolate ... frutas y diversas chucherías” (candies of chocolate ... fruits and many others sweet things) that the “Coro de Cayo Hueso” threw at her when she was arriving to Cayo Hueso as a welcome (16 trans. 27). This image contains a mixture of laughter and sadness in which Arenas presents his sadness through

Avellaneda, divided and *destruido* (destroyed) by the heteropatriarchal institutions of censorship in both countries.

The metaphoric *choteo* parallel between the rotten egg and sweet candies shooting is drawn from his experiences of how Marielitos were treated when they came to the United States. In this scene from the beginning of the novel that acts as a dramatic script, Avellaneda is near Cayo Hueso's coast and her boat is on fire and she is yelling for help that no one gives her.

CORO DEL MALECÓN: ¡Gusanos!
CORO DE CAYO HUESO: ¡Marranos!
AVELLANEDA: ¡Ay, una mano, una mano!...
CORO DEL MALECÓN: ¡Agentes del imperialismo!
CORO DE CAYO HUESO: ¡Fósiles del marxismo!

CHORUS ON THE MALECÓN: Traitors! Maggots!
CHORUS IN KEY WEST: Pigs! Faggots!
AVELLANEDA: Help me! This boat will not last!
CHORUS ON THE MALECÓN: Capitalist-imperialist apostles!
CHORUS IN KEY WEST: Commie Marxist fossils! (61 trans. 54)

While the two groups are insulting her and each other, the Cuban poet is sinking in the ocean.

Unable to be fully human and express free will in Cuba, Cubans who want to express their humanity flee but are turned into 'agents' or 'fossils'; dichotomous objects manipulated by political power. For example, in the United States, Avellaneda is quickly turned into an object for profit where a new product is sold at the market in Cayo Hueso named milk shake Avellaneda made of "avena, avellana, canela y nela" (avena, avellana, canels and *Vanilla*³⁵) (31 trans. 21).

Further, the Mayor of Miami only cared about the publicity campaigns won due to these scenes and declared that "si Tula llega o revienta es cosa secundaria" (whether Tula comes ashore or drowns, the more people watch, the more the sponsor pay) (42 trans. 32). In both

³⁵ Emphasis by translator

countries Cubans are treated as the objects of political and economic desires and dehumanized, but differently according to the needs of the system. For example, describing the ‘freedom’ he found in Miami Arenas recounts that, “nunca he sentido una soledad tan cósmica, tan deshumanizada, inminente e implacable como la que siento en estas playas miamenses. Todo me es ajeno, plástico, monumental, y desalmado” (I’ve never felt such a cosmic, suffocating, and implacable loneliness as I’ve been feeling on this beaches in Miami. Everything is so dehumanized, so alien, so plastic, so monumental, so soulless) (288 trans. 261). Arenas discovers that to be free in the United States is not the same as being fully human.

Arenas’s sense of having nowhere to go is captured in the encounter between Avellaneda and José Martí, who, once resuscitated was escaping Cayo Hueso for Cuba. She asked him why and in a poetic style José Martí answered that he is leaving Cayo Hueso “porque un mundo donde sólo cuenta el dinero/ no es precisamente lo que quiero” ([m]oney is all anybody cares about,/and that is not what I think life’s about) (53 trans. 46). This sentence echoes Arenas experiences as described in his autobiographic novel *Before Night Falls*.

In the chapter, “The Eviction”, Arenas explains his disappointment with the United States when he realized, “that it is country without soul: everything revolves around money” (este es un país sin alma; lo que mas importa es el dinero³⁶) (*Before Night Falls* trans. 310). For artists and intellectuals searching for true freedom of expression, putting a monetary value on that expression is dehumanizing. In *El color del verano* Gabriel writes a letter to Reinaldo from New York and declares, “en los Estados Unidos no hay intelectuales, ni artistas, ni políticos. Hay sólo negociantes” (here in the United States there are no intellectuals, no artists, no politicians. All there are businessmen) (*El color del verano* 166 trans.152).

³⁶ Translation mine

To summarize, Arenas's daily experiences with oppression in Cuba promote awareness that something is not as it should be. In the process that I am equating to *nepantla*, he gains *la facultad* and recognizes deep contradictions between government ideology and life in Cuba. Where all Cubans should enjoy freedom and liberty, those who are non-heterosexual and those who wish to express themselves without restriction are regarded as the enemies of Fifo. Arenas denounces hypocrisy and government tyranny throughout his *autohistoria*. The spirit of extreme freedom is embodied in all of the characters, each of whom represents some part of Arenas's many identities. By the act of writing he analyzes and critiques with a *choteadora* narrative pointing out the need to change oppressive relations. *El color del verano* is Arenas's biography hyperbolized, in which *el choteo* is a method of disidentifying from the homophobic Cuban system, which limits freedom of expression.

Arenas's use of the uniquely Cuban narrative form *choteo* allows him to express his understanding, *el conocimiento*, of continuing oppressive relations in Cuba that prevent Cubans from becoming free. Rather than expressing anger at the socialist revolution and its goal of human development and equality, Arenas focuses on the corruption and hypocrisy of Cuban political leaders, such as the tyrant Fifo. His humor, *choteo*, can be clear and understandable for readers and points out contradictions between the reality of daily life in Cuba and the ideology promoted by the political leaders. He humorously connects his life with that of other Cubans by describing the lies of the Cuban newspapers, the chaotic public transportation system, the poor quality of housing, and the scarcity of food and other goods.

Specifically, Arenas attacks the repression of non-heterosexual people who face imprisonment, or death, and the censorship of written expressions of individuality, imagination, and beauty. The two are continually intertwined and many characters are both artists or writers

and non-heterosexuals. Virgilio, Clara, and the three characters that represent Arenas specifically continually fight to express themselves both sexually and through artistic expression all the while aware that their actions bring them closer to danger. Each either destroys or watches her/his work destroyed, yet the will to be free drives them to create again. Comparing liberty in Cuba to liberty in the United States, Arenas further expresses his disillusionment with the United States and its love of money rather than humanity.

Linking his life and choices to his fiction, Arenas creates a character who is a *bugarrón* who *singa* (screws³⁷) Fifo, and many other important people in Cuban History. Arenas talks directly to his non- heterosexual readers and recounts the story of a ‘bugarrón’ who in his youth “se templó a Mella³⁸, a Grau San Martín³⁹ y a Batista⁴⁰ ... y después a Fifo, que hoy celebra sus cincuenta años en el poder” (*have screwed Mella, Grau San Martín and Batista ... and even Fifo, who’s celebrating a half century in power today*⁴¹) (64 trans. 57). Arenas’s *choteo* of Fifo and other important persons also is a story of the end of his life as he committed suicide to commemorate Fifo’s reign. The spirit of Arenas lives on in *El color del verano* challenging readers to understand and transform systems of oppression that limit our common humanity and freedom of expression.

In conclusion, the work of Gloria Anzaldúa guided the discussion in Chapter II to illustrate how the subaltern does not just represent a mass of people who share general forms of oppression but a whole range of distinct groupings of people inhabiting distinct worlds and

³⁷ Translation mine

³⁸ Julio Antonio Mella (1903-1929) was a revolutionary journalist who found *Alma Mate* magazine. He was assassinated in 1929.

³⁹ Ramón Grau San Martín (1889-1969) he was against Gerardo Machado, another Cuban dictator. Grau became a Cuban President from 1944 to 1948.

⁴⁰ Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar (1901-1973) He is one of the most corrupt Cuban president from 1952-1959.

⁴¹ Emphasis by translator

navigating *los intersticios* between worlds. Varying systems of oppression were shown to intersect and shape the lives of all three authors and the characters in their novels. Specific forms of oppression discussed in each of the novels shape their daily experiences, interactions with others, and goals in life. Chapter III continues the discussion guided by Anzaldúa's conception of *la facultad*, an awareness of oppression, and *el conocimiento* a critical understanding that potentially leads to social transformation.

Those in the *nepantla* process are torn between *mundos* and experience uncertain and confused lives. This time of possible self-reflection can lead to *la facultad*, which is awareness that something is not right or out of place. It is this awareness that leads to a shift in perception and a process of questioning, which is characteristic of the three authors in this comparative study. Condé's childhood experiences forced her to recognize contradictions between how her parents saw themselves and how they were treated in public. Listening to comments from her brother about the alienation of her parents, their loss of humanity, Condé begins to realize that she, too, does not know where she comes from or who she really is. Euba similarly questions who he is and his relation to the past due to the cultural dislocation he experiences torn between the West and Nigeria; between Christian and Yoruba belief systems. Arenas realizes he is torn between his love of Cuba and the oppressive political system that denies him the freedom of expression; his sense of humanity.

Each of the three authors turn their reflective processes into novels that I argue employ the literary form Anzaldúa calls *autohistoria*, which is infused with spirituality. These novels link individual experiences and stories to collective conditions of oppression to further understanding and analysis, and lead to personal and social transformation. *Autohistoria* may force readers to reconsider their assumptions of both oppression and the possibility of social

transformation. Condé searches written records and relies on the collective memories to learn about the lives of her grandmother and mother and challenges readers to understand the complexities of what she discovers. Euba, through the character Olumofin, continually reflects on the past while navigating the present and contemplating future paths in life.

Euba challenges readers to see the grotesquery of modern life through Esu's satire designed to spark awareness and reflection over which path we should choose and how it is intertwined with the paths chosen by others. As with Condé, his focus centers on family and radiates out to include society in general. Similar to Euba's use of satire, Arenas employs *choteo* to both ridicule oppressive systems and celebrate life and the power of the human imagination. He inhabits stereotypes, disidentifies with them, and shows readers possibilities they may have never considered. Arenas is able to infuse his spirit into his characters' stories and is thus able to raise the dead and bend time and space to develop a profound analysis of oppression in revolutionary Cuba. Through their novels and their characters' stories, the authors share their understanding of oppression with readers to inform social transformation.

Anzaldúa's notion of *el conocimiento* reverberates with how the authors in this chapter understand different kinds of oppression. They also gather information and present it to readers, through the techniques of *autohistoria* in their novels. *El conocimiento* is a relational way of understanding the world that enables those who use it to make insightful connections about oppression and its possible transformation. Characters in all the three novels become aware of ideological, institutional, and interpersonal contradictions but not all develop an appropriate understanding that allows their actions to be transformative at either the personal or social level. This inability of characters in all three novels to fully understand the nature of intersecting

oppressive systems and become free allows the authors to challenge readers to be more reflective of their own understanding of different forms of oppression and their ability to be transformative.

Condé shows how both Victoire and Jeanne occupied similar social positions but understood their lives in distinct ways. They could not agree on how to transform the social relations they experienced as oppressive and they disagreed with each other's choices and actions. That Victoire's and Jeanne's level of understanding of oppression was incomplete and did not fully lead to either individual or social liberation allows Condé to force readers to consider their own understanding. Through her process of discovery, Condé shows how characters' understanding of the intersections of class, gender, and race oppression in Guadeloupe creates very different and contradictory outcomes in character's daily lives.

Similarly, Euba's main character, Olumofin, and his father, Difala, navigate a world in between Yoruba and Western cultures and both understand that they have to act to shape their futures; however, their choices are very different. As with Victoire and Jeanne, Olumofin and Difala regard each other as having an incomplete understanding of circumstances and as choosing to follow a path that does not lead to true freedom. As in *Victoire* the choices characters make in *Camwood at Crossroads* do not necessarily lead to desired outcomes. Euba is thereby able to challenge readers to reflect continually on their choices and pay attention to the guidance provided by Esu in order to maintain a sense of balance and equilibrium in their lives.

For non-heterosexuals and writers who are characters in Arenas's *El color del verano*, understanding oppression shapes their daily actions. They long for the freedom of individual expression in Cuba and struggle to survive, struggle to love, struggle to express themselves artistically. They understand the dangers they face and engage in creative agency to continue their struggle such as burning poems once they are read. Those who go to the United States for

freedom may happen to encounter Cubans returning to Cuba and realize that freedom may not be something you obtain by changing countries. Unlike Olumofin in Euba's novel, they are unable to successfully maintain either their cultural identity or sense of humanity in the United States. However, as with characters in *Victoire* and *Camwood at Crossroads*, characters' actions have uncertain outcomes and freedom is always elusive.

In *autohistoría* novels writing is an act of individual and collective liberation. Authors link their experiences to collectively shared experiences with oppression and the longing for freedom. Examining and analyzing *mundos* so familiar to them Condé, Euba, and Arenas create characters to both delineate oppressive systems to readers and emphasize the importance of *el conocimiento* for both individual and social transformation. Each novel shows in some way that freedom from oppressive relations and systems is contingent and problematic and requires continual thought, action, and reflection in order to stay on the correct path. In the next chapter we will discuss the role of spirituality in guiding this reflection and continual thought process. Each author's *autohistoría* is deeply spiritual and informs the narrative technique used by the author to communicate their understanding of oppression and their struggle for freedom to readers.

CHAPTER IV SPIRITUALITY IN MEMORY, SATIRE, AND CHOTEO

The previous chapters compared and contrasted how characters in *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots* (2006), *Camwood at Crossroads* (2007), and *El color del verano* (1991) navigate *los intersticios* between *mundos* living marginalized, confusing, and chaotic lives. Many characters share awareness that something is not right, *la facultad*. However, it was shown that this immediate shift in perception does not always lead to a deeper understanding of oppressive relations, which may lead to the painful *conocimiento* of who they are in *los intersticios*. *El conocimiento* may lead to action by individuals for a collective transformation within a spiritual path. As *autohistoria* novels, the three authors use the contradictions between the characters' awareness, actions, and outcomes to challenge readers to think about their own understanding of oppressive relations and potential paths to liberation. This chapter will continue the discussion by illustrating how Condé, Euba, and Arenas re-write history around the everyday lives, daily experiences, and voices of the characters in their novels. These counter-histories emphasize how spirituality, one's inner self and immersion in one self, can alert and guide one's daily actions and choices in the physical world (*Borderlands*, 2012; *Poetics of the Creative Process*, 17-21).

As discussed in chapter one, nationalist narratives represent the views of the dominant groups that control the production and distribution of ideologies and deny the subaltern the ability and means of representation. That is why it is so important to take writing, art, and performance seriously as counter-hegemonic narratives. Condé, Euba, and Arenas write novels that express a conception of life that presents the characters as subjects of their own histories. The stories they tell are not frequently heard and each novel contributes to a more complex understanding of the general features of shared oppression as well as how it structures the daily lives of characters in Guadeloupe, Martinique, Nigeria, and Cuba. Nationalist narratives tend to

be rational and secular and promote historical and social views that condemn spirituality and regard it as irrational. However, each novel in this comparative study demonstrates how characters believe their daily lives are intimately linked to spirituality. Condé, Euba, and Arenas demonstrate how spirituality informs and guides actions for individual and social transformation.

Gloria Anzaldúa links *autohistoria* to ‘spiritual activism’ to demonstrate how spirituality may awaken *la conciencia* in the active reader by fostering a connection between the authors’ stories, the characters’ lives, and the experiences of the reader (*Borderlands* 247-248). Anzaldúa acknowledges the many ways that spirituality informs the ways we interpret our experiences, which inform our understanding of who we are and why we exist. Jacqui Alexander similarly argues spirituality “as a type of body praxis” in which “embodiment” united to the memories, everyday life; it “does not exist outside of these very social, cultural, and political relations” (Alexander 297). For many practitioners, spirituality “inscribes [their traditions] in the bodies of the followers (297).

Similarly, we see how in each of the three novels spirituality frames the characters’ memories of who they were, their understanding of the present, and their future paths. Understanding how the spiritual can guide everyday actions may lead to alternate *mundos*, which can be anti-racist and anti-sexist as Condé seems to posit in *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots* or a modern society informed by the sensibilities of traditional cultures as Euba, in *Camwood at Crossroads*, seems to suggest, or of a revolutionary society that does not force compulsory heterosexuality or censor creative self-expression, as about which Arenas dreams in *El color del verano*.

Alexander lists five ways in which daily lived experience is interwoven with the spiritual, “Sacred energies intervene in the daily lives of human beings; they bring a sense of purpose; they

are present everywhere, as in the Wind, and at specific moments, as in dreams; they mediate a process of interdependence / mutual beingness, in which one becomes oneself in the process of becoming one with the Sacred; and they manifest their sacredness in nature as well as with human beings” (301). Alexander’s view of daily life as intertwined with the ‘sacred’ supports the work of Anzaldúa and further informs and understanding of characters’ actions and choices in *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots*, *Camwood at Crossroads*, and *El color del verano*. Importantly, the centrality of spirituality in these three novels is also apparent in the narrative techniques each author uses to tell the characters’ stories.

The counter-narrative strategy relying on the ‘collective memories’ of the people that knew and interacted with her grandmother and mother allows Condé to tell the story of her family linked to the history of the people of Marie-Galante, Guadeloupe, and Martinique. Through this narrative choice Condé illustrates the ways that spirituality guides the daily lives of people in Guadeloupe and Martinique; their sense of themselves and their sense of history. Further, memories form the spiritual link between Condé and her African ancestry. Esu’s satire is employed by Euba to illustrate the contradictions of daily life in Nigeria and to make readers reflect on the grotesque features of the clash between the traditional and the modern. Esu Elegbara, the guardian of the crossroads in the Yoruba Pantheon, is omnipresent throughout *Camwood at Crossroads* demonstrating the inseparable relationship that binds the Yoruba people to their deities and memories. The novel unfolds during the festival of Esu and satiric interactions, events, and contemplations continually reinforce how the material world and the spiritual world are intertwined.

As we see, Condé and Euba directly link African spirituality to the daily lives of their characters. Similarly, Arenas, while acknowledging African spirituality at times in his novel,

intertwines daily life, official and unknown historical events, with dead⁴² historical figures from many parts of the world to give *arriendas* (release) to his spirit of freedom and of self-expression; his human spirit. Similar to the role of satire in *Camwood at Crossroads*, Arenas uses the Cuban aesthetic of *choteo* to ridicule and expose contradictions between government ideologies and the oppressive conditions that non-heterosexuals and writers experienced during the 1960s to the 1990s. Arenas maintains that the human spirit must be free to express itself, to be creative, and to make beauty in the world. So the Cuban novelist celebrates life under censorship and homophobia through *choteo*, a writing form of extreme freedom, which is crude, playful, thought provoking and liberating. Condé, Euba, and Arenas employ narrative strategies rooted in their sense of spirituality, and memories. Each novelist listened to the ‘inner voice’ described by Anzaldúa and began a spiritual journey. These novelists write novels that link each of their personal stories, through the experiences of their characters, to the lives of the readers.

Anzaldúa maintains that one’s spirituality emerges from within and is directed outward in an attempt of “social change” (*Borderlands* 247). Anzaldúa’s theory reflects a continual tension between one’s internal struggle, outer awareness, and transformation. Similarly, Condé, Euba, and Arenas question who they are and where they come from and their characters struggle with the meaning of their own existence as well. A deeper understanding of the sources of our struggles, *el conocimiento*, is obtained from experience and events, but also from emotions, memories, and dreams. Each of the three novelists shares with readers an understanding of history and present conditions obtained from these diverse sources of knowledge. Each novelist promotes a relational way of thinking that allows for connections to be drawn between physical and spiritual realms of existence.

⁴² Bringing back the dead “is part of Cuban spirituality –especially in regards to Espiritismo,” explains Solimar Otero. See the 2015 essay “Entre aguas/Between Waters”, in press.

Victoire, *Camwood at Crossroads* and *El color del verano* can be considered *autohistoria* novels that retell people's story from an oppositional consciousness. Each novel is guided by the author's sense of spirituality, and illustrates the practice of writing as an act of freedom. Each novel transcends nationalist narratives and contributes to a transnational dialogue about the operation of oppression and the possibility of individual and social transformation. *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots*, for example, is a personal and very emotional journey that traces the transformation of Condé's consciousness. Born and raised as part of the educated middle-class, Condé understood the freedom writing gives her. In an interview with *Repeating Island* in 2010, Condé explains, "writing is like reaching a personal freedom. At least, while it lasts" (Condé). The search for her grandmother's past is a spiritual search that links personal feelings, memories, and experiences to their broader social significance by uncovering her grandmother's life story and sharing it with readers.

Liberation and Condé

"Je ne suis pas un écrivain à message.

J'écris d'abord pour moi, pour m'aider à comprendre et supporter la vie."

Condé's interview by *Afrolegends*⁴³

Similar to Anzaldúa's conception of spirituality, Alexander (2005) tells us that the sacred, the realm of spirituality, brings us a sense of purpose in life. Her discussion of the sacred deepens readers understanding of both Condé and her novel, *Victoire*. As discussed in previous chapters, early in her life's journey young Condé struggled with contradictions between what she was told and what she experienced. *La facultad* is apparent in young Condé as she recounts how her brother told her that their parents were alienated. This statement juxtaposed against events

⁴³<http://afrolegends.com/2011/07/27/maryse-conde-the-birth-of-the-african-epic-fiction/>

and interactions she witnessed involving her parents sparked her curiosity about social relations and about who she was. She describes her struggle to understand her origins and the link between her present and her family's past. Condé laments that, « comment personne dans ma famille ne m'instruisit ni de la Traite, de ces voyages initiatiques qui fondèrent notre destinée d'Antillais, ni de l'esclavage. Je dus négocier sans aide le poids de ce terrible passé » (nobody in my family told me anything about slavery or the slave trade, those initiatory voyages that founded our Caribbean destiny. I had to negotiate on my own the weight of this terrible past) (*Victoire*, 117 trans. 84).

A deeper understanding of her family and her own link to the people of African descent *El conocimiento* eluded her until she became aware of the spiritual connection that tied her to the past. Similar to Anzaldúa's assertion that spirituality comes from within, Condé shares how she contemplated her origins throughout life but never searched for answers until she was told to remember by the spirit of her grandmother, Victoire:

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. – Qu'as-tu à faire à courir à Ségou, au Japon, en Afrique du Sud ? À quoi riment tous ces déplacements ? Ne sais-tu pas que l'unique voyage qui compte est intérieur ? Qu'attends-tu pour t'intéresser à moi ? Cela seul compte ! Semblait-elle me dire.
(Sometimes I would wake up at night and see her sitting in a corner of the room, like a reproach, so different from what I had become. What are you doing running around from Segu to Japan to South Africa? What's the point of all these travels? Can't you realize that the only journey that counts is discovering your inner self? That's the only thing that matters.) (*Victoire* 16 trans. 3)

Condé's *autobiografía*, *Victoire*, describes the spiritual, non-linear path she took to remember and to understand. She discovered her grandmother's story was one of both oppression as well as a struggle for independence and self-assertion. What began as a journey to discover her grandmother became a journey of self discovery linked to the collective history of the people of Guadeloupe and Martinique. To paraphrase Jacqui Alexander, Condé had to

become open to the movement of spirit in order to wrestle with the movement of history. As Condé came to know herself by following a spiritual path, her individual story is a window for readers into the people of Guadeloupe's unspoken history; a glimpse of what dominant group narratives have ignored.

In "An Interview with Maryse Condé" with Megan Doll on February 10th, the novelist Condé explains how she relied on memories to write her novel, "memory, which is the actual facts of the people of Guadeloupe and Martinique -- the way they lived, the way they suffered, the way they enjoyed life" to help her understand how her family, who were "one of the most educated families in Guadeloupe at the time, could come from an illiterate person" (Condé). This contradiction motivates Condé to write *Victoire* about the lives of her grandmother, her mother, and herself from the collective memories of the people of Guadeloupe and Martinique. This is a counter-hegemonic narrative that tells the history of Guadeloupe from the experiences of the subaltern, gives voice to those who are normally silenced by nationalist narratives, and emphasizes the importance of spirituality in the daily lives of those of African descent in the Antilles.

Condé was seven or eight years old when she began to ask questions about her grandmother. In *Victoire*, Condé recounts to the reader her memory of asking her mother about her grandmother's only picture that sat on the piano, which she used to play when she was a child. This sepia-colored portrait of her grandmother was strange for the young Condé who recounts: « Bref, elle détonait dans mon univers de femmes en capeline de paille d'Italie, d'hommes cravatés en costumes trois pièces de fil à fil, tous nègres noirs bon teint. Elle me paraissait doublement étrangère » (In short, she jarred with my world of a woman in Italian straw bonnets and men neck tied in three pieces linen suits, all very black shade of black. She appeared

to me doubly strange) (*Victoire* 14 trans. 1). This photo of a strange and unknown grandmother contrasted with the wealthy life Condé's parents gave her and triggered Condé's curiosity about her grandmother and herself. Her parents never spoke to her about their past. In fact, they both seemed cold, distant, and could not guide young Condé's path of discovery.

This is why Condé declares « Ce jour-là, sans doute, naquit ma résolution de me documente sur Victoire Quidal » ("I made the resolution to research the life of Victoire Quidal") (16 trans. 3). After three years searching, Condé found her grandmother split in many identities by the people of Victoire's hometown. The Guadeloupean writer paints a portrait of her grandmother in-between multiple *mundos*. Condé links the experiences of Victoire and her family to larger social and cultural issues and events to paint a portrait for readers of a Guadeloupe not normally read about in nationalist narratives. Condé creates characters that symbolize her personal search and represent the experiences of many people in Guadeloupe and Martinique.

Condé's understanding of both oppression and the love of life in Guadeloupe, Martinique, and Marie-Galante was informed by her research into the newspapers of the epoch, history books, family letters, and the memories of those who knew her grandmother, Victoire. Condé poured through letters written by family members and friends, she obtained official notes and documents related to stories she heard and read about. She searched archives and newspapers for supporting evidence. She traveled to the cities inhabited by her ancestors and walked streets she imagines they once walked.

As she searched, Condé came to have a deeper understanding of the forces that shaped their lives and their struggles for self-determination. For instance, Condé discovered how Father Amallyas, the priest at Grand-Bourg, « refusa donc de baptiser Jeanne et par note confidentielle

en date du 10 mai 1890, il enjoignit aux curés des paroisses de Saint-Louis et de Capesterre de l'imiter » ("refused to baptize Jeanne and, in a confidential note dated May 10, 1890, he urged the priests at Saint-Louis and Capesterre to do the same") (72 trans. 49). Father Amallyas did not want to baptize Jeanne on Saturdays, the days for the infants born in sin, nor any other day because « [s]a fille, c'était Satan soi-même » ("her daughter was Satan in person") (72 trans. 48).

However, Condé is able to share with readers that the pain of this event made Victoire resolved to raise her daughter in such a way that she would never have to experience this humiliation. Victoire left her home vowing never to return and asserted her sense of independence by forging her own path. Recounting the story of Victoire's love affair with Alexandre, while leaving Jeanne with Boniface and Anne-Marie, Condé shows how Victoire's sense of fulfillment in love is contradicted in the letters of people who viewed her with contempt for not acting as a woman 'traditionally' should. Condé found that, « Colportée par les lettres des parents et amis de la Martinique, l'affaire ne manqua pas de parvenir aux oreilles des mégères bourgeoises de La Pointe qui en firent leurs choux gras. Elles se déchaînèrent contre Victoire, *bòbò*⁴⁴, redoutable traînée, débauchée, mère sans entrailles, qui dérespectait les maisons respectables dans les moments les plus sacrés » ("By way of letters from friends and relatives in Martinique, the affair soon reached the ears of the bourgeois circle of harpies in La Pointe, who gleefully badmouthed Victoire. They let fly at her, calling her *bòbò*⁴⁵, slut, a debauched individual, and a heartless mother who disrespected respectable households at the most sacred of times") (126 trans. 91-92). Condé challenges readers to recognize how those around Victoire always shaped her choices. Through these letters we can see how traditional ideologies of gender inform and are perpetuated by those closest to us like our family, friends and neighbors. Condé's

⁴⁴ Emphasis by novelist

⁴⁵ Emphasis by translator

goal is to share her understanding of the complex and often contradictory operation of oppression throughout Guadeloupe and Martinique in order to promote a process of dialogue and social transformation.

Condé's search allowed her to understand Jeanne's choices in life as well. She saw how her mother was brutalized by social and cultural race and gender expectations. Multiple interactions with those who treated her in derogatory manners made her cold and insular over the course of her life. Condé recounts the story of a dinner party in which the Rueil-Bonfils' daughter, Félicité:

qui se piquait de lire offrit à Jeanne un mince roman d'Anaïs Ségalas, son idole, intitulé *Récits des Antilles : les bois de la Soufrière*. Ayant été couronnée, amusante coïncidence, du prix Anaïs Ségalas de l'Académie Française pour un de mes livres : *La Vie Scélérate*, je me suis renseignée sur cette écrivaine et j'ai découvert qu'il s'agit d'une créole de Saint-Domingue qui, en son temps, jouit d'une certaine notoriété. J'ai même lu son ouvrage republié par les Éditions *L'Harmattan*. C'est un ramassis sans intérêt des idées racistes de l'époque, curieusement assorti d'une mouture abolitionniste. (who liked to think she knew a thing or two about literature, with a spiteful smile offered Jeanne a short novel by Anaïs Ségalas, her idol, called *Tales of the Antilles: The Forest of La Soufrière*. Since by an amusing coincidence I had been awarded the Anaïs Ségalas Prizes by the Académie Française for one of my books, *The Tree of Life* I made inquiries about this writer and discovered she was a Creole from Saint-Domingue who in her time had enjoyed a certain reputation. I even read her book reedited by *L'Harmattan*. It's a worthless pack of racist ideas of that time, curiously combined with an abolitionist rehash.) (150 trans. 110-111)

In this account we see that Condé took the memory of an interaction involving her mother, searched for the author's biography, found a copy of the book mentioned in the story, and then read it to see that Félicité intentionally used existing racist ideas to hurt Jeanne because of the color of her skin. Recounting the story to readers allows them to see the impact of impersonal and racist ideologies on the life experiences and choices of individuals with emotions, hopes, and dreams.

Similarly, Condé discovers a newspaper account of an event in Jeanne's life, which should have brought her great happiness but is expressed in crude racial themes. « Le journal *Le Nouvelliste*⁴⁶ célébra la réussite de Jeanne au brevet supérieur par un article vibrant intitulé : 'Négresse en avant ! En avant toute !' » (The newspaper *Le Nouvelliste* celebrated Jeanne's success at passing her final, superior school diploma with a vibrant article headline 'Onward, Negress! Forge ahead!') (154 trans. 113). Uncovering so much information about her grandmother and mother through memories, stories, letters, and newspaper articles allows Condé to draw conclusions about their choices in life.

For example, reading a letter written to her mother by Boniface Jr. Condé begins to understand that Jeanne married for financial security rather than for love. « Quand elle épousa mon père, en une lettre violente d'amoureux frustré, il l'accusa de se vendre à la respectabilité. Sûr et certain, elle n'aimait pas celui qu'elle prenait pour mari » (When she married my father, Boniface wrote to her as a frustrated lover accusing her of selling herself out to respectability. There was no doubt she didn't love the man she took for a husband) (98 trans. 69). Condé expresses some confusion as to why a well-educated and beautiful woman would surrender her liberty for the security of life provided by a stable middle-class husband and exposes a dimension of gender oppression to readers.

Condé's search, which began after the visit of her grandmother's spirit, also uncovers the role of spirituality in daily life. « J'ai pas mal rôdé autour de la gendarmerie, espérant vainement obtenir des éclaircissements » (I have roamed around the police station quite a bit, hoping in vain to obtain some explanation) of why Victoire became close to Antoine Deligny, the gendarme in La Pointe (222 trans. 168). Though a reputable citizen and a man with authority, Antoine

⁴⁶ Emphasis by novelist

Deligny was devastated by the loss of his wife and two sons « par une épidémie de fièvre typhoïde » (in an epidemic of typhoid fever). He remained in La Pointe for the rest of his life to tend to their graves and to become « adepte du spiritisme » (adept at spiritualism) (221 trans. 168).

This spiritual practice allowed him to converse with his lost wife. He would hold séances in his house on the second floor of the police station and talk to the dead. People would come to him hoping that he would be able to connect them with their deceased loved ones. Condé roams the police station imagining that Antoine comforted Victoire by connecting her with the spirits of the three men in her life that had died, Dernier, Alexandre, and Boniface. Conversations with them, Condé imagines, would help alleviate Victoire's fears that she was somehow cursed and could not find love.

Similarly, Condé visited Le Moule and walked its streets to see how it compared with a description someone wrote in the past, « 'et ses vastes rues sont dépeuplée. Le feu dévastateur est passé par là ! Ville morte, port à l'abandon, un seul édifice, l'église, une seule promenade, le cimetière' » ('and its wide streets are empty. A devastating fire has swept through the town! The town is dead, the port abandoned, the only edifice standing, the church, the only walk, the graveyard') (157 trans. 115). The imagery of the spirits of nature and the spirits of the dead in this account is juxtaposed against her experience of modern Le Moule as overcrowded and wretched. This image captures how spirituality is embodied in the daily lives and experiences of the people of Le Moule and links the oppression of their ancestors in the past with continuing oppression in their present lives.

Alexander reminds us that in African views of the cosmos our biological being is dynamically intertwined with our spiritual being; the physical world is intertwined with the

spiritual realm. She regards spirituality as ‘embodied’ and argues that people all over the world organize their daily lives and interpret daily events with their sense of spirituality. This is what she means by, “one becomes oneself in the process of becoming one with the Sacred” (Alexander 301). She argues that, while reflecting on interactions or contemplating events, people flexibly move from the physical to the spiritual and back again to give meaning to their lives. Applying Alexander’s conceptualization to *Victoire* we can see how Condé’s search uncovers the threads of spirituality in her life and in the daily lives of her characters. This application of African spirituality links Condé’s stories to the memories of African people in the Antilles of their shared experiences with oppression.

Condé remembers that as a child in Paris she played with a white girl named Anne-Marie who was always in control of the games they played. One day she was the teacher and Condé was the pupil and she beat Condé. Another time Condé was the maid and Anne-Marie was the rich woman who beat and insulted Condé again. Another day Condé played the role of a horse while Anne-Marie beat and rode young Condé. Tired of being mistreated and nearly losing one eye to the violence displayed by the poor white girl, Condé asked why Anne-Marie beat and insulted her all the time. Anne-Marie answered that Condé must be beaten and insulted, « parce que tu es une négresse » (because you are a black girl) (*Victoire* 42 trans. 37).

This interaction with Anne-Marie and her response made young Condé more confused because she was raised in a privileged crystal ball made by her parents and was insulated from the poverty, misery, and racism faced by the majority of African descendants in Guadeloupe. Interestingly, in later life as Condé contemplates Ann-Marie she believes that the encounter was spiritual and served to spark her desire to understand her past and guide her choice of future path. Condé recalls that, « Aujourd’hui, je me demande si cette rencontre ne fut surnaturelle » (To this

day I wonder whether this meeting was not supernatural) (44 trans. 383-384). Her reflection on the encounter with Anne-Marie as spiritual is an example of Alexander's view of how the biological and spiritual realms are intertwined.

Throughout *Victoire* spirituality is embodied in that it shapes the choices and actions of Condé's characters. For example, Victoire's grandmother, Caldonia, was very spiritual and interpreted dreams for the people of the island. Condé recounts how, « Une vraie clé des songes que l'on venait consulter de loin » (people came from far and wide to unlock their dreams) (20 trans. 6). Caldonia could read the meaning of the signs embedded in dreams of others and help them make decisions and choices that affected their lives. However, when a strong wind blew the roof off of a house and lightening burned a dried-up guava stump, Caldonia failed to read the signs that she was to die. Caldonia was very spiritual and was very protective of her granddaughter, but Victoire's pale skin was seen by others as a bad sign and avoided interacting with her. Her experience shows how racial ideology can mix with spiritual interpretations and have a hurtful impact.

Throughout her childhood Victoire was referred to as a spirit who wanders the roads at night feeding on children or seen as the spirit of the dead who haunts graveyards. She was continually harassed by those who interpreted her biology, her skin color, as intertwined with the spiritual realm to signify evil. This culturally shared view impacted Victoire's choices in life and determined the quality of her interactions with others. At various points in the novel Condé recounts how those who lived and worked with her, as well as those she encountered in public, were scared of her. As part of her search for the memories of those who knew Victoire, Condé interviewed, Léonie X, a woman who, as a child, frequently saw Victoire in the neighborhood: « Elle m'a confié : 'Elle me faisait peur' Toute seule, dans la noirceur. Ma mamman m'assurait

que c'était un *jan-gagé*⁴⁷, qu'elle allait laisser sa peau sur le bord du trottoir et tourner en chien. Parfois, elle allumait une pipe et ce gros œil rougeoyait » ('She scared me', she confided in me. 'All alone in the dark. Maman convinced me she was *gagé*, had made a pact with the devil to leave her skin on the side of the road and turn herself into a dog. Sometimes she lit a pipe and it glowed like a big eye') (159 trans. 117).

Tired of the way others viewed and treated her all of her life, Victoire left her home for good to find happiness and a new life for her daughter Jeanne. However, she chose to leave as Bobette was dying and others in her family and the community viewed that choice of action as disrespectful. Lourdes yelled after her, « Je répète, on ne dérespecte pas les morts. Sinon ils se vengent et leur vengeance est terrible » (I'll say it again, you don't disrespect the dead. Otherwise they take their revenge and their revenge is terrible) (80 trans. 55). Though Victoire asserted her own independence by leaving when and how she did, and although she never regretted her decision to leave, she sometimes remembered Lourdes' words and wondered if they explained events in her life.

In fact, in later life Victoire became unhappy for not being able to fulfill her goals for Jeanne and for not having a satisfying long-term love relationship with a man. Near the end of her life, Victoire asks if the people who were scared of her are correct. She wonders,

Quelle ceinture de morts autour de ses reins ! De quel mauvais œil était-elle dotée pour coucher en terre tous ceux qui l'approchaient ? Dernier, Alexandre, à présent Boniface. Quand elle était petite, les gens de La Treille l'accusaient d'être un *jan gagé*, un *soukougnan*. C'était sans doute la vérité.

(What a belt of corpses she wore around her waist! What evil eye had she been dealt with to lay to rest all those who came into contact with her? Dernier, Alexander, and now Boniface. When she was little, people at La Treille accused her of being in league with the devil and a bloodsucking *soukouyan*. It was probably true.) (215- 216 trans. 162)

⁴⁷ Emphasis by the novelist

The answer to her questions are, in part, provided through the séances with Antoine Deligny, the gendarme who mediates her conversations with her deceased lovers in order to find a sense of balance and satisfaction in life.

Clearly, Victoire and the people she encountered lived their daily lives informed by the spiritual realm. They interpreted events and actions through their spirituality and made decisions that affected their future paths guided by their sense of the spirituality. Embodied spirituality also reflects how the spirit realm manifests itself in our dreams. This further illustrates the importance of the presence of ancestors as tangible phenomenon in the culture and texts on the islands. For example, while with fever Victoire dreams of walking with Alexandre who says to her lovingly « -Ne tarde pas, ... Je t' attends » (Don't be long, ... I'll be waiting for you) (239 trans. 182). Convinced of her uselessness in her old age the spirits of the dead remind Victoire of her link to the past and remind her that she is and will always be loved.

A Western secular view of the world denies that there are direct links between nature, spirituality, and the daily lives of people. Any natural disaster can be described in scientific and rational terms, which have nothing to do with the interconnection between the world of the spirits and the physical realm. Jacqui Alexander reminds us that in African conceptions, the sacred is present everywhere and shapes the course of our lives (291-295). Further, the spiritual appears to us at specific moments in our lives, as in the dream of Victoire described above. In general, spirits inhabit nature and express their feelings and desires through events that impact the lives of people. "Wind. Water. Fire. Thunder. Lightning. Volcano. The cosmic geography of Sky. Earth. Trees. Forest. Park. Mountain. River. Ocean. Rocks. Stones. They each have their own consciousness. They cluster at ... the crossroads, the railroad track, and the cemetery" (303).

More specifically, Alexander argues that the African slave trade, the ‘Crossing’ of millions of brutalized souls forced from their homes in Africa, included the ‘crossing’ of the dead and the spirits of Africa. Their suffering manifests in ‘natural’ events and disasters that continually shape lives throughout the African Diaspora. These disasters, according to Alexander, link our struggles in the present to the struggles of our African ancestors and remind us of the violent displacement of millions of beings against their will. “It hangs there, this grief, until today, an indelible imprint of the Crossing, fastened by a pool of tears below, constantly replenished by the tremors of human living (Alexander 288).

This conceptualization of African spirituality is particularly useful in reading *Victoire*. That the spirits of those who died during the crossing from Africa take the form of natural disasters that shape the lives of characters is apparent throughout the novel. Alexander says that the trade winds are the swirling spirits of our grieving ancestors. In *Victoire*, hurricanes destroy the towns of Le Moule, Marie Galante, and LaPointe at different times in the novel causing death, destruction, and shaping the future paths chosen by survivors. A wedding on the Wahlberg plantation, for example, was hit by a hurricane that killed all who thought they had found shelter. Condé also recounts how a church was destroyed in 1891 by a hurricane that killed sixty people (*Victoire*, 89). The forces of nature throughout *Victoire* continually destroy towns and lives built on the misery and brutal treatment of slaves.

Towns, cities, and communities are described in personal terms, which allows centuries of accumulated misery to be seen in their physical features. For example, the town of Fort-de-France is described by Condé in a way which links upheavals in nature to the continuing oppression of African descendants, « La ville sur laquelle ne cessaient de s’abattre, à l’instar de La Pointe, incendies, cyclones et tremblements de terre semblait triste et défaite » (The town,

which like La Pointe was a constant victim of conflagrations, hurricanes, and earthquakes, appeared sad and haggard' (121 trans. 87). Cycles of disasters and continuing poverty and racial oppression make the town seem as if it has been worn out. As described in this example, fire destroys La Pointe as well as Fort-de-France. In fact, throughout *Victoire* we see the destructive spirit of fire and its impact on people's lives. La Pointe was completely destroyed by fire once and the outlying districts inhabited by the poor were burnt on two other occasions. Le Moule, burns as well during the novel as does the property owned by Gervais. Antoine Deligny's family is killed by fire, as is Dernier.

Near the end of *Victoire*, Condé shares that a fire killed her father's mother when he was young. Fire intertwines the physical world to the spiritual realm and fire is perceived to act out of a sense of revenge or justice. The outcome of deadly fires not only shape destinies, such as Auguste being raised by the child welfare system when his mother was killed, but may also allow survivors to reflect and draw lessons that inform their future paths. Fire is further often linked to other forces of nature like disease in the following example: « À la suite de la chaleur, des incendies avaient ravagé les faubourgs et calciné deux ou trois familles nombreuses. En une nuit, dix-sept enfants avaient péri. Maintenant, les services de santé craignaient une nouvelle épidémie de fièvre jaune » (As a result of the heat, fires had devastated the outlying districts and burnt two or three large families to a cinder. In a single night seventeen children had perished. The health services now feared another outbreak of yellow fever) (144 trans. 106).

As discussed earlier spirituality is embodied and shapes the course of the characters' daily lives. The spirituality embodied by the characters allows them to link themselves to an event and perceive that a personal and / or a collective lesson is implied. This is possible because Condé's characters understand that the forces of nature have spirits. The death of Dernier

occurred in a fire set, according to official accounts, by local white Creole factory owners.

Victoire, however, regarded his death as justice delivered by the spirits for his aggressive sexual behavior and lack of concern for his offspring, which exceeded traditional expectations of behavior. Contemplating the possibilities of her life and what could have been if Dernier had treated her and Jeanne with dignity and respect, Victoire, « n'était pas loin de supposer que la main qui avait allumé l'incendie avait été celle de son justicier » (couldn't help thinking that it was the hand of justice that had lit the fire) (113 trans. 81).

This link between the forces of nature and the lives of characters is seen again as a link between grief and rain. At Boniface's death Victoire "burst into tears" and her grief coincided with terrible weather, which tore roofs off of houses and drowned five children playing in a canal. Another example of how the spirits inhabit the forces of nature is seen when, remembering the eruption of Mount Pelée that killed thirty thousand people in 1902, Condé rewrites and personalizes the traditional historical account, « D'un coup de sa baguette de fée Carabosse, elle fit de la perle des Antilles la ville fantôme que les touristes, nostalgiques, parcourent aujourd'hui » (With a wave of her magic wand, the wicked fairy turned the pearl of the Antilles into the ghost town visited today by tourists and souvenir hunters) (128 trans. 93).

Rather than relying on scientific explanations for the massive explosions, Victoire felt that her actions and Alexandre's infuriated the spirit of the volcano and caused the destruction. Victoire believed that the spirits of nature and the spirits of the dead are alive and emotional and may act out of anger, jealousy, or rage to extract revenge and teach lessons. Victoire intertwines her understanding of African spirituality with internalized messages of gender oppression and concludes that her relationship with Alexandre led to the disaster. This catastrophe happened two weeks after Victoire returned to her daughter, Jeanne, and her former masters. Understanding that

the spiritual realm intertwines with the physical realm to inform choices and actions, Victoire « ne se remit jamais d'avoir quitté Alexandre alors que le pire danger se profilait derrière lui »; « Souvent aussi, elle se croyait punie pour avoir abandonné si longtemps son enfant » (never forgave for having left Alexandre when the most terrible danger was looming behind him; believed too that she had been punished for having abandoned her daughter for so long) (*Victoire* 128 trans.93).

Alexander also discusses how the spirits of the dead gather at the crossroads of life and in places like cemeteries. Throughout *Victoire*, cemeteries and graveyards are frequent reminders of her grandmother's link to her ancestors' past. For example, as a young girl Victoire ran away and was found in the cemetery on top of her mother's grave. People regarded her as an evil spirit but Condé believes she was attempting to understand who she was and where she came from by going to the place where the spirits of the dead ancestors gather. Similarly, after the death of Dernier Victoire would visit the cemetery and contemplate her relationship with him while looking for answers as to what direction she should take in life. Gravestones surrounded by white flowers or white stones appear on multiple occasions in *Victoire* and always serve to link the present lives and choices of characters with those of their dead loved ones.

Condé also shares how spirits visit characters' dreams and shape their understanding of their actions and choices. In later life Victoire never forgave herself for running away with her lover, Alexandre, who later died in the volcano's eruption, and abandoning Jeanne with Boniface and Anne-Marie. Every night in her dreams, « elle se voyait faisant l'amour avec une momie qui, une à une, déroulait ses bandelettes sur sa chair putrescente. Souvent aussi, elle se croyait punie pour avoir abandonné si longtemps son enfant » (she saw herself making love to a mummy who unwound his bandages one by one, revealing a putrescent flesh. She believed too that she had

been punished for having abandoned her daughter for so long. In short, she was in agony) (128 trans. 93). Characters in *Victoire* act on an interpretation of life, which is deeply spiritual in the tradition of their African ancestors. Some of the characters, like Victoire, personally relate to the spirits of nature and the spirits of the dead and draw meaning from their actions to guide their own path in life.

In summary, the beginning of Condé's journey to know was a visit from the spirit of her grandmother who told her to research, understand, and write about both of their lives. Condé discovers that she is connected to Victoire across time and space even though they have never met each other. They are connected to each other daily as the realm of the spirits is intertwined with the realm of the living. The spirit of her grandmother gives purpose to her journey and allows Condé to establish a link to the collective memories and experiences of the people of Guadeloupe; a link to the grief and oppression of her family and her ancestors. Her grandmother's spirit calls upon Condé to remember and through remembering to heal the wounds caused by oppression both past and present and find a path to freedom.

Condé is aware how her present life is linked to that of her ancestors. She understands how her worldview is informed by their experiences, which contradict the ideological narratives promoted by dominant group members. The Guadeloupean novelist wonders: « 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 replete et riieuse, la bouche pleine de: *Tim, tim, Bois sec ! / La cour dort ? / Non, la cour ne dort pas !* » ("what would have been my relation to myself, my vision of my island, the Antilles and the world in general, what my writing that expresses all this would have been, if I had been

cradled in the lap of a buxom, jovial grandmother, full of the traditional tales: *Tim, tim, Bois sec !* / Is the audience asleep? / No, the audience is not asleep!) (17 trans. 4).

Understanding her origins and presenting them to readers through the collective memories of pain, suffering, and joy, Condé demonstrates why trans-generational memory is a vital spiritual practice within oppressed communities and a powerful antidote to oppression (Alexander 2005).

In *Victoire* there are only ordinary people struggling through oppressive relations while engaging each other, loving, and dreaming. Characters are not national heroes or famous cultural figures, but normal people whom are capable of both good and bad. Beginning with a search to understand her relationship with her grandmother, Condé radiates outward to understand her family, their friends, their communities, and the people of Guadeloupe and Martinique. She shares the results of her very spiritual search in *Victoire*. Throughout her *autohistoría* novel Condé challenges readers to understand the intersections of class, race, and gender systems of oppression and how they shape the daily lives of ordinary people like her grandmother.

Readers are confronted with contradictions between official narratives of history and life as seen through the experiences of the subaltern. Readers are not given solutions but insight as to how individual choices shape our collective destinies. Like the spirit of her grandmother inspired her to understand Condé, the writer, uses her art and her agency to inspire a similar search for understanding among readers. In her essay “Role of the Writer,” Condé states: “I am sorry that I have raised so many questions and have given so few answers. However, this is how I see the role of the writer” (4).

Therefore, it is clear that in the work of Condé contradiction is the point of departure for one to gain a deeper understanding on which to base one’s actions and choose one’s future path. For liberation to occur and for people to begin to heal from the wounds of oppression,

understanding the causes of suffering is the key. We must find out what has happened / is happening in the world to replace balance with chaos and confusion. Condé is guided by the spirit of her grandmother and uncovers the many ways in which the spiritual realm interacts with the physical realm to guide our actions. Similarly, in *Camwood at Crossroads*, characters are informed by satiric events and interactions with others. An understanding of life is gained through consultation with the *Ifa* oracle and Esu guides one's choices at the crossroads of life. In Yoruba culture, the spiritual and the physical realms dynamically intertwine to shape collective destiny.

Transformations at the Crossroads of Esu Elegbara

“Ori eni ni ngba ni”

(“It is one's head that saves one”)

Yoruba proverb quoted in Euba's *Archetypes*

Femi Euba's *Camwood at Crossroads* is an *autohistoria* that describes a history of Nigeria, and the Yoruba community specifically, in very spiritual terms. Past events, present conditions, daily interactions, and potential paths, to the future in the novel are framed by the deities of the Yoruba Pantheon. Euba thus rewrites Nigerian history from the position of Olumofin, who has been marginalized by both the forces of colonialism and of nation building. He navigates the 'in-between' of Western religion and modern culture and Yoruba tradition. As in the work of Jacqui Alexander, Euba conceptualizes the sacred as intertwined with the daily lives of people in the physical realm. As people struggle with daily existence, the sacred realm gives them a sense of purpose. Each is responsible for his or her choices, but the sacred informs, and guides their actions.

Similarly, Anzaldúa writes that spirituality emerges when we listen to the voice inside of ourselves, which empowers us to engage in acts for inner healing and social justice. Writing, as an example of self-representation and an act of freedom, can be an expression of an author's sense of spirituality. It can also be healing, promote dialogue, and contribute to social transformation. As with *Victoire* by Condé, *Camwood at Crossroads* is a clear example of this form of writing. Through the experiences and social interactions of Olumofin on the path to heal his body and soul, Euba contemplates spiritual and philosophical questions of individual and collective existence. Euba challenges readers to be more aware of the outcomes of their own choices and actions, which shape our collective destiny. "Who says what is done cannot be undone? Can't one's feet be trained not to tread a rocky road? Or one's arms, can they not be empowered to lift huge boulders that obstruct vision, obstruct one's road, one's fate?" (Euba, *Camwood at Crossroads* 225)

Grotesque events and contradictory outcomes of actions witnessed by Olumofin throughout *Camwood at Crossroads* take the form of satire and inform his choices and actions. As a deeply spiritual *autohistoria* novel, satire is the narrative form Euba employs to evoke Esu, the guardian of the crossroads. Esu is the Yoruba deity who promotes a reevaluation of self and of the social within the frame of tradition. Therefore, Euba, the satirist, writes from the point of view of Yoruba traditional values and codes of conduct and calls readers' attention to what he believes to be grotesque and dehumanizing features of the modern world.

Euba criticizes Nigerian society and culture through satire when and where it departs from good traditional norms. He links the social to the individual and emphasizes how individual choices and actions intertwine to perpetuate present oppressive social conditions. Importantly, he challenges readers to see how through reflection and acknowledging to Esu at the crossroads of

life they can choose a path that restores a sense of balance and social equilibrium to the world. To achieve and maintain this balance is difficult but not unachievable. In fact it is the difficulty that Esu poses. In other words, “It is a conscious or unconscious effort at a reevaluation of character and a reaffirmation of self within the boundaries of traditions” (*Archetypes*, 26). In *Camwood at Crossroads*, guided by Esu, Olumofin reaffirms the importance of Yoruba tradition and begins to heal. In gaining a sense of his freedom he sees a path forward from the oppressive relations he encounters in Nigeria and the United States.

The importance of Yoruba spirituality in *Camwood at Crossroads*, and its link to the role of satire, is discerned from Euba’s early work. In *Archetypes, Imprecators and Victims of Fate*, Euba posits satire as an expression and ritual power of Esu, the divine trickster and Yoruba God of fate. Esu is the essence of fate, which to the Yoruba is related to one’s character, personality, and will. *Drama of Epidemic* is Euba’s theory of ritual awareness from the point of view of Esu Elegbara, which identifies the importance of satire in black drama and, by extension, black literature. This approach is particularly useful in developing a more complete understanding of Olumofin’s journey and satiric encounters in *Camwood at Crossroads* as well as a deeper understanding of Euba’s critique of life in post-colonial Nigeria.

Esu is the first of all gods in the Yoruba Pantheon. Esu is the messenger of humankind and gods created by Oludumare, the Supreme God (*Archetypes* 19-20). Esu inhabits the crossroads of everyday life for Yoruba believers; his devotees consider Esu a hard teacher who helps determine one’s decision and fate at the intersections of daily human interaction. In every Yoruba religious ceremony Esu is the first orisha to salute and offer *ofrendas* (gifts). Similar to the importance of the sacred discussed by Alexander, Euba demonstrates how Esu is important in the daily lives of his Yoruba (by extension Africans) devotees throughout the African Diaspora.

In Nigeria Esu's altar is represented as "mound or boulder of red laterite ... near or at the threshold of a Yoruba household or compound, but can also be found, significantly, at the crossroads or at the entrance to a market" (37).

"Esu is not the one that endows fate, but one who has knowledge of one's fate by virtue of being a witness to its endowment; therefore he is the source of one's knowledge of it, or one's guide towards achieving one's destiny" (30). As the messenger-god of fate at the crossroads, Esu through satiric devices can often trigger awareness in people, thus calling attention to their wrongdoing, errors, crimes, or even their potential fate, as the case may be. To trigger awareness in readers, Euba uses satiric and narrative devices throughout *Camwood at Crossroads* in the form of newspaper headlines of Olumofin's recognition of contradictions between characters' words and actions, and as elements of Olumofin's 'mind exercises'. Euba argues that satire serves as a public indictment to address and correct an imbalance in the social order. Satire is "both conservative and instructive" and the satirist attempts to affect change of attitude in the individual (victim of satire) and/or the community (53).

Esu is provoked to act by an imprecator whose "desire is conditioned by his will, his Ori or Esu (fate), and the efficacy of the desire may be considered a result of an interaction of two fates" (*Archetypes*, 49). Satire is therefore related to both individual and communal fate. Satire is constituted of two main elements, humor and attack. It begins with an inner sense of outrage over an injustice, which it then indicts (attacks) with ridicule to the world (that is readers' problems). Satire is released in the form of a public ridicule. Throughout *Camwood at Crossroads*, Olumofin wrestles with the impact of Western religion on Yoruba culture, which he therefore indicts and ridicules, as it is corrupt and hypocritical. During mind exercises Olumofin satirically denounces a famous Christian evangelical pastor to the public: "BILL BRAGGS WEPT BITTER

TEARS OF GETHSEMANE IN FRONT OF HIS CONGREGATION, CONFESSING HIS SEXUAL DEVIATIONS: He launches Billion-Dollar Crusade to Win More Converts”

(*Camwood at Crossroads* 218).

Satire in this example challenges witnesses/ readers through sharp humor to develop a deeper understanding of the relationship between the lust for wealth and power and deviant behavior. The parallels drawn between Olumofin’s father, Difala, and Billy Braggart throughout the novel is also present in this satire as a critique of his father’s hybridized religion and deviant sexual behavior. Satire, as in this example, further serves as a warning to others to avoid such behavior, which defies tradition. A Yoruba proverbial saying links the concept of Destiny to the market place, where individual’s ‘market of destiny’ is determined and a fortune is communally shared (*Archetypes* 78). Wealth accumulation by an individual that does not benefit the community is thus immoral and brings misfortune to many in society.

Since the satire implicates the fate-processes, the satirized characters and subjects of the *Drama of Epidemic*, are victims of their own fate, of their own choices, and actions, as are both Braggart and Difala in the previous example. *Epidemic* refers to both the disease and its cure and Euba discerns two processes during satiric event(s): destructive and restorative. The actions of Esu are witnessed as grotesque images through unfolding satiric event(s), which brings public awareness to the transgression and can serve as a collective redefinition and reaffirmation of traditions and morals. In the context of a character or an individual it can serve as a moment for reflection to redefine his or her life, to choose an alternative path, as does Olumofin in *Camwood at Crossroads*. In *autohistoría* novels, readers are challenged by the satirist to engage in a similar restorative process.

Understanding Esu's importance and centrality in the *Drama of Epidemic*, one can understand the importance of Esu's satire in *Camwood at Crossroads* as a force of indictment, awakening, and transformation for both the character Olumofin and the readers of the novel. Throughout the novel a series of events impact Olumofin and he begins a process of reflection on his past and the cross-cultural contrasts between Nigerian and Western culture. Olumofin's process of transformation is spiritual and begins with him recognizing the satirized lives of his father, his friends and acquaintances, and continues as he links their fates to the fate of Nigeria. The novel culminates with Olumofin choosing his own path to a hopeful, although uncertain fate.

Understanding the central role of spirituality in the daily lives of Nigerian people and further applying the satiric concept of Esu to *Camwood at Crossroads*, it is possible to chart Olumofin's fate-process, his continual journey towards understanding his own fate and how it is linked to the fate of others. The novel makes this clear from the beginning as Olumofin's visit occurs during "the annual festival of Esu, which occurs late in the year as the dry season sets in, [and] is an occasion for such reevaluation and reaffirmation" (26). Standing at the crossroads of his former neighborhood in the city of Lagos, he recollects his father's divination adage:

Barefaced kernels of words on the oracle board, my friend! There, Do you see nothing?
... Ifa deity says it will rain in half hour, and do you doubt him because there is no wind
or cloud? It will come, my friend. Rain will certainly come. A Thunderstorm!
(*Camwood at Crossroads*, 9)

As seen in *Victoire*, the realm of the sacred is everywhere intertwined with people's daily lives. Characters become conscious of the spiritual realm when it provokes their attention, as did Condé when visited by her grandmother's spirit. As Alexander writes, "we see its effects, which enable us to know that it must be there. By perceiving what it does, we recognize its being and by what it does we learn what it is" (Alexander 307). Similarly, the importance of Esu in Olumofin's ongoing transformation is viewed throughout the novel as a series of satiric

encounters and grotesque situations by which Esu makes his presence known to Olumofin. The question then becomes to what extent Olumofin can learn from these encounters and how that knowledge will shape his fate.

Olumofin begins his journey with a local newspaper, the *Daily Service*, in his hand. On the front page is his father's photo with the satiric indictment above in the headlines: "Stormy Weather Brewing over Evangelical Priesthood: The *Panshaga* of Jesus of the Well" (9).

Panshaga is a humorous ridicule that attracts readers' attention. The satire both names and attacks the hybrid religion that Difala created, the corrupt outcome of Western evangelical Christianity, and Yoruba religious traditions. 'Stormy weather brewing' evokes the onset of the festival of Esu as a time of reevaluation of current practices in the 'Evangelical Priesthood'. The title 'Jesus of the Well' is a continual satiric reminder of the unnatural and corrupted bond of the two religions created by his father Difala, alias Prophet Jeremiah.

Olumofin's recollections of stories about his father's transformation and emergence from Esu's dried-up well are described in satiric terms calling attention to the contradictory title his father now holds. He recalls from the stories he heard, how as water oozed through cracks in the wall of the well, Difala "realized the full meaning of his vision, a calling to be the leader of a new faith of Jehovah (or was it Esu?), for there was something about a whip that an archangel or a god handed to him in the vision (28). Though he understood that his father's, "response to Christianity was that of a man at the crossroads of the cultures [who] culled connection from his religious cultural roots and attempted to match and fuse the invading religion...with those roots" (73); Olumofin witnessed Esu's satire and understood that Difala corrupted these religious practices.

The role of Esu's satire in *Camwood at Crossroads* clearly guides Olumofin's path away from Difala's, whose perverted, sexual desires and actions were very different from traditional expectations. Due to his sexual crimes against the women in his congregation, he became a corrupt *babalawo* turned evangelist who uses religion as a medium of survival but corrupts it for his own convenience. Consequently, as discussed in chapter three, Olumofin saw his father as a victim of his corrupted actions; one who made a choice at the crossroads of Esu to alter his own fate while affecting the fate of others. As Euba explains, "the victim may be seen as the agent of his or her own satiric action or destruction" (*Archetypes* 71). He further understood how individual fates are intertwined to shape collective destiny and decided not to follow his father's path.

Within Yoruba tradition a *babalawo's* son must follow his father's religious practice but Difala's actions resulted in shame and Olumofin, his only son, refused to follow his corrupt religious practices. Olumofin knew that to the Prophet Difala he was "Westernized" son and to many in the community he might be like those "rebels and reprobates" who live abroad "to make a new life and to follow their dreams" (*Camwood at Crossroads* 56, 10). However, Olumofin recognized that Difala's choices and his cultural transformation come through bad and corrupt decisions although he did not fully connect his father's corruption with its Western evangelical roots until he recalled Tokosi's experiences with the Baptist Evangelical of his school days near the end of *Camwood at Crossroads*. Olumofin knew that his transformation is in part due to his studies abroad and may be regarded as more 'western' but added to this is the gradual realization of his father's choices of corrupt religious practices, which often was the source of embarrassment in the community.

From a traditional Yoruba point of view, Olumofin's behavior and choices brought shame to the family and the people of the town but, importantly for Euba, Olumofin's choice should be understood as a characteristic or outcome of the breakdown of traditional social, economic, and political life in neo-colonialist Nigeria. Euba links "communal fate, the fate of a society, in which and against which individual fates are set as interrelating, conflicting forces" and posits that as the conflict between traditional and contemporary continues, "there is a general reordering of societal fate through a reordering of the individual" (*Archetypes* 84, 86).

Beyond illustrating the clear impact of his father's satiric fate on Olumofin's path, *Camwood at Crossroads* continually illustrates how the will and actions of other characters further shape the communal fate of post-colonial Nigeria and impact Olumofin's choices. Satiric encounters with family, old friends, and members of the community illustrate their varying degrees of responsibility for societal problems; their collective complicity through individual action(s) and/or inaction(s). Satiric encounters continue to promote reevaluation as he navigates public spaces of his hometown.

For example, when the wind blew Olumofin's newspaper to the *akara*⁴⁸ seller, Iya Itakose, (alias Iya 'Takose), he wondered if Iya 'Takose would remember "the old days" and connect him with his auntie, but she did not and treated him disrespectfully. Not recognizing him and his connection to her, she insulted him by calling him "lawyer-debtor who could not afford to buy" her *akaras* and continued loudly as he turned to leave, "it's people like you who spoil our 'natural gutters' with foreign dumps!" (*Camwood at Crossroads*, 31). These abusive words struck the back of his head like a curse blaming him and those like him for her fate and the fate of Nigeria. The satiric quality of this interaction relying on inverted satire that commented on the

⁴⁸ *Akara* are fried bean balls, see *Camwood at Crossroads*' Glossary for more information.

woman's misappropriation often made Olumofin reflect on their intertwining fates and the state of contemporary Nigeria.

Olumofin agreed that "he might have appeared to her as an exploiting neocolonial spook" but knew, "he was only a middleman, in a political game of gutters and dumps" and felt ridiculous in the suit that he had to wear to meet his employer's expectations, although that did not excuse her venom directed at him (33). What prevented him interacting was her view that he was some rich Nigerian returning from abroad rather than as a fellow Nigerian navigating like her the *in-between*. Olumofin understood in his transforming process that individual will and action have an impact on the communal order and recreating oppressive relations, "if words were seeds, those of the akara seller were bad seeds to sow" (31).

Olumofin reflected on the event again later in the novel and wondered, "if words were...cultures that originate and develop, then those of the akara seller ... were bad offshoots of a bad growth or an example of the corrupt acculturation of a native culture" (103). Her satiric use of 'natural' with 'gutter' and the entire interaction helped Olumofin recognize in his subsequent diatribe on the grocer and the manufactured that the *akara* seller, like his father, was part of a bad product from a colonial manufacturer, "her words being the poorly manufactured product from some manufacturing culture" (103). However, Olumofin also realized that while the colonial manufacturer is ultimately responsible for such interactions, people are not merely social products and their will shapes their individual fate as well as the communal fate and "perhaps people should be more honest to admit blame" (105). Such satiric encounters help Olumofin decide not to become part of the "manufacturing culture" but choose another path albeit syncretic, which attempts to reaffirm Yoruba traditions to guide daily life in the modern

world as opposite to a corrupted syncretic mix of Western and the traditional which only lead to corrupt and grotesque outcomes.

As Alexander writes “since no illness has a manifestation that is only of the individual, this theory of disequilibrium applies to the social, that is, to the collectivity as well. The two are therefore, entangled” (312). In *Archetypes, Imprecators, and Victims of Fate* Euba develops a similar analysis of the relationship of individual and communal fates by discussing Nigeria’s traffic accidents and dangerous road systems. Euba notes that from the period of 1979 to 1983, the political, social, and economic situation of the country was chaotic for Nigerians at every level and, by that time, the country was importing too many automobiles on the roads without good road infrastructure and maintenance (*Archetypes* 89-96).

Euba maintains that Esu’s satire “seems to be a natural vehicle for direct indictment of social, economic, and political injustices in a society or nation, and to call for change or revolutionary action” (134). Not surprisingly perhaps, the theme of corruption and social decay appears throughout *Camwood at Crossroads*. In one example, through Olumofin’s satiric encounter with Karako, now a commissioner of the roads, the link between individual and collective fate is emphasized. The link between social decay and individual corrupt choices and actions becomes clear to readers. The encounter began when Olumofin returned to his hotel quite hungry but there was only cold leftovers for him to eat under the “waiter’s withering stare” (*Camwood at Crossroads*, 49).

Olumofin understands the waiter’s dishonesty and acknowledges that “a few naira could do much to stir any waiter into activity, making food appear by some miracle from the kitchen – perhaps food that had been set aside by the waiters for their own consumption” (48). However, he prefers to eat cold leftovers than to participate in this corrupt behavior. Then Olumofin also

sees that Karako, once “a soldier-turned-civilian-turned-military politician” and now Brigadier General Karako, “commissioner for the roads,” eats in the company of “his parasites” a banquet of fresh and hot food on his birthday at the same hotel while he has to be contented with cold leftovers (49, 50, 51).

The satiric situation exemplified life in his country where those like Karako, “an academic failure and a military failure for that matter”, are, “corrupt nation builder[s]” today, he reflected with sarcasm (53). The nature of this satiric event inspires Olumofin to reflect on the general political situation of his country. Olumofin sees the Nigerian system after independence in 1960 as, “the fucked-up phone system. He excused himself for his language but felt it was an appropriate phrase to express the totality of his exasperation about the conditions of the country, the economic waste, and undeserved hardship into which the present rulers had plunged the people, a country where one continued to place one’s life at risk at every turn” (46).

Olumofin saw how the corrupt attitudes, actions, and will of many individual Nigerians, including commissioners of the road like Karako, culminated in the demise of road safety and served as a satiric attack of fate on Nigerian society. Similar to his character Olumofin, Euba points out in *Archetypes* that these car accidents can be seen as “manifestations of the fatal power of Esu”, however they “can be reduced by conscious efforts” of the Nigerian people (*Archetypes* 89). In fact, as were ‘natural’ disasters in Victoire, these social calamities are viewed as Esu’s indictment of modern Nigeria in *Camwood at Crossroads*. Calling attention to Nigerians willingness to accept Western religion Olumofin remembers how, “Epidemics galore ravaged the whole country—drought, cholera, bubonic plague, etc. That was a clear statement of the god’s anger, warning his people” (*Camwood at Crossroads*, 22-23).

Therefore, Nigeria's "stagnant economy, inflation, armed robbery are all manifestations of the fatal power of Esu generated to strike awareness of that imbalance and the necessity to maintain a balance" (*Archetypes*, 89). Throughout *Camwood at Crossroads*, Esu is a guide, messenger, and teacher who is capable of awakening consciousness, through satire's grotesque imagery of the political, economic, and social problems that continue to afflict Nigeria. Spirituality informs and guides as people daily refer to their deities for understanding and to find relief from oppression. The satiric indictment of Esu shows Olumofin that solutions are not as simple as changing political leadership again and again, "Men with arms, Ogun's men by trademark, rose against the garifarinaed democratic civilians, devastating the land all in the name of the nation's cause. They rose to indict their victims of misappropriation of the national treasures, accusing them of the same crimes of which they had accused the former alien white" (*Camwood at Crossroads*, 24-25).

However, Olumofin's realization about the corrupted path chosen by many Nigerians does not inspire him to accept Western culture and values blindly. He is not a mere outcome or product of social contradictions but is one who is trying to shape his fate by the choices he makes at the crossroads of Esu. He gains a greater understanding by witnessing the grotesque in American culture. For example, through the satire of Bill Braggart, an evangelist living in New Orleans related to what he has experienced in Nigeria, Olumofin sees no path forward which mixes indiscriminately Yoruba tradition with Western religion. During his return trip to New Orleans Olumofin is again reminded that Bill Braggart's religious practices and corrupt behavior are similar to Difala's. Olumofin hears about Bill Braggart's recent acts of deviance in a newspaper that Mr. Dewlap is reading to Olumofin in the plane returning to New Orleans (123, 137).

Dewlap, knowing that Olumofin was living in New Orleans, shared with Olumofin, between laughs, the satiric contents of a newspaper story about Bill Braggart being caught in a whorehouse on Bourbon Street in New Orleans. The parallel between this event and that, which opened the novel, are clear. Humorously, Bill Braggart's excuse was that "he was trying to win the soul of the whore to salvation!" (137). Olumofin further remembered how Christian missionaries made similar statements to justify their view of Africans while engaging in sexually deviant acts, like with his friend Tokosi

Dishonest preaching portrayed African cultures in a "ritualistic barbaric fashion" and Africans as those who "were always smiling and drifting in hordes, like animals, in a certain direction, sometimes even into throes of death" and with "souls that are easy to win over to Christ, ready, willing souls" (200). Considering these ideas in relation to his life experiences, Olumofin decides not to follow this corrupt, racially divisive evangelical religion or to blindly follow American and Western culture in general. He discovers during interactions with Savannah's family that African spirituality survives in the United States despite centuries of oppression and to the extent that many African Americans may not even realize.

Olumofin chooses not to be like his father, "a sexual pervert" prophet whose religious practices sexually exploit married women and control the people of the town, or Western prophets like Billy Braggart. Olumofin navigates the in-between of Western and African cultures and decides to not follow worldviews brought by the colonialists, which remain part of modern Nigerian culture and have distorted society into an inverse image of Western society itself. At the end of the novel, Olumofin sees new paths for a new creolization between his culture in Lagos, Nigeria and Savannah's culture in New Orleans, USA, which still has connections with his

African origins. Like the camwood powder that transforms according to the user's needs, Olumofin decides on a future married life with Savannah.

Olumofin's path forward is a 'creolization' of distinct African roots and freedom is obtained through reaffirmation of traditional notions of social balance and equilibrium, a quality of Esu. In spite of the destruction of Yoruba tradition Olumofin understands his choices may ensure his own survival and his culture's, as signified by the *iroko* tree. He imagines that, "out of the chopped up debris of the original iroko, a thin thwarting branch with a die-hard acorn has struggled free—this is the mysterious fledgling that assures its survival and retribution" (224).

Olumofin explains to Savannah that Camwood is "used for many things ... It implicates values such as virtue, character, or even one's fate," (160). "*Camwood of creolization!*" as Olumofin recognizes it in his mind, is his new culture in continual transformation (155). As Savannah and Olumofin hope to forge harmony, beauty, and "love from years of disenfranchisement" *Camwood at Crossroads* ends with an incantation similar to that, which began the novel, clinching the importance of Esu as guide to Olumofin's uncertain fate:

There! These cross patterns on camwood...your fate patterns...Africa, America, black, white. Do you see nothing? Do you learn nothing? (225)

The diagram figures on the camwood not only show Olumofin that the fates of Africa and the United States are linked but also confirms for him that the future is not easy to discern. It requires careful consideration and deep connection with one's spirituality to discover the correct path of one's fate.

In conclusion, the literary theory developed by Euba in *Archetypes* facilitates an understanding of *Camwood at Crossroads*. Euba's work is an *autohistoria* concerned with the impact of European colonialism on Africa, the establishment of post-colonial Africa nations, and the consequent movement of African people from their homelands to live and work in Western

countries. Within the 'Drama of Epidemic', free will influences the practitioner's path (*Archetypes*, 25). Euba's concern is how 'will' and 'action' shape the future paths of individuals and societies and his focus is the role of African spirituality, specifically the fate god Esu, in the process of individual and collective reevaluation and reaffirmation.

One's fate is intertwined to the person's "character and personality" which is "elusive and as unpredictable as Esu" (25, 32). Euba's *Camwood at Crossroads* illustrates how the recognition of the grotesque outcomes of human behavior can impact one's identity and foster awareness that there are other paths that can be chosen. While Difala chooses the path of a false prophet, Olumofin transforms and liberates himself from the false ideologies by analyzing the satiric experiences he had while returning home for a visit. At "the center of the crossroads," Olumofin reflects on his father and others whose fates are intertwined with his past, present, and future paths. Esu Elegbara is the counterpoint of false ideologies as well as violations of traditional morals and behaviors and exposes them through satiric encounters. With him as guide Olumofin learns through satiric events that he and his people are victims of their Esu /fate; that the ways they think and behave in life affect their destinies.

Through Esu's satire, Olumofin recognizes his father's exploitative, though creative, directions (mistakes), and is thus empowered to explore his will and own attitude of creolization as a viable path. He recognizes that Savannah's family is linked to African culture in ways they do not fully understand and he sees himself as part of the *iroko* tree; intimately interlocked to Yoruba culture and tradition. As such, he is able to come to terms with Savannah, whose knowledge of and experiences with the American history of domination and exploitation somewhat parallels his own in Nigeria. He understands his father and other Nigerians as victims

of their own fate and *Camwood at Crossroads* is an impassioned plea for reflection and an understanding that we share personal and collective responsibility for our intertwined fates:

The right hand will never know what the left one says, unless it makes attempt to coordinate with its twin self. One's blood is one's human blood; we're all in it together in this world. The farmer cries, 'The exploiter has cheated us of a good harvest, selling us bad seeds.' But if the seeds were choice and the rains were good, who does the farmer blame for his harvest of thorns? (*Camwood at Crossroads*, 225)

Euba's novel adds to readers understanding of life in Nigeria from the margins of modern society. His work contributes to a larger dialogue that seeks to resolve social contradictions and transform oppressive relations.

El color del verano similarly demonstrates Reinaldo Arenas's commitment to social transformation and freedom. Arenas's sense of spirituality is a sense of complete freedom and self-representation that gives his life purpose and is omnipresent throughout the novel in all of his characters and their actions. His *autohistoria* novel also contributes to an understanding of oppression by challenging readers through the power of *choteo*, which like satire, names and critiques social contradictions to promote reflection that may spur individual and / or social transformation. In fact, the entirety of *El color del verano* is a tremendous exaggeration, which revolves around *choteo* to show the ridiculousness of the socialist system during his life in Cuba that restricted individual human liberties. Listening to the inner voice that Anzaldúa describes, Arenas continually fights against that which imprisons the human spirit and he ridicules all who engage in acts that deprive humans of the ability to freely express themselves.

Arenas, Choteo, and Spirituality

“Huyamos en la calle que nos mata como dos marginados de estos tiempos”

“Lest scape in the Street that kills us, as two subalterns of this times”

Pablo Milanés, *A mi lado*

In order to understand *El color del verano/The Color of the Summer* (1991) as an example of *autohistoria* and *choteo* as a mode of resistance and liberation, it is important to understand Reinaldo Arenas's life experiences and memories in Cuba and the United States. Arenas is considered one of the first clandestine writers in Cuba during the 1960s. In his autobiography, *Antes que anochezca/Before the Night Falls*, Arenas explains his experiences with poverty, sexual oppression, and censorship in Cuba. He also discusses his frustrations with life in exile in the United States. Arenas tells readers the importance of his spirituality in guiding his *pentagonía*, which he also describes as the secret history of Cuba.

Arenas describes how poor he and his family were in rural Cuba. He discusses the interpersonal violence and sexual abuses he witnessed, and how great his love for writing became. Very young in life he saw great potential for the revolution and he also won a Cuban literary prize for his first novel, *Celestino antes del alba*. However, Arenas's second novel, *El mundo alucinante*, encountered censorship in Cuba despite winning the French literary Medici Prize for the best foreign novel of the year in 1969. The subject matter of this novel established Arenas's reputation as an advocate for freedom of expression. In *El mundo alucinante* Arenas denounces the irrationality of 'realistic socialism' forced on writers like Virgilio Piñera, Heberto Padilla, Lezama Lima and others, which limits their ability to create beauty in the world.

Despite his spiritual and cultural connection to and profound love of Cuba, Arenas's life became one of repression and fear. He was arrested, was imprisoned, and he saw his writings destroyed repeatedly. Further, he was continually harassed and forced to renounce his sexuality. *El color del verano* is therefore a deeply spiritual and personal denunciation of what Arenas experienced as the lack of human rights in Cuba. Arenas feels that despite the initial promise of the revolution, state sponsored hypocrisy, corruption, and irrationality destroy the lives of

Cubans who long for true freedom and the guarantee of human rights. Like many Cubans, Arenas fled Cuba; however, exile in the United States did not mean the freedom he desired. He lamented that Cuban exile writers, as Lydia Cabrera, Lino Novás Calvo, Carlos Baquero's literature "se están muriendo en el ostracismo" (are dying in the expatriation) (*El color del verano* 247). In fact, his sense of spirituality and self was so rooted in Cuba that Arenas suffered a sense of cultural and spiritual dislocation while in the United States.

This *autohistoria* novel, *El color del verano*, is a counter history of the first three decades of Cuban revolutionary society as well as life in exile in the United States. Arenas writes history from the position of those who are marginalized, silenced, and denied the ability to express their humanity. He employs the narrative techniques of *choteo* and disidentification throughout the novel to spark awareness, analysis, and resistance to oppression. Arenas relies on *choteo* to publically ridicule the oppressive hetero-patriarchal system in Cuban that censored his writings and imprisoned him for his sexual preference. Further, disidentification is a method by which Arenas's spirit infuses his characters in order to identify with their struggles, demonstrate their humanity, and expose stereotypes and ideological understandings of who they are and what they long for in life. Characters are so stereotypical that readers may recognize how dominant cultural ideologies work to perpetuate negative and overly generalized views of the characters' speech and actions.

Arenas's life was a daily struggle for survival and to express his will to write. *El color del verano* shares stories about his fight for artistic and sexual freedom with the reader. At the same time, the novel is an expression of his creativity, his humanity, and his vision for a free tomorrow. He creates an absurd and chaotic amalgamated narrative that starts with a play composed in a poetic style, followed by a subsection of short stories, *trabalenguas* (tongue

twisters), poems, and *cartas* (letters) that can be read in any order according to Arenas's *Prologo* (Foreword), which appears at the middle of the novel (246 trans. 225). Arenas presents himself divided and *destruido* (destroyed) by oppressive systems in Cuba and the U.S.A. but resilient in his struggle to be heard. He creates many characters that represent his experiences and hopes in life. Freedom is the main objective of Arenas's writing and his sense of spirituality gives him purpose.

Arenas, in terms of how Anzaldúa thinks about spirituality, listened to that inner-voice and shared his understanding of oppressive social relations in Cuba with readers in an attempt to transform those relations. Arenas engages in spiritual activism to the extent that *El color del verano* is a novel that humanizes those who struggle daily to survive. Arenas's *autohistoria* novel is not concerned with crude self-gratification and individual glorification but links individual and collective experiences of oppressive relations through ridicule. Arenas demands social change. He is driven by his sense of purpose to complete his written indictment of the Cuban government before his death. Arenas's sense of humanity, his spirit, infuses his characters with a passionate love of life, the longing for collective and individual freedom, and self-expression.

Further, at times throughout *El color del verano*, characters' sense that their daily lives are intertwined with the spiritual realm. Some of the residents of the Hotel Monserrate, for example, visit Lagunas, the Clandestine Clairvoyant who gives special readings to help those in attendance get a better sense of their destinies. At other times characters demonstrate how they believe objects can be infused with spiritual power and used in their favor. Arenas recounts the tale of how the famous dancer Halisia Jalonzo returned from a European tour and gave a beautiful belt to Coco Salas saying, "entre tú y yo, creo que tiene poderes mágicos, pues el

mismo día que lo compré se murió la Pasionaria” (between you and me, I think it has magical powers, my dear, because the same day I bought it, La Pasionaria keeled over and died) (157 trans. 142). Believing the belt could change his luck with men Coco accepted the gift. He loved the belt and wore it proudly until it was taken from him and used to beat him during a sexually violent encounter.

By sharing this story through *choteo*, Arenas illustrates how Coco’s destiny was not merely shaped by the belt, no matter what he believed. Coco’s vane behavior and choice of sexual partners while wearing such an attractive belt put him at risk. Arenas posits that our choices shape our future. Similarly, Arenas uses *choteo* to ridicule the Catholic Church. The Catholic faith is still important in Cuba despite decades of Fífo’s rule and Cubans still turn to the Pope, rather than Fífo, for spiritual guidance. Arenas uses complicity between the state and the church to ridicule both Fífo and the Catholic Church for their continuing oppression of non-heterosexuals. Arenas recounts the story of Aurelico Cortes, an older non-heterosexual man who died a virgin rather than shaming his mother by fulfilling his sexual desires. He became the patron saint of non-heterosexuals due to his sexual restraint.

In the following *choteo* Arenas mocks both Fífo and the Church as self-interested rather than as interested in promoting humanity and justice, “Finalmente el viejo papa, que sentía una extraordinaria atracción por los hombres (a tal punto que no permitió que las mujeres fueran sacerdotisas), tomó en serio la petición de beatificar la loca cubana. En la Basílica de San Pedro, mientras contemplaba a un joven en short que le pedía su bendición, el sumo Pontífice meditó: una santa para los maricones es un buen golpe político a favor de la Iglesia Católica” (At last the old pope, who felt an extraordinary attraction to men (so great an attraction, in fact, that he did not allow women to be priests), took up the request to beatify the Cuban queen. In St. Peter’s

Basilica, as his eyes fell upon a young man in shorts who was asking for the papal blessing, the Supreme Pontiff meditated: *A saint for faggots is good political strategy for the Catholic Church*⁴⁹ (199 trans. 181). Aurélico Cortes was thus canonized St. Nelly by the leader of the Catholic Church. As the patron saint of non-heterosexuals, those who believed that the sacred shapes their daily lives, St. Nelly would perform miracles on their behalf. He would find *hunks* for them, protect them from infectious diseases, and keep them safe from thugs.

However, as are many Cubans, Arenas shows how belief systems rooted in African traditions inform the course of his life and his choices. For example, in the story “Una carta” (A Letter) (84 trans. 76), la Tétrica Mofeta sent a letter from Paris to Reinaldo. She describes how she wants to visit a bridge “muy lindo” (beautiful) but due to the strong rain and her HIV condition she cannot reach it despite many attempts (84 trans. 77). However, rather than merely blaming the rain or her sickness, she describes her failure to Reinaldo in terms of what Alexander refers to the intervention in daily life of sacred energies. She laments that due to her exile from Cuba to a cold and strange land her orishas no longer assist her.

This story gives insight into how Arenas saw his life and his destiny as rooted in his home country and culture. The bonds, which tied him to Cuba, are expressed in very spiritual terms. Tétrica Mofeta advises Reinaldo, “No vengas a padecer un frio que no es tuyo y unas calamidades que te son ajenas pero tendrás que asumir. Mis santos se han secado, mis orishas han perdido las plumas y hasta el pellejo” (Don’t come to Paris to experience this cold that isn’t yours and calamities that are foreign to you but you’ll have to bow to. My saints have all dried up, my orishas have lost their feathers, and even their chicken skin) (85 trans. 77-78). Without

⁴⁹ Emphasis by translator

the sense that the spiritual accompanies her and guides her daily life, Tétrica Mofeta describes a sense of estrangement from her home and from herself.

Another story in *El color del verano* recounts a similar experience of feeling spiritually isolated due to his exile in the United States. Arenas contracted HIV and understood that there was nothing science and medicine could do to save him. He was desperate to complete his *pentagonía* and relied on his sense of spirituality to become resolved to survive long enough to finish his novel, and share his story of oppression with readers. The story continues:

[N]o me doy por vencido, sino que me di a la búsqueda de una mata de ceiba. Sí muy famosa en Queens, la Lola Prida, me dijo que podía salvarme. Tenía que llegar hasta una mata de ceiba, darle tres vueltas con un bilongo en el bolsillo, darle también tres suaves puñaladas, besar su tronco, tirar el bilongo, y sin mirar hacia atrás echar a correr. No vayas a pensar que es fácil encontrar una mata de ceiba, en Nueva York, ni que yo estuviera en África Ecuatorial o en el Parque de la Fraternidad. (I haven't given up- in fact, I've gone out looking for a ceiba tree. Uh-huh, a ceiba tree- a famous *curandera*⁵⁰ out in Queens (we were speaking of queens weren't we?) said it was the only thing that could save me. She gave me a *bilongo*- which is this little-bitty package with chicken claws and feathers and stuff in it, wrapped in a piece of cloth and tied with string- and told me to find a ceiba tree, walk around it three times with this bilongo in my pocket, stab the tree trunk three times, gently, kiss its trunk, throw the bilongo down, and without looking back, take off running. But I don't think it's easy to find a ceiba tree in New York City, and don think this is Equatorial Africa or Brotherhood Park in lovely downtown Havana" (168 trans. 153).

This humorous account again illustrates the influence of African spirituality in the life of Cuba and Arenas. The lack of success was not because the famous *curandera* (a traditional healer) was wrong, but because Arenas was in a cold land of exile separated from his spiritual roots as signified by the ceiba⁵¹ tree, which is important to Cuban spirituality. However, Arenas did not give up. He wanted to complete the last of his five novels and then die on his own terms. His sense of the sacred allowed him to complete his goals. Arenas thanks the spirit of Virgilio Piñera,

⁵⁰ Emphasis by translator

⁵¹ See Lydia Cabrera, *El monte* for more information on ceiba tree and spirits

whose photo hung in Arenas's apartment, for giving him three more years to finish his *pentagonía*.

Arenas, wary of fetishes and the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church, exiled from his homeland and his *orishas* believed that he would not survive three more years without the spiritual assistance of Piñeira who was his friend and mentor during life. Their mutual love of life and demand for the freedom of human expression was intertwined across spiritual and physical realms to give Arenas the strength to finish his life's work, which is an indictment of oppression of individual expression. Arenas's understanding that the realm of the spiritual and the physical are intertwined allowed him to find purpose and organize his daily life. The spirit of humanity infuses Arenas's novel and it is not impossible to believe that others may read *El color del verano* and be similarly inspired to fight for freedom. As Arenas points out in a *choteo* of St. Nelly, who still performs miracles despite not wanting to be a saint, "pues la fe está por encima de la realidad, y el número de sus devotos eran cada vez mayor" (because faith is stronger than reality, and the number of worshipers grew larger every day) (203 - 204 trans. 185).

Alexander discusses how a sense of spirituality, rather than only a reliance on empirical data, furthers one's understanding of how present experiences are rooted in the collective past and shape the collective future. She notes the importance of, "learning that the embodiment of the Sacred dislocates clock time, meaning linearity. ... Spirit brings knowledge from past, present, and future to a particular moment called a now" (309). In *El color del verano*, Arenas's spirit inhabits all characters and he shapes every scene and story to critique injustice and celebrate humanity. Space and time bend not only to the will of the tyrant Fifo in the novel's stories, but also to Arenas, the storyteller of this passionate counter-historical narrative.

For example, Fifo resuscitates many historical famous figures for his pleasure and for ideological purposes. All characters in the novel, however, ultimately represent the will of Arenas and all point out some absurd aspect of Fifo's power. Arenas *se rie* (laughs) at the corrupt political system by mocking Cuban political and cultural authorities such as Raul Castro, Fidel Castro, Nicolás Guillén, and Alicia Alonzo by creating absurd counter-historical characters such as Raul Kastro, Fifo, Nicolás Guillotina, and Halisa Jalonzo. Arenas further resuscitates important Cuban writers such as Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, Jose Martí, Virgilio Piñera in order to relate the author's individual experiences and memories of repression to the collective memories of Cubans. Arenas expresses his frustrations and his humanity through the ridicule of authority and the creation of absurd scenes that allows the readers to laugh and lament on how the difficulties of the present are related to oppressive systems of the past. However, by laughing together, there is still optimism for the future.

Disidentification is the technique that compliments *choteo* and allows Arenas to resist dominant group narratives and attack stereotypes (Muñoz 1999). Through the act of writing Arenas demonstrates how identity and gender are fluid and transformative rather than fixed, universal categories. This writing technique gives Arenas the freedom to both critique stereotypical thinking and propose alternatives to the oppression of sexuality and the censorship of writing. Characters are continually transgendered or multi-gendered throughout the novel to demonstrate the possibilities of human interaction free of stereotypical thinking. For example, as discussed earlier, Arenas is represented by three characters who represent different aspects of his identity, Tétrica Mofeta, Gabriel, and Reinaldo, and give him the ability to share with readers the complex way he perceives himself and others.

By breaking down stereotypes throughout *El color del verano* and showing that there are no simple ways of understanding people, whom are very complex, Arenas again demonstrates how freedom is key to human imagination. For example, the ‘Key to the Gulf’, like Cuba, is beautiful and seductive and sexually pleases everyone- young, old, men, women, heterosexual or non-heterosexual- and robs them as well. He is also a spy for ‘Fifo’. Arenas’s characters may find incredible pleasure in expressions of creativity and beauty; however, they may do horrible things for their own interests and self-preservation. As Arenas discloses, “[l]os amigos más íntimos de Virgilio, como José Rodríguez Pío, por ejemplo, le habían suministrado a los cuerpos efectivos de las seguridad de Fifo todos los movimientos del poeta” (Virgilio Piñera’s closest friends—José Rodríguez Pío, for one—had provided Fifo’s security forces with detailed reports on his routine) (*El color del verano* 346 trans. 317). With knowledge provided by those who loved Virgilio, Fifo’s agents murdered him. Through this narrative technique, Arenas demonstrates that characters struggle to survive in order to show that they can also struggle to transform, if they choose to do so.

Choteo represents the spirit of independence and is an affirmation of humanity. It is a narrative technique of extreme freedom used against everything opposed to individual expression and self-representation. For example, Fifo is a terrible tyrant who deprives all Cubans of personal freedoms and engages in violence against all who oppose his rule. Arenas ridicules Fifo’s tyranny by showing how his reign of brutality on the people of the Island is enforced, by *enanos* (dwarfs), petty bureaucrats and officials who carry out the daily wishes of a powerful dictator. Sharks, such as *Tiburón Sangriento*, kill those who are threats and those who try and flee the Island. Through *choteo* Arenas bluntly calls attention to the use of state violence against ordinary Cubans who want to leave the island by suggesting that maybe *Tiburón Sangriento*, was sexually

involved and was a shark, “que se erotizaba con el Fifo” (who acted erotically with Fifo) (141 trans. 132).

Fifo seems to enjoy violence more than he respects the lives of Cubans. This *choteo* makes him seem pathological and so less authoritative. Readers laugh and reflect on the grotesqueness of his rule. To inform readers and raise awareness *choteo* uses frank, clear, and blunt humor to expose the contradictions that exist between how Cuban institutions are ideologically represented and the reality of daily oppression experienced by the subaltern. For example, in the chapter *El hueco de Clara* (Clara’s Hole) (366 trans. 335), Arenas exposes the corruption that flourished in Cuban institutions such as the Committee for Defense of the Revolution (CDR), which is an official community monitoring committee. Clara, the artist, and her friends suffering from heat and the lack of circulation decide to make a window in the wall of her small room in Old Havana. They instead found that the hole led to an abandoned convent full of artifacts and potentially valuable items. It had been boarded up by the Urban Reform for Houses and forgotten.

Clara and her friends started to sell the entire convent’s objects in *la bolsa negra* (the black marked) in order to buy food and other objects that they normally lacked the money to buy. Instead of informing the police and putting Clara and her friends in jail, the local CDR President heard about the convent, came over, looked around, and took all she wanted. She too, despite her position of authority and vow to support the laws of the government, wanted things that she lacked money to buy and participated in robbing the convent of its wealth. She looked at Clara and left saying “Yo no he visto nada” (I haven’t seen a thing) (371 trans. 340). With this *choteo*, Arenas criticizes the hypocrisy of Cuban institutions and unites individual to collective

experience by ridiculing a common experience and reinforcing a common sense of human struggle.

Arenas also ridicules the notion of Cuban cultural hybridity, transculturation, found so often in nationalist narratives in order to expose the extent of anti-homosexual sentiment in Cuba. The chapter *El superensartaje* is a *choteo* of sexual restrictions between men in relation to the notion of *mestizaje* for Arrizón in *Queering Mestizaje* (The Super-Skewer) (185 trans. 170). A group of up to fifteen men possesses a woman at the same time; one man inserts his penis into another man who does the same until a chain of males is formed with a woman at the end, who will become pregnant by entirety of the ejaculations of all of the males. Arenas exaggerates male sexual desire by showing how each enjoys ejaculating in another during this imaginary Cuban sex train. This technique disidentifies with traditional notions of male sexuality and suggests that humans may find pleasure outside the boundaries of cultural norms. The flow of this *choteo* creates distance between the national identity being forced upon characters by Fífo's regime and the actual experiences of the characters.

Further, Arenas concludes that this sexual act, “ha dado lugar a una mezcla de razas insólitas en una sola criatura” (has given rise (so to speak)⁵² to an incredible mixture of races in a single baby) (*El color del verano* 186 trans. 171). This suggestion makes the readers laugh at such an outlandish idea and rethink how Cubans identify their sense of cultural unity; their sense of the hybrid *cubanidad* (Cubaness). Within the nationalist narrative of transculturation, there are no non-heterosexuals, and Cubans who attempt to create and shape culture are silenced. Arenas, therefore, employs *choteo* to remind readers that there is a greater diversity of ideas and behaviors among Cubans than dominant ideologies would have readers believe.

⁵² Breaks by translator

One of Arenas's objectives is to write a counter history to mock and ridicule official nationalist narratives in Cuba. One example is the lengthy *choteo* of the *actos of repudios* (acts of repudiation), which was the official state response to those Cubans who wanted to leave the country during the Mariel emigration of the early 1980s. This chapter is one in which Arenas plays with and rewrites the historical moment through the manipulation of words, lyrics, verses, etc. He wrote this chapter as a poetic drama with double meaning to ridicule this historical moment and make readers aware of the personal and social tragedy that was the *actos of repudios*. Arenas wrote an absurdly theatrical scene in which he rewrote history and 'repudiated' the system that treated him and many other Cubans as *gusanos* (worms).

As the above examples demonstrate, an understanding of disidentification and *choteo* is particularly relevant to an analysis of *El color del verano*. *Choteo* never admires authority and is, therefore, a counter-hegemonic narrative of oppressive social conditions. Arenas, the *choteador(a)* finds a reason to laugh where there is seemingly none. He can do so because *choteo* is *libertinaje* (extreme freedom) and is employed against everything that is opposed to *expansión individual* (individual development) (Mañach 70). *Choteo* is spontaneous and free narratives form that links Arenas's spirituality to a critique of institutional and cultural control, which denies Cubans the ability to be spontaneous and free.

Arenas creates stories and characters that capture the essence of his spirit of liberation, which he presents to readers to awaken their consciousness. Characters throughout the novel find ways to express themselves and act as the subjects of their own histories. To overcome poverty characters are inventive and resilient. To overcome censorship characters write for each other and then destroy their creations, as does Virgilio Piñera, or hang their wondrous paintings in their small apartments, like Clara. Choice is emphasized as important for subjective expression

as Fifo routinely tells Cubans what they can or cannot do and what they can and cannot think. For example, characters desiring the freedom to express their sexuality take chances with violence or disease, but at least the choice to act is theirs.

For Arenas, writing is liberating in that it allows self-representation and the freedom of expression. Throughout *El color del verano* Arenas emphasizes the power and beauty of written expression as liberating. In fact, one of the main tensions in the novel is between Arenas's desperate and persistent attempts to write and publish his novel and Fifo's desire to destroy every copy of the novel. Imprisoned for writing books that defied the social vision of Fifo, "Como escritor, Reinaldo era en el Morro una especie de personaje sagrado; era un mago que podía emitir mensajes e imágenes y sentimientos al exterior, subsanar intrigas, promover reconciliaciones, reparar traiciones" (Reinaldo was a sacred personage within the prison; he was a magician, a wizard, a sorcerer, able with a wave of his magic pencil to send messages, and images, and emotions into the outside world, calm emotional stormy emotional waters, resolve intrigues, foster reconciliations, mend betrayals" (321 trans. 293). In or out of prison writing bestows upon Arenas the power to share, to foster understanding, and to resist oppression.

Writing as freedom is central to Arenas's conception of spirituality and is shared with the readers through the stories in which his own novel is destroyed and he vows to write it again. Further, Arenas's relation with the Cuban author Virgilio Piñera and the stories involving his character link spirituality to liberation through writing. Virgilio's private readings, discussed previously, are spiritual events that allow those in attendance to reach new levels of fulfillment and being just before having their souls pierced by the burning of the beauty they had just witnessed. Virgilio is murdered by Fifo's agents who had him under constant surveillance because of his sexuality and because of his writing. The death takes the form of a mocking

choteo that shows both the absurdity of Fifo's power to kill and the resilience of the Cuban people, Virgilio, and the written word.

At the end of *El color del verano*, during the funeral ceremony for Virgilio, the inhabitants of the Island managed to separate the Island from its platform by gnawing its base. As the Island starts to sail away, Cubans cannot agree as to where they should go and begin to shout at and fight with each other. The Island starts to sink showing Cubans to solve their problems at home rather than by leaving. Once again, Grabiél/Reinaldo/La Tétrica Mofeta realizes that she has to save his novel and starts to put it in the bottles that flow by in the ocean currents. However, the skillful sharks working for Fifo aim for each bottle and eat them all. Rather than giving up in the face of continuing censorship, Grabiél/Reinaldo/La Tétrica Mofeta realizes that it is time to rewrite the novel before the Island completely sinks and they all die.

Through this comic short story at the end of the novel, Arenas fatalistically laughs at the short time that he has left finish his masterpiece, *El color del verano*. Arenas knew when he “had fallen out of grace” (perdió su protección espiritual⁵³) (*Before Night Falls*, 315). It was 1986 when Arenas “heard a tremendous blast in the room; it sounded like a real explosion,” (escucho tremenda explosión in la habitación; parecía una explosión de verdad⁵⁴) (313-314). He asked, “What was the glass that burst?” (¿Qué fue esa explosión?⁵⁵), and he knew that “it was the deity that protected” (fue su orisha el que protegía⁵⁶) him, the Moon. He believed in the Moon as a “goddess that had always accompanied” during his persecuted nights and tormented days in *El Morro*, for instance (316).

⁵³ Translation mine

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

However, his story also illustrates the incredible resilience of the human spirit in the face of constant oppression and the continual denial of expression and self-representation. The story at the end of the novel parallels his real life struggle to finish writing before dying. Arenas's struggle reinforces his sense of spirituality and desire to be free. When he found out that he was dying of HIV, Arenas asked the spirit of Virgilio Piñera's to give him three more years to finish his writing. Doctors in New York believed he would die much sooner but with the help of Piñera's spirit Arenas lived three and a half more years and finished his *pentagonía*. As seen in *Victoire*, Arenas shows the interconnection between the living and the dead in Cuban *espiritismo*; the dead help the living and help guide their paths in life (Otero, 2015).

Arenas had a spiritual drive to complete the novel that he felt the world should read to really understand beauty and art in the face of tyranny. He turned to the spirit of a fellow oppressed non-heterosexual writer to change his apparent destiny. Once the *pentagonía* was complete and Arenas had shared his experiences with oppression and visions of a more just future with readers, he again expressed his free will and his control over his own destiny by taking his own life. However, once again Arenas laughed at authority and cemented his vision of himself as an agent of social transformation. He took his life the same day Cubans celebrate the *mambises*, who were people who fought against Spain during the war of Independence in 1867.

In summary, Arenas grew up in rural poverty and experienced discrimination and marginalization in later life because of his sexuality. He loved literature and became whole while reading and writing but Arenas encountered the censorship of his ideas and words. What he believed to be creative and beautiful and an expression of his humanity were regarded by the State as counter-revolutionary and dangerous. Faced with the contradictions of a new revolutionary government that proclaims freedom from oppression while engaged in oppression,

Arenas listens to his inner spirit and refuses to be silent. He continually expresses his sexuality and he continues to write even though both acts result in his imprisonment and eventual exile in the United States.

Arenas is aware how his life and spirit is linked to that of other Cubans past, present, and future. He understands how his worldview is informed by their experiences, which contradict the ideological narratives promoted by state institutions. Arenas exclaims with pride, “si todo eso se publica hagan constar que mis libros conforman una sola y vasta unidad, donde los personajes mueren, resucitan, aparecen, desaparecen, viajan en el tiempo, burlándose de todo y padeciéndolo todo, como hemos hecho nosotros mismos” (Tell people that all of my books constitute a single enormous whole in which the characters die, are reborn, appear, disappear, travel through time—always mocking, always suffering as we ourselves have mocked and suffered) (*El color del verano*, 344- 345 trans. 315). His voice represents a single spirit of Cuba and again demonstrates that trans-generational memory is a vital spiritual practice within oppressed communities and a powerful antidote to oppression (Alexander, 2005).

Throughout *El color del verano* there are all types of characters struggling for a sense of freedom. They persevere despite oppressive relations while loving, dreaming, and creating beauty in the world. Characters are national heroes and famous cultural figures as well as normal people and all are capable of both good and bad. Beginning with his experiences and dreams, Arenas infuses all characters with a bit of his spirituality and so they all share a desire to be the authors of their own destinies. Throughout his *autohistoria* novel Arenas challenges readers to understand systems oppression and how they shape the daily lives of Cubans who have the capacity and desire to be so much more.

Readers are confronted with contradictions between official narratives of history and life as seen through the daily experiences of the Cuban people. Readers are not given solutions but are challenged through disidentification practices to more fully reflect on stereotypical thinking. The ridicule of *choteo* further highlights hypocrisy and corruption and provides insight as to how individual choices shape our collective destinies. Like the spirit of the characters in *El color del verano* are determined to struggle for their humanity, Arenas, the writer, uses his art and his agency to inspire a similar resolve among readers. Therefore, in *El color del verano* contradictions are exposed through ridicule for readers to gain a deeper understanding of oppression. As does Condé and Euba, Arenas posits that for liberation to occur and for people to create the type of world they would like to live in, understanding the cause of suffering is key.

Chapter Conclusion

In summary, Both Condé and Euba demonstrate how African spirituality is important in the daily lives of those in Nigeria and the Antilles. The deep connection that both authors and their characters feel to the past and their ancestors is strengthened through their understanding that the realm of the spiritual and the realm of the physical are dynamically intertwined. Arenas illustrates how Cubans also see the spiritual world as connected to the physical world. He takes that sense of the spiritual and transforms it into the spirit of humanity crying for freedom of expression in the face of violent tyranny. Each author, guided by their sense of spirituality, relies on specific narrative techniques to expose contradictions and oppressive relations they have experienced.

Condé challenges readers with clear and blunt questions that force them to contemplate what they have considered to be normal. Euba uses satire to spark awareness among readers to grotesque features of modern societies and cultures and reconsider their own paths in life. Arenas

employs *choteo* to mock and expose social oppression while celebrating the beauty of life. *Victoire*, *Camwood at Crossroads*, and *El color del verano* are *autohistoria* novels that contribute to a transnational dialogue on the complexities of oppression and possibilities of liberation. Rather than being egocentric and self-gratifying novels, each author, guided by their inner spirituality, writes as an outwardly directed act that contributes to a dialogue about individual freedom and societal transformation.

In the words of Anzaldúa, each author can be considered a ‘spiritual activist’ who listens to the spirit within and engages in self-reflection. Each author, informed by her or his sense of spirituality, attempts to spark awareness in readers that may lead to a deeper understanding of those oppressive relations and systems. The spirit of her grandmother inspires Condé’s journey. By listening to the collective memories and spirits which link her to Africa, Condé shares with readers questions about the intersections of class, race, and gender that continue to oppress people throughout the Antilles. Euba relies on the satire of Esu Elegbara to reaffirm the importance of Yoruba traditions to restore balance and equilibrium to modern life. Arenas’s sense of the human spirit enables him to freely express himself and publically ridicule corrupt authorities and the hypocritical laws and policies that limit freedom of expression. Each novel may seem very different from the others but as Jacqui Alexander reminds us, “to function as an antidote to oppression, healing work, that is, spiritual labor, assumes different forms, while anchored in reconstructing terrain that is both exterior and interior” (312).

CHAPTER V CONCLUSION: A PATH TO LIBERATION

“El perro tiene cuatro patas y sigue un solo camino”

(The dog has four legs and takes one road only⁵⁷)

Inés María Martiatu, “La duda” (137)

This comparative study of Maryse Condé’s *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots* (2006), Femi Euba’s *Camwood at Crossroads* (2007), and Reinaldo Arenas’s *El color del verano* (1991) demonstrates how each can be considered an *autohistoria* novel, as described in the work of Gloria Anzaldúa. Rather than being viewed as fictionalized autobiographies, each novel links an understanding of varying kinds of oppressive social relations to dialogue and action for social transformation. Each novel is shown to link the author’s experiences and worldviews to the readers through characters in the novels. By understanding these three novels as *autohistoria*, this comparative study examines subaltern self-representation through literature and demonstrates how the novel form can be employed in a manner of cultural opposition via creative agency.

Condé, Euba, and Arenas were driven by a sense of spirituality to create a more just world. Therefore, this study posits the central importance of spirituality to redefine and resist intersecting systems of oppression. Each novel demonstrates how characters are informed daily by the spiritual realm and, importantly, illustrates how spirituality is an essential feature of the struggle for liberation. Each novel emphasizes how, in varying degrees and forms, a sense of spirituality can inform people at the crossroads of their common experiences with systems of oppression. This comparative study demonstrates how spirituality can guide characters’ paths to different kinds of liberation and create the possibility of a more just and human-centered future.

⁵⁷ Translation mine

In this comparative study, writing is thus revealed to be essential in fostering an understanding of who we are, how our lives are interconnected, and generating resistance for social and cultural liberation. Understanding literary forms, such as novels, as counter-histories, and as examples of possible kinds of self-representation by subaltern groups, is important to this conceptualization of agency for social transformation. This comparative study further identifies narrative strategies and techniques, such as collective memory, satire, *choteo*, and disidentification as modes of analysis, recognition, and resistance for liberation.

Condé, Euba, and Arenas actively guide readers' reflections on the characters', and their own, experiences to promote ongoing dialogue about the daily operation of oppressive systems and relations. Oppression in this study is linked to both material exploitation and the internalization of dominant ideologies, which reproduce oppressive social relations in the actions of the oppressed. However, this comparative study demonstrates that while many people throughout the Atlantic Diaspora experience generalized oppression, such as poverty and the lack of self-representation, specific forms of oppression impact distinct groups of people differently. Agency for individual and social transformation is, therefore, dynamically linked to the recognition and understanding of the daily operation of intersecting systems of oppression faced by 'subaltern group members' who inhabit and navigate *los instersticios* of distinct societies. Each of these points will be summed up in greater depth in the following discussion.

It was demonstrated throughout this thesis how *Victoire*, *Camwood at Crossroads*, *El color del verano* are examples of *autohistoria*. Each novel and its characters are informed by the life experiences of the respective author. Condé, Euba, and Arenas rewrite history around the everyday lives, daily experiences, and voices of their characters. Each novel posits characters as the subjects of their own histories and emphasizes how characters survive social contradictions

while trying to find meaning in their lives. Condé, Euba, and Arenas further link the individual experiences of characters to collective experiences with societal and cultural oppression to posit the necessity of individual and social transformation. Their novels may inspire reflection and action among readers.

These *autohistoria* novels illustrate how writing is an act of freedom and the stories Condé, Euba, and Arenas tell are not frequently heard. Each author rewrites the history of the societies they know and that their characters traverse from the position of the subaltern (Gramsci, 1953). Importantly, each novel expresses elements of an oppositional consciousness, which includes how spirituality is intertwined with, informs, and guides daily actions and choices in the physical world. Therefore, *Victoire*, *Camwood at Crossroads*, and *El color del verano*, to the extent they describe how characters rely on the spiritual realm to make sense of their lives, each contribute to a more complex understanding of the general features of oppression as well as specific forms of oppression in the daily lives of characters in Guadeloupe, Nigeria, and Cuba.

Relying on unique and distinctive narrative styles, Condé, Euba, and Arenas each challenge readers to reflect critically on the operation of oppression and the imperfect relationship between the spiritual realm, awareness and understanding of oppression, agency, and liberation. Question-posing, satire, and *choteo* are used respectively as narrative styles to challenge active readers to understand the contradictions that shape both the characters' and the reader's lives. More importantly, readers are asked to reflect on the possibility of individual and social transformation. Condé, Euba, and Arenas, therefore, participate in a transnational and African Diasporic dialogue by describing how they and their characters become aware of the contradictions encountered at the intersections of systems of oppression as well as the decisions they make to change their lives.

The role of spirituality in these three novels is vital to both the author's purpose and their conception of daily life in the countries they write about. Despite the dominance of rational and secular historical and social views, each novel in this comparative study demonstrates how characters believe their daily lives are intimately linked to their spirituality. Anzaldúa emphasizes that spirituality informs the ways we interpret our daily experiences, which inform our understanding of who we are and why we exist. Jacqui Alexander similarly argues that the 'sacred' is part of the fabric of our being. These two theorists' view of daily life as intertwined with the spiritual is supported from a reading of characters' actions and choices in *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots*, *Camwood at Crossroads*, and *El color del verano*. In each of the three novels spirituality frames the characters' memories of who they were, their understanding of the present, and their future paths.

It was discussed in the study how Gloria Anzaldúa maintains that one's spirituality emerges from within and is directed outward in an attempt to transform the world. Condé, Euba, and Arenas each question who they are and where they come from. The characters in their novels struggle with the meaning of their own existence as well. Each author promotes a relational way of thinking that allows for connections to be drawn between physical and spiritual realms of existence. Each novel shares with readers an understanding of history and present conditions obtained from these diverse sources of knowledge such as lived experience, emotion, and dreams. Guided by the spiritual, characters in *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots*, *Camwood at Crossroads*, and *El color del verano* act to transform the conditions that structure their daily lives.

Specifically, it was shown that both Euba and Condé demonstrate respectively how African spirituality is important in the daily lives of those of Nigerian descent and inhabitants of

the Islands of the Antilles. The deep connection that both authors and their characters feel to the past and their ancestors illustrates how the spiritual and the physical realms are dynamically intertwined. Additionally, Arenas demonstrates a sense of the spirit of humanity crying for freedom of expression in the face of violent tyranny. Each author, guided by his or her sense of spirituality, relies on specific narrative techniques to expose contradictions and oppressive relations he or she has experienced. All of the authors' spirituality informs their novels and guides the reflection and thought process of readers by fostering a connection between the authors' stories, the characters' lives, and the experiences of the reader.

The sense of spirituality in each *autohistoría* informs the narrative technique(s) used by each author to communicate their understanding of oppression and their struggle for freedom. The narrative strategy relying on the 'collective memories' allows Condé to tell the story of her family linked to the history of the people of Guadeloupe and Martinique. Condé illustrates the ways that spirituality informs the daily lives of characters; their sense of themselves and their sense of history. Further, memories form the spiritual link between Condé, her characters, and her African ancestry. Esu Elegbara's satire is employed by Euba to illustrate the contradictions of daily life in Nigeria and make readers reflect on the grotesque features of the clash between the traditional and the modern.

Euba challenges readers to see the grotesquery of modern life through Esu's satire designed to spark awareness and reflection over which path characters should choose and how their paths intertwine with the paths chosen by others. Arenas employs the Cuban aesthetic of *choteo* to ridicule and expose contradictions between government ideologies and the politically oppressive conditions. Arenas, expressing the freedom of the human spirit, celebrates life in oppressive Cuba through *choteo*, a writing form of extreme freedom, which is crude, playful,

thought provoking and liberating. It is a narrative form that identifies contradictions in society that are experienced collectively. He further inhabits stereotypes, disidentifies with them, as Muñoz (1999) would indicate, and shows readers possibilities they may have never considered through the absurdity of his depictions of life in Cuba.

Subaltern characters in *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots*, *Camwood at Crossroads*, and *El color del verano* inhabit and negotiate *los intersticios* of their respective societies. *Los intersticios* is a very flexible analytical concept developed by Gloria Anzaldúa, which represents a space or a crack between the dominant culture and the culture of those who are socially oppressed. Through their novels, Condé, Euba, and Arenas illustrate the variability and complexity of oppression in each society as well as strength of their characters to survive and dream of a better future. Understanding the specific complexity of *los intersticios* in Cuba, for example, avoids the overgeneralization of oppression and promotes a more careful comparison with specific *intersticios* in other countries like Nigeria, for example.

This comparative study demonstrates how clearer and more specific comparisons of systems of oppression allow for analysis and dialogue that may lead to more practical strategies, including vernacular, for social transformation. These three novels illustrate that Guadeloupeans, Nigerians, and Cubans share a common history of slavery and colonialism in the transatlantic Diaspora. However, each author delineates in great detail the specific and unique contours of *los intersticios* encountered by characters in the three novels. Victoire and Jeanne are impacted by the intersection of systems of class, race, and gender oppression. Olumofin and Difala are ‘in-between’ Yoruba tradition, the emerging Nigerian nation, and the influence of Western culture. Arenas and his many characters struggle for freedom of creative and sexual self-expression.

In *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots*, *Camwood at Crossroads*, and *El color del verano*, as characters begin to demonstrate an awareness of the interlaced oppressive systems and relations that shape their lives, they struggle to redefine their identities, reshape oppressive social relations, and liberate themselves, to the extent they are able, through their choices and their actions. The comparison of the three novels demonstrates how characters may occupy similar social positions but be quite different in their level of understanding. Therefore, they may not agree on how to act and transform different elements of varying kinds of oppressive social relations. For example, characters in all the three novels become aware of ideological, institutional, and interpersonal contradictions but not all seem to develop an appropriate understanding that allows their actions to be transformative at either the personal or social level. This illustrates the delicate relation between agency and limited choices available to the characters. For example, on occasions, characters' goals and actions have uncertain outcomes and freedom is always elusive.

The inability of characters in all three novels to fully understand the nature of oppressive systems and gain a sense of freedom allows Condé, Euba, and Arenas to challenge readers to be more reflective of their own understanding of oppression and their ability to be transformative. For transformation of *los intersticios* to occur, and liberation to result, authors attempt to awaken readers through their *autohistorías*. Condé challenges readers with clear and blunt questions that force them to contemplate what they have considered to be normal. Euba uses satire to spark awareness among readers to grotesque features of modern societies and cultures and reconsider their own paths in life. Arenas employs *choteo* to mock and expose political oppression while celebrating the beauty of life.

Victoire, les saveurs et les mots, *Camwood at Crossroads*, and *El color del verano* are *autohistoria* novels that contribute to a transnational dialogue on the complexities of oppression and possibilities of personal and social liberation through creative agency. Rather than being egocentric and self-gratifying novels, each author, guided by their inner spirituality, writes as an outwardly directed act that contributes to a dialogue about individual freedom and societal transformation. Each author, through his or her sense of spirituality, engages in self-reflection leading to transformative action. This comparative study demonstrates that writing, as an example of self-representation and an act of freedom, can be an expression of an author's sense of spirituality. It can also be healing, promote dialogue, and contribute to social transformation.

Condé, Euba, and Arenas, informed by her or his sense of spirituality, uses the contradictions between the characters' awareness, actions, and outcomes to challenge readers to think about their own understanding of different forms of oppressive relations and the many potential paths to liberation. Therefore, it is clear that contradiction is the point of departure for one to gain a deeper understanding on which to base one's actions and choose one's future path. For certain modes of liberation to occur and for people to begin to heal from the wounds of oppression, understanding the causes of suffering is the key. Each author demonstrates to some degree that they believe characters in their novels must find out what has happened and what is happening in the world to replace balance with chaos and confusion. Only then can characters' actions lead to their freedom.

These three *autohistoria* novels illuminate writing as an act of individual and collective liberation. Authors link their experiences to those of the reader in an attempt to foster greater awareness, promote dialogue, and encourage transformative action. Condé, Euba, and Arenas create characters to both delineate oppressive systems to readers and emphasize the importance

of *el conocimiento* for both individual and social transformation. *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots*, *Camwood at Crossroads*, and *El color del verano*, each shows in some way that freedom from oppressive relations and systems is contingent and problematic and requires continual thought, action, and reflection in order to stay on the correct path.

To summarize, this analysis has demonstrated how the above themes are interrelated in each novel. *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots* is a spiritual and very emotional journey that traces the transformation of Condé's consciousness. Sensing her alienation from her ancestors and history, Condé engages in a spiritual search. Condé's *autohistoria* describes the spiritual, non-linear path she took to remember and to understand. What began as a journey to discover her grandmother became a journey of self discovery linked to the collective history of the people of Guadeloupe and Martinique. Condé came to know herself by following a spiritual path and her story is evidence that readers can do the same.

By uncovering her grandmother's life story and sharing it with readers, Condé links personal feelings, memories, and experiences to their broader social significance. As an *autohistoria*, Condé's narrative is an 'unofficial' or 'counter-history' of the islands of the Antilles through the story of her grandmother's and mother's lives. Condé describes the socio-historical context of their lives and illustrates how contradictions formed by intersecting systems of oppression shape their experiences and the paths they choose to travel. *Victoire* is a counter-hegemonic narrative that tells history from the voices of those who are normally silenced and emphasizes how spirituality is intertwined with the physical in their daily lives.

Condé delineates the many forms of material and ideological oppression characters experience and internalize in the novel. For example, others act upon both Victoire and Jeanne as if they were objects with no sense of self or agency. Condé describes throughout the novel how

both her grandmother's and mother's paths in life were shaped by the contradictions they faced at the intersection of class, race, and gender systems of oppression. Both are similarly defined in terms of gender and skin color (socially constructed race) but each is different due to the specific ways gender and skin color intersect to shape their experiences and opportunities. Therefore, rather than portraying people of African descent as similarly situated in Guadeloupe, Condé shows how oppression can come from your own people to create very different and contradictory outcomes in people's lives.

In *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots* Condé demonstrates *la facultad*, the awareness of oppression, and *el conocimiento*, a deeper understanding that informs the paths we choose to follow. Her narrative is therefore able to emphasize how hard it is for characters to make knowledgeable decisions about their paths in life. Victoire, Condé's grandmother, transformed her servitude into a culinary art form, which Condé compares to writing. She further dedicates herself to Jeanne's education. On the other hand, Jeanne focuses on education and social class advancement. However, as Victoire struggled to be the author of her own destiny, Jeanne became insular. Her actions transformed her mother, Victoire, into the object of her desires and she prevented Victoire from cooking and loving Boniface. Rather than engaging in positive transformative action, Jeanne became self-centered and cold to others. Her actions were objectifying and dehumanizing rather than liberating.

Readers see both Condé and her characters as contradictory actors who make decisions and not merely objects or 'others'. Throughout *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots* Condé demonstrates how characters may sense oppression but not fully understand its complexity or know what actions to take to change it. Condé actively questions the decisions of characters as well as official accounts and posits alternatives for readers. This narrative approach undermines

the authority of hegemonic narratives by showing that accounts of history are fluid and interpretations of events and outcomes may vary based on the social position, experiences, and the spirituality of the narrator.

Writing for Condé is a very personal search to understand and to remember and through remembering to heal the wounds caused by oppression and find a path to freedom. To contribute to a dialogue on liberation, Condé challenges readers to critically understand the intersections of class, race, and gender systems oppression in the Antilles and the impact on the daily lives of ordinary people like her grandmother. Readers become aware of contradictions between the ideological narratives of the dominant groups and life as seen through the experiences of the subaltern. Readers are not given solutions but insight as to how individual choices shape our collective destinies. In conclusion, Condé uses her art and her agency to inspire readers to search for understanding like the spirit of her grandmother challenged her to do.

Camwood at Crossroads is also an example of *autohistoría* as the life story of the main character Olumofin parallels the life and experiences of the writer, Euba. The novel is further linked to the experiences and stories of Nigerians in general. Euba questions who he is and his relation to the past due to the cultural dislocation he experiences torn between Christian and Yoruba belief systems. Euba's questions in life inform those of the main character, Olumofin Falashe, who reconsiders his past and contemplates the direction and meaning of his life. With Esu Elegbara, the orisha of fate as guide, Olumofin learns through satiric events that he and his people are victims of their Esu /fate; that the ways they think and behave in life affect their destinies.

Euba's *autohistoría* is a counter-history of the Nigerian nation. *Camwood at Crossroads* describes the history of Nigeria, and the Yoruba people specifically, in very spiritual terms. The

deities of the Yoruba Pantheon frame past events, present conditions, daily interactions, and potential paths to the future in the novel. As a deeply spiritual *autohistoría*, satire is the narrative form Euba employs to evoke Esu, the guardian of the crossroads. Further, by using Yoruba spirituality to guide the novel's action and satiric events to expose contradictions in Nigerian society and culture, *Camwood at Crossroads* serves as a counter-narrative to both Western and nationalist narratives of modern Nigeria. Euba is therefore able to call readers' attention to what he believes to be grotesque and dehumanizing features of the modern world and plea with them to reflect and reaffirm values of social balance and equilibrium.

Euba's concern is how 'will' and 'action' shape the future paths and his focus is the role of the fate god Esu in the process of individual and collective reevaluation and reaffirmation. The narrative is thus rooted in Yoruba spirituality and leads the reader to understand Esu Elegbara as a teacher and guide at the crossroads of the characters' memories and everyday lives. In *Camwood at Crossroads*, as characters struggle with daily existence, the sacred realm gives them a sense of purpose. Each is responsible for his or her choices, but the sacred informs, and guides their actions through satiric events and interactions with others. An understanding of daily life is gained through consultation with the *Ifá* oracle and Esu Elegbara guides one's choices at the crossroads of life. The novel illustrates clearly how, in Yoruba culture, the spiritual and the physical realms dynamically intertwine to shape collective destiny.

Camwood at Crossroads contributes to a transnational dialogue on oppression and liberation by examining the impact of English economic and political domination and Western cultural hegemony on identity and interpersonal relations in Nigeria. Euba further examines the movement of Nigerian people from their homeland to live and work in the countries and cultures of the Western powers. Euba creates characters, Olumofin and Difala, to delineate the

complexity of being ‘in-between’ transforming Yoruba traditions, the creation of a modern Nigeria, and the imposition of Western notions of culture and social development.

As inhabiting *nepantla*, Olumofin obtains *la facultad* and becomes aware of problems that afflict his family and the people of Nigeria. Olumofin’s journey in *Camwood at Crossroads* deepens this understanding through an analysis of the satire Olumofin witnesses and the contradictions he contemplates between Yoruba and Western cultures. As he makes connections among distinct events, people, experiences, and realities Olumofin gains *el conocimiento*, an understanding of how tensions between the traditional and the modern structure his life. This understanding informs which path he should take as he attempts to liberate himself from the chains of the cultural turmoil.

However, Euba emphasizes that the choices characters make in *Camwood at Crossroads* do not necessarily lead to desired outcomes. For example, Olumofin’s and Difala’s fates are intertwined, and one’s choice affects that of the other, though each is responsible for his or her own actions. However, each regards the other as having an incomplete understanding of circumstances and as choosing to follow a path that does not lead to true freedom. Olumofin struggles to maintain his traditional cultural roots and decides on a path of creolization and re-birth. Olumofin, however, regards his father’s actions as a grotesque satire of modern Nigeria. Difala actions lead to a grotesque hybrid of the two religions with no redeeming qualities. Through this narrative strategy, Euba challenges readers to be more aware of the outcomes of their own choices and actions, which shape collective destiny.

Freedom from oppressive relations and systems in contemporary Nigeria is therefore shown to be contingent and problematic and requires continual thought, action, and reflection in order to stay on the correct path. In *Camwood at Crossroads* Esu guides those at the crossroads

and informs choices of future paths. Euba challenges readers to see themselves as the victims of their own fate and continually reflect on their choices. He posits that with the guidance provided by Esu, readers may also maintain a sense of balance and equilibrium in their lives and understand how their choices are linked to possibility of social justice. Importantly, as an *autohistoria* which links individual experience to that of the community and society, the satire in Euba's narrative can have a collective or an 'epidemic' effect on readers as an impassioned plea for reflection and an understanding that we share personal and collective responsibility for our intertwined fates.

Reinaldo Arenas's life was a daily struggle for freedom to write and express his free will. *El color del verano* is an *autohistoria* that shares stories about Arenas fight for freedom of artistic and sexual expression with readers. At the same time, the novel is an expression of his creativity, his humanity, and his vision for a freer tomorrow. Arenas's spirit is omnipresent throughout the novel and infuses his characters with a passionate love of life and the longing for individual expression in the face of repression. Arenas feels that imagination should have free reign through individual self-expression, as for it is the source of beauty. Throughout *El color del verano*, guided by his sense of spirituality, Arenas demands freedom for all to live and to be respected as humans.

El color del verano is a counter history of Cuba, especially in opposition to how Fifo re-inscribes history for his own purposes, and also of the United States, as he experienced it during his life in exile. He defies nationalist narratives of the Cuban revolution as the paragon of human freedom. It is thus a counter narrative of Cuban society using fictive elements to link the author's biography to collective experiences of those who inhabit similar marginalized positions in Cuba. Arenas writes history from the position of those who are oppressed, silenced, and denied the

ability to express their humanity. Arenas's stories deviate from the official nationalist narrative of the Cuban revolution and suggest that Fífo's rule must end if Cubans are to be truly free.

The novel is constructed within the many complexities of the characters that participate in the carnival of his memories and imagination. All of Arenas's characters, in some sense, represent his experiences, his hopes, his aspirations, and share his vision for a world in which creativity and imagination are not bound by political and economic power. In fact, his sense of spirituality is infused throughout the novel allowing time and space to be distorted, ancestors to be raised from the dead, and freedom to be obtained through concerted and repeated effort. Arenas structures his novel around his sense of spirituality and chapters take the creative forms of memories, stories, letters, tongue twisters, dreams, and encyclopedia-style entries.

Arenas uses *choteo* as it is a mode of resisting all forms of authority and oppression by naming it and ridiculing it publically. The spirit of *choteo* is extreme freedom and therefore it manifests against everything that is opposed to individual expression and human development. It is a form of writing which best represents the spirit of independence and an affirmation of humanity. Further, disidentification is a method by which Arenas's spirit infuses his characters in order to identify with their struggles, demonstrate their humanity, and expose stereotypes and ideological understandings of who they are and what they long for in life. Arenas disrupts stereotypes by making identity and gender fluid rather than fixed categories. Events and interactions in the novel seem absurd and farcical but serve to draw readers' attention to those aspects of life in Cuba since the revolution not included in the national narrative.

Ridicule exposes the illogic of homophobic ideologies and provides insight into daily life in the margins of Cuban society. *El color del verano* is a novel, which illustrates how revolutionary Cuba destroyed the vestiges of Spanish colonial rule and American imperialism

but, contradictorily, created *los intersticios* for Cubans who seek the freedom of individual expression. Arenas feels that despite the initial promise of the revolution, state sponsored hypocrisy, corruption, and irrationality destroy the lives of Cubans who long for true freedom and human rights. Arenas specifically addresses the suppression of creative agency through art and literature, the suppression of individual liberty and sexuality, and further shows the intersection of the two in his life as well as the lives of other Cubans. Further, Arenas discusses how flight is not the solution, since many Cubans often find themselves ‘in-between’ Cuban and American systems and ideologies, neither of which allows them to freely express their creativity; their humanity.

Faced with the contradictions of a new revolutionary government that proclaims freedom from economic oppression while engaged in social and cultural oppression, Arenas develops recognition of oppression, *la facultad*, and refuses to be silent. Throughout *El color del verano* Arenas challenges readers to understand systems of oppression and how they shape the daily lives of Cubans. Readers are confronted with contradictions between official narratives of history and life as seen through the daily experiences of the Cuban people. In fact, the entirety of *El color del verano* is a tremendous exaggeration, which revolves around *choteo* to highlight hypocrisy and corruption and provide insight as to how individual choices shape collective destinies. Readers are not given solutions but are challenged through *choteo* and disidentification practices to reflect more fully on stereotypical thinking.

For characters in Arenas’s *El color del verano*, understanding oppression shapes their daily actions and feeds their desire for freedom of expression. They creatively overcome government corruption and incompetency to live their daily lives. They long for the freedom of individual expression in Cuba and struggle to transcend the physical, intertwine it with the

spiritual, and express their humanity and spirituality. Characters are aware of the dangers they face and find creative solutions to continue their struggle, such as burning stories after reading them.

El color del verano demonstrates Reinaldo Arenas's commitment to social transformation as well as sexual and artistic freedom. For Arenas freedom is not merely a physical escape from the Island, but the ability to write and express his creativity. Like the characters in *El color del verano* who are determined to struggle for their humanity, Arenas, the writer, uses his art and his agency to inspire a similar resolve among readers. In *El color del verano* Arenas's sense of spirituality is a sense of complete freedom and self-representation, which gives his life purpose. Arenas continually fights against that which imprisons the human spirit and he ridicules all who engage in acts which deprive humans of the ability to freely express themselves artistically, culturally, sexually, and in terms of gender. *El color de verano* vividly describes oppression in Cuba while showing the unbreakable spirit of humanity to be truly free.

In conclusion, guided by the theoretical work of Gloria Anzaldúa and others who recognize how the spiritual and the physical realms are intertwined, this comparative study demonstrates how *Victoire*, *Camwood at Crossroads*, *El color del verano* are each varying forms of the genre *autohistoria* in terms of novels that link awareness of social oppression to the transformation of these said oppressive systems guided by a sense of spirituality. Importantly, spirituality is a central feature of this comparative study that contributes to a clearer understanding of the transformative potential of literature.

Rejecting a merely rational approach common to Western culture and Western feminism, Anzaldúa, Alexander and others emphasize the centrality of spirituality—not in the sense of recognizing the power of an all-knowing God and then putting individual and collective destinies

in his hands—but to illustrate how characters sense of purpose and the organization of their daily lives is informed by their sense of spirituality as Anzaldúa does in *This Bridge Called My Back* (1983). This sense was shown throughout this comparative study to be essential in guiding actions to create a more just and humane tomorrow. Each author in some way, and Euba specifically, shows how individual fates are intertwined and choices by one person may shape the choices and fates of others.

To the extent that they may contribute to the transformation of multiple forms of oppressive conditions, *autohistorías* are more than individually centered, fictional autobiographies. This comparative study demonstrates how each novel is also a counter-history, and also necessarily an alternative history. Each *autohistoría* challenges the grand flattening narratives perpetuated by dominant group ideologies of nation, gender, race, and sexuality by re-writing history from the daily experiences of the characters that navigate the various and intersecting systems of social and cultural oppression. Condé's re-conceptualization of class, gender, and race is a challenge to both French and Guadeloupean official histories.

Victoire demonstrates divisions and conflicts among subordinate groups who have internalized dominant ideologies and shows why unity among the subaltern is so difficult. Euba challenges Western domination, culture and ideologies as well as the modern Nigerian nation, culture, and national ideology showing that the path forward is not as simple as these narratives claim. Arenas shows the 'in-between' of the Cuban revolution that perpetuated the marginalization of people who desire the freedom of individual expression. He clearly demonstrates the hypocrisy between proclamations that all Cubans are free and the continual harassment of those who wish to express themselves freely.

Uniquely, this comparative study employs the flexible concept of *los intersticios* to avoid universalizing characters experiences with oppression. Experiences of subjugation understood here as oppression is felt in a variety of ways that are variable across nations and groups of people. Scholars often argue that oppression is universal, recognizable and people experience that oppression similarly across the world. However, this comparative study demonstrates that while some forms of oppression are experienced nearly universally, such as material poverty or the denial of self-representation, most forms of oppression are unique to specific groups of people and may not be experienced universally.

For example, due to his education and apparent social mobility, many scholars may not see Olumofin as oppressed. However, a close reading of *Camwood at Crossroads* illustrates how the clash of traditional African and modern Western social and cultural systems create unique oppressive relations he tries to understand and overcome in the novel. Importantly, none of the three authors privilege their account of oppression and dehumanization by arguing that their description of oppression is the only valid one. Further, none of the three authors takes a hierarchical view of oppression and argues that some people feel it or experience it more than others. This approach echoes Audre Lorde's⁵⁸ sentiment that, "There is no hierarchy of oppression." As *autohistoria* novels of specific societies and characters, each novel describes in depth the form(s) of oppression experienced by characters and thus contributes to a dialogue, rather than a debate, that expands how scholars think about oppression and its transformation.

Further, this comparative study describes how the link between the lives of the authors and that of their characters is demonstrated as crucial in resisting dominant group hegemony and promoting a more complex awareness of the contradictions of daily life in African Diasporic and

⁵⁸ Quoted from: <http://www.pages.drexel.edu/~jc3962/COR/Hierarchy.pdf>

Caribbean societies. Many characters were shown to demonstrate ‘awareness’ that social relations are oppressive, but few, due to specific social constraints they face, seem actually to develop a fuller relational understanding of the causes of oppression to guide their actions and choices of future paths. Therefore, rather than generalizing ‘liberation’ as being universal and assuming that paths to liberation as recognizable by all, this comparative study illustrates a conception of ‘liberation’ and ‘freedom’ that is analytically more flexible. Each novel demonstrates a unique quest for liberation, freedom, and the ability of characters to reach their human potential unimpeded by power. This conclusion is unique as it shows how action for freedom is a dialectical and dialogical response of characters to the specific and intersecting systems and relations of oppression in societies they inhabit and navigate daily.

In conclusion, ‘third-world feminist’ theorists like Anzaldúa and Alexander seek transnational dialogue between oppressed groups. Their goal is to allow diverse groups of people to dialogue over the conditions of oppression they experience generally, material, ideological, and interpersonal, and to further delineate specific manifestations of oppression in specific social contexts. Dialogue also considers and delineates the possibilities for a more just future. This comparative study of *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots*, *Camwood at Crossroads*, and *El color del verano* contributes to this dialogue by positing that the voices of Condé, Euba, and Arenas must be included in order to uncover specific features of oppression, which may have been overlooked or dismissed, and share their vision for an end to oppressive conditions; those that deny all the ability to become more fully human as envisioned by Freire (1974).

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VITA

Lázara Bolton attended José Martí Pedagogy Institute in Cojimar in Cuba and graduated as an Elementary Teacher at the age of 20 with a GPA of 97.5 (3.7). After two years working as a 2nd and 5th grade teacher, Lázara came to the USA and studied English at the University of Florida ESL program while earning an Associate of Arts degree at Santa Fe Community College. In 1998, Lázara moved to Louisiana and taught 1st grade at Charity Christian Academy in Baton Rouge for two years. On May 21st, 2004, she earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Spanish from Louisiana State University and on May 19, 2006, she graduated with a Master of Arts at Louisiana State University with a 3.8 GPA. She taught Spanish at Baton Rouge Community College for two years. Lázara next taught Spanish at Southeastern Louisiana University while volunteering as a Spanish language teacher in the African American community. Lázara began to study for her PhD in 2012 at Louisiana State University. She earned a research assistant position in 2015 and defended her dissertation in May of 2016. She has written unpublished poems and short stories about the fantastic characters of her life. She loves teaching and writing for the well being of the others. She wrote *Transformations at Crossroads' Esu Elegbara* article, which was presented at the *Praise at the Crossroads* conference and it is in press at the current time.