Mary, Mother, Jailer: Deconstructing Marianismo

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Abstract

Mayra Santos-Febres' 2006 novel Our Lady of the Night focuses on the lives of three dramatically different women in mid-20th-century Puerto Rico: Isabel "la negra," a successful black madam; Cristina, a depressed white housewife; and Doña Montse, an old, exploited black servant. This study examines the ways in which these women subscribe to, struggle with, and reject marianismo*, a gender paradigm prominent in Latin America that demands all women emulate the Virgin Mary by embracing conservative feminine "ideals," among them selflessness, subservience, and erotic repression. Although the rigid tenets of this ideology seem to cross racial and socioeconomic lines, the two black characters ultimately find strength and succor in the form of other traditions that, like* marianismo*, have their roots in Roman Catholicism. Syncretic manifestations of Catholicism, from a unique Black Madonna figure to Santerían orishas, or goddesses, galvanize these two women to rage against the self-abnegating demands of* marianismo.

Keywords: Santos-Febres, *marianismo*, Santería, Black Madonna, gender expectations, syncretism, race perception, Puerto Rico

1. Introduction

Nuestra señora de la noche [*Our Lady of the Night*] centers on the historical figure of Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer, the notorious proprietress of "Elizabeth's Dancing Club," once the most renowned bordello in Ponce, Puerto Rico. Mayra Santos-Febres' 2006 novel chronicles the life of Isabel "*la negra*," from her earlier years working as a prostitute, to the glory years of Elizabeth's in the 1940s and 1950s, to her mysterious death in a 1974 shooting. Because of the dearth of details in the biography of the historical Luberza Oppenheimer, Mayra-Santos fleshes out the legend with a constellation of characters whose lives are affected by her protagonist. Among these are Isabel's lover, the prominent Ponce attorney Fernando Fornarís, and his wife Cristina, who spends her days in a fog of homemade fruit wine and desperate prayers to the Virgin for succor—and revenge against her rival. María Candelaria, the central focus of this study, is an elderly black woman charged with raising "Robertito," the bastard son of Fernando Fornarís and Isabel la Negra. While Isabel Luberza's and Fernando Fornarís' experiences are related in the third person, the narratives of Cristina Fornarís and María Candelaria are far less straightforward: their lives and thoughts are presented in a series of stream-of-consciousness passages, dominated by fervent petitions to the Virgin Mary. In a caustic review of *Our Lady of the Night*, literary critic Ricardo Bada (2007) suggests that Santos-Febres' novel would be much improved if the author had left out "the drivel of Matriology and Mariolatry that inundates, drowns, and asphyxiates a quarter of her text" (p. 49, own translation). It is true that Cristina's and María's inner musings are baroque, and their trains of thought difficult to follow. But Bada's criticism that their offending sections "asphyxiate" the text and should be removed illustrates his failure to understand their significance. As the forthcoming analysis reveals, Santos-Febres' intent is not to affirm intense identification with the Virgin, but to reveal its destructive effects on the women who practice it.

2. *Marianismo* and Doña Montse

Bado uses the terms "Matriology" and "Marianology" as essentially synonymous, referring to "excessive reverence for the Virgin Mary, especially to the extent of idolatrous worship" (*OED*). I would argue that a more specific form of Mary veneration is on display in Santos-Febres' novel: *marianismo*.

According to the gender paradigm of *marianismo*, women should emulate the Virgin Mary by embracing conservative feminine ideals, among them "sacred duty to family, subordination to men, subservience, selflessness, self renouncement and self-sacrifice, chastity before marriage, sexual passivity after marriage, and erotic repression" (Jezzini, Guzmán, and Grayshield, 2008). *Marianismo* may be traced to the patriarchal hierarchy established by the Catholic church during the colonization of Latin America. The Church presented the Virgin Mary as the perfect woman, whom all women should strive to imitate. The Marian ideal has meant that women in Latin America "have traditionally had to exist within the dichotomy of Virgin or whore—there exists no ambiguous space between these extremes. As the ideal virgin, women are to be chaste, pure, and docile. Just as Mary submitted to God's will, . . . so too are Latin American women and US Latinas to accept God's will to be wives and mothers, living humble lives and always being willing to suffer for the sake of their families" (De La Torre, 2009, p. 347).

In *Our Lady of the Night*, María Candelaria is neither wife nor mother. She is, nevertheless, a maternal figure, the unofficial godmother (*madrina*) of Roberto, the illegitimate son of Fernando Fornarís and Isabel la Negra. Roberto's mother abandons him only hours after his birth, leaving Fornarís to find someone to care for the child (obviously taking the baby home to his new bride Cristina is not an option). He chooses two maiden sisters who live on an old plantation far away from Ponce, far away from prying eyes. Though they promise to watch after the child, the sisters immediately place Roberto in the hands of María, who lives on the plantation grounds. The Attorney Fornarís never questions this arrangement: to him, the old woman seems an ideal solution, a trustworthy, godly soul who spends every waking hour maintaining the grotto of the Virgin of Montserrat, a shrine on the property, and attending to its pilgrims. To Fornarís, and to the rest of the world, María is a humble, doddering old black woman, agreeable to the point of obsequiousness (the submissive utterance "yesyesyesyesyes" appears frequently in her thoughts and speech). Her past is not important, and neither is her name. The pilgrims to the grotto have dubbed her *Doña Montse* ("Missus Montse") after the Virgin of Montserrat, and now no one remembers or uses her real name.

Aside from her godchild, *el Nene* (baby) Roberto, María has no one to talk with, so she talks to herself; it is through these inner monologues that the reader learns about her life before the grotto. As a young girl María Candelaria worked in the town brothel *Las tres Marías*, first carrying water for the prostitutes, and eventually becoming one herself. While supplementing her meagre income by picking coffee beans, she caught the eye of a wealthy landowner, Armando, and he took her as his lover. When we first encounter María, Don Armando has been dead for years, and she is living in a miserable shack on the edge of his family's property. Don Armando's two maiden sisters (whom María dubs "*las Arpías*" or Harpies) keep the old woman busy tending the grotto of the Virgin of Montserrat, and any donations from visitors end up in the sisters' pockets. In addition, the Harpies keep most of the money that the lawyer Fornarís leaves for his son Roberto's upkeep.

In her article "Brothels, Hell, and Puerto Rican Bodies," Hilda Lloréns (2008) describes Isabel Luberza, the central protagonist of *Our Lady of the Night*, as triply marginalized: she is black, a woman, and a prostitute. By my calculations, the character of María Candelaria is—at the very least—quintuply marginalized. Like Isabel, she is black and a woman. In addition, she is socio-economically as well as spatially marginalized (exiled to a decrepit hut on a remote plantation, María is removed from contact with anyone but the child Roberto, the Harpies, and anonymous pilgrims to Montserrat's shrine). Finally, she is marginalized by the Church, by the theology of *marianismo* which demands that she, like all other "good" women, be pious, docile, pure, and long-suffering.

The degree to which these different forces overlap and intertwine with one another makes it challenging, arguably impossible, to examine them one by one, in a neat, orderly fashion. Instead, I resort to a different principle of organization, one that is concentric rather than linear. All of the factors and forces that have determined María's peripheral and subordinate position in society relate in some way to one figure, a figure that will serve as a *leitmotif* throughout the following analysis. At times, the connection between the forces of marginalization may not be obvious, but all of these forces are constellations around the same central body: the celebrated resident of María Candelaria's grotto, the Virgin of Montserrat, whose skin is as black as María Candelaria's. This dark Marian figure is not an anomaly: she is an example of what scholars refer to as a Black Madonna.

3. The Black Madonna

The Virgin of Montserrat first "appeared" in Catalonia, Spain, in the ninth century; according to legend, a group of shepherds came across the dark statue of the Holy Mother in the mountains, where it had supposedly been hidden during a period of Moorish rule. The Virgin of Montserrat is referred to as *la Moreneta* (Catalan for "the little dark-skinned one"), and the cathedral where she is housed in Spain remains a major pilgrimage site. Similar Black Madonnas may be found throughout Europe, from Poland (Our Lady of Czenstochowa), to Switzerland (Our Lady of the Hermits), to Sicily (The Madonna of Tindaro) (Moss, 1953).

In the words of scholar Jeanette Peterson (2008), Black Madonnas "startle" the modern viewer because "[t]hey pose an inherent paradox in the Judeo-Christian dialectic between black and white, signifiers of negative and positive values" (p. 285). For centuries, however, these images did not "startle" at all. Every Catholic country had its shrines to the Virgin Mary, and in the majority of these, the Marian image was dark or black. A quantitative study of pilgrimage sites conducted in the late 1980s found that Madonnas or other iconic images with dark skin tone were "well over twice as likely to be venerated at a shrine" (Scheer, 2002, p. 1414). In most descriptions of Black Madonnas written before the seventeenth century did not even record the image's color; if color was mentioned, it was in terms of its symbolic significance. In a sermon delivered in Teising, Germany in 1726, the priest evoked elements of The Song of Songs to explain the Madonna's dark skin. Although the tendency was to associate blackness with sadness, ugliness, and sin, he explained to his congregation, in the Song of Solomon "the love between the bride (Mary/the church) and the groom (Jesus/God), th[e] opposition [of black versus white] is transformed": black becomes joyous, beautiful, and sacred" (Scheer, 2002, p. 1431). Only after the seventeenth century does the darkness of the Black Madonna become a marker of race; she is no longer seen as "a black image of Mary," but as an "image of a black Mary." By the turn of the nineteenth century, the symbolic significance of the Black Madonna has been completely transformed into an indicator of race or ethnicity (Scheer, 2002, p. 1436).

In her article "From Majesty to Mystery: Change in the Meanings of Black Madonnas from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century," Monique Scheer focuses exclusively on black Marian images in Europe. The objectives of her study, she explains in her conclusion, are to shed light on the relationship between historical context and the reception and veneration of Black Madonnas, to "add a small tile to the developing mosaic of knowledge about the European perception of black skin through history" (2002, p. 1440). An area that Scheer does not examine is the reception of Black Madonnas in the parts of the world colonized by Europeans, places whose inhabitants had dark skin. Did the indigenous peoples identify more strongly with Black Madonnas? Did the skin color of these dark Virgins facilitate their acceptance by "the natives," (or, in the case of Puerto Rico, by the thousands of imported African slaves), or make it easier for them to accept the religion of their colonizers? These questions are far too complex to address in a single article. To borrow Scheer's metaphor, I can only contribute a "tile" to what is at this point a very piecemeal mosaic: the question of the reception of Black Madonnas by dark-skinned peoples. This "tile" consists of the response of one black woman, María Candelaria, to one Black Madonna, the Virgin of Montserrat.

4. Black Virgin with White Child

Montserrat was a part of María's existence long before she took up the care of the Virgin's grotto. When Don Armando was still alive, he would sneak down to María's little hut, where the statuette of Montserrat would witness their lovemaking. When she protested ("Oh, no, Don Armando, it's like she sees us"), Armando insisted, comparing his lover to the Black Madonna: "You even look alike. You have the same face and the same skin" (p. 6).[1] Now María is an old woman, with "fallen tits" and a crotch that is "already gray" (p. 8), but with the arrival of the child Roberto, her connection with the Virgin of Montserrat has grown ever stronger. For the Black Madonna in María Candelaria's grotto is something exotic and rare: a black Virgin with a white child on her lap, a combination practically unheard of. The only examples of Black Madonnas with a white child, according to Monica Scheer (2002), "are seventeenth and eighteenth-century copies of Loreto Madonnas, and [there are] no examples of the reverse" (p. 1414). In the course of my own research I have discovered only a few representations of a black Mary holding a white baby Jesus, primarily in Cuba (figures of Our Lady of Regla and of Our Lady of Charity, that country's patron saint).

[1]Except where otherwise noted, when citing Santos-Febres' novel *Nuestra señora de la noche*, I quote from the English translation of Ernesto Mestre-Reed, *Our Lady of the Night* (page numbers only).

However, depictions of the Virgin of Montserrat of Hormigueras are, without exception, monochromatic. In the *Basilica Menor de la Virgen de Montserrate*, for example, the central pilgrimage site for the Virgin in the town of Hormigueras, Puerto Rico, wooden figures portray both Mary and Christ as white, brown, or black, but never mixed; in the portrait over the altar, for example, both figures are white. It is logical to assume, therefore, that Febres-Santos made a conscious decision to feature in her story a black Marian figure holding a white Christ child. It also seems likely that the author made this choice in order to shed light on the character of María Candelaria, considering how frequently references to "Black Virgin with the white child" appear in the old woman's internal monologues.

María often conflates the "Black Virgin with the white child" with herself and Robert, whose skin is the color of light honey, and whose eyes are as green as his father's. One of the reader's first images of María and *el Nene* is at the end of the first chapter, when the two of them go to the grotto and place candles in front of the figure of the dark Montserrat. "On her lap, as she holds onto him with one hand, the Divine Boy rests. Of light complexion, almost white, his hair is the color of honey, his eyes light green. 'That is you and me, godmother.' The Boy opens his arms to receive the pilgrims, the abandoned. The Child walks toward the figure and hugs the Divine Boy" (p. 12).

It is a lovely scene. However, the reader is not permitted to enjoy the sweetness of this moment for long, for María's relationship with the Virgin is, for want of a better word, fraught. All day long she prays to the Holy Mother, asking for help in emulating her patience, docility, and purity ("Tower of patience, pray for us; mirror of humility, pray for us" [p. 7]; "Fountain of Grace, bless me; Staff of Patience, guide me" [p. 13]). Interspersed with these prayers, however, are thoughts that reflect María Candelaria's ambivalence towards the Virgin. To María, the Holy Virgin, the "tower of patience" and "mirror of humility," embodies the quality the old woman most loathes about herself: her lifelong submission to others. She begs the Virgin for help, praying for vengeance against the Harpies, for the courage to stand up for herself. But the Virgin is unresponsive (after all, it is only right that María, as a good Christian woman, should accept her trials with patience and humility). The Virgin will not even grant her sufficient bravery to tell the Attorney Fornarís that the Harpies are keeping the money intended for the child. It is Roberto who innocently blurts out the truth, "Those old women don't give us anything," while his Godmother stands by in silent self-rebuke: "The Child saves her, the Son redeems her, the Child says what can't come out of your mouth, you old whore. Yesyesyes, the Child is your rage and your vengeance. . . . A sweet, bovine smile on the old woman's face. Accept everything, old woman, accept everything, like the Virgin, let her will dissolve in you" (p. 59). María clearly loathes the unconditional acquiescence the Virgin Montserrat represents, and resents her own mirroring of this behavior. The question remains: what effect, if any, does the color of the Virgin of Montserrat's skin—her "race"—have upon María? The answer is inextricably linked with what it means to be black in Puerto Rico.

5. Shades of Black

As Jorge Duany (2001) explains in his study *The Nation of Puerto Rico*, the perception of race and ethnicity on the island is very different than in the United States, with its dichotomy of black versus white. According to Duany, Puerto Ricans generally group people into three categories: white, brown, and black. Within these categories exist a wide range of intermediate types, "based primarily on skin pigmentation and other physical traits, such as facial features and hair texture, regardless of their ancestry." Such subtle gradations contrast sharply with the United States where, "anyone with a known African ancestor is defined as black, regardless of his or her physical appearance" (p. 237). For much of the twentieth century, the prevailing view among social scientists was that because of the islanders' more "fluid" understanding of race, racial conflict was essentially absent in Puerto Rico. In 1948, an American journalist described the country as "one of the few places in the world where interracial harmony has been achieved in a high degree" (qtd. in Duany, 2002, p. 242). In later decades, however, Puerto Rican social scientists began to question the assessment of their country as a utopia of interracial harmony. Their studies revealed "that blacks are a stigmatized minority on the Island; that they suffer from persistent prejudice and discrimination; that they concentrate in lower classes; and that they are subject to an ideology of whitening through intermarriage with lighter-skinned groups and a denial of their cultural heritage and physical characteristics" (Duany, 2002, p. 243).

In other words, although the concept of race might be more nuanced in Puerto Rico, in the island's hierarchy of race, black is still at the absolute bottom. And María Candelaria is not just black: she is *very* black, as we learn in our first encounter with her in Santos-Febres' novel.

The old woman is bathing with water from a rusty bucket, and the skin on her belly is described as "black as the darkness after a lightning flash" (p. 8). Santos-Febres draws attention to María's extreme blackness to help the reader better understand the dissonance that has dominated her life since arriving at the grotto. The Virgin of Montserrat is black, with a white child in her lap, and she is sacred, beloved, the mother of all. Yet María Candelaria, who is also black with a white (or, at the least, light-skinned) child in her lap, is just an old whore. Exiled and anonymous, she has no sense of connection to the rest of the world. When pilgrims come to offer up their prayers to Montserrat, "Doña Montse" meekly greets them, but behind the mask she seethes. Her mind is filled with rebellion, with "impure" thoughts of violence, of defiance, of sex. "And may I be struck dead," she mutters under her breath. "May the sinister paw of the Beast fondle the fervor in my crotch" (p. 8).

Another dissonance in María Candelaria's mind is Roberto, *el Nene*. Like the Virgin Mary, María was not consulted as to whether she wanted to be a mother. She is far closer in age to Abraham's wife Sarah than to the teenage Mary of Nazareth when Roberto is dropped into her lap, and though she loves the little boy, the burden of caring for him is often overwhelming. Throughout the novel, the recurring *leitmotiv* in María's internal monologues is the phrase "Black Virgin with a white child"; it is like a mantra that reminds her of her allotted role in life. But, as illustrated by her continual internal prayers to (and arguments with) the Virgin of Montserrat, María struggles terribly with this role. She dreams of a life without the little boy, a life in which she would have the freedom to emulate—or simply venerate—the person she most admires: Isabela la negra.

6. Turning the Virgin on Her Head

María has only encountered her idol once in her life, while walking through the streets of Ponce with Roberto, when Isabel suddenly appeared before them, "[r]ight in the middle of the plaza, in the middle of the street in the middle of the day. Blinding light that illuminates my face and the face of the Godson. . . . Who is that woman, Godmother? Her name is Isabel, and she is a bad woman. A bad woman yes yes yes, when what I wanted to do was get on my knees and weep, here I am señora, do with me what you want, here I am with the boy in my lap. Take me with you, let me approach you" (p. 256).

How can we explain Isabel la Negra's effect upon María Candelaria? Why does she adulate and envy someone whom society has labelled a "bad woman"? In attempting to address these questions, I turn to *The Maria Paradox* (2014), whose authors Rosa Maria Gil and Carmen Ino Vasquez present the following list of gender expectations for women, expectations that continue to obtain in much of Latin America.

1. Do not forget a woman's place.
2. Do not forsake tradition.
3. Do not be single, self-supporting, or independent-minded.
4. Do not put your own needs first.
5. Do not wish for more in life than being a housewife.
6. Do not forget that sex is for making babies – not for pleasure.
7. Do not be unhappy with your man or criticize him for infidelity, gambling, verbal and physical abuse, alcohol or drug abuse.
8. Do not ask for help.
9. Do not discuss personal problems outside the home.
10. Do not change those things which make you unhappy that you can realistically change. (Gil and Vasquéz, 2014, Chapter 1, Section 4, para. 1)

The tone of the "Ten Commandments of Marianism" is intentionally hyperbolic; it presents "Marianism in its purest, darkest form" (Jezzini et al., 2008). Gil and Vazquéz wrote their book for a twenty-first century audience. In Puerto Rico during the first half of the twentieth century, the setting of *Our Lady of the Night*, *marianismo* was a far more rigid, unyielding and oppressive force, much closer to its "purest, darkest form." Yet Isabel Luberza, already "triply marginalized" by her race, gender, and profession, is able to break every one of the Ten Commandments of Marianism listed above. She never marries, and she consistently walks away from the men in her life who mistreat her. She single-mindedly pursues her dream of being a woman of means, entering the male-dominated world of business (and succeeding by selling men sex that is purely for pleasure). Isabel's ultimate act of sacrilege against the tenets of *marianismo* is, of course, her rejection of motherhood, her abandonment of her child.

This is why María Candelaria glorifies Isabel la Negra—for doing what she herself never could, turning her back on everything the Virgin Mary, and society, have told her she must be. And now Isabel, black, whore, the descendent of slaves and servants, is both powerful and fabulously wealthy: she has turned the Virgin Mary on her head. Just the thought of Isabel la Negra fills María with such courage that she is able to "talk back" to the Virgin of Montserrate, the cruelest and most abusive of the voices in her head. When the Virgin taunts, "You'll always be as mangy as a goat's knee. You'll never have anything to call yours, except for the floor of my sanctuary," the old woman shoots back: "That's what you think, Virgin of Shit. She [Isabel la Negra] has more glory and power" (p. 243).

Of course, the abusive voice of the Virgin is María's own voice, shaped by years of internalized racism, sexism, and *Marianismo*. And the voice that fights back against this voice of self-loathing? What is its source? Santos-Febres does not tell us, at least not directly. Instead of providing a simple explanation—and how could there be a simple explanation for a character who is so enigmatic, so truculent, so marvelously contradictory?—the author has left us a number of clues in *Our Lady of the Night*, clues that can help us to at least begin to unravel the mystery of "Doña Montse."

7. Syncretizations and True Names

The first of these clues is the old woman's real name—"María Candelaria"—whose loss she laments throughout the novel. In our initial encounter with her, María recalls her grandmother's prediction that she would come to no good, "but she never told me it would be like this, with a different name, taking care of a Virgin darker than soot in this shitty town" (p. 8). Only a few lines later, the old woman curses the Virgin Montserrat, the Black Madonna, for erasing her name, her identity ("whore of a Virgin who left me without a name" [p. 7]). But María has not lost herself completely; she has not *become* Doña Montse. Several times in the text she evokes her true name, and in each situation she is, for an instant, transformed into someone powerful and dangerous. When the child Roberto is burning with fever, and the Harpies will not allow María to "bother" Fornaris about the boy, her hatred of the two women fills María with a smoldering rage. This rage drives her to take Roberto into her arms and to make her way towards the hospital in the middle of the night. She flags down a truck driver, but when she tells him her real name, she is almost overcome as the fire of the "candela" turns into a wave of sexual desire: "María de la Candeleria Fresnet, and I wanted to let go of the boy right there, throw him down a ravine, and climb on the truck driver's thighs, slip me on, you Christian, I am the apparition. I am Candela, the fire" (p. 255). She longs in this instant to throw off the burden of caring for the child, to reveal her true self, glorious, sexual, and superhuman. Instead, she continues to hide her light beneath the pious, patient facade of Doña Montse.

The power and fire of María's true name blazes forth years later, but this time it is accompanied not by a desire to abandon *el Nene*, but to save him. Roberto, now grown up, has accidentally killed a man in a fight, and he comes to his *madrina* for sanctuary. In this desperate moment, María's name evokes not just fire, but a weapon to protect her child: "You will be the sharpness of my sword. You will be the fire of my semblance. My name is Maria de la Candelaria Fresnet and none will enter the sanctuary where I twice rock the Son in my lap, accompanied by the sword of this rage that is me" (p. 190).

How are we to understand the significance—and power—of Doña Montse's true name? This name, I propose, points to the next step in deciphering this enigmatic character. For Montse/María is named after another manifestation of the Virgin Mary, the Virgin of Candelaria, who, like the Virgin of Montserrat, is a Black Madonna. The figure first appeared in the late sixteenth century, when two goatherds found her on a beach in the Canary Islands; she was named "Candelaria" because she held a green candle in one hand. As with Montserrat, veneration of the Virgin of Candelaria took root and spread throughout Latin America, where she was syncretized with African-based religious practices; in Santería, she is associated with the *orisha* (deity) Oyá.

Santería developed in Cuba when African slaves, torn from the home they knew, had to adapt their traditional beliefs to endure their grim new lives (De La Torre, 2001). In Santería's complex pantheon, the sacred energy of the supreme deity, Olodumare, is present in all beings; *orishas* are semi-divine manifestations of Olodumare, and provide worshippers with protection and guidance. In the New World, these *orishas* were merged, or syncretized, with the protectors and guides of Roman Catholicism, the saints. The Church has traditionally denigrated Santería as arising from the faulty understanding, or "confusion," of its practitioners.

De La Torre, however, maintains that *santeros* (followers of Santería) have always recognized the differences between their religion and Catholicism, have always "understood the need for placing Spanish masks over the black faces of the *orishas* to defend themselves from religious repression" (2001, p. 842). Doing so, moreover, does not compromise the Santerían belief system: since "*ashé*," the sacred energy of Olodumare, is a part of every aspect of the universe, icons and symbols from different religions are interchangeable, and new deities may be integrated, or combined with, existing ones.

But why bring up Santería or syncretization, Olodumare or the *orishas* at all? In *Our Lady of the Night*, Mayra Santos-Febres does not mention these subjects by name a single time. However, in a 2006 video interview the author explains her desire to have Isabel la Negra embody a supposedly unresolvable opposition: "I had a problem. I wanted Isabel to be a Virgin; . . . a Virgin whore. In Catholicism there is no such possibility; but in Santería, yes: especially Oshún, who is a Virgin, but at the same time is seductive, covering herself with honey and dressing luxuriously. She is Venus and Aphrodite, the symbol of femininity and sensuality" (own translation). Clearly, although the word Santería may not appear in *Our Lady of the Night*, Santos-Febres intended there to be a connection between Isabel and the *orisha* Oshún. There are numerous examples of this connection in the novel. One is Isabel's lifelong connection to water (Oshún is a river goddess): Isabel was born on the day of a terrible storm flooded the banks of the Portugués river; she locates "Elizabeth's Dance Club" on the banks of the river; and water plays a central role in her lovemaking with the young Fornarís (the two of them couple on the sudsy floor Isabel has been washing). Another link is the color yellow, the traditional color of Oshún's robes. For example, the near mythical figure of Isabel is pictured seated on her "throne" in Elizabeth's, wearing a bright yellow dress (Méndez Panedes, 2009).

Once we become aware of the connection between Isabel and Oshún/the Virgin of Charity of Cobre, we are able to detect similar clues relating to María Candelaria. As stated above, María's saint, and the source of her real name, is the Virgin of Candelaria. The Santerían *orisha* linked to this manifestation of the Virgin is Oyá, the *orisha* of strong winds, lightning, and change. Oyá is a warrior *orisha*, who accompanies her husband Changó (the thunder deity) into battle. She is portrayed as impetuous, brave, and clever; in a Santerían *patakí*, or folktale, she makes a wig from her own hair and uses it to disguise Changó as a woman so that he may sneak through enemy lines. She then joins him, wielding a war ax, and together they defeat the enemy (De La Torre, 2004, p. 76). Courage, bellicosity, passion: these are the qualities that define Oyá, and these are the energies that flare up in María when she invokes her real name.

But María is exiled from her true self, exiled from her *orisha*'s characteristic fire and lightning. Instead, she serves a manifestation of the Virgin Mary whose Santerían equivalent is very different from Oyá. The Virgin of Montserrat is paired with the *orisha* Yewá, who lives in the cemetery and dwells within the tombs of the dead. Once Yewá was a beautiful young woman, whose father Obatalá intended her to remain a virgin, forever chaste and pure. When Changó fell in love with Yewá, and Obatalá learned of his daughter's betrayal, he exiled her to the cemetery for all eternity. Yewá is so resentful about her treatment that she insists that her followers lead lives of abstinence. She is the most fastidious, the most puritanical of the *orisha*s: among the behaviors forbidden in her presence are lovemaking, nudity, cursing, quarreling, and rudeness (Lele, 2001). Thus, except for the few instances in which María becomes her true self, Candela/Oyá, she is doubly imprisoned, for both the Virgin of Montserrat and her Santerían *orisha* equivalent Yewá demand submission to the Marianist ideals of repression of female sexuality and power.

8. Conclusion: The Other Side of Heaven

All her life, María Candelaria is torn between the repressive forces of Montserrat/Yewá and the power and freedom of her true self. The struggle between these forces comes to its climax as María, on her death bed, addresses the Virgin in a final, confounding monologue: "She will die with me in this finale. . . . She is the whore, she is the Virgin that I have in my bones. My bones, her only abode now, are the grave. They are the candles that light her return to the other side of heaven, where she is Angel and Demon, where she is Montserrat and Isabel, where she is María Candelaria and the rage of the heavens that burn themselves out, leaving her cleansed of the fingers of the Absent One" (*Nuestra señora*, p. 324, own translation). Here, the meaning of "the other side" (literally, *"el reverso,"* or flip side) of heaven is ambiguous: as the "opposite" of heaven, it could be a reference to Hell. But I would argue that the space María Candelaria envisions is not the "opposite" of anything, and certainly not of the "perfect" Christian heaven with its fluffy white clouds and cherubim choirs. "The other side of heaven" is a (no)place where all binaries are suspended: Mary, mother of all, is both angel and demon, both Montserrat

(the virgin/whore María reluctantly served) and Isabel (the whore/virgin she secretly adored). In this space, the opposing forces that plagued María throughout her life coexist and comingle. In this space, the Virgin/whore dwells *within* her, among her very bones. The images of bones and of the tomb remind us of Montserrat's Santerían equivalent, Yewá, *orisha* of the cemetery, of decay and decomposition. But we are not permitted to envision oppositions in this space, not allowed to pit Yewá/Montserrat against Oyá/Candelaria, even for a moment. For these very same bones are also the burning candles that light the return to the other side of heaven. María's entire life has been marked by the dissonance between duty and desire. In the moment of her death, however, she is able to envision a space where dichotomies are suspended.

The reference to "the Absent One" in María's dying curse provides a particular challenge to the interpreter. In *Our Lady of the Night* the words "absent" or "the Absent One" appear in Cristina Fornarís' prayers to Mary, but they always refer to a *male* "*el Ausente*," namely her husband. When Cristina dies she seems to undergo her own Assumption, and she becomes "*la Ausente*" ("I ascend, I ascend, I am coming, I will now be the Absent One" [p. 298]). For Fernando Fornaris, absence was a means of escaping his exhausting, demanding and often embarrassing wife. For Cristina, absence is also about escape, escape from the battle that was her life, "the battle that is to be silent and live in yearning" (p. 299). In becoming *la Ausente* she enters a state of bliss and peace she has never before experienced.

During her life María Candelaria fought a battle very similar to Cristina's: a battle to keep silent, and to stifle her own needs and desires. In her dying moments, however, María does not become "the Absent One." She seems to suggest, in fact, that it is *la Ausente* who is to blame for the battle that was her life. To María, the Absent One is a decidedly negative presence, one that needs to be eradicated. In her vision of the afterlife, the space "on the other side of heaven," the fingers of the Absent One are cleansed from the body of "la Madre" (and, by extension, from María's own body, for the Mother is *within* her body, within her bones).

Who is "the Absent One"? Why is she is depicted as the object of blissful mystical union in Cristina's dying moment, while María sees her as someone whose fingers have besmirched her and the Mother? I propose that *la Ausente* is the Virgin Mary herself, and her very different reception by these two women reflects their differing understanding of the nature of the Divine.

The God of Christianity has traditionally been seen as a transcendent divinity who "stands outside of and apart from the world, largely unaffected by it, but who may act upon it to bring about some desired end" (Long, 2006, p. 142). God the Father, the Maker, "acted upon" Mary, a human woman, so that His will might be done in the world. Over the centuries, the figure of Mary became increasingly important in the worship of the transcendent God, an intercessor between normal human beings and a (male) metaphysical Divine force. The veneration of the Virgin Mary is clearly linked to the desire for a female presence within an overwhelmingly male-centric religion. But the figure of Mary has not just served as a figure of comfort and identification; for centuries she has also been a vehicle of control for the Church. Women have been encouraged to emulate Mary's virtues (i.e., humility, patience, and obedience) and to identify with her suffering; by doing so, it was suggested, they would be closer to her, and thereby closer to God. Of course, in declaring Jesus' mother's "perpetual virginity," the Church set a standard no mortal woman could ever hope to achieve. The more the Church—and worshippers—have emphasized the Virgin Mary's (unattainable) perfection, the wider the gap has grown between her and normal human beings. The Virgin Mary has become increasingly distant, increasingly transcendent, increasingly absent.

During her life, Cristina has only known a transcendent, "absent" Mary: even in her moments of greatest despair, she never received a response to her prayers or pleas. When she dies, however, Cristina experiences a mystical union with "the Absent One." Like the Blessed Virgin, she is assumed into heaven—a heaven above and separate from the earth, from which she can look down and see those she left behind. The afterlife María Candelaria envisions is very different than the one described by the dying Cristina. It is not the Christian heaven, because it is not a transcendental space. In "the other side of heaven" the divine presence is *immanent*—it lives in our very bones, like the Santerían *ashé* that inhabits and unites all things. In this place, all traces of "the Absent One," the perfectly pure, perfectly obedient, perfectly patient, transcendent Virgin Mary, have been cleaned away, along with the tenets of *Marianismo* that turned María's life into a battle of conflict, anger, and stifled desire.

In the first chapter of *Our Lady of the Night*, María addresses the Virgin of Montserrat as "Mary, mother, jailer" (p. 11). In her mind, the statue of the Black Virgin with the white child in her lap symbolizes her own incarceration in a life of loneliness, self-abnegation, submissiveness, and enforced abstinence.

Montserrat may be enshrined in the grotto, but it is actually Montserrat's keeper, María Candelaria, who is imprisoned, entombed. Only when she is dying does María embrace her own culpability in this imprisonment. She realizes that she herself was the jailer, hiding behind a name that was not hers, suffering silently when others humiliated and debased her, and allowing herself to be smothered by a religion that only humiliated and debased her further. Unlike Cristina, María Candelaria is not assumed into Heaven. But her final words reveal that her true name has not been lost, and that she has not been cut off from the immanent spirituality of her own *orisha*, Oyá.

Christianity elevates the spiritual to the detriment of all things physical: when we die, our reward is to escape our inferior existence of life and move on to the infinitely superior existence of the afterlife. Santería, by contrast, is a belief system centered upon the physical. It is "shaped and formed by earth-centered forces of nature," *orishas*, and "its rituals utilize earthly things—stones, herbs, water, plants, trees, soil, seashells, and so on; all become sacred objects" (De La Torre, 2004, p.14). Human beings are related to all other things, for all are permeated with the same sacred *ashé*. In Santería, as opposed to Christianity, the Divine is imminent: there is no separation between the Creator and the physical world. And although neither Santería nor the *orishas* find mention in María's final speech, her words suggest a turn towards immanence.

"This old woman no longer wants to be the confused Candela," says María in her last moments. She is tired of living in a world of "confusion," a world in which "the Absent One," the transcendent María in her inaccessible Heaven, is adored, while she—an old black woman who has given up everything for the white child who was dropped in her lap—is "the Debased One" (*Nuestra Señora*, p. 326, own translation). María does not resolve the dissonances of her life in this last moment. In the end, however, she is finally ready to let go of the Virgin Montserrat of Hormigueras and the destructive paradigm she represents, and to give herself to the earth. "Let the ants devour me, let them rip off my skin at this Last Hour," she prays. "All I want to do is to rest" (p. 338).

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