Feminine Immortalization: Georgina Herrera’s Poetic Restructuring of Yoruban Orisha Power Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

This paper situates the poetry of Georgina Herrera within the larger contexts of global racial, gender, and religious discourses. Specifically focusing on Herrera’s celebration of black female subjectivity, this research comments on her subversion of the eugenist rhetoric that saturates Cuban cultural consciousness. The poems “Dios de me casa y de mi sangre/ God of My Home and of My Blood,” “Ibu Sedi,” and “Iya” in particular are examined for their representation of Herrera’s religious and gendered subversion of colonial attempts at the erasure of black experience in Cuba. This research highlights the way Georgina Herrera restructures the pantheon of Santería deities in order to affirm the social power of black females in Cuban society.

Keywords: Afro-Cuban poetry, Black feminism, Yoruba / Santería

Largely untouched by the critical eye of English scholars, Georgina Herrera’s poetry is a complex interweaving of African ancestral pride and feminist thought composed within the context of modern Cuban culture. Born in Cuba in 1936, a time in which the transnational discourses of blackness, like the Harlem Renaissance and the Negristá movement, were solidified, Herrera entered the world at a cultural moment that called revolutionary black subjectivity into global consciousness. In the aftermath of two United States occupations, the Platt Amendment, and subsequently a racial civil war, the status of individuals, like Herrera, of African ancestry in Cuba was complicated. Consequently, Georgina Herrera’s poetry can be read in direct conversation with the stratified racial history of the island nation. Working against the racist and patriarchal power structures reminiscent of colonialism (slavery was not abolished in Cuba until 1886, after all– a mere 50 years before her birth), Herrera calls upon the Yoruban Orishas, the deities of Santería, in order to praise and uplift the African ancestry of Cuban heritage, more specifically, the feminine influence and power within this ancestry. In fact, by often labeling herself as the prophet and voice for the Orishas, Herrera uses her poetry to foreground the role of women in Santería mythology. Through subverting traditional race, gender, and religious binaries in her poetry, Herrera restructures the pantheon of Santería deities in order to affirm the social power of black females in Cuban society.

Before examining the ways in which Georgina Herrera uses her poetry to redefine the nucleus of Yoruban Orisha power to be female, or at the very least gender ambiguous, we must first understand her subversion of Christianity, consequently, her refusal of traditional colonial patriarchal power. As Dawn Stinchcomb explains, Santería, and other religions practiced by members of the African diaspora throughout the Latin American and Caribbean sphere, was itself crafted by slaves as a subversive tool. “These religions,” she argues, “have allowed those that practice them to maintain their cultural ties with their African origins through the use of collective memories and have given them personal relationships with guardian spirits known as orishas” (5). Stinchcomb details the scholarly belief that slaves, in an attempt to operate within the identities of African deities with those of Catholic saints. Readers learn that “this religious hybridization was a survival technique employed by the slaves to protect their religious practices while feigning full acceptance of Catholicism” (5). With this historical precedent set, we can see how, through her poetry, Georgina Herrera takes her ancestor’s religious rebellion one step further.

Portraying Christ as nothing more than a pitiful object hanging on the wall, Herrera asserts Olofin as the real seat of divine power on Earth in her poem “God of My Home and of My Blood.” However, before she arrives at this subversion, Herrera begins the poem with a rejection of Western racial binaries and mestizaje:

Black family of no mixed blood,
black our eyes, our skin, our kinky hair…
and our soul, pure,
almost wild, for
our origin was the jungle (57).

By opening the poem in this way, Herrera is working directly against the idealization of mestizaje in Cuban cultural consciousness. Asserting that she is the voice of a “Black family of no/mixed blood,” Herrera poetically purifies her Yoruban blood line and cultural ancestry of any Criollo influence. This subversion of traditional Western racial dichotomies works directly against the problematic
status of mestizaje within the greater Latin American and Caribbean sphere. With the understanding that mestizaje has been used in Cuba as a rhetorical strategy to rationalize eugenics and cultural whitening, we can see the importance of Herrera’s overt glorification of her family’s blackness and their “pure” soul. More specifically, Herrera is subverting the dehumanizing rhetoric that accompanies this rationalization of eugenics by claiming that her family’s purity comes from the wildness imbued by originating from the jungle.

In fact, the introduction to the collection in which this poem is published references Herrera’s ancestry by quoting this poem, particularly the same six opening lines quoted above. The original Spanish introduction, I believe, is more precise in expressing the gravity and complexity of Herrera’s heritage. It states: “Georgina Herrera…nació en una familia de afro-descendientes con profundo orgullo en su pureza racial” (35). In this version of the introduction, Herrera’s familial proximity to Africa is foregrounded. By linking her directly to Africa in this way, we can understand the following clause, which I translate to mean that she has profound pride in her family’s racial purity. The English translation published in the collection, however, displaces this link to Africa as a modifying clause at the beginning of the sentence, not a direct grammatical connection as the literal source of the family’s great pride – a connection that is paramount to contextualizing the significance of the need for Herrera’s redefinition of Afro-Cuban religious understanding. With the knowledge that Afro-Cubans have been fighting against the discourses of mestizaje as a eugenist tool since its inception, throughout the long twentieth century and all the way to present day, this indirect translation of an introductory sentence meant to provide the reader with a foundation for the understanding of Herrera’s motives becomes hypocritical. The English translation of “pureza racial” to the phrase “racial pedigree,” effectively erasing purity as the source of Herrera’s pride and replacing it with an animalistic signifier, stands in stark, direct contrast to Herrera’s rebellion against the history of dehumanizing rhetoric employed against Cubans of African ancestry. However, the greatest irony, comes with the fact that, in the English translation, it is the word “pedigree” that has the footnote pointing to the exact first six lines of the poem “God of My Home and of My Blood” as the rationale behind the statement, when, in fact, the entirety of this particular poem works against the erasure of her black heritage – precisely what we can see happening through the act of translation itself.

The poem continues to undermine Christianity and objectify Jesus Christ. Herrera writes:

> What a humble home! On the walls
> only a portrait: a blonde Christ hanging,
> imposed
> on the charred skin since
> who knows when (57).

With the image of “a blonde Christ hanging.” Herrera evokes the most pitiful moment of the life of Jesus Christ in Christian consciousness. By choosing this image in particular, Herrera is calling the strength of the Christian deity into question. She employs a type of double speak with the phrase “imposed/ on the charred skin,” pertaining to both the physical picture on the wall, which signifies the ubiquity of religious iconography, as well as everything the portrait stands for in Afro-Cuban history. Herrera also reveals just how deeply rooted this religious imposition is by not specifying a beginning. For as long as she has been alive, and, presumably, for the length of her living relatives’ lives, Christianity has been forced upon the black Cuban population. Herrera continues her rejection of Christian authority by calling Jesus Christ “that poor thing” and claiming “almost out of pity we accepted him” (57). Saying that the Afro-Cuban population accepted Christ “almost out of pity,” rather than attributing the acceptance to residual racist colonial power, Herrera affords the marginalized group agency. This affirmation of agency transitions into the final assertion of the poem. The poem ends by saying that there is “only one universal god:/ Olofi” (57). In this last line, Herrera disposes of the weak Christ and replaces him with the powerful Orisha Olofi, effectively solidifying her inversion of the standing religious dichotomy.

Herrera extends her subversive efforts into the gendered sphere. With a rejection of Christian authority established, she works within the context of Santería to assert feminine agency. In the poem “Ibu Sedi,” Herrera praises the deity Yemaya and asserts herself as the chosen prophet for the mother goddess. Herrera writes,

> In the language of my ancestors,
> I say everything
> that pleases my One Mother.
> From Abeokuta⁹, where
> that little woman was born, deceivingly feeble,
> truly olosi,
> I was the chosen one to speak (137).

Beginning the poem in this way, Herrera sets out to reshape the boundaries of Yemaya’s power all the way back to her creation. By invoking the language of the ancestor in the African region where Yemaya was born, Herrera is reassigning the seat of Orisha power to the feminine. The poet states that at birth, Yemaya was a “little woman,” “deceivingly feeble,” and “truly olosi” – the Yoruba word for wise. This image of the one true mother coming into being on Earth not as a helpless infant, rather, already as a strong and wise woman, immediately elevates her to supernatural worth. Here, Herrera affirms Yemaya’s omnipotence. Because Herrera herself says “everything/ that pleases [her] One Mother,” she legitimizes her role as the “chosen one to speak.”
Another poem in which Herrera praises the purity and ubiquity of the mother goddess Yemaya is a piece entitled “Iya.” Iya is the Yoruba word meaning mother, however, it is evident from the content of the verse that Herrera speaks about her spiritual mother, not her physical one. Herrera writes,

oh, your body of ancestral wood  
my faith and my heart: Iya!  
You are the one who gives me true life  
I cry your name as if a queen, and I free myself (121).

In this quote the reader sees how, reflective of the rest of the poem, Herrera emphasizes Yemaya’s unity with nature. She is able to control the elements, and her body is made “of ancestral wood.” Herrera connects Yemaya’s divine power to this cohesion with the natural Earth. She accomplishes this by exclaiming that in her role as Iya, the divine mother, Yemaya is “the one who gives me true life.” In this line Herrera is exemplifying the power of the Orishas in Santería mythology by stating the life that Herrera claims she is then able to free herself. This statement is packed with several racially charged and gendered significations. Herrera asserts that she is able to expand herself past the socially constructed borders of everything that comes with being an individual within one of the most marginalized groups in Cuba – a dark-skinned woman. Herrera affords herself, through calling upon Yemaya as the one true mother, the political agency to be able to free herself. There are no men present. This is an act that she accomplishes wholly with feminine power. Herrera, as the poetic voice, is able to liberate herself fully through channeling Yemaya, who we see represented in this poem as the epicenter of omnipotence.

This reassignment of power to the feminine is solidified in the closing lines of “Iya.” Herrera writes,

Iya,  
I embrace the sun with joy.  
I am not lost anymore, I know who I am.  
My steps move forever strong  
on this earth (123).

Herrera makes a powerful assertion to close this poem. Because of the access to power worshiping the one true mother has afforded her, Herrera is able to be what bell hooks deems a “radical black female [subject]” (53).10

After the affirmation of worth in the role of divine prophet, Herrera positions herself even closer to Yemaya. She writes,

She, the leader,  
who wears  
a silver chain around her ankles.  
She calls me Omi Sande  
for I am her true daughter (137).

Herrera, again, praises Yemaya’s power before asserting her own authority. Herrera portrays Yemaya as the sole leader, elevating her above any other deity. Yemaya then calls Herrera by the name of her own daughter: Omi Sande. By labeling herself as “her true daughter,” Herrera reaffirms her ability to speak for the goddess through her poetry. With this rhetoric, Herrera inverts traditional religious gender roles by reassigning the roles of omnipotent deity and prophet to the feminine.

Another interesting element of Herrera’s poetry that is reflective of greater Afro-Cuban religious culture, which we see prominently feminized in “Ibu Sedi,” is the blending of Yoruba words into the Spanish verse. Of this linguistic hybridity, Mary Ann Clark writes,

it was important for Africans, particularly those living in the cities of colonial Cuba, to be able to express their ideas in the language of this new culture in which they found themselves. As they reconstituted their indigenous religions, they creolized their language usage… Thus, the songs, prayers, and religious terminology continued in a form of the Yoruba language often called Lukumi. (32)

This creolization of language, as Clark defines it, is a tactic Herrera uses frequently in her poetry. By keeping religious words in the original Yoruba, and not translating them to Spanish, Herrera subtly restricts comprehension of her poetry to Afro-Cubans. Without the assistance of a footnote or a translation, the Criollo population may not be able to fully understand the context of the verse. This restriction of understanding adds another level of complexity to Herrera’s attempts at uplifting Yoruba religious practice. Again, in the poem “Ibu Sedi,” Herrera uses the voice of Yemaya to legitimze her poetic authority. Herrera declares that Yemaya speaks directly to her and says “‘you is Lucumisa’” (137). Because Lucumisa is described in the footnote of the poem to mean “woman belonging to the Lucumi ethnic group,” the goddess speaks directly to Herrera as the poet to name her as the voice of the group, the mouthpiece for Yoruban ancestry. Here, we see the way Herrera keeps the purity of Yoruba language intact, illustrating Clark’s point of verbal authenticity for Santería religious practices.
Herrera becomes the subject of the poem; she is the image of a black female not hindered by any societal constraints. Because of the divine power of Yemaya, Herrera is no longer objectified by racist, colonial, or patriarchal institutions. In this strong feminist exclamation, we see how Herrera answers hooks’ call for diverse pictures of black female experience. hooks writes that, in order to challenge and reshape cultural understandings of black womanhood, there must be narratives put forth that:

emphasize the importance of decolonizing our minds, developing critical consciousness. Feminist politics can be an integral part of a renewed black liberation struggle. Black women, particularly those of us who have chosen radical subjectivity, can move toward revolutionary social change...we make the site where radical black female subjectivity can be nurtured and sustained (60).

By claiming that her “steps move forever strong/ on this earth,” Herrera displays how she has decolonized her mind through reassigning Orisha power to be feminine – she is not afraid to place the seat of power on Earth with a female. Creating this link between herself and Yemaya as a way to assert “revolutionary social change” within the contexts of Cuba and Santería, Herrera is absolutely answering hooks’ call to “make the site where radical black female subjectivity can be nurtured and sustained.” Herrera subverts the traditional binaries of religion and gender in order to afford personal agency and power to herself, in turn all Yoruba black females.

Through her poetic voice, Georgina Herrera works within the confines of Cuban culture, particularly the borders of Santería religious consciousness, in order to challenge the standing dichotomies of race and gender. Specifically, Herrera’s poetry regarding the role of the Orishas in Cuban society reflects what has been referred to as “a complicated public discourse with important ramifications for under-standing especially Latina/o and Afro-Atlantic diaspora religions on a global scale” (Otero and Falola xxvi). Disrupting current understandings of religious practices in Cuba that are often sensationalized in order to rationalize racist discourse, Herrera creates vignettes that glorify Orishas and the mythology of Santería. Working to praise the role of female deities, and the role of black females in Cuban society in general, Herrera restructures the pantheon of Yoruban religious tradition in order to afford power and agency to black womanhood on the island of Cuba as a whole.

NOTES
1. A version of this paper was presented at the 31st Annual Interdisciplinary Conference in the Humanities (University of West Georgia, Carrollton, GA, 2016)
2. Georgina Herrera’s work is not well-known throughout the English-speaking world. This is often attributed to the fact that very little of her work has so far been translated into English. However, there are some emerging scholarly conversations that have started to take shape within the past 15 years in English. Herrera’s work has, so far, been examined in terms of its portrayal of the African diaspora, Cuban nationality, and maternity.
3. “Interbreeding and cultural intermixing of Spanish and American Indian people (originally in Mexico, and subsequently also in other parts of Latin America); miscegenation, racial and cultural intermixing...” (OED).
4. “A native of Spanish-speaking South or Central America, esp. one of pure Spanish descent” (OED). In Cuban context specifically, Criollo is used to categorize a person of Spanish blood – someone considered white.
5. As detailed by the OED definition above, mestizaje is a blanket term used throughout the Spanish-speaking world to describe the mixing of those of Spanish descent and those of indigenous or African descent. This mixing encompasses two different components: the biological (bi-racial couples producing children), and the cultural. In the post-Colonial period, mestizaje became the rallying cry behind which political and cultural leaders gathered to push for the end of the racial civil wars and the rampant intra-Cuban racism. One of these leaders was poet Nicolás Guillén. In the introduction to a collection of Guillén’s poetry entitled Yoruba from Cuba, Alistair Hennessy sheds some light on the way mestizaje was distorted into a justification for eugenics in the early 20th century, which stood firmly in place at Herrera’s birth and early life. Hennessy writes,

Overt racialism grew as new waves of Spanish immigrants flooded in as part of a whitening policy. Black immigration was forbidden by decree until labour was imported from Haiti and the British West Indies to meet the demands of expanding sugar plantations, now mostly under American ownership. Disillusion led to the formation of the PIC (Independent Party of Colour) but in order to stem its growth a law was passed in 1910 forbidding political parties to be based on colour….Further frustration erupted in the so-called Race War of 1912 in which as many as 3000 Blacks may have been killed. Faced by such discrimination Blacks withdrew into their own subculture based on secret societies (12-13).
6. Joshua Lund traces the evolution of the word mestizaje from its origin in colonial Mexico all the way to contemporary discourses. His book The Impure Imagination: Toward a Critical Hybridity in Latin American Writing shows how, because of the multiplicity of words the word mestizaje is used, it is a “discursive series” that becomes “a particularly tricky object of critique” (89).
7. The English translation of this sentence from the introduction reads: “Of African descent, Georgina Herrera (April 23, 1936—) was born in Jovellanos, the capital of
the province of Matanzas, to a family with great pride in its racial pedigree” (15).
8. While the word pedigree as a noun has been used historically to describe the purity of royal bloodlines, it is colloquially used now in American discourse as an adjective to describe the recorded history of an animal’s ancestry, most often in reference to a dog. This conjuring of animalistic imagery in an English language reader’s mind cannot be ignored.
9. The footnote by the translators reads “Abeokuta: region in Africa where Yemaya is worshipped” (139).
10. bell hooks’ book focuses mostly on an American context. However, the claim made about the need for diverse black female narratives is applicable to, and answered by Herrera.

WORKS CITED