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by

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2016

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**(Trance)formations of an AfroLatina:
Embodied Archives of Blackness and Womanhood in Transnational
Dominican Women's Narratives**

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Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

August 2016

Dedication

I dedicate this project to my ancestors, my mother Lucy Zamora who inspired this project, and my sister Omandra. I also dedicate this to my future daughter(s) and niece(s) who I hope will find something of themselves in this work.

Acknowledgements

I have so much to be grateful for! First and foremost I thank God and the ancestors for getting me through this journey and being able to create such powerful work. I am grateful for having a wonderful supportive committee, especially my advisor Jossianna Arroyo, who always saw the best in this project and supported every decision I made. I am grateful for the philosophical conversations with Cesar Salgado and having the feedback of Jennifer Wilks, Luis Cárcamo-Huechante, and Lyndon Gill. I want to acknowledge the Dominican Studies Institute at City College and the amazing team they have there—especially, Sarah Aponte and Jhensen Ortiz who went above and beyond to assist in my research from the beginning of this project. I could’ve never made it this far without the beautiful community that I also call my friends. Thank you to Shanya Cordis (My grad school day-one homie!) for keeping me grounded and human, Paul Joseph Lopez Oro for always being my interlocutor and supporter, Andrew and Chris Viñales for your friendship and support in my writing. My great friend Sandy Plácido, thank you for everything you do and extending your love and generosity to me. You’re the real MVP! I thank my sister Omandra for holding me up when I didn’t feel strong enough and my mother Lucy and brother Omar for their multidimensional support. Lastly, I want to thank my loving partner William Garcia for always reminding me that my work was important and necessary and my dog Nyla for keeping me sane.

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

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AfroLatina women's experiences have been left out of the traditional canon of Black and Latina/Chicana feminist theory. Black feminist theory lacks a transnational context and an afro-diasporic approach that acknowledges the multiplicities of blackness (Collins; Crenshaw; Davis; Combahee). Furthermore, Latina/Chicana feminist theory maintains blackness parenthetical and invisible in favor of a Latinidad that is primarily mestiza (Anzaldúa). My dissertation addresses these static theoretical spaces in which AfroLatina women cannot locate themselves. My dissertation recognizes the fluidity of blackness, the centrality of the body, and how transformation informs AfroLatina subjectivities. In acknowledging the spiritual as present in the inter-generational relationships between Dominican women, we understand the multiple transformations that they experience within

transnational spaces. I contribute to AfroLatina feminism by offering my own theory of (trance)formation. (Trance)formation is a continuous process that engages with the spiritual aspect of self-making and centralizes the body as an archive for the creation of an AfroLatina feminist epistemology. To further understand this theorization of (trance)formation, I turn to transnational Dominican women's narratives put forth by Nelly Rosario, Ana Lara, Loida Maritza Perez, Josefina Baez, La Bella Chanel, and Cardi B. My research shows how (trance)formation is 1) a process that is central to the creation of an AfroLatina embodied epistemology, 2) a violent process that allows for multiple belongings, and 3) a process that is performed in order to solidify the production of knowledge proliferated through the body.

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Introduction

Dancing with my Eyes

I look around and ...
I don't know where I am anymore
I think I've lost my way trying to
find my way.

I've danced my way through
looking, wandering, feeling my
eyes fixed, feeling cold

I'm asking about you grandma
"Abuela Negra, ¿qué tú miras?"
"Toy bailando." She says while shifting her blind eyes from side to side
"Bailando con mis ojo"

I look at her glassy eyes and
I see you momma
I'm dancing in your eyes momma
Look at me momma...

I hear you momma:
"Don trost no body"
"Un merengue siempre te hace sentir mejor
...ponte a bailar"
"I fil so lost in da warl"
I hang up the phone

I can't see you, but I feel you
working, working
working, working, working, working,
working, working

Fixed frames fabricating dreams
watching novelas, factory fantasies
But what happened to me?

I'm fabricated, framed, formulated
perm-e-ated

into-xi-ca-ted
cause you said I'd be prettier if I lost half myself
here and there

But I've lost me, then found you,
and now you're lost? Looking to me
to find you?

I'm feeling for you momma,
extending my arms in the dark still looking for you
Using my body to feel through the dark for you
writing on the walls of my body to give energy to you
write my body into light to find
your eyes
fixated on factory fantasies

And it's in that moment during our trip to see the rest of the world
in the art-filled room of the Louvre
that I truly see her
find her,
hear her,
breathing...

My eyes are captured by the painting—a classic Monet piece
But her eyes are fixed on the frame her hands once made.

In this prefacing poem, I “Dance with my eyes” to find the attention of my mother. In writing this poem I was re-visiting a moment in which there was a disconnection of a reference point between my mother and I. While I was making reference to the Claude Monet painting I recognized, my mother’s focus was the frame—our interpretations of this archive having a different focus. At the time that I wrote this poem I had been meditating on the changes of my relationship with my mother and with myself. I was realizing that my mother was in a state of depression and had been feeling like she was losing her place in life because her home was

becoming empty. My brother had moved out to live with his then girlfriend, and I had moved away to Austin, Texas for graduate school. I was also feeling the shift of home—that place of belonging, acceptance, where we assume things will always be the same.

I wanted to write this 2010 memory as a medium for understanding our place and ancestral lineage in 2014 and assure my self of a self. The image of a room of the Louvre Museum in Paris—which held many of Claude Monet’s paintings, came back to me, as did the image of my mother and me walking through the museum. At this moment I felt the worlds of the ocean and migration from the small town of Bonao to a frame factory in Chicago collide. It all stood still for a moment being at the crossroads of it all. As my mother accompanied me on this trip to Paris, I realized our lives had come full circle: From my mother’s Dominican pueblo of Bonao, to the factory in Chicago, to the “progress” marked in the moment when her and I were able to now afford a trip to Paris. She was finally able to see a similar frame as the one she worked on endlessly to make enough money to raise my brother and I, and send back money to our blind grandmother Abuela Negra in Bonao. I call on the spirit of my Abuela Negra—who indeed was a black woman—to re-visit a moment in my childhood of my ignorance of her blindness. In some ways, I looked to her for an explanation of the world to me through her eyes, but the only thing she could offer was her imagination of her own moving body. Her spirit reveals to me that while I wish to find out more about my mother through her, the

revelation is such that I must understand that dancing and corporeal movement can allow me to “see” or understand that my mother did not have all the answers and that she herself was also in this constant space of movement that was dictated by the entrapment of being a poor single-mother in a capitalist society. The constant movement of dancing, working, and framing (of the paintings we were seeing) and our generational stories come to a stand still at a crossing when my mother and I traveled across the Atlantic to Europe.

“Dancing with my Eyes” is my own creative narrative of black womanhood and transnational Dominican experience, which situates the themes and theories explored in this dissertation. AfroDominican writer Nelly Rosario, author of *Song of the Water Saints*, mentioned to me in conversation that much of her own writing process was based on the act of remembering. She said: “I started writing my memories down. Anything I could remember: a moment, a story, something that my mom had said, or something that happened. It was all about an image and remembering”. In understanding Rosario’s writing process and the importance of writing those memories, one also understands that our bodies are also central to that remembering. Memory is embodied. How do our bodies remember? How does our consciousness create a place for us to acknowledge the relationship between our body and memory?

In her book, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, M. Jacqui Alexander addresses these themes of remembering and the spiritual and how important they are to the politics

of black bodies. This dissertation engages with Jacqui Alexander's claim that the Divine is central to the transformation of how we relate to one another. To push this theoretical observation further, if the divine transforms the way in which we relate to one another, what would it mean to also explore how the divine or the spiritual characteristic of these relationships transform our subjectivities? I posit that the spiritual as present in the inter-generational and ancestral relationships between Dominican transnational women allow us to understand the multiple transformations women experience as they move between and within spaces. I offer (trance)formation as a theoretical framework and process through which AfroLatina "trans" subjectivities can be further understood.¹ In chapter one, I will also demonstrate what I mean by "trans" subjectivities as identities that are transnational, transformative, and transient. I acknowledge that this term is also part of transgender discourse and my intention is not to erase or proliferate violence onto this community in a way that co-opts the term from them. However, my use of it does engage with the notion of fluidity and transformation as it pertains to further understanding "woman" as a gender that may also be understood as fluid and in dialogue with race and space.

In particular, this project focuses on a new approach to AfroLatina feminism that takes on an afro-diasporic reading practice that recognizes the queerness of

¹ Throughout this work I do not hyphenate the term AfroLatina/o intentionally to convey that blackness should always be considered as part of Latinidad. Specifically, for the writers explored here and in my own positionality our blackness is not separate of our Latinidad, but a part of it.

blackness, the centrality of the body, and how “trans” informs AfroLatina subjectivities. More importantly, my dissertation imagines AfroLatina women’s “trans” subjectivities as centralized in their embodied archives and informed by processes of transformation.

In light of this, I propose that we re-visit transnational Dominican women’s experiences—which have been understudied—to shed light on these AfroLatina “trans” subjectivities. For decades these women have been laboring away at the production of knowledge that informs the way that we frame *dominicanidad*, womanhood, and blackness. Their epistemologies create a space for the voices and experiences of other women to be heard and recognized through their writing and performance.²

The transnational Dominican community that comes into focus in this dissertation is a result of the economic downturn of the 1980s in the Dominican Republic. This situation formulated the context that caused a massive increase in the migration of Dominicans to the United States creating the transnational Dominican community of Washington Heights in New York City. In *Quisqueya on the Hudson* (2008) anthropologist Jorge Duany argues that transnational Dominican identity is the result not only of traveling back and forth between the U.S. and the Dominican Republic, but also of a certain cultural continuity that transcends national borders:

² See Daisy Cocco de Filippis *Documents of Dissidence: Selected Writings of Dominican Women, Historias de Washington Heights y otros rincones del mundo*, and Mary Ely Gratereaux’s *Voces de la inmigración: Testimonios de mujeres inmigrantes dominicanas*

from religious traditions to Dominican cuisine. As I have insisted in my previous work “El tíguere sin cola,” transnational Dominican identity is about much more than merely eating mangú, listening to merengue or worshipping as a Catholic.³ Much more fundamentally, the Dominican transnation is a space itself characterized by the constant movement not just restricted to people. It includes politics, music, and cultural practices and along with this, our notions of race, gender, and sexuality. The movements found in this transnational space are two-way exchanges—literal and imaginative— which create a fluid cultural identity that stands outside of traditional concepts of nationhood.

This transnational experience— as Dominican scholars Ginetta Candelario, Ramona Hernandez, and Silvio Torres-Saillant have outlined in their work on Dominican migration—has demanded the reconceptualization of *dominicanidad* often in relation to various iterations of black consciousness.⁴ However, transnational *dominicanidad* in this U.S. context stretches to embrace not only the major Dominican hubs on the eastern coast like New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts, but also many smaller communities across the U.S. like the one I belong to in Chicago. In Chicago, the Dominican community is much smaller than the African American, Puerto Rican and Mexican communities resulting in the constant

³Omaris Zamora. “El tíguere sin cola: La emasculación de una dominicanidad transnacional”. *University of California-Berkeley Comparative Literature Undergraduate Journal*. 2 (Fall 2011): 78-94.

⁴ See Ginetta Candelario’s *Black Behind the Ears* (2007), Ramona Hernández *The Dominican Americans* (1998), and Silvio Torres-Saillant’s “Tribulations of Blackness” (2000) and “Introduction to Dominican Blackness” (2010).

assumptions of one being either African American or Puerto Rican. As a second-generation Black Dominican born and raised in Chicago's Puerto Rican Humboldt Park neighborhood, I understand that there are contexts in which my own *dominicanidad* is invisible or misread at best. My own experience as a black Dominican woman in a Puerto Rican neighborhood at many times has meant that my Spanish accent at times was more Puerto Rican than Dominican. However, it also meant that because I was read as being "too black" to be Puerto Rican or even Mexican, racism within the Latino community was always haunting me at every corner I turned with comments like "Tus trenzas parecen pedacitos de mojones colgando de tu cabeza" or being reminded in conversations that I was black, ugly, nerdy and ghetto. In these moments, my subjectivity had to be fluid enough to re-approach Dominican identity through other Caribbean and Black identities.

In an effort to continue expanding the breadth of transnational and trans-regional scholarship on the Caribbean, I propose that we start the conversation about Dominican studies within a transnational context. This means that I, as a responsible Dominican scholar, must acknowledge how the transnation is unavoidable for Dominican studies. We cannot conceive of a Dominican Republic absent its early transnational reach.⁵ The Dominican Republic is a space through which cultural production and Caribbean intellectuals travel and circulate, which makes it a country that can be re-mapped within multiple Caribbean cartographies.

⁵ The early transnational reach I mention here is clearly present when you read the early works of Eugenio María de Hostos and Pedro Henríquez Ureña.

Moreover, transnationalism continues to extend the literal and figurative boundaries of *dominicanidad*, persistently re-fashioning it at every step along the way. Through my research, I have been able to identify an important period of heightened transnationalism, tied directly to migration. Rafael Trujillo's dictatorship— which lasted from 1930 to 1961— provides a central historic reference point for Dominican scholarship. However, my work attends to Dominican migration decades after the dictatorship, though these years were of course still very much haunted by Trujillo's legacy. The migratory push of the dictatorship itself and the economic instability that came after have been key determinates of the transnational Dominican spaces opened by the movement of bodies, cultures, and politics. This is as true in the years immediately following Trujillo's reign as it is in the time period that I have chosen to focus on: 1994-2016.

In 1994, the Dominican government approved Dominican-American dual citizenship and in 1997, the Dominican congress proposed a law that would allow dual-citizenship Dominican-Americans living abroad voting rights in Dominican island politics although this law did not take effect until 2004. We must note that many of these laws were passed during President Leonel Fernández's government, who was the first Dominican-York president elected.⁶ The decade of 2004 to 2016 is

⁶Leonel Fernández was born in the Dominican Republic, but was raised in New York City. He returned to the Dominican Republic after high school to study law at the *Universidad Autonoma de Santo Domingo*. It is clear how this transnational subject may be invested in allowing agency for Dominicanos ausentes living and working in New York City, but a lot more invested in Dominican politics than U.S. politics.

probably the most transnational Dominican period in terms of the kinds of public recognitions in scholarly texts and beyond that are shaping *dominicanidad*. The amount of literature that grapples with the effects and discursive practice of this were spearheaded by scholars—Ramona Hernández, Silvio Torres-Saillant, and Daisy Cocco de Filipis among others. However, within the literary realm of the Hispanic Caribbean, Dominican-American writers like Julia Álvarez, Junot Díaz, Angie Cruz, Rhina Espaillat, Nelly Rosario, and Loida Maritza Pérez began exploring the shifting discourse of racial formation and gender norms in their poetry and novels to engage with the complexities of displacement, belonging, and Dominican understandings of blackness in a transnational context.

The Dominican communities in the U.S. cannot ignore the extent to which Dominicans must contend with blackness. Some Dominican scholars like Ginetta Candelario and Silvio Torres-Saillant have engaged with blackness and argued that Dominicans do not tend to self-identify as black until they experience the racialization process in the U.S. I would argue that the complexity of blackness in the Dominican diaspora has been understudied in terms of the discussion of how blackness and dissidentifying with blackness is at times a matter of survival that may manifest as self-hate. One must also consider how the continuous presence of violence disavows the power of blackness. Dominican blackness is complex and there is a danger in minimizing it to common generalizations of “well they’re just

self-hating black folk”. We should not simply abandon the conversation because some Dominicans may not self-identify as black.

Because of the violence that is associated with blackness in the Dominican Republic in its historical and political association to anti-Haitianism, identifying as black is resistant and in opposition to the nation state. Claiming blackness as an identity in a Dominican context has always meant that violence will ensue—that you will be killed. Or, as Junot Díaz puts it, “You’d be amazed how you reconstruct self when there’s a machete in your face” (Danticat). Therefore, we cannot approach Dominican blackness solely by paying attention to those who embrace it, but also to those who it haunts, and those who wait for the moment when the machete is no longer lurking in the dark waiting for them to develop kinship with other Afro-descendants. Transnational Dominican racial consciousness ought not to be understood solely as a result of U.S. racialization, but also in relation to a globalized black frame attentive to the nuances of how blackness is understood, performed, and embodied across a range of cultural identities—blackness is not a fixed racial category. Dominicans have historically been thought of as quintessentially anti-Black because of Trujillo’s anti-Black regime and the 1937 Haitian Massacre, marking Dominicans as inherently resistant to their own Blackness. This is a fallacy that violently negates centuries of conviviality in Dominican-Haitian cultures or enclaves of black cultural production, resistance, and political mobilization.

During the nation building process of the Dominican Republic it is important to remember that there were transnational influences and key factors in forging *dominicanidad*. Understanding it from a trans-Caribbean perspective allows us to understand that the influence of key figures such as Eugenio María de Hostos, José Martí, or the haunting spectre of Toussaint L’ouverture as portrayed metaphorically through foundational fictions like *Enriquillo*, were transnational influences that begin to forge *dominicanidad* as one that upholds *mestizaje* and privileges whiteness and patriarchy.⁷ However, this transnational *dominicanidad* also considers blackness as threatening to whiteness and the colonial inheritance that *criollos* were leading. In other words, as transnational subjects from the very early institution of *dominicanidad*, Dominican blackness is heavily policed and under surveillance. Noting this, we can think of the action of Dominicans that self-identify as black as a mode of resistance to hundreds of years of oppression and being—in some ways—taken away from oneself.

⁷ *Enriquillo* is, as Doris Sommer would call, a foundational fiction book. *Enriquillo*, a novel by Manuel de Jesús Galván, is the story of a legendary indigenous cacique. The novel gives us an image of Enriquillo that enhances his abilities as an indigenous subject that has been educated and trained in high society. In many ways, Enriquillo is portrayed as the possibility of what Dominican subjects can be and look up to. It is published during a time when Haiti’s revolution is a specter that haunts the Dominican Republic. To recover Enriquillo is to propose an image of a leader to be followed—he is a counter-hero to Toussaint L’Overture. He is one who embodies an erased performance of indigeneity and blackness and openly welcomes the education of the *criollos* and the power dynamics he must embody in order to become a leader and interpolator of his people.

In a U.S. construct Dominicans become AfroLatinos.⁸ Latinidad—as a term that refers to racially mixed peoples of Latin America living in the United States—is a term that upholds notions of *mestizaje* in which blackness is at the bottom and the most negated race of the mix and the white race is supreme, with the indigenous race being misconstrued as a middle ground “savage”, from which some characteristics should be adopted.⁹ Dominicans becoming AfroLatinos means that they are first racialized as black based on the way that their bodies occupy space and then secondarily recognized as part of Latinidad through cultural and linguistic identification. In Silvio Torres-Saillant’s essay “One and Divisible: Meditations on Global Blackness” (2009) he details his experience in dining at a Peruvian restaurant in Chicago with other Latino colleagues:

The nice gentleman assigned to our table greeted the gathering in Spanish, explained the specials of the day, and proceeded counterclockwise to take our orders, beginning with the colleague to my right. When he finally reached me, for some reason he felt compelled to code-switch, asking for my order in English. This linguistic detail did not escape the notice of my four colleagues, and once the waiter was no longer within hearing range, we all proceeded

⁸In 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). I also refer here to Afro-Latinos in the sense that Dominicans are Latinos racialized as black.

⁹ For more on the discourse of *mestizaje* see José Vasconcelos’s *La raza cósmica* (1948).

to interpret—as scholars are wont to do. In unison we concluded that my blackness had prevented the nice Peruvian gentleman from recognizing my Hispanicity (16-17).

Like Torres-Saillant, I have also experienced this linguistic code-switch. There have been moments where people have spoken to my partner in Spanish, who reads as mulatto, and when they see me, speak to me English. When he corrects them, their response is usually something like “Oh, I didn’t know or think you were Latina”. My blackness is usually read as suspect when I tell them that I am Latina and that Spanish was my first language.

The visibility of AfroLatinos has increased in the 21st century, creating a drastic turn in Black Studies and Latino Studies. As scholar Agustin Laó-Montes describes: “Afro-Latinos 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). Through a close look at the emerging field of AfroLatino Studies one is able to see how Dominicans destabilize notions of Latinidad as well as notions of Caribbeaness and blackness in the United States. This leads us to re-conceptualize our consciousness of how we embody blackness and negotiate it within many spaces as newly recognized AfroLatinos. AfroLatino studies allow us to locate Dominican transnational communities and to be able to talk about race and

migration as we contest hegemonic notions of Latinidad and essentialist notions of blackness.

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 AfroLatinos.¹⁰ This in turn, pushes the envelope a bit further to recognize the differences found within Latinidad while still acknowledging the African Diaspora.

In this project it is of key importance to find a balance and develop a strong relationship between theory and practice. Some scholars have been successful in contributing to closing the gap between theory and practice, such as Juan Flores and Miriam Jiménez Román in their works and direction of the “Afro-Latino Forum,” a collective of scholars, which has produced *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* an anthology that greatly contributes to the study of AfroLatinos 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 AfroLatino identities. The reader included a small section on AfroLatina women, which gave me breath and text to connect to my own

¹⁰ 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).

experiences. Nonetheless, it was not enough—we need more. There is still plenty of work to be done in terms of bringing AfroLatina voices to the forefront and this is definitely an area in which AfroLatino studies needs to expand.

AfroLatina women's experiences have yet to be recognized as an essential part of understanding the complexity of Latino and Black identities. Within the field of AfroLatino studies we must also create a space which grapples with the way that race, gender, and sexuality are reconfigured in a transnational context. This is not to say that the voices of AfroLatinas are completely silent—but the volume is not loud enough and it is difficult to hear. 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— as well as in my own experiences— that the constant presence of the preposition “trans-” is central to how we understood ourselves as AfroLatinas. However, there has yet to be an existing body of research that theorizes these experiences into understanding them as part of an embodied archive that informs an epistemology of the self.

Some understudied Dominican women's narratives and testimonies have been published throughout the 21st century. Some of these key narratives have been

put together by Daisy Cocco de Filippis and Mary Ely Gratereaux and tell the multiple experiences of Dominican women who have migrated to the United States. The women share their stories from writing circles to factory cafeterias. The labor of Dominican women in the United States has proliferated beyond factories and neighborhoods and into written works. The texts exist, the stories, and articles exist. Scholarship that theorizes these works from a perspective that engages an AfroLatina feminist epistemology constructed through embodied memory does not exist. In some ways my project aims to recover and re-integrate the importance of these narratives into a interdisciplinary field of study that challenges notions of blackness, latinidad, gender/sexuality, and transnational migration.

My argument is further explored through literature and performance produced by Dominican women primarily living in the United States. I analyze Dominican transnational women's narratives such as Ana Maurine Lara's *Erzulie's Skirt*, Nelly Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints* (Chapter 2), Loida Maritza Pérez's *Geographies of Home* (Chapter 3), Josefina Báez's *Levente No.Yolayorkdominicanyork*, videos by Dominican vlog star La Bella Chanel, and reality-tv star and hip hop artist Cardi B (Chapter 4).

In order to read an AfroLatina 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 creating and storing memories.

To expand on this notion, 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 and/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 AfroLatina embodied archive as a site of knowledge production that legitimizes and recognizes "trans" subjectivities. But, how is this embodied archive formed? How does this knowledge forge AfroLatina "trans" subjectivities? To answer these questions, this project's theoretical framework centers the importance of (trance)formation and the fluidity of identity present in Afro-Caribbean scholarship. Which, ultimately, designate how we can conceptualize "trans" experiences in reading Dominican women's narratives.

Furthermore, my methodological approach to focusing on the body, womanhood, and race is informed by scholars like Audre Lorde, Jacqui Alexander, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, Mayra Santos-Febres, and Donna Weir-Soley who are moving Black feminist thought into an Afro-Diasporic and yet, still Caribbean, direction that allows us to consider how the relationship between black women and their bodies in transnational spaces is something to pay close attention to. My work will seek to use the spiritual as part of my theoretical framework not in pointing out moments where the religious architecture of the spiritual is present, but in recognizing how these fluidities are always present in AfroLatina women's identities. Hence, my work will pay close attention to the ways in which the spiritual catalyzes a process we can understand as (trance)formations of the self and how epistemologies of the body are shared inter-generationally.

The empowerment of AfroLatina women circulates through the body. It is from this point of departure that such an epistemology is founded and passed from one woman to another forging solidarities and establishing an AfroLatina feminist thought. In using the theoretical approach of the fluidity of blackness in the African diaspora—(trance)formations of the self within the context of translocation—this project responds to these broader questions: How do we approach this archive that emerges from the body? Furthermore, how are race, gender, and sexuality re-configured through it? In analyzing literary cultural production set forth by Dominican women writers in the U.S., this project explores these questions and

seeks to propose this theoretical literary methodology as a reflection of everyday practices and resistances of AfroLatina women.

Within the emerging field of AfroLatino Studies this dissertation will be among the first to push the boundaries beyond the politics of recognition. My dissertation contributes to this struggle for equality, rights, and recognition and aims to push further in the direction of theorizing the experience of AfroLatinos in the United States. What empowers us? How do we understand ourselves and how do we develop our own sense of self and agency in the midst of being caught between different locations of space and time?

Furthermore, this dissertation aims to be a corrective theoretical and practical approach for re-conceptualizing Dominican blackness and the performance of gender and sexuality. This project approaches transnational *dominicanidad* from a trans-Caribbean perspective that takes into consideration the influence of Puerto Rican migration, Afro-Caribbean intellectuals, and inter-Caribbean exchanges. More specifically, within the field of Dominican Studies, I centralize the experience of Dominican women in the body and the memories it carries as influential to the creation of an epistemology by them and for them. No other project has ever taken into consideration the embodied archives of transnational AfroLatina Dominican women and their own production of knowledge.

On a broader scale, while there are many published literary and narrative works about Dominican women living in the United States, these narratives and stories have not been thoroughly theorized.¹¹ The chosen published works that are presented in this project have very little written about them. Really grappling with the works of Nelly Rosario, Ana Maurine Lara, Loida Maritza Perez, Josefina Báez, La Bella Chanel, and Cardi B is something that is rarely done. There is scholarship that has explored some of the works presented in this dissertation, however, not all in the same conversation. I believe that the works produced by these women in many ways may not be fully accessible to most readers as they relate the pains and transient subjectivities of AfroLatina women. These stories are out there, but they have yet to be teased out for their meanings and sociological implications on the way women relate to one another. These texts can facilitate the relationship between theory and practice because they portray very real-life experiences that are many times left out of scholarly/academic conversations.

Finally, I posit that an AfroLatina epistemology that recognizes the complexity of black subjectivities is a model that facilitates and further challenges Dominican scholars to critically engage with discourses on nation, blackness, gender, and sexuality. Employing these methods of literary analysis that theorize from the flesh by centralizing the body and the (trance)formations it takes us through will create a space within Caribbean scholarship that critically wrestles

¹¹ See, Daisy Cocco de Filippis and Mary Ely Grateraux

with rupture from within and beyond borders and challenges us to look closely at the archives that our racialized bodies create. Ultimately, this project is an important intervention in feminist theory, as well as an important corrective to Cartesian divisions and Enlightenment-stemmed dissections often imposed on Afro-diasporic bodies regarding who is human and who is a knowledge producer.

In carrying out the central argument of this dissertation each chapter focuses on a different aspect of (trance)formation in transnational Dominican women's literature and performance. The first chapter emphasizes the importance of AfroLatina feminist thought and epistemologies and argues that canonical Chicana and Black feminism have not entirely provided frameworks in which AfroLatina women can locate themselves. In developing this argument, I focus on drawing out the limits and stagnant spaces found within Chicana feminist thought by analyzing the canonical works of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La frontera* and her edited volume, *This Bridge Called My Back*. Furthermore, I will also provide an analysis of canonical Black feminist thought as it also lacks space for acknowledging AfroLatinas as part of this body of work and instead seems to homogenize blackness to African-Americaness. I grapple primarily with Kimberley Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality as used in Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought*, which is a crucial body of work that cohesively summarizes the guiding themes within black feminist theory.

I conclude this chapter by providing a new approach to AfroLatina 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, this chapter places the central argument of my dissertation which is that the significance of AfroLatina women's experiences are in recognizing that the body as an archive is in constant (trance)formation. Moreover, it is a place from where knowledges are re-created and disseminated creating a feminist epistemology for themselves. I articulate my theory of (trance)formation as a continuous process that engages with the spiritual aspect of self-making and centralizes the body as an archive for the creation of an AfroLatina feminist epistemology. What makes this AfroLatina-specific, is that this theorization comes out of the experience of AfroLatinas and creates a feminist framework for understanding and locating their experiences.

The aim of the second chapter is to highlight (trance)formation as a process that is central to the creation of an AfroLatina embodied epistemology. More specifically, presenting an analysis of the relationships between women, and between women and their bodies in the movements of transnational migration. Through an analysis of Nelly Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints* and Ana Maurine Lara's *Erzulie's Skirt* this chapter looks specifically at what is left behind, what is gained, and how constructions of sex and sexuality, the body, and the spirit transform. The framework for my analysis in this chapter is founded on my

theorization of (trance)formation as a constant process that takes place through the spiritual, and seeing the spiritual, as a place that can “...transform the ways we relate to one another” (Alexander 283). Conclusively, this chapter demonstrates how the embodied archive can be developed through the process of (trance)formation to develop an AfroLatina feminist epistemology in which knowledge is re-created and disseminated through the body.

In the third chapter, I look at a different perspective of (trance)formation as a violent and traumatic process that creates possibilities of multiple belongings. In Loida Maritza Perez’s *Geographies of Home* the process of (trance)formation and the spirit is present in a way that is violent and attempts to police AfroDominican women’s bodies. The characters in Perez’s novel question the way in which “home” forms their own identities and attempt to challenge the politics of it. “Home” is not a stable place nor is it exactly tangible—it is a space characterized by the circularity of time and the changes that the people connected to it undergo. However, as my analysis will show the process of (trance)formation experienced by Aurelia, Iliana, Marina, and Rebeca makes these embodied archives transgress the imaginary space of “home”. Nonetheless, in a shared place where these characters are (trance)forming and drawing from their own embodied memories what happens when these bodies clash? More specifically, how do we read the violent encounters between the different embodied archives that each of these women possess? Perez’s novel allows us to see these violent (trance)formations as vehicles for creating new

paths and possibilities of multiple belongings. In other words, this chapter offers violent (trance)formations as central to the process of self-making and the trans subjectivities of AfroLatina women.

In the fourth and final chapter, I expand on my theorization of (trance)formation and come full circle to engage with the body, memory, and the importance of its performativity in the proliferation of the created epistemology. While suggesting that (trance)formation is a process that is performed in order to solidify the production of knowledge proliferated through the body, this chapter explores transnational Dominican womanhood in trans/trance and what (trance)formation in the act looks like. By analyzing Josefina Baez's *Levente no.Yolayorkdominicanyork*, and the videos of La Bella Chanel and Cardi B, I demonstrate how the performance and performativity of (trance)formation can challenge how we view feminism. These creators not only transmit knowledge through their bodies, but also show us how feminism from below is obligated to engage and work within structures of power in their everyday lives. By putting Josefina Baez's *Levente's* performance/text in dialogue with La Bella Channel and Cardi B, this chapter demonstrates how the body as archive solidifies the process of (trance)formation as it engages with paradoxical understandings of black womanhood and feminism.

Conclusively, I will re-iterate the main argument of this dissertation as well as suggest the broader implications for this project. Ultimately, this project's

contributions are the following: 1) Place transnational *dominicanidad* within a canon that recognizes a trans-Caribbean intellectual community 2) Understand how transnationalism is not only experienced through migration but also from within newly forged transnational communities, like Washington Heights in New York City 3) Create a deeper understanding of AfroLatinidad that goes beyond recognition and visibility, but begins to theorize from the flesh how AfroLatinidad is a fluid identity that can be recognized through an Afro-Diasporic framework that contests notions of Latinidad and Blackness, and 4) Understand how transnational Dominican women embody transformations of the self and how this process restores memories present in their writing, oral histories, and music. In the end, re-visiting transnational Dominican women's experiences—which have been understudied—will carve out spaces for AfroLatina “trans” subjectivities. This project will contribute an alternative methodology to engage the interweaving of the embodied archives and epistemological realms within Dominican studies as well as Black and Latino Studies.

Chapter 1:

Let the Waters Flow: (Trans)locating AfroLatina Feminist Thought in (Trance)formation

*(Un)disciplined and (un)controlled*¹²

Hey, what are you?

**Te lo estoy diciendo, brother. Esa mujer es morena!
Mirala!**

Maybe Indian like Gandhi Indian.

& bein a mute cute colored dominican til saturday afternoon when the disc-jockey
say 'SORRY FOLKS ANTHONY SANTOS AINT GONNA MAKE IT TODAY' & alla my
niggah temper came outta control & i wdnt dance wit nobody

**Neglected, rejected, oppressed and depressed
From banana boats to tenements
Street gangs to regiments. . .**

Cuz you Black, nigger.

oyé negro
te amo mas que te amo mas queeee te amo mas que, te amo mas queee
than celia loves cuba

(why) do you speak spanish?

i usedta live in the world then i moved to AUSTIN & my universe is now six blocks/I
usedta live in the world now i live in austin & my universe is six blocks a street with
a bus i can't ride just anywhere remaining a stranger NO MAN YA CANT GO WIT

¹² I wrote this poem as a found poem, which uses lines from Willie Perdomo's "Niggerican Blues" and Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf*. The bolded lines are those used (and sometimes slightly changed to be relevant to my own experience) from their work.

ME/I DON'T EVEN KNOW YOU/NO/YOU AINT BUT 50 YRS OLD/NO MAN/LEAVE
ME ALONE/TOMORROW/YEAH/NO

i cd stay alone a woman in the world

then

I gotta dance to keep from cryin

Afro-Latinos "...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 AfroLatina bodies? Furthermore, where do we locate AfroLatina 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 AfroLatina women. AfroLatina women's experiences, in specific, have yet to be recognized as a central part of understanding the complexity of Latino and Black identities. To locate an AfroLatina feminist thought we must

obtain a fluid positionality that recognizes and articulates the many transformations that AfroLatina women experience.

This chapter attends to a thorough theoretical problematization and not a deconstruction of sorts. It provides a different lens through which we may access an AfroLatina feminist perspective informed by processes and intersections of black consciousness, sexuality, and knowledges that are constructed through the body. However, to locate *this* we must understand 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 AfroLatina identities. By providing a literature review of Chicana and Black feminist thought, I outline the essentialist concepts present in both bodies of knowledge that do not allow AfroLatinas to locate themselves. I propose a theoretical problematization between Black feminist thought and Chicana feminist thought by highlighting that they lack an afro-diasporic component. These theoretical frameworks have static, or stagnant, elements that leave AfroLatinas out. This chapter concludes by offering a different way to conceptualize AfroLatina feminist thought through recognizing the fluidity of blackness and the “trans” subjectivity of AfroLatina 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 imperative feminist theories emerge from the African American and Latino 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 experiences of women of color or even considering them "women" at all.

In contrast, Black and Chicana women reclaim a feminist theory that re-centers the racialized woman's body and theorizes in the flesh. Cherri Moraga explains that, "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 Chicana 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 queer women are also heard. Additionally, the knowledges that are created through lived experiences are central in the formation of a feminist theory of color. This is to say, that phenomenology is essential to our theorizations.

Chicana 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 extinction 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 Chicana 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-Chicana 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" via voluntary self-extinction.

Furthermore, throughout her book, Anzaldúa employs this Vasconcelian discourse of erasure as well as she 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 inexistent. 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 AfroLatina body could also be located, it is evident that even within this fluidity there are static and empty spaces that lack or police 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 and the falsehood 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's¹³ 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 AfroLatino subjectivities. When approaching the legacy and identity of Latina women, we can begin to further understand the particularities of the location of AfroLatina women. On the one hand, black women's bodies are unrecognizable and almost inexistent within these 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.

¹³ 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.

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

In contrast to Chicana 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 a 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, AfroLatina as well as other Black women of 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, Collins suggests:

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 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 truly 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, 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 “universal” Black feminist theories. 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, AfroLatina women.

Afro-Diaspora and the Queer in Blackness

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 AfroLatina body?¹⁴ Recognizing an Afro-Latino identity, as Marta Moreno Vega describes in her introduction to *Women Warriors of the AfroLatina Diaspora* is:

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 AfroLatina 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

¹⁴ 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).

AfroLatino identity. AfroDominican writer and scholar Ana Maurine Lara highlights this perspective when she argues that:

The spaces that AfroLatinas 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 AfroLatinas 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 AfroLatina women must employ. Black and Chicano feminist thought leaves out a space of recognition where a fluid AfroLatina subjectivity could be exercised and given agency.

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 movement.

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

Meditating about these intermediary and unrecognizable spaces where AfroLatina bodies are 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 AfroLatina 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 AfroLatina 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 connotations, 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 locating an AfroLatina feminist theoretical framework that is recognizable and emerges with its own voice from within the “trans”.

(Trans)locating AfroLatina Feminist (trance)formative Thought

AfroLatina 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, AfroLatinas, which grapples with the way that race, gender, and sexuality are reconfigured in a transnational context. This is not to say that AfroLatina 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 AfroLatina women.

The concept of translocality, as invoked by Laó-Montes and 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 use 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 AfroLatino 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 AfroLatinos 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 sujetividad.... 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 project, 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 AfroLatina 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 project, 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”, AfroLatina 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.

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 AfroLatina feminist epistemology that embraces self-knowing through understanding our “trans” subjectivities. The empowerment of the AfroLatina 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 AfroLatina feminist thought. When we take up a fluid positionality as an afro-diasporic reading practice, an epistemology produced by the body emerges.

AfroLatino 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 AfroLatina 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 AfroLatina 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 AfroLatina 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 AfroLatinas 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... AfroLatina 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 here. 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.

I delineate "trans" subjectivities here as identities that are transnational, transformative, and transient. I acknowledge that this term is also part of transgender discourse and my intention is not to erase or proliferate violence onto this community in a way that co-opts the term from them. However, my use of it does engage with the notion of fluidity and transformation as it pertains to the

category of “woman” as a gender that may also be understood as fluid and in dialogue with race and space.

I propose that we re-visit transnational Dominican women’s experiences—which have been understudied—to shed light on and locate these AfroLatina “trans” subjectivities. For decades these women have been laboring away at the production of knowledge that informs the way that we frame dominicanidad, womanhood, and blackness. Their epistemologies create a space for the voices and experiences of other women to be heard and recognized through their writing and performance.¹⁵ Moreover, there have yet to be an existing body of research that theorizes these experiences into understanding them as part of an embodied archive that informs an epistemology of the self.

Much of what we experience is embodied and leads us to understand how AfroLatinas “theorize from the flesh” to locate themselves. As women who lack visibility and recognition within Black American and Latino spaces, as Ana Lara states, “We must, in turn, push to be seen” (23). She posits that: “The tendency among those of us who occupy this space [of invisibility] is to go to the fear that ‘AfroLatinas’ and ‘Afro-Latinidad’ lack definition” (23). Furthermore, within the field of AfroLatino studies we must also create a space, which grapples with the way that race, gender, and sexuality are reconfigured in a transnational context.

¹⁵ See Daisy Cocco de Filippis and Mary Ely Gratreux

Ana Lara raises these questions: “What do our bodies demonstrate to the world, and what do our bodies remember?” and “Where are AfroLatina bodies found?” In encountering these questions and beginning my research to locate ourselves theoretically, I realized that we had not yet had our own theoretical framework for locating, giving visibility to, or understanding AfroLatina women’s experiences. I offer (trance)formation as a theoretical framework and process through which AfroLatina “trans” subjectivities can be further understood.¹⁶

(Trance)formation is a continuous process that engages with the spiritual aspect of self-making and centralizes the body as an archive for the creation of an AfroLatina feminist epistemology. To further understand this theorization of (trance)formation, I turn to transnational Dominican women’s narratives put forth by Nelly Rosario, Ana Lara, Loida Maritza Perez, Josefina Baez, La Bella Chanel, and Cardi B. This dissertation shows how (trance)formation is 1) a spiritually embodied process that is central to the creation of an AfroLatina embodied epistemology, 2) a violent process that allows for multiple belongings, and 3) a process that is performed in order to solidify the production of knowledge proliferated through the body. This theory contributes an alternative methodology of literary and cultural theory in Dominican studies, as well as in Black and Latino Studies. Ultimately, I would go as far to suggest that it is an imperative intervention in feminist theory

¹⁶ Throughout this work I do not hyphenate the term AfroLatina/o intentionally to convey that blackness should always be considered as part of Latinidad. Specifically, for the writers explored here and in my own positionality our blackness is not separate of our Latinidad, but a part of it.

that pushes to be open to our presumed notions of what feminism looks like and who is and is not deemed a knowledge producer.

Chapter 2:

(Trans)locating AfroLatina Bodies in (Trance)formation in Nelly Rosario's

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

In 2013, I returned to the Dominican Republic after seven years of a hiatus from the yearly trips my mother indulged us in, so that we would always know who we were and where we came from. I came across my mother's old home while spending time with my Madrina Bienvenida. Searching through my own personal archive, I share this journal entry in lieu of the image that moved my spirit at that particular moment on May 19, 2013:

This isn't the house on Mango Street, no. It's the house my mother grew up in. Yesterday, as I walked from my Tío Franklin's house to my Madrina Bievenida's house I passed it by, since it's literally in front of Madrina's house. I was overcome by this heaviness in my chest and heart. This heavy feeling of nostalgia, pain, death, and stillness. It pulled me in. And as much as I wanted to peak through the gates of the house and the already-opened *persiana* on the side, I withheld myself knowing that I was already being watched by neighbors. I had been so drawn to and distracted by my grandparents' house that I didn't even notice that Madrina had started building a second floor on her own house.



Figure 1: My mother's house in Bonao, Dominican Republic (2013). Photo by author.

This was the house that my mother grew up in. A place of painful memories of child abuse, the loss of her brother, and where both of my grandparents died, Abuela Negra and Abuelo Julio Reyes Prance. The house's stillness and haunting-ness conveyed a feeling of waiting to be opened. It makes me feel as if it was calling me to be opened, consumed, re-membered. A lot of things have changed here in Bonao. A lot of modernization, increase of technology and lifestyle. However, among the change some things remain the same. Some things are stuck or stagnant in time. Withholding memories to be unburied and re-membered. Perhaps these things have to be restored, or re-membered in order to create a reconciliation of self. Coming back to Bonao after seven years with a deeper understanding of what this place signifies for my mother is dense. It creates this dense feeling of a longing that you run away from. The pain and intimacy feels painfully closer.

The house is currently in this state as shown in the image: abandoned, worn, vandalized, and closed off. I remember Abuela Negra like it was yesterday sitting in the *galería* in her rocking chair smoking Dominican *cigarros* pretending to have the ability to see. The official papers of the property were never sorted out and a family member who has passed away has current ownership of the house and this update

was never made to the papers. My mother lost all forms of ownership she could ever have of it. The memories and stories my mother has of living in it are endless. The house can no longer be an archive for her to refer to since she has no legal ownership of it. The house is a material archive of memories that has been sealed and made inaccessible. However, it does not mean that her memories are inaccessible to her. The only archive for remembering and re-imagining this space dwells with her—her body remembers. It is within this embodied memory that my grandparents and deceased uncle dwell. Memory and remembrance are sites of dwelling for our ancestral Divine.

In reflecting on my own site of remembrance and memory, creative writing pedagogy has influenced and given me an alternative process for remembering. In this chapter, I focus on various ways that we can theorize “trans” as a frame to analyze the relationships between women, and women and their bodies in movements of transnational migration. *Song of the Water Saints* and *Erzulie’s Skirt* center the importance of embodied memories as a transformative archive. Both authors’ works grapple with the intimacy of pain, loss, and the constant movement and labor of bodies and spirit in order to ensure survival. Their AfroDominican transnational backgrounds map cartographies of the spiritual as a presence and life force that is at times made material by acknowledging our bodies as archives that hold an epistemology of constant transformations. The spiritual as present in the inter-generational and ancestral relationships between Dominican transnational

women allow us to understand the multiple transformations women experience as they move between and within spaces. Here, I offer (trance)formation as a process through which AfroLatina “trans” subjectivities can be further understood.

In understanding the manifestation of this process in cultural production I turn to Nelly Rosario’s *Song of the Water Saints* and Ana Maurine Lara’s *Erzulie’s Skirt*. Their works challenge us to look specifically at what is left behind, what is gained, how constructions of sex and sexuality, the body, and the spirit transform in transnational Dominican women’s narratives. The framework for my analysis in this chapter is founded on my use of translocation as a practice and establishing my theorization of (trance)formation as a constant process that takes place through the spiritual, and seeing the spiritual, as Jacqui Alexander suggests, a place that can “...transform the ways we relate to one another” (2011). Conclusively, this chapter demonstrates how an embodied archive can be developed through (trance)formation and translocality to develop what I define as embodied AfroLatina epistemologies. The importance of translocation, transformation and the fluidity of identity present in Afro-Caribbean scholarship are central to the theorizations offered in this chapter. Rosario and Lara’s literary works present the juxtaposition of a historical crossing of black bodies across the Atlantic and how its presence across multiple migrations and temporalities challenge us to conceptualize trance and transnational experiences.

Nelly Rosario's literary works are meditations on Dominican transnational memory and counter-memories offering an alternative space of being. Rosario, born in the Dominican Republic and raised in Brooklyn, graduated from MIT with a degree in engineering. However, writing offered her a space through which she could find herself. After college, Rosario took various creative writing courses and enrolled in an MFA program at Columbia University. Published in 2002, *Song of the Water Saints* came from smaller pieces of memory and imagery she had written throughout the years—a novel that encases the multiple “photographs” of three women—mother, daughter, granddaughter, and great-granddaughter from Dominican Republic to New York.

The novel begins following Graciela during the time of the 1916 U.S. invasion. She is depicted as the woman who continuously abandons her family to satisfy her own desires of roaming the world and adventuring. During her time away Graciela becomes infected with syphilis and upon her death, her daughter Mercedes is left to be cared for by her second husband. Mercedes, growing up in the midst of the Trujillo dictatorship and the 1937 Haitian massacre, is socialized to discriminate against Haitians in lieu of dealing with her own blackness. As the “songs” progress, Rosario takes the reader from daughter to daughter showing how trauma, violence, and memory are inherited and passed on for generations. The novel comes full circle when we are introduced to Graciela's great-granddaughter Leila who reflects many of Graciela's behaviors and must reconcile with her own

mother, Amalfi, upon her return from New York City. The symbolism behind the title of the “water saints” is an echo of the mystic imagery of *La Cigüapa*—a river-creature woman with wild hair that walks forward with her feet backwards. This forward, but backward direction creates a centrifugal force that highlights the qualities of constant movement and circularity that are present in the key female characters of Rosario’s novel. The song hints at the poetics of the memories and stories that are strung along to create continuity of the genealogy of her main characters—Graciela, Mercedes, Amalfi, and Leila. Rosario’s writing process is a combination of memories and imagery that are carried throughout the narrative by the spiritual poetic process of remembering and recreating memories.

Similar to Nelly Rosario, Ana Maurine Lara is also a daughter of the Dominican diaspora. Lara was also born in the Dominican Republic and traveled at a young age throughout Africa, the Caribbean and the east and Pacific Northwest coast of the United States. Currently, Lara is based out of Eugene, Oregon where she is a visiting professor at the University of Oregon. Lara identifies as an AfroDominican writer and she continuously voices her preoccupation with AfroLatinidad, gender, sexuality, and spirituality. Lara’s own transnational and geographical experiences inspire the translocality of this novel and its characters. When I met Lara, she shared that *Erzulie’s Skirt* (2006) came to her through dreams, the guidance of spirit, and the recurring characters of Micaela and Miriam coming to

her begging for their stories to be written. They would be stories and bodies to be re-membered by Lara and her readers.

Erzulie's Skirt tells the story of Micaela, a Dominican woman from the campo and Miriam, a Haitian daughter of immigrants from the *bateyes* of Santo Domingo.¹⁷ As adults, both women move to a *batey* closer to the city where they meet and work. However, life in the *bateyes* is tough for Afro-Caribbean women and homes are consistently raided for Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent, and anyone suspected of practicing non-Catholic religions. Miriam and Micaela begin to bond spiritually, intimately, and sexually in the midst of violence. The two women attend to each other's needs for desire, recognition, and agency as they make plans to migrate together to find a better life for themselves—to escape the violence and not only survive, but thrive. They embark on a journey on *yola* to Puerto Rico to find a better working life for themselves and their son Antonio, but they only find his death on the journey and further sexual violence when they arrive. Miraculously, they are freed when their perpetrators mysteriously disappear and are able to go back to Dominican Republic with money. There, they open their own bodega and take on a neighborhood girl, Yelidad, as an apprentice who learns the spiritual knowledge and experience of leading a business and defining her own subjectivity.

¹⁷ A *batey* is a rural community that typically emerged during the late nineteenth century because of the sugar plantation industry.

Yelidad becomes the daughter of Micaela and Miriam and looks after them until their death.

The works of Rosario and Lara shed light on the experiences of transnational Dominican women and specifically the generational and trans-generational relationships that develop in those liminal spaces in the processes of memory building. The body of critical works that have engaged with *Song of the Water Saints* and *Erzulie's Skirt*, are very small. In lieu of that, I have decided to include them to demonstrate what the ongoing scholarly conversations around these novels have been and to place my own contribution as part of those greater conversations. My own research contributes to the growing body of literature that engages with these novels and continues to explore the place of blackness and womanhood in transnational Dominican women's narratives.

However, the following scholars that have engaged with these novels have focused many of their analyses on its historical context and/or how gender operates within the society of the characters. Josun Urbistondo in her article "Bodies Scared Sacred at the Crossroads" (2013), points at the way that the multiplicity of the loa Erzulie is present throughout the framework and narrative of *Erzulie's Skirt*. She analyses the novel as a juxtaposition of the crossing of the Atlantic with Micaela and Miriam's migration to Puerto Rico and how their bodies memorialize this history. Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, a black literary expert on the queerness of gender has taken it a step further in her own widely-read article, "Black Atlantic, Queer

Atlantic” in which she uses *Erzulie’s Skirt* to explore the way that gender can become fluid within black subjectivities. Lara and Rosario’s novels push us to re-think gender, the role of spirituality, and agency in a black Caribbean context in ways that other novels may not.

The history of the Dominican Republic is weaved throughout the songs in Rosario’s novel—U.S. invasion, Trujillo dictatorship, and mass migration. However, it is important that we view these novels to not only understand this history, but to also understand the dynamics of this history as a context for a much richer conversation that engages with the complexity of gender and race in transnational Dominican women’s bodies. There are limitations to focusing our analyses on the dynamics of solely history, gender, or womanhood, without taking into consideration AfroLatinidad, the sacred, and migration as well. For example, the scholars mentioned here do not put these themes in conversation to fruitfully produce a contribution that theorizes the experiences highlighted in these novels. These limitations dangerously give us a narrow scope for understanding transnational *dominicanidad* or black womanhood from an intersectional approach.

As pointed out by Sophie Mariñez in her thesis titled, “Dominican-American Identity and Literature” the subversion of traditional gender roles and home culture is also present in Rosario’s *Song of the Water Saints*. Furthermore, Florencia Cornet has done captivating research in her dissertation “Decolonizing Transnational Subaltern Women: The Case of Kurasoleñas and New York Dominicanas” in which

her analysis of Rosario's novel takes into consideration a transnational approach that highlights how Dominican women in the U.S. embody blackness in an Afro-Diasporic context. She posits that,

These are all novels in which a US Black Latina identity or an urban racialized ethnic identity is woven in to the story lines. These novels, however subtly, introduce an Afro-diasporic or Black lineage in the main female characters' lives; the characters' Blackness is woven with their Latina identity. Race as in Blackness is salient and displayed as an ethno-cultural performance. (153)

Cornet's definition allows us to place our understanding of blackness and womanhood as centralized in the body. It is about how blackness is embodied and performed. Moreover, the value that is placed on these bodies is also central to our understanding of blackness in the Caribbean and is explored by Maisha Mitchell in her own analysis of *Song of the Water Saints* on the relationship between black female bodies and capital. She chooses to follow Graciela's journey as influenced by the economic and capital manifestations of the time. As portrayed by these literary scholars, Lara and Rosario's novels are important because they allow us to see how frames of history, gender/sexuality, and race are juxtaposed to highlight the matrices of oppression that are present transnationally and how they continue to proliferate terror and violence onto black Caribbean women's bodies.

Other works focus on how the history between Haiti and the Dominican Republic is streamlined throughout the narrative of the novel and even more so how trauma and violence is inherited. In her article, "How Lucky for You That Your Tongue Can Taste the 'R' in Parsley", Mónica Ayuso argues that "the events of the [1937 Haitian] massacre are clearly transmitted through the generations, through an evolutionary model of traumatic affect whereby female family members 'inherit' the traces of this massacre and its effects" (49). I agree with Ayuso in the importance of highlighting the psychoanalysis of how trauma manifests itself in the novel. Furthermore, Ayuso as well, as literary scholar Megan Adams, extend this traumatic affect of the development of anti-Haitianism in the character of Mercedes. Adams focuses on the relationship between Mercedes and a Syrian bodega-owner, Mustafa, to explore the 1937 massacre. She suggests that:

Through a complex examination of silence and speech, witnessing and voyeurism, Rosario interrogates conventional interpretations of the Trujillo period in Dominican history and forces recognition of the continued legacy of massacre on the island. Rosario begins this interrogation by affording the reader a context for her characters' behaviors and thoughts, not dismissing them as normal, but simply making them understood. (47)

In other words, Adams calls for special attention to how the historical context allows for trauma to be inherited and manifested in ways that are not

simply—Mercedes is anti-Haitian, thus racist. Adams pushes us to understand how the Trujillo dictatorship institutionalized a certain kind of *dominicanidad* that is Catholic, Hispanic, and non-black. In many ways, it poses blackness as something to be policed, do away with, and to be eliminated at all costs. While anti-Haitianism is an anti-black project against Haitians, it is also an anti-black project against Dominicans and Adams does well in pointing this out in Rosario's novel.

Literary scholar Lorgia García Peña highlights this as well and lightly mentions that women's bodies operate as a site of memory (74). She states: "Many histories of the intervention have been narrated; however a lot have also been silenced due to the unavailability of historical documents. Rosario's narrative seeks to fill in those silences by proposing a revision of the accounts from the memory of the female body" (79). Here García Peña suggests that while the lack of historical documents might limit the narratives of how the U.S. intervention affected the lives of AfroDominican women during that time, Rosario's work offers us the body of Graciela, specifically, as an archive that speaks of that intervention. I expand further on this notion of the embodied memory as an available archive through which we could not only understand the experience of the intervention, but also how AfroDominican women's sexualities and movement produce knowledge. García Peña initiates a dialogue that pushes my own argument to explore the way that embodied memories or the embodied archive of memories is a product of the process of (trance)formation. Here we ask: How does the spiritual transform the

way we relate to one another and the way that we envision ourselves? How do the Divine intervene in the development of our trans subjectivities? What is it about these embodied memories that penetrate our relationships with other women in our families and communities?

Unlike these scholars, my own contribution to the on-going conversation challenges readers to take a step further from a more fluid standpoint that recognizes the sacredness of the relationships between these women and how their embodied archives inform these relationships and processes of self-making. These novels are not to just be read for leisure, or cultural awareness. Reading these novels critically challenge us to re-think blackness, transnational migration, gender, and the sacredness of the relationships that we have with others in our daily struggle towards survival, agency, and recognition.

Sacral (Trans)formations of the Spiritless

Published in 2002, *Song of the Water Saints* follows the story of four generations of Dominican women from the time of the U.S. invasion in the early 20th 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, survival, and womanhood. From the beginning of the novel Peter West, an American photographer that indulges in the “exotic beauties” of the world, takes on

Graciela and her first lover, Silvio, as the subjects for his next photography postcard.

The postcard is described in the very first page of the novel:

They are naked. The boy cradles the girl. Their flesh is copper...Shadows ink the muscles of the boy's arms, thighs, and calves. His penis lies flaccid. Cheekbones are high...The girl lies against the boy. There is ocean in her eyes. Clouds camouflage one breast. An orchid blooms on her cheek. (Rosario 1)

Within the historical context of the novel, West is an American man who travels through the Caribbean marketing it to American military men and European men of the exotic women to be consumed in the Dominican Republic through his postcards. This image that Rosario intentionally opens the novel, or the photo album, with sets the stage for how womanhood, blackness, and Caribbeanness has been situated in an imperial and global context.

As Donette Francis argues in *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship* (2010) 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 and intimacy. The photographer takes advantage of this young couple and offers them money to look on and direct their physical love to one another erotically. Opening the novel with this visual, Rosario portrays the foundation of the narrative for how we are to understand intimacy, the power of the erotic, and the body as central to

the consolidation of the self. Audre Lorde reminds us in her essay “Uses of the Erotic”,

The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves. (278)

The violation of the uses of the erotic for Graciela do violence onto her own subjectivity and are cause for the dispiriting violence that creates a transient subjectivity in search for re-establishing its own power, agency, and “...this depth of feeling”. At the end of the photo shoot Graciela does not directly receive any money for her services with Silvio and her body has not only been exposed, but it is given no capital value. Here the only role of her body is to perform and recreate the fantasies that West intends to sell about the Caribbean. In other words, as Griselda Rodriguez posits in her dissertation, “Mujeres, Myths, and Margins: AfroDominican Women Within a Capitalist World-Economy”: “...the contradictions of capitalism create realities in which a woman’s sexuality, a Black woman’s sexuality in particular, is to be ‘publicly’ consumed and commodified for profit” (310). Which means that although Graciela is “robbed”, what else is she left with? In what ways, does this initiating image also create room for possibilities of recreating intimacy?

Through this imagery Rosario reveals what we might already know—that the place of AfroLatina women’s bodies and their relationship with other bodies are consistently being read as products of consumption by the structure of white supremacy. Furthermore, the exposure and pornographic exploitation of intimacy violates the sense of self and spirit. It is this embodied violence at the novel’s beginning, as Jacqui Alexander would agree, that is a “...violation of sex and spirit” (Alexander 277).

It is key to use Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic” to understand the difference between the dispiriting violence of the pornographic gaze and the erotic as that, which is spiritual, filling, and tied to agency and politics of liberation. Lorde articulates that: “There are frequent attempts to equate pornography and eroticism, two diametrically opposed uses of the sexual. Because of these attempts, it has become fashionable to separate the spiritual (psychic and emotional) from the political, to see them as contradictory or antithetical” (279).

We can relate this to the way that the gaze manifests violence through the policing of black womanhood. In similar light, bell hooks’ previous work in “Selling Hot Pussy” is still relevant for us to understand how black women experience violence through the gaze. In re-visiting the initiation of the novel, we see how the image of Silvio and Graciela taken by Peter West is one that produces a violent gaze that is dispiriting and objectifying as the focus of the lens is not on the whole, but in

parts—arms, thighs, calves, cheekbones, one breast. In other words, as hooks would posit, Graciela and Silvio "... were reduced to mere spectacle" (hooks 114).

Following this, Graciela's life becomes the pursuit of the erotic as a power that can be liberating and re-instate a sense of self via her claim of an erotic body as a transformative space of agency. This agrees with Donette Francis and Lorgia García Peña's analysis of this scene as an initiation scene and Graciela as the beholder of history in the family. Interestingly, the history with which the book begins is with that of the 1916 intervention of the United States in Dominican Republic—a violent entrance without invitation. Both of these scholars 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.

Sexuality, the body, and spirit are tied to self-making embodied memories. As Francis writes, "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 these 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, how does the body 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. As Hartman would concur: “Of concern here are the ways [embodied] memory acts in the service of redress rather than an inventory of memory” (Hartman 73). Therefore, I extend my reading of Graciela’s embodied archive, or embodied memories, to show how it is intertwined with the spiritual as something that facilitates the production of the archive. Furthermore, I 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 looking for adventure. After the false Puerto Rico trip that Casimiro takes her on, Graciela is left unfulfilled and lacking of adventure. The desire of leaving eats her up inside: “The idea of escaping was eating away at Graciela every night since the Puerto Rico trip earlier that year, when the chirping of crickets competed with Casimiro’s snores” (Rosario 62). It is at this moment that she begins to constantly abandon her daughter and husband. During her first trip, Graciela heads for La Vega, but she ends up at a brothel with Eli, a German man she meets on the train whom she contracts syphilis from (66). From the brothel her journey continues to Santiago where she works as a maid in a wealthy couple’s house (85). Finally, Graciela returns home for about nine years, yet her dispiriting body only yearns to leave again, this time to a convent (142). Her name coming from the meaning of “grace” illustrates some clashing characteristics of Graciela. On the one hand, her smooth

grace-like movements from one place to the next and on the other, her lack of enacting grace as “A controlled, polite, and pleasant way of behaving” (Merriam-Webster). 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 (Massey 2). Therefore, the focus of the novel’s narrative on Graciela’s subjectivity as an individual is one formed by her constant “searching” for the intimacy and adventure that will fulfill her. In other words, she seems to be looking for her spirit—that which gives us life; what allows us to become.

Moreover, Graciela is haunted by the hegemonic traditional notions of womanhood. Griselda Rodriguez takes on the dismantling of hegemonic Dominican womanhood in her dissertation stating that “Ideologies of womanhood, which are grounded in Eurocentrism, create conditions whereby a woman’s place is in the home, in which her body and sexuality can be thoroughly policed by both private and public forms of patriarchy (i.e. male family members, husbands, and the state in general)” (133). Rodriguez quotes and engages with Toni Cade Bambara stating that he

...further illustrates the sexualization of gender roles within capitalist societies, which in turn have been manipulated to perpetuate the international division of labor: ‘In a capitalist society a man is expected to be an aggressive, uncompromising...provider of goods,

and the woman, a retiring, gracious, emotional...consumer of goods...she is either a marketable virgin or a potential whore, but certainly the enemy of men (124-25)(Rodriguez 133).

Hence, Graciela's transience is a method of resistance she enacts through her fleeting habits. While her name points at being gracious, Graciela, defies all parts of this "womanhood" and turns it on its head: never grounded in her "home" duties, never truly a consumer, but not a provide either. Instead, Graciela moves through different spaces in a way that allows her to survive in a rising capitalist society where AfroDominican working-class women survive from continues movement and labor. Meanwhile, this also means that they challenge how socially construct ideas of gender, particularly the category of "woman" as a gender.

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 a normative Dominican woman since she constantly abandons and neglects her husband and daughter. Graciela's pained body redresses the system of patriarchy and becomes a space for creating a subjectivity antithetical to the norm. To be "normal", and domesticated, would be to fall into an erasure and invisibility of her constant movement toward redressing the dispiriting violence that took away her sense of womanhood and power as an erotic being. Her embodiment is not a cause, but an effect—not an action, but a reaction to the given circumstances in which she comes to life in. Understanding this can challenge us to understand the unique ways in which AfroLatina women have to recreate and transform themselves continuously as way of forming a subjectivity and epistemology that is not already there, but created from given circumstances of coming into the matrices of oppression. More plainly, the *matrizes de represión*—this meaning that we come from a womb where oppression is always and already present.

Graciela's enacting body redefines womanhood in a Dominican transnational context—she acts out against the grain of traditional Dominican womanhood and challenges the reader to question his or her own way of conceptualizing gender and its performance. As Butler posits in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution": "My suggestion is that the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" (406). If gender is constituted through repeated acts, then Graciela's gender performance offers her body as a site

of possibilities, agency, and transformation that revolutionizes how black Dominican womanhood is to be understood.

To further understand Graciela's resistance and revolutionary way of embodying womanhood, we can see a parallel with Sadiya Hartman's argument in *Scenes of Subjection* about the everyday resistances that slaves practiced to redress their own pained bodies. She writes:

The everyday practices of the enslaved encompassed an array of tactics such as theft, self-mutilation, dissimulation, physical confrontation with owners and overseers that document the resistance to slavery. These small-scale and everyday forms of resistance interrupted, reeaborated, and defied the constraints of everyday life under slavery and exploited openings in the system for the use of the enslaved. What unites these varied tactics is the effort to redress the condition of the enslaved, restore the disrupted affiliations of the socially dead, challenge the authority and dominion of the slaveholder, and alleviate the pained state of the captive body.

(51)

In this passage Hartman challenges the typical notions of slaves during slavery as simply docile human beings. Graciela's resistance restores her agency, redresses her condition of a dispirited woman, restores the relationship of desire and intimacy with herself and challenges the patriarchal system that continuously attempts to

limit her to traditional gender roles. Moreover, it is through this disavowal of such controlling images of black women that her subject formation is developed through how her body experiences these gendered spaces.¹⁸

In short, she performs out of character. In the continuous fleet, Graciela's criminal or fugitive ways also create tensions with the limits of blackness. Not in the sense, that Graciela transcends race, per se, but in the sense that her embodiment and movement go beyond the limits that the "black body" as a myth of social construct offers. Harvey Young articulates this idea of the black body and its mythification in his book *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body*. Young argues that, "When popular connotations of blackness are mapped across or internalized within black people, the result is the creation of the *black body*. This second body, an abstracted and imagined figure, shadows or doubles the real one. It is the black body and not a particular, flesh-and-blood body that is the target of racializing projection" (7). In other words, as Graciela's black body is presumably held to certain standards, or expectations of enacting or being a black woman, she instead steps out of the presumed habitus and performance of a black woman's body. Instead, she steps away from the misrecognized black body and into her own embodiment of black womanhood that cannot be quite captured. It

¹⁸ For more on controlling images of black womanhood see, Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Feminist Thought*. New York: Routledge, 2009.

is a fugitive, transient, and criminal blackness that survives in its own *marronage* of sorts. She is this body searching for a spirit, a subject consistently in the making.

Her subjectivity is in continuous movement through the translocation of her identity. 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, “Tranlocas”). It is the dispiriting invasion of the Dominican Republic and Graciela’s intimacy that constitutes movement for survival sake. Migration outward—outside the campo—outside the city—outside the country—outside her body, that instills feelings of survival and progress, which is present in Graciela’s multiple journeys. 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”. In other words, Graciela’s way of “Redressing the pained body encompasses operating in and against the demands of the system, negotiating the disciplinary harnessing of the body, and counterinvesting in the body as a site of possibility” (Hartman 51). To put it another way, her body in continuous movement is a redressing body that creates new ways of visualizing the self.

Throughout her outward journey, Graciela becomes a sex worker, a domestic worker, and finally she ends up in the convent seeking for her body to be taken by the spirit. Graciela’s movement and translocality make her body a spiritual conduit

through which multiple identities 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 Dominican womanhood maintain Graciela in a cycle of on-going performative transformation throughout different spaces. For many AfroDominican women capitalism pushes them into zones of labor such as sex work and domestic work. In other words, Graciela explores these spaces, but contends with the way that these may limit her from choosing her own path of self-making.

As readers, we begin to understand Graciela as a body that oscillates between transfigurations of body and spirit, but never precisely both. 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 and becoming.

While her process of becoming and ongoing (trance) 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 Graciela's hand? In his attempt at reading a spiritless body La Gitana asks Graciela: "¿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 how her body is a site of multiple possibilities of being. The multiplicity that the body allows for creates a tension with the act of "being read"—the spirit guider has no authority over Graciela's multiple spirit-posessions. In this way, Graciela's multiple spirit-identities dismantle the politics of Spirit; there is not one spirit that passes through her but many at different times. He reacts, "¿Why did you come to me? Such hands follow their own laws" (Rosario 116). In recognizing that Graciela's soul has been robbed, and that her fluidity of identity was cognizant to the spiritless body that acted as a conduit, 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 is a conduit for the spirits, but they do not guide her. They pass through her and use her body to enact and perform subjectivity. 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 destabilizes 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 and guide Graciela.

Graciela's constant movement and transformations are facilitated through the centrality of her decaying body in the novel. Her spirit, subjectivity, and 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’s body is a conduit searching for a spirit, a sense of being. A spirit subjectivity that would encompass the power of the erotic and the intimate relationship that she could have with her body—a spirit subjectivity that could transform the way that she relates to herself, but also to her daughter Mercedes. In light of this, what is the spirit without the body? How can the sacred, or the Divine, engage in spirit movement in a body that already has fleeting, transient, spirit characteristics? Does the spirit require a body to materialize its production of knowledge? The novel’s answer to this question seems to be that the production of knowledge is an ongoing process that may be mediated by the body, but the spirit remains its interlocutor.

The novel illustrates that the process of the body attaining a spirit subjectivity is violent. The body that transgresses multiplicities is policed, disciplined, and brought to death in its process of embodying the spirit. The process of the production of knowledge within the body as led by spirit creates an embodied transformative archive. An example of this in the novel is highlighted through Graciela's experience at the convent when 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" (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). Another way of understanding this scene is that Graciela believed that her prayers would move Spirit to liberate her of the pained body. Perhaps in some ways, recreate her as a new chastised virginal woman with a restored grace, sexuality and erotic subjectivity that is un-violated.

However, the liberation that is given to her is that of becoming a transient spirit that moves through other bodies. In other words, she is granted fluid materiality as a way of liberation and freedom. This fluid (trance)formation and movement from body to spirit is where Graciela is able to find agency through the transcendental labor she must perform; this is where she finds rest and where she can simply be.

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). It is the moment her body is disintegrating that it is no longer an objectified woman's body, or more specifically, material—a body that can now attend to a fluid subjectivity that is not stagnant or unchangeable. The convent seems to be the only place where Graciela stops and begs for liberation from her pained body.

The oppressive politics of power and pain force Graciela into the deepest space where body and spirit must face each other. For example, it is the violent juxtaposition of the Catholic Church and the policing of black bodies that allow Graciela to tap into a sense of unreconciled intimacy between body and spirit. In similar fashion, Sadaiya Hartman, would agree that such a violent moment as this recognizes agency in black subjectivities. In regards to Frederick Douglass's experience, she writes: "Douglass establishes the centrality of violence to the

making of the slave and identifies it as an original generative act equivalent to the statement 'I was born'" (3). This is to say that black subjectivity emerges out of violence. It was the convent, in the moment of her deepest bodily pain and spiritual (trance)formation that Graciela was born. The disintegration of her body embodies and solidifies the archive of memories she represents. The sickness and ailment rot away at her body the closer she gets to achieve her full materialization of spirit and possibility of subjectivity in a transcendental space. Her body, as described in this instance, is in the process of becoming undone and it is within this process that her "trans" subjectivity solidifies as a fluid spiritual presence that is capable of traveling through several corporeal spaces.

Graciela's spirit-like embodiment and movement takes readers to task on how we can envision the process and politics of black womanhood outside of Western thought. Adjunctly, Donna Aza Weir-Soley's *Eroticism, Spirituality, and Resistance in Black Women's Writings* pushes this notion further by arguing in her own work that the wholeness of black womanhood lies in the recognition of the black women's sexual selves and spiritual selves together. Similarly, Graciela's subjectivity must be imagined in an alternative space where the body and the spirit are wholly recognized and attended to—a (trance)local space.

Ultimately, this recognition of a full black female self can come to be by essentially constructing a queer or fluid space for desire and the power of the erotic. The rape and violation of Graciela's body and spirit leaves her with the desire to find

her power within the erotic—not only in the sense of sexuality, but in the sense of intimacy. Nonetheless, her fluid subjectivity allows her to survive the effects of these violations—syphilis, the U.S. invasion, and the impossibility of recreating a space of intimacy in the relationships she has with her husband and daughter. Being robbed of her power of the erotic in the beginning of the novel causes Graciela to become fluid in order to survive. Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley has taken up the task to materialize the queerness of the black body alluding to its fluidity that at times makes it one with the waters that transport it. In other words, this fluidity is an effect of violence of the Middle Passage on afro-diasporic bodies, but also the ongoing global violence against blackness. Fluidity allows for survival and a space of afro-diasporic recognition.

Queerness, or fluidity, employs a theory of desire that recognizes different subjectivities found within the matrix of domination and oppression. Moreover, Graciela takes up a fluid positionality as a method of resistance and liberation that attends to the violence and rupture experienced similarly by other women of the African diaspora. At the moment that her body and spirit come together—death—she leaves behind an embodied archive of memories that proliferates itself through the (trance)formations of the women that come after her. Through this, she is able to become a spiritual authority and voice that can guide her great granddaughter Leila.

Living in New York City, young fourteen-year-old Leila may be trying to grow up too fast by entangling herself with Miguel, a married man, who takes advantage of her sexually. Being felt up by Miguel gives Leila a feeling of excitement and the arousal of sexual desire. However it also seems that Leila craves the sense of intimacy with her own body that she looks for in Miguel. In other words, Leila is attached to the desires for the flesh that hold no true intimacy, or empowering agency. Leila's relationship with her body is a disconnected one—she looks at her body as a vehicle of eroticism and “feel good”-wholeness and hence, uses it to arouse herself and others. In her friendships Leila moves so swiftly and intends to pose herself as a sexual authority, as someone who knows about sexual subjectivity as if she were a grown woman. Her friend Mirangeli asks her to “demonstrate” or perform her knowledge: “Leila went over to Mirangeli, pulled back her head, and gave her a long and deep kiss” (Rosario 225). She believes her body grants her sexual authority for proliferating knowledge to her girlfriends. Moreover, as her witnessing friend Elsa is disgusted, Leila's responds: “‘You're just jealous 'cause you're not sexually liberated,’ Leila said while reapplying lipstick. It was not the first time she had kissed Mirangeli” (Rosario 225). For Leila, imparting knowledge of sexual intimacy and desire only comes because she is already “liberated.” She believes that because she is not limited to thinking of sexuality as only having the option to be a heterosexual woman that she is liberated. In many ways, Leila is

similar to Graciela in letting sexual desire overpower her without the engagement of intimacy.

In echoing the parallels between Leila and Graciela, Rosario places an interlude “Circles” intentionally right before the reader begins to know all of these things about Leila. The interlude becomes a transition between Leila’s grandmother, Mercedes, and now going to know Leila’s story. The transition echoes Graciela’s own transition into a spiritual realm. Moreover, it is within this space of “trans” literally placed in the book, where we encounter a convergence of generations in conversation between Graciela and Leila. In a moment of trance and spiritual connection with Leila, Graciela’s spirit reaches out to caution her approach to a sense of self and to instead empower herself through finding the truth within her. In this dialogue Leila wants her Grandmamajama—great grandmother—to materialize for her and teach her to be a woman. The conversation between the two is depicted in the novel:

‘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)

Leila authoritatively claims that she wants to be a woman. She recognizes that she is not yet a woman, that she is young, however she is in the process of becoming a

young woman. Leila's journey of becoming is more about knowing what she wants to become, but yet not being there. To be a woman, in other words, to finally, "become", Graciela demands that she "take off that skin" as a challenge. To put it another way, she must do away and detach herself from the flesh; do away with the body. Graciela corrects Leila's process of becoming, as if understanding that Leila's current process is not quite fine-tuned or ready for the violent process that is becoming. Another way of reading this would be to understand the relationship that Leila has with her body an empty one of significance for the production of knowledge that she envisions to have—to be a woman one must grown up, develop, experience life, and gain knowledge through that experience.

For Graciela, Leila's attachment to the flesh or the body, will not allow her to complete her own sense of becoming if she does not also engage with spirit, that which is truth. Graciela instructs Leila to keep her heart and bleed it for truth (203). If it is the heart that gives the biological body life, it is also said that it is the spirit that gives the heart life. With this in mind, bleeding the heart for truth would be to empty the heart of the spirit and to let it flow of blood and the fluidity of spirit that gives the production of the self, of that becoming. In this respect, Graciela passes on the knowledge of the violent process of becoming as an embodied knowledge. It was only through the body that Graciela's experiences are remembered. She emphasizes that the journey of becoming is through acknowledging the process of (trance)formation as necessary for recognizing her own power and agency. In short,

this (trance)formation is the process by which the fluidity and multiplicity of spirit transforms the way we relate to our body and ourselves.

Although this is a violent request from Graciela's spirit and yet seems impossible and self-sacrificing, the process allows for the de-objectification of the body and to materialize the spirit—a liberation movement. 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 the norm—to attend to the fluidity and queerness of her body. This would allow spirit to flow throughout her body and also (trance)form the way she relates to others. To put it another way, Graciela's spirit may be suggesting that the materialization of spirit will allow Leila to really see herself for who she is and with that transform the way she approaches the relationships she engages in. The materialization of spirit is the beginning of shedding light on the truth of oneself—it's to tap into a space of intimacy for the sake of liberation.

As it follows in the book, it seems that Graciela's knowledge only becomes a warning, but yet, a learned lesson shortly after the enforced sexual experience with Miguel. Leila runs back to her friend's house to catch up with them and seek refuge from the uncomfortable sexual experience that seems to echo Graciela's experiences with West and Eli. When Mirangeli again asks Leila for a "demonstration" of how she kisses Miguel, Leila refuses. At that moment, "More than anything, she wanted a

good lung-cleansing cry on Mirangeli's lap" (Rosario 237). During the week she ends up spending at her friend Elsa's house, Leila feels remorse not only because she has fooled her grandparents and abandoned them, but also because it is through Graciela's warning knowledge that she is finally able to see herself. On her way back home, "She unpinned Mamá Graciela's amber crucifix from her bustier and put in her mouth and was overcome with a desire to love them, to make their lives happy before they all turned to leather, then ash underground" (242). Graciela's spiritual materialization and knowledge allows for Leila's own liberation and ability to love herself and her family. Leila accepts Graciela's knowledge into her own body and intimacy overcomes her as the desire to love her ancestors.

Leila finds truth through her own body's archive and the fluidity available through it. Graciela creates an epistemology that arises from her dis-re-membered body that fluidly becomes one with its newly found trance-subjectivity. Her finalized process of becoming works to empower others, but at the cost of the body becoming undone and fluidly materializing into spirit.

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.

It is the translocation, from their hometowns to the *bateyes* at the outskirts of the capital city, that allows for a fluidity of blackness, gender, and sexuality. 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.). Micaela and Miriam first meet when Miriam’s son Antonio is lost and Micaela finds him. After claiming him, as Miriam and Antonio leave, “Micaela remembered her from somewhere, but where she didn’t know. She watched as they turned to walk in the direction of the cement houses. The woman walked like a girl, her step light and fast, unlike the heaviness of the others around them. Unlike her own walk” (Lara 114). It is this first moment that Micaela is drawn to Miriam in a way that queers gender and acknowledges the body’s movement as something left to desire. The lightness in Miriam’s walk is appealing to Micaela in the midst of the heaviness of life. When they meet a second time, the narrative voice describes both of their bodies becoming “hot” with desire for each other (Lara 116). The initial meetings between these black women highlight the similarities they see in each other and also the desire to attend to each other’s bodies. In fact, it is this same-sex and sameness that metaphorically blurs the lines of difference between Haiti and Dominican Republic.

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 needs when after suffering the loss of their children and families, and are raped and exploited by their captors. Their mending each other’s external and internal wounds leads to developing a queer relationship of desire and affect. 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 cease to exist, forging interpersonal connections that counteract imperial desires for Africans’ living deaths” (Tinsley 212). The love that exists between Miriam and Micaela can be seen as one that disrupts the violent borders between Dominicans and Haitians by blurring the lines of difference. In the text Lara depicts this gesture when she writes, “Micaela sat on the ground as Miriam passed her hands gently over her dark black hair, as thick and rough as her own” (Lara 135). It is the gesture of intimacy and relating to one another in ways that as Tinsley posits, “commodified flesh was never supposed to, loving your own kind” (Tinsley 212). In other words it is the spiritual energy of love

in the midst of violence that allows for these women's bodies to encounter closeness, but also to encounter a mirroring of themselves in each other.

Moreover, Erzulie is a queerly loving and demanding loa. Her force and energy is a transforming one. The relationship between Micaela and Miriam connotes M. Jacqui Alexander's argument that, "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). 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). In the

novel, this manifestation of Erzulie is present in Miriam's dream of having a better future where she is able to buy a home. In the dream a man in a business suit,

...led Miriam down the aisles of the market, pointing at houses that sat waiting for her to buy... He winked and pointed her to a white house with two tall blue columns and a large front yard. She walked toward it and felt a darkness envelop her, choking the air out of her lungs. An old lady wearing blue and grey stood behind the stall, laughing as she fell over (Lara 133).

Miriam's desire is interpolated by Erzulie's energetic presence in a dream that creates her desires, but yet is unfulfilled and lacking considering Miriam's current situation at this point of living in a shack in fear of the raids (134). But yet, it is also possible that Erzulie, as a demanding loa, has expectations Miriam must meet in order for her dream to be fulfilled. If Erzulie is lacking and unfulfilled, then so is Miriam. It is this same spiritual energy of Erzulie that moves the narrative, since having this dream instills Miriam to motivate Micaela to move out of the country. She tells her, "Micaela, I had a dream last night. I dreamt that we had left this infernal barrio, and that we lived in a big mansion, full of gold and white" (Lara 135). Shortly after this, Miriam and Micaela make their way to the consulate to begin the search for a way out.

After the constant anti-Haitian raids in the barrio of La Merced where they live, Micaela and Miriam move in together. However, the violence and fear in which

they live push them to the end of migration possibilities and instead to recourse to a *yola* trip to Puerto Rico. But of course, the violent sea of the Mona Passage is no easy recourse.¹⁹ In their process of migrating 60 miles east to Puerto Rico on a *yola* for better life opportunities, Micaela and Miriam experience the violence of migration. As it often happens, the captain abandons the *yola* and the people are left stranded at sea understanding that they have been fooled (Lara 163). After the boat tips over and many lives are lost, Miriam and Micaela are left on the boat with Antonio's limp body, which has met death through drowning and dehydration. The sea although a vehicle of transportation to other lands, also has a violent side that takes away. The middle passage and the sea as its accomplice claim their children, and Antonio becomes one of them. After this Micaela returns to her memory for release from the pain of her body:

Micaela recalled that brief moment, the loneliness of the night. She searched her cheeks for tears, her thirst claiming her memories. She licked her palm, the taste recalling her mother's jaguar, the iron pungency of the fruit subtly tainting its sweetness. Micaela closed her eyes to the salt, the sun, the memories of passing moments and the night before, and prayed for sleep to take her. (Lara 167)

¹⁹ This passage and its ongoing trips of undocumented migration of Dominicans to Puerto Rico echoes the middle passage as well. It is known to have violent waters, dangerous encounters in the trans space where goods and bodies are exchanged.

It is within the space of the sea, a transitory space that Miriam and Micaela engage with an embodied memory to connect with spirit. Through embodied memories Micaela attempts to appease to the Divine and for the sea, Erzulie, to take her as well. But yet it is not her moment.

Micaela and Miriam wake up in Puerto Rico—a strategic placing on Lara’s part for hinting at the presence of empire and colonialism. Furthermore, the presence of Puerto Rico as the global entrance to the United States relates back to Nelly Rosario’s novel and the positioning of the history of the U.S. empire on AfroLatina bodies. In Puerto Rico, Miriam and Micaela are held captive and sexually exploited in an old house. 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”(86). “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; in this moment when the body is pushed violently as close as possible to an end. This subjectivity is not available within the body, but immediately outside of the tortured body and must be accessed through a fluidity of identity and space. This is to say that the queerness of the AfroLatina woman’s body and its identities are accessible through the violent process of (trance)formation. It is these liminal moments that are central for understanding an approximation of liberty and agency.

After Miriam has a dream with her mother telling her that they will get out, the novel takes a surprising turn (190). 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. Although in the narrative of the novel this moment seems to come in abruptly, it calls the reader to question the intention Lara places in this abrupt transition: Why is this abrupt transition in the text? Did Erzulie finally become fulfilled? Did the moment of (trance)forming from the body to spirit for the sake of survival a violent, yet acceptable offer for Erzulie? It is only after that moment that they then return to the Dominican Republic and open a small market, or *colmado*. In other words, the dream is fulfilled.

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 occur 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 not only through death and violence, but through the intimacy one builds with others, to seek for the power of the erotic, to instate intimacy with oneself and

others, to be attentive to the way that Spirit manifests. 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 and daughter. After Antonio’s death during the migration to Puerto Rico and their partnership in the buying of the home and the *colmado*, Miriam and Micaela’s relationship has overthrown the hegemony of patriarchal and heterosexuality. The queer loving spirit of Erzulie (trance) forms the way the reader may conceptualize gender and sexuality to understand the notion of family as one that is more spiritually developed. In playing with the rhetoric of Dominican poetic narrative, Lara’s choosing of the name Yealidad for this character echoes Tomás Hernández Franco’s poem “Yelidá”. Franco’s 1942 poem is about how the protagonist Yelidá is a product of 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 that transcends national borders. In short, Yealidad is the daughter of a Dominican and a Haitian woman who blur the national borders through the spiritual similarities and affect that draw them together.

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. Yealidad’s close call with death allows for the (trance)formation to happen with the guidance of Micaela’s knowledge. This reconceptualization of the archive shapes an embodied epistemology that empowers their young daughter.

The Divine, queer loving, Erzulie-Fréda and Erzulie Ge-Rouge, as defined previously, 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 (trance)formation is complete? The end of the novel presents us with Micaela sounding “different” when speaking to Yealidad. She uses the pronoun “us,” which hints at the possibility that Micaela, is no longer, a “single” identity, but that the Divine Erzulie now dwells in her; perhaps all identities of Erzulie. 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 has this time lead Micaela outside of her body and become solely spirit. Yealidad feels the sacred presence because she notices that Micaela speaks differently. It is a voice that embodies omnipresence and the spirit is no longer bounded by the body, but is now a fluid, “trans” subjectivity. The voice 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 and 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 and the spiritual transformation that it brings for the living and for the dead, is what creates a possibility for the future generations and the restoration of memory. In other words, death allows for remembrance 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 (trance)formations in a Dominican context becomes possible.

Conclusion

Both *Song of the Water Saints* and *Erzulie's Skirt* allow us to read transnational Dominican women's experiences in a way that complicates and challenges how we understand the interstitial spaces that we cross. It puts into perspective how our ongoing process of becoming is not limited to transformations of the self, but also of the dimensions of the relationship between body, spirit, and our selves.

The characters in Rosario and Lara's work are black women that have agency, even though it is mediated through the body. As bell hooks would argue, "they are not a silenced body" (116). Their bodies have a voice that is articulated through movement and their relationships with other bodies. As hooks puts it,

When black women relate to our bodies, our sexuality, in a way that place erotic recognition, desire, pleasure, and fulfillment at the center of our efforts to create radical black female subjectivity, we can make new and different representations of ourselves as sexual subjects (hooks 128).

As hooks, Lorde, and Tinsley suggests, the relationship that black women have with their bodies should centralize the importance of the erotic and the power of intimacy since it is from here that we can reconceptualize our womanhood and create a self that is empowering. While in these novels the erotic does not necessarily create intimacy or vice versa, the power of the erotic is inexistent

without the presence of intimacy and affect. In other words, our sexual subjectivities cannot empower us without the engagement and commitment of intimate and affective relationships to fuel that power.

In addition, the (trance)formations of the characters in these novels are central to the fluidity of their identities and their survival. Although, displacement and translocation allows us to also understand how Dominican black women's identities as marked by "trans" manifests themselves. As Ed Michaels argues, the spiritual and physical dislocation of these women becomes necessary for the continuum of their own subjectivity, but also that of the larger community. They become witnesses, storytellers, and embodied archives that develop an epistemology of survival and agency for themselves. Furthermore, movement translocates our bodies. 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 articulation that takes the violence of colonization and decolonization into account as it moves from one space to another. Its fluidity forces us to challenge essentialist

notions of blackness and latinidad that never fully consider the AfroLatina, and much less, the AfroDominican woman's experience. We must (trans)locate AfroLatina 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 AfroLatina 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 ontological institutions that have dictated who is who, and what is what. With this, we move into offering an AfroLatina feminist theoretical framework that is recognizable and emerges with its own voice from within these "trans" subjectivities and spaces of (trance)formation. Ultimately, the lived experience of violence within these spaces of tension and ambiguity is painful, but at the same time, it liberating.

Chapter 3:

Violent (Trance)formations in Loida Maritza Perez's Geographies of Home

Interlude

Saturday, September 27, 2014, 4:51pm

Been on the road so long, wondering if I'm ever gonna make it back home. Or if I'm ever going to find what "home" was left behind. The pain that home life has continued without you. Almost that feeling of displacement where the world keeps turning and going while you stand outside of it trying to understand and see whatever you can in order to somehow still feel connected to it. You feel a stranger sometimes: disconnected and unknown. You are now strangers to each other looking at simple reflections and remnants of who you think you still are or were. It pains me when I am reminded that my relationship to the people I call family isn't the same. I feel lately my memories erasing and fading away in the distance. Like you're traveling on a boat leaving the shore and the people waving good-bye are becoming smaller and smaller until they are the size of dust on the horizon. And now all you know for sure is whoever else is on the boat with you. They too leave people, family and memories behind. You become someone else on that boat. Or maybe, you become who you really are, all on your own. It's a journey. But when will I make it back

to shore? Back to what I once knew, back to them: my people, my family, my known territory, my memories? Is there ever a return? Will the return be a romanticized idea of what I left behind? How will the real or "new" me be with the "me" they said good-bye to at shore? I don't know. What I do know is my desire for home; for that place of comfort. That place of knowing and being known. The intimacy that is powerful and unexplained. The place of being.

I wrote these words exactly two years after the terrible accident that made me stop to realize how my blackness as an AfroLatina was centered on movement, shifting, and the way that spirit created that movement. In other words, the accident had happened at a moment where I thought I could live life like any other Latina woman. However, in being obligated to sit and reflect and experience loneliness, I realized that the entire time before the accident I just moved and shifted in order for my Latinidad to be read. Not in any way to resist or erase my own blackness, but as a way of protecting myself and surviving in Latino circles. However, at the moment of realizing that very few people were around to support me during my recovery and I no longer wanted to act out my Latinidad as a way of resisting anti-black violence in the Latino community, I instead experienced the violence of loneliness, displacement, and invisibility. The crossing across shores to "become" is a violent process that is filled with moments of loneliness, being misunderstood, and at times invisible. It echoes the crossing that our African ancestors experienced for us to

“become” our subjectivities, or more plainly stated, our humanity. As sons and daughters of the African Diaspora we cross, migrate, and translocate our subjectivities across multiple spaces. Colonization created our subjectivities and in this way, our subjectivities are founded on violence, rupture, and movement.

Furthermore, the ‘trans’ space is the place of being known, knowing, and being. It is not a stagnant place or location it is the process or journey itself. *This* location, or dislocation, as tied to violence need not be a disempowering place. While violence creates dislocation, it also instills movement and the necessity to transform. In this personal journal entry that I share, my spirit wanders and moves, while my body is invoked to write on the anniversary of my awakening self-consciousness to (trance)formation.

In following, this chapter further explores the theory of (trance)formation as a violent process through which self-making within these ruptures creates the possibilities for multiple belongings. AfroDominican writer, Loida Maritza Perez's *Geographies of Home* offers us an understanding of this through the transnational narratives of its characters Aurelia, and her daughters: Rebeca, Marina, and Iliana. The story begins with the youngest daughter Iliana making the decision to leave her upstate New York college after experiencing anti-black racism and her mother's voice filling her in on the issues at home. Literary critic Betsy A. Sandlin argues that, “...mothers metaphorically ‘haunt’ their daughters in an attempt to communicate with them about and despite social systems that threaten their emerging identities”

(91). In this way, Aurelia uses her spiritual abilities that she has inherited from her mother, Bienvenida, to communicate with Iliana. For Sandlin, Aurelia employs “...alternative communication strategies—including silence, ‘madness,’ telepathy, voodoo, and the exorcism of their ghosts—in order to challenge their daughters and to warn them about patriarchal oppression” (91-92). However, Aurelia does not actively foster her spiritual abilities because she fears that it will make her go crazy, like her brother Virgilio, who could not control these abilities and committed suicide. Instead, Aurelia married Papito, whose Seventh Day Adventist faith gives his life the structure to maintain his own subjectivity of Dominican patriarchy and rule over the home. For Aurelia, following her husband’s religion has been an escape from her AfroDominican spiritual inheritance. Her spirituality is something that she decided to break with and leave behind upon leaving her mother’s home in Dominican Republic. Meanwhile, Iliana arrives home to East Brooklyn realizing that the condition her family has been living in continues to be worse than the way she left it. Her sister, Marina, has been raped and is suffering from a mental breakdown, or what can be read as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and her oldest sister Rebeca continues in an abusive relationship with her husband Pasi3n who threatens her and her children with blows.

As the novel unwraps, Iliana’s return home becomes marked by the displacement of others, whether geographical or ontological/existential. In her article, “Gendered Migrations” Jill Toliver Richardson is right in pointing out that

Pérez "... delves into varied interpretations of home and particularly the duality of home as both a safe and threatening space" (3). Readers may concur with Richardson's claim when reading about the state of family members in the home. Marina's disheveled self is confronting her own blackness for the first time and attempts to commit suicide. Meanwhile, Aurelia fights with Rebeca to come home with her children and save themselves from the abusive Pasi3n. Aurelia also internally battles her own subjectivity as an AfroDominican woman who has spiritual abilities she has neglected, however, become useful as she spiritually transfigures and transports herself to murder Pasi3n and finally save Rebeca and her children. Iliana's gender is also displaced since she is frequently read as a drag, manly, or masculine by men on the street, her sister Marina, and her brothers. In the end, Marina suspects her androgynously-read body as being intersexed and rapes her by violently shoving her fist into her sister to try to find out if this is true. While previously, Iliana had planned in coming home for good, after Marina's attack and Papito's accusations of being a whore she goes back to college knowing that her body is central to her understanding of home, and that the location of home is (dis) place. For many academics and literary critics this novel has been important in grasping concepts of home, migration, trauma, displacement, belonging, and cultural identity.

Most scholars in writing about *Geographies of Home* have drawn their attention to the role of spirituality and how violence, latinidad, and the body go

hand in hand. In particular, for literary scholar Susan Méndez, “This novel explores how violence is an integral part of the Afro-Caribbean faith of Aurelia, the mother-figure in the novel, and how the implementation of violence can be a method of agency, as it is for Aurelia when it facilitates the elimination of her abusive son-in-law, Pasión” (105). While Méndez reads violence as a method of agency mediated through Afro-Caribbean spirituality, she also extends her understanding of Afro-Caribbean spirituality as dependent on one’s AfroLatinidad. In other words, she posits that Iliana’s blackness allows her to have an affinity for her mother’s Afro-Caribbean spiritual roots. However, identifying only one of Aurelia’s daughters as AfroLatina is a disservice to the understanding of Dominican blackness. Méndez makes it clear that she works with Iliana’s AfroLatinidad because she is a self-declared black woman, while her sisters Marina and Rebecca are not (105). In many ways, Méndez’s reading of blackness is displaced since it disavows blackness for Rebecca and Marina, while the text itself does identify them as such.²⁰ But the major issue here is in misreading Dominican blackness. While the text illustrates black racial tropes in Rebecca and Marina, they come about in ways that are violent and subtle—in the ways that Dominican discourses of blackness are. For many racially black Dominicans, blackness is a tacit subject—blackness is always and already implied. In his groundbreaking work *Tacit Subjects: Belonging and Same-Sex Desire*

²⁰ Beatriz, one of the younger sisters says of Marina: “No one... would ever consider her attractive. Not with her baboon nose and nigger lips” (Pérez 42). Furthermore, while Rebeca is of light skin, she has textured hair that she “...habitually straightened with a hot comb so that prospective husbands would believe it was naturally that way” (Pérez 214).

Among Dominican Immigrant Men, Carlos Decena uses the idea of the tacit subject to suggest how some gay Dominican men may understand their sexuality. He writes,

In Spanish grammar, the “sujeto tácito” (tacit subject) is the subject that is not spoken but can be ascertained through the conjugation of the verb used in a sentence. For example, instead of saying “I go to school,” in Spanish one might say “Voy a la escuela” without using the Yo (I). Since the conjugation voy (I go) leaves no doubt who is speaking, whoever hears this sentence knows that the subject is built into the action expressed through the verb. Using this grammatical principle as a metaphor to explain how my informants interpret how others view their lives, the sujeto tácito suggests that coming out may sometimes be redundant. In other words, coming out can be a verbal declaration of something that is already understood or assumed — tacit— in an exchange. What is tacit is neither secret nor silent.

Decena argues that homosexuality for many Dominican men on the “down low” is not about coming out of the closet, but challenging the notion of the closet by stating that their homosexuality is already known and implicitly understood. In other words, their sexuality is a “tacit” subject. In this same way, Dominican blackness could also be understood as a tacit subject: “neither secret, nor silent” and as performed, enacted, or weaved into everyday practice.

Furthermore, in grappling with AfroLatinidad, spirituality, and violence Méndez claims that,

Overall, in *Geographies of Home*, Loida Maritza Pérez demonstrates how African diasporan faiths provide agency to AfroLatinas in order to negotiate issues of racial and gender identification and combat violence; however, she also demonstrates the losses when these practices are not passed on to the next generation of AfroLatinas, namely the persistence of troubles in determining racial and gender identity and preventing violence (Méndez 105).

While I can see how this could be true, I wonder at this point if Méndez considers that we have to pay attention at how all this is productive from a (trance)formation process aspect. In other words, how is passing down these spiritual practices stop violence? Is it utopic to believe that the passing down “fixes” things? This is a problematic presumption because it does not take into consideration the process of migration as one that is transformative, transient, and is very much so, about leaving and taking in the process, but also re-making. Méndez reads the use of Afro-Caribbean spirituality as a power that can save and protect—Aurelia can stop Marina from wanting to commit suicide, Aurelia by killing Pasi3n can stop him from further hurting Rebeca and her children. In addition to this she posits that, “The fact that Aurelia does not pass on her spiritual legacy to Iliana can explain this insecurity in racial identity. African diasporan faiths of the Latin Caribbean can connect a practitioner to a strong sense of African heritage, which would secure Iliana’s identity as black” (110). This is also problematic, because it

would mean that one's assumption is that blackness is rooted in Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices. Méndez reads Iliana as a rootless and powerless character because of her lack of "... a fully articulated connection to her ancestral Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices ..." (115). Contrarily, I see Iliana as a character of promise, where violence creates possibilities, agency, and transformation.

In expanding towards this notion of transformation and subjectivity Cynthia Christina Lam's thesis "*Geographies of Home: Remembering the Body in the Construction of Latina Subjectivity*" explores the potential that the body offers in subject formation. Lam "...attend[s] to the ways that the representation of experiences and memories grounded in embodiment advance the potentially transformative power of relationships between bodies to reveal the body not simply as a site of wounding, but also of knowledge, and potential healing" (1).

In exploring the violated body as a potential sight of healing and knowledge Lam maintains that the boundaries of a border subject are never fixed, meaning that Latinas possess a fluid identity, not one of displacement, but one where "...a return to the body works against a perpetual state of homelessness for the Latina subject" (Lam 6). In establishing this argument through her reading of Pérez's novel, Lam argues that the body is a location of belonging for displaced Latina subjectivities. *Geographies of Home* demonstrates how displacement could be addressed through the body to offer characters a space of belonging. However, I push further to

question Lam's homogenous understanding of Latina subjectivity and wonder if her argument actually entails AfroLatina bodies?

In reading *Geographies of Home*, a novel marked by Dominican and Afro-diasporic understandings of blackness, the body is not a place of belonging or homeplace considering that the narrative continuously operates within and without the body—yet always interpolated through the body. Here, I am thinking about the way the body challenges the location of the characters and the way that space, race, performance and embodiment operate. For example, Rebeca's body revealing to her the history of abuse, Iliana continuously being read as transwoman, drag, or sexually androgenous are examples in which the body also displaces these normative "Latina" subjectivities. Lam has argued that the body is central to the representation of experiences that adhere to violence or wounding and as a site of knowledge. However, what knowledges are represented through the experience of AfroLatina characters? Lam's argument has its limits in that it does not explore race, blackness, or more specifically, the black woman's body. *Geographies of Home* is written in a way that it is almost impossible to not engage with race. In what ways may we extend Lam's argument to grapple with black woman's bodies as wounded, but also productive of a particular subjectivity that is continuously in the making? How can we further understand black Latina subjectivity without universalizing the Latina experience and encouraging ourselves to read against the grain?

In her book *The Tears of Hispaniola: Haitian and Dominican Diaspora Memory*, Lucía M. Suárez steps away from universalizing approach of Latina experiences and dedicates her book to Dominican diaspora experiences. Suárez's last chapter on *Geographies of Home* posits:

...although Pérez's novel could represent the gentle musings of a woman's search for home, it instead exposes the invisible...degrees of violence women experience in the family...With this chapter I argue that women have been dually invisible in Dominican and Dominican diaspora memory. The object of violence, and the subject of silence, women's lives are made invisible on at least two levels (153-154).

In exploring how silence and denial contribute to violence toward Dominican women, Suárez focuses on supporting her argument by highlighting the history of the family in *Geographies of Home* as a way of having the past explain the present. More specifically, Suárez draws from the National Archive of Santo Domingo, Joaquín Balaguer's works, and historical narratives to explicate the role of violence, terror, and fear as present in the family history of Pérez's characters. The motif of remembering is key, but the haunting of the past, for Suárez, is central when she asks: "Could the past they refer to actually be the continued violations committed against women that creeps its way into the present precisely because it was not denounced in the past?" (155). Suárez also points out how silence penetrates the novel's characters and plot development. She suggests: "The most developed

characters in Iliana's family—Rebeca, Marina, and Aurelia—embody different forms of denial" (157). Suárez emphasizes that in dealing with denial and silence the Dominican community and its diaspora "... cannot address the pain caused by the denial of history, both national and familial" (157). While I agree with her, it seems that it requires us to also further examine what it means to use silence and denial as a coping mechanism from violence.

In the face of abuse, sexism, instilling terror and violence as a way of protection, Suárez explains Papito's demeanor and claims,

Iliana's character, I suggest, can be examined as a case study in what might happen when one is willing to embark on the long and arduous process of confrontation, examination, and rejection. The resulting rupture, as we will see, demands that the past abuses and repression be recognized for what they are and not excused for any reason (161).

While I also agree with Suárez here, it would be limiting to not further examine this rupture as a continuous element of diaspora and migration. Rupture is also violent and it is a part of transformation and self-making. For Iliana initiating rupture from her family and her father's faith, this is also a way of breaking away from the violent spirit. It is a battle of confronting the violence of Western spirituality, which as Suárez later points out has also had a history for oppressing women's subjectivity and agency—from their minds to their bodies and supporting misogyny and patriarchy.

While Suárez critiques the violent and oppressing structure of Papito's Seventh-Day Adventist religion, there seems to be a narrow insight for how she reads Afro-Caribbean spiritualities. She seems to ignore them altogether. At the beginning of the novel when Iliana hears her mother's voice, Suárez does not read this as *espiritismo*, an Afro-Caribbean spiritual method of communication, but instead as "haunting" and "ghostly" voices. Furthermore, in her reading of Aurelia's transfiguration to kill Pasi3n she calls it "brujería, witchcraft" (170).²¹ In doing this, is Suárez not also contributing to the silence of Afro-Caribbean spiritualities? Mis-reading this as "witchcraft" in many ways echoes a kind of policing for which spiritualities are readable, recognizable, or acceptable and those that are simply Western or Christian as more socially acceptable. Not only does her use of this vocabulary invoke policing and "witch-hunt" surveillance, but also has echoes of white supremacist language that deserves some reconsideration.

While Suárez attempts to rectify the silence and denial that operates in Dominican socio-political history and its haunting abilities into social life, in these ways, she also contributes to that silence by mis-reading. Moreover, her complicity in silence and denial is further established by not engaging with Marina's rape—yet again this chapter, she signifies, is supposed to address violence against Dominican

²¹ In her book *Witchcraft and Welfare: Spiritual Capital and the Business of Magic in Modern Puerto Rico*, Raquel Romberg describes *espiritismo* as a "...form of spiritual connection with the transcendental world that would be outside the church...but rather tended to be framed as a 'scientifically' based form of spirit communication" (59). She states that "*Espiritismo* refers to the belief in spirits as encoded by the French scientist and man of letters Allan Kardec" (ix).

women. Does Suárez avoid this dialogue in her chapter because it is too complicated or painful? What is it about the violence of rape and black spiritualities experienced across the African Diaspora that Suárez seems to avoid? In ignoring how violence is intertwined in the black Caribbean, Suárez's argument falls flat in fully exposing the degrees of violence against women and their contribution to diasporic memory making. It is almost impossible to successfully address violence through silence and denial in "Haitian and Dominican diaspora memory" without taking into consideration the transculturation of Afro-Caribbean spiritualities in Hispaniola.

Although it seems that this literature review may be in contention with other literary scholars' take on *Geographies of Home*, my intention is not to completely dismiss the work that has focused on Pérez's novel. My intention is to point out the lack of a critique that pays close attention to black womanhood and the way that transnational migration and spirituality play a central role to the transformation, or in my view, (trance)formation, of AfroLatina subjectivities. Besides, if we consider the embodied archive a representation of the experiences of transnational black Dominican women, we must acknowledge the way in which that archive re-conceptualizes knowledge production and self-making in the face of violence. Pérez's novel deserves a closer look. In this chapter I argue that Perez's novel allows us to see these violent (trance)formations as vehicles for creating new paths and possibilities of multiple belongings. In other words, this chapter offers violent

(trance)formations as central to the process of self-making and the trans subjectivities of AfroLatina women.

The characters in Perez's novel question the way in which "home" forms their own identities and attempt to challenge the politics of it. "Home" is not a stable place nor is it exactly tangible—it is a space characterized by the circularity of time and the changes that the people connected to it undergo. However, as my analysis will show the process of (trance)formation experienced by Aurelia, Iliana, Marina, and Rebeca makes these embodied archives transgress the imaginary space of "home". Nonetheless, in a shared geographical place where these characters are (trance)forming and drawing from their own embodied memories what happens when these bodies or archives clash? More specifically, how do we read the violent encounters between the different embodied archives that each of these women possess?

A Theoretical Understanding of Violence in (Trance)forming AfroLatinidad

In answering these questions, first, it is important to understand how violence is embedded in (trance)formation theoretically. (Trance)formation is a process that can be violent. Transformations, as we know, are processes that lead from one phase or state of being into another. However, the word always hints at the importance of the process. As Afro-diasporic subjects we cannot expect change without rupture, disjunctures, and breaks. Within these ruptures, or "in the break" we find a sense of freedom or life. The policing and surveillance of black bodies has

been central to black subject formation. Stepping out or resisting spaces of surveillance and policing means to create rupture or fugitive movement. As Fred Moten describes in his article, “The Case of Blackness”. He states:

What’s at stake is fugitive movement in and out of the frame, bar, or whatever externally imposed social logic—a movement of escape, the stealth of the stolen that can be said, since it inheres in every closed circle, *to break* every enclosure.²² This fugitive movement is stolen life, and its relation to law is reducible neither to simple interdiction nor bare transgression. Part of what can be attained in this zone of unattainability, to which the eminently attainable ones that have been relegated, which they occupy but cannot (and refuse to) own, is some sense of the fugitive law of movement that makes black social life ungovernable, that demands a para-ontological disruption of the supposed connection between explanation and resistance (179).

Moten’s explanation allows us to think how the violence of surveillance and policing of black bodies has been institutionalized. To push this further, the zone of “unattainability” is a zone of subject formation, however, the window of agency may be minimal. Regardless, Moten seems to argue that this zone of unattainability or institutions of oppression—if one wants to think about it this way—are needed in order to have the rupture or break. To escape the “zone of unattainability” is to

²² My own emphasis.

transform and transcend barriers that attempt to define us. In other words, this “fugitive movement” transgresses and transcends into a liminal space of liberation and true subject-making.

I use this reading of Moten to further contextualize (trance)formation as definitive of that break or “fugitive movement” that occurs as a result of the violence from occupying matrices of oppression. (Trance)formation as a process is a movement resistant to an oppressing social logic in place that attempts to define AfroLatina womanhood. The social logic of Latinidad and blackness in a U.S context becomes a fake space of belonging where AfroLatinos must either play up their “Latinidad” or assimilate into an African American identity to be seen or have a readable subjectivity. If Latinidad is based on popular cultural notions of being Catholic, Spanish-speaking, and possessing mestizo or European physical attributes, Blackness is rigidly read as always and only African-American. In other words, the mold of Latinidad and Blackness in the U.S. is composed of violent social logics that not allow the coexistence of blackness and Latinidad. The structure of white supremacy operates in these overlaying webs of repressive identity politics. Moreover, it works to sever the relationships between Latinos and African Americans by placing value on the proximity to whiteness.

In turn, I see AfroLatinidad as mostly understood through the excess of Latinidad and Blackness. In many ways misunderstood—too “black” to be Latino and too “Latino” to be black. In October, I went to an AfroLatinas brunch networking

event in New York City where I exchanged conversations with other professional AfroLatina women. Around the table as we broke bread they shared how other Latinos would ask them to “prove” their Latinidad by speaking Spanish, or an impromptu Latino pop culture trivia. They were doubted, and having to prove their allegiances to their Latin American or Hispanic Caribbean heritage—there was no way they could be Latinas, unless they hyper-exposed their readable Latinidad—speak fluent Spanish, know the latest Latino popstar gossip, or perform stereotypical images of Latina women. In addition to this, they also shared that while they felt “safer” or could fit in more easily within African American circles, the moment they exposed their Latino heritage, the conversation would shift into being one of skepticism as if they could no longer be one of them—they became black “others”, or non-black. For many of us it was the first time being in a space where we did not need to explain or prove ourselves. Instead it was a beautifully heartfelt embrace where we could remove those things that made us visible to others and could finally be seen in plain sight. No extra signifiers needed. We shared the ways our AfroLatina womanhood was hypervisible, yet in the same ways invisible and unrecognizable. Your recognition was based on putting on an extra signifier of Latinidad or African Americanness to establish a sense of being. In short, our blackness is grounded in *décalage*.

Brent Hayes Edwards provides an Afro-diasporic meaning of *décalage* in his essay, “The Uses of Diaspora” which could be understood as the unbecoming of

essentialist black notions or returning to an imbalance state of subjectivity. He writes: “Décalage indicates the reestablishment of a prior unevenness or diversity; it alludes to the taking away of something that was added in the first place, something artificial, a stone or piece of wood that served to fill some gap or to rectify some imbalance” (65). The moment that AfroLatina women resist invisibility by performing readable Latinidad and blackness, they are using the wedge to fill the gap of invisibility. The wedge is an assimilation strategy that rectifies invisibility, but only through something added, “something artificial”. The gap is a space of multiple possibilities, fluidity, and transientness. In this way, AfroLatino subjectivity flows through the empty spaces. The gap, as Edwards describes is also an imbalance—the imbalance of not being one, but not quite the other. “Rectifying” this imbalance means that AfroLatinidad must be corrected, surveiled, to fit in and be in balance. Incomprehensible subjectivities must be controlled and translated. Further thinking through this, we then understand that the social logic of Latinidad and Blackness, as we know it, does not account or consider the disjointedness of the African Diaspora. There is simply no space or location. In this sense, I read rupture and disjuncture as central to the African diaspora for approaching a (dis)location or break in which we can understand AfroLatinidad and more specifically, narratives of transnational AfroDominican womanhood as fluid and continuously in the making—“trans” subjectivities.

These “trans” subjectivities allow us to make connections with the use of diaspora, then how do we place transformation within migration? Transformation results in a new place of being, a location or geography for a new place of self-making. In this sense (trance)formation is a process that also engages with the violence of spirit and self-making. The ruptures, disjunctures, and breaking points are located in moments of continuous displacement. In other words, the spiritual characteristics present in the fluid liminal space of transnationalism establish a trance-like element within self-making. AfroLatinidad is an identity in trance, in transformation, in trans(it), and transient—continuously. However, while this may seem abstract, the materiality of the body allows us to understand that the aesthetics of (trance)formation are of a violent and traumatic process that creates possibilities of multiple belongings. In this way, my reading of Loida Maritza Pérez’s *Geographies of Home* first analyzes the narrative’s discourse of embodied archives through remembering and reminding. Second, the violent roles of Spirit in (trance)formation for the sake of survival and finally, how violence can be an essential part of the (trance)formation of AfroLatina womanhood as central to becoming and black self-making.

Violent (Trance)formations of AfroDominican Womanhood

The narrative discourse in *Geographies of Home* provides a framework for character development through their memories. More specifically, the narrative in the novel moves forward by seemingly also moving backwards through the

character's histories. Moreover, Pérez employs this technique by invoking their memories through their bodies. Specifically, their bodies hold these memories and it is through them that the memories come to life. These embodied archives reveal who these characters were, are, and will be through the, sometimes violent, echoes of remembering.

In the opening scenes when Iliana is first introduced, the narrative offers us a memory through sounds. Iliana's conflict with going home resonates when she is waiting for her friend Ed to take her to the bus station. She confronts him and he begins to respond with an "Ay mujer!" At the interpretation of these words Iliana's sense of listening takes her into a violent memory when she confronted her father as a child, "...how they reminded her of her father's 'Mira muchacha!' As clearly as if it had occurred the previous day, she recalled one of the few times she had stood up to Papito" (Pérez 7). Her body begins to conjure up the memory of how as a young girl telling her father that the strawberry soap he had purchased for her mother actually smelled like cinnamon. Consistently stating and "correcting" her father over and over again that it smelled like cinnamon, "...her father's calloused hand had slapped her face" and just like that it was bestowed on her that Papito must never be questioned (7). Iliana's disagreement challenges the Dominican patriarchy of her home. Her deviant behavior is policed through violence at an early age. Not only does her body remember based on sound, but it also invokes smells that take her back to that moment of confrontation. Her conflicted decision in going back home

reminds her that being home means following the politics of home where she is stripped of her agency and stripped from listening to how her body interprets sounds, smells, and even pain.

Revealing the characters' memories through the narrative allows the reader to understand their context and positionality. In other words, memory establishes one's location. Geography is a location—this is to say that memories are central to how we understand the many translocations of “home” for the characters explored in this novel. Translocation 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.)...from whence these subjects speak and assert their agency” (Lao-Montes 13-14). In other words, Iliana's embodied memories and their revelation through the narrative establish a location from which she speaks and moves. Furthermore, geography is a location that is mediated through the body (race, gender performance, sexuality, class). These memories that are embodied are placing a loci through which we can interpret how these characters understand “home” and the politics of it. The act of remembering is a mental transportation and transcendence into a memory in action. It means that when we remember we re-locate ourselves spiritually back into a specific moment in the past time through feeling, smelling, or seeing something or someone that reminds us or connotes that memory.

Sighting through the body is a way of invoking those memories. Embodied memories come into sight through references that surround us, or “sightations”.²³ Those archival references, or “sightations” are part of how remembering is embodied. As M. Jacqui Alexander highlights, “So much of how we remember is embodied: the scent of home; of fresh-baked bread; of newly grated coconut stewed with spice, nutmeg, and bay leaf from the tree” (277). In this case, it is important to highlight the *how* of remembering through scent and sight. In the novel, when Marina lights fire to a wall in the kitchen believing she has seen dark evil spiders invading the home, Aurelia’s sight of the fire incites the memory of when they had just moved into the house:

... she had recalled the dust thick in the air when they’d first moved in; the impenetrable darkness caused by boarded windows and relieved only by flickering candles; the distinct and unforgettable sound of rats scurrying inches from where she’d slept. It was these memories, more than the possibility of being burned alive, which had sparked her terror”(Pérez 22).

What is it for the characters to remember? Here, the “sightation” of the fire reminds Aurelia of the poverty in which they lived in upon moving into the house. It is the fear of losing what they have worked so hard for and the terror of poverty striking

²³ Here I am playing on the word “citation” as a point of reference to a larger body of work, so I use “sightation” to visual marker that makes reference to a more detailed memory.

again. The sight of the house on fire reminds Aurelia that they are so easily vulnerable to conditions of poverty. It is a reminder that the house has potential for becoming merely a shelter. Furthermore, the placement of this memory in the novel allows the reader early on to understand Aurelia's positionality or location. Her memory of their previous condition of poverty locates her in a vulnerable, fearful, frigid space that seems to just barely be keeping a home afloat.

While Aurelia's "sightations" locate her fear and terror of poverty, her body also remembers through sight, smell, sound, or touch, which transport her into the space of a memory. One morning after making hot chocolate for Papito, she realizes how she misses the ritual of making coffee with her mother (23). In being open to remembering her mother, Aurelia is inspired to tap further and further into her distant past, which comes to her through the body's reactions:

She might be in the middle of a conversation or in church listening to a sermon when she would suddenly recall an event, words spoken, even a scent, a flavor, a texture—each evoked as if she were experiencing it at the moment. It was as if, after years of setting aside memories, the pile had grown too high and had tumbled, obliging her to take an inventory of her life. As she delved into the past she was conscious of something missing in the present—something her mother had possessed and passed along to her but which she had misplaced and failed to pass on to her own children...And she was

determined to discover what had caused the loss and to figure out how she had brought herself to the present moment so that she might guide herself into the future (Pérez 23).

Through her embodied memory Aurelia is forced to revisit those moments that piled up too high to continue ignoring. Aurelia's embodied archive pushes her to reassess her current location or geography in terms of her subjectivity. She understands that her current location is not a final destination. In other words, she is still in the process of self-making. Her body further creates the knowledge that something is missing, or more specifically, has been lost. As readers we know that Aurelia intentionally no longer wanted to partake in the Afro-Caribbean spiritual inheritance her mother bestowed on to her—the gift of spiritual visibility and communication. Aurelia is reminded of the knowledge or epistemology her mother has left her with. Her embodied archive reveals the loss of the epistemology, or knowledge production and the necessity for retaking it. This small, yet significant, moment in the novel creates a shift in how Aurelia thinks of herself. She begins to question her existence in the present moment and wondering how the future of her own becoming will look if she does not challenge herself to discover what caused the loss of such ancestral gift. The narrative function of memory provides character development, context, and a history for the reader.

In that same vein, these embodied archives do not stand alone. In the novel there are moments when embodied archives clash and force others to engage with

unaddressed violence, trauma, and displacement. Everyone carries their own embodied archive. But what happens when the way one person remembers clashes with another's memories? In what ways does reminding or bringing up memories in order to force others into your own space of memory recreate violence and trauma, or calls others to confront it with you? The clashing of embodied archives recreates a situational knowledge that interrupts the narrative of forgetfulness. While forgetting can be intentional, "At times, forgetting stands in for never having known or never having learned something, the difference between staying in tune with the source of our own wisdom and relying on borrowed substitutes, fleetingly fulfilling" (Alexander 276). Forgetting could be a way of coping with violence and trauma. However, it could also be a violent way of instilling silence, invisibility, and lack of recognition, or erasure. As Alexander posits here, forgetting also means substituting made up elements to stand in for what actually took place.

The practice of being reminded (through the body) in *Geographies of Home* is also essential to its narrative discourse. For example, in combating silence, Marina tries to remind her family of her rape consistently although her family is dismissive and blames it simply on her mental condition. Marina recognizes the evasive silence and intentional amnesia her family takes up to avoid talking about her rape and instead simply believing Marina is experiencing a mental disability. In this sense, the silence for "such a memory of violence and violation begets a will to forget, to forget the innards of that violation" (Alexander 277). Marina's interruptions and

disturbances resist forgetting and silence. She uses her own embodied archive to confront her family of her sexual violence. She wishes for them to break the silence and recognize what has happened to her. In chapter four, she confronts her mother, Aurelia, by showing her vagina, parting it and then holding her fingers up to her mother's face exclaiming: "'Tell me! What the fuck is this?' ...Breathing heavily, she approached Aurelia. 'You can't say anything, can you?' ... 'Not even, I'm sorry this has happened?'" (Pérez 31). In showing her vagina and hands to her mother and the other sisters in the room, Marina attempts to signal at the site of violation and remind her mother (most of all) of her violated body. However, this "sightation" does not serve as a recognized reference for her mother. Marina seems to quickly realize that even her visual bodily reference will not bring out the recognition she is looking for.

In lieu of the bodily "sightation" Marina's "...memory acts in the service of redress rather than an inventory of memory" (Hartman 73). Following Aurelia's silence and sisters' disgust at the vulgarity, she responds: "'So I'm supposed to feel sorry for you, the great self-sacrificing mother who left me in the Dominican Republic when you came here?'" (Pérez 32). At this challenging question Marina forces Aurelia to remember what she may already have forgotten:

... the February day when not only Marina but also Beatriz and Gabriel arrived in New York wearing wispy cotton clothes and too-tight shoes, their arms hanging thin from sleeves, their feet wrinkled, their

toenails a fungus-green because they'd been made to pail water from her sister's repeatedly flooded yard...She also remembers the parasites... in their intestines...and her guilty, angry pain...her sister...had housed all three children in a chicken coop and barely clothed or fed them (Pérez 32).

Aurelia has silenced guilt—guilt that she has purposefully forgotten and instead attempts to smooth the edges of family tensions and remake fond memories. Aurelia forgets in order to not deal with her complicity in the neglect of Marina's needs. For Marina reminding her mother of the ways that she contributes to the violence done to her is not something Aurelia wants to be recognized as being a part of. However,

Marina consistently is willing to bring out and remind others of what their memories are. Yet these memories are silenced. Another example of this is when Marina almost burns the house down and she warns her family that many of them will burn in hell to her brother Gabriel she yells: “‘You’re the worst of them! Fucking your brother’s wife and pretending to be devout!’... ‘You think I don’t know the shit all of you have done? I can recount your sins one by one and tell them to your face!’” (Pérez 15). Marina threatens to bring out the memories that have been forgotten. She is the embodied archive that serves to remind, reveal, and resist forgetting and sweeping under the rug.

The embodied archive resists forgetting and is used to provide insight and depth for understanding the characters and developing the narrative. The embodied

archive also clashes with what one might choose to remember or how one chooses to remember. Particularly, one of the most complex characters, Rebecca, experiences domestic violence in her marriage to Pasi3n. Throughout her marriage Rebecca has tried to keep silent about the abuse, but her body speaks in contradiction to what she claims the narrative to be. As she reminisces about her troubled relationship with Pasi3n, Rebecca looks at herself in the mirror and is confronted with the memories her body tells: "...the diffusion of terror and the violence perpetrated under the rubric of pleasure, paternalism, and property" that Pasi3n had her under (Hartman 4). Through her broken body she is reminded of his physical abuse—the twisting of arms, the breaking of fingers—as she looks in the mirror (171). She also realizes how sustaining such violence for so long had withered her body and broken it: "So many years of waiting and all she had to show for them was her battered face, her bruised body whose flesh daily sagged further from her repeatedly broken bones, and three children whom Pasi3n should have provided for better than he had done for her" (P3rez 171). In closely examining this scene, the relationship between the body and memory is crucial for understanding the dangers of ignoring the embodied archive. While Rebecca is in an abusive relationship, she ignores her body and continues to wait believing that a miracle will happen and Pasi3n will change.

The embodied archive that Rebecca carries reminds her of the abuse and challenges her beliefs. The archive clashes with what Rebecca chooses to believe

and chooses to forget: the material reality of her situation. To put it another way, Rebecca's confrontation with her own embodied archive offers the violated, ravished body as a site of remembrance. Just as Sadiya Hartman argues, this may be a form of redressing the pained body: "The remembering of the violated body must be considered in relation to the dis-membered body.... This re-membering takes the form of attending to the body as a site of pleasure, eros, and sociality and articulating its violated condition" (77). Rebecca looks at herself in the mirror and remembers the violence and confronting her own predisposed thoughts that waited for the miracle to happen. In re-membering her body and what it reveals also monumentalizes it. It is a memorialization of that which could no longer be ignored—the body as a witness takes the stand against Rebecca and testifies against her. In resisting "forgetting", Rebecca's body moves her to confront the reality and immediately after she decides to take her children and abandon the home. While the body may be ignored, the embodied archive clashes with the discursive narrative and challenges how one remembers and how one forgets.

While the embodied archive in the novel operates to move the narrative forward and provides character development, it also functions as the central space for the violent process of (trance)formation to take place. (Trance)formation as a violent process produces the possibility for multiple belongings. Moreover, it invokes spirit to generate self-making and new understandings of the black embodied archive. *Geographies of Home* explores the way that sexual violence and

narratives of black womanhood in a transnational Dominican family can explore new ways of belonging and thinking through “trans” subjectivities. We see this in both Marina and Iliana’s experience with sexual violence and the role of spirituality or trance/trans in the process of (trance)formation.

Marina's rape, while many readers may believe is an “imagined” rape, is clearly stated in the beginning of the text. However, the way that it is placed in the text echoes the non-chalantness and passiveness of such sexual violence. Pérez works out the silences of sexual violence through the narrative artistically implementing doubt into the readers’ mind. For example, throughout the novel the reader encounters news about the rape happening in the beginning when her sister Iliana is being informed through her mother’s spiritual voice, when Marina falls into a trance-like state and re-lives being raped, and when she is remembering having bite marks on her breasts after the rape.²⁴ Outside of the spiritual voice and Marina’s character development, sexual violence is disavowed and understood as imagined. More specifically the way that other characters think about Marina’s mentally-unstable condition would make the reader doubt her rape, or even the cause for her mental instability. Since it is only mentioned once in the text with such ease and little attention, readers may be led to believe that Marina imagines being raped. Nonetheless, she demonstrates the very symptoms that many women

²⁴ “Remembering the teeth marks that had lingered on her breasts after she was raped, Marina shamefully slid under the bedcovers” (Pérez 119).

experience as a result of rape, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

According to the National Center for PTSD, one of the common symptoms of PTSD that Marina experiences is reliving the event through flashback.²⁵

Her experience with rape and the silence that surrounds it allows for sexual trauma to become manifest through trance as she is raped over and over again by reliving her rape. More specifically, in the beginning of the novel, a spiritual mounting presented as the man who raped her appears: “Now there it stood: the embodiment of her worst fears: she had known it arrive. But not so soon, not for her, not as the man who'd raped her. She recognized the shape of his body and his stench—an odor of rotting greens she had been incapable of forgetting” (Perez 16).

Again, her embodied archive recognizes the experience or memory through scent and the trance of violence begins. The violent trance recreates the scene of sexual violence. Here, her rape is a violation of body and spirit that haunts her. The recreation of this rape is described as one where a black male spirit rapes her. The spirit possesses, intervenes, and penetrates her foundation. Pérez writes, “...he yelled, tightening his mount and jamming into her so that it felt as if he would exit through her mouth...Her pain was so intense that she expected her body would release its soul” (17). The trance of rape is violent, but also instills the process of a new sense of self-making and transformation.

²⁵ For more specific symptoms of PTSD see the National Center for PTSD website http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/PTSD-overview/basics/symptoms_of_ptsd.asp

The spirit enters her and takes over her stripping away her "virginity" or the innocence she believes would protect her from such things and, along with that, her self-imposed blinders to her own blackness. It removes the filter separating her from being connected to her own flesh—her black body. Marina's anti-blackness becomes embedded with her experience of being raped by a black male astrologer. In reliving her rape through trance Marina's re-imagination is fueled by her hate for blackness: "Unable to see his face, she detailed it from memory so as to draw courage from her hate" (Pérez 17). For her, "No flat-nosed, wide-lipped nigger would claim her soul. No savage with beads dangling from his neck. She would survive all this. There was nothing to lose. Nothing else to fear" (Pérez 17). Marina had always been the only daughter to be the "obedient" daughter who stayed at home and followed Papito's religion and Aurelia's rules. "Her chores were done when asked, and she willingly attended church on Saturday mornings and afternoons, even on Wednesday and Friday evenings when Papito allowed those of his children claiming exhaustion to remain at home" (Pérez 42). Marina was the quintessential Dominican woman who respects and upholds patriarchy, Christianity, and whiteness.

However, in doubting her faith and looking for an alternative view on life's journey, Marina steps out and challenges the social logic of hegemonic Dominican cultural identity and "moves fugitively" by visiting this black male astrologer. The rupture away from Papito's, or God's path has violent results for Marina in being

raped by a black man. Marina's hate for all things black are conflated with evil and darkness. Hence, after her hallucinating episode that dark black spiders are taking over the house and her lighting them on fire, she retreats to her dark space of the basement where she relives the rape scene through trance. While following the Seventh-Day Adventist doctrine and in the footsteps of attaining whiteness, the rape and rupture of sexual violence brings Marina to confront her relationship with her body, sexuality, and her blackness. The violent act of rape seems to castigate Marina and pushes her into a zone of mental instability causing her to suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. However, in this zone of liminality Marina is forced to explore her troubling relationship with her blackness, body, and sexuality. Furthermore, it pushes her spiritually to experience the embrace and light of spirit despite the Seventh-Day Adventist tradition that does not believe in spirit possession or trance.

Papito's religion requires the body or the flesh to be ignored. Instead, it is one's spirit and soul that matters. However, in being raped Marina believes that while her body may have been "snatched," her soul would remain intact. She believes that her body "...did not consist of who she was" (Pérez 18). Marina's raped body causes her to question the relationship between her body and spirit. More specifically, Marina begins to pay attention to the blackness of her body. While looking at herself in the mirror she notices the bruises and cuts and the achiness of her body further corroborating the rape. Additionally,

The longer she watched herself the more repulsed she became. Before, she had been able to manipulate her reflection so as to see only her pale skin shades lighter than any of her sisters' and only slightly darker than Gabriel's wife. That skin color had blinded her to her kinky, dirt-red hair, her sprawling nose, her wide, long lips. Now those features appeared magnified, conveying to her eyes that she was not who she'd believed (Pérez 18).

Here, Marina's revelation to her own blackness means that her place of belonging is being altered. As Frantz Fanon would argue, Marina experiences what finally, seems to be for her, the fact of blackness, or, as Juan Flores and Miriam Jiménez-Román posit, the "Fact of Afro-Latinidad".²⁶ In other words, the violence of rape allows her to (trance)form into a different subject in the making. She confronts her blackness and attempts to get rid of it:

Filled with self-loathing...Determined to rid herself of the odor and to reclaim her defiled body, she reached soapy fingers into the folds between her legs. Wincing, she worked the lather into her inner walls...She meticulously scoured herself with Brillo, lingering behind her knees, under her arms, in the inside of her elbows. When her skin blistered and she could stand the pain no more, she stepped from the stall and sprayed herself with Lysol (Pérez 18-19).

²⁶ Jiménez-Román and Flores. *The Afro-Latin@ Reader*. "Introduction", p. 14.

Here, it is as if Marina is trying to undo the violence and blackness of her body by “reclaiming” it through this violent “cleanse”. However, after the cleanse, she seems more connected to her flesh as she walks the snowy Brooklyn streets with nothing but her naked body covered with a coat and some sandals: “Her feet sunk into the snow...For the moment she was alive and free and could breathe with ease, walk to where she pleased, sing her praises to the night” (Pérez 84). Only after beginning to confront her blackness, does Marina seem to be able to attend to her body in ways that she never could or would before. She begins to access memories of freedom and agency through her violated body.

In confronting the fact of blackness through sexual violence Marina is able to tap into her own sense of feeling or sentience. Sadiya Hartman’s comments on the violated body and its liberation through violence can be used to further understand Marina’s “trans” subjectivity. She writes, “If, on one hand, pain extends humanity to the dispossessed and the ability to sustain suffering leads to transcendence, on the other, the spectral and spectacular character of this suffering, or, in other words, the shocking and ghostly presence of pain, effaces and restricts black sentience” (Hartman 20). Marina’s history as a dispossessed woman who experiences sexual violence brings her into a traumatic fluid space that allows for liberation and possession of her own subjectivity through trance. However, as problematic as Hartman points out, her trauma and her family’s silence around rape push her farther into her mental instability. Through this mental instability she explores new

ways of being, but the spectrality and performance of her “craziness” as seen by others strips her again from a recognized humanity. While her trauma allows her to explore other possibilities of belonging and being, its external manifestation further blinds her family of seeing her further proliferating the violence of invisibility. Her “craziness” is just for attention as her sister-in-law Laurie points out.²⁷

On her train ride, as other passengers smell the stench that oozes from Marina’s pores she begins to feel self-conscious of her body and her unforgiving blackness. Pérez writes, “The knowledge gathered from the eyes of others had carved a path into her brain to become a part of her very being, unreconcilable as the color of her skin and the texture of her hair” (Pérez 87). Through the knowledge she gathers from the staring gazes of those around her, Marina begins to understand that the relationship between her body and her self are not compromised. It is the judgmental gaze of others that remind Marina of her blackness. Going back to Fanon and his work *Black Skin, White Masks* we gather how the phenomenology of the black body is warranted by the gaze of the white other. Fanon writes: “At certain moments the black man is locked in his body. And yet, ‘for a being who has acquired the consciousness of self and body, who has achieved the dialectic of subject and object, the body is no longer a cause of the structure of consciousness; it has become an object of consciousness’” (200).²⁸ Marina becomes conscious of her own body

²⁷ “Look at her. She’s not crazy. She’s faking it for attention” (Pérez 15).

²⁸ Here Fanon engages and quotes Merleau-Ponty’s *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p. 277.

through the perspective of others. It is an object of consciousness meaning that the division she previously had in manipulating it to fit what she perceived subjectivity to be (white, feminine) is no longer there. Marina embodies the fluidity of that division which is now blurred. Her “trans” subjectivity rests on the blurred relationship between what she wants to be and what she really is. As much as she may have wanted to run away from her black body, it only further reveals the endless possibilities of being.

As Marina begins to recognize this, her body—as Fanon would argue—makes her a woman who questions.²⁹ For example, during her time in the subway train Marina begins to reminisce and remember her time in the attorney’s office she worked in years ago. She remembers her courage fueled by her body questioning “...the clammy hand slithering up her thigh” (Pérez 97). When one of the attorneys attempts to grope her, she stops him and signals that he is not allowed to do that until he has agreed to marry her. In her attempt to “own her body” and confront sexual harassment, this man punishes Marina by giving her the impossible task of making hundreds of copies that she must hand-staple and organize. She resists and pushes back by lighting fire to the piles of paper. In her invocation of this memory, “She was free...free of the conventions which had kept her wobbling on a tightrope for fear of plummeting into the abyss she now reached in the quickest blink of an eye...Intoxicated by her newfound freedom, Marina began to laugh” (Pérez 98).

²⁹ Fanon writes, “O, my body always makes me a man who questions!” (206).

Through remembering her challenging and questioning of sexual harassment, Marina understands the freedom that the performance of “crazy” grants her.

Marina’s trance within the memory reminds her: “She had taken for granted that her future would rise from ashes to reward her with new possibilities of existence even as her boss fired her on the spot” (Pérez 98). Here in the midst of Marina’s “crazy” outburst in resistance to sexual harassment she finds joy and freedom. In her vulnerability Marina finds an alternative way of being and self-making.

The dispossession that Marina confronts allows the Sacred dimension of self to explore a different way of feeling the spirit. In her moment of spirit possession in the church, Marina claims that she has seen God’s face. In disbelief of this and believing that this trance-like episode was a work of Satan, the congregation demands that she leaves the church. As she walks home, her body comes out of the ecstasy and Marina is quickly struck with the oppressive memory of the congregation’s doubt (112). In this, Marina’s impulse towards violence grows as she begins to doubt God and consider “...how God had introduced violence into the world by demanding sacrifices from those who had previously not conceived of shedding blood, the more she questioned His wisdom in other things” (113). Marina then begins to see power in herself and what she could offer God instead. So much power, that Marina seems to take ownership of her own life. The violence of spirit

that Marina has been meditating on relieves her to the freedom of having power over her own body.

Marina lives in the space of liminality and while this is a liberating space, it is also a space where the lines between life and death are blurred. We see this when Marina after her trance-like moment in the church goes home to try and commit suicide. Suicide is her way of re-claiming her body, power, agency, and control. The power she sees in her self manifests in the ownership of her body and seeking ways in which her body can feel violence to tap into a different space of being—a spiritually transcending space where she can tell God what to do. Marina sets out to correct or redress the disbursement of power through the body.

In preparing her self for departure from this world Marina drinks water from a wine glass and thinks about biting the thin glass “...to sink her teeth in, snap a piece off, feel it slice into her tongue as her lips simultaneously pressed against the jagged edges, turning the water truly red” (Pérez 118). This violent thought of self-inflicting pain reflects Marina’s crave for feeling her body—to be connected to her flesh. Here, “Redressing the pained body encompasses operating in and against the demands of the system, negotiating the disciplinary harnessing of the body, and counter-investing in the body as a site of possibility” (Hartman 51). The spirit of violence creates the space for “feeling the pained body”, since all these years her father’s religion only allowed her to simply be a tenant of her body, but not an

owner. Now she craves to no longer be distant or disowned from it; she craves to be in the flesh, to feel the flesh—violently.

Her counter-investment in her body through her suicide attempt creates another way of belonging and subject-making. In other words, it is her taking away from the life of the body that gives a different life to her subjectivity. For Marina to understand the endless possibilities her body offers she has to tap into the violence of spirit to feel the black body she possesses. Suicide will take her to a different world. One where as Fanon suggests, “In the world I am heading for, I am endlessly creating myself” (204). The violent process of (trance)formation takes Marina through a journey of discovering that black self-making is continuously in the process. As she lays naked on her bed waiting to feel the effects after taking several pills: “Electrical currents darted through her body, sending tremors along her limbs. Her spirit gathered itself into her heart. Simultaneously, her heart lurched violently. Yet she felt no pain. Rather, she had the sensation that her spirit had burst free through an open wound to soar higher than the angel she had formed against the snow” (Pérez 120). Marina’s suicide attempt does not create more pain as she probably assumes that it will. Through the attempted killing of her black body Marina frees her spirit. In the liminality between life and death the body serves as a medium through which her spirit and life force is recreated in freedom. In other words, while it does not liberate Marina it is essential for the liberation of spirit to happen. The access to the inmateriality of a subjectivity available through

transcendence and (trance)formation is dependent on the materiality of the body. The violence of death produces the liberty into a fluid space where “trans” subjectivities can operate more freely. In the end, Marina’s suicide attempt is not successful in acquiring death, but it successfully allows Marina to imagine herself differently.

(Trance)formation creates multiple possibilities of belonging even in a narrative that is grounded in displacement. The sexual violence that Marina’s sister, Iliana, experiences is because of her contradictory embodiment of womanhood. More specifically, Iliana’s feminine embodiment and performance is that of an AfroLatina transgender woman. In the beginning of the novel Iliana is a young, racially-black Dominican woman away at college who is experiencing racial discrimination. She goes home looking for a place of belonging, but is met with the sexual and gender violence that some of her family members subject her to. Although Iliana has a spiritual connection with her mother, she has an antagonistic relationship with her sister Marina. Iliana has been dealing and embracing her blackness, she does not follow the rules of patriarchal womanhood, she does not perform the essentialist notions of Dominican womanhood that require her to not go to college, always have a chaperone around men, and to tend to household chores and men instead. In these ways, Iliana is everything Marina is not, which can explain why she holds her in contempt and violates her body by seeking difference in it. Nearing the end of the novel, Marina mistakes Iliana’s gender performance and

embodiment as someone who is intersexed and rapes her sister by forcing her fist inside of her to reach for the penis she imagines is inside Iliana. In this way, we understand Iliana's experience with sexual violence to be caused by her black transgender embodiment.

In the introduction to the *WSQ Journal* edition dedicated to transgender women, Susan Stryker uses 'Trans' as a framework from which we question our own realities and place within the power structures that we work within. I also propose here that we think of 'Trans' as a way of understanding a biopolitics that moves us. In other words, how our bodies negotiate with power, when seeking to find an agency that is recognized. Iliana's trans subjectivity looks for ways of being recognized in her body. She wrestles with the way her it is read as always in trans—in this in between movement. In locating Iliana's understanding of her AfroLatinidad the reader is exposed to her wishes of being recognized for herself and others. Pérez writes,

... she had yearned to look like the Puerto Rican or black American girls so that she could be easily identified as belonging to either group. She would have traded her soul to have the long, straight hair and olive skin of her Spanish-speaking friends or to wear her hair in cornrows and have no trace of a Spanish accent like the Johnson girls down the street...With her skin color identifying her as a member of one group and her accent and immigrant status placing her in another,

she had fit comfortably in neither and even less in the circles she had found herself in when she finally went away to school (Pérez 191). Her yearning for belonging is further limited by her racial embodiment. While she wishes that there was a community for her to belong to she later also realizes that her gender is also in transgression and transition. Iliana's trans subjectivity obliges us "...to recognize that 'trans-' likewise names the body's orientation in space and time..." (Stryker 13).

For Iliana the ugliness of blackness and her manly-looking body place her in a trans subjectivity that does not fit into an understanding of gender, or even womanhood available to her within a traditional Dominican framework. Her body and embodiment challenges this framework. Her brother Gabriel who had a history for "accusing black women of being the ugliest" says to her, "if you weren't my sister I wouldn't know if you were a man trying to look like a woman or a woman trying to be a man' ... 'Laurie, look at her. Doesn't she look masculine with her hair pushed back like that?'" (Pérez 107). As this demonstrates, her womanhood is rooted in displacement and undesirability. In recognizing this, she wrestles with her own "lack" of femininity and displacement, when seeing a family photo: "Iliana inspected her own face in the photograph. Because she continued to think of herself as ugly, she was repeatedly surprised when others described her as beautiful" (Pérez 43). Her ugliness and monstrosity of transgender embodiment is created through the gaze and spectrality that violates her own power over her body.

However, the violence of the gaze and her transgender embodiment also transcend our notions of subjectivity and the creation for new ways of understanding black self-making in transnational Dominican women's narratives. I would bring in Susan Stryker's question to further this thought process. Stryker asks, "What might be gained, in other words, by regarding 'trans-,'... as the stable location where current forms of capital and sovereign power seek to reproduce themselves through our bodies, and where we—if we cannot if we must—might begin to enact and materialize new social ontologies?" (14). In this way, current forms of capital and sovereign power operate through violence and once again this (trance)formation of black self-making materializes new ways of imagining the self. Iliana's violent (trance)formation into self-making is centralized in her body being read as a black transwoman, a transforming woman, (trance)forming queer non-normative woman.

I should be clear that in thinking about gender through this analysis it is important to note that "Rather than seeing genders as classes or categories that by definition contain only one kind of thing ...we understand genders as potentially porous and permeable spatial territories...each capable of supporting rich and rapidly proliferating ecologies of embodied difference" (Stryker 12). Iliana's embodied difference, while it is not a biological difference, questions how we understand the gender of "woman". To make it clearer, Iliana is not a character who chooses to be a transgender woman, she is read by her family and others as manly,

unfeminine and unapproachable. Her sisters consistently accuse her of dressing like a man and her father, Papito, once told her: “You’re a young woman and should dress like one” (Pérez 260). Furthermore, her body and performance in being read as a transgender woman can be seen from others outside her home. When walking out in the street she’s called a “Drag queen in style” because of her walk (74).

Iliana’s body is a space where genders collide. More specifically, her body and the way it takes up space reflect a different way of understanding gender and, more precisely, womanhood.

Iliana’s sexual desire can also be understood as queer. In the beginning of the novel as we are introduced to her gay best friend Ed, we learn that Iliana initially had a crush on him. What drew her in about Ed were his “...narrow hips, graceful hands, shoulder-length hair and lashes longer than most women’s that had set her sexually at ease” (Pérez 76). Iliana desires a male body that does not resemble the patriarchal patterns that she is exposed to at home. Transgender desire for a feminine-embodied man in this case also makes us re-think sexuality and the orientation of the body. The novel never points out Iliana’s sexual orientation, but in placing her sexual desire over a queer non-normative male Pérez challenges us to re-think the reasons sexual orientation or sexuality begets a name. What is in a name or label for one’s sexual orientation? Susan Stryker argues that “...orientation fundamentally pertains to the relationship between bodies and space, and that many terms related to sexuality—straight, bent, deviate, perverse, and so on—

describe patterns of bodily movements through, and occupation of, space" (Stryker 13).

To further this argument, I would argue that the labeling of sexual orientation strips away the agency we have over our bodies as sexual beings. For example, when asked about my own sexual orientation I fall into a quarrel of sorts because the way I understand my sexuality is not grounded in a hetenormative performance of sexuality all of the time. The way I relate to women is homosocial, my own sexual desire fluctuates, although I have only become sexually involved with men. This, however, does not make me understand myself as strictly "straight". So then again, when I am asked the question of sexual orientation, I feel as if I am obliged to choose a recognized label that only regards my present sexual experience and history, but strips away my own chosen understanding of sexuality that concentrates on the fluidity of desire, affect, and intimacy. The label seems to only operate for the benefit of patriarchy—where heterosexual men must know 1) whether, as women, we can be of sexual aim or b) whether they need to over-perform hetero-normative masculinity that seeks to emasculate others who may not identify with heterosexuality. So then again, in reading Iliana's sexual desire for Ed as heterosexual desire, would blind us to the reasons she desires him, but also how desire is politicized as well. Iliana believes that Ed would be an ideal first sexual partner: "Nights at school, after her mother's voice had faded, she had lain awake aching to be held and to be reminded that she was more than spirit and possessed a

beating heart and flesh needing to be touched. Ed would be gentle, she had thought” (Pérez 76). Iliana’s desire for a man who resembles a woman allow her to understand that her subjectivity is more than just spirit—as Papito’s religion has taught her. Iliana’s process of (trance)formation highlights the body as also important in establishing intimacy, affect, and sexual desire.

The common narrative of transgender violence follows in *Geographies of Home* where Iliana’s body and performance of womanhood must be watched, outed and “corrected”. In her article, “Domestic Illusions: Manifesting Existential Uncertainty in Loida Maritza Pérez’s *Geographies of Home*”, Denia Fraser writes about Iliana’s gender and the family’s interpretation of it, Marina’s “...assumption about Iliana’s androgyny is predicated on a combination of her mental inability to filter information and her strictly traditional views about gender roles”.³⁰ According to Marina, Iliana “was as self-seeking as a man” and “behaved more like her brothers and shared few personality traits of her sisters” (Pérez 277). Marina’s attempt to not see Iliana as a black resemblance of herself looks for signifiers of difference in her sister’s body. While finally hanging out with Iliana and Ed, who Marina is unaware is gay, she observes her sister closely: “Iliana’s hands were as wide as Ed’s, her fingers just as long. It was those hands, which had first hinted at her secret. Those hands were too large for a girl” (275). In walking “Her gait...had been the exaggerated walk of a man imitating a woman” (276). Yet, we must remember that Ed is young man

³⁰ In the primary document for this journal there were no page numbers found.

who looks feminine. Case in point, Marina is reading Iliana's body at this moment through a framework of traditional notions of womanhood. This pointing out at how this lens fails to recognize Iliana's own womanhood, agency, and subjectivity.

In putting all these observations together, Marina believes that Iliana is not like her at all and believes that she may be intersexed, "...born with male organs tucked inside" (277). For Marina, "...it would be the reason why she'd never had a boyfriend, expressed no interest in marrying or bearing children, and appeared at moments like a woman but at others like a man" (277). Marina's curiosity for establishing her claim as true drive her into the physical violence of outing and finally putting peace to her mind, that her sister is indeed no reflection of herself as a black woman, but also that there must be a biological explanation for understanding Iliana's embodiment and performance of gender. In other words, Marina believes that gender and sexuality (or lack thereof) are biological factors and not socially-constructed. To "out" her sister, that evening, Marina jumps on Iliana and forcibly pries open her legs. Marina's,

... hand tore into her. The pain, when it shot through her, was incisive as a blade...Back arched against the raging pain, hands clawing futilely at the fitted sheet, Iliana thrashed and writhed. The world, as she had known it, crashed irrevocably around her head as her sister's hand curled into a fist...'I almost had it!' Marina shrieked, yanking her hand

out from between her sister's thighs. 'I almost had it in my hand!'

(Pérez 284).

Marina penetrates and violates Iliana's body searching for a penis that could establish the biological reasoning behind Iliana's "manliness". However, although Marina does not actually find a penis inside her sister, she tries again a second time believing and attempting to make a correction for Iliana's embodiment, which is read as a transgender woman, or more particularly in this case, intersexed.

In acknowledging Marina's trauma with sexual violence, Iliana believes that this is not her fault. In shock of her own experience with sexual violence inflicted by her sister, Iliana's state of vulnerability is a forgiving one that instills the same silence around Marina's rape. Pérez illustrates Iliana's thoughts: "She told herself there was no need to make a fuss, no need to wake her parents, no need to wipe the blood off her thighs or to consider in other ways the body that had been violated for what amounted to a mere fraction of her existence. She was far more than the sum of her spilled blood and her flesh that had been pierced" (287). Here, Iliana understands that her body shall not limit her subjectivity, yet creates the same discourse of silence by implicitly suggesting that her embodiment is at fault and in some ways, perhaps, deserving of such violence. It is the same discourse that Marina battles with—that because she broke the rules of her religion and doubted God by seeing an astrologer, she deserved to be punished.

The sexual violence, once again is followed by silence and its disavowal. After Iliana is raped a second time and witnessed by her parents, "She rose unsteadily from bed. Certain of her invisibility, she made no effort to hide her nudity or shame" (290). In walking out she exposes her nudity and shame and while we would hope her family would react to what they have witnessed, they do not. They are in shock and yet silent. In walking nude and not hiding her body, Iliana uses the hyper-visibility of her violated body to combat the invisibility and silence of what has just happened. It becomes clear the way Marina's trauma proliferates more sexual violence. Marina's violent (trance)formation through sexual trauma translates into her hate of the black self and other black selves like Iliana. Marina "...knew and depended on shame to silence Iliana and to efface whatever self she'd been" (290). For her, being able to efface the recognition of blackness and black humanity was a call for violence, or as Hartman puts it "...recognition of black humanity itself becomes an exercise of violence" (35). Furthermore, Marina saw Iliana for who she was: a woman who challenges the traditional notions of Dominican womanhood. Iliana is also accepting of her blackness and sees agency in her own sense of womanhood. Iliana "...was the prodigal daughter who had returned, the one her parents now proudly offered up as an example in leaving she had broken most of the rules by which she had been raised, rules her sister had abided by and had received no recognition for" (Pérez 312). In other words, always following the rules and still, getting no recognition, Marina believes that there must be something special or

different about Iliana that she must take away. Also, her own freedom from the limitations of womanhood were predicated on the outing and correcting of Iliana's own way of envisioning herself. What her sister does not acknowledge is that Iliana's self is a displaced self continuously looking for a place of belonging.

Iliana's sexual violence and inheritance of rape and silence makes her realize that what she believed home would be for her—a place of belonging, safety, and affect—was no longer, and never was. Her process of (trance)formation—being invoked by spirit to come home, but yet finding displacement and violence take her to the realization that her “home” had always been a threatening space. After being raped by her sister, “Her primary thought was that she wanted to go home. Every spasm of her body, every tremor and heave only reminded her that she was already there” (291). Iliana's main purpose in returning home was not as much to help, but to be embraced. She came home wanting “...more than anything, to belong” (312). In the final scenes of the novel after Iliana arrives home very late one evening seeking to speak to Ed about what happened to her, her father hits her and calls her a “whore” for it. These final moments push Iliana to leave her home, understanding that she can no longer survive or simply be in a place where the political geographies of home are policed through surveillance, violence, and silence where a fluid trans subjectivity has no place.

In experiencing these things Iliana acknowledges her transformation or (trance)formation and decides to leave:

...her soul had transformed into a complex and resilient thing able to accommodate the best and worst.³¹ Everything she had experienced; everything she continued to feel for those whose lives would be inextricably bound with hers; everything she had inherited from her parents and had gleaned from her siblings would aid her in her passage through the world. She would leave no memories behind. All of them were her self. All of them were home (321).

(Trance)formation is a violent process that allows her to re-envision herself through multiple possibilities of belonging. Moreover, her process of black self-making transforms the way she relates to herself, but here, the ways she relates to her family. The knowledge she will take with her is bounded to those she relates with affectively and spiritually. Her violated and displaced body finds home in the memories it carries. But more precisely, her embodied archive is located in (dis)place(ment).

For Iliana, home is not where her memories are—a geographical site—but an embodied archive that is part of the process of continuous black self-making. Iliana's embodied archive now has produced the knowledge to understand how her place is displace(ment). Through Iliana's narrative we understand how, as Stryker claims,

³¹ This part of the quote echoes Aurelia's thought after Rebecca decides to go back and she realizes at that moment what her own mother was trying to convey to her: "...that genuine power originated from a soul resilient enough to persevere against all odds" (300).

...neither '-gender' nor any of the other suffixes of 'trans-' can be understood in isolation—that the lines implied by the very concept of 'trans-' are moving targets, simultaneously composed of multiple determinants. 'Transing,' in short, is a practice that takes place within, as well as across or between, gendered spaces. It is a practice that assembles gender into contingent structures of association with other attributes of bodily being, and that allows for their reassembly. ... It can also function as an escape vector, line of flight, or pathway toward liberation (13).

In other words, Iliana's character challenges us to think about transnational, transgressive, and other transversal ways in which (trance)formation is in conversation with race, gender, and sexuality. In addition to this, the black transgender body moves and destabilizes limited ways of thinking of "woman" as a gender and ways we can reassemble black women's subjectivity—particularly, that of the transnational AfroDominican woman. Destabilizing transnational narratives of Dominican womanhood allow for more fluid, liberating, and multiple ways of existing.

Conclusion

Geographies of Home is a story of chaos and a plot whose development is carried out through the memories that the characters remember. The embodied archives of these characters supports the narrative framework of the novel. In

addition to this, as memories are re-membered, revealed, and re-lived, the (trance)formation of these characters happen. To put it another way, the moments in which characters recall or relive these memories are in dialogue with other embodied archives and the result is the conjuring of violent ruptures that shatter their notions of belonging.

Moreover, while this is not a canonized novel, in her article, “Towards the Canonization of Loida Maritza Pérez’s *Geographies of Home*”, Monica Ayuso argues that this novel deserves to be canonized, however, “...it is tempting to dismiss it precisely because of its excellence—because its characters are too original and too jarring to be easily assimilated into the racial stereotypes that we all feel safe with” (26). As Ayuso posits, this could be one of the many reasons the literary market has not pushed Pérez’s work enough. Or perhaps it does not get enough attention because, as Ayuso states: “Novels that provide the revaluation of particular spaces tied to fluctuating identities are crucial to postmodern realities, ‘lest we represent peoples of color as static and unchanging” (26). In many ways, Pérez’s novel is definitely a postmodern intervention in understanding Dominican blackness, and more specifically the afro-diasporic black woman self.

If we understand what is postmodern to be challenging the structural and institutional social logics, then we must understand that when we question and challenge, and deconstruct blackness and womanhood we are not being divisive, or

leaving ourselves with nothing—we are going beyond what we have got. As Homi Bhabha posits in *The Location of Culture*,

Being in the 'beyond', then, is to inhabit an intervening space... But to dwell 'in the beyond' is also... to be part of a revisionary time, a return to the present to re-describe our cultural contemporaneity...to touch the future on its hither side. In that sense, then, the intervening space 'beyond', becomes a space of intervention in the here and now (10).

Pérez's novel goes beyond our simple understanding of transnational and immigrant family narratives and re-fashions the narrative of migration, displacement, and blackness. The theoretical and ontological "beyond" space that the novel takes us to allows readers to question what is black, what is Dominican, what is a woman, and finally, what is or makes up our subjectivities. The "beyond" is a space outside the margins of what makes up our subjectivity—or at least what we believe (or are made to believe) make up our subjectivity. The novel pushes its readers to "touch the future on its hither side" by thinking about these categories of identity in a post-structural sense that gives tentative license into the canon of Afro-futurist literature—literature that pushes our theorizing of blackness forward in ways that envisions black futurity through multiple dimensions. In its existentialist discourse on AfroDominican subjectivity Pérez's novel lets readers touch and see what futurist understandings of blackness and Dominicanidad could look like. The "beyond" is a space where we challenge and deconstruct essentialist notions of

blackness, Dominicanidad, and womanhood. It demonstrates how far-reaching the magical, or more specifically, the spirit and the body collide and (trance)form subjectivities for the sake of survival—of a future. The body functions as a technology for the interrogation and re-inscription of its materiality through movement to create multiple dimensions of how one as a subject exists and acts. More specifically, “... the black female body serves as a conduit for the reshaping and redrawing of racial, sexual, and class divisions” (Hobson 66). Pushing this further, one can insist that as a mediatic space of memory and knowledge production our bodies also recreate black postmodern geopolitics.

This is something to consider when analyzing *Geographies of Home* as a novel that centers this intervention in the midst of how the characters understand “home” or belonging. To recreate black postmodern geopolitics means that the way blackness is re-conceptualized also re-conceptualizes the politics of space and place. While this would seem to move our sensibilities into an unspace or undoing of space, the reality is that AfroLatinas are consistently acting, moving, and working through uncertainty and (dis)location—as seen through Iliana’s narrative of trying to belong home after feeling displaced in college. Her story further corroborates that our place is (dis)place. Homi Bhabha consolidates this thought when he claims: “The ‘atmosphere of certain uncertainty’ that surrounds the body certifies its existence and threatens its dismemberment” (Bhabha 64). Once again the dialogue with Homi Bhabha is crucial to our location of AfroLatina subjectivity and identity. I choose to

include this dialogue not to over-theorize or de-materialize the experiences of AfroLatina women, but to pose the importance of black philosophical thought in my approach of a corrective intervention at Cartesian notions of black feminist ontology and subjectivity. Ultimately, *Geographies of Home* is a novel that understands blackness to be fluid and examines what that looks like through the characters, their embodied memories, and the centrifugal narrative framework that moves the reader and the narrative forward.

In Pérez's novel the process of (trance)formation and the spirit is present in a way that is violent and attempts to police AfroDominican women—their bodies and subjectivities. In other words, this is to say, that violence can be productive in ways that contribute to the self-making process that AfroLatina women experience through (trance)formation. Conclusively, this chapter has shown that: embodied archives transgress the geographies and politics of home re-conceptualizing its own cartography. Second, how archives/bodies/memories clash with other embodied archives through trauma and violence are productive factors. Finally, this chapter fully visualizes how violent (trance)formations create new possibilities of multiple belongings (Aurelia, Iliana, Rebeca, and Marina).

Different to writers like Nelly Rosario and Ana Lara, the *Geographies of Home* novel has received critical acclaim, multiple literary reviews, and thorough engagement. Until now, it is Pérez's only publication. It is unclear as to why that is, but it warrants an investigation on the writing process and journey of

AfroDominican writers like Nelly Rosario and Loida Maritza Pérez whose production volume beyond their first novel has not had immediate or continuous follow up. The question arises: Did the work of (trance)formation offered through these literary expressions exhume so much labor that as writers, they are left artistically undone? Was the painful laboral process of writing liberating? What happens when narratives of (trance)formation are excavated, replicated, and materialized into cultural production? What are the politics of this publishing silence? While the answers to these questions would further validate the importance for studying transnational Dominican women's literature, I am not alone in finding the treasure that *Geographies of Home* has been for other readers.

Chapter 4:

Alright Ladies Now Let's Get In (Trance)Formation: The Performativity of Knowledge Transmission and Paradoxical feminism in Josefina Baez's *Levente*

No. Yoloayorkdominicanyork, La Bella Chanel and Cardi B

#YOLO

Un café con leche al filosofiar un poco
Un buen libro para remenear el cerebro
Una buena bachata pa' recordar los Buenos tiempos
Una hora infinita para amarte sin diarrea

Una comida que me dé un orgasmo en la boca
Un "groovy baby" de Austin Powers
Un rai en el Mercedes de tu abuela
Una memoria de tambor y güira

Una cadera por allá otra por acá
Unos dulces al llegar a las nubes
Un baile al sincronizar de las luces
Un espíritu de risas, sonrisas y coqueteos

Un ritmo
Una alegoría
Un pensamiento
Unos versos

Un avión a donde no se caiga
Una cama de piedra
Un olor de peos ajenos
Unas aventuras cervantinas

Una cueva, mi cocina
Unos tragos de rón
Una conversación de pornografía
Un masaje en la espalda
Un trans que no respeta el tiempo ni el espacio

Una locura de cuca
Una noche de hotel
Unos besos en el sótano al lao' del laundry
Un apretón de pinga
Un amor acabadito de nacer

Una vuelta en pasola
Unas compras
Una cerveza
Un happy hour
Un poema medio tostao

In writing #YOLO, I take advantage of the slogan “You Only Live Once” to express my lived reality into liberation from preconceived notions others had of me, but that I also had of myself. My blackness did not need to become African American in order to be black. My Latinidad did not have to become non-black to be Latina. And finally, I had also come to recognize that my feminism did not have to be respectable. My subjectivity does not have to be recognizable to be considered as such. I allow myself into the trance and fluidity of my own subjectivity to take me to write the poem that situates my very being at that moment: Listening to Rita Indiana’s electro-merengue, reflecting on the adventures of migration, life, love, sex, and being unapologetic or uncensored about the inner and outer workings of my body. In this poem my body experiences and the spirit recognizes my body and agency into creative expression. Two weeks ago performing this poem for the first time in front of a live audience felt liberating. It was comfortable to be myself in ways that may have been contradictory, paradoxical, or even ironic to whatever preconceived ideas others had of me as *la profesora literata de Brooklyn College*.

#YOLO, the hashtag, serves as a keyword that leads into a catalogue of interpretations from different users in the twitter, instagram, and facebook world. The multiple voices contribute their take on the hashtagged word, which reveals a commonality across postings of photos, videos, and captions—but not as homogenous. In this same way, the cyber and media space have forced us to rethink diaspora and transnationalism. The cyber world reformulates and enhances diaspora and transnationalism—it makes the diaspora visible. Hashtags are like the diaspora's lynchpins, the moments we connect that make us feel like a diaspora in the first place and with the internet these commonalities and differences are visible in a new way. However, with the internet there is a destabilizing of the idea of diaspora being spread over space. The online space becomes a meeting ground that did not exist before which encapsulates diaspora at the simultaneous point of rupture and juncture.

With this in mind, how do we locate these voices, bodies, and archives in the geographies of cyber space? What are the geopolitics of cyber and media space and how do these spaces allow us to conceptualize transnational Dominican and AfroLatina feminist epistemologies? How does media as a new-age space of validation or authority challenge epistemology? The cyber world becomes a trance/trans space that evokes fluidity and confluence. Dominican transnational migration and its engagement with the cyber world is a world in which *los de aquí y los de allá* converge.

This chapter explores transnational Dominican womanhood as always in trans/trance and the way that this process or act of (trance)formation is solidified through the performativity of its expression. I expand on my theorization of (trance)formation as a process that is performed and produces the transmission of knowledge through the body. Furthermore, this chapter brings to the forefront how (trance)formation is a method of survival that engages with the cyber space as a trance space of fluidity and continuity. By putting Josefina Baez's performance text, *Levente no. Yolayorkdominicanyork*, in dialogue with Dominican vlog star La Bella Channel and VH1's *Love and Hip Hop—New York's* Dominican-Trinidadian Cardi B, this chapter demonstrates how performance or the performativity of the body as archive solidifies the process of (trance)formation as it engages with paradoxical understandings of black womanhood and feminism.

To understand my own suggestion here for "paradoxical" feminism, I must first, clarify that I do not believe that it is truly paradoxical, however, let me provide some light as to why I am choosing to use this term. If we have traditional and essentialist understandings of black feminism it can easily be said that these knowledge producers that I am highlighting in this chapter may not be understood as feminists. Here, I mean paradoxical, because as these women perform feminist ideologies of empowerment, they do so in their own way. However, some well-established feminist theorists may read their delivery or embodiment as complicit to patriarchy and not feminist at all.

To take case in point, I want to bring attention to the title of this chapter and why it echoes Beyoncé's "Formation", which is featured in her latest visual album *Lemonade*. In light of the album release, many wrote their analyses, commentary, and critique in favor and against Beyoncé's *Lemonade*. bell hooks, a prominent black feminist scholar, wrote her own piece entitled, "Moving Beyond Pain" where she offers her own feminist critique of the work suggesting: "Beyoncé's version of feminism cannot be trusted. Her vision of feminism does not call for an end to patriarchal domination...it does not bring exploitation and domination to an end...Ultimately *Lemonade* glamorizes a world of gendered cultural paradox and contradiction". Furthermore, hooks begins her essay underlining why Beyoncé's feminism is paradoxical and contradictory due to the fact that it is "capitalist money making at its best". She states that, "*Lemonade* offers viewers a visual extravaganza—a display of black female bodies that transgresses all boundaries. It's all about the body, and the body as commodity. This is certainly not radical or revolutionary". Now, if we focus on the reasons why hooks calls Beyoncé's feminism paradoxical it seems to be due to three main things here: its engagement with capitalism as it relates to the business, but also her relationship to Jay Z as portrayed through the album's lyrics and aesthetic, and last, but not least, Beyoncé's portrayal of black women's bodies. In other words, while hooks acknowledges that Beyoncé's artistic and aesthetic choice may be led by and read as black feminism, at

the same time, she uses it to make her own money or re-establish her relationship and complicity to the patriarchy and the capitalist society that we live in.

While I understand and to a certain degree agree with hooks, there is also something “paradoxical” and problematic about her own essentialist feminist framework in analyzing *Lemonade*. Since when did we begin to police and essentialize what black feminism should look like? Beyoncé is already in a very privileged position, but what about her fan base? Many of the black working-class women who follow Beyoncé’s art are in need of visualizing themselves in the media space. *Lemonade* is one of the first visual art works that highlights black feminism through an afro-diasporic framework that allows AfroLatinas and other AfroCaribbean women that were never a part of the black feminist discourse as understood in the United States.³² Second, if this feminism is paradoxical because it finds itself within a capitalist framework, well does that not make it more realistic? In what ways are we, working-class black women of the diaspora, never complicit to patriarchy and capitalism? While these are the systems we attempt to dismantle, they are also the same systems that we live, breathe, and survive within. Is it completely realistic to imagine a feminism that is devoid of patriarchy and

³² *Lemonade* features cameos of professional tennis player Serena Williams, Trayvon Martin's mother, Sybrina Fulton; Eric Garner's mother, Gwen Carr; and Michael Brown's mother, Lezley McSpadden. The Afro-Cuban duo Ibeyi, singer Zendaya also make an appearance, as well as London-based Somalian poet Warsan Shire. The visual album presents a diverse group of black women that is representative of the African diaspora. This is something that, in my brief lifetime, I have never seen or heard of other African American female pop artists do.

capitalism entirely? Do we overlook the different ways that feminism manifests when we attempt to essentialize what it should look like? How can we understand the multiplicity and multi-dimensionality of feminist embodiment with an essentialist black feminist framework? Now, my regard here is not to completely let Beyoncé off the hook (no pun intended), but to shift the focus from Beyoncé to the kind of feminism she is invoking—one that honestly, seems more realistic for many of us. This is not a call for being complacent within the matrices of oppression, but instead to recognize the ways that feminism looks from within this *matriz* or matrices of oppression.

The paradoxical feminism I read here in the work of Josefina Baez, Bella Chanel, and Cardi B is one that would be overlooked for its engagement with the matrices of oppression in which it operates. While they relate to more traditional and “readable” feminist traditions, at the same time, they weave in their own kind of feminism that works from within capitalism and patriarchy. As per Beyoncé, getting in (trance)formation is about the process of creating an AfroLatina epistemology via a “paradoxical” feminist embodiment and performance epistemology.

The work of these *AfroDominicanas* demonstrates how the (trance)formative multiplicity of womanhood can be whole within one body. In other words, we are not a fragmented body even if we embody multiple understandings of feminism. Meaning that it is also possible to embody the paradox, or irony, and contradictions, which are significant in understanding how trans- and trance operate at the center

of AfroLatina, and specifically, AfroDominican womanhood.³³ It is a womanhood that could not be boxed in. It is ratchet and graceful, it is sexually liberated and asexual, it is spiritual, secular, and yet still politically engaged.

The body's performativity and movement provides the fluid space for the proper possession to take place. Through her performance of *Levente* Josefina Baez lends herself for the manifestation of Dominican women's experiences that make trans subjectivities fluidly whole within the process of black self-making. These (trance)formations are necessary to resist erasure. Baez is the (trance)formative vessel that gives voice and agency to transnational AfroDominican womanhood in what is an already recognized literary performance genre. La Bella Chanel is easily one of those voices of the women who live in *El Ni E'*. Her multiple videos of advice for women and others full of shade and defensive strategies challenge us to re-think notions of sisterhood while at the same time stepping away from homogenizing the AfroLatina or AfroDominican experience.

Furthermore, Cardi B, as a contemporary reality TV star and rising hip hop artist pushes us to re-think black womanhood as queer in the understanding of the fluidity blackness, the malleability of femininity within capitalism and the performance of feminism from below. Cardi B's instagram and youtube videos force

³³ This is where (trance)formation as an AfroLatina feminist theorization comes in. While this may not be a unique process or experience to solely transnational AfroDominican women's experiences, it should be stated that in looking at how we can locate AfroLatina feminism it is important to *listen* to what these women are saying and experiencing. Particularly, the theorizations in the flesh that manifest themselves waiting to be written.

us to understand (trance)formation in the act—as it’s happening right before our eyes. She embodies the pinnacle of what it is to be a living contradiction, to embody the many tensions of our multiple understandings of blackness, womanhood, and feminist epistemologies. In many ways Cardi B is just another *levente*. As Rita De Maesseneer describes, “‘Levente’, inspirado en levantino, es un término despectivo que se usa en la República Dominicana para referirse a un errante, un desarraigado, alguien que no tiene costumbres identificables. El levente siempre está en movimiento y regularmente del lado dudoso de la ley” (350). In many ways as I will demonstrate in this chapter Cardi B does not fall into a particular place within social media when it comes to be an identifiable stripper, reality tv star, hip hop artist, feminist commentator, etc. She moves from one subject position to the next right before our eyes to the point that she becomes unidentifiable. Cardi B is every single one of these things and more. Although, she claims she is “...just a regular degular shmegular girl from the Bronx” and nothing more.

In a world where you are everything and you are nothing, it is hard not to think about Baez’s “fictive” geographic space of *El Ni E’*. *El Ni E’* is an apartment building in Baez’s performance text *Levente no. Yola york dominican york* predominantly inhabited by first and second-generation AfroDominican women. “*El Ni E’*”—as it is called—signifies linguistically: “*Ni e’ de aquí, ni e’ de allá*”, or simply “neither”. Neither from here or there, neither this or that—is what the inhabitants of this building embody. In the performance (text) of *Levente* Josefina Baez lends her

body as a vessel to perform the stories, experiences, or more specifically, the voices of the women who live in this space of “neither”—the trans/trance space that also takes significance in the body. Not simply by taking up space in Baez’s body as the performer, but also the secondary definition of “*Ni e*” in Dominican Spanish: That of the physical space between one’s anus and genitals (A place of pleasure without real penetration). Baez’s piece allows us to hear the voices and different locations at which Dominican women in Washington Heights experience blackness and re-conceptualize womanhood through the transformative archive the body provides. Baez’s work is pivotal for seeing how fragments of womanhood are embodied and manifested. Moreover, her work lays as a framework for situating Bella Chanel and Cardi B in this chapter as they also can be found in the real-world *Ni E’*.

Las leventes

Although *Levente no.Yolayorkdominicanyork* was a performance text published in 2008, there has yet to be a thorough engagement with the text or performance itself. Generally, Dominican and performance studies scholars have engaged more thoroughly with Baez’s other works such as *Dominicanish* and *Comrade Bliss Ain’t Playing*. Rita De Maesseneer’s article titled “Aprende es difícil: Junot Díaz, Josefina Baez y las literaturas nacionales” and Sharina Maillo-Pozo’s dissertation, “Entre dos islas: Diálogos músico-literarios entre Manhattan y Quisqueya” are the only two scholarly works that have lightly analyzed *Levente*. However, they do not provide much critical engagement as to the content, style, and

narrative it contains. It is unclear as to why such a candid text like *Levente* published eight years ago, at this point, has not received much acclaim from literary and performance critics.

In my own analysis here, *Levente* is a performance text that is centered and produced through the body. Baez's work further establishes (trance)formation as a process that necessitates the body for the proliferation and transmission of knowledge. The body is central to the operating of the voice and agency and without it (trance)formation cannot occur. I challenge how we understand black feminism and epistemology by proposing that Josefina Baez's *Levente*, as well as La Bella Chanel, and Cardi B are knowledge producers from below who are redefining black feminism from an AfroLatina standpoint that challenges the essentialist notions of black feminism as well as those deemed as "intellectuals", "knowledge producers," or "experts". These women use their bodies and the archives they produce to empower and reconceptualize AfroLatina narratives of blackness and womanhood. Ultimately, they do so by creating an epistemology central to the black Dominican body's occupation of space, embodiment, and performance.

In a more untraditional route, Cardi B and La Bella Chanel have also gone unmentioned in the scholarly world. The intellectual institutions have not deemed them knowledge producers, feminists, or necessary voices that invoke change. In lieu of a literary review or bibliographical engagement of their work, I have decided to purely delve into the work of Baez, La Bella Chanel, and Cardi B as way of creating

dialogue and giving light to the ways we can begin to conceptualize the real-world ways that (trance)formation as theory is also a practice that is performed and can be captured in real life. In doing so, I challenge myself and other literary scholars to push our scholarship beyond the text, beyond theory, and to recognize our communities as experts, educators, and knowledge producers who are validated by the very theorizations that their bodies create. Here, I challenge the discipline to acknowledge the very people who create, support, and validate the work that we do as scholars from poor, working-class, afro-diasporic and transnational Caribbean enclaves. If we are to write about communities of color, we must also allow our work to be guided by our community and our ancestors. This work seeks less so to be validated by the ivory tower, and more so to powerfully give a name and the space to the women who continue to create several ways of understanding the trans subjectivities we live with. Let the *levantes* speak for themselves into this space—this dissertation—that presents them as dismantling the Cartesian ways of ontology and humanity. We theorize in the flesh, but here, I am just an interlocutor.

Josefina Baez's Levente

One of the elements in being the first scholar to thoroughly engage with *Levente* is highlighting Josefina's writing process as she is central to the production of the narratives and performances she puts together. In order to understand, why and what she produces, it is first important to contemplate Baez's positionality within the work itself.

Josefina Baez is a dominicanyork performer, writer, and ethnographer of sorts. Having been born in La Romana, Dominican Republic and immigrating to the United States when she was 12 years old, Baez has a keen interest in her writing to highlight not the experiences of transnational immigrant Dominicans, per se, but to capture the moment as if we were there with her. As a performer Baez allows her body to (trance)form into various personalities of people that you may come across in your daily Washington Heights commute. Josefina's oeuvre contains meditations on the diasporic Dominican experience. She finds joy in the spaces others have forsaken. Baez's methods for constructing performance text are very unique in all its candidness. This past November, I was able to witness her in all her glory and transic space. Baez was so open to me writing about her work and was willing in talking about her process. She stated, "Invisibility and exclusion were the most beautiful gifts I got for my creativity...Since I'm invisible I can be everywhere—nobody sees me". Furthermore, in delving into this space of invisibility, there is a strategic marginal positionality that allows her to see, hear and perform. Her invisibility as an AfroDominican and AfroLatina woman is not limited to an act of violent erasure. Instead, Baez has turned that into an empowering and privileged tool that grants her the ability to (trance)form into a semi-omniscient subject that can by anywhere undetected. Her (trance)formation of the invisible subject produces multiple voices and subjectivities and languages through which to express the self.

Baez follows up by providing examples of how this strategy of invisibility is a method for her daily ethnography of Dominicans in New York City or Dominicanyorks. As part of her work she walks from 125th street to 200th street in Manhattan and listens and looks at the ads and the voices of women and men. The voices or characters in *Levente no. Yolayorkdominicanyork* are real voices that Baez has overheard during her walks from Harlem through Washington Heights. Baez confesses to sometimes following people on the street while they held conversations on their phones. She tells that once she was getting her hair cut at a barbershop near 135th street and Convent Avenue. A man came in announcing how he had just arrived from Santo Domingo for the first time. Baez, knowing that in many ways she was invisible, knew he was about to say something. He exclaimed, “Tanta’ mujeres casada’ y lo motele’ barrato” and just like that it became a line in *Levente*. She also writes everyday although she is honest that it is not easy to do so, but because she is a writer, she acknowledges, that it is what she has to do. Baez explained how originally *Levente* was a 500-page text, but she had to choose specific pieces for the publication of the book. Moreover, in living her invisibility and awareness as an AfroDominican woman Baez explains, “I’m not seen as Dominican. In the Dominican neighborhoods here I don’t look Dominican. In DR I get cursed for being dique Haitian—so who am I representing?!”

As previously quoted from De Maesseneer’s article, Baez represents the *levente* and embodies the same characteristics as her “informants”. Baez represents

AfroDominican transnational women who are continuously on the move—be it geographically or ontologically. Baez is and represents, as Sharina Maillo-Pozo suggests, “...mujeres que están en movimiento” (173). In other words, she is also, a resident of *El Ni é* where, “Las mujeres de “El Ni é” son, en su mayoría, inmigrantes dominicanas, hijas del éxodo dominicano que están en constante movimiento y negociación con su identidad cultural, su espacio geográfico, su lengua, su sexualidad y/o las tradiciones heredadas de una isla que a veces es 'el aquí' y otras 'el allá'" (173). The text itself is a kind of *levente* as it takes us so fluidly through different bodies, voices, places, and situations. The published text contains no page numbers, no cues for who is speaking when, or hints for location. In other words, you can be anywhere and anyone as you read through the voices. In learning that that Baez writes fragments of conversations she over hears one can now understand why the text at times sounds like fragmented conversations. Baez embodies the fragmented voices that are happening at different moments and simultaneously. In giving the performance/text some structure, the voices at many points give names or nicknames of the women and in what apartment they live in. While it is rather difficult to keep track of who is speaking when, one of the main voices in the performance/text is that of Kay's. Kay's full name is Quisqueya Amada Taína Anaisa Altagracia Indiga. She self-identifies as an AfroDominicananyork and is the central character that introduces us to other women, other voices, and the many things that

happen or are thoughts and overheard conversations of the women who live in the building.

While *Levente* is an immensely rich text, I want to focus on the ways that trans/trance creates space for paradoxical understandings of feminism, transnational *dominicanidad*, and race. As a text that exposes the candidness of everyday life in Washington Heights, or your local Dominican neighborhood, *Levente*, as Maillo-Pozo describes, "... es un texto rico en dominicanismos que desafía las reglas de clase, fronteras y género. Cumple una función conciliadora entre lengua y clase, lengua y espacio, lengua y mujer, lengua y cultura" (172). The text flows in and out of different languages like Spanish, English, Spanglish, Dominican Spanish, and even cybernetic language codes such as, LOL (Laughing Out Loud), CTT (Como Tu Ta), or FFF (Freed From Facebook). It is of utmost importance to consider Baez's performance/text because of its truly intersectional approach to AfroDominican womanhood. It reflects the actual ways in which race, gender, and class take place within one body. It shows us what it is to be a working-class or poor AfroDominican woman without homogenizing the experience. Baez forces us to reconceptualize Afro-diasporic feminisms from below that are not middle-class, but working-class. In other words, paradoxical feminism is real in all its ironies and overlaps for many—it speaks to a specific group of women.

Within understanding this paradoxical feminism the women of *El Ni E'* demonstrate the power that money could have over them in their relationship with men. Instead, they show how to manage oneself in such relationships. One of the women comments: "A mi que ningún hombre me de cuarto. Se me azara y después se descuida en la singadera. Quiere mas cocinadera, fregadera. Y la jangueadera, él solo. No beibi, nos vamos to' pa' la calle" (Baez). This woman acknowledges that if she allows the man to give her money, she loses her agency over the relationship. She makes this statement non-chalantly while creating a particular knowledge through what hints at prior experience. She states that she does not want money from a man because this will cause him to not provide sexual pleasure of high quality and will create the expectation that because he is giving her money, she must serve him by cooking for him and cleaning. In return, he gets to go out. Instead, she gets ahead saying that she does not accept money from men so that she continues to get quality sexual pleasure as well as be able to go and be out and about with him—together, to be precise. For this voice, agency in a relationship cannot ignore the effects that capital and money play into the exchange of pleasure and intimacy. Moreover, as she hints, the money would create an imbalance in the relationship in which she would not benefit. Instead, she acknowledges that the lack of money into the relationship would actually create a more equal relationship. The feminist theorization here is that being that capitalism creates power hierarchies within relationships that are costly and potentially exploitative to women.

In *Levente* Baez does not only demonstrate the different ways feminism looks like in *El Ni E'*, but also the moments in which patriarchal womanhood and feminism collide. In one of Kay's encounters with men she says,

Diantre ese tíguere que vive con Doña Victoria si lo tiene bien
puesto...Ella hablando conmigo...Él viene y me Saluda. Se queda con
mi mano en su mano me rasca el medio de la palma de mi mano. Así
mismo le dije, rácate el culo, 'aqueroso. Ella, con la vaina de todo el
mundo: 'gorda ya deja de hablar así tan plebe, ya eres una mujer'. Yo
coño seré plebe de boca y él de mente. Entonces quería yo entrarle a
galletas a ella. Pero vi a mi mamá en la ventana. Mi mamá como
neverita, me enfrío

By scratching the middle of Kay's palm, Doña Victoria's lover hints that he wants to have sex with her. The scratching of the middle of the palm is a Hispanic Caribbean mannerism to silently communicating the want for sexual pleasure. Kay acknowledges what has happened and curses back at him, meanwhile, Doña Victoria seems to ignore entirely what Kay has said ("Scratch your ass dirty man") and instead of understanding that he scratched her palm, decides to reprimand Kay for speaking so vulgarly. At that moment, Kay recognizes the issue of Doña Victoria being in the wrong and blinded by patriarchy and infidelity that she wants to hit her. Once again, Kay is reprimanded by simply seeing her mother give her "the look" that

signals she must be a well-behaved woman and cool down her anger and irrepectable behavior.

Kay's recognition of the initial problem is that of a man who feels that he has the right to have sexual access to any woman, even if it happens in front of his own partner. Here, Baez may be revealing something to us about the ways that women are complicit to patriarchy and how other women including your own mother can police one's body. Furthermore, what good is it to be a "well-behaved" woman if you cannot speak out against sexual harassment? In what ways can Kay escape sexual violence that is perpetrated by men and women? Kay's persona of being black, fat, and vulgar (as she is described in the text) is the only thing that may sometimes protect her from such violence.

However, as she also describes, the lack of affect between her mother and other men have put her at a disadvantage where she feels alone, undesired, and unattended. In the beginning of the performance/text Kay reveals to us that she dropped out of school because she did not have a boyfriend. She says, "...I dropped out of high school 'cause I did not have a boyfriend. No boy ever looked at me...Mi mamá contenta por eso. Even proud...Yes, yes, yes, it is true. I really, really, really just wanted to get lucky. Lucky aka fucked. Yes to fuck". To put it another way, her mother was proud that Kay did not have any suitors and dropped out of school because of that. But clearly, the issue here is dropping out of school because she

feels undesirable and invisible. Baez, here, gives voice to Kay as a desired and central character that highlights other voices that have been rendered undesirable and invisible by society. The voice of Kay—as the most recognizable voice in the book—is the voice of the woman who attempts to push past patriarchy, capitalism, and racism to explore her own sense of womanhood that cannot be fully identified. Kay's subjectivity, while recognizable, shifts from location to location seemingly seeking a space in which she could be safe and accepted just as she is.

Baez's text redresses AfroDominican womanhood and racial understandings by simply recreating the paradoxical and ironic ways which race is understood in transnational Dominican spaces. In the transic world of *El Ni E'* Dominican whiteness is inexistent. Kay tells us about an educated black Dominican woman who believed that her level of education and Americanness would exclude her from discrimination in touristic places during a visit to the Dominican Republic. She says:

Ella fue con sus diplomas, amigos Americanos, su ropa Banana Republic y su corona desrizá, a la influenza Condi Rice y no la dejaron entrar a una discoteca por prieta. A la fiesta que pudo entrar, no la sacaron a bailar por lo mismo. Y yo no he visto al primer dominicano blanco. Deben existir. Pero yo nunca lo he visto. ¿Tú te imagines, a un dominicano blanco? Oye a e'te dique blanco. Mírale la naríz, Mírale la

boca. Mírale las nalgas. Míralo bailando. Esas no son cosas de blancos (Baez).

Here, it is clear that Dominican whiteness exists, but not recognized in working-class transnational Dominican spaces. Whiteness is so separated from Kay's reality that she only knows how to identify blackness. Kay points out at the irony of Dominicans who do claim that they are white when, in fact, their embodied blackness gives them away. She delineates what blackness looks like not just in phenotype, but also in movement. Kay, again as a knowledge producer, teaches us that Dominican blackness is existent even if left unclaimed. Blackness is embodied through visually being read as black, but also through corporeal movement that is black. Regardless, of the education level of this woman, or how "American" she dresses, her blackness will not exclude her from racial discrimination. Kay reminds us to stay aware and not think that because one may not think of oneself black, that you are white.

Kay's voice, as well as Baez's embodied performance (trance)form transnational Dominican spaces into a cyber transient space where we recognize that trans subjectivities are informed by the ways migration and displacement leave us with nothing but ourselves. A voice in *Levente* reminds us, "En verdad la migración ayuda tanto como jode. Diantre, esta vida no se queda con na' de nadie. Y nadie se queda con na' de la vida. No te puedes llevar na', ni los recuerdos. Ay Dio'.

Mejor así. Ni de aquí ni de allá. To' sin na'. Total, ¿Qué es lo que es aquí? ¿Qué es lo que es allá?" (Baez). Migration and displacement allows people to survive, however, in that midst of survival the memories and experiences of pain are not something this voice may want to take with her. Perhaps leaving behind memory and experience allows this voice to be in whatever form she wants to be in—to not belong to anyone or to any place, or any thing. In other words, to only belong to her self. Through this voice Baez pushes us to rethink subjectivity from the trance in which we have no physical location or possession. We do not owe anyone or ourselves anything—we just are. These women create epistemologies that through Baez's embodied performance we gather new ways of conceptualizing subjectivity. What would it mean to (trance)form ourselves into trance-based subjectivities that are not possessed, policed, or experience violence? What would it mean to be able to be in a place where you are yourself unapologetically and without having to think about it?

Baez pushes this line of thinking as well as challenges the sacrality of women as already divine. Kay imparts knowledge on the sacrality of living when she says,

Aunque no lo parezca, yo soy una mujer de Dios. Sé que estoy aquí por un ratico y regreso al mismo lugar de donde vine. Pero no te lo voy a decir en tu puerta, ni de testimonio, ni en ninguna iglesia. Te lo voy a decir bailando apretao. Riéndome mucho. Cantando desafinao. Así

Dios me acepta y me ama...El Dios mio es un Dios de amor. De aceptar a todo er' mundaso como quiere ser.

Kay sees herself in all her divinity and accepts herself for who she is. Her "God" accepts everyone in whatever way they want to be—and what is that way? It is by showing your goddessness through the desires of your body and joy. This is the way that she claims God loves and accepts her. In subplanting the paradox of who and what God accepts according to Christianity, Kay has her own interpretation that challenges those ideals. Through the body she creates a spiritual relationship that transforms the way that she accepts and loves herself. For Kay, God is herself. She shifts the perspective of divinity so that her body can be a part of it. Her flesh and bodily movement is what expresses that she is a godly woman. In other words, the irony of what is traditionally considered ungodly for a woman, is what for Kay, defines her sacrality. The body becomes the spiritual prowess of her trans subjectivity.

Baez takes performance to task as a method that will further transmit and proliferate knowledge as well as places value on the third space the cyber world provides. Baez's work seems to suggest that, as Diana Taylor states: "By taking performance seriously as a system of learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge, performance studies allows us to expand what we understand by 'knowledge'"(16). This is very important when it comes to understanding embodiment, performance,

knowledge, and the digital. Baez's work pushes us off the pages of the performance text, which she publishes as a way of making the performance accessible. However, the text reminds us of the importance of being off and on the page by signaling us to the blog where the conversations and daily lives of the women that live in *El Ni'E* continue. Diana Taylor challenges us to think about embodied performance as it transmits knowledge. She brings us back from Western epistemologies and the importance of writing and back to embodied performance as a process of knowledge production. Taylor questions the digital revolution as a space that threatens to displace writing and the body. She writes:

... writing has paradoxically come to stand in for and against embodiment. ... Now on the brink of a digital revolution that both utilizes and threatens to displace writing, the body again seems poised to disappear in a virtual space that eludes embodiment. Embodied expression has participated and will probably continue to participate in the transmission of social knowledge, memory, and identity pre- and postwriting (16).

Baez responds to this by showing us that *Levente* is a digital and traditional text at the same time. The performance text necessitates the body to be written. However, the cyber and media world is necessary for trans subjectivities to become visible. The cyber space is a transnational location that is an ideal environment for the

invisibility AfroDominicans experience. The text of *Levente* continues the process of self-making outside of geographical locations. The present geopolitics of space do not allow for the full existence of AfroLatina subjectivities. Hence, the text at some point forces its readers out of the book itself and into the cyber space. *Levente*, is not only a performance text, but also a blog that offers an ongoing life and can be found at <http://www.leventeno.blogspot.com>.³⁴ Baez forces us out of her bodily performance, out of the physicality of the published book and into the cyber world where transnational lives can be sustained.

Chanel

In this world, we encounter the blog and easily identify other voices within that space calling out to us—other *leventes* like La Bella Chanel and Cardi B. La Bella Chanel is a young Dominican woman who resides in the Bronx and works at a furniture store located in Washington Heights. Chanel who was born in Dominican Republic migrated to Puerto Rico with her parents when she was ten years old. Although she has spent more time outside of her country of origin, she still considers herself one-hundred percent Dominican (Blázquez interview). She has become an internet sensation having over a million followers on facebook world-wide.

³⁴ Baez writes on the blog, which is titled “El Ni’e”, “En este espacio dialogamos sobre y desde el texto *Levente no.yolayorkdominicanyork*; siendo esta conversación parte integral de su desarrollo como libro, video-performance y otras manifestaciones a ser creadas con esta experiencia”.

In an interview with *Los Replicantes*, a daily news and media website based in Spain, Dany Blázquez, writes:

Chanel es una defensora de la mujer. No tiene escrúpulos a la hora de hablar delante de la cámara de su móvil y despotricar sobre el género masculino y su inevitable falta de humanidad y delicadeza para con las mujeres. ... Lo mismo te habla de aquellos hombres que "*pegan cuernos*" y les recrimina que no respeten a sus esposas; que ataca fervientemente a las mujeres que se ven envueltas en triángulos amorosos donde ellas siempre salen perdiendo...aconseja sobre aspectos del día a día y anima a los demás a alcanzar sus sueños.

In the interview Blázquez describes Chanel as a preacher with many followers. He deems her an authoritative voice that arises incidentally. Chanel is the voice in the cybernetic *Ni E'* that is as unapologetic and unfiltered as La Kay in *Levente*.

Chanel is validated not by academia or feminist theorists, her experience and followers validate her. As literary scholars and intellectuals, we may ask ourselves: what validates this woman as a knowledge producer? Why do people follow her on social media? What does this preacher offer its followers? While no one has taken to task to write about La Bella Chanel in a scholarly manner, I do so here for two reasons: 1) She is a knowledge creator like other women's voices in Baez's *Levente* that disrupts sisterhood by calling out anti-blackness and our complicity in patriarchy, and 2) Chanel is key in understanding how alternative or paradoxical

feminists are the “go to” for many working-class transnational AfroDominican women. At this moment we must reflect back to what the theory of “epistemology” was supposed to be. As Kathryn Pyne Addelson reminds us,

The traditional epistemology of the Anglo-American canon was a theory for *knowledge makers*. It was a normative theory that told how knowledge makers ought to reason to reach knowledge of the true or the good or the right...the traditional epistemology was a theory for knowledge makers in a straightforwardly political sense; it supported the elites who in fact exercised cognitive authority through knowledge-making institutions (265).

While Chanel is not producing knowledge through an institution such as a university, or research center, her own experiences as an AfroDominican woman lay at the center of the epistemology she produces.

She states that her videos or “vlogging” began when she felt that she was not getting the message across to someone she was angry with. She says,

el primer vídeo que subí fue un vídeo de desahogo porque ese día estaba... un poco estresada...y llena de odio contra una persona en especial. Esta persona no entendía mi mensaje cuando yo lo escribía, por lo que opté por hacer un vídeo y publicarlo... A la semana siguiente, muchísima gente me conocía y hasta el día de hoy, en el que soy Chanel Chanel (Blázquez).

In shifting methods of communication from the written text to the video, Chanel identifies for herself a platform that cannot be avoided. Like Baez, she forces her listeners and viewers to meet in the presence of her body. To put it another way, her body and its performativity is central to the transmission of the message. Diana Taylor thinks of performance as embodied practice and episteme (16). She decenters the historic role of writing introduced by the Conquest—which leads us to ask, what about when we perform our black bodies? This is the case in one of La Bella Chanel's videos where she addresses someone who criticized her because she is a black woman wearing bright red hair. As stated by Harvey Young in his book *Embodying Black Experience*, "'black' can only resonate with the meaning that it does when it is considered to be geographically and socially in or out of place" (9).

In this way, Chanel's blackness is understood as excessive at the moment that she takes up cyber space in a significant way, but also steps out of place socially and sartorially. Hence, her blackness must be policed. Chanel responds to the policing of her black womanhood by stating the following in the video:³⁵

Según tú, yo no puedo tener el pelo de este color porque yo soy negra.
Oyéme lo que te voy a decir. Yo pago bastante para que me pongan el
pelo de este color. Porque me lo pongan y muchas horas en una silla
para que me pongan mi peluca en mi cabeza [...] Sobre los colores de

³⁵ Since I am not able to place the video for the readers viewing in this document, I have transcribed it here.

mi ropa yo me pongo lo que me salga de mi santa crica³⁶ [...] ¿Usted me entendió? Que usted sea blanca y que yo sea negra eso no quiere decir que yo no pueda complacerme en lo que a mi me dé la gana. El proximo color que me voy a poner en la cabeza va a ser verde y me voy a vestir de Amarillo para que te dé el verdadero infarto; el verdadero ataque de crica. ¡Satánica! Lleva tu vida y no te metas en la mía. ¿Tu me entendiste? ¿Tu me entendiste? Y no vuelvas hacer ningún comentario sobre mi color porque esta negra que esta aquí donde yo llego, tu rubia y blanca, te siento setenta veces siendo negra tostaíta coño! ¿Tu me entendiste? [...] Tu y tu color amarillito y tu pelo rubio y bueno y natural. [...] No compitas conmigo para que no te dé el verdadero infarto satánica! (“Me tiene jarta...Ratatotasooo”).³⁷

Throughout the video Chanel’s rage could be felt to the core. She stands up to what apparently is a racially-white woman, which signifies a few things for the viewers. One of the first things to acknowledge is that Chanel self-identifies as a black woman, second, she challenges white womanhood by acknowledging her own body’s desires as well as re-establishing her agency, voice, and right to decide what she wants to do. While it may not be necessarily anything original to think about in real life, it is important to underline that Chanel reinforces and empowers the ability

³⁶ In the Spanish-speaking Caribbean *crica* is a word used as a vulgar expression for vagina.

³⁷ For easier access, I have included the url to the video here:

<https://www.facebook.com/chanelchanelvideos/videos/1753829261517756/>

to be a strong-willed AfroDominican woman that does not fall into respectability politics and shows face to challenge the policing that occurs within the Latino community between women. Chanel disrupts the ideas that Latina women maintain a strong sisterhood. Although Chanel has videos where she encourages women, regardless of race, to value and love themselves, she also reprimands them and disrupts whatever notions of sisterhood one might be loyal to.

One of the main monologues that Chanel has in her series of videos is addressing the women who want to pressure men to be with them. She mocks them recreating very-well known scenes of women calling their male partners asking who's facebook page are they liking and why, why they have phone numbers of other women, or why are they being blocked from being able to contact them.³⁸ Her response to these women is to stop devaluing and humiliating themselves, she says, "Deje de hacerse la payasa ridícula...deje de maltratarse, satánica!... El sufrimiento es inevitable, soportalo es opcional" ("No sigas buscando satánicas"). Chanel's way of addressing women comes from a different place of affection. It is not gentle and it may not be well received. However, her intention is to snap women out of their "blind" complicities to relationships that are not working out. Even though, many of her viewers expect her soothing and empowering ways to carry out through all

³⁸ For examples of these refer to the following videos: "No sigas buscando satanicas" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FeJqD7mx_Y&feature=youtu.be and "Medicate coño" <https://www.facebook.com/chanelchanelvideos/videos/1790297587870923/>

other videos, Chanel disrupts ideas of womanhood, sisterhood, feminism, and blackness.

Even in the most paradoxical ways, Chanel recognizes the capitalist society that we function in when she calls out to the *chapeadoras*, or women who are gold diggers and provide affection, intimacy and sex to their male partners in exchange for goods.³⁹ She calls them *putas* or whores and even tells them that if they are to engage in being a *chapeadora* they must learn how to financially administer their bodies. In the video, “Putas con etiqueta” she claims,

...las putas con etiquetas, las putas finas se manejan de esta manera: no le piden cien dólares a cualquiera porque ellas se preocupan de que tengan muchos cien dólares en su cartera, ¿Entendiste? Eso es una buena administración de nalga. Cuando ese tipo de mujer tienen un hombre se aseguran de no pedir todo el tiempo para uña y para pelo—cuando piden, piden de a mucho. Y tienen un don divino que cuando ese hombre no la puede vaquiar en la cantidad que pidieron, lo sueltan en banda porque nadie quiere un hombre que le asare su maldito culo detras. Eso se llama puta con etiqueta. Si vas a ser puta, porque en verdad no te gusta hacer mucho esfuerzo en la vida, tienes que hacerle una buena administración a tu nalga, ¿entendiste? (“Putas con etiquetas”).

³⁹ It must be noted that *chapeadoras* are not sex workers and most men are not aware that they are being used.

Chanel is an empowering woman even for *chapeadoras*, who may not be doing right. While as scholars, we might expect feminism to look a very particular way by actively dismantling patriarchy and systems of domination there are also ways to do these things in various realms. I am not arguing here that feminism should not dismantle systems of oppression. I am positing instead, that the way we understand black feminist theory is very much classed and buys into respectability or uplift politics that are not always accessible.

If we look at feminism from below, we can learn of new ways that feminism really looks like in the micro, in the everyday lives of working-class and poor women. Chanel's monologues and performance also dismantles restrictive uplift politics, which "seeks to reform the behavior of individuals, and as such takes the emphasis away from the structural forms of oppression such as racism, sexism, and poverty" (Vogel 8). Our bodies have become commodified within systems of capitalism and patriarchy, however, how will we take agency over our bodies and administer the capital that they possess? Through her performance, Chanel (trance)forms the ways that we look at the empowerment of women and the multiplicity and fluidity that exists between embodying various subjectivities at once.

The moments where she creates the rupture between presumed notions of feminism and what she offers are key. She steps out of the assumed role that she is

only a preacher that encourages women and gives them hope to fulfill their goals, are moments of breaking with her own habitus:

Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* offers the most useful way of understanding how *performance* allows the black body to be singular (black) and variable at the same time...social expectations are incorporated into the individual, and the individual projects those expectations back upon society...What makes habitus so interesting is that we forget that we are performing...The theory of habitus—thought in terms of a *black habitus*—allows us to read the black body as socially constructed and continually constructing its own self (Young 20).

Chanel breaks from her *habitus* without really breaking away from her role as the preacher who reprimands her disciples but also loves them. In these moments she transforms herself through the trance-like performance that happens before the camera. It is at that moment of the recording that the knowledge production happens—this very moment of rupture where the video is unapologetically loaded with aggressiveness and vulgarity.

Chanel's performance before the camera becomes an embodied practice through which she creates knowledge. Her videos are not practiced or scripted, the message is revealed as the video is recorded. Chanel takes to vlogging as a method through which she can perform her message and transmit it successfully, while

always making sure to start most of her videos with: “A ver si me entiedes..” “A ver si me escuchas...” In other words, in acknowledging that she may not always be understood or heard, she takes charge of her own voice and body to create a virtual space where she establishes a hypervisibility that cannot be ignored. The media and cyberspace become her institution of knowledge production as we see her impart her advice and reprimands towards other women and men.⁴⁰ Diana Taylor's work helps us think through and challenge the ways that writing/publishing validate certain epistemologies. However, we must understand that our own epistemologies are produced through the embodied performance of our everyday lives.

Cardi B

Chanel, as well as Cardi B, are new-age AfroLatina feminists that predominantly inhabit the cyber space in order to (trance)form themselves into various subjectivities. The trans/trance space of the cyber world allows them to be at multiple locations at once—to ebb and flow out of diasporas, race, gender, and sexuality. They, like Baez, create epistemologies that are by us, and for us. Similar to La Bella Chanel, Cardi B also embodies a kind of paradoxical feminism in which she recognizes the capital her body possesses and how to use it to gain access to more. Cardi B, whose real name is Belcalis Almanzar, is 23-years-old and was born and

⁴⁰ Chanel has videos where she reprimands men for not taking women seriously, but also letting them know that we know we are valuable. See, “Tu pasaje pa mierdilandia satanico” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0gbljVzT6E> and “El perroooo” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2pOkWA8L05Y&feature=youtu.be>

raised in the Bronx, New York to a Dominican father and a Trinidadian mother (Kameir). She spent much of her time growing up between the Dominican neighborhoods of Washington Heights in Manhattan and Highbridge in the Bronx.

While no one has yet taken it upon themselves to also engage with Cardi B on a scholarly level, I do so because, again, I consider Cardi a contemporary AfroLatina knowledge producer from below that embodies and theorizes from the flesh through the (trance)formation the viewer sees right before their own eyes.

However, as mundane as she may be considered, Shane Vogel reminds us that, "It is in the sphere of the mundane...that theorists such as Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, and Robin DG Kelley locate the resistances and revolutionary practices that are a precondition for happiness and that offer material for imagining a better world" (18). As a former exotic dancer, or stripper, Cardi embodies paradoxical feminism in sharing her own story on how it empowered her and saved her life. In an interview with Vlad TV she talks about her own experience in being in an abusive relationship at a young age: "...these little young girls they so quick to move with they boyfriends, and then it's like, once you do, you gotta deal with cooking for them everyday, doing things right for them everyday, you might deal with getting your ass beat everyday. That's the shit, it's like, yup".⁴¹ When asked if anyone ever tried to pull her out of that situation she responds no, and explains that she got out by, "...stripping getting my own money and leaving. How was I gonna leave if I only

⁴¹ You can see the clip of her Vlad TV interview here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vzfcNl-o9bl>

made \$200 a week?...Stripping saved my life". Cardi is real-life evidence that respectability politics will not always save you from oppression. If anything, Cardi's own experiences pushes us to reconsider what are some of the potential pitfalls of black feminism, such as that of bell hooks. She realizes that although stripping can be considered as complicit to patriarchy and the exploitation of women's bodies, she uses it to rid herself of other exploitation and violence that she was experiencing. The lack of economic capital or money did not allow her to escape and gain agency over her own body. Hence, in order to be able to leave and continue to survive she must use her most prized possession—her body.

Although stripping "saved" her, she does not encourage other women in similar situations to do the same. She clarifies this by stating that before she began stripping she felt very comfortable and confident with her body. Nonetheless, once she began stripping she started looking at her body differently because the money you make as stripper, not only depends on your dance moves, but also your body. "I started to feel like, I don't make as much money if I don't have big boobs. Bam! I did boobs. Then I started working in hood clubs. I don't make enough money if I don't have a big ass, so" (Vlad TV Interview). The body is central to Cardi's experience and through it she has been able to archive the memories of domestic violence, and ways in which you can work and transform your body and sex appeal to get ahead. As Vogel reminds us, "...intimacy, like sexuality, can be an effect of power relations, and that these relations are, as Foucault states, 'matrices of transformations...subjected

to constant modifications, continual shifts'" (25). In physically transforming her body from a skinny woman to a voluptuous curvy woman by getting breast implants and a butt-lift, Cardi gains access to the entryway of the trans space that allows her to play with (trance)formation and her fluid black identity unapologetically on her instagram page.

Cardi is hyper aware of the politics of her own black body, yet seeks to critique the paradoxes and problematizations of uplift politics. Epistemology, and even black epistemology, would not consider Cardi a knowledge producer because of her class status, articulations, and the essentialisms that render AfroLatinas invisible. Indirectly, Cardi, seems to be aware of this, at least in the mainstream sense, when she states in an interview conducted by Rawiya Kameir for *Fader* magazine: "A lot of people think I'm just a dumb ass, like, hoe ass bitch because I can't talk English properly and it's just, like, yo if I was dumb, I would not be in the position that I'm in". Cardi B was brought on to the sixth season of *Love & Hip Hop: New York* as a minor personality, however, Cardi, used her talents of being quotable and her strong persona by getting ahead of the show-biz game and capturing the audience immediately. Cardi's performance on the show and on her instagram challenges her interlocutors and herself as she transforms herself before the camera. As Taylor would agree, "Performance carries the possibility of challenge, even self-challenge, within it. As a term simultaneously connoting a process, a praxis, an episteme, a mode of transmission, an accomplishment, and a means of

intervening in the world, it far exceeds the possibilities these other words offered in its place” (Taylor 15). Cardi intervenes in the world sharing her achievements, praxis and who she is.



Figure 2: Cardi B at popular Dominican restaurant, La Casa del Mofongo, located in Washington Heights. Caption from the original photo: “You take him to Red Lobster I take him to the MOFONGO HOUSE”. Photo by @iamcardib of instagram

What is most capturing about Cardi B, is the ways that her Latinidad and her blackness are never separated, or even discussed. Instead Cardi expresses her AfroLatinidad in “everyday” ways. Shane Vogel author of *The Scene on Harlem Cabaret* explains the everyday suggesting that, “The everyday refers to the mundane routines, habits, gestures, practices, procedures, relationships, speech acts, and performances by which unremarkable subjects negotiate the modern disciplinary organization of society through lived time and space” (17). However, although the everyday can become her habitus, Cardi undoes her expected performance continuously. In another instagram video she addresses positive or pro-black webpages stating:

There’s a lot of pro-black pages that really inspire me...they show me what our black women and our black men in our urban community is doing to change the world... and a lot of pages as well have shown me how to love my hair... how to grow my hair, how to soften my hair, and just love yourself. But, however, there’s a lot of pro-black pages that ya’ll not pro-black pages! Like, tryin’ to put other people down because they wear wigs, because they may wear makeup, or because they getting money other ways that you don’t think is appropriate—

it's not uplifting nobody! It just make other people go against each other; hate each other (Cardi B).⁴²

Here, while Cardi believes in the positivity that pro-black pages are trying to proliferate, she critiques the uplift ideology and respectability politics behind it. While the viewer believes and may agree with her in the beginning, she steps out of the expected script and (trance)forms right before our eyes, bringing us in with her charm into a trance, and then shapeshifting herself or changing directions from the presumed script we believe she will perform.

Cardi is indirectly in conversation with Vogel's work, which states that "To redress the corrupting and community-weakening influences of low culture, elite cultural uplift promoted an educated cultural vanguard that would set an example for the black majority, produce morally and racially validating art, and lead the race into modernity" (8). So meanwhile, these pro-black pages may seem to be promoting uplift, Cardi also sees the ways that they attempt to redress or police "low culture" by criticizing the use of wigs, makeup, and making money in ways they see inappropriate. In pushing further the idea of modernity, I question: What is Black modernity for us today? If seen through the lens of Michael Hanchard's definitions of afro-modernity: In what ways is Cardi B an afro-modern subject? For Hanchard, Afro-Modernity, "...at its broadest parameters, consists of the selective incorporation of technologies, discourses, and institutions of the modern West

⁴² Instagram video by @iamcardib "Seriously", <https://www.instagram.com/p/BFza4YdTHSU/>

within the cultural and political practices of Africa-derived peoples to create a form of relatively autonomous modernity distinct from its counterparts of Western Europe and North America” (247). Very similarly, Cardi B is an afro-modern subject because she uses technologies of the media and of her body to create, perform and embody AfroLatina feminist epistemologies. Her innovation of knowledge is body-based and carried out through the trance she creates through her performativity. While she is not performing as she records the videos, she is considered performative.

As an afro-modern subject, Cardi embodies her AfroLatinidad without explanations or translations. Although many viewers know about Cardi’s Dominican heritage, she does not talk about it all the time, wave Dominican flags, or speak Spanish on screen. In other words, Cardi does not seem to feel the need to “play up” her Dominicanness to be considered Latina. Instead, Cardi seems to show just who she is by enjoying her time getting her nails and hair done, performing songs from her first album while on tour, or introducing her friends to the Dominican restaurant in Washington Heights named La Casa del Mofongo—or “Mofongo House” as she calls it. Hence, it came by surprise to many of her followers on instagram when she posted a video of her singing along to a Spanish merengue song. Cardi sings along to La Insuperable’s, “Cero gogas”: “Que yo tengo pa la lipo y a ti tu chicho te encomoda, cero goga/Que le guto a tu mario ve comprandote la sog a cero goga/Que yo siempre ando de marca de lo teni’ ha’ta la gorra, cero goga/Que mi

flow a ti te quilla y mi brillo te sofoca, cero goga/La goga es aquella que te lleva la vida se pasa el dia entero criticando a la vecina..."⁴³ She ends the video exclaiming: "Shmood bitch, shmood, this my shmood! If you don't understand it, get somebody to translate for you bitch. I don't care what anybody say about me, that's my shmood" (Cardi B).⁴⁴ Cardi breaks with the presumed habitus and throws her viewers a curve ball, or unexpected moment. She posts the video of her singing a song that is about having other women who "hate on you" or envy you for what you have and what you and your body can do. Cardi's motion to reveal this part of her—singing in Spanish—breaks away from putting her in an African American trope of blackness. She creates a rupture from being boxed into Latinidad or African American blackness.

This video on her instagram is a moment of rupture that has us catch her in the act of (trance)formation in which she creates a slippery subjectivity that can only be read and translated by a few. To put it bluntly, you either know, or you do not know and this is the trans subjectivity that AfroLatinidad offers. In approaching this lack of translatability, I agree with Diana Taylor when she suggests, "I propose that we proceed from that premise—that we do not understand each other—and recognize that each effort in that direction needs to work against notions of easy access, decipherability, and translatability" (15). In other words, we must

⁴³ You can find the music video to La Insuperable's "Cero gogas" here, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mOMfxxYMoFs>

⁴⁴ Instagram video by @iamcardib titled, "Don't ever forget", <https://www.instagram.com/p/BFrwcN-THUz/>

acknowledge the complexities and depth that exists within discourses of blackness. If we attempt to capture or essentialize blackness, or more specifically, AfroLatina womanhood, we fail to acknowledge it in the first place.

Cardi B's instagram is one of the cyber spaces that Baez's *Levente* pushes us into. In the cyber space subjectivities are continuously being made and the AfroLatina trans subjectivity is no exception. Her claim to an instagram cyber space is where she is continuously in the process of becoming right before our eyes. Here, you see (trance)formation in the act. As Harvey Young reminds us, "Conversely, becoming looks at the body in the present day with an eye toward the future and allows for its future possibilities. Unlike being, which is an unchanging 'one true self,' becoming is a 'production,' continually developing beyond its historical base" (16). Seeing beyond that "historical base" and thinking of the futurity of blackness and its politics is something that Cardi also seems to understand.

While she is hyper aware of her hypervisibility, Cardi takes advantage of her deemed positionality at the crux of blackness and Latinidad to address, give light, and reminds us of the importance of black positionality. In a very recent instagram video captioned "Sick of the shits", Cardi addresses the recent shootings of Alton Sterling (Louisiana) and Philando Castile (Minnesota) warning her followers to acknowledge and address the future actions of politicians before they even happen. She exclaims:

...and I don't wanna here none of ya'll fuckin' politicians take this tragedy as an advantage for y'all fuckin' campaign. 'Oh, if I was president this wouldn't happen' Shut the fuck up! If our fuckin' own black president couldn't do much about this ya'll definitely ain't gonna do shit about it. Ya'll don't give a fuck 'cause ya'll not in our mothafuckin' position. So shut the fuck up! I don't wanna hear none 'o the bullshit! (Cardi B).

Again, while Cardi may be considered vulgar, aggressive, and excessive, the reality is that she is responding to the realities of black people in the United States, and understands that she is not excluded from that violence. Cardi is a political critic of the violence against black people as well as aware of the systemic and institutional racism that is in place. It is important to acknowledge that Cardi takes herself seriously and goes above and beyond just using her body to gain capital, flip the script on men, and call out her female haters.

In another video, she acknowledges the way that institutional racism is at play when she responds to the six-month sentence given to Brock Turner, a young white man, convicted of rape in California:

...and you know a lot of us is saying, 'oh, but if he was black', BECAUSE BITCH IF HE WAS BLACK IT WOULD'VE BEEN A DIFFERENT FUCKIN' STORY! THAT'S WHY WE USE IT. 'Oh ya'll always wanna use the race card'. BECAUSE, BITCH, IF HE WAS BLACK IT WOULD'VE BEEN A

DIFFERENT FUCKIN' STORY! THE FUCK? THAT'S WHY WE USE THE
MOTHAFUCKIN' CARD! BECAUSE THAT'S THE MOTHAFUCKIN'
TRUTH BITCH! (Cardi B).⁴⁵

As a mainstream and reality-tv celebrity, Cardi does not separate herself from her identity. In these videos you encounter her rage and pain in confronting and commenting on black violence. She is a moving body, a transforming body, but also engages the viewer in the spirit and trance of what we now call: black girl magic. In some ways, Cardi B is a *bruja* who enchants you with her good looks, her stylish ways, her humor and at the same time transforms into multiple subjectivities all in one time frame. She is a *levante*: continuously moving, transforming, becoming in ways that make her subjectivity and embodiment questionable for many followers. She is (trance)forming AfroLatina feminist epistemologies right before our very eyes.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have demonstrated how my theory of (trance)formation, a theory in the flesh, is a process that is performed through the body. In other words, it answers to the question of, how is knowledge proliferated or transmitted? In order to understand the performing body and the transmission of this knowledge we must also highlight what performed feminist epistemology looks

⁴⁵ The capitalization is to connote when Cardi is yelling in the video full of rage

like. As Sadiya Hartman posits, in *Scenes of Subjection*: "The interchangeable use of performance and performativity is intended to be inclusive of displays of power, the punitive and theatrical embodiment of racial norms, the discursive reelaboration of blackness, and the affirmative deployment and negation of blackness in the focus on redress" (57). In their performance and performativity Baez, Chanel, and Cardi demonstrate how the paradox of being feminist and yet engage with the oppressive structures that are in place looks like. They display how power operates in the everyday or the mundane, but also how to still manage to find moments of liberation and agency. They reelaborate blackness and womanhood by redressing their own bodies and experiences of struggle.

I have brought to light different knowledge producers that use their bodies to transmit knowledge, however, would never be validated as that. We can learn so much from everyday "regular, degular, shmegular" women who recreate themselves each day and each time to survive. Baez, La Bella Chanel, and Cardi B continuously create themselves through their art; the art that is not fictive, but the art that is life.

Our real-life experiences create theorizations for how we could really reconceptualize and consider different ways that feminism looks like, but also different ways that women empower themselves within the matrices of oppression. Cardi B, Josefina Baez, and Bella Chanel offer us and contribute to the heterogeneity of Black Diaspora feminisms. The examples I have delineated here push further the

ways that we can learn to see and identify AfroLatina feminist theory in the making. Josefina Baez's *Levente* is a bridge between semi-traditional works of analysis and those works or epistemologies that are found in cyber spaces like facebook, youtube, and instagram, which are also worthy of our attention. This is where we find La Bella Chanel and Cardi B—our new-age everyday knowledge producers that are never given much thought or validation by the academy. Yet they are necessary voices that challenge us to reconceptualize feminism, blackness, and transnational identities in ways we could not ignore. Their voices and multiple subjectivities enrich the scholarship and dialogue in ways that are continuously evolving.

Coda⁴⁶

From the moment I began my journey as a graduate student until now, I have moved from Chicago to Austin to New York City and now to Philadelphia. The trans moments that I have centered this dissertation on are very personal. In hopes to position myself as a scholar, this project acknowledges my own embodied experiences as an AfroDominicana born and raised in the diaspora. I write this dissertation filled with pieces of my own narrative because I acknowledge that my voice along with the voices of other AfroLatinas in this dissertation have been suppressed by the very institutions in which we work. The inspiration for this work comes from my mother Lucy who although only has some college education she is the prime example for me of (trance)formation. Lucy was born and raised in Bonao, Dominican Republic to two revolutionaries who were not able to care for her. Her grandparents became her parents: Abuelo Julio and Abuela Negra. She migrated to the United States at the age of 23 and began working in the cold Chicago factories. Throughout her lifetime Lucy, my mother, has experienced pain, loss, and recreation of herself. As her daughter I have witnessed the ways that mother creates her own subjectivities through majestic mannerisms, grace, and in being grounded. My mother is an expert that will never be validated by academia, but through this work, I hope that will change. I hope that the underprivileged and marginalized woman that support us, influence us, and bestow their knowledge on to us are recognized

⁴⁶ I title my conclusion “Coda” instead in loving memory of Dr. Juan Flores who passed away in December 2014. He always titled his own conclusions as Coda as if it was the end song.

one day. They are the truest form of epistemology. I am an heiress to an archive of knowledge that is created through her body. I was also created through her body and I pay tribute to that divine spirit that made it so. The sacredness of our relationship is founded on the fluidity of transnational Dominican identities.

Generally speaking, most AfroLatinas are first-generation college and graduate students. We enter uncharted territory as first-generation students, as working-class black latina women, who do not fit the presumed mold of blackness or latinidad. Hence, it is central for us to acknowledge the necessary fluidity that our subjectivities rely on for survival and recognition. Being fluid means that you also recognize that blackness is not just African American. Recognizing fluidity means that the existence of the African diaspora or Afro-descendants throughout the world challenges our limited understanding of blackness. It means being black and being Dominican is possible. Being black and Brazilian is possible. It means that “Latino” is not a race. It means that we have to sit and think through what it means to be an immigrant or a child of immigrants, what does it mean to recognize how we never really belong anywhere and that our true place of belonging is the trans space where we are always in transformation, transnational, transient, in transition from place to place. Furthermore, we must recognize that as AfroLatinas we transgress the expectations and perceptions that others have of us. Usually, we are never Latina enough or black enough. But the reality is that we are just enough for

ourselves. We are not “extra,” nor should we feel pressure to fit into what is usually recognized as Latino or Black so that we can truly be seen.

AfroLatina feminist epistemologies are not just about resisting patriarchy, but also, racism and classism in multiple ways. As an interdisciplinary literary scholar, my goal here has been to bring a critical, new perspective to Latino Studies by studying AfroLatinos in the underrepresented context of Black feminist theory. I have addressed the static spaces in which AfroLatina women cannot locate themselves. In particular, AfroLatina women’s experiences have been left out of the traditional canon of Black and Latina/Chicana feminist theory. Black feminist theory lacks a transnational context and an afro-diasporic approach that acknowledges the multiplicities of blackness (Collins; Crenshaw; Davis; Combahee). Furthermore, Latina/Chicana feminist theory maintains blackness parenthetical and invisible in favor of a *Latinidad* that is primarily *mestiza* (Anzaldúa). If we are to move these fields forward into the future AfroLatinas must take a seat at the table and be part of the dialogue.

In many ways we are already part of the dialogue in the sense that we connect with these feminist of color on many fronts. But our presence at the table has not been recognized. In fact, we are the guest at the table whose name nobody knows; whose life nobody understands; whose embodiment is always in question. Our black bodies and our black lives matter too.

In moving forward beyond this dissertation, we must push the research

further to engage literature and ethnography. While I have slightly tried to do that here, I believe more should be done and in more formal ways. It would be essential to analyze the personal stories of transnational Dominican women living in the United States. Specifically, their experiences as interpolated through their bodies, or how their bodies are central to their knowledge. A project like this would approach transnational *dominicanidad* from a trans-Caribbean perspective that takes into consideration the influence of Puerto Rican migration, Afro-Caribbean intellectuals, and inter-Caribbean exchanges. More specifically, within the field of Dominican Studies, we must centralize the experience of Dominican women in the body and the memories it carries as influential to the creation of an epistemology by them and for them. These stories are out there, but they have yet to be teased out for their meanings and sociological implications on the way these women recreate their subjectivities and how. Such work would facilitate the relationship between theory and practice.

Ultimately, this dissertation works to recognize the warrior in every woman. To recognize their power and embodied knowledge because it should be made clear that you do not need a degree or a published work to be a knowledge producer. Our experiences as AfroLatina women make us experts in such fields. We are warriors that create subsystems of survival for ourselves. We do not allow others to define us, we define ourselves.

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