HIP WORK

Undoing the Tragic *Mulata*

Prologue

I sit down to write and I cannot stop crying. I am hesitant to admit to these emotionally charged currents of tears as it is not my intention to coyly perform the tragic *mulata* of this chapter's title. But, in effect, the tears continue. I think about my recently deceased maternal grandmother, Elba Inés, a Colombian mulata, hailing from the Caribbean coast of the country and working long, nervous hours at the mayor's office of Barranquilla, fearing for her job every city election. As a single mother of two daughters, she could not have risked unemployment. I imagine my longtime deceased paternal grandmother, Carmen, a Cuban mulata, walking down the narrow streets of Ranchuelo, Cuba, on her way to work at the Popular cigarette factory. She had worked for the founders of the cigarette brand, los hermanos Trinidad, since she was fourteen, and when they opened up their factory, she remained there for another forty years. I try to piece together family narratives of my maternal great-grandmother also named Carmen (of black and Indian descent) who died of a hemorrhage after a miscarriage, orphaning six children, one only six months old. To make a living, she worked as a seamstress and would also make candies and other sweets that her eldest daughter sold. I wonder what it must have felt like for my paternal great-grandmother, yes, another mulata, to have her eldest daughter, María, be recognized as the only legitimate child from her long relationship with a Spaniard from Asturias that produced seven other children. If he had recognized the other children as legitimate, my last name would be García, not Blanco. These are

several of the mulata histories that make up my own, histories that time, my search for family legacy, and my scholarly research have only made more necessary to revisit. My tears suddenly lead me to recall the Afro-Cuban/Yoruba anthropomorphic energy force or deity Ochún/Òsun. What can "she" do? What does she represent? John Mason, a scholar and practitioner of Yoruba spirituality, writes about Òsun's association with tears. He states, "Tears are our first physicians; they carry away body poisons and signal that we are alive. They are a sign of deep feeling, pain, joy, sorrow, remorse, and remembrance. . . . Feelings . . . are the doorways to our ancestors" (Mason, *Orin Orisa*, 316). My crying is not in vain.

This performative turn to the self-reflexive echoes what D. Soyini Madison writes when she explains, "how you, me, the self, or, more precisely, 'the self-reference' can actually be *employed*, can actually *labor*, even be productively exploited, for the benefit of larger numbers than just ourselves" (Madison, "Labor of Reflexivity," 129). Thus, I bring these personal histories into the larger historical framework of the mulata experience in the circum-Caribbean. I refuse to accept my family history as one solely fraught with characteristics associated with tragic mulatas: unable to completely inhabit one side of the racial dichotomy, riddled with socioeconomic problems, entering into heterosexual relationships out of economic necessity, to name a few. I reject carrying the burden of this loaded literary trope on my skin, my physicality, my corporeality. I would rather undermine the problematically constructed representations of the mulata that are unable to acknowledge her agency, potentiality, and prowess. As such, I struggle with the familiar moniker of the "tragic" mulata when I think about these corporealities' roles in the making of both everyday and "official" histories of the circum-Caribbean. I become baffled at the disjunction between the tragic narrative associated with the mulata, and the visceral, vivacious corporeality moving through the rooms of a salon or ballroom, sitting at a desk and working long hours to support her family, using her hands to roll tobacco, or to make and sell confections, or even dancing today on the cabaret stages of the Havana Tropicana. Instead of admitting to the tragedy implied by discursive renderings of the mulata's inability to fully inhabit the either/or of constructed racial categorization, I propose to insert a radical shift in the thinking of the mulata as tragic.[1] By radical shift, I mean to corpo-realize this figure through her active mobilization of her own body. To corpo-realize means to make the body a real, living, meaning-making entity; a focus on the material body in the social sphere enables an understanding of how subjects find and assert their agency. Drawing from histories, hagiographies, and hysteria about the transnational, circum-Atlantic body witnessed as

mulata, particularly her choreographies of race and gender, I shall enable a reconsideration of her historical significance, her access to citizenship, and her body. A focus on the body, or more specifically corporeality, adds a new dimension to an ongoing discourse about the mulata's role and significance within the greater African diaspora.

By comparing and contrasting several spaces where the mulaticized body prevailed, such as quadroon balls in New Orleans, or *bailes de cuna* in Havana, the idea of a tragic mulata dissipates as the visceral, active body takes its place. The act of turning the noun "mulata" into a verb, "mulaticize," reflects my theoretical postulation that bodies are interpellated as raced and gendered not just by visible economies, but by the actual corporeal herself. As such, choreographies of mulata were in fact one of the few opportunities available to these corporealities where they could acquire some form of self-determination regarding their gendered, racial, and social status. Moving through different locales in the Caribbean allows me to draw certain examples of mulata economies to elucidate, first, how the European cultural imaginary's predilection for almost-other flesh established a libidinal economy where mulaticized bodies had particular spaces, labors, and value; and, second, how these bodies engaged in self-sufficient means of employment specific to the intersection of the political economy and libidinal economy where they circulated.

My analysis of mulatas depends heavily on her hips, as they not only become sexualized, deified, and vilified, but—as I argue—emerge as the signifying characteristic of mulata bodies.[2] One need only to read a comment written by Cuban social hygienist Benjamin de Céspedes in 1888 to see what I mean: "No existe tal cortesanía, ni cultura, ni belleza ni halagos en ese tipo semi-salvaje de la mulata ordinaria que solo posee el arte de voltear las caderas acrobáticamente" (There is no such civility, nor culture, nor beauty nor flattery in that semi-savage type of the ordinary mulata who only possesses the art of turning her hips acrobatically) (Céspedes quoted in Lane, 180). Rude dismissals aside, the mulata's hips serve as a rich site from where to consider her powerful potentiality. The use of those hips for acts of sex, labor, mobilization, pleasure, and dance provides a way to re-historicize the mulata's lived presence and significance in the circum-Altantic, or, as I prefer to call it, the hip-notic torrid zone.[3]

Informed by a background in critical dance studies where the body and its corporeality emerge as sites for investigation and of power, the mulata exists as a sentience that is always present and visible, staking out space, territory, and meaning with the same body that has been used against her. As a visceral body with embodied knowledge, manifesting, circulating, and

re-membering memories, and transmitting and producing knowledge, the mulata body inhabits a space outside yet is as valuable as logos. By positing the notion of voice outside of the structuralist presupposition that voice and logos are concatenated, the idea of "voice" can insert itself onto the mulata's hips and turn them into a communication device and, more important, a theoretical tool for dismantling the tragedy that discursive practices have constructed.

The mulata body is a form of performative labor, a racialized choreography. That is, her body develops and goes through the process of becoming and being read as mulata by and through the cultural work that precedes her. This is not to say that her body does not have the capacity to learn, manipulate, and mobilize itself in ways that either encapsulate or resist preexisting constructions of said body. She has gestures, texts, and utterances that emanate from the hip, since what she says has already been discursively and socially pre-scripted. Thus, the power of the mulata comes from her ability to improvise and to choreograph her hip from undelineated texts. This then leads to the focus on the hips as tools for communication. Although the hips have been racialized and gendered, the mobilization of this body part serves as a means to address the sociohistorical situation where these mulaticized bodies came to be, multiplied, and were valorized for their mere phenotypical and epidermal realities: their mulata-ness. They populate the hip-notic torrid zone, making declarative statements with their bodies, both past and present.[4]

By focusing on the body of the mulata as a site and source of power and potentiality, her corporeality sets up a space betwixt and beyond mere locality. She in-sinew-ates a transnational body politic and epistemology through her body that speaks in tongues: not just English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Creole, or other languages from the circum-Caribbean, but also a bodily rhetoric by and about women that sets out to historicize a space, a place, and reconfigure and deconstruct notions of "race" as they correspond to gender.[5] In this chapter, I also draw from the genealogy of racialized religiosity in the Americas, specifically tying the mulata to the Yoruba cosmology and the energetic force deified as Ochún in Cuba. My use of Ochún as a trope, and "her" relationship/association with mulata bodies, attempts to show alternative means for understanding how women who can inhabit this colonial sign of the unmoored, independent woman with the ever-moving hip of varying brown skin tones might negotiate an active sociohistorical role. The practice of Ochún will manifest through the many corporeal activities of the mulatas moving herein. Ocassionally, Ochún will "speak" through these pages, offering insights of "her" own.

Act I: The Market for Mulatas

Histories of colonialism in the circum-Caribbean have set up and maintained racialized exchanges of power and desire. To this day, Cuba continues to exist as a libidinous site for sex tourism, with mulata and black female bodies often used as advertisements to lure foreign capital in the form of lustful men, yet ultimately becoming the targets of national discrimination against them.[6] Perhaps a genealogy of the mulata, namely the ways in which she moves through a changing yet still extant marketplace of desire coupled with race, might offer a way to think about its legacies, but also, more important, how history might engage with the bodies making, doing, or simply just making do. I introduce this mulata genealogy of the Americas by briefly contextualizing a history of concubinage beginning in the eighteenth century. Jenny Sharpe, a scholar of Anglo-Caribbean literature, has explained that for many black and/or mulatto women in the eighteenth century, concubinage existed as a means for them to extract certain favors from their white master (husband, lover, or patron). How did these women function within these constraints and utilize their mulaticized flesh and its value as capital as a bargaining tool? Although these hypergamous affairs were indeed exploitative, the kinds of exploitations and power struggles within them were nuanced depending on the ideological system in place.[7] It is from these complex relationships and negotiations of power, a New World libidinal economy if you will, that the role of the mulata as an exchangeable (but powerful) commodity solidified itself within the social spaces of the nineteenth-century quadroon balls in New Orleans and the bailes de cuna in Cuba. By the nineteenth century, the market for mulaticized flesh that emerged from these competing narratives of desire—the mulata's to have greater significance as a citizen, the white man's to be coupled—formulated certain economic opportunities for women of color working as shopkeepers, landlords, and servants of the sacred. In Cuba, for example, the nineteenth-century elite sought to replicate the social order so many of them had witnessed and admired in France and Spain, attempting to import the separate-sphere paradigm as a cult of domesticity. This cult of domesticity primarily assigned specific bodies to either private or public space. Despite Cuban elite desire to control and enforce the separate-spheres paradigm, it was difficult to adhere to given the radical mobility of the mulata. "The strategies, maneuvers, or means [free women of color] deployed" and how these women were "motivated by a desire to place themselves beyond slavery" with "economic and occupational resourcefulness" stand out as remarkable given the various legal, political, and power struggles that filled their everyday.[8]

A seeming disassociation from "blackness" occurs in how these women negotiated their spaces of identity given the fact that blackness was synonymous with slave, and slave status did not offer any form of choice, mobility, or freedom. Since certain mulaticized bodies (depending on their phenotype and how closely it approximated whiteness) could move through varying spaces of (ambiguous) racial identity and domesticity, one might position the mulata as a woman with a certain degree of access. As a house servant or washerwoman carrying soiled clothes to wash by the river, she partook and maintained the flow of domestic activities in the private sphere. As a concubine or *placée* (the term widely used in New Orleans to identify a mulata mistress), she was the public mistress of white masculine domesticity, a female body visibly sexualized and racialized by the men who, in some cases, paid extraordinary amounts of money to conquer, buy, and keep her. Finally, as a public businesswoman (artisan, confectioner, seamstress, among others) one of her more notable roles was as a lodge keeper, maintaining inns for European male travelers in cities like Havana, Kingston, and New Orleans.[9]

One of the more sensationalist spaces featuring moving mulatas were the quadroon balls of New Orleans, where concubinage, or *plaçage*, played a significant role in the everyday reality for many mulatas. These balls occupy the focus of several scholarly works that highlight the construction of these quadroon balls as nothing more than a dressed-up, fancy version of the auction block.[10] Caramel-skinned, honey-colored, tawny, and/or tanned, the *mûlatresse* populated these social-dance events set up as erotic entertainments for their display and exchange among imperial men with capital. The incentives and goals were the same: to parade mulaticized flesh for plaçage in a more relaxed and less socially constricted environment than the exclusively white balls. Ritualized codes, behaviors, and choreographies of exchange between mûlatresses and their would-be patrons cemented certain socioeconomic conveniences for these women, who sought to support and maintain their lifestyles and to secure the future of their offspring from such liaisons. Thus, the libidinal imperial economy created pre-scripted choreographies of racialized and gendered performances that mûlatresses adopted, learned, and exchanged as a way to gain greater access to citizenship and personhood.

Not surprisingly, legal measures and laws often attempted to control mulata "freedom" of access or expression. If, as Lady Nugent (a British traveler to Jamaica from 1802 to 1807) wrote in her journal, imperial men were "almost entirely under the dominion of their mulatto favourites," then something had to be done to contain the problem (quoted in Sharpe, 45). In 1786, Spanish New Orleans's governor, Esteban Miró, instituted the Tignon Law

forbidding all women of color from wearing jewels, fine fabrics, elaborate headdresses, or feathers; it required "negras, mulatas, y quarteronas" to wear their hair flat or, if styled, with a modest scarf wrapped around their head, hair hidden, as a signifier of their lower status (Cocuzza, 82). Sure enough, *tignons* began to be made out of expensive cloths, and many free women of color made fashion statements with their tignons as subtle defiance of the law. This issue of mulata beauty bears mentioning for hair (color and type) represented part of the eroticism linked to the mulata body. Although they had to keep their hair "invisible," mulatas found other ways to demonstrate their allure (especially if their economic position depended on it) through the fabrics chosen for the tignon, or simply by playing up the face "unperturbed" by the hair. Jewelry made of "coral, gold or carnelian" further adorned and embellished her, with or without the tignon (Cocuzza, 82). The issue of how their epidermal reality contrasted with the tignon and other accoutrements, and/or whether or not some of the ones with a lighter epidermal reality created a disconnect with the "race marker" of the tignon, surely added to the mystique and further eroticized the mulata and her "absent" hair.[11]

The nineteenth-century circum-Caribbean trafficked in women of color potential, yet female power and agency were constrained under a series of codified juridical and corporeal practices. The dynamic social participation of mulatas in the public sphere led to the contradictory development of the mulata as a social threat, a femme fatale and signifier of nation and religiosity, primarily in Cuba. Luz Mena's "Stretching the Limits of Gendered Spaces: Black and Mulatto Women in 1830's Havana" argues that because of the important social contributions made by free women of color in Havana, the white Cuban elite felt it necessary to denigrate her socially productive status to one of moral transgression and degeneration. In this way, her power and autonomy would be compromised. Although the mulata-as-sign (i.e., the culturally coded signifier of a racialized identity recognized/agreed upon as "mulata," a stereotype) operated as a public commodity, the visible corporeal examples in the public sphere challenged these stereotypical circulations, seeking "liberation" by whatever resources were available to them. Writing in his travel journal of Cuba, which was published in 1871, Samuel Hazard describes a mulata confectioner as such:

> Now we meet a "dulce" [sweet] seller. As a general thing they are neat-looking mulatto women, rather better attired than most of the colored women one meets in the streets. They carry a basket on the arm, or perhaps on the head, while in their hands they have a waiter, with all sorts of

FIGURE 4.1. Rumba Dancers, circa 1942. From the collection of Mayda Limonta. Limonta rescued this picture (among others) from being thrown in the fire at the Tropicana.

> sweetmeats,—mostly, however, the preserved fruits of the country, and which are very delicious, indeed,—much affected by ladies. We need not have any hesitation in buying from these women, as they usually are sent out by private families, the female members of which make these *dulces* for their living, the saleswoman often being the only property they own, and having no other way (or perhaps, too proud, if they have,) of gaining a livelihood. (167)

It appears as if he assumes the mulata is "property" of another family, perhaps even a white one, as the use of the word "private" would indicate. Ad-

ditionally, for Hazard the mulata's racialized body automatically renders her labor as "property," as work done for another's benefit. Fortunately, Mena's research enables a different interpretation as many mulatas were their own employers, participating in a self-sufficient economy. Furthermore, they also had a reasonable variety of occupations to choose from, given the woman-centered economy in which they operated; they were nurses, teachers, businesswomen, midwives, artisans, peddlers, to name a few. Other than being astute businesswomen, mulatas were often moneylenders themselves and, given their daily activities involving money exchange, many were skilled in mathematics and business proceedings, often to the chagrin of the white patriarchal elite.

Interlude I

Singing begins to be heard in the distance . . .

> *Òsun se're kété mi, owó*
> *Òsun se're kété mi, owó*
> *Omi dára o dára oge o*
> *Òsun Wére kété mi, owó*
>
> Ochún make blessings without delay for me, money.
> Ochún make blessings without delay for me, money.
> Beautiful water, you are beautiful and ostentatious.
> Ochún quickly without delay for me, money. (Mason, *Orin Orisa*, 375)

Òsun speaks:

> Tears . . . crocodile tears that come as prayers of supplication awaken me . . . asking me for money. Yes, you will keep your possessions. No one can take what you earned away from you. It belongs to you and your sisters. My daughters, all of you, be firm, keep to your work. Strive, be tenacious. Use your charm if you must, enchant them on my behalf. Let them see your beauty that needs not eyes to be appreciated. Go, keep to your work.

Act II: Òsun/Ochún as Trope

Òsun/Ochún has arrived. She has responded to one of her praise songs.[12] Òsun is known as the "Occidental Venus" in the Yoruba pantheon. Allotted love, luxury, beauty, and the sweet waters, Òsun represents those things that make life a sensual experience: money, love, sex, and family. Adorned in yellow vestments with wrists encircled by gold bracelets, her delicate hands carry a fan usually made of peacock feathers, her favorite bird due to its

flagrant display of arrogance and beauty. In his canonical work on African and Afro-American art and spirituality, Robert Farris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit* describes Òsun (or as he spells it, Oshun) this way: "[She has a] reputation for great beauty. . . . She was romantically transmuted into the 'love goddess' of many Yoruba-influenced blacks in the western hemisphere. But there are dark aspects to her love . . . her masculine prowess in war; her skill in the art of mixing deadly potions, of using knives as she flies through the night. . . . But Oshun's darker side is ultimately protective of her people" (80). Additionally, Òsun "has a deep relationship with witchcraft, powders, charms, amulets, and malevolent forces" (Mason, *Black Gods*, 101). Renowned for her beauty and charm, she is both sensual (hip) movement and an unmoored woman with a capacity to love, cure, enchant, punish, excel, and please as she sees fit. In the Yoruba community, she is bestowed with the title of Ìyálóde, a title given to the most popular and powerful woman, in terms of women's affairs (99).

The circum-Atlantic voyages of the slave and tobacco trade brought Òsun to Cuba, where her name slightly altered to Ochún and her myths, fables, and magic were interpolated by representations of miscegenated female bodies; the concept of Ochún materialized as the beautiful mulata within the Cuban national imaginary by the nineteenth century.[13] Although Òsun has fifteen avatars or spiritual roads, each assigned a different aspect or personality associated with the deified energetic force, the avatar most widely accepted and circulated in Cuba is that of Ochún Yeyé Kari (mother who is sufficient) and/or Yeyé Moro (mother who builds wealth). This avatar is described as "the happiest, most extravagant, most flirtatious of all the Òsun. She is constantly on the stroll, wears make-up and perfume, and constantly gazes at herself in the mirror" (Mason, *Orin Orisa*, 317; see Cabrera). Some of her practitioners that I consulted with claim that these avatars developed from praise names, that is, names pronounced during the rituals to invite her to manifest. They state that these names are not part of the original fifteen. The avatar Òsun Pasanga (the stream that is a prostitute) would then stand out as the avatar from where Yeyé Kari and Yeyé Moro may have developed. This Ochún loves to dance, revels in coquetry, and represents salacious behavior. It was this Ochún that coalesced onto the (late) nineteenth-century mulata, further elaborated through textual, visual, and theatrical representations of this hybridized body as one that, despite its seductive appeal, was both a social and a sexual threat.[14] These discursive practices served to cement the mulata-as-sign in the Cuban cultural imaginary; a palatable, corporeal representative of a colonized country searching for some form of national

identity. The mulata sign reverberated as an apparently neat representation of not-so-neat and vastly different criteria. As a result, the mulata did not have to labor to become; rather, that body's meaning was fully inscribed and interpellated by the forces of colonial history, myths (both African and Creole/Cuban), and widely circulated and widely held ideas about racial categorization. The mulata's laborless body as mere sign enables a country to represent itself to itself, all the while denying/avoiding the subject status of the corpo-real who occupies the space of mulata.

In contrast, Òsun/Ochún-as-practice becomes useful as a way to insinew-ate "her" onto the hip movements and somatic activity of the mulata and her explosive sign, and to mobilize her body through spiritual and corporeal labor. For example, devotion to Òsun, as reenacted in yearly festivals at Osogbo, Nigeria, celebrates her power, charm, wealth, beauty, and wisdom. Dierdre Badejo's *Oshun Sèègèsi* documents one of these festivals. While in Osogbo, Badejo witnessed how the festival drama and its production (in the Marxist sense) display the intricacies of these Nigerian women's daily activities—particularly how adroitly they conceive and materialize the festival. These renderings of Òsun's significations in the context of these Nigerian women laboring and producing a festival in her honor demonstrate how women's work not only materializes the principles of Òsun, but adds value to the social. Badejo explains, "The annual Òsun Festival and oral literature [of Òsun] attest that even within the patriarchal Yorúbà system, women are central to the proper function and survival of humanity" (177). Indeed, Badejo's concept of humanity erases the technologies of power and ideologies based on Enlightenment principles that separate human bodies based on their differences, yet it is the activities of these women—their labor, and their working, sweating bodies as they execute and demonstrate the multiplicity of factors involved in realizing an object of veneration—that best demonstrate how production of knowledge operates. Through this lens, the festival occurs not as a flawless, beautiful, or celebratory place where dancing, singing, and worshipping black bodies exist bucolically; rather, it is a site of social and political commentary, reverence, and female cultural production. Here, women negotiate in the market; they both acknowledge and challenge patriarchy and male authoritarianism; and they demonstrate why one of the praise names for Òsun, that of Ìyáloja (mother of the market), speaks to the social organization, business acumen, and skills of the marketplace that these "daughters" of Òsun demonstrate. Although Òsun/Ochún reifies gendered ideas of being, she (as she is understood and practiced among her devotees) nevertheless enables an understanding of women

as knowledge bearers and producers. By tying the deified energetic force Òsun/Ochún into the corpo-mulata, the person engaged in this amalgam results as a potent force.

Òsun/Ochún exists variously as the beautiful sensual dancer, the astute market woman, and the ornery "old woman spitting curses at the world because of the loss of her beauty" (Mason, *Black Gods*, 98). Ornery and ornate, bedecked and bedazzling, the mulata as Ochún (re)appears as a remembered, performed corporeal iteration of the complex histories in the circum-(black) Atlantic, or more precisely, the hip-notic torrid zone. Named the circum-Atlantic by Joseph Roach and the black Atlantic by Paul Gilroy, the bodies and histories of the figure of the mulata and her enunciating hip transform this particular territory into a hip-notic torrid zone. It becomes a space for and about women of color—black, brown—mulatas with their bodily labors, practices, histories, and defiances. The mulata as producer of Ochún becomes a participatory body in the socioeconomic networks of the colonies, unable to extricate herself from the political economy of desire. Thus, when mulatas "in pursuit of their rights as women and free persons, [flaunt] gold jewelry, headdresses, and clothes that only whites were supposed to wear" and continue to produce beauty with accoutrements that Ochún favors (gold, coral, feathers), it is a practice of Ochún, of Ochún having her way, ensuring not only the presence and vitality of these women, but their historicity (Hanger, "'Desiring Total Tranquility,'" 546).

Interlude II

(Singing heard in the distance)
Ìyá mi ilé odò. Ìyá mi ilé odò
Gbogbo àse
Obí ni sálà máā wò e
Ìyá mi ilé odò

My mother's house is the River.
My mother's house is the River.
All powerful
Women that flee for safety habitually visit her.
My mother's house is the River. (Mason, *Orin Orisa*, 361)

Òsun interrupts:

I am the River. My sister is the sea. I dance with her. I lie next to her. I spill forth into her. I lead you from her to me aboard ships with mermaids on the prow. She leads the way. She rocks you. I lead you from my River

Osogbo to the (Atlantic) ocean, to the sea (Caribbean) to another River (Mississippi). All waters are mine and my sister. We flow to, from, in and through each other. I swerve this way and that. I undulate through and to a new place. My daughters, come to me. I am here for you whenever you need me. I have never left you.

Act III: Choreographing Mulata Bodies

How, then, does a mulata choreograph her gender and her body, specifically through her hips, in order to make insertions into the visual, theatrical, and libidinal economies where her sign is most frequented? Might sexuality, acts of sex, be ways of choreographing gender? How might these women of color's choreographies become cultural productions produced, exchanged, and commodified as mulaticized bodies? Such cultural choreographies of identity manifested quite literally in bailes de cuna and in quadroon balls, social-dance(d) spaces for re-presentations and performances of mulata-ness, operating as local hip-notic torrid zones. Driving my analyses of the quadroon balls and bailes de cuna is my goal to intervene in the modernist opposition between the corporeal and the linguistic. By locating knowledge outside of its historically normative space of language and text, even disturbing pat assertions of "embodied textuality," the lived materiality of an acting body mobilizes the historical and cultural codes where it sits and, in this case, dances. At the quadroon balls and/or bailes de cuna, for example, the mulata made choices as to how to represent herself given her everyday surroundings, demonstrating how gender coupled with race operates as a seductive choreography, so seductive in fact that articles, research, travel journals, novels, and films continue to submit to their allure.[15] These balls/dances, whether they took place in Havana or New Orleans, both burgeoning cities of the Spanish empire, provided the dancing mulatas a space to choreograph the complexities of race and gender that defined them to their male provocateurs and created codes of behavior for themselves to choreograph and (un)successfully perform. A possible performance might be a woman who refuses to co-opt mulata, choosing to establish another form of corporeality with different sets of options. Henriette DeLille, for example, the founder of the Sisters of the Holy Family Catholic order in New Orleans, was in fact a quadroon with a family history of plaçage. She was expected to follow the "tradition," yet she, in effect, chose to still her hips and render her body inexchangeable. Her corporeality, through its religiosity, purposefully choreographed a mulata outside the libidinal economy (see Guillory, "Under One Roof"). Others may have specifically mastered the codes of mulata, for it provided them with a comfortable and recognizable space from which to

act. Rosette Rochon, one such placée, made a considerable fortune in New Orleans real estate and apparently left a property valued at the equivalent of $1 million today.[16] It is important to note here how the mulata firmly situated herself into an economy of exchange and made an attempt at self-produced economic agency, essentially managing her body as (her) capital for some access, and/or social mobility.

BAILES DE CUNA

A brief critical examination of Cuban cultural scholar Reynaldo González's analysis of the mulatas hosting and attending the bailes de cuna in the nineteenth-century Cuban *costumbrista* novel *Cecilia Valdés* by Cirilo Villaverde positions the mulata as a discursive site where ideas of race, gender, and class choreograph themselves. *Cecilia Valdés, o la Loma de Ángel* serves as one of the foundational texts in the trope of the tragic mulata in Cuba. Cecilia, the mulata of the title, falls in love with Leonardo Gamboa, a white, wealthy criollo (Cuban-born Spaniard), who unknown to them both is her half brother. Their illicit affair—along with Cecilia's relentless desire for higher social and racial status—contributes to her tragic demise. A baile de cuna hosted by a mulata named Mercedes introduces the reader to their social interactions. Said reader, through Villaverde's exquisitely detailed accounts, experiences the bailes where wealthy criollos attended for the pleasure of being among the most beautiful mulatas in Havana. These danced spaces served as spectacles of the pairings between race, class, and gender as performed by the *canela* (cinnamon) bodies of the mulatas and their white suitors. They danced *la contradanza cubana*, or *danza* (Cuban contredanse which eventually led to the development of the *danzón*), a syncopated version of European country dance described by Villaverde as follows: "The feet moved incessantly as they were softly dragged to the rhythm of the music, the dancers mixed and pressed in the midst of a packed crowd of onlookers, as they moved up and down the dance floor without break or pause. Even above the deafening noise of the kettledrums, in perfect rhythm with the music, the monotonous and continuous swish sound made by the feet could be heard. Colored people believe this to be a requirement for keeping perfect rhythm to the danza criolla" (Villaverde quoted in Gevara, 124). Villaverde's focus on the feet fails to articulate other movements of the danza dancing body. For example, the syncopation led to "more lateral movement [of the] hips," these movements called either *escobilleo* or *sopimpa* (Chasteen, 63). Villaverde's account differs from that of María de las Mercedes Santa Cruz y Montalvo, or the Countess of Merlin. In her journal from 1840, she wrote that the dancers moved "more with the body than the feet. . . . Some seem to

glide as if on wheels, [others use] quick turns and backsteps, now to the right or to the left [but] all keep up the same graceful movement of the body" (Merlin quoted in Chasteen, 63). Considered transgressive to the elites because of the Africanist element in its rhythm, the close proximity required of the dancing couple, and its popularity, the danza's mystique only heightened if it could be danced in the arms of a mulata at a racially mixed dance event, such as a baile de cuna. The allure of the mulata's hips moving beneath cumbersome layers of fabric, and more specifically what lay between those hips, marked the bailes de cuna as spaces rife with meanings and negotiations in terms of courtship, arrangement for concubinage, pleasure, and economic stability for the mulata. *Cecilia Valdés* features three incidents of danced drama, but it is the baile de cuna toward the beginning of the novel where the material for analysis is rich.[17] González summarizes:

> Los bailes de cuna representaban el crisol del acriollamiento: el amulatamiento cultural. Los jóvenes blancos ricos que en ellos se sumergían, salían amulatados en su ánimo. Contribuían a este embrujo tanto la música que se escuchaba y bailaba como la seducción de las mujeres. Eran bailes dado por mujeres, por eso se les llamaba "la cuna de Fulana o de Mengana"; en ellos predominaba la regencia femenina, sus designios, sus juegos de tácticas y estrategias. Más que en el baile "de etiqueta o de corte," también dado por negros y mulatos, estas cunas, por su sencilla promiscuidad, propiciaban el entrecruzamiento cultural y racial. (206)
>
> (The "cradle dances" represented the melting pot of creoleness: cultural mulaticization. The young white rich men who submerged themselves in them left mulaticized in their mood. The music that was danced [in these bailes] contributed to their bewitching as much as the seduction of the women. The dances were held by women, that is why they were called "the crib of so-and-so"; feminine regency dominated these places, their purposes, their games of tactics and strategies. More so than in the black tie dances or the court dances, also held by blacks and mulattos, these "cribs," for their simple promiscuity, propitiated the racial and cultural exchange.)

In this rendering of the baile de cuna, González uses the positivist language of the nineteenth century to mark these cunas organized by women as feminized spaces of sin, seduction, and cultural intermixing. It is important to note that González writes from a privileged scholarly position in revolutionary Cuba, where part of its dogma asserts a specific, essentialized Cuban identity. In so doing, many scholarly texts endorse a stable, universal idea

of *cubanía*, *cubanidad*, *mestizaje*, mulato-ness, transculturation: critically discursive neologisms used to describe the Cuban cultural condition and its cultural production. At the same time, González's description of these bailes de cuna highlights how the literary imagination adds to the complicated web of race, class, and gender negotiations critical to this study. For González, the mere act of integrating these nuanced terms led to simple promiscuity, thereby acknowledging the widely held nineteenth-century Cuban belief that intermixing led to moral and sexual degeneration. He also proclaims, using words usually associated with Michel de Certeau, that the mulata-actions within the bailes de cuna operated as "games of tactics and strategies."[18] (Un)Knowingly, González affords some kind of power to these mulatas. For my purposes, I want to transport strategies and tactics to the bailes de cuna and quadroon balls, where the mobilizers of strategies and tactics dispute simple categorization. Granted, these bailes de cuna and quadroon balls existed within the place of colonialism and its insidious ideological ramifications. Yet the particular space of the baile de cuna as controlled by women and their negotiations for some kind of economic agency confirm how these mulatas shifted between what Gonzalez calls "games of tactics and strategies." I contend that mulata corporeality, specifically the hips of the mulata, existed as the primary tactic operating in these spaces. The desire for the mulata body (in the many ways that that might possibly manifest) set up the mulata as an active agent in situations that, given the complexities of power, might render her mute, passive, and merely objectified.

QUADROON BALLS

In contradistinction to the bailes de cuna of Havana, which were held at a woman's—usually a well-established or respected mulata's—house and orchestrated by her alone, the New Orleans quadroon balls or *bals en masque* were white male capitalist productions conceived, controlled, and attended by them for their own material and sexual enjoyment. The prize or thing to be consumed, enjoyed, and exchanged, the capital, was the mûlatresse (quadroon). These balls "would emerge as the unique formula of Auguste Tessier, an actor and dancer with a local opera company" (Guillory, "Some Enchanted Evening," 27). His formula was quite simple: advertise it as a twice-weekly affair held exclusively for free colored women and white men. Offer some surplus value, or "perks," by way of carriages at the door and private room rental at the end of the evening. Many other entrepreneurial men followed suit. They even respected each others' dates and avoided scheduling conflicting balls on the same night. "A man so inclined could

still spend three days a week with his family," one man observed (Guillory, "Some Enchanted Evening," 28). These balls were highly popular during the era of Spanish rule in New Orleans (1763–1803), tying these productions of gendered performance and power to those of Havana, another major Spanish colonial enclave.

Just as the bailes de cuna had (white) witnesses who waxed poetic in their journals or letters about the skill of the dancing bodies, the quadroon balls also enjoyed a fair share of discursive accounts. One such visitor, an Edward Sullivan, wrote about the quadroons' movements at these balls as "the most easy and graceful that I have ever seen. They danced one figure, somewhat resembling the Spanish fandango, without castanets, and I never saw more perfect dancing on any stage. I wonder if some of the opera lessees in Europe do not import them for their corps de ballet" (Sullivan quoted in Li, 94). His admiration of the mulatas' dancing skill suggests an association between their apparent talent and their race. Another observer, an H. Didimus, states the following about a particular quadroon who caught his eye: "She is above the ordinary height, and moves with a free, unrestrained air, distinguished for grace and dignity" (Didimus quoted in Li, 94). Again, movement renders her body noticeable and notable. I realize most of these accounts stem from a white, patriarchal perspective, desire mitigated by a supposed objectivity, and rather than accept them as careful, factual accounts of what may have occurred, I read them as discourses that show how the corporeality of the mulata was something to witness and subsequently write about. These documents serve to memorialize the swaying, preening, turning, curtseying, danza-ing corporeality that so fascinated at these social events. There, the mulata could only rely on other mulatas and their acquired knowledge about their situation for the kind of protection necessary for optimum benefits. Therefore, when negotiations for plaçage took place, it was a mother, an aunt, or another close, trusted, older woman who took charge of the young mulata and made the arrangements with the white man. A matrilineal, matri-focal, or woman-centered production of knowledge circulated the mulata-product in these libidinal market economies. These women learned how to mulaticize themselves and then used the value that their bodies had to wield it as capital and market themselves. Although the New Orleans quadroon balls lie in a mythological space somewhere between romanticism, nostalgia, and sexual exploitation, the lived presence of the mulata there serves to undo the myths and discursively rendered tragedy, offering a way to remake the space into one of negotiation and power exchanges. Herein is where the significance of the body, or more precisely the hip, lies.

Interlude III

Yèyé yèyé mã wò'kun; mã yíyan yòrò
The Mother of mothers always visits the sea;
Always walking with a slow swagger to melt away.
(Mason, *Orin Orisa*, 372)

Ochún interrupts:

> My daughters walk, they map out space. They take up space. They use their bodies, bodies I need to exist, bodies I bestow with grace, health, vibrancy . . . bodies that work for me, venerating me. Their eyes sometimes are filled with tears, and they cry. Their tears call me. Their tears connect many of us. They also work, they sweat, they breathe, they move, they dance. Theirs are bodies that both feel, and make you feel, make you sensate . . . experience . . . express, re-dress. Use your bodies, think with it, feel with it. That is me. Keep to your work, my daughters.

Epilogue

My Cuban grandmother, Carmen, did not like to dance. She preferred to watch my grandfather sway to the danzón in their kitchen on Sunday afternoons during the weekly danzón radio shows. She was demure in her appearance, wearing almost no makeup, faint perfumes, and a gold necklace with a round Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre charm. Ochún (re)appears here as La Virgen as they operate coterminously in Cuba, syncretized versions of the same deified feminine force. Both are considered patron saints of Cuba, one Catholic, the other African. That both of my grandmothers did not dance strikes me as particularly ironic given the intrinsic social role that dance played in their respective cultures (Cuban, and Caribbean-Colombian). Nevertheless, I have laid out a genealogy of histories and situations that perhaps informed their understandings as to how their bodies could and should act. I often wonder what each would say if they saw me dancing for Ochún, dancing the danzón, or the *cumbia*—the heavy hip-laden dance of coastal Colombia. As I sit, think, and write about ideas, (dance) histories, and racialized gendered bodies, I realize just how far removed I am from the kinds of labors my grandmothers and great-grandmothers had to engage in. Part of me wants my intellectual labor to serve as a form of honor and veneration for my female ancestors, yet somehow I believe that my body, dancing, thinking, moving, and perhaps even hip-notizing, acts as the real *ebo*, or offering to them. I still think that my tears will get the best of me when I remember those that I knew and those that I (re)imagine. Yet, my act

of crying is nothing compared to how *ellas seguirán*, how they will endure as I continue to sit and write, walk and dance for them.

Mbe mbe máa Yèyé
Mbe mbe l'órò.

Exist exist continually Mother.
Exist exist in the tradition.

I exist in many incarnations. When she decides to wear her gold bracelets and her brass rings, I am there. It's not allowed, they tell her. I don't care. I must be beautiful, I must be clean, clear, like the water. Look at her and you will remember me. When another one moves her body, shaking, shimmying, swaying her hips back and forth to transfixed and hip-notized eyes, I am there.

Go, my daughters, make them see you. Make them love you. That way, they will see me, they will acknowledge me. They will understand what they have done. My daughters are everywhere—black, brown, copper, brass, gold, wheat, honey—beautiful, embellished, beloved, ornery, ornate, and honored. Make beauty. Never let them forget the work involved.

Ochún begins to swirl away as the last of her praise songs echoes above the stream that is her.

Notes

1. I use the Spanish spelling of the term when I focus on the mulata in Cuba and Spanish New Orleans. When I write about French New Orleans, I use *mûlatresse*. When I mention said corporeal in Jamaica, I use the term "mulatta" or "mulatto woman."

2. See Kutzinski for numerous examples of mulata poetry that both exalts and demeans the mulata and her hips or buttocks.

3. The hip-notic torrid zone is my way of thinking through the transatlantic diaspora that Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* and Joseph Roach's *Cities of the Dead* establish. I highlight the feminized space of the diaspora through the hips of the mulata and the different labors women of color have had to do and endure given the histories of slavery, colonialism, and patriarchy in these locations.

4. Here I would like to address the work that Jayna Brown's *Babylon Girls* does in rethinking the concept of transatlantic modernity through the traveling, singing, and dancing bodies of black women performers in the early twentieth century. Brown's extensive research frames these women's bodies against literature and drama, European primitivism, and colonialism (2). By so doing, Brown troubles the epistemologies that situate the body and performance outside of history-making and demonstrates how the transatlantic movement of black expressive cultures undergirds any discussion of modernity. This type of analytical work is crucial to the study of transatlantic black

performance and influences my own thinking of the mulata as a transnational actor moving with and through her hip.

5. These languages are primarily spoken in the Caribbean and in North and South America.

6. Amalia L. Cabezas writes extensively on sex work in Cuba and the Dominican Republic in her monograph *Economies of Desire*. Other publications include "Discourses of Prostitution: The Case of Cuba," and "On the Border of Love and Money: Sex and Tourism in Cuba and the Dominican Republic." Her work specifically looks at the history, market, and participants of this phenomenon. Performance artist and activist Coco Fusco has also written on the *jineteras* in Cuba. See "Hustling for Dollars: Jineterismo in Cuba."

7. Anglo-Caribbean historian Trevor Burnard questions most American slavery scholarship that only examines sexual relationships between women of color and white men as merely exploitative: "The pronounced differences in the treatment of the Caribbean and North American experiences of enslaved women or free women of African descent are striking, given the existence of similar power relationships between white men and black women in both regions" (85). Some of these differences include the following: greater influence of feminist thought in North American slave historiography; greater historical and contemporary acceptance of interracial sexual relations in the Caribbean than in the United States; the absence in North America of the concept of an intermediate racial category of mulatto, since the existence of a mulatto class of "browns" with greater privileges and higher status than blacks is a distinctive feature of Caribbean society, both during and after slavery (101 footnote 17). Although not denying the violence and exploitation that occurred, Burnard comments that in the Caribbean, historians tend to view interracial relationships more positively. See Burnard's chapter on Thistlewood and his slave lover, Phibbah, in David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine's *Beyond Bondage*, where he quotes from Edward Cox (1984) and Barbara Bush (1990), other historians of Caribbean women, to qualify his argument about the "less exploitative" relationships between Caribbean slaves, mulattos, and their white masters.

8. In Gaspar and Hine's edited volume *Beyond Bondage*, the various authors voyage throughout the Americas and situate these women in different economic positions (x).

9. In her chapter "Victims or Strategists? Female Lodging-House Keepers in Jamaica" featured in Verene Shepherd, Bridget Brereton, and Barbara Bailey's edited volume *Engendering History: Caribbean Women in Historical Perspective*, Paulette A. Kerr presents how the mulatto woman mobilized her identity within the political economy of colonization. For the Jamaican mulatto woman, the keeping of lodging houses and taverns was "one of the few means of economic and possibly social independence for women during and after slavery" (198).

10. Monique Guillory's dissertation, "Some Enchanted Evening on the Auction Block: The New Orleans Quadroon Balls," does comparative analysis between historical accounts, fictional representations, and ephemera from the era of the quadroon balls. She makes the claim that although the events were sumptuous in their produc-

tion, they were merely a fancier version of the auction block. Lisa Ze Winters's dissertation, "Specter, Spectacle and the Imaginative Space: Unfixing the Tragic Mulatta," examines both the quadroon balls of New Orleans and the *signare* balls in Senegal as a way to rethink the mulata as a relevant diasporic actor.

11. The term "epidermal reality" comes from Anna Beatrice Scott's work on blackness, race, and carnival in Brazil.

12. Òsun is the Yoruba spelling. Ochún is the Cuban spelling. I differentiate between the two to demonstrate how this deified energy force is understood in these cultural contexts, and how Cuban Ochún developed differently.

13. During the nineteenth century in Cuba, Yemayá (Ochun's sister, and another water goddess) came to represent dark beauty, while Òsun represents honey-colored beauty. Yoruba scholar John Mason states that Yemayá contains qualities of another African deity, Mamí Wàtá (pidgin English for "mother of the water") (*Olóòkun*, 56). Mamí Wàtá, similar to Òsun, procures gifts and wealth to her followers. The mulata, as a product of Africa and Europe, benefited from the mobility and access afforded to yellow bodies. Mason corroborates by writing that "in the Americas, this position [being mulata] allowed for greater facility of movement in the procuring of wealth and position. Òsun's traditional role as Ìyálóde (titled mother who deals with external affairs/strangers) sets the New World stage for the mulatta/Òsun/Màmí Wàtá/child of whites to step into the role" (55).

14. Kutzinski's *Sugar's Secrets* and Lane's *Blackface Cuba* trace the development of the mulata archetypes that circulated in Cuba by the end of the nineteenth century.

15. Dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster's "Choreographies of Gender" aims to naughtily disturb, disrupt, and contribute to the fields of feminism, dance, and performance studies. For her, a dissection of choreographic strategies in dance enables a clearer understanding of the intention behind the dance. Her adamant suggestion to examine gender as a form of choreography stresses the significance of how bodies both create and resist culturally specific coded meanings. She writes: "To analyze gender as choreography is to acknowledge as systems of representation the deeply embedded, slowly changing rules that guide our actions and that make those actions meaningful. Not biologically fixed but rather historically specific, these rules are redolent with social, political, economic and aesthetic values . . . connect[ing] that body to other cultural orchestrations of identity" (29) .

16. See the Musée Rosette Rochon website, http://www.rosetterochon.com, for details on how one of her homes is being renovated to become a museum. Wikipedia also features a long biography of her under the heading of plaçage, notable placées.

17. The other two danced events in *Cecilia Valdés* are a black tie dance and a dance for the Spanish peninsular aristocrats, respectively. These two were homogeneous dance environments where minimal, if not nonexistent, contact between races and different social classes predominated.

18. De Certeau explains that "strategies are actions, which, thanks to the establishment of a place of power, elaborate theoretical places" while "tactics are procedures that gain validity in relation to the pertinence they lend to time" (38). He contends that

strategies and tactics volley between the roles that space and time afford one or the other. Strategies depend on having an established location as the locus of power, while tactics find moments within the historical progression of power and time to insert their "guileful ruses." Theoretically, strategies and tactics operate as distinctly separate spheres of influence. That is, one emerges, the strategy, as more triumphant than the other, thereby establishing what we come to understand as the ideological status quo: patriarchy, logos, transnational capitalism.