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TITLE: Santería's Empowerment and Tensions between the Individual and the Community in Alex Espinoza's *Still Water Saints*

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ABSTRACT: In Alex Espinoza's *Still Water Saints*, the main character Perla becomes empowered through her connection to the practice of Santería. When her mentor, Darío, offers her the job of running the Botánica Oshun, Perla takes on the roles of being a healer and leader within her community. She encounters difficulties in negotiating her obligations to the individual and the community as a leader. Eventually, Perla's interactions with patrons of the botánica emphasize the religious practice of Santería's true communal and reciprocal basis, thereby underscoring the dangers of succumbing to the myths of individualism and a meritocracy found in the cultural and historical narratives of the United States while highlighting the use-value of a Latin American spiritual practice. Works by Walter Mignolo and Gloria Anzaldúa, and several other critical studies of Santería, are used to demonstrate the empowerment of Perla but also the productive tensions between the individual and community.

KEYWORDS: Santería, Individual/Individualism, Community, Spiritual Leadership, Agency, Meritocracy

RESUMEN: En *Still Water Saints* de Alex Espinosa, el personaje principal, Perla, adquiere poderío debido a su conexión con la práctica de la Santería. Cuando su mentor, Darío, le ofrece trabajo de dirigir la Botánica Oshún, Perla toma el papel de sanadora y líder dentro de su comunidad. Ella enfrenta dificultades al negociar sus responsabilidades como individuo y líder de la comunidad. Eventualmente, las interacciones de Perla con los benefactores de la botánica destacan la verdadera base comunal y recíproca de la práctica religiosa de la Santería, subrayando los peligros de sucumbir a los mitos del individualismo y la meritocracia encontrada en las narrativas culturales e históricas de los Estados Unidos mientras realza la utilidad de una práctica espiritual de América Latina. Las obras de Walter Mignolo y Gloria Anzaldúa, y otros estudios críticos de la Santería, son utilizados para demostrar el poderío de Perla, y también las tensiones productivas entre el individuo y la comunidad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: santería, individual/individualismo, comunidad, liderazgo espiritual, agencia, meritocracia

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Santería's Empowerment and Tensions between the Individual and the Community in Alex Espinoza's *Still Water Saints*

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Images of Los Angeles life overshadow the geographic totality of Southern California, which includes the Inland Empire cities of Riverside, Colton, and San Bernadino. These places often go unacknowledged because no iconic scene is ascribed to them.¹ In an interview with Rigoberto González, Alex Espinoza explains how he offers a specific image of Southern California through the main setting of his debut novel, *Still Water Saints*:

Espinoza found the perfect symbol for the complex cultural space that is Southern California in a *botánica*—"a religious supply shop that fuses elements of Catholicism, [S]antería, voodoo, Hinduism, Native American lore, and Judaism," he explains, adding, "and it's usually found in a strip mall, sandwiched between a nail salon and a Laundromat. I became fascinated by how beliefs and cultures come together in such a mundane space and how fascinating things happen within those walls." (95)

Although Espinoza unintentionally speaks dismissively of Native American religious and cultural practices here by labelling them as 'lore,' his point remains that the deceptively mundane locale of the *botánica* is the perfect representation of the pedestrian but culturally robust location of the Inland Empire in Southern California. This region bursts with multicultural and multi-racial communities

and stories, and what better way to symbolize this multiplicity than through the image of cultural *mélange* that is the *botánica*. Use of this space allows Espinoza to narrate the omnipresence of the religious practice of Santería and emphasize the main character Perla's roles as a healer and community leader since she is the one to run *Botánica Oshun*.² Indeed, the subject of religion structures the very narrative, as saint cards that commemorate feast days' act as chapter divisions and mark off months in a year of Perla's life.

In paying attention to Perla and her role in the *botánica* in this text, the reader recognizes the significance of Santería, its leadership roles, and the resultant tension between the individual and community.³ Perla, as the sole operator of the *Botánica Oshun*, takes on her community's concerns, and she and the *botánica* are the meaningful locus around which all revolve. Daniel A. Olivás writes of Perla's function as a character: "Espinoza adeptly uses Perla and her *botánica* to introduce fully realized characters who search for answers and struggle to make sense of their lives" (53). In fact, the author explains how Perla's significance grows in relation to the other characters: "'She became the mortar that held the stories together,' Espinoza says. 'Her narrative is interwoven into the different stories that take place in the course of a year'" (González 95). As a healer and community leader, she unifies her neighbors and patrons in their common endeavor of surviving illness, death, romantic

difficulties, abuse, and racism. Despite this litany of troubles, Olivas explains how “[t]he novel moves briskly from character to character, creating a mosaic of this predominately Latino community without ever falling into melodrama” (53). Perla and the practice of Santería provide empowerment and facilitate endurance by guiding this community.

Nevertheless, the violence that afflicts one of her community members, Rodrigo, takes its toll on Perla, compelling her to question the faith she places in her ability to function as a leader and healer. The novel also shows how Perla sacrifices her physical well-being, the financial well-being of her botánica, and the proper care of her community of worshippers by assuming the burdensome responsibility of her faith community as its leader. In Alex Espinoza’s *Still-Water Saints*, the choice to become a healer and leader within Santería through running the Botánica Oshun greatly empowers Perla, and her interactions with her community ultimately emphasize Santería’s true communal and reciprocal basis, thereby also alluding to the dangers of succumbing to the myths of individualism and the existence of a meritocracy that are prevalent in the cultural narratives and history of the United States.⁴

Dismantling these myths disrupts the process in which knowledge is built upon these ideas. In order to accomplish this task, one must begin by examining how myths and knowledge are constructed in Western society. The work of Walter Mignolo matters here because he argues for the need to decolonize epistemology (knowledge-construction) by questioning the naturalized principles on which knowledge is built, thereby assisting in the development of decolonial epistemology. Mignolo names Santería as one of the practices that encourage this simultaneous decolonizing of epistemology and creating of decolonial epistemology:

There is no one-to-one correlation between the political society and decolonial projects, but there are some projects

that are clearly decolonial, that is, projects that could be understood as responses to the making, transformations, and persistence of coloniality. Among them we can count Sovereignty of Food and La Via Campesina, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the politicization of African religions in the Americas. (Candomblé, Vodou, Santería, Rastafarian) (40)

Mignolo validates Santería as a decolonial project because it utilizes non-Western ways of knowing. Gloria Anzaldúa states similar sentiments when she critiques ways of knowing endorsed by Western institutionalized religion:

Institutionalized religion fears trafficking with the spirit world and stigmatizes it as witchcraft. It has strict taboos against this kind of inner knowledge ... The Catholic and Protestant religions encourage fear and distrust of life and of the body; they encourage a split between the body and the spirit and totally ignore the soul; they encourage us to kill off parts of ourselves. (37)

Once we query ways of knowledge-construction in Western society and view non-institutionalized religious practices such as Santería as helpful in this task, we can move to a revising of American myths that assert the power of the individual over the community.⁵ No one person truly makes it on his/her own or can take the responsibility of a community on him or herself successfully. Such is the case for Perla as she exercises an individualistic understanding of spiritual leadership, and this exercise does not benefit her, her community, or the tenets of the Santería faith itself. Perla’s individualistic understanding of leadership and religion arguably comes from residing in the United States and being immersed in Western worldviews. In short, Alex Espinoza’s first novel addresses how a community negotiates religious practices and how an individual, especially as a leader, can function within this negotiation.

Recent scholarly works which address *Still Water Saints* illuminate other key issues

in the novel. In *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries*, Karen Tongson examines Espinoza's novel as one text of many that elucidates the complexities and fluid reality of Southern California and its culture, including its artifacts, practices, and landscape. Tongson writes of how *Still Water Saints* resists being placed in the niche of magical realism, as are so many other Chicano/a and Latino/a texts that address spirituality and/or religion; such a reading "risks eliding the painstaking historicity of Espinoza's realism" (141). Tongson analyzes Espinoza's characters and plot as re-workings and interrogations of traditional suburban and national imaginaries; yet she does not address the religious practice and location at the center of this novel in an in-depth way, perhaps in an attempt to avoid the trap of "magical realism." Moreover, in *Accessible Citizenship: Disability, Nation, and the Cultural Politics of Greater Mexico*, Julie Avril Minich focuses on the intersections of Chicano/a and Disability studies in order to ascertain meaningful questions about nationalism and citizenship; in this book, she has one chapter that covers Alex Espinoza's *Still Water Saints*. Minich argues that this "novel presents characters with a range of disabilities and body anomalies—obesity, infertility, wounds sustained during unauthorized border crossings—to reveal the ideology of body normativity that the border produces and supports" (25). To execute this analysis, Minich does highlight the botánica setting and the narrative structure of the novel, both significant aspects of the religious practice at this novel's core; however, more connection to and coverage of Santería and its tenets of faith are necessary in delving deeper into the tension between the individual and community, which I would argue is at the root of larger discussions about suburban imaginaries, and the ramifications of nationalism and citizenship. This is the critical intervention that this essay makes.

Additionally, emphasizing both the community and the individual through the analysis of religious practices in Chicano/a (Latino/a) literature is pertinent to American

literary studies as it points out the limits and emptiness of the ideas of individualism and a meritocracy.⁶ In this way, multi-ethnic literary texts keep complicating the historical and cultural value of American literature. Therefore, this analysis can be of critical importance to the disciplines of religion, literature, and the Chicano/a (Latino/a) community overall. Moreover, an analysis of how the practice of Santería interrogates these notions of a meritocracy, individualism, and community in this text also allows for understanding the extended cultural and social significance of a spiritual practice from the Latin Caribbean in the United States, thereby augmenting knowledge about Latin American literature and culture. To examine the religious practices here, we must address the reasons why Perla turns to the botánica and her role as a community leader, and thus the character of Darío, as Perla's mentor, becomes significant.

Santería as Empowerment

When Darío moves into the town of Agua Mansa, the community immediately becomes suspicious of him. His behavior and dress are notable:

His left leg was shorter than the right. Both his ears were pierced, and he wore scarves wrapped around his head and adorned his wrists with bracelets made of shark teeth. He pulled into town one day, driving a trailer with balding tires and a cracked front windshield. He parked it down by the río and washed his clothes and bathed in the water there. (71)

Darío sets himself apart from the community with his eccentric appearance. Yet he demonstrates himself to be someone involved in various faiths. Darío opens the Botánica Oshún in order to assist the community, and participates regularly in church services. When he attends mass, the local church-goers comment on Darío:

Every Sunday, they saw him at mass, sitting up front, a cane tucked neatly between his legs, always the first in line to receive the Host, always first to shake the priest's hand. Perla's mother and some women at church looked at him as he passed, tipping his straw hat as he left San Salvador's. A friend of her mother said, "I heard he's a brujo. That he reads cards and talks to the dead. Could it be true?" "Pura mentira," the other woman standing with them added, glancing at Perla and her mother. "Te lava el coco." "The Devil," the first woman added. "That's what he is—the Devil." (72)

Despite Darío's faithful attendance at mass, his peculiar appearance and merchandise at his botánica in the Prospect Shopping Center mark him as clandestine and possibly evil, a witch or devil. One day when Perla walks into Darío's botánica and has a conversation with him, she discovers that Darío practices Lucumí, a faith taught to him by his mother. He explains to Perla:

A religion. Some call it Santería. It came from Africa. In the Caribe, the monks tried to convert the slaves working in the sugarcanes to Christianity. When the slaves refused, they were beaten. They prayed in secret in the woods and worshipped their spirits by hiding them as santos so the monks would never know ... She [Darío's mother] made me promise not to tell anyone what she taught me, not even my father. (76)

Darío's definition of his religion highlights elements of secrecy, violence, heritage, and a history of longevity. In time, Darío offers Perla a job at the botánica, and this opportunity becomes salvation from an increasingly meaningless life for Perla.

Even though Perla wonders what she can do to fill her life with purpose if she and her husband Guillermo cannot have a family, the decision to work for Darío at the botánica is still not an easy one. It requires some

soul-searching on her part. One night, at her parents' house for dinner, Perla reflects on her childless future and Darío's offer of employment: "When had this happened? When had she become this woman? Did she take a wrong turn somewhere? *I could walk away. Leave him* [Guillermo]. *Maybe he's* [Darío] *right. Maybe I do have it. Maybe he can teach me. Maybe he should*" (80, emphasis in the original). Perla's struggle for personal fulfillment in her marriage does provide the context and perhaps a certain motivation in considering Darío's job offer. Perla recalls how she tells Guillermo about her decision: "I want more ... If I can't have kids, I can have a job. I don't care what you want. I didn't have a say in any of it, of us not having kids. So you can't have a say in me getting a job" (81). Notably, this employment opportunity extended to her through the botánica affirms her personhood by allowing her to pursue her desire for fulfillment, regardless of her husband's opinion. María Teresa Marrero explains the significance of examining the practice of Santería within Latino/a literary works in terms of identity:

The practice of incorporating Santería in works of fiction by Cubans and Latinos in the United States, I believe, addresses more than literary tropicalization. More urgently, it suggests the creation and negotiation of a new cultural space for Latino self-identity (Flores and Yúdice 57-84). As an underlying tenet I entertain the concept that the Yoruba Lucumí religious practices need to be considered both as a *worldview* and as a cultural practice of political and gender significance. (141, emphasis in the original)

According to Marrero, the botánica and Santería can be linked to an assertion of identity and a sense of individual empowerment here for Perla. She demands her right to have a job as an exercise of self-definition. This claim to self and agency is only strengthened when further considering the spiritual context of the character of Darío.

Darío can be read as representative of Elegguá, a deity within Santería. Elegguá is described “as the energy of the universe, Elegguá who opens roads and possibilities” (82).⁷ Indeed, Darío gives opportunity to Perla when he informs her, shortly after opening the botánica, that he must leave town: “When I came here, it wasn’t to stay forever. It was just to open the store. To find someone to run it. Now I have to go again. Move to another town somewhere and start the whole thing over again. Perlita, I want you to take over the store” (83). Darío acts as Elegguá here in that he opens a new door in Perla’s future; he enables her to find self-empowerment as a spiritual healer and leader. Perla now has the ability to define a life for herself outside her home. Darío creates these opportunities of leadership for many people; he continually sets up these possibilities for the benefit of individuals and manifests the energy of communities. He is Elegguá; even his physical description as a short older man, who hobbles around on a cane (71-72), echoes a common depiction of Elegguá/Legba. In the African Diasporan religion of Voudou in Haiti, Legba is the counterpart deity to Elegguá of Santería. As the deity associated with crossroads and destiny, Legba’s depictions vary from a strong, healthy young man to an elderly, crippled man:

Legba who was life and its destiny, who was the Sun, itself destined to descend from the noon of each year, from the zenith of its ardent fire, has become an old tattered man shuffling down the road, with his crude twisted cane or crutch, a small fire in his pipe, a little food in his macoute, and sores on his body, as if the maggots had begun their work already. (Deren 99)

As a trickster figure, one who prompts people to make life-changing decisions and possesses greater strength and intelligence than appearance would indicate, Darío embodies all the internal and external attributes of the deity Elegguá/Legba.⁸ He and the Botánica

Oshún are critical in demonstrating to Perla how she can survive life’s disappointments and exercise the ability to redefine both her public and private selves through her work in the botánica. Nevertheless, Perla comes to doubt her abilities to advise and lead her community.

Portrait of Perla

The narrative overall presents Perla as a great spiritual force. The first pages of the novel, however, present an unrealistic description of Perla:

She was a Bruja. A Santa. A Divina. A Medium, Prophet, and Healer. Able to pass through walls and read minds, to pull tumors from ailing bodies, to uncross hexes and spells, to raise the dead, and to stop time. When doctors failed, when priests and praying were not enough, the people of Agua Mansa came to Botánica Oshún, to Perla. (3)

Perla is described as a witch, saint, god, medium, prophet, and healer all rolled into one person; supernatural abilities are ascribed to her, and people call on her when all other sources of assistance have failed. Such a grand depiction overwhelms the reader with Perla’s capabilities until the narrative undercuts its own initial portrait: “Perla could not do what they said or believed, could not float through walls and utter strange words, could not speak with the spirits of the dead. She never could, and she knew she never would. But Darío had said she had el don, the gift. It was strong in her. He had said so. And there were times she had even believed him” (11). Here, Perla becomes this oddly empowered character. She stresses her obvious inability to achieve supernatural feats, yet she and Darío believe she has the gift to heal.

In running the Botánica Oshun, Perla provides spiritual resources/supplies and advice to many members of the Agua Mansa community. All of the community members who go to the botánica are not direct adherents

to the faith of Santería, yet this point does not take away from the significance of the Botánica Oshun and Santería in this novel. Miguel A. de la Torre and Edwin David Aponte explain:

Today, there are indications of the ongoing influence and presence of African religious traditions among U.S. Hispanic groups that have no direct connection with Africa. An example is found in the many botánicas and spiritualists' establishments found throughout U.S. urban centers that contain a large Hispanic population. (34)

The presence and use of botánicas in Hispanic/Latino/a neighborhoods verify the centrality of Santería as a cultural practice regardless of direct racial heritage or religious affiliation. Accordingly, many people go to Perla and her religious-supply store when they have a direct request or problem in their lives, not necessarily as a direct exercise of faith; some other people are prompted to go to the botánica by their loved ones. The Agua Mansa community members who come to the botánica are not all practitioners of Santería, yet their reliance on Perla speaks to their many needs, belief in the prowess of this faith, and the efficacy of Perla as a guide. However, the person/client that tests Perla's spiritual skill and fuels doubt of her ability as a healer is a young, undocumented man from Mexico named Rodrigo.

When Rodrigo enters Perla's life, he comes with the express purpose of seeking comfort and learning from her, but in the end, Rodrigo and his story teach Perla about herself. Rodrigo tries on several occasions to enter Perla's botánica. When he finally has the courage to introduce himself to Perla at the botánica, he is slow to tell her the details of how his journey north has involved him in the sex-trafficking industry, and how he is now subject to the violent will of a United States citizen named Dwight, a man who beats and sexually abuses Rodrigo. He does tell Perla that he wants to learn English and shows her a book in which he has practiced English by writing interesting questions, a

few of which grab Perla's attention. The first question is, "*Who are you, exactly?*" (65, emphasis in the original). Perla responds to herself, "I am someone who is always trying to figure out who she is. When I was younger, I was a daughter. A best friend. A wife. An apprentice. Now I'm just Perla who runs the botánica" (66). Here, Perla does not allude to her role as a community leader or healer; in fact, she stresses her indeterminate state—"always trying to figure out who she is," and her role as someone who runs a religious-supply store and that is all. The appearance of Rodrigo and his book of provoking questions prompt Perla to consider who she really is to her family and her community. As she continues to read other questions in Rodrigo's book, Perla becomes increasingly doubtful of her abilities as a healer and community leader.

As Perla goes through Rodrigo's book, she comes upon another provocative question written in it that asks what the reader of the question is most ashamed of. Perla responds: "I am ashamed of the fact that I only agreed to do this job because it would get me out of the house. Guillermo spent all those years working, leaving me alone in the afternoons. No kids. No nothing. I felt like I had no life" (67-68). This question makes Perla confront her shame about her life-changing decision to work at the botánica. Perla agrees to work for Darío because she is not able to have the children that she wants with her husband. Guillermo has his work and Perla, and for him, that is enough, but Perla wants more. When she could not have it, she turns to other sources of fulfillment available to her, and the shame she feels stems from her guilt about resenting her husband for his inability to give her a child and anger at herself because she once thought of leaving him due to this inability (68). Perla does not take up religious leadership and healing out of a selfless desire to help others. She turns to it because her domestic life was unsatisfying. Consequently, she doubts her ability because her calling to this life was less than altruistic, but Darío counsels her on this point before she accepts the position at the botánica.

When Darío explains his religion to Perla, he details a history of personal sacrifice that applies to all who seek involvement with Santería. He describes how his price for membership into the faith was to endure Polio. His mentor was burned in a fire. Another spiritual practitioner that Darío knew was blind in one eye but had the gift of prophecy. Finally, Darío indicates that Perla's inability to have a child (which was due to her husband's infertility not hers) is the price she pays for her ability to lead and heal: "I felt it the first time you came in. But power like yours, like mine, like the woman I learned from, it doesn't come without a price" (79). To have this great power, Perla must "pay a price," which is too great and not something that Perla wants. "I want a family," she said, starting to cry. "Not power" (79). However, Joseph Murphy, noted scholar of African Diasporan religions, explains how an initiate into the religion often will suffer through a period of illness or loss right before making the decision to profess Santería:

This path begins with a call from an *orisha* [deity], usually first perceived as a disturbance in life. This can be a problem which might prompt a visit to a priestess or a priest; persistent headaches, difficulties with finding work, bad luck in love. To the trained eye these problems indicate the activity of an *orisha* seeking to arrest the attention of a spiritually naive person ... For those chosen, however, the *orisha* is sometimes demanding their very life. Many devotees remember that their call to the *orisha's* service came through a life-threatening illness. In the throes of the experience, an *orisha* reveals itself as both the cause of the crisis and the hope for its resolution. (91-92)

These encounters with illness or grief are what call the potential practitioner to the faith. Perhaps Perla's difficulties in conceiving a child are meant to force her to realize other possibilities of fulfillment in her life, such as running the Botánica Oshún, which is an

opportunity offered to her by Darío, a representation of the orisha Elegguá. Significantly, Murphy describes this period of difficulty as 'a call' that 'arrests the attention' of the afflicted and enables them to recognize the orisha as 'cause' and 'resolution' to the crisis through religious participation; Murphy does not label this time period as a "price to pay." Perla's doubt about her lack of altruistic calling and ability to heal should be alleviated after Darío presents this knowledge, but it is not.⁹ It lingers, and people like Rodrigo just worsen Perla's doubt and keep her worried about the individual over the community, so much so that she cannot recognize concerns regarding her own financial and physical well-being.

During one of Perla's annual physical examinations, she responds to her doctor's questions about her health and her lifestyle in a very telling manner. The conversation between patient and doctor reveal how responsible Perla feels as a leader and a healer for her community:

Ever thought about getting someone to help you out around there?
Perla said, "No."
You should. That way you could take a vacation. Relax. Travel.
I can't right now. (108)

Perla only considers these questions when she asks if the doctor has seen something in the tests that worries her. When the doctor responds "no," the concerns are put aside. Later, when talking to Alfonso, who plans on relocating his mini-market from next door to the Botánica Oshún to another shopping center with less expensive store rental space, Perla cannot help but think about why Rodrigo has not come to see her: "*He knows where I'm at. Burns or not. I've got other customers. I've got other things to worry about. If he needs me, I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere. Alfonso is. But I'm not*" (110, emphasis in the original). Perla's worry for Rodrigo's safety, fixating on the burns on his hands which she believes are the result of Dwight's abusive behavior, pervade her mind. Her reflections identify her as

steadfast; she has no plans to leave the Prospect Shopping Center for a more profitable location as Alfonso is doing, nor will she abandon her community. She regards Rodrigo's burns, which are inflicted by Rodrigo himself in a suicide attempt to end his torment with Dwight, as important, but if she cannot help Rodrigo, then she resolves to continue giving assistance to her neighbors until she can help him.

Despite the doctor's concern for her health and the possible financial benefits of relocating the botánica to another shopping center, Perla remains rooted to the physical community of Agua Mansa; she accepts this responsibility, and this is precisely the problem. She views the welfare of her people as *solely* her duty and that belief contradicts one of the basic premises of Santería, which is that it is a faith based on a reciprocal relationship between a community of believers and the deities: "The spirit of [S]antería is thus to be found in its orientation to Africa, the *reciprocal relationship between spirit and human beings*, and the shared manifestation of the spirit in communal dance" (Murphy 110, emphasis added). The main point explicitly here is the reciprocity between spirit and human entities, but implicitly, there is also the point of the reciprocity that should exist amongst people in a community. Believers, including leaders, are supposed to profess and practice their faith by rendering service to each other and the deities to be worshipped; believers are not meant to elect one leader to render service on behalf of the community. Again, Walter Mignolo's work factors in here as his description of a decolonial project mirrors Murphy's description of the reciprocal basis of Santería: "Building a world regulated by the principle 'living in harmony' requires both decolonizing the epistemic foundation of the colonial matrix of power and building decolonial epistemologies that legitimate 'living in harmony and reciprocity' rather than 'living in competition and meritocracy'" (25). The true aim of living and knowing for people should be harmony and reciprocity and not individual competition or acquisition of merit;

thus, the analysis of Santería and its leadership practices within Chicano/a (Latino/a) literature bears specific weight on American literature by allowing the critique of cultural and historical narratives of the United States by which its citizens understand themselves. Additionally, this critical examination of knowledge-construction engendered by the study of the tenets of Santería demonstrates the productive influence of a Latin American cultural practice in the United States. To return to the novel, no one member, leader, or deity is responsible for all, yet that is exactly the role Perla has ascribed to herself. This weighty emphasis on the individual over the community hampers Perla's efforts as a leader. Interestingly, the narrative also emphasizes the community over the individual in a priest's homily during a mass.

The Community Versus the Individual

While attending mass one day and again thinking about the fate of Rodrigo, Perla listens to a powerful homily. Father Madrid's words emphasize the communal elements of life and faith:

Do you see ruin? Do you see misery? Do you see something that needs to be changed? Then ask yourself: Am I doing enough? We must pray, yes. But we must also act. Take responsibility. For your community. For one another. For yourself. Let us go forth and do what is within our power to make things better. Instead of asking God simply to remove our obstacles, let us ask Him to give us the strength to remove them ourselves. Instead of throwing our hands up and saying 'It's too late, I can't do a thing,' let us implore Him to give us the ability to fix it, to change it. Instead of asking Him to solve our problems, let us ask Him to give us the wisdom and clarity to arrive at our own solutions. (178)

Perla bows her head and closes her eyes at the priest's words. Because Perla worries so much about Rodrigo, she cannot bring herself to heed the poignant comments that Father Madrid makes about the values of the individual and the community in matters of faith. Father Madrid speaks of each person taking responsibility for self and community, and his comments can apply to practitioners of both Christianity and Santería. In this way, no one person, not even a religious leader, is responsible for all. Specifically, in Santería, service and interdependence function as core values:

The spirits call to serve them is the same call to serve the community of [S]antería, for though the spirits offer spiritual wisdom and worldly power to the individual, it can be achieved only by humility before elders and generosity to juniors in the tradition. (Murphy 92)

Simultaneous consideration of the individual and the community is a key component of Santería. These values escape Perla's attention. Most importantly, ignorance of Santería's central attributes allows Perla's doubts to grow when she realizes how the size of her local community has dwindled over the years.

At the same mass celebrated by Father Madrid, Perla realizes how many people have left her immediate community in recent years, and she takes this loss to heart, possibly adversely affecting confidence in her leadership ability. She notes the direct decline in the number of people who have come to seek her assistance:

There were so few left Perla recognized. She remembered how there had been a time when she'd counseled parishioners outside near the drinking fountain before Mass, or had sat with them in the pews afterward, giving them recetas and novenas she carried in her purse. *Where did you go? Why did you leave?* she repeated, over and over, to herself. *Why? Why? I could have helped. I could have helped.* (178-79, emphasis in the original)

Perla laments the loss of her community members. The repetition of the question 'why' and of the statement 'I could have helped' show Perla's growing doubt about her own abilities. Perla interprets the people leaving as her own failure to assist them in the way that they needed, and especially difficult cases such as Rodrigo's continue to bring Perla's doubts to the forefront.

News of a badly burned body found along the banks of the Santa Ana River and Rodrigo's prolonged disappearance prompt Perla to search for him at the building where he stayed with Dwight, and here she solidifies her worst fears and doubts. The last time Rodrigo goes to Perla for help, she manages to care for his wounds and give clothes to him, but Rodrigo is frightened off by visitors to the store next to the botánica. When Perla arrives where Rodrigo was staying, scraps of flannel clothing confirm more violence has befallen Rodrigo: "She recognized the pattern—black and red checks. They were the sleeves of Guillermo's shirt, the one she had given Rodrigo to wear the day he vanished [...]. She didn't know what to think anymore—whether to stay or go, whether to call the police office in San Bernadino or not. She knelt beside the altar and cried" (211). Before she entered the residence where Rodrigo stayed, she created an altar by using a white candle, a jar of river water, Holy Water, and a stone head of Elegguá. In this moment, Perla resorts to the use of her spiritual abilities to secure the protection and perhaps location of Rodrigo, and they do not reveal a concrete answer. The only thing she finds is the flannel shirt she last gave him. Whether this find is interpreted as Rodrigo is still lost and alive or dead, it hits Perla hard and her doubts are strengthened. In the practical matters of deciding to stay or go and calling the authorities or not, Perla does not know what to do. She cries out of sadness for Rodrigo's continued disappearance and frustration at her own self-doubt. The lessening of these doubts only occurs when she sees the attribute of community in Santería at play, and this happens when news of another

young man's death circulates in the neighborhood.

Perla finally makes this critical realization of the value of community, particularly within the practice of Santería, when a neighborhood boy named Joey is run over by a car and killed. The people from the neighborhood gather around where Joey was run over and construct a makeshift memorial for him. Joey's mother, Angela, arrives and Perla joins the crowd in order to comfort the grieving mother. In order to further care for Angela, Perla brings her over to the botánica, and she demonstrates great confidence in guiding Angela:

Perla leaned in and asked her, "Do you know who I am?" Angela's hands still touched her son's dried blood. She shook her head slowly. "I can walk on water. The dead," Perla told her. "Spirits and saints. They talk to me. I just have to listen." Angela lowered her head and began to weep. "Look at me," Perla said, placing the rosary around Angela's neck. "I'm here to tell you your baby, he's fine. Where he is." ... "Don't worry," Perla said. Taking a pad and pencil, she wrote something down from memory—a receta, a saint's name, a prayer for the dead. "Listen to me," Perla told her. "Listen now. I'll help. I'll tell you what to do." (238-39)

Presently, Perla recovers her confidence. Her statements to Angela here directly demonstrate Perla's strength and ability as a healer and leader; she will help Angela get through this period of mourning for her son. Perla tells Angela what she needs to hear: that Joey is fine where he is now. The culmination of Perla's recovery of confidence presents itself in the manner in which her prescription is given, from memory and in a direct, authoritative tone. What accounts for this sudden removal of doubts? The answer to this question lies in who surrounds Perla and Angela in the botánica and what these entities show Perla and the reader about the true tenets of Santería.

Moments after Perla directs Angela in what she needs to do now, the simultaneous

emphasis on community and the individual in Santería becomes evident in the botánica. Perla perceives that she is no longer alone in offering assistance: "Perla felt them there, all those who had come and gone, who had sought her help and guidance. She felt them standing with her, their fingers wrapped around her own, their hands working with hers" (239). At this time, Perla makes a crucial recognition. She feels the presence of all those she has helped before; they are standing with her, giving her the strength she needs to lend to Angela in her grief. Moreover, as Perla and Angela walk back to the memorial site, they see people from all over the neighborhood gather:

Little by little the crowd grew until it filled the empty field, spilling into the parking lot and unto the street. There were members of San Salvador's church there, co-workers and friends of Angela, Joey's high school principal and some of his teachers. A reporter from the *Agua Mansa Courier* went around interviewing everyone, writing things down in a small notebook ... *So many. So many of them.* Perla began moving through the crowd, reciting a prayer, touching their hands and faces when the people gathered around her. They had felt ache and disappointment and borne witness to passing and loss. (240, emphasis in the original)

Perla feels and sees communal support for Angela in these scenes. Not only do the spirits of troubled people from the past return, but as Perla and Angela walk back to the memorial site, live community members rally to support Angela. Significantly, Perla notes the critical importance of the community gathered around to relieve Angela's sorrow and imparts to them her touch and prayer in recognition of what they have suffered in their lives. Here, the reader receives an accurate depiction of how faiths like Santería work best: as a solid and reciprocal relationship between the human and spiritual realms. Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert indicate that

this notion of a spiritual realm includes not only deities but the spirits of people who have died:

The cult of the dead (the egún or the ancestors) is distinct in Regla de Ocha [another name for Santería] from that of the orishas. Highly respected, the dead must be ritually invoked and propitiated before Eleguá himself and before anything else can be done, and their ritual space must be separate from that of the orishas ... The ancestors therefore play an essential role in sanctioning everything that is done in the Ocha house. (61)

Perla and her practitioners need each other just as much as they need a connection to the spirit world, which includes both the deities and ancestral spirits. The notion of community in Santería is all-encompassing and powerful; it is just as important as the role of any one individual, even a religious leader. This is especially true when this leader places excessive emphasis on her role to the point where she does not function in her best interests or the interests of her community, as in the case of Perla. This novel offers a strong critique of how falling prey to ideas of individualism and/or the myth of a meritocracy can be negative for the individual and community alike. Adopting religions like Santería can be empowering and significant to identity formation such as it is for Perla, but any enacting of its practices should uphold basic principles of this faith: no one individual is responsible for all; the earthly and spiritual community should be the focus. Consequently, Chicano/a (Latino/a) literary texts such as *Still Water Saints* keep diversifying the cultural narratives within American literature in necessary ways that are important to Chicano/a, Latino/a, and non-Latino/a individuals and communities alike, and proves the extended relevance of Latin American literature and cultural practices on the global scale.

Conclusion

The novel's conclusion demonstrates a critical lesson being learned by Perla about how Santería works best amongst its followers in a community setting. No one member, not even a leader, should be burdened unduly with the constant care of all her practitioners. Such a structure in a worship community runs contrary to the reciprocal and balanced relationship of service and prayer between practitioners and deities that serves as the foundation of Santería. Perla must always be mindful of not only the duties that she has to her practitioners but also of the obligations her community members have to each other and their deities of worship. That is the only way for the faith of Santería to flourish. She has the family that she has always wanted, as she once told Darío; now Perla just needs to lead them more effectively. Even the title of the novel "Still Water Saints" references Perla's "Agua Mansa" community members and their reliance on religious practice, thereby emphasizing the importance of the community in this story.¹⁰ In the aforementioned interview with Rigoberto González, Espinoza's explanation as to how he views his own role as a Chicano/Latino writer reaffirms the focus on the community and the individual: "I can't forget those who came before me—those Chicano writers who paved the way for me to be able to say it and write it," he says. "And I hope to be an advocate for other Chicano writers. We can't forget where we came from; otherwise, we won't know where we are going" (97). Espinoza defines his role by honoring a connection to past Chicano/Latino writers and realizing a debt to future Chicano/Latino writers, to serve as their advocate just as past authors once advocated for him, in the interests of not only the writers but of the entire Chicano/Latino community. The author verifies the same point that the story of Perla demonstrates in regard to resolving the tension between the individual and the community. In matters of faith and life,

simultaneous consideration of the singular and the whole must be practiced.

Notes

¹ Having lived in the Inland Empire of California for six years, this essay's writer admits a certain bias to this novel's author and setting.

² Although Santería is an African Diasporan religion with historical roots in the African slavery period of the Latin Caribbean and is practiced often in communities that originate from this region, it is a faith that has become practiced more widely over the years, especially in the Latino/a (being of Latin American descent) and Chicano/a (being specifically of Mexican-American descent) communities of the United States. Southern California is a region known for its high population of Chicano/as and Mexican-Americans, and not a high population of descendants from the Latin Caribbean; however, as the Latino/a population increases and its cultural practices spread, more and more non-Caribbean Latino/a and Chicano/a communities are practicing Santería or, at the very least, making use of religious supply stores such as botánicas. Perlá's community is one such example. Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert offer a working definition of Santería as "[a] complex religious system whose beliefs and rituals rest on the veneration of the orichas [deities] of the Yoruba pantheon of Nigeria as identified with their corresponding Catholic saints" (1997, 288). Later, the novel provides its own definition of Santería through Darío's character.

³ In order to clarify here, the "individual" refers to one person's mindset and actions, which are based primarily on an idea of the self and what it can achieve; meanwhile, the "community" refers to the mindset, actions, and interests of a larger collective of people. The tension between the individual and community is inherent in many instances of Chicano/a (and Latino/a) literature, and has been addressed implicitly in works such as Tey Diana Rebolledo's *Women Singing in the Snow: A Cultural Analysis of Chicana Literature* (1995). What is most compelling about such analyses is how different narratives show writers dealing with cultural archetypes and various facets of their subjectivity in order to negotiate an identity that can then be expressed and shared in voice and writing. In other words, such studies highlight how individuals negotiate, understand, and value themselves as

individuals and then complete the same processes as individuals who are a part of a larger whole, a community. In this essay, I propose to show this same (ultimately) productive tension between the individual and the community for the character of Perla within the important context of the religious faith and practice of Santería.

⁴ A "meritocracy" is defined usually as a system where one's talent and achievement directly result in one's place in society. Much like the belief that the individual matters more than the community, the existence of a meritocracy is embedded often within the culture and history of the United States and can be misleading in understanding the true value of community in the construction and function of a nation. I argue that Espinoza's use of Santería, exhibited through the characters and plot of the novel, question notions of individualism and a meritocracy.

⁵ Indeed, many other scholars have expanded on Anzaldúa's work here, specifically on the points of how religion and epistemology are connected and the productive tension between the individual and the community. Most recently, in *Spiritual Mestizaje: Religion, Gender, Race, and Nation in Contemporary Chicana Narrative*, Theresa Delgadillo describes Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of spiritual mestizaje as "a continual, cyclical epistemic inquiry" (9). Delgadillo also explains how Anzaldúa's autohistorías demonstrate the productive tension between the individual and the community. Autohistorías allow Chicanas and other women of color to tell their personal stories which link back to their larger communities, engender new frameworks of knowledge, and reveal the importance of memory: "The individual and collective story through which a new consciousness can be theorized is brought to light through memory" (19). There is much to be gained by looking at the tension and connection between the individual and the community, and viewing religious practice as epistemic inquiry.

⁶ Although Espinoza identifies as Chicano and writes of a geographic location and community that is identified traditionally as Chicano/a, I assert that the critical points that I make in this essay about Espinoza's narrative pertain to the larger Latino/a community and thus also pertain to discussions of Chicano/a and Latino/a literatures within the larger fields of American literature and Latin American literature.

⁷ The novel's definition of Elegguá is validated by many other texts that analyze the spiritual practice of

Santería such as George Brandon's *Santería from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories* (1993) and Michael Atwood Mason's *Living Santería: Rituals and Experiences in an Afro-Cuban Religion* (2002). It is also pertinent to point out here that the spelling of this deity's name varies from Elegguá, Elleguá, to finally Eleggúá, depending on the source material.

⁸There are two points to be made here. First, the partial description of Elegguá/Legba as trickster figures is not to be confused with the concept of the trickster within Native American religious and cultural practices. Santería, Voudou, and Native American religious and cultural practices use the notion of the trickster in a similar fashion (to be a figure who prompts people to make crucial decisions), but that does not mean that these usages or figures of the trickster are strictly interchangeable or negative. Second, the connection between Elegguá and Legba (Santería and Voudou) through the character of Darío underscores the racial diversity implicit and explicit in the Chicano/a and Latino/a communities. Although Santería is an African Diasporan religion and by itself highlights racial diversity within a community, the further connection to Voudou (another African Diasporan religion), which is rooted in a nation whose citizens are descendants mainly from Africa, just strengthens this point.

⁹Interestingly, Joseph M. Murphy notes another distinctive point about leadership positions and women in actual Santería communities that could support questions about Perla's ability to lead:

Yet despite women's relatively unrestricted paths for leadership, the largest *ilés* [communities], and the leaders with the widest reputes, seem to be men. Again this may have something to do with pressures against women rising as the scale and public nature of the *ilé* grows, or it may be their preference, or even natural ability to form smaller and more intimate communities. (87)

Putting aside issues with Murphy's description of 'smaller and more intimate communities' as a 'natural' attribute of women, one can see from his assertion that a female leader in a Santería community has to contend with both private and public perceptions about her ability to lead merely because she is a woman. These may be issues that implicitly trouble Perla, but Espinoza gives no textual evidence to this idea.

¹⁰"Agua Mansa" roughly translated into English is "Still Water" which references the novel's title.

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