

XHERCIS MÉNDEZ
SUNY Oneonta

TRANSCENDING DIMORPHISM: AFRO-CUBAN RITUAL PRAXIS AND THE REMATERIALIZATION OF THE BODY

Once they crossed, they graced all things with the wisdom of Ashé.
Wind. Sky. Earth. Fire. Thunder. They deposited it in *otanes*, stones, in
the mossy underground of treacherous caves; in the caress of elegant
waterfalls; in forests imposing enough to assume the name Mountain; in
water salt and sweet to taste the opposite in things. In all winged
creatures including the butterfly. All four-legged. And two-legged. And
those who slithered on land, the color of coral, while their sympathies
lived in Sky. And with those yet to be born.

— M. Jacqui Alexander *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 2006

Introduction:

One of the greatest obstacles to thinking “gender” in the “post-colonial” geographies of the Caribbean and beyond, is that not enough attention has been paid to the dehumanizing and racializing work that “gender” has performed and continues to perform in those contexts. In historicizing “gender,” feminists of color such as María Lugones (2007) and Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (1997), have called for a paradigmatic shift in the way “gender” has been theorized and deployed as a cross-cultural category of analysis.¹ Implicit in their work are at least two key concerns with the deployment of “gender” as a cross-cultural category of analysis, particularly as it relates to formerly colonized or enslaved people of color. First, there is a tendency within hegemonic theorizations of “gender” to obscure “gender’s” colonial history and reconstitution. As Lugones provocatively suggests, if “gender” as a category of analysis has been a useful and indispensable lens from which to read and unmask social, political and power relations arranged around the differences *between the sexes*, then it does so only for those who could be recognized as human. Attentive to the particular status of the enslaved, Lugones examines the role “gender” played in the making of a culturally and racially-specific humanity, such that bodies of color were transformed into its constitutive outside. In other words, not only were racialized bodies excluded from having ‘gender,’ but ‘gender’ in the Americas and the Caribbean referred specifically to the “Euro”-centric² arrangement of bodies and power that colonizers mapped

1 Maria Lugones, “Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System.” *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (2007), 186-209; Oyěwùmí, Oyèrónké. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

2 “Euro”-centric here refers to the culturally-specific social arrangements that seemed to

out for themselves, as humans.

Secondly when reduced to the social relation between "Men" and "Women," both on some level argue that "gender" as a category of analysis limits, distorts, and even mistranslates our understanding of social and power relations in "non-Western"³ contexts and ultimately forecloses our ability to recognize alternative logics at work. For instance, Oyēwùmí claims that the reading of "gender" into pre-colonial Yoruban society has effectively (mis)translated relations that were organized around the logic of seniority and produced gender/sexual hierarchies where there were none before. Rather than presuppose the universality of "gender," these scholars call us to critically engage with "gender," particularly in its relation to colonial and postcolonial contexts. Indeed, they call us to be attentive to the ways in which "gender" was (re)constituted in and through the practices of colonialism, colonial violence, and the racialized relation to bodies of color. They call us to be attentive the colonial trappings of "gender" and the role it plays contemporarily as a colonizing force. Together, they call for a theoretical and methodological crisis in "gender," a clearing that could also be productive for rethinking racialized "bodies" and engaging the complexity of social and power relations in "postcolonial" spaces.

This article builds from these contributions towards a decolonial feminism and explores the ways in which Afro-Cuban ritual praxis contributes to a reconstitution of the "body," and or "(re)materialization" of the "body," as it relates to questions of "gender." Rather than presuppose a "human body" restricted in and through a dimorphic and racialized conception of "sex" and ultimately "gender," at stake in my tentatively broaching the conceptualizations of the "body" and the "human" at play in Regla de Ocha, a religiosity more popularly known as Afro-Cuban Santería, is the possibility of recognizing some of the co-existing logics being obscured in and through "gender" analyses of these practices. As a result, this article on the one hand seeks to make sense of

be prevalent in the geographical spaces that later get understood as "Europe," and inform spaces that later get identified as "Western." Namely, this include places such as France, England, Spain, and later the United States. I bracket "Euro" because these categories were not stable but rather in-the-making in many of the examples that I consider. See Maria Lugones, "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System," *Hypatia*, 2007. See also Kelvin Santiago-Valles, "Race, Labor, Women's Proper Place, and the Birth of Nations: Notes on Historicizing the Coloniality of Power," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2003), 47-69.

3 My reference in this paper to the "Western" vs. "non-Western" is not simply a reference to geography or the division of space, but more broadly to a set of logics, Euro-centric epistemes and ways of being in the world that emerge from the expansion of the colonial empires. "Non-Western," in this sense, then conjures up those knowledges and ways of being that have been understood as "backward," "primitive," "irrational," and even satanic in relation to the "rationality," and "holiness" of the empire and its agents. In terms of lineage, the "Western" can claim to be a direct descendent of the Greek and Roman civilizations while the non-Western can not, all of which are ways to mark the relative inferiority of the non-Western. However, my interest is in exploring and centering those sets of knowledges that have been historically relegated as waste. It is with this in my that I depart from and center practices/knowledges that could be characterized as "Non-Western."

the complex ways in which material “bodies” are (re)configured in and through ritual praxis, while on the other hand, consider what these practices have to offer in terms of rethinking “gender” and its concomitant social relations in a decolonial vein.

My turn towards Santería, is not as a spiritual programmatic, but instead a political investment in considering those spaces that “marginalized” and or “abjected” communities have turned to in liberatory ways. Notably, the analysis of religion as it relates to questions of “gender,” sexuality, and power has primarily been concentrated on an examination of monotheistic religious forms. This has resulted in the tendency to characterize religion writ large as innately restrictive and disciplining of women’s bodies and queer subjectivities. Rather than construe those who have turned to these religious forms as complicit in their own oppression or as duped by “tradition,”⁴ also a tendency in much feminist theory, I instead want to consider how Afro-Cuban Santería can, if at all, contribute to upending or destabilizing dominant arrangements of bodies and power. Part of the hope is to destabilize the tendency to think of “religion” as fundamentally antithetical to feminist/decolonial struggle.

With that said, many scholars of Afro-Cuban Santería may find my approach to these practices troubling and perhaps even idealistic or romantic. Indeed, much of the research that I have encountered has argued that the beliefs, a reference for divination proverbs and/or narratives about the Orishas, and ritual practices actually reinforce heterosexist and gendered normativities.⁵ My theorization of these practices is not an argument for a reversal of that assessment, but instead an effort to explore *ingredients* that stand in tension with “heteronormative” and “gendered” arrangements of bodies and power. I will not argue that Santería is on the whole non-gendered, but explore some of the non-gendered logics at work in its practices, non-gendered logics that often are and can be mobilized in resistant ways and to greater effect. It is an effort to explore the myriad of ways in which the narratives about “sexual difference” are not *the whole story*.

Reiterative Rituals and (Re)materialization

According to Judith Butler, and her significant contributions to the thinking on “bodies” and “gender,” bodies are consistently being (re)materialized through

4 Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

5 See Mary Ann Clark, *Where men are wives and mothers rule: Santería ritual practices and their gender implications* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005); David H. Brown, *Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Daisy Rubiera Castillo, “La Mujer en la Santería o Regla Ocha: Género, Mitos y Realidad” in *Afrocubanas: Historia, pensamiento y prácticas culturales* (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2011), 107-132; Tomás Fernández Robaina, *Cuba: Personalidades en el Debate Racial*, (Habana, Cuba: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2007); Aisha M. Beliso De-Jesus, “Becoming Santería: A Transnational Study of Cultural Politics, Media and Religion in Cuba and the United States” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2009; Salvador Vidal-Ortiz, “Sexuality’ and ‘Gender’ in Santería: Towards a Queer of Color Critique in the Study of Religion” (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2005).

"reiterative ritual." In her book, *Bodies that Matter*, Butler denaturalizes the fixity of "bodies" by denaturalizing the very notion of Matter. She argues that Matter is not a fixed "thing" unto itself but should instead be understood as "a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter."⁶ In this sense, the "human body" is not a material "thing" but an effect of the processes through which it gets materialized. While Butler is concerned explicitly and primarily with the regulatory norms that materialize human bodies as sexed, and therefore gendered, her emphasis on "reiterative ritual" as the process through which sex gets naturalized is suggestive for thinking about the power of ritual for materializing bodies in other ways.⁷

Notably, "ritual" in Butler's use is conjured up as a disciplining and constraining force. It comes to symbolize those sets of norms meant to regulate the body into an identification with "sex" and therefore "gender." Ritual, for Butler, carries with it a negative and disciplining connotation since she uses it as a referent for the repetition and citation of an ideal body, or rather an ideal pair of bodies, that of "Man" and "Woman." Butler also uses "ritual" to refer to the sets of idealized relationships between these bodies, namely the heterosexual imperative. Accordingly, it is the reiteration of this ideal pair that produces the boundary between those who can be understood as "properly gendered" and those who have been relegated as their constitutive outside. Indeed, it is the reiterative "ritual" that produces the "abjected" outside of sex/gender, those bodies that do not and cannot fit.⁸

However, at the same time that ritual can be understood as productive of constraining and regulatory forces, most often in its symbolic connection to "primitive" religions, it is also a site where many of the "abjected" find enabling possibilities. At least within the context of the Caribbean, ritual has produced spaces where abjection can be and historically has been transformed into powerful valuations. Ritual has also been the space where "those who are not yet 'subjects,' but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject," can and do activate another reality and possibility, a reality not fully captured or subsumed by a colonial logic or imagination. It is with this in mind, that I set out to unpack some of the ways in which those "bodies" that have historically and contemporarily been materialized as the constitutive outside of "gender," "humanity," nation, body politic, etc., in this case Afro-Cuban "men" and "women" of varied sexualities, have found a ground within Afro-Cuban Santería from which to think of their "bodies" otherwise.

Before moving on, it is important to note that my understanding of "non-gendered" is not simply a referent to the fact that a sexual distinction between body-types is not being articulated. In other words, its not just that the differences between "male" and "female" are not foregrounded in key aspects of ritual praxis. For me, non-gendered also refers to the ways in which other

⁶ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 8.

⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁸ Ibid., 3.

dominant categories of classification, other codified differences between bodies, are reworked. The deployment of non-gendered in this sense, recognizes the ways in which the “sexual difference” has historically been (re)constituted in and through “Euro”-centric notions of race, class, and sexuality. This is as much the case in Western scientific practices as it is the case in Cuban Revolutionary versions of masculinity and femininity. Non-gendered in this more expansive usage then addresses itself to the deep imbrication between these categories, without which a hierarchy of humanity could not have been articulated.

Thus, I would argue that the non-gendered within Santería dwells in the spaces created by practices that draw little distinction between body-types, such as is the case in ritual initiation and possession. Indeed, regardless of body-type, racial background, sexual orientation, there are practices in Ocha that are open to every-“body.” My attentiveness to these practices, is not an effort to discount or ignore other practices within Ocha that have over time become body-type specific.⁹ On the whole, more scholarly attention has been paid to the practices that are body-type specific, which have been held up as evidence of the misogynistic, heterosexist, and patriarchal tendencies in Santería.¹⁰ And while I do not disagree with most of the critiques that have been wielded at practitioners who deploy ritual practice and spiritual interpretations to the exclusion of “women” and “gays,” I also wish to couple these critiques with the more open possibilities also made available through practice. Rather than assume that the practices in Santería that are reserved for particular body-types represents a definitive devaluation of the “female,” or Patriarchy writ large, or that the overriding logic of practice is that of “sexual difference,” I instead want to consider the range of possible interpretations and co-existing logics that partially explain these varied arrangements of bodies and power.

This is not an effort to argue that non-gendered logics replace gendered normativities within and beyond practice, but instead an effort to hold the two in

9 Regla Ocha and Regla Ifá are both labeled Afro-Cuban Santería because of the ways in which the two cults interrelate and at times overlap. However, I would like to point out that there are significant differences between the two, especially as it relates to this question of practices that are/are not body-type specific. For instance, “women” are “homosexuals” are excluded from participating in Regla Ifá. See David H. Brown, *Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). However, that is not the case within Regla Ocha. For the purposes of this paper I have concentrated on the practices in Ocha, in part because, I want to explore the extent to which highly gendered formations within the dominant society do not necessarily overdetermine or completely obscure non-gendered logics within these ritual practices. Part of the interest is considering the ways in which these non-gendered logics can also be mobilized to counter such exclusionary enactments.

10 Aisha M. Beliso De-Jesus, “Becoming Santería: A Transnational Study of Cultural Politics, Media and Religion in Cuba and the United States” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2009; Daisy Rubiera Castillo, “La Mujer en la Santería o Regla Ocha: Género, Mitos y Realidad” in *Afrocubanas: Historia, pensamiento y prácticas culturales* (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2011), 107-132; Salvador Vidal-Ortiz, “‘Sexuality’ and ‘Gender’ in Santería: Towards a Queer of Color Critique in the Study of Religion” (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2005).

tension and explore the kind of dynamic relationality made available through practice. Thus, making it possible to consider the ways in which hierarchical distinctions drawn between practitioners are not necessarily grounded in observable differences between material bodies.

The Multiplicitous Divine: Sacred Flows and Polymorphic Orishas

In terms of how “Western”-trained scholars have approached the question of “gender” in Santería there seems to be an interesting tension in their attempts to center a dimorphic understanding of the “body” in a religiosity whose practices appear to cosmologically and practically resist that logic. Beyond dimorphism, the following section will consider the range of “bodies” discursively produced and inhabited by the divine entities of the Supreme Being, Olodumare, and the pantheon of divinities, known as the Orishas, within Santería. I do so in order to illustrate the extent to which divine “bodies” are conceived of as fluid, plural, multiplicitous, and polymorphic. An examination of the fluidity present among divine “bodies” is significant to understanding how the relationships established with and to these sacred entities can provide alternatives for how practitioners can think and inhabit their own “bodies.”

Before getting into specific practices such as ritual initiation and possession, it is first necessary to gain some sense of Ocha conceptions of the Supreme Being. Santería is monotheistic in the sense that there is an understanding amongst practitioners of an ultimate Supreme Being. Although often translated as synonymous with Christian and Catholic conceptions of “God,” there are some fundamental distinctions between the two that alter how practitioners interact with the divine. For instance, within Ocha there is an ultimate Supreme Being, Olodumare, who lies beyond the bounds of human comprehension.

To illustrate the point, I visited the Yoruba Cultural Association during a 2012 trip to Cuba, where there is a museum displaying installments on the various Orishas and divine beings. The display set aside to represent Olodumare was comprised of two large pieces of white cloth that came draping down from the ceiling above. The white cloth functioned to demarcate without completely enclosing a wide “empty” space. Notably, the display was designed to represent the degree to which Olodumare is unfathomable. Indeed, Olodumare as the Supreme Being is so beyond human comprehension that this divine entity’s representation is comprised of an acknowledgment that does not confine this being to a specific kind of materiality. Indeed, Olodumare can not be reduced to a specific body-type or even pronoun, for to do so is to proclaim a degree of comprehension of this divine being that is not possible. Instead, the Supreme Being resists being contained by any one set of meanings or representations.

As a result, I would argue that this being remains *non-gendered/non-racialized* in the most expansive of senses. Instead of binding Olodumare to a specific form or type of materiality, this being is indirectly and implicitly characterized as a force that is both fluid and multiple. Olodumare remains fluid, in that this being is not circumscribed by any particular embodiment or representation, and multiple in that this being is comprised of many “aspects” as you will see below. Indeed, Olodumare is different from any other of the sacred entities in the Ocha

pantheon, since according to practitioners this Being “was not created, but has always existed.”¹¹ Unlike some of the Orishas, practitioners can not be inhabited or possessed by Olodumare, since this Being is too expansive to be contained by any one “human” “body.” Moreover, due to this Being’s transcendence, practitioners do not address themselves to Olodumare directly, at least not in the ways that Catholics and Christians pray directly to God. Instead practitioners direct their attentions to “aspects” of Olodumare that can be approximated, namely the forces represented by and known as the Orishas.

In addition to its monotheistic qualities, Santería, is also considered to be polytheistic. It is characterized as polytheistic because of the ways in which practitioners direct their attentions and worship towards a pantheon of divine entities known as the Orishas. Ocha practice is comprised of both ritual behavior and hundreds of proverbs and myths, known as *patakines*, that provide insights into the world of the Orishas and serves as models for humans to follow. As I mentioned before, the Orishas can partially be understood as “aspects” of Olodumare that also have the ability to move and act in the material world of humans. However, in order to get a sense of the layers of fluidity, multiplicity and plurality at work we must consider the relationship between Olodumare, the Orishas, and “humans.”

According to one of the origin myths, Olodumare created all of the Orishas and then enlisted their help in the creation of all things, including “humans.” In order to enlist the Orishas’ assistance in the creation of all things, Olodumare distributed small amounts of their¹² power to each.¹³ For instance, the Orisha Aganyú was given the power to melt stones with its breath and create volcanoes, while Orisha-Oko was given the secret of the harvests, and Babalu-Aye the power to cause and cure illnesses. Although each Orisha was given an aspect of Olodumare’s divine power, no One Orisha holds a gift or power greater than any other. Moreover, they collectively represent the expansiveness and multiplicity of the Supreme Being.¹⁴

Part of the divine gift that was shared by Olodumare with the Orishas, is the force of ashé. While some describe ashé as a supernatural power emanating from Olodumare,¹⁵ others describe it as “the-power-to-make-things-happen.”¹⁶ For

11 Migene Gonzalez-Wippler, *Santería: The Religion, A legacy of Faith, Rites, and Magic* (New York: Harmony Books, 1989), 24.

12 I am referring to Olodumare in the plural, “their,” as opposed to the singular, “its,” in recognition of the ways in which this Being is comprised of multiple Orishas and forces. To refer to Olodumare in a singular fashion to me seems to perform a reduction away from the plural and expansive ways in which this Being is most often described by practitioners.

13 Natalia Bolívar Aróstegui, *Los Orishas en Cuba*. Habana: Ediciones Union, 1990, 66-9.

14 Bolívar Aróstegui, *Los Orishas*, 67.

15 Mercedes Cros Sandoval, *Worldview, the Orishas and Santería: Africa to Cuba and Beyond*. Gainesville: Florida, 2006, 387.

16 Margarite Fernandez-Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole religions of the Caribbean : An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo*. New York: New York University Press, 2003, 31. See also, Marta Moreno Vega, *The Altar of My Soul: The Living Traditions of Santería*. New York: One World Books, 2000.

many practitioners, ashé is a primary ontological principle that can be described as the “vital force [that] permeates all aspects of life,” the force that “is believed to bring balance, well-being, and harmony.”¹⁷ Practitioner/scholar Joseph Murphy, describes ashé as “growth, the force towards completeness and divinity,” as well as “a current or flow, a ‘groove’ that initiates can channel so that it carries them along their road in life.”¹⁸ As a result, everything from prayers to rhythms, to offerings to possession, “tunes initiates into this flow.”¹⁹ Ashé is understood to flow down from Olodumare to the Orishas and from the Orishas to all living things. Indeed, ashé flows down from the divine and is shared and deposited in all living things, from “human” hosts, to animals, to sacred stones.

Thus, as “aspects” of Olodumare, Orishas are also conceived of as manifestations of ashé. As ashé, Orishas can themselves be channeled in the form of divine energy by initiates in sacred rituals, as well as literally move through and inhabit different forms. For instance, Orishas as ashé are capable of inhabiting everything from stones to the variated “bodies” of their initiates. The capacity to manifest in various material forms then, suggests that the Orishas are not only fluid, but also capable of shape-shifting. This is relevant to the question of what kind of “bodies” are materialized in and through ritual since, even when the Orishas are understood and/or represented as embodying a specifically anthropomorphic, and therefore dimorphic, form there is always an impermanence, and/or ephemerality about such embodiments. Indeed, while the Orishas are in some sense conceived of as powerful flows that can be in(corp)orated in all kinds of material forms, these flows of power are not necessarily reducible to any One of those inhabitations.

In addition to manifestations of ashé, the Orishas are also often conceived of as “forces of nature.”²⁰ According to practitioner/scholar Marta Moreno Vega, each Orisha holds domain over a force of nature as well as represents an “aspect” of that “nature’s energy.” For instance, the Orisha Yemayá is not only closely associated to the ocean, but wields the ocean’s power and as such can be considered as embodied by the ocean. Similarly, the Orisha Oyá can be represented by the power of the wind and Changó by the strength of thunder and lightening. In this sense, the Orishas are divine energies that also manifest materially in and through these forces of “nature.” It is important to note that although anthropomorphic representations of the Orishas, that are highly sexed and gendered, do exist and are widely circulated among practitioners, these dimorphic representations *do not* replace the ways in which the ocean, wind, thunder and lightening are also embodiments of the Orishas. Despite their ability to move and act in the material world of humans, Orishas “bodies” seem to resist being contained in or confined by any One form. To only foreground the Orishas as dimorphically sexed or racially gendered is to obscure the extent to which Orishas are themselves fluid and can be understood to manifest in and flow between multiple forms and materialities.

17 Fernandez-Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean*, 31.

18 Ibid., 32, cited in.

19 Ibid., 32.

20 Moreno Vega, *The Altar of My Soul*, 14.

The plurality and multiplicity of Orishas, however, is not solely confined to their ability to flow and manifest in various forms. It is also reflected in the Orishas being perceived as sacred entities who themselves are comprised of multiple “aspects,” avatars, and paths. For instance, Obatalá, the Orisha credited with creating the earth and literally giving shape to the “bodies” of “humans,” is recognized as having anywhere from 16 to 24 different paths and avatars.²¹ If in some instances, Obatalá is represented as a wise old man, in other instances this being is represented as an old woman who is sensitive to the cold; as an old blind woman; as a primitive “macho,” or a male warrior; as a reckless youth; and even as disembodied “divine thought,” who wishes to remain invisible to others.²²

Interestingly enough, some of these representations might seem contradictory in nature. Indeed, how can Obatalá be both a wise old man and a reckless youth? How can Obatalá be understood as both a blind old woman and a male warrior? To complicate matters further, in Cuba, a correspondence was drawn between Obatalá and the Virgin Mary. As a result, Obatalá is often also represented by the Virgin's iconography. Notably it has been linkages such as the one drawn between Obatalá and the Virgin Mary that has led many scholars to think of Santería as a space of “gender”-crossing, or “queering.” However, such assertions seem to ignore the history of those terms and the multiplicitous logic, fluidity and polymorphism being expressed at various levels of Santería's myths, proverbs, and practices. Considering the example of Obatalá, the Orishas are polymorphic in the sense that they have the capacity to manifest in different forms, such as that of an old blind woman or disembodied “divine thought.” Indeed they do not inhabit bodies that are fixed or even necessarily dimorphic. As flows of energy and sacred power, the Orishas instead have the ability to inhabit and move through different kinds of “bodies” which allows them to materialize in various forms.

Other instances where Orishas are represented and manifest as polymorphic illustrate the extent to which the logic being expressed in practices such as ritual initiation and possession is more nuanced and expansive than what practitioner/scholar Mary Ann Clark suggests when she characterizes Santería as a space of “gender”-crossing or female-normativity.²³ Elegguá, for instance, is another major Orisha that is often referred to as the guardian of the crossroads and/or the gatekeeper. In Cuba, this sacred being serves as a messenger between the visible and invisible world, and no ceremony can begin without addressing Elegguá first. According to some, Elegguá is the Orisha that holds the keys to one's destiny.²⁴ Elegguá, is responsible for opening and closing doors, which is part of the reason why this divine entity is often located near doorways. Similar to Obatalá, there are different paths associated with Elegguá which also include a range of materializations and forms. For instance, in one path Elegguá is represented as an old man who is short in stature, while in others Elegguá is represented as Echu's wife; as an adult woman; as a mischievous little boy; at

21 Bolívar Aróstegui, *Los Orishas*, 80; Cros Sandoval, *Worldview*, 188-190.

22 Bolívar Aróstegui, *Los Orishas*, 80-2.

23 Mary Ann Clark, *Where men are wives and mothers rule*, 25-46.

24 Bolívar Aróstegui, *Los Orishas*, 35.

times able-bodied and at others missing a leg.²⁵ It is interesting to consider the extent to which no One version of Eleggúá can fully encapsulate the collective diversity of this sacred being. Eleggúá, just as Obatalá, is all and yet none of these representations.

Additionally to the Orishas that seem to move between more or less recognizable body-types, there are other Orishas that remain even more fluid and expansive in terms of their representations. A major Orisha by the name of Olokun is intriguing for this very reason. The owner of the ocean, Olokun, has in some instances been represented as half-human/half-fish or sea creature, and in others remains completely undefined.²⁶ During my trip to Cuba, Olokun was described to me, not as male or female, but simply as the “depths of the ocean.” Olokun, dwells at the bottom of the ocean and for the most part is referred to in androgynous terms. Interestingly enough, androgyny here is not just a reference to the fact that practitioners shift between referring to Olokun as male in some instances and female in others, but also that Olokun is understood as being simultaneously male and female as well as neither male nor female. Moreover, Olokun's androgyny extends to the fact that this being can be understood as neither human nor animal, simultaneously human and animal, and ultimately indeterminate. Far from problematic, this indeterminacy and/or opacity is bolstered by a divination verse associated with Olokun which states, ‘No one knows what lies at the bottom of the sea.’²⁷

It is with this multiplicity in mind that I resist the assumption that Western conceptions of “gender” permeate all spaces at all times, recognizing that a “perceived difference between the sexes,” at least as it relates to the divine within Santería is far from salient.²⁸ Part of my concern is that the potentially liberatory efforts to identify spaces for “gender-crossing,” “queer” inhabitations of the body, and even spaces for women's empowerment, have centered and further entrenched notions of a fixed dimorphically sexed human body along with the “universal” meanings of “sexual difference,” at the expense of being able to recognize the fluidity, multiplicity, and plurality at work within these ritual practices. This reduction by analyses that function to gender, becomes evident when you consider the fluidity, multiplicity and plurality at play in the “bodies” the divine. It is with this in mind that I argue that the presupposition of “gender” in many ways forecloses our ability to recognize the non-gendered logics at work, non-gendered logics that include the ability of divine “bodies” to move through and in fact inhabit various material forms and that play out in the human-divine relations established through practices such as ritual initiation and possession.

25 Ibid., 41-53.

26 Ibid., 148.

27 Mary Ann Clark, *Santería: Correcting the Myths and Uncovering the Realities of a Growing Religion*. (Westport, Connecticut, 2007), 62.

28 Joan Wallach Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053-1075.1059.

(Re)constituting and (Re)materializing “human bodies”: An examination of Ocha ritual praxis

In this next section, I consider the ways in which practices such as ritual initiation and possession introduce and in(corp)orate practitioners into a particular cosmological order that includes alternative conceptions of the “material body” and new ways of relating to the world. Here, I am specifically attentive to instances where the “sexual differences” between practitioner’s “bodies” are not especially relevant to or foregrounded in ritual practice. Moreover, I consider how the polymorphic manifestations of the sacred provide a theoretical space from which practitioners can think and inhabit their “bodies” in a variety of ways.

Some of the questions raised here are, to what extent does the fluidity, multiplicity, and plurality that is part and parcel of the conceptualizations of the divine pertain only to the sacred Orishas? In what ways, if any, is the fluidity, multiplicity, and polymorphism of the Orishas transmitted or extended, even if in somewhat attenuated forms, to the materiality of the practitioners themselves? Indeed if, as Butler suggests, we are to think of the “body” as materialized through a process of interlocution that establishes a grid of intelligibility, a range of pre-determined coordinates that codify one's choices and predispositions, then what kinds of “bodies” are materialized in and through the “reiterative rituals” of Afro-Cuban Ocha? In order to get a sense of the layers of complexity at work in the relationship between the Orishas and their “human” children, let us consider how the “human” “body” is ritually addressed and ultimately reconfigured in its relationship to the divine.

Santería is an initiatory religion, in that entry into this cosmos is marked by ritual initiation and subsequent initiations mark different levels of knowledge accumulation by the practitioner as well as their elevation in the religious hierarchy.²⁹ However, ritual knowledge is not only transmitted through the rituals themselves, but also in the planning for these ritualized events.³⁰ Notably, becoming initiated into Ocha is not something anyone can just simply decide to do. On the contrary, there are several steps prior to initiation that must be taken if a initiate-in-the-making is to become a full-fledged Ocha “priest” or “priestess.”³¹ For instance, a potential initiate must have a divination consultation where important details regarding their spiritual path are revealed. During the consultation a potential devotee discovers information such as who is

29 Michael Atwood Mason, *Living Santería: Rituals and Experiences in an Afro-Cuban Religion* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 34.

30 Elizabeth Perez, “Cooking for the gods: Sensuous ethnography, sensory knowledge, and the kitchen in Lucumi tradition,” *Religion* 41, no. 4 (2011), 665-683. Her conception of ritualization extends to less formalized instances of knowledge transmission and accumulation. For Perez, it is not just in ritual practices, such as initiation, that knowledge is transmitted, but also in non-ritual spaces, such as the prepping of food for an event.

31 I bracket this terminology because practitioners of Santería aren't quite the same as a priest would be understood in Christianity.

the Orisha that rules their head and whether or not they need to “make santo,”³² or in other words proceed with initiation. Within Ocha, every person born has an Orisha associated with them. Knowing one's Orisha becomes important because initiation into the religion means becoming a “priest” of that particular Orisha. It is the divinity that has an official claim to one's head, and ultimately one's body. Becoming initiated also means learning about the Orisha in the same way that one learns about ancestors or any other person with whom one seeks to have a meaningful relationship. Accordingly, this means seeking out information about the Orisha's life, history, relationship to others in the pantheon, their characteristic gestures, music and dance, favorite foods, animals, colors, designated days of worship, numbers, and representative objects. A practitioner familiarizes themselves with the Orishas myths as well as learns to execute the sets of rituals associated with their particular divinity. While practitioners are commonly introduced to and “given” multiple Orishas during ritual ceremonies, it is understood that there is a primary Orisha that rules one's head.

However, the official beginning of the relationship between the “human” initiate and their corresponding Orisha is marked by the process of ritual initiation, known variously as the *asiento*, *coronación*, or *kariocha*. Although there are several rituals that take place prior to initiation, I will concentrate on the ways in which the specific weeklong event known as the *asiento*, calls practitioners to reformulate their conceptions of their “bodies,” particularly in relation to the nascent and soon-to-be deepened connection to the divine. Like everything else within this religiosity, initiation entails a complex exchange between human and divine forces and “bodies.” However, we can begin by thinking about this process as most scholars and practitioners of Santería initiation have characterized it, as a kind of rebirth.³³ In Ocha, the “material body” of “humans” is the site of this rebirth and therefore the primary focus of ritual attention. Here, I am interested in being attentive to how the “human body” is situated and perceived in ritual initiation and to what extent the logic implicit in these practices differs from that of “sexual difference.”

While many scholars of Santería have provided descriptive accounts, few have focused their attention to the ways in which the “human body” is rematerialized in ritual practice. The closest example of research done in that direction is that of practitioner/scholar Michael Atwood Mason, whose book entitled *Living Santería* explores the ways in which ritual events and daily practice contribute to the formation of a new “habitus” for practitioners. He applies Pierre Bourdieu's conception of the “habitus” to Ocha practice, to explore how Santería knowledge “becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them.”³⁴ Mason's research is attentive to how the “body”

32 According to Joseph M. Murphy, the use of the term to “make santo” “emphasizes the role of human action in constructing the presence of the spirit out of symbolic ingredients.” *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994, pg. 93.

33 Moreno Vega, *Alter of My Soul*, 282.

34 Wacquant 2005: 316, cited in Zander Navarro, “In Search of a Cultural Interpretation of

absorbs ritual knowledge and how practitioners learn to use their bodies in different ways as result. For instance, practitioners learn how to prostrate themselves before spiritual elders in ritual practice to the point that it becomes "natural" to do so. In addition, Mason successfully traces various shifts in practitioners' subjectivity as he follows them into the religion. However, I find his attentiveness to the "body" in practice useful for also thinking about how the "body" becomes materialized in different ways.

Contrary to the dichotomous and dimorphic conceptions of the "human" "body" implicit in notions of "sex" and "sexual difference," I would like to explore at least five significant ways in which "human" "bodies" are (re)materialized in and through ritual practices. Notably I understand the conceptions of the "body" that emerge through practice, not as distinct, but as interrelated and interdependent. To begin with, we can think of the "human body," in its relation to the divine, as a ritual "object." On the one hand, the "human body" is treated in much the same way as other "objects" are treated and engaged during ritual activity. While on the other hand, part of the process of initiation is the preparation of the "human body" for its role as a sacred vessel and/or container for the Orisha. The *otanes*, the sets of sacred stones that represent specific Orishas, are a great counterpoint from which to gauge the similarities between how "objects" and "human bodies" are prepped for their newfound relationships to the sacred.

For instance, during initiation, a set of stones are gathered from a location associated with the Orisha that is going to "be made." These stones are to be ritually treated in order to collectively become the tangible embodiment of the Orisha. Mason describes the process as follows:

These small stones are gathered at the river,...after being cleaned, each stone is interrogated with the coconut oracle. The oracle reveals if the stone has an oricha within it, which oricha dwells there, and if that stone and its oricha 'eat with the head' of the initiate. A simple initiation will require twenty-six stones each of which is asked these three questions;...These river stones are then placed in containers for the different orichas....They become the 'foundation' upon which the orichas' presence rests and is built.³⁵

It is important to note that the process to discover whether a stone houses an Orisha, and which particular Orisha it houses, is similar to the divination process used to determine which Orisha rules an initiate's head. As "objects" that will become central to the creation of altars and future ritual praxis these stones have to be specially identified through divination, just as an initiate-in-the-making has to be identified through divination. Depending on the result, the identified "objects" must be purified, consecrated, and gathered together along with other ritual "objects" that will collectively represent the Orisha. In order for these stones to become fully activated and "alive" as tangible embodiments of the Orishas, they must first be ritually cleansed through the use of particular herbs

Power: The Contribution of Pierre Bourdieu," *IDS Bulletin* 37, no.6 (2006), 11-22, 16.
 35 Mason, *Living Santería*, 70-1.

associated with that Orisha. In addition, they must be placed in close proximity to older *otanes* of the same Orisha that have already been “made.” Finally they become fully consecrated through the ashé, blood full of divine power, that flows onto them and “feeds them” during the ritual sacrifice and offering. Once a new Orisha is “made,” the consecrated ritual “objects” are placed into a soup tureen and given to the practitioner after their own process of purification and consecration has been completed. The soup tureen filled with religious sacra then becomes one of the official dwelling sites of the Orisha and the material base, *el fundamento*, for future rituals.

Similar to the *otanes*, “human bodies” also have to be purified and ritually consecrated in order for the Orisha to come “alive” in them. As practitioner/scholar Jessica Hagedorn describes in her book entitled *Divine Utterances*:

during the seven-day initiation process, the iyawó is *ritually cleansed several times* to get rid of the bad spirits that are believed to have accumulated in her “former” (that is pre-initiation) life. The ritual cleansing not only involves *washing the iyawó with an herbal mixture*, but usually requires *shaving the iyawó’s head*, to make explicit the symbolism of cutting away/shaving off the physical reminders of the pain, injuries, and other toxic experiences the iyawó might have suffered previously.³⁶

Notably, the treatment of the “body” as a ritual “object,” does not entail a degraded status or location within Santería. It is different from the notion of being “objectified” in a Western sense, in that “objectification” signals a reduction of one’s humanity. On the contrary, as Hagedorn suggests, being treated as a ritual “object” instead marks the possibility of a rupture away from the negative experiences in one’s pre-initiation life, which may include experiences meant to reduce one’s humanity.

Moreover, “objects” in this cosmos are not reduced to “passive things.” Quite the opposite, all sorts of “objects” are bought into a living relationship with “humans” and rematerialized as the living embodiment/manifestation of the Orishas, what one scholar refers to as the creation of a “*cosmos subjetivizado*.³⁷ Indeed, “objects” are transformed into living entities that need to be “fed,” taken care of, and communicated with. This living relationship to “objects” is evident in altar and ritual practice, when practitioners attend to their *otanes* on specific days of the week by offering them their favorite foods or drinks, or when initiates provide larger offerings, such as the ritual sacrifice of animals, in times of greater need. However, ritual “objects” are significant, specifically, in their role as dwelling sites for the Orishas, in the same way that “human bodies” as “ritual objects” become another site where the Orishas can potentially be made manifest.

In other words, initiation is the process through which the “human body” is

³⁶ Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances: The Performance of Afro-Cuban Santería*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001, 214, emphasis added.

³⁷ Bolívar Arostegui, *Los Orishas*, 26.

reconstituted as a non-gendered sacred vessel or container for the Orisha. Part of initiation as a praxis is to prepare the “human body” to serve as a vessel for the Orisha to both descend upon and “mount” during ritual possession. As a result the “human body” becomes another “container” or “object” for the Orisha to temporarily inhabit. Some scholars of Santería have described possession as a somewhat violent displacement of the human host’s consciousness in an active taking over of their “bodies.” Unlike other “bodies” in the cosmos, there is something particular and special about “human corporeality,” in that the materiality of “humans” provides the Orishas with a living, breathing, opportunity to communicate directly with their devotees, touch their “children,” and provide them with counsel and healing energy. In addition, the materiality of “humans” is different in that they allow the Orishas to sensorially experience the tangible pleasures of the material world, such as eating, drinking, and dancing. The temporary “borrowing” of an initiate’s “body” in possession illustrates the extent to which “bodies” are produced as necessarily *shared* with the divine.

Second, practices such as ritual possession, rematerialize “human bodies” as open, porous, and ultimately permeable to divine forces. I would argue that the relation of the Orishas to “human bodies” functions similar to that of ocean currents to a sea sponge. For instance, ocean currents are able to flow in, through, and out of sea sponges. The water that enters these porous sites flows through the sponge, leaving behind bits of “food” for the sponge to feed on. As the water flows in, through, and back out of the sponge, the exchange provides an opportunity for the sponge to be fed and ultimately cleansed of any material waste. Similarly, Orishas as powerful flows of ashé and divine energy, are also able to flow in, through, and out of “human bodies” during possession. This flow of energy, not only deposits ashé within the practitioner being possessed, spiritually “feeding” and cleansing its host, but ashé also radiates outwards through the host to be shared with the rest of the participating community. In other words, the “human body” is both cleansed through this force as well as participates in the healing and cleansing of others in their possessed state. The materiality of the “human body” functions as both a sacred vessel for the Orisha and a channel for communal well-being.

The head of the practitioner is the central site of this divine-human exchange, as it is the head that is made permeable through ritual for the Orisha to enter. Indeed, it is the head that receives the ashé and makes possible a sacralized body. Notably, it is the non-gendered head that is foregrounded here rather than the “human body” as dimorphically “sexed.” It is the non-gendered head that allows the “human body” to be permeable, open, and available to these invisible forces.³⁸ The stability of the “body” as a “fixed materiality” is troubled by a practice like possession. Without a permeable conception of the head an Orisha can not descend upon a human subject, in an ecstatic engagement of the mind.³⁹ During possession, the head as well as the mind are perceived as fluid sites

38 Here I want to thank Agustín Lao-Montes for his notes on this point re: the head as a non-gendered site of divine exchange.

39 Anthony Ephirim-Donkor, “Akom: The Ultimate Mediumship Experience Among the Akan.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 1 (March 2008), 54-81.

where Orishas have the power to enter and take over, in a mutually beneficial mental and spiritual exchange with their human "children." Unlike dimorphic and dichotomous conceptions of "sex" and the "body," this kind of permeability to outside forces opens up a range of possibilities for how practitioners can and do inhabit their material "bodies."

Thirdly, this openness to invisible forces calls practitioners to conceive of their "bodies" as protean, as a shape-shifter of sorts. In the same way that a strong current can transform the shape of a sea sponge, albeit temporarily, so too can the influx of an Orisha or other invisible force alter the physicality of the initiate. During possession, the "body" shifts from being that of the "human's" to that of the Orisha's. This often entails both metaphysical and physical transformations in those being inhabited. As I mentioned earlier, not only does each Orisha have their own set of stories, favorite foods, and colors, but they also have their own set of identifying rhythms and trademark gestures. For instance:

Elegguá dances with a red and black *garabato* (hooked staff); Shango raises his hand, symbolically touching flashes of lightening in the sky while swinging his red double ax and sticking out his tongue as a symbol of fire; Oshún dances with a fan, as does Yemayá, who moves like the waves of the sea; Obba dances with her hand covering one of her ears, enacting the myth where she was fooled into cutting off her ear; Ogún swings a machete; Ochosi's movements recall a hunter shooting arrows.⁴⁰

Regardless of how practitioners move in their daily lives, possession often requires initiates to exhibit the behaviors and trademark gestures of the incoming spirit. Consequently, this entails exhibiting transformations in an initiate's physicality, which includes and is not limited to changing their voice or speaking patterns, moving between languages, or contorting their body in unusual body postures as they manifest the possessing spirit. To give you a sense of what that may look like in action, consider the following example:

Suddenly, a girl in her early twenties who had recently become initiated, wearing white clothes and a white headdress, became possessed with her santo, Obatalá. She transformed completely. *Her young face was now that of a very old woman.* She had great difficulty standing upright, and she was breathing heavily. An old "aspect" of Obatalá had taken over her body, and she danced slowly.⁴¹

Scholars such as Mary Ann Clark and Yvonne Daniel, have considered such instances illustrative of "gender"-crossing, because the "gender" of the practitioner does not align with that of the possessing Orisha. For example, Yvonne Daniel in her book entitled, *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé*, makes the claim that "male"-bodied devotees who embody a "female" deity are considered "female" for the

40 Johan Wedel, *Santería Healing: A Journey into the Afro-Cuban World of Divinities, Spirits, and Sorcery* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2004), 71.

41 Ibid., 74, emphasis added

purposes of the ritual and vice versa.⁴² However, I would like to suggest that a far more complex and nuanced conception of the “body” is at work, one that has non-gendered logics as part of it. In the example above, the “sex” of the “body” manifesting the Orisha seems to matter less than the fact that the “girl” of twenty is capable of physically transforming from “young” to “old” and from “human” into one of the “aspects” of Obatalá.

In a similar example, practitioner/scholar Raul Canizares writes:

A young girl of about fifteen, Andres' niece, began to tremble violently. Someone made a motion to assist her, but Zena shouted, 'Don't touch her!' Barbarita, as the girl was called, jumped up and fell hard to the ground; she then sprang up with eyes bulging, her face transformed. Her dancing was now brusque, manly. She swung and invisible sword or axe. The crowd became ecstatic. Shouts of welcome to the orisha resonated throughout the ilé [house of the Santer@]. "Shango 'ta 'qui!" "Cabiosile, Baba-mí!" (Shango is here! Welcome, my lord and father!).⁴³

Obscured by the gender analyses of these practices, and there characterization as spaces of “gender”-crossing, is the extent to which initiates “bodies” have the potential to become something beyond their worldly form as well as something beyond the meanings attached to their worldly bodies. In this way, possession provides one space where practitioners are ritually unhinged from their bodies and transformed into the Orishas themselves. Lydia Cabrera, one of the earliest anthropologists of these practices, cites practitioners as saying, “Al que esta montado, ‘como el no es el, sino *que es el Santo*.⁴⁴ This translates into “those who are mounted are no longer themselves, *they are the Santo*.” Clark tells us something similar when she writes, that the act of possession fundamentally disrupts Western conceptions of minds and bodies.⁴⁵ It is an act where “*the body of the neighbor is temporarily [transformed into] a sacred body*.⁴⁶ Not only is the host taken over by the sacred being, but more importantly the host is *transformed into the sacred being*.

However, it is not just the capacity to transform into the Orisha that makes the “human body” protean. Indeed, it is also protean in its ability to manifest multiple Orishas and even past ancestors through the same materiality, the same “body.” Notably practitioners are, in some sense, available to be possessed by multiple kinds of spirits and are physically transformed, albeit temporarily, through each inhabitation. As a result, ritual events provide spaces where practitioners are able to materially embody the plurality and multiplicity of the range of Orishas themselves. Thus, initiates “bodies” are both theoretically and practically capable of shape-shifting into the various Orishas that inhabit them.

42 Yvonne Daniel, *Dancing wisdom: embodied knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005, 23.

43 Raul Canizares, *Cuban Santería: Walking with the Night* (Vermont: Destiny Books, 1999), 13-14.

44 Lydia Cabrera, *El Monte* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 2000), 40, emphasis added.

45 Clark, *Santería*, 96.

46 Ibid., 96, emphasis added.

Fourth, within these human-divine connections the “body” can be understood as layered or what I would like to think of as palimpsestic. In her book, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, woman of color feminist philosopher M. Jacqui Alexander posits the notion of a palimpsest as a way of troubling the centrality of linear time. For Alexander the idea of the palimpsest is useful for thinking about time because as she writes, it is:

a parchment that has been inscribed two or three times, *the previous text having been imperfectly erased and remaining therefore still partly visible....The idea of the “new” structured through the “old” scrambled, palimpsestic character of time,...thus rescrambles the ‘here and now’ and the ‘then and there’ to a ‘here and there’ and a ‘then and now,’ and makes possible what Payal Banerjee calls the ideological traffic between and among formations that are otherwise positioned as dissimilar.*⁴⁷

Applying this idea of the palimpsest to the “body” is useful for thinking about how practitioner’s “bodies” can be multiply perceived. For instance, even if practitioners understand their “bodies” along highly “gendered” and dimorphic lines, they are simultaneously called to conceive of their “bodies” as non-gendered ritual “objects” and sacred vessels permeable to incoming divine energies and forces. Far from fixed, they are also called to think of their “bodies” as protean in their ability to shape-shift into the Orishas and other spirits, including all the multiplicity and plurality that such polymorphic transformations entail. The “body” in this sense is made plural, palimpsestic, in that there is more than one entity present at one time. The body is layered, in that it doubles and triples as human materiality, sacred object, and divine actor. It is palimpsestic in its coupling of “human corporeality” plus supernatural power and personality. Consequently this becomes significant to thinking about the extent to which possession is reducible to dimorphism, and can be considered an act of “gender”-crossing. The logic here seems to suggest a far more complex vision of the “body” at work.

In other words, there is a practical/praxical rupture between what one sees and what effectively is. For example, in the description of possession above while one may be seeing the “body” of a young girl in her twenties, it is Obatalá who is effectively being perceived as present. Similarly in the second possession account, it is not the “material body” of the fifteen year old girl that is being perceived but instead the successful manifestation of Changó. Notably, this conceptualization of the “human body” is different from the logic at work in analyses that read these practices in gendered ways. There instead seems to be a radical disruption of a dimorphic conceptualization of the body, in that the fusing of “human-divine” energies, produces the possibility for practitioners to rematerialize in a variety of ways, including ways that can be understood as non-gendered.

Finally, I would argue that the newfound relationship to the divine reconstitutes

47 M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 190, emphasis added.

the very corporeality of the “human,” such that the head, skin, and bones of an initiate becomes sacred. One’s body in no longer one’s own, but instead is literally shared with the divine. As Joseph Murphy describes in his book entitled, *Working the Spirit*:

the *orisha* is not just “on” the initiate, but also “in” her or him. By a variety of symbolic actions the *orisha* is placed both “upon” the individual as the seat of the spirit, and “within” the individual as the *spirit's vessel*. By ingestion, anointing, and incision the sacred ingredients which “make” the *orisha* are literally placed inside the body of the initiate. She or he eats and drinks *orisha*-consecrated foods, is soaked in *orisha*-valent poultices, is infused with *orisha*-active herbs and preparations. The spirit, now dwelling “in” the initiate, can be shown or manifested through her or his actions in public ceremony an in ordinary acts of generosity and power.⁴⁸

Practitioner/scholar Hagedorn adds that during initiation:

A mixture of herbs, water, and other secret ingredients that embody the head *oricha* is “installed” (rubbed onto) the *iyawó*’s shaved head, after which the *iyawó* sits under a *trono* (throne) bearing the colors and attributes of her head *oricha*. It is from the images of the installation and throne that the initiation ceremony is called *asiento*, or “seating.” The head *oricha* is “seated” in the *iyawó*’s head, *symbolizing the iyawó’s sacred potential*, and then the *iyawó* is seated on the throne, *symbolizing the respect she is to be accorded as a result of this sacred potential*.⁴⁹

Rather than solely perceiving one’s “body” in secular scientific terms, whether it be the stuff of skin and bones, or the stuff of “sex” and “sexual difference,” there is a concerted transition towards reformulating one’s “body” as something beyond the worldly, as something potentially divine. Identifying which *Orisha* has laid claim to your “head” is part of the transition towards (re)constituting one’s materiality as sacred, as an initiate-in-the-making takes steps towards being integrated into that *Orisha*’s lineage as their “human” child. However, initiation does more than officially recognize a new practitioner as the “child” of the *Orisha*. It also provides a process by which the *Orisha* is figuratively and literally in(corp)orated into the “body” of the new initiate. Indeed, initiation is the first instance where the two are figuratively and literally merged within the “human,” opening the pathway to a more sustained and deepened connection to the divine.

With each visit of the *Orishas*, the line between “human” and “divine,” “material” and “sacred” becomes blurred in this in(corp)oration and deep association. The *Orishas* deposit their *ashé* into the “body” of their hosts with every visit and/or inhabitation and that *ashé* radiates out to others through physical contact with that “body.” However, the notion that one’s materiality

⁴⁸ Joseph M. Murphy, *Working the Spirit:Ceremonies of the African Diaspora* (Boston:Beacon Press, 1994), 95.

⁴⁹ Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances*, 214, emphasis added.

has become sacred is not as ephemeral as the Orishas' visits. As Hagedorn points out in a footnote, the line can become so blurred that even though the respect being paid to the new initiate is theoretically directed at the Orisha that rules their head, many practitioners often demand this respect for themselves.⁵⁰

Conclusion:

This article has been attentive to the ways in which Afro-Cuban Santería not only presents practitioners with a set of divine "bodies" that are fluid, multiple, and polymorphic, but it also provides practitioners with a practice through which they can reimagine and reconstitute the meanings of their own "bodies" and very materiality. Far from being a matter of simple dimorphism, practitioners "bodies," as I have illustrated in the examples above, are simultaneously conceived of as non-gendered ritual objects, as sacred vessels, as protean, shape-shifters, and as "human" and "divine." The "human body" is multiply perceived, a *palimpsestic body*, that negotiates the tensions between "contradictory forms" in ways that are not mutually exclusive.⁵¹ In other words, having dimorphic and highly gendered conceptions of one's own body does not totally erase or subsume the fluidity and transformative possibilities also at work, and vice versa.

While many scholars and practitioners of Santería have characterized and experienced this religiousity as highly "gendered," this article has focused on aspects of ritual practice that can be characterized as non-gendered. Rather than presuppose and further entrench dimorphic conceptions of the "body" as well as Western-centric understandings of "sexual difference" through an analysis that that unwittingly "genders," I would argue that being able to recognize these non-gendered ingredients becomes important for making possible alternative, and even decolonial, arrangements of bodies and power. For indeed, it is in the engagement with the divine that practitioners "bodies" and their social relations are called upon to be rethought, reconfigured, reconstituted, reimagined, and ultimately reborn.

XHERCIS MENDEZ is a Visiting Assistant Professor in Women's and Gender Studies at SUNY Oneonta and a Ph.D. candidate in the Philosophy, Interpretation, and Culture program at SUNY Binghamton. Her research explores the ways in which ritual practice can and does shift how we understand questions of "gender," embodiment, religiosity, and power as they pertain to Latino/a and Afro-descendent populations in the Caribbean and the U.S.. Her work brings together Women of Color and Decolonial Feminisms, Modernity/Coloniality Studies, and Latina/o and

50 Ibid., 232-233.

51 According to Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, polytheistic religious practice often entails "living with several different moral or truth claims and negotiating the tension that arises from sameness and difference without excluding one or the other" (9). I find her characterization suggestive for thinking about how the practices of Santería involve living with multiple conceptions of the "body" that then do not operate in a way that is mutually exclusive. Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, "Yoruba's Don't Do Gender: A Critical Review of Oyeronke Oyewumi's The Invention of Women: Making African Sense of Western Gender Discourses" (n.d.), www.codesria.org/Links/conferences/gender/BAKARE%_YUSUF.pdf. Accessed 2011

Africana cosmologies, philosophies, and ways of knowing in an effort to explore alternative grounds for the (re)making of social relations, histories, intimacies, and resistant possibilities.

©Xhercis Mendez

Mendez, Xhercis. "Transcending Dimorphism: Afro-Cuban Ritual Praxis and the Rematerialization of the Body," in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 13 no. 1 (Winter 2014): 101-120.