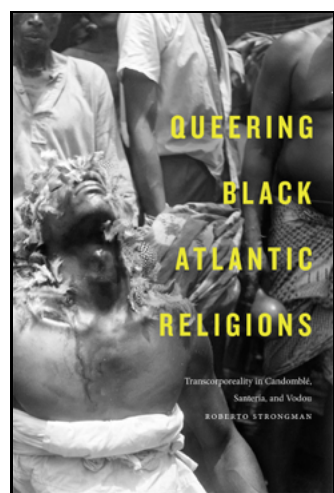


Queering Black Atlantic Religions: Transcorporeality in Candomblé, Santería, and Vodou

By Roberto Strongman. 2019. Durham: Duke University Press. 296 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4780-0310-6 (soft cover).

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Roberto Strongman's exploration of sexuality and embodiment in *Queering Black Atlantic Religions* is a newer offering in what has been an important emerging discourse in the study of African-inspired religions in the Americas. Like *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions* (Conner and Sparks 2004), *Black Atlantic Religion* (Matory 2005), *Electric Santería* (Beliso-De Jesús 2015), *Religion in the Kitchen* (Pérez 2016), and *Archives of Conjure* (Otero 2020), Strongman's study resituates concepts of personhood, sexuality, gender, and race along a continuum of Black Atlantic cultural practices. However, it is important to note that earlier work by Cuban folklorist Lydia Cabrera (1954) and anthropologist Ruth

Landes (1940) also addressed gender and sexuality in ways that helped to lay the foundation for this current line of research. Strongman's contribution is an innovative deployment of cultural studies that looks at art, performance, film, and literature to research the religiosity of African diaspora communities in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The book opens with an invitation into the *igbodu*, the sacralized space where initiatory transformations happen in Yoruba-inspired religions. Seeing this site of remaking and secrecy as akin to the process of entering the work of the cultural critic, Strongman utilizes the idea of the *igbodu* to ground how he thinks through artistic representations of African diaspora religions to get to the process of remaking vital energies into something new: visual art, writing, and film. To be clear, creating an *igbodu* is a long-standing community practice whereby natural and mystical geographies are created in a ritual home, an *ilé*. However, Strongman's deployment of the *igbodu* does not necessarily come from what would be considered a traditional ethnographic description or cultural location. Rather, his consideration of the *igbodu* is more of an implementation of what anthropologist and poet Ana-Maurine Lara calls an "archive of the imagination" (Lara 2018). Similar to Strongman's take on a non-linear temporality,

Lara's reformulation of Afrolatinx pasts and futures relies on a creativity that includes imagining black LGBTQ subjects into multiple religious sites that connect various traditions in the Americas.

Queering Black Atlantic Religions is a three-part book that includes the following sections: I, Vodou; II, Lucumí/Santería; and III, Candomblé. Each section contains two chapters for a total of six chapters, plus an introduction and conclusion to the volume. Strongman is a polylingual scholar with an impressive ability to move deftly between materials in French, Kreyòl, Portuguese, and Spanish, using a transnational perspective. Likewise, his commentary on visual culture, whether it be painting or film, is adroitly maneuvered to emphasize the temporal and aesthetic connections he is making between the enactment of ritual knowledge and artistic expression.

To connect various strands of Candomblé, Santería, and Vodou, Strongman introduces the concept of transcorporeality. By doing so, he generates the possibility of engaging with the multiplicity of religious subjectivity that shapes and informs work with and about Black Atlantic religions. Strongman boldly states that his framing of transcorporeality “has profound philosophical implications for the understanding of the black body” (4). Indeed, his exploration of the materiality of blackness is articulated by embracing the many valences of the idea of “corpus,” to include dance, film, painting, and writing. Further, he argues that these works, like possession rituals of cohabitation with deities and spirits, embody certain kinds of blackness that reproduce Atlantic religious praxis. Thus, for Strongman, doing work with cultural materials about the gods and ancestors may also reproduce them in significant ways. These reproductions suggest a lasting queer underpinning to how personhood and being manifest over time.

Iconic figures like Pierre Fatumbi Verger, Zora Neale Hurston, Katherine Dunham, and Lydia Cabrera are re-examined in ways that stretch the meaning of their work on Black Atlantic religions. Mainly, Strongman seeks to reassert the queer ontologies of Black Atlantic religions that become evident in studying their non-binary conceptions of personhood and divinity. Artists like Hector Hyppolite and Wilfredo Lam are also reintroduced to the public with special attention paid to the mobility of gods and spirits as created through their iconic work. In other words, divinity can be re-made in painting, writing, and dancing because of the centrality of transcorporeality not only to ritual, but also to representations of spiritual incarnations. These “acts of transfer,” to borrow from performance studies scholar Diana Taylor's idea of embodied knowledge, are activated and perpetuated by Strongman's analysis of the many ways that beings become in Vodou, Candomblé, and Santería.

Throughout the study, emic concepts are utilized from Black Atlantic religious practices to queer art and ethnography. For example, Strongman takes the idea of “twinning” from Vodou and uses it as a mirror in discussing representations of the lwa (divinities) and the

gwobonanj (intellect) as ethnographer-practitioner-artists reflect upon experience, study, and representation. He excavates reflections of Vodou participation by Karen McCarthy Brown, Mimerose Beaubrun, Maya Deren, Zora Neale Hurston, and Katherine Dunham to think through multiple forms of consciousness and materiality. In this aspect of his analysis, the two deities, Erzulie Freda and Erzulie Dantor, serve as important guides to understanding how these women viewed and experienced the mutability of gender and sexuality in Vodou traditions (43).

Of particular note is Strongman's reading of Tomás Gutierrez Alea's seminal film on sexuality and the Cuban revolution, *Fresa y Chocolate* (1993). Based on a short story by Senel Paz, "El lobo, el bosque, y el hombre nuevo," the film grapples with homophobia in post-revolutionary Cuba. The film was quite popular and deeply influenced Cuban attitudes towards sexuality. Other critics, like José Quiroga, have given *Fresa y Chocolate* close readings of the politics of representation of especially the main gay character, Diego, and the young revolutionary, David (2000). Strongman, instead, pays particular attention to the visual narrative of the film, where the characters are aligned with different orichas and/or their corresponding Catholic saints that reflect a semiotic discourse on Cuban religiosity and sexuality. It is important that the film's release occurred during the "special period" when Cuban culture and economic systems came into crisis due to the end of Soviet support. Multiple changes in attitudes towards previously taboo topics, like tourism and religion, allowed for *Fresa y Chocolate* to speak to the moment. As Strongman relates, "I would like to propose that *Fresa y Chocolate* is as much about religion as it is about sexual orientation," and he further suggests that the film demonstrates a "coarticulation of sexual desires and forms of spirituality" (103). In his evaluation of the film, Strongman digs into the works of Fernando Ortiz and Rómulo Lachantañeré to access ethnographic descriptions of the black body under trance that exoticizes, queers, and yet also reaffirms the important link between spirit, materiality, and time that the concept of transcorporeality engenders. Thus, Strongman illustrates how *Fresa y Chocolate* captures the enmeshed nature of embodiment, sensuality, and spirituality – and the polemics that these states of being generate – in Cuban cultural expression.

Another example of this eclectic yet persuasive mode of literary and cultural criticism is Strongman's exploration of Exu, the trickster deity of the crossroads as s/he is known in Brazil through the novel and film, *Dona Flor e seus dois maridos* (*Doña Flor and Her Two Husbands*) (1969), written by Jorge Amado and adapted by Bruno Barreto. Strongman pays attention to the tales and beliefs surrounding female Exu spirits, like Maria Padilha. This particular spirit rules over brothels and serves as a patron for individuals who do not conform to gender norms or behaviors of sexual respectability. Strongman argues that the novel's "transvestitism, homoeroticism, and androgyny play an important role, lending the narrative a strong non-heteronormative aspect" (203). The sexuality of the novel's protagonist, Doña Flor, also breaks norms of respectability, as

does Maria Padilha, in exploring the intimacies possible between humans and spirits by copulating with her husband's ghost. Strongman argues that the Exu spirits' overt sexual nature and their penchant for boundary-crossing inform Doña Flor's acts, and thus create a template for understanding the irreverent transcorporeality being explored in the novel and film. Jorge Amado's larger body of work, as in *O Sumiço da Santa* (The War of the Saints) (1988), also employs spirituality as a weapon aimed at the Brazilian government's repressive behavior towards women, LGBTQ communities, and African-inspired religions such as Candomblé.

Strongman concludes the book by introducing an apt term, transcripturality. He writes that transcripturality is an "act of cultural creation" that occurs in "an altered or exalted state of consciousness" (252). In writing in such a manner, he mirrors trance and cohabitation, and recreates multiple African diasporic subjects that can be read and conjured continuously. I have discussed a similar dynamic found in the poetics of Cuban authors like Zoé Valdés and Guillermo Cabrera Infante through the creation of an "initiated reader" (Otero 2007). The construction of a text that generates subjects has Strongman turn to linguistic performativity, as understood by Judith Butler and J. L. Austin, to think about how these words transform reality and time in a variety of ways. This turn towards transcripturality really maps *Queering Black Atlantic Religions* quite well, as the book is about innovations in the process of writing, painting, and filming Vodou, Santería, and Candomblé. Though there are few ethnographic moments in the volume, its formidable strengths lie in the cultural criticism that is at the heart of Strongman's analysis of representations of queer Black religiosity. The work is ultimately an important and sophisticated addition to the growing consideration of the transnational aesthetics that interconnect different kinds of queerness, blackness, and spirituality in the Americas.

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