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**“Maps, Mythologies and Identities: Zombies and Contra-Anglo Spirituality in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and Angie Cruz’s *Soledad*”**

I. Race and Identity in the Atlantic World

The black-white binary that has for so long marked the boundaries of race and identity in the United States has never been as firmly proclaimed or rigidly imagined in the rest of the Americas. In the United States where, early on, laws dictating that the child follows the condition of the mother and the one drop rule shaped a discourse of race that validated white rulership and black subservience. No matter that people of African and European descent had already intermarried before the installment of these laws, in the U.S. there remained a persistent discourse of racial identity that allowed white America to disregard the reality of racial border crossings that compromised the neatness of the constructed black-white binary. Therefore, despite the knowledge that by the middle of the nineteenth-century a significant sector of the black population was either mixed or descendants of mixed unions, the construct prevailed. While slavery was deeply rooted in the nations that emerged throughout the Americas, the black-white binary was manipulated in more complex ways than in the U.S. In his study of race and identity in Latin America, historian, Peter Wade, sheds light on this variance. He explains that in the U.S.,

the category ‘black’ supposedly includes anyone with a known ‘drop of black blood’ . . . In Latin America, to over-simplify a complex situation, there is a continuum of racial categories and often only people who look quite African in appearance will be identified as black; people of evidently more mixed ancestry frequently will be classed by a variety of terms denoting a position between black and white. (14)

As Wade further explains, these differing concepts of race and identity can have dramatic consequences for border crossers of the Americas who arrive on U.S. soil: “Thus, for example, a Puerto Rican, used to not being classed as black in Puerto

Rico, when she moves to the mainland US, may find herself suddenly identified as a black person” (14).

Myriam Chancy explores how the more complex divisions of racial identity in Latin America have played out in a discourse with the west to cater to the black-white binary that has historically anchored U.S. racial division. She explains specifically how this discourse has been shaped to construct a myth of racial difference between the nations of Haiti and the Dominican Republic:

. . . a wide range of contemporary articles on race in Latin American studies exhibit a high degree of anxiety regarding black racial antecedents specifically . . . this anxiety is a reflection of long-standing practices in Latin American societies to deny the presence of African heritage and to deny blackness as a defining trope of any given Latin American nation. . . Interestingly, racial anxiety in the present day is often and consistently buttressed by anti-Haitian sentiment that appears to be held throughout the region, most markedly (of course) in its neighbor, the Dominican Republic. (*From Sugar to Revolution* 17)

The irony in what Chancy outlines is of course the shared geography and the long shared history and ancestry of Haitians and Dominicans. Shedding further light on the African legacy in the Dominican republic, Silvio Torres-Saillant asserts that “a demographic assessment taking account of racial distinctions would show blacks and mulattos as making up as much as 90 percent of the country’s nearly 8 million inhabitants” (110). Torres-Saillant reminds us also that the two island nations share a history that dates back to runaway slaves from Haiti who in 1678 “founded San Lorenzo de los Minas, a neighborhood that still strives today in the midst of the Dominican capital” (113). Other distinct moments in their shared histories includes a twenty-two span of unification under Haiti’s rule and the ongoing importation of Haitian labors (Torres-Saillant 115-116). The centuries old division between the two nations, despite their interwoven histories dates back to the aftermath of Haiti’s successful revolution and the “elite Dominicans in power [who] wished to preserve the Spanish colonial heritage” and felt threatened by the possible domination of black Haiti (J. Heredia 88). The result has been a longstanding “process of

antihaitianismo (anti-Haitianism) [in which] all Dominicans learned to deny any aspect of their black heritage, including mulattos and blacks” (88).

## II. African Culture/Spirituality in the Atlantic World

As with the matter of racial identity, spiritual practices and sensibilities connected to Africa have been historically ridiculed and exoticized by westerners. Conversion to Anglo Christianity has been the presumed marker of the African’s spiritual redemption and passageway to civilization. Throughout the Americas, the Middle Passage set the stage for transformations in African religiosity as blacks were, to varying degrees, driven underground with their traditional practices and/or to refashion their religions to survive under the umbrella of AngloChristianity. In general, western scholarship has maintained that new world Africans lost all meaningful connection to or preservation of their past and culture; however, increasingly scholars are challenging this assertion. Across disciplines, scholars of the African diaspora now acknowledge that throughout the Americas blacks fashioned societies rooted in an African ethos. This was no less the case for their religion in the new world. That new world blacks have in great numbers come to identify their religion as Christianity, does not mean they have abandoned the continental origins of their religiosity. As scholar Jim Perkinson explains, contemporary trends suggest that in fact blacks of the African diaspora increasingly look to Africa for spiritual guidance and grounding: “Despite the touted triumph of book religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc) over oral carryovers (traditional religious practices of various ilks) from a ruder age and in spite of the withering auspices of scientific advance, West Africa and Afro-diasporic religious practices are expanding and proliferating rather than receding” (575). Perkinson explains that outward genuflections or shows of reverence to Christianity on the part of blacks does not consequently confirm an absence or abandoning of African spiritual principles and practices. The surface impression does not necessarily represent the core or the foundation of African diaspora spirituality. Perkinson submits that on the contrary, “it is apparently possible for a human being to preach Jesus while dancing Xango,” and further that perhaps “inside the body baptized in the Spirit we find spirits, that the Holy Ghost of the twentieth-century

Pentecostal movement is itself ghosted by Ogou and Gede” (590).

### III. Zombies and Blackness in Anglo and African Ethos

What western scholars have labeled with terms such as “magic,” “magical realism,” “black magic,” and “superstition,” speaks to the colonial ethos that continues to inform western intellectual and social discourse. Population groups whose survival and life skills involve beliefs and practices that reside beyond the material fabric of western religiosity are stamped with these labels, with the intimation that this is yet another sign of their still “developing” state. In general, then, western intellectual discourse continues to marginalize or diminish the religious depth and worthiness of African derived spirituality. More damaging perhaps is the inclination of westerners to exoticize, humorize and sensationalize African rooted spirituality. In the Americas this has played out repeatedly in popular stagings of conjure and voodoo/hoodoo. In the United States, turn-of-the-century texts on black folk culture of the south was warmly received by audiences in the north and south. Publications by Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page are among those still well known and discussed to date. These works generally portrayed simple-minded blacks, living in a world of superstitious and illogical beliefs, having no real religious foundation. In its more sensationalized form, this denigration of black spirituality was staged in frightening images of blacks dealing in “black magic,” practices that involved collaboration with evil forces—in contrast to western Christianity’s “all-good” divinity. With the U.S. occupation of Haiti in the early decades of the twentieth century (1912-1934), there resulted a heightened vilification of African spiritual practices. Representations of Haitians and their culture as savage and threatening predates twentieth century U.S. occupation: these stereotypes date back to nineteenth-century commentaries on the black-ruled country that aligned it with the tainted “‘dark’ continent [i.e. Africa].” Like Africa, Haiti was then “condemn[ed] to unfair and often unsubstantiated stereotypes and criticisms. These ranged from charges of Haitians’ inferiority and inability to rule themselves to allegations of child sacrifice and cannibalism” (Rhodes 70). This sentiment was not limited to forces outside Haiti, however, for “dating back to the aftermath of the Haitian revolution, the new elites—particularly those descendants of white planters “cloaked their fear of the masses in a loathing for black spirituality” (Wilcken 198). U.S.

influence would help to fuel this legacy of loathing. In U.S. discourse Haitian Voodoo became the symbol of an African and savage past out of which Haiti had to be led: during this early U.S. occupation “any marine or journalist with a flair for writing could produce a potboiler about ‘voodoo,’ with special attention to the zombie, the soulless body of Haitian legend” (199). The critique of voodoo then grew to be a commentary on the nation and the people, and this extended as well to a general critique of Africa—as the mother of black Haiti. The refrain from the west was that Voodoo was evil, and that western powers/whites had to exert their superior powers to subdue this evil.

In literature and film one of the most pervasive symbols of voodoo’s evil was the zombie: “The plot of *The White Zombie* [1932 film directed by Victor Halpen] bears a message that has been repeated in the dozens of voodoo-zombie films succeeding it: Haiti needs North Americans to solve its problems caused by its own ignorance and superstition” (Wilcken 199). From the earliest, U.S. literary and cinematic accounts of Haitian voodoo and zombiism had an eerie resonance to the denigrating and sensationalized tales propagated about blacks in the U.S.<sup>i</sup> An independent Haiti and a free population of U.S. blacks seemed to have inspired similar reactions. In both cases, whites responded by representing black freedom and independence as a threat to white civilization, and this was exemplified most dramatically in the presumed threat black men posed to white purity. As was the case for blacks at the turn-of-the-century in the U.S., Haitians would be subjected to pernicious characterizations that rested in sexualized stereotypes—particularly the myth of black male hyper sexuality and desire for white women. Whereas native Haitian zombie tales were of the living dead whose horrific state may have been the result of their own evil or an external evil source, in U.S. tales the narrative carried a distinctly racist tone. In U.S. tales of Haitian zombiism a “master narrative” was established: standard in the tales was a white or near-white female victim, of wealth and high social standing cast against a sinister and lustful black sorcerer<sup>ii</sup>” (Paravisini-Gebert 42). For Haitians, however, zombies are more often shunned than feared: their lifeless state represents a loss of the inner self—the soul—and a disconnect from the community and its spirit (Paravisini-Gebert 38). A people

rooted in the belief of community over individualism, Haitians thus find the alienation of the zombie a fate to be avoided.

While the zombie prototype that originated in western cinema and fiction continues as the blueprint for depictions of Haiti and Haitian/African spirituality, the Haitian trope of the zombie as soulless and disconnected provides a critical lens for reading texts by Haitian and diasporic black narratives. In zombie tales of black lore the lifelessness of the zombie creature corresponds to the malady that spring out of slavery: “The concept of the zombie best illustrates the West’s disjunction of flesh and spirit, especially as the concept of the zombie grew out of the Haitian-evolved Petro rites as a metaphor for the slave, a person whose soul/psyche has been stolen,” thus marking her as “the living dead” (Jennings 165). The trope is particularly useful in readings of black women’s texts, which are often rooted in tensions between western and African worldviews. Again, across the Americas, zombiism has been propagated through interpretations both internal and external to black folk culture. Reading black authored works as informed by black originating tropes of zombiism, we find narratives of resistance that challenge Anglocentric assertions that maintain a western worldview as the path to black progress and humanization. This narrative subversion in diasporic black women’s writings reveals again the shared cultural and ideological past of new world blacks—even in the case of Hispaniola, the two nation island where Haitians and Dominicans have been lead to proclaim distinct and separate identities, despite their shared island location and overlapping histories. This paradox of separate but same is revealed most poignantly through the critical juxtaposition of fictional works by Haitian writer Edwidge Danticat and Dominican writer, Angie Cruz. In particular, applying the zombie trope as the critical lens to read Danticat’s *Breath Eyes Memory* and Cruz’s *Soledad*, the case is clearly made for the shared African roots of Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

#### IV. Africanity/Blackness and the Zombie Protagonist in *Soledad* and *Breath Eyes Memory*

The walking dead are often the product of trauma or violence, and this is portrayed in both Danticat’s and Cruz’s novels. In the case of Danticat’s *Breath Eyes Memory*, Martine gives birth to a daughter after she has been raped as a young girl. The

violence and the shame of the trauma leaves her permanently scarred, and thousands of miles of distance from the site of the injury cannot free her from the imprisonment of her soul. Similarly, Cruz's heroine, Olivia, becomes pregnant under shameful circumstances. Although she is not raped, she succumbs to the world of prostitution after leaving her home in search of economic opportunity in the Dominican city of Puerto Plata. Unable to find legitimate work, she is coerced into prostitution. Pregnant, but uncertain of the father's identity, she persuades Manolo, who unknown to Olivia, has bought her time on the promise that she was a virgin, that he is the father. After the birth of the mixed race child that is clearly not his, the marriage becomes a violent affair. Eventually Olivia retreats into a psychological state that echoes images of the walking dead zombies of voodoo myths. She is alive, but she is not awake: she has lost her essence—that is, her soul.

In chapter two of her full length study on Caribbean women's writings, Brinda Mehta's focus is Danticat's novel, *The Dew Breaker*; nonetheless, her assertion of Danticat's use of the body in her fiction offers a useful point of entry into reading both Danticat's *Breath Eyes Memory* and Cruz's *Soledad*. According to Mehta,

. . . the body represents a certain textual historicity in its capacity to reveal multiple oppressions, violations, and triumphs within the parameters of Haitian history. Danticat pays particular attention to the body of the survivor as a physical marker of racial, sexual, and economic difference as it negotiates subalternity within oppressive power structures. . . . the body is directly involved in a political field.” (70)

Martine and Olivia cannot escape the past. Their inability to free themselves from the scars of violence and trauma echo a similar inability of blacks to free themselves of historical traumas and violent encounters. Just as many ex-slaves and their victimized descendants of violent regimes were unable to reclaim their life force/essence post trauma, Martine and Olivia are trapped, and their living bodies magnify their lifeless souls. Martine is not able to emerge out of her zombie state, but for her daughter, Sophie, the struggle against a similar fate depends on “the folktales the older generations tell to the younger ones” (*Chancy Framing Silence* 121). Housed in these tales is the wisdom and the road to healing, but “the language of the ancestors, which grows increasingly difficult to access” is not always

discernible to the younger—and especially physically distanced—generations (121). Just as Martine’s daughter must leave New York and return to her Caribbean homeland, so must Cruz’s heroine, Soledad.

#### IVa. Protagonists as *Zombies* in *Breath Eyes Memory*

In Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, we find a mother-daughter relationship rooted in trauma that manifests itself in the victim’s zombie-like state. At the heart of the text is the rape Martine suffers when she is only sixteen, a rape that is coupled by the likelihood that the rapist was a Macoute and that his threat to kill her should she dare to look up confirmed that the crime would go unpunished (139). The horror of the rape leaves Martine “in a perpetual state of aphasia while her body takes over” (Roselle 123). The trauma that defines Martine’s victimization does not originate singularly in male orchestrated violence, however. The practice called testing, a name that veils the act of rape by the hand of the mother is a form of sexual violence that precedes that of Martine’s rapist. Whether by the hand of the mother or the Tonton Macoutes who regularly seize and rape young girls like Martine, the rape act is seated in male hegemonic social order that places the value and fortunes of women in male sexual desire. The loss of virginity out of marriage, especially for impoverished women, means no chance for marriage and an even more diminished chance of economic survival—a state that effectively leaves women alive but without real life: in effect, zombies. Mothers “test” their young daughters to make certain that they have maintained the central value that they hold—their virginity. As she initiates this ritual with Sophie, Martine explains its origins: “‘When I was a girl, my mother used to test us to see if we were virgins. . . . The way my mother was raised, a mother is supposed to do that to her daughter until the daughter is married. It is her responsibility to keep her pure’ (60-61). In this paradoxical attempt to protect the daughter from disgrace and ill fortunes, the testing mother physically invades the daughter’s body and reaffirms male authority over women’s bodies. In a discussion with Sophie Martine highlights the eerie similarity of these two acts: “‘I did it . . . because my mother had done it to me. . . . I realize standing here that the two greatest pains of my life are very much related. The one good thing about my being raped was that it made the testing stop. The testing and the rape. I live both every day’ (170).

Through the Caco women of Danticat's novel, we see three generations of mothers and daughters whose bonds are complicated by the mother's horrific invasion of the daughter's body. The paradox is more complicated for Martine and Sophie: as a young girl, Martine is tested by her mother, but this safeguard does not protect her from the unidentified rapist, whose violent act has left Martine to the fate her mother's testing was designed to prevent. The product of that rape, Sophie, becomes the recurring image and reenactment of the event; thus, Martine is never able to free herself from the memory. Even in his absence then, the rapist, like the zombie sorcerer, wields power over Martine. With this single, violent act the rapist establishes ongoing control of Martine, who in the aftermath of the rape, lives in the shadows of society, socially and spiritually disconnected from the world around her. Recognizing that she is only a step ahead of insanity, Martine goes through the mechanics of living—working, paying bills, engaging in the commercialism that confirms one's place in what is deemed normal society. By night, however, Martine is revisited by the rapist—the sorcerer, whose presence she cannot escape.

While the rapist is the direct agent of Martine's trauma, the novel interlaces the political, revealing the connection between the personal fortunes of these women and the larger politics of their nation. On the exterior, the politics play out through the machinations of black led government regimes that rule the people through their terrorist tactics. It is the Duvalier reign of terror that serves as the backdrop of the narrative. We see this, for example, when Sophie departs for the U.S. to live with her mother. Though Sophie longs to remain in Haiti, Tante Atie reminds her that the violent scene they witness between the police and students exemplifies the life she is escaping by going to America (34). This is further impressed upon Sophie by the sight of the young boy in tears boarding the plane, having to flee Haiti after his corrupt father has been executed (37 -38). When Sophie returns years later to Haiti, the vestiges of the Duvalier's reign are still present: as Louise reports the death of the old man Dessalines, she explains despairingly that he was killed by the Macoutes. Remembering the violence against Martine years earlier Sophie's grandmother reminds Louise why she is not moved by Louise's fear that they could be the next victims: ““We already had our turn” (138). Violence and the threat of

violence are part of the landscape, and the political regime fuels and empowers this ongoing terror against the population.

The power of the Macoute who rapes Martine results not just from the immediate regime in power, but from a long political history that is tied to U.S. occupation of Haiti and its ongoing relations with the nation. The rapist is then the sorcerer that we see—at least partially, but the U.S. is the sorcerer that while invisible, has a heavy influence in the lives of Haitians as well. Thousands of miles from home, Martine does not escape the rapist/sorcerer nor does she escape the sorcery of U.S. influence. The terror of the political regimes does not rest simply in the hands of those in power in Haiti. Haiti's culture and politics are very much shaped by western influences. In the New York Haitian restaurant where Martine and Marc take Sophie upon her arrival, the Haitian immigrants discuss their homeland and the U.S. influence is evident: one man proclaims, ““Never the Americans in Haiti again . . . They treated our people like animals . . . and they made us work like slaves”” (54). The Americans may be useful for helping to build roads and infrastructure as one man asserts; however, these immigrants denigrating remarks about boat people and those Haitians that remain in the country suggest a deep self hatred informed by American propaganda on Haiti and its inhabitants (54). Martine's own body alteration is a reminder of the deep seated, denigrating influence of western racism upon Haiti. In America, Martine bleaches her skin, making her more acceptable to the lighter skinned Marc and diminishing the contrast of her dark skin in the lighter world of New York. She explains to Sophie that she must quickly learn English to avoid the insults that are strewn at Haitians if their accent is detected: ““Many of the American kids even accused Haitians of having AIDS because they heard on television that only the ‘Four Hs’ got AIDS—Heroin addicts, Hemophiliacs, Homosexuals, and Haitians”” (51). Haiti resides in the American imagination then as the equivalent of those most despised and outcast.

Martine departs Haiti after the rape, hoping to emerge from the brink of insanity and desolation. The move to New York offers her financial opportunity but not a pathway to spiritual renewal. She goes through the mechanics of daily living—working, consuming, eating, etc. However, upon her reunion with Martine Sophie

observes immediately a physical affect that can be likened to the living dead. Sophie notices that in person her mother does not look like the picture that stood on Atie's night table in their home in Haiti. The real life image lacked vivacity: in the flesh "her face was long and hollow. Her hair had a blunt cut and she had long spindly legs. She had dark circles under her eyes and, as she smiled, lines of wrinkles tightened her expression" (42). Sophie associates her mother's harried expression to that of Haitian cane field workers, but the similarity to the zombie figure stands out. Although Martine's portrait on Atie's nightstand projected a more vivacious image, the affect of the zombie was suggested even in this image. Although Sophie recalls her mother bearing a smile in the portrait, her mother's image was threatening rather than comforting: "She witnessed everything . . . She saw us when we got up, when we went to sleep, when we laughed, when we got upset at each other. Her expression never changed. Her grin never went away" (8). She feared that her mother would "try to squeeze [her] into the small frame" with her (8). Sophie's fear is reminiscent of the Haitian fear of zombies originating not out of a physical fear of the zombie, but rather that those in contact with the zombie might be zombified themselves (Paravisini-Gebert 38). Sophie's description of the portrait paints Martine as "incapable of words, incapable of evolving, but capable of instilling in the onlooker, the fear of being contaminated by her traumatic consciousness. The child might be, if the mother catches her, turned into a picture too" (Rosello 125). While Mirielle Rosello equates Martine's state to that of vampire, the prevailing stasis that Sophie associates with Martine's image is arguably reflective of zombification.

During her return to Haiti after many years away, Martine answers her mother's inquiry about her noticeably lighter skin not by confessing that she uses lightening crèmes, but rather telling her that "It is very cold in America . . . The cold turns us into ghosts" (160). Clearly, it is not just America that causes Martine's ghostliness. This is revealed in her confessions to the then teen-aged Sophie regarding her fear of returning to Haiti: "'There are ghosts there that I can't face'" she tells her. Years later, after they return from Dame Marie and begin to reconcile, Martine explains again that home brings her too close to the realm of the dead: "'Whenever I'm there, I feel like I sleep with ghosts'" (189). In Haiti and in New York, Martine is

threatened by ghosts and the fear of being drawn into their realm—the realm of the dead. Her sleeplessness is the result of her attempt to resist the sleep that might render her powerless to their lure.

As a young girl, Sophie saved her mother often from her nightmares: Martine reminds Sophie of this as they begin to restore their relationship in Haiti: “I want to be your friend, your very very good friend, because you saved my life many times when you woke me up from those nightmares” (170). What Sophie knows instinctively is that she must seek a remedy for her mother because her mother’s pain is in fact hers:

After Joseph and I got married, all through the first year I had suicidal thoughts. Some nights I woke up in a cold sweat wondering if my mother’s anxiety was somehow hereditary . . . Her nightmares had become my own, so much so that I would wake up some mornings wondering if we both hadn’t spent the night dreaming about the same thing: a man with no face, pounding a life into a helpless young girl.  
(193)

Sophie too is victim: she suffers the scars of her mother’s rape, and she suffers the scars of her mother’s testing. In contrast to Martine, however, Sophie knows that the cure is to be found not in the flight from but rather in the return to home—both spiritually and physically. Martine accepts western medical treatment for her cancer, but she has no faith in their power to treat the ghosts that haunt her. And since as she tells Sophie, “you can’t report a ghost to the police,” she remains terror stricken and helpless (199). In contrast, Sophie has sought counseling, but not through conventional western practices: her therapist is “a black woman who was an initiated Santeria priestess,’ who held their sessions not in a sterile office building but “in the woods by the river” (206). It is the therapist who clarifies for Sophie that her mother’s cure and her own would be found in their return to Haiti to face the rapist ghost (211). She explained that this confrontation would free them of the rapist’s hold.

Martine dies in her New York home from self-inflicted wounds; thus, confrontation and resolution at the cite of the trauma cannot happen for her. Sophie returns her

mother's body to their Haitian homeland for burial, however, and with this return Sophie frees her mother's spirit and confronts the evil in the cane field that her mother could not. Before she departs New York with her mother's body, Sophie knows that this will be Martine's journey to freedom. She dresses Martine in her favorite color, red, a color that in western culture signals promiscuity and immorality in a woman: "it was too loud a color for a burial" (227). But for Martine and a legacy of Haitian women, red signaled Erzulie, the goddess of love: the equal to the Christian Virgin Mother (113, 227). When Marc suggests that Martine may have some trouble entering heaven in red, Sophie explains that Martine will be going to her ancestral home—to Guinea, or wherever else she might choose. With this journey, her mother will finally be free (228). Following the advice of her Santeria therapist, Sophie returns to the site of her mother's trauma. She rushes from the burial site where her mother's body is being covered in the grave, to the cane field. "Attacking the cane" Sophie suggests what would have been the actions of the young Martine in the cane field had she been able to defend herself (233). Sophie confronts and defeats the rapist and his hold. She recalls this moment of triumph, "I took off my shoes and began to beat a cane stalk. I pounded it until it began to lean over. I pushed over the cane stalk. It snapped back, striking my shoulder. I pulled at it, yanking it from the ground" (233). Sophie's triumph is then confirmed with the call-and-response like exchange that ends this scene:

From where she was standing, my grandmother shouted like the women from the market place, "*Ou libéré?*" Are you free?

Tante Atie echoed her cry, her voice quivering with her sobs.  
"*Ou libéré!*" (233)

#### IV.b. Africanity/Blackness and the Zombie Protagonist in *Soledad*

Angie Cruz's *Soledad* has been publicly celebrated for its powerful representation of the complex cultural world of Dominican immigrants in the United States, specifically, New York City. While *Soledad* speaks to a specific immigrant identity and experience, the novel also represents Cruz's exploration into "the African element of her Dominican heritage (J. Heredia 85). The novel sheds light on the pervasive resonance of a spiritual ethos found throughout non-Anglo population groups of the Ameri-Atlantic world and pointing to Africana origins. Cruz's

*Soledad*, not unlike works by black women writers of the U.S. such as Toni Morrison (*Beloved*), Gloria Naylor (*Mama Day*), and Paule Marshall (*Praisesong for the Widow*), tells the story of a woman and a community's search for healing and belonging and her eventual arrival through pathways that point away from the structures and strictures of Anglo Christian and western, "rational" sensibilities. It is a journey that requires remembrances that are passageways to revisiting and restoring the past to make the present livable. This revisit and restoration is only possible through the "magic" and "myths" found outside Anglo culture. The Dominican family in Cruz's *Soledad* finds its way in the alienating Anglo-determined world of NYC only by reinstating the spiritual ethos of their homeland. The adroitness with which Cruz weaves the subversive nature of her text is most glaringly evident in her unconventional play on the passing trope. Whereas writers have historically employed this trope to signal the silencing of black identity, Cruz's fictional family is haunted by the mother's attempt to conceal her child's white parent. It is a stark play with irony, given the Dominican Republic's legacy of leadership that has been committed to whitening the country's narrative of identity. This denial has been so emphatic that the brownness evident in the larger population of Dominicans would still not deter the dismissal of the nation's link to Africanity. In Cruz's *Soledad*, however, whiteness is the genetic link that is denied: while Olivia wants Manolo to accept Soledad as his daughter, he knows from the earliest that she is not: "Since the day she was born, he watched her, waited to find a trace of himself in her and the paler she became, her nose, the shape of her eyes, her fine straight hair, neither Olivia's or his," he became more certain that he was not the biological father (Cruz 140).

Manolo's dark skin stands as constant reminder to Olivia that her façade cannot stand, and while she contributes his dark skin to "too many years in the sun" (19), the doubt concerning his paternity persists. The violence and distrust that comes to define Manolo and Olivia's marriage, results in Manolo's death at Olivia's hand, and Olivia's retreat into the world of the living dead. Again, while the zombie figure is popularized in the west through tales of walking dead who have been brought to this hideous state through the evil of folk magic and sorcery, Cruz's heroine falls into this state through trauma. Olivia's zombiism is induced not by an

evil, black sorcerer, but rather results from a crisis white/western in origin. As a young girl of fifteen, Olivia leaves home to avoid a forced marriage: she knows that given the economic and political hardships, “her parents were looking for ways to move to the States,” and that marrying Olivia off to Pelao, who had moved to New York, could prove the family’s ticket out of the Dominican Republic (47). While she escapes the threat of being delivered to the sexual hunger of Pelao, she finds a worse fate in Puerto Plata. In Puerto Plata, Olivia is forced to give her body for the purchased pleasure of male customers who find their way to her via an unlikely sorcerer—unlikely that is, through the conventions of the western zombie trope. The innocent, sexually pure maiden is not the helpless, white maiden of western zombie lore, but rather the young, innocent, black Olivia. Like so many other young, poor black girls in Puerto Plata, Olivia’s victimization does not rest in the machinations of the evil black sorcerer of white authored zombie myths. On the contrary, Olivia is tricked by the sorcery/deception of whiteness and western capitalism embodies in the “Swedish man, balding head, rosy cheeks, who . . . said he managed models around the world [and] . . . promised Olivia she would make enough money so she could buy a house” (47).

The staging of Olivia’s trauma has been set: her marriage to Manolo with the lie that he is the father, begins their tumultuous relationship and years of violence that she would suffer at Manolo’s hand. While Manolo’s death at Olivia’s hand is arguably the climatic trauma precipitating the onset of her zombie like state, Soledad’s departure pushes Olivia into the extreme coma/zombie state where we find her at the novel’s onset. No one is more aware of this than Soledad, who had witnessed the years of Manolo’s violence and abuse and also his death: “On many nights when I still lived with my mother, she screamed for help, woke me up asking me for forgiveness. She was always apologizing between screams. And no matter how far I tried to push back the screeching sound of her voice, I hear it, and hate myself for letting her carry the burden of my father’s death” (14). Soledad’s grandmother also sees her departure as the event that triggered Olivia’s transformation; she explains to Soledad that the loneliness at her departure “pushed her [Olivia] to live in her dreams (12). When Soledad returns she finds that her mother “looks like a walking dead person” (30).

The quest to deliver Olivia out of her living-dead state clearly drives the plot, but she is not the only family member in this kind of limbo. Her father who has suffered a stroke, also wavers between the world of the living and the dead. Through death, however, he finally escapes the zombie entrapment that resulted from western medicine. When Soledad calls 911 to attend the lifeless body of Don Fernando, Abuela reminds her that her grandfather slipped into his lifeless existence because they had invited “the devils” in to treat him and their after they “put those machines inside of him . . . to help him breathe and make his heart beat . . . He had no reason to work at living no more” (182). Don Fernando’s lifeless state after his stroke portends the failure of western alternatives to facilitate healing for Soledad and Olivia.

Arguably, Soledad functions in a living-dead state that results from her mother’s experience: Manolo’s violence and rejection leave Soledad traumatized as well. Soledad’s zombiism plays out in the form of self-denial and flight: ashamed of her Washington Heights upbringing, she manufactures a biography that locates her roots to the “Upper Upper Upper West Side” (2). She desires Europe and whiteness, hoping to escape her Dominican heritage. The art gallery symbolizes this attempted escape into whiteness: “At times the art gallery looks like a psychiatric ward. Everything is white, the walls, the ceilings” (56). Though she works in the gallery, she still remains outsider, hoping for the day when the elites will invite her to one of their exclusive gatherings (64). Before she is called back home to her mother’s side in their Washington Heights apartment, she imagines herself “following James Baldwin’s footsteps,” escaping far away, to Europe, to Paris even, (3). Soledad has fled from the site of trauma, living a sterile and spiritless existence, and though she returns for the sake of her mother’s recovery, the journey will lead to her recovery as well.

Manolo’s death propels both Olivia and Soledad into spiritual recess, and both attempt escapes that are futile. Soledad retreats into a world of indifference in which she removes her father’s death from her memory (134). Olivia seeks an immediate return to the Dominican Republic to “relive her niñez,” but her effort is thwarted

when she is unable to buy her family's old land in Juan Dolio because the government had bought it and sold it to Germans. Gorda explains to Soledad that with that disappointment "Olivia cracked and her spirit spilled out from her" (155). In death Manolo's spiritual presence is the evil force that brings Olivia to her dramatic zombie state, and she struggles against him for herself and for Soledad: "My body fights to get out of bed. I need to see Soledad. I have to tell her I love her. Tell her about her father. Tell her that she has to get out of my apartment. She doesn't have much time before Manolo gets to her too" (154). When Soledad realizes that Manolo has captured her mother's spirit, she must abandon the world of western rationality, and return to home and ancestors as a way to recovery for her mother and herself as well.

Together, Soledad and her mother return to the Dominican Republic, to homeland, family, and ancestors to recover their spiritual essence so that they can begin to live again. That Olivia's cure will not be had through western medicine or religion is signaled early in the novel. While Olivia does not believe in the mystical healing and prevention practices of her sister, Gorda, she finds no healing in western alternatives. Olivia "believes in X rays, prescriptions, things that come out of a pharmacy," and does not believe that the ill ease she feels is due to an evil spiritual presence (13). Though she reveres western culture, Soledad senses early that the white world, particularly white religion, holds no remedy for her mother. This is expressly conveyed in the bedside scene where Soledad notices that her mother's rosary feels "cold and useless," and determining its uselessness she then puts it away in her pocket (20). In similar fashion, even in Olivia's zombie state she comes to understand not only the uselessness of western religion, but also its oppressiveness: thinking of her own mother's burdensome life, Olivia wants to tell her that it is "the golden Virgen Maria around her neck that keeps her from flying" (220).

After Soledad has herself seen Manolo's ghost and the other male ghosts from her mother's past, she realizes that these are powers to be reckoned with in ways that go beyond Anglo rationalism and science. She and Gorda agree that the unwelcomed spirits must be removed from their lives. They agree that a return to the Dominican Republic to a sacred place, for a sacred ritual will free Olivia and Soledad of the

haunting past that threatens their future. Taking the list of male customers that Olivia had compiled and stowed away for decades, and photographs of Olivia, Soledad and their Washington Heights family members, Soledad travels to the Dominican Republic with her mother to the waters of a secret cave to find freedom and rebirth.

After her awareness of the spirits haunting her mother, Soledad understands that nothing she has learned in the rational orientation of western thinking can serve her in the quest to be free of this presence. She is now ready to return home, to a mythical place where one can revisit the past and resurrect oneself: in this place Soledad and her mother can destroy the list that has empowered the evil spirits in their NY apartment. Gorda explains to Soledad how the ritual will work: “We can have Olivia retrace her steps, erase her past step by step. She will start again” (206). In Santa Domingo Soledad and Olivia travel to the secret cave with Tía Christina and their young guide who navigates the raft, warning them that the waters are both healing and dangerous. The young boy explains that the water is much deeper than it seems—bottomless—and that no one survives if they fall in. Christina explains the water’s power to change evil to good, the promise that brings them to this paradox of danger and hope: “Even if the person is evil or ill, this water has been known to cleanse, rejuvenate, change a person’s life for the better” (223). When Soledad falls into the water after attempting to find her photograph that does not reemerge after being placed in the water, all fear that she will be lost to the water. Remembering a time when Soledad was a little girl and they went to the bottom of the ocean, Olivia is not initially afraid. Instead of meeting the dreaded water monster, Soledad finds a peace and understanding at the bottom of the water that allows her to reemerge alive. It is when she “surrender[s] to the warmth of the water” that “the past, present and future become one,” and Soledad is cleansed and reborn (226-227). The zombie curse is broken; the sorcerers no longer hold power over Olivia. Soledad’s journey through the water is both hers and Olivia’s: when she washes ashore, her mother receives her, restored herself to life and to speech. She can now tell Soledad the stories that will clarify the past and allow them to move into the future.

## VI. Conclusion

In her essay on Lucía Charún-Illescas's novel of seventeenth-century Peru, *Malambo*, Aida Heredia argues that the story of Jacinto's manumission reminds us of slavery's lasting imprint on the psyche of the enslaved—even in freedom. As a free man, "Jacinto behaves as if he were chattel and subjected to his master's will. So permeating is this internalized form of oppression that his memories of the rituals of initiation into adulthood, which he underwent in his native Angola are replaced by his actual captivity in Lima as the only way of life possible for him" (86). The story of seventeenth-century Jacinto of Peru resonates with the Haitian notion of the zombie as slave figure, and likewise, the stories of Danticat and Cruz's protagonists. For Martine and Olivia, the freedom and hopefulness of their youth is replaced by the horror of the trauma they experience. Trauma strips them of their life spirit or essence, and they navigate the world as mere physical entities. They are then forced into the realm of the living dead. In both novels the break from the sorcerer's curse suggests a more salient triumph. As these heroines find their way out of spiritual death, their return to home and ancestors underscores a dynamic tension between western and Africana worldviews. In the history of western intellectualism the presumption has been that the presumed superior gaze of the west prevails. Jim Perkinson explains, however, that this perspective is one-sided: he contends that so-called "'religions of the oppressed' . . . represent a form of signification upon the academy as salient as the academy's comprehension of these same religions in its own discourses of ethnography, history, philosophy, and theology" (569). In *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Soledad* the authors signal to the academy that the so-called oppressed possess and exercise the power to gaze the west and to reject the sorcery that it conceals under the veneer it calls civilization and rationality.

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<sup>i</sup> Most pervasive in its influence was Thomas Dixon's *The Leopard's Spot* (1902) and the silent film, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), that was based on Dixon's 1905 novel, *The Clansman* (1905). These works suggested that Reconstruction had failed and that as free and unsupervised, blacks—particularly black men—were a threat to the nation. Historians have argued that Dixon's novels and the film played a major part in the rise of the KuKluxKlan.

<sup>ii</sup>Called the bokor in traditional Haitian Vodou, this name for the master of the zombie was converted to sorcerer in U.S. and western discourse.