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**Let the Waters Flow:  
(Trans)locating Afro-Latina Feminist Thought**

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**Let the Waters Flow:  
(Trans)locating Afro-Latina Feminist Thought**

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this body of work to some of the most influential women in my life. Mom, you motivate me to be a warrior and to always keep up the good fight. To my sister, Omandra: I honestly, don't know where my brain and my heart would be if you weren't always there to remind me of who I am and where we are going. To my black sisters who are always sharing words of wisdom and dropping knowledge, continue being who you are.

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## **Abstract**

### **Let the Waters Flow: (Trans)locating Afro-Latina Feminist Thought**

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When thinking specifically of transnationalism, African diaspora and the fluidity of identity: Where do we locate Afro-Latina women? The answer for this question would seem to come from a Black or Chicano feminist thought, nonetheless, these theoretical frameworks have static spaces where fluid subjectivities like that of Afro-Latina women are not recognized. This report frames a theoretical conversation between these two frameworks through a dialectic discussion of their empty spaces or limits and proposes a new approach to Afro-Latina feminism based on the processes and intersections of Black consciousness, sexuality, and the knowledges that are created through the body and its fluidity. More importantly, paying close attention to the roles of translocation, transformation, and the fluidity of identity. In furthering this theoretical conversation, under the theme of Afro-Latina women, this report takes on the case

of Dominican women's transnational experiences and their different dimensions as represented in novels like, Nelly Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints* and Ana Lara's *Erzulie's Skirt*. Looking specifically at the relationships between women and women, and women and their bodies as being transformed through the sacred, this report concludes that the centrality of Afro-Latina women's experience is in recognizing that the body as an archive, is a place from where knowledges are re-created and disseminated creating a feminist epistemology for themselves.

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## **Part One:**

### **An Approach to Afro-Latina Feminist Thought**

#### *Introduction*

The visibility of Afro-Latinos has increased in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, creating a drastic turn in Black Studies and Latino Studies. As scholar Agustin Laó-Montes describes: "Afro-Latinidades as transdiasporic subjects tend to transgress essentialist conceptions of self, memory, culture, and politics corresponding to all encompassing categories of identity and community such as simply 'Blacks' and 'Latinos'" (Laó-Montes 319). Moreover, as Black scholars continue to explore transnationalism, the African diaspora and the fluidity of identity, I wonder: What rupture does diaspora create and how is this rupture manifested through the body and transnational identity? How does sexuality and blackness take up space in transnational Afro-Latina bodies? Furthermore, where do we locate Afro-Latina bodies?

The answer for this question would seem to come from the Black or Chicano feminist movement which offered us a theoretical framework that re-centers the racialized woman's body, or as Cherrí Moraga describes, a "theory in the flesh". However, in re-visiting the foundational texts offered by these scholars, one notices the essentialist notions of race and migration that do not allow for recognizing fluid subjectivities like that of Afro-Latina women. Afro-Latina women's experiences, in

specific, have yet to be recognized as an essential part of understanding the complexity of Latino and Black identities. To locate an Afro-Latina feminist thought we must obtain a fluid positionality that recognizes and articulates the many transformations that Afro-Latina women experience.

This paper attends to a thorough theoretical problematization and not a deconstruction of sorts. It provides a different lens through which we may access an Afro-Latina feminist perspective informed by processes and intersections of black consciousness, sexuality, knowledges that are constructed through the body and its fluidity. However, to locate *this* we must understand that how a methodology of afro-diasporic reading practice by taking up a fluid positionality that acknowledges and articulates the experiences of “trans” moments and spaces within Afro-Latina identities. By providing a literature review of Chicana and Black feminist thought, this paper outlines the essentialist concepts present in both bodies of knowledge that do not allow for Afro-Latina women to locate themselves. I propose a theoretical problematization between Black feminist thought and Chicano feminist thought by highlighting that they lack an afro-diasporic component. These theoretical frameworks have static, or stagnant, elements that do not allow the opening of a space where Afro-Latina bodies can be located. This section of this report concludes by offering a different way to locate Afro-Latina feminist thought through recognizing the fluidity of blackness and the “trans” subjectivity of Afro-Latina women.

### *Literature Review*

The Black Nationalist movement and Chicano movement of the 1960s and 70s are some of the most influential social justice movements. These movements emerged in resistance to racial and class oppression. However, meanwhile race and socio-economic class are at the center of these movements, sexism within these movements and racism within feminism during this time did not grant women of color agency. This invisibility then paves the way for the emergence of Black feminist thought with the Combahee River Collective Statement and Chicano feminist thought with Gloria Anzaldúa and Norma Alarcón's *This Bridge Called My Back*. Although these newly found feminist theories emerge from their own community's nationalist movements, they, in turn, confront the sexism within these movements that has continuously obscured their voices and contributions. Furthermore, they challenge traditional notions of a second-wave feminism led primarily by white middle-class women that ignores the experience of women of color or even considering them "women" at all.

In contrast, Black and Chicano women reclaim a feminist theory that re-centers the racialized woman's body, or as Cherrí Moraga describes, a theory in the flesh. She writes, "A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual belongings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity" (23). A feminist theory in the flesh that establishes itself from the margins and highlights lived experience from and

through the body as well as challenges the communities of which racialized women are a part of—this becomes a political necessity in order to establish their own agency.

The Chicano and Black feminist movements have developed a feminist philosophy with key elements that helps us further understand the experiences of women of color. Black feminist thought has provided us with its theories of intersectionality that allows us to understand that race, sex, nation, and class oppressions are intersectional and that the matrix of domination highlights how these intersectional oppressions are organized (Kimberly Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins). Moreover, Chicano feminist thought has also contributed its theories of border identities that take migration and language as its point of departure (Gloria Anzaldúa). Ultimately, both schools of thought also create space within themselves where the voices of lesbian women are also heard. Additionally, the knowledges that are created through epistemologies and lived experiences are central in the formation of a feminist theory of color. This is to say that, phenomenology and the body become a place from which to theorize.

#### *Chicano Feminist Thought and the Vasconcelian Move*

Within Chicano feminist thought the static centrality of *mestizaje* is invoked within its discourse of identity. *Mestizaje* introduced by José Vasconcelos's theory of the "cosmic race," is the idea that eventual and continuous racial mixing in Latin

America will form this superb race. It has become an identifying discourse for the Chicano movement, as well as the formation of the Latino community at large. In her book *Borderlands/La frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa presents the oppression of Chicana and lesbian women within their very own Chicano community. Throughout her book she uses a Vasconcelian discourse to create a space that allows for the emergence of this new mestiza consciousness. Anzaldúa writes:

Opposite to the theory of the pure Aryan, and to the policy of racial purity that white America practices, his theory is one of inclusivity... From this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollinization, an 'alien' consciousness is presently in the making—a new *mestizo* consciousness, *una conciencia mestizo de mujer*. It is a consciousness of the Borderlands. (99)

In this mestiza description Anzaldúa is in dialogue with Vasconcelos not only when it comes to racial mixing or miscegenation, but also in the creation of an identity where she can locate herself:

What I want is an accounting with all three cultures—white, Mexican, Indian ... And if going home is denied to me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—*una cultura mestiza*—with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture. (44)

Nevertheless, proposing a discourse of a mestiza consciousness that uses Vasconcelian discourse as its foundation complicates the location of blackness since Vasconcelos himself employs an ever-present invisibility of blackness in the creation of the “cosmic race”. When Vasconcelos addresses the position and function of blackness within *mestizaje* he argues:

De esta suerte podría redimirse, por ejemplo, el negro, y poco a poco, por extinción voluntaria, las estirpes más feas irán cediendo el paso a las más hermosas ... El indio, por medio del injerto en la raza afín, daría el salto de los millares de años que median de la Atlántida a nuestra época, y en unas cuantas décadas de eugenesia estética podría desaparecer el negro junto con los tipos que el libre instinto de hermosura vaya señalando como fundamentalmente recesivos e indignos, por lo mismo, de perpetuación. (27)

When Anzaldúa identifies herself with a racial miscegenation discourse that invokes a sentiment of harmony that may be available to her within her own community, it is important to pose this question: What kind of *mestizaje* or miscegenation is Anzaldúa invoking and how does it function in the construction of Chicano feminism? The *mestiza* culture that she intends to construct leaves out black bodies and relates itself closely with an Indigenous and European identity, which in turn does not create a space where Afro-Mexican, or even, Afro-Chicano bodies could locate themselves. In Vasconcelos's *mestizaje*, black identities are left at the margins

while a discourse of erasure acts to discard them with the purpose of creating this “cosmic race”.

Furthermore, throughout her book, Anzaldúa employs this Vasconcelian discourse of erasure as well as promotes these characteristics implicitly recognizing the “few black people in Iberoamérica” (Vasconcelos 27). The moments in which Anzaldúa recognizes the African presence in Mexico are minimal and almost nonexistent. In this way, Anzaldúa contributes to an invisibility of the black woman’s body in a way that does not allow the possibility of this identity to flow into a space of recognition. When referring to a mestiza and Chicana spirituality she argues:

*Guadalupe* unites people of different races, religions, languages: Chicano protestants, American Indians and whites.... She mediates between the Spanish and the Indian cultures (or three cultures as in the case of *mexicanos* of Africano or other ancestry) and between Chicanos and the white world. (52)

It is clear here that Mexicans of African descent do not fit into this present discourse of Chicano-Mexicano spirituality, but only in a parenthetical manner. This parenthesis allows us to read the black body—literally—as a body in the interstices of the borders of this *mestizaje* discourse. The black body is within and without this discourse, it is at the borders and at the limits of what Anzaldúa attempts to construct. Although Anzaldúa theorizes about border identity—a fluid identity—where one would assume that an Afro-Latino body could also be located, it is

evident that even within this fluidity there are static and empty spaces that lack an afro-diasporic component. Moreover, Anzaldúa herself highlights the lack of recognition of this component in her own work when she writes that, “When not copping out, when we know we are more than nothing, we call ourselves Mexican, referring to race and ancestry; *mestizo* when affirming both our Indian and Spanish (but we hardly ever own our Black ancestry)” (85). In this parenthesis, she recognizes blackness, however, does not grant it agency. It is in this similar way that Vasconcelos traces out the function of the black subject in the process of racial miscegenation as one with a voiceless subjectivity. The black subject is not allowed to speak in the process toward racial harmony.

Racial miscegenation has been central in the construction of Latino identity as it has created an ideology of racial harmony; this pre-dominant idea that has shaped Latin America and is ever-present in *latinidad*. In *This Bridge Called My Back*, Mirtha Quintanales—a Cuban contributor who migrated to the U.S.—writes about the difficulty of understanding how race, or blackness per se, is constructed in the United States. For her, understanding blackness becomes something of confusion as she claims that Black culture is not a Latin American thing. She argues:

Many of us Latinas are non-white—as a matter of fact, most of us are racially mixed to various degrees. Ask a Black or ‘mulato’ Puerto Rican woman what her identity is though, and mostly likely she will tell you ‘Puerto Rican’ ... Many African peoples are ‘Black,’ but as a Nigerian,’



or 'Ethiopian,' or whatever... Obviously 'Black Culture' is an American phenomenon. (155)

Quintanales does not recognize Black culture as an afro-diasporic element, but only strictly recognizes it as U.S.-born phenomenon. Nevertheless, is there not a Black culture in Cuba and other Spanish-speaking parts of Latin America, Central America and the Caribbean? Black culture is not an American phenomenon, but a global one. To invoke a discourse of racial harmony within a Latino identity is to ignore its racial complexities and to fall into homogenizing and conflating differences and experiences. This lack of recognition parallels a colonial discourse of erasure present in Vasconcelos and José Martí's<sup>1</sup> speeches and writings. In brief, this also functions as a de-politization of race—and in specific—blackness.

Ultimately, to consider Vasconcelos and Martí's discourses of racial harmony as a framework of de-colonization in the Chicano/Latino feminist movement is to continue establishing the invisibility and marginalization Afro-Latino subjectivities. When approaching the legacy and identity of Latina women, we can begin to further understand the particularities of the location of the Afro-Latina woman. On the one hand, black women's bodies are unrecognizable and almost inexistent within these

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<sup>1</sup> In his brief essay, "My Race," Martí portrays a nation-building project that is based on an anti-imperial critique of the United States, but also in constructing a Latin American imaginary. Although his modernist arguments seem progressive and anti-racist, his arguments are in fact haunted at the peripheries by phantasms of colonialism and racism that subtly highlight how Martí envisions a free Cuba. His modernist ideas depend on a colonial discourse of the erasure of race. In "My Race," Martí invokes an imaginary of political assimilation and rejects the presence of structural racism. Specifically, the black subject seems to be erased from this Latin American discourse where black voices are repressed—since to express racial pride is a threat to the nation. Ultimately, to construct the nation, race must be erased.

legacies of anti-imperialism and decolonization. However, if we know that black subjects are also part of a history of colonization and development of the Spanish empire, then how is the black woman being considered? We can perceive her body and subjectivity as an unrecognizable specter that haunts the peripheries of discussions of gender and subjectivity even within a de-colonizing attempt.

*Black Feminist Thought: A problem of essentialism and the “transnational” attempt*

In contrast to Chicano feminist thought, Black feminism has taken Black women’s bodies into account in regard to the processes of colonization and decolonization. However, within this school of thought there has been an ongoing trend of universalizing the black women’s experience. Through the Combahee River Collective Statement published by pioneers of the Black feminist movement, Black feminism introduces itself as the one that will speak for others. It states: “As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face” (210). During this time, Black feminists established the movement as symbol of solidarity between black women and other third world women. And while those solidarities are crucial and foundational in the movement towards women of color agency, the problem here is one of conflation. It is not that Black women are left out, but that it conflates third world women’s experiences as well as presents blackness ambiguously since it does not give us an understanding of who is included in this Black identity. The

Combahee River Collective argued, “We are dispossessed psychologically and on every other level, and yet we feel the necessity to struggle to change the condition of all Black women” (215). But when we recognize that this collective was composed of strictly African-American women from the U.S., we can ask ourselves: How is blackness being used? Is it a cultural political identity or an essentialist one that is referring to a specific experience? From this, we gather that the Collective, as well as with Angela Davis in *Women, Race and Class*, the African-American woman’s experience is established as the experience from which the oppression of *all* Black women and other women of color can be resisted. Here, the foundational philosophy of Black feminism falls into the traps of not recognizing differences even within the Black community. In other words, to recognize that Black women are not just African-American, but also Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latina as well as other Black women’s identities that are also within the African diaspora. As Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberle Crenshaw—two contemporary Black feminists—highlight:

In a context where many believe that to talk of race fosters racism, equality allegedly lies in treating everyone the same. Yet as Kimberle Crenshaw (1997) points out, ‘it is fairly obvious that treating different things the same can generate as much inequality as treating the same things differently’. (26)

As they have pointed out, not recognizing differences is to re-establish other discourses of oppression even within a movement toward social justice. This is to

say that the essentialization of blackness is a static characteristic of Black feminist thought that has caused the creation of an empty space where an afro-diasporic element should highlight and emphasize the fluidity, movement and queerness of black women's identities.

In her work, *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins argues that it is necessary to consider Black feminist thought in a transnational context of social justice through which the empowerment of Black women can be achieved (23). However, it is not clear if Collins is using the term "transnational" in a way that alludes to the fluidity of a transnational space that emphasizes migration or movement, and not a stationary space. For example,

In a transnational context, women in African, Latin American, and Asian nations have not sat idly by, waiting for middle-class, White women from North American and Western European nation-states to tell them what to do. Instead, using the United Nations as a vehicle, women from quite diverse backgrounds have identified gender oppression as a major theme affecting women transnationally. (250)

When making reference to transnationalism and contextualizing black feminism within it, Collins focuses on parallels of Black women's experience and does not create a complex account for the connections and solidarities that are established. In other words, there isn't a space where Black feminism is transnational, but only in a way that draws on similarity of experiences throughout different spaces of the

African diaspora. For her, this thought presents itself as universal since the matrix of domination and intersectional oppressions are found in various places of the world.

She posits that:

The myriad social problems associated with Black women's poverty and Black women's responsibilities in caring for children—violence, drugs, adolescent pregnancy, and school dropout rates—transcend the U.S. context. Instead, U.S. Black women's experiences are an American version of an important transnational phenomenon. (264)

For Collins, finding these similarities is equivalent with placing Black feminism in a transnational context. Nonetheless, she does not extend her framework to problematize or even situate the experience of Black women that move within and without a transnational space. So, while her take is transnational, in that these are issues that are found across national borders—or, really, within many national borders—Collins, does not consider a transnational context to also be that which is embodied and experienced by Black women who constantly migrate between national spaces and find themselves within and without national boundaries. Her approach to a Black feminist thought in a transnational context alludes to solidarities that can be created because of the similarities, but then again, does not grapple with the complexity of understanding this space as one that is fluid, of coming and going, and of the movement between borders and their interstices. Ultimately, she falls into the minimalization of Black women's experience when she

establishes this subject from within a U.S.-context looking outward. Although Collins' conflation recognizes women in various places of the African diaspora, her arguments do not wrestle with the complexities of transnationalism and fall flat into invisibilizing, or erasing, the differences that exist within this context.

The conflation that takes place when articulating this discourse of invisibility only further stagnates a social justice movement for Black women at a global level. Furthermore, even within Black feminist thought there have been Afro-Caribbean intellectuals whose differences have been homogenized and are read as African American feminists, such as Audre Lorde, Jacqui Alexander, and Luisa Teish, just to mention a few. What would it mean within Black Studies to read them, in an Afro-Caribbean as well as transnational context? If they are read as part of an essentialist Black feminist thought canon, then this means that ruptures and moments where things come together, within blackness are not being recognized. These beholders and creators of knowledge have been proposed as the intellectuals of a "universal" Black feminist thought. Lorde, herself, cautioned against this homogenization when she proposed her theory of "difference". In her brief essay, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" Lorde argues that "difference" is a tool through which we can dismantle the master's house, which begins to take place when, first, we recognize that the communities that we form a part of, or our 'homeplace', is made up of differences that must be recognized and not homogenized (112). In "difference" there is power, as well as a mechanism that

unites differences. Moreover, to meddle in this space of “difference” can lead us to achieve a fluid positionality of liberation. It is from here that we can begin to articulate and approach a feminist theoretical framework that recognizes “Black Atlantic others,” specifically, Afro-Latina women.

### *Afro-Diaspora and the Queer in Blackness*

But what bodies are accounted for? Which are not? To further extend our knowledge of these feminisms and the bodies from which its theories emerge when thinking specifically about issues of transnationalism, African diaspora, and the fluidity of identities: Where can we locate the Afro-Latina body?<sup>2</sup> If we take this question as a point of departure, one would think it possible to refer to Black or Chicano feminist thought as theoretical framework to locate ourselves. Nonetheless, these frameworks have their limits or empty spaces where Afro-Latina women cannot locate themselves. Chicano feminist thought—which has become a hegemonic feminist Latino thought— does not take black women into account outside of ways that are parenthetical or invoke a discourse of racial harmony. To recognize an Afro-Latino identity, as Marta Moreno Vega describes in her introduction to *Women Warriors of the Afro-Latina Diaspora*:

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<sup>2</sup> In using the term “Afro-Latino” I refer to the definition proposed by Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores in the *The Afro-Latino Reader*: “They are people of African descent in Mexico, Central and South America, and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, and by extension those of African descent in the United States whose origins are in Latin America and the Caribbean” (1).

Contesting illusory notions of a multi-racial utopia in which European, indigenous and African descendants live harmoniously without addressing the effects of colonialism, imperialism and enslavement, *Afro-latinidad* not only demands recognition for the historical presence and contributions of African descendants since the end of the transatlantic slave trade, but also heralds a shift with regard to how Latin American identity is constructed today. (viii)

Meanwhile trying to find the Afro-Latina woman within Black feminist thought is a complicated task due to its essentialism over Blackness that does not open itself to the vast inclusion of afro-descendants outside the United States. It concentrates on a racial construction in the United States that complicates how we can understand Afro-Latino identity. Afro-Dominican writer and scholar Ana Maurine Lara highlights this perspective when she argues that:

The spaces that Afro-Latinas in the United States occupy are undefined spaces that result from the ways in which race has been constructed in U.S. society. Because of these constructions, and the institutions built around them, many Afro-Latinas are often not seen by Black American nor by other Latinos. We must in turn push to be seen. (23)

Lara presents the invisibility and the identity negotiations that Afro-Latina women must employ. Black and Chicano feminist thought leaves out a space of recognition



where a fluid Afro-Latina subjectivity could be exercised and given agency. In other words, these “thoughts” are lacking an afro-diasporic component that recognizes multiplicity and heterogeneity without creating a conflation of our differences.

If we want to define the emergence of a black consciousness within transnational and afro-diasporic spaces, we must further explore what *is* diaspora, more specifically, Afro-diaspora. As Brent Hayes Edwards historiographical and etymological analysis of “diaspora” highlights, “The use of the term *diaspora*... is not that it offers the comfort of abstraction, an easy recourse to origins, but that it forces us to consider discourses of cultural and political linkage only through and across difference” (64). As Edwards suggests, this is to read diaspora as moments of identification and dissidentification, recognition and otherness—in a way that prohibits us from essentializing blackness and instead acknowledging its fluidity. This is not only to challenge the hegemonic notions of blackness found in Black Studies, but to also take into consideration the processes of black self-making. To take up a fluid positionality within Black Studies would be to re-interpret the African diaspora as an on-going political process of racial consciousness that also recognizes “Black Atlantic others,” such as Afro-Latinos.<sup>3</sup> This in turn, pushes the envelope a bit further to recognize the differences found within Latinidad while still acknowledging the African Diaspora.

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<sup>3</sup> In using the term “Afro-Latino” I refer to the definition proposed by Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores in the *The Afro-Latino Reader*: “They are people of African descent in Mexico, Central and South America, and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, and by extension those of African descent in the United States whose origins are in Latin America and the Caribbean” (1).

Within this afro-diasporic fluidity there are moments of rupture and linkages simultaneously. Edwards writes:

...articulations of diaspora demand to be approached this way, through their *décalage*. For paradoxically, it is exactly such a haunting gap or discrepancy that allows the African diaspora to ‘step’ and ‘move’ in various articulations. Articulation is always a strange and ambivalent gesture, because finally, in the body, it is *only* difference—the separation between bones or members—that allows movement. (66)

It is when we acknowledge fluidity and movement as afro-diasporic elements that we have gained a perspective through which we can recognize and accept differences—seeing “difference” as something that contributes to social justice and the creation of solidarities.

### *Afro-Diaspora Reading Practice and the Fluidity of Identities*

When we recognize the empty spaces prevalent in Chicano/Latino and Black feminist thought and their lack for a true afro-diasporic element that highlights the importance of differences and fluidity, we can now begin to approach an Afro-Latina feminist theoretical framework. Meditating about these intermediary and unrecognizable spaces where the Afro-Latina body is located, as Ana-Maurine Lara highlights in her own work, I ask: What happens in these intermediary and transitory spaces? To begin answering this question we must access an afro-

diasporic reading practice that can facilitate our understanding of an Afro-Latina experience and identity as a fluid body that transgresses various spaces at a time. This methodology of an afro-diasporic reading practice articulates a fluid positionality that allows us a space from which to read Afro-Latina subjectivities throughout transnational and transcendental spaces. For further understanding, we can refer to Omi se'eke Natasha Tinsley's "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic" where a fluid positionality is proposed in order to recognize "Black Atlantic others". In her article, Tinsley delineates central categories of racialized tortured bodies as the first sites of colonization. She materializes the queerness of the Black body alluding to its fluidity that at times makes it one with the waters that transport it. To employ this practice, she suggests that we think of queerness or fluidity as an afro-diasporic element:

*Queer* not in the sense of 'gay' or same-sex loving identity waiting to be excavated from the ocean floor but as a praxis of resistance. *Queer* in the sense of marking disruption to the violence of normative order and powerfully so: connecting in ways that commodified flesh was never supposed to, loving your own kind when your kind was supposed to cease to exist, forging interpersonal connections that counteract imperial desires for Africans' living deaths. (199)

*Queerness*, or fluidity, employs a theory of desire that recognizes different subjectivities found within the matrix of domination and oppression. Moreover, to

take up a fluid positionality becomes a method of resistance and liberation that recognizes differences and attends to the violence and rupture experienced through diaspora. An afro-diasporic reading practice does not allow us to fall into confluences, essentialisms and major contradictions, and instead allows for water to flow into these empty spaces. As Tinsley states, “Most simply our challenge is to be like the ocean: spreading outward running through bays and fingers, while remaining heavy, stinging, a force against our hands” (212). At the moment that we achieve this kind of fluid positionality we challenge what is already established and move into creating an Afro-Latino feminist theoretical framework that is recognizable and emerges with its own voice from within the “trans”.

*(Trans)locating Afro-Latina Feminist Thought*

Afro-Latina women’s experiences, in specific, have yet to be recognized as an essential part of understanding the complexity of Latino and Black identities. Within the field of Afro-Latino studies we must also create a space for us, Afro-Latinas, which grapples with the way that race, gender, and sexuality are reconfigured in a transnational context. This is not to say that Afro-Latina feminist and queer scholars are non-existent as their voices are now taking stage and being heard. In the 2012 volume of *Women Warriors of the Afro-Latino Diaspora* co-edited by Marta Moreno Vega, queer women, community organizers, spiritual healers, and educators shared their experiences through writing. Their personal testimonials maintained a

narrative throughout the anthology where their bodies as well as the fluidity of their identities in the transnational, spiritual, sexual sense were present. It is here that I recognized in my own experiences as well, that the constant presence of the prefix ‘trans—‘were central to how we understood ourselves as Afro-Latina women.

The concept of translocality, as invoked by Laó-Montes and coined by Afro-Puerto Rican novelist and intellectual Mayra Santos-Febres, furthers our understanding of the transnational experience of Caribbean migrants. In her dissertation, “The Translocal Papers: Gender and Nation in Contemporary Puerto Rican literature” Santos-Febres takes on the works of four Puerto Rican writers—Ana Lydia Vega, Luz María Umpierre, Manuel Ramos Otero, and Sandra María Estevez, who have constantly migrated between Puerto Rico and the United States—as a point of departure for developing her theory of translocality. Since their works challenge hegemonic notions of nation, gender, and sexuality as they do not “belong” to either a Puerto Rican or U.S. American cannon, Santos-Febres argues that the writers’ marginalized experiences reflected in the texts themselves, can be understood as translocal. For Santos-Febres,

Translocality describes the way in which displacement makes class, gender, sexuality, nationality and racial classifications continuously fluctuate. It also challenges the neatly defined boundaries of national, ethnic/racial, or class cultures by proposing a view that takes into consideration their transformations amidst shifting contexts. (26)

To further understand this notion, she proposes that these writers, as translocal subjects, are negotiating their identities depending on the context they find themselves within that circulatory migration.

As translocal subjects, these writers are not legitimated within any national space or another, or one gender or another. In fact, they are approached with apprehension and skepticism, seen as traitors and possible agents of conspiracy (Santos-Febres 52). Therefore, their multiple identity negotiations that lay outside an “origin” work as a performance of survival within the texts they produce. This textual performance of survival allows them to write themselves into existence as they write from their specific experience. Translocality is a theory that reflects the multiplicity of adjustments or “maladjustments” for surviving within the matrices of oppression (53). Ultimately, for Santos-Febres translocality problematizes the work of these authors by demonstrating the experience of transnational migration and identity negotiations and where these authors try to locate themselves.

In the introduction of his 2013 *Mambo Montage*, Laó-Montes offers his own reconceptualization of translocation or translocality, as a way to further complicate Afro-Latinidad. He writes:

The notion of translocality refers at once to historical/structural location, geographic scales, and subject positions. In contrast to the more common term *transnationality*, it is not centered in nation-states and nationalities but articulates geographic units of space (place,

nation, region, world) with historical locations and subject positions (classes, genders, sexualities, races, ethnicities, nationalities, etc.).

(13-14)

In other words, this is to understand that the constant movement between geographical spaces and the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality influence the formation of Afro-Latino identities. It points to an ongoing complexity. In short, Laó-Montes offers us a way of expanding how we may think of Santos-Febres' translocality when thinking about Afro-Latinos and their own transnational experience that falls on the margins of national boundaries.

Both of these scholars present translocality as a concept that problematizes identities. However, in her conclusion Santos-Febres briefly mentions how poet Julia de Burgos *embodies* translocality "since she inscribes the conditions that had lead to a reorganization of both political and personal conceptions of identity" (186). This is something that begs further expansion and interrogation. Moreover, what does it mean or what does it look like to embody translocality or for our bodies to translocate? Not to merely think of translocality as a concept or a theory for problematizing a situation, but to expand on this notion as a practice.

In her book, *Travestismos culturales: Literatura y etnografía en Cuba y Brasil*, Caribbean scholar and literary critic, Jossianna Arroyo relates to the idea of the translocal as the continuous circuits of movement and negotiation. However, her own concept of cultural transvestism also highlights the position of violence present

in these negotiations, she writes, “... ese cambio continuo de posiciones que termina por convertirse en un circuito que encierra una postura melancólica de la subjetividad... se escribe también desde una 'retórica de la violencia' en cuanto a la representación del otro" (7). More specifically, this is to recognize that trans— subjects are manifesting their own subjectivity from a position that has experienced violence, as part of their informed subjectivity. This is to say that trans— not only functions as a practice or strategy of survival, but encompasses the presence of the body on which this violence has been inscribed to facilitate the process of self-making.

In further understanding “trans—“ as a practice of survival and the centrality of the body, Jossianna Arroyo’s theory of cultural transvestism, reminds us that trans—is also a way through which one gains access to a subjectivity and agency not available before. She describes, "travestimo cultural" or cultural transvestism, as a concept where the marginalized subject at the moment that he/she is "reinscribed" into the national discourse becomes problematic and falls into a series of negotiations as a strategy for being. She writes:

La integración del cuerpo del otro en el discurso nacional plantea los problemas de la representación—racial sexual y de género—de ese cuerpo y las distintas máscaras a las que tiene que recurrir el sujeto de la escritura. A esta estrategia de la representación la identifico como travestismo cultural. (5)



This is to say that there are series of negotiations that this body must adhere to in the presence of being repressively "reinscribed" into the national space. In relation to the scope of this paper, we can expand Arroyo's argument to highlight the transgressions the body will continuously find itself in, and therefore, partake in a series of constant transformation as a strategy of survival, especially when speaking of Afro-Latina women.

Moreover, the body may not only transgress, but also serve as the space in which the power of knowledge marks itself. As Arroyo posits in her work,

Los nuevos debates críticos sobre el lugar del cuerpo como el espacio donde se cruzan ideologías políticas, poderes sociales y definiciones sobre la identidad en la posmodernidad latinoamericana marcan, en muchas instancias, la reflexión de este trabajo. (3)

In other words, her work recognizes the body as a space from which we create knowledge as well as the space within which we combat with external oppressions that intend to strip us of our agency. It is a space from which the epistemological work is done, from which knowledge is created.

In reflecting how my own approach to the use of "trans" theory ever-present in this paper, I want to delineate its usage as Lawrence La-Fountain Stokes has evoked it:

I see that which is "trans" not necessarily under the optic of the unstable, or in between, or in the middle of things, but rather as the

core of transformation—change, the power or ability to mold, reorganize, reconstruct, construct—and of longitude: the transcontinental, transatlantic, but also transversal (oblique and not direct). (195)

Similarly, as La-Fountain Stokes describes in his own usage of “trans”, Afro-Latina women are found within and without many spaces articulating a subjectivity that attempts to complete itself from this constant movement, not from that which is stagnant, or static. It is an identity that moves within transnational spaces not just when migrating, but also at the moment of return as it articulates a phenomenology of the body in continuous transformation and transition.

### *Conclusion*

The stage has risen for us to be heard, but now let us collect our bodies in a space to share our individual experiences in which we theorize from *our* flesh; in which we construct an Afro-Latina feminist epistemology that embraces self-knowing through understanding our “trans” subjectivities. The empowerment of the Afro-Latina woman circulates through the body. It is from this point of departure that knowledges are founded and passed from one woman to another forging solidarities and establishing an Afro-Latina feminist thought. When we take up a fluid positionality as an afro-diasporic reading practice, an epistemology produced by the body emerges.

Afro-Latino identity, as a fluid identity, is composed of many experiences that emerge from the interstices—it is a lived and expressed identity from within *trans* spaces. The movement between spaces is constant and is at the center of this identity. It is from this *trans* place that one can approach an Afro-Latina feminist thought. And it is here where I want to arrive: to propose that these different *trans* moments and experiences are central to the fluidity of Afro-Latina women’s being. She is found within and without many spaces articulating a subjectivity that attempts to complete itself from this constant movement, not from that which is stagnant, or static. It is an identity that moves within **transnational** spaces not just when migrating, but also at the moment of return as it articulates a phenomenology of the body in **transition**. As Lara describes: “...our bodies are also found in transition from place to place—between islands, between homes, between the past and the present, between dreams and the waking world”(45). Through these transnational and transitional experiences, there are knowledges that are left behind, others that are created and solidarities that are established.

As Ana Irma Rivera Lassén posits, a **transversality** that recognizes the multiplicity of our identities is needed; one that does not fall into conflation or essentialisms:

As a part of our transversal analysis, we must recognize the multiplicity of identities that form part of our identity as women. I am all the identities at the same time; I am the intersection of all of them. We are all people with a nationality, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation

and other all together. We do not leave any of our identities behind when we participate in an activity. However, that is exactly what analyses that do not recognize the transversality of identities try to do: they emphasize some identities at the expense of others. (73)

The centralization of the body and ritual constructs certain knowledges through invoking the sacred. It is important to emphasize the role of the sacred and the spiritual as routes of **trance** in which certain knowledges are acquired.

Ultimately, to try to read Afro-Latina women's bodies within a Chicano/Latino and Black feminist framework is to recognize that this body is at times in **transgression**. Lara describes this more in-depth when she argues that,

As Afro-Latinas in the world, we are constantly negotiating others' assumptions about where our bodies and our memories overlap, where our Blackness/*negritud* begins and our Latina-ness ends... Afro-Latina identities and bodies transgress essential categorization. (31)

The Afro-Latino body in its diasporic element is in violation with the essentialisms in Chicano/Latino and Black feminist thought as it has already been presented in this paper. Her body transgresses the conflation and the "universal" and from there, knowledges and epistemologies that establish subjectivity are constructed. This is to think of *trans* spaces as fluid spaces where knowledges of resistance are created from the body and towards a discourse of liberation.

## Part Two:

### **(Trans)locating Afro-Latina Bodies in Trance-formation in Nelly Rosario's**

#### ***Song of the Water Saints and Ana Lara's Erzulie's Skirt***

##### *Introduction*

We can continue to hold onto a consciousness of our different locations, our understanding of the simultaneous ways in which dominance shapes our lives and, at the same time, nurture the erotic as that place of our Divine connection, which can in turn transform the ways we relate to one another (M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 2011)

Afro-Caribbean feminist and scholar Jacqui Alexander's words in this epigraph secularize the spiritual and the political as central to black women's formation of solidarity with one another. The Dominican literary texts explored in this paper, engage with this notion of how the spiritual operates in Afro-Caribbean women's experiences within matrices of domination. Moreover, this paper explores how we can locate ourselves in multiple dimensions through the spiritual and the political by acknowledging our bodies as archives that hold an epistemology of constant transformations. As Black scholars continue to explore transnationalism, the African diaspora and the fluidity of identity, I wonder: What rupture does diaspora create and how is this rupture manifested through the body and transnational identity? How does sexuality and blackness take up space in

transnational Afro-Latina bodies? Furthermore, where do we locate Afro-Latina bodies?

The answer for this question would seem to come from the Black or Chicano feminist movement which offered us a theoretical framework that re-centers the racialized woman's body, or as Cherrí Moraga describes, a "theory in the flesh". However, in re-visiting the foundational texts offered by these scholars, one notices the essentialist notions of race and migration that do not allow for recognizing fluid subjectivities like that of Afro-Latina women. Afro-Latina women's experiences, in specific, have yet to be recognized as an essential part of understanding the complexity of Latino and Black identities. To locate an Afro-Latina feminist thought we must obtain a fluid positionality that recognizes and articulates the many transformations that Afro-Latina women experience. In stating this, while exploring how race, sex, and sexuality are re-configured in Afro-Latina bodies, I ground these knowledges by focusing on Dominican women's transnational experience and its different dimensions.

Dominican cultural production has been understudied as a subject within the Afro-Diasporic and Caribbean Studies as many do not self-identity as black.<sup>4</sup> In the 1980s, the massive migration from Dominican Republic to the United States

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<sup>4</sup> Although in light of my discussion with Junot Díaz, I would then argue, that the complexity of blackness in the Dominican diaspora has been understudied. Ginetta Candelario and Silvio Torres-Sillant are two great Dominican scholars that engage with blackness, on the contrary, I think the discussion of how blackness and dissidentifying with blackness is at times a matter of survival that may manifest as self-hate, but the continuous presence of violence disavows the power of blackness.

(primarily, to New York City), created a transnational Dominican community. In *Quisqueya on the Hudson*, anthropologist Jorge Duany argues that the essence of transnational Dominican identity is not only made up of traveling back and forth between the U.S. and the Dominican Republic, but also the cultural continuity that transcends national borders: from religious traditions to Dominican cuisine. Nonetheless, as I have stated in my previous work “El tíguere sin cola”, transnational identity goes beyond eating mangú, listening to merengue or being Catholic. It is, to be part of a transnational space characterized by the constant movement from one place to another, which begins to form a fluid cultural identity.<sup>5</sup>

The transnational experience—as Ginetta Candelario, Ramona Hernandez, and Silvio Torres-Saillant have outlined in their numerous works on Dominican migration—has allowed the space for the resurgence of Afro-Dominican culture and black consciousness. In light of this, I propose that we re-visit transnational Dominican women’s experiences—which have been understudied—to shed light on Afro-Latina “trans” subjectivities. For decades these women who constantly migrate have been laboring away at the production of knowledge that informs and empowers other women through their writing, art, music, oral histories, and performances.

In this paper, I argue that the centrality of Afro-Latina women’s experiences is in recognizing that the body, as a transformative archive, is a place from where

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<sup>5</sup> For more on this work, see: Omaris Zamora. “El tíguere sin cola: La emasculación de una dominicanidad transnacional”. *University of California-Berkeley Comparative Literature Undergraduate Journal*. 2 (Fall 2011): 78-94.

knowledges are re-created and disseminated, thus creating a black feminist epistemology for themselves. Moreover, I focus on the relationships between women and women's bodies as being transformed through the sacred in the novels of Dominican-American writers Nelly Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints* and Ana-Maurine Lara's *Erzulie's Skirt*.

In order to locate an Afro-Latina body as a transformative archive, it helps to understand how others have theorized the relationship between the body and the archive. For Diana Taylor, the archive is composed of "enduring materials" such as, "...documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archeological remnants, bones, videos, film... all those items supposedly resistant to change"(19). Although Taylor's "archive" alludes to some kind of materiality, it is limited in that it does not consider the materiality of the body as one that is open and resistant to change. Taylor's line of thinking in regards to her notion of the "archive" ignores the centrality of our bodies in making, creating and storing memories.

In contrast, I argue that bodies and archival memory are linked to form an embodied archive, or place where memories are kept. The body becomes the place in which experiences are recorded or engrained. As Jacqui Alexander writes,

So much of how we remember is embodied: the scent of home: of fresh-baked bread; of newly grated coconut stewed with spice (we never called it cinnamon), nutmeg, and bay leaf from the tree...Violence can also become embodied, that violation of sex and spirit. (277)



To echo Alexander, we can understand our bodies as archives where the records of multiple translocations, transformations, and the violence done to us are kept. In this same way, we can understand an Afro-Latina embodied archive as a site of knowledge production that we can trace back to the “...ways in which knowledge comes to be embodied and made manifest through flesh, an embodiment of Spirit” (Alexander 15). But, how is this embodied archive formed? How does this knowledge forge Afro-latina “trans” subjectivities? To answer these questions, the theoretical framework in this paper centers the importance of translocation, transformation and the fluidity of identity present in Afro-Caribbean scholarship. Which, ultimately, designate how we can conceptualize “trans” experiences in reading Rosario’s and Lara’s novels.

*Trans—theorizations: A Theoretical Framework*

If we want to define the emergence of a black consciousness within transnational and afro-diasporic spaces, we must further explore what *is* diaspora, more specifically, Afro-diaspora. As Brent Hayes Edwards historiographical and etymological analysis of “diaspora” highlights, “The use of the term *diaspora*... is not that it offers the comfort of abstraction, an easy recourse to origins, but that it forces us to consider discourses of cultural and political linkage only through and across difference” (64). As Edwards suggests, this is to read diaspora as moments of

identification and dissidentification, recognition and otherness—in a way that prohibits us from essentializing blackness and instead acknowledging its fluidity. This is not only to challenge the hegemonic notions of blackness found in Black Studies, but to also take into consideration the processes of black self-making. To take up a fluid positionality within Black Studies would be to re-interpret the African diaspora as an on-going political process of racial consciousness that also recognizes “Black Atlantic others,” such as Afro-Latinos.<sup>6</sup> This in turn, pushes the envelope a bit further to recognize the differences found within Latinidad while still acknowledging the African Diaspora.

The visibility of Afro-Latinos has increased in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, creating a drastic turn in Black Studies and Latino Studies. As scholar Agustin Laó-Montes describes: "Afro-Latinidades as transdiasporic subjects tend to transgress essentialist conceptions of self, memory, culture, and politics corresponding to all encompassing categories of identity and community such as simply 'Blacks' and 'Latinos'" (Laó-Montes 319). In further challenging essentialist characteristics sometimes found in Latino and Black Studies Laó-Montes and Arlene Dávila have revisited *latinidad* as a way of breaking away from its predominant discourse of racial harmony and *mestizaje* that erases black subjectivities. In *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York* they explore the caveats of *latinidad* as a way of bringing

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<sup>6</sup> In using the term “Afro-Latino” I refer to the definition proposed by Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores in the *The Afro-Latino Reader*: “They are people of African descent in Mexico, Central and South America, and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, and by extension those of African descent in the United States whose origins are in Latin America and the Caribbean” (1).

Afro-Latinos into the conversation, but also highlighting the transnational and translocal aspect of the process they call *latinization*.<sup>7</sup>

The concept of translocality, as invoked by Laó-Montes and coined by Afro-Puerto Rican novelist and intellectual Mayra Santos-Febres, furthers our understanding of the transnational experience of Caribbean migrants. In her dissertation, “The Translocal Papers: Gender and Nation in Contemporary Puerto Rican literature” Santos-Febres takes on the works of four Puerto Rican writers—Ana Lydia Vega, Luz María Umpierre, Manuel Ramos Otero, and Sandra María Estevez, who have constantly migrated between Puerto Rico and the United States—as a point of departure for developing her theory of translocality. Since their works challenge hegemonic notions of nation, gender, and sexuality as they do not “belong” to either a Puerto Rican or U.S. American cannon, Santos-Febres argues that the writers’ marginalized experiences reflected in the texts themselves, can be understood as translocal. For Santos-Febres,

Translocality describes the way in which displacement makes class, gender, sexuality, nationality and racial classifications continuously fluctuate. It also challenges the neatly defined boundaries of national, ethnic/racial, or class cultures by proposing a view that takes into consideration their transformations amidst shifting contexts. (26)

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<sup>7</sup> For further reading on this concept please refer to the introduction of *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York City* by Agustin Lao-Montes and Arlene Dávila.

To further understand this notion, she proposes that these writers, as translocal subjects, are negotiating their identities depending on the context they find themselves within that circulatory migration.

As translocal subjects, these writers are not legitimated within any national space or another, or one gender or another. In fact, they are approached with apprehension and skepticism, seen as traitors and possible agents of conspiracy (Santos-Febres 52). Therefore, their multiple identity negotiations that lay outside an “origin” work as a performance of survival within the texts they produce. This textual performance of survival allows them to write themselves into existence as they write from their specific experience. Translocality is a theory that reflects the multiplicity of adjustments or “maladjustments” for surviving within the matrices of oppression (53). Ultimately, for Santos-Febres translocality problematizes the work of these authors by demonstrating the experience of transnational migration and identity negotiations and where these authors try to locate themselves.

In the introduction of his 2013 *Mambo Montage*, Laó-Montes offers his own reconceptualization of translocation or translocality, as a way to further complicate Afro-Latinidad. He writes:

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nation, region, world) with historical locations and subject positions (classes, genders, sexualities, races, ethnicities, nationalities, etc.).

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In other words, this is to understand that the constant movement between geographical spaces and the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality influence the formation of Afro-Latino identities. It points to an ongoing complexity. In short, Laó-Montes offers us a way of expanding how we may think of Santos-Febres' translocality when thinking about Afro-Latinos and their own transnational experience that falls on the margins of national boundaries.

Both of these scholars present translocality as a concept that problematizes identities. However, in her conclusion Santos-Febres briefly mentions how poet Julia de Burgos *embodies* translocality "since she inscribes the conditions that had led to a reorganization of both political and personal conceptions of identity" (186). This is something that begs further expansion and interrogation. Moreover, what does it mean or what does it look like to embody translocality or for our bodies to translocate? Not to merely think of translocality as a concept or a theory for problematizing a situation, but to expand on this notion as a practice. In my own readings of the characters in Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints* and Lara's *Erzulie's Skirt* translocality appears as a practice in which the body is central to producing the epistemology it creates in the act of translocation. They regard translocality as an active *practice* of survival. This invocation is an attempt to narrow the gap between

theory and practice in the humanities, as the works of fiction we sometimes analyze are often reflections of our everyday realities.

Some scholars that have been successful in contributing to this “closing of the gap” are: Juan Flores and Miriam Jiménez Román. They have brought forth the “Afro-Latino Forum,” a collective of scholars, which has produced *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* an anthology that greatly contributes to the study of Afro-Latinos in the United States. This developing scholarly work has included organic intellectuals and urban working-class communities, and is creating a space that pushes back against invisibility, yet reveals integrally the fluidity of Afro-Latino identities. Nonetheless, there is still plenty of work to be done and places where Afro-Latino studies needs to expand.

Afro-Latina women’s experiences, in specific, have yet to be recognized as an essential part of understanding the complexity of Latino and Black identities. Within the field of Afro-Latino studies we must also create a space for us, Afro-Latinas, which grapples with the way that race, gender, and sexuality are reconfigured in a transnational context. This is not to say that Afro-Latina feminist and queer scholars are non-existent as their voices are now taking stage and being heard. In the 2012 volume of *Women Warriors of the Afro-Latino Diaspora* co-edited by Marta Moreno Vega, queer women, community organizers, spiritual healers, and educators shared their experiences through writing. Their personal testimonials maintained a narrative throughout the anthology where their bodies as well as the fluidity of their

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In her book, *Travestismos culturales: Literatura y etnografía en Cuba y Brasil*, Caribbean scholar and literary critic, Jossianna Arroyo relates to the idea of the translocal as the continuous circuits of movement and negotiation. However, her own concept of cultural transvestism also highlights the position of violence present in these negotiations, she writes, "... ese cambio continuo de posiciones que termina por convertirse en un circuito que encierra una postura melancólica de la subjetividad.... se escribe también desde una 'retórica de la violencia' en cuanto a la representación del otro" (7). More specifically, this is to recognize that trans— subjects are manifesting their own subjectivity from a position that has experienced violence, as part of their informed subjectivity. This is to say that trans— not only functions as a practice or strategy of survival, but encompasses the presence of the body on which this violence has been inscribed to facilitate the process of self-making.

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into the national discourse becomes problematic and falls into a series of negotiations as a strategy for being. She writes:

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This is to say that there are series of negotiations that this body must adhere to in the presence of being repressively "reinscribed" into the national space. In relation to the scope of this paper, we can expand Arroyo's argument to highlight the transgressions the body will continuously find itself in, and therefore, partake in a series of constant transformation as a strategy of survival, especially when speaking of Afro-Latina women.

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In reflecting how my own approach to the use of “trans” theory ever-present in this paper, I want to delineate its usage as Lawrence La-Fountain Stokes has evoked it:

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Similarly, as La-Fountain Stokes describes in his own usage of “trans”, Afro-Latina women are found within and without many spaces articulating a subjectivity that attempts to complete itself from this constant movement, not from that which is stagnant, or static. It is an identity that moves within transnational spaces not just when migrating, but also at the moment of return as it articulates a phenomenology of the body in continuous transformation and transition.

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Afro-Latina woman circulates through the body. It is from this point of departure that knowledges are founded and passed from one woman to another forging solidarities and establishing an Afro-Latina feminist thought. When we take up a fluid positionality as an afro-diasporic reading practice, an epistemology—that is not only based on written or documented knowledges, but also reads the body as an archive—emerges. But how do we approach this archive that emerges from the body? Furthermore, how are race, gender, and sexuality re-configured through it? Looking specifically at what is left behind, what is gained, how constructions of sex and sexuality, the body, and dynamics of power change, this paper explores these questions by turning to transnational Dominican women writers in order to begin developing an epistemology of Afro-Latina feminist thought in which knowledge is re-created and disseminated through the body.

*Sacral (Trans)formations of the Spiritless*

Released in 2002, *Song of the Water Saints* follows the story of four generation of Dominican women from the time of the U.S. invasion in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to post-migratory movements in the 2000s. It is with Graciela—mother of Mercedes, who is mother of Amalfi, who is mother of Leila—that the story begins to unfold and reveal a spiritual, yet embodied memory that mediates the access to agency and empowerment. From the beginning of the novel Graciela and her first lover, Silvio, are erotically photographed by American, Peter West, who intends to

capture exotic Caribbean images for postcards. As Donette Francis argues in *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship*, this pivotal moment in the novel during the U.S. invasion is not only a military occupation of space, but a dispiriting invasion of Graciela and Silvio's bodies. The photographer takes advantage of this young couple and offers them money to look on and direct their physical love to one another erotically. It is this embodied violence at the novel's beginning that is a "...violation of sex and spirit" (Alexander 277).

Francis and Dominican scholar Lorgia García Peña have focused on this initiation scene and Graciela as the beholder of history in the family. They acknowledge Graciela's body as an archive of memories that create knowledge that will be passed on to her daughter and future generations of women, like her great granddaughter, Leila. As Francis posits,

Defying generational closure, agency materializes as a continuous series of maneuvers to be enacted and reenacted over time and space, so that Graciela's legacy lives through the oral stories passed on to subsequent generations of women and their consequent life choices.

(75)

It is the trans-generational oral histories that allow for the creation of a knowledge that will later empower other women to find their own voice. But how does this knowledge creation take place, what does it look like for the body to become an archive? The process of self-knowing and constant transformation through the body

and its fluidity is paramount to understanding the archive that the body produces. I extend my reading of Graciela's embodied archive to show how it is intertwined with the spiritual as something that facilitates the production of the archive. Furthermore, it is to add that the translocation of Graciela's subjectivity is further problematized when we challenge ourselves to ask: what is the body without the spirit? And what is the spirit without the body?

In *Song of the Water Saints* the dispirited Graciela is always in movement, constantly abandoning her daughter and husband and going away to a brothel where she is contaminated with syphilis by a German man, then working as a maid in a wealthy couple's house, then back home, and once more to a convent. Her movement to and from these secluded and gendered spaces creates a sense of resistance to being held "captive" to a disciplined and controlled role, but the novel also demonstrates her constant failure to fully develop a sense of self in these spaces (Rangelova; Massey). Therefore, the focus of the novel's narrative on Graciela's subjectivity as an individual is one formed by her constant "searching" for something that will fulfill her. The attempt to embody the ideal or be legitimized by the hegemonic notion of a "real woman" haunts Graciela's subjectivity. Judith Butler reflects on how gender or the "realness" of gender performance inscribes itself in the body:

And yet what determines the effect of realness is the ability to compel belief, to produce the naturalized effect. This effect is itself the result

of an embodiment of norms, a reiteration of norms, and impersonation of a racial and a class norm, a norm which is at once a figure, a figure of body, which is no particular body, but a morphological ideal that remains the standard which regulates the performance, but which no performance fully approximates. (*Bodies That Matter*, 88)

And in this story, Graciela, never fully approximates her performance as the normal woman since she constantly abandons and neglects her husband and daughter—failing to become a matriarch. However, it is through this disavowal of such controlling images of black women that her subjectivation, or process of self-formation, is developed through how her body experiences these gendered spaces.<sup>8</sup> In short, she performs out of character. She is this body searching for a spirit, a subjectivity of sorts.

However, her subjectivity is in continuous movement through the translocation of her identity as she crosses through these different spaces. In the novel the translocality experienced by Graciela can be interpreted as “...the direct result of North American imperialism and of the present-day world political and economic regime, which has favored continued migration outward...” (La Fountain-Stokes). It is this constant displacement of the spirit and of herself—in search for a self—that forces her to perform various identities in her own process of “becoming”.

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<sup>8</sup> For more on controlling images of black womanhood see, Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Feminist Thought*. New York: Routledge, 2009.

She is prostitute, domestic worker, and finally in the convent seeking for her body to be taken by the spirit. Throughout these coming and goings moving from one space to the next Graciela's constant transformation through her own translocality construct her body as a vessel that serves as a medium for the various identities/loci to be manifest. As Jossianna Arroyo argues: "Identities are performative in their 'becoming,' so part of their constitutive order belongs to racism as a socio-historical discourse of displacement, alienation, and disavowal, which creates complex orders of signification" (Arroyo, "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall," 153). These performed identities and controlled images of black womanhood maintain Graciela in a cycle of on-going performative transformation throughout different spaces.

As readers, we begin to understand Graciela as a spiritless body. She roams the city (trans)forming herself into "... a vendor, a roaming doctor, a beggar, a nun, an orphan" (Rosario 117). While she is a body without a spirit, she moves from one location to another so fluidly as if she were a spirit herself—completely unstoppable. However, none of these identities become solidified as to embody the spirit of any of these would be to halt the process of making the archive of memories that her body becomes. "The idea, then, of knowing self through Spirit, to become open to movement of Spirit in order to wrestle with the movement of history... are instances of bringing the self into intimate proximity with the domain of Spirit"

(Alexander 295). In other words, her body becomes not a space for subject-being, but for subject-making.

While her process of becoming and ongoing (trans) formations create an embodied archive, her spiritless body, or her spirit-like characteristics, challenge the sacred. What happens when a spiritual guider, such as La Gitana, a transvestite man named Lorenzo, attempts to read a spiritless body? In her reading of Graciela's hand she notes: "¿How do you have so many lives?...Many futures, but you cannot move forward" (Rosario 115). Being able to "read" Graciela's many identities or no identities, explain the Simian Line he finds in her palm where Head and Heart are one. He reacts, "¿Why did you come to me? Such hands follow their own laws." (Rosario 116). In recognizing that Graciela's soul had been robbed, and that her fluidity of identity was cognizant to the spiritless body that acted as a vessel or medium, the Virgin speaks to him through Graciela's palm: "*—Lorenzo, the future can be changed. Be not complacent,* La Virgen had said to him through the wounds in her palms. Never before had a vision challenged him so directly" (Rosario 116). In short, Graciela cannot be guided by the spirits, but acts as a medium for them. Her body acts as a space where identities continue to be enacted and performed. This moment of spiritual possession, is one in which her body "...becomes a means of communication, simply because Spirit requires it (although not only it) to mount its descent" (Alexander 320). Furthermore, Graciela's entrance into La Gitana's home is one that de-stabilizes and de-linearizes the perception of time and space as a spirit

that comes in and speaks to La Gitana, instead of La Gitana invoking the Divine to speak to Graciela.

Graciela's constant movement and transformations are facilitated through the centrality of her decaying body in the novel. Her spirit/subjectivity/agency can only be accessed through the attention of her body and its transgressions through the spaces of brothel, domestic work, the convent, and home. But upon her arrival to the convent, the final place that she runs off to, one would think that this would be the place where body and spirit come together. Graciela is an empty vessel searching for a spirit that also serves as a medium. In light of this, what is the spirit without the body? In other words, how can the sacred, or the Divine, intervene without the physical presence of a body? The novel's answer to this question seems to be that the body that transgresses must be policed, disciplined, and brought to death to embody the spirit. In Graciela's experience at the convent she realizes that:

Convent life was built on three legs: poverty, chastity, and obedience.

Graciela must put her flesh to death, so that her love becomes solely

focused on God's will. Through prayer and the rosary she could

overcome the demands of the body, kill its urges. (Rosario 149)

In being that Graciela's contaminated and spiritless body allowed for a fluidity of identity, the novel presents that this "transgression" is at times in conflict with many oppressive institutions. While Graciela feels that her staying at the convent longer will fill her, what stagnates her body in this place, also hints at the disintegration of



it:

...What kept her from leaving the convent was her hope that her fervent prayers during vigil would stop what felt like the slow disintegration of her body...When sleep finally did come, Graciela's dreams seemed to drag her through other bodies. (152)

These fluidities of identity, or being a spiritless body allow for movement and continuous transition where Graciela is able to find agency through the transcendental labor she must perform. Her arrival to the convent as a place of devotion, "... begins as an effort to subordinate the body to a transcendent object, it ends by taking the body, that is, self-feeling, as its object of worship, and letting the unchangeable spirit die" (Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 48). In other words, it is the moment her body is disintegrating that it is no longer a an objectified woman's body, but a de-objectified one. A body that can now attend to a fluid subjectivity that is not stagnant or unchangeable. The disintegration of her body embodies and solidifies the archive of memories she represents. The sickness and ailment rot away her body the closer she gets to achieve her full embodiment of spirit and possibility of subjectivity in a transcendental space.

At the moment that her body and spirit come together—death—she leaves behind her body. She becomes a spirit whose knowledge later guides her great granddaughter Leila. Living in New York City, Leila may be trying to grow up too fast by entangling herself with a married man who takes advantage of her sexually.

Graciela's ghost reaches out to caution Leila of her path and to instead empower herself through finding the truth within her. The conversation between Graciela's ghost and Leila plays out in the chapter titled, "Circles". In this dialogue Leila wants her Grandmamajama—great grandmother—to materialize for her and teach her to be a woman, but the only lesson she could give her is to become spirit or aim for that "take off that skin," and to keep her heart and bleed it for truth.

'I wanna be a woman.'

--Then, Leila, take off that skin.

'Get outta those clouds, Greatest-of-the-Grandmamajamas...'

--Take it off. To the bottom, disrespectful child...

--Keep your heart...let's bleed your heart for truth. (Rosario 203)

Although this seems as a violent request from Graciela's spirit and yet seems impossible and self-sacrificing, we can read it through a lens of de-objectification of the body. As Graciela's syphilis-ridden body begins to stand out of the controlling images of black womanhood and consistent objectification of black bodies, Graciela's spirit urges Leila to de-objectify herself and her body. In other words, to tap into the knowledge and life source our bodies contain outside of norm—to attend to the fluidity and queerness of her body.

The body is an archive and with its fluidity we find truth. Graciela's ghost becomes an embodied knowledge that haunts/guides her daughters creating an epistemology that arises from her dis-re-membered body that fluidly becomes one

with its newly found spirit-identity. We can read this as a kind of liberation that works to empower others, but at the cost of the body becoming undone or exhausted into a spiritual realm.

*Transcending Bodies, Re-conceptualizing archives*

The spirit of the sacred in Lara's *Erzulie's Skirt* (2006) positions itself differently from how it is presented in Rosario's novel. In Lara's novel, the overpowering presence of the sacred follows the lives of Dominican Micaela and Haitian Miriam. These women who grew up practicing Dominican Vodoun find themselves as outcasts and marginalized laborers in the capital city of Santo Domingo hoping to create a better life for themselves at the costs of being continuously exploited. While both protagonists come from "different" locations, during their translocation from the *campo* to the city, to their later transnational migration to Puerto Rico the two attend to each other's violated bodies that have suffered the loss of their children and families, as well as rape and exploitation. Their relationship of mending each other's external and internal wounds leads to developing a queer relationship of desire and affect.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, we can read the relationship between Micaela and Miriam as M. Jacqui Alexander describes in her book, *Pedagogies of Crossing*:

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<sup>9</sup> In her article, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage", Omi se'eke Natasha Tinsley elaborates on queerness as "...not in the sense of 'gay' or same-sex loving identity waiting to be excavated from the ocean floor but as a praxis of resistance. *Queer* in the sense of marking disruption to the violence of normative order and powerfully so: connecting in ways that commodified flesh was never supposed to, loving your own kind when your kind was supposed to

We can continue to hold onto a consciousness of our different locations, our understanding of the simultaneous ways in which dominance shapes our lives and, at the same time, nurture the erotic as that place of our Divine connection, which can in turn transform the ways we relate to one another. (283)

This is to say that the erotic love and solidarity that arises between these two women comes with the mediation of the Voudon loa Erzulie's as a spirit that carries the narrative from one violent location to the next.

The loa of Erzulie, a Vodoun spirit that represents love, creation, and beauty, is present throughout the narrative in a way that guides the love story of Micaela and Miriam. Erzulie's manifestations in the novel encompass her multiple identities, in the Haitian Voudon pantheon: Erzulie Rada, "...concerned with love, beauty, flowers jewelry," or Erzulie-Fréda who promiscuously loves men and women, or Erzulie Ge-Rouge, who's part of the stronger and more intense Petro family of the pantheon (Deren 62). As scholar Josune Urbistondo argues, Erzulie "...assumes a position in the pantheon as the figure through which creation, myth, dream and desire are fashioned while she remains forever unfulfilled and lacking" (4). To put it another way, Erzulie is a queerly loving and demanding loa. Her force and energy is a transforming one.

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cease to exist, forging interpersonal connections that counteract imperial desires for Africans' living deaths" (212).

In the novel, the queerness of blackness between Haitians and Dominicans contributes to the heightening of black consciousness in a Dominican literary body of work through the transformations experienced in various “trans” spaces (spiritual trance, translocation, transnational, etc.). It is this translocation, from their hometowns to the *bateyes* at the outskirts of the capital city, that allows for a fluidity of blackness, gender, and sexuality. But of course, we must highlight that this is always a violent procedure. In their process of migrating 60 miles east to Puerto Rico on a *yola* for better life opportunities, Micaela and Miriam end up held captive and sexually exploited in an old house upon arriving. While in this violent transnational space, they are tortured and experience living in a liminal space between life and death. In one of the worst rapes that Miriam experiences, “She felt her body ripped to shreds. She opened and closed her eyes, suffocating on the pillow underneath her...Miriam swallowed, her voice submerged beneath the fluids that consumed her before everything went black” (185-186). While the smell of tortured bodies reins the air they breathe, Miriam and Micaela create their own transcendental space as a way of resisting and surviving. After this sexually violent moment, Micaela figures out a way to distant herself from her body becoming “absolutely still” in a death-like state:

Miriam’s voice came out in whispers. ‘No, Micaela. That was the last time. That was the last time. From now on, when they come in, I’m just going to focus on the dirty ceiling. Think of a picture show, I’ll wait for

them to collapse, and I'll wait, absolutely still, until their sweaty skin is no longer touching mine. (Lara 186)

"Life" in this violent transnational space is questionable. Nonetheless, here, the women access a moment of transcendence by ignoring their feelings, and fragment their bodies to resist and survive the sexual violence being done to them. They attempt to access a "trans" subjectivity to locate their spirit in the interstices between life and death. This subjectivity is not available within the tortured body and must be accessed through a fluidity of identity and space. This is to say that the queerness of the Afro-Latina woman's body and its identities are at the center for its liberation and agency.

The novel takes a surprising turn. In a moment of miraculous physical liberation they find the door to their cell open, their oppressors gone, and thousands of dollars lying around the house. They then return to the Dominican Republic and open a small market, or *colmado*, through which they pay homage to their ancestors and the loas that guide them. After embodying memories of the violent experiences of the crossing or migration to Puerto Rico, Miriam and Micaela manage to restore the archive of the middle passage through their bodies that connects both of them. As Josune Urbistondo posits:

Through Micaela's conversation with La Mar (Erzulie) once aboard the *yola*, Lara constructs a collective by casting history as a place and not an abstract concept imprisoned in the mind and bound by linear

time... Lara's construction of history as a place gives materiality to the act of remembering and creates a literary representation of the notion of embodied history. (24)

We can extend Urbistondo's insights by highlighting that the spiritual not only restores the archive through migration, or the crossing becoming embodied, but that it also re-conceptualizes our own self-knowing and continuous transformation. Furthermore, we can think of the crossing as "the space of convergence and endless possibility; the place where we put down and discard the unnecessary in order to pick up that which is necessary" (Alexander 8). The crossing is a space where experiences of "trans" converge. It is one of multi-dimensional crossings that occurring at once: transnational migration, translocation of race, gender, and sexuality, as well as a crossing into and through our own bodies to attend to the Divine or the Sacred. It is this place, as Alexander describes, where we put down the pure secularization of ourselves in order to attend to and pay close attention to that part of ourselves that becomes excluded--our intimacy between one another and closeness with the Divine. It is here that my own close reading of Lara's novel expands: to facilitate our understanding of how the moment of complete transcendence from the body to the spirit, draws the reconceptualization of the embodied archive as one where knowledges are created and disseminated through the body.

It is this reconceptualization of the embodied archive that Micaela and Miriam represent that allows for an epistemology that brings life and establishes continuity. For example, at the end of the novel, Micaela and Miriam pass on their teachings and sacral knowledges to Yealidad, a young girl from the batey that they have taken in as their apprentice. Yealidad's name is an echo of "Yelidá", the title and main character of a poem published in 1942 by Tomás Hernández Franco that mixes Scandinavian and Haitian Vodoun myth. Her name is a mythic echo, but also a reflection of the new generation that the poem speaks of—one that recovers an Afro-spiritual memory.

After her initiation ceremony Yealidad becomes very ill to the point of almost dying. At her bedside Micaela explains how her own crossing required visualizing the middle passage as a violent history of pilgrimage in order to "awaken" and fully understand herself. Micaela says,

I saw the bodies of those who had accompanied me on the journey...  
They were making a pilgrimage to the bottom of the sea. I felt Erzulie calling to me to join them. I felt fear rise in me, just as the fever had risen to consume me. I gave in to the darkness. I gave in to the fever. I awoke a prisoner, Yealidad, but nonetheless I awoke. (Lara 222)

These words revive Yealidad. She awakes and recovers. For Micaela, telling the story, or revealing the archive that her body withholds becomes a process of healing



and a way to give life. This reconceptualization of the archive shapes an embodied epistemology that empowers this young “daughter” of theirs.

The Divine, queer loving, Erzulie-Fréda and Erzulie Ge-Rouge have guided these women through their transformations as well as a reconceptualization of the archive through their bodies. Nonetheless, what happens when the body fully embodies the sacred? When the transformation is complete? The end of the novel presents us with Micaela sounding “different” when speaking to Yealidad. She uses the noun “us” which hints at the possibility that Micaela, is no longer, a “single” body”, but that the Divine Erzulie now dwells in her. Yealidad is emotionally shaken as she perceives and realizes this transformation:

‘You are now connected to the powerful breath of God in the way that the kings and queens who arrived here before us were connected. ... Trust that you are never alone’ ... Micaela had never spoken to her like that before. She felt her hands clammy, and she struggled to hold onto the glass jar in her hands. (Lara 232)

In her words and expressions the presence of the Divine have taken over the body and the trance-formation is permanent. Yealidad feels the sacred presence because she notices that Micaela speaks differently. It is a voice that embodies omnipresence and immortality and highlights the fact that the transfer of knowledge is complete. Both Micaela and Miriam have become the Sacred and can no longer live in the space of reality. They must transcend mortal existence become those ancestral

spirits that guide others through their own transformation and survival. By the time death has announced their complete transformation, the epistemology that they formed to continue to empower Yealidad with their knowledge becomes understood:

For a long quiet moment, she silently contemplated what for so long she had struggled to understand, what for all these years they had been trying to teach her...They had shown her how to walk, how to breathe and how to believe...Yealidad reached down to the ground for the keys, her body filled with a new sense of belonging. (Lara 242)

This moment of transcendence at the end of the novel becomes necessary to spark a different kind of self-knowing. The “trans” experience creates and gives life and from that, an acute consciousness of the self and one’s surroundings. The moment of physical death is not an end, but another spiritual dimension that stands outside the body—nonetheless, this realm can only be accessed through the body. Death here is the de-objectification of the black body through a physical and spiritual *trance-formation*. In this case, death is what creates a possibility for the future generations and the restoration of memory. In other words, death allows for re-memberance of our ancestors and their dis-re-membered bodies. It is with Yealidad, that a restoration of black feminist consciousness through an embodied archive of (trans)formations in a Dominican context becomes possible.

## *Conclusion*

Both *Song of the Water Saints* and *Erzulie's Skirt* allow us a way to read transnational Dominican women's experiences and ourselves as Afro-Latinas in order to complicate and challenge how we understand the interstitial spaces that we cross. This is to put into perspective how our ongoing process of becoming is not limited to transformations of the self, but also of the relation between body and spirit. The *trance-formations* of the characters in these novels are central to the fluidity of their identities and their survival. Although, without the displacement and (trans)location they experience, we cannot understand how Afro-latina women's identities as marked by "trans" subjectivities manifests themselves. As Ed Michaels posits, the spiritual and physical dislocation of these women becomes necessary for the continuum of their own subjectivity, but also that of the larger community (Michaels). They become witnesses, storytellers, and embodied archives that develop an epistemology of survival and agency for themselves.

As Lara proposes in *Women Warriors of the Afro-Latino Diaspora*: "...our bodies are also found in transition from place to place—between islands, between homes, between the past and the present, between dreams and the waking world" (Lara 45). The translocation of our bodies, as Lara points out, is constantly moving through "in-between" spaces where knowledges are stored, or created and solidarities are established.

Writing, like the embodied archive, converts itself in an articulation of rupture, dis-identification and recognition. In other words, this is an afro-diasporic element that takes the violence of colonization and de-colonization into account as it moves from one space to another. Its fluidity forces us to challenge essentialisms found in Chicano/Latino and Black feminist thought. To (trans)locate Afro-Latina feminist thought that engages with an afro-diaspora reading practice by taking up a fluid positionality that acknowledges and articulates the experiences of “trans” moments and spaces within Afro-Latina identities. Besides, to take up a fluid positionality becomes a method of resistance and liberation that recognizes differences and attends to the violence and rupture experienced through diaspora. At the moment that we achieve this kind of fluid positionality we challenge what is already established and move into creating an Afro-Latino feminist theoretical framework that is recognizable and emerges with its own voice from within these “trans” subjectivities.

In short, this paper acknowledges the queerness of blackness and its bodies throughout different spaces of the African diaspora. The static spaces found in Black and Latino Studies outlines the channels and pathways where water needs to flow for Afro-Latina bodies to materialize: an afro-diasporic articulation, a fluid positionality, a body in continuous transformation. Ultimately, the lived experience of violence within these “trans” spaces of tension and ambiguity is painful, but at the same time, it may be liberating.

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