

Toward a Black Liberatory Feminism: Erna Brodber's *Myal* and Luz Argentina Chiriboga's *Bajo la Piel de los Tambores*

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The body thereby becomes a text on which pain can be read as a necessary physical step on the road to a higher moral state, a destiny, or a way of being. This in turn reveals a radical transformation (generally considered positive) in the initial state of the individual or her community.

—FranHoise Lionnet, "Inscriptions of Exile"

Hija de las aguas marinas,
dormida en sus entrañas,
renazco de la pólvora
que un rifle guerrillero
esparció en la montaña
para que el mundo renaciera a su vez

(Daughter of the ocean waters,
sleeping in its womb,
I am reborn from the gunpowder
that a guerrilla rifle
disperses over the mountain
so that the world may be reborn in its time)

* * *

—Nancy Morejón, *Renacimiento*

The relationship of individuals to communities informs much of the literature written by black women in the late twentieth century. Additionally, many of those writers are also concerned with the effects of patriarchy and heteronormativity on the psychological condition of black communities in nations whose foundations rest on such restrictive ideologies. These writers often characterize the illness that results from these features in terms of their effect on black women's bodies. Writers such as Erna Brodber and Luz Argentina Chiriboga, for example, focus attention on black female subordination, erasure, and censoring. They are particularly concerned with combating "[m]ysogynist thought [that] has commonly found a convenient self-justification for women's secondary social positions by containing them within bodies that are represented, even constructed, as frail, imperfect, unruly, and unreliable, subject to various intrusions which are not under conscious control" (Grosz 13-14).

Specifically characterizing black women's oppression in terms of male privilege and discourses of repression and domesticity, Brodber's *Myal* and Chiriboga's *Bajo la Piel de los Tambores* critique the patriarchal cultures of the Americas and the social mores

which perpetuate the subjugation of the black female and her community. The protagonists of their novels offer a conception of the black woman as more than just a body to be objectified, but as an individual, connected to her community, pursuing agency, and resisting the restrictions of societal conventions. In characterizing their struggles, Brodber and Chiriboga signify on specific African folk practices and key aspects of liberation theology in order to suggest ways in which women of the African diaspora in the Americas may resist the male gaze. Black women in their texts achieve empowerment through psychological and spiritual processes of cleansing and interactions with spirits of the enslaved in the form of already empowered ancestor figures. They ultimately redefine themselves through community and history, rather than through limiting nationalist ideologies, such as patriarchy. Through their representations of the black female body, Brodber and Chiriboga tell the story of the transformation of the black female subject as she grapples with patriarchy and of her community as it too is altered by her struggle.

Both Brodber and Chiriboga use their works as polemical tools in order to propose activist agendas within the space of the African diaspora of the Americas. The intersections of race, gender, and diaspora in their fiction express their desire to engage in political and social interventions that will move beyond the stasis of imperialistic, male-dominated narratives of nation. Trained in Jamaica as a sociologist, Brodber purposely engages issues related to the perception of black women in the Americas and the dynamics of communal formation. Of her work, she insists, “My sociological effort and therefore the fiction that serves it [. . .] has activist intentions” (“Fiction in the Scientific Procedure” 164). She goes further by articulating her perspective on the difference between her methodology of fiction writing and that of a historian:

What conclusively separates these works (fiction) from history is the relations of the writer's 'I' to his data. While the historian, having collected his data, leaves them to move logically to a conclusion, the creative writer can impose his own sense of justice, his own feelings upon the data and guide them to a conclusion which accords with his prejudice. ("Oral Sources" 4)

Chiriboga too is concerned with animating history with a "sense of justice," as she uses her literature to articulate the challenges of inhabiting the ontological spaces of blackness and femaleness in the Americas. Like Brodber, Chiriboga is specifically interested in revising the history of the nation in order to achieve justice for black subjects in general and for black women in particular. As a writer from Ecuador, she seeks to shed light on the cultural contributions made by those of African descent. She says of her purpose in writing,

[. . .] I write in order to defend our natural resources. I write because I am committed to my race; I write in order to unmask white historians who deny the significance of the contributions of Afro-Ecuadorians in the Wars of Independence, of those people who fought side by side with Simón Bolívar for our freedom [from Spain]. I write in order to emphasize the fact that peoples of African descent also have contributed to the development of our country. (Beane, "Chiriboga: A Conversation" 81-82)

Chiriboga is particularly interested in the intersections of "el machismo" and racism and their visceral effects on black women's bodies and psyches. She describes herself as a feminist who aides "las masas femeninas a tener su propia voz y un decidido protagonismo social y politico" (the female masses in having their own voice and a decidedly social and political protagonism). She also speaks of her role as a writer of African descent in terms of the creation and elevation of diasporic subjectivity within Latin America: "[. . . U]na de mis funciones es elevar la auto-estima de los afro-ecuatorianos y el de sentirse orgullosos de sus ancestros y reafirmar su identidad; que olviden su posición de inferioridad, consecuencia de los años de opresión cultural a la que ha

sido sometido” (One of my functions is to elevate the self-esteem of Afro-Ecuadorians and the feeling of pride in their ancestors and to reaffirm their identity; that they forget their position of inferiority, the result of years of cultural oppression to which they have been subjected) (Seales Soley 64).

The activist aims of Brodber and Chiriboga are distinguished from other political agendas, such as mainstream feminism or black nationalism, in that they are rooted in cultural practices that elevate all of the members of the diasporic community, including women and those individuals who are not easily “read” as ethnic. Their aim reflects a type of cultural domino theory, by which one member’s “fall” affects the health and growth of the entire community. Thus, their fiction enacts Patricia Hill Collins’ definition of black feminism: “a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community” (39). Critic Carolyn Denard expands upon the definition offered by Collins:

Among black women, who have historically suffered oppression because of both race and gender, there is usually a simultaneous concern for both these issues. They abhor both sexist and racist oppression. But because of their minority ethnic status, which keeps their allegiance to ancestral group foremost, they shun an advocacy to of the kind of political, existential feminism embraced by many women of the majority culture. For black women, their concern with feminism is usually more group-centered than self-centered, more cultural than political. As a result, they tend to be concerned more with the particular female cultural values of their own ethnic group rather than with those of women in general. They advocate what may be termed ethnic cultural feminism. (171-72)

This ethnic cultural feminism complicates isolated notions of race, nation, and gender difference by revealing their intersections. Such a feminism actually places the above categories into dialogue with one another in order to reach a humanist formulation as a way out of the trap of privileging any one of them. The black cultural feminism

advocated by Brodber and Chiriboga expresses this aim, in that it enacts a model of communal liberation from oppression vis-à-vis the transformation of the black female.

Though literary and cultural critics recognize the feminist poetics inherent in the works of black women writers like Brodber and Chiriboga, they wholly fail to link the polemics with the practice of liberation characterized within their texts. The works of Brodber, Chiriboga, and others are charged with issues of liberation and spirituality. The spiritual considerations go further than mere rendering of religious practices or models of existential ways of being in the world. They represent what literary critic Melvin Rahming refers to as a “critical theory of spirit,” by which certain presences function outside of time and operate “on individual, communal and cross-cultural levels to release human beings (and, by extension, human institutions) from the spiritual paralysis of essentialist and materialist ideologies” (Rahming, par. 3). Yet, even Rahming does not go far enough in his explication of this paradigm, for at the root of this poetics of liberation is a signification on the tenets of liberation theology.

Often associated with the Third World and the postcolonial condition, liberation theology has become a global phenomenon, claimed by dispossessed persons to whom its message of freedom from oppression and struggle rings a resonant chord. In *A Place in the Sun*, Dutch theologian Theo Witvliet critiques Western notions of spirituality by emphasizing its debilitating adaptation to modernity and its progeny, the nation, or “to the modern consciousness which developed out of the Enlightenment and which coincides historically with the growth of bourgeois capitalist society.” He notes that the distinct difference of a spiritual practice based on liberation theology is that its central focus is on those whom nations have labelled historically, due to gender, race, or class, as

“non-person[s],” or “those without possessions” (26), including self-possession. He argues that spiritual liberation practices have embedded within them a “deep awareness that the liberation of classes, races or groups can never be complete without the liberation of *all* people” (40). He emphasizes that much of the work of liberation theology takes place in the “underground” (111), a physical and/or metaphysical space at the margins of nations and/or national thought where a counter-culture of care exists to elevate the dispossessed from a position of non-person to a position of subject so that the community at large may be strengthened.¹

If we marry these notions of black cultural feminism, of spirit, and of liberation theology, I posit that we will, in effect, produce what I term a black liberatory feminism, by which a humanist vision of the black community is instantiated through the “underground” metaphysical transformation and political activism of its female members. This type of feminism resembles Alice Walker’s notion of “womanism.” The terms “black feminism” and “womanism” may be used interchangeably; for, as Walker herself says, “Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender” (xii). However, what I term black liberatory feminism marks its difference from womanism exactly because of its signification on liberation theology, its movement away from U.S.-centered formulations, and its diasporic implications. A black liberatory feminism may be deployed in spaces where “[r]eligion and postcolonialism, as disciplines, meet on an awkward threshold; one is confronting its own Western ideologies, while the other is deconstructing Western ideologies” (Darroch 206). Focusing on its potential for inclusion of various cultural, religious, spiritual, and metaphysical practices, it “makes space for a more heteronomous framework that embraces the powerful religious bodies throughout the diaspora”

(Darroch 206).

In addition to their signification on metaphysics, black women writers particularly focus on the liberation of the black female. The black female is significant to diasporic formulations, for her body has been implicated in late twentieth century nationalist discourses regarding the progression of the black community in various nations of the Americas. Such discourses render the black female body as an object of gratification and/or as a biological conduit of citizens of imagined, future nations. Writers such as Brodber and Chiriboga offer an alternative vision of the potential of the black female once liberated from such nationalist constraints. In counter-narratives such as Brodber's *Myal* and Chiriboga's *Bajo la Piel de los Tambores* the liberated black female births a new discourse of nation that will become part of the stock used to thicken the discursive transnational soup of the Dutch pot diaspora of the Americas.

Myal: The "Spirit Thievery" of Empire, the Frontier Space of Nation, and the Other Half That Has Never Been Told

Erna Brodber's *Myal* concerns itself with the effects of colonization and racial and cultural miscegenation on the rural community of Grove Town in the St. Thomas Parish of Jamaica in the second decade of the twentieth century. The village has consumed itself with the problem of what to do about the seemingly psychosomatic illness of the mulatta Ella O'Grady, who returns to the village after having "tripped out in foreign" (4). Unlike other villages, Grove Town is "not a peripheral site threatened, like all margins, by the imperialist expansion of the centre, but is a centre that has always defined itself against its enemies" (Kortenaar 52). Thus, a disruption that appears to be linked to the encroachment of cultural imperialism in the form of elusive bodies and

ideologies is met with alarm and an immediate call to action. The people of Grove Town react to the disruption of the equilibrium of their community by calling upon Mass Cyrus, a conjurer, to aid them in healing the body of the young woman, who remains trapped in a catatonic state. His private musings on the situation reflect the need of the town's people to confront not only an attack on one of its members but also the changing nature of its racial and social dynamic:

“These new people,” his score was saying, “these in-between colours people, these trained-minded people play the percussions so loud and raucous, the wee small babe could know they feared the tune. Now, if they think of worms and black boil, why come to me? I am not that kind of doctor. No. They know it is something else, that only I can handle yet they come blasting my ears and shaking my etheric with their clashing cymbals. This discord could shake a man out of his roots.”

In tune with nature's harmonious melodies, Mass Cyrus can sense the discordant notes of the misalignment of spirits with nature. Thus, he laments the failure of his people to perceive what he apprehends quite well. They seek material cures for what they view as a physical ailment. However, Ella O'Grady's sickness is of a metaphysical/spiritual nature; her “in-between colours” self is caught in the in-between of national, racial, and social epistemologies whose war with one another has left her almost devoid of life. As a symbol of the larger community's illness, she will function as the catalyst that allows for transformation of all. But, as Mass Cyrus notes, “Curing the body is nothing. Touching the peace of those she must touch and those who must touch her is the hard part. And you can't do that unless you can touch their spirits” (Brodber 1).

Deemed sensitive and intelligent by others, Ella's lineage and upbringing conspire to frame her as the locus of communal tension. Born of a black mother and Irish father, a police officer in the parish who abandoned mother and child because he could not cope

with the sea of blackness in the countryside, Ella became the town's "alabaster baby." Though her maternal grandparents descended from the Moors, the village people still viewed Ella and her family members as strange, especially since the grandparents would "skin-up pon Kumina"² and its drums and only attend services at the established church (7). The "long face, thin lip, pointed nose souls in a round face, thick lip, big eye country" appeared out of place (8); and Ella's near-white body only added to the strangeness, acting as a "conduit for a range of superstitions, jealousies and anxieties" (Narain 108). Her church recitation of a Rudyard Kipling poem about the expanse of the English empire garners her the attention of Maydene Brassington, a white English woman with a third eye of spiritual insight, despite being married to the "spirit-thieving" Methodist minister in charge of the parish. Though Reverend Brassington is also of mixed heritage, his austere desire to "exorcise [the folk practices of the people] and replace [them with 'holiness']" (Brodber 18) disconcerts enough people, including his own wife, as to facilitate division. With that in mind, Amy Holness, a friend of Ella's mother, demands to know of Maydene the Brassington's intentions in apprenticing Ella.

The negotiation over possession of Ella's body ironically takes place at the Cross Roads, signifying on the mediation of death and life (the death of Ella's marginal status in the countryside and her new life under the Brassington's tutelage) and the translation of bodies that occurs in a space marked by the sign of a cross. The name also alerts the reader to the presence of a Legba figure, Maydene, who, as a white woman married to a black Jamaican, straddles the worlds of the colonized and the colonizer, and who will operate as a trickster in helping to facilitate Ella's ultimate liberation. Her negotiation with Amy Holness foreshadows the claiming of Ella's body by her eventual husband,

Selwyn Langley, who completes the imperialist possession of Ella that the Brassingtons, though well-intentioned, began. It also foreshadows Maydene's final reclamation of Ella's traumatized body from Selwyn for the purpose of the young woman's healing and the growth of the community. This crossroads initiates a discourse of nation that will reflect the anxieties and potentialities of the larger nation in its desire to come into being as it grapples with imperial ideologies, racial constitution, and newly emerging national ideologies that run counter to imperial ones.

Hinting at Ella's subsequent demise, the narrator describes her husband Selwyn's character and lineage in terms of white privilege, landed inheritance, and imperialist tendencies:

If Selwyn had been born in eighteenth or nineteenth century Britain and of upper class parentage, he would have been called a black sheep. He would have been sent off to Jamaica and would have met Ella O'Grady and chosen her from among his stock to be his housekeeper. He would have given her two children, made his fortune and returned to England as an ordinary sheep ready for his rightful place in the fold there and she would have been left with a small consideration, and her children, with what she could make of it, along with their very profitable skin colour.

(42)

The narrator is clear in noting that a mere accident of birth placed Selwyn in the wrong social strata, but that his disposition has been groomed to enact the upper class values and colonial desires of the British nation. Despite his working class origins, Selwyn's subsequent inheritance of the Langley empire of herbal medicines and techniques and his attempts to expand that empire through the production of motion pictures frames him in terms of imperialist measures.

When Ella travels to the U. S. and shares her stories of her place of birth and emphasizes her Jamaican difference, Selwyn, as the colonizer apprenticing the colonized,

educates her about her true racial status and its implications. As the narrator explains, “It was Selwyn who explained to her in simple terms that she was coloured, mulatto and what that meant, taking her innocence with her hymen in return for guidance through the confusing fair that was America” (43). His objectification of Ella as an exoticized white woman and his desire to remake her as such reflect Ann Stoler’s reading of the intersections of colonial desire and imperialism. As she states, “sexual control was more than a convenient metaphor for colonial domination. It was a fundamental class and racial marker implicated in a wider set of relations of power” (Stoler 45). Selwyn’s understanding of these relations of power allows him to claim Ella’s body as a site of creation for his progeny, a minstrel representation entitled *Caribbean Nights and Days* that “grievously misrepresents Grove Town as a tropical heart of darkness against which white America can constitute itself” (Kortenaar 65). These relations of power play out in Selwyn’s revision of Ella’s life story through the negation of her black roots and the emphasis on her Irish lineage. As the British had done through the Jamaican education system, Selwyn reconstructs the history of the colonized in order to stave off the emergence of an independent consciousness. Ella, as symbol of colonized Jamaicans and of the emerging Jamaican nation, reflects the difficulty of the colonized in resisting imperial power with an alternative construction of nation that has not yet found articulation. Selwyn’s acquisition of further power in order to expand his empire rests on how successful he is in reinventing Ella as an exotic white woman whose body and spirit he may possess. As with all colonial rule, the identity of the colonized must recede in order to facilitate the normalization of imperial power, and Selwyn becomes determined to normalize his control over Ella.

Selwyn's claim to inheritance and imperial power are most clearly embodied in his plans for his coon show, based on Ella's stories of conjuration, spirit possession, and folk ways of being in Grove Town. Having already constructed a metaphorical partition between herself and the black people of her village, who always kept her at a distance due to her racial difference, Ella ambivalently celebrates her Jamaican culture while allowing herself to be inserted into spaces of whiteness in order to fulfill her longing for identification with the characters of colonial literature that she has read. When Selwyn enters her life, she willingly offers herself and her life story to him. Upon marrying Selwyn, Ella begins to lose herself, so much so that, though she can narrate her experience, she too becomes complicit in the objectification of her culture:

Selwyn had indeed propelled himself through the gauze partition and into Ella's carnate past. After a couple of months of marriage there was no gauze at all and Ella seemed to be draining perpetually. And the draining brought clarity so that Ella could, after a time, see not only mammy Mary and them people clearly but she could see things around them. She could show him the star-apple tree. (*Myal* 81)

Being "shown" a star-apple tree through someone's imagination is not the same as actually engaging the tree with one's own senses. This is what Selwyn misses and what Ella cannot impart to him. Hence, his insulting hybridization of her narrative reflects the taint in the star-apple of her imagination and his skewed perception of her native land.

Though Ella does possess an "indigenous narrative"³ to counter the colonial narratives in which she immerses herself, her marginalized status within the predominantly black community of Grove Town, her miseducation under her apprenticeship with the Brassingtons, and her misrecognition of the deeper cultural signifiers inherent in the folk practices and beliefs of the village people all leave her vulnerable to the influence of Selwyn, who slowly robs her spirit of that which marked

her difference. Drained of her limited understanding of her culture, Ella is erased and redrawn as part of Selwyn's exotic narrative creation; and "now there exist[ed] a version of her self outside herself in Selwyn's racist imagination" (Kortenaar 65). Selwyn's new colonial narrative, the child produced from his rape of Ella's imagination, is the version that remains outside herself; "[b]ut she wanted to make something inside, not outside of it" (*Myal* 82). Ignorant of Selwyn's use of prophylactics and other birth control measures, yet longing to bear a child to fill the loneliness created by her husband, Ella demands to be shown "how to fill the spaces he had created and give her too, a chance to create [. . .]" (82). Instead of filling the space he created, Selwyn completely divests her of her sense of self and of reality by taking her to see their bastard child, the fetishistic play based on her personal narrative, and by expressing his plans to translate the text into film. Insensitive to Ella's plight, "[h]e of course was a man on the make, a man of success who could not now be stopped: Ella's spirit and with it that of Grove Town would be locked into celluloid for the world to see for ages on end" (92). With that, Ella's complete disassociation from all she knows manifests itself in her zombification and in the swelling of her womb, which must be purged of its toxic growth in order to bring about healing for Ella and for the community that tenuously claims her.

As Ella succumbs to Selwyn's spirit thievery, her adopted mother Maydene senses that her surrogate daughter's spirit has been troubled and enlists the aid of Mass Cyrus, who demands that the Brassingtons and the community rally together for Ella's healing. In this moment of crisis, Maydene discovers another self within her, an ancient myal spirit,⁴ named White Hen and of African origin, that communes with other myal spirits who inhabit Mass Cyrus; Miss Gatha Paisley, leader of the Kumina tabernacle; the

Reverend Musgrave Simpson, the Baptist minister; and Ole African, another healer.⁵ Just as Ella's illness is pivotal to the unification of the community, so too does the syncretic union of the individuals possessed by myal spirits facilitate the community's growth and progression from colonized village to symbol of an emerging, independent nation. This syncretic improvisation encourages a movement "toward the excavation of spiritual substrata that can attest to a commonality of feeling and purpose that transcends religious differences" (Rahming, par. 13). Moreover, it allows for the heterogeneous resistance and shortcircuiting of "monolithic discourses of colonization, spirit thievery, and patriarchy that suppress otherness" (Smyth 12). Syncretism signals the presence of a transnational soup that has begun the process of a slow and steady boil in the microcosm of the diasporic Dutch pot of an emerging Jamaican nation. Maydene, as symbol of a mixture of a new British liberalism and a creolised sensibility, is especially important to this progression, for "Maydene finds it difficult to meet the people of Grove Town across the lines drawn by race and speech until spirit communion allows her to transcend the body" (Kortenaar 56).⁶ She then becomes the catalyst for the repairing of the breach in Ella's psyche and in the community. It is Maydene who urges her husband, Reverend Simpson, and Ella to traverse the racial, religious, and epistemological divides that have separated so many and to engage in a new, anti-imperialist discourse of liberation and nation formation.

Ella's healing, marked by the passing of a foul-smelling grey mass from her body, is accompanied by a greater clarity, distinct from the false clarity she felt she possessed while under Selwyn's imperialist gaze. As she assumes the role of teacher of A class children of the village, she begins to critique for the first time the imperialist narratives

which she has learned and is expected to impart to the children. A particular narrative about farm animals (Percy the chick, Master Willie the pig, Mr. Dan the dog and their friends—names shared by the myal spirits, incidentally) especially strikes her as problematic. In consultation with Reverend Simpson, she expresses her concern that the animals are treated as “sub-normals who have no hope of growth”; that the children “are invited into complicity”; and that the writer “has robbed his characters of their possibilities,” has “[d]ismissed the existence within them of that in-born guiding light,” and has “left them to run around like half-wits, doing what the master has in store for them” (*Myal* 97, 106). In her critique of the story, Ella finally recognizes that such narratives, sent to islands such as Jamaica by European educational authorities, function as colonial master narratives with imperialist metaphors meant to steal the spirits of generations of colonized individuals through the written word. Such stories operate as hegemonic texts in order to maintain the meta-narrative of empire that they reflect. Hence, Ole African’s refrain that “the half has never been told”⁷ is accurate, as the other half of the story, from the perspective of the colonized, is not reflected in these seemingly innocuous stories for children, who will be most affected by such narratives and who will perpetuate their implicit message by way of pedagogical indoctrination.

Ella’s intervention in the pedagogical space of the community sparks a new vision, for “[. . .] through pedagogical action, Ella is empowered to empower others like herself” (Oczkowitz 148). Reverend Simpson/Dan, perceiving that Ella’s healing is almost complete, begins to articulate this change in his subsequent communion with the other myal spirits:

— Percy, Willie, she is thinking. Did you hear her? — Then he sniffed the air and jumped around some more, muttering behind

clenched teeth.

— There is hope. There is hope. There is hope. Willie, my job can be done. —

— Calm yourself, Dan — Willie said.

— But Willie, — Dan said — you heard her. How can I be calm? Has she not seen two things in one? The two first principles of spirit thievery — let them feel that there is nowhere for them to grow to. Stunt them. Percy and Master Willie stunted. Let them see their brightest ones as dumbest ever. Alienate them. Percy and Master Willie must be separated, be made to play... —

— The coon, the buffoon — Percy came in. Perce the kind, lit in.

— And where is that little cat choked on foreign? — Dan was happy. He just watched him with a smile on his face. The man understood.

(98)

Animated by the notes and lyrics of resistance of the slave spiritual “Let My People Go,” Reverend Simpson/Dan recognizes that the “little cat choked on foreign” is no longer afraid to speak and will write back to the empire in order to resist zombification. As he pushes Ella further in her critique of the writer of the children’s book, Reverend Simpson questions her: “But does he force you to teach without this awareness? Need your voice say what his says?” (107). Armed with her experience of having been colonized/zombified in mind and body, Ella accepts Reverend Simpson’s challenge and determines to rewrite the imperialist text in order to express to a new generation the other half that has never been told.

Ironically, Ella’s new purpose revises Reverend Brassington’s former one. Where once he sought to exorcise the indigenous beliefs of his people and replace them with modern notions of spirituality and holiness, he now apprehends that the epistemology of empire inherent in modernity is what needs to be exorcised and replaced with an epistemology of liberation and wholeness. As Brassington suggests to Reverend Simpson, the key to this re-education will be the encouragement of an awareness and comprehension of the characteristics and effects of spirit thievery and zombification.

William Brassington, like his wife and Reverend Simpson, recognizes that a new nation is on the verge of being born—a nation whose foundation will include the Ellas and the generations that she and others teach about the half that has never been told. As Neil ten Kortenaar astutely notes, “Ella and William are thus positioned at the frontier where the myalist centre, a small community where everyone knows everyone else, meets the threat of literacy, which can strike from a great distance. This frontier position where colonial literacy resists imperial literacy has a name: the nation” (68). If, as Ulrike Erichsen argues, “the ‘other’ is ‘always already’ at the centre of any self-definition,” then in-between colours people like Ella are necessary to nation formation (93). In the words of Shalini Puri, “[c]ontrary to black nationalist accounts, then, *Myal* inscribes mulattoes as having played a significant role in Jamaica’s struggles for national liberation” (166). Reading Ella’s racial and social status within a larger transnational framework, Evelyn O’Callaghan states, “Ella embodies the Jamaican national motto (‘Out of Many, One People’)” (71). In this sense, the Jamaican nation, much like the transnational soup of a Dutch pot diaspora, is constituted by multiple and varied national provisions that mix to form a nourishing whole. With the recognition of in-between people like Ella and of their interventions in telling the half that has never been told, Brodber’s rewriting/righting of Jamaican history, like that of Jones and Condé, reveals that the Jamaican nation was and is already part of a transnational diaspora in spite of nationalist narratives to the contrary.

The resolution of the crises of Ella’s subjectivity and of Grove Town’s constitution reflect the ways in which the nation may be more broadly defined as more than just a nation-state but as a transnational space of mutual liberation. The something

that Ella wanted the chance to create will be a new transnational Jamaica, beginning with Grove Town. As a modern Eve, she will negate her stepfather's original belief that a black woman could not really be Eve "when the God of the garden had stacked the cards so that she could not say 'No'" (*Myal* 87). Though she may have succumbed and said "Yes" to the white imperialism represented by Selwyn, her later resounding "No" to the writer and to the empire behind the writer represents a paradigm shift in the consciousness of Ella and the potential for a ripple effect to occur within her community, within the larger nation, and beyond. Indeed, Ella's many cultural and racial claims mark her as a symbol of not only an emerging Caribbean nation, but also of an evolving transnational Americas, characterized by hybridity and the intermingling of peoples of many nations.

The myal spirit Dan, in conversation with White Hen and the others, sums up the potential effects of the paradigm shift that has occurred in Ella and William Brassington and of the transnational nation-building that is sure to take effect:

[. . .] Two people understand, White Hen. Two special people. My people have been separated from themselves White Hen, by several means, one of them being the printed word and the ideas it carries. Now we have two people who are about to see through that. And who are these people, White Hen? People who are familiar with the print and the language of the print. Our people are now beginning to see how it and they themselves, have been used against us. Now, White Hen, now, we have people who can and are willing to correct images from the inside, destroy what should be replaced and put us back together, give us back ourselves with which to chart our course to go where we want to go. Do you see, White Hen? (109-10)

These "special people," "in-between colours people," "trained-minded people" are the signifiers of the racial, ethnic, epistemological, and cultural miscegenation that make up the Americas. Such people signal a new way of outlining the boundaries of the nation,

not in terms of fixed lines of demarcation but in terms of underground, in-between spaces, where individuals of various national affiliations, histories, and subjectivities may meet and support one another in mutual progression. The particular position which they occupy between blackness and whiteness, their refusal to completely abandon their blackness, and their powerful affiliation with literacy all mark them as agents of change in developing societies seeking to resist imperial domination, construct their own identities, and chart their own destinies. The discursive medium of the written word will be the vehicle driven by these special people; and that vehicle will transport the minds of the colonized from enclosed pastures of sub-personage to open landscapes of humanity and liberation. It will enact a new transnational discourse of liberation that allows the participation of diverse individuals who may claim multiple roots and chart multiple routes of liberation.

Bajo la Piel de los Tambores: The Limits of Patriarchy, the “Marimbarization” of The Nation, and Activist (Re-)Percussions

Luz Argentina Chiriboga’s *Bajo la Piel de los Tambores* also enacts questions of what to do with “in-between people,” whose bodies and literacy mark them as different in white and black spaces of the nation, and of how their presence alters and transnationalizes those spaces. Chiriboga, like other writers whose works inform this study, is particularly concerned with nation formation and how the historical and social construction of the nation races, places, and impacts the lives of in-between people who struggle to reconcile the competing influences of whiteness and a persistent, though repressed African presence on the national imaginary. The excavation of this African presence and its effect on the black female, in particular, is implicated in the evolution

and effects of a transnational discourse of liberation.

In Chiriboga's novel, Rebeca González Araujo, a young woman from Sikán, a village in the Afro-Ecuadorian region of Esmeraldas, travels to a boarding school in the capital of Quito, where she begins to confront her blackness and her sexual awakening during the 1960s political turmoil within the nation. Rebeca's mother, Nidia Araujo, while desiring an education for her daughter, remains concerned that her progeny will not progress if she does not conform to the social prescription that women must invest in patriarchy through marriage and domesticity. Of her mother's concerns, Rebeca muses,

Yo, consciente de que en el internado tejía la urdimbre de mi destino, oía lejanos los consejos de mamá que solo dejaría de suspirar cuando me viera casada. Ella sabía que yo no era ni demasiado buena, ni demasiado mala; ni demasiado pulcra, ni demasiado vulgar; ni demasiado inteligente, ni demasiado tonta; ni demasiado blanca, ni demasiado negra. Justamente por eso le preocupaba mi carácter inestable, mi nadar entre dos aguas que la llenaban de pavor. (12)

(I, conscious that in the boarding school I wove the wrap of my destiny, heard in the distance my mother's counsel that she would only stop sighing when she saw me married. She knew that I was neither too good, nor too bad; neither too beautiful, nor too ugly; neither too intelligent, nor too stupid; neither too white, nor too black. That was exactly why she worried over my unstable character, my swimming between two waters that filled her with dread.)

The image of swimming between two waters metaphorically represents Rebeca's ontological and metaphysical position in the nation. She neither interprets herself nor is interpreted as too much of any one thing. Instead, she consistently finds herself in the position of occupying a space between two opposing states, particularly with regard to the issues of marriage and her racial identification. Her inability to conform to either side of the binaries created by society marks her as a problem, which her mother seeks to fix by encouraging her daughter to marry. Though she acknowledges and would like to

fulfill her mother's wishes, Rebeca cannot make the same kind of investment in marriage that her mother made. Her internal struggle with her desire to be claimed sexually by a man and her equal desire for an independent identity almost drowns her emotionally and psychologically. Finally, just as she seeks entry into the white spaces occupied by her friends in Quito, the voices of Afro-Ecuadorian slaves and freedom fighters and of her grandmother Uyanga speak to her and remind her of the importance of her African roots. In the face of issues of race, class, sexuality, and gender, these turbulent "waters" frame Rebeca's burgeoning identity and mark her as a symbol of Ecuador's changing national identity.

The tension felt by Rebeca as she seeks to differentiate herself from her mother is often the result of her mother's statements. In one of her letters, Nidia says that when she looks in the mirror, she feels as if Rebeca was staring back at her. Rebeca emphasizes the image of "el espejo de crystal de roca" (the rock crystal mirror) as the site that literally mirrors her divided self, influenced by her mother's discourse of domesticity and her own emerging discourse of liberation. In her discussion of the function of mirrors and mirroring in Afro-Hispanic literature, Rosemary Feal argues that the mirror

may constitute a stage of sorts where performances of identity take place. Rather than impassively reflecting some static, fixed, or pre-existent identity, the mirror, understood also as a psychological and ideological instrument, displays an image in flux or in motion, one that will be received, interpreted, analyzed, accepted, or rejected. In this sense, the mirror holds representational potential for an individual consciousness, since the eye that contemplates the *I* must reassemble fragments of the self into recognizable patterns of experience and existence. (31)

Attempting to differentiate herself from her mother and to bring together the fragmented parts of her consciousness, Rebeca examines her own body before her mirror: "Por las noches ante él me desnudo, observo complacida mi cuerpo azucarado, pido a la vejez que

haga excepción conmigo” (At night in front of it I undressed, observed with pleasure my sweet body, and begged old age to make an exception of me) (44). Despite her body’s youthfulness, Rebeca still regards herself within the parameters of her mother’s discourse. Even in her interactions with men, she is conscious of her figure: “el cabello recogido a un lado, la minifalda verde, el escote de la blusa negra, el cinturón dorado” (the hair collected to one side, the green miniskirt, the neckline of the black blouse, the golden belt) (46). Though she bears the colors (green and yellow) of the African goddess Oshun, whose belt ties all things together, Rebeca’s fragmented self marks her as an incomplete Oshun figure. Oshun is a powerful water goddess whose attributes empower those who reflect them. However, because Rebeca still cannot negotiate the “waters” that define her existence, she cannot fully embody all of Oshun’s attributes and use them to her full advantage. She especially finds it difficult to tie together her own body with her own consciousness. As a result, as she gazes at herself, “she sees herself *as* body — with her wide hips, firm behind, and narrow waist” (DeCosta-Willis “The Poetics and Politics of Desire” 221). Her failure to recognize her self as individual consciousness reflects the internalization of the objectification of her body by her mother and by men. Ironically, the intervention in Rebeca’s life of the black nun, Sor Inés del Rosario, facilitates the latter’s development of a consciousness separate from her mother’s and reflective of an activist spirit. Though the black nun also articulates conservative discourses that regulate the female body and encourage abstinence, her participation in a women’s prison ministry and her leadership of a black woman’s organization mark her as an agent for empowerment of black women. Her tutelage of Rebeca and her underground political movements will influence Rebeca to enact the words of one of Sor Inés’ fliers: “Solo

organizados se construirá la nueva América” (Only when we are organized will the new America be built) (*Bajo la Piel* 44).

Fleeing the social restrictions of the boarding school and the negative implications of her intense flirtation with Father Cayetano, Rebeca changes her status to a day pupil and takes up residence in a hostel for girls, with which Sor Inés is affiliated. In this new space, the image of the mirror once again reflects and influences Rebeca’s sense of self: “Mi pensamiento interior era mitigado por los espejos de diferentes formas y tamaños en los que me veía cada vez más tentadora. Así como el sacerdote coleccionaba mujeres, Milton Cevallos, el vecino en Oriquí, botellas vacías de ron, yo reunía espejos” (My interior thought was mitigated by the mirrors of different forms and sizes in which I saw myself as more tempting each time. Just as the priest collected women and Milton Cevallos, my neighbour in Oriquí, collected empty bottles of rum, I collected mirrors) (63). In terms of mirror images, it is significant that Milton Cevallos, a neighbour from Esmeraldas, is from Oriquí. In Yoruba art and culture, *oríkì* function as cognomen of deities. An *oríkì* is also “an attributive name, expressing what the child is, or what he or she hopes to become, an endearment or praise intended to have a stimulating effect on the individual” (Folárànmí, par. 3). Thoughts of Milton Cevallos should have functioned as *oríkì*, with the stimulating effect of causing Rebeca to begin to live up to the praises given to the deities whose attributes she reflects. Her thoughts should have caused her to recognize that the gaze of men like Cayetano diminishes her and deters her from seeing herself as person instead of as body. However, in spite of becoming aware of the fact that her relationship with Cayetano, much like the relationship of the colonizer to the colonized, is based on objectification of her body and manipulation of her desires, Rebeca still turns to the false

mirror image in order to frame her identity. The mirrors, like the empty bottles collected by Milton Cevallos, are devoid of substance and sustenance; they lack the animating spirit that accompanies subjecthood. Yet, they hold the potential for the development of Rebeca's consciousness; and, coupled with the later image of trigonometric functions, they serve as catalysts in the process of self-recognition.

Trigonometry is the study of the relationship between angles and the sides they form. The mathematics used to solve trigonometric functions involves interrogating perspectives, solving equations, and deciphering the unknown. The trigonometric proofs and logic of Rebeca's math homework thus operate as symbols of her mental processing of her emotions in terms of her unequal position in her relationship with Cayetano and the unknown of her emerging subjectivity:

Revisé las funciones trigonométricas: Demostrarar que el triángulo cuyos vértices son los puntos D (2 6) E (17 1), F (29 37) es isósceles. ¿Qué es un triángulo isosceles? El que $\frac{\quad}{2}$ $\frac{\quad}{2}$ tiene dos lados iguales y uno desigual. ¿Habrá dos cosas iguales? Si, Heráclito de Efeso, nadie puede bañarse dos veces en un mismo río; todo cambia [. . .].
(*Bajo la Piel* 63)

(I reviewed the trigonometric functions: Prove that the triangle whose vertices are the points D (2 6) E (17 1), F (29 37) is isosceles. What is an isosceles triangle? One that $\frac{\quad}{2}$ $\frac{\quad}{2}$ has two equal sides and one unequal one. Can two things be equal? According to Heraclitus of Ephesus, no one can bath twice in the same river; everything changes [. . .].)

Though she proves the reflexivity of equality inherent in the structure of the isosceles triangle, Rebeca's unconscious mind takes heed of the words of Heraclitus. It recognizes that, though Cayetano's interest in and pursuit of Rebeca give the appearance of equality with white women and of a subjecthood characterized by enacted desire, Rebeca's

position in the relationship, as an unknown object of desire, reflects her position in the larger white nation as an object of exoticization, possession, and oppression. Ironically, the acquisition of literacy in a space governed by white authorities alters Rebeca's relationship to those authorities and to the nation. Her particular achievement and use of mathematical literacy in relation to her subject/object position foreshadows her eventual achievement of a literacy of liberation that will accomplish her full evolution as a subject. But Rebeca must first reconcile the outside image/object with her inside self/emerging subject.

As with Ella, the war between the outside image and the inside self results in illness, as Rebeca comes down with the mumps and must be confined to her bed. It is significant that Rebeca is stricken with a colonial disease, a metaphor for imperialism and colonialism and their destructive effects. Cayetano, again acting as a colonizer seeking to re-establish his relationship to the colonized, attempts to prove his love for Rebeca by nursing her back to health and by offering to flee with her. However, the appearance of "la Cruz de Mayo" (the May Cross) in the night sky and of Venus "al pie de la cordillera" (at the foot of the mountain range) (65) signifies the simultaneous demise of their relationship and the growth of Rebeca's consciousness. Just as Rebeca takes notice of these signs, her classmate Amelia Roca, a Panamanian prostitute posing as a Costa Rican student, appears to claim Cayetano through extortion. Under the sign of the cross, Rebeca begins her transformation from a body into a person; under the watchful eye of Venus, also associated with Oshun, she begins to inhabit a new position as a subject rather than an object. She finally recognizes that, in the eyes of the nation (represented by father Cayetano), she is not equal to but rather less than the Amelias of the world

because of her blackness. With this knowledge, she begins to critique those white males who claim to be “defensor[es] de la libertad femenina” (defenders of female liberty) (70). The quest for subject status is not complete, however, without a truthful examination of her racial status and of her lineage, a challenge which Rebeca must engage for complete liberation of her body and spirit.

Rebeca’s ambivalent investment in national constructs of patriarchy and whiteness restricts her from completely eschewing the mask she has used to garner male attention and to insert herself into white spaces.⁸ Whiteness especially limits Rebeca’s development of self. While the urban space of Quito allows Rebeca to align herself with the national ideology of whiteness, the rural site of her birth marks her as an Other. As Jean Muteba Rahier notes of Ecuador, there is a “racist map of national territory: urban centers (mostly Quito, Guayaquil, and Cuenca) are associated with modernity, while rural areas are viewed as places of racial inferiority, violence, backwardness, savagery, and cultural deprivation” (259). The power of whiteness and of its attendant racial mapping in Ecuador is reflected in the peripheral place to which Rebeca assigns her own blackness and lineage. When a classmate’s father makes advances toward her and then learns of her rural origins and assumes that her family owns a farm, Rebeca quickly invents a landed background. “[. . .]na mulata con dinero, pasaba a ser blanca, pero mulata pobre es negra” (A mulatta with money, I passed for white, but a poor mulatta is black), she reasons (*Bajo la Piel* 72).⁹ Rebeca’s instructions to her mother that the house be repainted white, that Bavarian china and silverware be rented, and that cattle be borrowed to fill up the pasture in preparation for the visit of some of her classmates reflects her continued desire to pass socially as white by way of invented economic

prosperity and a claim to roots other than African.

Rebeca understands well the racial politics of Ecuador, but she forgets the rich history of black resistance within that country. Her visit to “la gruta de la Paz” (The Grotto of Peace) affords her a vision of the role played by a female slave, Nasakó Zansi (later named Jonatás), in collaboration with feminist revolutionary Manuela Sáenz, in the liberation of Ecuadorian slaves and later in the fight for Peruvian independence:

Entramos a la gruta. Allí el tiempo tomó forma inconvencional y desafiante, como si los siglos se hubieron superpuesto. [. . .] Era allí donde la materia y el espíritu convergían en un tranfinito, desde el cual se percibía el universo. [. . .] Yo] vi en un cuarto una mujer con los cabellos echados a ambos lados del rostro y los pezones sobresalientes tras de una blusa de encajes negros. A la luz de la lámpara pude observar su hermosura. Junto a ella un hombre de pómulos salientes tomaba sorbos de café y tosía con frecuencia, mostrando una palidez sorprendente. Ladridos insistentes, que llenan el aposento, despiertan a una negra que ha estado durmiendo al pie de la puerta, Jonatás, le grita un hombre herido. Ella va al corredor, escucha disparos a tiempo que ve caer al soldado que realiza la guardia, regresa veloz, ¡Ahí vienen, son muchos, niña, huyan!, Jonatás defiende la entrada, con una lanza [. . .] Jonatás proteg a Manuela. La Sáenz los reconoce, son los mismos de siempre, Manuelita, le dije, ella me miró, ¿Seré feliz? Movié el índice, No, por un largo tiempo, pero después, sí. La ventana de pronto se cerró y yo me quede con un grito de angustia atravesándome la garganta. (85-86)

(We entered the grotto. There time took on a firm and defiant form, as if centuries had been superimposed on one another. [. . .] It was there that the material and spiritual converged in transfinity, from which one could perceive the universe. [. . .] I saw in a room a woman with her hair thrown to both sides of her face and her nipples protruding underneath a black lace blouse. By lamplight I could see her beauty. Next to her a man with high cheekbones took sips of coffee and coughed frequently, showing a surprising paleness. Insistent barks that fill the room awake a black woman who had been sleeping at the foot of the door. “Jonatás!” an injured man shouts to her. She goes to the corridor, listens to the shots at the same time that she sees the soldier fall who guarded the door, and returns quickly. “Here they come. There are many, girl. Flee!” Jonatás defends the entrance, with a lance [. . .] Jonatás protects Manuela. Sáenz recognizes them. “They are the same ones as always.” “Manuelita,” I said to her. She looked at me. “Will I be happy?” She waved her finger. “No, not for a long time, but later, yes.” The window suddenly closed and

I remained with a cry of anguish stuck in my throat.)

Emphasizing the contribution of women to the historiography of the Americas and the transnational alliances they created, Lesley Feracho notes Chiriboga's characterization of the intersections of Peruvian and Ecuadorian national identities and histories: "Chiriboga uses [this connection] to show the development of revolutionary renegotiations of Ecuadorian, Peruvian and ultimately Latin American space." In alluding to the ideological and cartographic revisions enacted by slave women and mestizas in the Americas, Chiriboga's reference to Jonatás and Manuela Sáenz reflects the ways in which "the Americas as a whole are representative of these ruptures of gendered, racial, national, and geographical boundaries" (40). Rebeca's vision, influenced by sacred time and the presence of the ancestral spirit of Jonatás, especially identifies her with the slave woman's disruption of boundaries, temporalities, and spatialities. In a moment in which the past, present, and future converge, Rebeca's identity fuses with that of Jonatás; and their struggle against imperial forces is revealed to be cyclical, as the forces of empire rearticulate their oppression with each move of resistance.

As with Jones and Condé, Chiriboga's signification on the black "herstories" of the Americas represents a black feminist intervention in historiography. Chiriboga's move to place a black Eve at the frontier of Latin American nation formation also resembles Brodber's similar rearticulation of Jamaican historiography. Once again, the insertion of the black female body into the early historical record alters not just the ways in which the past may be apprehended, but it also influences the present. In general, this act of excavation re-members Jonatás to the Ecuadorian nation, to Latin America, and to the larger diaspora of the Americas. Moreover, Chiriboga's re-membering of the body of

Jonatás and of her story of struggle allows for readers of African descent within Ecuador, Latin America, and the larger Americas, who may be unaware of the foundational African presence in certain areas of the region, to reinterpret nations of the Americas that represent themselves through discourses of whiteness as always already having been transnational and diasporic. As with Marshall and Morrison's ancestor figures, Chiriboga places Jonatás in the role of ancestor for Rebeca and for the larger diaspora nation(s) which the latter represents. The excavated record of an early spirit of transnational liberation, articulated through the body of a black female slave, and the cross-cultural alliances formed in order to enact such liberation certainly affects Rebeca's sense of self and her relation to her community. Her temporary identification with Jonatás, specifically, is the catalyst that influences Rebeca to turn from an investment in whiteness and to embrace spaces of blackness that historically have been linked to the diaspora space of the Americas.

Though she represses the vision of Jonatás in her mind as she returns to Esmeraldas, Rebeca demands "una bailadita al son de la marimba" (a marimba dance) (*Bajo la Piel* 92). Marimba is an Afro-Ecuadorian musical expression that "carves out a distinctly black space against, and yet within, the context of a nationalist, mestizo discourse" and operates as a discursive and "sonic marker of liberated black space" (Ritter, par 2 and 5). Areas of Ecuador, such as Sikán, that are inhabited by blacks are often folklorized and viewed as quaint, not as civilized and progressive as those areas populated by citizens whose bodies are read as white.¹⁰ Thus, Rebeca's silence about her African ancestry and her instructions to reinvent the space of her parents' farm in terms of white attributes reflect an attempt to invest in the nation by moving herself and her

family away from folklore and the perceived blight of blackness. Yet, as Rebeca notes, “[M]anos antiguas, esclavas en cañaverales e ingenios religiosos, revivieron en mis adentros sus tambores. Entre la nubes de polvo de aquel abandano me pareció leer: Apartheid” (Ancient hands. Slave women on sugarcane plantations and religious sugar mill workers. Their drums came back to life inside me. Between the clouds of dust of that abandoned place I seemed to read: “Apartheid.”) (*Bajo la Piel* 94). As with Avey, the living and persistent memory of slavery and of a diasporic dance and its drums, used by slaves to communicate to each other, resonate within Rebeca and cause her to reflect on her ancestry, her homeplace, and on the hegemonic system of racial division within the nation. Carole Beane, in “Strategies of Identity,” further articulates the significance of the marimba and its relation to slavery: “the marimba, with its empowering rhythms and signifying sounds, also shares with the drum a subversive indecipherability from the point of view of the white master. The marimba is more than folklore; it is a sign of cultural affirmation; sign and instrument of resistance to injustice, historically validated and authenticated in legend and story.” As Beane notes, Chiriboga’s use of the marimba image serves as a means “to assert the subversive intent of African culture in the face of Creole elites. This is the incident that provides closure for Rebeca González’s call to conscience” (171).

Jonathan Ritter further identifies the space of marimba performance as a transnational space that allows for Esmeraldeñas “to communicate with and take part in a cultural African diaspora that reaches far beyond their national borders” (par. 11). The reframing of the border space of the nation as transnational is later evidenced in Sor Inés’ use of the marimba space to communicate the Argentinian Ché Guevara’s message of

liberation. The actions of Rebeca and Sor Inés produce what I term the “marimbarization” of the nation. In effect, the space of the marimba reconfigures the nation by way of (re-)percussion. The percussive sound of the drum calls its listeners to action in order to rewrite/right national narratives and to map out alternative spaces of subjectivity and intersubjectivity both within the nation and across nations. The (re-)percussive counter-discourse produced in between the beats of the drum and the dance steps that accompany them mark the marginal black space of the marimba as an in-between space between the nation and the larger diaspora which it engages. This underground space operates subversively against national narratives of whiteness and patriarchy. The larger repercussion of this space is the broader sense of recognition, community, and empowerment that it produces. The space of the marimba, like the transnational soup within the Dutch pot, unites nations and provides performative and discursive sustenance to the diaspora. This in-between space is thus a fitting catalyst for the movement of Rebeca from object to subject.

Upon her return to Sikán, Rebeca’s African heritage is disclosed by a black woman whose niece was going to marry Rebeca’s father at one time, until the niece found out about his lineage. Reacting to the opprobrium of the situation, Rebeca finally claims her suppressed African roots and lets the drums beat loudly under her skin:

Pero cuando la mujer hablaba, la abuela me afluyó lentamente a los ojos, la vi enseñándome a elevar cometas, contándome canciones de cuna aprendidas en su Africa, me sentí con una nueva identidad, había ocupado mi lugar. Soy su nieta, le dije como un desafío.

Después todo fue fácil, ya no me dolió aquella raíz que antes, equivocada, deseaba esconder. Me sentí parte de la abuela, su consecuencia, oyendo sus tambores sonar bajo de mi piel. Desde entonces empecé hablar con frecuencia de ella, y cada vez que lo que lo hacía, encontraba más fuerza en sus recuerdos. (*Bajo la Piel* 104)

(But when the woman spoke, my grandmother flew up slowly before my eyes. I saw her teaching me to fly kites, singing to me lullabies learned in her Africa. I felt a new identity, had taken my place. “I am her granddaughter,” I told her as a challenge.

Afterwards everything was easy. My roots, which before I wrongly desired to hide, were no longer painful to me. I felt like a part of my grandmother, a consequence of her, hearing her drums beating under my skin. From then on I began to speak frequently of her, and each time that I did, I found more strength in her memories.)

The discourse of liberation inherent in the (re-)percussive sound of the drum are very much aligned with Rebeca’s grandmother and the homeplace of the village, whose ancestral spirits now inhabit the consciousness of an evolving Rebeca. “The homeplace,” as Beane points out, “elicits responses from her that oblige her to break the silence and to cease obfuscating her identity.” It gradually “becomes a place of sustenance for her, of empowerment and protection; it becomes a provider of strength, a healer of wounds” (“Strategies of Identity” 168, 170). Her embrace of her homeplace, history, roots, and racial and cultural difference marks the entrance into the final stages of Rebeca’s journey to full subject status.

Influenced by Sor Inés, Rebeca unwittingly becomes a conduit by which a message of liberation may be propagated in the rural black space of Esmeraldas. The activism of Sor Inés leads Rebeca to desire, like Ella, to create something inside of herself, to give birth to a type of pedagogy of empowerment through self-determination. Initially seeking to establish a fishing company that would benefit all in the area and lift residents out of poverty, Rebeca soon abandons that project, due to the destructive machinations of her co-investor Juan Lorenti, who tries to seduce her, despite his marital status. She eventually pursues a new plan, “un hijo a punto de nacer” (a child about to be born) (*Bajo la Piel* 114). This child, the result of her intimacy with the people of Esmeraldas, will

grow into a full-scale fishermen's co-operative, which will influence the reorganization and reopening of the local sugar mill. She implements these business ventures by selling the jewels given to her by Juan Lorenti, and she enlists the aid of Sor Inés in order to acquire the legal permits. Heraldizing Rebeca as their savoir, the people of the villages of the area cry out in celebration, "Changó bendito, que viva doña Rebeca" (Blessed Chango, long live Miss Rebeca) (124). The discursive and metaphysical alignment of Rebeca with the deity Chango is significant. Rebeca is already empowered by the attributes of the water goddess Oshun. With her assumption of the role of activist and leader, she, like Chango, expresses outrage at her people's subjugation and determines to avenge this through broad measures. The integration of Oshun and Chango into her personality marks her full acceptance of her African roots and her progression toward an identity as a fully liberated black woman living within yet identifying herself with those beyond the racist and sexist boundaries of the Ecuadorian nation.

Rebeca's evolution as a liberated woman is fraught with temptations and pitfalls, in the form of men (Father Cayetano, Juan Lorenti, Miton Cevallos, etc.), who continually enter her life in order to objectify her and, more importantly, to subjugate her and suppress her desire for liberation. They do so by demanding her investment in national discourses of patriarchy and domesticity. Rebeca's constant renegotiation of her identity in relation to these men stems from her fear that her ideal man, Julio Martínez, will never reappear to fill the empty space of loneliness that she persistently feels, despite the presence of her mother, the villagers, and Sor Inés. In the words of William O'Donnell, "In a broader context, Rebeca's search for identity and her evolution are synonymous with the search for a political ideology that will dethrone the reigning

patriarchy. This new ideology is symbolized by the mysterious Julio Martínez / Ché Guevara” (134). Because this ideology is new to Rebeca, who does not entirely understand its features and implications, Rebeca misrecognizes its manifestations, as she mistakenly refers to her white childhood friend and suitor as Julio Martínez. Milton Cevallos’s comfort with farm animals, his alignment with the land, and his interest in her business all cause her to conclude that he, like she, share the same ideals. This misrecognition, similar to the colonized misrecognition of the benevolent colonizer, reflects both Rebeca’s pursuit of companionship in the form of a man who will allow her to assert herself and be independent and her lack of examples of relationships with such a man that would reveal to her the vicissitudes of such a progressive interaction. She says the following of the lingering influence of Julio Martínez on her interactions with Milton:

Comprendí que era el hombre interesado en evitarme un fracaso en los negocios. Después del marquillaje de una partida de ganado, fue quedándose en casa como pájaro confundido de jaula. No olvidada que cuando equivoqué en el palmar su nombre por el de Julio Martínez, tuve la impresión de que le había quedado un poso de rencor. (*Bajo la Piel* 131)

(I understood that he was a man interested in keeping my negotiations from failing. After the branding of a herd of cattle, he stayed at home like a confused, caged bird. He did not forget when I mistakenly called the name of Julio Martínez in the palm grove, and I had the impression that there remained resentment in him.)

The branding of the cattle foreshadows the ways in which Milton will attempt to brand Rebeca, sexually and ideologically. Milton’s insecurity and virulent animosity will reappear in the form of infidelity and regular abuse of Rebeca. Her reaction to this abuse will be the litmus test that proves once and for all if she is truly capable of moving in the world as a confident black woman who has no need of validation from white authority figures or from men.

As with the relationship of the colonized to the colonizer, Rebeca's misrecognition causes her to offer her virginity to Milton, for whom it is a possession, much like her land and bank account, whose regulation she hands over to him upon their marriage. She realizes later that her misrecognition was based on her conflation of the images of Milton and Julio Martínez: "[. . .] de pronto, junto a él apareció la silueta de Julio Martínez, alternativamente las dos imágenes se interpusieron, vi a Milton como una sombra desdibujada [. . .]" (Suddenly, along with the silhouette of Julio Martínez he appeared. The two images alternated. I saw Milton as a misdrawn shadow) (151). Rebeca is repulsed at what she has lost, because of her failure to attract the embodiment of the new ideology she seeks in order to liberate herself from ideologies of domesticity and patriarchy. Her reaction takes the form of a brief breakdown:

Encerrada en mi cuarto lloré toda la noche, di golpes en la cama, arrojé mis cremas por la ventana, lloré por Cayetano y su cobardía; lloré por Fernando y su decision; lloré por Lorenti y su maldad; lloré por la muerte de papa; lloré por la ausencia de Julio Martínez; lloré por mi odio a mama y su obstinación en no salir de Sikán; lloré por mí, por mi liviandad y mi estupidez al entregarme a un blanco. Di vueltas en el insomnio y en el sueño reuní destinos; junté a ellos el de Manuelita Sáenz, la vi caminando en la playa junto a Simón Bolívar, me sonrió y preguntó a papa por mí, él, cabizbajo, con la mano derecha en el pecho, avanzó hasta esconderse en una gruta, Rebeca, era mama la que golpeaba mi puerta, Otra vez estás hablando dormida, llama a ese tal Julio Martínez. No podía creerle, pero era cierto; asustada dejé pronta la cama. (136)

(Locked in my room I cried all night. I punched the bed. I threw my creams out the window. I cried over Cayetano and his cowardice. I cried over Fernando and his decision; I cried over Lorenti and his wickedness. I cried over the death of my father. I cried over the absence of Julio Martínez. I cried over my hatred for mama and her obstinancy in not leaving Sikán. I cried over myself, over my looseness and my stupidity in giving myself to a white man. I tossed and turned from insomnia and in sleep I joined destinies. I added those of Manuelita Sáenz. I saw her walking on the beach next to Simón Bolívar. She smiled at me and asked papa for me. He, downcast, with his right hand on his chest, advanced until he was concealed in a grotto. "Rebeca." It was mama that knocked

on my door. “You’re talking in your sleep again, calling out to that Julio Martínez.” I could not believe it, but it was true. Frightened, I quickly got out of bed.)

Rebeca weeps over her losses and frustrations and for the in-between space in which she again finds herself. However, as with Ella, the in-between space is generative; its pressures allow for a clearer vision of what has passed, of what is transpiring, and of what will be. Linking the past, present, and future, this space affords Rebeca with the opportunity to bring together several destinies: hers, her father’s, her grandmother’s, and those of Julio Martínez, Manuela Sáenz, and even Jonatás. She simultaneously identifies with all of their life paths and diverges from them in the same moment of her vision. While she longs for the guidance and companionship of the major heroic figures of her dream, she eventually comes to terms with the fact that the signification of their representations will form the substance of the later stance that she will take in defining her life against limiting discourses of hegemony, repression, and the threat of death. Their ideological and spiritual presence in her life will ultimately punctuate the words uttered by Julio Martínez to her during their first meeting: “[T]enés que vivir la vida en una nueva dimensión” (You have to live life in a new dimension) (14). Determined to enact this directive, Rebeca announces her plans to divorce her husband and responds to the summons of the military police to account for her activities with the fishermen’s cooperative.

Free of the restrictions imposed by Milton, Rebeca aligns herself more thoroughly with her ancestry and with her community, which responds in kind. She quickly identifies with not just the people of Esmeraldas, but with the people of her nation and with other nations where underground movements against oppressive national authorities

are thriving. When asked by the military police if she knows of the whereabouts of ammunition and weapons, how to make homemade bombs, and whether she has traveled to Cuba or had contacts outside of the country, she remains calm: “Me consolé con la idea de que en todo el país los ciudadanos teníamos que responder preguntas semejantes” (I consoled myself with the idea that all over the country citizens had to respond to similar questions) (151). Just as the organization of the fisherman’s co-operative had been a collaborative, communal project, so too is the process of organizing those at the nation’s margins to resist domination, embrace a new discourse of liberation, and endeavor to create a new nation, based on collective empowerment.

Rebeca, influenced again by Sor Inés, embraces the transnational, revolutionary spirit pervading her country and the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean. She regards Sor Inés in a new light, as a mother figure, martyr, and bearer of the African presence that is unaffected by time in the Americas:

Amanecía, atardecía y anohecía leyendo y haciendo acotaciones en sus libros. Con la ropa de mama se desplazaba más rápida, y con su cabellera hecha trenzas al ras del cráneo parecía nuestra ekobia. Nos contó haber sufrido discriminación en el convento, donde aún persistían las categorías impuestas por el color de la piel. Una noche que veíamos el desliz de la luna escarbó las estirpes africanas de Bolívar, de Flores y Alfaro, en el deseo de probar que Africa era una luz en nuestra república. [Sor Inés] no demostró miedo, debilidad ni arrepentimiento, pero tampoco nos habló del conflicto que yo creí vislumbrar tras su reserva. (152)

(In the morning, in the afternoon, and at night she was reading and making notes in her books. In the clothes of mama she moved about more quickly, and with her hair done up in tresses close to her scalp she seemed like our sister. She told us of having suffered discrimination at the convent, where categories imposed by skin color still persisted. One night while we watched the moon slip by, she revealed the African lineage of Bolívar, Flores, and Alfaro, in the hopes of proving that Africa was the light in our republic. [Sister Inés] did not show any fear, weakness, or repentance. But neither did she speak to us of the conflict that I believed I glimpsed behind her reserve.)

The assumption of the role of a close relative of the González family and the wearing of Nidia Araujo's clothes link Sor Inés more closely with Rebeca. As Sor Inés hides in the house of Rebeca's parents, her liberating image completely replaces the mirror image of Rebeca's mother. It negates the discourse of domesticity and patriarchy espoused by her mother and finally enacts for the young mulatto woman the discourse of liberation that she so passionately craved in her relationships. The black nun's fortitude in the face of racial discrimination resonates with Rebeca in ways that it had not previously. Her revisionist historiography of the Americas clarifies the vision Rebeca once had of Manuelita Sáenz walking on the beach with Simón Bolívar. Both were freedom fighters, but the latter, a male who is read as white, due to the negation of his African ancestry, is heralded as the ultimate signifier of liberation from Spanish colonial and imperial oppression. Sor Inés' speech act shatters the silences in the tales of the formation of the Ecuadorian nation and of the larger American landscape, with regard to the presence of strong African influences. Her discursive measures decolonise the patriarchal discourse of the Americas; reinsert Africa into the Americas; and reveal the multiplicity of races, genders, and classes in the region's formation. These measures help to reveal the true origins of various ingredients in the Dutch pot diaspora that is the Americas and point to the ways in which a transnational soup may be continuously recreated, as those origins are made known. That Africa is the light that illuminates this creation signifies on the message of the cryptogram, which instructs Sor Inés to pass on "la luz en el tumbado" (the light in the attic) to the bearer of the note (83). Rebeca, who solves the cryptogram, receives that light and is now entrusted with it.

As a neighbour later relates how Sor Inés was assassinated by soldiers under the direction of the military junta for not confessing to the identity and location of Julio Martínez, Rebeca comprehends the significance of the actions of these freedom fighters. The military junta's assassination of individuals associated with Julio Martínez / Ché Guevara reflects the state's attempt to stem the flow of revolutionary discourse within the nation and between nations. It also proves the fact that Julio / Ché has transcended corporeality and has become a transnational ideology. In the words of William O'Donnell, he "represents the new, subversive socio-political ideology that speaks for the Other" across the Americas (135). Embracing this ideology, Rebeca assumes the fortitude she regarded in Sor Inés and in her vision of Jonatás. She redeploys her old mask as a tool of dissemblance and resistance, as the soldiers interrogate her and the members of the household:

[S]obre mi llanto cayó el antifaz de terciopelo rojo oculto en mi recuerdo y con él saltaron los pedazos de la cómoda y una antigua cicatriz me sangró cuando no pude responder quién era Julio Martínez y el oficial me arrastró por los cabellos, No te hagas la inocente, es Ché Guevara, y me preguntó dónde estaba él y no pude confesarle que yo lo esperaba [. . .].

(155)

(Over my weeping fell the red velvet mask hidden in my memory, and out jumped pieces of the dresser, and an old scar bled when I could not answer who Julio Martínez was, and the official dragged me by the hair. "Don't make yourself out to be innocent. He is Ché Guevara." And he asked me where he was, and I wasn't able to confess that I was waiting for him.)

Rebeca's statement that she could not confess that she was waiting for Julio Martínez / Ché Guevara subtly expresses two seemingly divergent meanings. On the one hand, Rebeca knows that to reveal her association with the revolutionary figure would lead to her immediate death and to his potential capture, which she does not want because of her longing to reunite with her "hombre ideal" (ideal man) (140). On the other hand, given

the new spirit of liberation that courses through her being, she may no longer need her ideal man to rescue her from her circumstances; she may no longer feel the need to wait for him. For Rebeca and for many others in the Americas, Julio Martínez / Ché Guevara still retains the status of the romanticized hero, especially given his prominent participation in the Cuban revolution and his support of revolution against imperialism in the rest of Latin America and Africa. However, Rebeca also reveals through her own revolutionary activities that she can act without the presence, validation, or immediate intervention of an ideal male figure. Given its many connotations and the lingering presence of various socio-political influences, Rebeca's ultimate expression reflects an investment in a liberal form of patriarchy *and* an investment in a transnational discourse of liberation that motivates her to act on behalf of herself and her African roots. With these investments in mind, Rebeca becomes a type of freedom fighter in the vein of Jonatás and Sor Inés. History repeats itself, as the vision of Jonatás defending the entrance re-enters Rebeca's mind and moves her to combat the forces of imperialism and repression, just as Jonatás did. Rebeca's embrace of sacred time allows her to accept her fate: "Por un instante, aunque creí que todos mis caminos estaban cerrados, advertí perdurable la vida" (For an instant, although I believed that all my ways out were closed, I noticed that life was everlasting) (155).

Miriam DeCosta-Willis concludes that Rebeca never achieves

that wider freedom of the mind and spirit that will allow her to realize her full potential as a confident, secure, and independent woman, who calls into question her socially constructed identity as a middle-class, African-ancestored, Ecuadorian woman, but who eventually surrenders to a bourgeois femininity because she has internalized the socially-sanctioned values of a patriarchal society. (222-23)

I disagree with DeCosta-Willis, who judges Rebeca hastily and harshly. I argue instead

that Rebeca remarkably realizes more potential than is expected of her by society, especially given the turbulent waters of race, class, and gender, which she must negotiate even in her final moments of life. Though she has internalized some of the values of a patriarchal society, she has also moved beyond them in terms of valorizing her race and championing a liberating ideology that exceeds national constructions. As she embraces a new transnational discourse of liberation and claims her spiritual place alongside other liberators of the Americas, life will indeed be everlasting for Rebeca, whose life story and activism will identify her forever in the history of Ecuador and the larger Americas as a modern freedom fighter, who was ultimately willing to sacrifice her life for the liberation of her community, her nation, and the greater Americas.

Conclusion: Literacy, Liberation, and the Transnational In-Between

Erna Brodber and Luz Argentina Chiriboga's works confirm that resistance to imperial and national ideologies does indeed produce what Homi Bhabha defines as a way

to rearticulate the sum of knowledge from the perspective of the signifying position of the minority that resists totalization – the repetition that will not return as the same, the minus-in-origin that results in political and discursive strategies where adding *to* does not add up but serves to disturb the calculation of power and knowledge, producing other spaces of subaltern signification.

(The Location of Culture 232-33)

The “in-between” spaces, in the sense of Bhabha's notion of the term as the site of “articulation of cultural difference” (2), between imperial/national ideologies and extra-national ones, between the nation and the diaspora, function as other spaces of subaltern signification. These spaces allow for the subaltern to speak, and they are where marginalized communities may find empowerment. These in-between spaces, produced

by a lack of belonging to the nation, are sites that are ripe for cross-cultural interplay and the creation of new “discursive strategies,” or literacies, that may supplant static modes of articulating the self. Brodber and Chiriboga express that these new literacies must be understood and disseminated by those whom Antonio Gramsci referred to as “organic” intellectuals, or those intellectuals trained under traditional educational models but who use those very models to effect change in the everyday lives of the marginalized (10). Organic intellectuals such as Reverend Simpson and the Brassingtons, Sor Inés, Julio Martínez / Ché Guevara, and ultimately Ella O’Grady and Rebeca González exemplify the type of impact that new literacies may have in the in-between spaces of the nation that reflect a transnational sensibility.

The stories of Ella O’Grady, Rebeca González, and their respective communities indicate the possibility for a new apprehension of the diaspora in the Americas in terms of nations that already have the potential for transnational configurations and the dissemination of organic literacies. As Brodber and Chiriboga suggest, the release of the black female body, in particular, from imperial and patriarchal oppression will engender this transformation. The Ellas and Rebecas of the Americas must begin to feel that they are significant to its evolution, not just for what their bodies may (re-)produce, but for what their consciousness, empowered by larger communities, may engender. This can only occur if there is a reframing of the patriarchal ideology of the nation to include the birth of novel transnational ideologies and an attendant organic literacy of liberation that may be placed on par with the biological and political imperative to reproduce nations based on static, colonial/imperial models.

Erna Brodber’s *Myal* and Luz Argentina Chiriboga’s *Bajo la Piel de los*

Tambores reveal the ways in which the diaspora space of the Americas may be changed for the better by way of a black liberatory feminism that stresses organic literacy. The practice of this type of feminism, which combines features of ethnic cultural feminism and liberation theology, reflects not just a humanist vision of the black community, but a very real model of how to enact this vision within and across nations. What will lead to this is a divorce from discourses of empire, patriarchy, and domesticity that regulate the black female body, which may reproduce and rearticulate the region in novel ways. However, as Brodber and Chiriboga's texts express, this will only occur if diverse members of transnational black communities within nations across the Americas rally together in support of the radical transformation of the collective consciousness of the diasporic community, so that "we are not just confronted with people in other situations but, through them, with ourselves, with our own social commitment [. . .] to the struggle over issues of class, race and sex that is going on in our society" (Witvliet viii). With this in mind, Brodber and Chiriboga offer a vision of a transnational American soup that, after simmering in its diasporic Dutch pot, will serve as liberatory sustenance to multiple nations whose borders and ideological boundaries may be reconfigured for the better, as a result. This redefinition of diaspora, by way of a transnational discourse of liberation, may allow its members to live life in a new dimension—one in which everyone is empowered and elevated.