

BOOK REVIEW

## Queering Black Atlantic Religions: Transcorporeality in Candomble, Santeria, and Vodou

Roberto Strongman. Durham, N.C., and London: Duke University Press, 2019 (ISBN 978-0-1478001973)

Mary Nyangweso

East Carolina University, North Carolina, USA; email: [wangilam@ecu.edu](mailto:wangilam@ecu.edu)

African American religious and black queer studies have engaged the subject of queered bodies historically and historiographically. As observed by Greene-Hayes, they have often rendered queer and transgender persons as devoid of a religion (Greene-Hayes 2019). Queer theory and queer studies add to this considerable scholarship by evoking the sacredness of queered bodies, and Greene-Hayes demonstrates how the fluidity that is embedded in the Afro-American religious worldview is extended to the analysis of gender and how this fluidity expresses the African cosmology that affirms queer bodies. In *Queering Black Atlantic Religions: Transcorporeality in Candomble, Santeria, and Vodou*, Roberto Strongman explores the expression of queered bodies in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Lucumi (Santeria), and Brazilian Candomble. He engages this timely subject by utilizing cultural studies' critical methodological framework to show how transcorporeality occurs in literary, aesthetic, and performance contexts. He argues that black bodies are not only the site of sacred and secular contention, they transcend and transgress normative ideologies through real and imagined performance, a position Ashon Crawley concurs with (Crawley 2008). Strongman draws from performance theories to describe foundations for understanding how rhetorics of African religiosity relate to issues of queered sexualities and erotics. As Crawley argues, the queered black body "is a production of its movements from place to place and from the church to the night club and back and how possibilities for flaunting as well as trauma are presented" (Crawley 2008, 201). Strongman not only demonstrates how religious rituals of trance possession enable humans to understand themselves as embodiments of the divine, but he also explains how the commingling of the human and the divine in these religions produces empowering gender identities devoid of and independent of presumed Western duality often defined by biological sex (2019). The focus on how the body is circumscribed by social, cultural, and religious values clearly illustrates how social and general experience is constructed in the Afro-centric transcorporeal worldview.

In the first chapter, Strongman acknowledges the contributions of pioneers in his field, including Zora Neale Hurston, Maya Deren, Katharine Dunham, Karen McCarthy Brown, and Minerose Beaubrun. By recognizing their contributions, he affirms the feminist component in Afrocentric scholarship. He appreciates how the queer convergence as a lens is embodied in the mythological and in worldviews that inform gender, sexuality, and especially how beliefs and reality intersect. He also acknowledges the contributions of

ethnographers, including Pierre Verger and Herbert Fichte, whose great work he describes as contextual and yet glazed by fetishized tendencies that are often referenced in the subject of sexuality. He specifically describes Hector Hyppolite's work as gender-bending, illustrating how flexible scholarship is and how this gender-bending argument presents compelling mystical imagery that conveys the flexibility of scholarship on gender and sexuality.

In chapter 3, Strongman describes queer dimensions of Lucumi to show the accommodating tendencies in this religion that include the accepting of the queer and transgender experience. Specifically, his analysis of *Fres y Chocolate*, a 1993 film, illustrates how sexuality is expressed in the Afro-Cuban spiritual context. In chapter 4, he engages lesbianism as expressed in Lydia Cabrera's timely ethnographic piece that shows how Lucumi's power in the diaspora helps to empower and to define experiences of sexuality. Candomble, like Vodou and Lucumi, is also a vehicle of sex and gender expression, Strongman argues. He reinforces how sexuality is undergirded in these religions by referencing Dona Flore Seus Dois Maridos. In the chapter on Candomble practice in Portugal, he highlights how the evolutionary process draws from social-historical influences informed by processes of gentrification and de-Africanization. This is a theme that is also explicit in Brazilian modernism as clearly demonstrated in Mario de Andrade's 1928 novel *Macunaima* (Andrades, 1984).

Strongman's articulation of all the expressions of these queer dimensions in Afro-diasporic experiences illustrates the significant role of Afro-Atlantic religious worldviews and how they shape social experiences, including sexuality and identity. By equating the queer body to one that is spirit-possessed, he evokes the holistic view of the physical and spiritual world, which he describes as akin to original, indigenous, or (commonly described as) traditional religious worldviews. Among Native Americans, for instance, queered bodies of *berdache* are often described as two-spirit people, an acknowledgment of how bodies can occupy an alternative or third gender in which traits of men and women are combined. Similarly, the hijras of India are affirmed in the Hindu religion as a third gender and are viewed as possessing unique spiritual abilities to perform rituals of fertility or prosperity for a newborn child or married couples. Their queer bodies are the vehicles of the power of the goddess Bahuchara Mata, who grants them mythological and historical legitimation (Nanda 1999, 24–25). In Africa, for instance among the Ga of Ghana, individuals with special disabilities are treated with awe, kindness, and patience as they are believed to be reincarnations of a deity. To treat them otherwise is to offend the deity (Field 1937/1961). In Benin, West Africa, queer bodies are revered as harbingers of supernatural forces. The existence of an androgynous god(dess) is acknowledged as in the case of Mawu Lisa, the female-male deity of the Fon Community in Dahomey. The recognition of various possibilities of existence is empowering. It is an acknowledgment that some humans possess unique supernatural qualities since they are simply a reflection of the supernatural. As Benjamin Ray validly explains, unique godly qualities can be expressed in physical bodies including human bodies (2000). By invoking indigenous precolonial values expressed Afrocentrically to argue for the transcendence of social boundaries, Strongman acknowledges how all bodies, even those that do not conform to Western gender and dichotomous sexual norms, are affirmed in the transcorporeal worldview, even as these are expressed within specific social contexts.

The descriptions of syncretized transatlantic religions as engaging aesthetics reveal the multiple dimensions that form Afro-Atlantic religions. The queer dimension is but one of the many matrices embodied in the transcorporeal reality of the Afro-diasporic body. In drawing from a variety of ritual experiences of the

Afrocentric holistic reality, Strongman's work is a reminder of how physical and spiritual bodies are interconnected and of the sacredness with which each personal entity is viewed. In employing ethnographic interviews, he produces self-reflective personal narratives that help to give voice to queer experiences, such as those of priests and practitioners of Afro-diasporic religions. As he aptly argues, "the traditional sense of the relationship between the body and the soul or the anima is that they are within the corporeal case, a transcorporeality which is the distinctly Afro-diasporic cultural representation of the human psyche as multiple, removable and external to the body that functions as its receptacle" (7–8). In the transcorporeal worldview, rituals not only enact reality, they are designed to liberate or to free the participants from constraints of the social, and the body. The divine is made to affirm all reality. Transcorporeality in Afrocentric religious view reflects the holistic worldview which integrates the personal, the sexual, the spiritual and the cosmic experience with the needs of the earth and all sentient life. The individual is viewed as participating in a cosmological sacred web of life that includes plants, animals, elemental forces, the earth, and the living and the dead. In such a cosmology, humans are not only stewards of creation, they are members of the whole that manifests in various bodily forms.

Holism rejects dualist notions that oppose and denigrate spiritual and other social experiences, including queer bodies, for not conforming to dichotomous expectations. Holism embraces all bodies because all experiences are perceived to be a part of the whole and a reflection of reality. As an experience, holism acknowledges corporate existence that is often alluded to in African scholars' works, such as that of John S. Mbiti. Mbiti summarizes this corporate existence when he observes that "an individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately" because one owes existence to other people, including those of the past generation, the family and the clan, and his or her contemporaries (Mbiti 1969, 106). This notion of corporate existence in a continuum is enacted through rituals of incorporation. Often rituals contribute to the process of making, creating, or producing the individual in order to instill this transcorporeal worldview in all. Through rituals such as rites of passage, the community ensures the incorporation of the individual in their various forms as part of the holistic existence. The interrelatedness and interconnectedness of everything are affirmed in a relationship that is considered to be both visible and invisible, physical and spiritual, and sacred and secular as the profane is always viewed as infused in the sacred reality. As a holistic being, an individual is surrounded by a mystery, an active agent in one's being. Although this holistic reality is not uniquely African, specifics about interpretation are central to the African context under discussion. Starhawk describes this holistic existence when referring to Gaia as a holism that perceives all reality as the living body of a goddess. "When this earth is seen as the living body of the Goddess, there is no escape, nowhere else to go, no one to save us. This earth body itself is the terrain of our spiritual growth and development, which comes through our contact with the fullness of life inherent in the earth—with the reality of what's going on here" (Starhawk 1989, 178). In other words, all bodies (including queer ones) are part of the one living body of Gaia. Strongman's argument that Santeria incorporates gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities as expressed in practitioners' education on sexuality and sexual orientation is reiterated in Salvador Vidal-Ortiz's work (Vidal-Ortiz 2006). Although historically, Santeria as a religion was practiced by marginalized populations and was dismissed as a form of "superstition and devil worship" by colonizers, it possesses invigorating and affirming power that affirms identity as argued by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (Shohat and Stam 1997, 17). As a form of resistance, Santeria and other Afro-Atlantic religions continue to serve as liberating agents that bring hope to Afro-diasporic communities.

In concluding, Strongman evokes transculturality as the representation of transcorporeality and argues that the body that is spirit-possessed is empowering and incentivizing to the black Atlantic religious experience. As he argues, Candomble, Vodou, and Santeria acknowledge the multiple nature of the human psyche and that the body is but a material aspect of the real. It is viewed as an open vessel that can be occupied temporarily by a variety of hosts, both male or female (Strongman, 2019). The fact that the divinity can choose a body to possess during trance illustrates the simple fact that the body is not as fixed in the African understanding as is often described in binary understandings of the West. If selfhood is external to the body, and what is within physical appearance may be the opposite for the self, the Afrocentric cosmological view transcends physical bodily inscriptions that are often circumscribed by the social.

Strongman's audacity in exploring the evolution and intersection of Afro-Atlantic religiosity with queer bodies is a significant contribution to the literature and discourse on Afro-diasporic religions and cultural studies. His acknowledgment of the interconnectedness of queerness, blackness, and spirituality in the Americas and especially his study on trance-possession serve as channels of Orishas in Afrocentric religious thought. This is a significant contribution to knowledge and to the reality lived by Africans in the diaspora. Strongman illustrates how scholarship can be expressive and an agent of radical transformation of social experience. He demonstrates that Afrocentric religious thought processes contest the conventional, binary, dualist understandings of gender identity. Limiting essence and identity to physical bodies is illusory and is rooted in the binary assumptions of the Western mindset.

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**Dr. Mary Nyangweso** is Professor of Religious Studies and the J. Woolard and Helen Peel distinguished Chair in Religious Studies at East Carolina University in North Carolina. Her research specialization is religion, gender, human rights, African religions, religion and sexuality. She is a graduate of Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta GA, and Drew University in Madison N.J. where she trained as a sociologist, ethicist, and theologian. She is the author of *Female Genital Cutting: Mutilation or Cultural Right?* (Praeger, 2014), *Female Circumcision: The Interplay Between Religion, Gender and Culture in Kenya* (Orbis Maryknoll, New York: 2007) and co-author of *Religion, Gender-Based Violence, Immigration, and Human Rights*, (Routledge, 2019) and editor of *World Religion in the Global World: A Reader* (Cognella, 2020). Website: <https://religionprogram.ecu.edu/dr-mary-nyangweso/>