

THE NEW FOREST SCHOOL: RITUALS OF RESISTANCE AND RE-MEMBERMENT
IN LIFE ON THE MARGIN (Bogotá, Colombia)

by

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Dedication

For Aretta Lewis, who told me that
“both the past and the present can be home...”



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ABSTRACT

THE NEW FOREST SCHOOL: RITUALS OF RESISTANCE AND RE-MEMBERMENT IN LIFE ON THE MARGIN (Bogotá, Colombia)

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By way of exploring how pillars of transnationalism, faith, and history are harnessed by migrants as a means to purposeful ends in potentially hostile urban environments, this study proceeds to investigate the religious phenomena that occur at the intersections of devotion and diaspora, belief and history, and gender and generation within the divergent migrant enclaves of Bogotá. Specifically, this study asks: If and how is [diasporic] religion operationalized among Bogotá's migrant undercaste and how is it tied to resistance and hope? Furthermore, how do contemporary contours of Structural Violence and Deathworlds impact the rise and survival of such religions? More precisely, how have aspects of two uniquely syncretic and diasporic religions, Cuban Santería and Maria Lionza (from Venezuela), been deployed and subsequently altered (or rather, *extended*) by migrant devotees in Bogotá and for what purpose(s)? Within the various contexts of this study, "Rituals of Resistance" and "Re-memberment" are defined respectively as transcendental reformations/survival mechanisms and as the process of reclaiming (or reframing) historical, subconscious influences/modes of feeling that have been lost and/or *transplanted* due to dynamics of diaspora. From a set of five ethical

encounters, which utilize the *kinetic* ethnographic tool of Street Phenomenology “Go Alongs,” a myriad of historically-deep and culturally-broad conceptualizations, via these individuals’ transitory experiences, of what *the sacred* is and where it can be found come to light. Appropriately so, with the intent to understand why and how the aforementioned extensions of tradition occur alongside movement, this analysis duly applies an ontological microscope to both initiated and liminal spaces and imaginaries that have deftly avoided it; while the noted increase of subaltern, diasporic religious influences in Colombia’s *ciudad cosmopolita* continue to be largely neglected in scholarly discourse beyond the prevailing quest to uncover *bundanga* (the mysterious).

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

“Destino: Ilé-Ifé”

“Yo vengo de todas partes,
Y hacia todas partes voy.
Arte soy entre las artes,
En los montes, monte soy.”
-Jose Martí

The most defining figure of our times, and perhaps of our entire existence, is most assuredly the migrant (Rushdie, 1991). Within ever-expanding contexts of wandering, history appears inescapable, ritual adopts and adapts as needed, and faith is just as practical as it is quixotic. Yet, this tractile trinity of history, ritual, and faith “endlessly [re-]creates itself” (Fanon, 1967) within a novel urban diaspora of sorts as a “call-response” of overlapping innovation and tradition, revealing unique forms of memory, utility, and hope to those willing to *move*; and this imperfect movement is resolute, despite a looming Urban Penalty for those mired in structures of poverty.¹ Add that to the contemporary designation of a number of these diasporic movers (many of whom originate in Venezuela and Cuba) as practitioners of a seemingly second-class religiosity and the picture becomes labyrinthine when analyzing *lived* spirituality and its social mileage for those who seek feasible means to fruitful ends via the aforementioned trinity.²

Yet, whose spirits matter the most to *whom* in this quest? That question depends on several factors and the answer(s) need not be constant. The transnational and co-ethnic religious phenomena that occur at the intersections of devotion and diaspora, belief and history, and gender and generation within

¹ The “Urban Penalty” (considered by various academics as both a sociological approach and a robust concept) lends itself to the notion that city planning antagonistically appropriates impoverished and/or vulnerable populations to unhealthy physical and social environments (Escudero, 2014).

² “Lived spirituality” within the context of this study evokes Morello’s *Latin Americanized* version of Ammerman’s Lived Religion. His extensive work frequently refers to what he calls “Enchanted Modernity,” signifying a phenomenon in which modernity in the region, contrary to popular academic opinion, has resulted in *needs* for a paradigm shift in religious practice grounded in the innovative autonomy of the practitioner (Morello, 2021). “Lived spirituality,” as used in this study, echoes the Lived Religion aspect(s) of Morello’s “Enchanted Modernity” insofar that religion in Latin America, due to its particular cultural and historical trajectories, is best observed through the eclectic lens of daily life.

steeped migrant footholds of Bogotá are of particular interest to this study, which ultimately asks:³

I. IF and HOW is [diasporic] religion operationalized in Bogotá's migrant undercaste and HOW is it tied to *resistance* and *hope*?

II. Precisely, HOW have aspects of two uniquely syncretic, transnational, and diasporic religions, Santería Cubana and Maria Lionza/Santería Venezolana, been deployed and subsequently altered (or rather, extended) by migrant devotees in Bogotá and for what purpose(s)?

Opting to focus on migrant *seguidores* (followers) of varied Santería worlds from Cuba and Venezuela is this study's lifted anchor of focus on Afro-diasporic religion, bearing in mind that at least one of Maria Lionza's six *plazas* (courts/pantheons) maintains direct links to indigenous African traditions (Andrade, n.d.). Santería, also known as Lucumí/La Regla de Ocha, is a Yoruba religion that worships a variety of Orishas (African deities), is a major institution, specifically in Cuba via the TransAtlantic Slave Trade, and has been a major focus of anthropological study for over a century (Bascom, 1950). Conversely, Venezuelan Santería comprises a miscellany of standalone religions (including variations of Lucumí) whose occasional namesakes are those of the principal, and likely most recognizable, spirit (i.e., Tibisay, Maria Lionza).

Maria Lionza is a relatively new religion, originating in Venezuela, which blends elements of African, indigenous, and Euro-Catholic religion and is named for its central figure, the goddess of nature, love, peace, and harmony (Andrade, n.d.). Above Maria Lionza's six, varied courts sit the *Las Tres Potencias* (The Three

³ Interviews with one of the more prominent interlocutors of the group, Charlotte, revealed that gender is relevant to the changing paradigms of gatekeeping for certain religious rites and practices in Bogotá. For instance, the rise of Venezuelan transgender *seguidores* of Maria Lionza, Cuban transgender *santeras* and de facto *Iyaloshas* or *Madrinas* (Godmothers who serve as spiritual guides) alongside Colombian counterparts has been notable in recent years. Furthermore, generation and gender are particularly relevant to religious phenomena in this city and region insofar that Generation Z and Alpha have noticeably resurrected/popularized arcane (and/or occult) religious beliefs and practices; with cis-women visibly leading this trend in Bogotá.

Powers): Guaicaipuro, a Native American chief; Negro Filipe, an African slave (or possibly Pedro Camjeo, the famed fighter of African descent in Venezuela's war for independence); and Maria Lionza. Interestingly, these three spirits (and those within the courts they are associated with) can be channeled via mediums, but the Catholic Saints under which *Las Tres Potencias* sit, however, cannot (Davies, 2011). This unique arrangement is discussed later in the section entitled *La nra*.

During the 1960's, Venezuela began to receive large influxes of Cuban and Haitian immigration. While many of these immigrants would adopt the Maria Lionzan religion, they would end up contributing to it by adding Yoruba elements coming from Cuban Santería and, to a lesser extent, Vodou and Palo Monte. In such a fashion, the Maria Lionzan religion, along with Venezuelan Santería, adopted an African diasporic profile, which had been largely absent from Venezuela's religious development until that time (Andrade n.d., 4).

Upon further analysis of the observations conducted in this study, one could surmise that both Cuban and Venezuelan Santería's respective *plazas* possess innumerable similarities and contrasts, which vary not only by region and epochality, but also by individual preferences of reverence. Hence, neither group comprises a monolith by any stretch of that which Bloch refers to as the Transcendental Social, let alone the imagination.⁴ Accordingly, this study also investigates the dynamics of generation, class, race, and gender as they apply to Cuban and Venezuelan migrants' religious placemaking (operationalized in this

⁴ Anthropologist Maurice Bloch coined this term after theorizing on the capacity of humans to transcendently unify with groups, clans, and even the dead via idealized religious codes (i.e, prayer, meditation). "One can be a member of a transcendental group, or a nation, even though one never comes in contact with the other members of it (Bloch, 2008)."

study as the “shaping” of a place/space, physical or otherwise, that harnesses the ideals and assets of the people who use it; as seen, normally, in minority cultures) and their ontological conceptualizations of the same within various *localidades* (districts) of Bogotá.

Initial observations of what Castor (2013) refers to as “spiritual [and cultural] citizenships” in a study of Trinidad and Tobago (to describe how Indigenous religions, notably Yoruba religious systems, shape local, national, and transnational notions of belonging in African Diasporic milieus) reveal that they seemingly intersect more noticeably in marginalized communities. Additionally, subsequent observations on the prevalence of ritual economies (strangely bolstered by the theory of Failed Prophecy) in those same areas, the *encanto* of spirits like Dr. José Gregorio Hernández in homemade shrines and *tiendas esotericas*, and the eclectic/electric nature of Santería’s technological advent all show that diasporic connections clearly abound in Colombia’s *ciudad cosmopolita*.⁵

This study, titled *The New Forest School*, applies an ontological microscope to a “slide” that has deftly avoided it beyond the sitting rooms and intimate places of worship for devotees and aficionados and hence seeks to understand, not to simply uncover and substantiate and/or invalidate, these unifying yet often misinterpreted connective experiences against a Post-colonial backdrop of Western parochialism.

⁵ Dr. José Gregorio Hernández was a highly renowned Venezuelan physician/“doctor of the poor” who became even more so after his death in 1919, due to the number of medical miracles supposedly performed in his name; resulting in reverence by followers of the Maria Lionza religion and beatification by the Catholic Church in Caracas in 2021 (BBC, 2021). “Spiritual citizenships,” a term coined by Castor, relates how indigenous religion (notably that of Yoruba religious systems) shapes local, national, and transnational notions of belonging in African diasporic milieus (Castor, 2013).

While a hypothesis is not wholly appropriate for a phenomenological study of these, what Said (2006, 440) refers to as “creative empowerments” of socio-cultural structures via diasporic phenomena, it can be surmised that discoveries of complex, syncretic and systematized ritualism are to be an expectation and not an exception in these communities as a very literal means to survival, belonging, and agency (whether spiritual, social, economic, and/or otherwise). The prevalence of these rituals gives rise to a robust form of socio-cultural fashion for practitioners as well as for the similarly situated; forging a silent, yet visible, and flexible resistance (of which the practitioner, at times, may or may not even be aware). Furthermore, this study seeks to corroborate the notion that practices of solidarity and syncretic religious practices are bestowed generationally on a grander scale than once thought, comprising a unique form of group re-memberment.⁶ In relative subtlety, this study shows that while practices are handed down generationally (whether via biological family or religious community family members), they often change when imparted to fit new realities.

From a set of five semi-structured and eclectic interviews, which utilize the ethnographic tool of Street Phenomenology “Go Alongs” (a qualitative research tool that differs slightly from participant observation and formal interviewing in that it captures subtle meanings of *place* through active interviewing while physically exploring places of significance; i.e., engaging in neighborhood strolls, attending social/cultural events) at varying degrees, historically-deep and

⁶ Such notions are purported in tenets of metagenealogy, “Diasporic Imaginaries” as related by Rushdie and Quayson, Bloch’s Transcendental Social, Lucumí *asiento* (the ritual by which a *Santero* candidate “receives” an Eggún (ancestral spirit) (Martínez, 1998), and the commonplaceness of indigenous African syncretism as it applies to ancestral worship.

culturally-broad conceptualizations of the essence of these human (and supernatural) experiences come to light (Kusenbach, 2003). Also, I argue that the ambulant nature of the “Go Along” method provides a unique benefit as it unerringly exposes the complex and subtle meanings of *place* in everyday religious experiences and practices, bringing greater phenomenological sensibility to the study of Lived Religion and critical spirituality, specifically as it applies to these research questions and subjects (Kusenbach, 2003). Finally, I would add, following Achebe, that such methods employ a *kinetic* performance/process; an interpretive rhythm that is distinctly African (as well as, Arab): “You do not stand in one place to watch a masquerade” (Achebe, 1988). Even so, *this* “imagined Africa” remains a distinctly different one.

There are powerful narratives in the oftentimes confounding relationships between history, faith, and movement within these particular individuals’ religio-cultural imaginaries and social matrices of poverty and worship. Nevertheless, this study looks to pull what is most useful from such discourses and move forward with contemporary applications for a counter-mapping of social change: a change that brings such beliefs out of the forests of seclusion. Lofty? Perhaps; but [modern] religious theory cannot simply be a history of ideas. While new valuations and corresponding extensions of tradition, resulting from a de-emphasis on institutionalization and reemphasis on individualism as seen in various aspects of this study, may desire to be understood by outsiders for motives of peaceful coexistence, this study does not seek cultural preservation at the cost of socio-political renewal. Rather, it seeks to acknowledge the

capabilities for socio-political agency and renewal via the aforementioned faiths, and corresponding conceptualizations of the sacred, as *lived* in the daily lives of the participants of this study.

It is, for those reasons and more, that the title of this study refers to “Forest Philosophers.”⁷ The documented historical persecution of African-based religions in the Americas largely drove those practices:

“underground and literally into the forest”

(Castor 2013, 480).

Those forests have now been replaced by crumbling tenements, *comunas*, so-called *barrios de invasión*, and marginalized settlements of the like.⁸ Or, rather, Deathworlds as Mbembe recounts in his discourse on Necropolitics.⁹

Yet it would be these same African-based religions that rendered greater solidarity, ideas on emancipation, and collective identity on behalf of their practitioners (Morello, 2021). Exclusivity matters as well. Santería, in particular, has historically been a heavily guarded “religious space...that, for reasons of protection from persecution, has policed access to rituals through complex initiations that have served as a form of collective embodied security” (Belis-De Jesus 2015, 24). Yet in this study, said exclusivity has undergone numerous changes as well, due to a veritable drive for political renewal. Still, how and why “inventive adaptations” or the aforementioned extensions of tradition regarding

⁷ Forest Philosophers is a direct reference to movements of esoteric/gnostic thought in the early 20th Century pioneered by George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff and Samael Aun Weor (who is from Bogotá). Both occultist thinkers gave rise to an extremely complex “genealogy” of global groups and movements. “A peculiar, yet universal phenomenon,” which focused attention on a deeper level of reality, performing a *unifying function*, (Bogdan, 2014) stands as a veritable comparison (albeit not in creed) to the rationales for the exclusive religious experiences that this study investigates.

⁸ *Comunas*, as they are referred to in Medellín, and *barrios de invasión* as referred to in Bogotá are marginal, impoverished urban settlements; akin to the more commonly known *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro.

⁹ Mbembe’s Necropolitics explores, among other things, his evocative concept of Deathworlds: sites of a ghastly social existence where vast populations are subjected to conditions conferring upon them the status of the “living dead (Mbembe, 2019).” Yet, its relatability to this study, while clearly evident, merits further research.

faith and ritual occur, as seen through the eyes of Venezuelan and Cuban migrants, are the spaces to which this study seeks access (Beliso-De Jesus 2015, 3).

CHAPTER II: SETTING

“Ashé¹⁰ en Disfraz”

To quote Mayra Santos-Febres in *Fe en Disfraz*, “for the longest time, I have been a follower of a disguised faith,” one that I have never been able to convincingly explain to myself let alone anyone else. It is in the relative vicinity of that sense that I found myself being drawn to and entranced by certain locales in Bogotá, but not as a search for what Aisha Belis-De Jesus refers to throughout *Electric Santeria* as *bundanga* (the mysterious) or spectacle. Rather, it was simply an innate pursuit of understanding something I could not classify but was nonetheless attracted to. Reading *Fe en Disfraz* left me reaffirmed on the power of Rushdie’s “imagined homelands” and the apparent ancestral energies of physical objects (as seen in Xica’s dress and its spiritual links to the past).¹¹

Even so, I would come to find, on foot, that it is in Bogotá’s lower-strata/marginal communities of Suba, Engativá, Los Mártires, Kennedy, and parts of Chapinero where faith clings dearly to religious objects (i.e., talismans, bracelets, statues) and syncretic rituals/rites. Why, aside from economic rationales, is this measure of “Enchanted Modernity,” a religious landscape in which human agency, contradictions, and seemingly “improper” practices are all welcomed and indeed flourish (Morello, 2021), not as often visible in higher strata communities? I continuously asked myself this question as I walked, eventually arriving at the

¹⁰ Ashé is a Yoruba expression that collectively denotes life force/power, blessings, and the divine power of words; it is also a term of affirmation (Martinez, 1998).

¹¹ Santos-Febres’ Brazilian “Neo-Slave Narrative” (Rangelova, 2012), *Fe en Disfraz*, relates the tale of a dress once belonging to a freed slave, Xica da Silva, that is discovered by an anthropologist, *Fe* (Faith), and in turn becomes the site of a metaphysical connection to the past. In *Imaginary Homelands*, a collection of Rushdie’s essays and criticisms on diaspora, “fragmented memories,” attempts to reconnect with homelands and the resulting alienation for migrants, the notion of this cultural/transnational/co-ethnic limbo experienced by migrants complements similar experiences explored in this study (Rushdie, 1991).

first of many conclusions: The most deplorable conditions yield the starkest displays of enchantment and spirituality.

Re[-]membering La[s] Cara[ca]s [Lindas]

While I may not have realized this at the time, my southbound strolls from Calle 80 near what used to be the Heroes Monument along the arterial Avenida Caracas (through Chapinero and parts of Los Mártires) actually comprised a religious reconnaissance of sorts; *Espiritismo* was literally all around.¹² These strolls would be re-lived with greater detail and cultural/spiritual intimacy in the Street Phenomenology “Go Alongs” (the literal walking to and through locations of significance while conversing with interlocutors) which provide the foundation for this study (discussed later in the section entitled “Calle Luna, Calle Sol”). Multitudes of colorful advertisements for spiritual guidance to resolve marital disputes and financial woes, shop windows and restaurant menus adorned with religious icons and/or slogans, and even the matchless gaze into oblivion of a drug addict on the corner.

In a self-proclaimed cosmopolitan city which stands yet as a prominent gem in the Latin American crown of Catholicism, it was interesting to see there an unkept eclecticism of sorts. On select street corners along Bogotá’s Avenida Caracas and Carrera 13 within the environs of the renowned Theatron de Pelicula and Leo’s Bar Mistica, I witnessed Venezuelan teens donning crucifixes and bracelets of the Orisha Orula and sometimes Ochun (with Ochun appearing to be popular as well

¹² From its inception in the 1930’s to being forgotten in the midst of bourgeoisie development in the north of the city due to *la bonanza agrícola*, and from the destructive fires in *el Centro* after the assassination of Gaitán (*Bogotazo*) to the advent of the *Transmilenio*, Avenida Caracas has undergone several transformations. Yet, it still serves as a hub of humanity, moving around 2 million people per day along its 50+ kilometers (Semana, 2017).

among cis-women and transgender individuals; which may or may not be a result of *asiento*, sacred populism, spiritual feminism, or a combination of all three; as many seem to personally identify with her attributes and Patakí), Augustinian nuns purchasing icons of Doctor José Gregorio, prostitutes adorning makeshift Santa Muerte altars in windows adjacent to brightly lit ones of comparable caliber, but for the goddess of nature, love, peace, and harmony: Maria Lionza.¹³

Paradoxes? Not quite.

Syncretic rituals of resistance? Quite possibly. While all religions can be said to be syncretic in some way, *syncretic ritualism* is at the heart of the experiences with which I strangely already felt familiar (having seen the most indiscriminate of altars here in homes of Colombians and migrants alike) and which this study seeks to understand. Hence, if one knows not just where to look but *how*, Rushdie reminds us that there are glaring “shards of memory that comprise *remains*” in the observed human struggle (Rushdie 2006, 429). Ammerman takes this further, positing that it is about more than how one perceives, but that “what [one] sees [also] depends on *where* [one] stands” (Ammerman 2021, 2).

Ammerman’s view lends itself unsurprisingly to aspects of this study via my initial aforementioned discoveries (which only occurred because I physically went *there*), this study’s use of Street Phenomenology “Go Alongs,” and the importance of being in specific locations to witness specific phenomena, particularly as per the experiences of interlocutors Leo and Charlotte (discussed later in the section entitled *La nNuestra*).

¹³ Orishas are spirits in the Yoruba tradition that serve as intermediaries between humanity and the Creator. Patakí is/are Yoruba parables.

While Chapinero and the other aforementioned *localidades* of the city boast an unmatched vibrance, activism, and diversity, their unresolved security issues beg several questions about the aforementioned Urban Penalty in addition to a clearly observable form of social red-lining. Avenida Caracas, heading further south from the *localidad* of Chapinero represents the main trunk of this reverent tree in Bogotá's spaces of transience and in efforts to deploy the anthropological tool of Street Phenomenology, spaces/places of significance are pre-identified jointly through preliminary informal interviews (followed by a series of semi-structured interviews) with each participant and include visits to not only residences, street corners and sacred murals but neighborhood gathering points (i.e., bars, community centers, dance academies), parks, and even abandoned buildings; all of which possess a story worth knowing. Yet during these conversational strolls to these *destinos*, previously not-thought-of spaces/places come to mind, hence occasional phenomenological *desvíos* indeed happen and are hoped for.

These ethnographic interviews take place in lower strata communities of Bogotá, notably the *localidades* of Engativá, Suba, Chapinero, and Los Mártires (which is of particular interest as it borders the *localidad* of Santa Fe, a de jure Tolerance Zone of Bogotá). The sprouting of "Tolerance Zones" (officially referred to as "Social Deviance Zones" or "High Impact Zones" with the purpose of legalizing and limiting prostitution) in urban cityscapes, like Bogotá, is nothing new, but social scientists' understanding of the manifold suffering they propagate *is* and should, perhaps, yield a more radical nomenclature to the tune of operationalized plight. Santa Fe has its origins in government diminution of not

only the sex trade but also accompanying forms of criminality to lower strata communities; later, growing to include dynamics of “migrant appropriation” as a robust transitory space (Enciso, n.d.). Yet when viewed through the bedaubed lens of religiosity, a more transcendent image, beyond that of the threat of crime, prostitution, and gang malfeasance, becomes ostensibly clear for Santa Fe and areas of the like.

Conservative media and *Rolo* rhetoric sometimes dehumanize the people who find themselves on Caracas Ave.¹⁴ Hence, it was not only the apparent “homophoning” that brought to mind the words of Afro–Puerto Rican composer Tite Curet Alonso, the architect of the immortal *canción*, *Caras Lindas* (1978), performed in different eras by both Ismael Rivera and Susana Baca:

"Black people still carry along sorrow with them from the era of colonialism, "invisible chains." I look at these faces of dark skinned people and they're all so different from one another. There is a certain beauty in them, in the attitude they carry through life. That is what I was thinking, the lovely faces of my Black people" (Flores 2001, 4).

Of course, not all who find themselves in these areas are *Afrodescendientes*. Still, many subjects of this study, in one way or another, consider that if they did not arrive here as *negro*, they have still been *blackened* in some way in some place at some point in time; and their faith appear to compound this perception. Even so, the “*Caras Lindas*” on Avenida Caracas carry a colonial burden, memory, and resistance that is just as artistic as it is arresting.

¹⁴ While contemporary natives of Bogotá tend to conflate the terms *Rolo* and *Cachaco*, it should be noted that they are in fact not synonymous. *Rolo* was originally used during the colonial era as a contemptuous term to refer to *mestizos* from the surrounding areas of Bogotá that had a unique pronunciation/intonation. *Cachacos*, on the other hand, developed as a term for “*Bogotanos Originales*.” Both today denote “*Bogotano*” along with an accompanying bourgeois undertone (El Tiempo, 2021).

As two of the most transient *localidades* in Bogotá representing the main commercial districts along Avenida Caracas, Chapinero and Santa Fe are places where cultural tradition and economic necessity seemingly meet. Yet it seems that the opposite holds true as well, for economic traditions and cultural/social necessities are *operationalized* in diverse, creative and fascinating ways; akin to a social arrangement, or ecosystem of survival, for sellers, hawkers, and hustlers alike. Prompting these and other variants of similarly situated groups to inscribe their economic, spatial and socio-religious *imprint* on the cityscape of Bogotá.

Hence, one may easily notice that these communities do not comprise homogenous units. Diversity of origin, ethnicity, experience, and class difference all shape how groups and individuals in these *localidades* socially engage with urban spaces (Pelican 2014, 261) and that diversity along with the aforementioned economic traditions and cultural/social necessities within the target groups of this study are *expected* to be very revealing of a unique notion of *unity* cached in the intersecting *calles* (streets). Sex workers, in particular, in these parts of Bogotá (or anywhere for that matter) are not a monolith by any stretch of the imagination, but some common “social matrices” regimented around their traditional practices (i.e., communal eating, pooling of resources, religious expression) are aptly encountered in this research and comprise a major part of it.

The varied settings for this study invoke the flexible eclecticism representative of migratory experiences and the overall ethnoscape that created them. These spaces of power possess an elusive promise for liberation beneath a cover of

oppression, albeit not easily observable at times. Consequently, both sides (east and west) of Avenida Caracas in lower Chapinero and Santa Fe yield veritable conundrums of localism, transculturation, and Enchanted Modernity at each corner's Ontological "turn."

CHAPTER III: LITERATURE REVIEW

“Diaspora and the Sacred, Lived Religion, Re-memberment, Deathworlds and the Cityscape”

The literature relevant to this study ranges from analyses of the transnational developments of La Regla de Ocha and Maria Lionza as diasporic religions in their own rights (and rites) and their post-movement reconfigurations of local valuations within the sociological approach of Lived Religion (Ammerman, 2021) to the resulting surge of non-traditional leadership and access within new locales to the alloying forces presented through these religious encounters, producing the familiar *Sancocho* effect (a metaphor for the diffusion and/or mixing of diverse elements, based on a popular Colombian dish).¹⁵

Literature on the roles of re-memberment and spiritual possession in contemporary manifestations of group consciousness and solidarity for the target group(s) of this study along with the history behind the impoverished settlements (linking Colombia’s armed conflict to its transnational migration crisis) which set the spatial topography for this study and its subjects are traversed as well. It is important to note that within the context of this study, “Rituals of Resistance” and “Re-memberment” are defined as transcendental reformations/survival mechanisms and as the process of reclaiming (or reframing) historical, subconscious influences/modes of feeling that have been lost and/or *transplanted* due to the dynamics of diaspora, respectively; and while the use of these terms in contemporary academia on Lived Religion remains fringe at best, they remain

¹⁵ As a rising holistic framework in sociological analysis of religion, Lived Religion focuses on aspects of religion present in everyday life, ultimately revealing the capacity of the follower to produce his/her own religion in said everyday life (Ammerman, 2021); yet this study seeks to extend this definition (as does Morello) to accommodate unique scenarios pertinent to Latin American communities.

terms that will take on several manifestations and ultimately surprising rationales, at varying intervals, throughout this study; as will the currently agreed upon definition of Lived Religion.

**Diasporic Imaginaries of the Sacred: Spiritual Sancocho:
Allomorphism in Maria Lionza and Santería**

While understanding the impact of the religious African diaspora on communities of relevance to this study is significant to say the least, the resulting dynamics of diffusion and unification are just as interesting if not more so. Of the multitude of peer-reviewed literature which comprehensively investigate the development of either Santería and/or Maria Lionza, Andrade's (n.d.) *A Girardian Reading of the Myth of Maria Lionza* and Beliso-De Jesus' (2015) *Electric Santería* offer the most native insight for this study due to their *emic* (from within as opposed to from without) academic stances.

Beliso-De Jesus' *Electric Santería* is a work of profound authenticity as it delves into the transnational and technological remodelings that have taken place within the sturdy social architecture of Santería and, more specifically, the changing nature of ritual, to a more voltaic (or, *Voltaire*-ish) form for the flagship religion of the African Diaspora. "Transnational Santería simultaneously fulfills local economic, social, and political needs" (Beliso-De Jesus 2015, 22), is a line that juxtaposes quite well with my own pre-identified observations, notions, and sentiments through personal experience with Santería as an occasional "religious traveler."

Andrade's synthesis of various ethnographic, sociological, and psychological perspectives on the uncertain history of Maria Lionza provides in-depth context for the horizontal nature of the religion in its presently visible state in Venezuela. Still, as Andrade states, the Maria Lionzan religion remains genuinely mysterious. Being devoid of any uniform truths, religious canons, official beliefs and practices or historical consensus, it has become difficult to pinpoint when and how this religion began to develop beyond the mountains of Yaracuy. Even so, Andrade submits that this religion is the utmost of utilitarian faiths as it manifests a "harmonious *mestizaje*" of Latin America's colonial cultures, is only deployed "when needed," and has replaced the Catholic Church in scope of social work in areas of need (Andrade, n.d.).

Furthermore to this, I add the take from Beliso-De Jesus which opts to not conflate "fresh innovations" (due to transnationalism) with "extensions of authentic tradition." By virtue of their respective diasporic genesis, these two religions are, in a way, *allotted* room to maneuver (or adapt) as needed; so long as foundational structures remain intact:

"Ingenuity is legitimized only through connections to an authentically experienced past. Inspirations are thus deeply wedded to perceptions, sensations, and feelings of historical consistency. In past-present moments such as in bodily possessions of black African spirits who fought enslavement during colonialism and continue to fight oppression through spiritual warfare on behalf of contemporary practitioners, these inspirations are crucial temporal deployments of tradition; deployments that hail particular logics of originality seen to be deteriorating through the experience of modernity... (Beliso-De Jesus 2015, 3)."

Regardless of *how* the "body" is re-membered (i.e., whether via "legitimized ingenuity," as posits Beliso De-Jesus, or via "rogue" means), it remains a literal site of resistance and oppression of the psyche and physical body for those under

the structurally violent imperial gaze (Ashcroft, 2006). This notion raises many questions on what Césaire refers to as “memory of the re-membered body” along with Achebe who states, “if one is to move with the rhythm of change, one must contribute one’s own rhythm and not simply mark time” (Ashcroft, 2006). It seems that nothing, not even the act of putting back together what has been broken to achieve the “simultaneity of freedom and belonging” (Pöykkö 2016, 639), nor the final product (if there is such a thing), has a fixed contour.

Quayson’s views on and conceptualizations of diaspora, co-ethnicism, and transnationalism are of particular interest to this research as it delves into the myriad of meanings associated with various *pasos* of the diaspora dynamic. From what he refers to as Genealogical Accountances (diaspora narratives) to his dissociation of co-ethnicism and transnationalism (Quayson, 2014), this study, while valuing Quayson’s perspective(s), re-proposes his ideas within the *creole* context of Latin America; one in which Genealogical Accountances are rather referred to as “A-Countenances” due to a very visible *mestizaje* in the region and that co-ethnicism and transnationalism can indeed coexist in the same body. Yet his commentary on “enclave building” (Quayson, 2014) as it applies to diaspora is one that this research appears to fully support.

Yet Gilroy’s *Diaspora* lays out a metaphoric social ecology of sorts for the term; one that seems to go far beyond Quayson’s analysis in *The Diasporic Imaginary*.

Underscoring the phenomenon that Fanon liked to allomorphism, Gilroy posits:

“By focusing attention on the sameness within differentiation and the differentiation within sameness, diaspora disturbs the suggestion that political and cultural identity might be understood via the analogy of indistinguishable peas lodged in the protective pods of closed kinship and sub-species being” (Gilroy 1994, 209).

His comparison of diasporic communities to plants of the same species that, due to various factors, are rarely indistinguishable in absolute terms, along with his referral to diaspora as a vessel of *embodied* (rather than inscribed) living memory (Gilroy 1994, 212) echo existential elements of the communities of focus for this study. *Santero* communities are distinguishable from indigenous Yoruba communities in ways that are keenly observable through *corporality*, *pataki* (parables), and overall practice. Likewise, Maria Lionza being the variegated and personalized religion that it is, exhibits the same yet, albeit on a micro level.

Analyzing Dimensionality in Lived Religion and Ritual Framing for Migrant Communities

Understanding how religion happens in everyday life (Lived Religion) is in many ways paramount to this study which follows Ammerman to ask: “How do ideas about the sacred emerge in [the most] unofficial [of] places?” (Ammerman 2021, 5). The Ammerman text makes the case that “any kind” of religious engagement, is essentially “multidimensional: [including dimensions of] embodiment, materiality, emotion, aesthetics, moral judgment, narrative and spirit” (Ammerman 2021, 8). It goes without saying that knowing *how* to unpack the different ways the practice of religion is organized, juxtaposed with the experiences of this study’s participants, is a much needed dimension to this study’s diversified approach. A myriad of texts delve into this but Ammerman’s *Studying Lived Religion* stands as the most cited and overall handiest of guides.

So, how are Bogotá’s migratory religious experiences best analyzed via those aforementioned lenses/dimensions of Lived Religion? What actually *is* religion in

this respect? While many more questions persist, one glaring area of focus for this study will undoubtedly be the *ritual*, and Utriainen's insight proves truly helpful in that regard; especially via what she terms "ritual framing" (Utriainen, 2020). On non-institutionalized engagement with supernatural beings, comparative to various traditions in Santería, Utriainen submits the following:

"Employing ritual theory, she analyzes how women are able to move between 'framing in', taking seriously the possibility of the presence and guidance of angels, and 'framing out', directing attention away from these possibilities. Ritual demarcation, or framing, is here understood as a dynamic process...[switching] instantly between assuming the world to be a place where enchantment is possible—a feather in the street can be a sign from an angel—and the default assumption that a feather is just a feather from a bird" (Knibbe, 2020).

Thus, Utriainen develops a framework of sorts for understanding the ways Lived Religion, in the sense of regular engagement with supernatural phenomena, is embedded within daily life in secular society. Although often invisible to others, this engagement has a presence that is significant, empowering, and life-directing for the practitioners. Still, in much of the literature, Lived Religion is designated variously as a phenomenon, an approach, and a field of study—or all of these. In light of this complexity, I add to those conceptualizations with one of my own: Lived Religion, as observed here in Bogotá with this study's communities of analysis, pertains to a deliberate and/or opportune seeking of purpose in literally everything and not just the *idea* of [a] God; albeit inconsistently, with occasional uncertainty, despair, and impracticality at times, to the *practitioner*. Hence, it comprises a "Religious Quixotism," a way of life devoid of a sacred text that does not take perceived absurdity into account. It is *lived* as we live, with seasons. Just as the protagonist in *Don Quixote*, these religious *quixotistas* envision

a world and seek it when the moment (or need) strikes. I should also offer [my] views on the “craft and objectives of the study of Lived Religion and what it involves and achieves” (Knibbe, 2020).

As mentioned earlier, “any kind” of religious engagement is essentially multidimensional; yet, I add that “exile milieus” (Ashcroft 2006, 441) add a unique feeling to these dimensions, especially as seen in practitioners of the religions addressed in this research.

Operationalized *Plight* and the Cityscape: Deathworlds and the Subaltern in Bogotá

The previously discussed settings for this study merit analysis of how those areas became the transient sites of liminality and social oppression complemented by spiritual liberation that they most certainly are. The works of Enciso, Mbembe, and Rueda Garcia spotlight various considerations relevant to the understanding of these environs and the communities that inhabit them.

In what capacity has the Colombian government refused to provide structure to previously identified “informal settlements” in the *afueras* of Bogotá in the name of Community Health as juxtaposed with subalternism? How has the creation of a Tolerance Zone in Bogotá affected the prospects of life and death for its inhabitants (Enciso, n.d.)?

As it seems, “nearly everywhere the political order is reconstituting itself as a form of organization for death” and instituting a system of *othering* (Mbembe 2019, 7). Mbembe’s commentary on political violence in the Global South offers some insightful answers to these questions and many others, as he proposes that

war (in the name of the sovereign state which deploys means to decide who lives and who dies) and race (as a by-product of Empire) are the “privileged sacraments” and overall causes of said violence (Mbembe 2019, 66). This work is grounded in Mbembe’s experiences with Apartheid, but it extends beyond to other realms, notably, of the Global South; where, war and race have been most clearly established as “privileged sacraments” (Mbembe, 2019).

While Mbembe does not venture into the urban perils of Latin America in *Necropolitics*, Structural Violence as exacted on *undesirables* (in this case, migrants of color) in the sprawling cityscape of Bogotá surely constitutes (and creates) a very real example of what he refers to as *Deathworlds*. All of this is relevant to understanding how urban phenomena contribute to the conditions that bring to life various forms of religiosity/spirituality and practices/rituals of resistance in diasporic/co-ethnic (and, this research argues, transnational) communities.

“[Each] instrument of labor... has a price. As a property, he or she has a value. His or her labor is needed and used...Just like the [plantation] slave, the laborer is kept alive but in a state of injury, that is with low wages and precarious, unhygienic living conditions. Just as a slave's humanity is dissolved having been inflicted with both mental and bodily pain, so too daily wage earners suffer from intense cruelty and profanity whose life is possessed by the master” (Mbembe 2003, 39).

As per research conducted within various contexts of this study, Bogotá’s lower strata communities exhibit milieus of notable comparison. Enciso’s treatise on Santa Fe evokes a deeper discourse on how oppression is *spoken* within the confines of Deathworlds and subalternism (interestingly without ever having mentioned either term). Still, I find it useful to apply these to literature on the historical and current state of underdevelopment in the cityscape of Bogotá from Enciso and a detailed study by Universidad de los Andes by Rueda-Garcia.

In the 1950's, "Operación Colombia," whereby urban industrial development and agricultural modernization took predominance, resulted in the dissolution of traditional rural society and massive immigration to urban environs. With political violence, the looming threat of organized crime, and the more recent increase in the rates of forced displacement becoming additional factors in the migration process, forces of spatial concentration became even more clearly evident than in former periods (Rueda-Garcia n.d., 1). Within the national context, Bogotá has always shown an accelerated urban growth rate and the dynamics of unplanned growth (notably in areas along the city limits, as opposed to its upper strata areas) have been characterized by an acute growth in housing; which has not been properly followed by a proportional increase in infrastructure, generating a situation of a marked imbalance between the population and educational, health and recreational services (Rueda-Garcia n.d., 3); as seen in various scenarios recounted by Mbembe in his perennial work.

This influx, and its negative impacts on living conditions in the city fostered a bleak phenomenon of low-income tenement housing (devoid of visible social and urban homogeneity) in Bogotá, which originated in illegal processes of urban subdivision that took place in the peripheral areas of the city. The majority of the inner-city slums are concentrated in two *localidades* (Santa Fe and, more specifically, Los Mártires), in which the most important activity is not that of housing. "The lack of public services such as water, sewerage and electricity, and the absence of education and health care, are translated into a precarious environment" (Rueda-Garcia n.d., 8) for these settlements with illegal origins in

their first stages of development. Those illegal/unmonitored origins engendered the dilemmas (or rather Deathworlds) of today.

In these zones, tenement houses in bad conditions co-exist with sectors that mix housing with illicit activities. The pronounced isolation in which these people live, given the evident deficiencies in the urban transport system, or just the distance that some people have to travel every day to reach their work, the poor conditions of public services, and education, the difficulties in gaining stable and qualified work and the high levels of violence compared with the rest of the city, generate patterns of shared needs among the inhabitants of these depressed areas (Rueda-Garcia n.d., 10). That shared need also appears to produce a collective consciousness of suffering among residents.

As previously stated, these degraded zones of the city are characterized by the informality of the settlements' founding. As such, the majority of residents from other areas understand these neighborhoods to be spontaneous settlements that do not fulfill most of the urban rules, and which concentrate migrant and poor populations. This informality includes some social and physical characteristics that go against the existing order in other parts of the city. Delinquency, participation in informal work, low levels of education, and deficiencies in sanitary conditions are directly associated with the people that live in these neighborhoods, who are blamed to a large extent for their situation of poverty (Rueda-Garcia n.d., 11).

CHAPTER IV: METHODOLOGY

“Calle Luna, Calle Sol”

Herein discussed are the ethnographic methods applied in this study, which comprise a truly eclectic arrangement; one that reflects the “unkempt eclecticism,” highly representative of this study’s settings and its participants. The theoretical approaches for this study involve facets of Lifeworlds (a miscellany of physical experiences, surroundings, activities, and contacts that make up an individual’s world) and Diasporic Imaginaries (it should also be noted here that there is great potential for applications of Africana Phenomenology in future extensions of this study). Similarly, this study’s practical approach of choice, Street Phenomenology “Go Alongs,” seemingly yields both subtle and stark dimensions of analysis from Morello’s *Enchanted Modernity*, Ammerman’s *Lived Religion*, and Quayson’s *Genealogical “Accountances.”* Yet, while the intersections of these diverse approaches alone present an array of peculiar questions, my descriptions of each appear to also highlight varying notions of tenebrosity and luminosity as they apply to the physical and metaphysical environs that encompass this study as well as its *moving* moments of encounter under flickering street lights.

Lifeworld Crossings in Street Phenomenology

As Husserl would put it, the [transcendental] phenomenological approach may be defined initially as the study of structures of experience, or consciousness and accordingly, it has maintained a broad influence on established qualitative and interpretative perspectives. Founded in the work of German philosophers in the

late 19th and early 20th Centuries, it offers challenges in both understanding and practice (Schmidt, 2005). These stem, in part, from the requirement of the researcher to actively seek personal and deep meaning from those who are studied; and from the embedded requirement to acknowledge researcher influence and involvement in the research process. In this case, and as mentioned before, I as the researcher have [well before now] maintained a veritable interest in this topic and hence my influence on this phenomenological process is welcomed if not, in fact, *needed*; especially as it pertains to places of personal significance (to both the subject and myself since my time in this city has availed me such experiences before this research was conceived).

Yet Street Phenomenology goes beyond descriptions of *forms* of conscious experiences. Humanist Geographer Relph's concept of "Perceptual Space" posits that human movements orientate a living environment that is "differentiated into places of special personal significance; including not only actual places but imagined and remembered ones as well" (Kusenbach 2003, 456). This is useful to point out in various *localidades* of Bogotá as each is distinct in their respective (and subjective) cultural "coordinates" that describe the structures of these varied, yet connected, lifeworlds. The role of environment and the meaning of place in everyday lived experiences is valuable to this research.

Insofar that this study seeks to contribute to a better phenomenological understanding of how groups and individuals comprehend and engage their physical and social environments in everyday life as it applies to lived religion, Street Phenomenology is implemented as a unique ethnographic research tool

that brings to life more of the transcendent and reflexive aspects of experiences as “lived” in a place. According to Kusenbach, “Go Alongs” are particularly suited to explore:

- Environmental Perception (participants’ attitudes/stances/positions on places/spaces of relevance)
- Spatial Practices (the kinds of practices engaged in by whom, how often, and for what purposes in a place/space of relevance)
- Biographies (personal accounts lived and told by the participant(s))
- Social Architecture (range of desired social behaviors in pursuit of a set of goals)
- Social Realms (organizations, both formal and informal; networks of individuals oriented to each other and/or a social goal; social groups unified by features of consciousness or existential circumstance)

It is possible to *conduct* cultural phenomenology at differing levels of experiential specificity (Katz, 2003) and in this research, the interactional phenomena between healer and patient (and ethnographer) and its material efficacy and the phenomenon related to the collective memory and identity of a group are examined. Since this study is concerned with the nature of a shared social reality, or at least one of multiple contexts, it is appropriate that ontology takes its proper place in the research paradigm. By examining the coming together of uneven and differently located practitioners who understand themselves to be connected religiously and transnationally, I ask how these connections are envisioned and experienced. What sentiments, modes of feeling, perceiving, and ontological reformulations of religious practice are enabled, halted, and transformed by these connections?

It is by virtue of this question that the Lifeworlds approach also has its place in this research. Conceptualizing experiences through the eyes of the living practitioner is paramount to understanding the changes and/or extensions of tradition undertaken as a result of movement. This involves presenting interview results as they are told, not devoid of elements of Magical Realism which are duly expected to *appear*. Hence, the five interviews mentioned below will comprise deep, phenomenologically personal installments on anthropologically valuable experiences.

Attempting to portray the world as viewed by the subject is critical to this particular type of research, especially when analyzing the strategies of placemaking for migrants within the realm of urban conflict. Their experiences must be analyzed through their experiences. Additionally, this research expects to shed light on a novel form of Khaldun's *asabiyyah* (social solidarity with an emphasis on group consciousness) within this marginalized group while highlighting the intersectionality of conflict and survival; ultimately building upon the ideas of Simmel and Coser, as a derivation of Marx, on Conflict Theory, which holds that any form of unity is an undeniable result of conflict (Coser, 1957). There are required antagonisms in urban lives of the interlocutors in this study and the societal rationales for their resulting compartmentalization "revolve precisely around their [antagonistic] connection" (Simmel, 2020).

Journeys Matter

Movement played a continuous role in this study and it became starkly evident from informal interviews that freedom of movement does not denote freedom of

worship let alone the pursuit of Ashé. Quayson's Postcolonial discourses on diasporic imaginaries found their way into these understandings via informal interviews that revealed an apparent nostalgia for a lost space and the importance of stories of "traversal, disembarkation, and interaction with the bureaucratic apparatus." Therefore, the approach to dialectically understanding the spirituality relevant to this study requires an understanding of the actual stories of travel, arrival, visa processes, and any accounts of suffering along the way as juxtaposed with origin (Quayson, 2014). "I suffered, therefore I am..."

It is clear that these stories, what Quayson specifically refers to as "Genealogical Accountances," (Quayson, 2014) exist as a surveilling mechanism of sorts: narratives provide protection, protection fashions the enclave. For these reasons, in the formalized semi-structured interviews conducted for this study, very little of spirituality was overtly discussed. Rather, the distinct phenomenology of travel narratives and any suffering involved was applied and elucidated the interlocutors' spirituality with more *pureza* and *naturaleza*, than I could have imagined.

Enchanted Modernity and/is/or/was Lived Religion [?]

Morello's Enchanted Modernity, as with Ammerman's Lived Religion, can be understood invariably as both a theoretical and practical anthropological approach insofar that it presents distinct features to look for and, from which, a direction to proceed. The dimensions described in Ammerman's work that are of particular interest to this study are: emotion, aesthetics, embodiment and narrative. These "rhythms" are to be considered and interpreted, collectively and

organically [respectively], rather than divided and followed independently in this study. Looking for and acknowledging these dimensions through the lens of “social practice” provides a start.

Yet the challenge lies in how to locate the *spiritual* dimension within these and articulate how it is connected to and how it informs them. For the sake of this study, Ammerman’s spiritual identifications of the *entangled* and the *established* stand as signposts for my emic and etic observations. Yet the entangled seems to fit more within Morello’s treatise on Latin American spirituality and its eclectic antithesis to dominant [religious] culture. Where I see that unkempt eclecticism, that entangled spirituality is undoubtedly near.

Alter+Natives in Qualitative Analysis

While there are several religious experiences that sparked preliminary interest for this study and opting for a non-denominational, non-congregational strategy/approach was at first thought ideal for capturing a broader range of migratory religious experiences, the decision to focus only on the two aforementioned faiths appears to make the most ethnographical sense (given their prevalence in the target communities and in the communities to which I had the most access). However, along those same lines, interview participants represent a diverse array of ethnic/racial affiliations, gender, age, social status/position, and interest. Hence, broadening the anthropological scope of this qualitative research without compromising specificity.

Given the phenomenological nature of the questions with which this study is concerned, several preliminary informal and formalized semi-structured

interviews (three for each participant) with a diverse set of individuals from various levels of experience were conducted. Being that these semi-structured interviews were conducted in a “Go Along” fashion, they manifested an ineffable journey of sorts; with both expected and unexpected courses of direction, destination, and affirmation.

- Leo Pérez (Cuba), Actor/Dance Instructor, *Santero*
- Charlotte Bernal (Cuba), LGBTQIA+ Activist, *Santera*
- Gustavo Mosquera (Colombia), *Babalawo/Activist/Santero*
- Yara Uzcategui (Venezuela), LGBTQIA+ Activist, *Santera+Marialioncera*
- Angel Marin (Venezuela), *Marialioncero*

As touched upon earlier, ethnography (and film) have often intruded on important elements of secrecy and revelation by providing glimpses into secret initiations and rituals, a dynamic which I do not intend to reproduce here. Conversely, this study opts to respect Santería’s protection of ritual spaces by focusing on moments that non-initiated people would be allowed to access (Beliso-De Jesus, 2015).

The interlocutors for this study were selected based on their perceived knowledge of the various communities they represent (although not necessarily *leaders* of said communities) along with the most instinctive of criteria: happenstance. Indeed, many scholars like Beliso De-Jesus who study Santería and other Africa-derived religions often find themselves, in one form or another, as (or becoming) practitioners or being in their vicinity at least, which was precisely the case for this study and, according to some, a slippery anthropological slope may have been at play here. However, impartiality, neutrality, and objectivity, once imbued with great institutional authority within

anthropological inquiry, are now seemingly out-of-date artefacts of the past and that “social analysis must now grapple with the realization that its objects of analysis are also analyzing subjects who critically interrogate ethnographers” (Belis-De Jesus 2015, 26). I would add that the positions of researcher and interlocutor both *infect* and affect—haunting, negotiating, and penetrating in ways that are never fixed or without power. So, we must hold in tension the desire to know and the desire to represent.

Intro6uction¹⁶

“Yo vengo de todas partes, y hacia todas partes voy...” This aforementioned excerpt (translated as: “I come from everywhere, and everywhere I am going...”) from the poem, *Yo Soy un Hombre Sincero*, by Cuban poet José Martí speaks volumes to my own personal story as well as those of the individuals and communities represented throughout this study. Yet, the story of Paulina Pedroso, the Afro-Cuban woman who physically defended and spiritually nurtured Martí during the most important, and perilous, years of his life, may deem more appropriate; for very few know who she was (Hill, 2021). It can be said, in fact, that the Divine Feminine, while never sufficiently acknowledged or made visible in such discourses, is always in our midst, presenting and protecting; in one form, lifetime, dimension, or another.

This has definitely been the case for my journey. For it is in the lesser known and rarely seen that much more becomes evident to the astute observer; at least in the style of the writings I have chosen to emulate in this collection of memories, visions, and hopes entitled: *La.muestra/nnuestra*. The pun on the letters M/N in the title underscores a theme of duality of meaning in everything (*la muestra*, indicating the revealing of something that is ours, *la nuestra*); *Ejiwapo*, or the twoness of everything in nature, is also a foundational Yoruba belief. Appropriately so, this work reciprocates the concepts of *la muestra* and *la nuestra*

¹⁶ The number 16 is significant in Yoruba divination ceremonies as 16 cowrie shells are used by the diviner to read the spiritual prospect(s) of the consultant. Here, in the title of this section (and a following one, entitled Discuss¹⁶ⁿ) the number 16 is used to accentuate this purpose.

continuously, emphasizing the everpresent influence of the unseen in the Magical Realism traditions of not only Gabriel Garcia Márquez, but AfroLatinX writers such as Manuel Zapata Olivella, and Mayra Santos-Febres who all too often fall silent under what Vanessa K. Valdés refers to in her comprehensive work on diasporic curator Arturo Schomburg as the “conspiracy of silence” (Valdés, 2017).

Yet they, along with countless others, have never been silent. In the narratives that follow, Magical Realism and the sprinkling of Spanish and West African parlance in English passages, presented as a series of letters to the reader, have a strategic purpose in creating alternate means to elucidate a existentially liminal plan at work in collective and individual psyches, dreams, and actions. In tracing these discoveries of ancestral *huellas* in the everyday experiences of Lived Religion, the reader and this study’s participants come closer to comprehending the significance of one of life’s confounding anomalies, of which Rushdie reminds us: Is the past *home* and the present *foreign* or is the past *foreign* and the present *home* (Rushdie, 1991)?

La.muestra/nnuestra illustrates this in a highly Santos-Febres-esque line, mentioned in earlier in this paper: “For the longest time, I have been a follower of a disguised faith.” The mystic (and sometimes abstract) language used to convey the presence of something guiding us that we cannot see or understand, as seen in this work, is also a characteristic of other AfroLatinX poets like Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel. My interest, as with Schomburg, in the immutable fixture of Diaspora is clearly evident in these writings as well. The importance of curating our subconscious and religious connections to Africa, albeit an imagined one, and the

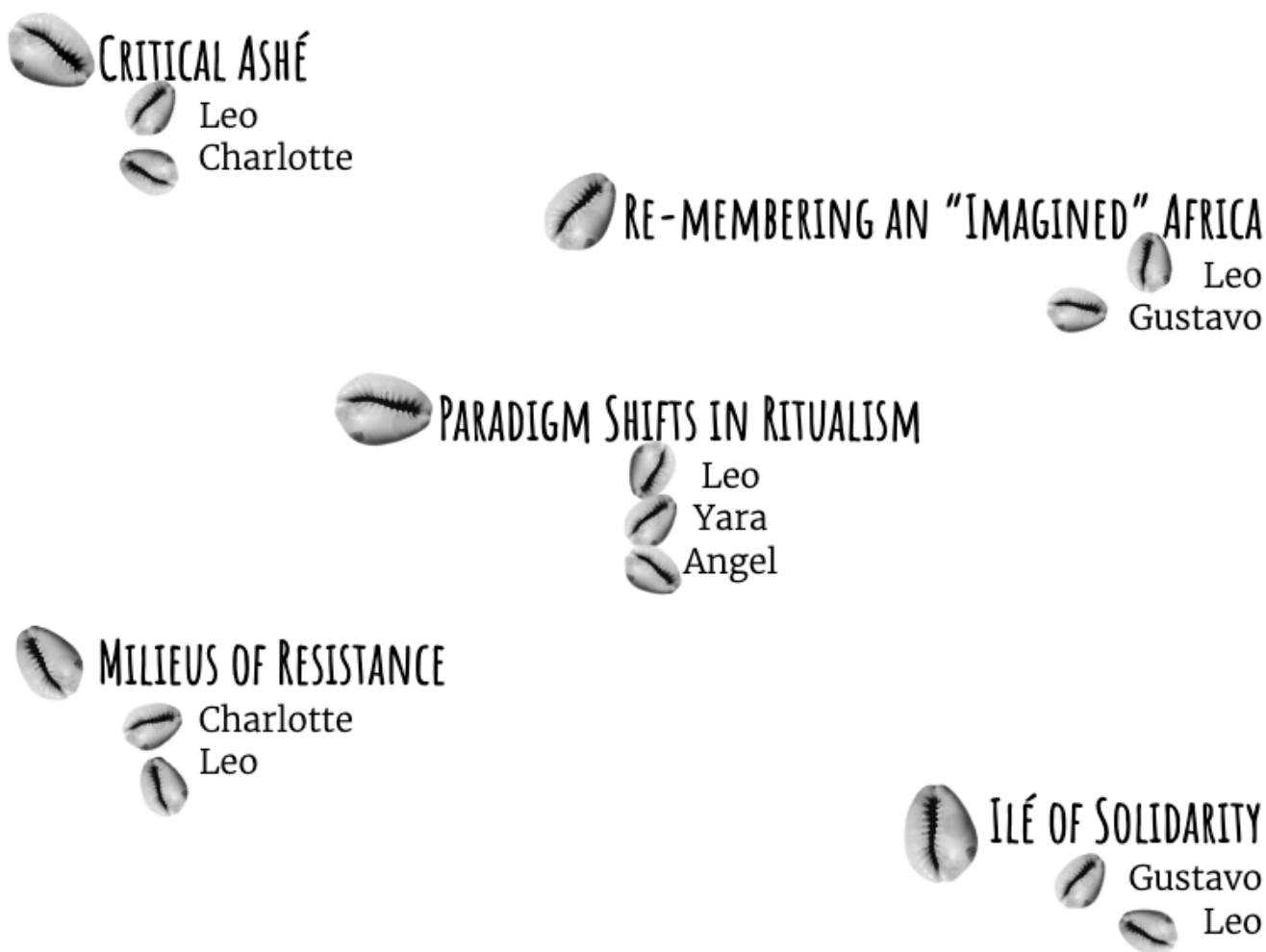
Americas, as seen in the works of Jose Maria Torres Caicedo and Laurel is paramount to this project as well; despite, as previously posited by Rushdie, being obliged to “deal in broken mirrors...[whose] shards of memory acquire greater resonance because they are *remains*” (Rushdie 2006, 429).

These narratives of a particular strain of *encanto* are all based on factual events as experienced and recounted by the interlocutors turned Griots (storytellers) that are connected within a web of several common themes: dreams, ancestralism, the Divine Feminine, Yoruba belief systems and traditions, love vs. lust, symbolic interactionism, subalternism, and the notion of a Divine Trinity (of varying kinds). For each participant this work can better be considered a spiritual exhibition of a traveler, clad in whispers of the ancestors, who defiantly rejects the label of Other. Here in this collection of fragments, I combine these stories to share a powerful, albeit unfinished, diaspora narrative.

Employing the epistolary tradition, the following is a *bembe* of factual re-memberances, roots, and *routes* that light five distinct “paths” of the ontological *Ilé* of Lived Religion for the five interlocutors who contributed deeply to this study.¹⁷ Each of these five paths constitute a theme of inquiry, to which [a total of] eleven correspondences “written in the voices” of the aforementioned participants are applied; as based on data gathered from each phenomenological/”Go Along” interview:

¹⁷ This study’s ethnographic encounters saw the concept of Bembe deployed numerous times. “Bembe” is a Yoruba term referring to an intermittent religious festival that involved the mingling of different ethnic groups for the sake of establishing cooperation and solidarity whilst enslaved at Cuba’s sugar and coffee plantations. Yet other meanings have come to apply as well, notably a symbol of solidarity.

Table 1: “El Oráculo:” As in any Diloggun (the reading of a santero/a candidate by a Babalawo to reveal his/her Orisha; also known as *oráculo* or oracle) the image above has 16 cowrie shells, with each indicating a distinct topic and/or interlocutor of this study.



La[s] Isla[s] Que Se Repite[n]¹⁸

Critical Ashé

The letters included in this section address perceptions of Critical Spirituality, or what I have reframed as Critical Ashé, by reenacting (and re-membering) the role of Griot to confront questions on group origin, structure, promise, rites, inter/intra-group relations, innovations, and even contradictions insofar that

¹⁸ Adapted from title of Antonio Benítez Rojo's *La Isla que Se Repite: El Caribe y la Perspectiva Posmoderna*.

they provide a uniquely holistic analysis on Lived Religion as experienced within the enclaves involved with this study.

LEO

ZONA G, BOGOTÁ, 1999:

After only a few weeks, the Rosales Plaza Hotel almost felt like a Panopticon. Constant surveillance that I may or may not have been aware of, persisted. I am a racial, not to mention artistic, anomaly to the curious gaze of the majority culture here in the north of Bogotá. And without access to my *santos*, this has truly been a lonely time. While I have my Eleggua (the Orisha with which everything begins and ends), made of *caracoles* to signify Ayé (the earth of living things and, via my *Madrina*'s interpretation, "traveling grace") I do not have the company of the others; notably Oshun. Even so, I feel I am supposed to be here.

Yet somehow, strangely, I would find the slightest of refuge in a corner *cafe/tienda* where I like to sit alone and think, watch passersby, and try to glean some inspiration for potential castings. Last week, on one particularly inclement day, I saw an elderly woman crossing the street and, without knowing why, I immediately focused my sight on her like a laser. I examined her each and every detail, from her sophisticated, yet *humilde*, choice of dress to her Indigenous (or possibly Zambo) profile. She brought to mind the Castas Paintings. She did not look familiar but she definitely *felt* familiar. My mind began to reel madly through a wormhole of memory until it stopped abruptly...Nuria!...My *Madrina*.

I truly miss her...and at this moment she would have told me to go find a *Santero* family for the time being. I knew of other Lucumí groups around Bogotá but having never had time to approach them, I often found myself alone in my hotel room on various nights or early mornings, crooning *cantos* to the Orishas. The housekeeping lady must have thought of me as a foul human being for the plates of food and glasses of water I left in the bathroom and in various other places [for my ancestors]. Just like my religion...and just like my ancestors who survived the Middle Passage and the horrors to come, I had been resilient. They *breathe* through me when I cannot. But it was starting to become clear that this would not work for long...

One day I saw another woman that caught my eye. She was wearing all white with the unmistakable gold and amber *collares* of Ochum around her neck. I greeted her in Yoruba and she responded appropriately, albeit not to my surprise. She was a mulatta from Buenaventura who was living and studying here. Peculiarly, she seemed to have a myriad of spiritual interests given the other accessories she had chosen for that day: a pentagram pendant, earrings of mini-statues that may have been Tibisay or one of the many avatars of Pomba Gira, and a golden bracelet composed of Amarna Period Ankhs; all of which I loved aesthetically, while nonetheless eyeing her suspiciously.

Later, I would find out that *my* religion for her was just another plume in her storied spiritual cap. She followed it in ways she saw fit and made changes that meant nothing to the transcendental community of La Regla de Ocha, in my opinion. The *jineterismo* of my religion... Nevertheless, she seemed to know basic

Yoruba and the wisdom of various Patakí and that has to stand for something!
Sometimes I wonder why I am so beholden to traditions that other *aceres*
apparently are not? All I know is, my genesis was organic.

This brings to mind the Patakí in which Oshun, after being mistreated morally
and [I would say] spiritually by her lover Shangó, decided to court his brother
Abeyi in an act of revenge. Upon finding out, Shangó interrogated Abeyi, who
responded: “*Hermano*, I have given Oshun what you were incapable of giving Her.
You have maltreated and embarrassed Her for which She is now tired; She has rid
Herself of you. With me, She is happy and honored as the *Iyalode* She is.”

I will not give in to the whims of society, Oshun. Never.

CHARLOTTE
CHAPINERO, BOGOTÁ, 2021:

Contradictions abound, indeed.
How can a fellow *santera* tell me what I felt when I felt it? And I, her?
I am a contradiction to others and so is my religion.

But *perceived* contradictions do not concern me...
Rumors abound as well.
Rumors of my *brujería*.

...of holding others' hands to snatch away their Ashé.

Hearing this nonsense saddens me.
Condemned to roam amongst the dead, like my Orisha: Oya.
To say that they fear what they do not know is cliché; but ever so true.

Nevertheless, WE have a purpose.

The detractors have a purpose, too.

And, I have a legion of *ahijadas* behind me.

Who, although may have arrived to my aegis as “lost boys,” have found solace in the Ashé this way of life brings. Now they are *brujas* in their own right with their own *ahijadas*. You see, we learned to multiply without the ability to do so. And I am still the oracle who has learned to be no one.

STILL...some say I am a charlatan,
Counter mapping my own faith for personal gain.

Eggún remain our ancestral guides here where the terrain *still* matters.
A trans person in a trance must look ridiculous to the Other's *other*.
Misunderstandings abound in this city.
Even Shangó crossdressed once.
We are not that different.
Ashé.. .

Re-membering an “Imagined” Africa

The following “passages” evoke visions of an irrevocably *new* African imaginary on behalf of the participants of this study and their respective counterparts while helping to understand how diaspora has been responsible for the innovative adaptations that engender such philosophies. Who/What is African to the interlocutors, as they see it? Who/What is indigenous? How do processes of reconnecting lost “body parts” (re-memberment) actually function and *look* in spheres of daily life? What role has the Imperial Gaze enacted on these processes? If and why is cultural stealth still a necessity for this strain of Africanization?

LEO

CAYO HUESO, LA HABANA, 1997:

Whether if it was my aunt that brought me on that tottering train to Havana from Songo La Maya as a child on the 30th of August and allowed me to remain

there in school for a few months as an *oyente*, or the teacher that convinced my mother to let me stay there for the remainder of my *primaria* and *bachillerato* years due to my unique set of talents; there has always been a wise/wizened woman in my midst; guiding me and opening doors. Albeit alongside my *santos*, of course. Yet none of those women match that of Nuria, my *Madrina*...

One of the main pillars of the Yoruba religion, as we see it here, is to reconstruct a lost family. To provide parental love where there are no physical parents present. And, in this religiosity, if one feels it, then one *is*. As an aspiring actor, my initial search for the elusive co-occurrence of freedom and a sense of belonging led me to Heron Jimmy Cuestas, a would-be-friend who showed me the beauty of the Lucumí religion. I feel that *he* felt that he resembled Manolo from Scarface, only with Orisha *collares* around his neck. Quickly becoming obsessed with their “imaginative strength,” and the potential to reclaim that which I had been robbed of by waves (specifically Atlantic waves) of history, I found myself not only wearing but actually making my own *collares* of various Orishas and donning them proudly. Yet, in retrospect, I might have done so quite excessively. My neck would be completely covered in them (almost up to my chin!), as if I were a distant relative of Karen in Thailand or Masaai in Kenya. I felt pride when wearing them, as if my Afritude suddenly had more credibility and substance but I also recall arriving late for some castings for my *collares*’ sake. Putting them on in the mornings was a complicated, but pleasurable and all too necessary (for me at that time), task. Understandably so, I placed a tremendous amount of importance on them, but later I would learn that these objects are an exceptionally small part of

being a *Santero*. Still, back then it came as a surprise to discover that this way of life had been around me the entire time in Havana but I never once perceived it to be there. I saw the *collares* and people in white of course, but I also did not see them. It all depended on where I *stood*, not just where I was.

Then came that fateful trip with Cuestas to Matanzas to confront a [very] white, and soon-to-be *Padrino* that would give me my first Eleggua, made from coco. He gave it to me with such faith and adoration that I would end up replicating that symbolic interactionism with the object itself. This coco really was Eleggua, to me. I prayed to it often (and it truly worked some what I could now call miracles, helping me even to avoid military service and to secure various “longshot” casting opportunities) and I remained steadfast in my faith; so long as I had that coco of Eleggua physically with me. I actually felt invincible when holding it. Nevertheless, I was still not aware that this was, and is, a “philosophy of life” and I should proceed to complete the path of being a *Santero* should I want to solidify my reclaiming process. But, as a *negro* in search of his African past, I (as did many others) surely made errors. Still, at that moment, I felt I belonged to something grand. Nothing else really mattered. My Lost City appeared closer than before.

All of this would change or, rather, “expand” at an opportune *tambor de Eleggua* in Havana. At the end of this particular function, as the room was clearing out, I fixed my sight on a woman sitting in the corner, completely dressed in white. She was dark, but bright, like me. I approached her to say hello and she quickly admonished me for coming too close as if I were about to touch her, which I surely was. She told me that she was in the middle of her *santo* process and could not be

touched. Even so, we had a jovial conversation and I ended it with a request (or better yet, warning) that I visit her frequently to converse more. To this day, I am still not sure why I wanted to so badly. The electricity of attraction, I suppose; but a spiritual kind of attraction. Despite having just met me, she kindly obliged and over time, my visits to her house increased with frequency until it became a daily routine. Nuria, whether she wanted to or not, became my mother.

She attended all of my acting events, even just the preliminary castings. Showed me how to cook properly, how to do *cantos* to the Orishas, and, of course, how to speak Yoruba. Many months later, I would ask that she initiate me as my *Madrina*. Which, again, she sincerely obliged. One time, when I called her, distraught for not having my Eleggua (made of coco) with me while preparing for a casting, she reproached me with a simple line: “Leo, Eleggua does not live there. Eleggua lives everywhere.”

A perpetual mystery surrounds us. Yet, I am not referring to the pejorative use of words like occult or *brujería* with intent to marginalize. But there truly is something around us. I knew it without knowing it. Nuria’s words left me wounded but with faith renewed.

GUSTAVO

EL RETÉN, BUENAVENTURA, 2010:

This way of life chose me and I, it.
The small pieces matter, and there is never a perfect fit.
Yoruba’s “*a-pa-ta*” came from Ptah.
They say Atlas and I respond, “He is Obatalá.”

If my blood is too diluted to be African then my spirit surely is not.

Another sister of Isis put Us back together as another Osiris,
A sempiternal thought.

We claim this because it is one of many birthrights and namesakes to which,
We have access,
In the faceoff of Spiritual Chess. Advantage: Babylon...
But We have already won.

As long as the rules are followed and sincerely respected (Ashé!),
The past that We created will never be neglected.

Paradigm Shifts in Ritualism

Ritual framing and perpetual *reframing*, along with an examination on its observed practicality in Lucumí and Maria Lionzan communities is recounted in this collection of letters; which seek *redress* to the following questions: How is authenticity defined for these communities? How is power developed and/or altered? How, if so, does ritual contradict itself?

LEO
FONTIBÓN, BOGOTÁ, 2021:

Today, Yemaya is on my mind. Yemaya is beautiful beyond words. I cannot explain how. One time, she came to me in a dream. Or in reality. What is the

difference?! The sensation of water splashing on my face awakened me to a spine-chilling sight. There in my cramped bedroom was an enormous figure that I squinted to perceive in the murky darkness. A resounding thump on the floor shook my gaze as more “water” splashed on my face. The thumping was rhythmically slow and painfully loud, as if it were my own heartbeat, amplified to a deadly decibel. I soon realized that it was my heartbeat. She was very tall and everything about her was dark, save the faint dazzle of blue and silver from her lower half. Moving slowly from side to side as if floating, her tail smashed against the floor once again to break my concentration. All I could hear was the deafening rhythm of her tail synchronized with my heart. BOOM, boom, pop...BOOM, boom, pop...over and over for what seemed like a dilated stanza of eternity.

The more I stared at her cryptic silhouette, the more I understood what was happening. I was frozen, but my mouth opened and I began to sing a *reza de salutación*:

“Agolona o e
Ye ilé ye lodo
Emi karabi ayé oni Awayó Yemayá o
Okuó iyale iyá ilú mao
Iyale omí yale ayaba omi o...”

No one doubts that this happened when I share it. Of course my Orisha is Oshun but others intercede on behalf of Oludumare from time to time. My stories give both the listener and myself a power that is manifest. Have I heard Orisha accounts that I do *not* believe? Yes, I have. There is a thread of truth in everything, but there are some who seek attention in the wrong way. Those who really know, know the difference.

YARA

USAQUÉN, BOGOTÁ, 2022:

Our *Santero* community's cornerstone is, in fact, Leo. The thespian yearnings that brought Leo here, brought him also to another "here and now;" with the latter being an *Ilé* of those whose identity has actually been nourished by their backdrop of exile. Messianic, his arrival has been for many, including me. The black *Viracocha* I once called him, to which he frowned...and then smiled. The night I met him, years ago, still stands as surreal as it did then...

In the violet haze of the dimly lit bar, his red buffalo hat and black silk shirt obscured his true form while simultaneously highlighting his ethereal presence, darting from table to table accompanied by the spindly yet elegant silhouette that would be Charlotte. The one I had originally come to see. As I beheld this curious specter, who appeared in that very instant to be the Opener of the Ways (*Eleggua*) in the flesh, I eventually made my way over to their reserved table to greet Charlotte and present myself to him. "Leo is a *Santero*," Charlotte told me almost immediately while inviting me to sit down, as if she knew I would need to know that. Later I would learn not only that Leo is truly much more than his religion, but that his religious journey has truly been much more than I could imagine. And that his imagined community had always included me in its fold.

He is genuine, but he has his shadows... of which we have indulged in at times. Yet that never clouded my view of what I am doing. The *Orishas* intermingled romantically, why should we mortals not be able to?

Ancient processions through the streets of Ifá,
Led me to a face from which I could not turn.
The ultimate prize, however, I would not earn.
Funny how history repeats itself,
But not for those who really know.
And for how our inhibitions were cast aside,
Who knew what seeds we'd knowingly sow.
Yet it quickly became clear to observers near and far,
That a book was being written.
A tale of a lost comet (him), rapt with a dwarf star (me).
Crossing space and time,
Alter dimensions revealing all that is sublime.
I orbit as you rotate, leaving all that is unsaid to fate.
Waking up in a state of confusion,
Only to be restored by the constellation in your face.
A tale for the millennia, of apparent nothingness.
Rather, the evidence of things not seen nonetheless.

ANGEL

CHAPINERO, BOGOTÁ, 2018:

My trek to this place, in fact, depended on many of those little statues. Rather, my aunt is the one who depended so heavily on them. I keep them around for her sake and for any extra help I believe they can offer. My aunt, who is the most clairvoyant of all of her sisters, says that she “heals in different directions, but only with ones that reaffirm [her] past.”

She continues, “No new *santos*, but rather, new ways to see, reach [and use] them. There seems to be a *santo* for everything now, but [she is] not with that crowd.” Border police in Cúcuta never broke them open, let alone touched them.

Our *humilde* home here is literally populated with *santos*: Tibisay, Maria Lionza, Guaicaipuro, Negro Felipe, Jose Gregorio, some Viking hero, various *Virgines*, and some that I cannot even name. There is a rusted crucifix on the wall above all of them. When my aunt’s friends enter, they greet these *santos* (sometimes with offerings); always ending with the sign of the Cross on their chests. I do the same. We tell ourselves that we are saving up for a pilgrimage to Yaracuy someday, but those savings never make it through a month.

No one finds us strange because all of us are just like us: *Venecos*. I hate that word but I am proud to be Venezuelan (and an occasional *santero*), despite everything.

Milieus of Resistance

Is resistance genuine if not acknowledged or felt by the one who clearly exhibits *huellas* of it? This study and the following letters submit that the answer is a resounding yes and *where* that resistance is found may be even more interesting. The *cartas* that follow evoke, appropriately so, a motley of perspectives and experiences regarding this question and more, such as: How does this resistance contribute to enclave building? How does this resistance juxtapose with the concept of trust in these communities? How do the marginalized *within* the marginalized resist inter/intra-group discord?

CHARLOTTE

SANTA FE, BOGOTÁ, 2002:

Diana and I are *comadres* of the street on the dodgy *esquinas* of Avenida Caracas in Santa Fe. Later, however, I wish that we would stand as frontline activists for the coruscating causes of a colorful multitude on those same corners, but the ecosystem of poverty in which we find ourselves is unrelenting and dreary; but not always. At 10:00, whether a.m. or p.m., on those crowded corners, with all of us baring the holes in our soles/souls, both Diana and I manage to keep it together. Makeup covers bruises, pride conceals pain, and laughter is just that. Occasional fights, thefts, and murders sprinkle short-lived sorrows on our days. There is never much time to be fearful or mourn. We *overstand* and *over-live* to overcome.

Diana wears prismatic bracelets and necklaces of an importance that I had previously instructed her on. I gave them to her with religious benefit in mind but, bereft of any dedication to that, she took a liking to them more for their stylish look and now applies her *own* meanings to them; even so, she reveres them spiritually from time to time as I do. For me, however, these more than adornments are as systematic and mandatory as drinking water. Powers, poverty, and possibilities are our daily fragrances and accessories...

I miss her...

My religion's *patakí* seem to always fit our realities (especially back then when we were flesh for sale); being transgender seemed not to matter. After all, Shangó (as I always say) had his opportune transition. My own transition began whilst I

was in Havana and continues years later, even now, as I still seek completion to my process; that is, if I am to live to see it. Death, for me, always hovers nearby, like an anxious waiter at an expensive restaurant, as Arundhati Roy (who I LOVE) wrote years ago. Even more so now due to my recent diagnosis. I would be remiss if I did not mention how, despite everything, Oya's winds spoke to me daily, dispatching assurance alongside that ever present prospect of death or worse. Which is what she is *supposed* to do.

How could I be so sure of her presence and what she meant for me? That is the secret. We never *really* know. Faith pushes us through, and makes things happen. Or better yet and simply put, if you know, you know; and that "know" can be different for everyone. My "know" was and still is propagated from my kaleidoscope of personal experience. Back then, I was flesh for sale. Now I *am* a movement.

With time, I grew to know that I needed those *toques* more than I had previously realized. Those drums and *cantos* feed my soul. Like those who go somewhere to worship every Sabbath but grow increasingly weary when they miss a Sabbath or two. This is true, as do I grow weary during extended absences from those precious invocations, that I must admit, may have me completely mistaken at times; as I mentioned before. My relationship with the Eggún, Oya, and my religion overall is a complicated one. It is precarious at times and does not function the way I always want it to. Yet, even in those moments, it *functions* as a means to an end of a particular kind. Perhaps my spirit is fractured and cannot

absorb Ashé the way it used to. Is that even possible? Still, I [perceive that I] get what I need from whatever it is I do in this regard...

Leo and I are because they were! We crossed paths in Havana...where our bodies really did become our archives: sites of oppression and sites for the undoing of the same. Yes, I quote Fanon to myself too. Yet, Leo and I do not agree on everything. Spats over ceremonial touches are not uncommon. Still, our *hermandad* through this beautiful religion keeps us stubbornly stuck to one another; and that would be forever.

I love him...

LEO

CHAPINERO, BOGOTÁ, 2023:

I found belonging in this community and put it at the center of my life. Everything I was involved in grew from there. Although the doors are wide open now, I do reminisce on the privacy our ceremonies once had. I suppose a new, and positive, thing would be the support we provide for each other (i.e., spiritual, political, financial and familial). Being that many of our community members are struggling, not just to survive but to have their voice actually heard and acknowledged, our community has stepped up where others have not and for that I am very proud and will continue to be. Ashé!

Ilé of Solidarity

Regarding the concept of antagonistic sociation and how it impacts group formation, intra/inter-group conflict, reciprocal relationships, and instances of

self-deterministic mobilization, the conundrum for articulating solidarity within varied scenarios of conflict is formidable as confounding variables abound. For instance, it is well-known that closely knit groups in which there exists a high frequency of interaction and high personality involvement of the members have a tendency to actually suppress conflict but how is all of this expressed in the communities of interest to this study?

GUSTAVO
CHAPINERO, BOGOTÁ, 2022:

I lead *Guijiros* and *Toques* at least twice a month and it bears on me at times. Our greater cause, however, is more important. Spiritual consultations with my *ahijados* (many of which are newly arrived from Venezuela) and various meetings with fellow *Babalawos* plaster my calendar. As I am hearing the drumming down the hall at this very moment, another *tema* comes to mind. Unbeknownst to most, *Congas* and *tambores* indeed constitute literature on a level that Western academia is yet to comprehend. Aside from manifesting as devices of communication with slaves in neighboring plantations, they are also the language deployed to communicate with, and as Tito Allen tells us in *El Hijo de Obatalá*, placate, Orishas and the Eggún:

*“Si me llevas como hermano pon tu mano en el tabor que el hijo de Obatalá
ya se contentó
Si me quieres como hermano pon tu mano en el tabor que el hijo de Obatalá
ya se contentó
El hijo de Obatalá ya se contentó
El hijo de Obatalá ya se contentó*

*Y el hijo de Obatalá y ese y ese soy yo
El hijo de Obatalá ya se contentó
Obatalá y Obatalá a el santo mayor cabeza de los demás
El hijo de Obatalá ya se contentó”*

I work for the government, but only a few (on both sides) know what I really do. Even fewer people know or understand what it is We really do, and that is: provide a space to which to belong in a place that does not offer anything of the like. What does the Pope do that I do not do? What does the Catholic church offer that We do not offer? Vilifiers critique but they look, nonetheless. Let them look, then. Perhaps it is a look of horror that stems from colonial memories...or guilt. Perhaps it is the same look they lend to the swollen feet and hands of the homeless man. Or maybe it is the same look they give to the scantily clad prostitute walking by at 9:00 in the morning. Still, they *look*.

LEO
USAQUÉN, BOGOTÁ, 2021:

We are because *they* are [not were].
The Ancestors remind us daily...
We fight each other and fight together.
Even so, we survived the Atlantic weather.

For all roads never really led to Rome.
Our Yoruba legacies were never forgotten,
Because of our foundation at Home.
Yet we are still learning to stand alone, here...

Carrier pigeons do not lie as all flock to Mean Streets to behold,
The beneficiaries of Ifá with a gaze of gold.
...And My sincerity is true.
Like blades of grass' dew.

So I try to understand while leading a majestic caravan,
To a place that only the future will understand.
From *Cabildo* memories and Palenques born under trees,
To insights gained that only Our brains perceive,
Obatalá has grown taller, amongst Us.

Now directing his attention back to that suspended chain
Hanging from a cloud.
And...with a glint of a smile, he begins his ascent,
Leaving us knowing more than what the Oracles had prophesied before.
Returning to the land that our ancestors bore.
Because, in our favor,
Olodumare will always calculate the score.
Ashé.

Discuss16n

Clearly, some questions remain unanswered. Bearing in mind that the above letters were fashioned from interviews that took place on busy street corners, in desolate alleyways, in front of countless graffiti murals, on moonlit rooftops surrounded by multitudes of feeding pigeons, in the backseats of taxi cabs in Bogotá's infamous traffic, in the boisterous (pun intended) bars of Chapinero, at guarded *Guijiros* and *Toques* (gatherings) in various practitioners' homes, and

philosophical domino tables at all hours of the day and night, one can begin to imagine how the interlocutors' stories took on a life of their own while simultaneously initiating me into a very personal space; forging that ever elusive "simultaneity of freedom and belonging" (Pöykkö 2016, 639) that they (and I) once sought and are possibly still seeking.

The *trans-latio* from oral to written form for the needs of analysis (and hence, reification) had me conflicted at times. Therefore, I strove to keep things as organic as possible in the creation of these letters: allowing myself to feel, see, and move how they feel, see, and move. To write about the people and *not* the ideas. To show that these individuals are valuable simply because they exist. This would require more than three formalized, semi-structured interviews, of course. A distinct lifestyle change would emerge in me after a certain point, one that I believe to have always had locked away in my subconscious. As mentioned earlier, the positions of researcher and interlocutor both *infect* and *affect* (respectively and vice-versa).

Sometimes potential danger and/or harsh critics lurked nearby. Other times it was a purely jovial, even magical encounter. There were also times in which I witnessed (and duly participated in) activities that made me not only *believe*, but feel re-membered to my own "lost city" in a very corporeal way. Has this been destiny or that which was nestled deep in my iceberg all along? The experiences expressed above, along with the ones I personally had throughout this study, resonated compellingly; leading me to not only better understand but to further question as well.

There are additional conclusions (some of which are related directly to the research questions addressed in the ensuing conclusion) uncovered during the *journey* manifested throughout this study that warrant further discussion:

- Non-traditional gender “shifts” in religious leadership are more evident in migrant communities in Bogotá than in its clearly defined *rolo* sectors. Similar shifts in sexuality and morality among *seguidores* are also more evident in these communities. This is most likely due to Bogotá’s large, but widely persecuted, LGBTQIA+ community. Accordingly, cis-women and LGBTQIA+ community members are visibly leading the varied trends towards individualized spiritualism with no sign of slowing down.
- Another tendency observed, specifically in Maria Lionzan circles, is that practitioners pursue their religions on their own terms as their own religious authorities. In all of the locales involved in this study, I found that mandatory religious rituals were seen to be hostile to the practice of self-discovery. The advent of technological means by which to worship has also contributed to this individualization. Moreover, there is continual framing in/out (as discussed earlier from Utriainen’s perspective) amongst these marginalized communities, especially in how and when supernatural interaction is occurring. Veneration is deployed when needed (more so, from my observations, in the cases of actual migrants) and is usually accompanied by a second, Western, religion. Having said that, the ever present pedestal upon which Catholicism is placed remains puzzling for me as an observer, insofar that it continues to dictate many religious proceedings for the target communities (i.e., Catholic Saints cannot be “received”

by a person as Orishas can). How resistant does resistance need to be? How Colonial do things need to remain for said practitioners?

- The foreign (and spiritual) “Promised Land” (in this case, Bogotá) is a pitiless wilderness (for these communities), through which to wander. The precariousness of the destino engenders the aforementioned “creative empowerments” that Said reminds us of. Discord breeds enclave building and hence, unity; albeit a fractured one at times.
- Questions of legitimacy from personal (and group) changes or extensions of tradition contribute to the splintering of the religion’s orthodox state. So is *macro* unity still feasible in terms of spiritual revolution?
- There is a valid critique here for the proverbial box of Exoticism that these practitioners find themselves in (whether by their own doing or not) insofar that it is seemingly preserving cultural tradition at the cost of political renewal. Authenticity, in this sense, breeds a staticness which denies the chance for a truly organic, changing culture. I have observed that many of the aforementioned practitioners that are breaking from the traditionalist view know and feel strongly about this and see their spirituality as a vehicle for social change just as much as they do their political affiliations.
- Traditionalists resist the homogenization of Africa in many of their talks of the Continent, religion, and heritage. Modernists have fallen susceptible to the tendency to homogenize Africa (as seen in Globalized Capitalism); which is something else, I argue, that adds angst to the traditionalists’ position.

- Despite my intense admiration for it, Street Phenomenology Go Alongs present issues at times, mainly being that the *emic* nature of this method may yield distortions (especially from an overzealous interlocutor). Furthermore, an important question remains from these interactions: Who can write as Other? My attempts to avoid the stereotyping romanticizations and sympathetic popularizations have been integritous and my interactions with the participants have been genuine and transparent, but I concede that there is a lingering doubt.
- Initiation requires elements of both the spiritual journey *and* the physical one. Traversing both paths via oral tradition with the community of initiates is a staple of these practitioners' proceedings. Initiation also necessitates the process of kinetic performance. "Drawing with the body" is one of the ultimate rituals of resistance evident in these communities; even more so because of its ability to bridge poles of opposition within the community. All of these interactions build solidarity, kinship, and ultimately, enclaves.
- Spiritual epistemologies shape belonging as does symbolic interactionism, more often than not, in how "divine companionship" is defined. In other words, the use of spiritual language and aesthetics are almost requirements for public validation, as observed in the target communities.

CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

“Ubuntu”¹⁹

The unpacking of these encounters will without a doubt endure far beyond the official submission of this research as the original research questions engendered a myriad of others. Nevertheless, those initial inquiries did reap some interesting revelations:

I. IF and HOW is [diasporic] religion operationalized in Bogotá’s migrant undercaste and HOW is it tied to *resistance* and *hope*?

Spirituality as understood through [particularly Afro-] diasporic religion in the target communities for this study is operationalized organically to such a degree that it is almost unidentifiable. It is merged with every facet of life and gives meaning and power to things that would otherwise not have it. Yet, this is not always the case as the essences that accompany the task of being human do not falter. Some practitioners [admittedly] only “deploy” their spirituality whilst observed by others. Some are devout but commit egregious acts when deemed necessary. Hope remains a revolutionary sentiment that, however, that all seem to manifest; perhaps because there is never a reason not to. The word “resistance” rarely comes up in the discussions with interlocutors, but it is clearly visible in their actions. Leading members of these communities do scramble to assemble strategies of recuperation for lost cultural heritage and overall acceptance. In fact, the subaltern scene, here, *has* to resist. Do they create religion where it seemingly does not exist? Yes. Have certain elements of these

¹⁹ Bantu in origin, the philosophical concept of Ubuntu is spoken as such in Yoruba circles to denote collective responsibility towards a collective humanity and/or good

practices been fetishized by some practitioners? Yes. These are all forms of a cultural and spiritual sortie against the majority culture in Bogotá, which has actively caused or passively allowed the marginalization of these beliefs, cultures and language.

II. Precisely, HOW have aspects of two uniquely syncretic, transnational, and diasporic religions, Santería Cubana/Lucumí/La Regla de Ocha *and* Maria Lionza/Santería Venezolana, been deployed and subsequently altered (or rather, extended) by migrant devotees in Bogotá and for what purpose(s)?

The changes that have taken place in these communities, [some of which may be] due to their *exilado* status, are questioned by some *seguidores* but nevertheless accepted by many. The reasons vary but seem to center on personal convenience and a modernist “that was then, this is now” approach to spirituality that younger devotees are ostensibly leading. The preservationists of the faith understandably struggle with this, but still acknowledge the social benefits to changes aligned with physical access, technological modifications, initiation rites, and worship styles. Still, there are rifts appearing that signal more changes to come that may ultimately usher traditional, communal Yoruba religious practices to their end in this particular location.

The New Forest School opened doors to several other research possibilities, three of which I plan to carry out at some point in the near future:

- Critical Feminist Spirituality: How does [occult] spiritualism impact Feminist social movements in Bogotá?
- Queer Theology in Santería: How does the transgender community

operationalize [various kinds of] Santería as both a spiritual means and socio-political end and vice-versa?

- Neo-Negritude in Santería: There is a Neo-Negritude movement occurring in these communities that goes beyond, and is perhaps even damaging to, Gilroy's Black Atlantic. It hinges upon the power of receiving an African ancestor (Eggún) through an *asiento* process (regardless of the candidate's ethnic and/or racial background). How does this increasingly popular phenomenon bring about a novel form of racial acknowledgement, understanding, and association (although it was rarely spoken as such in this particular study)?

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APPENDIX A

”Semi-Structured Interview Questions (16)”

- 1) ¿Cómo llegaste a este lugar?
- 2) ¿Cuál es el aporte del grupo a la comunidad? ¿Hay aportes originales (como nuevas prácticas o nuevos significados de tradiciones)?
- 3) ¿Cuáles son sus conceptos de salud-enfermedad-curación? ¿Cuál es su concepto de destino?
- 4) Tienen libertad o no de manejar la propia vida en la forma que quiera?
- 5) ¿Quién tiene poderes? ¿Se traspasan o se desarrollan? ¿Cómo se define si son auténticos poderes o imitación sin sustentación? ¿Se pueden perder? ¿Por qué?
- 6) ¿Cuáles son los valores y antivalores que predicán y los que de verdad practican?
- 7) ¿Qué es africano, qué es indígena, y qué es europeo en su ideología?
- 8) ¿Cuál es la estructura de los encuentros santeros (toques, güiros, etc.) en Bogotá? ¿Cómo son diferentes de los encuentros santeros que pasan en Cuba?
- 9) ¿Cuáles son las promesas y/o amenazas a sus seguidores?
- 10) ¿Cuál es la historia del origen de la comunidad santera en Bogotá?”
- 11) ¿Cómo se relacionan con otros grupos religiosos?
- 12) ¿Qué se muestra y qué se oculta a los curiosos?
- 13) ¿Las creencias son coherentes? Contradictorias? ¿Todos comparten las mismas?
- 14) ¿Hay coherencia entre lo que se predica y lo que se practica dentro y fuera de las ceremonias?
- 15) ¿Qué se espera cambiar o mejorar en los seguidores?
- 16) ¿Hay proselitismo para buscar más adeptos?

Fig.1: A list of the semi-structured interview questions discussed with each participant. As in any semi-structured interview, these questions served as a starting point while the aforementioned “Go Alongs” provided more opportunities for unexpected inquiries.

APPENDIX B

“Las Iyalodes”

Fig.2: “Las Iyalodes:” An artistic representation of a transcendent fusion of Maria Lionza with Ochum. This image displays several other *sincretismos* as well from Lucumí and Palo Monte traditions (Ghonem, 2022).



Appendix C

“Food for the Egún”

Fig 3: “Food for the Egún:” Offerings to the Ancestors in the home of one of the participants of this study, taken during a *Toque* [gathering] for Elegua (Lewis, 2022).



Appendix D

“Toques, Guijiros, and Cajónes”

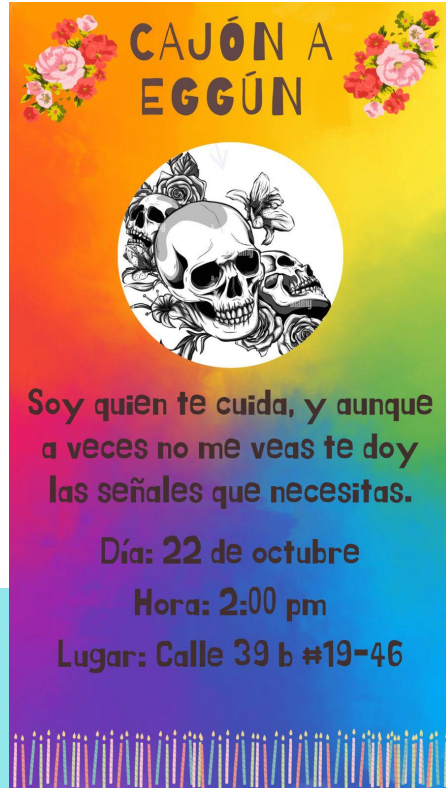
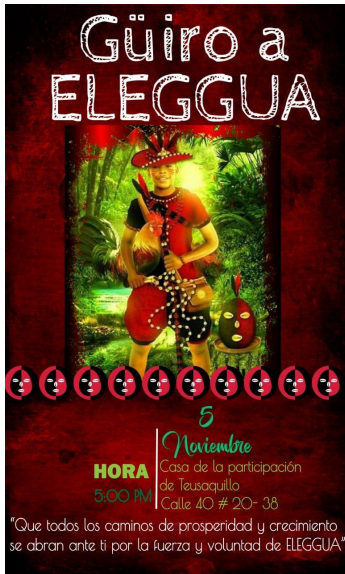


Fig.4: Invitations to various *Toques*, *Guijiros*, and *Cajónes* (social gatherings accompanied by live music and dance) for the *santero* community in the *localidad* of Chapinero, specifically, the neighborhood of Teusaquillo. These gatherings generate powerful spiritual energy among practitioners and visitors to these spaces (like me) via call/response group cadences and Yoruba *cantos*; which often induce trances of all kinds, a social and spiritual journey of sorts, as well as curious glares from passersby.

