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## Pedagogies of the Sacred: Making the Invisible Tangible

### One: The Memory of Mojuba: A Spiritual Invocation to Remember

For more than six of my preteen years, I crossed the intersections of Mojuba in St. James during clandestine visits to friends or the more legitimate attendance at the Catholic Church, St. Mary's, not knowing that from Trinidad, Mojuba reached back to a lineage for which there were no signs, no visible ones at least. "Meet me at Mojuba Crossroads." No one could plead ignorance as the excuse for arriving late since everyone knew where it was—Mojuba, not far from Bengal Street. There was no apparent need to demarcate itself from the other streets from which the crossroad drew its name. Mojuba simply claimed the entire space of the intersection, and we crossed it over and over again without even a hint of knowing its secret or needing to know from whence it came. It took thirty years and another set of crossroads to point me to a path straight to a basement in the Bronx, New York, where, at a home that assumed the bearings of a spiritual workplace, I learned the lineage of Mojuba in a community of practitioners—Puertorriqueño/as, Cubano/as, Trinidadian, African American, Salvadorean, Brazilian—living an ancient memory in a city overcrowded with errant spirits, teeming with yearning not easily satisfied in towering buildings or in slabs of concrete.

*A Spiritual Invocation to Remember*

Omi Tutu / Cool Water / Freshen the Road / Freshen this House / Death is no more / Sickness is no more / Loss is no more / Obstacle is no more / To be overwhelmed is no more / The immortality of our ancestors / I Salute God / I salute all Orișa / I Salute all the mothers of Orișa, fathers of Orișa who are citizens of Heaven / Homage to the Sun, the Moon, the Earth / I salute all ancestors who sit at the feet of Olodumare who have no desire to return to Earth / I salute all my ancestors whose blood run in my veins. Mojuba. I greet you.

Mojuba: an expansive memory refusing to be housed in any single place, bound by the limits of time, enclosed within the outlines of a map, encased in the physicality of body, or imprisoned as exhibit in a museum. A refusal that takes its inheritance from the Crossing, which earlier prophets had been forced to undertake from the overcrowded passage-ways in a place called Gorée, the door of no return, still packed centuries later with the scent of jostled grief so thick that no passage of human time could absorb it. It hangs there, this grief, until today, an indelible imprint of the Crossing, fastened by a pool of tears below, constantly replenished by the tremors of human living.

## Two: The Crossing

> *We lay in a dungeon. Many more of us lying in death, 21 times 21 times 21 and more. Crossing water on backs with sores and bellies empty except for those filled with air or swollen with child. Lying in rot and moon blood with skinless ankles and wrists, black skins turned yellow from chains acting like saws on our fearful flesh. Rocking. Wracked bodies numbed from pain. Rocking the dark noise, the loud silence of trembling hands and feet and whole bodies turned cold and numb from shock and heat and longing for the rhythm of daily living. Rocking. Crossing that line where humans force the sea and sky to meet so that their vastness would seem more bearable. Back then we crossed the horizon over and over again. Crossing the vortex of thick watery salt greenish gray bluish green turquoise spew of foam, only that time there were more of us on water. Some refused the Crossing, deciding instead to use their arms as wings, thousands of winged creatures flying free. Others simply kept each*

*others company at the bottom of the Sea, becoming messengers from the spirits of the deep whose Souls had plunged there from the voyage before and the one before that and the one before that. O Yemaya, Achaba Peligrosísima / Haunting Sweet Verbena / Wise one / Hiding your age deep within the soft fold of waves, translucent / Amongst your treasures rest the captives shuffled through the door of no return / No longer imprisoned / You have restored their wings. No one knows the mysteries at the bottom of the Ocean. Crossing the line, the Kalunga line.*

Once they crossed, they graced all things with the wisdom of Ashé. Wind. Sky. Earth. Fire. Thunder. They deposited it in *otanes,* stones, in the mossy underground of treacherous caves; in the caress of elegant waterfalls; in forests imposing enough to assume the name Mountain; in water salt and sweet to taste the opposite in things. In all winged creatures including the butterfly. All four-legged. And two-legged. And those who slithered on land, the color of coral, while their sympathies lived in Sky. And with those yet to be born. For once they intuited that the human will was long intent on capture, they all conspired to rest their Truth everywhere. And in the simplest of things. Like a raindrop. And therefore the most beautiful of things, so that Truth and Beauty would not be strangers to one another, but would rely one on the other to guide the footprints of the displaced, and those who chose to remain put; of those only once removed and those who had journeyed far in the mistaken belief that books were the dwelling place of wisdom; those who thought that the lure of concrete would replace or satisfy the call of the forest; those who believed that grace was a preoccupation of the innocent and the desire to belong a craving of the weak. Being everywhere was the only way, they reasoned, to evade capture and to ensure the permanence of change—one of the Truths of the Ocean.

Not only humans made the Crossing, traveling only in one direction through Ocean given the name Atlantic. Grief traveled as well.

The dead do not like to be forgotten, especially those whose lives had come to a violent end and had been stacked sometimes ten high in a set of mass graves, the head of one thrown in with the body of another, male becoming female, female becoming male, their payment for building the best stone fortress that hugged a steep hill, reputed to be the most well-

secured in the Caribbean. Secure for the British, that is, who buried their antipathy for the French for one brief moment and killed off three hundred Indians in one day in the hope of proving ownership of the country. For months after the massacre, Indian blood usurped the place of mud and ran into the narrow channel that led to the Caribbean Sea, but not before depositing layers of bloody silt thick with suffering at the bottom of the river's floor. The bloody river took the story to the Sea, the Wide Sargasso Sea, which absorbed the grief, folding it into its turquoise jade until it assumed the color of angered sorrow. It spun into a vortex, a current in the Caribbean. The Trade Winds. North, pushing clear to Guineau, close to the shores of the Old Kôngo, Kingdom of the Bantu. Cabinda. Down, down Benguela. Angola. Forced upward again. Dahomey. Trade Winds South. Brazil. Nago. Candomblé. Jéjé. Swept into the Cape Horn up to Peru, Colombia, Ufaina. Spitting. Descending in the drift of the West Winding, climbing just underneath the dividing line that rests in the imagination. Equator. Kalunga. It joined the grief of those who had died emaciated, gasping for air in the two-storied house locked shut for months by the man who believed he could own flesh. Pain transforming their fingers into twisted scalpels that carved hieroglyphs on the walls. Reuniting with the current in Australia. Pacific. New Zealand. The Bone People. Washing over the Marrawuti. Sea Eagle. Dreamtime. Choosing a different route: Shanti, Bahini to India. Kala Pani. East? West? Monsoon. Mozambique. The bloodied vortex of angered sorrow plotting its way. Kuro Shio. The Pacific. Hawai'i Ascending. Arctic. Norwegian Current. Labrador. All the time announcing, spitting, grieving, as it washed itself up on different shores. The dead do not like to be forgotten.

Sentience soaks all things. Caresses all things. Enlivens all things. Water overflows with memory. Emotional Memory. Bodily Memory. Sacred Memory.

Crossings are never undertaken all at once, and never once and for all.

## Three: Cosmologies

African-based cosmological systems are complex manifestations of the geographies of crossing and dislocation. They are at the same time manifestations of locatedness, rootedness, and belonging that map individual

and collective relationships to the Divine. The complexity derives in part from the fact that the Sacred energies that accompanied the millions who had been captured and sold for more than four centuries had indeed inhabited a vast geography. But they had also traveled internally as a result of wars of conquest, in the name of religion, and for the sake of capturing people and owning territory. Even before the depletion of Yorubaland in its bound "cargo" headed to Cuba, Haiti, Brazil, Trinidad, and points in between, art historian Robert Farris Thompson tells us, "the deities of the Yoruba had already made their presence felt in Dahomey over hundreds of years. Yoruba deities were served under different manifestations in Allada before 1659 . . . transforming them into Ewe and Fon local spirits."[1] The pantheon of inheritance in what would come to be called the African diaspora collected itself on new soil through a combination of conditions: the terrain from which the trade drew its ambit; the specific and already transformed spiritual sensibility—the African provenance of belief structures and practices; the local pantheons that were encountered and transformed with successive waves of people; the degree of spatial autonomy that enslaved populations fought for and retained; and *Osanyin*, the ecology, a flora and fauna already inhabited by the Sacred.[2] By the time these energies began to plant themselves on the soil of the Americas, bringing different consciousnesses of culture, language, and region, they had long undergone various journeys and transformations.

In general terms, the cosmological systems of Kôngo Angola deposited themselves in the *minkisi,* medicines, of Kôngo Angola systems in Brazil; in the Petro Lemba of Haiti; the Palo Mayombe of Cuba; the Spiritual Baptist of Trinidad, St. Vincent, and Grenada, while they fused into the Winti system in Suriname. Those of the territories of West Africa, Dahomey, Yorubaland, Ghana, and Benin brought a varied and related spiritual lineage observed through *Lwa* Guinée, Spirits of Haiti, Lucumí of Cuba (more widely known as Santería), Shango of Trinidad, the Orixás, *minkisi* (medicines), and Vodun of Candomblé in Brazil, the Winti system of Suriname, and Vodou of New Orleans and the southern United States. Four centuries later, destined for the teeming metropoles of North America—New York, Boston, Chicago—these systems effected another migration, another cosmic meeting, this time forced underground to inhabit the most curious of dwelling places: the basement of immigrant homes. But

the naming of place is somewhat misleading in light of the omnipresence of the Sacred, since naming implies that the Sacred has been cordoned off, managed, and made partial to a chosen geography, much like the invocation to God to bless America, while presumably leaving the rest of the world unblessed.

Migrations are one indication that these cosmological systems are marked by anything but stasis. Some energies have been fused; others apparently atrophy in certain places while becoming dominant in others. Yemayá, the goddess of the Ocean seems to have "disappeared" in Haiti, yet homage to Agwe the sea god and Mambo La Siren, the mermaid sister of the two Ezilis, Freda Dahomey and Dantò, attest to the sustained metaphysical significance of water in both systems. Yemayá reigns in Candomblé and Lucumí, assuming the position that had been accorded her River sister Oshún in Yorubaland, the recognition that it would have been impossible to have survived the Crossing without her. Often there are multiple avatars of the same Sacred force, while collectivities develop different relationships to the same multilayered entity as Sacred energies engage the different inventions of the social. Not paradoxically within Vodou, Lucumí, and Candomblé is retained the manifest energies of Eshu/Papa Legba/Elegba/Elegbara, guardian of Divine energy and communication, guardian of the crossroads, the force that makes things happen, the codification of potentiality and its indispensable tool, choice, which is multiplied at the crossroads—the place where judicious vigilance needs always to be exercised. Still, who is remembered—and how—is continually being transformed through a web of interpretive systems that ground meaning and imagination in principles that are ancient with an apparent placement in a different time. Yet, both the boundaries of those principles as well as what lies within are constantly being transformed in the process of work in the present; collapsing, ultimately, the rigid demarcation of the prescriptive past, present, and future of linear time. Both change and changelessness, then, are constant.

Housed in the memory of those enslaved, yet not circumscribed by it, these Sacred energies made the Crossing. But they did not require the Crossing in order to express beingness. They required embodied beings and all things to come into sentience, but they did not require the Cross-

ing. There was a prior knowing, a different placement in the human idiom of constricted time. Still, the capacity to operate outside of human time does not mean that Divine energy has no facility within it. In this sense, there is no absolute transcendence—no transcendence, in fact—for if there were, there would be no intervention in, and no relationship with, the material, the quotidian, the very bodies through which divinity breathes life. Indeed, the Divine knits together the quotidian in a way that compels attunement to its vagaries, making this the very process through which we come to know its existence. It is, therefore, the same process through which we come to know ourselves, as in the words of María, an espiritista: "Yo soy mis santos; mis santos soy yo" (I am my saints; my saints are me).[3] How does one come to know oneself through and as Saints or Spirits? How does one not know oneself without them? What kind of labor makes this intelligibility possible?

The force of these questions at first came only imperceptibly to me, and in quite another guise. In 1989, I had embarked on a project on the ways in which African cosmologies and modes of healing became the locus of an epistemic struggle in nineteenth-century Trinidad, the period marking the establishment of the slave plantation economy and the consolidation of the colonial state. My intent was to use an array of documents surrounding the trial, torture, and execution of Thisbe, one of those captured and forced into the Crossing, who was accused of "sorcery, divination and holding frequent converse with the devil." I wanted to show the ways in which the body had become central in the contest between European and African systems: positioned as moveable property —chattel—and as repository of sin, or understood as the direct instrument of the Divine, mediator between the world of the living and the world of the dead. 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 that such memory was necessary to distill the psychic traumas produced under the grotesque conditions of slavery. How, why, and under what

conditions do a people remember? Do spiritual practices atrophy? Or do they move underground, assuming a different form? What is the threat that certain memory poses?

What once seemed a legitimate set of questions to understand the plantation figure Thisbe were entirely inadequate to the task of knowing Kitsimba, who was waiting to be discovered. I first had to confront the limits of the methodology I had devised to know her. While legal and missionary documents gave me proximate access to daily life, they were unable to convey the interior of lived experience, the very category I needed to inhabit in order to understand how cosmological systems are grounded and expressed. Reading against the grain to fill in the spaces of an absent biography was simply not sufficient. I couldn't rely on the knowledge derived from books, not even on the analytic compass that I myself had drawn. Moreover, I had to scrutinize my own motivations for embarking on the project, as well as to figure out why I had been delegated to go in search of Thisbe's life. In short, I had to begin to inhabit that unstable space of not knowing, of admitting that I did not even know how to begin to know. Divested of the usual way of posing questions, I became vulnerable and experienced the kind of crisis that is named "writer's block." It was this that led me to examine the recalcitrance that masked an unacknowledged yearning for Spirit. Propelled to seek a different source, I began to undertake linguistic spiritual work with a Bakôngo teacher so that I could follow Thisbe from a plantation located about seven miles from the Mojuba crossroads of my childhood back to the Mayombe region of Central Africa to discover Kitsimba, who refused to be cluttered beneath an array of documents of any kind, whether generated by the state, by plantation owners, or by me. It was in that basement in the Bronx, New York, that she manifested her true name, Kitsimba—not the plantation name Thisbe—and placed it back into the lineage that she remembered and to which she belonged. From then I began the tentative writing of a history that was different from the one I had inherited, knowing that I could no longer continue to conduct myself as if Kitsimba's life were not bound inextricably with my own.

The idea, then, of knowing self through Spirit, to become open to the movement of Spirit in order to wrestle with the movement of history (as occurred in the process of how I came to know Kitsimba), are instances of

bringing the self into intimate proximity with the domain of Spirit. It would make the process of that intelligibility into a spiritual undertaking. The manner in which Kitsimba emerged to render her own account of her life, including the narrative of the Crossing with which I began this chapter, was diametrically opposed to my research plan of using her body as the ground for an epistemic struggle. Kitsimba's plan required my engagement with the texture of her living. If texture of living were to be felt and analyzed as not only memory but, importantly, voice and identity, all seeming secular categories in which subjectivity is housed had to be understood as moored to the Sacred since they anchored a consciousness that drew its sustenance from elsewhere: a set of codes derived from the disembodied consciousness of the Divine. With what keys are these codes activated? Of what is its labor constituted? What is the purpose of such labor? Does rememory sharpen itself in the context of work, and is this project of rememory aligned with the Sacred? What is the self that is made in performing labor with disembodied energies that are themselves poised to work? These are the questions that Kitsimba provoked, and they are the very questions I use here to pivot our thinking through the constitutive elements of living a life that is propelled by the Sacred.

Work—spiritual work—is the major preoccupation of this final chapter. Drawing on ethnographic work and my own involvement in two African-based communities as a priest—one of Vodou and the other the Lucumí house that provoked my rememory of Mojuba—I wish to examine how spiritual practitioners employ metaphysical systems to provide the moorings for their meanings and understanding of self—in short, how they constitute or remember experience as Sacred and how that experience shapes their subjectivity. Experience is a category of great epistemic import to feminism. But we have understood it primarily as secularized, as if it were absent Spirit and thus antithetical, albeit indirectly, to the Sacred. In shifting the ground of experience from the secular to the Sacred, we can better position, as Lata Mani has proposed, the personal as spiritual.[4] But the designation of the personal as spiritual need not be taken to mean that the social has been evacuated for a domain that is ineluctably private. While different social forces may have indeed privatized the spiritual, it is very much lived in a domain that is social in the sense that it provides knowledge whose distillation is indispensable to

daily living, its particular manifestations transforming and mirroring the social in ways that are both meaningful and tangible. Indeed, the spiritual is no less social than the political, which we no longer contest as mediating the traffic between the personal and the political.

Not only have we secularized experience but we have also secularized labor, both in our understanding of the work process and of its ideological construction, that is, the naturalization of women's labor. These formulations do not travel easily into the communities of the practitioners we meet here, communities that are marked by women's leadership as priests and practitioners who are themselves largely women, immigrant women. It is thus difficult to understand either what these women do or who they are when work is solely understood in relationship to the disciplining imperatives of global capital, in the terms that I crafted in chapter 3. Thus, part of the analytic challenge we face in considering the spiritual dimensions of work derives from the very nature of the epistemic frameworks we have deployed. Another part of that challenge derives from the hierarchies that are insinuated within our knowledge-making projects and in the geographies we have rendered inconsequential to them. As we saw in chapter 5, one of the consequences of the cultural relativist paradigm that undergirds the feminist-as-tourist model is the production of a distant alterity in which tradition is made subordinate to, and unintelligible within, that which is modern. Yet, it is not only that (post)modernity's secularism renders the Sacred as tradition, but it is also that tradition, understood as an extreme alterity, is always made to reside elsewhere and denied entry into the modern. In this context, African-based cosmological systems become subordinated to the European cosmos, not usually expected to accord any significance to modernity's itinerary, their provenance of little value in the constitution and formation of the very categories on which we have relied. It is not that (post)modernity's avowed secularism has no room for the Sacred (witness the Bush administration's avid mobilization of faith-based initiatives in the service of renewing American imperialism), it is rather that it profits from a hierarchy that conflates Christianity with good tradition while consigning "others" to the realm of bad tradition and thus to serve as evidence of the need for good Christian tradition. If Africa functions largely as an epistemic gap, as spectacularized homophobia dressed up in tradition—

its brand of feminism qualified, not for reasons of historical specificity but for cultural alterity, its religions designated as pejoratively animist—then its cosmological systems cannot be made to figure legitimately in (post)modernity's consciousness and, therefore, cannot be availed to assist in understanding the constitution and formation of self or the remapping of the major categories with which a transnational feminism has been engaged. And yet some of its most formative categories—migration, gender and sexuality, experience, home, history, and memory—can be made intelligible within these very systems.

Of what significance, then, is the body in the making of experience if it cannot merely be summoned instrumentally to serve or explain the axes of violence that stem from the crises of capitalism's various plantations or from its attendant modes of financial timekeeping? Clearly the focus on spiritual work necessitates a different existential positioning in which to know the body is to know it as medium for the Divine, living a purpose that exceeds the imperatives of these plantations. Put differently, it is to understand spiritual work as a type of body praxis, as a form of embodiment about which Nancy Scheper-Hughes offers an illuminating formulation: "Embodiment," she says, "concerns the ways people come to inhabit their bodies so that these become in every sense of the term 'habituated.' All the mundane activities of working, eating, sleeping, having sex, and getting sick and getting well are forms of body praxis and expressive of dynamic social, cultural and political relations."[5] Since the spiritual does not exist outside of these very social, cultural, and political relations, it too can be taken to constitute body praxis, and this, I believe, is what Karen McCarthy Brown means when she says that "religions such as Vodou inscribe [their traditions] in the bodies of the followers . . . the tradition, the memory of how to serve the spirits is held in the ritualized and ritualizing human body."[6] Far from being merely superficial, these markings on the flesh—these inscriptions—are processes, ceremonial rituals through which practitioners become habituated to the spiritual, and this habituation implies that requirements are transposed onto the body. One of these requirements is to remember their source and purpose. In this matrix the body thus becomes a site of memory, not a commodity for sale, even as it is simultaneously insinuated within a nexus of power. Body and memory are lived in the same body, if you will, and this mutual

living, this entanglement, enables us to think and feel these inscriptions as process, a process of embodiment.

The purpose of the body is to act not simply, though importantly, as an encasement of the Soul, but also as a medium of Spirit, the repository of a consciousness that derives from a source residing elsewhere, another ceremonial ritual marking. To this end, embodiment functions as a pathway to knowledge, a talking book, whose intelligibility relies on the social —the spiritual expertise of a community to decode Sacred knowledge, since it is inconceivable to think about the Lwa or Orisha descending without a message to the collectivity gathered in their presence. Since body is not body alone but rather one element in the triad of mind, body and spirit, what we need to understand is how such embodiment provides the moorings for a subjectivity that knits together these very elements. How is a Sacred interior cultivated, and how does it assist practitioners in the task of making themselves intelligible to themselves? How does spiritual work produce the conditions that bring about the realignment of self with self, which is simultaneously a realignment of oneself with the Divine through a collectivity? These questions lead us to foreground practice (which is why I choose the term work) through which the Sacred becomes a way of embodying the remembering of self, if you will, a self that is neither habitually individuated nor unwittingly secularized.

Before proceeding further, I want to say a word about the coupling of Vodou and Santería. Historically, it has not been customary to speak Vodou and Santería in the same sentence, but the problem is neither of a linguistic nor grammatical sort. Within the community of practitioners in New York, for instance, suspicion and recriminations abound, laced with a peculiar strand of racialization and racism that paradoxically dislodges Santería from its African moorings and positions Vodou as bad witchcraft, thus mirroring popular cultural sentiments. Haiti still largely functions in the American imaginary as the accused for HIV infection, or otherwise as a projection for what Laënnec Hurbon has called a feeling of "disquieting strangeness," emerging primarily from phantasmagoric representations of Vodou, representations that have also been fanned by the American state.[7] And while Santería was thrust into public consciousness with the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that legitimized it, neither it nor

Vodou are widely understood to be religions.[8] To be sure, there are differences between the two systems. The elements of Vodou that are drawn from the Bântu Kôngo cultural zone and housed in its Petro pantheon of "hot" Spirits are not found in Lucumí, nor do Fon elements appear to be present. But these apparent differences are rather difficult to ascertain since Yoruba-based cosmologies morphed into the Fon and Ewe cultural zones. How can we be certain that the latter did not travel back into Santería once the Crossing was made? Yet similarities exist as well. Practitioners of both Santería and Vodou used Catholicism as the subterranean mask to sabotage colonial attempts to annihilate them. They walked the same celestial geography as they implored Catholic saints then, and they continue to do so now. Within Vodou's Rada rites and those of Lucumí are to be found the constitutive elements of both Yoruba and Dahomean ceremonial rituals. And it is this shared epistemological history that coheres around a similar set of foundational principles in which both systems are anchored—the most significant of which positions the energy force of the universe as a Sacred force emanating from God, Bondieu, Olodumare, the supreme quintessence of Ashé, the life force. Both attend to the idea of a multiply manifested or multidimensional god, avatars, that make the Sacred tangible, the most central of which are manifestations of Lwa and Orisha that inhabit physical elements as well as human beings. As healing systems anchored in the idea of the constant manifestations of spiritual power, they share the belief in the power of spoken medicine, the power of utterance, the literal understanding of Ashé, which means "so be it," as well as in the Sacred healing power of physical elements such as water, fire, and plants, *fèy*—Osanyin who functions both as forest-bearing medicinal plants and Orisha within Lucumí. Indeed, the fundamental metaphysical principles in which each is based collude in ways that nullify the very segregations that are produced and maintained. My intent here in bringing them together is not, however, to compare, conflate, or suggest that they are the same but to examine how they both illuminate the cosmological underpinnings of a world that uses Spirit knowledge/knowing as the medium through which a great number of women in the world make their lives intelligible. It is at these crossroads of subjectivity and collectivity, Sacred knowing and power, memory, and body, that we sojourn so as to examine their pedagogic content to see

how they might instruct us in the complicated undertaking of Divine self-invention.

## Four: Knowing Who Walks With You: The Making of Sacred Subjectivity

The Spirit is a wind. Everywhere I go they are going too . . . to protect me.—ALOURDES MARGAUX IN BROWN, *Mama Lola*

Winti (wind) come upon you in your dreams, they give you the strength and push you in a particular direction.—RENATE DRUIVENTAK IN WEKKER, "One Finger Does Not Drink Okra Soup"

Yo soy mis santos, y mis santos soy yo (I am my saints, and my saints are me).—MARÍA, IN PROROK, "Boundaries Are Made for Crossing"

These statements, which reflect the spiritual sensibilities of practitioners immersed within the different practices of Vodou, Winti, Lucumí, and Espiritismo, encapsulate an understanding of self, knitted through a force—Spirit, Wind, Orisha—or through energies that are sacred. They are simultaneous expressions of mutual truths about both the self and that self's relationship to those Sacred forces. In being constituted as truths, we can imagine them as principles that one arrives at and literally wrestles with, and that then deepen over the course of time. Since this coming to know is both process and outcome, there is a strong suggestion that we need to become attentive to the inside in order to see the ways in which its elements are constructed. In the classes on Spirit propensity in which I participated at the outset of my own journey, my Madrina (godmother) used the following phrase constantly: "You have to know who walks with you." These practitioners illustrate that they have come to know themselves as accompanied and as nonindividuated—that Winti walk with them, Spirit walks with them, and Orisha walk with them. They would not have been able to manifest these reflections as sensibilities, however, outside of a complicated, ongoing process of coming to consciousness, or what Donna Daniels calls "spiritual consciousness."[9] Thus, what appears at the outset as a first statement, "I am my saints," is actually the result of a series of moments of grounding one's conscious-

ness in the idea and practice of Sacred accompaniment, Sacred guidance, and Sacred identity.

Taken together, the practitioners' statements speak to an intimacy of a lived experience in which the Sacred is embodied. They are woven through five interrelated elements: the idea that Sacred energies intervene in the daily lives of human beings; they surround, protect, push, strengthen, and bring a sense of purpose so that the individual is attuned to the Soul's purpose; they are present both everywhere, as in the Wind, and at specific moments, as in dreams; they mediate a process of interdependence, of mutual beingness, in which one becomes oneself in the process of becoming one with the Sacred; and they manifest their sacredness in nature as well as in their relationship with human beings, both of which take shape in a process of mutual embodiment. It would seem from these statements that Divine desire works to prod the self into believing that it does not exist of its own accord, free will notwithstanding. Such a formulation can be found in the cosmological anchor of the Bântu-Kôngo, as explained to me in the terms of Kia Bunseki Fu-kiau, my Bakôngo teacher:

> The same force that gave shape to the universe is the same force which resides within us. This force is Kalunga, a complete force by itself, the principle of God, the principle of change, vitality, motion, and transformation . . . There was nothingness, into which came this source of life, this energy, expressed as heat, cosmic fire after which there was a cooling that produced rivers, oceans, mountains. The world floated in Kalunga, endless water within subcosmic space, half emerging for terrestrial life, half submerging for marine life and the spiritual world. Kalunga is the ocean door between two worlds.[10]

In one sense the body's water composition seals our aquatic affinity with the Divine.

This idea of the intimacy between personhood and Sacred accompaniment is also signified in the formative character of Winti in the lives of working-class Surinamese women. Gloria Wekker's ethnography, *The Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora,* hones in on this cosmological complex that, in her words, "shapes the ways working-class people think and talk about themselves and how they act from understandings of what a person is . . . It is the discursive

context in which notions of working-class subjectivity and gender take shape . . . and also offers emic understandings of the bridges between subjecthood and sexuality."[11] When Renate Druiventak says that Winti come upon her in her dreams, she is drawing from a cosmology that frames a relationship with Winti, (which literally means Wind, and like Wind conveys the swiftness with which Spirits and ancestors can take possession of human beings and natural phenomena like trees and animals), and simultaneously her own understanding of who she is in the world. We will come later to see the purpose of this dream sequence, but for now it is enough to go deeper into this complex as a way of threading subjectivity with cosmology. To do so, I begin with Wekker's formulation:

> Within this cosmological system human beings are understood to be partly biological and partly spiritual beings. The biological side of humans, flesh and blood, is supplied by the earthly parents. The spiritual side is made up of three components, two of which are important here: all human beings have a *kra* or *yeye* (soul) and *dyodyo* (parents in the world of the gods). The *kra* and *dyodyo* together define a person's mind . . . [they] both consist of a male and female being and both of these parts are conceived of as human beings, with their own personality characteristics. The female and male part of the soul are determined by the day of the week on which the person is born. Thus, somebody born on Sunday is "carried" by Kwasi and Kwasiba, and is believed, therefore, to possess different characteristics that make her different from a person born on Wednesday who is "carried" by Kwaku and Akuba. Likewise a person like Renate, who has Aisa as a female godly parent, will, regardless of gender, display nurturing behavior, while somebody who has Leba (Elegba) will be very clean and orderly.[12]

The correlate of the *dyodyo* within Vodou and Lucumí is expressed in a parallel understanding of the Sacred energy that claims one's head, one's *mèt tète* or guardian angel, who is itself gendered. We can understand this claiming as the Sacred recognition of a likeness with someone whose primary "personal" sensibilities resemble the metaphysical principles that a particular Lwa or Orisha embodies. This likeness can be divined in a range of ways: sensed or seen by a seasoned practitioner, presented in dreams to the person herself, ascertained through a *lavé tèt,* washing of

the head, in the case of Vodou, or through divination that relies on the Sacred corpus of the Ifa oracle, as is the case with Lucumí. The resemblance might be visible, but it might also be deeply hidden, or in need of reassembly, in which case the purpose of the *lavé tèt,* for instance, would be to activate latent or idle sensibilities so that they could steady the course of one's life. Still, the sensibilities are never singular but rather always pluralized, not only because we as human beings are made up of multiple energies, but also because those multiple energies exist within a single Orisha or Lwa as well. Knowing who walks with you, then, becomes a spiritual injunctive to activate a conscious relationship with the spiritual energies with whom one is accompanied, and who make it possible, in the words of Audre Lorde, "to do the work we came here to do."

But what are these energies or forces? What metaphysical principles do they codify? If we return to the Winti and to the figurative story of Kalunga, we see that these are forces of nature, the metaphysic of that which is elemental. Wind. Water. Fire. Thunder. Lightning. Volcano. The cosmic geography of Sky. Earth. Trees. Forest. Park. Mountain. River. Ocean. Rocks. Stones. They each have their own consciousness. They cluster at those places that the imagination fills with movement, upheaval, and contradiction: the crossroads, the railroad track, and the cemetery. Still, it is simply not possible to plumb their full depth, and we have come to know, through intuition and transmission, that there is a great deal of mystery constituting them, which explains why Vodou characterizes Lwa as *Les Mystères*. Finding the points of engagement is at once mystical, elusive, imaginative, and pragmatic, as Judith Gleason's artful rendition of Oya, Yansa, the Goddess of Wind and Fire conveys:

> Oya at her most awesome, untrammeled Oya, is a weather goddess. This is how she appeared before the "world" as we know it and how she continues to manifest herself beyond the reach of meddlesome technological devices set up to simulate, alter, and pluck the heart out of the mystery of her storms. Caught in her updrafts, the religious imagination without apparatus seeks, though threatened with annihilation, to meet the weather goddess halfway, where sensuous experience remains possible. By reconnecting ourselves to the elements through which her urgent temperament expresses itself in patterns recognizable in our

own swirls, inundations and disjunctive ardors, we come upon a language with which to invoke and reflect her power.[13]

It was on a stormy winter evening in New York City, the fifth in a series of unexpected blustering storms whose origin meteorologists designated as the North Pole, that I posed questions to Ekundayo and Sonia (both priest and devotee of Oya) aimed at understanding just how they connected themselves to Oya's convective currents—that is, what of her did they see in themselves. Although I had sat with Kitsimba's narration of the movement of the Trade Winds, I was slow to realize that they had come into being through the force of the energy of the dead—that is, in her telling, the grieving dead instigate their global movement. And it was that realization that pointed the direction to Oya. With Kitsimba and Gleason's updrafts buzzing in my mind, I posed those questions to both Ekundayo and Sonia. I explained Oya's updrafts as her capacity to move within multiple domains, possessing *ajè*—the power to do good and evil—yet refusing to admit it, the same way in which she refuses capture. As shape-shifter she is the River Niger, buffalo woman, dual symbol of the carrier of fire and mother of the cemetery, and mother of nine. "How do you find balance in turbulence?" I asked, "What does being one with the Wind of transformation mean?"

My questions came as an unexpected barrage, which Ekundayo generously greeted by asking me to repeat them. Here is the torrent that poured forth from her:

> It's being in the eye of the storm, which is the stillness. Oya takes me to different levels of consciousness . . . into a different plane, knowing that something is shifting in my mind. I am there (in the vortex) [though I am] not spinning. She allows me a different perspective on what's inside and outside of me and my role in it . . . Oya brings much peace, but will also move me when I am too still. You have to get up and do, hence the balance. She is also the gentle zephyr. [Here there was a long pause] Oya is also the first breath and the last breath . . . Oya moves people; moves the Ocean . . . moves me beyond fear, since movement is sometimes scary . . . moves us to grow as mother of transformation . . . She allows me to sit in the eye of the storm to grow.

As the world would have it, you can't sit in it for too long, but without wind there is stagnation, things will die . . .

Oya is very protective, she protects with a ferocity . . . what will a mother do to save her child? . . . There is no limit . . . I did not know how to do battle. There was always, well, too much emotion . . . I had to learn to sit with her and tell her what was going on . . . What seemed like such a problem with emotional strain, she would show me, look, move things here, go here, and when I follow, because I know it isn't me, when I follow I can take up my battle. She acts with a swiftness that is amazing. She does not like tears, so when I bring them the shift is even more immediate, more dramatic . . . She is equally as subtle; she can kiss you as a light breeze.

I really had a deeper sense of Oya going into Ifa. Everything was coming out right and then all of a sudden things started to go wrong, topsy turvy. I had to talk to Oya to say to her even though I was going into Ifa, I was still her daughter. And at the *bembé* for Oya this sister began doing this dance for her, swirling and swirling, and before I knew it I was brought into that swirl, saying "even though I am going to Ifa I am still your daughter . . ."

I had bronchial asthma that was killing me. Oya gave me life. She is the reason I am on this planet. She made it possible for me to breathe . . . Oya will call upon Yemayá to help her children . . . I know that some stories talk about the enmity between the two of them, but that is not what I experience . . . The dead are in the ocean, and the dead are also in the air . . . Oya teaches us to know the dance of life . . . We need to see the beauty of the dance . . . We can't be afraid to move . . . that is a rejection of life . . . One leg in life and one in death . . .

What is striking to me even as I now write Ekundayo's words is the degree to which they epitomize the sensuous intimacy, the ability to inhabit different planes of consciousness, that Gleason herself has conveyed. Clearly, she too has met the weather goddess halfway. But Ekundayo's rendering also reflects an agile movement between the metaphysic and the anthropomorphic, evincing again an embodiment of principles that are meaningful principally because she has threaded them through

her daily life. The threat of death from asthma is no metaphor. The work of prayer, sitting with *ebbo,* offerings that Oya accepted, enables Ekundayo to say in just that matter-of-fact way, "[Oya] has made it possible for me to breathe," while her reflection on "one leg in life and one in death" pertains to a principle that has existential import. The challenge with which we are confronted here is how to move between death's clutches, and what Ekundayo suggests is that we do so by living in a particular way, by becoming still within Oya's multiple manifestations. It is no simple task.

And as shape-shifter, Oya could not be only one thing. Says Sonia, "She is an Orisha you have to deal with in the right way. I am still learning about her, still trying to understand her. I think I'm learning how to turn fear into power, like the power over darkness. I can sit and receive information . . . in the dark since darkness does not separate light for me."

There is a great deal to be understood about whether the character of the person and that of the Orisha or Lwa is indistinguishable; whether there is some degree of distance between that which demarcates person from Spirit; whether the process of being the ground in which the Sacred energies are planted fashions an entirely new self; and about the relative balance between the application of principles that are metaphysical or anthropomorphic in the living with these energies. These are indeed knotty issues that take the span of lifetimes to sort out. To be sure, the anthropomorphic mediates the distance between the physical and metaphysical as Ekundayo's reflection shows. But what is the context for learning? In places where Lwa, Orisha, and Winti are grounded in the soil, the multiple institutionalized instances of extended family yards that sometimes approximate small towns provide the sustained meeting place for the ceremonial rituals that school practitioners in the consciousness of the Spirit. But the fragmentation of urban living in places like New York City can sometimes make for what Gleason calls "a skittish pairing of the human and the divine."[14] There are principles to be adhered to, but there are no written maps that contour precisely how the pedagogic moments for Sacred learning are to be structured. And because in many instances there are ruptures in the lineage of practice—there was no homage to ancestors or to Orisha in my biological family, for instance—learning assumes a particular kind of deliberateness in communities that are mul-

tiply displaced. Donna Daniels was able to capture this slow process of deliberate embodiment that unfolded during her encounter with a West Coast community of Lucumí practitioners. She witnessed "a quality to spiritual learning [which women] described as a slow and deliberate coming to [spiritual] consciousness . . . predicated on vigilant observation of a sacred idea over time as it manifested itself in the devotee's life such that a personal understanding of its meaning was derived. Thus, spiritual knowledge . . . was acquired through a process of embodiment wherein understanding of a sacred idea was based on (in) the experience of living it or experiencing the idea in action, or 'seated' in one's life."[15]

In practice, the daily living of the Sacred idea in action occurs in the most simple of acts of recognition, such as pouring libations for and greeting the Lwa; attending to them on the days of the week that bear their signature; feeding ancestors first with the same meal we feed ourselves as a way of placing the purpose of our existence back with its source, as a gesture of mutual exchange and as a way of giving thanks and asking to be sustained; building an altar to mark Sacred ground and focus energies within the home, constructing a place to work, to touch down, discard, pull in, and practice reciprocity; and participating in collective ceremony. It is this dailiness that instigates the necessary shifts in consciousness, which are produced because each act, and each moment of reflection of that act, brings a new and deepened meaning of self in intimate concert with the Sacred. This idea to which Daniels refers of vigilant observation that rests at the heart of spiritual labor was also given form in these words of Kitsimba: "With careful attentive service and focused contemplation, the Divine is made manifest. It is why this work is never done." Thus, the cycle of action, reflection, and practice as Sacred praxis embodied marks an important reversal of the thinking as knowledge paradigm.

In the realm of the secular, the material is conceived of as tangible while the spiritual is either nonexistent or invisible. In the realm of the Sacred, however, the invisible constitutes its presence by a provocation of sorts, by provoking our attention. We see its effects, which enable us to know that it must be there. By perceiving what it does, we recognize its being and by what it does we learn what it is. We do not see Wind, but we can see the vortex it creates in a tornado. We see its capacity to uproot things that seem to be securely grounded, such as trees; its capacity to

strip down, unclothe, remove that which draws the sap, such as leaves; its capacity to dislodge what is buried in the bowels of the earth. Wind brings sound, smells, messages that can at times be directionally deceptive so that we can be prompted to go in search of truth. Its behavior can be sudden, erratic; it can cleanse and disturb; provoke, destroy, caress and soothe. We learn about and come to know Wind by feeling, observing, perceiving, and recognizing its activity; in short, by remembering what it does as bodily experience. But it is bodily experience that demands a rewiring of the senses mirrored, for instance, in the aesthetic representations of figures whose ears, mouths, nostrils, and eyes assume a scale that is larger than life, so that they might convey a heightened grounding of the senses. Hearing is seeing and seeing is feeling.[16] An unbroken bottle with a thin elongated neck can contain a full-size wooden cross, challenging the naked eye. The feel of fire is strong, not hot.

That demand for the rewiring of the senses is even more provocative when the cycle of action, reflection, and practice cannot be automatically transposed to a curriculum whose learning requirements are sometimes neither straightforward nor self-evident. The very *how* of the manifestation of the Divine is a practice to which we have to become attuned and accustomed. This was brought home to me during one of the weekly sessions of the *mesa blanca*—spirit mediumship with the white table—when my Madrina was mounted by one of her main spirits, La Negra. La Negra is a firm, sympathetic spirit, one of whose embodied lives unfolded in Haiti. She spoke in the coded language of archaic Creole and Spanish combined, a border language, one might say, of another time. She often urged us: "Never be ashamed of your spiritual inheritance." And unity was a constant theme, a necessary one, in light of a good deal of racism, misogyny, and heterosexism that reigned in the temple. One day, however, she left us with a message in the form of an unexpected riddle: "The bourgeoisie sacrifice their children." I still remember the numinous silence enveloping the semidarkened room that encircled us. Those of us who were not mounted did not readily know to which time frame La Negra was referring, whether the bourgeoisie did so in the past, whether it was doing so then—that is now—or whether it intended to sacrifice its children in a time to come. Was/is sacrifice literal or metaphorical? "Bourgeoisie" in human idiom carries the understanding of a specific class

extracting capital, not a term in popular currency at this moment. Its use was, therefore, unexpected in that space and at this time. To which particular bourgeoisie was La Negra referring? In which social formation? Haiti, the geography of another of her incarnations, one we do not know? Or the United States of North America? Or was she linking Haiti and the United States in a mutual complicity with bourgeois sacrifice? How did she come by that information? Did she experience it, that is, witness it, or was she told about it as a common practice? And why was it being revisited here and now? What modes of sacrifice was the bourgeoise exacting from members of their class, and could it be from members of a subordinated class? If sacrifice belonged in a "past," what key did it hold for decoding the "present"?

All of these questions press on our perceptions of, and relationship to, time with a capital T. In thinking about that moment of La Negra's pronouncement, as well as others, I am learning that the embodiment of the Sacred dislocates clock time, meaning linearity, which is different than living in the past or being bound by tradition. The feeling conveyed that afternoon of La Negra's announcement was one of being somewhat lost in time, of time standing still, the encounter with Time. Although the voice is present in the now, it collapses that tense we call present into a past and future combined. Notice that La Negra used the present tense. Spirit brings knowledge from past, present, and future to a particular moment called a now. Time becomes a moment, an instant, experienced in the now, but also a space crammed with moments of wisdom about an event or series of events already having inhabited different moments, or with the intention of inhabiting them, while all occurring simultaneously in this instant, in this space, as well as in other instants and spaces of which we are not immediately aware. Spirit energy both travels in Time and travels differently through linear time, so that there is no distance between space and time that it is unable to navigate. Thus, linear time does not exist because energy simply does not obey the human idiom. What in human idiom is understood as past, present, and future are calibrated into moments in which mind and Spirit encounter the energy of a dangerous memory, a second's glimpse of an entire life, of a dream or a sequence of dreams, of a shadow lying under a village, of the vibration of a feeling, of a letter to be delivered, a decision to be made, all penetrat-

ing the web of interactive energies made manifest. I can't say that I know in any definitive sense how the bourgeoisie sacrifice(d) their children, although the statement leaves me with a lot of possibilities to be decoded. Perhaps some historical record will, or perhaps already has, confirmed it. To be sure, confirmation in the historical record would be important only if we needed reassurance about Spirit truth-telling. Wrestling with the idea of Time, however, forces us to evacuate the desire for written confirmation, drawing us closer to observe and, therefore, to perceive how the mind of Spirit works. The demand is more exacting, for it would have us learn how to suspend inherited habits of knowing so as to better apprehend the very gestalt that is itself provoking the shifts in consciousness that scrambled time, turning its constructed fragments into one Time. Human beings are neither the guardians nor the owners of Time.

The work of rewiring the senses is neither a single nor individual event. Practitioners have to be present and participating in a community; they must show up, in other words, for this appointment, to the ceremonies that rehearse over and over again the meaning of Sacred accompaniment. To be sure, there is a compelling awe in the beauty of numinous ceremony, and there are no lengths to which practitioners will not go to bear its financial cost, but the bridge between that exterior and an interior, using what emerges from the contemplative and reflexive to shape exteriorized practice, whether in the form of ceremony in New York or in the form of hunting in Mali, has to be made. It is a crucial bridge, for without it we could indeed not address subjectivity of any kind.

The desire to cultivate this interior figured prominently among practitioners with whom Daniels worked. She found that "openness, poise, balance, alignment, clarity, humility, honesty and respectfulness [were] some of the spiritual principles and desirable inner states on which meaningfully living one's life and learning from life's lessons [were] predicated."[17] But working to achieve that alignment is pure challenge, not only because of the cultural dissonances in daily living that can undermine the evolution of character, but also because the spiritual is lived in the same locale in which hierarchies are socially invented and maintained. Within the Lucumí communities in New York, this social is invented through the very hierarchies that constitute the secular: heterosexism in the midst of the visible presence of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and two-spirit

people; a peculiar brand of racism that positions Cuba as the seat of the religion, freed from its African moorings; a variant of indigenous black nationalism that interprets these moorings to mean the exclusion of lesbians and gay men and the paradoxical positioning of women's priestly function as marginalized mother in spite of women's numerical predominance; and a brisk trade and commodification of the Sacred that confuse the instrument with the source.

Yet dissonance results not only from the effects that these various exclusions produce but also because the old self, if you will, comes under siege once it begins the slow, indeterminate move toward its own dissolution. As my Madrina often asked rhetorically, as she linked the ego to a stone, "How would you know why the stone is there, whether you need to remove it, bury it, or ignore it?" The work, then, of traveling to the interior to unmoor, fracture, dislocate, and excavate those parts that are staunch in their defense of separation because they resist the idea of Divine guidance has to be intuited and projected as desire, injected into the very conviction of the choice of one's spiritual path. Knowing who walks with you and maintaining that company on the long journey is a dance of balance in which the fine lines between and among will and surrender; self-effacement and humility; doing and being; and listlessness and waiting for the Divine are being constantly drawn. This dance of balance is the work of healing, and it is to a discussion of the confluence between healing work and spiritual work that I now turn.

## Five: Healing Work Is the Antidote to Oppression—Kitsimba

The idea that the fire that constitutes the center of human beings also constitutes the center of the universe anchors a Sacred connection between the two. It provides a theory of equilibrium, and, implicitly, of disequilibrium, since we can rightly assume that the result of moving away from that center is imbalance. The symbols and symbolism of centering—that is, of the concentration of Sacred energies—are numerous. Such centering, as opposed to scattering, coalesces in Vodou in the *djevo* (the altar room), the *poto mitan* (the central pole through which the Lwa descend), and the *vévé* (the Sacred ground etchings on which they

come to ceremonial rest, which are not to be displaced once ceremony begins). But since no illness has a manifestation that is only of the individual, this theory of disequilibrium applies to the social, that is, to the collectivity as well. The two are, therefore, entangled.[18] And Kitsimba's particular formulation that healing work is the antidote to oppression not only implicates oppression in the production of disequilibrium but applies the solution—healing—at the point of the problem that everyone, it would seem, is called to address. She not only suggests that the work of healing is of various kinds, but also that it is at the very heart of spiritual labor, explaining why the healing instruments in Kikôngo are called *minkisi,* medicines, why *fèy,* leaves, in Vodou are also called *medicament,* medicine, and why in the Yoruba creation stories as told in the Ifá corpus medicines were allotted to Orisha as they were sent down to earth. To function as an antidote to oppression, healing work, that is, spiritual labor, assumes different forms, while anchored in reconstructing a terrain that is both exterior and interior.

For healing work to be undertaken there has to exist some understanding of cause, the precision of which is gained through a consultation of the Ifá oracle, or the Dillogun in the case of Santería, or the cards as in the case of Espiritísmo and Vodou. As Alourdes, a *mambo* (priest) of Vodou, explained:

> You do the cards for a person. In the cards you see the problem of the person. But when a person comes to see you he doesn't have anything to say. You have to read the cards. You going to spread out the cards to see what the person needs. You explain it. You tell the person . . . The cards tell you and then you speak with the person . . . And the person speaks to you and says, "What you say is true."
>
> If you see something in his face, you say, "Did this happen to you?" "Did you have an accident?" You search to see if the accident was natural or not . . . You have people who have things "thrown on them" (*voyé sou li*) but you have others who don't have that. It is a natural sickness they have, but people imagine that it is other people who have caused it. If someone has a *maladi* of the imagination, you can't do anything for them. You can survey someone's house . . . go there, read cards . . . you don't find a thing, because they have nothing. It is a

[medical] doctor's sickness they have. But they have an imagination and think that someone has done bad against them. There are people like that, but there are also people who really do bad. So you search to find where a malady comes from.[19]

No medicine or treatment comes without a theory of the cause of disequilibrium, *la causa*. What is the violation that displaces balance with disequilibria? Some crisis acts as the instigator for the healing work, but crisis is not the cause, yet it pushes the question of which set of explanations will one accept as the reason for the fractures that produced the crisis—the ones with which one has been living or the ones soon to be disclosed—and through which set of explanations will one begin to intuit the faint outlines of the self that succumbed to being constantly pushed aside, held at bay.[20] The crisis could be quite wrenching and deceptively self-evident, as in my earlier rendition of how I came to occupy that unstable space of not knowing in the pursuit of Kitsimba's life story. Might we think that writer's block could be the result of spiritual misalignment? Here is Kitsimba's version of my story:

*She lived a mere four miles from one of her two best friends, the one who lived right on top of the Yoruba cemetery, she, her clairvoyant aunt, Tantie, a hoard of boys and her parents, all of them laying their heads every blessed night, unknowingly, on the heads and bones of the dead; the friend who lived only two houses away from where they disturbed Sophie and unleashed the restless energy of other dead in order to build permanence in concrete houses in which they dreamed they could live in peace and luxury, but never really could . . . She and this friend would pass through the cemetery, always in a rush, taking a short cut. If they taking short cut why leave Diego Martin and go all the way to America and then to London to find out she wanted to study the plantation where I lived, right in Diego Martin, a stone's throw from where she grew up. She went to London to find out what the British put in their records about the plantation with someone called a research assistant. I was assisting her all this time, yet I never got any recognition. Well the British didn't put anything, and what they put was destroyed by fire. Fire destroyed records in St. Pierre too. What did the British have to do with snatching us from Kôngo. Absolutely nothing.*

*The second night, this reluctant, or rather hard-head, arrived in London. While taking a bath, she asked someone for assistance in completing all the work she had to do. And it was really a lot of work. But you know the distant way these nonbelievers do, needing assistance but self-conscious and skeptical about calling the higher power. I told her I would help her and in exchange she made a promise she vowed to keep. Yet, while in London, she still continued to introduce Allison as her research assistant. She never found anything about me in the archives, but she developed this fancy idea of which she became quite proud that I was somehow co-implicated in the psychic economy of slavery—such fancy words that meant nothing—and that there was some relationship between myself and Luisa Calderón. She fabricated that relationship only because the British were fond of collecting, and so they collected pages and pages about the trial and torture of Luisa Calderón. These were the pages she found, but there was nothing about me. Incidentally, there was a relationship, but it was not in the records. She had this fancy book all outlined, and I was the prop, for she had planned to rely on a skewed account of my life from one Pierre McCallum who was determined to seek revenge against the British by painting a picture of the horrors of slavery with us as the abject victims. Ask her to go back and find the chapter outlines, for she keeps meticulous records, never throwing away anything before time, and you can verify my story yourself. It was then I decided to create a block, to make it that she couldn't write what she had planned.*

*I told her she couldn't write about me unless she came to know and feel my daily life. She had to feel what it was like to get up before dawn and implore the protection of the fading dark to move in stealth to do what you had vowed to do in another place, another time, for another reason under different conditions. You could die in stealth and determination to pay the debt you were chosen to pay. She had to feel what it was like to survive above ground while really living underground by fire. She had to come as close to the ground as I did, learning to depend upon the damp rain smell of earth to clean her insides, jar her senses and to bring her to the heart of the oath I had sworn never to betray: all life is shared with those at the bottom of the Ocean, the bottom of the river, the bottom of water—the meeting point of the encircled cross. She had to feel the folds and dips*

*against those places where earth becomes level again. I wanted her to come to feel how folds and dips provided security even more so than level ground, which could be deceptively friendly. Too level. Too even. Hostile to change.*

*And she was not one of those who learned by feeling. "Those who don't hear will feel," her mother was fond of saying, but no one learns to feel on demand, by dint of sheer threat. She had learned quite early, and in a way that did not serve her, that feelings had to be buried since they did not belong in the world of the living, except on auspicious occasions as when somebody died. So the ordinary feelings of daily life always eluded her; they came as a surprise to her. She found them excessive, almost always unexpected, out of the ordinary, for what was ordinary for her was to live devoid of feelings, having learned well to quietly predict the order of events, never their effects. I wanted her to feel the textured tapestry of my life in the soft markings of her flesh and through this feeling come to know it intimately, feel it as if she were the one who had lived it. She could no longer rely on what was written in books to convey or even arrive at Truth. What was written in those books was not even a faint shadow of me; it had nothing to do with me. They knew nothing about who I was. Relying on only one way of knowing to point a path to the wisdom of the Soul. This learning would take at least the span of one life, and only the Soul could decide what would be left over for a different time, a different place. It took her seven years of skeptical fits and starts to feel the power of that early revelation which was given in that place called London; and it would take her even longer to come to have faith in it, to know that her answers needed to come from a source different than the ones she had mastered in books; to begin to feel the difference between knowledge and wisdom—one could save you in the kingdom of the dead, the other gave you only temporary status in the kingdom of the living . . . To know that with careful focused attention and contemplative service, the Divine would be made manifest. The answer to many things lay in her hands, in her very own hands.*

By the end of that day of being turned inside out, I had become convinced that Kitsimba's singular desire was not to have me author her life, but for her to author mine and make public my guarded secrets.

"How much more," I demanded, in a tearful fit of dampened rage, "are you going to divulge"? Now I struggle against the powerful urge to edit.

The *causa* can also manifest in attempts to beat back what was intentionally left behind, an intentional forgetting that is not the same as not knowing that one had something to remember. In a scene reminiscent of Julie Dash's "Daughters of the Dust" in which those bound for the city portend a misfit between the call of Spirit and the lure of concrete, Karen McCarthy Brown maps how Alourdes was jolted to remember the Lwa Kouzin Zaka, who was forced to leave his abode in the mountains of Haiti and appear on Forty-Second Street in New York City in the form of a relative's dream. "Tell Alourdes," he said, "if she dresses like me, everything going to be beautiful." It was the call to the portal of initiation, *kouché,* and a simultaneous call to remember her own family lineage of a mother and grandmother serving the Spirits.[21]

If healing work is a call to remember and remembering is embodied, then we would want to situate the body centrally in this healing complex. Brown rightly notes that "the healer's knowledge is carried in her body and it is addressed to the body of the client,"[22] and given that body praxis has been central in our mapping of subjectivity, it follows that it would be equally central in understanding the structure of healing as well. But we would also want to know how this healing work on the body travels, as well, to the inner self. Here is my reflection on a healing session in which I assisted Mama Lola, my spiritual mother in Vondou:

> Janice showed up to Mammie's basement in Brooklyn, a successful middle-class professional, wearing the strong scent of her grandmother, the scent of asafetida. From reading the cards Mammie saw that people were jealous of Janice's success and had consistently worked obeah on her, which resulted in her inability to keep money in her hands. Janice confirmed that she had a number of projects pending, but she had been in a spiral in which nothing came to fruition. "Other people go to church," she blurted with a twinge of lament and shame, "and they don't need any of this." Sensitive to the mixed scent of her grandmother's asafetida and Janice's own ambivalence, Mammie was quick on the uptake, "How do you know? You don't know that as an African woman your answers come from a different source!" The cards

indicated three cleansings, the first of which was to appease and activate Papa Legba, the guardian of doorways, the essence of choice. It began the very next day.

Standing on Legba's colors of black, red and white emblematic of the crossroads, with a lit white candle in her right hand, Janice prayed the prayer asking for protection against her enemies:

> . . . May the Peace of the Lord be with me! Divine Master, always accompany me, talk to me as you did to the disciples . . . walk in front of me and defend me against my enemies . . . May their eyes never see me, their hands never touch me, their ears never hear me, their wicked wishes never harm me and never overtake me on their way, neither on horse nor on foot, neither on earth, on the sea nor in the air. I beseech you, Lord, to spread your mighty arms to free me from unfair imprisonment . . .

"You finished?" With a limp nod from Janice, Mammie began the meticulous shredding of old clothes, snip, snip in a clockwise direction . . . snip, snip in a counterclockwise direction. The only sound was the snip snip of the new scissors and the sniffles from the steady stream of tears that mingled with the clothes discarded on the floor. Naked. Next came the food, cooked and uncooked grains, beans, ground provisions, cube sized, with two handfuls to be held for a different moment.

"I work on the outside, you work on the inside," the clear matter-of-fact announcement instruction to Janice. Again, the cleansing began with the head, this time with meat.

"If something is too heavy for your head, where will you put it?"

Not knowing whether or not it was a real question, Janice hesitated until the prompt, "On your shoulders," and so she repeated, hesitatingly, "On my shoulders."

"If it's too heavy for your shoulders where would you put it?" Still hesitating, and again the prompt, "In your hands."

"In my hands."

"If it's too heavy for your hands where would you put it?" This time with no need for a prompt.

"On the floor."

Each time the same set of questions pleading the same responses to the four directions, each time Janice's responses becoming more sure.

Next came the bad bath, strong smelling, again moving from top to bottom. "As soon as I put the bath on top of your head, drop what in your hand," one of the last vestiges of that which weighed down. With the last drop of water drained from the basin, Mammie cleaned Janice with black, red, and white cloth, each piece of fabric offered to the four directions, placed afterwards under Janice's feet. Standing on white cloth, Janice was sprayed with gin and agua florida, incensed, first the outstretched hands then the soles of the feet and head, the grounding to the earth and the seat of the Soul. She was then dressed with a new camisette of red and black with an emblazoned white cross. All clothes were incensed, including the shoes, to bring mindfulness to the road she walked.

At a different time a second steadying bath would follow, accompanied by a third white bath, the cooling signature of Papa Danbala, a good luck bath of milk, *malanguette,* a miniature family of bay leaves, cloves, cinnamon and star anise to be administered by Mammie when she traveled to complete the work at Janice's home and her place of work. It was not Papa Legba who made an appearance at Janice's workplace but Avandra, the animal spirit, come to disturb, dispel and outwit the obeah that was put there, and to teach the power of the difference between good strong medicine of the right hand and obeah of the left. The healing cycle had completed its trajectory from the bitter to the sweet. But healing takes time. Its mystery does not belong to us. It is now five years since that first moment in the basement. Janice continues to work with Mammie as she deepens her own internal sense of possibilities, still living in a place that continues to define the work *she* now does as obeah.

With the appropriate invocations and medicinal applications, the healer's work involves navigating an uninterrupted flow between the behavioral self, the inner self and the world of the disembodied.[23] To be successful, healing takes place at several levels, not the least of which is the symbolic—the peeling back of layers built up on the outside in order to get at that which resides on the inside, to which Janice had access. Tempo-

rarily, the body was unable to go the physical distance, but it could be prodded to go the metaphysical distance, within that space of the interior. Enemies lurked there, as well, not only on the outside. With the right prayer and concentration Janice could get to that inside while the body was being rid of burdens and blockages, its outer clothing, old, no longer required to adorn a body that needed to be rendered naked in order that it might be clothed differently—in the protective colors of Divine intermediary Papa Legba, guardian of the crossroads who opens the doorway to endless possibilities. The crisis had brought Janice to a crossroads, Legba's own domain, much the same way in which writer's block had catapulted me there. Invoking him was crucial to the success of this work. "I work on the outside; you work on the inside," demanded the participation of Janice, since no matter what shape one is in, one is never entitled to abdicate responsibility for one's healing or to assume the role of the passive bystander to obstruct it. "I work on the outside; you work on the inside," marked the necessary division of labor between Mammie and Janice that is required to knit the interior and exterior. And since the corporeal, physical body is not only body but of mind (inner self) and Spirit, the purpose of this body work is to bring them into synchronicity, into alignment.

Misalignment, then, is another way of thinking about alienation, that movement away from the center of fire. The pathway between the scent of asafetida and a middle-class professional does not necessarily point to alienation, but the loss of that scent may well be a powerful predictor of it. Janice did not spell out all of what she encountered on that pathway, but from Mammie's incisive uptake, "You don't know as an African woman your answers come from a different source," she did not need to. The sharp (astute) response articulated the perils associated with the journey: there is a cost associated with taking refuge in the borrowed gifts of alienation that cultivate the practice of forgetting, the refusal to pull on the ancestral cord, denying ourselves life source. But it also brings one face to face with genealogy, whether or not one is willing or ready to engage it. And those borrowed gifts of alienation are not simply passive, for ingesting the belief in obeah, another way of ingesting a deep mistrust of our senses, or the shame of our spiritual inheritance as La Negra put it, confronts the internalization of dominant religion's institutionalized dis-

avowal of these practices, yet another form of oppression. The alignment of mind, body, and Spirit could be expected to assault the social practices of alienation wherever they may be practiced, whether within dominant religion, in the enclosure of the academy with its requirements of corporate time, or in day-to-day cultural prescriptions of disablement that call these Sacred practices into question and challenge their value. Ultimately, this alignment cannot but provoke a confrontation with history, both its Cartesian variant that produced the splits in the first place and the history that is being mobilized to displace it. This is what Kitsimba's rendition of my experience of writer's block so poignantly illustrates. Writer's block, like alienation—or rather, writer's block as an aspect of alienation—is a spiritual problem requiring a spiritual solution.

The knitting together of mind, body, and Spirit finds another pivotal anchor in the world of Spirit possession. Here, body becomes the means by which mind, which has fashioned itself as autonomous, is propelled outside of itself in order to invite the return of Spirit. Body, in this complex, becomes a means of communication, simply because Spirit requires it (although not only it) to mount its descent. There are many representations of possession that rely on exteriority to make the point about the visible transformation that takes place in outward appearance as a way of providing evidence for what practitioners take to be real. But that outside, visible dimension cannot be unmoored from an interior transformation that sets up the terms for the descent of Spirit. Crucial to those terms is surrender, a handing over of autonomy in the service of Spirit, without which that transformation, itself a struggle with surrender, would never occur.

I say that the body is only one of the media for the housing of Spirit because there is no single place where this knowledge resides. Within the context of Orisha ceremony, for instance, the *Batá* themselves, the Sacred drums, are invested with the energies of the Orisha who reside there, Anya. They evoke and provoke those Sacred energies, but they also express through rhythm their own belief in their release. Doubling. At *bembés,* ceremonies that rely on the Batá, practitioners dance their belief in the rhythm of movement to guide them toward the energies of Yemayá who will manifest: *Hasta que muere,* "until I die," says Xiamara.

*As she dances, soft waves begin to form a swaying circle, round and round, seduced by songs of praise and homage; skirts open, rise, and fall to a choreography aimed at the feet, tentative at first, mimicking the tidal way of the Ocean in search of a place to settle. Feet are the first to succumb to the shift in ground from concrete to water, throwing the dancer off balance until the body begins to rely on the weightlessness of water to sustain being upright. As the circle of movement widens, drums converse with the urgent plea of the bard. Waves become insistent, compelled by the roll of the drum call. Sharp. They crash as they reach shore. Sensitive to the spot where the water wants to settle, the bard moves closer, singing the resonance so that the eardrum would take the vibrations of its meanings to that meeting place: the vibrations of rhythm of drum beat released through Sacred energies; the vibration of song released through the rhythm of drum beat and movement.*

*As the rhythms complete the invitation by reminding the body of a prior promise of its ultimate surrender, darkness descends and a deep moan bursts through the artificial enclosure, rippling down the length and across the breadth of River, which, by this time, begins to remember. River assumes on its surface a delicate veil of moving tapestry, a rippled mirror flowing impatiently, yet revealing every manner of treasure: every tadpole ebony, shiny, slippery, every crayfish, each cowrie that had crawled into its protective spiral the color of ivory, each grain of silt hued to its finest having tumbled for eternity in this muddy vortex. The cry travels upward to Sky, downward again into the deep bowels of Earth until each molecule of air, each particle of soil, each sleeping star that planned to rise to brilliance later that night, each stone, each shard of leaf, each root of a tree that had crawled surreptitiously to lands grown distant from loss and from the fruits of its labor, the exploding scent of each flower, each expectant bud, each pig that had given life including those yet to be born, each fowl, each itinerant rooster, every drop of water including those hesitatingly formed, they all, each one of them began to feel the desire of the cry and agreed to conspire to make its power manifest.*

The Divine call to the Divine, inside of a meeting of self with self, a practice of alignment with the Divine. Yemayá, that broad expanse of

Ocean, who lives both on sea and on land has pushed past modernity's mode of reason and taken up temporary sojourn on the insides of this artificial enclosure, come to accept, to cleanse, to bless, to remind us that in the same way the breaking of waves does not compromise the integrity of the Ocean, so too anything broken in our lives cannot compromise that cosmic flow to wholeness. The body cannot but surrender in order to make way for this tidal flow. And this, too, necessitates practice.

## Six: Beginnings

While my focus here has been on African-based spiritual practices, it should not be taken to mean, as I indicated earlier, that the precinct of the Sacred is any way partial. Within the metaphysical systems of Native American, Hawaiian, the *I Ching*, ancient Hindu, and Jewish mysticism are to be found correlates of Vodou and Lucumí that can be interpreted through Fon, Ewe, Kikôngo, Yoruba, and Dahomean Sacred prisms. And since geography, culture, or religious systems cannot carry the capacity to annex the Sacred, we can safely assume that there must be multiple instances where its shades are inscribed. If it is to be found everywhere in the terrain of the everyday as part of the continuous existential fabric of being, then it lives simultaneously in the daily lives of everyone, in spiritual work that assumes a different form from those I have engaged here, but also in daily incidents, in those "things" we routinely attribute to coincidence, those moments of synchronicity, the apparently disparate that have cohesion but under another framework. It is to be found in direct revelation, in those domains that mystics routinely inhabit, but in work that in a purely secular realm would seem not to derive from Spirit. I am thinking here of Michael Cottman's project to uncover the sunken wreckage of the *Henrietta Marie*, a slave ship, off the coast of Florida and his explicitness about the spiritual character of the project: "We go to the sea to explore the depths of our Souls . . . the call that beckoned us under water came from the sea."[24] It is also to be found in the meeting ground of the erotic, the imaginative, and the creative, which Akasha Gloria Hull addressed in what she called the "union of politics, spiritual consciousness, and creativity that gave rise to a new spirituality among progressive African-American women at the turn of the 21st century."[25] This fusion

helps to explain why black female theologians use Baby Suggs in Morrison's clearing as Sacred text. And it is not surprising that Donna Daniels found that many Santería practitioners in the Bay Area were artists, for in a larger sense there is no dimension of the Sacred that does not yearn for the making of beauty, an outer social aesthetic of expression whether in written or spoken word, the rhythm of drum, the fashioning of an altar, or any of the visual arts. The Sacred is inconceivable without an aesthetic. "We wanted to know God," Mbûta Kusikila explained in my trip to the Kôngo, "and that's why we carved all of these figures, not because we worshipped idols."[26] In an even larger sense, the sacred precinct is at once vast, proximate, and intimate. In Kitsimba's universe, the principle is quite simple: *You human beings have this fancy word—syncretism—for something quite simple: everything in the universe is interconnected!*

Interconnectedness, interdependence, and intersubjectivity as constructs or desire do not necessarily provoke resistance within the shared canon of materialist modernity. Indeed, we count on this for the making of successful political movements. It is not the fact of intersubjectivity, then, but the interjection of the Sacred in its matrix that renders it suspect. Let me examine the geographies of that suspicion. At times it is linked to the practitioner/believer, who ostensibly comes with a proclivity to disengage the world of politics. But that suspicion is simply not borne out in practice. There is a wide range of contexts that imbricate the Sacred with the political: the large-scale political movements that are based in liberation theology in Latin America; that phase of Indian anticolonial struggle inaugurated by Gandhi whose prayer life lay at the root of mass politics; and the political party in Suriname that was formed by Renate Druiventak, introduced earlier, based on the prompting of Winti in her dreams. Luisa Teish, who has been in a range of intersecting struggles, links the political to the spiritual in these terms: "We were political *because* we were spiritual,"[27] a formulation echoed in Marta Moreno Vega's apt sense of an intrinsic connection between the political and the spiritual: "The energy that naturally flows from initiation opens up inner channels, granting the initiate the ability to see, feel, smell, taste, and sense more acutely, and to be more present in the world. By combining my knowledge of the spiritual and the secular worlds, I have found a universe that unveils all of its wisdom and beauty before me. Like the great . . . goddess of the ocean,

Yemayá, who lives in the ocean and on the earth, we must avail ourselves of all the natural treasures of both worlds."[28] Indeed, the formulation of embodied praxis mounts a deep challenge to that suspicion of disengagement. Thus, to continue to argue from that suspicion not only denies the pedagogies derived from Sacred praxis but exposes an allegiance to that form of rationality that divests the secular of the Sacred in a way that both privileges and subordinates—privileging the former while subordinating the latter.

Or is the suspicion cathected onto women themselves whom feminism wants to cure of the desire to be consorts of manly male gods? To be sure, many of the immigrant women in Vodou and Lucumí practices do not claim the name feminist or woman of color. However, negotiating the social relations of gender and sexuality occurs within complicated inheritances of anthropomorphization. Within the Yoruba system Olodumare, god, is not gendered, and in the Kikôngo creation narrative what brings earth into existence is Kalunga, an energy force that is similarly nongendered. Thus moving from neutered conceptualization to the engendering of Sacred praxis maps a complex journey from energy to embodiment constitutive of a masculinization of the social organization of the Sacred, but it need not carry the immediate presumption of women's subordination. Lorand Matory's work is most instructive here, for in it he elaborates how cross-dressing and gender-bending in Oyo-Yoruba practices in Nigeria muddy the categories of male and female, husband and wife, in ways that carve a space for dominance by women.[29] The Vodou god Gede, a preeminently masculine god, dances the balance among sexuality, trickery, and death by mounting Mammie with consistency at every fete, replete with oversized penis, re-enacting the sensuous rhythms of sex on women—lesbian and heterosexual alike. There are then at least two kinds of mounting taking place, a process of doubling that makes the question of gendered memory of Spirit appropriate for both the mounted and mountee (the same person) and the woman who rides the sexual advance of Gede. Short of us all becoming practitioners, the urgent requirement here is not to presume a priori how gender and sexuality work but to lean on ethnographic work to create the proximate categories that convey a sense of the meanings of these gender transmutations.[30] The problematic

here pertains to how we approach knowing when much of the service of that knowing emanates from being.

All of these questions heighten the importance of traveling within, of reaching on the inside of these cultural spiritual categories. In order to do so there are at least four areas we must examine. First, the critiques of patriarchal religions and fundamentalisms have, in some instances, kept us away from the search for Spirit. We have conceded, albeit indirectly so, far too much ground for fundamentalists to appropriate the terrain. And yet, the Sacred or the spiritual cannot be deployed as the ace in the political hole, that is, deployed only as a critique of fundamentalism.

Second, our legitimate repudiation of the category of naturalization as an instrument of domination ought not to be confused with the engagement of the forces, processes, and laws of nature, particularly because these forces of nature do not behave according to the terms prescribed by hegemonic thought systems. It is one reason that capitalist imperatives would have them "tamed" and "owned," or otherwise reconfigured as (Christian) paradise in order to be secularly consumed. The animus and activities of nature and the hegemonic processes of naturalization that would have social inequity originate in the natural are, simply put, not the same.

Third, critiques of the shifting faces of hegemony do not automatically provide the maps for an inner life, for redefining the grammar of the mind, for adjusting the climate of the Soul (in the words of Howard Thurman). Those maps have to be drawn, and drawing them is crucial since one of the effects of constructing a life based principally in opposition is that the ego learns to become righteous in its hatred of injustice. In that very process it learns simultaneously how to hate since it is incapable of distinguishing between good hate and bad hate, between righteous hate and irrational hate. My point here is not to reduce radical political movements to mass psychologies of hatred. Rather it is to suggest that the field of oscillation between the two might be quite small. The good righteous hatred of injustice solidifies in the same way in which, for instance, we learn how to class by living in a class system. We learn how to hate in our hatred of injustice, and it is these psychic residuals that travel, sometimes silently, sometimes vociferously, into social movements that

run aground on the invisible premises of scarcity—alterity driven by separation, empowerment driven by external loss—and of having to prove perpetual injury as the quid pro quo to secure ephemeral rights.

Fourth, secular feminism has perhaps assisted, unwittingly, in the privatization of the spiritual—in the dichotomization of a "private" spiritual self from the corpus of work called feminism and from organized political mobilizations. There are personal, political, and epistemic ramifications here. Consider again Renate Druiventak. At the outset of her field project, Wekker was "wary of Winti, hoping that [she] might study the construction of gender and sexualities without having to get into it," to separate life from what she then thought of as the superstructure religion. As the evidence began to pile up, however, and "women frequently attended WintiPrey/ritual gatherings and consulted religious specialists in matters of love, sickness, health, and prosperity," Wekker admits that "it became inescapable."[31] If political work among Afro-Surinamese working-class women is taken merely to illustrate that "Third World women have agency too"—in short, if we theorize outside of that which gave impetus to the political work in the first place—we would have missed something quite crucial about how Winti knitted together the interstices of selfhood and the relationship between that self and community. We would not know Druiventak, although we would know *something* of what she did—that is, political work. Clearly the "success" of the political party in the secular world is not the only important "outcome" of the life she lives. Ultimately, excising the spiritual from the political builds the ground at the intersection of two kinds of alienation: the one an alienation from the self; the other, which is inevitable, alienation from each other.

What would taking the Sacred seriously mean for transnational feminism and related radical projects, beyond an institutionalized use value of theorizing marginalization? It would mean wrestling with the praxis of the Sacred. The central understanding within an epistemology of the Sacred is that of a core/Spirit that is immortal, at once linked to the pulse and energy of creation. It is that living matter that links us to each other, making that which is individual simultaneously collective. But as I outlined in the previous chapter, its presence does not mean it is passively given or maintained. Of course, the idea of core or essence signals essentialism, but the multiple praxis of embodiment I have explored here

indicate requirements for a work life beyond the mere presence of a body. In this sense it marks a major departure from normative essentialism.[32] Yet core, like destiny, has been made to signal fixity and the unchanging, a move that opens the back door to conflate the Sacred with a primitive tradition that is resistant to change. Those who would characterize this world of the postmodern and the identities of its inhabitants as absent of this essence or core would seem to be at odds with the thought systems of a great number of people in the world who live the belief that their lives are intimately and tangibly paired to the world of the invisible. And this state of being at odds is to be expected since Enlightenment reason and its attendant psychologies have only a relatively short lifespan, coming into prominence as one mode of reasoning that achieved dominance, like any other hegemonic system, by beating out others. And although its diffusion as it accompanied imperialism in its quest to be imperial has, for the moment, promulgated some of its own essence on different shores, it need not follow that these are the only beings who can be produced, since each thought system has in fact its own attendant psychology, code of behaviors, and its own prerogatives to deal with impermanence that is not imagined as a recent by-product of modernity but as a permanent condition of the universe. Taking the Sacred seriously would mean coming to wrestle with the dialectic of permanent impermanence.

The constructs that constitute the praxis of the Sacred would thus have to be taken as real and the belief structure of its practitioners as having effects that are real. The constituents within its ambit, such as Truth, cannot be superficially positioned as multiple choice, contested situational claims, or lapses in communication, but as metaphysical principle. The knowledge derived from faith and belief systems is not uninformed epiphenomena, lapses outside the bounds of rationality to be properly corrected with rationality, but rather knowledge about Sacred accompaniment, knowledge that is applied and lived in as consistent and as committed a way as possible so as to feel and observe the meaning of mystery, not as secret, but as elusive—hence the constancy of work. Faith could not then live without spiritual literacy or competence, a shade of competence that does not rely on the tired exertion of an individuated will but on the knowledge of Divine accompaniment and guidance, itself the essence of Truth. And grace, the quality that, as Lata Mani says, picks

us up and dusts us off over and over again, instills a sense, however faint, of its companion humility, since it comes through no merit of our own.[33] But for these anchors of Sacred praxis to shake the archives of secularism, they would have to be removed from the category of false consciousness so that they can be accorded the real meaning they make in the lives of practitioners.

Taking the Sacred seriously would propel us to take the lives of primarily working-class women and men seriously, and it would move us away from theorizing primarily from the point of marginalization. In chapter 3 I argued against the analytic tendency of turning women's indispensability in the labor market into narratives of victimhood, but that formulation remained narrowly materialist. Since in spiritual work inheres the lived capacity to initiate and sustain communication between spiritual forces and human consciousness, to align the inner self, the behavioral self and the invisible, we are confronting an engagement with the embodied power of the Sacred, collectivized self-possession, if you will. We can hardly think *empowerment,* then, premised as it is in the notions of need, lack and scarce resources that have to be shored up by an exterior source, since it would mean conferring on "theorists" the power to confer power, a power, quite simply, that we do not have. At the very least it should make us wary about theorizing from the point of marginalization, for even the most egregious signatures of new empire are not the sole organizing nexus of subjectivity, if we manage to stay alive, and even in death there are commitments and choices about the when, how, and the kind of provisions with which we return.

Since the praxis of the Sacred involves the rewiring of the senses, the praxis for secular feminism would involve a rewiring of its most inherited concepts of home and formulations of domesticity, for instance. Home is multiply valenced, a space and place in which Time centers the movement of Sacred energies; a place where those who walk with you—Orisha, Lwa, Spirit—live and manifest (drop in) apparently impromptu, or when called to work. They are fed, celebrated, and honored there because they reside there. It is one of the many places where they reside, whereas it may be the only place that we reside. Home is a set of practices, as John Berger notes, and at the heart of those practices are those that mark its conversion into a spiritual workplace.[34]

Of immediate importance to feminism is the meaning of embodiment and body praxis, and the positioning of the body as a source of knowledge within terms differently modulated than the materiality of the body and its entanglement in the struggle against commodification, as it continues to be summoned in the service of capital. But here again that materialism has absented Spirit, and so the contemporaneous task of a theory of the flesh, with which I think Cherríe Moraga would agree, is to transmute this body and the pain of its dismemberment to a remembering of the body to its existential purpose.[35] There are Sacred means through which we come to be at home in the body that supercede its positioning in materiality, in any of the violent discourses of appropriation, and in any of the formations within normative multiculturalism. That being at home in the body is one of the meanings of surrender, as in a handing over not a sacrificial giving up. Bodies continue to participate in the social but their raison d'être does not belong there, for ultimately we are not our bodies, and this contract cannot be settled cheaply. Sacred energies would want us to relinquish the very categories constitutive of the material world, not in the requisite of a retreat but as a way to become more attuned to their ephemeral vagaries and the real limits of temporality so as to return to them with a disciplined freedom capable of renovating the collective terms of our engagement.

Kit*simba* walks with me. She lives in springs, in water—that is, everywhere. She carves resistant rock. She lives in the roots of words: *Simba,* to bless, to grow into the gentle vibrations of our names. *Simbi,* the Soul of someone who holds the power of making community. *Simbi,* teacher, the Soul of someone who holds the power of touch. *Simbi,* healer, the Soul of someone who holds the power of words . . . *Simba Simbi,* hold onto what holds you up.

Yemayá holds the crown, having enabled the Crossing, Kitsimba's as well as my own. She has assumed the task of transforming what we most need to learn from the Crossing into what we most need to learn about ourselves. Pedagogies of the Sacred are pedagogies of Crossing.

## Seven: Prayer Poem in Praise of Yemayá Achaba, Mediator of the Crossing

Without you I would not know life
I would not be
Myself/Yourself
In me/In you
Sin tú no hay vida
Mother/Teacher
I learn how to caress from the cadence of waves
Supple
Gentle
Tumultuous Enveloping

In the vastness of Ocean surrounded by your treasures
Which passion alone could not coax you to reveal
Inle
Wash me . . . mother of life
of water
One in the beginning when there was no beginning
No time
Take me to that underground home on top of the sand
To your mirror turquoise jade inlay
Known in the land of gods to shatter
Illusion, Maya
Peligrosísima
Take me
Desnuda
Without pretense
Sin nada
Rebirthed in the cadence of waves

The end of your name is illusion
In another tongue
But there are no other tongues
For those who know your many names
Ancient names

You know you who love the ends of things
Who use them to sustain you
So that nothing may come to an end
Ashé

In the last cycle of Moon
We come paying homage
Gifts of Seven
No one mistakes your calm for weakness
When you tumble foam
Spew turquoise rage
No room for calm
In those times it is not weakness for which
We yearn but peace
That truth which passion alone
Could not entice you to divulge

O Achaba, Peligrosísima
Haunting Sweet Verbena
Wise one
Hiding your age deep within the soft fold of waves
translucent
amongst your treasures rest the captive
shuffled through the door of no return
no longer imprisoned
You have restored their wings
Bathe me
Goddess of Salt
Protector of the salt eaters
The salt pickers
Heal our wounds
You who rescued Lot's wife
Tongue-tied
From the scourge of generations
As I approach you in the early dawn
Wind whispers its welcome to the melody
Of the salmon violet horn

Moon rests from its full bloom
You in honor assume a stillness
Draped smooth in seamless silk
Awaiting a lover's return
In this early dawn
We coauthor
this day
of endless transformations
I rest my pen upon your altar
my Soul[36]