

# QUEER AND AFRODIASPORIC FEMINIST LENS: *LXS HIJXS DE LAS DOS AGUAS*<sup>1</sup>

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So now here is the question: what tools, what methodologies, if you will, do we need to develop to coax memory back into work, to mute the seduction of forgetting and make re-memory irresistible?<sup>2</sup>

—M. Jacqui Alexander

- 1→ I replaced the name of the path using x's to intervene and challenge the gender binarism in the Spanish language. I extended it to the rest of the text when referring to the plurals of people, subjects and collectives, because in Spanish the grammatical gender indicates these as masculine in most cases. Sometimes it is possible to use the feminine, but the X corrupts the naturalization of gender binarism and allows us to imagine all the people that cannot be named under the customary and rigid pronouns (*ellos/ellas*).
- 2→ Gina Athena Ulysse, "Grounding on Rasanblaj with M. Jacqui Alexander", in *Emisférica* 12, no. 1-2 (2015). <https://hemisphericinstitute.org/es/emisferica-121-caribbean-rasanblaj/12-1-essays/e-121-essay-alexander-interview-with-gina.html>

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I intend to share some notes on the lens that I developed for my doctoral thesis. I named it *Lxs Hijxs de las Dos Aguas* (The Children of the Two Waters), in order to mark the methodological and epistemological importance of Afrodiasporic spiritual bodies in our processes of anticolonial struggles. Through this methodological tool, my interest lies in taking a closer look at the necessity of questioning the instrumentalist discourses of the cis-colonial, heterosexist logics of the mostly White-Mestizo academy in Latin America; to expand upon the theoretical and methodological limits of the same; to recuperate Afrodiasporic epistemologies and relocate them on the same epistemic plane where one encounters Western knowledge; and, lastly, to insert my work into a queer and trans Afrodiasporic conversation with other activists, intellectuals, and academics who are rethinking—from feminist, antiracist, queer, and transfeminist critical perspectives—the possibilities of these spiritual bodies for Black movements in *América*.<sup>3</sup>

In order to develop my feminist research, I used this lens in order to assist me in systematizing—selecting, organizing, summarizing, compiling, and later, analyzing the information based on interviews, observed participation, feminist cartography, and the archive—with an Afrocentered focus that emphasizes the corporealities, epistemologies, methodologies, and experiences of Afrodiasporic subjects in the execution of my research. Another central characteristic is its intersectional essence, which allows me to get close to the geopolitical space and social universe of several Afrodiasporic activists from a lens

3 → América is a geopolitical term created by the Afro-Brazilian feminist philosopher Léila González in 1988 which centers the historical experience of Black people in the Americas. It challenges the White-Mestizo gaze over the region and its denomination of this land as *América Latina*, which centers the Whiteness and European heritage that erase Black and Indigenous communities. Renaming the region through the experience of Black people inserts the historic process of resistance, reinterpretation, and creation of new ways of Blackness here, which are heirs to an African heritage but developed a different history of Blackness in this territory, Amefricanx. Doing this situates racism, racialization, gender, and gendered racialization, and their consequences as part of this region. See Léila González, “A categoría político-cultural de amefricanidade,” trans. Aline Moura, *Revista Tempo Brasileiro* 92-93 (1988).

in which gender, race, sexuality, and class are interwoven and co-designed, and examine how they negotiate colorism.

I used a queer and Afrodiasporic lens to develop a cartography of Afrodiasporic feminists through and in San Cristóbal de las Casas<sup>4</sup> in Chiapas, Mexico and the contributions that their time there has made. For this I needed a lens through which to see, a perspective that would transcend the binary logics of gender, racial colorblindness, and the anti-Black deterritorialization that have prevailed in social activist spaces. As a result, I went about tracking down works that use Afrodiasporic spiritual positions within the social processes of Black communities in Abya Yala.<sup>5</sup>

The lens *Lxs Hijxs de las Dos Aguas* was useful in distinguishing how the process of Black queer erasure takes shape in territories such as Mexico, where not only is Black queerness commonly erased but Blackness itself is blurred through *Mestizaje*<sup>6</sup> discourses and practices

- 4 → *Jovel* is the Tzotzil name of the territory where the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas is located.
- 5 → Abya Yala is a geopolitical term. In the Gunadele language, from the Guna people located in Panamá and Colombia it means “land in full maturity” or “land of lifeblood.” It is one of the first terms for what is today Latin America, and it has been used extensively since the 2004 Second Continental Summit of the Indigenous Peoples and Nations in Quito as a way to interrupt the White-*Mestizo* landscape of colonization over this territory.
- 6 → *Mestizaje* is a racial category that emerged in the case of Mexico between the end of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century as a result of the consolidation of the Mexican state. Spanish colonialism and White settler heirs developed a distinctive type of racism, using racial mixing or whitening of Indigenous and Black populations as the basis of its racial caste system. *Mestizaje* was the outcome and was distinct from the racial segregation imposed in the United States and Caribbean islands, which were ruled by English and the Dutch conquerors. The White elite settlers, intellectuals, and academics of that period created a strong ideology that sustained and promoted a national notion of racial neutrality or racial democracy incarnated in the *Mestizo* subject that represented the citizen while activating the whitening of the population as a social aspiration to progress. As Mónica Moreno Figueroa explains, “*Mestizaje* is the racial project of Mexico. One that was characterized by the pretension of accepting the racial mix under a violent process of assimilation, with pillars founded upon anti-Indigenous, anti-Asian and anti-Black racism.” See Mónica Moreno Figueroa, “¿De qué sirve el asco? Racismo antinegro en México,” in *Revista de la Universidad de México* (Ciudad de México, Cultura UNAM, septiembre 2020), 65. While doing this, *Mestizaje* reinforced anti-Black racism through the social stratification of Black people as linked to their erasure. Moreno details: “*Mestiza* is a polyvalent category related to different moments in Mexican history and, simultaneously, refers to a person with mixed European and Latin American Indigenous heritage; to a flexible social identity with which the diverse racial mixtures that occur in the colonial period in Latin America are named, after a wide range of ‘combinations’ between Indigenous people, African descendants,

of “whitening the landscape.”

Along with this process, it is important to recognize some challenges of the category “trans,” which has been interwoven with the history of Western medicalization, pathologization, and criminalization of people who defy Western gender binaries. This category has been central for the trans movement internationally to mobilize and organize while exposing the extensive violence towards trans bodies in the name of medicine, anthropology, psychology, and the law. One part of the history of the term “trans” makes explicit how the coloniality of the gender system is rooted in the colonial process of América, imposed to colonize Black and Indigenous bodies and communities.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, it is shown through the bodies, identities, and cultures of transness how these binary ideas of “man” and “woman” are imposed in numerous ways and hardly capable of being embodied, especially in Black and Brown bodies. Upon doing this, spaces open up for non-white Western perspectives, genealogies and identities that transcend the heteronormative gender spectrum, such as the spectrum of Black queer-trans genders that reside within Black spiritualities/religious systems and that had to survive the colonial imposition of Western gender norms.

I encountered important references, including those found in the work of the famous Nigerian academic Oyèronké Oyewùmí (1997/2017), who explains in her book *The Invention of Women: An African Perspective on the Western Discourses of Gender* that before Western colonization, “gender wasn’t an organizing principle in Yoruba society. . . . The social categories of ‘woman’ and ‘man’ were inexistent, and so there wasn’t a system of gender” (84). This study shows how gender is socially constructed, how it is intimately tied to history and culture, how it is built around the two social categories of man/woman, which are antagonistic and determined by a hierarchy. From this perspective,

European settlers and others; and to the subject of national identity presented as the embodiment of the promise of improvement through race mixing for individuals as well as for the nation.” See Mónica Moreno Figueroa, “Yo nunca he tenido la necesidad de nombrarme”: Reconociendo el Racismo y el Mestizaje en México,” *Racismos y otras formas de intolerancia*. De norte a sur en América Latina, eds. Alicia Castellanos and Gisela Landázuri (México, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2012), 22.

7 → María Lugones, “Colonialidad y Género,” in *Tabula Rasa*, no. 9 (2008), 73-101.

gender is another manifestation of the naturalization and universalization of its imposition as a mode of Western social organization through the process of colonizing other peoples.

To further understand how this process materialized, I engaged with Hortense Spillers, who explains that “the conditions that produced the African diaspora through enslavement marked the deliberate, violent, and unthinkable theft of the body from a distance, broke the will of the captive body and its active desire.”<sup>8</sup> In these conditions, the population suffered the loss of its constructions of gender; the feminine and masculine body became territories of cultural and political interpretation. This plundering imposed meanings on and usages of their bodies. They created a process of degendering African bodies and later imprinted racialized identities of binary gender that contested the forced placement of these subjects occupied before the capitalist/ colonial system of production.<sup>9</sup>

Following these ideas, it becomes possible to rethink how Black sexualities do not exclusively function by the socio-political order of the Western sex-gender system which was imposed on them through torture. Religious systems also offer us possibilities to exist outside of the colonial narrative. These were some of the few cultural manifestations that colonizers could not take from enslaved African peoples, though their meanings were reconstructed in distinct Black communities in order to maintain them.

The works discussed above allowed me to understand the limits of Western gender and opened paths to rethink ourselves as queer and trans Afrodiasporic people outside that generic white box. They led me to other works which studied non-heteronormative and non-heterosexual experiences, and nonbinary identities present in the pantheons of African religions in Latin America, like the ones easily found in the Regla de Ocha, Candomblé, and Vodou spiritual/religious systems.<sup>10</sup>

8 → Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe. An American Grammar Book,” in *Diacritics*, vol. 17, no. 2, (1987), 67.

9 → Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.”

10 → It is necessary to recognize the numerous forms of commodification, whitening and cultural appropriation of Afro-descended religions at the hands of different types of White

These three Afrodiasporic spiritual traditions/religions have roots in West Africa. Santería and Candomblé have strong roots in Yoruba culture. Vodou also has some influence from Yoruba, though primarily from Fon and Ewe roots originating in Benin, Togo, and Ghana. Regla de Ocha originated in Cuba and later expanded to other territories within the Black Cuban diaspora, including New York, Mexico, Venezuela, and Colombia. Candomblé was developed among Black communities in Brazil and later spread through other countries bordering Brazil such as Uruguay, which has a significant Black population, and in Paraguay and Venezuela. Lastly, Haitian Vodou, one of the most ancient Black spiritual practices in the Caribbean, nurtured with Indigenous spiritual traditions from Ayiti,<sup>11</sup> has become very well-known and has widespread practice throughout the Haitian diaspora in New York, Toronto, Montreal, and Cuba, among other territories. New Orleans is related to Voodoo.<sup>12</sup> These religions are part of the Amerfrican territory as a result of the Atlantic slave trade wherein Europeans enslaved African people, turning them into commodified bodies sold out to the White settlers at the ports of Latin America and the Caribbean.

In the book *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Participation in African-inspired Traditions in the Americas*, Randy P. Conner and David Hatfield Sparks investigate the multiplicity of sex-gender dimensions manifested by the deities and the practitioners in ways that transcend heterosexual and binary notions of gender in these three spiritual systems. The authors also focus on the relationship between the social representation of the

consumption. Along with this process we can find the impact of Western heteropatriarcal order on those religions, and the heteronormative system on them as well as their practitioners. Walderson Flor do Nascimento explains how in the *terreiros*, the *Candomblé* temple houses, there have been cases where white men dominate those temples, generating implications of “white-washing.” Similar experiences can be encountered in the Regla de Ocha, which also has increasingly experienced becoming a commodity since the opening of the Cuban economy to tourism from the 1990 to the present. *Live Diálogos Anpof-Walderson Flor Do Nascimento Convida Katiúscia Ribeiro*. Ep.8, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LuljuZwckPo>.

11 → Ayiti is the Taino name of the island where the nation-estate of Haiti and Dominican Republic share territory.

12 → Randy P. Lundschieen Conner and David Sparks, *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Participation in African-Inspired Traditions in the Americas* (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 20-21.

deities and their path with the social representation of their genders and sexualities—and how practitioners, queer and trans activists, and intellectuals embodied this relationship in their daily lives and political and intellectual work to decenter the idea of the binary gender system alongside the naturalization of heterosexuality.

In one example regarding Haitian Vodou in particular, the Black American researcher Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley affirms, "In its cosmology as well as its community formation, Vodou is radically inclusive of creative genders and sexualities."<sup>13</sup> Tinsley focuses on the *Lwa Ezili*, which is an umbrella of distinct representations of Black femmes that transcend the gender binary and heterosexuality. In her book *Ezili's Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders*, she uses the paths of this *Lwa* to flesh out the distinct queer and Black trans femme identities that have been constructed in resistance to colonialism and its present-day effects. This work also explores the possibilities offered by Afrodiasporic religions as archives of knowledge of Black communities in Abya Yala, and the importance of Black queer epistemologies which have survived the continuous attempts at erasure by Western ways of thinking.<sup>14</sup>

In this way, the pantheons of Afrodiasporic religions serve as an archive, references which might allow us to disidentify ourselves from the colonial gender binary and forge our paths in a positive light, under the protection of our *Orishas* and *Lwas*. This provides a different landscape of ancestral memories, identities, and denominations to refer to Black queerness and Black transness from other genealogies that are not linked to histories of medicalization, pathologization, and criminalization, and that also resist colonialist technologies of dehumanization that activate the use of the binary gender as the human norm.

## **HOW DID I COME TO USE THE PATH OF LXS HIIXS DE LAS DOS AGUAS?**

13 → Omise'ke Natasha Tinsley, *Ezili's Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 9.

14 → Tinsley, *Ezili's Mirrors*, 32.

As a result of the numerous experiences of racism and transphobia during my time as a doctoral student, many of them related to an underlying epistemic racism that prevailed in the institution, I decided to use my spirituality as a guide to navigate and survive this scenario and the power dynamics that emerged. After numerous episodes of institutionalized racism and diverse experiences of academic racism, I was able to change my original advisor and doctoral committee. My new tutor, Dr. Marisa Ruiz Trejo, warmly accompanied me and my research as it turned in another direction, one that reflected my political interests as a Black, migrant, transmasculine, nonbinary person living near the southern border of Mexico.

The impact of my experience navigating and struggling with this specific type of racism was fueled by understanding how deeply intertwined White supremacy, epistemic racism, and rationality are. One of the main tools that I developed to survive this period was a spiritual practice related to Regla de Ocha. In that period, I began to pray frequently, to do different rituals to clean the violence and micro-expressions of racial transphobia that I experienced daily in the academy.

It worked. I developed a discipline and a practice that became part of my daily life. It helped me enormously to be rooted and in relationship with the Black Cuban spiritual tradition. As part of the spiritual ritual, I started to write every day not only my research but also about life in general. I gradually realized that if this spiritual practice could ease my life even in my most trying moments, it also could be immensely helpful with my research. Barbara Christian reveals in her article “The Race for Theory”:

For people of color have always theorized, but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have



we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity.<sup>15</sup>

Her reflection opens an important space to discuss the numerous ways in which people of color have historically produced knowledge outside the Western, academic format. Her standpoint served as an entry point for me to observe other ways that other activists and I approach social reality. Which tools have we used to understand and analyze the reality that surrounds us besides the Western, academic framework?

That same question guided me to recall the words of my godmother, the Black Cuban feminist poet, Luz de Cuba, who always strongly emphasized the spiritual practices that I must follow in order to get closer with my *Egguns* and *Orishas* to receive their blessings. An important part of these spiritual practices is that it helps people clear their path, to find light in their personal journey, and to avoid problems and people that may hinder their purpose. On a more anthropological level, however, it is necessary to understand the person themselves, and their personal journey through this world. M. Jacqui Alexander expands on the essential epistemic character of Afro-Caribbean religions:

I used this approach in order to move beyond the more dominant understanding of African spiritual practice as cultural retention and survival, to get inside of the meaning of the spiritual as epistemological, that is to pry open the terms, symbols, and organizational codes that the Bântu-Kôngo people used to make sense of the world. I had surmised that cosmological systems housed memory, and such memory was necessary to distill the psychic traumas produced under the grotesque conditions of slavery.<sup>16</sup>

15 → Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," in *Cultural Critique*, no. 6 (1987): 52.

16 → M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 293.

Extending these reflections, all of the methodologies for the creation and sustenance of rituals in the spiritual system of Regla de Ocha are revealed to be a historical platform and archive where knowledge is created and transmitted. That is why I decided to use it in my research. I became interested in the potential of spiritual guidance, its capacity to affect and lead social and political processes.

Omise'ke Natasha Tinsley offers an example when noting that, despite the predominance of heterocisnormative, masculine epic narratives of the Haitian Revolution, it in fact started during a Vodou ceremony and it was Ezili Danto, a *Lwa* from the Vodou pantheon, who, through a *Manbo*, a femme priest, fed the participants and sent them to the rebellion.<sup>17</sup>

This is one of many examples that signals the strong interconnection between Black religious systems and social movements and also exposes the significance of spiritual guidance for Black communities. The social function of spiritual guidance was primordial in developing the lens for my research based on one of the Regla de Ocha paths, since one of the objectives of a methodological lens is to guide my research throughout. In my case, that guidance was needed to steer my work in a queer direction.

## WHAT IS THE HIJXS DE LAS DOS AGUAS LENS?

Yemayá Akuara: From the two Waters. Yemayá in the confluence of one river. There she meets with her sister Ochún. She lives in freshwater; is a dancer, happy, but she is strict; she doesn't work with curses on others. . . .

Ochún Akuara o Ibú: Lives between saltwater and the freshwater. She's also a good dancer and has a joyful character; a hard worker, she delights in doing good.<sup>18</sup>

—Lydia Cabrera

17 → Tinsley, *Ezili's Mirrors*, 11.

18 → Lydia Cabrera, *Yemayá y Ochún. Kariocha, Iyalorichas y Olorichas* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1996), 29, 70.

I took up the path of the *Hijxs de las Dos Aguas*, a religious/spiritual path coming from the Regla de Ocha/Santería because I wanted to honor the queer knowledge submerged in this path where the *Orishas* Yemayá and Oshun converge.

Yemayá “is the universal queen because she is water, saltwater and freshwater, the sea, the mother of all creation.”<sup>19</sup> She has numerous paths, each representing distinct essences with differing stories. For example, one path of Yemayá is Olokun, the first Yemayá who lives at the bottom of the ocean and who challenges the idea of a gender binary. Another path is Yemayá Okute, who protects the queer and trans community. Oshun, on the other hand, is an Irunmole, the only one of the 401 Irunmoles that was female, and whose multiple paths challenge notions of Western heteronormativity.

The representation of the “Children of the Two Waters” in nature is the place where sea and river meet, where Yemayá and Oshun caress. Following this idea, Solimar Otero shows that this path strongly suggests a reading whereby Yemayá and Oshun are perceived as lovers whose relationship, under the patriarchal gaze, has been reduced to *comadrazgo* (a form of tight friendship between women and femmes).<sup>20</sup> Being that Regla de Ocha is an Afrodiasporic religion, historically the majority of its practitioners are Black and Afro-descendant people. This path recognizes the protection of two of the three most powerful femme *Orishas* of the Yoruba pantheon, and the experiences of non-heteronormative Black genders and sexualities, especially what we now know as trans and nonbinary people.

Another characteristic of my quest was seeing from a queer viewpoint. I took this idea from a text by Solimar Otero, who refers to rereading material in a queer framework with the aim of opening up some of the categories of studies to broader interpretations, which disruptively expands the stable categories sustaining the gender

19 → Cabrera, *Yemayá y Ochún*, 20.

20 → Solimar Otero and Toyin Falola, “Yemayá y Ochún: Queering the Vernacular Logics of Waters,” in *Yemoja: Gender, Sexuality, and Creativity in the Latino/a Afro-Atlantic Diasporas*, ed. Solimar Otero (New York: State University of New York Press, 2013), 85-111.

binary.<sup>21</sup> Seeing from a queer perspective means casting doubt on the theoretical foundations of White-*Mestizo* heteronormativity and its political embodiment maintained in feminist spaces in San Cristóbal de las Casas. From this, it follows that those queer lenses through which I observe and analyze throughout my research are profoundly Black and nonheteronormative. This allows me to understand *Lxs Hijxs de las Dos Aguas* as a Black, queer frame with which I was able to highlight, locate, and recuperate the contributions that non-normative Black subjects have generated during the political processes in which I have also participated.

It functions as a spiritual intuition about which investigative and methodological routes I should take, which theoretical inspirations I should incorporate into my work, and which paradigms of “feminist intervention” I should set aside due to their hegemonic essence.

*Lxs Hijxs de las Dos Aguas* is in conversation with the concept of transversality that Riley Snorton employs in his book *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* he borrows from Edouard Glissant: “Constituting the Caribbean by crosscurrents, undercurrents, and “submarine roots” that are floating free, not fixed in one position . . . but extending in all directions, transversality articulates submerged forms of relationalities that need not be visible to have effects.”<sup>22</sup> Snorton expands this concept to study the deep connections of Blackness and transness in the United States. From this he concludes:

A transversal approach to history, then, becomes a way to perceive how difference can take transitive form, expressed in shifting modalities of time and meaning from within the abyss. Transversality also describes this study’s treatment of submerged thought, naming its propensity to linger in the depths of discarded theories for what they can and cannot say about their temporalities of emergence.<sup>23</sup>

21 → Otero and Falola, “Yemayá y Ochún,” 86.

22 → C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2018), 10.

23 → Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 10.

*Lxs Hijxs de las Dos Aguas* shares in this characteristic of transversality, which was useful to me in connecting Black spiritual practices in América that are descended from African cultures, to a *longue durée* genealogy and episteme where social and spiritual structures of gender and sexuality still resist the gender binary system and heterosexuality which are technologies of Western colonialism. Also, it helped me to trace the continuity of those processes and to highlight how it became a submerged political practice which Black queer and trans folks have used to destabilize those systems that are essential to capitalism, while continuing to create alternative and outsider niches for the survival of Black queerness. I used it to identify how the structures of gendered racialization and the racialized genderization of oppression are sustained even in spaces of radical thought in the territory where I did my research, San Cristóbal de las Casas.

The *Hijxs de las Dos Aguas* lens was intent on following the critical Afro-Caribbean feminist tradition that originates with the forms of resistance by enslaved Black women and femmes. It was nourished by the theoretical and intellectual production of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Mexican feminist historians, sociologists, and anthropologists from the 1980s onwards, such as Audre Lorde, Sylvia Wynter, Rhoda Reddock, Mónica Moreno Figueroa, Rosamond S. King, and Angelique Dixon.

My lens was further fostered by the Black, queer, and feminist pedagogical work done by my political elders, such as Black and Afrodescendent cis, trans, queer women and transmasculine people; Afro-Cuban artists, intellectuals; lyalochas; and academics such as Luz Despaigne Garrido (Luz de Cuba), Georgina Herrera, Daysi Rubiera, Luz Cristina Despaigne, Magia López, Sandra Alvarez, and Krudes Cubensi, among others. They have created spaces to think critically about the effects of colonialism and late capitalism in the lives of Black queer and trans people. Moreover, they have provided us with historical and contemporary anti-establishment tools of resistance which have become, in some cases, political tools to face the structurally racist, binary, and heteronormative social system of the Black Diaspora.

## THE LAYERS OF MESTIZAJE IN FEMINIST MOVEMENTS

For my doctoral research I interviewed ten Black, queer, and trans activists whose work has had a deep impact on the feminist movement. I then mapped their places of origin using the Indigenous names of the territories. On the map, I placed their travels to San Cristobal de las Casas from their places of residence now. I intercepted this information with the queer and trans autodenominations from the Caribbean, Central Mexico and Chiapas that I was able to find, which emerged from the workshops and various encounters that I was part of along with other Black activists during their presence in San Cristobal. I highlighted the difficulties that some of the Black activists experienced with border agents when crossing White-*Mestizo* borders at the airports when arriving at San Cristóbal de las Casas.

In my research, I was able to distinguish the impact of the imbrication of racialization and gendering on specific subjects in feminist spaces. Even though some of them recognized themselves as *Mestizxs*—a kind of neutral, national identity in Mexico—in others parts of the Black diaspora their identities could be understood as Black or Afrodescendent.

One of the particularities of Mexican *Mestizo* identity consists in erasing the Black population, Afro-Mexican communities and framing all Blackness as foreign. Racial denominations such as *prieto*<sup>24</sup> and

24 → “*Prieto*” is a racial denomination that is used in Cuba, Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil (*pretos*) among other countries to designate people with darker skin and place them in the poorest social strata. Sylvia Wynter presents a genealogy of the term *prieto* that provides us with a decolonial and anti-racist interpretation at a moment when the word is gaining political force in Mexico. Wynter recovered this term from a report from the early seventeenth century written by the Spanish Capuchin priest, Antonio de Teruel, in which the priest stated that, among the Indigenous people of the Congo at that time, the darker skin tones were considered an expression of great beauty. For those born lighter-skinned, as they grew older, their skin darkened because their mothers used an ointment or exposed them to the sun to achieve this effect. The priest wrote that this chromatic value of the skin was so important for the Congolese, that the Europeans seemed ugly to them and they also demanded that the Spaniards call them *Prietos*, not Blacks, because they only called the enslaved “Black” since Black and slave meant the same thing. In this way, Wynter established two important precedents for understanding the history of Black communities in the Americas. The first is the relationship between the emergence of the category Black in relation to the transatlantic slave system. Second, is to unravel

*moreno*—traditional terms for Black and Afrodescendent people across the Americas and the Caribbean—are trapped in a dense fog in Mexico that diminishes the real impact of anti-Black racism on Black and Indigenous people.<sup>25</sup> Through the false idea of racial democracy and the steady narrative of Mexican citizens' racial neutrality that usually only refers to White and whitened bodies, *moreno* and *prieto* represents racial identities that somehow have been linked to Blackness but have been easily disconnected from the history of Black communities in this country, the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade, the consequences of slavery, and the structures that have remained.

Numerous forms of cishetermnormativity, the imposition of heterosexuality, respectability politics, homophobia, transmisogyny and transphobia, when imbricated with racism become more violent for *morenos*, *prietos*, and Black migrants. In my research I was interested in how these dynamics impacted the feminist movement in San Cristóbal de las Casas. One of many tools I encountered was in the expressions found in narratives of deterritorialization, displacement, and erasure of Black, queer activists in feminist spaces.

The foundation of the city is traversed by anti-Black racism and the erasure of Black people. Bartolomé de las Casas fought to reduce the exploitation that Indigenous people experienced under the *encomienda* regime. He proposed instead that African people continue the work that Indigenous people were forced to do for the Spanish in San Cristóbal.<sup>26</sup> This can be considered a foundational narrative that tied the dehumanization of Black people to the African and Afrodescendent people in San Cristóbal. From an Afrodiasporic perspective, Chiapas became Afrodiasporic territory with an important

the origins of the word *prieto*, to comprehend how it went from being a word that was a distinction of beauty to a synonym of dehumanized Blackness in Latin America and the Caribbean. Sylvia Wynter, *Unsettling the coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After the Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument* (Stanford: Stanford University, 2003), 301-302.

25 → Mónica Moreno Figueroa, “Yo nunca he tenido la necesidad de nombrarme”: Reconociendo el Racismo y el Mestizaje en México,” *Racismos y otras formas de intolerancia. De norte a sur en América Latina*, eds. Alicia Castellanos y Gisela Landázuri (México, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2012).

26 → Andres Aubry, *San Cristóbal de Las Casas: Su historia urbana, demográfica y monumental, 1528-1990* (San Cristóbal de las Casas: Colectivo Bats'il k'op, 2017).

Black population. Populations of Black people were established during the colonial period, mainly in Ciudad Real (San Cristóbal de las Casas) and the Soconuzco region, and later continued growing with new waves of Black migration. In another vein, procedures for bringing and binding this population to Chiapas were the result of various techniques of colonial terror, discourses, and politics of dehumanizing Black people that remain in practice into the present. Although the colonial period ended at the beginning of the nineteenth century, social and political structures of that racial system remain, now updated for neoliberal times. Those discourses have infiltrated every aspect of society and social relationships, even within leftist, feminist, and other social movements.

### **LXS HIJXS DE LAS DOS AGUAS IN ACTION**

I started to identify these forms of racialization as soon as I arrived in San Cristóbal and began my doctoral program. One of its most popular expressions was the exoticization of Black bodies. I was able to identify the exoticization of Black queer and trans activists in phrases, gestures, and the sexual objectification of Black bodies. In the company of many others, there were several feminists who expected a “good salsa and reggaeton dancer” and a “skilled lover.” I was constantly admired for the texture of my hair, among so many micro-expressions of exoticization. Once I identified these dynamics, the lens *Lxs Hijxs de Las Dos Aguas* became a bridge that connected other forms of Black past and present, in Chiapas and Mexico, beyond my own experience.

I had conversations with other Black Cubans who shared their experiences of different forms of exoticization. Thus, I intuited that it had a historical root. Mexico and Cuba have had a long history of cultural and social interchange between governments and peoples. In the construction of the Mexican nation, Blackness was set up as a foreigner or outsider in opposition to the Mestizo citizen. Afro-Cuban people and culture have been used by Mexican intellectuals to sustain this idea:<sup>27</sup> for example, the migration of Black Cuban intellectuals

27 → To amplify this idea, it is important to recognize that Mexican racism erases Afro-Mexican communities by locating Blackness outside the borders of the nation. Theodore Cohen



throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to Veracruz and Mexico City; the deep impact of Afro-Cuban music<sup>28</sup> and Regla de Ocha on Mexican music and religious practices; the Rumberas Cinema in the 1940s and 1950s; the ongoing Cuban migration to Mexico since the colonial period. Even though there are no reliable statistics to count the number of Black people in Mexico, the number and impact of migrants has been, without a doubt, significant.

All of this has created fertile ground for White-*Mestizo* Mexican culture to create the Mexican citizen in opposition to foreign Blackness. These forms of cultural geophagy extend to even the most radical of political spaces like those of queer feminism in Mexico, which are deeply immersed in *Mestizo* subjectivity.

To raise awareness about this, I developed a workshop named “Afroperreo and Fat Activism” from 2018 to 2020. I was interested in talking collectively about ancestral technologies of liberation that reside in Black cultures such as popular dances like reggaeton and rumba. I felt the necessity to reflect on these technologies as a political force instead of as mere objects of *Mestizo* consumption of Black culture and Black bodies.

I decided to use the methodology of a dance workshop in conversation with *Lxs Hijxs de las Dos Aguas* to establish a space that recognizes: 1) the diversity of positions inside feminisms; 2) the numerous expressions of Blackness in Mexico: *morenx*s, Black, Afro-Indigenous, *prietxs*, and *afromestizxs* queer and trans activists who may participate in the workshop, and, more broadly, expand the idea of Blackness in Mexico and in feminist spaces; 3) the impact of the

expands on this idea, linking it to cultural relations with Black movements across the region: “Mexican construction of Blackness was in constant dialogue with cultural and political projects such as the New Negro Movement and Black Nationalism in the United States, Afro-Cubanism, Haitian Negrism, and Brazilian Modernism.” Theodore Cohen, *Finding Afro-Mexico: Race and Nation after the Revolution* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2020), 16.

28 → Theodore Cohen explains the historical influence of Black Cuban music on Mexican culture: “However, in the port of Veracruz, residents continued to embrace African-descended musical genres as a window into their history and daily lives. Afro-Cuban music had tied the city’s festive culture to the Atlantic world since the colonial period. Fandangos, rumbas, and specially counterpunctual *danzones* typified the genres locals performed and consumed during the Mexican Revolution and in the decades immediately after it.” Cohen, *Finding Afro-Mexico*, 190.

process of gendered racialization and racial gendering on Black and Indigenous bodies, and the creative forms by which the gender expressions and identities of Black and Indigenous people challenge the White-centric idea of a binary gender system, and in which queer Blackness and local identities can be recuperated, celebrated, and healed.

A final objective of this workshop was for participants to see San Cristóbal de las Casas as a part of América. By locating these territories within the Black Diaspora, local cultural representations like dances and religious/spiritual systems associated with *morenx*, Afro-Indigenous, or other forms of Blackness in Mexico become a part of Afrodiasporic cultures and epistemologies that resist being submerged—within and/or on the margins of so-called “popular cultures” and across the White-*Mestizo* imposed borders of nation-states. Highlighting this historical and cultural connection challenges negative historic representations of Blackness that remain in popular imaginaries and impact feminist and activist spaces generally.

From the workshops I was able to gather information to start mapping Black, queer-trans presences that live in and pass through San Cristóbal, in order to visibilize the diasporic and queer essence of Black people in historic relation with the rest of the Black Diaspora in the Americas and the Caribbean. I wanted to incorporate this territory and the queer identities and expressions that emerged in it as part of the path of Black feminist epistemologies.

To this end, I employed the *Hijxs de las Dos Aguas* lens to guide me in constructing the methodology for this cartography. The queer essence of the Regla de Ocha, Vodou, and Candomblé religions that persist despite the gender coloniality expressed in the positive stories of what we now call queer and trans identities: 1) gender transition, 2) queer love, 3) cross-dressing, and 4) queer and trans-African based denominations of the *Lwas* and *Orishas* that I employed to create the mapping method.

## **SOME CONCLUDING IDEAS (FOR NOW)**

In my personal journey, I have been deeply interested in the potentiality of the Orishas as an alternative and powerful source of gender identities that challenge heterosexist binary gender norms. I knew about the path *Las Hijas de las Dos Aguas* and a few other paths that proposed other expressions of gender outside of the previously mentioned norms. That's how I made the decision to employ that path in conducting my research.

I attempted to create a methodological path using Regla de Ocha, one of the Afrodiasporic religion systems, and *Las Hijas de las Dos Aguas* to develop my doctoral research. This research has allowed me to give a name to the Black, queer methodological lens through which I see the world. It also expressed the three dimensions of my worldview: historicity, Black queer rebellion, and Blackening (*empretecer*) of all social practices and relationships that seek Whitening.

I have been involved with these processes of struggle and the recognition of dissident, Black, sex-gender movements in Cuba as well as in Mexico through intellectual, artistic, spiritual, activist, and activist work. From my position in a new wave of Black, queer, and trans thinkers who have inherited Black radical thought but who are also expanding its limits with queer, Afrodiasporic, feminist research that is politically engaged in the struggles of the Black peoples and communities of América, I contribute this transformed lens: *Lxs Hijxs de las Dos Aguas*. ■