

(Trance)forming AfroLatina Embodied Knowledges in Nelly Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints*

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Introduction

I remember my blind Abuela Negra like it was yesterday sitting in the *galería* of her home in her rocking chair smoking Dominican *cigarros* pretending to have the ability to see. Upon her death, the official papers of the property were never sorted out and a family member who passed away has current ownership of the house and this update was never made to the papers. My mother lost all forms of ownership she could ever have of it. The memories and stories my mother has of living in it are endless. The house can no longer be an archive for her to refer to since she has no legal ownership of it. The house is a material archive of memories that has been sealed and made inaccessible. However, it does not mean that her memories are inaccessible to her. The only archive for remembering and re-imagining this space dwells with her—her body remembers. Our bodies are central to that remembering. Memory is embodied. It is within this embodied memory that my grandparents and deceased uncle dwell. Memory and remembrance are sites of dwelling for our ancestral Divine. But, how do our bodies remember? How does our consciousness create a place for us to acknowledge the relationship between our body and memory?

As Jacqui Alexander writes, “So much of how we remember is embodied: the scent of home: of fresh-baked bread; of newly grated coconut stewed with spice (we never called it cinnamon), nutmeg, and bay leaf from the tree...Violence can also become embodied, that violation of sex and spirit” (277). For Diana Taylor, the archive is composed of “enduring materials” such as, “...documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archeological remnants, bones, videos, film... all those items supposedly resistant to change” (19). Although Taylor’s “archive” alludes to some kind of materiality, it is limited in that it does not consider the materiality of the body as one that is open and resistant to change. Taylor’s line of thinking with regards to her notion of the “archive” ignores the centrality of our bodies in creating and storing memories. To expand on this notion, we can understand how bodies and archival memory are linked to form an embodied archive, or place where memories are kept. In that way, the body becomes the place in which experiences are recorded and/or engrained.

Much of what we experience is embodied and leads us to understand how we, AfroLatinas, “theorize from the flesh” to locate ourselves.¹ As women who lack visibility and recognition within Black American and Latino spaces, Afro-Dominican writer, Ana Lara suggests that “We must, in turn, push to be seen” (23). She posits that: “The tendency among those of us who occupy this space [of invisibility] is to go to the fear that ‘Afro-Latinas’ and ‘Afro-Latinidad’ lack definition” (23). Furthermore, within the field of AfroLatino studies we must also create a space, which grapples with the way that race, gender, and sexuality are reconfigured in a transnational context. This is not to say that AfroLatina voices are completely silent—but the volume is not loud enough and it is difficult to hear. In remembering our bodies and how memories of experiences become embodied, Lara’s questions serve as the main research questions for this article: “What do our bodies demonstrate to the world, and what do our bodies remember?” “Where are Afro-Latina bodies found?” In encountering these questions and beginning my research to locate ourselves

theoretically, I realized that we had not yet had our own theoretical framework for locating, giving visibility to, or understanding AfroLatina women's experiences.

My purpose here is to demonstrate how an embodied archive can be developed through (trance)formation and translocality to develop what I define as embodied AfroLatina epistemologies. In further supporting this argument, I turn to Nelly Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints* which challenges us to look specifically at what is left behind, what is gained, how constructions of sex and sexuality, the body, and the spirit transform in transnational Dominican women's narratives. The framework for my analysis here is founded on my use of translocation as a practice and introducing my theorization of (trance)formation as a constant process that takes place through the spiritual, and seeing the spiritual, as Jacqui Alexander suggests, a place that can "...transform the ways we relate to one another" (2011).

In order to read an AfroLatina body as a transformative archive, it helps to understand how others have theorized the relationship between the body and the archive. To echo Alexander, we can understand our bodies as archives where the records of multiple translocations, transformations, and the violence done to us are kept. In this same way, we can understand an AfroLatina embodied archive as a site of knowledge production that legitimizes and recognizes "trans" subjectivities. But, how is this embodied archive formed? How does this knowledge forge AfroLatina "trans" subjectivities? To answer these questions, this article's theoretical framework centers the importance of (trance)formation and the fluidity of identity present in Afro-Caribbean scholarship. Which, ultimately, designate how we can conceptualize "trans" experiences in reading Dominican women's narratives.

I focus on various ways that we can theorize "trans" and trance as a frame to analyze the relationships between women, and women and their bodies in movements of transnational migration. Nelly Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints* centers the importance of embodied memories as a transformative archive. The memories of pain, loss, and the constant movement and labor of Graciela—a key character in the novel—are stored and remembered through her movement from place to place. This archive she carries in her body transforms the way she relates to herself and the women that come after her. Her embodied archive creates an epistemology whose formation is rooted in constant movement, or translocality, but also in the ways that this centrifugal movement of leaving and coming back pushes her own consciousness and subject formation into a transcendental space where new subjectivities can be formed. In other words, I use trance, in a spiritual kind of grammar that tells us how our own consciousness can be in suspense where we are temporarily not in control, but furthermore, using trance as a third space of consciousness where our subjectivities are in the process of becoming. The movement of the body and the movement of the spirit, or sacred life force within us, leave space for (trance)formation to take place as an alternative epistemological process that ensures and proliferates survival. In Rosario's novel it is through Graciela's (trance)formation—the process through which her embodied archive becomes knowledge—that her spirit is able to relate the epistemological tools of survival to her great granddaughter Leila.

Rosario's AfroDominican transnational background maps cartographies of the spiritual as a presence and life force that is at times made material by acknowledging our bodies as archives that hold an epistemology of constant transformations. The spiritual as present in the inter-generational and ancestral relationships between Dominican transnational women allow us to understand the multiple transformations women experience as they move between and within spaces. Therefore, my focus is to contribute an approach to AfroLatina feminism that takes on an afro-diasporic reading practice that recognizes the queerness of blackness, the centrality of the

body, and how “trans” informs AfroLatina subjectivities. More importantly, I imagine AfroLatina women’s “trans” subjectivities as centralized in their embodied archives and informed by processes of transformations. I delineate “trans” subjectivities here as identities that are transnational, transformative, and transient. I acknowledge that this term is also part of transgender discourse and my intention is not to erase or proliferate violence onto this community in a way that co-opts the term from them.² However, my use of it does engage with the notion of fluidity and transformation as it pertains to the category of “woman” as a gender that may also be understood as fluid and in dialogue with race and space.

Trans— not only functions as a practice or strategy of survival, but encompasses the presence of the body on which violence has been inscribed to facilitate the process of self-making. AfroLatina women are found within and without many spaces articulating a subjectivity that attempts to complete itself from this constant movement, not from that which is stagnant, or static. It is an identity that moves within transnational spaces not just when migrating, but also at the moment of return as it articulates a phenomenology through the body as an archive of knowledge that is in continuous transformation and transition. AfroLatina women’s “trans” subjectivities are centralized in their embodied archives and informed by processes of transformations. The spiritual as present in the inter-generational and ancestral relationships between Dominican transnational women allow us to understand the multiple transformations women experience as they move between and within spaces.

The importance of translocation, transformation and the fluidity of identity present in Afro-Caribbean scholarship are central to the theorizations offered in this study. Rosario’s literary work presents the juxtaposition of a historical crossing of black bodies across the Atlantic and how its presence across multiple migrations and temporalities challenge us to conceptualize trance and transnational experiences. Published in 2002, *Song of the Water Saints* came from smaller pieces of memory and imagery Rosario had written throughout the years—a novel that encases the multiple “photographs” of four women—mother, daughter, granddaughter, and great granddaughter from Dominican Republic to New York.

The novel begins following Graciela during the time of the 1916 U.S. invasion. She is depicted as the woman who continuously abandons her family to satisfy her own desires of roaming the world and adventuring. During her time away, Graciela becomes infected with syphilis and upon her death, her daughter Mercedes is left to be cared for by her second husband. Growing up in the midst of the Trujillo dictatorship and the 1937 Haitian massacre, Mercedes is socialized to discriminate against Haitians in lieu of dealing with her own blackness. As the “songs” progress, Rosario takes the reader from daughter to daughter showing how trauma, violence, and memory are inherited and passed on for generations. The novel comes full circle when we are introduced to Graciela’s great-granddaughter Leila who reflects many of Graciela’s behaviors and must reconcile with her own mother, Amalfi, upon her return from New York City. The symbolism behind the title of the “water saints” is an echo of the mystic imagery of *La Cigüapa*—a river-creature woman with wild hair that walks forward with her feet backwards. This forward, but backward direction creates a centrifugal force that highlights the qualities of constant movement and circularity that are present in the key female characters of Rosario’s novel. The song hints at the poetics of the memories and stories that are strung along to create continuity of the genealogy of her main characters—Graciela, Mercedes, Amalfi, and Leila. Rosario’s writing process is a combination of memories and imagery that are carried throughout the narrative by the spiritual poetic process of remembering and recreating memories.

Rosario's novel sheds light on the experiences of transnational Dominican women and specifically the generational and trans-generational relationships that develop in those liminal spaces in the processes of memory building. The history of the Dominican Republic is woven throughout the songs in Rosario's novel—U.S. invasion, Trujillo dictatorship, and mass migration. The novel helps us understand the dynamics of this history as a context for a much richer conversation that engages with the complexity of gender and race in transnational Dominican women's bodies. We should broaden our analyses on the dynamics of history, gender, or womanhood by taking into consideration AfroLatinidad, the sacred, and migration as well. In doing so, we will be able to understand transnational *dominicanidad* or AfroLatina womanhood from an intersectional approach.

Rosario's novel is important because it allows us to see how frames of history, gender/sexuality, and race are juxtaposed to highlight the matrices of oppression that are present transnationally and how they continue to proliferate terror and violence onto AfroLatina women's bodies. Literary scholar Lorgia García Peña corroborates that women's bodies operate as a site of memory (74). She states: "Many histories of the intervention have been narrated; however, a lot have also been silenced due to the unavailability of historical documents. Rosario's narrative seeks to fill in those silences by proposing a revision of the accounts from the memory of the female body" (79). Here García Peña suggests that while the lack of historical documents might limit the narratives of how the U.S. intervention affected the lives of AfroDominican women during that time, Rosario's work offers us Graciela's experiences in not being allowed to work or walk through certain areas occupied by U.S. Marines (13-14). Furthermore, U.S. intervention is literally painted as an intervention or interruption of Graciela's agency over her body and intimacy. Rosario describes the scenery of a "yanqui" man observing Graciela and her lover, Silvio, in the distance as they become intimate with one another:

Graciela and Silvio were too lost in their tangle of tongues to care that a few yards away, a yanqui was glad for a brief break from the brutal sun that tormented his skin. With her tongue tracing Silvio's neck, Graciela couldn't care less that Theodore Roosevelt's 'soft voice and big stick' on Latin America had dipped the yanqui the furthest south he had ever been from New York City. Silvio's hands crawled back into the rip in Graciela's skirt; she would not blush if she learned that the yanqui spying on them had already photographed the Marines stationed on her side of the island, who were there to 'order and pacify,' in all their debauchery; that dozens of fellow Dominicans somberly populated the yanqui's photo negatives; and that the lush Dominican landscape had left marks on the legs of his tripod. Of no interest to a moaning Graciela were the picaresque postcard views that the yanqui planned on selling in New York and, he hoped, in France and Germany. ...Graciela would certainly not pity the yanqui because his still lifes...had not won him big money or recognition (8).

As the novel continues we find that although Graciela's despotic gestures attempt to ignore and re-inscribe ownership over her own bodily and geopolitical territory, the yanqui's later interruption and intervention only leads to further losses over her sexuality, her sense of intimacy, and affect. It is this violence that pushes her to feel dislocated, lost, and unfulfilled. The intervention also happens in Graciela's body as she contracts syphilis from a German traveler hoping to find Dominican women—like the one's on the yanqui postcards.

I expand further on this notion of the embodied memory as an available archive through which we could not only understand the experience of the intervention, but also how AfroDominican women's sexualities and movement produce knowledge. García Peña initiates a dialogue that pushes my own argument to explore the way that embodied memories or the embodied archive of memories is a product of the process of (trance)formation. Here we ask: How does the spiritual transform the way we relate to one another and the way that we envision ourselves? How does the Divine intervene in the development of our trans subjectivities? What is it about these embodied memories that penetrate our relationships with other women in our families and communities?

My own contribution to the on-going conversation challenges readers to take a step further from a more fluid standpoint that recognizes the sacredness of the relationships between these women and how their embodied archives inform these relationships and processes of self-making. This novel is not just to be read for leisure or cultural awareness. Reading it critically challenges us to re-think blackness, transnational migration, gender, and the sacredness of the relationships that we have with others in our daily struggle towards survival, agency, and recognition.

Sacral (Trans)formations of the Spiritless

Published in 2002, *Song of the Water Saints* follows the story of four generations of Dominican women from the time of the U.S. invasion in the early 20th century to post-migratory movements in the 2000s. It is with Graciela—mother of Mercedes, who is mother of Amalfi, who is mother of Leila—that the story begins to unfold and reveal a spiritual, and embodied memory that mediates the access to agency, survival, and womanhood. From the beginning of the novel Peter West, an American photographer that indulges in the “exotic beauties” of the world, takes on Graciela and her first lover, Silvio, as the subjects for his next photography postcard. The postcard is described in the very first page of the novel:

They are naked. The boy cradles the girl. Their flesh is copper...Shadows ink the muscles of the boy's arms, thighs, and calves. His penis lies flaccid. Cheekbones are high...The girl lies against the boy. There is ocean in her eyes. Clouds camouflage one breast. An orchid blooms on her cheek. (Rosario 1)

Within the historical context of the novel, West is an American man who travels through the Caribbean marketing to American military and European men the exotic women to be consumed in the Dominican Republic through his postcards. This image with which Rosario intentionally opens the novel, or the photo album sets the stage for how womanhood, blackness, and Caribbeanness has been situated in an imperial and global context.

As Donette Francis argues in *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship* (2010) this pivotal moment in the novel during the first U.S. intervention is not only a military occupation of space, but a dispiriting invasion of Graciela and Silvio's bodies and intimacy. The photographer takes advantage of this young couple and offers them money to look on and direct their physical love of one another erotically. Opening the novel with this visual, Rosario portrays the foundation of the narrative for how we are to understand intimacy, the power of the erotic, and the body as central to the consolidation of the self.

Audre Lorde reminds us in her essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,”

The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves. (278)

The violation of the uses of the erotic for Graciela do violence to her own subjectivity and are cause for the dispiriting violence that creates a transient subjectivity in search of re-establishing its own power, agency, and "...this depth of feeling" (Lorde 278). At the end of the photo shoot Graciela does not directly receive any money for her services with Silvio and her body has not only been exposed, but it is given no capital value. Here the only role of her body is to perform and recreate the Caribbean fantasies that West intends to sell. In other words, as Griselda Rodriguez posits in her dissertation, "Mujeres, Myths, and Margins: AfroDominican Women Within a Capitalist World-Economy": "...the contradictions of capitalism create realities in which a woman's sexuality, a Black woman's sexuality in particular, is to be 'publicly' consumed and commodified for profit" (310). Which means that when Graciela is "robbed," of her own agency over her body, what else is she left with? In what ways does this initiating image also create room for possibilities of recreating intimacy? Through this imagery Rosario reveals what we might already know—that the place of AfroLatina women's bodies and their relationship with other bodies are consistently being read as products of consumption by the structure of white supremacy. Furthermore, the exposure and pornographic exploitation of intimacy violates the sense of self and spirit. It is this embodied violence at the novel's beginning that represents what Jacqui Alexander calls a "...violation of sex and spirit" (Alexander 277).

It is key to use Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic" to understand the difference between the dispiriting violence of the pornographic gaze and the erotic as that which is spiritual, filling, and tied to agency and politics of liberation. Lorde articulates that: "There are frequent attempts to equate pornography and eroticism, two diametrically opposed uses of the sexual. Because of these attempts, it has become fashionable to separate the spiritual (psychic and emotional) from the political, to see them as contradictory or antithetical" (279). We can relate this to the way that the gaze manifests violence through the policing of black womanhood. In a similar light, bell hooks' (1997) work in "Selling Hot Pussy" is still relevant for us to understand how black women experience violence through the gaze. In re-visiting the beginning of the novel, we see how the image of Silvio and Graciela taken by Peter West is one that produces a violent gaze that is dispiriting and objectifying as the focus of the lens is not on the whole, but on parts—arms, thighs, calves, cheekbones, one breast. In other words, as hooks would posit, Graciela and Silvio "... were reduced to mere spectacle" (hooks 114).

Following this, Graciela's life becomes the pursuit of the erotic as a power that can be liberating and re-instate a sense of self via her claim of an erotic body as a transformative space of agency. This agrees with Donette Francis and Lorgia García Peña's analysis of this scene as an initiation scene and Graciela as the beholder of history in the family. Interestingly, the history with which the book begins is with that of the 1916 intervention of the United States in Dominican Republic—a violent entrance without invitation. Both of these scholars acknowledge Graciela's body as an archive of memories that creates knowledge that will be passed on to her daughter and future generations of women, like her great granddaughter, Leila.

Sexuality, the body, and spirit are tied to self-making embodied memories. As Francis writes, "Defying generational closure, agency materializes as a continuous series of maneuvers to

be enacted and reenacted over time and space, so that Graciela's legacy lives through the oral stories passed on to subsequent generations of women and their consequent life choices" (75). It is these trans-generational oral histories that allow for the creation of a knowledge that will later empower other women to find their own voice. But how does this knowledge creation take place, how does the body become an archive? The process of self-knowing and constant transformation through the body and its fluidity is paramount to understanding the archive that the body produces. As Hartman suggests: "Of concern here are the ways [embodied] memory acts in the service of redress rather than an inventory of memory" (Hartman 73). Therefore, I extend my reading of Graciela's embodied archive, or embodied memories, to show how it is intertwined with the spiritual as something that facilitates the (trance)formation of knowledge production. It is in this moment where Graciela's spirit redresses her great granddaughter Leila's approach to her own subjectivity. Graciela's now bodiless spirit can speak and pass on a knowledge that is based on the experiences of the body. When we challenge ourselves to ask: what is the body without the spirit? And what is the spirit without the body? We come to understand that knowledge is produced because of the embodied memories and it is the spirit, or life force, that (trance)form knowledge for the passing or crossings between women.

In *Song of the Water Saints* the dispirited Graciela is always in motion looking for adventure. Her second lover Casimiro pretends to take her to Puerto Rico, when in fact, he has just taken her along the Ozuna River to the other side of Santo Domingo. Upon realizing she had not gone to Puerto Rico at all, Graciela's desire for adventure is left unfulfilled. The desire for leaving eats her up inside: "The idea of escaping was eating away at Graciela every night since the Puerto Rico trip earlier that year, when the chirping of crickets competed with Casimiro's snores" (Rosario 62). It is at this moment that she begins to repeatedly abandon her daughter and husband. During her first trip, Graciela heads for La Vega, but she ends up at a brothel with Eli, a German man she meets on the train whom she contracts syphilis from (66). From the brothel, her journey continues to Santiago where she works as a maid in a wealthy couple's house (85). Finally, Graciela returns home for about nine years, yet her dispiriting body only yearns to leave again, this time to a convent (142). Her name coming from the meaning of "grace" illustrates some clashing characteristics of Graciela: on the one hand, her graceful movements from one place to the next and on the other, her lack of enacting grace as a controlled and respectable way of behaving. Her movement to and from these secluded and gendered spaces creates a sense of resistance to being held "captive" to a disciplined and controlled role, but the novel also demonstrates her constant failure to fully develop a sense of self in these spaces (Massey 2). Therefore, the focus of the novel's narrative on Graciela's subjectivity as an individual is one formed by her incessant "search" for the intimacy and adventure that will fulfill her. In other words, she seems to be looking for her spirit—that which gives us life; what allows us to become.

Moreover, Graciela is haunted by the hegemonic traditional notions of womanhood. Griselda Rodriguez takes on the dismantling of hegemonic Dominican womanhood in her dissertation stating that "Ideologies of womanhood, which are grounded in Eurocentrism, create conditions whereby a woman's place is in the home, in which her body and sexuality can be thoroughly policed by both private and public forms of patriarchy (i.e. male family members, husbands, and the state in general)" (133). Rodriguez quotes and engages with Toni Cade Bambara stating, "In a capitalist society a man is expected to be an aggressive, uncompromising...provider of goods, and the woman, a retiring, gracious, emotional...consumer of goods...she is either a marketable virgin or a potential whore, but certainly the enemy of men" (102). Hence, Graciela's transience is a method of resistance she enacts through her fleeting habits. While her name points

at being gracious, Graciela, defies all parts of this “womanhood” and turns it on its head: never grounded in her “home” duties, never truly a consumer, but not a provider either. Instead, Graciela moves through different spaces in a way that allows her to survive in a rising capitalist society where AfroDominican working-class women survive from continuous movement and labor. Meanwhile, this also means that they challenge socially constructed ideas of gender, particularly the category of “woman” as a gender.

Judith Butler reflects on how gender or the “realness” of gender performance inscribes itself in the body:

And yet what determines the effect of realness is the ability to compel belief, to produce the naturalized effect. This effect is itself the result of an embodiment of norms, a reiteration of norms, and impersonation of a racial and a class norm, a norm which is at once a figure, a figure of body, which is no particular body, but a morphological ideal that remains the standard which regulates the performance, but which no performance fully approximates. (*Bodies That Matter*, 88)

And in this story, Graciela, never fully approximates her performance as a normative Dominican woman since she repeatedly abandons and neglects her husband and daughter. Graciela’s pained body redresses the system of patriarchy and becomes a space for creating a subjectivity antithetical to the norm. To be “normal”, and domesticated, would be to fall into an erasure and invisibility of her movement toward redressing the dispiriting violence that took away her sense of womanhood and power as an erotic being. Her embodiment, or the way in which she possesses her body, is not a cause, but an effect—not an action, but a reaction to the given circumstances in which she comes to life. Understanding this can challenge us to understand the unique ways in which AfroLatina women have to recreate and transform themselves continuously as a way of forming a subjectivity and epistemology that is not already there, but created from given circumstances of coming into the matrices of oppression. More plainly, the *matrizes de represión*—this meaning that we come from a womb where oppression is always and already present.

Graciela’s enacting body redefines womanhood in a Dominican transnational context—she acts out against the grain of traditional Dominican womanhood and challenges the reader to question his or her own way of conceptualizing gender and its performance. As Butler posits in “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution:” “My suggestion is that the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (406). If gender is constituted through repeated acts, then Graciela’s gender performance offers her body as a site of possibilities, agency, and transformation that revolutionizes how black Dominican womanhood is to be understood. Her resistance restores her agency, redresses her condition of a dispirited woman, restores the relationship of desire and intimacy with herself and challenges the patriarchal system that continuously attempts to limit her to traditional gender roles. Moreover, it is through this disavowal of such controlling images of black women that her subject formation is developed through her body’s experiences of these gendered spaces.³

In short, she performs out of character. Graciela’s continuous fugitivity creates tensions with the limits of blackness. Not in the sense, that Graciela transcends race, per se, but in the sense that her embodiment and movement go beyond the limits that the “black body” as a myth or social construct offers. Harvey Young articulates this idea of the black body and its mythification in his book *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body*. Young argues that, “When popular connotations of blackness are mapped across or internalized within black

people, the result is the creation of the *black body*. This second body, an abstracted and imagined figure, shadows or doubles the real one. It is the black body and not a particular, flesh-and-blood body that is the target of racializing projection" (7). In other words, as Graciela's black body is presumably held to certain standards, or expectations of enacting or being a black woman, she instead steps out of the presumed habitus and performance of a black woman's body. She steps away from the misrecognized black body and into her own embodiment of black womanhood that cannot be quite captured. It is a fugitive, transient, and criminal blackness that survives through its own *marronage* of sorts. She is this body searching for a spirit, a subject consistently in the making.

Her subjectivity is in continuous movement through the translocation of her identity. In the novel, the translocality experienced by Graciela can be interpreted as "...the direct result of North American imperialism and of the present-day world political and economic regime, which has favored continued migration outward..." (La Fountain-Stokes, "Tranlocas"). It is the dispiriting invasion of the Dominican Republic and Graciela's intimacy that constitutes movement for survival's sake. Migration outward—outside the campo—outside the city—outside the country—outside her body, instills feelings of survival and progress which are present in Graciela's multiple journeys. It is this constant displacement of the spirit and of herself—in search for a self—that forces her to perform various identities in her own process of "becoming." In other words, Graciela's way of "Redressing the pained body encompasses operating in and against the demands of the system, negotiating the disciplinary harnessing of the body, and counterinvesting in the body as a site of possibility" (Hartman 51). To put it another way, her body in continuous movement is a redressing body that creates new ways of visualizing the self.

Throughout her outward journey, Graciela becomes a sex worker, a domestic worker, and finally she ends up in the convent seeking for her body to be taken by the spirit. Graciela's movement and translocality make her body a spiritual conduit through which multiple identities manifest. As Jossianna Arroyo argues: "Identities are performative in their 'becoming,' so part of their constitutive order belongs to racism as a socio-historical discourse of displacement, alienation, and disavowal, which creates complex orders of signification" (Arroyo 153). These performed identities and controlled images of black Dominican womanhood maintain Graciela in a cycle of on-going performative transformation throughout different spaces. For many AfroDominican women, capitalism pushes them into zones of labor such as sex work and domestic work. In other words, Graciela explores these spaces, but contends with the way that these may limit her from choosing her own path of self-making.

As readers, we begin to understand Graciela as a body that oscillates between transfigurations of body and spirit, but never precisely both. She roams the city (trans)forming herself into "... a vendor, a roaming doctor, a beggar, a nun, an orphan" (Rosario 117). While she is a body without a spirit, she moves from one location to another so fluidly as if she were a spirit herself—completely unstoppable. However, none of these identities that she so fluidly comes in and out of become solidified or stagnant since to do so would stop the production of the archive that her body becomes. She must stay spirit-like and embody the movement of spirit. "The idea, then, of knowing self through Spirit, to become open to movement of Spirit in order to wrestle with the movement of history... are instances of bringing the self into intimate proximity with the domain of Spirit" (Alexander 295). In other words, her body becomes not a space for subject-being, but for subject-making and becoming.

While her process of becoming and ongoing (trance) formations create an embodied archive, her spiritless body, or her spirit-like characteristics, challenge the sacred. What happens when a spiritual guider, such as La Gitana, a transvestite man named Lorenzo, attempts to read

Graciela's hand? In his attempt at reading a spiritless body La Gitana asks Graciela: "¿How do you have so many lives?... Many futures, but you cannot move forward" (Rosario 115). Being able to "read" Graciela's many identities or no identities, explains how her body is a site of multiple possibilities of being. The multiplicity that the body allows for creates a tension with the act of "being read"—the spirit guider has no authority over Graciela's multiple spirit-possession. In this way, Graciela's multiple spirit-identities dismantle the politics of Spirit; there is not one spirit that passes through her but many at different times. He reacts, "¿Why did you come to me? Such hands follow their own laws" (Rosario 116). In recognizing that Graciela's soul has been robbed, and that her fluid subjectivity has allowed her spiritless body to become a medium, the Virgin speaks to him through Graciela's palm: "*—Lorenzo, the future can be changed. Be not complacent, La Virgen had said to him through the wounds in her palms. Never before had a vision challenged him so directly*" (Rosario 116). In short, Graciela is a conduit for the spirits, but they do not guide her. They pass through her and use her body to enact and perform subjectivity. This moment of spiritual possession, is one in which her body "...becomes a means of communication, simply because Spirit requires it (although not only it) to mount its descent" (Alexander 320). Furthermore, Graciela's entrance into La Gitana's home is one that de-stabilizes and de-linearizes the perception of time and space as a spirit that comes in and speaks to La Gitana, instead of La Gitana invoking the Divine to speak and guide Graciela—this encounter also challenges notions of spiritual authority.

Graciela's constant movement and transformations are facilitated through the centrality of her decaying body in the novel. Her spirit, subjectivity, and agency can only be accessed through the attention of her body and its transgressions through the spaces of brothel, domestic work, the convent, and home. But upon her arrival to the convent, the final place that she runs off to, one would think that this would be the place where body and spirit come together. Graciela's body is a conduit searching for a spirit, a sense of being. A spirit subjectivity that would encompass the power of the erotic and the intimate relationship that she could have with her body—a spirit subjectivity that could transform the way that she relates to herself, but also to her daughter Mercedes. In light of this, what is the spirit without the body? How can the sacred, or the Divine, engage in spirit movement in a body that already has fleeting, transient, spirit characteristics? Does the spirit require a body to materialize its production of knowledge? The novel's answer to this question seems to be that the production of knowledge is an ongoing process that may be mediated by the body, but the spirit remains its interlocutor.

The novel illustrates that the process of the body attaining a spirit subjectivity is violent. The body that transgresses multiplicities is policed, disciplined, and brought to death in its process of embodying the spirit. The process of the production of knowledge within the body as led by spirit creates an embodied transformative archive. An example of this in the novel is highlighted through Graciela's experience at the convent when she realizes that: "Convent life was built on three legs: poverty, chastity, and obedience. Graciela must put her flesh to death, so that her love becomes solely focused on God's will. Through prayer and the rosary she could overcome the demands of the body, kill its urges" (149).

Since Graciela's contaminated and spiritless body allowed for a fluidity of identity, the novel presents that this "transgression" is at times in conflict with many oppressive institutions. While Graciela feels that her staying at the convent no longer will fill her, what stagnates her body in this place, also hints at the disintegration of it: "...What kept her from leaving the convent was her hope that her fervent prayers during vigil would stop what felt like the slow disintegration of her body...When sleep finally did come, Graciela's dreams seemed to drag her through other

bodies” (152). Another way of understanding this scene is that Graciela believed that her prayers would move the Spirit to liberate her of the pained body. Perhaps in some ways, to recreate her as a new chastised virginal woman with a restored grace, sexuality and erotic subjectivity that is unviolated.

However, the liberation that is given to her is that of becoming a transient spirit that moves through other bodies. In other words, she is granted fluid materiality as a way of liberation and freedom. This fluid (trance)formation and movement from body to spirit is where Graciela is able to find agency through the transcendental labor she must perform; this is where she finds rest and where she can simply be. Her arrival to the convent as a place of devotion, “... begins as an effort to subordinate the body to a transcendent object, it ends by taking the body, that is, self-feeling, as its object of worship, and letting the unchangeable spirit die” (Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 48). It is the moment her body is disintegrating that it is no longer an objectified woman’s body, or more specifically, material—a body that can now attend to a fluid subjectivity that is not stagnant or unchangeable. The convent seems to be the only place where Graciela stops and begs for liberation from her pained body.

The oppressive politics of power and pain force Graciela into the deepest space where body and spirit must face each other. For example, it is the violent juxtaposition of the Catholic Church and the policing of black bodies that allow Graciela to tap into a sense of unreconciled intimacy between body and spirit. In similar fashion, Saidiya Hartman proposes that within such a violent moment as this lays the existence of black subjectivity. With regards to Frederick Douglass’s experience, she writes: “Douglass establishes the centrality of violence to the making of the slave and identifies it as an original generative act equivalent to the statement ‘I was born’” (3). This is to say that violence comes because of the recognition of black humanity. It was in the convent, in the moment of her deepest bodily pain and spiritual (trance)formation, that Graciela was born. In other words, it was the pained body, in the liminal space between life and death, that bears witness to her own recognized humanity and subjectivity. The disintegration of her body embodies and solidifies the archive of memories she represents. The more the sickness and ailment rot away at her body the closer she gets to achieving her full materialization of spirit and the possibility of subjectivity in a transcendental space. Her body, as described in this instance, is in the process of becoming undone and it is within this process that her “trans” subjectivity solidifies as a fluid spiritual presence that is capable of traveling through several corporeal spaces.

Graciela’s spirit-like embodiment and movement takes readers to task on how we can envision the process and politics of black womanhood outside of Western thought. Adjunctly, Donna Aza Weir-Soley’s *Eroticism, Spirituality, and Resistance in Black Women’s Writings* pushes this notion further by arguing that the wholeness of black womanhood lies in the recognition of the black women’s sexual selves and spiritual selves together. Similarly, Graciela’s subjectivity must be imagined in an alternative space where the body and the spirit are wholly recognized and attended to—a (trance)local space.

Ultimately, this recognition of a full black female self can come to be by essentially constructing a queer or fluid space for desire and the power of the erotic. The rape and violation of Graciela’s body and spirit leaves her with the desire to find her power within the erotic—not only in the sense of sexuality, but in the sense of intimacy. Nonetheless, her fluid subjectivity allows her to survive the effects of these violations—syphilis, the U.S. invasion, and the impossibility of recreating a space of intimacy in the relationships she has with her husband and daughter. Being robbed of her power of the erotic in the beginning of the novel causes Graciela to become fluid in order to survive. Omise’ke Natasha Tinsley has taken up the task to materialize

the queerness of the black body alluding to its fluidity that at times makes it one with the waters that transport it. In other words, this fluidity is an effect of violence of the Middle Passage on Afro-diasporic bodies, but also the ongoing global violence against blackness. Fluidity allows for survival and a space of Afro-diasporic recognition.

Queerness, or fluidity, employs a theory of desire that recognizes different subjectivities found within the matrix of domination and oppression. Moreover, Graciela takes up a fluid positionality as a method of resistance and liberation that attends to the violence and rupture experienced similarly by other women of the African diaspora. At the moment that her body and spirit come together—death—she leaves behind an embodied archive of memories that proliferates itself through the (trance)formations of the women that come after her. Through this, she is able to become a spiritual authority and voice that can guide her great granddaughter Leila.

Living in New York City, young fourteen-year-old Leila may be trying to grow up too fast by entangling herself with Miguel, a married man, who takes advantage of her sexually. Being felt up by Miguel gives Leila a feeling of excitement and the arousal of sexual desire. However, it also seems that Leila craves the sense of intimacy with her own body that she looks for in Miguel. In other words, Leila is attached to the desires for the flesh that hold no true intimacy, or empowering agency. Leila's relationship with her body is a disconnected one—she looks at her body as a vehicle of eroticism and “feel good”-wholeness and hence, uses it to arouse herself and others. In her friendships Leila moves so swiftly and intends to pose herself as a sexual authority, as someone who knows about sexual subjectivity as if she were a grown woman. Her friend Mirangeli asks her to “demonstrate” or perform her knowledge: “Leila went over to Mirangeli, pulled back her head, and gave her a long and deep kiss” (Rosario 225). She believes her body grants her sexual authority for proliferating knowledge to her girlfriends. Moreover, as her witnessing friend Elsa is disgusted, Leila responds: “You're just jealous 'cause you're not sexually liberated,” Leila said while reapplying lipstick. It was not the first time she had kissed Mirangeli” (Rosario 225). For Leila, imparting knowledge of sexual intimacy and desire only comes because she is already “liberated.” She believes that because she is not limited to thinking of sexuality as only having the option to be a heterosexual woman that she is liberated. In many ways, Leila is similar to Graciela in letting sexual desire overpower her without the engagement of intimacy.

In echoing the parallels between Leila and Graciela, Rosario places an interlude “Circles” intentionally right before the reader begins to know all of these things about Leila. The interlude becomes a transition between Leila's grandmother, Mercedes, and Leila's story. The transition echoes Graciela's own transition into a spiritual realm. Moreover, it is within this space of “trans” literally placed in the book, where we encounter a convergence of generations in conversation between Graciela and Leila. In a moment of trance and spiritual connection with Leila, Graciela's spirit reaches out to caution her approach to a sense of self and to instead empower herself through finding the truth within her. In this dialogue, Leila wants her Grandmamajama—great grandmother—to materialize for her and teach her to be a woman. The conversation between the two is depicted in the novel:

‘I wanna be a woman.’
--Then, Leila, take off that skin.
‘Get outta those clouds, Greatest-of-the-Grandmamajamas...’
--Take it off. To the bottom, disrespectful child...
--Keep your heart...let's bleed your heart for truth. (Rosario 203)

Leila authoritatively claims that she wants to be a woman. She recognizes that she is not yet a woman, that she is young, however she is in the process of becoming a young woman. Leila's journey of becoming is more about knowing what she wants to become, but yet not being there. To be a woman, in other words, to finally, "become," Graciela demands that she "take off that skin" as a challenge. To put it another way, she must do away and detach herself from the flesh; do away with the body that she has used as a sort of mask. Graciela corrects Leila's process of becoming, as if understanding that Leila's current process is not quite fine-tuned or ready for the violent process that is becoming. Another way of reading this would be to understand the relationship that Leila has with her body, which is one that she devalues. Yet she believes she knows how to be a woman at her age. To be a woman, one must grow up, develop, experience life, and gain knowledge through that experience.

For Graciela, Leila's attachment to the flesh or the body, will not allow her to complete her own sense of becoming if she does not also engage with spirit, that which is truth. Graciela instructs Leila to keep her heart and bleed it for truth (203). If it is the heart that gives the biological body life, it is also said that it is the spirit that gives the heart life. With this in mind, bleeding the heart for truth would be to empty the heart of the spirit and to let it flow of blood and the fluidity of spirit that gives the production of the self and the becoming of the self. In this respect, Graciela passes on the knowledge of the violent process of becoming as an embodied knowledge. It was only through the body that Graciela's experiences are remembered. She emphasizes that the journey of becoming is through acknowledging the process of (trance)formation as necessary for recognizing her own power and agency. In short, this (trance)formation is the process by which the fluidity and multiplicity of spirit transforms the way we relate to our body and ourselves.

Although this is a violent request from Graciela's spirit and yet seems impossible and self-sacrificing, the process allows for the de-objectification of the body and to materialize the spirit—a liberation movement. As Graciela's syphilis-ridden body begins to stand out from the controlling images of black womanhood and consistent objectification of black bodies, Graciela's spirit urges Leila to de-objectify herself and her body. In other words, to tap into the knowledge and life source our bodies contain outside of the norm—to attend to the fluidity and queerness of her body. This would allow spirit to flow throughout her body and also (trance)form the way she relates to others. To put it another way, Graciela's spirit may be suggesting that the materialization of spirit will allow Leila to really see herself for who she is and with that transform the way she approaches the relationships she engages in. The materialization of spirit is the beginning of shedding light on the truth of oneself—it's to tap into a space of intimacy for the sake of liberation.

As it follows in the book, it seems that Graciela's knowledge is a warning and a lesson to be learned shortly after Leila's enforced sexual experience with Miguel. Leila runs back to her friend's house to catch up with them and seek refuge from the uncomfortable sexual experience that seems to echo Graciela's experiences with West and Eli. When Mirangeli again asks Leila for a "demonstration" of how she kisses Miguel, Leila refuses. Instead, of a violent intimate encounter, she desires an intimate moment with Mirangeli, "More than anything, she wanted a good lung-cleansing cry on Mirangeli's lap" (Rosario 237). During the week she ends up spending at her friend Elsa's house, Leila feels remorse not only because she has fooled her grandparents and abandoned them, but also because it is through Graciela's warning knowledge that she is finally able to see herself. On her way back home, "She unpinned Mamá Graciela's amber crucifix from her bustier and put in her mouth and was overcome with a desire to love them, to make their lives happy before they all turned to leather, then ash underground" (242). Graciela's spiritual materialization and knowledge allows for Leila's own liberation and ability to love herself and her

family. Leila accepts Graciela's knowledge into her own body and intimacy overcomes her as the desire to love her ancestors.

Leila finds truth through her own body's archive and the fluidity available through it. Graciela creates an epistemology that arises from her dis-re-membered body that fluidly becomes one with its newly found trance-subjectivity. Her finalized process of becoming works to empower others, but at the cost of the body becoming undone and fluidly materializing into spirit.

Conclusion

Song of the Water Saints allows us to read transnational Dominican women's experiences in a way that complicates and challenges how we understand the interstitial spaces that we cross. It puts into perspective how our ongoing process of becoming is not limited to transformations of the self, but also of the dimensions of the relationship between body, spirit, and our selves. The characters in Rosario's work are black women that have agency that is heavily mediated through the body. As bell hooks would argue, "they are not a silenced body" (116). Their bodies have a voice that is articulated through movement and their relationships with other bodies. As hooks puts it:

When black women relate to our bodies, our sexuality, in a way that place erotic recognition, desire, pleasure, and fulfillment at the center of our efforts to create radical black female subjectivity, we can make new and different representations of ourselves as sexual subjects (hooks 128).

As hooks and Audre Lorde suggests, the relationship that black women have with their bodies should centralize the importance of the erotic and the power of intimacy since it is from here that we can reconceptualize our womanhood and create a self that is empowering. While in this novel the erotic does not necessarily create intimacy or vice versa, the power of the erotic is non-existent without the presence of intimacy and affect. In other words, our sexual subjectivities cannot empower us without the engagement and commitment of intimate and affective relationships to fuel that power.

In addition, Graciela's (trance)formation is central to the fluidity of her identity and survival. Displacement and translocation allows us to understand Afro-Dominican women's identities as marked by "trans." As Ed Michaels argues, the spiritual and physical dislocation of these women becomes necessary for the continuum of their own subjectivity, but also that of the larger community. They become witnesses, storytellers, and embodied archives that develop an epistemology of survival and agency for themselves. Furthermore, movement translocates our bodies. As Lara proposes in *Women Warriors of the Afro-Latino Diaspora*: "...our bodies are also found in transition from place to place—between islands, between homes, between the past and the present, between dreams and the waking world" (Lara 45). The translocation of our bodies, as Lara points out, is constantly moving through "in-between" spaces where knowledges are stored, or created and solidarities are established.

Writing, like the embodied archive, converts itself in an articulation of rupture, dis-identification and recognition. In other words, this is an afro-diasporic articulation that takes the violence of colonization and decolonization into account as it moves from one space to another. Its fluidity forces us to challenge essentialist notions of blackness and latinidad that never fully consider the AfroLatina, and much less, the AfroDominican woman's experience. I propose that we continue to re-visit transnational Dominican women's experiences—which have been understudied—to shed light on and locate these AfroLatina "trans" subjectivities. For decades,

these women have been laboring away at the production of knowledge that informs the way that we frame dominicanidad, womanhood, and blackness. Their epistemologies create a space for the voices and experiences of other women to be heard and recognized through their writing and performance.⁴

We must (trans)locate AfroLatina feminist thought that engages with an Afro-diaspora reading practice by taking up a fluid positionality that acknowledges and articulates the experiences of “trans” moments and spaces within AfroLatina identities. Besides, to take up a fluid positionality becomes a method of resistance and liberation that recognizes differences and attends to the violence and rupture experienced through diaspora. At the moment that we achieve this kind of fluid positionality we challenge ontological institutions that have dictated who is who, and what is what. With this, we move into offering an AfroLatina feminist theoretical framework that is recognizable and emerges with its own voice from within these “trans” subjectivities and spaces of (trance)formation. Ultimately, the lived experience of violence within these spaces of tension and ambiguity is painful but at the same time liberating.

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¹ Throughout this work I do not hyphenate the term AfroLatina/o intentionally to convey that blackness should always be considered as part of Latinidad. Specifically, for the AfroLatina writers mentioned here and in my own positionality our blackness is not separate from our Latinidad, but a part of it.

² I am currently in the process of expanding my research to include the narratives of transgender Afro-Dominican diaspora women.

³ For more on controlling images of black womanhood see, Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Feminist Thought*. New York: Routledge, 2009.

⁴ See Daisy Cocco de Filippis *Documents of Dissidence: Selected Writings of Dominican Women, Historias de Washington Heights y otros rincones del mundo*, and Mary Ely Gratereaux's *Voces de la inmigración: Testimonios de mujeres inmigrantes dominicanas*.