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Black transgender subjecthood places many at the crux of multiple marginalizations and often thinking the self apart, unable to find space in a world that isn't built for those who are most marginalized. Between the persistent issues of colonialism and cisheterosexism Black transgender subjects are constantly being unraveled and subordinated, both ideologically and through violent repression. A journey towards cohesiveness, this thesis turns to Afro-Indigenous knowledge to forge paths towards wholeness for Black, Transgender, and Queer people living in the colonial state. Interviews with and theorizing alongside a non-binary, agender practitioner of Lucumí form the foundation for research. This Afro-Atlantic religion centers the Orisha, a pantheon of nature-based gods brought to the Americas by enslaved members of the Yoruba tribe of West Africa. Gender is unmade, unpacked, and reimagined in this project through collaboration with a practitioner in the Lucumí tradition, theorizing their own gender using the Afro-Indigenous knowledge housed within the tradition. Forging paths towards gender abolition, revolution, and gender craft place this thesis in conversation with de-colonial theory, anti-racism, Black feminism, transfeminism, and other bodies of anti-oppressive work. It makes meaningful interventions in the field of Afro-Atlantic Religious studies for Black Transgender and Queer practitioners and theorists, and important revelations for personal acts of gender craft through academic theorizing and divine community.

CALL ME BY YOUR NAME:
THE ORISHA AS MIRRORS FOR THE BLACKTRANSQUEER DIVINE

by

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION: SEEKING BLACKTRANSQUEER FAILURES

This is a project framed by failure, not to do, but to be, and what marvelous new paths we can uncover, renovate, and dust off when we ask the right questions about ourselves.

In *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), Jack Halberstam articulates failure as linked with death, finality, and queerness. He envisions queerness as failure to follow pre-destined paths towards capitalist success and biological reproduction. But rather than being an end, for Halberstam, failure represents alternative ways of being, and rebellious futures where utopic impossibilities can happen (Halberstam 3). This project is a presentation of my own failure; in this thesis I explore the possibilities presented by failure for myself and my interlocutor, KC, another BlackTransQueer¹ seeking alternative ways of being. They are a queer, agender Lucumí practitioner who utilizes their practice to theorize their own genderlessness. Together we think gender apart through the lens of Afro-Atlantic Spiritualities, specifically Lucumí². Through interviews with KC, my co-creator, I undertake the labor of situating gender within its white supremacist-colonial roots and seeking alternatives through the Black epistemologies housed within the theology of Lucumí. I pull from the interview process, texts that explore Lucumí traditions, and an advisor, Dr. Daniel Coleman, who is a practitioner and source of knowledge within this thesis.

¹ I use **BlackTransQueer** as a singular but complicated identity category within this project to articulate myself as whole, rather than the scattered identification that the separate identities of “Black”, “Transgender”, and “Queer” offer people in my particular subject position. I see the use of this term as a suturing of myself in the midst of the dispossession of colonialism/slavery, which I discuss later.

² **Lucumí** is a spiritual tradition originating in Cuba based on the worship of the Orisha, the Orisha made the journey across the Atlantic Ocean through the bodies and memories of the enslaved Yoruba people who eventually spread their truth across the Americas.

For me, this project's stakes are two-fold: as a scholar of Black and Transgender studies I am fascinated by the possibility founded in African(-American) epistemologies for Black genders (or the abolition of gender). As a Black Trans believer, I am thrilled by the possibility of entering an Orisha-centered tradition and seeing my BlackTransQueer self reflected in divine community. This project serves as an exploration of that dual desire, to engage with the knowledge of the Orisha and practitioners spiritually and academically. In this body of work, I am seeking ways to articulate my transgender self using the gender theorization of a collaborator, working through the knowledge of Lucumí. I explore ungendering, genderlessness, Black genders, and gender craft all while contending with the power of colonialism, slavery, and dehumanization. From gender failure to gender rebel, I begin by mapping my journey to this body of work; how I arrived at BlackTransQueer for myself.

I'd failed at being a girl for the majority of my childhood, and then continuously failed at womanhood afterwards. I loved dresses but also loved getting dirty; I was too loud and too opinionated, too self-assured of my own intelligence, was willing to overshadow and correct boys (and men) whenever I had something to say. I was never pretty enough, never delicate, never demure, and never ashamed, like a young woman should be. I was always too curious about sex and never willing to let a boy beat me at wrestling, boxing, or a race to cushion his ego. Most of all I knew I was too Black.

Growing up in a white suburb, going to white schools with all white teachers and classmates it became obvious to me early on that I was never going to have a boyfriend, get asked to prom, or be found attractive. I was Black and that meant there was something wrong with me. Blackness often serves as the antithesis to white female vulnerability, gentility,

beauty, and femininity. There was very little I could do to combat the negative images of *unnatural* masculine womanhood associated with my Black female body. The few moments of reprieve that I could enjoy away from the castigating gaze of whiteness was in church, where I was free from my own failure to be a white girl, surrounded by a Black community with a different set of expectations that smothered me in other ways.

Pedagogies of liberation were integral to my Christian experience and the embrace of my Black-embodied self was central to my spirituality. My church emphasized community work and Black pride. We were a majority Black congregation in the middle of a working-class neighborhood, and we spent time learning about Black history all year. There were fundraisers several times throughout the year, and the youth group partnered with local non-profits to offer tutoring, mentorship, college preparation, food and clothing donations. We caroled at Christmas and donated time to local senior centers. There were trips organized for high schoolers to get free SAT prep and tour historically Black colleges in the area. In short, the congregation of worshippers thought of themselves as servants to the community, and most of the work we did was headed by the members.

The congregation was home to accomplished local activists and organizers who relished the opportunity to influence and nurture future agitators and picketers. We gained a pro-Black political education there that was unrivaled, learning to think critically for ourselves, build community with other Black people wherever we could, and challenge powerful institutions. Our teachers emphasized that when things weren't right, particularly as Black Christians, it was our responsibility to set them right. The message communicated through this dedication to empowering and impacting material conditions was that our earthly

flesh had needs, and that as servants of God it was our responsibility to meet those needs through donation, education, and political work.

Years later, when I was reading Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) for the first time, this idea of the yearning earthly flesh and its unity with good Christian practice was recounted by Baby Suggs, who speaks to the importance of the physical body in worship:

In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick 'em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. You got to love it, you! And no, they ain't in love with your mouth. Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear. What you put into it to nourish your body they will snatch away and give you leavins instead. No, they don't love your mouth. You got to love it. This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I'm telling you. And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. and all your inside parts that they'd just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver--love it, love it and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize (89).

Although Suggs is an “unchurched preacher”, what she says in the clearing speaks to the Black Christian theology that I came to understand in my childhood, one that was steeped in ideas of liberation, equity, justice, and most of all autonomy and embodied worship (Morrison 89). What is understood as her sermon for the freed black people living in the community around her speaks to the necessity of the flesh for living and enjoying freedom; flesh that free Blacks should not take for granted in their daily motions or in their acts of religious praise. My Christian practice taught me that the body should be understood as tied to divinity and the

divine right to humanness and feeling that supersedes the white desire to enslave and dominate.

Suggs speaks to the value of your “beating heart” over your “life giving private parts”, and in that chapter of the novel women, men, and children take turns dancing, laughing, and crying until the separation between those groups ceases to exist; all laugh, cry, and dance as one. In my own church home, feminine, delicate women could be led to kick their shoes off and march as soldiers of Christ and grown men would weep like babies at the height of worship. There could be nothing wrong with dancing, crying, and embracing the needs and (queer) desires of the feeling Black flesh when a Black god³ so clearly wanted to be praised with the entirety of my imperfect, misgendered being.

It seemed that the Church was a space of immense freedom, fluidity, and transformation; a space in which the spirit could take the flesh and mold it into whatever was needed to bring the subject to meet the divine. In a lot of ways the embodied understanding of my own divine connection with a god was why I had to depart. How would I be taught to understand my spirituality as so profoundly freeing from the constraints of white bondage only to tie my body to other man-made masters?

In this specific case, proximity to family and community networks, especially those facilitated and maintained through church membership made me anxious to pursue relationships with women. It would be so easy to get caught, outed, then shunned from the

³ Reflecting on that time, I don't really remember how I understood and thought of “God”. My mother always said that God was ever-changing, that he was all races because he was the same God that served white, Black, and Brown people. All I knew was that there was no way my God was white, I wouldn't accept that. I knew people who asserted that God was a man, or a woman, or neither and both, but no one had the language (or the courage) to say that God in the many forms God took was or could be “genderfluid.”

church, which was the only real reprieve from white society and racialized-gender failure; it would be a whole other type of shame. But, being a part of a church, for me, also meant understanding homosexuality as so antithetical to good (Black) Christian practice that a direct conversation was never necessary. Whispered snippets of adult conversation about certain children, the delicate sissies, and rambunctious tomboys (and me when I wasn't performing girlhood properly) made it abundantly clear what the consequences of queer desire were. Within my experience of my Black community-- queerness was understood as a betrayal -- a refusal to love Black people by loving a Black man and making Black babies who could have a two-income, two-parent household that defies anti-Black stereotypes. I remember the emphasis put on finding a "good, Christian man" once I'd reached a certain age. Active in church with good grades and pretty enough, being set up with one of the Deacon's nephews or the First Lady's godson was supposed to be a badge of honor, a testament to my worthiness. It was the final blue ribbon, the last report card, the penultimate trophy. Knowing that full adult membership in this beloved community was held back by this single failure on my part, to secure my future as Christian wife and mother, was a shock of cold water to my love-drunk mind. I simultaneously yearned to, and dreaded, crossing this final threshold.

Religion was confounding; I could finally be seen as a girl, be celebrated and accepted as genderfluid as I was, could find some reprieve from whiteness, and feel connected to a community of similar others, but I had to deny the embodied desires that marked me as *other* from already othered Black worshipers. As I began to understand myself as queer -- having met my first crushes and first kisses at church in fact -- I shied away from Christianity, unable to reconcile my spiritual self with the ways that the church attempted, in concert with white supremacy, to control my body and access to my queer truth. Before I eventually left, I had

church to make me feel as if I could be *Black* and *girl* at the same time, but the addition of *queer* complicated that relationship so that I couldn't be any of those things. Despite what I had been taught, I knew what was true about myself, and that I couldn't be alone. I started searching for similar others, the Black(Trans)Queer out in the world, though I didn't have that name in mind quite yet.

At that point, away at college and more alone than I had ever been, the need for a community of Black and Queer people was becoming urgent. At a young age, even before realizing my own queerness, I already begun to identify and seek out queer others. Of the 5 people I am still in contact with from high school, 4 of us, all Black, and all straight/closeted when we met, are queer now. Realizing what I was seeking once I'd discovered my own sexuality and conscious need for community, I knew we existed and must gather somewhere, if only to give each other brief moments of reprieve and seek romance. I wondered: was there a community to which I could truly belong, a way of living and being that I could "succeed" at? (Ultimately the answer was that success is never the answer). In searching for Black(Trans)Queer folks and other failures, I sought out information as well, beginning my engagement with Black Feminist and Queer scholarship as a window into my own queerness and in order to fulfill my own needs.

The "whole-person" feeling that I was seeking out, one in which I didn't have to exist in categories but rather as all of the things that I was, is one that irked me as I learned about intersectionality in my first year of college. Learning about intersectionality was at first incredibly liberating for me, as I began to understand the seemingly disparate and incompatible parts of myself as interconnected and overlapping. Of course, in "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color" (1991) Kimberlé

Crenshaw isn't speaking about personal identities and the way they are experienced by the individual, as my very neoliberal university taught us. Rather, she was speaking on the convergence of systems of race, gender, and class discrimination in the lives of Black women struggling to be understood and served through feminist or anti-racist analysis alone (Crenshaw 1244). Although Crenshaw's work focuses on identity politics and the overlapping nature of Black women's oppression, thinking about my identity as "overlapping" and "interconnected" was helpful in some ways. It helped me to rethink my relationship to self in ways that weren't Black *and* Queer *and* Woman *and* ... and this act of reconfiguration eventually led me to BlackTransQueer, to my whole self and fully formed others.

Ultimately, it was a Transgender History and Politics class in my senior year that led me to Omise'eke Tinsley's "Songs for Ezili⁴: Vodou⁵ Epistemologies of (Trans)gender" (2011). It is an examination of the documentary, *Of Men and Gods* (2002), in which filmmakers interview genderqueer Haitians and examine the role of Vodou in their gendering. Through the documentary, she attends to the misnaming of *masisi* as gay men, when in reality the *masisi* are gender category that doesn't exist in the lexicon or imagination of the white documentarians. *Masisi* is "a *Kreyol* work that references male femininity or womanness in conjunction with male same-sex desire" (Tinsley 420). Tinsley contemplates the power and potential of Black genders outside of colonial constructs of the body and what it means to construct the self through Black Atlantic cosmologies. Rather than being Black, Haitian,

⁴ **Ezili:** the lwa of love, desire, and femininity in all forms, exists as a pantheon with multiple names and manifestations. Also known as: *Erzulie, Ezili Danto, Ezili Freda, Gran Ezili, Lasyrenn, etcetera*.

⁵ **Vodou:** the spiritual system/cosmology that contains the lwa as spirits sent to Earth by a Supreme God to help mankind. Vodou finds its roots in Benin.

Transgender girls, the masisi are beloved children of Ezili, male-women that belong not only to the Lwa⁶, but also to the beloved community of worshippers, and ultimately to each other. In being claimed by Ezili they not only gain status and protection, but also a cohesive identity that is woman, girl, Haitian, Black, transgender (but not quite), divinely appointed and whole in ways that *Black and Trans and Queer and ...* is not. Omise'eke Tinsley works through the documentary, understanding Ezili and the lwa as an epistemology through which scholars should be performing and examining Black people's lives and feminist work. The documentary and the work Tinsley does emphasizes the everyday movements and life-happenings of masisi and other women as living theological works that mirror, and in some ways empower the lwa, Ezili in particular. She proposes that the existence and articulation of masisi-ness in the film, despite the misarticulation of filmmakers and scholars, is a window into Queer Black divinities and a particular facet of Haitian (trans)feminism as the masisi are empowered in their community through their connection to the "divine feminine" that is Ezili. In this text, by acknowledging the dissonance between what the filmmakers report of their masisi interviewees and how the masisi define and view themselves, Tinsley asks "*how hearing Ezili as a masisi history of Haiti reveals the limits of what global Northern queer and transgender theory produces*" (Tinsley 423).

Tinsley's work, particularly my discovery of *Songs for Ezili*, shaped my own journey towards better understanding of a united BlackTransQueer self, and later a community. Other moments in my life continued to challenge the ways I had learned to communicate and think about myself as parts of a whole, not quite united. In my senior year of college I became a member of Southerners on New Ground (S.O.N.G.) at the same time as I was taking a

⁶ **Lwa:** the collection of spirits in Vodou appointed to enhance the lives of humans.

Transgender History and Politics course. I came into contact with Black Transgender and Queer people ranging in age, location, knowledge, and experience, but united through the sacred life-changing work of liberation and strategizing. We built community with one another. It was the largest group of Black Transgender people I had ever encountered, and before I even began to understand myself as such I came into that community through the sense of overwhelming love and siblinghood that I found in S.O.N.G. Many of my siblings in the work were already practicing and constantly talking about Orisha⁷ traditions and their own spiritual work. It was how so many of them were finding home, and healing in BlackTransQueer embodiment. I wondered at the time and continue to wonder as I engage in this community why the Orisha pulled queer folks so strongly into their embrace and into divine knowledge. It was through that line of questioning that I really began this project in the first place and although it is a messy way to enter, I would rather think critically about what I am doing. It is better to be cautious than allow myself to charge in without consideration for my elders, ancestors, community members and their beliefs, in Black liberation and divine practice.

Through Tinsley's "Songs for Ezili" and my experience in S.O.N.G., I began to understand and articulate myself as non-binary⁸, transgender, as *more*. Tinsley's writing led me to understand that my identities didn't have to be so disparate and othered from each

⁷ **Orisha:** the pantheon of gods indigenous to the Yoruba people of West Africa, primarily located in what is Nigeria today. Over time and during the transatlantic slave trade, the worship of the Orisha has come to the Americas in form of several traditions, including Lucumí. Also spelled Oricha, or Orixá.

⁸ **Non-binary:** a gender identity outside of the man vs. woman model. Some non-binary people consider themselves transgender, others do not. Non-binary is an umbrella for a body of gender identities rather than one cohesive, androgynous gender.

other; that they were all the same material that made me who I am. Reading my gender and my own relation to my body through scholarship helped me to understand my sense of self within the context of the Black Atlantic and gender theory. Rather than being non-existent, non-white, non-woman, I find my gender elsewhere and in spaces that are hard to articulate academically. My gender is something that I struggle with constantly, and in the process of searching for my BlackTransQueer self reflected in community I am finding that the ways I can articulate and engage my gender in this moment is insufficient. It may be because this is not the language or the way of thinking that I was meant to name myself in. I am unsure if there is some gender-like description or way of being to which I am culturally entitled but missing; something that was stolen from me. I am in the process of remembering how to be myself, or somebody like me, every day and this project in many ways is one of excavation.

When I articulate and began to understand my Black/Trans/Queer self as parts dispersed by white supremacy rather than inherently disparate and contentious, questions of spirituality and the uniting power of the divine became important for me. Thinking about the ways in which my Christian upbringing pieced me together but ultimately failed to heal, I seek healing elsewhere and I feel I am getting close to a balm⁹. As I became more aware of the power and particularities of Afro-Atlantic cosmologies I pondered the possibilities for myself and other BlackTransQueers searching for a real sense of self, re-stitched through the inevitable wholeness that M. Jaqui Alexander articulates is the natural consequence of surrendering to Spirit:

⁹ One of the most popular and well-known songs in my church was “There is a balm in Gilead.” It refers to the healing balm for which the town of Gilead was infamous, mentioned in Jeremiah 46:11. The only lyrics were “There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the soul” repeated as one until the congregation collectively felt we were finished. These lines came back to me during the editing process, and I think in some ways they speak to the goal of this project.

The Divine call to the Divine, inside of a meeting of self with self, a practice of alignment with the Divine [...] the same way the breaking of waves does not compromise the integrity of the Ocean, so too anything broken in our lives cannot compromise that cosmic flow to wholeness. The body cannot but surrender in order to make way for this tidal flow (321-322).

Omise'eke Tinsley's exploration of the specific and exalted place for transgender and queer people at Vodun gatherings speaks to an epistemology of gender that connects trans-queerness with the ever-changing bodies of the Divine: the right to protection, love, and spiritual community. When we understand the power that Afro-Atlantic spiritual systems hold to heal the broken body, reuniting it with the mind, the sociality, and the suffering divine spirit within Black people, we can come to understand the importance of knowing our gendered selves outside of white genders as an act of reclamation, redress, and healing that have the power to return what we've lost.

If we consider the process of enslavement a severance of "*the captive body from its motive will, its active desire*" we can begin to understand the importance of spirituality in the lives of Black people, as a balm for the aching whole needing suturing (Spillers 67). In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987) Hortense Spillers maps slavery's violence upon the Black body as a study on the non-existence of Black subjecthood and the ways in which Black people become uninhabited flesh through ritual acts of violence. For Spillers, slavery is not only a physically violent institution, long past; it is a scar upon our current state of being that is constantly being reopened by the social scripts of the not-quite-post-colonial world. Spillers claims:

These indecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjuncture come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color. We might well ask if this phenomenon of marking and branding actually 'transfers' from one generation to another, finding its various symbolic substitutions in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments? As Elaine Scarry describes the mechanisms of torture [Scarry 27-59], these lacerations, woundings, fissures, tears,

scars, openings, ruptures, lesions, rendings, punctures of the flesh create the distance between what I would designate a **cultural vestibularity** and the culture, whose state apparatus, including judges, attorneys, 'owners', 'soul drivers', 'overseers', and 'men of God' apparently colludes with a protocol of 'search and destroy.' This body whose flesh carries the female and the male to the frontiers of survival bears in person the marks of a cultural text whose inside has been turned outside (67).

The Black body in the emancipated Americas becomes a living text of violence, a calling card to the state and its agents to continue the dehumanizing rituals that have become commonplace against this supposedly unruly population. The cultural vestibularity that Spillers refers to is a literal disequilibrium of the Black body with the society which seeks to unravel it and disequilibrium of the self constantly being unmade. The cognitive dissonance of Black personhood within our slave-build society has the potential to displace the cornerstone of white supremacist power. Black personhood is such a contradictory position that Black people must be cut down to fit into the subjugated place our society built for them, or risk toppling the entire structure of power. For scholars like Spillers, this is not a way of life but rather acts as perpetuated death as the violent scripts of slavery are reenacted in order to maintain the hegemonic racial order. The society itself requires abolition, but the Black psyche divorced from the ravaged body also requires rebalancing if Black people are to ever truly occupy the space of personhood. M. Jacqui Alexander addresses disequilibrium: *"No medicine or treatment comes without a theory of the cause of disequilibrium, la causa. What is the violation that displaces balance with disequilibria? Some crisis acts as the instigator."* (Alexander 313). Spillers gives us the theory of rupture that is necessary to take Alexander's work and run. Understanding that Spillers articulates the cause -- the crisis that slavery presents for the living -- and Alexander speaks to the need for healing, we can begin to move towards ideas of what medicine looks like for Black people in the somewhat-emancipated world.

M. Jacqui Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing* speaks to the healing power of restoration of spirit for Black people, that ashé is a way of knowing, a form of knowledge transfer and creation that Black people are capable of carrying, in the body and soul as well as the mind:

If healing work is a call to remember and remembering is embodied, then we would want to situate the body centrally in this healing complex [...] Body, in this complex, becomes a means of communication, simply because Spirit requires it (although not only it) to mount its descent (316-317).

The Divine call to the Divine, inside of a meeting of self with self, a practice of alignment with the Divine. Yemayá, the broad expanse of ocean, who lives both on sea and on land has pushed past modernity's mode of reason and taken up temporary sojourn on the insides of this artificial enclosure, come to accept, to cleanse, to bless, to remind us that in the same way the breaking of waves does not compromise the integrity of the ocean, so too anything broken in our lives cannot compromise that cosmic flow to wholeness. The body cannot but surrender in order to make way for this tidal flow. And this, too, necessitates practice (321-322).

This is the project that I hope to undertake here: one of redress, wholeness, and repair. I am looking to the Orisha as ways to re-examine and reform my BlackTransQueer body after the atrophy of slavery and colonization. The ways of being, living, and knowing that the Orisha hold for Black people seeking fuller ways of being in America have healing power for the Black body unmade in the transatlantic crossing (according to M. Jaqui Alexander). I am examining the ways that BlackTransQueers resist categorization and craft themselves *for* themselves and the Orisha when they exist in communion with Black divinity. For the practitioner that I interview, KC, crafting themselves in the image of the genderfluid Orisha and enacting the divine queer desires of their patrons is not only an embrace of Orisha epistemologies but a rejection of colonization. Through this project, an examination of the practices of Lucumí in the life of one particular BlackTransQueer in relation to my own negotiation and formation of that identity, I am searching for myself reflected in the mirror that

the Orisha provide for Black life. Although the ultimate goal of this project is the scholarly examination of potential pathways for my own BlackTransQueer liberation, I know that there is spiritual work to be done in the wake of its completion as the academic approach to this project proves insufficient.

This is the truth of how I've been called to this work, though I am hesitant. I believe that I am being called into some sort of Orisha-based tradition because thinking about and in some ways working for the Orisha feels like returning home in ways no physical location has ever been able to accomplish. I am taking a pause here to assess my engagement with this work as a scholar desiring spirit rather than an initiated practitioner. My deep personal investment and the potential of this research are the best reasons to dive in, but also hold the potential to disrupt, misname, and degrade the work of those living and walking under the guidance of the Orisha. Engaging Afro-Atlantic thought-ways through the lens of scholarship rather than practice is a clumsy entrance into this ongoing conversation to which I am a recorder rather than a consequential contributor. This is why co-creation with my interviewee, an inductee in Lucumí, is so essential to this project; there is too much that I cannot know as a non-practitioner. Problematic as it is to enter as a researcher first, I believe that this project holds weight for my own self-discovery and may add something of value to the ongoing conversation within Orisha-worshipping communities about gender and how we should navigate sacred paths while embodying divine queerness. Scholarship that engages Lucumí respectfully also has the potential to create revolutionary shifts in the conversation around and navigation of gender in the houses of worship, opening paths and possibilities for BlackTransQueers within the practice to engage in their truths.

In undertaking this work, I also seek out the Orisha's context and origins to gain more clarity, looking towards their manifestations as maps towards communicating and understanding Black ways of being, gendered and otherwise. According to Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, in Yoruba¹⁰ society *“the ‘physicality’ of maleness or femaleness did not have social antecedents and therefore did not constitute social categories [...] The principle that determined social organization was seniority, which was based on chronological age [...] What these Yoruba categories tell us is that the body is not always in view and on view for categorization”* (Oyěwùmí 13-14). The “bio-logic” of the West, in which the body is categorized based on the visual field and the immutable¹¹ biology of those observations isn't universal and fails to meet the worldview of West Africans.

This line of thought and the project I am seeking to undertake lead me to question the operation of gender constructs for people like me, the world's queer and trans Black failures. What does it mean if gender for non-white, colonized peoples was never strict; what if the biological is a social construction that doesn't quite fit in other societies? What does it mean for the Black colonial-subject embodying genders outside of and within the binary, and how does it explode bio-essentialist understandings of gender? What does it mean for those who have lost the language and understandings of embodiment in this way? What paths to Black liberation and new senses of community can be rediscovered when we integrate and exalt the BlackTransQueer failure? These are larger questions that frame the important stakes of this

¹⁰ **Yoruba:** A West African tribe/ethnic group, originators of the Ifá religion which is where the Orisha come from. Mostly in Nigeria and branching into some other West African countries.

¹¹ What the author argues is that conceptualizing gender as a social category means that it is only mutable in social contexts where it is constructed as mutable, and thus by Western logic biological gender is immutable in all contexts.

research, self-making but more broadly the crafting of self within community. The ability to be able to dictate and create oneself as an autonomous being with similar others is essential, but often denied to Black people as we are continuously defined by dominant powers and institutions. Western thinking urges us to frame our identities in terms of the self versus the other as whiteness is constructed in opposition to Blackness, humanity is constructed in opposition to the colonized, and gender is created in opposition to the ungendered. Lucumí and other traditions place the community at the center of identity formation rather than the individual; one is defined by similarity and interconnectedness rather than difference¹². What happens, then, when we place the community at the forefront of identity crafting and seek out ourselves through others rather than in opposition?

Through engaging a co-creator within the Lucumí tradition I hope to gain some insight into the power of Orisha-centered cosmologies in gendered self-making. I lack the embodied and practical knowledge to engage in this study alone and thus must engage in co-creation through a series of interviews with an inductee in Lucumí. More importantly, I believe that to engage without practitioners would be in bad faith, and a direct antithesis of what Alexander proposes, as we understand the body as an infuser of spiritual knowledge:

To know the body is to know it as medium for the Divine [...] it is to understand spiritual work as a type of body praxis, as a form of embodiment about which Nancy Scheper-Hughes offers an illuminating formulation: 'Embodiment,' she says, 'concerns the ways people come to inhabit their bodies so that these become in every sense of the term 'habituated.' All the mundane activities of working, eating, sleeping, having sex, and getting sick and getting well are forms of body praxis and expressive of dynamic social, cultural and political relations.' [...] 'the tradition, the memory of how to serve the spirits is held in the ritualized and ritualizing human body.' [quoting Karen McCarthy Brown] [...] Body and memory are lived in the same body, if you will, and this mutual living, this entanglement, enables us to think and feel these inscriptions as process, a process of embodiment (297-298).

¹² Conversation with Dr. Daniel Coleman.

This work cannot be done outside of the bodies that lead the ceremonies, make the offerings, and walk the paths towards liberated wholeness that I seek out. The academy has a long history of talking about a group of people without engaging them in the conversation as creators of knowledge for whom the project could be mutually beneficial. I hope to circumvent extractive practices through crafting interviews that acknowledge the expertise and lived experience of my collaborator, empowering them to be a part of the crafting process and create knowledge through and for their own community. Through this method I hope to acknowledge both the practitioners and elders who KC has gleaned from, and their own expertise as an initiated practitioner. Close relationship and established trust, intentionality around naming my own status as a non-practitioner and naming the co-creation project I hope to cultivate is essential to the validity of this project by my own standards. Covid-19 and the resulting periods of quarantine have complicated this project. I planned to spend time in physical space with my interviewee, KC, in order to capture the totality of the conversation and co-creation happening between us. I've had to move our sessions to an online format that exhausts and limits both of us, making the practice of embodied listening and Black feminist storytelling nearly impossible (Johnson 2018, p. 14). We forge on regardless.

I attempted to take part in the tradition of scholars like Zora Neale Hurston¹³, spending the time and giving the care necessary to build trust and community between the scholar-self and the community in which one seeks to engage, although limited by the current circumstances. Hiding myself behind the guise of scholar, interviewer, etc. would be the empirical thing to do,

¹³ Zora Neale Hurston was an author and cultural anthropologist whose style of research in Black communities serves as a model for this thesis project. Works like *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and *Barracoon* (2018) frame my work here and the relationship I seek with my interlocutor.

but to disguise myself and the personal stakes of this project would be dishonest. The goal is the cultivation of knowledge not just for myself, but for similar others seeking epiphanies about themselves and community.

I am thinking through ideas of journeying away from the solitary self towards the divine community. My co-creator's understanding and experience of gender before transitioning is important to my theorizing and I would like to know as much as possible about that aspect of their identity formation. I believe that the ways in which queerness and transness was a splintering of self for me has the potential to create room for divine intervention and acts of gender-craft hold interesting potential for this project as well. I am asking when and how KC found the Orisha (or did they find KC?), and how they knew that they had encountered their spiritual destiny. What impact it had on them to enter as an adult, and what impact it may have on their child, now growing up with a parent in Lucumí. I am using Blackness as a lens through which Trans/Queerness is informed; what conflicts did KC face as they came to understand their gender having always understood themselves as Black? I am engaging this idea of the multiplicitous self-created through and by community as part and whole. It is an important concept I am thinking through with my interlocutor as they place themselves in relation to their religious community in contention with their identity formation before/after they entered their tradition. In conclusion, I seek to sit with my friend, comrade, and practitioner-scholar at the intersections of multiple identities, seemingly disparate but intrinsically connected and informed by and through one another. Together we are uncovering how the connections between queer life paths, the Orisha, decolonial gender-defiance, and spiritual Blackness interact to create wholeness within community and the self, and/or how we address tearing apart.

There are several scholars and works across disciplines that have brought me to this project. The works that I reference throughout this introduction and in the body of this thesis come from a long-running education in Black feminism and Gender Studies. Some lay the foundation for this work and lead me to the most important questions I ask my interviewee, and others I ask myself and eventual readers of this work. Others lead me to the methodology I undertake with my interviewee and as I engage my own subjectivity. Understanding that foundation is elemental to engaging this thesis work and forging paths towards deeper engagement with gender, race, oppression, and liberation for oneself.

Literature Review

A. *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe* by Hortense Spillers

Hortense Spillers articulates the violence of slavery as one of symbolic transformation from human embodiment to unfeeling flesh, in which the colonial imagination severs enslaved Blacks from their own will, tethering them to the desires of the master class instead. Slavery's ritual violence was a process of "*profitable 'atomizing' of the captive body*" that created what Spillers titles an "*American Grammar*": a rhetorical and sociological process of re-inflicting the violence and hierarchy of the slave system onto Black bodies (Spillers 68). In the process of enslavement the body is replaced by the flesh, the marker of the captive (non-)subject position vs. the liberated subject, denoted by self-possession. "*Under these conditions we lose at least gender difference in the outcome*" Spillers claims, Africans become "*ungendered*" and in the Western imagination unembodied, non-subject, non-human (Spillers 67). Ungendering becomes a mode through which the violent dehumanization of slavery may occur as women, mothers, daughters, girls, babies, and all societal roles from which one might claim rights or place are denied.

Spillers' articulation of the ungendering of Black bodies through the course of enslavement is essential to this gender-reclamation work. I'd never understood the gender trap I was caught in was one that was fundamentally a colonial problem; that my existence, or lack thereof, was fundamentally a colonial problem, an unfinished remnant of the slave system. Being Black in the Americas is to be the scar tissue, badly healed and constantly reopened, of racialized colonial violence. Spillers' focus on the power of (mis)naming the Black body, and the ways in which it continues to shape discourse around and about Blackness, is particularly important for this project. The white misnaming of Blackness *"demonstrate[s] the powers of distortion that the dominant community seizes as its unlawful prerogative [...] borrows its narrative energies from the grid of associations, from the semantic and iconic folds buried deep in the collective past, that come to surround and signify the captive person"* (Spillers 69). theorizing helps me to conceptualize what is happening within and outside of the Black body, as it becomes a space for political and social contestation, and a site of gendered failure. The Moynihan report that she references places Black family structures in question as they fail to live up to the standards set by white society.

Although she does not ask this question, by working through Jack Halberstam's *Queer Art of Failure*, I wonder what alternatives to gender, family, community, and personhood can present themselves when we accept and move through failure. Thinking through her work from the lens of gender-racial wholeness makes me think about what types of redress may be necessary as we move through racialized gender failure. Spillers marks the site of schism, bringing gender to the forefront of theorizations of race and of blackness as a site of rupture and colonial violence by asking us to place the African captive woman at the

center of our theorizing for a moment. Although she does not question the existence of a similarly oriented gender for African people and families, Spillers does acknowledge the violence of humanity as a philosophical creation and social category in its creation of the ungendered non-human.

B. *Toward a Decolonial Feminism* by Maria Lugones

Maria Lugones writes about the history of the colonial process through the lens of gender in a section of her book called "The Coloniality of Gender". She asserts that gender is a colonial construct that continues to hold weight in the post-colonial world as it is ascribed to and denied to bodies existing within the colonial categorization of the human and non-human. The European man is considered (by himself, as the master of his own reality) perfection, and any variation, including European women, are a lesser attempt at perfection (Lugones 743). What becomes clear through the dissection of this essay is that manhood and womanhood are contingent categories dependent upon and confounded with race. *"The semantic consequence of the coloniality of gender is that 'colonized woman' is an empty category: no women are colonized; no colonized females are women"* (Lugones 745). Humanity is attributed to white men and women (although less so) as they are defined as such, the genderlessness of colonized people serves as a justification and a moral motivation for enslavement and occupation: *"The hierarchical dichotomy as a mark of the human also became a normative tool to damn the colonized. The behaviors of the colonized and their personalities/souls were judged as bestial and thus non-gendered, promiscuous, grotesquely sexual, and sinful. [...] Hermaphrodites, sodomites, viragos, and colonized were all understood to be aberrations of male perfection"* (Lugones 743).

Lugones claims that men and women, as we understand gender in the post-colonial present, are created and defined by whiteness and white supremacist initiatives towards empire. Without those, sex stands alone as a marker of difference and doesn't directly correlate with or articulate gender(s). Gender, in the colonial landscape, becomes a marker of hierarchy and a locus of power and oppression. Lugones asserts that instead of searching for gender outside of the colonial power structure, the coloniality of gender must be resisted in other ways (Lugones 750-751). I don't disagree; gender as we know and understand it is a colonial construct and we should look not to binary understandings of "Indigenous manhood" or "African Womanhood" because the colonized probably didn't understand their relations to their bodies in this way. The exploration of gender I undertake here cannot move forward without a critical reimagining of the power of language and rhetorical creation. What I am doing with this project is not necessarily seeking out Afro-indigenous gender categories rearticulated through the lens of the Orisha. Rather I am asking myself and anyone else interested to consider the power that gender holds and the power we yield when we leave it behind as Lugones suggests.

C. "Visualizing the Body: Western Theories and African Subjects", from the *African Gender Studies Reader* by Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí

According to Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, Western belief that "*biology is destiny*" permeates the social sciences and our understandings of reality (Oyěwùmí 1). Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí argues that in the West, policed by visual field as their way of understanding the world, biology becomes "*the filter through which all knowledge about society is run*" as the body is placed at the center of knowledge production (Oyěwùmí 5). They hold that this ideology has on our ability to create theory is cyclical; "*When biological interpretations are found to be compelling, social categories do derive their legitimacy and power from biology. In short, the social and biological feed each other*", particularly in feminism and gender studies (Oyěwùmí 9). Of most

significance, what Oyěwù mí uncovers in this chapter is that European thought ways, especially around gender, cannot and should not be universalized, as they continue to propagate bio-essentialism and the western worldview. Biology is not indisputable fact but rather is as influenced by biases as the more explicitly social, as it too is socially constructed. She questions the Western interpretation of queerness and gender-crossing “third genders” in Native American, African, and South Asian cultures, critiquing the incorporation of folks into “*Western bio-logic and framework without explication of their own sociocultural histories and constructions*” asking “*Are these social categories gendered in the cultures in question? From whose perspective are they gendered?*” (Oyěwù mí 11). Oyèrónké Oyěwù mí concludes, after much deliberation with the pervasiveness of Western worldviews in our perception of the world and of the “other” that “*the discussions of social categories should be defined and grounded in the local milieu, rather than based in ‘universal’ findings made in the West*” (Oyěwù mí 16). I would assert that interpreting other cultures through the socially significant categories of the West/Europe is bad research and continues linguistic traditions of violence and dehumanization as described by Hortense Spillers.

This piece speaks to the importance of thinking through biology as subjective, and European thought as determined by its violence. Objectivity doesn’t exist and Oyèrónké Oyěwù mí’s work leads me to question its use, particularly in this project. Disciplines which we have come to understand as neutral and universal, like biology, are deeply entrenched in white supremacy. Thinking through the ways in which the Black body remains supposedly incomplete, or deviant based on biological determinism of fitness speaks to the fact that anti-Black racism is indoctrinated into our everyday lives and our knowledge production. The author’s ponderance of biological determinism in relation to the body leads me to think critically about my own

education and cultural biases as I undertake this life-making work. At what point do I know the truth about myself or like others if racism so thoroughly impregnates my learned ways of thinking?

Thinking critically about the white supremacy that I perpetuate as a Western-trained scholar in engaging critically with philosophies in which the Black body is central, sacred, and deeply queer is essential within this project, as it is a redressive one. It is one of the reasons why I name myself as a non-practitioner, with the understanding that the Western academy is not some purely objective beacon of knowledge and human progress. This project requires deep self-reflection as I place myself in the orbit of an ongoing conversation within Orisha-centered traditions without overestimating my own knowledge or importance. Engaging in this project also means thinking critically about the power that this conversation holds for redressing the violence inflicted by Western thought¹⁴ onto Black bodies. Black epistemologies as housed by the Orisha, and Afro-Atlantic spiritual systems have the potential to address Black failures as possibilities for Black futures as informed by African epistemologies.

D. Religion in the Kitchen: Cooking, Talking, and the Making of Black Atlantic Traditions by Elizabeth Pérez

According to Elizabeth Pérez, the crafting of religion, particularly Black Atlantic spiritual Traditions, happens in the kitchen. Pérez posits that in her time as a non-initiate outsider studying Lucumí, she found that religious practice and invocation happened in communal acts of cooking, talking, and preparatory activities. The Gods crave *“the sight of symbols and gestures; the sounds of oracles*

¹⁴ In her book Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí uses the term “Western Thought” often to refer to the theories and knowledge popularized in the “West”, referring to European theories of the biological. When I refer to the West or Western Thought in this thesis, I am referring to Europe, North America, and whiteness as the binder between these land masses.

and instruments; the scent of breath and cigar smoke. They also want food” (Pérez 2). One must not only think through the theology and philosophy of Black Atlantic traditions in order to embrace and be embraced into the practice and amongst worshippers. There are a host of skills and lessons that are gained through acts of meal preparation: butchering, cleaning, conversation, and eating together with elders and others. Her work centers the micro practices, particularly food preparation and narration of personal experience that occur between practitioners, elders, and non/future initiates that craft the religion and the everyday experience. She also theorizes the place of queer men, queer women, transfeminine and transmasculine practitioners in the space of Afro-diasporic worship houses, thinking through the gendered role of being mounted, crowned for the Orisha, and who is valued within the house of worship.

Often the idea to assess and create scholarship about Black Atlantic traditions from the top down is misguided, and in my work I hope to come into the practice as a non-initiate outsider through relationship and communal engagement with practitioners rather than from the theoretical outside of its lived context. The pandemic has significantly altered how we can commune with each other, and even how practitioners can gather in community with one another, let alone host an interloping researcher. As much as I would like to model my methodology after Pérez and E. Patrick Johnson, there are limitations to my research in the midst of this national crisis and I value the health of my community members and myself more than the hands-on approach I wish to pursue. *Religion in the Kitchen* speaks to the everyday experience and minute acts that make up the larger tradition, and this often has more weight for individual practitioners living and embodying Black cosmologies than the larger theoretical concepts.

In thinking through the misconceptions made by scholar-outsiders about gender, Pérez acknowledges major mistakes within the field that deserve attention. Although “*recent research in African American studies posits that the Black Atlantic-- the world shaped by the Middle Passage and transatlantic slave trade -- has always been a queer Atlantic*” this scholarly approach fails to recognize that “*there are limits to straight practitioners’ tolerance of LGBT community members*” (Pérez 117). Her work on the micro practices of Lucumí bring daily motions to the forefront, bringing the nuances of the practical into conversation with scholarly interlopers. Her methodology when engaging with Lucumí marks a path for this project as I seek to speak alongside practitioners in ongoing conversations about queerness, Blackness, and gender without speaking over them. I am hoping to gain some perspective from those within the sacred space, engaging in good faith rather than extracting knowledge from its native context and the mouths that touch, taste, and converse with the Orisha.

E. Queering Black Atlantic Religions: Transcorporeality in Candomblé, Santería, and Vodou by Roberto Strongman

Roberto Strongman’s work looks at European concepts of the soul and the body as the filling and casing of the self, thinking through philosophical traditions in the West and their influence on misconceptions of Black spiritualities. The Cartesian version of the self is the most prominent in Western philosophical thought; the philosophy posits that the soul and mind are separate from the body that contains them. Parts of the body may be lost or severed but the soul/mind remains. These same theories are incompatible with Black spiritualities and fail to recognize the externality of the spirit and the ways in which it has the potential and ability to travel; in the Black Atlantic the self is “*multiple, external, and removable*” (Strongman 17). Rather than being a closed containment for the singular spirit, the body is an open-mouth jug that

contains the self, the ancestral connections, and oftentimes becomes the vessel for spirits and Orisha to speak at the ceremony. Through exploration of Candomblé, Santería, and Vodou Strongman aims to link queerness and gender crossing to the divine, thinking critically about the concept of being mounted by the Orisha and spirits in ways that speak to transcorporeal embodiment. Strongman asks critical questions about concepts of the soul, the mind, and the body as open container rather than a sealed enclosure that speak to Afro-centric ways of being and thought systems that make room for gender-luxe¹⁵ reflections and relationships with community. This is a groundbreaking work in the field of Black transgender studies, particularly as it relates to Black spiritualities as thought systems and philosophies enacted through and by Black bodies engaging in spiritual practice.

It's not the first work of its kind as others have connected queerness and gender fluidity to the Orisha and other spiritual pantheons he examines here (*Lydia Cabrera, Joseph Murphy, and Rómulo Lachatañeré, to name a few that Strongman himself mentions*). One of the great failures of this work is that it speaks *about* practitioners of this religion, not with them, effectively romanticizing the gender crossing and queerness from an academic perspective without accessing the praxical. What is missing in his study is deeper engagement with practitioners' understanding and enactment of gender from within the practices, even in their own tensions with (gender)queerness. It is evident to most queer practitioners of Orisha-centered traditions that not every house is ready to accept TransQueers into the tradition, as evidenced by Pérez's work, my conference with Dr. Coleman, and the interviews with KC that I undertook in

¹⁵ A comrade in S.O.N.G., another BlackTransQueer, used this once to describe their gender identity. They felt themselves as so full, multiplicitous, rich, and deep; their sense of self was tied with decadence and sensational pleasure; it felt good to gender themselves. This particular expression of gender has become significant and meaningful for me in this project about Black gender.

this thesis. The Orisha are not strict in their gender and sexual performance/preferences, and the theology often lacks strict binary understandings of good and bad, reward and punishment that characterize Western logics. Despite this, many practitioners continue to hold onto hegemonic ideals of gender and sexuality that helped protect them in the past, when sexual/gender deviance was so thoroughly admonished by colonial powers (Coleman). Through engaging with Strongman's work I hope to think critically through the ways in which transcorporeality breeds possibility for transgender practitioners and BlackTransQueers seeking belonging and understanding of self through like others.

F. "Pedagogies of the Sacred: Making the Invisible Tangible" in *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* by M. Jacqui Alexander

In the last installment of this essay collection, Alexander presents the sacred as a new way of understanding the self and framing the transatlantic journey that transformed Africans' relationship with the world and their bodies. She performs a historical imagination of the transformation of the Orisha and the transmission of the knowledge of Ashé in the Americas. Alexander presents African cosmologies and the related cosmological systems in the Americas (like Vodou in Haiti, Santería in Cuba, and others) as knowledge systems as epistemologies that should be engaged thoughtfully, as bodies of scholarship (Alexander 293). She adopts a methodology that uses the ways of making sense of the physical reality present in Orisha and Iwa centering traditions to think through her engagement with Kitsimba, an enslaved subject on whom her research centered. Alexander challenges scholars to understand Afro-indigenous cosmologies as more than religious systems and to engage them as epistemologies that lead towards African and diasporic ways of knowing the world. These systems of thought and ways of being work not only to challenge understandings of

Afro-Atlantic spiritualities simply as evidence of cultural retention and resistance, but also as bodies of knowledge that deserve attention as we seek to reunite de-humanized Africans with their material bodies and spiritual selves in the present.

In engaging this work I'm attempting to frame my project within Alexander's understanding that African-Atlantic cosmological systems should be engaged more deeply than at the cultural or religious level in order to understand their presence in the lives of practitioners. Spiritual systems exemplify the philosophies and thought-ways of pre-colonial Africans divorced from those ways of thinking and being with the Trans-Atlantic crossing. Ashe, the spiritual understanding of the world that many Black people brought to the Americas with them, is a cosmological system but must also be understood as an epistemology and an ontology, *a body of knowledge and a guide to living*. They have the potential to create real change in our everyday lives and the state of our world. These cosmologies, the ones Alexander engages in particularly, are deeply healing as well and should be used in order to redress the pained Black body. When we conceptualize gendered ways of being within Black bodies and the spiritual as a tie that has been severed, we understand these cosmologies and the re-ignition of their practices as ways back to ourselves. I'm shaping my research questions with this in mind as I engage my own critical reflection, my research, and my participant.

G.Ezili's Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders and "Songs for Ezili: Vodou Epistemologies of (Trans)gender" by Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley

In *Ezili's Mirrors* Omise'eke Tinsley explores various sides of the Ezili deity and explains her connection with queerness and femininity in diaspora. She explores possibilities for black femme embodiment and queerness outside of white heterosexist frameworks and creates space for indigenous "queer" gender to take hold and flourish in Black communities, even outside of its place of origin and without conscious knowledge of Afro-Atlantic divinities.

Specifically, she speaks about the ways in which art and performance by Black non-practitioners of Vodou evoke Ezili and reconnect lineages, bringing the past and present into alignment and making space for Black genders and queerness to flourish in Haiti as well as New York.

In “Songs for Ezili” Tinsley explores the relationship between Vodou and (trans)gender more deeply, proposing that Vodou has the ability not only to create space for genderqueer people embodying difference but also to connect the embodied self with the sacred. She utilizes M. Jacqui Alexander’s proposal, engaging Ezili as a body of knowledge rather than a myth or religious figure, engaging the ways that spirit possession, embodied spiritual practice, and alternative decolonial epistemologies are made possible through Vodou. Tinsley’s exploration of gender, particularly femininity and gender transgression, as being tied with revolutionary decolonial blackness shifts determining power to the oppressed and gives voice to gender diversity in the African Diaspora.

The connection between Vodou practitioners, transgender Haitians, and Ezili herself is of particular interest to me. Ezili in many of her manifestations represents the fluidity of self and gender and appears in multiple forms. Tinsley posits that her pantheon creates new genders, born from the amalgamation of cultural and cosmological traditions and the practice of Vodou. Just as Ezili exists as the hyper-feminine caricature of womanhood often denied to black women, she also exists as the butch single mother, and the gender fluid, intersex mermaid luring young women into the water’s depths with sexual secrets (Tinsley, “Songs for Ezili”, 422). The examination of this particular deity and the fruitful manifestations that she creates around gender are a mirror and a map for Vodou practitioners and Ezili’s blessed children seeking themselves reflected in the spiritual world. In Tinsley’s book, she considers the

relationships that the masisi, New York artists, queer Caribbean women, and others cultivate with the goddess and themselves. In turn they demonstrate the reflexivity of the divine in practice, and the ways in which Queerness is a sacred practice when we understand queer bodies as godly vessels.

H. *Yemayá y Ochun* by Lydia Cabrera

Lydia Cabrera was a lesbian ethnographer who studied Black spiritual traditions in Cuba. According to Solimar Otero, Cabrera's book, *El Monte* (1954), was a groundbreaking piece of ethnographic work through which the queer desires, confounding racialization, and mutable genders of the Orisha came to the foreground in the study of Santería (also known as Lucumí)¹⁶. In *Yemayá y Ochun* Cabrera interviews practitioners of Lucumí-Santería and unveils Yemayá, and then Ochun, Yemaya's "*little sister, friend, and prodigal queen of the River*" bringing the intricate and intimate relationship between the two into focus (Cabrera 55). She places particular emphasis on the avatars of the Orisha as they all have multiple manifestations, both male and female. "*Pues, Yemayá es una y siete a la vez*" (Cabrera 21) -- the Orisha, Yemayá, embodies endless potential as she is "*more woman than all other women combined*" in some manifestations and "*as masculine as the most macho man*" in others (Cabrera 45). Cabrera's work in this book and other writings on Santería are seminal texts to the study of the Black (Queer) Atlantic as she reads and tells the stories of the Orisha through a queered lens that emphasizes their gender and sexual fluidity. Coming directly from the mouths of practitioners

¹⁶ **Santería** and Lucumí are two branches of the same Orisha worshipping tradition originating in Cuba, and some use them interchangeably to talk about the practice. Others, like KC, argue that although they're the same tradition, Santería places more emphasis on Catholicism and whiteness while Lucumí is more in tune with its African roots.

and trusted authorities in the practice, she engages in queer storytelling that uncovers incredible truths about the mutability of gender in the Black Atlantic.

In this project I use her retellings of the Pataki, religious stories that make up the theology of Lucumí, to bring the reciprocal practice of storytelling in Lucumí into conversation with questions of gender, sexuality, and gender craft for the BlackTransQueer practitioner. The second chapter focuses on Lucumí in theory and practice, thinking of the ways in which the tradition genders practitioners depending on their role, the moment, and other factors. The Pataki is the religious text of Lucumí and in teasing out the queer relationships between the Orisha, queer people in the ilé carve space for themselves in the community of worshipers. Alongside my interviewee's own stories about the Orisha, I am hoping to think through stories about the gods and their inherent queerness not only as a sanction of BlackTransQueers as they already exist within the ilé, but also as a challenge to the heterosexism within the ilé that Pérez describes.

I. "The Ruse of Consent and the Anatomy of 'Refusal: Cases from Indigenous North America and Australia" by Audra Simpson

Audra Simpson is a professor of Anthropology and a scholar of Indigenous/Native studies. In "The Ruse of Consent and the Anatomy of 'Refusal': Cases from Indigenous North America and Australia" (2017), Audra Simpson catalogues the anti-colonial politics of indigenous tribes. She uses these politics of refusal to negate the farcical assumption of consent to colonization that comes along with indigenous citizenship in colonial states. Simpson's work focuses on the effects of governance across time, space, and bodies, and is especially focused on indigenous people and politics. This piece challenges the politics of recognition as they ahistorically stage problems of citizenship as a diversity and inclusion issue, hiding the machinations of power and colonialism that affect the lives of Indigenous peoples in the U.S. and

Australia. Effectively, the “*law in colonial contexts enforced Indigenous dispossession and then granted freedom through the legal tricks of consent and citizenship. For Native people, this ruse of consent marks the inherent impossibility of that freedom after dispossession, a freedom I argue is actually theft*” (Simpson 20). Simpson asserts that inclusion in the polity for the formerly colonized, particularly for indigenous peoples, masks itself as liberal liberating but strips their rights to autonomy and erases histories of oppression.

This argument is fruitful for this project as I encounter my own participant’s political refusal of gender as a commitment to pro-Blackness and abolition. Refusal as a political stance, for Simpson and KC, serves to unveil the little man behind the curtain. If democracy and inclusion is an illusion for the formerly colonized, those being Black and Indigenous people, does citizenship simply bandage the wound without healing it; does it allow it to become infected? While Simpson looks towards the state as a brutal mechanism for continued colonization, and I acknowledge that reality as well in the first chapter, to end on refusal seems like a call to action that I think I desperately crave. This project is ultimately reflective, about finding and exploring myself and ways of knowing that self. KC: beautiful, powerful, and ingenious, makes me step off the ledge at the end of my first chapter and question how gender is more than the personal, and can also be an alternative to the outside-unmaking of my Black being and that of others.

J. *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* by C. Riley Snorton

C. Riley Snorton explores Black Trans Identity through history, utilizing archival work and theoretical labor to address the existence and erasure of Black gender non-conforming persons existing in the United States. Snorton speaks about the ideas of blackness and transness not as gender and racial categories but rather as transitory states of being with multiple

meanings for the term “transitory”. He describes both blackness and transness as social conditions which are fluid and mutable, but also socially contingent on white manhood as human perfection in order to make these states of being meaningful. He asserts the referentiality of Blackness and transness:

For Colebrook, transitivity is the condition for what becomes known as the human,’ as ‘trans’ expresses primordial being from which difference is formed. I propose that ‘Blackness’ is in apposition to Colebrook’s formulation of ‘trans’ -- that is, that they overlap in referentiality-- insomuch as ‘Blackness’ is a condition of possibility for the modern world and insofar as blackness articulates the paradox of non-being, as expressed in its deployment as appositional flesh. Such a view necessitates drawing on multiple meanings of ‘transitive,’ not only as a term that articulates a quality of ‘passing into another condition, changeable, changeful; passing away, transient, transitory,’ but also in terms of the mechanics of grammar, in which the transitive refers to the expression of an action that requires a direct object to complete its sense of meaning (5-6).

Snorton’s work focuses on the connections to be found in the archive between trans and Black existence, and the imaginative potential of reading transness and blackness in transitive relation. I agree and aim to discover the relativity to be found between Black and trans being, particularly for individuals inhabiting both. Snorton asserts that both Black and trans ways of being have incredible potential, due to the mutability of both categories and the contingency of their existence. Understanding the construction of normativity in juxtaposition to the encountered other (trans and black people) can lead to an understanding of black and trans being not only as similarly marginalized categories of otherness but also as confounded otherness created through and demonized by the process of colonialism. Thinking them together in this way is critical to my thesis work; imagining new possibilities through the richness that black-transness holds as a continuous method of non-normative existence rather than discrete ways of non-being.

***K. Black. Queer. Southern. Women.: An Oral History* by E. Patrick Johnson**

Black. Queer. Southern. Women. is an oral history by E. Patrick Johnson. He interviewed over 80 Black Queer Women and Other Gendered Folks engaging in Queer relationships with queer women, being born or raised in the South. The book is a dive into the lives and personal experiences of Black Queer Southerners as they deal with their childhoods, sex, relationships, discrimination, and the particularity of queerness in the South. Johnson acknowledges that although he is a Queer Southerner, he was unaware of the ways that Southern queerness differs from mainstream and white understandings of queer cultures and communities, speaking to regional and cultural differences in practices, relationships, presentation, and language for Black Queer Women in the American South (Johnson 5-6). Most important to my own work, E. Patrick Johnson engages in a Black Feminist interview practice that places subjects at the center of their own stories in order to recenter the voices of the oppressed in the cultivation of oral history for the use of their own communities rather than for the extraction of the academy.

E. Patrick Johnson undertakes a practice of conducting interviews that places him outside of the recognized field of oral history, because it is a method that seeks to care for subjects and place the power of shaping and dictating their stories in their own hands, and on their own time. I want to undertake this practice as an interview method, intended not only to deconstruct and interrupt structures of power but also to uncover the knowledge to be found in relationality. As a Black, transgender subject, my research is grounded in subjectivity, and I would argue that it improves the depth of understanding that I can achieve and places me in relation to this work and my interlocutor in ways that others could not achieve. E. Patrick Johnson's work speaks not only to black queerness as culturally informed, but also to the

importance of a critical feminist method of undertaking ethnographic research and engaging with participants that deconstructs hierarchies of knowledge creation.

On Method

I am undertaking this work through interviews with a Black transgender practitioner of Lucumí. I want to explore the possibilities of Black queer existence by placing the voice of the practitioner, a BlackTransQueer person specifically, at the forefront of my work as the dictator of their own story and resistant ways of being. I'm attempting to undertake this interview process through the lens of oral history, taking cues from oral historians in queer anti-oppressive practices in order to center the needs, relationships, and voice of my informant rather than establish an extractive relationship between us. Throughout the project I am emphasizing the importance of ancestors, lineage, community, and particularity of practice as engagement with the Orisha is defined by one's ancestral connections and elders first.

My collaborator and I talked about their house, practice, and lineage in the tradition; I wanted to prioritize the knowledge of my interviewee and their expertise. Engagement with scholarship about Lucumí and my own research will fill in the gaps only where absolutely necessary (*engagement with Strongman, Pérez, and others who produce work on and within Lucumí*). I am synthesizing the theoretical and scholarly with the experiential in order to craft context for understanding and deep engagement with this work. I wanted to balance my interaction with scholars and texts on Lucumí with the interview, acknowledging the weight of KC's contribution as an expert in the religion (*an aborisha entering their iyawo year in the direct wake of this interview*).

The questions that I asked as I engage with KC have a lot to do with the minutiae of Lucumí practice, as well as their own theological interpretation, political and intellectual work, as well as BlackTransQueer experience. They are:

1. What factors inform your identity?
2. How has navigating the world as a Black person felt for you?
3. At what moment did Blackness and your Blackness particularly enter your conscious thought?
4. If you had to describe your gender as intimately and minutely as possible, would you? And what are some things you would say?
5. When and how did you come into queerness/transness? What happened once you knew and began to live your truth?
6. How did you enter Queer spaces and how did it feel to inhabit them?
7. How did you come into spirituality? What/Who brought you in?
8. How does Blackness weave in and through how you engage with spirit? Does it inform and shape the experience, does the experience shape your enactment of Blackness in turn?
9. How did it look/feel/taste/etc. To engage with the world, with Blackness, with others, before you encountered spirituality vs. now?
10. How does communing with spirit feel in your body?
11. What about your spiritual journey and path has led you to your place within that tradition or practice?
12. In what ways has coming into contact with Orisha opened up knowledge about yourself and people like you?
13. What was your first encounter with the orisha in as much detail as possible?
14. Where are you in your initiation process?
15. Who is your titular Orisha?
16. What was the divination process like? How does divination work in your tradition?
17. How does your lineage understand/think about gender and gendered manifestations of the Orisha?
18. How would you describe the difference between the iconography associated with Orisha as they come into popular culture and their real manifestations as forces of nature?

The order and depth of the questions are meant to tease out the connections between the seemingly separate Black/Trans/Queer realities that we straddle. They were asked with some subcategories of questioning in order to address the entire scope of issues of Black, Transgender, and Queer experience as well as take advantage of my participant's knowledge as a basis for the outside research I had to undertake later.

The various texts that I have identified as integral to my research will serve not only as evidence to support my thesis, but also as methodological grounding for the work that I seek to undertake. They spell out decolonial and deconstructive methods that seek to challenge colonialism and the erasure of Black-indigenous knowledge while attempting to avoid extraction as a methodology. I chose to use Black transgender researchers, particularly C. Riley Snorton as a Black Trans researcher focusing on Black-Transness. Blackness informs the questions I seek to undertake, and an alternative reading practice informed by Blackness frames Snorton's archival research. C. Riley Snorton understands the fungibility of Blackness and the contingency of gender upon other qualifications, creating an understanding of identity as temporal and interrelated; not concrete categories of existence but rather created, recreated, changeable, and evolving. I understand myself as a Black scholar researching Blackness primarily in this thesis, while also understanding Blackness as fungible otherness determined by white settler colonialism and fungible due to the necessary construction of the (white, human) self in opposition (Fanon 121).

I am also deeply invested in a decolonial feminism that places trans and gender non-conforming people at its center, understanding that binary bioessential (white) gender is a western social construct that controls and unmakes Black bodies. What must also be understood about a decolonial vision is that it is an impossible, impractical, and incomplete transformation to return to the state of being before colonization. Rather, a decolonial vision should provide redress, redistribution, sovereignty, and self-determination for the oppressed, and deconstruct hierarchies that place Black and Brown people into a mutable category of non-being for the benefit of white capitalist societies. It is not the aim of this project to topple the centuries-old colonial project but rather to look towards Black redressive futures through the

lens of gender. Understanding oppressions as interconnected means that our liberation from this web of hierarchies must be intersectional as well; to escape racism we must address gender. Just as gender failure has the potential to dehumanize Black families, Black women, and Black people in general, I believe that in the process of searching for free Black alternatives we must look to gender freedom as well.

Language becomes a point of contention for the project as it is difficult to articulate queerness when understanding and honoring Black traditions and peoples outside of Western constructed norms. Black Atlantic ways of being existed and exist outside of what is communicable through Eurocentric bodies of knowledge, and Queer and Trans/Gender Theories with their basis in Western academia. In undertaking this project, I am seeking ways to challenge the language and neo imperialism that knowledge production in the West continues to perform. I am challenging myself to articulate the nuances of using words like “queer”, “transgender”, and “gender” in order to form some understanding of my collaborator and myself. How I attempt to combat extractivism and the further categorization of Black bodies and ways of being is to name those practices and dynamics while I theorize along with my practitioner-scholar informant. In attempting to honor the ways that people and (and even the Orisha) communicate their beings I hope to find myself and my own queerness in that conversation, being careful to name the parts of my queer self I find there and not place queerness onto others unconsensually.

Chapter Overview

I plan to split this thesis into 4 sections, this introduction, and 2 chapters, followed by a conclusion and personal reflection. While staying flexible in form due to the nature of co-creating knowledge and narrative shaping, I want to be free to follow the lead of the

participant when their stories fall outside of the outline that I conceptualize here. Detours only work to make this project deeper, richer, and better.

The first chapter is an introduction of my co-creator, KC, into the project and their background in relation to gender, queerness, politics, and eventually how they found Lucumí. The interview, led by the questions that I chose to tease out the intricacies of identity, moved from the personal to the larger work of theorizing gender through the lens of Lucumí. KC is a practitioner-scholar whose Queer identity sits at the center of their practice of Lucumí, and in using their own experience of Blackness, genderlessness, and Queer political consciousness as the medium for theorizing they perform important Black Queer-Feminist work. The work of the first chapter is exploring KC's gender through the lens of the Orisha, using the theology and epistemologies they offer as a guide for exploring the scholarship that already exists as well as my own understanding of gender. This chapter is where I begin to tease out the reality of life in Lucumí for Transgender and Queer people, acknowledging the culture of heterosexism that often permeates the space. The chapter concludes with an examination of the political and decolonial implications of Black genders, thinking through what it could mean to refuse gendering as colonial.

The second chapter centers the Pataki of Lucumí and the practices that would mark the African Diasporic tradition as queer. The boundaries of gender in Lucumí are much more fluid than the immutable gender categories that Oyěwùmí articulates are central to the Western/European worldview. The male/masculine ocean becomes the feminine/female water Orisha, male initiates become brides, and the strict rules around gender become slippery, subordinated, and ultimately inconsequential. Through Lydia Cabrera's retelling of certain Pataki and KC's interviews I map an alternative practice of storytelling that reads between the

lines of Lucumí theology in search of the queer self reflected in the divine. From there, through the work of Strongman, Pérez, and the contributions of Dr. Coleman I tease out the contentions between strict gender roles and rules in the midst of so many gender-anarchic practices.

The purpose of the **conclusion** is to examine the findings of the 2 chapters engaging with my co-creator and what they mean for me in the aftermath of this project. At the end of this process, I will have spent more than a year thinking about and communing with KC about their relationship to divinity and gender. This project has had a profound effect on the ways that I view and value gender as it conflicts and colludes with my Blackness. It is in this final chapter that I examine my process, reflect on this endeavor, and commit to healing myself through spirituality as I have proposed here. Although I am not in direct conversation with the Orisha, what have I heard, felt, and realized in the process of this work that will lead me where I am meant to go? The final chapter will conclude the work of the first two, thinking through their implications for myself and the body of scholars, and worshippers, with whom I hope to place myself in critical conversation and blessed community.

CHAPTER II: BUILD-A-B*TCH: THE BLACK BODY UNMADE, HOMEMADE, AND IN
REBELLION

KC (they/he)

KC is a spiritualist and healer living in Greensboro, NC who I have known for several years as a confidant, mentor, comrade and the self-proclaimed “twerk king of the South”. We met as two members of the inaugural class of Southerners on New Ground’s (SONG) Black Queer Leadership Cohort: The Lorde’s Werq. It was on our first cohort retreat that 30 of us began mutually crafting a BlackTransQueer community in ways that I had never witnessed or been a part of before. In 2018, I was one of the youngest people there, if not the youngest, and definitely one of the least experienced. Having recommended some of my own mentors in local work to the next generation of Lorde’s Werq fellows and seeing both rejected let me know just how lucky I was to be admitted to the first group.

There we were, in all our glory, on a reclaimed cotton plantation in Whitakers, NC living out BlackTransQueer dreams and imagining free Black futures. It was a transformative experience (literally) and one where I was re-introduced to the divine through Black Community. It was where I met Wendy Moore, a freedom singer whose songs I taught to my own community in the wake of John Elliot Neville’s death in the Forsyth County Detention center. I was reminded there of how much I loved to sing, and what a cleansing act it is to sing as one voice with similar others, the way we used to treat hymnals in church. In this space I also met folks like KC and so many others who were invoking spirituality in ways that I had never before imagined, communing in queerness with the Orisha and their ancestors without shame or hesitation.

I remember being in awe of him when KC described being at the Charlotte Uprising¹⁷ (Scott 1) and what organizing in the midst of chaos was like, how BlackTransQueer folks from this group, who already knew each other and held each other down in the middle of a warzone. I had never known that type of organizing, and it made me so hungry. At my Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in my senior year I was becoming disillusioned with student activism and felt that although I was learning how to organize, what I was doing had very little impact in an already privileged populace. It was this leadership cohort, the folks I met there as well as the training I received, that developed my politic and my genderqueer identity.

KC was one of the people who led me to interrogate my gender, and I will always appreciate them as a guide in my own life, leading me to this project and myself. They spoke, in this interview and in our personal conversations, about feeling led by Obatala, the head cooler and father of Orisha, to participate in conversations and work centering gender because the opportunity continued to present itself, over and over. We undertook this journey together, being in close relationship and with mutual understanding that we were acting in mutual vulnerability, trust, and friendship with one another. In our conversation, he took me on a journey from childhood, through school days and giving birth to their child, all the way to the present, where they believe that Lucumí is meant for them and is saving their life.

This chapter focuses on how the Black body is engaged by BlackTransQueers like KC within Lucumí and how spirituality helps him turn towards West African thought systems to gender (or rather de-gender) himself. Upon inspection of the Western epistemologies that formulate gender and the Afro-indigenous cosmologies that would challenge it, KC helps me see

¹⁷ The **Charlotte Uprising** refers to the coalition of community members that formed in response to the police killing of Keith Lamont Scott, amongst others, that sparked multiple days of protest in Charlotte, NC in 2016.

how gender is confounding and ultimately social, mutable, and man-made in the most literal sense. The importance of this project lies in its interrogation of concepts of gender, why and how they mark the Black body as other, and exploration of the alternatives that Lucumí, present for KC as they seek access to (BlackTransQueer) community and self. Furthermore, this chapter interrogates the ways in which BlackTransQueers are often denied access to community in ways that speak to the cisheterosexism¹⁸ persistent in Black communities and Black-Atlantic traditions. The conversation that KC and I had, as friends and collaborating scholars, was incredibly insightful in examining the gaps between queer Lucumí theology and practice, and their own experience as a BlackTransQueer practitioner. Scholars like Elizabeth Pérez have discussed this dissonance; though some practitioners are ready to embrace the genderqueer theology of Lucumí others are not ready to fully accept queer/genderqueer people into the space (Pérez 117). This would seem antithetical to the ways in which the space has already been queered by certain Lucumí practices, which I discuss in the next chapter. This culture of cisheterosexism creates tension within the ilé¹⁹; between the machismo²⁰ culture inherited from colonial powers and TransQueers mirroring the gender-freedom of the Orisha.

Thinking through the tension between learned anti-queer sentiment and the place of TransQueer practitioners in Lucumí leads me directly to KC's gender negotiation through the theology of Lucumí. Although they use the theology of Lucumí and the Orisha's own gender-

¹⁸ **Cisheterosexism:** the system of oppression that exists at the intersection of gender and sexuality in which cisgender and heterosexual identities and performances are assumed, privileged, and rewarded while others are admonished.

¹⁹ **ilé:** the house of worship and/or community of practitioners.

²⁰ **Machismo** is a Latino/a socio-cultural value of masculine pride and overperformance of masculinity. It can be damaging to women, queer people, and others that *machista* men see as inferior.

expansion to relate their own gender, they also equate their gender identity with a political commitment to decolonialism. Ultimately the act of being gendered was not something that Black people, colonized and enslaved in the Americas, consented to, thus they can refuse the colonization of their bodies in this way. I argue at the end of this chapter that although consent is a socially constructed “right” created in opposition to those who did not have rights, refusal becomes a powerful tool for decolonialism as Black and Indigenous people push against the continued occupation of their land and bodies by the state. Through interpretation of this interview and engagement with scholars thinking critically about gender, colonialism, Blackness, and the Orisha as frameworks for theorizing and world-building, I hope to uncover paths for BlackTransQueer life that are cherished within a community of divine practitioners.

I tried to translate this idea of cherishing our community members, particularly other BlackTransQueers existing in divine community with one another, into my interview. Sessions with KC were characterized by informality, interruptions, and the familiar rhythms of kinship. Nugget, their 6-year-old child, often came into the room to ask for lunch or why we were talking about them. We spent a lot of time at the beginning of interviews going over our feelings of anxiety and apprehension, while catching up on current events. Often when conducting these interviews, I wasn't feeling very well, and KC echoed these sentiments, dealing with anxiety around the interview process in general and the topic of gender identity. It was a fight not to interject when they said something incredibly interesting or just prolific in the moment, and we often found ourselves not speaking over one another but harmonizing. Moreover, mutual trust and relationship were important parts of this project at the root, and KC re-emphasized the importance of trust as a Lucumí practitioner speaking to someone outside of the tradition.

After giving some disclaimer about my own lack of membership in a tradition and the problematic nature of coming into this research from an academic standpoint, KC reassured me:

If I didn't know you I would need to know that. [...] I would expect for someone with this type of thesis to be in tradition in some type of way, just because of the nature of it. You know? But I also know you so I appreciate you saying that, but you also don't have to. When you go to interview other people it is important to name that." I continued to explain myself when they stopped me, saying that as Black Trans folks we "tend to overly explain and whatever-whatever because there's always so much that we gotta do to even be, like, accepted into the space. I get it, you don't have to do that with me.

This reassurance of our relationship was essential in calming my nerves and spoke to the purpose of this project, recording honest conversation between two BlackTransQueers seeking self-knowledge through Lucumí and Afro-centric thought ways.

In an attempt to decentralize and challenge Western knowledge creation and epistemologies, I want to acknowledge the expertise of my interviewee. KC, at this time, was initiated in Lucumí with *elekes*²¹ and *warriors*²², and was on the precipice of beginning their journey towards priesthood. In Lucumí, the majority of information is transmitted from elders to newcomers through oral tradition, and often practitioners are forbidden from learning about the practice from outside of the *ilé* before they have reached specific milestones (Dr. Daniel Coleman²³). Additionally, there are some things that outsiders to the tradition are never supposed to know, and KC emphasized this in our interview, letting me know when questions about

²¹ **Elekes:** sacred beaded necklaces bestowed upon initiates represented the four pillars of the Regla de Ocha: *Obatala*, *Shango*, *Yemayá* and *Oshun*.

²² **Warriors:** another form of initiation in which one is accepted by the four warriors of Lucumí: *Eleggua*, *Ogun*, *Oshosi*, and *Osun*.

²³ One of the advisors on this project is Dr. Daniel Coleman, soon-to-be crowned Child of *Obatala* in the Lucumí tradition. We were in conversation about Lucumí traditions, as well as ways that this project should push the boundaries of scholarly methodology through challenging Western knowledge creation. I cite his expertise often within this project.

certain ceremonies were sacred and secretive. In acknowledging my own desire to come into an Afro-Atlantic tradition at some point and to honor Lucumí practices of knowledge transmission and secrecy, I recognize KC as not only an interlocutor but also as an expert in Lucumí. There are some things that I am not meant to know, yet or maybe ever, and in trusting KC's expertise and allowing them to guide me I hope to carefully walk the line between scholar and potential practitioner as I undertake the work of thinking gender into pieces.

The mode of knowledge-production utilized in this interview made the work of theorizing that much richer, and I chose my questions carefully in order to emphasize the process of coming into spiritual awakening, as well as queerness. "What factors inform your identity?" became a weighty question, one that characterized our first session and co-theorizing, as we explored the power of life events, multiplicitous oppressions, and Orisha epistemologies as informants of self-knowledge. Questions like this accompanied by others like "How has navigating the world as a Black person felt for you?" as well as "When and how did you come into queerness/transness?" asked in conjunction with one another are meant to tease out the connections between BlackTransQueer embodiment and existence for KC, painting a picture of life for them as they came into the assemblage of identities that they hold. Although these questions are asked separately, often the answers they evoked overlapped and lead to deeper discussion of the interconnectedness of Black-Trans-Queer identity for my interviewee. Thinking through ideas of identity and the construction of seemingly disparate identities created in relation to each other, I was made to understand the ways in which categorization and labels like "Black", "Transgender" or "Queer" would have us think ourselves apart. For KC and hopefully my future self, Lucumí can offer ways to stitch our BlackTransQueer selves back together after the atrophy of colonialism. Our interview was instrumental in reuniting "BlackTransQueer" into one, working

against the ways Black people are misarticulated and misgendered through the process of enslavement and colonization.

Ode to Qbatala: Crafting Black Bodies and Birthing your Ancestors

According to KC, their gender identity developed throughout their life in a series of steps, and they use the imagery of a popular meme meant to describe a thought process.

“It's like, ‘girl’ and then it's like a regular brain, and then it's like ‘girl?’ and then it's like a bigger brain, then it's like, ‘what is gender?’ and then it's like a bigger brain, and then it's like ‘gender does not exist’ and then it's like this big like... you know? So, I think that's how I came to understand my gender in those type of ways.” [see Figure 1]

Figure 1. GENDER DOES NOT EXIST Meme



[Aries Powell, adopted meme, 2020]

KC came to understand their genderlessness through studying colonialism, Black feminism, and Lucumí. Their godfather²⁴, when learning about their gender identity (or lack thereof), had little to say in terms of LGBTQ+ allyship in the traditional sense, but did tell stories of Ọbatala.

Known as the man in white, Ọbatala is the creator of mankind and the head-cooler, he is the patron of anyone yet unclaimed and is known to take male and female forms. In the Ifá²⁵ creation story, Ọbatala asks to go down to the Earth to create beings that the Orisha can help with their power, as he grew bored in the heavens. Upon seeing his reflection in the ocean, he begins crafting bodies from clay using his own pleasing image as the model. Once the other Orisha realize that the bodies are without life, Ọlọrun²⁶ throws a fireball down to earth that sets the planet spinning and bakes the clay as he breathes life into the figures who become humans (Anderson 31). KC theorizes: *“The way that bodies were created and thought of had nothing to do with gender, it was literally just Ọbatala being like oh this is cute, like, lemme, you know, see like what, you know what I’m saying, and-and made them in -- uh, made bodies uh, in-in their image.”*

The creation story in conjunction with Ọbatala’s gender fluidity and ability to switch and shift forms speaks to KC as they conceptualize their gender in relation to the Orisha. Within Lucumí, the Orisha are gendered in some ways and in others are not tethered to gender; their pathways are gendered and the Orisha that claims someone may not be in alignment with their

²⁴ Within the Lucumí tradition, initiates have godparents that are tasked with introducing them to the tradition, educating them on the beliefs and practices, and overseeing their ceremonial induction.

²⁵ **Ifá**: the traditional religion of the Yoruba people from West Africa, it is the original belief system on which Lucumí and all other Orisha-centered spiritual traditions in the Afro-Atlantic are based.

²⁶ **Ọlọrun**: the supreme ruler of the heavens and the Orisha, also known as Olodumare.

gender (Coleman). According to KC, and their elders, it is essential to submit to the will of the Orisha and understand that how we, in this historical and geographical moment, perceive and interpret human bodies matters very little to the Orisha: they may call one to do and serve in whatever way they see fit, regardless of our preconceptions. KC understands BlackTransQueerness as embodied through engagement with the Orisha and looks towards other ways of thinking about and living in the body as a purposeful home for the soul rather than an inescapable container for a mythologized, biologically predetermined self.

Work by scholars in the field of Afro-Atlantic cosmologies asserts that engagement with the body and gender differs between African and European philosophies. Roberto Strongman is a scholar whose work on transcorporeality in Candomblé, Santería, and Vodou works to tease out the queerness inherent in Afro-Atlantic cosmologies. He proposes that the act of being mounted by spirits and Orisha is evidence of gender and sexual crossing that evokes a more fluid understanding of Black genders and sexualities. Strongman emphasizes new ways of thinking about the body, and queering it through these alternative understandings, highlighting the difference between understanding the body as an open versus indivisible container for the soul as outlined by Orisha-centered and Western philosophies, respectively. Strongman theorizes:

A thorough study of Afro Diasporic religions reveals how—unlike the Western idea of the fixed internal unitary soul—the Afro Diasporic self is removable, external, and multiple. [...] African pots, calabashes, baskets, and other concave ritual, representational, and utilitarian objects provide OyoYorùbá metaphors of personhood [...] the notion of the body as vessel allows for queer resubjectifications that are rare or impossible under the containment model provided by Descartes (10-11).

When conceptualizing the Western perspective of gender as biologically determined by sex characteristics and unchangeable, it makes sense to think of the body as inescapable and closed. The Yoruba concept of the open-container body, by contrast, allows the soul and the divine to enter and exit when desired, challenging this notion of gender-determinism. Strongman's work

makes gendering an action that is ongoing and ever changing; the Black body is mounted with divine purpose.

Other scholars challenge the gender determinism of White-Western philosophies from different angles, taking the physical body from the forefront of the conversation to the more peripheral position that it holds in Yoruba culture. Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí is a Nigerian gender scholar whose work focuses on the intersection of colonialism and gender. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses (1997)* is a text that examines the ways in which the thought systems of colonialism are incompatible with the world-sense of Africans. Emphasizing the biological knowledge of the White-West as universal (when it is not) others the Black female body and reinforces the socio-biological construction of gender, fixing gender across space, time, and cultural context in ways that disadvantage scholarship and feminism. Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí's work urges scholars to think critically about human categorization in the past and present, and the ways in which that thinking places biology at the center of our constructed reality, ignoring the realities of other cultures and their social organization:

The classic example is the female who played the roles of ọba (ruler), omo (offspring), ọkọ, aya, iyá (mother), and aláwo (diviner-priest) all in one body. None of these kinship and non-kinship social categories are gender-specific. [...] Seniority as the foundation of Yoruba social intercourse is relational and dynamic; unlike gender, it is not focused on the body (14).

The biological worldview assumes the importance of what the West imposed as man and woman genders in the colonized because of the bodies they saw, failing to meet the Yoruba from their own sense of the world and their bodies.

For the Yoruba in West Africa, the body, biology, and gender do not sit at the center of social relationships and thus gender is an ill-fitting category for social organization in their

society. Through engagement with these scholars, I argue that assuming gender and its importance not only leads to bad research, but also reinforces the false universality of Western epistemologies while subverting other ways of being and thinking. Alexander G. Weheliye is a scholar of African American studies who explores Hortense Spillers' concept of ungendering and the flesh for Black humanity in *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (2014). While Oyěwùmí claims that centering the biological is bad research, Weheliye claims that centering the biological, phenotypical, and physiological as a way to classify bodies creates and recreates slavery's social order. He describes the racialization that occurs when the Black body is made flesh and interpreted through the white-biological lens as a facilitator of "*the political, economic, social, and cultural disciplining (semiosis of procedure) of the Homo sapiens species into assemblages of the human, not-quite-human, and non-human*" (Weheliye 43). This scholar asks us to consider the concept of ungendering through the process of slavery, and the ways in which "*the banning of Black subjects from the domain of the human occur in and through gender and sexuality*" as the Black body is made profitable flesh (Weheliye 42).

Bridging these three texts brings gender and philosophies of personhood into conversation in this project. Weheliye thinks critically through ideas of personhood while confronting the pathbreaking concept of ungendering as articulated by Spillers, making the Black body into flesh, the non-subject that is without gender. When thinking about the fact that gender may not have existed for the Yoruba, or at the very least was unimportant as a social category, I wonder if gendering Black bodies as an act of humanization or social inclusion is important, or even "correct" as it certainly fails to heal the wounds of colonialism/slavery. This much is evidenced by the perpetuity of racialized violence *through* gender enacted against Black families

in the Moynihan report (Spillers 66). In conjunction with the aforementioned work of Strongman and Oyěwùní, Weheliye's piece makes me question if gendering the Black body is an inclusion or an act of social/biological control, limiting the possibilities for self that African epistemologies present.

Where the pathways to personhood through assimilation to white gendering are constantly closing, I am seeking to uncover the alternatives to the Yoruba concepts of gender and being present. The open container conceptualization of the body and understanding of the philosophical differences between White-Western and the Yoruba epistemologies opens pathways to BlackTransQueerness. Through these theories we can challenge ideas of gender as a category of major significance in Yoruba societies and by extension the Black Atlantic. In my earlier engagement with Maria Lugones and Hortense Spillers I argued that gender is a method of categorization from the West. Gender separates humans from non-humans and establishes hierarchies that subvert the colonized and enslaved in the Americas (see introduction). Maybe, when we turn to the open-container conceptualization of the body, one in which gender is a transitory and mutable state, if it has significance at all, we come closer to making space for BlackTransQueer folks. Decentralizing European conceptualizations of the body, the biological, and gender as we theorize BlackTransQueerness is an essential step towards living in the thought-ways that are present in Lucumí and other Orisha-centered practices.

What the epistemologies of Lucumí ask is why we continue to center the body (to the detriment of our own understanding and imaginations of what is possible) when the biological matters very little to the *ori*²⁷. In conversation with Dr. Daniel Coleman, I was introduced to the depth of *ori*, although I originally encountered the *ori* in conversation with KC. *Ori* is a number

²⁷ **Ori:** The Lucumí concept of one's spiritual destiny, essence, temperament, potential, etc.

of things, and although it is often compared to the concept of a soul, it is much more than just that. The ori is chosen before birth, while one still resides in heaven. We choose a number of things before we are born, according to Dr. Coleman and KC, both experts in Lucumí. One's parents, dates of birth and death, the body you are born into, and many aspects of the life you are meant to live are all chosen. Ori is one's destiny, one's personality and temperament, the physicality of the head as well as its spiritual contents. Ori is a confounding concept that encompasses all that one is and has the potential and responsibility to be. The Orisha are so named because the ori requires guardians, *sha*. The path of the Orisha, as articulated by Coleman, is all about coming back into alignment with the path that you chose before birth. It is the duty of the Orisha and the purpose of Lucumí to bring balance to practitioners and restore destinies (speaking to Alexander's spiritual healing).

The predestination element creates questions about gender, particularly for transgender people, within the practice. Some would undoubtedly articulate the importance of gender stability using one's destiny and choice of body as a justification. If you don't believe you are a man/woman, why would you have chosen this body? Gender must be fixed, and gender difference correct if we all chose. The reality for myself and other BlackTransQueers is that the conversation deserves nuance. A compelling and delicious argument can be made for transgender destinies. As KC understands and tells it, Ọbatala did not make bodies male or female in order to be men or women and having crafted multitudes of different bodies from his own genderfluid image we can assume that their inhabiting ori are not so fixed in gender, because Ọbatala is not. The spirit that those bodies contained did not denote gender, and KC asks a question that has informed my own theorizing and explains their conceptualization of their own

gender: *“So if you’re genderfluid and you show up in many different presentations in your body, then the people that -- the bodies that you create are going to be different, right?”*

When we think through the concept that bodies and ori are chosen in advance, we can craft theories of transgender embodiment as an important part of that destiny. What if rather than a certain body denoting a destined woman/man identity we are meant to be who we are, and for some the transition or discovery of their gender is a part of that pre-ordained journey? This idea is especially legitimate when we’ve already analyzed the theorizing of Oyěwùmí and the gender craft of Ọbatala. With the body resting in the background of the Yoruba world sense and social hierarchies, Ọbatala crafting clay bodies, male and female, from his own reflection acts as a mirror for that worldview. If Ọbatala doesn’t have a fixed gender what could that mean for the bodies that he sought to create as the genesis of mankind? One can imagine that male, female, and intersex bodies came to be based on what Ọbatala saw in himself, rather than being predestined as men or women. If Ọbatala’s body can change and become what it needs to be, what of our bodies as a reflection of that creator? Can we shapeshift? Do we imitate godliness to embody that divine transition?

We can also think through these questions of (trans)gender from the perspective of Ọbatala’s gender-trickery at the city gate. Just as his ever-changing forms serve his needs, the bodies of practitioners can be understood as serving a purpose within their lives. We can interpret the stories of Ọbatala as communicating the purpose of the physical aspects of the body and their misalignment with Western constructs of gender for BlackTransQueers seeking self, particularly when examined in relationship to KC’s interpretation of his body, ori, and egbe²⁸.

²⁸ **Egbe:** spiritual family.

Egbe decide to be born in order to help their spiritual family on Earth when they are needed, and KC relates it to the concept of soulmates. Rather than a romantic connection it is an intentional encounter or relationship meant to set Lucumí practitioners on the right path. *“I believe that Nugget (KC’s child) is one of my egbe, which makes sense ‘cause he my child, but he told me, he told me that he was older than me. He was like ‘yeah, you know, you had me, but I’m older than you’ and I was like ‘what?’ and he was like ‘yeah, I came here to help you out’.”* It is through this understanding of the need for the relationship between themselves and their egbe, KC and Nugget, that KC relates to their body. *“So maybe I had to be born in this body because my egbe was gonna come back as my child. So I had to be able to give birth to my egbe, so that’s why my ori chose this body, not because my ori said ‘I want to come back in this world as a woman’.”*

There is something enticing about this way of thinking of the body, particularly the bodies that carry BlackTransQueer folks seeking out new ways of living and being for themselves unrestricted by gender. If the body serves a purpose, one preordained by the egbe and the ori, and sexual organs have more to do with literal reproduction than the status they are associated with (in this social moment), what does that mean for gender in the post-colonial Black Atlantic? There is so much to think about here, and this revelation from KC has informed my own reading of my body as I think through BlackTransQueer embodiment for myself and what my body can mean when I allow it to be purposeful rather than encasing. This argument when taken at face value might seem like one that aligns with patriarchal ideas of the (assigned) female body as innately reproductive and meant for childbearing. I would challenge that here as we engage with and think through non-Western epistemologies. Although KC’s ability to give birth is something they see as essential in the course of bringing their Egbe to Earth, I am not

arguing that people with bodies assigned female are meant to bear children, or that divine purpose for the body is tied to the sexual organs in particular. Rather this example in KC's life speaks to the arbitrary nature of gendering when understood through a different lens, and ways in which one might conceptualize their body differently when engendered by the crafty self and the omnipotent divinity of the Orisha.

The act of theorizing around the self and the Black body is fruitful for KC as they think through their genderlessness and come to terms with what it means for them to be birthing and agender. For me, this process of theorizing, decentering, rethinking, and thinking myself back together becomes less like rationalization and more like repotting a plant. Refilling the same old vessel that used to feel too tight and rigid with fresh soil, water, and fertilizer allows me to grow within and beyond its walls, sprouting fresh leaves and flowering epiphanies. What happens when we begin to understand ourselves as the plant rising above and beyond, constantly growing and changing, rather than the pot? Separating myself from my body in order to examine the ways in which it is useful, fruitful, and ultimately a self-made home rather than a man-made prison is an exercise in peace for which I am so grateful.

KC's account of their own progression to understand and uncover their gender through and along with Lucumí stands out to me as I search for alternatives and gender failures. Their experience and the process of theorizing one's own gender speaks to the idea of gender crafting, gender as process, gender as processing, and gender cultivated in relation to the community one inhabits. According to transgender studies scholar, Jeanne Vaccaro, "*the labor of making transgender identity is handmade: collective—made with and across bodies, objects, and forces of power—a process, unfinished yet enough (process, not progress)*" (Vaccaro 96). Rather than being something fixed and determined, gender is a process that works in steps, relations, and

reinforcements. When we begin to think about gender as a DIY project rather than a determinant or determined social category, Lucumí provides instructions for the unraveling of factory-made genders, unfit for the individuals they seek to categorize and control, making room for the individual crafting of BlackTransQueer identity in collusion with the divine. KC thinks through this unraveling and crafting process in their first queer experiences in their youth relating their “coming out” story and how it put them on a different path than they would have chosen had they been unrestricted by family, consequences, space, and the limiting conceptions of biological-gender.

Valuing BlackTransQueers

When I was a kid, um, I was what people would call a tomboy. You could not pay me to put on a dress, you could not pay me to wear anything other than sneakers. Could not, could not! Then I moved to North Carolina, and that was my freshman year of High school [...] my first girlfriend was white, a white girl, and her family was literally racist and called my house when they found out we were ‘dating’ and threatened to burn our house down and like they had affiliations with the Klan²⁹. [...] The relationship I had with my mom was really awful. I was getting into trouble for so much little shit that I knew that it was because, um, I told her I was bisexual³⁰. I came clean about it after all of the shit happened. [...] I threw myself into this hyper-feminine, like, way of being [...] So very much hyper-fem, like “I’m a woman, I’m a woman, I’m a woman.” Like, it never felt right, but “I’m a woman.” Like okay, maybe, y’know I’m wearing these heels, like I got my hair done and I’ll start to feel more...like whatever, it’s not that.

As KC gains access to new knowledge, and enters new communities, his gender shifts, and changes; it is a product of relationality as well as knowledge cultivation. As he came into the community of Black Queer radicals (through SONG and other organizations in the South) and

²⁹ **The Ku Klux Klan**

³⁰ *They originally came out as bisexual, but later identified as a lesbian. KC now identifies as Queer with a capital Q, signifying their political commitment to Queerness as well as their sexual preferences and behaviors.*

learned the language to rearticulate himself, KC was able to choose new ways of being and living that speak to his BlackTransQueerness in totality:

That's where I was in high school at this point, like 'I'm a lesbian.' Like, I know I want to express differently but I can't, [...] I guess when I get older, I can be like a butchy lesbian or whatever. Then coming into organizing, fast-forward, coming into organizing, um, I learned that there's something that exists to identify as that's not a man or a woman, and I was like 'huh... this. This kinda scene kinda lit...'

It is this rearticulation that I am seeking out in undertaking this interview, thinking critically through the process of forming normative and non-normative genders from the perspective of Black folks in Orisha-traditions in contrast to my own stifling experience. It is through this interview process and the processes of theorizing and crafting one's own gender using the Orisha as guides that I hope to map my own path forward.

KC's first experiences with gender expression and sexuality were policed and his choices were determined by necessity and conformity rather than personal preference, specifically the threat of racialized violence. KC's experience speaks to the interconnectedness of racism and heterosexism, as their relationship with a white girl leads to threats from the Ku Klux Klan; one could speculate that the white family is threatened by Blackness encroaching on their child as well as queer sexuality. In thinking about Blackness, KC thinks through the confounding aspects of living as a Black person, particularly as a BlackTransQueer person, dealing with immense pain of racialized violence and victimization, using community to cope and counterbalance the post-colonial trauma of racism. What becomes consistent in their life are the ways in which BlackTransQueer folks are continually marginalized even within their own communities, facing alienation and violence from Black community as well as the white supremacist state:

Being Black and Queer at the same time, and Black and Queer and Trans specifically at the same time, [...] it's like... [huff]...ah-when, it's like... it's like... something happens with Black men, everybody shows up. Something happens with Black women, some

Black women, queer and trans people show up. Something happens to somebody queer and trans [silence].

In the wake of the ill-fated passings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Tony McDade³¹ this summer, this statement couldn't be more poignant. Rather than accounting for the difference in the legal handling of each situation, this statement accounts for who seems to warrant protest, rage, grief, and retaliation, and who does not. BlackTransQueers are in need of the same protection and mutual aid that Black communities provide their cis-heterosexual members in the midst of racialized violence and after death, but often Black trans people are forgotten, erased, and ignored when their lives are lost.

The erasure of BlackTransQueers in death is something that scholars and activists within the Black Lives Matter movement have been critical of, claiming that the movement centers cisgender-straight Black men at the expense of other Black people. The scholarship of Tehama Lopez Bunyasi and Candis Watts Smith focuses on the concept of group identification in Black communities in the era of Black Lives Matter, citing it as an understanding of mutual vulnerability within an in-group of marginalized people. These scholars argue that although there is group identification within Black communities, particularly in the age of BLM and M4BL³², secondary marginalization (Cohen) continues to disadvantage Black people who experience multiple marginalizations, particularly queer and transgender people. Group identification is the

³¹ I thought about clarifying who these folks were and their significance to the nation-wide protests this summer when I realized that some would be household names and others, namely Tony McDade, are widely unknown. I think it is important to call them into the space, but in the spirit of intentionality I want you to find them yourself and, in that process, come to truly understand what I am saying about BlackTransQueers and the violence of erasure.

³² **BLM and M4BL:** Black Lives Matter and the Movement for Black Lives respectively; two organizations created to advocate for the rights of Black people in the wake of police and state-sanctioned violence. Both are intersectional movements aimed to center and serve those closest to the margins within Black communities. (Bunyasi and Smith).

impetus to identify with and protect other members of one's community or in-group as they recognize that their fates are interconnected; if one Black person can be murdered by police or lost to state sanctioned violence without just recourse, then it could happen to any of us.

Although Bunyasi and Smith would argue that Black people feel the need to show up for one another, to grieve and demand justice, they find that respectability politics continues to affect who is and isn't worthy of justice, even in death. According to Bunyasi and Smith's research:

If the smaller segment [of Black populations] is one that is socially constructed as deviant, undeserving, immoral, or unworthy, it is likely that the challenges faced by that group will not receive the attention of Black political leaders. [...] The narratives of slain Black people are often accompanied by details of their past. Those who do not follow traditional, White-middle class, heterosexual patriarchal norms are (perhaps unintentionally) deemed as deviants, and thus, not as "grieveable" (Obasogie and Newman 2016, 555). Therefore, those who endorse a politics of respectability are disposed to focus on individuals who make more "compelling victims," not only so that (White) conservatives can be persuaded that state violence is real but also to persuade White and Black moderates of the same idea (187-188).

BlackTransQueer folk living within Black communities and seeking justice for Black lives, like KC, have critiques of the organizing that happens within our communities as BlackTransQueers are continually omitted from the obituaries. The double bind of the BLM era (2013 to the present) is the duty to show up for other Black folks while truncating our full selves in life and often in death if one hopes to be "grieveable".

This same infuriating power-labor imbalance exists in Afro-Atlantic spiritual communities as they deal with the clash between heterosexism/transphobia, and the genderqueer and sexually fluid nature of their own beliefs and practices. In *Religion in the Kitchen* (2016) Elizabeth Pérez writes:

Recent research in African American studies posits that the Black Atlantic [...] has always been a queer Atlantic, pointing to the rich history of sexual crossings, gendered maroonage, and multiple gender identities that have flourished in the Caribbean and Latin America [...] yet there are limits to straight practitioners' tolerance of LGBT community members (117).

Despite this attitude there is some consensus amongst practitioners that “sissies” are good to have in the ilé, for their skill in food preparation, animal sacrifice, ceremonial chanting, overseeing initiations, and many other jobs that keep the ilé running smoothly. This dichotomy results in the perception of queer and transgender identified practitioners as *“both a cursed and necessary object”* within the practice of Lucumí as some feel that *“Afro-Cuban traditions in the United States have been queered to the point of spoilage by the presence of too many LGBT people”* (Pérez 117). Despite their necessity, the attitude of distaste and culture of hetero-masculinity in some houses results in the policing of queer behaviors and practitioners. *“Almost any nonheteronormative behavior -- in choice of clothing, mannerism, or romantic partner -- elicits discriminatory treatment”* (Pérez 118). In Pérez’s study, Afolabi, a genderqueer priest and author, notes that no amount of homosexual activity castigated within the house could approach the social deviance of ritual acts of possession and animal sacrifice, yet gays within the ilé are the ones tasked with acting “normal” (Pérez 118). Here I ask: What significance do gender roles and sexual orientations have within such an already non-normative space? Why is it that the taboo against homosexual and gender-crossing activities remains in the ilé when every other social norm established in the Americas has already been crossed? Possession, ritual dance, animal sacrifice, and more are all standard practice and yet gender boundaries remain. Although the scholarship on the Black Atlantic, particularly recent scholarship on Black Atlantic spiritual traditions, would romanticize the queerness of Black-Atlantic spiritual traditions like Lucumí, there is distinct dissonance between the reality of the practice and the “gay-friendly” theology that scholars tend to emphasize.

The relationship between the Black and Brown participants, Lucumí, and homophobia is one that deserves some exploration, especially in the context of a spiritual tradition housing so

much gender diversity and sexual fluidity. The dissonance between the theology of Lucumí and the practical heterosexism that lives in the ilé is arguably a colonial problem, one that can be addressed through the lens of Maria Lugones' *Decolonizing Feminism* (2010). Maria Lugones thinks through the problem of gender under colonialism and her thoughts in *Decolonizing Feminism* are relevant as we ponder the place of BlackTransQueers in Lucumí. Lugones writes: “the hierarchical dichotomy as a mark of the human also became a normative tool to damn the colonized. [...] Hermaphrodites, sodomites, viragos, and the colonized were understood to be aberrations of male perfection” (Lugones, 743). According to Lugones, gender became a marker of humanity for white men and women, created in order to separate them from those who they considered their rightful property and inferior beings. As the language of gender emerged to describe humanity and was specifically denied to the colonized in conjunction with the denial of family, rights, and personhood, its power increased as a regulatory social construct that separated people from property. One can see how clinging to Western ideas of gender and normative sexuality would seem like a way for Black formerly enslaved people and their descendants to assert their humanity. That is not to say that the homophobia and transphobia within Afro-Atlantic traditions is purely tactical, but it is an effect of the larger culture of heterosexism that remains deeply embedded within the practice of these religions.

Returning to Pérez's text, based on the accounts of lesbian, gay, and genderqueer identified practitioners within Lucumí, they are often relegated to certain roles within the ilé based on their status as optimal mounts for spirits. In some of the more heterosexist or machista spiritual homes, this means that queers are forbidden from entering certain orders or spaces designated for the masculine men of ilé, although they cook for everyone and perform the duties usually allocated to women. Elizabeth Pérez argues:

For the same reason that gay, nonbinary, and gender-queer men have been accepted and valued as possession mounts, they have been welcomed into the overwhelmingly female space of the kitchen: they are perceived to have an internally coherent subject-position with women that renders them capable of serving the spirits in the manner appropriate to a wife (118).

Elizabeth Pérez pauses to discuss the lack of differentiation between lesbian and straight women in the tradition (read: erasure) versus the intense castigation of gay men and other AMAB³³ gender queer people. Often relegated to the kitchen or used for their proficiency in animal sacrifice, art, ceremony, and initiations, gay men and other TransQueer AMAB people can occupy a transitory position between the men and women of the ilé. This position says more about the gendered hierarchy of some Lucumí houses than any sort of gender-queer understanding of worship, as mounting has double meanings associated with consumption and penetration that would cast queer men (and AFAB³⁴ people regardless of sexuality or gender queerness) in the role of servant-wives to the Orisha. Rather than claiming that this is a way that gay men have been cast aside or subjugated within the practice of Lucumí, Pérez concludes that:

The kitchen's gendered division of labor has historically equipped those marked as exemplary wives for the spirits with the special skills required for the transmission of Lucumí traditions to succeeding generations [...] Far from merely adding a dash of spice to Lucumí, gay men have helped turn generations of green aleyos³⁵ into seasoned aborishas³⁶. Their contributions to the tradition's characteristic temporalities and affective structures live on in 'the best kitchens'(123).

Ashabi is the woman whose home Elizabeth Pérez begins to learn about Lucumí in and do the theoretical and micro practical work that weaves together *Religion in the Kitchen* (2016).

³³ **AMAB:** Assigned Male at Birth

³⁴ **AFAB:** assigned female at birth

³⁵ **Aleyo:** a non-believer, non-initiate, or newcomer to Lucumí

³⁶ **Aborisha:** those who have been initiated with necklaces and/or warriors in Lucumí

In Ashabi's house, Pérez finds that LGBTQ+ identified practitioners are treated not only as essential to the running of the house but are free and honored within it. Queer identified folks in the household weren't strictly regulated around their affection towards partners or gender presentation, being accepted as they were without their sexual orientation being regarded as "*a defect to be fixed*" (Pérez 121). Pérez tells an anecdote of two gay godchildren of Ashabi, Andre and Brian, who travel to assist in the initiation of a young woman to Ọbatala, which goes exceedingly well. Upon their departure, hearing the praise of their elders at their invaluable role in the initiation process, Andre declares that "*Michigan faggotry has left the building!*" and gets into the car to depart. "*By borrowing the phrase that would announce Elvis Presley's departure from concert venues [...] this godchild ventured to confirm his status as a star in Ashabi's approving eyes. He also underscored his pride in being a gay man whose centrality to the smooth operation of a major Lucumí ritual was undisputed*" (Pérez 121).

In the ilés where queer people are accepted and honored, the whole house thrives and is better for their inclusion. The importance and essential work of LGBTQ+ practitioners within the ilé is something that is acknowledged even by resentful, straight practitioners, decrying that "*Sissies, the best kitchens; sissies, the best dresses; sissies!*" (Pérez 117). Additionally, gay men and genderqueer folks are allowed to assert their competence in traditionally male roles as well, showing their prowess through animal sacrifice and rising to priesthood when they are allowed (Pérez 119). Although some may understand the peculiar position of queer men and women within Lucumí as a subjugation to the male leaders of the ilé, reinforcing gendered hierarchies, Pérez proposes a reorientation of our thinking. When we begin to interrogate the assumptions of unimportance that we place on kitchen work, that analysis unravels, revealing our own biases and the crucial role of TransQueers within this Black Atlantic tradition.

Consent and Refusal

The relationship between KC's genderlessness and the larger ilé is one that is complicated, despite the root of that identity formation in Lucumí and relationship with the gender-queerness of the Orisha. He speaks about this relationship with gender and the house of worship:

[My godfather] understands names, calls me my name -- the only time I need to give my given name is for very specific purposes that make sense to me. Um and, genders me right for the most part [...] I don't get gendered properly much in the ilé but I feel like that's, um... I haven't asked my godfather to talk to other people about it and I also like, y'know I'm new... I wanna get comfortable with people first before like... you know, whatever. But, um, like, my god sisters are pretty good about it.

KC's apprehension to out themselves as a transgender/agender identified person has a lot to do with fears of rejection and ostracization that Elizabeth Pérez interrogates, informed by experiences of rejection in other areas of their life. KC hopes for acceptance in the ilé but is apprehensive of entering the space fully and vulnerably, waiting until he is more fully established within this new community before asking to be recognized. This part of the interview didn't surprise me; as another BlackTransQueer I also keep some parts of myself to myself rather than giving others the opportunity to prove that they don't value me enough to come correctly³⁷.

³⁷ There is some need here to tease out the nuances of TransQueer experience in an ilé where one is hiding transness. I'm in no place to judge or even analyze anyone else's experience of Transness or Cissexism. I find it uncomfortable to make statements or to theorize about someone else's experience, but I would be omitting some part of this project if I didn't name the dynamic at hand. How would someone else be treated within the ilé; someone visibly transgender, on hormones, out to the entire community? I won't speculate on the difference but this chapter's discussion of TransQueers within other ilés may be illuminating if we wanted to imagine it. All that to say that KC's experience is in no way representative of all transgender people within the tradition.

Dealing with the backlash from loved ones who are disrespectful or indifferent to a BlackTransQueer coming into their truth publicly can be incredibly disheartening, and color the way that one chooses to come out or remain hidden in other areas of their life:

It just felt like people who were important to me or people who I was important to, they would make an effort, [...] and they showed me who wouldn't and that was kinda like, BAM. Like I still have family that misnames me, family that misgenders me, [...] the person that I said was gonna be Nugget's godmother still misnames me and still misgenders me.

Coming out and living in one's truth can be an exercise in patience and simultaneously separating the wheat from the chaff ³⁸; there are always folks who claim to love and support BlackTransQueer folk but cannot acknowledge them fully. The difference in their god family's treatment of KC and their gender is particularly telling, in their own opinion, for how they are valued within the space, versus within their biological family.

Thinking critically about power and powerlessness within the context of abolition work empowered KC to rethink their relationship to family, particularly those that don't acknowledge their chosen name or gender. KC asserts based on that abolitionist politic that *"our days and lives are, is like a series of getting and giving consent"* and for their relationship with family that meant taking a step back from folks who weren't being respectful of the boundaries they set around their chosen name and pronouns. They claim that engaging with the Orisha gave them a better understanding of the boundaries they should have for themselves, as it reflected the consent model that was a central part of Lucumí:

Understanding Orisha, you need consent, period. And understanding that these energies are their own entities, Orisha are their own entities. Yes, they are here to help humans, that's literally what they are here for. I also have a job, and I am here to do things and I also am required to set boundaries and make sure people engage with me in a consensual way. [...] I think before Lucumí I didn't have boundaries.

³⁸ A biblical saying (used ironically here) which means to separate the good crops from that which wastes your resources/energy; to judge who/what is good and bad in your life.

Consent became a larger overarching theme as we thought together through the contentions that they found in their life between their Blackness and gendering:

I feel like I didn't consent to having gender placed on me...like I did not consent to that. I did not consent to the name that was given to me, I did not consent to the norms that were placed on me because of the body that I have, I didn't consent to any of that ... and I don't have to... and I didn't consent to be colonized, my people did not consent to be here.

Once more, coloniality and gender are connected by scholars like Hortense Spillers as she explains slavery's theft of desire for the enslaved, as the Black body is remade as the unfeeling flesh. According to Spillers, for enslaved Africans in the colonized Americas:

Their New-World, diasporic plight marked a theft of the body -- a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire. Under these conditions, we lose at least gender difference in the outcome, and the female body and the male body becomes a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific (67).

Upon the completion of the transatlantic voyage, the captive Black body was stolen not only from its native land and connection to ancestral traditions, like spirituality, but the very ability to *want* and *feel* was presumably abducted as well. For Black captives in the Americas, consent was never an option, and neither was dissent, revolt, or refusal; decisions made on their behalf for the profit of slave owners and the good of the master class was all there was. It wasn't that slaves couldn't want freedom, but their desires were regarded as similar to a sheep or cow that escapes the enclosure; a misunderstanding of white benevolence and the ways in which Black people needed to be dominated in order to survive in the eyes of white slavers. This is how the Black

body is transformed, through the process of enslavement into an empty vessel, capital, and “the white man’s burden³⁹.”

Spillers argues that in the translation from Black being to uninhabited flesh, the Black body loses gender and in that ungendering becomes disentitled from the human categories of gendered rights and desires (motherhood, childhood, manhood, and other gendered categories of significance). In light of Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí’s arguments, in contention with Spillers, Africans did not gender themselves in the same ways as Europeans would ungender them. In the process of colonization and slavery African ways of being and social categories of importance were lost, subordinated, and demonized by the captor class in ways that dispossessed Black people from that lineage and way of knowing oneself outside of gendered socialization (and ungendering). I would articulate the dissonance between White and African ways of being, even as Black Americans often communicate and present themselves through the lens of binary-western genders, as misgendering. The misgendering of Black people upon their emancipation and supposed integration into U.S. society works to their detriment as it reinforces the hierarchies of colonial gender through which they were originally possessed *and* dispossessed.

Being made unfeeling and unthinking for Black people was a theft of agency; where Black people are relegated to objecthood, and their (inability to) consent never enters the conversation around them. As Hortense Spillers spells out, “*the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming being for the captor*” (Spillers 67) as the will of the slave is usurped by the will of the master, and the Black body becomes the vehicle for the realization of white supremacist desires. In thinking through this paradox of Black consciousness and colonialism, I was made to consider

³⁹ **The White Man’s Burden** is an 1899 poem by Rudyard Kipling in which the author claims that it is the divine responsibility of the white man to care for, oversee, and dominate all other peoples for their own good.

the role of non-consent in the larger colonial project but also in the gendering, ungendering, and misgendering of my informant, KC, a BlackTransQueer who is rejecting all things whiteness and colonialism has placed upon their Black body.

The power dynamics of consent need to be situated in the historical, political, and geographic moment to which we are applying the term as a framework for anti-colonial scholarship. Often when consent is considered by scholars, politicians, feminists, and others within the neoliberal power structure, they define it as permission or refusal outside of the context of power and history. Engagement with the historical context of consent is essential to understanding what refusal potentiates for BlackTransQueers like myself and KC who are seeking alternatives to the limiting biologically-determined binary genders assigned to our bodies.

Scholars, in the midst of nationwide reconsideration of what consent is and means, have been dissecting the concept in the context of post-colonialism. *Querying Consent: Beyond Permission and Refusal* (2018) is a collection of scholarly essays in which authors are thinking through the meaning of consent in the current era in which we fail to interrogate its problems. Jordana Greenblatt and Keja Valens assert that consent is a hierarchical tool that reinforces categories of subjecthood in which “*women, people of color, the colonized, children, and the insane [are] subjugated to the will of those whose human subjectivity is accepted and to contracts in which they are not the subject but the objects of exchange or confinement*” (Greenblatt and Valens 3).

Those who are constructed as human beings and citizens fall within the boundaries of consent, although “*obtaining the ability to consent means entering a fully human state, which also polices its borders and subjects its members to its laws*” (Greenblatt and Valens 3). For

non-citizens and non-subjects within the confines of the post-colonial state, consent is outside of their grasp, and they are disentitled from their own desires. For the select few eligible for citizenship, falling outside of the boundaries of what is acceptable to the state means risking the same objectification. Ultimately consent within the state is a ruse in which personhood, entitlement to rights, and free will are contingent categories. Agency and the ability to consent (but never refuse) comes in degrees based on the subject's proximity to power. This examination of consent through the lens of citizenship and the supposed consent of the governed asks critical questions of the concept. Is consent real when the option to refuse is one that places subjects (the few allowed full citizenship in the first place) outside of the realm of state protection, the rights of full citizens, and by extension access to humanity?

In Audra Simpson's "The Ruse of Consent and the Anatomy of 'Refusal'" (2017) she thinks through the political choice of refusal for Indigenous peoples, claiming that citizenship and the language of inclusion is actually a theft of Indigenous sovereignty. For the Indigenous people who engage in refusal, sovereignty is emphasized through persistent renunciation of the state (the United States and Australia), and settler occupation. It is characterized by emphasizing the right to land and life that Indigenous people have and the ways in which colonial governance is a continued illegal occupation, disallowing colonialism to be relegated to the past and placing it firmly in the present as an ongoing struggle. It responds to issues of erasure and seeks to unveil the inner workings of governmental control that characterize the settler-colonial state and the lives of all of its citizens. Refusal provides indigenous people and nations with alternatives and roads back to their ways of life. "*'Refusal' rather than recognition is an option for producing and maintaining alternative structures of thought, politics and traditions away from and in critical relationship to states*" (Simpson 19). Returning to the interview, what does this mean for

KC and others like them, BlackTransQueer or otherwise, to refuse gendering as an act of anti-colonial defiance?

KC shares their beliefs:

All people should not have gender placed upon them, not just me. [...] I feel like I'm coming into this genderless place, just because of how I even understand gender to be and it is white and I reject all things that are white [laughs] like I reject all things that colonialism and whiteness has placed upon me and gender is that, sexuality is that. Not having my African spiritual practices, like, I'm gonna go away from that and go back to my practices.

KC's statement here speaks to their political commitment to refusal: refusing to be gendered in ways that would misarticulate and harm them. Refusing investment in the colonial state through investment in the biological-binary genders that are pressed upon Black bodies in the past and present. With social control ultimately at the center of gender constructions, and within the context of ungendering, refusing to be gendered is comparable to the refusal of citizenship, emphasizing Indigenous rights to their ways of life and sovereignty. The path of refusal that Audra Simpson presents as it is being carried out by Indigenous activists and nations within settler-states bears fruit for this project and my own self-crafting as I seek BlackTransQueer paths towards myself, rearticulated through the epistemologies of Lucumí.

In conclusion, I am coming to understand consent as a political construct dependent on the hierarchies that colonialism builds and reinforces to suppress us. Refusal, then, speaks to the impetus to preserve Orisha informed methods of thinking, living, and feeling whole in a world that seeks to disperse "BlackTransQueer" into categories of difference, subjugation, and polarity when for people like KC and myself, they exist as one. For KC's and my theorization about the meaning of gender within Lucumí traditions, refusing gender is an anti-colonial revelation that can build pathways to BlackTransQueer ways of thriving in the wake of slavery and colonialism.

The politics of refusal speak to the ways in which we craft our relationships to our bodies, communities and the divine in spite of that which seeks to control us.

In addition, BlackTransQueers already lack access to personhood through institutions outside of the realm of what is simply racist. When we add the transgender element to the relationship between Black subjects and the state, inclusion with the polity is not enough, and the state fails to extend even that to transgender people within its confines. From the medical institution to identification procedure, elevated violence, the lack of housing and employment; at every step powerful institutions tell transgender people, particularly BlackTransQueers that they ought not exist in any form and ought not survive. In this paradigm, where the government of a powerful nation serves to exercise and maintain power over life and death with no plausible alternatives, the Orisha for BlackTransQueers refusing social death, gender, control, and colonialism are pathbreaking. They lead the way towards gendered ways of being and sociality sanctioned by divine power that supersedes all that we think we know about who can live and who must die.

CHAPTER III: MIRRORS, MARIMACHOS, AND MARRYING OUR GODS: QUEER

STORYTELLING AND LUCUMI TRADITIONS OF GENDER CROSSING

The last chapter focused on spiritual gender formation, the place of BlackTransQueers in the ilé, and ended with refusal, thinking about how indigenous refusal and KC's BlackTransQueer refusal are interconnected acts of anti-colonial rebellion. The work of this chapter is identifying the places where the theology of Lucumí holds space for queer reading. By engaging Lydia Cabrera and scholars who analyze her work, I examine what it means for practitioners to co-create with the Orisha and for the Orisha to reflect the queer children they protect and who serve them. KC engages some of these stories in the first chapter, and in this chapter I focus on their telling of the Pataki, the interpretation of oral histories passed down and the ways they read queerness within the stories they are told, retelling them queerly. This chapter also examines queer and/or gender-crossing practices within Lucumí. I am engaging the gender fluidity, performance, and identity formation that takes place through the initiation of the iyawo (bride) and other queer gender performances in Lucumí along with mounting. In order to transition from one conversation to another, this chapter requires a bridge and I continue to engage refusal here as we think through the queer practices of speaking about and communing with the Orisha as embodied by KC's practice of Lucumí.

Audra Simpson's work on the politics of refusal uncovers the inner workings of colonial power and how the acquisition of rights and citizenship for Indigenous peoples often comes along with erasure of colonial violence and continued occupation of Native land. Through engaging Simpson I aimed to communicate the reach of colonialism and what refusing colonialism means. For Indigenous tribes and activists, this means refusing inclusion in the

polity in order to emphasize rights to Indigenous sovereignty and the preservation of Indigenous self-governance. For KC this meant refusing engagement with colonial ideology in all possible aspects of life. Our interview emphasized their commitment to refusal of the entire web of oppressions that make up white supremacist imperialism, uncovering the “ruse of consent” that persists for all “formerly” colonized people living in the post-colonial state. For Black and Indigenous people recognizing the damage and history of colonialism, refusing progress is an acknowledgement of what one has lost and an assertion of what one is still entitled to in a decolonized world. Tiffany Lethobo King discusses Simpson’s engagement with refusal, concluding that for the academy, the fields of Black and Native/Indigenous Studies, and ultimately for Black and Indigenous life in the United States, refusal, skepticism, and rejection of colonial thought-ways is essential to our incorporation in the human race.

Tiffany Lethobo King *“tracks how traditions of ‘decolonial refusal’ and ‘abolitionist skepticism’ that emerge from Native/Indigenous and Black studies expose the limits and violence of contemporary non identitarian and nonrepresentational impulses within white ‘critical’ theory”* (King 164). In her article “Humans Involved: Lurking in the Lines of Posthumanist Flight (2017) King looks to Black feminist scholars like Sylvia Wynter and Native/Indigenous feminist scholars like Audra Simpson as they deconstruct the veneration of the European academy. The post-humanist (white) scholars discussed, particularly Deleuze and Guattari, in attempting to move past the notion of the human continue to center white manhood as the most central form of personhood and maintain colonial hierarchies. King asserts *“the human as man, in its ordered, rational, gendered, sexed, European, bourgeois form, needs chaos in order to secure a self, even as what is human changes [...] natural or rational man still needs to create himself as the center of the norm in relation to those who lack rationality and reason (the Black*

and Native)” (King 177). In attempting to escape or move past the idea of the human into a post-human perspective, critical theory continues its violent historical erasure of Black and Indigenous people. The only way for one to assert subjectlessness or take a position of subjectlessness is to possess subjecthood, and through Western/European thought, that subjecthood is only achieved through the ontological death of those who are considered non-subject, re-establishing the non-being of some as others attempt to transcend.

In attempting to overcome identity, subjecthood, and ultimately the idea of the “human”, Eurocentric scholars simply reveal to the skeptical eyes of Black and Indigenous scholars that they are planted firmly in the land of subjecthood. King argues that the call for posthumanism in the field of critical theory is a sort of white transcendentalism that refuses to reckon with the Native Genocide and Anti-Black racism in meaningful ways. *“If there is no plan to enable Black and Indigenous life, then there is no transcending the violence of the human”* (King 179).

Without accountability there can be no transcending subjecthood; it is the seat of power from which the post-human can be understood and articulated in the first place. What King concludes for Black and Native allied resistance is that skepticism and refusal are powerful tools for unveiling the remnants of colonial hierarchy in our scholarship. She looks to Black abolitionists and Native freedom fighters as examples of praxis and theory to shift and guide conversations about Black and Native humanity within and outside of our academic work (King 180). A commitment to abolition for KC meant a radical shift in everyday (gender) performance and engagement with systems of power, leading them to reject gender as colonial.

I think that being in community with trans people, um, nonbinary and binary trans people, [...] organizing, plus my spiritual practice is deepening. I’m practicing how to be an abolitionist, all of these things are happening at the same time and I’m also, like, fully coming into my queerness. I’m not dating men [laughs] anymore, and I’m fully like, okay... gender does-- gender is not even real, actually.

Ultimately this ponderance of “Humans Involved” leads me to important questions around refusal, subjecthood, colonial violence, and Lucumí as a site of alternative subjecthood. Particularly for KC, concluding that gender is fake in the midst of their relationships with queer community, engagement with spirituality, and abolition, gender expansive ways of being are essential parts of their gender-crafting.

I wonder what it means to place the idea of humanity itself and subjecthood in question in this particular project as we expand, evolve, defy, and in some ways abolish gender. Is this a project of gender creation, destruction, or a little bit of both? I am not unsure, but I sway back and forth like the tide in my co-existent commitment to both.

Queer storytelling can present these alternatives to the European-made human by engaging the storyteller and listeners in their own acts of queer craft, as discussed through the work of Vaccaro in the first chapter. By exploring gender failure, in the same thought lineage as Jack Halberstam, I have encountered anarchy, rebellion, and refusal as necessary alternatives to hierarchy. *“The possibility of other forms of being, other forms of knowing, a world with different sites for justice and injustice [...] should not be dismissed as irrelevant or naive”* (Halberstam 52). Acts of queer anti-colonial refusal lead me in this discussion with myself, my interlocutor, and all ears perked this way, to question destruction. If I understand myself as a queer failure seeking liberation through this line of thought, what comes after ungendering and gender refusal? Do I desire gender destruction? I know for sure that I am not seeking absolute destruction by pursuing this project. I am looking towards Lucumí as a potential healer for the disarticulated BlackTransQueer in myself and others. Seeking out the building blocks for Black personhood that I can find within the Pataki of gender-fluid Orisha.

In this project, KC pays particular attention to the stories about the Orisha told to them by their godfather and other elders. He makes a point to bring up stories of Ọbatala, and this part of the interview led me to think about the other stories held within the theology of Lucumí. In the next section of this chapter I explore queer-readings of several Orisha and pay attention to the ways stories about them are told and retold. KC tells me several Pataki within our interview and our conversation is interwoven with the scholarship of Lydia Cabrera, a Cuban scholar interviewing Santería practitioners in Cuba and recording their stories.

Queer Storytelling: Re-reading Pataki, Resisting Straightness

Practitioners of Lucumí would stray from over-personification of the Orisha, as they are understood less as gods and more as physical manifestations of natural phenomena with human avatars. To name an example, Oshun is the Orisha of sweet water rivers, but she *is* the river and occasionally takes human (or other) forms; she is *not* a humanoid deity that controls or rules the rivers. KC asserts that although Orisha can be gendered and characterized by masculine or feminine performances and traits, it would be unwise to attach too much significance to that aspect of their avatars. *“Gender is a worldly thing and Orisha are not worldly, and we see that when they can shapeshift and they change forms and whatever the goal is that’s what body they use.”* In order to understand the discussion of the Pataki fully, and the significance of certain stories and their queer readings, here is a short review of the Orisha already mentioned and those we will discuss in this chapter:

Yemaya: Orisha over the oceans and mother of all living things on Earth. She is described by Lydia Cabrera as possessing different avatars or manifestations that show the multitude of her personality and power. Also known as: *Yemoja* (Cabrera, 24).

Ochun: The Orisha of sweet water rivers (freshwater), femininity, fertility, and love. In her multiple avatars she can be the daughter, sister, or mother of Yemaya as the Pataki contradict one another, but they are always beloved companions. Also known as: *Ochún, Oxum, Osun.*

Olokun: the older, masculine water Orisha, The Ocean and all other water deities fall under his dominion/are reflections of him.

Shango: The Orisha of lightning, thunder, and fire; A powerful warrior deity. Also known as: *Sango, Şàngó, Changó, Xangô, Jakuta.*

Obatala: the head cooler, the patron of all humanity, the father of all Orisha and the creator of mankind. Also known as: *Oshala, Oxala.*

Ochumare: Orisha of the rainbow, possesses both male and female forms.

Ogun: Orisha of war and iron; the only one allowed to take life without permission.

Orula: Orisha of divination and counselor to mankind. Also known as: *Orunmila.*

Inle: Freshwater River Orisha; healer, fisherman, hunter; a beautiful, androgynous youth whose tongue was cut by Yemaya, so that he can only speak through her.

Elegba: Orisha of the crossroads. (KC, interview)

There is so much merit in understanding the characteristics of the Orisha we are about to discuss going in. Some are characterized as incredibly feminine or masculine while others are explicitly androgynous; these surface level readings, although they do leave room for queerness for some Orisha, lead us astray. I would hesitate to read queerness myself, but I will point out the reading of queerness that others point out and perform, namely the scholars I cite and my interviewee. Many are most often associated only with one particular avatar, but there are stories, art, and practices that would complicate a one-dimensional reading of *any* Orisha. The labor of this section is engaging with the stories of the Orisha that KC presents and the work of Lydia

Cabrera, a celebrated scholar of Black-Cuban religious traditions. I am guiding my reading of Cabrera with the work of Solimar Otero, who theorizes the significance of Cabrera's queer readings of the Pataki to tease out queer desire and gender in flux within Lucumí. In connecting the queer scholarship that already exists with KC's own theorizing I am re-emphasizing his expertise in this project. For Cuban lesbians like Cabrera, and BlackTransQueers like KC within the body of Lucumí practitioners, queering the Pataki in their reading and re-telling is a self-making practice that places queer and transgender ways of being on the pathways of the Orisha.

Lydia Cabrera's *Yemaya y Ochun* is concentrated on the relationship between the two water deities. Often depicted as sister, mother-daughter, or dear companions, the two are always close. The book contains a chapter entitled "¿Quién es Yemaya?"⁴⁰, naming the Orisha in her multiple forms and personalities. Cabrera notes that Yemaya is "*mother of all living things, 'queen of all the waters', our mother who sustains and alters us.*" (Cabrera 24) KC makes it clear in our interviews that the Orisha have different pathways that speak to different aspects of their being and personalities; the Orisha cannot be limited to a single or central form. "*There are different roads of different Orisha, um, like for instance, my road of Elegba is Elegba Laroye. So, my Elegba is the king of Elegbas; the king of kings, likes nice things. [...] but then there are other roads of Elegba, there are children-Elegba. Like there are little boys and grown men.*" For Elegba, Orisha of the crossroads and destiny, to manifest as both children and fierce warriors, is an incredible demonstration of the Orisha's versatility. Understanding that the Orisha possess different pathways for themselves, and their followers is a central tenet of the practice of Lucumí.

⁴⁰ Originally written in Spanish, all translations are my own.

KC also told me about the sculptures and stories about Shango, the masculine warrior Orisha with dominion over storms, thunder, and fire:

When we talk about masculinity, I looooooove, when like-- to bring up Shango. Because Shango is a fierce warrior [...] Lightning, fire, okay? And he also, okay, he gets bitches, he gets all the biddies, okay? he that nigga. The way people talk about Oshun and her beauty, that's Shango. And there are stories and sculptures of Shango with breasts, and Shango wears skirts, and the reason why we dance is because of Shango. [...] So this whole idea about masculinity, the way y'all think about masculinity is not it.

Shango as the handsome, aggressive warrior is a compelling image. To complicate that reading by centering his breasts, his skirts, and his command for dance is beautifully nuanced and not at all contradictory for the theology of Lucumí, although it may pose problems for the man-centric *ilé*. This reading is even more complex when we consider what it means for this masculine, desirable male-orisha to have biological characteristics assigned female and what that would mean for the desire he personifies in his love of women. Can we read Shango as a butch-dyke warrior, or a trans-masculine lightning god when we embrace this interpretation? Is his love of women a queer one and what does that mean reflexively for the willing objects of that desire?

Roberto Strongman quotes within *Queering Black Atlantic Religions* (2019):

When we limit the understanding of Sàngó to mere 'masculine traits,' his duality is never fully explored. Despite the fact that male and female initiates of Sàngó have been taught that Sàngó is the womanizer of the goddesses of Yorùbá tradition, he is truly the lover of women. This restricted understanding diminishes the depth of the potential relationship that we can have as we participate in Sàngó's energy internally and communally. The nature-based force Sàngó cannot be adequately interpreted through these distorted notions of gender (Olomo 2009, 321).

Yemaya sits at the center of Cabrera's queer reading of the Orisha as her relationships with multiply sexed Orisha and her own manifestations of gender are central to Cabrera's understand of the water Orisha. As the mother of all water and life, Yemaya's manifestations are incredibly diverse. From Yemaya Awoyo, "*the highest and oldest*", to Yemaya Akuara, the one who lives at the junction of the river and the sea, to Yemaya Okute, the blue skinned Orisha of

war who dwells in the jungle (Cabrera 28-29). Yemaya Awoyo, as described by Cabrera, is particularly interesting: she is the one who “*puts on the adornments of Olokun and crowns herself with the rainbow*⁴¹” (Cabrera 28). One could understand walking this particular path as male/masculine, but Awoyo is referred to as one of “las Yemaya”, marking her as female. I would read this instance of cross-dressing as a mark of queerness. Yemaya takes on some of her more masculine attributes while not fully crossing the gender-lines drawn in the sand; she straddles boundaries of gender that set her apart from either side. This manifestation speaks to the genderqueerness of dykes, studs, bulldaggers, tomboys, trans-masculine folk, mermaid queen-kings⁴², and others engaging in queer relationship with the mirror.

According to Omi-saya, one of Lydia Cabrera’s practitioner-informants, despite being a beautiful and feminine Black woman, “*more woman than all other women together, more mother than all other mothers, [Yemaya] can also be as manly as the most macho man*⁴³” (Cabrera 45). Yemaya cannot be limited to what we believe she is or must be and in refusing limitation she encompasses all. She cannot be controlled or contained; she is the ocean itself. She has endless potential that cannot be limited to the feminine aspects most often associated with her personality, and that is proven by the manifestation of Yemaya when she is with Ogun. Cabrera describes her:

⁴¹ Yemaya Awoyo crowns herself with Ochumare, the Orisha of the rainbow. The Orisha are their domains; Ochumare is the rainbow. Whether we should interpret this sentence to mean that in her masculine form she crowns herself with a rainbow or with the genderqueer God of rainbows himself... and what that interpretation might mean for readings of queer desire in Yemaya Awoyo is up to the reader.

⁴² A former mentor and close friend describes themselves this way and reading Yemaya as the genderqueer mermaid she is makes that description more beautiful each day I dig deeper into this project.

⁴³ Emphasis is my own.

Yemaya liked to hunt, to cut, to wield the machete. In this path she's a marimacho⁴⁴ and looks like a man. But, because of the awful treatment she received from Ogun in private, Yemaya, who is indomitable and spiteful, didn't hesitate to be unfaithful to him (45).

Yemaya, dressed like a man, machete in hand, vicious and vengeful, is burned so sweetly into my mind. In her relationship with Ogun, becoming this more masculine-than-any-man avatar speaks to the potential that the Orisha create for BlackTransQueers in the Atlantic. Yemaya is “*one and seven at the same time*”, and even the more masculine versions of this Orisha are still the same Yemaya (Cabrera 21). For Cabrera and her interviewees, even Olokun, the older, male, ocean -- *El Mar* -- is Yemaya.

Olokun is “*the ocean. Olokun, the older Yemaya -- masculine Yemaya -- root, origin of all the others*” (Cabrera 21). He is the ultimate from which all other water deities emanate/to which all others answer. Cabrera reads Olokun as a male/masculine manifestation of Yemaya (or the other way around, seeing as he is older). *It's true, my most authoritative informants assured me, as they heard from their elders that 'Olokun is male and female', androgynous. Quoting Omi Dina: 'of amphibious sex'.*” (Cabrera 28). The duality of Yemaya-Olokun as emphasized by the Santería practitioners to whom Cabrera speaks, along with their elders, is a revelation. For Yemaya and Olokun to be 2 aspects of the same ocean, embodying the terrible and life-giving power of water is a distinctive step towards reading BlackTransQueers into Lucumí. KC speaks of their ilé's interpretation of Olokun: “*Olokun is also fluid. Many houses use she/her pronouns and in my house and how he's shown himself to me, he's masculine in presentation.*” As the water holds limitless potential for the manifestation of life, death, peace, plenty, vengeance, and

⁴⁴ **Marimacho**: a kind of lesbian location that signals a performance of what we could call a “butch” aesthetic, used by other Latina/Chicana queer theorists like Gloria Anzaldúa and Alicia Arrizón after Cabrera. (Otero 99).

violence, Yemaya-Olokun represents the bounty of characteristics (male and female) that this deity holds in any of their forms. The Yemaya that is Olokun brings the gender lush aspirations of this project back around the bend. The existence of this version of the Orisha is in direct defiance of the culture of heterosexism that has taken hold of many well-intended ilés.

What does it mean for the everyday practices of Lucumí, and the way those practices are often divided and dictated by gender, for Yemaya-Olokun to exist as the one and the seven? What does it mean for us to examine the queer manifestations and behaviors of other Orisha when Yemaya-Olokun is clearly not the exception, but the rule?

Yemaya, although important, is not the only Orisha with genderfluid potential in the pantheon of Lucumí. Ọbatala⁴⁵ is one Orisha that has already been mentioned. Father of all, creator of mankind, the man in white is a man only sometimes. *“There’s literally a Pataki [...] where he is trying to get into this city and like the male guards won’t let him in. So he leaves, changes his form, comes back as a woman, seduces them, and then goes on about his business.”* KC’s interpretation and re-telling of the Pataki is not the only story in which Ọbatala expresses desire towards men, Lydia Cabrera speaks of the queer desire of Ọbatala and Yemaya’s short-lived partner, Orula:

I won't omit a version that pretended Yemaya was disguised with Orula because she discovered he was an adodi; that he abandoned her for Ogun and the indignant goddess hid his divination tools, and Orula spent some time without the power of divination. It wasn't such a terrible stain for Orunmila: Ọbatala Odua also was in love with another ado and lived with him in the shade of a cottonwood tree (45).

⁴⁵ While I consistently use he/him pronouns for Ọbatala and other Orisha who I am describing as genderqueer or genderfluid, that doesn't denote a “default” manhood or maleness for these Orisha. Pronouns correlate with certain genders in our social understanding but aren't definitive markers of a certain gender (or lack thereof). In this body of work I am deferring to the pronouns that practitioners use to refer to these deities with whom they are in close relationship, trusting their knowledge and respecting their traditions.

According to Solimar Otero, *adodi* or *ado*, is a word that describes a man whose sexual preference is other men (Otero 98). Otero is a Professor of Folklore, studying the queerness housed within the practice and Pataki of Afro-Cuban traditions that speaks to earthly queer desires and the fluidity of gender. She studies Cabrera's telling of the Pataki in her article "Yemaya y Ochun" (2013), thinking through the relationship between the fresh and saltwater Orisha, and the lovers they pursue. In Cabrera's opinion, Orula's affair with Ogun was not so shameful because Obatala had done the same with another man.

Later, Yemaya found herself "*madly in love with androgynous, gorgeous Inle.*" in the wake of Orula's departure. "*To satisfy the passion that the youth inspired in her, she captured him and took him to the bottom of the sea, and there she satisfied all of his appetite*" (Cabrera 45). "Yemaya, in one of her avatars, was also the companion of Obatala; Orula, Inle, Obatala... what does it mean to read Yemaya's attraction and relationship to these Orisha as queer desire or even a desire for queerness?"

Solimar Otero analyzes Cabrera's telling of the love affairs between Yemaya and the androgynously gendered avatars of other Orisha, namely Inle, Orula, and Obatala:

It is important to note Cabrera's positioning of Yemayá in her roles as a protector and a lover of these orichas. Note Yemayá's affinity for friendship for and infatuation with queerly gendered and sexualized spiritual beings. For Cabrera, writing as a queer (and lesbian) subject herself, her text gives the character of Yemayá access to a kind of power that transforms static notions of gender and sexed bodies, as well as the kinds of love and affection that can be expressed through these performances of embodiment (98).

Otero asserts that Yemaya's affection and romantic love for a diverse body of queer Orisha (who possess diverse bodies), and the assertion of her protectiveness over them, is an act that transforms seemingly inflexible aspects, like gender. Yemaya's queer love expands what the boundaries of wifedom can be, speaking to the needs of her lovers for protection. Oshun also has a love affair with Inle, and through their mutual love of genderqueer Orisha "*the two refuse to be*

located in fixed, rigid categories in terms of how they choose to express their intimacy with other beings” (Otero 98). To communicate their fierce protectiveness and aggressive courting of their lovers differently, but with no less conviction or nuance, KC says that “*Yemaya and Oshun don’t play about queer and trans people.*” Yemaya, and the lesser discussed Oshun, could be interpreted as desiring queerness; queer genders, femininity, androgyny, and the presence of queer desire itself, through their pursuit of lovers in these tales. Coupled with Yemaya the marimacho, boundaries of gender and sexuality begin to bleed in this relay of the Pataki, as is the intention of Cabrera. She describes the revelation of the Yemaya-Olokun deity as “*an enchanting and irrefutable definition*” of the dual nature of the ocean. “*Because of this, when you enter the sea you should say: Papa, Mama, Yemaya-Olokun*” (Cabrera 28).

Although *Marimacho* and *Yemaya-Olokun* interpretations of the water Orisha are founded retellings of the Pataki confirmed by elders and trusted aborisha in the tradition, this does not make them irrefutable. What Lydia Cabrera relays in her emphasis on the potential and possibility that Yemaya and others hold is the reciprocity inherent in storytelling: the importance of telling, retelling, and listening to the Pataki as the act of telling the story makes the theology of Lucumí. Otero claims that Cabrera reads the Orisha through *chisme*, rumors circulating between the practitioners of Santería that reflect their own queerness and that of others serving in and studying Lucumí-Santería. Solimar Otero theorizes:

The use of *chisme* and rumor as the tone for Cabrera’s consideration of gender and sexuality among the orishas [...] illustrates a subversive mode of world making in terms of both women’s speech and subaltern knowledges that cannot be verified in conventional, official ways. These *chismes* about the deities perform an alternative history, a queer history that wants to resist a heteronormative and patriarchal domestication of the deities. [...] Cabrera gives us clues as how to read the variegated nature of the performance of gender and sexuality in religious communities that stem from intersectional beliefs and practices (99).

The Orisha are not definitively straight and biological men and women being misinterpreted through gossip, and they aren't definitively queer beings either. Rather, Cabrera refuses to settle for 2-dimensional, normative representations of the divine forces of the natural world as unlike their genderfluid and queer devotees: the people who tell the stories, make the offerings, and imbue the powerful knowledge and potential of ashé wherever they go (Alexander 289). For some Orisha, who are characterized by their androgynous or ambiguously sexed natures, our own queerness echoed back to us is easy to read in their stories. For others like Shango, it takes a further reach, but is present nonetheless for those with eyes peeled and ears perked to hear their own names; to hear the call home. This discrepancy could be a result of how the Pataki are recited and heard, reflecting the particular understanding of the Orisha and the sensibilities of the person who is retelling or the group who hears the tale. What Cabrera's reading of the Orisha grants us is a rhetoric of queerness to ground KC's storytelling in a tradition of queer Lucumí discourse. They are not the first to engage in what Solimar Otero calls acts of queer chisme, or gossip about the gods, and they are far from the last, or only one.

The first chapter acknowledged homophobia, or more accurately a culture of cisheterosexism, in the practice of Lucumí. Cabrera's method of re-reading the Orisha speaks to queer strategies of evasiveness that allow marginalized people to avoid categorization and identification for their own survival. For (BlackTrans)Queers and Lucumí practitioners alike, survival is often a matter of staying hidden, codes of secrecy, performances and signals that take on meaning only to those with fine-tuned ears, who speak the language of subterfuge. Speaking on the secrecy of Lucumí, KC claims as an insider-aborisha:

In Lucumí tradition you don't know until you know [about certain sacred knowledge, or who your titular orisha is]. Which is different from Isese⁴⁶ tradition because, like, people like, kids learn the odus, sacred texts and prayer, that in Lucumí tradition only priests have access to that, but in Isese, like, tradition kids grow up learning it like their alphabet.

In the traditional practice of Lucumí, secrecy is central, and new initiates aren't allowed to know certain secrets, traditions, or procedures until they reach certain stages in their initiation. As an aborisha about to enter his iyawo year, there is still plenty that KC does not know. KC infers that the practice differs in secrecy between Black Atlantic offshoots of Ifá and Ifá Isese because in order for African spiritual practices to survive in the Americas (passed down and preserved by the enslaved) they had to be secretive. Thus Solimar Otero argues that listening for the coded language of gossiping storytellers *“allows for a privileging of information that is rooted in many different kinds of performance strategies that subvert racial, gendered, and cultural orders that are often part of a colonial legacy”* (Otero 90). Subversive and secretive practice was central to the survival of Lucumí through the period of enslavement and colonialism in Cuba, and queer storytellers exist as a recent representation of Lucumí's communication strategies.

Acknowledging the ways in which the practice has had to maintain secrecy throughout its existence in order to survive may lead us to the conclusion that the less normative parts held within the theology of Lucumí are still being kept in the shadows. Maybe not in the theology, but in the ilé itself.

This storytelling method utilized by Lydia Cabrera, gossiping aborisha, and queer devotees emphasizes the reciprocity and reflexivity of Orisha worship. It is the people who constitute the religion and do the work of maintaining the Orisha; according to M. Jacqui

⁴⁶ **Ifá Isese:** The traditional religion of the Yoruba tribe in its form on the African continent. Pronounced: *E-fa E-shay-shay*.

Alexander, the Orisha “*required embodied beings and all things to come into sentience*” (Alexander 292). The Orisha are not independent of human beings, rather they required the movement of human bodies imbued with the knowledge and power of ashé to make the crossing themselves, although they did not require or want to cross in such horrible conditions. This is not to claim that the Orisha desire new lands and people to rule and conquer -- they are not colonizers-- however, I would speculate that once the enslavement of the ilé began, the Orisha wanted to arm them in the new land with the tools to free themselves. Maybe the Orisha give BlackTransQueers the tools to free themselves. Alexander’s work asserts that the relationship between the practitioner and divinity is not one characterized by differentiation, separation, and one-sided dependency. The interdependent relationship between the divine and “*the material, the quotidian, the very bodies through which divinity breathes life*” (Alexander 293) facilitates the Orisha’s ability to intervene in human affairs, utilize their power to help mankind, and continue to empower their protected children in the material conditions of enslavement and its aftermath.

Alexander claims that “*the Divine knits together the quotidian in a way that compels attunement to its vagaries, making this the very process through which we come to know its existence. It is therefore, the same process through which we come to know ourselves*” (Alexander 293). Her observation of the mirror that the divine provides for the material self begs the same questions as Tinsley. Omise’eke Tinsley, an Afro-Caribbean scholar working in Caribbean feminisms and queer sexualities, introduced me to Ezili. A pantheon makes up the body of Ezili in the practice of Vodou and through her work with “Ezili’s children” Tinsley asks us to consider how “*these female spirits are both mirrors and maps’ for gender and sexually complex practitioners of Vodou.*” She asks us to ponder how engagement with Ezili may not

only “*explain non-normative genders but also produce them*” (Tinsley 419). This idea that the Iwa, or in this specific study the Orisha, may provide “mirrors and maps” for BlackTransQueer genders is enticing, fruitful, and cathartic as I engage Lucumí’s epistemology. Both Alexander and Tinsley ask how the deities of the Black Atlantic are mirrors for the queer selves that we craft on earth, and Tinsley goes further to ask if and how the ways of being they model produce new gender paths. Ultimately when we analyze the queer storytelling practices of Cabrera and KC through the mirror as articulated by Tinsley, and the divine knitting of Alexander, we begin to understand the Pataki as reflexive gender/sexuality-craft for queers who engage the Orisha. The Orisha are an innate part of the identity of practitioners and in turn, through their storytelling and the micro practices of Lucumí, become reflections of those who serve them, if we are willing to give storytellers that power.

I won’t omit a version of this idea where the Orisha were always queer and never strictly gendered. The Orisha demand their people re-discover their destinies and show that destiny through themselves. As protectors and guides, the Orisha validate and exalt queer desires and genders (and genderlessness) by taking them on as an adornment gifted by their pre-destined followers. Oh, to be worthy of such divine intervention... for the Orisha to say one is trans-divinity and show us all how beautiful it can be...

For a host of BlackTransQueers seeking more intimate knowledge of the self, using the divine as a template for self-making, bringing the queer parts of the Pataki to the forefront of their own storytelling is a reciprocal religious praxis. It speaks to the ways in which the Orisha are as constructed, maintained, and evolved by their followers as the practitioners are by the Orisha. As Cabrera pieced together the *marimacho* within Yemaya, the androgynous object of desire in Inle, and the unashamed adodi in Orula, from the pieces of herself she saw reflected in

their stories, we too can engage in this act of divine crafting. As KC utilizes the Pataki and the wisdom of their godfather to validate their gender through stories of Obatala and Shango, we can also find clues to our own gendered path through subversive listening. We can use gossip, queer decoding, divine mirrors, and stories re-told to tease out the ways in which our BlackTransQueer selves are a reflection of the undefinable Orisha. In this self-crafting act practitioners can blur the lines of separation and colonial redrafting that would exclude BlackTransQueers from the stories and practices that make up Lucumí.

Orisha Praxis: Transcorporeality, Bridehood, and Gendered Destinies

Storytelling, a consequential aspect of the practice of Lucumí, is a primary medium through which practitioners come to know the divine and how to serve them. New initiates take courses with elders to learn the Pataki, the rituals, beliefs, and sociality of Lucumí. Elizabeth Pérez argues throughout *Religion in the Kitchen* (2016) that it is the micro practices of the religion that make up Lucumí and make inexperienced, frightened aleyos into work-worn, gifted aborishas. The acts of cooking, working, and talking in Lucumí kitchens “*reveals that the seemingly trivial kinds of activities involved in ceremonial cooking turn out to be emotionally and somatically intricate sites at which individuals are socialized*” (Pérez 2). Lucumí is made up of more than just the spirituality held within the Pataki, and the practices of Lucumí are another place in which the religion demonstrates an affinity for queerness. As mentioned before, the often homophobic culture of Lucumí seemingly contradicts the practices that we could read as gender-fluid or gender-apatetic: those being cross-gender mounting, the gendered pathways of the Orisha, and the concept of bridehood that characterizes the relationship between the divine and devotees. In this section, I examine these queer practices and the ways that Lucumí defies

heteronormativity, allowing BlackTransQueers, like KC and others, to work to re-read Orisha praxis in modes that bring their bodies and ways of being into conversation with divinity.

Ritual Possession is one way in which the body is gendered transiently; in the process of being mounted by spirits and Orisha who wish to bestow blessings, advice, and their presence upon the Lucumí ceremony, the possessed body is gendered by the occupying divinity along with the self. In *Yemaya y Ochun (2013)*, Solimar Otero speaks on the mechanics of spiritual possession in Santería and the ways in which gender becomes mutable in the process of being mounted. Within the ritual when one is being possessed:

The attitudes toward what constitutes a bounded being are fluid. In terms of the performance of gender, for example, it is not unusual that a person who is gendered one way in society to be gendered ambiguously or differently in ritual and possession. That is, one's body can inhabit several selves that are constructed in a broad range of ways in terms of gender, race, culture, and even time period (96).

The sex of the devotee is unimportant for the Orisha that wishes to enter the spiritual space and in moments of possession the body *becomes* the vessel that the divine needs, just as the Orisha change themselves to match the needs of their devotees. Socially constructed identities like race, gender, sexuality, age, nationality, and others blur in moments of possession so that mounts can “*shift between different registers of embodiment during ritual: male, female, black, white, Chinese, nun, [...] oricha, healer, ancestor, relative*” (Otero 96). This fluidity of identity speaks to KC's earlier statement that the Orisha are otherworldly and exist outside of fixed identity categories like gender, “*they change forms and whatever the goal is that's what body they use.*”

Solimar Otero is not the only scholar thinking critically about the murkiness of gender in the process of ritual possession, Roberto Strongman also thinks about the body as gendered through ritual possession in Lucumí-Santería, Candomblé, and Vodou. In “A Chronology of

Queer Lucumí Scholarship”, the third chapter of *Queering Black Atlantic Traditions* (2019),

Strongman defines transcorporeality within the practice of ritual possession:

Transcorporeality: the sacramental regendering of material bodies made possible by a conceptualization of the body with an anima [that is] external and removable. This unique modular quality of the self enables trance possession, or the moment in which the body of the initiate becomes a receptacular vessel for the orisha, allowing for instances of queer identifications when the orisha and the initiate subscribe to different gendered categories (127).

Strongman, like Elizabeth Pérez, examines the ways in which women and homosexual men’s bodies are understood as “*receptacular open bodies, the epitome and idealized form of the Afro diasporic sacramental body*” (Strongman 122). Although they are understood as the optimal religious subjects, often women and queer men are forbidden from performing certain higher-level roles or tasks within the ilé. The Orisha’s preference for these types of bodies for spiritual possession is often attributed to the metaphor of mounting, or being eaten/consumed that accompanies possession, which is itself a metaphor for sexual penetration (Pérez 115).

Dr. Daniel Coleman, in our conversations, has challenged me constantly to place mounting and spirit possession on the margins of my engagement with Lucumí. Although it can be misinterpreted as such, mounting is not the end-all-be-all in terms of receiving the knowledge and power of ashé. The Orisha touch the lives of and work through practitioners of all genders and sexualities and some are *never* mounted. This does not place them below others who are or can be possession mounts but may speak to the conversation on the purposeful body that was held earlier in this piece. Not everyone is meant to be mounted and the emphasis on the female/gay male body as the optimal mount due to the implied penetration, consumption, and mastership of being mounted only works to reinforce gender hierarchy. The body receives the touch of ashé regardless of whether they can be possessed; possession is meant for those that it is meant for, and others have other purposes. This singularization of a multitude of gender and

sexual beings speaks to the man-made culture of the ilé more so than acceptance or inclusion of queer people in the practice of Lucumí.

The alternative conceptualization of the body as engendered by multiple spirits, ancestors, guides, and Orisha is a helpful one in this analysis of Lucumí's queer practices, although when possession focuses on "receptacle" bodies and what they are able to hold, birth, and contain (naturalizing that role in misogynistic ways) it defeats the purpose of this project. It would also be foolish to assume that possession is something that engenders the body all the time and is a lingering effect. KC articulates their gender through the genderlessness, gender-defiance, and transience that the Orisha cosmology he follows offers for the interpretation of his body, way of living, and queer attraction:

It's really interesting the way Orisha also affirms my gender, or lack thereof, very much so, because um... gender is not a thing [...] and we see that when [the Orisha] can shapeshift and change form -- whatever the goal is that's the body they use, you know? And it has nothing to do with who they are inherently.

Overemphasizing the importance of possession in the process of gendering would be out of alignment with that world sense that I am trying to make sense of for myself and others unthinking the colonial damage of gender. What I would propose to preserve about the conversation that the aforementioned scholars have about possession, holding in contention the positions of gendered hierarchy that it reinforces within the ilé as they mirror the normative social order, is this transcorporeal idea of the body as open, multiply gendered, mutable, and full of potential for radical, powerful change in relationship to the divine.

Entering Lucumí requires a reading: divination from the Orisha specifically performed by a priest who is endowed with the ability to do so. *"I can tell you this, divination is the priest getting messages from the Orisha. Communicating with Elegba because Elegba is the messenger. [...] when a priest reads they're reading odus."* Divination is the only thing that can

tell someone if they are supposed to engage with the Orisha in the Lucumí tradition and to what extent. KC's path towards the priesthood was paved in readings with his godfather. Dr. Daniel Coleman asserts that for many BlackTransQueers within the tradition, as long as they are being transparent and working with the correct people, divination can be an affirmation of their gender. All must be known when going into the divination process and all is already known to the Orisha (this would trouble KC's engagement with their own ilé as mentioned in chapter 1, as hiding transness could cause problems for one's engagement in the divination process). Although Dr. Coleman reports that for some the divination process can be deeply affirming as the Orisha pave one's path with transgender and queer identity as a part of one's destiny, KC's experience differs:

I think that it's the understanding of the Orisha and the creation story, and ... the readings are literally just, this is what's going on in your life this is what you need to do. [...] For example, in one of mine I was told that I can't carry weapons. Ogun told me that I can't carry weapons, the knives, the guns, all of that belongs to him and he said I can't.⁴⁷

Being called to ascend the priesthood has been incredibly affirming for KC as they navigate their agender, non-binary identity within their Lucumí house with the spiritual support of the Orisha and their god family:

My first reading said that I needed to make ocha. Kariocha⁴⁸ is the ceremony that makes you a priest [...] so I've known that I was supposed to be a priest for about 3 years now. I

⁴⁷ It's important to wonder why KC doesn't explicitly say that readings aren't more affirming for his gender identity, and I could draw some conclusion around his experience in the ilé or the way they have chosen to navigate the space, but I won't draw them myself, I think it unwise.

⁴⁸ **Kariocha** is the ceremony of initiation into the priesthood in which new initiates learn which Orisha is on their head, meaning the Orisha who protects them and who they are a child of most directly, but priests serve and hold relationships with all Orisha. At this ceremony new initiates are given an **ita**, a lifelong reading with more significance than the general readings from a priest that practitioners receive, which apply usually to the near future rather than long term or forever.

am moving at an accelerated pace [...] but like my baba says, some people need ocha to save their life, so [how fast I am getting crowned] doesn't mean anything but that Orisha knew I needed it soon.

KC is on the precipice of the beginning of their iyawo year, or “the year in white” as it is often translated. According to Dr. Daniel Coleman, the initiation process is catalyzed by the reading of odus: how the shells fall. In a 3000-year-old system, numbered shells fall in an order that tells the interpreting priest the “odu” of the person they read. This order is directly related to particular Pataki, and priests then give recommendations, rules, and restrictions for new initiates based on the theology associated with the odu they see. In the initiation process, practitioners often spend the year wearing only white clothing from head to toe. White is a protective color associated with cleansing and the iyawo (new bride) needs the extra protection in this period of spiritual vulnerability. KC doesn't know “*what all, what all, you know, [the iyawo year] entails because it's different person to person*” and is currently collecting their new wardrobe and anxiously waiting for the instructions that they must follow throughout their year in white in order to come out the other side a fully initiated priest of Lucumí.

Dr. Daniel Coleman, soon to be Omo-Ọbatala⁴⁹ and one of the advisors on this project, went into detail outlining the iyawo year with me and what it entails⁵⁰. Newly initiated iyawos have their heads shaved so that their ori can be bound with the Orisha that they are crowned for, and they spend the next three months unable to style or cut their hair. The first three months are the strictest; young brides must wear white, cannot be touched, cannot dance, must always cover

⁴⁹ **Omo:** The Yoruba word meaning “child”; when immediately followed by the name of an Orisha it denotes that someone is crowned for that Orisha.

⁵⁰ I thought of including Dr. Coleman's contribution after the other scholars but remembered what it meant to subordinate the knowledge of practitioners to that of non-initiate scholars. His account is first because that is where it belongs.

their heads, cannot look in the mirror, cannot gossip, and have many more restrictions placed upon them as they transition into priesthood. Iyawo are given an ita, a lifelong reading that has restrictions and commands for the rest of an initiate's life. According to KC, "*the [general] readings that you get is different [...] what my godfather says is for 3-6 months, keep these things in mind, y'know, avoid these things, whatever whatever, but like an ita is for life*". Dr. Coleman gave the example that some are forbidden from entering the ocean because Yemaya will take them if they go too far, others are forbidden from certain types of alcohol or activities that lead to disequilibrium with the ori. After the first three months, initiates go through another reading and the rules are relaxed somewhat. The year in white takes place over the course of a year and 7 days; only after this period is an iyawo considered a priest in Lucumí.

Strongman spent some time on the concept of the iyawo year and "bridehood" to the Orisha in the practice of Santería. With *Santería: African Spirits in America* (1988) Joseph Murphy was one of the first scholars to uncover the process of initiation in Lucumí/Santería, and to define the term iyawo, which roughly translates from Yoruba to mean "bride". Elizabeth Pérez comments on the nature of the relationship between the Orisha and the initiate: "*The orishas, whether male or female, are regarded as husbands in their initiatory marriages to human spouses. This wedding gives new life to an initiate after she has undergone ritual death*" (Pérez 114). Concepts of bridehood, marriage, and even mounting, to describe new initiates into the priesthood and the process of rebirth that they must undergo "*has the potential to masculinize the orishas and feminize the initiates, adding a polemic spiritual layer to the biological sex and sociocultural construction of gender. Murphy offers the first hints of regendering as an important component of possession and sacramentalization of the devotee*" (Strongman 107). While Strongman articulates the division between scholars and practitioners at the time about

this definition of the term and the gendering that it implied, when read in conjunction with the regendering/layered-gendering that happens during possession the two paint a picture of transient gender for Lucumí/Santería practitioners for whom wifeness to the Orisha is the highest calling.

Roberto Strongman continues this examination of bridehood through a reading of David Brown's *Santería Enthroned* (2003), in which Brown explains that the ritual feminization of iyawos is a central part of the priesthood:

In Yorubaland, not only do male initiates wear the dresses of their female deities. In many places, the “wifely” status of the aworo (priest) translates into dresses or wraps and female hairstyles for all priests of all deities. . . In the Brazilian Candomblé, priests of both genders wear dresses, even for male orixás. . . Yorubaland and Brazil evidence religious versions of transvestism and gender manipulation not normally found in the Cuban context. (2003, 207) (129).

Through the practice of bridehood, the tradition of Orisha worship within and beyond Lucumí confounds, complicates, and flexes understanding of gender roles within the ilé and the larger cisgender society. It places the role of the wife, *the iyawo and priests*, as one of feminine servitude that would bring into question the relegation of queers to the kitchen as a place of subjugation. What do we begin to piece together when we place the role of women and queers in the ilé alongside feminized roles and visions of the optimal practitioner; the dutiful wife?

Incoming priests are claimed according to the will of the Orisha and their ancestors, the gender and/or sexual orientation of an initiate has nothing to do with the Orisha for which they are crowned. Solimar Otero argues that “*spiritual beings are also part of the selfhood of different practitioners [...] because these relationships are thought of as reciprocal. [...] In this manner the practitioner can call upon these identities as varying parts of the self*” (Otero 96). This interpretation of the Orisha as an inherent part of the practitioner’s identity speaks to ritual possession but also the pathways of the Orisha and the ways in which they would seem to contradict the gender identities, cisgender or otherwise, of practitioners. In Lucumí, the gender

identities of devotees of masculine, feminine, or genderfluid/androgynous Orisha do not necessarily coincide with or change due to the Orisha for whom they are claimed. Orisha have gendered manifestations, meaning that there are many masculine, feminine, or androgynous avatars for all of the Orisha for practitioners to follow. The “one and seven” avatars of Yemaya, for example, are all different roads, and practitioners are destined for a certain road regardless of their gender. Rather than speaking to gendering, these paths speak to the talents, affinities, life path, and purpose of the devotee in serving the particular Orisha rather than the gender of the Orisha in that pathway.

Strongman argues that the practitioner is engendered by the divine (in moments of possession) and that Lucumí holds elements of transient/transcorporeal gendering that challenge the gender/sexual norms of the colonized Americas. Queer sexualities and genders, though, are larger and more permeating than feminized clothing worn at the ceremonies, rules for comportment during the period of the “new bride” year, or the disorienting gender configuration of practitioners during possession. What these windows into the practice of Lucumí add to this queer reading of Lucumí theology and practice are an understanding of the body in flux as it relates to the divine. These Lucumí practices fail to supply an explanation for queerness, although the stories of certain Orisha and the gendered situation of practitioners in relation to the Orisha speaks to queer desires, gender explosion, and the divine rights of BlackTransQueers. But I don’t think that an explanation for queerness is what this project is seeking out from Orisha epistemologies. Strongman’s queer scholarship of the Orisha is characterized by arguments against the reading of queerness in the practice coming from its defendants and practitioners who would want to separate their tradition from the taboo that is homosexuality/transgenderism. One scholar that Strongman attends to, Rómulo Lachatañeré, one of the first scholars to attend to the

number of queer practitioners in Santería in 1992, asserts that “*crossgender possessions do not subvert male and female sexual corporealities.*” Lachatañeré also asserts, despite the claim above, that cross-gender identifications “*are evident in the syncretism of orisha-saint. They are also apparent in differently gendered avatars of one deity. Furthermore, these cross-gender identifications occur between deities and initiates of different genders*” (Strongman 111). Some remain convinced that although the Orisha hold endless potential for embodied worshippers and gender-crossing, that does not speak to an affinity for queerness or genderqueer practitioners.

I continue to hesitate in reading the Orisha as queer, and rather I would call them boundless. In their endless power and potential, they cannot and refuse to be defined and confined to the man-made categories of being that dictate our lives. They walk multiple paths, and in the pathways intended for their beloved children I believe queer footsteps can find solid ground. What these ruminations on the queerness of Lucumí in practice provide in this conversation about gender fluidity, genderlessness, the Black body and the Orisha is a foundation for understanding. Although scholars like Lachatañeré argue against queer readings of the Orisha, sex-apatetic possession, chisme/rumor, bridehood to the Orisha, and more, reflect the queers already communing with Orisha as mirrors, maps, and futures. Like my co-author in this project, TransQueers within Lucumí re-read, gossip, serve, dance, and overall live for and through the Gods. What Lucumí may offer for its BlackTransQueer practitioners, and the Black failures who have yet to find it, is a space to dream and pray radically to the Black images of Queer divinity that shamelessly reflect all of the divinity to be found within themselves.

CHAPTER IV: THE STREETLIGHTS ARE ON: WHEN THE GODS KNOW MY NAME

AND CALL ME HOME

Up until the last moments of writing, editing, and ruminating with this body of work, it still lacked a title. It wasn't until I submitted the first full draft for review that I decided on *Call Me by Your Name*, and even that was meant to be a placeholder. Now, as I am coming to the end of this journey and reflecting on the time I have spent communing with Lucumí practitioners, I find that this title fits perfectly for this project. After the release of the full Montero album, in its incredible vulnerability and unapologetic queerness, I feel as if this title was meant to be all along. Listening to it makes me feel the way this project makes me feel, incredibly seen and heard as I articulate my multiple truths.

In March of 2021, Lil Nas X released *MONTERO (Call Me by Your Name)*, a song that embodied the kind of explicit queerness that branded the rapper as a “deviant”, especially in the wake of his mainstream hit, *Old Town Road*. It was clearly a queer love anthem, and an overtly sexual one at that. All over social media concerned (read: *homophobic*) parents were calling for the song and video to be banned and were almost successful. The song itself is all about sexual relationships with other men, maybe a particular man, and telling him to “*call me when you want, call me when you need, call me in the morning*” and Nas will be on the way. The song is catchy and fun, explicitly queer hip-hop/pop which is a gem in and of itself, but it is the music video that gained my attention.

Depicting himself as the lone inhabitant of the Garden of Eden, Lil Nas X is tempted by the serpent into a thrilling kiss and the camera pans away as the scene becomes physically intimate. From there Nas is captured and judged guilty by a council of look-alikes: one could

infer the duplication of his own image, the way he plays multiple roles in the story, is meant to represent internalized homophobia. Our protagonist is killed when a stone (if you pay close attention, the stone is actually a buttplug) is thrown from the enraged audience, evoking the image of stoning sinners in the bible. He begins to ascend to heaven but is quickly thrown back down and begins falling towards the earth, then even further into hell. This imagery is meant to evoke the tired tale of queers being damned to hell for their orientation or for acting on their desires, but it takes a distinctive turn when Lil Nas X descends to hell on a stripper pole. Nas literally dances for the devil, entering hell in a mouth-watering pair of leather thigh-high boots and performing a lap dance that can truly be described as sinful. The video ends with Lil Nas X snapping the devil's neck and taking the throne of hell for himself.

The video provoked outrage from those outside of the target audience, mainly people who only saw homosexuality, explicit content, pole dancing, and a man seducing the devil. For people who saw Lil Nas X as a child-friendly artist who sang Old Town Road and performed at elementary schools writing explicit music for a queer adult audience was a betrayal of their trust. They expected straight, G-rated hip-hop for their children to enjoy without them having to supervise the media consumption of 5-year-olds. To those living over the rainbow, the video was an entirely different experience.

Having grown up myself amongst Christians as a young queer, the rhetoric that gays are going to hell was not unfamiliar, and for Lil Nas X was likely something he had to deal with as he came to terms with his own sexuality. This video plays on that idea, that queerness is an unforgivable sin worthy of damnation, but rather than simply sending LGBTQ+ folks to suffer eternally, Nas gives the damned queer agency beyond the grave. Through this reimagining of eternal punishment, I see Lil Nas X's queer fantasy as an engagement in the religious gossip that

Cabrera activates when she re-reads the Pataki through a queer lens. *MONTERO (Call Me by Your Name)* is a critical reimagination of what it means to be damned, and what it looks like for queers to have power and agency beyond the imaginations of their oppressors. Cabrera's engagement of the Pataki, KC's retelling of their favorite religious stories, and Nas' imagination of damned-queer agency exist in the same bloodline. They are all engagements with the divine that center queerness and the queer storyteller in order to find space for (BlackTrans)Queers within the sacred world. In making a place for himself on the throne of Hell, Lil Nas X in some ways engages the divine mirror that for KC and Cabrera shows the Orisha and the practitioner as genderless, genderqueer, agender, and beyond gendering.

Furthermore, Lil Nas X's lament to be called by his lover's name is inspiring in some ways. The title of the song was inspired by the 2017 film "Call Me by Your Name" in which the romantic leads each referred to the other by their own names. In an interview with Genius, Nas states: *"I thought the theme was so dope, like calling somebody by your own name is love, keeping the love between you two"* (Mendez 1). The title and its inspiration have led me to a shocking revelation, that maybe this is what I desire in this divine project of self-making. The second chapter of this work focused on reflection; the idea of the Orisha and their gender-divergent pathways acting as a reflection and in some ways a map for queer genders and sexualities. Maybe what I desire is to be called by their names; not only to be known by the Orisha and to be called home into their embrace (if it is meant for me) but also to be acknowledged and ordained in my BlackTransQueer destiny through the ways of being they demonstrate. Gender crafting then is an act of divine romance; a wifely duty, a reflection of the Orisha, a labor of love done in beloved community, and deeply academic and theoretical even as we engage it outside of academic spaces.

So where do I leave this beloved act of queer craft? Working with my interviewee to create this project has been a great privilege and I am so proud of the work that they have achieved through decades of theorizing gender in collaboration with community, elders, and ancestors. Their experience and the articulation of that experience has been the basis for this entire project, and I could not be more grateful for KC's knowledge and invaluable insight. The work of unpacking gender from its colonial roots and re-gendering/liberating ourselves from gender through Afro-Atlantic thought is a great task. It is one best undertaken in conjunction with others seeking truth, and through discovering the multiple truths that exist in contention and harmony with each other, coming to know ourselves.

KC has come to know himself, his destiny, and the role of his body through the Lucumí concept of ori and egbe, the practitioner's sacred destiny and spiritual family. The central part that ori and egbe played within this analysis of gender was incredibly fruitful for the rest of the piece and set the tone going forward. The assertion that the Black body is purposeful and full of radical potential leads to endless possibility even within this study, and that discovery leaves me breathless in its wake. Exploring the concept of Black gender-freedom, genderlessness, and the non-existence of gender in the Yoruba world-sense was a jumping off point that I didn't know I needed. I started this project seeking out Black genders, seeking some explanation for my own gender within the theology and epistemology of Lucumí. Moving away from the "third gender" and "woman-marriages" that Oyěwùmí critiques enabled me to greatly expand what I could do with this academic piece, and what I could dare to be in the embodied world. What I found in interviews with KC and my own research afterward was gender as unreal, gender as colonial -- a mechanism of control and a powerful oppressive tool for subject-making -- and this new thought-wave ultimately reframed my research as a search for ways of being that did *not* center gendered

bodies. Addressing the Orisha not as queer subjects or newfound genders but rather as pathways towards racialized-gender freedom was a revelation for this project that I didn't know I needed in order to be free.

I am in the process of beginning, at this curtain close, to play with ideas of gender not only as inherently oppressive, but as race-dependent, homemade, insignificant, explosive, transient, and with the potential to be *fun* if we refuse definition in the mode of Yemaya.

When we become gendered like the ocean, dictated by fluidity, waves, tides, storms, calm, by our bounty and our depth, we leave gender behind as it stifles us. When we refuse to be known and embrace the radical potential and ancestral technologies offered by the Orisha, we take the master's tools down to scrap metal and rebuild based on our own designs. Yemaya offers freedom through the immeasurable potential of the ocean to connect us all in its endlessness.

This is not to say that I have come to any real and concrete conclusion about gender at this point; man-made it is, and its power is undeniable. In playing with the marks of gender, piecing together identities and articulations of self from the pieces of me I see reflected in KC, in other friends and mentors, in the Orisha, am I continuing to grant gender power? I am unsure.

When I say that gender is socially constructed what I mean is that although it isn't real, it has major implications in the everyday lives of people. Because we are beings in a society, gender has a hold on all of us. Refusing gendering as I navigate the outside world is a delicious possibility that speaks to the political commitments I have already made, for myself and others. While KC refuses gendering through refusing the existence of gender in and of itself, which is correct, I think I walk a different path, which is also correct. In order to transcend gender I find that I must continue, cyclically, to discover, uncover, unmake, destroy, rebuild, and transcend it.

Being gendered is not something that is easily resisted as we are all constantly being assessed from the outside rather than through some inner feeling of where our alignment falls; it matters very little to the Target clerk or the policemen, my boss, or my local congresswoman what my gender really is. They do not see me.

I am giving in to gender annihilation and gender creation in tandem because they should co-exist. In refusing gender I am refusing to leave it unacknowledged and uncontested as fact. In the mode of Audra Simpson, I am refusing to allow gendering to be an invisible truth or an unspoken reality when we have the power to break it down when we name and question it. But in looking towards the pathways for destiny, healing, and queer alternatives presented by Lucumí I am also looking towards gender freedom: gender liberation. When we gender ourselves as mirrors of the Orisha, bringing divine gender crossing, unashamed queer desire, balance, and multiplicity to the forefront of our spiritual healing, we embrace the powerful potential of ashé to be *all and one*. BlackTransQueers should not be limited to cisgender or heteronormative visions for Black futures, even those presented within the ilé as the Orisha have ordained BlackTransQueer paths.

Queer failure brought me to the beginnings of this project, and they also bring this project to an intermission, but not a close, nor a finale. The work of unmaking gender is as endless as it is tiring and although I acknowledge the need for rest I must also acknowledge the necessity of continuity.

When I escape to the quietest place in my mind and think on the culmination of my queer life that lies between the lines of this paper I am so incredibly proud. I remember the way my mother used to explain away my queer tendencies, claimed that I was wishing for queerness, seeing it because I was obsessed with gay people, when I saw it wherever I went. In the two men

holding hands at the grocery store, or the woman in basketball shorts and slides picking her kids up from summer camp, the undeniable chemistry between the female protagonists/best friends on Disney channel, and the effeminate man who sang in our church choir with the most beautiful tenor.

I remember the way my mother looked at me when I came home with my head shaved the first time, how upset she looked when my father freshened up my cut on Christmas eve. How she cried when she got a call from my aunt asking why my mother's daughter was going out in Atlanta dressed like a man. She said it was rebellion, that I was rebelling against her at 23. I laughed in her face on accident, and it only made her mad. But why would I, at 23, living 4 states away on my own, need to rebel in a way that my parents didn't even ever see? She never answered.

I remember coming out to my mom when I was 14, and again when I was 20. I asked her not to tell my dad; she told him anyway and let me know that he was just waiting for me to tell him myself. I remember everything that my father said to my mother, and she told me, about how he felt when I told him I was gay.

He thought that it was a joke. He thought that it was a phase. That I would meet a nice man, the right man, and forget I ever liked women. He was okay with it as long as I didn't date anyone ugly. He was okay with it as long as I didn't date anyone too mannish. He was okay with it unless I was being too mannish. As long as I didn't want to be a man, whatever I wanted to do was okay.

I used to feel so incredibly disgusted with myself when I failed my parents; when I got the wrong grades, said the wrong thing, missed a step somewhere or other. It used to kill me. These failures, though, were so saccharine sweet they made my teeth hurt. The deliciousness of

defiance has always spoken to the unruly child within me, but embracing my transgender truth was something that I wouldn't let anyone steal or misname. I will not be unmade again. My parents aren't evil, and I wouldn't even say that they're homophobic (at least not after 20-odd years of having an incredibly queer child). They were always supportive of my dreams, even the ones that they don't quite understand and they got me, a first generation Black-Trans-Queer graduate student to the point where I can write silly papers about *gender*. What brought me to this project initially, to Tinsley's work through which I started to theorize and knit my own Black gender, was this dreaded failure-feeling that creeps into my throat when I think about my father's assurances and my mother's tears.

Today, I am obviously much less affected, although I still get the same comments. I love, despite their disapproval, that my parents both seem to assess my shaved head and my durag collections as acts of defiance. I am not defying my parents, but rather the world that tricked 2 Black people into thinking that gender was a code through which they would live and die. I am so elated to rebel against it, to push, to prod, to poke numerous holes in a dam that's been leaking for decades.

Where do I go from here? As I already stated at the beginning of this project, this examination of gender through the lens of the Orisha and African epistemologies of gender is incomplete. Although I have had the privilege of working alongside my interlocutor, I continue to desire spirituality for myself; to crave the Orisha. All I can hope and pray for is that they crave me in return. My next steps, according to Dr. Coleman and others within tradition that I have consulted, I need to get a reading and figure out my path, come back into alignment with my ori. I am terrified. That I will receive answers I don't like; that I cannot accept. I am terrified that I

will be told no. There is really no way to alleviate these fears but to dive in headfirst and see where I come out on the other side.

I do know this: regardless of what I hear when I go to be read, I will be listening. Deeply, thoughtfully, joyfully... to hear the Orisha calling my name as they have been for so many years.

Aries, beloved. Aries, undefinable. Aries, divine. Come home,

come home,

come home.

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