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Antonio Jose Silva Santana

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**Trans-Atlantic re-turnings:
A trans/black/diasporic/feminist auto-account of a black trans Brazilian
woman's transitioning**

**APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Supervisor:

Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley

Matt Richardson

**Trans-Atlantic re-turnings:
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woman's transitioning**

by

Antonio Jose Silva Santana, B.A.

Report

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Dedication

To Jemanjá. Axé, Minha Mãe!

To all black trans women whose lives have been interrupted by violence.

May they rest in peace.

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I am also want to acknowledge the support of my spiritual family; of the black queer community in Austin; of my dear trans black friends in Rio de Janeiro and my Afro-Brazilian friends that have been involved in AADS.

Abstract

Trans-Atlantic re-turnings: A trans/black/diasporic/feminist auto-account of a black trans Brazilian woman's transitioning

Antonio Jose Silva Santana, M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

Supervisor: Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley

This report constitutes an auto-account that theorizes on/as my process of transitioning as a black trans Brazilian woman. In order to do so, I work with the concept of transitioning in conjunction the idea of re-turn by drawing mainly from studies within the realm of black feminism, black studies and Trans Studies. For this text, I elect the transitioning along temporalities, embodied sexualized gendered racialized experiences in different geographies I cross, with focus on my connections with Brazil.

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Literature Review

The brief set of texts selected reflects my three main areas of interest that inform the second section of this report, which is a glimpse the long term academic/activist/healing project that I am building throughout my PhD Program. Thus, there are some texts within that set that I work more closely in the discussion on second section, but the set extrapolates because it constitutes more of a map of the theoretical production available with which I can dialogue. The format of this literature review is presented as an annotated bibliography in which I point out briefly some important aspect that calls my attention in that work and that that piece relates to my project. The division of these areas is arbitrary in the sense that they overlap in many ways. For instance, the work done by Dr. Matt Richardson could be placed within Trans Studies, Gender Studies, Black Queer Theory, African Diaspora Studies or Black Feminism. In addition, I am also interested in Brazilianist Studies, as well as African and African Diaspora Sites that has a history of Portuguese colonization and currently have Portuguese as an official language. For this reason, Instead of making a section dedicated to Brazilianist Studies, these studies are intertwined within the areas presented here. The areas I chose to focus are Black Queer Studies, African and African Diaspora Studies and Gender and Sexuality Studies, as it follows:

Gender and Sexuality Studies

1. Parker, Richard (1999). *Beneath the Equator: Cultures of desire, male homosexuality, and emerging gay communities in Brazil*. New York Routledge.

This ethnographic account was carried out in the urban areas of Rio de Janeiro (southeast of Brazil) and Fortaleza (northeast of Brazil) mainly among male gay men and travestis. The author describes the emergence of a homosexual identity and how some specificities of the Brazilian culture such as the passivity and activity is related to a certain kind of masculinity. His discussion is also parallel to AIDS prevention movement in the country. The silence around anti-black racism and not addressing the black face of some of his white collaborator's performances, for instance, is a problematic aspect of this work.

2. Manalansan, M. & Cruz-Malave, A. (Eds.) (2002). *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*. New York: NYU Press.

This is a collection of articles addressing the different ways being queer is experienced and shaped in different geographies. Mobility, race, the sacred, global capital, the idea of nation and borders are some of the themes in this volume, which is comprised mostly of ethnographic and cultural studies analysis.

3. Muñoz, José Esteban (1999). *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minesota Press.

Muñoz addresses the ways queer artists of color reelaborate and transform of the codes within which they perform as a way of resistance and survival against the structural attempt to eliminate the queer body of color. He perceives performance as an act, and as such does something through the elaboration of aesthetics and indexation of politics.

4. Kulick, Don (1998). *Travesti: sex, gender and culture among Brazilian transgendered Prostitutes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

This is an ethnography carried out in Salvador, Bahia, with people called Travesti in Brazil. The author brings the life stories of transgendered prostitutes and how they develop their subjectivity. The account talks about the violence and oversexualization they face but also addresses their agency in their love relationships and through the pleasure they may experience in their work. However, the book is oblivious to the latent racism in their lives.

5. *Trans Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 3/4 (2008).

This volume focuses on feminist work that crosses different fields and whose Trans part of it resides on their capacity to “leak” areas, definitions, subjects. The discussion on Trans a term and not as a prefix in order to point out the limiting concept of the latter was fundamental to articulate the view I use here.

6. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* * Volume 1, Numbers 1–2 * May 2014.
Duke University Press.

This volume set the terms for the institutionalization of Trans studies by introducing main categories used in the field. I am especially interested in how Trans is more well explored in terms of its intersections with discussions that are not only related to trans-gender but also trans-national and other trans- possibilities.

7. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* * Volume 1, Number 3 * August 2014. Duke University Press.

This volume focuses on decolonizing Trans studies by highlighting issues of indigeneity and transnationalism. It also elect the “I” and the “eye” as forms of theorizing, that is, it acknowledges personal narratives as effective ways of decolonizing trans studies. This volume is very helpful for the work I am doing in this report given my intension to articulate personal narrative with a black transnational approach.

Black queer studies

1. Tamale, Sylvia (Ed.) (2011). *African Sexualities: A Reader*. Cape Town: Pambazuka Press.

The word of the editor sums up this volume, that is, as a set of articles that perceive sexuality as a source of pleasure but also oppression and violence though the theoretical, political and historical aspects of it in Africa. At the same time, they critically interrogate what both sexuality and African means as well as the conjunction of these terms in order to “avoid essentialism, stereotyping and othering.” Approaches range

“within the field of history, feminism, history, law, sociology, anthropology, spirituality, poetry, fiction, life stories, song, art and public health.”

2. Murray, O, Stephen & Roscoe Will (Eds.) (1998). *Boy-wives and Female Husbands: studies in African Homosexualities*. New York: Palgrave.

The articles in the book seek to break the silence around what the authors call same sex relations mainly within ethnographic and historic accounts, which obscures the argument of homosexuality coming from outside. The texts are organized according to regions in the African continent, thus different manifestations and namings such as queerness, same sex relations, maleness and femaleness, masculinity and femininity are discussed within a certain region, country or traditional people.

3. Mott, Luiz (1988). *Escravidão, homossexualidade e demonologia [Slavery, homosexuality and demonology]*. São Paulo: Ícone, 1988.

This author analyzes the information he brought to Brazil from the archives in Portugal concerning the cases judged by the Catholic inquisition on “immoral” sexual practices and gender expressions. His argument is that homosexuality started to be demonized in Brazil in that period but he fails to address the power relations and racialization of bodies, thus reproducing a logic of white Brazilian scholars in seeing colonial sex as a harmonic and pleasurable way of disrupting hierarchies.

African and African Diaspora Studies

1. Vargas, João H. Costa Vargas (2008). *Never meant to survive: genocide and utopia in black diaspora communities*. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

This text comes from Varga's experience in the ethnographic work he has done in Los Angeles and Rio de Janeiro. He maps how anti-black racism has prevented black people from their physical and mental wellbeing through systematic targeting by the state in these places as an index of the major diasporic experience. The systematic, intentional and high rates of deaths of black bodies characterizes the use of genocide in this work, which also highlights the different ways black people resist and experience blackness and discourses around race.

2. Pierre, Jemima (2013). *The Predicament of Blackness: Postcolonial Ghana and the politics of race*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

This is an ethnography that exemplifies the fruitful dialogue of Africanist, diaspora and black studies to analyze one specific experience in Africa. Her work questions how race also structures quotidian and political relations as a legacy of colonization and the consequence racialization of black bodies. She traces this path of othering in Ghanaian history and how it operates on the level of lightness and skin bleaching for instance as a sign of how race operates in an assumed race homogeneous society.

3. Ferreira, Roquinaldo (2012). *Cross-Cultural Exchange in the Atlantic World: Angola and Brazil during the Era of the Slave Trade*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

The book is written by a socio-cultural historian and it is based on extensive archive research mainly in Angola. The author intends to discuss the middle passage and the relation between Brazil and Angola from the perspective of Angolan individual's stories. According to him, most historians' studies on the link between Brazil and Angola through slavery focus on the macrostructure of it, while he is trying to approach it from a microstructure perspective.

4. Clarke, Kamari Maxine (2004). *Mapping Yorubá Networks: Power and agency in the making of transnational communities*. Durham: Duke Press.

This is a good example of multi-sited ethnography, which focuses on the development of Yorubá religious practices mainly in the US and Nigeria, although she makes references to Cuba, Brazil and other sites. The text discusses through this matter what blackness means to black people in these different places from the perspective they have about themselves and each other.

5. Bisschoff, Lizelle and Peer, Stefanie Van de (Eds.) (2013). *Art and Trauma in Africa: representations of reconciliation in Music, Visual Arts, Literature and Film*. New York: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd.

War traumas, genocide, conflict resolution and nation reconciliation in the African Continent are some of the recurrent themes addressed by this book by means of different urban Art manifestation's analysis by Cultural Studies and Ethnomusicologists scholars (mostly from German background). This book called my attention especially because some articles focus on Portuguese speaking countries such as Mozambique and Angola (Kuduro).

6. Dreawal, H. J. (2008). *Mami Wata: arts for water spirits in African and African and its Diasporas*. Fowler Museum at UCLA, Los Angelis.

This book talks about the manifestation of water spirits in different African Diaspora sites by discussing its genealogies, spread and materialization through artistic representations. It addresses the shifting representation it has acquired as well as its naming. They are usually associated with the mermaid, la sirene, and Mami Water, which is a creolization of Mummy Water. As a signifier of diasporic cosmologies and as a way of theorizing, the water spirits guide the approach I interested in taking.

Trans-Atlantic re-turnings: A trans/black/diasporic/feminist auto-account of a black trans Brazilian woman's transitioning

The right to write

As the sky drizzles thin tears over our shoulders, I climb those stairs with the usual habit of not making eye contact, but discreetly searching for familiar faces in the crowd. I stop by hand waves of dear colleagues who kindly tighten themselves to leave me space to sit on the dry part of the concrete stair. Being touched by cold rainy tears would add too much to the already affect of that mourning night. By sitting on the top row of the stairs, I look down with the usual habit of searching for resemblance. I greet back three black friends on the next row down who turn back to acknowledge my presence with warm smiles. Resemblance comes with the few colored back necks I see here and there. I am handed a booklet with a long list of names I assumed would be remembered that night. As I flip the pages my vision is blurred by the tears as I notice most of those names belong to Brazilian trans women. One page, two pages. Blurriness. My wet palm can't differentiate skyly tears from mine. Memories of fear. Sadness. Rage. I can't read anymore. My mourning is interrupted by the microphoned voice of a white woman saying "we will remember the names of people in the US." It must be the time constrain. It must be the cold rain. Skipping two pages out the almost five ones reminded

I somehow don't belong here. The two pages filled with murdered Brazilian trans women reminds me that nation don't want me there alive either. My pain can't differentiate the sadness for my sister's from mine. Suddenly I clench my teeth as I berate myself. Does your privilege allow you to merge your pain? What legitimacy would you have to remember those skipped pages? What a privilege to mourn over printed names when people struggle over the bodies of their loved ones! It's mainly their pain! Why me, right? A black Brazilian able bodied documented (passible?) trans woman who transitioned in her thirties at the beginning of a PhD program at a US institution! Would I have lived this long had I transitioned earlier living in the "invasões¹" of a mostly black poor area in the northern of Brazil? Would I have benefited from affirmative action sponsorship hadn't I been perceived just as a black man? Why me?!

After that rainy night of the Transgender Day of Remembrance 2014, ritualized on the stairs of Austin City Hall Plaza, "Why me?" haunted me strongly as I drudged on writing my papers for that semester. As I drew from the theorizing of powerful black women, I leaned that the self questioning affect of "Why me?" also haunts them in their writing. Janet Mock, in her memoir says "I come home, see myself in the mirror and ask 'why me?'" Shonda Rhymes² also speaks about that feeling by declaring:

¹ I refer to non official occupation of state land in the Capital of Maranhão, São Luís, mostly by poor black migrants from the countryside, who had resisted leaving despite the attempt of demolishing our houses. A similar process characterized the formation of favelas in Rio de Janeiro.

² Retrieved from <http://www.makers.com/moments/only-ones-left-standing> on 01/04/2015

For a long time you feel like the new person, and almost apologizing for feeling like the new person and apologizing for being in a place where you think you're not supposed to be. This thing is very unfortunate and frankly I don't think men feel that way. Men walk in a situation a lot of times and feel like they're absolutely supposed to be there, they have a sense of entitlement from the beginning. I don't think women have that sense of entitlement in them naturally. But without that it makes you feel that you're not sure, and some point in time I went from feeling that I was not supposed to be there to realizing that I had been there the longest

Tobe Melora Correal, in her book about her spiritual path with the Orisa, acknowledges the support of Saidiya Hartman in Correal's "terrified steps toward writing" and "during rough waters," the author shares that her dear friend "insisted that I have the right to write and reminded me that though the road is long it is never futile."³ What these women are saying is that patriarchy has engendered an imaginary that we are suspicious, be for being too close or being too distant to tell the stories we want. These powerful black women writers have reminded me that, despite the haunting "why me?," we have the right to write. I needed to acknowledge that right in order to write this text, in order to allow my vulnerabilities and privileges give me a precarious sense of entitlement to make the choices of language, vehicle of circulation and academic alignment for this text. This apparent digression with a metalinguistic beginning of the

³ Tobe Melora Correal, *Fiding Soul on the Path of Orisa* (The Crossing Press, 2003), x.

usual taken for granted writing process allows me to neutralize⁴ “why me?” as a paralyzer effect of anti-black racist patriarchy and leave the potential in it for critical vigilance of my positionality as I write/remember. I have the right to write. I have the right to live. I have the right to transition geographies. I have the right to learn. I have the right to hope.

The trans-orientation of language

In their introduction to the TSQ, Stryker at all, tell us that although the use of the term transgender may signal to a delimitation, a phenomena/subjectivities, the readers should be comfortable to pick us any kind of trans- that best suits us. In a previous work also expanding the concept of trans, these authors make reference to the work by Ahmed on Orientation in order to invite us to think in a different spatiality for trans-, that is, instead of a horizontal perception, we should think ?. I want to argue that such trans-work has been done especially by black feminists, that the routes it has taken points to that direction, but the work on certain trans bodies leaves space for more nuanced analysis. Bearing that in mind, the trans- that best suits me is the one from Trans-Atlantic, *a travessia*, the Crossing, in Alexander terms. The trans- in its phonetic similitude with trance and the possibilities of collapsing trans-ing/tranc(e)-ing as a space of simultaneities, whose orientation is other than just horizontal. The trans-Atlantic is in that space of simultaneity in which the body is also water and energy, the water is also energy

⁴ Shonda makes reference to this “neutralizing power” of sharing vulnerability in her commencement speech at Dartmouth. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EuHQ6TH60_I on 12/23/2014.

and body, and the energy is also body and water. Tras-ing/tranc-ing is finding that space of transition with(in) body-water-energy. In this text, I am interested in how perceptions of some kind of femininity has been deemed dangerous on afrodiasporic body-water-energy. Black bodies perceived as feminine, waters approached as having feminine forces, energies remembered as feminine power. I don't intend to define feminine here. Rather, I work with the references to it, and consider the variability of it says more about the capacity of being constructed in relation to danger, be that as perceived as dangerous or in resistance to that perception of danger. The trans-feminine then is what suits me here.

Ahmed not only call us to think of other ways to think about orientation in relation to sexuality, but also how such orientation as orientalization is attached to a process of racializing bodies. By taking the trans- in trans-atlantic, da travessia, is also a way of calling attention to that aspect, not as an aspect of "difference" but as an inherent constituting in shaping that transition of trans individuals, including transgender ones. Thansition into individuating experiences with our bodies, violent forced transition out of the materiality of our bodies, transition along the secular world and within worlds. In this text, I want to unpack the potenciality and performativity of "I'm transitioning" used by trans feminine individuals in all these levels.

The water is the embodiement of the trans-orientation. The illusion of horizntality contranst with the shapeshift-ing, leaking, bleeding, in-corpo-rating, "em-corpo," it's membrane, burial, means, memory, itself and a connection. My orientation is possible by

the confluence of romance language morphological composition of the languages I transition into and the haunting of languages I was allowed to live in, and was left to remember. I transition between Portuguese and English, in which trans- happens to bring me the acoustic/embodied memory of crossing. The learning that Tupian People allowed me to have from their world view through their language keeps me critical to the linguistic/worldview situational filter of that trans. What feels trans in Awá system of deixis, oriental particles? I go among kitsimba, kimbanda, amapo, kilombo. The singularity of ki- attached to the collectivity of samba (worlds), imbanda (medicines), ilombo. Pretu-guês? Black feminist talk about language. Trans also inprinted the transness in the language. The trans-linguistic suits me. What I am left with memory in the Yoruba and Bantu lexical legacy, the vocabulary that guides me. The recurrent reference to “simbi” as this body-water-energy gives me the impression of the trans-sensual. Of the possibilities of a simbi-otic perspective on trans instead of trans-ing what already in-trance-ink.

Transitioning along and Re-turning

In the summer of 2014, a few months after I started publicly vocalizing “I’m transitioning,” I return to Brazil after a year and a half in the US; not to my hometown São Luis, but to Rio de Janeiro. As I sit in a table at Lapa with a group of trans activists friends, most of whom black, I am approached by what I read as a black cis male police officer asking for my purse. Due to the World Cup, Lapa was heavily crowded by people from outside the country, although I noticed a considerable number of harassing white

males. Realizing that we were the only group targeted within that whole crowd, I was so paralyzed by the mixture of anger, the fear and also by the sadness of the predictability of that situation that I couldn't react and just stayed where I was, with frenetic smiles of amazement framing my "I can't believe this, I can't believe this!" as he grabbed my purse and shuffled the things inside it. Some of my friends stood up and started yelling at the police officer "she's just arrived, she's not from here, that's shameful what you're doing!" As the officer didn't care and skipped from my purse to the purse of dark skinned black trans woman on my side, people in the table started shouting "Policia ra-cista! Policia ra-cista!" (Ra-cist police! Ra-cist police!). Not able to find or plant anything considered illegal in our purses, he and two other white police officers left. A few minutes later they targeted a black man wearing a backpack who was selling shots, which is not illegal in Rio. What it appears to be his mother reaches for her son while people in our group yelled at the black man to watch his bag closely as the officer screens it so that they are not able to plant anything in it. As we witness the profiling of this person, our group starts shouting "de noite, de dia, contra o racismo, o machismo e a transphobia!" (at day, at night, against racism, machismo and transphobia!).

This scene, a context in which mega events mobilize high surveillance of black bodies through racial profiling and, in this case, intersected with transphobia, that is resisted by the voicing of black trans people naming those systems; is a departure to inform my discussion on transitioning in this paper. Rather than aligning with what Aizura (2012) calls "dominant spatial narrative of transsexual transition, the journey out

and return home (p.145),” that reproduces oppositions of here and there present in “global and transnational histories of colonialism and imperialism,” I situate this experience as an instance of what Page and Richardson (2010) call “sexually racist and gendered practices of oppression” shared by millions of Blacks in the African Diaspora, which defines “Black trans subjectivity as a racialized embodied experience of gender variance that ranges beyond the state’s preferred binary gender code” (p.57).

Aizura (2012) acknowledges that “travel narratives are central to understanding trans experience,” and that there is a complexity conveyed by travel metaphors beyond the spacialization of gender, the “from...to...”. He also states that these metaphors:

draw on the specificity of particular modes of traveling to make meaning: road trips, overseas vacations, immigrant stories. In turn, different understandings of modes of traveling both condition and shape the trans travel narrative conventions” (Aizura, 2012, p.140)

I suggest that, for black trans people in the African Diaspora, trans travel narratives evoke the metaphor of transitioning in similar ways Alexander (2005, p.8) works with the metaphor of the Crossing, that not only recalls the embodied memory of the disembodied in the “tidal current of the Middle Passage,” but also “evokes/invokes crossroads, the space of convergence and endless possibility” (Alexander,2005, p.8). The idea of “return home” here, rather than recalling what Aizura (p.140) points as an “import of Euro-American geographical narrative about the shaping of the (colonized) world into

a center,” it is closer to the discussions on the of home as a site of displacement raised by authors such as Janet Mock in her memoir *Redefining Realness*, Hartman in *Lose your mother*, Joseph Beam in his essay *brother to brother* and Holand in her article “home” is a four-letter word.

Return is also re-turn here. It is a choice of coming back to a space that transforms us and that orient us in new (un)familiar ways, thus return is also re-turn and the “coming home” not only refers to transitioning along geographies but also along spaces of theorizing whose approach encompasses our intersecting experiences with oppression. In this sense, returning to Brazil, signifying my relation with my past in the country, as well as with the past of slavery in that country that has generated a legacy of anti-blackness also associated with transphobia is a choice of return and re-turn the present through this coming back.

Along those lines, in her chapter on the “Come, Go Back, Child,” Hartman (2007) writes about the meanings of “return” through her trip to Ghana, its relation with the *Come, Go Back, Child*, the rebels of St. Jones, and her grandfather’s sense of (no) home. She presents us with a narrative in which these stories about “returning to one’s land” are constituted by loss, a relation to a past and to a desired future. Loss can be either remembering or forgetting. Remembering the conditions one had and lost with dislocation or forgetting the connection one lost by dislocation. In this sense, the past becomes a reference to be remembered and forges the hope to be reproduced in the future; to be remembered as a way to avoid its reproduction in the time to come, or to be

forgotten to avoid the pain it brings by reconstructing a future departing from the new context of dislocation. Thus, our relation to the past is also a relation to choice, be it choosing or a lack of choice, based on the necessities of the present and expectations for the future. Hartman (2007, p. 100) states that “the past depends less on ‘what happens then’ than on the desires and discontents of the present” and “what we recall has as much to do with the terrible things we hope to avoid as with the good life for which we yearn.” Then if going back to the past is based on the choices of what to recall, returning is also based on a choice of a place to what to return, a place, as the past, imagined, but motivated, constituted and shaping/ed by the material lives of those who imagine them. In this regard, Hartman (2007, p.100) says that “return is much about the world to which you no longer belong as it is about the one in which you have yet to make home.” She concludes the chapter by saying that the “returnees,” subjects that “circle back to times past” and “cross over parallel lives,” include the rebels, the come, go back child and herself. As, I return to Brazil, return to the metaphor of the Crossing and re-turn transition as encompassing those returns. I am also a “returnee.”

Alexander also refers to that space of crossing in the following terms:

a place from which I navigate life, using the foot I keep in the Caribbean, the one I have had in the United States since 1971, the arithmetic of which continually escapes me, and yet a third foot, desirous of rooting itself deep in the forest of Mayombe in Kôngo. Living and thinking this dialectic means refusing to insist on two feet, which would be the recipe for sheer imbalance (p.8).

This triped metaphor resonates strongly with my preliminary process of establishing a research agenda. I was initially returning to the accounts of a trans ancestor healer called Kimbanda, known as the mother of the water, whose appearances both in the colonial Brazil and Angola/Congo gave me a perspective on a trans-Atlantic connection. Such trans-Atlantic led me to the transition of the trans Angolan Performer Titica between Brazil and Angola, as well as the exchange of telenovelas between these countries. These steps on Angola and Brazil in dialogue with one foot on the theorizing of African diaspora in the US anticipated my transitioning to Brazil.

That process called my attention to the fact that for black trans people the idea of journey and return refers to a different route from those that assume whiteness as an ideal. Our theorizing is made in ways that recall other memories of transitioning through forms of embodied knowledge materialized, among other means, by narratives. In regard to this perspective on theorizing Barbara Christian states:

For people of color have always theorized - but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social

institutions, countries, our very humanity? (...) My folk, in other words, have always been a race for theory.⁵ (Christian, p.68, 1988)

In this report, I suggest that, given the current technological conjuncture, those narratives are gaining visibility by their production and sharing through new media such as blogs, vlogs and communities within online social media networking, expanding this notion of theorizing also to the digital world. Thus, I will be taking my experience as I relate to narratives by black people from outside the digital world as well as through it as a continuum of the mode of theorizing stated by Christian. My very presence among that group of trans activists in Lapa that I describe in the beginning on this section was lead mainly by two means. By my initial work with a Black Women's organization whose educational program put me in contact with the collective of black students from Fluminense Federal University. This collective demonstrated interest in my research on "Black trans subjectivity in Brazil" and invited me to compose a panel with the scholar Patrícia Rodrigues, a black cis woman whose work focuses on "Black Travestis educational trajectories." The formation of the online event entitled "Blackness and gender Indentity, shared within specific networking on facebook, brought an audience comprised mostly by black cis women, a transman and a few black cis man. That space connected me not only with that present audience but also with a broader audience who learned from the invitation and from those who were present in the discussion. That led me to connect with people from the queer collective beijato, collective meninas black

⁵ Christian, Barbara. The Race for Theory. *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Spring, 1988), pp. 67-79.

power (black power girls), the group of black women who formed the panel I will address here and who later formed the online community “intelectuais negras” (black women scholars). That space also allowed to connect with participants of the group Transrevolution and be part of the meetings, one of which was followed by that episode in Lapa. In other words, the conditions to take part in spaces of theorizing within panels was influenced in great extent to my access to black trans spaces of theorizing forged through social media networking. The opportunity to revisit the panels that I discuss in this paper, both here in the US and the ones I took part in Brazil, was also mediated by their availability in online platforms. Transitioning here acquires the meaning of transiting across spaces of virtual and non-virtual theorizing, across different engagements with communities that elect a perspective to frame the struggle for social change. However, this transitioning does not presuppose a taken for granted belonging.

In the initial account I presented here, the sentence “she’s not from here” although used as an attempt to refrain the officer’s screening by pointing out the state politics of having the police to protect foreigners in mega events, it also marked my outsideness, the privilege of mobility, passing (?) as a cis black woman, the possibility of performing foreignness by speaking English with a certain prestigious phonetics, of academic education; and their implications and also limitations on the precarious legitimacy of my discourse of “us, black trans people.” On the other hand, I interrogate, in case I passed as a black cis woman from the US, would the implications be different? Other cis black women from US who are Brazilianist scholars such as scholar Erica Williams (2013),

have talked about their experiences of racism and misogyny by, among other things, being mistaken for a sexually available Brazilian woman. There's no privilege that confers safety in "passing" as a cis black woman across the diaspora, from the accounts I know so far. Although passing as a black cis person may be discussed in terms of privilege, which also is, it is also important to interrogate the commonalities in processes of oppression acting by the way we are read as well as the common efforts to resist them. In this regard, I take theorizing taken place within spaces of trans-cis-terhood as a praxis of black feminism that offers spaces for nuanced reflections on the gendering/racialization of black trans and cis women.

On black trans-cis-terhood

Upon the release of her first book, *Redefining Realness*, Janet Mock, a Hawaiian black trans woman activist and writer, posted on her Facebook page two pictures with the black feminist scholar bell hooks; in one of them they both pose to the camera side-by-side hugging⁶, and in the other one they are laughing profusely⁷, followed by Janet's comment "Spending the weekend in Sarasota visiting bell hooks who pushed me to take a few days off. I hope you have a relaxing (unplugged!) weekend too!" In addition to that, bell hooks praise is the only one that appears on the cover of Janet Mock's book, which says "Courageous! This book is a life map for transformation." The second picture is also

⁶ This can be accessed at <http://janetmock.com/speaking/>

⁷ This can be accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/janetmock/photos/a.10151901670486522.1073741825.375092221521/10152360681966522/?type=1&theater>

found as the background for a video with a soundtrack of a conversation between hooks and Mock about the intersections of transness and black feminism. bell hooks starts the dialogue by saying:

I want us to historicize the reality that black women have always occupied the space that we can call queer. That the moment ain't I a woman had to be addressed by Sojourner Truth, the moment she had to bear her breasts to prove that she was the woman, was already a queer, a trans moment. So that rather than seeing ourselves as outside blackness, as outside the dialogue of queerness and trans I think that we need to place ourselves as black females at the core of the dialogue because as I wrote at Ain't I a woman, continue devaluation of black women has been our lives since we first were brought to these shores and it affects all of us, it affects us no matter how we interpret, define, identify our woman-**ness**. We are in a black hate women culture, ok? And we can see that how media has treated Michelle Obama, we can see that (...) in the woman who shot into the ceiling and we can see that in the death of all black trans woman lately that has been an absurd.

hooks continues her by interrogating the possibilities of being safe, which she points later in her talk to Lorde's words on breaking the silence, but she also says that language must come from "speaking together" about "provocative ways of thinking about womanness, about gender identity and "about trans." She is followed by Mock who expresses her admiration for hooks and also engages in the discourse of material violence

against the bodies of black women as a reflection of patriarchy and white supremacy. Mock focuses on the story of *Eyricka Morgan*, a trans woman who went to one of Mock's talks and expressed that Mock's talk and her story meant something for her and what it could be possible for her as a black trans woman. Mock narrates then that she later found out about the murder of Eyricka by the way the media "stripped her from her identity by saying that a man was stabbed to death in a boarding house". Mock said that her intervention was reaffirming Eyricka's identity in the media by saying:

her name is Eyricka Morgan and she is a she and a her. Eyricka Morgan was stabbed in the boarding house. The reason she was targeted was because she was a woman of trans experience. Because she was poor, because she was isolated and because she was a trans woman living in a boarding house. Because she was a trans woman, they didn't know where to put her. (...) So when we talk about these issues we cannot talk about the fact that it is an LGBT thing because black trans women are not an LGBT thing. That should be a black thing. I am still stunned for the fact that only now we are having these conversations about our sisters and we ignore these issues as a black community because we ignore this because we say that they don't matter.

In both excerpts the tran-cis-terhood discussed by these two black feminist women is pointed as a way to fight against the violence derived from the misogyny and racism that historically impact the bodies of black women, be them of trans or cis experience. The media is also pointed as a strong apparatus of delegitimizing the

womanness of black women and the necessity of counter-narratives to reaffirm those identities.

Theorizing black feminisms from the perspective of praxis and engagement is a call that Tinsley (2011) does when she talks about the daughters of Erzili, female and male bodied women whose femininity and ritualizing/ritualized body share a sisterhood of spiritual connection, but also a sisterhood in the material conditions and everyday struggle under which they are impacted by patriarchy. The approach used by Tinsley in her piece points out to different possibilities of theorizing about the praxis of sisterhood between black cis and trans women as an strategic way to create communities that challenge some aspect of heretopatriarchy. Tinsley is clear about the work of engaging with Erzili and as an action of doing black feminism work. Alexander (2005) is another author that talks about the role of the body and everyday practices as a way of embodying the sacred energies of the water. Underlying these two perspectives there is sense of that watery black Atlantic consciousness whose vehicle is a shared/community practice of black cis/trans women engaging/embodying a fluid work on aesthetics, pleasure, self-care and everyday activities. If we take this underlying perspective as a way of theorizing, we are able to address other forms of black cis/trans women sisterhood praxis that has gained visibilities though media and, although they are not within the context of an openly discussion of spirituality, they reproduce some aspects highlighted by the work of Tinsley and Alexander.

I argue that I have been transitioning along black feminism, in the sense that I refer to my embodied knowledge of understanding the black feminist theorizing on the intrinsic gendering nature of the racialization of black bodies through the perception that black trans womanhood and femaleness exposes not only how black bodies are gendered but also sexed, thus not perceiving black trans women within the realm of black womanhood while black cis women are within the realm of black femaleness. Black feminism, in bell hooks terms, has been fundamental to exposure and dismantling of white supremacist/capitalist/patriarchy by foregrounding its major historic oppressive effects mainly on the lives of black cis women. On the other hand, I take the call by Lavern Cox, in conversation with bell hooks in another panel, to work with this genealogy but, if we also intend to foreground the experiences of black trans people, we need to push to the acknowledgment that this system is also a CIS/white supremacist/capitalist/heteropatriarchy. By bringing the tensions in the theorizing of these black and trans and cis women, I do not intend to reproduce this space as a race for theory, for the sake of theory novelty, as pointed by the work Barbara Christian, but quite the opposite. Spaces such as panels comprised of established black cis women scholars/activists and black trans people scholars/activists are one of the few spaces of public theorizing in which black trans and cis people come together to work on a more complex perspective of solidarity not based on sameness. A similar argument is highlighted by American black scholar Keisha - Khan Perry (2013), when she talks about how two black Brazilian women came in her defense when she experience racial profiling in Bank of Brazil in Salvador. She states that her work “defends the possibility

of discussing gendered race and racism within a diasporic continuum, attuned to commonalities and distinctions” in which “rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work together” (Perry, 2013, p. xiv).

In my transitioning along communities in Brazil, I have also experienced this kind of theorizing by taking part in a panel with black women, a “roda de conversa com mulheres negras,” mediated by Brazilian black feminist scholar Giovana Xavier. We chose to constitute this panel in response to the questioning of the organizers of the slut march in Rio, constituted mostly by white cis women feminist who would like to open a dialogue about the lack of black women in the organization of such a march. Xavier worked in her introductory talk to the panel with the patronizing and racist tone of those organizer with her during the e-mail exchange discussing the terms of our participation in that space. She firmly asserts that after all that interaction, that panel would be a moment in which white women would have to “shut up” and listen to what black women, both cis and trans had to say. In our talks, we addressed how troubling it is for black women both cis and trans to embrace “slut” as a revolutionary term to name us since we are always already assumed to be “sluts” when we are not seen in our “proper place.” The work of Smith (2014) points out to the violent effects on black women bodies by analyzing the case of a black cis woman called Sirley de Carvalho, who was beaten by white middle class men under the argument that she was perceived as a “prostitute. In the

case of black trans women those cases have mostly a deadly effect since murders usually refer to the discourse of deception.

As a black trans woman in Brazil I transition along the discourse of racial democracy, that places black trans people within the discourse of multiple negations, the negation of the effects of race on a black trans body, and the negation of one's gender due to racialized constructions of gender. Transitioning along the discourse of racial democracy refers to an embodied knowledge constructed by the visceral affect of moving within and reacting to those spaces in which we are negated. In my case, those instances are materialized by cordial racist transphobia "oh, but you are "morena, not black" and "you don't look like you're trans" or the stuttering "he.. she..." the patronizing over acknowledgment of "you are a woman, you are a woman," "the pathologizing scrutiny of my body and story to convince the state to change my documents, by the visceral affect of anxiety around the possibility of being a case of random hate crime, even my hyperconsciousness in leaving the US and entering into Brazil given the technologies of surveillance that target black bodies and the shaming procedures of screening trans bodies.

The perspective that I have constructed here is what I am perceiving as Afro/trans/feminismo, that it, the possibility of articulating the theorizing around the racialization, gendering, sexing of bodies and their material consequences, departing from, but not limited to, the experiences of black trans bodies; by establishing a dialogue with works mainly within the realm of trans studies, black queer theory and black

feminism, an arbitrary separation here, given the overlapping approach of many perspectives related to those fields.

“I’m transitioning”

In this section I’d like to address what I mean by “I’m transitioning” and to present subsections on experimentation of creative-auto-ethnographic work that captures that process of transitioning upon my return/re-turn and my relation to the black women in my family and to the context of racialized oppression within the context of the mega event of the World Cup

As a black trans woman, when I say I’m transitioning or I’ve transitioned, I want that to do something with it. When I choose not to engage, I assume that I let the usual meaning of “transition from male to female through bodily modification” take place within the conversational formula answered by addressee: “oh, ok.” In this piece I chose to unpack the meanings of this “I’m transitioning” as a black trans woman. Despite the risk of incurring into a neologism, I used transitioning along and not necessarily transitioning into, since the former recalls a sliding, while the latter usually is read as reaching an end, although this may constitute a legitimate self-making narrative for some of us. I perceive transitioning as an embodied knowledge on crossing. I’m perceive the transness of certain matters through my embodied knowledge of the crossing. Although the strategic use of “I’ve transitioned” instead of “I’m transitioning,” they are not in opposition. “I’ve transitioned” may consist of a chosen point of departure within the

continuum of “I’m transitioning.” That refers, for instance (within the different examples of nonconforming experiences) to the sharing in public of an aesthetics of femininity mutually constructed in our own terms and outside perceptions that does not match an old photo ID. That does not necessarily marks a point of start or end, or even an abrupt and sudden change, but is states a point of departure of a series of effects based on that decision, which may be suffering transphobic violence. “I’ve transitioned,” as an oral response or body reaction (I raise my eyebrows) responds to the gap of the addressee oscillating imagination (multistable perception) of beforeness/nowness and our current state of aesthetics and/or discourse confronting the inquiring gaze, question, expression or consistent stuttering on pronouns and racial classifications. In my case, it comes after the stuttering mmm... b... black/b... Brazilian, of color... Latina... h..she... or after I ask, Excuse me, isn’t there’s an “other” in this form?” I transition in languages in an accent and tone that elicit answers like “oh but you don’t sound like you’re Brazilian, oh but you don’t sound like you’re black” while for me those indentifications refer to transitioning along space, but not citizenship, transitioning along racializing gaze but not a certain language socialization. Transitioning (transicionando, transitando) in the sense I have discussed refers to spatial mobility, crossing theories, embodied knowledge and intersecting community engagement. Transitioning as an state of acknowledgement when “I was placed as just “morena” or “person of color” or “latina” “just a woman” to flatten Transitioning along the racializing gaze that denies ancestral forced diasporic crossing and my self identification as a black trans woman. Or when those acknowledgments come embedded in sexualizing intonation “Mmmm... Brazilian, hun?” That “mmm...”

“uuu...” and its prosodic variations encapsulate the sexualization of black trans women bodies and makes it very difficult to experience/acknowledge desirability in a non objectifying manner; or the patronizing “black trans people **are** humans too.” My frowning answer “Yes...” to both statement always reminds me of the quality of these crossings.

Across the waves

As I leave the airport in a cab, the view of the landscape of Rio is interrupted by grey plastic membrane. The thin wall of milky appearance has its edges shaped into waves. It hides the view of the favelas, of poor and black people whose images are only entertaining as exotic lives that desirable white tourists in the world cup may choose to see during a “favela tour;” whose bodies are comodified in tourism catalogues displaying, especially black women, in Carnival Costumes. The state has to make sure the desirable white tourists are the ones who chooses whether they want to lay their gaze over the segregated landscape. The landscape of racialized poverty cannot impose itself onto the site of the desirable white tourists. The static milky plastic membrane with wavy edges starts to move in steady watery currents in the pace of the cab race towards our hotel in the mostly white middle class neighborhood in Copacabana. But these static-moving-plastic tides are not empty. They are covered with drawings of dolls, sayings, resembling doodles over the milky wall, with hills covered with the tips of the hidden houses sticking out of the wave-edge-grey-water. The wall is inhabited by the marks of those it was built to hide. As the car moves, I see a cartoon like image of steady grey-shiny-plastic-wave

with expanded doodled dolls floating in the body-edge-bottom of the milky wall. These walls are water, are marked bodies, are erasure, are violence, are new landscapes of racial anti-black apartheid resting on repeated-differently-materialized tides. Colonial practices of domination as well as their reenacted by the Neo-Colonial Brazilian State has been those of systematically alienating black bodies through the tides, be them as a transportation-means/burial-open-coffin or materialized in plastic walls. But blacks have crossed the tides imprinting our bodies in the water, be them by our bones, or through the drawings on those plastic waves. The waves become a haunting signifier in the economic marketing of that costal city. They are imprinted on t-shirts, on beach saragons, on mugs, mainly as an intertext of the waves that come out of the mosaic of black and white stones covering the whole sidewalk of Copacabana beach. As I walk staring at the sidewalk to avoid eye contact with harassing intoxicated cismale masculine white tourists, the stony-wakes flow under my feet. The light brown sand of the beach is limited by the stony-black-and-white-mosaic waves along one side and by the shimmery moving water along the other. Between those two, black-poor bodies are not welcomed as entitled to enjoy and connect with the sea, but they are bearable as street individual outside vendors or quioski workers. A large group of black poor people entering that space is usually gazed with amusement, suspicious or fear. Reproducing conditions of precarious relation and proximity between blacks and the water is a colonial strategy that targets also the healing potential of such connection.

Minha Filha! memories of a black Brazilian trans daughter

Will she say it? Will the sea say it? She was performing her rippling dance framed by the bus window, *ffffurthering, rrrrising, fffolding, sshhore...* [window] *ffffurthering, rrrrising, fffolding, sshhore...* [window] The thin membrane of her skirt had little boats of whites, the timid sun of that winter day would just give enough shimmer to her watery fabric. The white foaming ruffles covering her tail moved back and forward on the light sand following her greeting moves. *Ashé, minha mãe!* I greeted back. Her skirt would flow between hills stitched with houses of the favelas pushed back by the wall of expensive apartment buildings formed around her. *Oh, minha mãe!* We see you from the heights across these walls, we meet you under vigilant eyes, but we fight to be close... [window] *ffffurthering, rrrrising, fffolding, sshhore...* [window] *ffffurthering, rrrrising, fffolding, sshhore...* Will she say it? Dora... Dora... Dora... Dora!

- Dora!
- Huh?!
- The phone is ringing. It must be your mother. Hello? (...) Minha irmã, we are coming! Beijo... Tchou! She is already in the airport. Minha irmã, poor thing, we are coming, we haven't forgotten you.

We haven't. I haven't. The joy of her loud laugh has warmed my memories for this past year and a half since I left our island of São Luis in Brazil to pursue my graduate studies in Austin in the US. I left in a body whose changes into my womanhood during a few preceding months she hadn't seen. Will she see ME? My gaze shifts from the window

and goes to the patterns on my yellow dress. It's Senegalese, the street vendor said at the time. I follow the route of black lines crossing each other into lozenges filled with a bright orange over the gold yellow fabric. The wax cloth rubbing against the changing feeling of my skin under the effect of hormones during those few months made me think about my resilience along my transition. A resilience-legacy from my ancestors who transitioned through the water, into the water, from the water... A legacy rippled through generations and poured by this powerful black woman my auntie and I were about to see again. I entertained the idea this fabric had its own route crossing the Atlantic to get to Rio de Janeiro; it would cross over the ocean again upon my return to Austin. Its crossing would intersect with mine, ours. This time the dress wouldn't dance with the breeze from the watery skirt surrounding São Luis island. There doesn't feel like home yet. Nowhere feels like home now. The bump of the bus pulls me back to my senses. I see my left hand unresting on my lap, my thumb scratching my middle finger, my folded right arm over my collarbone supports my fingers playing with the knot tying the end of my hair weaved in my braided extensions. My body tells me I'm anxious. Will she say it? Dora... Dora...

- Dora!

- Huh?

- We get off here.

As I followed my aunt towards the airport, my sense of unfamiliarity of the directions merged with the resemblance of the geography and my high awareness of other pedestrians. Are they staring? Are they looking? Can they see ME?

It was my first time coming back to Rio as a recently turned thirty adult since the last time I was there when I was seven. After spending a year in a failed attempt to live in Rio and returning to São Luis, I remember mamãe saying how adventurous she felt making this three day bus trip from the north of Brazil to Rio, how she enjoyed the landscapes. Her smile would change into a sad gaze towards the ground when she remembered how the violence and jealousy of my ex aunts husband heightened with our presence there. Mamãe would end with a sigh “Oh lord, where might my sister be today?” Over all those years, we had lost contact with my auntie Matilde, tia Matilde. Almost every day, out of all her siblings, mamãe would wonder about the fait of her youngest sister, irmã caçula. Two years before that trip, I asked my mother what she wanted as a birthday gift.

- I want my sister back.
- What do you mean, mom? We have no clue where she might be in Rio!
- Aren't you the researcher? Go ahead and use your internet thing to find my sister. That's my birthday gift.

I just nodded at my mom as I looked at her teary eyes. I grabbed my computer, the little information I had and entered in every missing people webpage I could. Scrolling over faces, mothers handing posters, texts flashing anguish, faces, faces, faces, comments, found! This woman. Scrolling over faces, mother marches, texts flashing despair, faces, faces, faces, comments, found! This woman. Her ubiquitous presence in these pages made contact this woman who volunteered to do this work of finding people.

I called tones of phone numbers she provided me associated somehow with my aunt's name without any success. One night, hopeless of finding anyone across the line, I called.

- Hello, this is Marcos, security guard.

- Uncle Marcos! I can't believe it!

- How did you know this is my shift? Who gave you my phone number?

- Uncle Marcos, please, I'm aware of you and auntie Matilde are divorced, but would you please let her know we are looking for her?

That night I hang up that phone with no hope that mean white man would say anything to my aunt. I looked across the living room and saw mamãe sleeping on her chair as her favorite soap opera would display white people crying.

- Mãe!

- Huh? I'm watching, I'm watching...

I giggled. Your blessing mom, I'm going to bed.

- Deus e Nossa Senhora te abençoe.

Mamãe would bring up her sister more frequently since she was being able to meet her other siblings. Uncle Gregório, tio Gegório had just moved from the neighboring state to a city in our state and had sent his children to spend vacation with us

around that time. As my mom met the nephews she would only had seen from pictures, she would sigh “Oh lord, where might my sister be today?” We went to the beach. Despite my connection with the water, my comfortableness with my body would hardly trigger the desire to meet the sea. Are they looking? Can they see ME? As I let the water embrace the body I had, I let the water in me connect within the case I had. The flesh doesn’t feel like home, but the water feels right. That was the last time my body wore the skirt of the island. On our way back home, in the crowded bus my voice suddenly reach mom across the crowd as I scream and squeeze to reach her and hand it the cellphone “Mãe! Tia Matilde! Tia Matilde!” “Oh, lord, thank you lord, oh my sister, minha irmã, meu Deus!” I felt happiness flowing inside. The water feels right. The water feels right.

Our encounter was a celebration of our search for ourselves in our love for each other. Mamãe would meet her baby sister after all these years; she would also meet her daughter.

I spotted that short curvy black woman covering her smile. There she is auntie! Tia Matilde ran and hugged my mom tight and long as they exchanged words of love and longing. I was right behind my auntie, I also let water flow from my eyes and wet my yellow dress. After a few moments my aunt releases her arms and look at me and back to mom “Here is your daughter.” Mamãe looks at me in way that I haven’t seen before. That takes only a few seconds before we hug, me leaning over my mom. My mom hugs me. The water feels right. I let myself into my mother’s arms, I recall that feeling. I feel she is not concerned of what a hug can do to me at this point. My mom hugged ME. Dora, her

daughter. I am not used to feel such happiness. When we release our arms mom looks at me from head to toe and the water in my body seems to want to scape through my palm when I see her motion to speak. “You are too skinny, you haven’t fed yourself properly as usual” I smile as the water cools my neck. “Let me pull your suitcase for you mom.” My aunt grabs my mom’s hand and start talking. I go a little forward pulling the small suitcase she brought, as I hear she saying how adventurous she felt by flying on a plane for the first time, how well treated she was by the crew who helped her in every step, so that she did not have the need to say she forgot her glasses as a way to avoid saying she couldn’t read. From time to time my mom would pause while my aunt would take the floor and I could see from side eye that she was looking at me, from head to toe again with that expression I couldn’t read at that point. I had become very knowledgeable in reading gazes at this point. Walking in the sidewalks of Copacabana during the world cup forced me to react to multiple gazes, especially those by intoxicated white male foreigners. *We meet you under vigilant eyes, but we fight to be close...* Eyes, eyes, eyes, eyes. Frowning eyes, staring eyes, smiley eyes, angry eyes, hungry eyes, indifferent eyes, eyesss, eyes see, eyes-sea, see, sea, see-sea-eye, eye... water heating... I... water boil. I, I’m, am, am, mmm, me, me, ME! What are you looking at?! I breathe deeply. Water cools my neck. As I’m these memories flow and I mechanically walk as I pull my mom’s suitcase I hear it. Dora! Dora! I turn back making sure I was not still in my head. Mamãe asks me with uncertainty and the same gaze “It’s Dora, isn’t it?” “Yes, mom” I answer taming the tears. “Come back here, your aunt says we should go this way.” I pull the suitcase in another direction. Water rises and layers and turn my sight into watercolor.

She said it! She said it! After a week that gaze was not there. I was not used to have my mom's gaze of (un)familiarity, of an (un)familiar love. She was *learning to love* her daughter. I was learning to deal with her timing to love ME. We are learning to give language to each other's (un)familiarity. As I remember, water rises, fold and shore up at the edges of my eyes. Water cools my neck. The water feels right. The water feels right.

Axé, minha mãe!

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Vita

Antonio Jose Silva Santana was the legal name assigned to Dora Santana by her parents upon her birth. She is a black trans woman who was born in the City of São Luis – MA, Brazil. She has a B.A. in Portuguese and English language teaching and Literature, with special training in Linguistics. She has worked as an English and Portuguese teacher, interpreter and translator and as a Documentation Linguist.

Email: dorasantanat@gmail.com

This report was typed by the author