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“Creole Religions and Spirited Literary Identities”

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In 2002, when the editors at New York University Press approached Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert and me with the idea of writing an introductory text regarding the Creole religions of the Caribbean, we were interested. As scholars teaching in the area of Latin American and Caribbean studies, we had been aware for some time of the need for a more general, introductory text that could be of use as a teaching tool and as a springboard for future research. In the elaboration in our book, we greatly benefited from the experiences and research of numerous experts in the field – ethnographers, anthropologists, historians, sociologists, religious scholars, linguists, literary authors and critics – together with the testimonial narratives of devotees of these religions. The fact that we both had NYU PhDs was icing on the cake.

We thought it vital to include the practice of Creole religions in diasporan communities: we both grew up in Puerto Rican homes (Lisa on the island and I in the U.S. mainland) where we experienced first-hand the dynamism and centrality of these religious practices. But beyond personal considerations, the diasporic condition, which is so fundamentally Caribbean, is a global concern, linking, through the encounters of peoples and cultures engaged in transnational movement, the ongoing (re)construction of identities that is itself a form of global Creolization; which can be defined as the ongoing and ever-changing process of new forms born or developed from the interaction of peoples and forces due to “adaptive pressures omnipresent and irresistible” in the Americas. Religion is one of the crucial elements of that ongoing process for the peoples of the Caribbean.

Eight years later, our original book needed to be updated and expanded. The interest and scholarship in Creole religions is like the Creolization process itself – always evolving. The interest in new ways of *theorizing the spiritual* is also evolving. In the field of feminist theory, for example, one

observes more and more discussions of gender and spirituality. The editors of the journal *Signs*, in a special 2006 issue on gender and spirituality, requested submissions on the theme observing that:

Although historical and comparative perspectives on women and gender provide a rich and complex vision of spirituality, contemporary feminism often rests on exclusively secular conceptions of justice, equality, and transformation. We seek manuscripts that provide new ways of theorizing and analyzing the relationship between women/gender and spirituality. . . essays that move beyond conventional binary oppositions between the sacred and the secular (which is often itself structured as a religion) by considering the ways in which women's lives, identities, thought, cultural and intellectual practices, activism, and social movements have rested on complex understandings of the relationships among the spiritual, the material, the rational, the scientific, and the secular. (viii)

Trinidadian scholar M. Jacqui Alexander incorporates Creole spirituality into her feminist and somewhat controversial work *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (2005) with what can be called a “spirited” methodology. As a devotee of Santería/Regla de Ocha and Vodou, Alexander claims to a profound research experience via the spiritual and the sacred that goes beyond accepted modes of representation. She boldly asserts the value not only of traditional archival research but of *spiritual possession* in writing the life of an enslaved Kongolese woman in the Caribbean, what some have referred to as “ethnographic immersion.” According to Alexander:

All of the elements with which feminism has been preoccupied – including transnationalism, gender and sexuality, experience, history, memory, subjectivity, and justice – are contained within this metaphysic that uses Spirit knowing as the mechanism of making the world intelligible. But primarily because experience has been understood in purely secular terms and because the secular has been divested of the Sacred and the spiritual divested of the political, this way of knowing is not generally believed to have the capacity to instruct feminism in the United States in any meaningful way in spite of the work of feminist theologians and ethicists. It is a paradox that a feminism that has insisted on a politics of a historicized self has rendered that self so secularized, that it has paid very little attention to the ways in which spiritual labor and spiritual knowing is primarily a project of self-knowing and transformation that constantly invokes community simply because it requires it. In spite of the work

of Gloria Anzaldúa, Cornel West, bell hooks, and the more recent work of Lata Mani, Leela Fernandes, and others, there is a tacit understanding that no self-respecting postmodernist would want to align herself (at least in public) with a category such as the spiritual, which appears so fixed, so unchanging, so redolent of tradition. Many, I suspect have been forced into a spiritual closet.
(15)

In addition to a reconsideration of the categories of the spiritual in terms of academic disciplines, we found it necessary to expand regional considerations of the influence of Creole religions in the diaspora to Mexican Americans and other U.S. Latinos who are influenced by Creole spiritual practices, particularly in the increased significance of material culture – art, music, literature – and healing practices influenced by Creole religions. Creole spirits travel well and have broadened their reach to the African American and the wider U.S. Latino populations, and to the artists and writers of those communities who have demonstrated an affinity with and been inspired by spiritual traditions. *Orishas* and *lwas* but also *santos* and *kachinas* have claimed influential spiritual daughters and sons in the arts and have created spirited identities. “Literary Creolization” has produced what we refer to as “spirited” cultural identities and, in many cases, an “initiated” readership, understood here as one with a familiarity and affinity with the magical realism of Creole spirituality from the point of view of an “insider.”ⁱ

The initiated reader has an awareness and appreciation of the spiritual layers in an artistic work by a “spirited” writer/artist who has attained a certain degree or level of spiritual/religious understanding, from the most basic linguistic and cultural appreciation to the more committed level of practitioners who have undergone ritual initiation. The living dynamic of these religious traditions has led to their continued Creolization in the islands of the Caribbean and in the diaspora and, consequently, in diasporic Creole literature, as in the writing of the Cuban ethnographer/artist Lydia Cabrera. In the case of such Mexican American authors as Rudolfo Anaya and Gloria Anzaldúa,

their spirited identity derives from the syncretized indigenous and Roman Catholic *mestizo* practices and beliefs, as I will briefly discuss below.

Lydia Cabrera's monumental ethnographic work *El monte* (1954) was essential in the creation of the field of the Afro-Cuban religious and cultural ethnography. *El monte* was the work of an ethnographer who was also a creative writer, interests that are clearly evident in Cabrera's fiction written prior to the publication of her ethnographic book. Cabrera's short stories introduced the religions to a larger audience while maintaining the integrity of the spiritual practices. Published in 1934, *Cuentos negros de Cuba (Afro-Cuban Tales)* was her first short story collection and is frequently read solely in terms of local folkloric traditions and the author's skillful use of African languages. The stories should be recognized, however, as an example of the incorporation of religious, cultural, and spiritual traditions into the body of Cuban and Cuban American twentieth-century literature in order to more accurately reflect Cuban identity since, as the author herself noted, "No se comprenderá a nuestro pueblo sin conocer al negro" (Our people cannot be understood without an understanding of our blacks). In her study *Lydia Cabrera and the Construction of an Afro-Cuban Cultural Identity*, Edna Rodríguez-Mangual observes that Cabrera offers an "alternative to the standard, homogeneous interpretations of Cuban identity . . . the black cosmogony recreated in her work becomes a place of enunciation of an alternative identity that exposes the limits of official discourse" (20).

The story *El sapo guardiero (The Watchful Toad)* from *Cuentos negros* is one example of the author's foregrounding of a spirited identity within Cuban national culture. While it can be read as a mythical tale of twins "the size of bird feed" who are lost in the dark forest of an evil witch, the domain of which is guarded by a toad who "protected the woods and their secret," sleeps in a puddle of "dead water," and has not seen the light in many centuries, the "initiated" reader, aware of the ritual-specific language used in the story, will know that they are in a Palo Monte, a sacred wild

of religious spirits and rituals. The monte is for Afro-Cubans and for those familiar with the symbolic universe of the culture the residence of the deities, the spirits of the ancestors, and supernatural beings.

“Cocuyero, give me eyes so that I may see!
Horror of dreams, let all tremble! I knock over la Seiba
angulo, the *seven Rays*, Mamma Louisa . . .
Sarabanda! Jump, wooden horse! Lightning Tornado!
Evil wind, carry it off, carry it off!”

The woods were pressing against his back on tiptoes and watching him anxiously. From the dead branches ears were hanging, listening to his heartbeat. Millions of invisible eyes, with sharp, furtive glances, pierced the compact darkness. And behind everything lay silence’s inexorable claw. The guardian toad left the twins lying on the ground.

No matter who suffers, Sampunga wants some blood!
No matter who suffers, Sampunga wants some blood!” (Italics added, 167)

The forest is further described with ritualized expressions and language suggestive of the contents and rituals for the making of an nganga cauldron of the Palo Monte religion in Cuba.

In the muddy stomach.
Dust of the crossroads.
Earth from the cemetery, dug at night.

Black earth from an anthill, because ants have worked doggedly, thinking neither of pain nor pleasure, since the beginning of time. The *Bibijaguas*, industrious and wise.

Stomach of Mama Tégue. She learned her mysterious work in the roots of the Grandmother Seiba, in the earth’s womb for seven days.

For seven days she learned the work of silence among the fish in the river’s depths, Mama Tégue drank the moon.

With the hairy spider and the scorpion, the rotten rooster head and with owl-eye, eye of immovable night, blood yoke, the Word of the Shadows shone, “Evil Spirit! Evil

Spirit! Mouth of darkness, worm’s mouth, consuming life! Allá Kiriki, allai bosaikombo, allá kiriki!”

Flat on her stomach, the old woman spat alcohol along with dust and Chinese pepper into the enchanted saucepan.

On the ground, *she drew arrows with ashes* and sleeping serpents with smoke. She made

the seashells speak. (Italics added, 167-168)

For the uninitiated reader the story is a delightful example of folklore, similar to the naïve readings of Cuban poet Nicolas Guillen's well-known poem "Sensemayá," which ignored the ritualized language of the verses, labeling them examples of *jitanjáforas*, and invented poetic words created for their suggestive sounds rather than their meanings. For the initiated or privileged reader, however, the references to "Evil Wind" in the Cabrera story and especially to "Sarabanda" (Zarabanda) are clues to another spiritual – reality: the Congo religious traditions in Cuba.

The nganga theme is also found outside Cuban literature in Creole-U.S. Latino writing and is the origin of the short story "The Cauldron," by U.S.-Puerto Rican author Lyn Di Iorio Sandín. In the story a cauldron left behind in an abandoned hacienda, "made of iron blackened by fire and years of exposure, stands in the center of the ruins under the ceibas. Malodorous soil, flavored with blood and a human skull, is a sign that the cauldron is the prison of a *fuiri*, a dead one." The author substitutes the word *fuiri* for the more commonly used words *nkisi* or *mpungo* for the Congo spirits as a more poetic and evocative choice of language, following the use of the word by the well-known writer of Santería literature Migene González Wippler. History and spirituality converge in the story, along with the avenging of past injustices with regard to the enslaved Africans in Puerto Rico.

La Margarita's owner was a *sinverguenza*, an upstart Corsican. He had a concubine, a slave who, according to the historical sources, had been a priestess among the Congos. The oral tradition tells us a little more about this woman. It says she got the man his property with her magic. After he had glutted himself on all the land he could get, he decided to marry the mayor's daughter and live happily after. The Congo woman killed herself out of grief. Or maybe the Corsican killed her. No one really knows. The rumor was that he learned her magic. He imprisoned her spirit in that cauldron you've been hearing so much about. It was after her death that strange things began to happen in the town [. . .] (159-160)

A "spirited identity" is found in New Mexican author Rudolfo Anaya in the fictional

character Ultima, the magical curandera/bruja of his famous 1972 novel *Bless Me, Ultima*, which is for many U.S. students their introduction to Chicano literary culture. Anaya often depicts the spirits of the ancestors and the local New Mexican magical traditions in his fiction and essays in order to express the “truth” of his *Nuevo Mexicano* culture, elements which may make some uncomfortable, but which are part of the “mundo mental,” the psychic world of the *Nuevo Mexicano* people. In fact, the category that has most disturbed some readers of *Bless Me, Ultima*, even going so far as to consider the novel dangerous for young readers, is precisely that of magic. (The novel enjoys the dubious distinction of appearing on the list of the 100 Most Challenged Books on the Banned Books List in the ten years prior to 2000, published by the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom.) In the words of Anaya's fellow New Mexican José Armas, the mix of the mystical, spiritual, and magical is particular to New Mexican writing; Anaya's success was in *capturing* that culture.

It is much more than a style. It is a form, a dimension of literature which captures an underground manifestation in the culture of Chicanos in *Nuevo Mexico*. . . There is magic and there is witchcraft. Both are unexplainable and unacceptable in rational terms to Western thinking or religious doctrine, yet they are very much alive, very real. . . Superstition, witchcraft and spirits are alive and active in the lives of the New Mexico writer. They are not so outrageous to accept. (42-43)

In *Bless Me, Ultima* and in his numerous works following, Rudolfo Anaya creates what he calls New World characters with a unique New World nature derived from the people and earth of the Americas.

The definition of Chicano culture must come from a multicultural perspective. Many streams of history define us and will continue to define us, for we are the synthesis that is the Americas.

Christ and Quetzalcoatl are not opposing spiritual figures; they fulfill the humanistic yearning toward harmonious resolution. Harmony within, harmony with neighbors, harmony with the cosmos. The Virgin of Spanish Catholicism and the Aztec Tonantzin culminate in the powerful and all-loving Virgen de Guadalupe. And

los santos of the Catholic Church, and those more personal saints of my mother's altar, merge and share the sacred space of the kachinas of the Indian pueblos.

This metaphor, "Los santos son las kachinas," the saints are the kachinas, has become a guiding metaphor of synthesis for me. The Old World and the New World have become one in me. Perhaps it is this syncretic sensibility of harmony that is the ideal of the New World character. (363-364)

It is fascinating to note that among Mexican Americans the artistic influence of the Afro-diasporic religious traditions has created *Almas Afines* (Kindred Spirits), and artist devotees in particular Chicana muralists and writers, who consider themselves "daughters of Yemayá," the deity associated with the oceans, the moon, fertility, and motherhood. Yemayá is the orisha of dreams and female secrets, ancient wisdom, and the collective unconscious; little wonder at her appeal to female creative artists. According to Laura E. Pérez in her book *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities* (2007):

In addition to fomenting criticism of the received, the legacy of countercultural and civil rights struggles has led to the search for more useful social, political, and spiritual models. Chicana artists have looked to the distant past, to Mesoamerican and North American Indigenous female deities, to those of African diasporic and Buddhist pantheons, and to the goddesses of ancient Europe and the Mediterranean, in part, in order to imagine a future beyond patriarchal cultures. They have variously assimilated goddesses-spiritualities . . . [O]thers have studied and incorporated aspects of African-diaspora *santería* in their lives and/or their art practices. (299)

As a devotee of the Yoruba orisha Yemayá, Gloria Anzaldúa, the acclaimed Chicana author and cultural theorist who helped transform contemporary Chicana and border theories, invokes the orisha's name combining it with the Catholic Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico, in the bilingual opening poem of the first chapter of her 1987 work *Borderland/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Both spirits guide the inhabitants of the borderlands: "transgressors, aliens – whether they possess documents or not, whether they're Chicanos, Indians or Blacks," who populate the U.S.S. – M Mexican border, an area Anzaldúa refers to as a third country or "border culture" (3).

But the skin of the earth is seamless.
The sea cannot be fenced,
el mar does not stop at borders.
To show the white man what she thought of his
arrogance,
Yemaya blew that wire fence down.

Anzaldúa was a self-defined “spiritual activist” for whom mestiza consciousness comprises inclusionary politics, a “tolerance for ambiguity,” and real and symbolic boundary transgression. Widely studied for her theoretical contributions in the reinterpretation of postcolonial realities, Anzaldúa’s politics of spirit, equally radical in its focus, is less well-known and, at times, marginalized from serious intellectual discourse as a nostalgic anachronism or fanciful New Age superstition. Her spiritual activism defies scholarly and academic prejudice and questions reductionist Western scientific epistemology. Spiritual activism for Anzaldúa begins with a reclaiming of the power of inner transformation of spirit in order to create the consciousness that will lead to a transformation of unjust social structures, as noted by AnaLouise Keating:

Although revisionist mythmaking does play a role in her spiritual activism, Anzaldúa does not try to resurrect ‘old gods,’ reclaim an ‘authentic’ pre-colonial spirituality or religion, or in other ways nostalgically reinvigorate pseudo-ancient traditions or beliefs. Instead, she investigates a variety of indigenous and post-indigenous histories and traditions in order to learn from them, and she applies what she learns to our contemporary situation. (2008: 55-56)

For Luis D. León, author of *La Llorona's Children: Religion, Life, and Death in the U.S. - Mexican Borderlands*, Anzaldúa’s consciousness and “religious poetics” emerge from “a lifetime of struggle”, from experiencing injustice and subsequently transforming pain into tactical maneuvers.

In a symbolic spiritual border crossing in the years prior to her untimely death, and with an inclusive perspective and “radical interconnectedness,” Gloria Anzaldúa embraced the spiritual energies represented by the Yoruba orisha in a poem.

Yemayá
I come to you, Yemayá,

ocean mother, sister of the fishes.
I stop at the edge of your lip
where you exhale your breath on the beach
into a million tiny geysers.
With your white froth I anoint my brow and cheeks,
wait for your white-veined breasts to wash through me.

Yemayá, your tongues lick me,
your green mouths nibble my feet.
With your brine I inhale the beginnings of life.
Your silver tongues hiss then retreat
leaving hieroglyphs and silence on the sand.

Take me with you, Yemayá.
Let me ride your flaking tortoise shell,
dance with your serpents and your seals.
Let me roar down the marble cliffs of your shoulders
varooming into waterfalls—
chipping into a million emeralds!

Beached at the edge of your lilac skirt,
you lay driftwood, a feather, a shell at my feet.
Your silver tongues hiss then retreat.
I wipe the salt spray from my face,
Yemayá, ocean mother,
I take you home in a bottle.
Tonight I will sleep on your rolling breasts.
Esta noche sueño contigo. (2009: 242)

Joseph M. Murphy's reflections on the term *Creole* and its diverse and varied meanings in the experience of the Americas, included in his foreword to our *Creole Religions* (2011), is an apt conclusion here.

For me “Creole” means creative, and Creole religions are inspired constructions of symbols out of wide experience and often deep hardship. The men and women who built the Creole religions portrayed here were forced by terrible circumstance to create healing systems out of the fragments of cultural materials available to them. They responded with profound and effective medicines to survive and thrive in the brave new world of the Caribbean. . . . Their traditions have now become world religions, as we find Rastafarians in South Africa and *babalawos* in the Netherlands. All the religions featured here are in renaissance in the United States and are being reclaimed and reimagined by people of all backgrounds. More and more Americans are finding “a righteous place” in Creole religious communities, places of inclusion and empowerment. Their embrace of creativity in symbol building suggests a key

to understanding the future of American religiosity as borders are crossed and new communities formed. (xiii)

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ⁱ Many of the ideas expressed here can also be found in my essay, "Spirited Identities; Creole Religions, Creole/U.S. Latina Literature, and the Initiated Reader". (2007).

[Keywords: Puerto Rican photography, Latina photography , precarity and visual culture, Santurce street art, Harford Puerto Ricans, New York City documentary photography]. Save to Library. Download.Â In *Gendered Geographies in Puerto Rican Culture: Spaces, Sexualities, and Solidarities*, Radost Rangelova addresses how the configuration of space in contemporary Puerto Rican literature and film (both documentary and fictional) is a site more.