

**BOOK PROPOSAL**  
**Sexual Cultures Series**  
**New York University Press**

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**Title:** *Black Atlantic Transcorporealities: Religious Representations of the Queer Body in Candomblé, Lucumí, and Vodou*

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**I. Introduction**

My book establishes *transcorporeality* as the distinct Afro-Diasporic cultural representation of the human psyche as multiple, removable and external to a body that functions as its receptacle. This unique view of the body, preserved in its most evident form in African religious traditions on both sides of the Atlantic, allows the regendering of the bodies of initiates who are mounted and ridden by deities of a gender different than their own during the ritual ecstasy of trance possession. Through discussions of novels, paintings, films and interviews, my book assembles and interprets a representative collection of such transcendental moments in which the commingling of the human and the divine produces subjectivities whose gender is not dictated by biological sex. In so doing, it demonstrates that while transcorporeality is rooted in the religious practice of trance possession, its effects spill over into the every day life of participants and observers of these religions and becomes a leading feature of nearly every aspect of Afro-Diasporic cultural production.

## **II. Rationale**

The purpose of this book is to disseminate knowledge of this Black transatlantic conceptualization of corporeality among a wide readership within and outside the Academy. It achieves this goal by utilizing cultural studies' critical methodologies to expose and explain the occurrence of this transcorporeality in literary, aesthetic and performative contexts. It also employs ethnographic interviews to produce self-reflective personal narratives that give voice to queer priests and practitioners of Afro-Diasporic religions in which this transcorporeality has been preserved and is rendered most markedly. The counterpoint between theoretical discourse and interpretive first-person accounts offers multiple points of entry to readers at various stages of familiarity with academic discourse.

## **III. Distinctive Features**

Black Atlantic Transcorporealities will be the first academic book that addresses queerness as a defining feature across the major Afro-Diasporic religions. In addition to its theoretical depth, the geographical, linguistic, and disciplinary breadth makes this a singular text in the market. The competitors to my book are five recently published single authored manuscripts by four writers, which I list below:

Where Men are Wives and Mothers Rule by Mary Ann Clark (University Press of Florida, 2005). This is an excellent text on gender in Lucumí written from an anthropological and feminist perspective. My favorable book review appears in the forthcoming issue of the New West Indian Guide. My book distinguishes itself from this

book by being multidisciplinary, focusing on queer sexualities and making connections between Lucumí and other Afro-Diasporic religions.

Sex and the Empire that is No More: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Oyo Yoruba Religion (Berghahn Books, 2005) and Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition,

Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomble (Princeton University Press, 2005) by J. Lorand Matory. These are very solid works written from an

Anthropological perspective with a keen awareness of African Yoruba culture. The focus of each book is on one of the religions and not on the connections between them—

precisely the task of my book. Also, gender is covered from a very traditional anthropological perspective that is not in dialogue with current Queer scholarship.

Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomble by Yvonne Daniel (University of Illinois Press, 2005). The success of this

work is evidence that work across all three of these Afro-Diasporic religions can be focused, nuanced and profound. The author makes an important contribution to the field

of performance studies. However, my book's culturally constructed conceptualization of the Afro-Diasporic body is more theoretically sophisticated and is of relevance to more

academic fields. Daniel's descriptions of performances are accurate and their

interpretation interesting, but the underlying basis for such phenomena are not explained.

This is a lacuna that my work addresses in great detail. Finally, Daniel's work is not a

volume that has queer sexualities or even gender as a salient mode of analysis.

Queering the Creole Spiritual Traditions: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender

Participation in African Inspired Traditions in the Americas by Randy Conner with David Hatfield Sparks (Harrington Park Press, 2004). A noble and ambitious enterprise, but this is not an academic book. It is a poor-quality, self-published, encyclopedic and tedious list of otherwise important deities, people, and rituals strung together without a coherent narrative. It is nevertheless important to list given the thematic overlap with my project.

Given the strengths of the Sexual Cultures Series in Latino Studies (José Quiroga's Tropics of Desire, Juana María Rodríguez's Queer Latinidad), African American Studies (Dwight McBride's Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch, Robert Reid-Pharr's Once You Go Black) and Religion (Michael Cobb's God Hates Fags, Ann Pellegrini and Janet Jakobsen's Love the Sin), I believe that NYU Press would be a very good publisher for my book.

#### **IV. The Market**

The publication of this book will make significant interventions and contributions to a wide range of academic fields. The project foments hemispheric understanding of Black cultures, moving beyond US and Latin American models of analysis. In so doing, it intervenes in current discussions regarding the scope of the Ethnic Studies disciplines of Black Studies and Latino Studies. In a related sense, this work contributes to Latin American and Caribbean Studies as it foregrounds the Black experience as an important component of the ethnic make up of Latin America and makes visible important linkages between the Hispanophone, Lusophone and Francophone Caribbean that are often overlooked in the language-specific disciplines prevalent in the Academy. Further, Diaspora Studies as a field has been dominated by works attempting

to understand South Asian migration to England and the US. This study seeks to add to a growing body of work that expands the understanding of Diaspora from the perspective of other migrant trajectories. This project makes an important contribution to the field of Gender and Sexuality Studies as it contributes to an understanding of how first world categories of sexual difference often fail to correspond to non-heterosexual categories elsewhere. This builds on new queer ethnic work such as of Global Divas by Martin Manalansan and Aberrations in Black by Roderick Ferguson. Certainly, there is a need for a greater understanding of Lucumí, Candomblé and Vodou within Religious Studies. Furthermore, when the topic of syncretism emerges within Religious Studies, it is not seen as a multilayered formation that can acquire new strata through current migrations. Similarly, it addresses gaps in other fields such as the discussions of migrancy in American Studies that are almost entirely devoid of the topic of religion. The confluence of theoretical and ethnographical writing on religious ritual ensures that the book will be of interest to scholars and students of Anthropology, Cultural Studies and Performance Studies. Given the number of academic disciplines to which my project has relevance, there is an audience and a market ready to purchase such a book in large quantities.

The following courses from selected university catalogues will find my text essential:

***Harvard University***

Caribbean Societies (African and African American Studies)

What is Black Religion? (Study of Religion)

***University of California at Berkeley***

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Studies (Gender and Women's Studies)

Caribbean Anthropology (African American Studies)

***Princeton University***

SPA 345 Caribbean Islands (Spanish and Portuguese)

SPA 401 Caribbean Intellectual Traditions (Spanish and Portuguese)

***New York University***

Introduction to Latin American and Caribbean Studies (CLACS)

Gender, Society and Culture in Latin American and the Caribbean (CLACS)

Afro-Latino Culture and History (Africana Studies, Latino Studies)

Queer Belongings (Gender and Sexuality Studies)

***Duke University***

The African Diaspora (Cultural Anthropology)

**V. Chapter Outline**

***1. Cauldrons of Desire: Introduction to Black Atlantic Transcorporealities***

The Introduction presents the concept of Transcorporeality. It historicizes and contextualizes the development of Lucumí, Vodou, and Candomblé from the beginning of the Slave Trade in the XVI Century to the more recent mass exodus of Caribbean exiles to North America and Europe. The introduction promotes the idea that the ability of these African religions to adapt to their Caribbean and First World contexts has ensured their survival, making them the paradigmatic examples of cultural creolization. Each chapter of the book addresses each religion separately and this introduction functions as their connecting node by focusing on Afro-Diasporic religions in a more catholic and theoretical manner. The introduction presents these religions as one of the most valued repositories of cultural knowledge on subjectivity in the African Diaspora. It discusses how the conceptualization of the body as a receptacle that remains open to a

plurality of personalities enables nonheteronormative alignments between sex and gender that are harnessed by queer practitioners for ritualistic and political purposes.

## **Section I: Lucumí**

### **2. *La Mujer Caballo*: Transcorporeality in Cuban Lucumí Cultural Production**

This chapter decodes the queer deployment of the Lucumí deities Changó and Oshún in the work of Cuban surrealist painter Wifredo Lam, Senel Paz's novel *El lobo el bosque y el hombre nuevo* and its adaptation to film by Tomás Gutierrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío's, *Fresa y Chocolate/Strawberry and Chocolate*. When Wifredo Lam flees the German occupation of Paris at the outbreak of World War II, he returns to his native Cuba and reencounters the Lucumí religious tradition of his family. I propose that the paintings of this period are largely dominated by representations of humans in communion with the Orishas. The small facial motifs atop the heads of many subjects with hermaphroditic traits as well as the strong thematic of the *female horse* serve as vivid illustrations of my concept of transcorporeality in Black Atlantic cultural production. This cross-gender identification between the divine "rider" and its human "horse" is also evident in Alea and Tabío's adaptation of Paz's novel in which the queer character of David embodies the persona of Oshún, the coquette Lucumí Orisha of romantic love. My analysis then presents how the queer blackness of this transcorporeality destabilizes the normative and normalizing ideologies of the European avant-garde and the Marxist state.

### **3. *Santos Maricones*: Ethnographies of Exile across the Florida Straits**

This chapter narrates my interaction, observation and conversations with two Cuban Babalaos, one in the island and another in Florida. Rafael Melendez is a queer Babalao living in Santiago de Cuba. Ernesto Pichardo is the founder and current corporate president of the Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye in Hialeah, Florida. The narrative focuses on the ways in which Lucumí tradition responds to the pressures that First World and Marxist societies impose on queer Caribbean peoples.

## **Section II: Vodou**

### **4. La Mermaid's Seahorse: Transcorporeality in Vodou**

The culture of Haitian Vodou provides powerful examples of cross-gender identifications through the phenomenon of trance possession, mystic marriages and zombification.

These altered states of consciousness create propitious environments for the production of local forms of nonheteronormative identities and practices that can successfully fend off the onslaught of imported “gay” and “lesbian” identities from the First World.

I propose particular interpretations of novels, a film, and ethnographic interviews in order to explain how the distinct Afro-Diasporic notions of corporeality of Haitian Vodou produce such local categories for subjects of same-sex desire. René Depestre's

Hadrianna dans tous mes rêves is a novel in which the female protagonist becomes identified with a male Vodou deity, or Lwa, during Carnival. Frankétienne's

Adjanoumelezo utilizes spiralist literary techniques to reveal the potential for gendered ambivalence in Vodou. Documentary film-makers Anne Lescot and Laurence Magloire

foreground the role of queer male Vodou initiates in the worship of the female deity

Erzulie Dantor in their celebrated film Des Hommes et Dieux.



## **5. *Madevinez genyen gwo zozo*: Testimonies of cross-gender identifications in Vodou communities**

This chapter gives voice to the wisdom of Jacqueline Epingle, a Mambo who has led a Vodou Temple for the Haitian community of Montreal, Canada for over 25 years. During my three years of participation in her spiritual household, I have interviewed a dozen initiates who are queer. The chapter distills the content of my conversations with Jacaqueline Epingle and the interviews with the initiates by focusing on the peculiar conceptualization of the body in Vodou. The narrative is self-reflective, or autoethnographic, in its appraisal of the Ethnic Studies' scholar role as a "consciousness-raiser."

### **Section III. Candomblé**

## **6. *Exu*: Queering the Crossroads**

In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues that the African trickster deity of Eshu-Elegbara functions as a unifying trope between African and United States' African-American discourses. In this chapter, I explore the survival of this same African deity in another location in the Western Hemisphere—the city of Salvador da Bahia in Brazil—in order make the claim that the figure of Eshu-Elegbara, far from remaining monolithic across the Diaspora, shifts shapes in different New World contexts. I argue that while Eshu acquires a dismissive and combative stance to the Anglo-Saxon dominant culture in North America, in Brazil Exu contests the dominant Lusitanian culture through a jocular and threatening exhortation to cultural creolization that is distinctively queer.

The character of Vadinho in Jorge Amado's Dona Flor e seus Dois Maridos (1966) affords us an opportunity to observe this phenomenon. After his death, Vadinho—a devotee of Exu—continues to appear to his wife and, as a transcorporeal being, is able to keep a sexual relationship with her. Realizing that the power of Candomblé has enabled Vadinho's return from the grave, Dona Flor decides to use the powers of this same Afro-Brazilian religion to drive him out so she can remarry. However, in the end she decides to keep both her ghostly stud and her homely, but living husband. This *ménage-a-trois* embodies a queer embrace of cultural and ethnic hybridity that is quite distinct from the Eshu of Zora Neale Hurston or Ralph Ellison. Therefore, my study revises Gates' analysis by insisting on the idea that Eshu-Elegbara is a unifying feature of Afro-diasporic discourses not because of fixed spiritual attributes, but because of its ability to survive through adaptive changes that often render it unrecognizable at first glance.

## **7. *O Pai de Santo e um bixa*: A Diasporic Ethnography across the Lusophone**

### **Atlantic**

Structured as a travelogue, this chapter strings together various responses to my queries regarding the large numbers of queer Pai de Santos in Candomblé on both sides of the Atlantic. Through interviews, observations and participation in rituals with members of the FENACAB (Federação Nacional do Culto Afro-Brasileiro) in Bahia, Brazil and Lisbon, Portugal, I present how the response to this question is modulated by insider/outsider context, by degree of intimacy, migrancy and by current cultural climate within the context of the nation.

## **8. In lieu of a Conclusion: An Initiation**

This chapter reiterates my argument that the unique Afro-Diasporic conceptualization of the body as an open vessel able to host and transport a plurality of subjectivities simultaneously enables cross-gender identifications in religious rituals. The chapter also becomes a forum for Cuban, Haitian and Brazilian informants to become aware of the way in which the power of these cross-gender trance possessions and mystic marriages spill into the everyday lives of initiates. In keeping with the autoethnographic and non-linear/anti-Cartesian spirit of this book, I offer at the end a brief self-analysis of my initiation into Vodou.