

Ayabbas: Memory, Sacred Performance and the Restoration of Afro Cuban Women's Subjectivity to the Cuban Trans/nation

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I will seek the commoners, the unwilling and coerced migrants who create a new culture in the hostile world of the Americas and who refashion themselves again, making possibility out of dispossession. (Hartman, 2007, p. 7)

What is the content of (your) (black) technique?

What is the essence of (your) (black) performance?

An imperative is implied here: to pay attention to black performances since it is left to those who pay such attention to re-theorized essence, representation, abstraction, performance, being. (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 49).

Writing this paper, I am committing sacrilege, one that is an attempt against a life of my own creation. I had lived my life as a liminal creature with two brains: one for dance and another for research, to analyze and dissect. They didn't cross lines easily, until recently when I started looking at Afro-Cuban dances like texts. But my scholar brain hasn't suffered more than it has in this moment of trying to discuss the workings of my artist brain. The monologues of Oshun, Yemaya, and Oya came to me like one piece in three different days of the stormy summer of

2013. I called for them dancing. As I knew dance is a way to open a bridge of wisdom from the past to the present. I was submerged for hours in their gestures; I allowed them to guide me through stretches of avenues until I could see some of the wounds that they heal today. They are themselves and their antithesis and have our backs even when we forget them. It will be easy for somebody else to write about the play and their impressions, the rights or wrongs of women orishas but here I am: a witness of my own creative process attempting to make sense of what I simply give birth. *Women Orishas* premiered in Kubeck Center, sponsored by the Miami Cuban Museum, on September 7th and 8th, 2013. This play was my act of marronage against the public absence of Afro-Cuban and Afro-Latina women. Humanizing and blessing publicly their existences I staged a cluster of Black women stories, to speak Cuban, Spanish, Yoruba, and English.

I grew up two blocks away from the Mella Theater, which was the gift of my Havana childhood. It was one of the widest stages in Havana and hosted the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional (National Folkloric Ensemble), Danza Contemporanea (Cuban Contemporary Dance Company), and Teatro Irrumpe, a theater company directed by veteran of Cuban Theater Roberto Blanco, whose mise-en-scène were baroque and majestic. All that high quality art I could enjoy for less than five Cuban pesos; I enjoyed orisha dancing and drumming, which had the most profound effect.¹ The costumes' vibrant colors, representing natural elements, were crowned by a strange synchronicity between the bodies, drums, and vocals. There was a solemnity and a transcendent beauty there beyond my comprehension.

Orishas, the Yoruba deities worshiped in the Cuban Santeria religion, were one ingredient in the formation of a national language for the performing arts after the 1959 Revolution. In October of 1960, the National Theater of Cuba organized a seminar series about Cuban folklore

¹ Approximately twenty-five cents.

that fostered the creation of the National Folkloric Ensemble—Conjunto Folklórico Nacional—and the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore in the National Science Academy (Hagedorn, 2001). More importantly, those seminars sparked a generation of playwrights, choreographers, and researchers to search for a “creative assimilation of Afro Cuban culture” (Fajardo-Cárdenas, 2010, p. 241). This triumphal process for intellectuals, who were seen as agreeable to the revolution, were adverse to religious practitioners. The revolution increasingly required political devotion, scorning, punishing, or exiling critics and dissenters, or holding grudges. In this period of radicalization, the political process became adverse to any religious belief (Lopez Oliva, 1994).

Until the late 1980s, stage performances were the only way to celebrate publicly Afro-Cuban culture (Berry, 2010). Afro-Cuban audiences were visually enthralled when choreographies like *Sulkary*, *Rey de Reyes*, or *Suite Yoruba* were staged by Danza Contemporanea; or when they were able to see plays like *Requiem por Yarini* or *Maria Antonia*. I now realize that on stage, those who were playing or dancing were important Santeria interpreters and priest(ess), whose numerous religious families came to enjoy their performances (Hagedorn, 2001). This process of stage mediation was assuaged with the disintegration of the Eastern bloc and the subsequent economic crisis (Farber, 2011).

Maria Antonia, which was the most successful play at the box office in Cuban history and one of the first shows ever presented at the Mella Theater, attracted more than 20,000 spectators in its first season in 1967 and has continued to draw large audiences ever since. This play, authored by the Afro-Cuban writer Eugenio Hernandez, who also wrote *Santa Camila de la Habana Vieja* and *Andoba*, brought to the stage the beauty and the alternative aesthetics of Afro-Cuban culture. Musicians, choreographers, and dancers from the new institutions assembled to

produce an opera-like super production. Nonetheless those plays represent Afro-Cuban subjectivity, especially women, with tragic undertones. *Maria Antonia* and *Camila*, both classics of the Cuban theater, represent Afro-Cuban women as failures destined to disappear in the new revolutionary project (Fajardo, 2010, p. 235). In the post-1959 period, Afro-Cuban actors were mostly cast in supporting roles in the theater or on television, with the exception of colonial renditions, relative to slavery or the independence wars (Morris, 2012).

These plays at the Mella Theater were what nourished my dreams to be a dancer, something that was never well received in my family. For my parents, who grew up in rural Pinar del Rio, the western province of Cuba, I was too smart to be an artist, they thought I should be a doctor or a lawyer. “There are enough Black artists in the world and they have to work three times harder than the Whites.” I ran away and registered as soon as I could for any art or dance classes I could on my own. I remember the last crisis I had with my parents when I was ten years old when I wanted to audition for the modern dance specialty at the National Art School. “What you want to be semi naked in front of the people for what? It is a world full of effeminate and homosexuals!” To protest I announced that I would become an actress “to be totally naked in front of everybody!”

Theater became my main focus in the years to come. I accomplished this mostly in the “Casa de la Cultura,” a national system that enlisted amateur artists of all ages. I did plays in several festivals and theaters, among them *El premio* [*The Strongest*] by August Strindberg. In 1991, I was cast in the play *Virginia and the Orishas*, which celebrated our new religious freedom. The director was struggling to improve his reputation after some conflicts with the administration of the Casa de Cultura and couldn’t find another actress to play the role of Virginia. The plot was about a little Black girl who was unhappy with her Black features so she

reached out to the orishas to make her White. Only Yewa, one of the death deities, granted Virginia's wish, but as retribution she had to pay with her life after three days. Fearing death, Virginia desisted and embraced her Blackness.

Since the early readings, I protested many aspects of the play. I was convinced my character could energize a necessary and then nonexistent debate about racism in Cuban society. I considered it important to highlight the reasons why a Black person felt troubled by her color in a supposedly egalitarian, socialist society, how we barely have any Black characters on TV or in the theater, and when they were shown, they were in secondary and negative roles. I also argued that Virginia deserved a dignified and reflective resolution where she understood her personal and collective value and destiny. Yet no one, neither the director, who was Black, nor any of the actors in the show, seemed to agree with me. They dismissed my claims as exaggerated and considered the play perfect and beautiful for the political moment. I felt hurt and isolated emotionally. What gave me light in those moments were the orisha dance classes the cast received as a part of the training for our roles. I learned to listen to the melodic variations of the sacred drums (the Batas) and to follow the conversation between the drums and the calls of the *Akwon* (the singer), shepherding orishas by the grace of their voice. Feeling the call of *iya*—the mother and the biggest of the three rishi drums—in my chest, I quit the play and acting all together.

I scrambled around Havana for several years after engaging in a strange personal ritual: taking orisha dance classes during the day and hunting “toques”—ritual drumming—every weekend. I took classes at Conjunto Folklórico, National Dance Company, the Caribbean Theater, and ProDanza studying with teachers with diverse religious and regional backgrounds. On the weekends I looked in the poorest neighborhoods for the “call” of Iya. Those were the

hard years of the “Special Period,” as the 90s’ post-USSR economic crisis was known. But no matter how rich or poor the practitioners were, the doors of the “Tambor” were always open, everybody was welcome, and everybody had a share of the food offerings.

Dancing around I received constant religious advice: “You should get initiated!” “Don’t you have your *guerreros* (warriors)?”² I responded with the same question, to which nobody seemed able to respond: why? The economic hardship incentivized practitioners to view Santeria economically. I love the dance and the traditions, but was not able to give in that fast. I was completing my bachelors at the University of Havana in the Psychology Department when a colleague in the university’s Folkloric Ensemble took me to Victor Betancourt’s house, a Babalawo—priest of the sacred Oracle of Ifa—a reader of destiny (Mazama, 2009, p. 86). I consulted the Oracle of Ifa in November 1998, moving two little objects he offered me between my hands several times, and showed him the one that was in my left or right hand on his request. At the end he composed a prophecy and explained it with sayings and stories related to my larger existential panorama. I objected to everything Victor said in my first consultation, but I appreciated the logical way he answered my questions. “Your life has been lived many times. Through the oracle you learned the success and failures of your previous ‘doubles,’ so you can take your essence to a higher level.” I left his incredible tiny house in the Los Sitios tenement light and renewed. I realized I had met a unique practitioner when he patiently told me not to pursue initiation and told me to pay. I had never met or seen a practitioner passing on the opportunity to take economic advantage. It was unheard of for a practitioner not to try and make money. To my surprise, at the end of that consultation, Victor told me that I did not require initiation and explained why. I was shocked that he passed on the opportunity to take me beyond

² One of the basic initiation rites into the orisha cult of Santeria where the deities of protection, Elegua, Ogun, Ochosi, and Osun, are received.

the basic rituals of knowing my destiny. Victor was the first practitioner who told me not to get initiated. Years later I became integrated into the Ifa Iranlowo temple editorial counsel with anthropologist Rafael Robaina and philosopher Tania Caignet Iglesias. We helped Victor, already a prolific writer, to shape his ideas and reach a broader transnational audience.

Through Victor's work I amplified my understanding of the orisha tradition. The word orisha is comprised two Yoruba words, ori (internal head, personal deity, and personality) and ashe (the power of resolution). Orisha can also be translated as "the selected head." It involves a cultural technique that "archives" the collective histories of the remarkable individuals of a particular community. The religious concept of orisha represents a spiritual collision between the individual and its divine doubles, unleashing new dimensions of personal power. The Orisha's lineage is open-ended; furthermore, it is enriched when the living impacts their community in powerful ways. A top model that becomes a UN Goodwill Ambassador, embracing humanitarian causes, could be read as a current manifestation of Oshun, the orisha of feminine beauty.

In the context of Yoruba diasporic culture any individual is in dialogue with his or her "doubles," reflecting divinity in a singular way. See, we are an archive of our doubles' past manifested as a concrete present. This is similar to the idea that our genes shape our existential condition. In a similar fashion, Yoruba mythology recognizes a myriad of "mutations" avatars (or caminos) corresponding to every orisha. Oshun, the orisha that represent grace and feminine beauty, manifests as Oshun *Kole* with different characteristics, for example—the witch and healer is represented as a flying vulture. Contrary to Yeye Moro, the caretaker of little children. The avatars represent incarnations of the orisha and mimic the concrete ways their "divine force" helps and saves their communities in a given historical time.

In Santeria, African religious practices were preserved and hidden behind Catholic images and institutions. The *cabildos*, the colonial associations of African people in Cuba that were created to acculturate the new “charcoal sacks,” fostered Santeria, Abakua, and other religious practices in Cuba as ritualized memories of their previous African ethnicity. The Yoruba people in particular forged a new identity and political alliance in the new land. They integrated their local deities into a new pantheon, negotiating hierarchies and creating new liturgical implications. They developed new notions of kinship beyond filial connections. Religious families replaced biological ones, providing emotional support, a social network, and spiritual guidance to overcome any existential challenges.

In Santeria, as in other religious practices in Cuba, performance activates the communion with the ancestors. In the sacred ambiance, drumming, singing, and dancing create a “black hole,” a symbolic machine that dilutes time and space, allowing the African spirits to bless their descendants in the New World. Singing, dancing, and drumming was not a way to go back to Africa, but a way to actualize Africa, to make Africa a portable concept to be manifested anytime and anywhere with a myriad of symbols. Orisha renditions are omnipresent in multiple art forms.³ This portability of African memory gives this practice a particular significance in the African diasporic communities in Latin America and the United States.

³ Recent examples are the song “Aguanile,” based on a ritual song to Oggun, by international salsa artist Mark Anthony and the jazz suite “Oshas” premiered at Lincoln Center by Wynton Marsalis in 2014.



The author, as Yemaya, with Wynton Marsalis, Chucho Valdes, and Pedrito Martinez at Jazz at Lincoln Center, September 2014.

The Path toward *Women Orishas*: Addressing Race, Memory, and Diaspora through Performance

I moved to the United States in 2004 for two international fellowships. The multiple academic contacts I cultivated in the United States while working for the Cultural Research Center in Havana didn't last beyond the first year. I became a political burden for people sympathetic to the Cuban revolution, but also to the Cuban exiles that looked with reserve at my long dreadlocks and at my research on the Afro-Cuban experience. Among the several survival jobs I held during this period of limited support, I started to regularly teach and perform Cuban dance while slowly working my way back to my academic path. In 2012, the Miami Cuban Museum (MCM) commissioned me to develop a special show for African American heritage month. Ileana Fuentes, a militant feminist and the curator of the institution, saw my presentation at the Cuban Cultural Center of New York Congress in 2012, previously recorded by the filmmaker Ricardo Bacallao. I discussed in the presentation the "Invisible History of Afro-Cuban Women" that Bacallao animated with footage of my orisha performances.⁴ Ileana wanted to stress the inclusive will of MCM, which she said was also "called to represent the diversity of the Cuban Diaspora." Walking into similar institutions founded by Cuban exiles I always felt like a stranger. As a Cuban from the Island I had never been in spaces that were exclusively White. For me, membership to their predominantly White institutions, in which my membership slowly began fading year after year, highlighted the need for more racial inclusion. My contributions in this area became one of my strategies for survival.

The show was postponed several times, and its production ended up coinciding with the celebration of the Cuban Catholic patron saints Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre and Virgen de Regla—Our Lady of Charity and Our Lady of Regla—on September 7th and 8th. The virgins,

⁴ XI Congress of CCCNYC, June 23, 2012.

mulata and Black, have welcomed believers of any shade since 1612 (Larrua-Guedes, 2011). They iconized in one hand the ideological formulations of Cuban nationalism, “a nation, more than white, black or mulatto,” and on the other, via syncretism with the orishas Oshun and Yemaya, the fungibility of the Afro-Cuban women’s bodies as “asexual, undesirable, nanas, servants or seductresses, hipersexual concubines” (Marti, 1893; Perez, 2013, p.13). The nation from an Afro Cuban perspective has been a site of physical, political, and symbolic violence.⁵ I decided to develop a full theater piece where Oshun, Yemaya, and Oya speak to the nation, revealing the Afro-Cuban women’s subjectivity in a cross-temporal, spiritual journey. After years living in the United States I identified strongly with other Afro diasporic subjects, recognizing my experience as unique but feeling communality about our challenges. As such my character goes naturally to several languages, English, Spanish, Cuban slang, and Yoruba.

While the notion of women’s power is undeniable in the tradition, there are branches of the praxis that became man-exclusive in the Cuban incorporation. The highly specialized sacred drumming, for example, was instructed only to men in Cuba, as compared to Nigeria. The same ban was imposed on the use of the Ifa Oracle that held the fundamental literary corpus in the Cuban orisha tradition. Fortunately, over the last few decades, a new generation of women percussionists has managed to challenge this colonial rule with artistic ensembles like Batanga Sonoc and Obini Bata. In 2004, my *padrino*, or godfather, Victor Betancourt, faced death threats from several Havana house temples for taking the “license” of initiating women as Ifa priestesses. The intervention of respected Yoruba religious figures saved his life and restored this initiation practice in Cuba. With all that in mind, I was deeply concerned about finding a team of musicians in the Miami religious community able to handle the content of the play. Finally, I

⁵ “*Dar cuero*,” give the lash, which is still a current expression in colloquial Cuban slang, is a trope for the Christian way, in that disciplinary Afro-Cuban bodies learn to “stay in their place.”

spoke to Radames Villegas, a babalawo and Akpwon familiar with Victor's philosophy, that agreed to be the musical director and to bring on his people of absolute trust.

I wanted to write a text for the play, the orisha's discourses, out of the orisha's dances. I have taught a few workshops at NYU and the Open Center about *Women Orishas* that helped me to reflect specifically on the diversity of femininity in the Yoruba pantheon. Oshun and Yemaya, orishas of the river and the sea, respectively, are also orishas associated with procreation and fertility. They are understood as orishas of the cool, the ones that establish harmony and order on the individual and the community. Oya, Yewa, and Obba represent a triad of orishas of the dead, living in the cemetery, helping the deceased on their path to *Ara Onu*. Oya, goddess of storms and warriors, brings necessary destruction with her powers. Students of different audiences find resolution to problems or feel empowered after dancing for Oya.⁶ Orisha dances regularly trigger emotions, memories, and personal narratives.

I decided to experiment with those triggers, collecting interviews about the recollections, memories, and feelings after classes and using my own body. I submerged for hours in orisha gestures, the epic songs where the energy of the orisha is transformed again and again, in a musical crescendo. I allowed them to guide me through painful personal avenues until I could write about the wounds they heal today. I intentionally wanted to explore those universal issues of womanhood, our ontologies, motherhood, and transcendence, but through a Black gaze. I write singular words for plural stories and felt on my neck the breath of my grandmothers, some of whom never learned to read or write. The three monologues that I will now discuss encompass a multitemporal and collective narrative that attempts to reflect the disjuncture of Cuban Yoruba mythology. The play ended up having three monologues, one for each of the Yoruba pantheon deities: Oshun, Yemaya, and Oya. I added the Oya monologue as an epilogue, as I felt that the

⁶ Interviews conducted after workshops about the effects of orisha dances.

notions of femininity from a Cuban-Yoruban perspective could not be exhausted without the deity that empowered women, a feminist archetype par excellence. The characters could be seen as three characters or one character manifesting different existential moments, with contemporary conflicts and aspirations. The monologues came to me as one piece, I was not sure what I was writing, not sure of an order, and tried unsuccessfully to fix them. I shared it first with my friend, the writer, musician, and santero Pablo Herrera, who spent hours with his six-month-old baby in his arms, correcting my broken English. Then, with the Fairy-Renta-Sisters (Priscilla and Cynthia Renta) in New Jersey, while Cynthia tailored my dresses and made new wonderful accessories—belts, crowns, *agbebe* (fan), and *iruke* (horse tail) —for my orishas. They reassured me that the script was a good catapult for the transnational issues of women of color.

Oshun



The author as Ori-Oshun, 2013.

The monologue of Oshun walks an intermittent line between the political and visual economies of the body. One of the several ritual objects of Oshun are the mirrors with which she embellishes herself. I wrote the monologue taking the metaphor of Oshun looking at herself in the mirror and how in this daily act of putting ourselves together we merge with the goddess. Oshun owns the world by owning her body; beauty became a political weapon to overcome undefeatable warriors, like Oggun. She represents the effects of diplomacy, grace, and nurturing as a means of human progress. Oshun is also the orisha of prosperity, as gold and copper are metals of this orisha. Ori-Oshun, the character, dealt with the economics of being women today, the pressures to conform to a performance of femininity, as per the internalization of a conflictive relation with our body features. *Ori-Oshun*, the orisha manifestation in the present, wakes up and goes out into the world, where *Elegua*, the trickster, gives her a series of objects to wear. She gets a yellow wig, a golden sequin dress, and only one shoe, with which she had to look good, comfortable, and sexy. She complies before collapsing before the altar of Oshun.

The monologue is a conversation with the goddess. Ori feels abandoned in the turmoil of the United States' economic crisis. Her anger at Oshun overlaps with her sense of betrayal under President Obama. Her fading political faith is engrained on the fading of her religious faith. The rampage moves to her biography, her own painful stories come about. To her, becoming a Black woman has been a matrix of pain, a pain that is learned through her loved ones. Her grandmother paid her a Cuban peso to stop her constant whistling inside the house. This shocked her first creative impulses, leading her to give up her love for music. Her mother is a fashionista to whom natural, kinky hair was unacceptable. Remembering the torture of straightening her hair as a kid, Ori-Oshun repeats, "Just a bit more, just a bit more" —with a choir comprised of the hairdresser

and her mother. Taking the wig off she screams at Oshun, “Mother, where is my kingdom?” Oshun’s presence is manifested first through music. The trance in the character happens poetically. Ori, now Oshun, merges with the goddess body with a prayer while Elegua, the trickster, helps her put her dress on. Oshun gets ready to party and leave the scene flying and laughing.

Yemaya



The author as Ori-Yemaya, 2013.

In orisha mythology, Oshun and Yemaya are beloved sisters. Yemaya is the serious sister who represents universal motherhood. Yemaya's, orisha of the ocean, body is the origin of life, which multiplied and diversified to create a bountiful planet. Using the character of Ori Yemaya, I explore the complexities of contemporary maternity, an aspect that occurs in the female body that is often portrayed as essentialized. The scene of Yemaya in the play starts in a similar fashion as the section on Oshun, the character runs in the circle of life while Elegua offers different objects this time a small baby cradle and a diaper. Looking at the objects, Ori-Yemaya explodes "I am not ready, I rather have a dog!"

Ori-Yemaya is a woman that despises the idea of becoming a mother and has acrid, even callous, views about the decision of other women to become mothers. The connection with the orisha here differs from the direct colloquial connection to Oshun. The character has a negative relationship with the orisha, and simply ignores it! She laughs at the painful stories of her grandmother, "wondering if she ever had postpartum depression." The mothers in her family are single, unsupported by men or society. Motherhood is perceived as a trauma that a woman brings on herself, a pain she must deal with the best way she can. Ori-Yemaya at the end secludes herself in individualism and consumption. After a night with her cousin's triplets, she just wanted to drink the fanciest coffee Starbucks could give and to watch the birds; saying, "They learn so fast to fly away" she merges with Yemaya. While dressing, her prayer calls for solidarity and support for the mothers, a sort of reconciliation with motherhood beyond the individual womb.

Oya



Oya as the writer of history, the author and Shango (Yosvany Gonzales).

In the case of Oya, I attempted a different intervention. Oya is the goddess of the winds, storms that bring about social transformations. The bull also symbolizes her; and she passes her extraordinary strength to her chosen partner, Ogun or Shango. In this way the strongest warrior

in the Yoruba pantheon is empowered, protected, and finally undefeatable by the gift of Oya. Oya reigns over the markets and cemetery, spaces considered liminal to life and death in Yoruba culture. Through the market, the riches of the sacred earth became mundane; when we die we rest in the sacred earth. Guarding those transitions, Oya is followed by an army of spirits. This goddess is often recognized as an important symbol of African feminism. Through the combination of strength and beauty, she owns the rainbow and dresses in nine colors. Also of equal intensity is her passionate love for Shango, for whom she abandons her husband and family. I was particularly interested in restoring Oya's feminine character as her strength and power. In the Cuban and diasporic tradition, she is often defeminized (Hagedorn, 2011). In my intervention I wanted to perform a version of Oya where her femininity is in synch with her revolutionary and transformative capacity.

Oya's entrance is anticipated by Shango's spirit dancing a Rumba Columbia. The Columbia is very athletic and competitive style of Rumba; it is warrior like. He dresses as a contemporary Cuban rumbero and dances to songs allegorical to Shango. While the lights fade, Ori-Oyo comes dressed as the goddess writing memories of her beloved Shango, her deceased lover. The feather breaks, so she calmly takes out a laptop and continues writing. She is an "illustrious" history writer, a character in control of her own narrative. The tale about her mythical love becomes an agenda of the past when Oya faces the many women of the audience. Oya's revolutionary power manifests to awaken women, particularly those of African-descent. She calls on "her daughters" to unite and to merge with her to learn their history. To Oya, history is weapon for liberation, solidarity, and revolution. She dances the "*tui tui*," the dance of the storms, exiting the scene through the audience.

Repercussions

The exercise of this paper has been to submerge in the roots of creation, exploring my ambidexterity—as an artist and scholar—a deeply queer instinct to dissect and to create. *Women Orishas* has a life of its own, hopefully untamable, unmanageable, and uncomfortable (Sontag, 1986). I offered separate pieces of a puzzle but the play I guess has a life of its own. As a performing artist I create and share, as an activist and cultural critic I envision how to heal and bring justice and equity to my several communities, as a scholar I try to bring light and new understanding to our past and present. Those are not all the hats I wear regularly, I am also the oblique character of Ori-Yemaya: the triplets' mom she mocks, a Black PhD student in a highly competitive program, a wife, and a daughter. I may be Oshun, Yemaya, and/or Oya according to the hour of the day or my social function. I praise them all for their blessings and protection in different moments of my life.

Reading the work of Marcelo Fajardo I understand my own act of marronage, how I stole myself away from the colonial frame. The characters of Black women in Cuban theater were tragic and broken; their tragedies were often essentialized. Post-revolutionary theater represented Afro-Cuban characters in a new dramatic spectrum beyond the traditional minstrel. Classics like *Maria Antonia*, *Santa Camila de la Habana Vieja*, and others registered Afro-Cuban women as tragic and failed characters, echoing the representation of Afro-Cuban women on TV and in films.

The invisibility of Afro-Cuban histories/stories is deepened by a traditional abyss between Afro-Cuban ideologues and religious practitioners. The fragmented history of Afro-Cuban women portrayed in books like *Afrocubanas, History, Thought and Cultural Practices*, though, shows how they pioneered fields like education, literature, music, and cinema compared

to their White Cuban peers. Furthermore, the invisible stories of healers and community pillars, both civic and religious, remain untold. In the same measure we have been set-up and represented as failures in the national imaginary, our ritual practices have memorialized our identities and provided an alternative “mirror” in that our present and presence is impregnated with the transcendent possibilities of heroes, healers, and innovators archived as orisha avatars.

Rereading this paper I realized how this tradition healed me several times in my life. Dancing, singing, learning, and the means to open the invisible “black hole,” I have been in Africa, and Africa has come back through me. Through *Women Orishas* I amplified and shared my collective history, my, my ancestors’, and my peers’ existential challenges. I also place our quests for sustenance, love, and transcendence as part of THE human experience. I normalized them as subjects and validated their “right to look” and the right to tell our own stories (Mirzoeff, 2011). In *Women Orishas* our Black bodies are not a source of entertainment, but we are human beings with personal narratives, diverse and unique at the same time. More importantly, I believe our conflicts and pain are not our destiny but a circumstance we push through, and orishas are a reflective self that bring perspective and that help us heal and transcend.

My choice of making an experimental play instead of a folkloric show was an artistic marronage that shocked the audience. I remember the faces of santeros horrified during the performance, as they expected to see the traditional legends or *patakies* on stage. However, there were others who liked how the legends were rewritten from a contemporary perspective. I worked with five men, all initiated, two santeros and three babalawos. They were incredibly supportive, contesting rumors with the pride of being part of the cast. This is not a religious play, it is spiritual, “this is art.” They told me they had never performed for a White Miami audience and that *Women Orishas* was crossing a cultural and racial boundary that had never fallen in the

decades they lived there. *Women Orishas* was not a cultural breakthrough at the box office; we have had two performances and have failed to interest any institution to which I have previously reached out. But through Cuban Yoruba culture I have learned other measures for time and success. I was exhausted and hungry, worn out by the energies of the orishas entering and leaving my body, but will never forget the silence of the audience and the serenity in me with the first two questions of the Q & A. An older, skinny Cuban White woman asked, “When is this show coming again to Miami?” A question dodged by the representatives of the Miami Cuban Museum. The second came from a middle-aged man who asked, “How could you produce feminism out of this misogynist practice?”

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