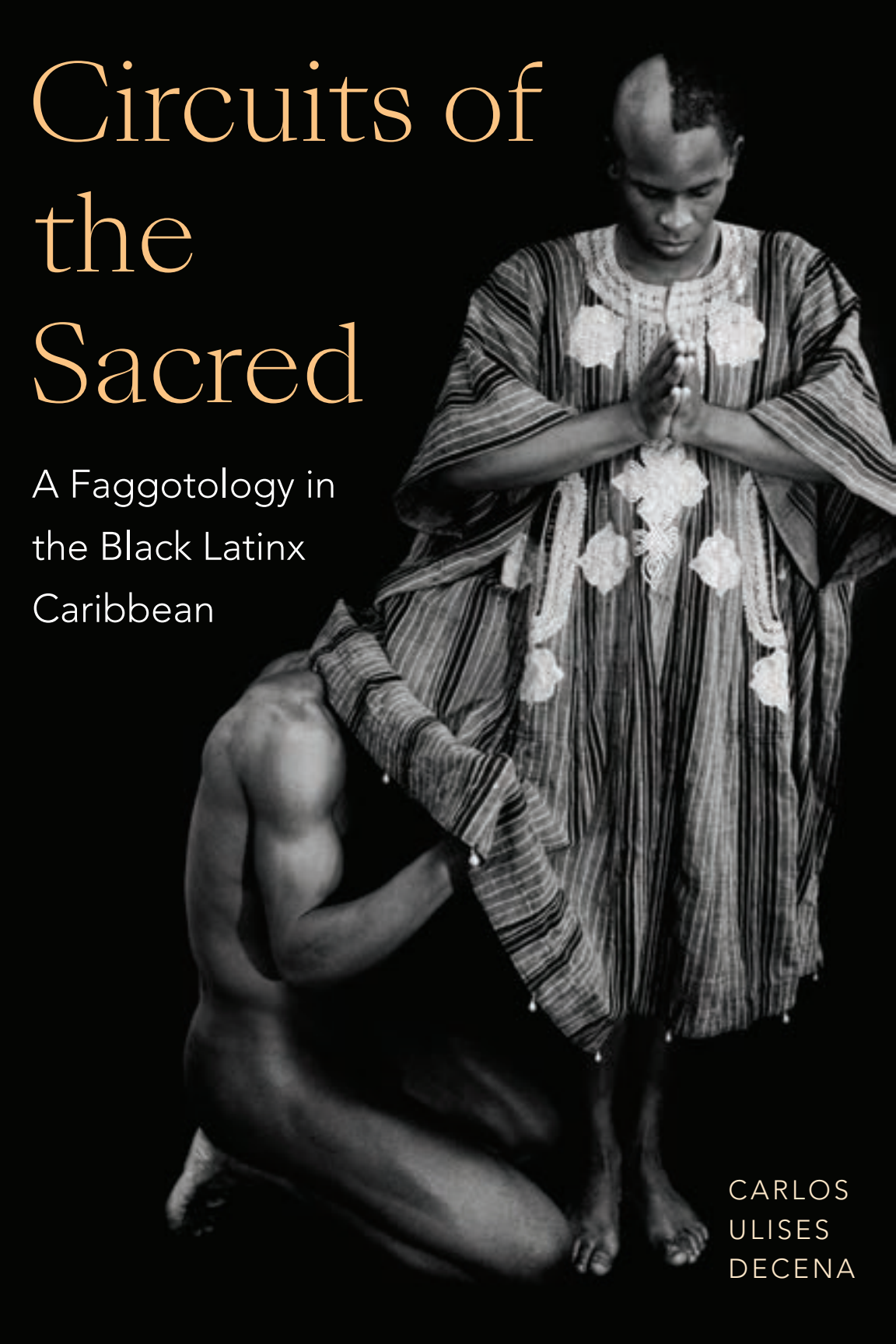
Circuits of the Sacred

A Faggotology in the Black Latinx Caribbean



CARLOS ULISES DECENA

Circuits of the Sacred

A Faggotology in the Black Latinx Caribbean

WRITING MATTERS! a series edited by
Saidiya Hartman, Monica Huerta, Erica Rand, and Kathleen Stewart

Circuits of the Sacred

CARLOS
ULISES
DECENA

Duke University Press · Durham and London · 2023

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Designed by Aimee C. Harrison
Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro, Avenir LT Std, and
SangBleu Kingdom by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Decena, Carlos Ulises, [date] author.
Title: Circuits of the sacred : a faggotology in the Black Latinx Caribbean / Carlos Ulises Decena.
Other titles: Writing matters! (Duke University Press)
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2023. | Series: Writing matters! | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2022039177 (print)
LCCN 2022039178 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478019442 (paperback)
ISBN 9781478016809 (hardcover)
ISBN 9781478024071 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Decena, Carlos Ulises, 1974– | Gays, Black—Caribbean Area. | Black people—Caribbean Area—Religion. | Gay immigrants—Caribbean Area. | Queer theory. | Feminist theory. | Caribbean Area—Emigration and immigration—Social aspects. | BISAC: SOCIAL SCIENCE / Ethnic Studies / Caribbean & Latin American Studies | SOCIAL SCIENCE / LGBTQ Studies / Gay Studies
Classification: LCC HQ76.3.C27 D44 2023 (print) | LCC HQ76.3.C27 (ebook) | DDC 306.760109729—dc23/eng/20221018
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022039177
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022039178

Cover art: Rotimi Fani-Kayode, *Under the Surplice*, 1987. © Rotimi Fani-Kayode. Courtesy of Autograph, London.

A mis tres Jotas: Jordan Joaquín, Joshua Ulysses, y Joaquín Alfredo

En honor a Robyn Magalit Rodriguez y a su hijo,
Amado Khaya Canham Rodriguez,
minamahal na umalis kaagad sa amin (the beloved who left us too soon)

Contents

Part I. Caminos

Part III. Trances

Gratitudes

For the breath of life that animates my journey with and beyond the creature of ink and paper you now read, I am grateful for the ancestors and divinities holding space for me. May this instrument bring many closer to what freedom can be.

I am privileged to work at a public university where many of us believe and practice learning for ourselves, for others, and for the many who can dream and aspire through our work, our teaching, and the gift of accompanying one another and our students. My colleagues in Latino and Caribbean Studies and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies have held space for the visions articulated through this study for more than a decade. I am especially appreciative for the mentorship, friendship, and companionship of Ethel Brooks, Zaire Dinzey-Flores, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Michelle Stephens, Deb Vargas, and Omaris Zamora. Nelson deserves special recognition for supporting my thinking about this study through an appearance and exchange with students in one of his graduate seminars and for sponsoring the workshop on my manuscript with Roberto Strongman and Edgar Rivera-Colón. Thank you to Omaris and Zaire and to all the colleagues in attendance for accompanying me in working through some of the ideas in this book at the Black Latinx Americas Labs before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. This book has enjoyed the companionship and mentorship of many friends connected to Rutgers University throughout the years, including colleagues in the Institute for Research on Women's 2020–21 Seminar, led by Arlene Stein and Sarah Tobias, and the Tepoztlán Institute for the Transnational History of the

Américas' 2021 virtual meeting. Mary Hawkesworth provided invaluable and rigorous feedback on the manuscript as a whole. Emerging scholars who have collaborated with me, listened to me, and redirected me as needed include Camilla Belliard-Quiroga, Alok Vaid-Menon, and Rafael Vizcaino. Yomaira Figueroa-Vásquez mentored me through an important rewrite of the introduction of the book—what a marvel to be mentored by one of your own mentees! Judith Rodriguez has become a dear friend and fierce interlocutor with this text; it is sharper and richer because she has given the most transformative feedback I have ever enjoyed receiving for my work; I only hope I might model for others the kind, loving, and rigorous engagement that Judith has shared with me. Hyacinth Miller has been a companion and interlocutor about and beyond this book; your presence and mentorship have meant the world to me. Madai Poole and Maria Ealey have been steadfast supporters and ingenious collaborators in working through all bureaucratic challenges of our collective institutional life. But perhaps the biggest shout-outs here go to Carlos iro Burgos, who worked with me steadfastly throughout the drafting and revising process and whose own growth and evolution as a scholar activist I have accompanied. This study benefits from his unerring writer's ear, his ability to model steadiness and peace even in the thick of crisis, his gentle and big-hearted sense of humor, and his belief that men of color can hold space for one another to grow into fuller expressions of the men we have been taught to be. Gracias.

I am a devoted unionist, and part of what has made Rutgers a genuine home for me has been the community I have found with fellow hell-raisers. For your presence, companionship, and guidance, I am grateful to Sandra Rocío Castro, Saskia Cipriani, Carlos Fernández, Michelle Shostack, and Silismar Suriel. My union peeps keep me hoping, dreaming, and actively working to realize a better workplace for everyone, and I am grateful for the comradeship of Becky Givan, Patrick Nowlan, BJ Walker, Sherry Wolf, and Todd Wolfson. Donna Murch deserves a special shout-out for her political intuition, as well as her boundless intellectual generosity. And we just have a hell of a lot of fun when we get to hang out. I hope we get to write a book together some day, but my heart swells with pride to know that we are friends.

As the manuscript evolved, it earned some friends and taught me lessons about what honest collegiality is supposed to be. In this regard, I extend my gratitude to Richard Morrison for offering sobering critical editorial feedback at the time I needed it. Salvador Vidal-Ortiz also provided invaluable feedback and the sustained gift of friendship. I am happy to be in the company of Ken Wissoker and the Duke University Press team in bringing this study to the

world, and I am gratified to see this work published in the Writing Matters! series. Particular kudos goes to Erica Rand, whose advocacy for this work included challenging me to see more than I could see on my own. I am also indebted to the external readers for their rigorous engagement with this work, for their belief in its promise, and for their continued challenge for me to push it to be closer to realize its potential. Joshua Gutterman Tranen, Liz Smith, Annie Lubinsky, and Aimee Harrison: thank you for your responsiveness and clear-headed guidance in the production process. Leonard Rosenbaum continues to amaze me with his editorial skill and responsiveness. Thank you for the attention you brought to preparing the text for production and indexing.

I came to think and write this book in and through community and love for the parts of myself I had been taught to hate. I credit and thank Ana-Maurine Lara and Alaí Reyes-Santos for the Transnational Black Feminist Retreat that changed everything for me and (I know) for several others of us who were there. For my introduction into Regla de Ocha, I am indebted to Maritza Barranco Rodríguez and all members of the Ilé de Abbebe Oshún in Santo Domingo-Havana. I am also grateful for the spiritual companionship and mentorship of Jaime Gaviria, and I look forward to writing a book together.

Friends and interlocutors of this book include folks I literally met while revising. They took on reading and offering their thoughts on specific sections of the book, and it has grown the richer for it: Luis Menéndez-Antuña, Vinicius Marinho, and Santiago Slabodsky. My love and comradeship with the poet and critic Octavio González grew through helpings of Zoom conversations and the way he brings a generous heart to his incisive engagement with this book and with me. Over the years, my soul has been fed with steady helpings of the extraordinary work of Caroline Bergvall, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Caridad Souza, and Gina Athena Ulysse, and I had the good fortune to getting them to lay eyes on this text and talk with me about it. For stunning and formative readings, I am also grateful to Elizabeth Pérez and Roberto Strongman at a Zoom talk hosted by the Chicano Studies Institute at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Director Inés Casillas deserves special mention for her leadership and invitation. Questions, suggestions, and comments emerging from interaction with all these smart interlocutors were important in how this text evolved. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Yolanda Martinez-San Miguel, and Michelle Stephens are towering figures in their fields, amazing mentors, and priceless colleagues. Their generosity as demanding readers and perspicacious interlocutors has also shaped this text. I am grateful to Yolanda for her mentorship and support throughout the decades we have known each other and for having invited me to visit and present sections of the book before her

colleagues at the University of Miami and to her colleagues for engaging and supporting my work: Jafari S. Allen, Donnette Francis, Gema Perez Sanchez, and George Yúdice. Alan Filreis, my mentor of almost three decades, read and engaged this book with his characteristically relentless intensity, and I credit our emotional and intellectual reencounter for the crystallization of the signature term of this text: *faggotology*. Thank you.

Edgar Rivera-Colón appears more than once in the gratitudes because he has traveled with me and with this text for several of its iterations. I think one of the reasons I got the job at Rutgers almost twenty years ago was so I would meet Edgar. He is at once my toughest critic and most generous intellectual companion, my spiritual adviser and the friend who can put you in your place when that needs to happen. You have believed in this text and in our pastoral mission with the little queens coming up. Ours is work that feeds la obra, and I hope that this text, born out of many of our conversations throughout the years, will also become a friend and companion in your ministry.

I have enjoyed companionship and friendship that makes family not something you are but something you practice. My family includes dear mentors such as Stuart Curran, Alan Filreis, and Joseph Wittreich, and friends of a lifetime Shauna Ahern, Aaron Ampie, Ethel Brooks, Yudy Cairo, Erica Edwards, Maceo Edwards, Rosario and Rosita Fernández and clan, Corinne Minard and her daughters Paloma and Ilona García-Minard, Katherine Grau, Marina Grau, the Labour clan (Agueda, Luana, and Diego), Fátima Portorreal Liriano, Pablo Mella, Julissa Reynoso, Robyn Rodriguez, Deb Vargas, Katyuska Vazquez, and my cousins in the Decena clan (Pablo, Carlos Alberto, Dorca Gilbertson, Gloria, Ginette, Gisselle) and the Fernández clan (Rhina Esmeralda, Giselle Oliva, Angela Celeste). Little by little, I enjoy reencountering my blood brothers Edwin and Omar as adults, as well as my viejos Xiomara and Dario.

The only thing greater than coming into this life to do work that opens paths for others is the opportunity to accompany human beings through their journeys, and this is where my home front continually feeds my zeal to imagine a world more capacious, more open, than the one I inherited. It's sometimes shocking for me to take stock of the fact that I am a man who is married to another man and that our love and companionship have made space for the lives of the two young men we are honored to call our sons. I look forward to the day when Jordan Joaquín or Joshua Ulysses will come back from a college class and argue with me about a point made in this book, in an article, or in anything else I get to produce in print. May this offering be as much of a gift to them as it might be for other queerlings in the future so they might teach

me and all of us how they see the horizon for freedom and the full realization of our humanity.

Joaquín Alfredo Labour-Acosta has taught me so much about what it means to mobilize power, resources, and sacrifice in support of others. This book represents a very personal take on what it means to have one's work irradiate, open, and expand the horizon for the ones coming. But the love of humanity that fires up this query comes from the same love that defines our life together, and this is a love he models for himself, for our sons, and for me.

I can only speak for myself. But what I write and how I write is done in order to save my own life. And I mean that literally.

BARBARA CHRISTIAN,
"THE RACE FOR THEORY"

Orígenes (Origins)

PART 0

Pensar Maricón (Faggotology)

An Introduction

CIRCUITS OF THE SACRED DOCUMENTS HOW ONE BODY MOVES, IMAGINES, WITNESSES, AND REMEMBERS, ILLUSTRATING HOW BLACKNESS TRANSMOGRIFIES IN ONE PERSON'S JOURNEY AS A CHILD, AS AN IMMIGRANT IN THE UNITED STATES, AND AS A UNIVERSITY STUDENT AND PROFESSIONAL. I aim for audiences to experience reading and thinking as a transit analogous to writing and remembering, a gathering attuned to all dimensions of embodied life. This black Caribbean study is a conversation on spirit in working-class queer feminisms. It is an exploration of how our fleshy bodies operate as instruments for sensation, pain, struggle, joy, and pleasure. Modeling a pensar maricón, or what I call a faggotology, I center excessive black latinidades, lo sucio, los sucios, y las sucias.[1] Together, we swish along and touch the divine through the abhorrent.

This writing makes space for the ancestors we want to be for the black working-class locas, maricones, jotería of the future.[2]

We do not need a verb to validate our existence.

Ou pa chwazi sa ou vle le w'ap fè yon rasanblaj ou ranmanse tout bagay. Catalyst. *Você nâo pode ficar escolhendo do lixo, deve recolher tudo.* Keyword. *On ne choisi pas entre les choses quand on fait un rasanblaj. On ramasse tout.* Method. *No escogemos de aquí y allá entre los desechos: debemos ensamblar todo junto.* Practice. You don't pick and choose when you make rasanblaj, you gather everything. Project.

GINA ATHENA ULYSSE, "INTRODUCTION," *EMISFÉRICA*

CIERRA LOS OJOS (CLOSE YOUR EYES).

My back was turned to a bridge to the force of the universe that chose this head before I slid into the world as a newborn, forgetting that even though the orishas all loved me, only one of them crowned my third eye (ori).[3]

My charge? Entrust my body to mentors and strangers. Like floating in water. Boyar.

Upon prompting, I turned around. I knocked on a door; I said what I wanted; and the world went aflutter. Hands touched me. My clothes tore, brushing by my skin as they withdrew their caress.

Scissors cut hair; herb-scented water slid through me. People paid tribute and asked for blessings. Some prayed in Cuban Lucumí/Yoruba. The officiating priest, who led the bath and cut my hair, sang. One by one, voices named their ancestors, loved ones who had passed, mentors.

Felt hands on top of hands.

Love was in the air, in the smell, in the touching hands, and in the feel of the room. The iyawo's ori and body were the object being consecrated, the head of a maturing gay man turned into an infant of the gods born in stone, their consecrated head now sibling to stones through sacrifice. But this was not about the iyawo. This was an offering to the gods. Gratitude to the gods; blessings in breath, in saliva, in words, in touch. People giving thanks for their health and wishing the iyawo health.

I was not I. To the strangers in that room, this was the iyawo—bride of the orisha.[4]

Hands joined and instructions ceased. Chanting, singing. More chanting and all hands on one head. Drums.

Later, my eyes opened again.

Abre los ojos.

MADRINA (GODMOTHER) SAID that la morfología del cuerpo cambia (the morphology of the body changes). I savored the phrase after it jumped off the lips of this Cuban iya and journalist in Santo Domingo, who had become my third mother, and my first black mother.[5]

As I embarked on this pilgrimage, a friend told me that I seemed more "whole": en paz conmigo mismo (at peace with myself).

But *wholeness* suggests *enclosure*. My body was not for me to own or close but, rather, an instrument of contact with sentience.

The morphological turn is outward, to imbibe the world, an opening.

I felt more *hole* than whole, as years put distance between my friend's view and my interpretation.

I am at peace with being a hole. A black (w)hole, all in the opening, the raja (tearing)—unavailable to vision but there, like the weather, an idea from the black feminist historian of science Evelyn Hammonds that has stayed with me for years.[6] "Black hole dark matter is special for another reason," writes the black feminist physicist Chanda Prescod-Weinstein. "It's the only scenario where I might agree that 'dark' is a good descriptor because they tend to absorb light and not give it off."[7] Could Olodumare be the black (w)hole whose force I could feel, touch, breathe, and smell but not see? The god whose grace I willed to forget until madrina hugged me for the first time?

Ceremonies involved friends and strangers in love, faith, and physical intimacy with other strangers. Your pores opened. Your body tingled, eagerly awaiting brush, touch, saliva. Their touch. Their smell. Their density and heat. Their breath—its funk on your head.

My black gay male sensibility snuck into the analogies I drew on to sense what was happening. Sexual practice was off the table, but the whole path was electrified by the sensorial erotic. Rhythm, mixture of wills and bodily fluids, and the proximity of other bodies to mine connected to anonymous intimacy, sex with strangers, dark rooms, orgies, and gangbangs. Like the philosopher Georges Bataille, I sensed the religious and the erotic as "part and parcel of the same movement," though my drift in "movement" is closer to classical music, as a "principal division of a longer musical work, self-sufficient in terms of key, tempo, and structure."[8] As Doña Cristiana Viuda Lajara (my first piano teacher) said, music is la combinación de los sonidos y el tiempo (the combination of sounds and time).

The comparisons are offensive, even heretical. Doña Cristiana would be horrified, and perhaps so would my madrina and other Santería elders. Yet this queerling writing walks with Santería/Lucumí, with gratitude and respect, to gather the insurgent, rebellious, and affirmative traditions in working-class, black Latinx, and queer life. This is the task.

Circuits of the Sacred is fè yon rasanblaj. It performs a gathering of everything for black Caribbean study, arguing that black queer paths to the divine swerve from the transparent "I" of the academic and drift toward the intuitive, the sensorial, and the disreputable. Consistent with Ashon Crawley's vision, *Circuits of the Sacred* leans on blackness as "but one critical and urgently necessary disruption to the epistemology, the theology-philosophy, that produces a world, a set of protocols, wherein black flesh cannot easily breathe."[9] As rasanblaj, *Circuits of the Sacred* disrupts, expands, and unmoors blackness and

black study from the myopia of US-centered coordinates to account for transit in and through the Caribbean. To elaborate its claims, *Circuits of the Sacred* turns to memoir, ethnography, analysis, and creative writing to reckon with racially marked upward mobility and deracination, gay male coming of age, and sustained family loyalty. This book chronicles episodes drawn from my path to initiation in Santería, inclusive of my year of initiation and encompassing ethnographic work in New Jersey; metropolitan Santo Domingo, San Cristóbal, and San Juan de la Maguana (Dominican Republic); and Havana from 2013 until 2019.

Circuit

I argue that blackness is a circuit, demanding a reckoning with contradictory grids of intelligibility for racial markings, geopolitical histories, and structural arrangements that insist on black-presenting people and black women as the most precarious yet foundational to all labor implicated in religious and other becomings. I elaborate the "circuit" metaphor as a multipronged and multisensorial field, linking nodes that otherwise appear separate. While discussing *circuits of desire*, Yukiko Hanawa stresses the need to see the local in the global when interrogating sexualities across regions and areas. "It is neither possible nor desirable to insist upon some *pure* local episteme: we must consider the *circuits of desire*," she writes, pressing critical imaginations to unpack processes, exchanges, and forces coalescing around sexual and other formations in Asia and shaping their making and evolution.[10] In her ethnography on BDSM in San Francisco, Margot Weiss encourages her readers to consider multiple nodes in the making of pleasure and collectivities among the practitioners with whom she works.[11] "Like an electrical circuit, which works when current flows between individual nodes, the circuits of BDSM work when connections are created between realms that are imagined as isolated and opposed. . . . The elaborate circuitry of BDSM energizes any particular BDSM scene, but it also provides the productive charge that constitutes the BDSM scene itself."[12] Hanawa and Weiss emphasize a coming together of nodes that energize one another while tasking their readers to consider complex mediations and contradictions in their assembly. My study centers the circuit to illustrate a gathering of forces, grids of intelligibility, and structural alignments and contradictions that animate how Caribbean immigrant blackness is lived.

An expansive view of *blackness* is the frame to what follows. Each chapter of this study is a nodal point that amasses observations, insights, stories, anecdotes, and theories and that elaborates evolving and contradictory

articulations of blackness. By displacing the narrative "I" by shifting pronouns, genres, narrative styles, and storytelling techniques, I invite readers to (1) join, feel, hear, and touch the voices of the text and the text's narrative nodes; and (2) hear through these nodes the ancestors and spirits that they bring and that the narrators could not anticipate or imagine.

Listening, feeling, and opening to the sacred in spirit work, voices, words, and worlds challenged me to question the authority of academics, invested in their ability to proffer expertise and assert confidence and evidence where either (1) neither confidence nor evidence could be fully had; or (2) they could be had only in passing. In other words, the scholar's speaking "I" (what Denise Ferreira da Silva calls the "transparent I" of reason) would not suffice. As da Silva explains, "In writings of the black subject, one consistently meets a transparent I, buried under historical (cultural or ideological) debris, waiting for critical strategies that would clean up the negative self-representations it absorbs from prevailing racist discourse."[13] Instead of cleaning up the debris described by da Silva, I dwell in it.

Let us gather in excess of the transparent I. Orisha energies live in sacred stones but require other fundamentos, or "foundational" utensils associated with that deity, plus the ritual work of consecrating the mystical objects, spaces, and receptacles, to settle at one's altar. For the ensemble to dwell there requires the pieces and the rituals, the aché of the priests, and the blessing of the orishas propitiating the birth.[14] Additional requirements may be involved, such as the rule that priests may "birth" Orisha in others only if they have received the consecrated deity themselves. The pieces move or "electrify" as objects, actors, and rituals come together.[15] This text is built not so much on a flight of Whitmanian fancy ("I am large, I contain multitudes") than as a composition that energizes a circuitry for lives of mind and spirit.[16]

A view of blackness as a circuit is useful in black Latinx studies, as this emerging field addresses the white supremacist conditionings of latinidad while also proffering cartographies of blackness in, through, and beyond the United States.[17] When discussing the dangers of agglutinating different contexts, politics, and geo-imperial histories of blackness into one label, Yomaira Figueroa-Vásquez cautions: "The move to label all of these subjects as Black peoples, without a nuanced understanding of the stakes and limits of what that means in each of their homelands and diasporic context would produce violent cartographies that flatten and distort their subjective experiences."[18] I perform a gathering to theorize and map blackness in and through one Dominican queer immigrant identity and story to demonstrate as worthy the quest for creative expression as theory and practice of collective psychic

survival. This study grapples with the price higher education exacts from the professionals it produces, complicitous as universities are in producing and reproducing alienation in us. Like Barbara Christian, I write to save my life. I hope that, regardless of what conditions shape the arrival of their eyes to these pages, readers will find space to dwell in this book's affirmations of black queer life.

Upon becoming a tenured professor as the first college graduate from a working-class black Dominican immigrant family, I considered the contradictions of my achievements and the toxicities of academic institutions.[19] Despite what looked (at first glance) like a story of an immigrant of color achieving his "American dream," why did my quotidian life feel empty? How could I achieve while my family struggled with deteriorating health, poverty, addiction, and deportation? And what price did I pay for "making it"? Socialization and training as a man, immigrant, and scholar of color taught me to temper and discipline aspects of myself seen as an affront to the white supremacy of the institutions from which I write, read, and think. This left my soul desolate.

How did I survive as a black Dominican working-class faggot? Is *survival* even the right word for my accomplishment, or could it be something closer to *survivance*—"an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not mere reaction. . . . Survivance is greater than the right of a survivable name"?[20] As this book grew over a decade, I realized that writing it honestly required grappling with the ways different parts of my life—pre- and post-immigration, high school and college, in the professoriate, and in the pursuit of religious initiation and life as an openly gay and black Latino man—could be examined and reflected on together. Gathering and analyzing disparate moments in one journey allows for the discernment of the broader outlines of the journey, the fundamentos that energize one life. *Survivance* is oriented to black Latinx immigrant coordinates (not to be confused with those of Native America): it hinges on refusing to pick and choose parts of myself, in turning toward and tuning into interior work on the dimensions I have been taught to hate. Following the Haitian American feminist anthropologist and theorist Gina Athena Ulysse, I fè yon rasanblaj (gather everything), though I dwell in the felicitous (if unintended) use of the word *desechos* (remains) in the Spanish and *lixo* (trash) in the Portuguese translation of Ulysse's definition of *rasanblaj*.[21] As a Dominican in diaspora, I theorize and dream through the guiding mind of a Haitian American colleague and sister. Given the centrality of antagonism toward Haiti and Haitians in the Dominican context, which has intensified since a time when I learned anti-Haitianism in history books as a child, *Circuits of the Sacred* will strike some as a heretical text. This particular reading

would be welcome: heresy is central to dwell in blackness as the cut, wound, and raja with specific historical and geopolitical coordinates on the island of my biological birth.[22]

Circuits of the Sacred: A Faggotology in the Black Latinx Caribbean is a gathering of remains, desechos, lixo, lacras, wretched refuse.[23]

Muerteando Methods

Circuits of the Sacred insists that our lusty, funky, and stank quests to freak through our bodies couple eros with the mystical. My take on "the sacred" follows the black feminist M. Jacqui Alexander's thinking about what makes up the divine as it "knits together the quotidian in a way that compels attunement to its vagaries, making this the very process through which we come to know its existence. It is, therefore, the same process through which we come to know ourselves."[24] Informed by ethnography, this study is inspired by scholarship that centers small-scale yet consequential dimensions of quotidian labor and life. For instance, Elizabeth Pérez focuses on micropractices—"routine and intimate sequences of operations that can be broken down into more minute units of activity."[25] She explains that this focus "answers the need to look beyond valorized genres of ritual action to see the centrality of micropractices in fashioning sacred selves, spaces, and societies."[26] In this way, Pérez's work is consistent with the increased attention feminists have paid to anecdotal theory.[27] My impulse throughout is to draw on the ethnographic and to challenge its zeal for empirical verifiability through recourse to memoir, crónica, and experimental and speculative writing, pushing toward a capacious and open mapping of that which cannot be fully known.

My take on what are viable moments, sites, and narrated traces of the sensorium for analysis throughout *Circuits of the Sacred* is inspired by Pérez, as well as by Susan Howe's poem "Melville's Marginalia."[28] In the preface, Howe explains that after the negative commercial reception of the novels *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, Herman Melville became increasingly isolated and turned to reading and writing: "Melville read with a pencil in his hand. Marks he made in the margins of his books are often a conversation with the dead."[29] In a poetic turn, Howe breaks the thread of her preface and proffers her own marginalia, in verse: "Margins speak of fringes of consciousness of marginal associations. / What is the shadow reflex of art I am in the margins of doubt."[30] In writing about Melville, Howe's poem doubles the conversation that this canonical writer was having with the dead: "One day while searching through Melville criticism at the Temple University Library I noticed two maroon

dictionary-size volumes, lying haphazardly, out of reach, almost out of sight on the topmost shelf. That's how I found *Melville's Marginalia* or *Melville's Marginalia* found me."[31]

Los muertos son ideas (The dead are ideas). This is what a young Babalawo told me in Havana.

Circuits of the Sacred is an extended conversation with the dead. It is part of a generational trend in feminisms of color by emerging and established scholars thinking toward a future where other scholars of marginalized backgrounds might emerge, establish themselves, and survive the academy.

This book is a journey, a pilgrimage, to geographic, psychic, and intellectual sites. *Circuits of the Sacred* rehearses and practices the itinerancy of my pilgrimage across countries, regions, and languages. It moves through Spanish, English, and the Yoruba terms I learned phonetically in prayer and religious life. It slides through anecdotes, refrains, and remembrances of the Havana of my birth in santo; the Santo Domingo that birthed and reared me; and the Philadelphia, New York, and New Jersey where I came of age and became a racialized subject and a black Latinx and feminist queer man.

As it activates and energizes otherwise disparate nodes of relationality, this study illustrates what Roberto Strongman calls *transcripturality*: "cultural creation—painting, photography, film, and particularly writing—in an altered or exalted state of consciousness that mirrors trance possession and prompts or suggests a similar experience in the receiver of such a work of art."[32] Though there are moments in the study where the voice makes implicit or explicit invitations to psychoanalytic reading, *Circuits of the Sacred* gestures to but does not pursue this path for analysis. This is a deliberate choice to eschew normative misapprehensions of spiritual or religious experience as psychologically problematic.[33] Through the deployment of multiple pronouns to decenter a singular voice, this study takes up, valorizes, and stages "altered states" as they connect to trance possession and dissociative forms of "acting out" associated with black latinidad, locura, and mariconería.[34] Beyond the shift in perspectives it stages, *Circuits of the Sacred* insists on scholarship as a form of channeling for writers, readers, and texts valorizing the radicality of black madness.

My job is to channel becoming. Thinking with the anthropologist Todd Ramón Ochoa, the morphogenesis of narrative in *Circuits of the Sacred* "happens at the interface of the dead and the subject or object in which it is actualized. . . . The dead are divinity's verb, or potential—not existing prior to it, but generating life in Divinity itself."[35] Marginalia prompt my conversations with the ambient dead, lingering at the corner while awaiting

ceremonies, hanging out, recalling the beauty of falling petals of flowers on my head and shoulders, the joy of dancing with madrina. The dead are also carriers of the words I read and the stars of gay male 1970s and '80s porn, whose bodies and acts I celebrated in awe and lusty delight, despite warnings by my elders that most of these men died from AIDS. Here I also follow and take inspiration from Ochoa: "It is the dead that inspire action in Palo and Ocha/Santo, and the dead that are the generative spark behind all that is beautiful and emergent in them. . . . The ambient dead is a climate of transformation, complete with zones of woe and marvel, flashes of inspired intuition, and thunderclaps of astonishment that echo in the cavities of our bodies to wake us from our petrified thoughts."[36] In other words, the writer might score points as the "author" of this work; he is also responsible for all errors in this text. Yet *Circuits of the Sacred* is an exercise in talk, walk, and dance with spirit; it is an extended dialogue with, alongside, and through turning intellectual labor into a mystical quest—writing, thinking and speaking with and through the dead (muerteando). After all, don't intellectuals talk to the living and the dead?

I don't believe that identifying as queer increases my ability to channel what's coming. That's the woke ruse of identity politics, the "individual method" of our multicultural neoliberal elites, as Asad Haider recently noted, echoing earlier critiques of the class politics of queer feminisms from Rosemary Hennessy and Michael Hames-García (among others).[37] Let's open up to the flaming queen as your eyes meet the ink and paper of this word body, as we walk together, as we touch one another in our transit and stranger intimacy.

Faggotology

Circuits of the Sacred is a mystical bottoming, a *pensar maricón*, a *faggotology*. I am inspired in this pursuit by what Peter Savastano calls *spiritology*: "I have invented the word 'spiritology,' as one alternative to 'theology' in order to signify the 'spiritual' as energy and/or a 'force' that is non-anthropomorphic, fluid and polymorphic. . . . I use both 'theology' and 'spiritology' interchangeably so as to destabilize theology from its epistemologically privileged position in the nomenclature of gay male spirituality."[38] With Crawley, Savastano, and Marcella Althaus-Reid, these writings exceed theology and dwell in polymorphous perversity. As Crawley puts it, "What is dematerialized in theology is the materiality of funk, the materiality of unworn cloth. . . . Perhaps we need to become indecent and queer *against* theology."[39] Faggotology reverses the dynamic and influence of queer thinking in theology. *Circuits of the Sacred* is the work of a black Latinx writer and critic in dialogue with feminist and

queer theology, black and Latinx radical critical theories, and Afro-Caribbean anthropology. Instead of informing theology through feminist and queer-of-color scholarship, *Circuits of the Sacred* engages Afro-Caribbean religions and liberation theologies *from* the vantage point of radical feminism and queer-of-color thinking. The text speaks to religious studies and anthropology while also directing itself to scholar activists in feminism and in queer-of-color collectives. A pensar maricón also pries open the political, intellectual, and sensorial coordinates of black study to a hemispheric black diasporic sensibility, connecting it to the literatures of ferocious Latin American writing queens such as the Cubans Severo Sarduy, Reinaldo Arenas, and Virgilio Piñera; the Chilean Pedro Lemebel; and the Argentine Manuel Puig.

Circuits of the Sacred also offers a critical perspective on the class dimensions of racialized politics in feminist, black, and queer-of-color communities. Many of us did not come out to see our sex, bodies, and political and spiritual imaginations stunted by mainstreaming, neoliberal formations inclusive of sanitized respectabilities and calcified identities. Some of us who read, write, live, think, and fornicate also did not pursue this path to witness our bodies limited by the shiny objects that keep us away from "thinking sex," imagining and reimagining the choreographies, geographies, and possibilities of pleasure and relationality, as Gayle Rubin advised us to do at one of the founding moments of queer studies. If we are to have sainthood as maricones, let's have it as Yves F. Lubin, the Haitian American fierce queen writer and performance artist known by the pseudonym Assotto Saint, liked to have it: "Assotto is the Creole pronunciation of a fascinating-sounding drum in the voodoo [*sic*] religion. . . . Saint is derived from Toussaint L'Ouverture, one of my heroes. By using the *nom de guerre* of Saint, I also wanted to add a sacrilegious twist to my life by grandly sanctifying the low-life bitch that I am."[40] With a nod to the assotto drums to imbibe the musicality of this text, I pay respect to Assotto Saint as ancestor and to the lwas of the Vodun pantheon.[41]

This text interrupts the desire to know, explain, and master.[42] Instead, the lowlife bitch narrator steers in the direction of an openness that can produce ruptures—rajas that hurt but that might also hurt good, hurt hot enough to make you hard/wet: contradictions as we sit with the tingle, licking the cut or the sphincter that dilates as we press a finger or tongue or as we swallow and hold the shocks and thrusts of expressive puncture. Thinking and feeling like a flaming faggot is intellectually, politically, and spiritually productive, for the sake not of the queen who speaks, but of the queerness in nosotres.

The yo (I) who tells stories, analyzes, and curates what follows has a voice within the US academic tenure system due to work, degrees, publications, titles

longer than his name, and recognition: a small collection of objects, symbolic and material. Following the Argentine philosopher and anthropologist Rodolfo Kusch, our narrator has confused the freedom of ser (to be) with the zeal to ser alguien (to be someone), just like the urban Argentine and Latin American elites Kusch critiqued for their urban, metropolitan, and Europhilic orientation.[43] And that afán de ser alguien (zeal to be somebody) left desolate the yo who writes. The journey to the "transparent I" resulted in violence to self, deracination, and dilapidation. Writing to liberate more than one person starts with discerning what material accomplishments, degrees, and other objects of reason are for, and what price we pay for becoming someone.

Ser alguien will not cure my mother's dementia or her broken hip that healed in misalignment due to postfracture neglect, nor will it stop the addictions that have plagued my biological family. Ser alguien also will not stop the horror of realizing, on the day my compañero Alfredo and I picked up one of our sons after his birth ten days earlier, that nobody would be coming for several of the other babies crying in that nursery in Newark, New Jersey. Ser alguien might help me support my students with letters of recommendation, but it will not assist me in walking with them to arrive at their judgment of why they do intellectual work or to realize that intellectual work matters only to the degree that it helps us hustle, think, feel, fuck, and walk toward freedom.

The point of this writing, then, is to collaborate in figuring out "how we get free."[44]

In writing through what you encounter in these pages, it became clear to me that recalling moments along this path also triggered details of the larger canvas of a life remembered. The result is a fragmented and extended conversation with the child, adolescent, and adult who was as he (1) talked to his dead and living mentors, relatives, beloved elders, contemporary friends, colleagues, and companions in the profession; and (2) relished sparkles of fleshy contact with love, intimacy, or transitory spark. The muertos of that child re-membered are mine and yours. They also hover in crevices of this narrative, in a shelf or pocket somewhere in this text, awaiting for you to open for them, to listen. I hope that you will catch a glimpse of their world-making force.

Arrivals

When I first thought that Santería could be the focus of a research study that resulted in this queerling in academic drag, existing models of how one might pursue this constituted a voluminous body of scholarship, much of it foundational to Caribbean studies and anthropology.[45] The names associated with the

early study of Santería and sibling traditions were those of the towering figures Lydia Cabrera, Maya Deren, Zora Neale Hurston, Ruth Landes, and Fernando Ortiz. A foray into more recent works on the subject, which provided critiques of and revisions to questions I had at the outset of this writing, linked sexuality and religiosity as they swirled within and across Yoruba-influenced religious practices in the Américas.

Perspectives that paralleled mine inform contributions to the interdisciplinary social science on Afro-Caribbean religions. Some students, observers, and specialists cast Santería (a.k.a. Regla de Ocha) and other Afro-Caribbean religions as more "tolerant" of queer bodies (inclusive of LGBTQ folks, as well as socially and sexually atypical people in general). But a newer generation of scholars (e.g., Aisha Beliso-De Jesús, Roberto Strongman, and Salvador Vidal-Ortiz) echoed and expanded on established scholarship by J. Lorand Matory, Stefan Palmié, and others. Some believe Regla de Ocha is more "tolerant" and "open" to queers than are Afro-Cuban traditions such as Ifá, Regla de Palo, and the Abakuá secret society. However, evidence within Santería suggests ambivalence. Vidal-Ortiz's ethnographic research in the New York metropolitan area, for example, explored the relationship between LGBTQ practitioners and Santería traditions, division of labor in houses of worship, and restrictions regarding who leads ceremonies and who performs consecrations.[46] In *Queering Black Atlantic Religions* (2019), Strongman maps out and explores the operations of queerness in Haitian Vodou, Brazilian Candomblé, and Cuban Santería, suggesting that these traditions appeal to gender and sexual dissenters because of their vision of the human subject as not being limited by its encasement in the Cartesian cogito.[47] Strongman is inspired in this interpretation by Matory's view of Afro-Atlantic religions in their critique of the Cartesian body as immutable, contained, and individual; instead, Matory argues that Afro-Atlantic religions view the body as a vessel that can be occupied and disposed of during trance possession.[48] Strongman's work expands Matory's insight by exploring "just how the notion of the body as vessel allows for queer resubjectifications that are rare or impossible under the containment model provided by Descartes."[49] Strongman builds on a large-scale close reading of a polyglot ethnographic archive by pioneering figures in the study of Black Atlantic religion; practicing and writing in English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, German, and Kreyòl; and straddling the Américas, Africa, and Europe to support the view of what he calls a *transcorporeal* Afro-diasporic self. Strongman believes that this self is "multiple, external, and removable" and that it rests on corporeal surfaces, irrespective of the gendered embodiments that might be most readily associated with those surfaces.[50]

Other views of queerness in Ocha suggest further challenges to notions of its tolerance of queers and queerness. Even while remaining open to the presence and supposed "openness" of Santería to sexual and gender diversities, Beliso-De Jesús, an anthropologist, embeds her discussion of the political dimensions of gender and queer dissent in houses of worship within a critique of the operations of patriarchy and heteronormativity *within* Santería. She suggests that the ethnographic record shows, at best, ambivalence. "Even as Santería is perceived of as seemingly more 'open' to gays, lesbians, and women," she writes, "there are also important heteronormativities and patriarchies that make it extremely difficult for divergent sexualities."[51]

While considering nuances and ambivalences concerning queerness and queer people in Santería, it is crucial to attend to the messiness of religious practice and belonging in the early twenty-first century. My engagement and insights drawn from initiation are debatable, given how Yoruba traditions have been commoditized and encased in religious transnational tourisms. The faggotology this study conceptualizes and practices emerges from movement and discernment of *Santería as idea* with a commoditized, complex, and contradictory life under transnational neoliberalism as related yet distinct from Santería/Lucumí as "a bona fide religion with a theology and practice."[52] Still, suggesting that I "found" Santería cedes to my scholarly voice more ground than it deserves. In fact, Santería found me.

Presenting the sequence of events in this way lets readers grasp how much the text of *Circuits of the Sacred* allows for the transit scholarly analysis deployed to make space for conocimiento.[53] After years of Catholic religious devotion as a child in the Dominican Republic, I turned my back on religious matters after my family migrated to the United States. My family was part of what was then a small but growing community of Dominicans migrating to Philadelphia and cities of the Northeast (and elsewhere in the United States) other than New York City.[54] My education, training, and professional advancement allowed me to live, work, and thrive without engaging in a direct appeal to a higher power, given my isolation from fellow Dominicans and other people of color. I grew to doubt that the God of my childhood was operating in my life. I became irritated by how much Dominican colloquial phrasing turns on God's will—for example, we're going on vacation si Dios lo permite (if God allows); that job will happen si Dios quiere (if God wants). At my angriest, I claimed to be atheist, but that affirmation became untenable with most of the nonacademics around me, so I settled on claiming to be agnostic.

My adolescent anger and resistance to organized faith was connected to how immigrant assimilation and (gay) coming out afforded me access

to privileged institutions of higher learning, elite literature and culture, and networks of peers disinclined to talk openly about spirituality. Spirit mattered, but people in my upwardly mobile class cohort would not call or recognize spirituality as such or ever utter the word *God*. Their engagement with inner life came through in commodified forms of contemplative practice that promoted conformity to white middle-class deportment. Accordingly, I tried yoga and meditation. These traditions (and the overwhelming middle- and upper-class whiteness of the spaces where they are practiced) challenged me. Any talk of God, spirit, or the divine was like farting, burping, and snoring while doing yoga—everyone hears and some smell, but the stench wafts through like just another muerto. I was trained to notice and move the focus back to the breath, no matter the intensity of the ass trumpet, the duration of the funk wave moving in the space, or the fact that you are sitting there and breathing in the funk of the neighbor who did not shower and put their imprint on your nose.

Circuits of the Sacred is a belated tribute and response to a Transnational Black Feminist Retreat in Santo Domingo that I attended in 2013 and that was organized and facilitated by Ana-Maurine Lara and Alaí Reyes-Santos. My "arrival" to faggotology was informed by my literary training and absorption of elite writing traditions in Anglo, Latin American, and world literatures. These debts are reflected in the writing throughout *Circuits of the Sacred*. Another set of foundations for the journey was prompted by my encounter, reading, thinking, and teaching of the writings of Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, and M. Jacqui Alexander. The routes here are calibrated through my sustained engagement with the thinking, flesh-to-flesh encounters, and spirit work of gay male and radical lesbian artists, writers, mentors, and ancestors in Santo Domingo, Philadelphia, New York, New Jersey, and Havana. I crossed the bridge to the English language through the guiding presence and hand of James Baldwin. My loca fleshy consciousness found its erotic expression through the writings, films, and activist and artistic praxis of mentors and elders such as David Acosta and Frances Negrón-Muntaner and ancestras Marlon Riggs, Essex Hemphill, Joseph Beam, and Assotto Saint. I also note the thorny questions that Anzaldúa, Maria Lugones, and Frantz Fanon raise for the pursuit of black Latinx queer critique. I make no apology for the trouble these ancestors represent for those of us aspiring to werk black Latinx study. Nevertheless, I find valuable contributions (for what I undertake later) in the larger canvas that is the work of these thinkers while recognizing the shortcomings, recurring patterns, and ambivalences that generate debate across fields, especially concerning blackness, black women, and homosexuality.[55]

Reading as Listening

One early reader of this study joked that I was building a three-dimensional cathedral on a two-dimensional surface and that the density of this book's architecture might be hard to visualize.

Instead of visualizing, listen.

Listen to the voices in *Circuits of the Sacred* the way you might lend your ear to contrapuntal music in a contemporary string quartet. In this soundscape, the pressures and releases that have acculturated our ears to the comforts of tonal harmonies are dislocated in combinations that acculturate one's ear to dissonance. Tonal European composers, particularly those considered canonical, have trained the listening habits of audiences to experience sound combinations as pleasant if they subscribe to learned expectations of tension, melody, harmony, and resolution. Twentieth-century atonality renders explicit that what we hear in any combination of notes, in chords and instrumental arrangements, is how sounds work *through* one another—interrupting, grating, and producing vibrations that might be pleasant or unpleasant, agreeable or disagreeable, depending on how we receive and organize them.

Listen to what you read in this book in this manner; listen to it in your mind's ear. Listen to it as Omi Tinsley listens to the songs of divine Ezili in her *Ezili's Mirrors*. The book form might present us with temporal arrangements of which moment/anecdote/crónica/analysis/story comes when. Yet this book aspires to be a "transcorporeal" body like those Strongman describes as modular, flexible, and mobile.

Listening to this archipelago of sounds is no writerly conceit. I ask you to consider sound metaphors to alter what might be available to us through visual metaphors for "soul work."[56] I concur with Beliso-De Jesús in finding utility in the feminist theorist Karen Barad's conceptualization of *diffraction* for a reading, writing, and spiritual practice in Santería and other Afro-diasporic traditions.[57] Drawing from visual metaphors, Barad explains that *diffractive* events take place when combinations of light and surface produce visible manifestations of how they come together, grind, combine, and move through one another: "For example, the rainbow effect commonly observed on the surface of a compact disc is a diffraction phenomenon. The concentric rings of grooves that contain the digital information act as a diffraction grating spreading the white light (sunlight) into a spectrum of colors."[58] How do moments of critical exegesis spread or narrow the reach of sound in the moments that came before and will come after? How does insight sound through the vibrations of the evocative writing in its expressive ability to activate nodes in a circuit?

How might a moment interpreted one way appear different to the reader upon learning later that another element, insight, or message subtended it? What if we imagined flashes of insight or narrative threads as waves, capable of sweeping through our mind's eye and ear, hit the pit of our stomach, the base of our genitals, and other body hot spots, on top of one another and occupying the same space temporally, synchronically, and asynchronically? Barad explains that, in physics, "only waves produce diffraction patterns."[59] *Diffraction grating* in Barad becomes what Beliso-De Jesús presents as *reading diffractively*—tuning our bodies to the affective work of concepts. As Beliso-De Jesús explains, to read in this way turns the intellectual labor out to expose its affective dimensions: "Scapes are therefore shifted into affectivities and intensities (instead of only representations of imagined communities)."[60] Still, let us simmer in Barad a bit more, floating on waves: "A diffraction grating is simply an apparatus or material configuration that gives rise to a superposition of waves. A reflecting apparatus (e.g., mirrors) produce[s] images of objects (that are relatively faithful to the objects) placed a distance from the apparatus. In contrast, diffraction gratings are instruments that produce patterns that mark differences in the relative characters . . . of individual waves as they combine."[61] What if objects that appear in front of the mirror are diffraction gratings produced by combinations of light, shadow, surface, and gaze? Although this encouragement to hear in what we see and see in what we hear is a clunky mixing (or messing) of metaphors, it goes to a core protocol for the reading praxis promoted by *Circuits of the Sacred*: allow the ideas to move through this text, find you, and surprise you.

Peregrinas: Contours of the Journey

> The "pilgrimage" that the title of the book calls forth moves through different levels of liberatory work in company forged through a practice of *tantear* for meaning, for the limits of possibility; putting our hands to our ears to hear better, to hear the meaning in the enclosures and openings of our praxis. I say *different levels* to try to accommodate levels of comprehension and incomprehension, as well as levels of opening ourselves to each other, levels of intimacy, and large and sometimes dispersed solidarity.
>
> MARÍA LUGONES, *PILGRIMAGES/PEREGRINAJES*

Maria Lugones offers this passage to readers of her book *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes* (2003). I echo her sensorial maps of intimacy in *Circuits of the Sacred*. I particularly appreciate how tanteo gets done in Lugones's formulation. In a footnote, she explains that she uses "'tantear' both in the sense of exploring someone's inclinations about a particular issue and in the sense of 'tantear en la oscuridad,' putting one's hands in front of oneself as one is walking in the dark, tactilely feeling one's way."[62] We might not be the only ones putting hands to "our" ears to hear, to hear better, to touch and feel one another's pulse as reader and writer, as friends and allies. I am not alone as I sit in front of the platform that allows for a discharge of energy and movement, marking letters to compose words. I am touched, and I can touch. I hear, and I am heard. Can you feel my words moving through the iris of your eye/I across this paper, this meeting point, this eje (axis) between us, like the veil through which our muertos tease, talk, and touch us?

My piano teacher said that before I could achieve the quality we were working toward, I had to hear sounds in my head. Then I moved toward that which we were trying to entwine one another in hearing together, through the co-flexing of our imagination muscles, a kinesthetic sensing that allowed our ears to collaborate in the tanteo for the right nuance. I invite the collaborative experience of building toward black futures and futures of freedom, for us to listen at our points of contact with one another through the membrane of the page.

In ritual fashion, a narrative tribute to the ancestors follows this introduction and closes the "Orígenes (Origins)" part of the study. Titled "Re-membered Life: A Composition for Egun," this piece is an homage to the black Dominican working-class child. Through a description of my early socialization in Santo Domingo, this narrative is a topography of the barrio that describes the forces of discipline mobilized through commentary, instructions, and the child's increased awareness of and distance from other black queens. This introduction also highlights how the sissy survived through an activation of allegiance and mentorship of teachers and older women, leaning on religion and prayer and finding (in classical music) alternative sites of being beyond his immediate surroundings. "Re-membered Life" pays tribute to ancestral forces, and it casts the queer child as an ancestral figure. The chapter also pays homage to the black faggots and femmes whose presence guided a young man's sense of the interdictions of manhood in urban working-class Santo Domingo of the 1980s.

What follows is divided into three parts.

Part I, "Caminos," counterpoises a narrative bridge to an analytical chapter, addressing immigration and higher education. The sequencing of the "Caminos" chapters stages an about-face that is as much experiential as it is epistemological. The deracination of the quest for upward mobility and exile from the struggling biological family in "Bridge Crónica: A Triptych, with Elegguá" is countered in "Experiencing the Evidence" through an opening to the sensorium and a dialogue with a text in the scholar's training and access to the transparent "I" of antifoundationalist critique. Chapter 2, "Bridge Crónica," continues the "re-membering" that began in chapter 1 through an elaboration of the distortions of blackness produced through the inhabitation and access to elite institutions. These anecdotes illustrate the mixture of forces that deracinate queer black subjects and the ongoing linkages and discomforts that structure kinship and working-class loyalty. A ritual tribute to Elegguá (the deity that grants permission to all paths), the chapter charts divergence but insists on the urgency and discomforts of sustained love and loyalty.

Chapter 3, "Experiencing the Evidence," challenges the way feminists and queers have addressed "personal experience" in our work. It charts my shift away from the predations of a normative reasoning that disavows blackness, excess, and the body. This shift allowed my senses to reengage with the world. Instead of thinking about the "evidence of experience," I probe the possibility of "experiencing the evidence," arguing that normative projects of research are steeped in the pursuit of the mastery of the transparent "I" and that such pursuit unfolds in and through the disavowal of blackness and embodied life. Rejecting the notion that "personal" and "individual" are always the same, I envision our bodies as socially mediated instruments to access and apprehend the world—to feel, hear, and think. Moving beyond the transparent "I" of reason provides hints of where one meets the other, where we touch one another, and where we hear and touch the body of the other. "Experiencing the Evidence" is staged in dialogue with narrative materials and in conversation with the historian Joan W. Scott and the science fiction writer and critic Samuel R. Delany, moving toward an enlarged and embodied epistemological frame through the kinesthetic. A faggotology can help bring our sentient capacities into closer contact with historicities embedded in small flashes of insight in the present tense.

Part II, "Dos Puentes, Tránsitos," works toward faggotology by focusing on the impossibility of the transparent "I," mapping instead how circuitries illustrate the body as a transitive vessel that can be heard, touched, and occupied by forces beyond its sovereign will, in transnational settings, as well as in scenes

of subjectivation. Chapter 4, "Loving Stones: A Transnational Patakí," works through the situatedness of Santería and sibling traditions (as well as those who walk those paths) in circuits of transnational exchange, contradictory geopolitical histories, and projects of belonging despite differential access to resources and asymmetries of power. Mobilizing a loose formulation of the Santería patakí (morality tale), I argue that absences push us to grapple with the uncomfortable politics of transnational religious belonging. Locating the workings of what cannot be fully known in a narrative about the loss and travel of sacred stones, the chapter argues that the relationship to the commodity form is one of the ways Santería repurposes commodity fetishism, registering an overcoming and retention of racialized coloniality. I engage Karl Marx, M. Jacqui Alexander, and J. Lorand Matory to challenge conventional views of commodity fetishism while describing the complexity of transnational Santería practice, community, and belonging.

The knot of the transnational in the circuit that is blackness is part of the broader mappings of diaspora in "Loving Stones." But those knots also present in smaller sites for the making of subjects, where we have yet more opportunities to meditate on what we learn from silence and absence. Chapter 5, "¡Santo! Repurposed Flesh and the Suspension of the Mirror in Santería Initiation," juxtaposes two narratives that chart the movement and interruption of the gaze of the other in the ideation of the religious subject. I present two narratives side by side. Interrogating the introjection of the imago at the site of its gendered and racialized formation in "Mirrors," I explore withdrawal from the mirror in "Looking for Santo," thereby critically scrutinizing the mirror, gaze, and circuits that structure subject formations. I analyze subject forms made possible through the call to blessing (not by the "I" of the ego but, rather, through the vessel of the *santo*). The side-by-side narrative structure (a short story about learning to dance in counterpoint to crónica sketches from religious initiation) tasks the reader with grasping the diffractive relay in becoming a man in relation to santo becoming. Both point to something ineffable that the body cannot witness but that the body can carry and that can be recognized only in the other and by the other. However, becoming a legible man demands the authorizing and approving gaze, while the santo shifts the dynamic as it also tasks the other who calls to ask for a blessing.

Chapters 1–5 of the book are nodal points, gatherings activated in and through narrative in the service of a tanteo through blackness as a circuit in preparation for faggotology.

Part III, "Trances," the final section of the book, puts faggotology into practice, arguing for the power that derives from vulnerability in our sensorial,

mystical, and erotic openness to the dense funk of the other in pursuit of the anonymous and impersonal infinity of the divine. It consists of a long narrative (which I call a "suite") to entreat readers to read as listening, imagining each part of the piece as writing and musical movement. Chapter 6, "Indecent Conocimientos: A Suite Rasanblaj in Funny Keys," performs faggotology by combining ethnography and film analysis with creative writing and crónica to raise questions about sex, intimacy, and the divine for queer men. This suite is a meditation that starts from questions of trance possession in tourist economies, exploring and mapping the racial, class, and gender politics of labor and extraction. The second movement, "Adagio," offers a short-story treatment of stranger intimacy to thematize the way passion affords glimpses of connectivities laden with forms of conocimiento. The final movement, a crónica of coming of age as a gay man in the late 1990s, centers generational shifts among cis gay men to emphasize the degree to which the zeal to "be safe" foreclosed past and present cohorts of men from deeper discussions about sex as soul work. The closing section of the chapter underscores the need for continued thinking and bridge building to link sex, the perverse, and the divine, given how much may be learned by thinking and taking seriously the open and vulnerable body, the (w)hole, at the center of faggotology.

The closing "Epístola al Futuro/An Epistle to the Future," a letter to my children and to black queer children of the future, is a perverse appropriation of the Pauline epistolary tradition and an opening of the faggotological as foundation and bridge for livable and breathable black futures for todes. It completes the cycle of the study by turning the ritual homage to ancestors into a gift to progeny, offering a queer gospel for black lives.

Notes

Introduction

1. See Vargas, "Ruminations on *Lo Sucio* as a Latino Queer Analytic."

2. The phrase "ancestors we want to be" comes from conversations with Carlos iro Burgos in spring 2021.

3. Mary Ann Clark defines *ori* as "head; personal destiny, one's personal Orisha": see Clark, *Where Men Are Wives and Mothers Rule*, 167. I have heard *ori* described as "what makes you who you are individually." One of my elders discusses it as one's "chip," living at the top center of your forehead, as the seat of your individual consciousness.

4. Beliso-De Jesús translates *iyawó* as "bride of the *oricha*; Santería initiate within first year of priesthood": Beliso-De Jesús, *Electric Santería*, 224. Strongman translates *iyáwó* as "bride of the Spirit": Strongman, *Queering Black Atlantic Religions*, 24. Apart from noticing the differences in punctuation, which suggest how these terms have traveled through languages of the black diaspora, the feminine casting of the newly initiated priest (irrespective of biological gender) as "wife" has prompted debate, particularly in its conjunction with gender politics and homosexuality. However, this is only one of several sites in Yoruba studies where gender and sexuality are politicized and are sources of acrimony. For a field-defining debate on the geopolitics of gender and sexuality in Afro-Atlantic traditions, see the account of the Oyěwùmí-Matory debate in Strongman, *Queering Atlantic Religions*, 22–24. Clark offers a useful elaboration of marriage imagery and its gendered dimensions. "Regardless of his actual sex, the iyawo assumes a female position in that household. He is addressed as 'iyawo' throughout his novitiate year and must prostrate himself to every member of the household and of the larger community whose initiation predates his own": Clark, *Where Men Are Wives and Mothers Rule*, 77.

5. Iya means "mother; also, title of any adult woman": see Clark, *Where Men Are Wives*, 165.

6. I'm thinking of the lines at the opening of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, where Anzaldúa writes about life on the US–Mexico border as being in the "1,950 mile-long open wound / dividing a pueblo, a culture, / running down the length of my body, / staking fence rods in my flesh, / splits me splits me / me raja me raja": Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 55, emphasis added. The idea comes from Hammonds, "Black (W)Holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality."

7. Prescod-Weinstein, *The Disordered Cosmos*, 41.

8. Bataille, *Erotism*, 9; "movement," *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, accessed 30 May 2021, https://www-oed-com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/view/Entry/123031?redirectedFrom=movement#eid.

9. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*, 3.

10. See Hanawa, "Circuits of Desire," viii.

11. The abbreviation BDSM encompasses bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadomasochism.

12. Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure*, 7.

13. Da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 7.

14. "Aché"—also spelled "ashé"—is "life force energy; spiritual power; blessings; breath, saliva, and touch of the santero who imparts blessings": Beliso-De Jesús, *Electric Santería*, 223.

15. "Electrify" and its implications are usefully conceptualized in Beliso-De Jesús, *Electric Santería*.

16. Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," sec. 51, accessed 16 October 2022, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45477/song-of-myself-1892-version.

17. A valuable articulation and critique of the whiteness of latinidad comes in the work of Arlene Dávila: see Dávila, *Latino Spin*. But research in this area is shaping an emerging generation of scholars in Latinx studies. An important contribution is Hernández, *Racial Innocence*.

18. Figueroa-Vásquez, *Decolonizing Diasporas*, 9.

19. As the sociologist Ruth Enid Zambrana documents, "One of the major theorizing arguments is that study participants [scholars of color] are marked by coconstitutive and mutually reinforcing social status identities that shape life chances, opportunities, and, in turn, experiences of higher education institutions": Zambrana, *Toxic Ivory Towers*, 10.

20. Vizenor, *Survivance*, 1.

21. "Do a gathering, a ceremony, a protest": Ulysse, "Introduction," *Anthropology Now*, 125. I use the phrase "No escogemos de aquí y allá entre los desechos: debemos ensamblar todo junto" (roughly "We don't choose from here or there among the remains: we assemble everything together"). I called Ulysse to ask if the Spanish word for "remains" was intended, being that such a word did not appear in the French, Kreyòl, Portuguese, or English translations. She stated that *desechos* made it into the Spanish unintentionally. We agreed that it was a felicitous mistranslation: Gina Athena Ulysse, personal communication, March 2021. In Portuguese, *lixo* is translated

as "garbage, trash; refuse, waste, sweepings, rubbish." The Portuguese text reads, "Você nâo pode ficar escolhendo do lixo, deve recolher tudo": "lixo," in Michaelis, *Pequeno Dicionário Inglês-Português Português-Inglês.*

22. The literature on Dominican-Haitian relations, histories, and tensions, is voluminous. For some important and recent texts, see García Peña, *The Borders of Dominicanidad*; Mayes, *Mulatto Nation*; Paulino, *Dividing Hispaniola*. I echo the recent call of scholars in Dominican studies to continue to explore how anti-Haitianism structures Dominican identity but, also, how we need to open up space for a Dominican blackness as a formation that deserves its own focus and attention in relation but also independently from Haiti as signifier. For an text and group of essays addressing this problematic, see Chetty and Rodriguez, "The Challenge and Promise of Dominican Black Studies."

23. "Wretched refuse" draws from "Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, / The wretched refuse of your teeming shore": Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus," accessed 4 June 2021, https://poets.org/poem/new-colossus?gclid=Cj0KCQjw—GFBhDeARIsACH_kdZdW9pGR-h8fu5tqTXVRnvTGycyu5VXWaI56dx4SraFt6vH-AmFZ4saAjIFEALw_wcB.

24. Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 293.

25. Pérez, *Religion in the Kitchen*, 9.

26. Pérez, *Religion in the Kitchen*, 11.

27. See Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory*.

28. Howe, "Melville's Marginalia."

29. Howe, "Melville's Marginalia," 97.

30. Howe, "Melville's Marginalia," 99.

31. Howe, "Melville's Marginalia," 97.

32. Strongman, *Queering Black Atlantic Religions*, 252.

33. There is an archive of research discussing the nuances of mental health among Latinx populations and the "culturalist" and problematic readings of Latinx cultural excess as psychiatrically problematic. Two recent contributions to this literature are Gherovici, *The Puerto Rican Syndrome*, and Santiago-Irizarry, *Medicalizing Ethnicity*.

34. This makes the performance of critical exegesis as an act of radical black madness consistent with the creative impulses described and analyzed in Bruce, *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind*. It is also consistent with critique as "translocura," undertaken by Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes in his wonderful book. "Translocas, whether insane women, effeminate homosexuals, drag performers, or transgender subjects, are way too many things in an ever-expanding trans-geographic rhizomatic map that inhabits and pushes out from the tropics and engulfs other spaces and locales": La Fountain-Stokes, *Translocas*, 1–2.

35. Ochoa, *Society of the Dead*, 37.

36. Ochoa, *Society of the Dead*, 37.

37. As Haider explains, "In its contemporary ideological form, rather than its initial form as a theorization of a revolutionary political practice, identity politics is an individual method": Haider, *Mistaken Identity*, 23. In her trenchant critique of bourgeois conceits of queer critique, Hennessy writes, "The commodification of gay styles and

identities in corporate and academic marketplaces is integrally related to the formation of a postmodern gay/queer subjectivity. . . . To a great extent the construction of a new 'homosexual/queer spectacle' perpetuates a class-specific perspective that keeps invisible the capitalist divisions of labor that organize sexuality and in particular lesbian, gay, queer lives. In so doing, queer spectacles often participate in a long history of class-regulated visibility": Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure*, 138. Hames-García emphasizes the complicity of some visible strands of queer theory with whiteness. As he explains, "Despite the failure of so many canonical works in queer theory to live up to their own promises to address race complexly and fully, queer theory clearly offers something useful to theorists, as it has continued to entrench itself in the academy. I suspect that the success of queer theory actually has much to do with that failure. Its disavowal of race (in the separatist guise) and its disavowal of identity (in either guise), in other words, offer theorists of sexuality a means whereby they might disavow whiteness": Hames-García, "Queer Theory Revisited," 32–33.

38. Savastano, "Gay Men as Virtuosi of the Holy Art of Bricolage and as Tricksters of the Sacred," 1014.

39. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*, 17.

40. Saint, *Spells of a Voodoo Doll*, 9.

41. Called assotto, asotò, or asotor, this drum is described by Lois Wilcken as physically a "Rada drum, although its shape is more cylindrical than conical, and it has large orifices in the collar for the emission of sound. . . . Measuring no less than six feet of height, we might call it the giant of the drum pantheon." Wilcken cites Jacques Roumain's explanation of what makes the asotò particular: "They [the other drums] are servants, the instruments of the deity, whereas the Assôto(r), dressed in its sacrificial skin [kerchiefs], is also, and above all, the power Afro-Haitian god: Assoto Micho Tokodun Vodoun": Wilcken, *The Drums of Vodou*, 38. It is considered a rare drum. I am grateful to Elizabeth McAlister, Angel Lebrun King Agassouyemet, and Roberto Strongman for email exchanges in support of this brief description.

42. See Singh, *Unthinking Mastery*.

43. See Kusch, *América profunda*.

44. Taylor, *How We Get Free*.

45. Scholarship on Santería and other Afro-Cuban (as well as Afro-Atlantic Yoruba) traditions includes Carr, *A Year in White*; Gonzalez, *Afro-Cuban Theology*; Gregory, *Santería in New York City*; Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*; Murphy, *Working the Spirit*; Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists*. The classic study of Haitian Vodou is McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola*. A more recent addition is Beaubrun, *Nan Dòmi*. On Brazilian Candomblé and the broader field of Afro-Atlantic Yoruba traditions, J. Lorand Matory's work is pivotal. For a representative example, see Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*.

46. See Vidal-Ortiz, "'Maricón,' 'Pájaro,' and 'Loca'"; Vidal-Ortiz, "Queering Sexuality and Doing Gender"; Vidal-Ortiz, "Sexuality Discussions in Santería,"

47. As the philosopher Mario Sáenz explains, "Descartes's dualism is unable to define the person in terms of fluid, changing, and ambiguous borders. That is, his definitions of corporeal and spiritual substances as things that require nothing but

their essential attributes to exist . . . as well as his uncomplicated perception of the self as a solitary thing with thoughts, preclude any conceptualization or description of the self as existing with others and under the spell of social ideologies and relations that blur individual distinctions and de-essentialize selfhood; in short, the self *is not* in the flesh": Sáenz, "Cartesian Autobiography/Post-Cartesian Testimonials," 311.

48. This insight is elaborated in Matory, "Vessels of Power."

49. Strongman, *Queering Black Atlantic Religions*, 11.

50. Strongman, *Queering Black Atlantic Religions*, 17.

51. Beliso-De Jesús, *Electric Santería*, 194.

52. I take seriously Ulysse's urging queer feminist projects of the sacred to be clear about the distinction between (1) their engagement with the "idea" of Santería and sister traditions; and (2) the actual praxis, dogma, and theologies that inform the traditions. See the critique in Ulysse, "Vodou as Idea."

53. Throughout this study, I think of "conocimiento" as a form of knowledge closest to the word "wisdom" in English. This is partly inspired in the work of Anzaldúa discussed throughout the book, but it is also based in the frequent surfacing of "conocimiento" in the words of elders to account for inarticulable ancestral wisdom learned through imitation, accompaniment, and other interactions across generations.

54. In the vast literatures that have developed around US-bound Dominican migration, New York City figures centrally. For an extended historical treatment of this phenomenon, see Hoffnung-Garskof, *A Tale of Two Cities*.

55. In the case of Anzaldúa, much of the critique focuses on her use of the eugenicist-tinged text *La raza cósmica* (*The Cosmic Race*), by the philosopher José Vasconcelos. Pointed critiques of the problems generated by Anzaldúa's use of Vasconcelos to her theory of "mestiza consciousness" include Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes*, 198–202; and Smith, "Queer Theory and Native Studies." A trenchant critique of tendencies surfacing in the work of the late María Lugones appears in Terrefe, "The Pornotrope of Decolonial Feminism." Macharia's *Frottage* and Marriott's *Haunted Life* address the complexity of Frantz Fanon's thinking and its reception among feminist and queer critics and artists.

56. Rivera-Colón, *Love Comes in Knots*.

57. See Beliso-De Jesús, *Electrict Santería*, 12–14.

58. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 80.

59. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 81.

60. Beliso-De Jesús, *Electric Santería*, 13.

61. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 81.

62. Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*, 1.

Chapter One. Re-membered Life

1. Coates, *Between the World and Me*.

2. A *tíguere* (literally, a "tiger") is a Dominican working-class figuration of racialized masculinity attempting to survive the multiple odds stacked up against them

through cunning and street savvy. Often cast as borderline "criminal" from the vantage point of the dominant class, *tígueres* might be best described as (mostly, though not exclusively) men with a street cunning threading on the edges of the licit. The classic text on *tigueraje* is Collado, *El tíguere dominicano*.

3. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1.

4. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 91.

5. Here, I'm invoking my own definition of masculinity as "strai(gh)tjacket," following E. Antonio De Moya. See Decena, *Tacit Subjects*, 48, 60–61; and 122–26.

6. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 91.

7. I suspect this remembrance of blackness and Dominican childhood would figure Haiti and blackness differently in the 1990s or early 2000s, as state and other actors promoted a metastasizing of anti-Haitianism into quotidian sentiment, and as increased Haitian migration to the Dominican Republic, the intensification of economic and political entanglements, and border disputes were weaponized for political expediency: see Ricourt, *The Dominican Racial Imaginary*.

8. In thinking of childhood as a country of its own, I recall the phrase "l'enfance est un pays en soi" from Laferrière, *Je suis fatigué*, 70.

9. Ulysse's line in Spanish, as quoted at the beginning of this book: "No escogemos de aquí y allá entre los desechos: debemos ensamblar todo junto" (We don't choose, from here or from there, among the leftovers. We assemble everything together): see Ulysse, "Introduction," *emisférica*.

Chapter Two. Bridge Crónica

1. "Path," in *Oxford English Dictionary* online, accessed 5 March 2021, https://www-oed-com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/view/Entry/138770?rskey=7VraIU&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid.

2. Antonio Machado, "Caminante, no hay camino/Traveler, There Is No Road," accessed 11 November 2021, https://www.favoritepoem.org/poem_CaminanteNoHayCamino.html. The famous version by Joan Manuel Serrrat was released in the 1969 track "Cantares," an homage to Machado's poems, combined with additional lyrics by Serrat: see "Joan Manuel Serrat: Cantares," accessed 11 November, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QHcypSLIp_A.

3. Beliso-De Jesús, *Electric Santería*, 80.

4. In his account of the distinction between *ser* (ontological being) and *estar* (to be somewhere), Kusch argues that, in transplanting European models to the building of their country, the architects of the Argentine nation missed the geopolitical conditions that make asking about ontological "being" something that cannot ignore its location in the American continent: see Kusch, *América profunda*.

5. See Candelario, *Black behind the Ears*.

6. Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé's work is an inspiration for this chapter, particularly as he recounts (1) the "life trails" that shaped his education and training as a literary scholar; and (2) interaction, friendship, and access to a connection (and eventual *testimonio*) from Juan Rivera, whose life and relationship to artist Keith Haring Cruz-Malavé engages,