

Syncretic Religion and Dissident Sexualities  
Roberto Strongman

## queer globalizations

citizenship and the  
afterlife of colonialism

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## 10 Syncretic Religion and Dissident Sexualities

Roberto Strongman

This essay presents a dissatisfaction with certain strains of thought within the political discourse on sexual orientation produced by economically and racially privileged segments of the gay and lesbian movement in the United States. I argue that the exportation of these knowledges on sexual orientation has a universalizing and homogenizing effect that erases culturally distinct and politically enabling gender differences and options in poorer populations and among communities of color worldwide. I also discuss an equally disturbing trend within scholarly discourse that polarizes U.S. and Latin American homosexualities to an extremely reductive and essentialistic simplicity. My main argument consists of an investigation of the Afro-Catholic syncretic cults of the Americas—Santería, Vaudou, and Candomblé—as sites of local knowledge that can serve as cultural arsenals in the resistance to these hegemonic discourses and as places in which Latin American homosexual identities can find the construction materials necessary to continue developing without total absorption by the hegemony of the mainstream gay and lesbian movement in the United States.

One of the most important reevaluations taking place in queer communities of color, in both Latin America and its diasporic population in the United States, involves a generalized realization that the promise of liberation of the North Amer-

ican gay, lesbian, transgender movement is implicated in the project of U.S. hegemonic control through the bodies of its citizens. The work of U.S.-based gay human rights organizations in Latin America, aside from attaining security and asylum for victims of sexual orientation discrimination in many countries, has had the effect of emplotting Latin America as culturally backwards in comparison to what is presented as the more enlightened and progressive United States. For instance, the work of the San Francisco-based International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) often involves the judicial defamation of the countries of origin of asylum seekers. This has been required to constitute the main line of argument in immigration judicial proceedings after the February 3, 1986, ruling of U.S. immigration Judge Robert Brown, in which he granted Fidel Armando Toboso's request to withhold his deportation to Cuba on the basis that Toboso fit the definition of a refugee by virtue of being "a member of a particular social group (homosexuals)" who feared persecution from the Cuban government.

Further, the indiscriminate imposition of such gender categories as "gay" or "lesbian" without questioning the culture-specific conditions that gave rise to them in the United States and their noncorrespondence to local Latin American categories is an act of cultural hegemony that the wealthier United States imposes on its neighbors in the hemisphere. The rhetoric of the gay and lesbian human rights movement in the United States unites under the single category of "gay" such different sexual categories as an Indian *hijra* and a Mexican *joto*. Moreover, as U.S. cultural products are exported, often by the demand of other cultures around the world, U.S. categories of sexual orientation start to subsume local modes of sexual alterity.

Aware of the role of translation as a mechanism for the stabilization and homogenization of identities, even as it begins, this essay must confront the problematic nature of language. How is it possible to strive for the construction of more local gay, lesbian, queer Latin American identities when the very terms "gay," "lesbian," and "queer" have been manufactured elsewhere? Therefore, it seems more appropriate to speak of Latin American homosexualities than, for instance, a Latin American "gay" or "lesbian(a)" identity. Nevertheless, because of the current usage in Latin America of the U.S.-fabricated terms "gay," "lesbian(a)," "queer" to refer to some types of Latin American homosexualities—especially among the U.S.-influenced upper classes—I will be using those labels throughout the essay. I will also be using more native designations for same-gender sexualities. As a rule, I will use the sexual label that the subject referred to is likely to use



in identifying him/herself according to his/her geographical, linguistic, and class position.

The paradoxical scenario in which a liberational movement among a privileged population translates into a situation of hegemonic domination for another population group is not altogether new. In fact, the problematic displayed in the domination of the U.S. gay, lesbian, queer identities over Latin American native forms of alternative genders is strongly reminiscent of an earlier discussion in the 1980s of Western feminism as a colonizing force. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's important essay "Under Western Eyes" presents how the writings of Western women on women of color construct a monolithical third world woman and how this representation is equivalent to a form of discursive colonialism. As if anticipating our debate on gay, lesbian, queer politics in Latin America, Mohanty writes, "As a matter of fact, my argument holds for any discourse that sets up its own authorial subjects as the implicit referent, i.e., the yardstick by which to encode and represent cultural Others. It is in this move that power is exercised in discourse" (55). In much the same way as Western feminists writing about women of color in India and Africa applied to them developmental models that positioned women of color as "lagging behind" the road to progress and emancipation, so do Western gay/lesbian/queer scholars often carelessly defer to such inefficient and dangerous models of cultural comparison without reflecting on the distorted evaluations that their privileged perspectives are prone to make. Statements such as "Such countries are in a *pre-gay* situation" (Lacey 8) abound in queer U.S. internationalist discourse. Even for a writer like Dennis Altman who, conscious of his positionality as a "privileged, white, Australian, gay intellectual, with access to considerable resources" (418) and critical of the application of the notion of development cross-culturally in the writings of other scholars (426), still falls into the trap of dangerously prejudiced comparisons. Speaking of the cultural transformations taking place currently in Asian countries with respect to sexual orientation, Altman writes, "Yet a certain blurring of the sex/gender order may not be that different from developments in the West . . . which prevailed in the *early stages* of homosexual consciousness in Europe" (emphasis mine) (421). In the Asia of the late 1990s, Altman sees "parallels with the West of several decades ago" (422), such as a form of macho-hustler aesthetics that reminds him of John Rechy's novel of the early 1960s *City of Night* (423).

Altman's essay is suffused with a paternalistic desire toward his informants. Altman's repeated references to the "young Asian men" who make up his pool of informants, for whom "an older western man will often be cast in the role of pro-

tector" (423), raise suspicions as to the nature of the relation between researcher and informant and of Altman's perception of himself in such a relationship. Joseph Carrier's essay "Miguel: Sexual Life History of a Gay Mexican American" raises similar suspicions. Carrier's detailed description of his informant's sexual practices makes one wonder exactly which methods of data collection were employed in his study. His description of Miguel as a "trim, good-looking man of average height and build with large, beautiful dark brown eyes and straight black hair" (211) is permeated with a sensuality that could be questionable under the traditional code of ethics of the field of anthropology.<sup>1</sup> In highlighting this, I do not strive to bring censure to any sexual involvement between informant and researcher. Rather, I hope to foreground the asymmetry of power between informant and researcher and explore how this replicates the dominating "global gaze" of U.S. gay/lesbian/queer politics in Latin America and other economically impoverished areas of the world.

Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes" continues to be of use to me in thinking about the issue of gender-minority representation in scholarship, especially in instances in which the distorted representation is enacted by a member of the community s/he is describing. Mohanty writes,

*Similar arguments can be made in terms of middle-class urban or working class sisters which assumes their own middle-class culture as the norm, and codifies working-class histories and cultures as Other. Though, while this essay focuses specifically on what I refer to as "Western feminist" discourse on women in the third world, the critiques I offer also pertain to third world scholars writing about their own cultures, which employ identical analytical strategies. (52)*

Mohanty's essay appears to me to be at its most suggestive point here as she stops short of saying what appears to be the logical conclusion of her thinking: that class outranks ethnicity, nationality, and geography as the most important criterion in determining the perspective of the researcher toward his or her subject of study. It being so, academics, as middle-class citizens in the United States, are prone to make problematic assumptions about subjects of study who are beneath them in the economic stratification of society. And it is not uncommon to find academics of color who, like Tomás Almaguer—a Chicano—replicate much of the problematic discourse that his White-American colleagues produce. In line with other researchers such as Joseph Carrier and Roger Lancaster, Almaguer makes a distinction between U.S. and Latino homosexualities by presenting the former as "egalitarian" and the latter as based on a "*pasivo/activo*" model. Unlike



the egalitarian model, in which sexual partners are able to exchange roles, in the *pasivo/activo* model the sexual roles of inserter and insertee are rigidly established and set. While the insertee or *pasivo* role is stigmatized, the inserter or *activo* is not, and is not thought of as a homosexual.

Anthropologists are very often trained and expected to create a representation of the other as exotic and rare by highlighting differences and ignoring what is familiar and similar to their audience's culture. Authors who write on the Latin American *pasivo/activo* model often note that there also exist a large number of "egalitarian" homosexuals in Latin America (Murray 14), yet they fail to take them into account because their existence does not foster their desire to represent Latin America as sexually exotic. Their extremely simple and essentialistic rendering of the comparison between U.S. and Latin American homosexualities avoids the complexity that the inclusion of U.S. gay top/bottom distinctions would bring out. While the differences in stigma between inserter and insertee might be real, I am partisan to the belief that they are differences of degrees and not the absolutes Joseph Carrier and his school believe. I am certain that, in mainstream heterosexual contexts, none of the *activos* in their study brag about their encounters with other men because there they would face social condemnation together with what Carrier and his school of thought consider the only object of societal opprobrium, the *pasivos*.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note how in spite of the fact that Latino homosexualities are not solely *activo/pasivo*, some writers represent them as such in order to replicate the popular image in the United States of Latin American politically dictatorial oppressors—not to speak of a perpetuation of the representations of Latin America as "simple" and the United States as more "complex." Moreover, Carrier's very possible sexual involvement with some of his young informants of considerably lower economic means points to a sexual reenactment of the relationship of neocolonialism between the dominant United States and dependent, subservient Latin America.

I believe that the most salient difference between U.S. gay and Latin American homosexual categories is not found in egalitarian and *activo/pasivo* frameworks. It lies in the issue of disclosure/secretcy, which in U.S. gay discourse has been crystallized around the image of the closet. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet* calls the closet appropriately "a structured silence." The rupture of this silence by "coming-out" narratives enacts the birth of the gay subject in discourse while at same time, ironically, forfeiting some of the freedoms of not-being.

Many native Latin American alternative genders and sexualities do not rely on the same notion of disclosure to exist; the performance of desire is a much more defining moment than the declaration; the act is more important than the speech-act. Latin American interdictions against homosexual disclosure appear to Euro-North America as entrapment, but entrapment can occur only with the appearance of the closet. Many native Latin American homosexualities still enjoy the freedom of ignorance of the closet and thus operate sometimes with greater liberties because that which isn't part of *vox populi* is difficult for society to condemn. It becomes important to note here the correspondence between disclosure and legislation: In sharp contrast with the United States, where many states still have sodomy laws, Latin American constitutional prohibitions against homosexuality are virtually nonexistent. Whenever homosexuals are arrested in Latin America, it is usually under the charge of *indecencia pública*. In other words, what is often punished in Latin America is not the homosexual act per se, but the alleged disclosure of it in the public sphere as "public indecency." Broadly speaking, the North American closet spells liberation through disclosure and many native Latin American homosexualities operate through freedoms afforded by secrecy. The binary distinction becomes blurred with the arrival of the closet in Latin America, but if there is a binarism that must be utilized to distinguish Latin American from U.S. homosexualities, disclosure/secretcy appears to be a more pertinent one than the problematic *activo/pasivo*.

When we take a wholistic look at the representation of Latin American homosexualities, two trends become apparent. The first, produced by the political activism of gay and lesbian human rights groups based in the United States, consists of a homogenization of alternative genders and non heterosexual sexual performances through a translation of these into gay and lesbian identities taking shape within a developmental model that positions them as backwards. The second representation, found in anthropological discourse, utilizes an extreme and oppositional rhetorical strategy in order to distort Latin American homosexualities: instead of homogenization, it makes a distinction between Latin American and U.S. homosexualities by making a highly problematic distinction between an "*activo/pasivo*" system in Latin America and an "egalitarian" system in the United States—a polarized distinction that mirrors, in the sexual arena, the problematic images of tyranny and democracy that are used politically by the United States to distinguish the representation of itself from Latin America. In this way, gay discourse operates like other forms of imperialistic propaganda in which the Other is reduced to an opposite of the values desired to be represented in the imperialist



self. It is different from common forms of discursive colonization in that it is concerned with the culture of an oppressed class, and not simply that of the elite.

Investigating sites within Latin American cultures that provide more genders from which to choose than are traditionally available is an important step toward the understanding and elaboration of Latin American homosexual practice and identity that would be able to overcome the historical emplotment, peripheralization, and domination by the U.S. gay and lesbian movement. The three largest syncretic cults of the Americas, Santería, Candomblé, and Vaudou, are such spaces.

Any exploration of the complex work of gender within syncretic belief systems in the Americas requires a basic understanding of the idea of syncretism as the co-existence of different ideological systems through a series of correspondences. In the history of New World slavery, the religious conversion of the slave became the single most important process for the slave's adoption of European culture. In the areas settled by Spain, France, and Portugal, slaves were required to abandon their traditional beliefs and become Catholic. In spite of this absolutist demand, slaves were able to preserve their belief systems through the phenomenon of syncretism, by which Catholic ideology was superimposed on traditional African belief systems. In Cuba, Brazil, and Haiti, the African beliefs that merged with Catholicism were essentially Yoruba beliefs, even though in Haitian Vaudou there exists a large amount of ideological material from the religion of the Fon people of Dahomey. Though Catholicism remained in a position of dominance over traditional African beliefs in these syncretic structures, the network of associations and correspondences that was created between the two systems ensured the survival of the threatened African belief system, now embedded within Catholic practice.

This ideological syncretism or merger between Catholicism and African religious beliefs is visibly evident in religious iconography. In order to indoctrinate the slaves, Catholic missionaries made use of religious images depicting important saints in Catholic theology and history. Upon seeing these images and hearing about the lives of these saints, African slaves associated them with many of their ancestral gods. Once the association between the Catholic saints and the African deities was established, Africans were able to continue worshipping their gods, now disguised as Catholic saints, without the reprimands from the church and colonial authorities.

The Yoruba god Eleggúa, for instance, is the deity of crossroads and gates. He is the messenger between the Yoruba deities, or Orishas, and the supreme God, Olo-dumare. In colonial Saint-Domingue, slaves associated Eleggúa, Papa Legba in

Kreyòl, with Saint Peter because of his role as gatekeeper between earth and heaven. In Cuba, slaves associated Eleggúa with the Lonely Spirit of Purgatory for his role as a messenger. Another example of this syncretism can be seen in the survival of Ogún, the Yoruba god of war, iron, and warfare. In Cuba he was associated with Saint Peter, who is represented as holding up keys made of metal. In Haiti he is called Ogou Feray and is associated with Saint James, who holds up a spade atop his white horse. Displaying the resilience of Yoruba religion in the face of migration, suppression, and technological development, Ogún, by virtue of his association with metal, also receives offering at railroad tracks and is even invoked for protection before flying on an aircraft.

Certainly here I do want to look at how the idea of syncretism in religion fosters the existence of homosexualities within its realm and how, then, the notion of syncretism might be applied to hybrid sexual formations, especially those produced at the confluence of Latin American and Euro-North American forms. Any discussion of syncretic structures will fluctuate between treating them as coherent, unified entities and treating them as composite structures with various internal elements. The fact that individuals successfully manage an integration of Latin American homosexual identities and Euro-North American models points to the importance of syncretism as a technique for cultural survival in an increasingly homogenized world. Nevertheless, the existence of forms of this ideal integration does not prejudice a discussion of these sexualities in binary terms. Syncretism, as helpful a tool in cultural survival as it is, is not always, if ever, a happy marriage between equal partners. Syncretism is fundamentally predicated by an ideological inequality that persists even after the point of coalescence. In the case of the Latino with dual allegiances to a Santería house and to participation on a Pride Parade float, the distinction between the Afro-Latino homosexuality and the North American gay identity continues to be hierarchical. This hierarchy between the two can be illustrated through the idea of linguistic translation and borrowing. To my knowledge, English has not borrowed any Spanish terms for homosexual identity. Doesn't the Spanish borrowing of "gay" point toward the hegemonic unidirectionality of cultural change between the United States and Latin America? It is this dangerous unidirectionality of borrowing of English terms into Spanish that causes me to insist on indigenous Latin American terms and categories. Because syncretic structures maintain the asymmetry of power that they themselves seek to resolve, it becomes important for me here to highlight these differences as well, even if at the risk of having the discussion take on at times a polarizing tone.

One of the foundational works in the study of syncretic cults in the Americas



is Lydia Cabrera's monumental work of ethnography, *El monte*, in which she comments several times on homosexuality within Santería. She notes the presence, in Santería groups, of several homosexual men, such as Papá Colás, who "era famoso Invertido y sorprendiendo la candidez de un cura, casó disfrazado de mujer, con otro invertido, motivando el escándalo que puede presumirse."<sup>2</sup> The purpose of her discussion appears to prove homosexuality as a long-standing and pervasive situation within Santería: "Desde muy atrás se registra el pecado nefando como algo muy frecuente en la Regla lucumí."<sup>3</sup> Also, Cabrera mentions a Santería legend about the goddess Yemayá having been in love with a homosexual man (56). Lydia Cabrera, who is apocryphally reputed to have had amorous affairs with other women during her lifetime, speaks of the abundance of female homosexuality in the Regla de Ocha (58). Throughout, she mentions several Yoruba names for homosexuality-practicing men: Addóddis, Obini-Toyo, Obini-Naña or Erón Kiba, Wassicundi or Diánkune; and for women Alácuattas or Oremi (59).

Syncretic religion is becoming an issue of great cultural and academic fascination today due to the current interest in marginalized, subaltern, silenced groups around the world. For Latin Americans, homosexual Latin Americans in particular, the interest in Santería, Vaudou, and Candomblé is tied to the greater availability of gender options within these belief systems than are found in mainstream Latin American and U.S. social contexts.

While syncretic cults are becoming a matter of much attention in academic and cultural circles in the 1990s, a fact that is attested by the relatively large number of books published on them within the last five years in Latin America and the United States, not much has been published on the role of homosexuals within these cults. Therefore, in order to supplement the few readings on this specific topic, I have had to utilize information obtained in the summer of 1997 during my one-week involvement in the Santería house "La Casa de Obatalá" in Dorchester, Massachusetts, and during a two-week visit to Haiti, where I was able to participate in Vaudou ceremonies and conduct some informal interviews on the topic of homosexuality and Vaudou.

Women occupy an important and active role in the religion. Candomblé has been led exclusively by women, the *mai de santo*, for hundreds of years in Brazil and, in spite of the recent acceptance of men as *pai de santo* of Candomblé houses, the matriarchal heritage of Candomblé is still very strong and continues to influence the continuous development of the religion. Vaudou has been historically more egalitarian with respect to the gender of its leadership. The male priest, the

Oungan, must conduct the Vaudou ceremonies with the Mambo, the Vaudou priestess. In Santería, the rule that requires that the *babalao* be male is not completely representative of the work of gender within the religion. Other than not being allowed to become *babalaos*, presumably because women's potential for maternity forbids them from killing four-legged animals, women occupy the same leadership roles in the religion as men.

The phenomenon of syncretism opens up avenues for multiple subjectivities and cross-identifications for the Orishas and for the Orisha worshipers. The identification between an Orisha and a Catholic saint need not be restricted to a strict correspondence in terms of gender. The hagiology of each saint played a much more decisive role in the association between African and Catholic figures than did gender. As a result, during the historical process of identifying the Orishas with Catholic saints, many of the gods changed gender identification. For instance, in Santería male Changó became Santa Barbara. Moreover, many Orishas are represented as androgynous, bisexual, or multiply gendered. In Santería, Olokun and Obatalá are represented sometimes as male, others as female, and often as androgynous. In Candomblé, Exu is a polysexual (Wafer 17) and genderless (Araújo 31) Orisha, Ossaim is bisexual, and Ossãe, Logunede, and Oxumare are said to be androgynous, hermaphroditic, and bisexual (Staal 228; Wafer 87).

In much the same way as the Orishas are identified with Catholic saints, so are the initiates dedicated to a particular Orisha during their initiation. This cross-identification does not need to correspond by gender any more than the syncretism between deities does, so it is not uncommon to find female initiates with a male "head" and vice versa.

Linked to this is the phenomenon of possession. This is an intensified form of the cross-identification that occurs between the initiates and their respective Orishas because through this experience the god incarnates human form. The opportunities for transgressing normative gender categories that the phenomenon of possession provides is aptly mined by homosexuals in these religions, and is probably one of the most important factors explaining the large numbers of them in Santería, Vaudou, and Candomblé. In Santería, *maricones*—male homosexuals—are particularly drawn to being initiated as children of the female Orisha Yemayá. In Vaudou, the men who inhabit the Haitian homosexual categories of *makomé* or *gwo masisi* often become *serviteurs* of Erzili Freda, the Voudou goddess of love by whom they are often possessed during religious ceremonies.

The practice of cross-gender possession has been mastered in Candomblé by the *adés*, the passive male homosexuals *filhos de santo*. As stated earlier, the



participation of males in Candomblé is relatively new. Only in the 1930s and 1940s did men begin to be admitted in Candomblé circles (Landes 1947). The fact that it has been often remarked that the men who join the Candomblé religion are homosexual has been a matter of tangential discussion in many treatises on Candomblé, but a thorough study of the subject is missing from scholarship. Within the last ten years, two doctoral dissertations addressing the broader issue of gender in Candomblé have given the *adés* more critical attention: Parvati Jeanette Staal's "Women, Food, Sex, and Survival in Candomblé: An Interpretive Analysis of an African-Brazilian religion in Bahia, Brazil" and Patrícia Birman's *Fazer estilo criando gêneros: Possessão e diferenças de gênero em terreiros de umbanda e candomblé no Rio de Janeiro*, which was published as a book in 1995.

In *Fazer estilo criando gêneros*, Patrícia Birman attempts to rationalize the complex, gendered categories of Candomblé houses. She examines the category of the *adé*, the *mais* and *pais de santo* or mother and father of the houses, the *filhos* and *filhas de santo* or the initiates, the *ogãs* or male financial sponsors, and the *ekedes*, a category closely akin to the Western term "lesbian." The problematic that she tackles deals with the curious gender divisions in the houses of Candomblé that allow *adés* to dance in the possession ritual and not the *ogãs* and the *ekedes*, even though these last are female. Like many before her, she interprets the phenomenon of possession as a sexual metaphor of human intercourse with the divine. However, Birman concludes with the original assertion that these categories can be structurally divided around the phenomenon of possession into two groups: those who can be possessed and are therefore "feminine," the *adés* and the *filhas de santo*, and those who cannot be possessed and who are therefore masculine, the *ogãs* and the *ekedes*. Her assertion is useful in that in disengaging biological sex from gender, it arrives at an explanation as to why gender operates differently within Candomblé than in mainstream Brazilian society. Nevertheless, she curiously replicates a binary masculine/feminine structure around which she organizes the categories of a belief system that does not perceive the world in an either/or format. Instead of division and incompatibility, the episteme of syncretism is complementarity. Because of her unchecked Western predisposition to reduce categories to their simplest terms in order to arrive at some sort of underlying and essential notion, I question the usefulness of her final analysis.

In spite of this, Birman manages to present an important account of the work of gender in Candomblé and to provide one of the more extended critical treatments of the figure of the *adé* to date. She explains that the entrance of men into Candomblé is seen by some women with suspicion. The general feeling among

many women is that men should be allowed to be members of the Candomblé house and to dance in the ceremonies as long as they do not attempt to take over. Apparently some women are not so tolerant, as many *pais de santo* are currently having a difficult time recruiting *filhas de santo*. Moreover, there appear to be very sharp differences in what many of the *adés* and *filhas de santo* perceive to be the virtues of being an initiate. Birman describes how the emphasis on duty and responsibility, especially in the areas of domestic labor, has always played a crucial part of the identity of the *filhas de santo*. Many women complain that the *adés* are only interested in the spectacular and performance aspects of Candomblé. A more serious accusation involves the charge that many of the *adés* fake their possession in order to be the stars in the dancing ritual of the Candomblé ceremonies.

Birman explains how many who are members of Candomblé houses as well as many who are simply spectators in their ceremonies clearly understand that many of these possessions are not real possessions at all. For many, the realization of the fictive nature of the possession does not detract any value from them: on the other hand, it raises the Candomblé ceremony to an aesthetic level that renders homage to Afro-Brazilian religion and culture. A favorite Orisha to perform among the *adés* during the ceremonies is Iansá, the goddess of wind, storms, and lightning. In my opinion, it appears that the *adés* show a preference for Iansá because the tempestuous and temperamental femininity she represents not only offers the *adés* the possibility of experiencing femininity, but it allows them to perform a persona that, although gendered in a subaltern position to males, is nevertheless very powerful. Thus, performing Iansá is a public avowal of a desire for liberation from the constraints of gender of mainstream Brazilian society. Syncretized as Santa Barbara, Iansá has also come to be known recently for her current representation in Candomblé ceremonies as *reina dos adés*, queen of the homosexuals.

### Practical Conclusions

The Latin American homosexual categories that find a niche in these syncretic cults—*maricones*, *makomé*, *bichas*, and *ekedes*—certainly do not fit into the U.S.-fabricated gay and lesbian categories. These forms of homosexuality are different from each other and from those forms of homosexuality found in the United States because they have developed within specific regional contexts. Nevertheless, we have seen how, whenever non-Western categories are given attention in the United States there is a general tendency toward presenting them as simply other versions of "gay" identities. Furthermore, the extreme polarization of Latin



American and U.S. homosexualities in certain strains of academic thought, in spite of its underscoring of differences, works together with the first homogenizing tendency in the enactment of a discursive colonization of Latin American homosexualities by research methodologies that rely on U.S. models as points of comparison.

Representation can have very real effects. Its distortion of practices and identities is able to lead to the formation of subjects who will conform to these transformed, received notions. The dissemination of knowledges of local practices and identities of homosexuality in Latin America is a necessary endeavor for the continuation of distinct Latin American gender identities. I see this present work as part of this much needed corpus of texts that is only now beginning to appear.

I would like to conclude with some notes concerning the application of the knowledge of alternative homosexual genders in Latin American syncretic cults to the mainstream gay, lesbian, queer movement in the United States and to communities of color in the United States and Latin America.

For the mainstream U.S. gay and lesbian movement, an understanding of the work of gender in syncretic cults could do the following:

1. *Denaturalize gay and lesbian identities and contextualize gender and sexual orientation identities within a specific cultural context.* This is an important point that works on alternative genders in non-Western cultures should make: an important component of homosexualities is their culturally produced condition, and therefore they do not comprise an intrinsic trait in peoples all across the world or constitute an underlying "biological" common ground that obfuscates differences of socioeconomic, racial, and geographic situation.
2. *Contribute to an awareness of a homosexual experience outside the United States.* Much of the work produced in the area of gay and lesbian studies tends to be concerned with the homosexualities in the United States. Whenever the topic extends beyond the national boundaries, it usually covers Western Europe. The rest of the world is the homosexual "terra incognita" that is being "discovered" by anthropologists who are to a great extent still trapped by the colonialist methods that have been a part of their field since its inception.
3. *Dispel the notion that "the first world" is the place that has the most freedom to offer in terms of sexual orientation.* Lesbian, gay, queer communities in the

United States need to be conscious of the way queer political struggle for political representation and cultural visibility in the United States utilizes the idea of the United States as the most tolerant, free, and accepting place in the world. This patriotic ideal is not only dangerous in its exaltation of U.S. supremacist benevolence, it is also a false portrayal, as proven by the discussion of the great acceptance homosexuals receive within syncretic cults in Latin America.

4. *Dispel the notion that people of color are homophobic.* Though initially this might appear to be a superfluous remark, it is an important one to make because it is a powerful assumption that underwrites much of the racism in gay, lesbian, and queer communities. In San Diego, the city where I live, the *Gay and Lesbian Times* has run several articles that have argued for a closer political alliance between queers and White upper-middle-class heterosexuals. This assimilationist rhetoric is coupled with putative statistical work that proves that White upper-middle-class heterosexuals are more likely to accept homosexuality as a viable option, whereas people of color are the most homophobic. This formulaic argument often ignores an analysis of how the figures might be the result of class values and are not necessarily racial. Moreover, this line of argument not only ignores the economic racialization that is at the core of inequality in the United States, but also fails to include any discussion of the dangerous loss that this assimilationist move would pose to the revolutionary potential within the gay, lesbian, queer movement.

An examination of the African religion in the Americas whose membership is largely of African descent serves to make the point that communities of color around the world have spaces in which homosexualities are comfortable.

For queer communities of color in the United States and in Latin America, an understanding of the work of gender in syncretic cults could do the following:

1. *Help to oppose total domination by the hegemonic master narrative of gay liberation in favor of more culturally pertinent form options.* As stated throughout the chapter, it becomes necessary for information on local Latin American homosexualities to be distributed in order to create histories that document the distinctiveness of these traditions. Only with such documentation can



these identities and practices survive absolute absorption by the U.S. lesbian and gay categories making inroads into Latin American society at the present time.

2. *Establish syncretic correspondences between U.S. and Latin American forms as the most practical response to homogenization.* An understanding of native homosexual subjectivities should not be followed by a total adoption of those models either. This would be presupposing that authentic, stable, and natural categories exist. Rather, the blending of the native Latin American categories with gay/lesbian categories seems ideal and is in line with the idea of the complementarity of syncretism. Authenticity is a very fragile building material. The strength inherent in the combination of materials from different sources is a better alternative to "authentic ideals" and is more in line with Latin American strategies for cultural survival and transformation.
3. *Promote useful political realignments and coalition building between queer communities of color in the hemisphere.* It becomes crucial in the era of transnational capitalism to move beyond the nation as a framework of analysis. National isolationism finds its way into the academy and expresses itself in, for instance, studies of slavery that treat it as an exclusively U.S. phenomenon. African American studies is only recently beginning an investigation of the ways its field can be enriched by the knowledge of other former slave societies in the hemisphere. In the same way as this new shift of focus provides an alternative to merely reacting to mainstream U.S. culture in order to find a communal definition and politics, so would an investigation of the possible links between queers of color in the hemisphere have potentially beneficial results.
4. *Contribute to realization that the important role syncretic cults have had in revolutionary movements elsewhere can be used to achieve the desired political goals of queer communities of color in the United States and in Latin America.* Ideology binds. Religion in general is used to achieve group cohesion, which can have significantly powerful effects. The Haitian revolution occurred as a result of the slave revolts that were organized and planned during Vaudou ceremonies. Utilizing the traditional and historical significance of these cults in orchestrating successful political changes can be an extremely helpful tool in achieving the group cohesion of queer communities of color.

Perhaps a final note should include a restating of the dangers of translating social-change agendas from economically privileged population groups to poorer

population sectors. Living in the era of globalization forces us to think of the ways these differences of class are relevant on a worldwide scale and of transnational strategies that might help offset this domination. In Latin America and for lesbian and gay studies this appears to imply further thinking about the intersection of class, race, geography, and research methodologies in the cross-cultural study of gender and sexuality. A study of syncretic cults in the Americas appears to be a good point of departure for such a project.

### Notes

1. For work dealing with sex between field researcher and informant, see Lewin and Leap; Kulick and Willson.
2. He "was a famous invert; surprising a gullible priest, he was married disguised as a woman to another invert, causing great scandal" (my translation).
3. "From a long time ago, the abominable sin has been something very common in the Regla Lucumí" (my translation).

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Globalization has a taste for queer cultures. Whether in advertising, film, performance art, the internet, or in the political discourses of human rights in emerging democracies, queerness sells and the transnational circulation of peoples, identities, and social movements that we call "globalization" is deemed to be liberating to the extent that it incorporates queer lives and cultures.

The essays in *Queer Globalizations* bring together scholars of postcolonial, ethnic, and lesbian and gay studies in order to examine, from multiple perspectives, the meanings and values of this incorporation of queer lives and cultures into global networks. In so doing, the critics in this volume reassess the validity of the claims made for globalization both by queer and non-queer theorists and offer critiques that have major implications for queer activism and coalition-building across national boundaries. They also make legible, in the process, alternative queer itineraries that attempt to redeploy and redirect global capital's networks toward cross-cultural engagements that are more respectful of queer cultures and lives.

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