During my time at the Cuban Heritage Collection, I conducted research on Afro-Cuban
religions, specifically Santeria, for my senior honors thesis. The Collection possesses valuable
resources, such as Lydia Cabrera’s books and notes, which were instrumental in writing my
thesis. The central figure of my research was Our Lady of Charity, the patroness of Cuba. In my
earlier undergraduate years, I had written a short research paper concerning La Ermita de la
Caridad del Cobre, the national shrine to Our Lady of Charity in Coconut Grove. The Goizueta
Foundation Fellows program allowed me to expand this research with materials in the Cuban
Heritage Collection, providing extensive resources about Santeria in Cuba.

My research was largely comparative, as I analyzed the roles of Our Lady of Charity and
her counterpart, the African orisha named Ochun. In order to create a basis for my research, I
first studied the slave community in the mines of El Cobre, Cuba. My primary resource for this
part of my research was Maria Elena Diaz’s book entitled *The Virgin, The King, and The Royal
Slaves of El Cobre*. In her book, she details the history of the slave community in Cuba from the
confiscation of the mines by the Spanish Crown to the Cuban war of independence. According
to Diaz, the slave community in El Cobre was unique because of royal status that the slaves
received once the mines were confiscated by the Spanish Crown. This new title brought
privileges that were not seen in other parts of the Caribbean, while also creating new challenges.

The royal slaves enjoyed access to a market, small shares of land, and the chance for
manumission. The slaves also had the opportunity to create a united identity and saw themselves
as cobreros, according to Diaz. They had special protection from various royal officials and
were even allowed to bring their complaints into court. The author mentions one such case when the cobreros won back their hunting grounds of Barajagua from Spanish officials that were trying to sell them to private landowners. They saw El Cobre as belonging to them, allowing them to fight against the injustices often incurred by their slave status.

As a result of their royal status, the cobreros were subject to labor-intensive building projects throughout Cuba. Men were often sent as far as La Habana to work on fortification projects, while their wives and children stayed behind in El Cobre with no assistance. They were even threatened with reenslavement, which would tear their community apart. Throughout these challenges, the cobreros called on the name of Our Lady of Charity, believing that they were her people. The Virgin was found floating in Nipe Bay during a storm by two indigenous brothers and a mulatto slave whom, in some accounts, claimed to be cobreros. She also chose to rest at the top of the hill above the El Cobre mines in a small hermitage, rather than in a cathedral among the Spaniards. During the war of independence from Spain, the cobreros also wore images of her on their armor for protection in battle, spreading the popularity of devotion to the Virgin throughout Cuba.

In my research, however, I also examine other explanations as to why the cobreros were so faithful to Our Lady of Charity. I chose to examine the process of syncretism, or the blending of cultures and religions, in El Cobre. Although Catholic missionaries worked diligently to evangelize the slaves in El Cobre, the majority of the slave population brought their African religions to the New World. I specifically examined the Lukumi faith of the Yoruban people of West Africa, whom comprised the majority of slaves in El Cobre and throughout Cuba. The Lukumi had a pantheon of deities, similar to the Greek pantheon, with each deity reigning over a specific area of life. What made these deities unique, however, is that they did not have one
consistent personality. The Lukumi believed in caminos, or paths of personalities, that each deity would take depending upon the situation they were facing. This made the Lukumi deities, or orishas, more accessible to their devotees, allowing them to adapt to their environment.

For the second part of my research, I focused on the African and indigenous elements of Our Lady of Charity, with an emphasis on the similarities between Ochun and the Virgin. I utilized Lydia Cabrera’s *Yemaya y Ochun*, along with works by Fernando Ortiz, Olga Portuondo Zuñiga, and Armando Ferrer. Ochun is known as the orisha of wealth and sensuality and is often labeled as a coquette. She is known to prefer gold bracelets, peacock feathers and the color yellow. She is the orisha that reigns over the rivers and the sweet waters, but her devotees also come to her for help with fertility. If an outsider were to observe these two figures, however, the connection between Ochun and Our Lady of Charity would not be apparent. The majority of my research, however, shows that these two icons are one in the same, with Santeria elements pervading into the Catholic realm and vice versa.

One of the more noticeable similarities, as demonstrated by Zuñiga and Cabrera, is the use of the color yellow. The mantle of Our Lady of Charity is adorned with yellow flowers, a departure from the usual blue color of her mantle. Another physical commonality between the two figures is the mulatto color of the Virgin’s face, making her an inevitable camino for Ochun. There were also historical and theological explanations for the syncretism of Ochun and the Virgin, as mentioned by Zuñiga and Ortiz. The Virgin chose to rest above copper mines, which Ochun was associated with in Africa. The association with water in the histories of these two figures also facilitated the syncretism that occurred. In a well known pataki among the Lukumi devotees, Ochun straightens her hair and lightens her skin in order to follow her people to Cuba.
It is possible that Ochun’s devotees saw Our Lady of Charity as Ochun coming to them from across the Atlantic.

African elements, however, must not be the only influences considered when studying Our Lady of Charity. In her book about the Virgin, Olga Portuondo Zuñiga considers the importance of indigenous influences. The flowers on the Virgin’s mantle are strikingly similar to the blooms of the maguey fruit, which was often revered by the indigenous for its magical qualities. Fernando Ortiz also notes the importance of indigenous influences on Our Lady of Charity. The inverted moon beneath the feet of the Virgin is popularly seen as a Catholic element, but Ortiz understands the inverted crescent moon as an indigenous symbol adopted by Catholic priests in Cuba. In indigenous cultures, the moon was often associated with fertility and the Mother Creator, long before the Spanish Catholics introduced the image of the Virgin Mary. One last indigenous influence that should be considered is mentioned by Zúniga. In the early 1900’s, the Virgin was restored after being damaged by intruders in her hermitage. It was found that her face actually contained corn particles, which was often used by indigenous peoples to construct their female deities. Zuñiga speculates the possibility that the image of the Virgin was modified by indigenous peoples before being found in Nipe Bay. Although the syncretism between Ochun and the Virgin is important, the indigenous influences must also not be forgotten.

After researching the African and indigenous elements that comprise Our Lady of Charity and her history, I concluded my research by focusing on the current tensions between Cuban santeros and Cuban Catholics. For this portion of my research, I used the Cuban Heritage Collection’s large collection of pamphlets concerning Our Lady of Charity from her shrine in La Ermita. I also used the Commemorative Album from 1936, the year of the coronation of the Virgin, along with various pictures and articles. I found that following the war for independence
from Spain, tensions between the Santeria devotees to Ochun and Catholic devotees of Our Lady of Charity increased. Santeria was demonized and Catholic priests tried to eliminate any residual elements of Santeria from Our Lady of Charity. In the Commemorative Album from Our Lady’s coronation, the majority of the album contained articles on the importance of the Eucharist and the Virgin as a white Mother to all Cubans, with little mention of the cobreros who spread her devotion throughout Cuba. This mission continues today, as many Cubans now live in exile in the United States.

La Ermita de la Caridad del Cobre in Coconut Grove is an excellent example of the struggles that still exist between the Catholic Church and Santeria devotees. Pamphlets, such as the ones I found in the Cuban Heritage Collection, instruct nominal Catholics about the importance of the rosary, confession, and communion. Priests often address the confusions between Our Lady of Charity and Ochun, and members of the confraternity of the Virgin have been known to chase away santeros that come to visit the shrine. Our Lady of Charity, however, cannot be seen as purely a Catholic saint, for that would deny her roots among the slaves of El Cobre. I would also argue, however, that she is also no longer a purely religious figure that can be claimed by Catholics or santeros. Since the victory against the Spanish, the Virgin has been removed from her purely religious realm into a unique category that combines both spiritual and political realms. She has been given the title of patroness of Cuba, and is often the symbol employed by political activists. In her shrine at La Ermita, she is enthroned behind a mural comprised entirely of political activists and a few historical figures, such as Fr. Felix Varela and Jose Marti. Although she continues to be the center of religious controversies, she is still an overwhelmingly unifying symbol for the Cuban people in exile. Whether she is worshipped as Ochun or as Our Lady of Charity, she is the protector of all Cuban people.