A Contra corriente
Una revista de estudios latinoamericanos

Vol. 19, Num. 1 (Fall 2021): 209-228

Ashé! Daymé Arocena: Santería, Cultural Contestation, and the Politics of Remembrance

Silvia M. Roca-Martínez
The Citadel

Known to some as "Cuba's latest Jazz phenomenon," Daymé Arocena, an Afro-Cuban Jazz musician from Havana, has taken the international music scene by storm. Trained in one of Cuba's most prestigious music schools, the Amadeo Roldán Conservatory, and performing since she was fourteen years old, Arocena, who also writes her own songs, has become the poster child of a new generation of Cuban artists. This cohort of artists follow in the footsteps of groundbreaking Cuban artists and intellectuals such as Wifredo Lam, Nicolás Guillén, Nancy Morejón, Manuel Mendive, or Belkis Ayón, who incorporated Afro-Cuban religious imagery in their work both to honor and to narrate the Afro-Cuban experience. Through their work, this new generation of artists articulates a new concept of Cubanness, one deeply rooted in its Diasporic condition, and which strongly rests on religion. Santería aesthetics informs both Arocena's music and her sartorial choices, and infuses other aspects concerning her artistic production. Through her music and appearance, Arocena depicts Santería as a legitimate and deeply spiritual religion, unpretentiously challenging unfavorable, commonly held views. Arocena radiates a noble reclaiming of her own as well as Cuba's

Afro-Cuban heritage and culture, all of which had been institutionally demonized.[1] Her appearance and work provide us with the coordinates of a new cartography that highlights and legitimizes traditionally discredited discourses, practices, and people.

Although at face value one could argue that Arocena's channeling of Santería aesthetics, her use of prayers, her references to deities, and her use of the Yoruba language further commodify this religion, there is a solemnity to her craft, and to her relationship with this religion that tacitly, yet firmly, dispels this claim.[2] The artist's representation of Santería through her songs and through her own image continues to engage with and contribute to former renditions of Cuba's most popular faith as positive, dignified, and empowering.[3] As I will examine in depth, what makes Arocena unique and sets her apart from other Cuban musicians who are also Santeros (or Babalawos—Ifá priests—such as Alexander Abreu) and who incorporate Santería into their work (Telmary, Descemer Bueno, Orishas, Yusa or Ibeyi, to name a few) is that, despite not being a religious singer per se, Arocena's sartorial choices, cover art, music, and the structure of her albums are informed by Santería. Both Arocena's artistic persona and her work stand as a project that rests on remembrance and cultural

---

[1] Scholar Stephan Palmié challenges the idea that Santería is an Afro-Cuban religion since, among other reasons, it includes a series of practices from different traditions and beliefs—not all of which originated in Africa—culled, documented, and even labeled as Santería by white Cuban ethnographers such as Fernando Ortiz, Lydia Cabrera, Rómulo Lachatañeré or Miguel Barnet. See Stephan Palmié's *The Cooking of History: How Not to Study an Afro-Cuban Religion* (2013). Although by and large I agree with Palmié, I contend that arguing against the use of the label Afro-Cuban when discussing Cuban religions such as Santería or Ifá erases and, in doing so, further whitens and Westernizes a robust belief system, religious and spiritual practices, and a history of both oppression and resilience, all of which has become the foundation and scaffolding of what we know as Santería today

[2] See Julie Rausenberger's article *Santurismo: The Commodification of Santería and the Touristic Value of Afro-Cuban Religions in Cuba* for a discussion on how the Cuban government's efforts to resuscitate the tourist industry in Cuba resulted in the state's appropriation of Afro-Cuban religions in the way of Santería tours or having Santeras as strategically placed props in Old Havana to attract tourists and provide them with an exotic, and I would add racialized, experience. Rausenberger also examines how constant financial hardship has led to the commodification of Santería and other Afro-Cuban religions, as many Santeros/as and Ifá priests have profited from initiating foreigners, sometimes deceivingly, who visit Cuba exclusively for that purpose. Also, see Maya Berry's "Salvándose in Contemporary Havana: Rumba's Paradox for Black Identity Politics" for a compelling discussion of the importance for the Afro-Cuban community's survival (spiritual and otherwise) of dignified performances of Afro-Cuban religions and popular traditions.

[3] Although the literature agrees on the fact that Cuba is the birthplace of Santería, the Cuban diaspora has transformed Santería into a transnational religion practiced in different locales such as the United States, Canada, Mexico, Spain, Italy, and Russia. For a discussion on the popularity and the practice of Santería beyond Cuban borders, see Aisha Beliso-De Jesús' *Electric Santería: Racial and Sexual Assemblages of Transnational Religion* (2015). See also C. Lynn Carr's *A Year in White: Cultural Newcomers to Lukumí and Santería in the United States* (2016) for an exhaustive study on the presence of Santería devotes in the United States.

contestation, thereby challenging hegemonic, Eurocentric paradigms through which Black Cubans have been simultaneously silenced and misrepresented.[4] As María Olavarría explains, due to Government efforts to eliminate race and racial issues, there has not been a traditional sense of belonging to the African Diaspora, a predicament that the new generations are changing (Olavarría 2008, 371).

Building on Flora González Mandri's *Guarding Cultural Memory: Afro-Cuban Women in Literature and the Arts*, I read Arocena and her work as an act of self-figuration of both the personal and the collective, and also as an act of remembrance that challenges Eurocentric narratives about Cuba and Cubans of African descent. González Mandri argues that, during the second half of the twentieth century, Afro-Cuban women producing culture "must correct the overwhelming cultural erasures regarding Black (race) female (gender) subjectivity and creativity, all the while asserting themselves as Black women through either veiled or expressed autobiographical incursions" (González Mandri 2006, 4). In effect, Arocena's work and sartorial choices signal a perpetuation well into the 21st century of the practices abovementioned; she walks in the footsteps of the Afro-Cuban women before her who have devoted their work to recover, document, and decolonize their cultural legacy by incorporating Afro-Cuban religions, practices, and beliefs. In doing so, Arocena also paves the way for others coming behind her. Her unapologetic incorporation of Santería can therefore be read as both an autobiographical gesture and as an act of remembrance that continue to reshape the ethos of Cuba and Cubanness. This article contributes to an emerging body of scholarship that examines the increasing visibility and legitimacy of depictions of Afro-Cuban religions in contemporary Cuban cultural production. These positive, vindicating representations, which many regard as the result of contemporary Black social movements in Cuba, bely a pernicious narrative on nation, race, gender, and, belonging that persists in Cuba today despite claims of equality.[5]

---

[4] In an interview with fellow Afro-Cuban writer Pedro Pérez Sarduy, Afro-Cuban poet and intellectual Nancy Morejón refers to race in Cuba as an unresolved issue and one strongly interwoven to national identity (163). For Morejón, the perpetuation of stereotypes about Black Cubans as "stupid, as someone who talks bad, who sweats and gyrates, and behaves in a socially inferior way" is not so much a matter of a "collective consciousness" … "but rather the image in the mass media and certain propaganda." (Morejón 2020, 167; 165)

[5] In her article "La movilización del tema afro-descendiente en La Habana, 2012-2014," Maya Berry studies the inception of the Cuban chapter of the Articulación Regional Afrodescendiente de América Latina y el Caribe. Berry's account bears witness to an organization that was created in the hopes of being a catalyst for positive change for and awareness raising among members of the Afro-Cuban community by, among other roles, acting as mediator between the Afro-Cuban community and the state.

The presence of non-Western religions such as Santería in Cuba has been traditionally perceived as a threat on many levels. Since colonial times, the gathering of slaves and free Blacks in *cabildos*—the associations that enabled the preservation of the different African identities represented on the island—abounded. In fact, Cuban authorities recognized their role in preventing both the freed and enslaved African and Afro-Cuban communities from rebelling and dismantling the status quo. The *cabildos* encouraged the syncretism of different African religions from different locales as well as the syncretism of the Yoruba religion and Catholicism. A new faith born in Cuba, Santería is one of the manifestations of religious syncretism, and in itself an expression of resiliency.[6] As Philip Howard notes, by the end of the nineteenth century, the *cabildos* were targeted as "a threat to the island's security, modernization, and relationship with Spain," and highlights that "authorities started to harass these gatherings and their attendees, yet their efforts to dissolve them proved futile" (Howard 2003, 147). Upon gaining independence from Spain, Cuba sought to craft a sense of national identity that would reaffirm the country's cultural independence from colonial powers, while simultaneously promoting its integration as a peer nation in the new world order. As such, anything that jeopardized the perception of the newly emerged nation and associated it to societies and cultures considered primitive and uncultured from a Eurocentric perspective was to be discarded. Santería fit the bill.[7]

The relationship between government and Santería practitioners during the Cuban Revolution has not been exempt from conflict either. While the Castro regime believed that Santería practitioners countered Catholic hegemony on the island and therefore saw them as somewhat of an asset, state ideology ultimately deemed religions as detrimental to the citizenry and the nation. The Cuban government tried to transform Afro-Cuban religions into a series of dances geared toward pure entertainment, divested of any religious content (Rausenberg 2018, 156). As a result of

[6] Santería is a religion born in the Americas, specifically in Cuba. Its inception signs at the resilience and agency of African slaves and their descendants who, rather than comply with colonial rule and embrace Catholicism, used the latter to cleverly disguise their loyalty to their own faiths. The initial resistance unfolded into religious syncretism. Today, Santería is a religion that has adopted practices from other belief systems (such as mediumship or cartomancy) and has adjusted to the political, economic, and geographical realities of the island. It has also become more encompassing, welcoming people who used to profess former faiths, with different nationalities and with no relation to any African nation. In fact, in "Porque tú no estás," ("Because you are not here") the sixth song in Arocena's latest album, there is a reference to Tarot reading as a means of divination, which is a very common practice in Cuba.

[7] Fernando Ortiz's publication of *Los negros brujos* (1906) illustrates this sentiment toward Santería as well as other Afro-Cuban religions and their practitioners during this time period.

the government's views concerning religious beliefs, Santeros continued to practice their religion in hiding until the 1990's.[8] When the Cuban economy plummeted during what came to be known as the Special Period, Cubans experienced a process of religious liberalization that afforded practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions the opportunity to openly claim their religious beliefs and affiliations. Upon noticing the emotional and material relief that religious communities provided Cubans, the Cuban government elected to depart from years of state-sponsored atheism by becoming a secular nation-state.[9] In fact, the government reframed its definition of Santería from a series of "ideological aberrations" to being "one of Cuba's most unique and powerful weapons in the international struggle against capitalist cultural hegemony and an enduring contribution to global culture" (Palmié 2013, 20). Although prejudicial narratives prevail and Afro-Cuban religions continue to be depicted as racialized practices of what some continue to portray as a primitive and delinquent culture, with its practitioners cast as con men and women seeking to profit, Afro-Cuban religions, and Santería in particular, have gained much visibility and, most importantly, have become the cornerstone on which many (re)imaginings of Cubanness rest, as well as a legitimate platform that allows Afro-Cubans to partake in the conversation about the Cuban nation.

Unlike many other artists who are also practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions, Arocena wears her identity as a Santera and a daughter of the Diaspora on her sleeve. Her appearance is always consistent and is characterized by features that have become part of her trademark: the use of white clothes—Santeros' preferred color as it signifies purity and it is believed to have a cleansing effect on one's aura—and covering her head with a white turban as well as frequently performing barefoot. This image echoes a common sight in Cuba, the female Iyawó, or newly initiated Santería priestess.[10]

---

[8] From 1961 until the early 1990's, devotees of Santería, Ifá or any other religion could not join the Cuban Communist Party. (Rausenberger 2018, 171)

[9] In her article, "Healing Practices and Revolution in Socialist Cuba," Marina Gold explains how the Cuban government resorted to alternative types of healing practices such as acupuncture, Reiki and medicinal plants in order to counter the shortage of drugs generally used in Western medicine treatments. Gold states that the Cuban government drew on *Santeros'* and *Yerberos'* (people who manage stores in which plants and other religious items are sold to Santería practitioners) knowledge on plants to provide the Cuban population with treatments for some of their illnesses.

[10] After a week-long ceremony, *Iyawós* spend a year wearing white garments, covering their heads, and shying away from any activities that would make them impure and unworthy of their Saint/Orisha. The objective is, broadly speaking, to break away with everything they were and be born into their new faith with a newly-acquired sense of themselves that is greatly dictated by the Orisha that now reigns the initiate's head. For a comprehensive study on this year-long

Occasionally, her turban shows a combination of white and blue, a color pattern that represents Yemayá[11], whom Arocena has claimed to be her Orisha (Arocena 2017, n/p).[12] Despite her success, Arocena has encountered many hurdles in her career. In an interview with Alejandro Van-Zandt-Escobar, the Havana singer shares that she faced "a lot of obstacles . . . to be the musician that I wanted to be. A lot of doors were closed to me . . . because I wasn't up to the country's beauty standards, because I walked barefoot, because I was making the music that I wanted to make." (Arocena 2017, n/p). She goes on to explain that at one point she was told: "'If you want to triumph, stop singing the music that you're singing, get on a diet and lose weight, put on some high heels, and go get a perm and some extensions.'" (Arocena 2017, n/p). This problematic piece of advice points to the ways in which Arocena's deliberate appearance defies Western female beauty standards that some deem as *sine qua non* requirements to succeed in a Westernized entertainment industry. As scholar Tanya Saunders asserts, "Black women are encouraged to manage perceived female masculinity or hypersexuality by straightening and elongating their hair, losing weight, and wearing clothing that minimizes the visibility of their bodies" (Saunders 2015, 144). This pygmalization of Black women seems to not only be driven by an attempt to distance them from non-Western beauty standards, but also from a stereotyped idea of the performance of Blackness that has marred Black women and has kept them from being fully accepted into Cuban society. As the Afro-Cuban intellectual Inés María Martiatu Terry explains, the image of the Cuban Black woman has been built upon negative stereotypes that stress traits such as violence, loudness, vulgarity, chaos, and promiscuity (Martiatu Terry 2010, n/p). In either case, Black women are not allowed to truly show themselves or their subjectivities without mediation and manipulation informed by hegemonic societal norms on decorum and beauty. They are consistently controlled by a colonial and racist discourse that insists in dictating their existence. In sum, Black women are urged to become more palatable to audiences that adhere to Westernized standards of womanhood. Building on Maya Berry's discussion of the

initiation into Santería, see *A Year in White: Cultural Newcomers to Lukumi and Santería in the United States* by C. Lynn Carr (2016).

[11] In Afro-Cuban religions, Yemayá is one of the Seven African Powers in the Orisha pantheon and considered to be the mother of the world and of all the Orishas. She lives and represents the ocean, she is the source of all life (Bolívar Aróstegui 2018, 299). Yemayá is represented as a Black woman; her Christian counterpart is Our Lady of Regla.

[12] At any point in their lives, anyone may find out who their Orisha is by undergoing a three-day Ifá ceremony with Babalawos. At the end of this ceremony, initiates learn about their Orisha, their Ifá sign, which spells out some characteristics and life lessons, and an Itá, which is a personalized series of advice about how to live their lives in a more satisfactory manner.

Cuban government cooption of Afro-Cuban religious performances for self-serving purposes, I argue that Daymé Arocena's Santería aesthetics as articulated by her Sartorial choices, album covers, and music constitutes an act of maroonage that attempts to reverse the insidious discourse on Black women. Furthermore, it reclaims a religious tradition and practice coopted by the state for political and financial reasons.

Despite the pressure placed on her by a society that holds Westocentric beliefs as axioms, she has remained true to her vision and has not caved in to the demands of the market, which highlights her commitment both to her craft and to her culture. Drawing on Tanisha Ford's study on Black women of the Diaspora and their sartorial choices to engage in cultural contestation, I argue that Arocena's aesthetics must be read as a political discourse that pays homage to her heritage as well as an overt self-identification as an Africana woman and a daughter of the African Diaspora, thereby further redefining Cuba as the same. Her work and her aesthetics reconfigure the role of women— Black women in particular—in the Cuban and Caribbean music industry while reinserting Cuba as an interlocutor in the ongoing conversation about African Diaspora and Cubanness. She does not comply with the demands placed on her by the music industry thereby defying gender dress codes and industry demands that seek to both objectify and Westernize women of non-European descent as a means to ultimately transform their bodies into desirable commodities that are more marketable on a global scale.[13] Curiously, the title of one of the songs included in her first album is "Don't unplug my body." Although it does not address body or racial politics, the title of the song, "Don't unplug my body," which also serves as the chorus, is repeated throughout. In the official video, we see Arocena dressed in white, wearing a white head wrap, and dancing barefoot with a white backdrop. In the video, she sings, scat sings, smiles, and uses *caxixis*—handheld basket shakers. Perhaps most importantly, notwithstanding the Western standards of beauty and colorism that largely dictate the (Cuban) music industry, we see Arocena, a dark-skinned, Black, full-figured Santera moving in a seemingly careless manner, hardly wearing any make-up. There does not

[13] Scholars such as Sujatha Fernandes point out the abundance of tourism brochures with the image of eroticized and sexualized Black and biracial women, which strongly suggests the commodification of these women on both the Cuban government and the main investor in the Cuban tourist industry: Spain (Fernandes 2007, 6). Along the same lines, Angela Lu has noted that even male musicians, and she discusses the internationally known rap group Orishas in particular, have resorted to this image. In their video "A lo cubano," we see the members of Orishas "mingling among Afro-Cuban and *mulata* women dancing on the beach in bikinis or tank tops with short skirts. In effect, the music video for this song may be interpreted as a tourist advertisement for Cuba" (Lu 2007, 18).

seem to be an attempt to lighten her dark skin color nor to conceal her full figure. Indeed, her work and appearance radiate an aura of authenticity and dignity that differs greatly from the image in which Black and biracial women—including those who are practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions—have been consistently portrayed.[14]

Santería aesthetics and symbolism recur in Arocena's three albums to date. On the cover of her first album, *Nueva Era* (2015), we see Arocena from the waist up. She is dressed in white and wears a white turban on her head. The backdrop is also white. Arocena's name is written in black, although the title of the album is written with letters of different colors that, together with Arocena's name and face, suggest the emergence of different, more colorful and challenging voices—a polyphonic Cuba. We must not lose sight of the fact that Cubans and non-Cubans alike deemed the time during which this album was crafted and released as a new era for the people on the island. On December 17, 2014, Cuba-US relations started to thaw and the island stopped engrossing the list of enemy nations to its neighbor to the north. Cubans celebrated this step forward. It was indeed the beginning of a new era for Cuba, a new project that would require much guidance, wisdom, and even creativity. Afro-Cuban scholar Odette Casamayor-Cisneros argues that this historical event was even more significant for Afro-Cubans, who had borne the brunt of the collapsing economy after the fall of the Soviet Union. She goes on to affirm that not only did Afro-Cubans rejoice about the new possibilities that arose on the horizon, but also about the presence of President Obama and his family on the island, an image that further highlighted the lack of racial diversity in the upper-echelons of the Cuban government and, in particular, his appreciation of racial inequalities in Cuban society, as mentioned in his speech (Casamayor-Cisneros 2016, 120). President Obama's speech was indeed music to Afro-Cubans' ears. They felt hopeful; their struggle acknowledged. The title track, *Nueva Era*, which at the time felt like a musical ode to a new era and more promising future, today feels more like a eulogy.

---

[14] In addition to their depiction in tourism brochures, older, Black Santeras are strategically placed around Old Havana as props to enhance the exotic appeal of the area by La Oficina del Historiador de La Habana (the state-sponsored institution responsible for restoring Old Havana to its original splendor). These women, dressed in their traditional attire and equipped with Santería items, practice different types of divination for a fee for tourists who request it. Due to economic hardship, these women's faith and cultural legacy are reduced to souvenirs. For a detailed discussion on this matter, see Julie Rausenberger's article "Santurismo: The Commodification of Santería and the Touristic Value of Afro-Cuban Derived Religions in Cuba" and Maya Berry's "'Salvándose' in Contemporary Havana: Rumba's Paradox for Black Identity Politics."

The cover of *Cubafonía* (2017), Arocena's second album, shows half of Arocena's face; she is looking up and we can guess a smile, perhaps a subtle hint to Oshún, the Orisha known, among other traits, for her smiles and laughter. The colors on the cover are white, blue and yellow, which yet again remind us of the artist's faith: white and blue are the colors of Yemayá and yellow is the color of Oshún, who is syncretized with Our Lady of La Caridad del Cobre, the patron saint of Cuba. A string of one hundred and two white cowrie shells, which also represents Yemayá and is the instrument used by Santeros for divination purposes, frame the cover. All of the shells are face up, which is the side Santeros read during divination rituals. White flowers, the type used to offer the eggun (the dead) during a *misa* (a Santería spiritual mass intended to provide a space for the dead to deliver messages to the living), adorn her head.

The cover of her third and latest record, *Sonocardiogram* (2019), shows Arocena standing in the ocean. Her eyes are closed, her head is tilted back slightly, and she is wearing a necklace made of predominantly blue and celeste beads. She appears as though she were in a trance, as taken by the presence of something much bigger than herself. This image suggests different interpretations. While she projects the image of Yemayá coming out of the ocean, where said Orisha resides, Arocena is simultaneously depicted as being in deep communion with Yemayá, who surrounds Arocena in the guise of the ocean, as if seeking her blessing—as the Orisha that stands for motherhood and creation—in order to embark on her new creative project. Additionally, the image of Arocena in the ocean is also reminiscent of the Middle Passage and thus can be deemed an act of remembrance in which she honors her ancestors.

The presence of Santería in Arocena's artistic project transcends her personal style and her albums' cover art. In fact, Santería lends structure to her albums as well as permeates her music from the titles of many of her songs, to the Yoruba language in which she oftentimes sings, to the Santería prayers she incorporates in her lyrics, to the composition of her albums, which either honor Santería deities or resemble Santería rituals in a skillful combination of traditional and contemporary trends, of following ancestors' footsteps while simultaneously creating new paths. When asked about the strong connection between Santería and her music, Arocena claims: "Santería came to my life through music. I fell in love with religious music, because it has so much to draw from and build upon. Religious music has an impressive rhythmic and melodic richness" (Arocena 2017, n/p). Santería music also speaks of a past, of a history that is autobiographical on both a personal and a collective level; it speaks of and to slavery,

oppression, resilience, cultural contestation, and survival as well as brings to the front a Cuba that continues to engage with transculturation day in and day out.

As mentioned earlier, Santería also informs the structure of her albums. In the first album, *Nueva Era* (2015), the opening song, "Madres" ("Mothers"), is a piece dedicated to her mother Saint or Orisha, Yemayá (Our Lady of Regla) and to Oshún (also known in the Catholic tradition as Our Lady La Caridad del Cobre)—the former is the mother of everything, who reigns over the sea, and the latter is the patron saint of Cuba. It is a choral song, infused with polyrhythms and a heavy presence of Afro-Cuban percussion—primarily conga drums and shakers—and comes across as a powerful invocation to two of the three the most revered female Orishas and to their feminine energies.[15] The Yoruba lyrics in "Madres" are in fact taken verbatim from a well-known *orun* (chant) for the Orisha Yemayá and the *eggun* (the dead) offered in a *tambor* (a trance, drumming ceremony) to ask for their blessing to overcome great challenges.[16] In fact, the drumming, the singing, and the cadence bring the audience close to experiencing a *tambor*, a ceremony in *Santería* in which a certain Orisha is asked through singing and dancing to come down and manifest him/herself. It is not a coincidence that in the only lines in Spanish, Arocena sings: "Yemayá, gracias madre por estar aquí" ("Yemayá, thank you mother for being here") and "¡Ay! Oshún mi madre yo te quiero cantar de corazón, yo te vengo a decir que gracias mamá por estar aquí" ("My mother Oshún, I want to sing to you from the heart. Thank you mother for being here") ("Madres" by Arocena 2015). She thanks both Yemayá and Oshún for their presence, much like any Santería priest or priestess would do in a ceremony. Arocena calls on both her mother Orisha and the patron saint of Cuba; the former representing the ultimate mother, the protector, and the latter the Orisha of love, creativity and all of the so-called fine things in life. Arocena, who is about to embark on a career in the recording industry, gain international exposure, and, ultimately, legitimacy, opens her first album with a song mainly interpreted in Yoruba through which she calls upon two of the most powerful and revered Orishas, two of the seven Orishas known as the Seven African Powers. The official video to this song is filmed at an old church. This venue may serve to stress the syncretism inherent to Afro-Cuban religions and to the cultural manifestations that emerged from them. But it may also be

[15] I wish to thank Greg Simpson and Daniel Vissi García, both musicians and music teachers, for their assistance in finding the appropriate descriptors for this song and answering different questions I had in regard to music terminology.

[16] I wish to thank Magdelin Soto, Santera and Daughter of Obatalá, who graciously answered the questions I had about Arocena's Yoruba lyrics.

a reminder of the oppression the Afro-Cuban religious community endured: Santeros lack temples to worship in, ceremonies are held at people's homes, and they attend Catholic churches to worship their Orishas as they suffered systemic religious persecution and were denied their own places of worship.[17] "Madres" is the only song in this album to have Yoruba lyrics or to have a Santería theme. The rest of the songs are in English and Spanish and their content moves from love, to a lullaby, to a light-hearted tale about her mom learning Russian in Cuba.

Cubafonía, released in 2017, begins in a very similar fashion to *New Era* with a track titled, "Eleggua," the Orisha believed to open or close a path in a person's life and therefore the first Orisha to be addressed in any type of ceremony in Santería. The song, very jazzy, with blues, and elements of progressive rock, is mostly performed in Yoruba, borrowing the lyrics from a common chant to Eleggua. This Orisha is key to any Santería religious ritual or ceremony and Santeros ask for his consent about whether or not to continue with a ceremony with a chant that Arocena incorporates in her song: "Omi tutu, ona tutu, ashé tutu, ilé tutu, owo tutu, tutu omo, tutu layore, tutu ariku babawa" ("Cool water, cool road, cool my house, cool my head, cool my money, cool my children, cool Eshu, cool my father Eleggua)," alongside reading four pieces of coconut meat thrown in front of Eleggua—the meaning of the reading lies on how the pieces of coconut meat land on the ground, on how many land face up or face down. Later in the song, she continues with the Moyugba: "Moyugba eggun, moyugba ocha, Olodumare, moyugba eshu Olodumare" (Respects to Eggun—the dead—, respect to Ocha—Regla de Ocha also known as Santería—, Olodumare), which is yet another part of the chants that open a Santería ceremony. By structuring the album this way, Arocena is recreating a Santería ceremony, which opens with Eleggua, to request both his permission to continue and protection to walk the path ahead. Although consisting mostly of Yoruba lyrics, "Eleggua" has a few lines in Spanish that also merit attention: "Saca tu Eleggua, sácalo del closet pa gozá" [Sic] ("Take your Eleggua out of the closet to have some fun"). Eleggua is an Orisha that is kept behind the main door of a Santero's/a's house for protection and therefore visible to all who enter the home. It is also an Orisha that can be received by anyone, even if that person has not gone or won't

[17] The most impressive example of this takes place every year on December 17. On this day, Cubans celebrate Babalú-Ayé, patron saint of the poor and sick, syncretized in Saint Lazarus. Devotees from all over Cuba gather at the Church of El Rincón located in the town of El Rincón, in the outskirts of Havana, to pay their respects. As part of their celebration, they smoke cigars, drink Cuban coffee and rum as in any Santería ritual, but this time in a Catholic church.

go through the year in white as an Iyawó (i.e., there are many more people who have received Eleggua and the other three warriors— Oggun, Ochosi, and Osun—than there are people fully initiated into Santería). Therefore, my reading of Arocena's encouragement to take Eleggua out of the closet is two-fold: it stands as a tongue-in-cheek allusion to those people who are still "closeted" practitioners of Santería, a phenomenon that is not at all uncommon even today, after so many years of forced secrecy and malicious narratives that framed most discussions on Afro-Cuban religions. Their reasons are many: they may not be of Afro-Cuban descent; they may be professionals who fear ridicule; or they may be people who publicly profess other faiths (Catholics, Jehova Witnesses, Baptists, or Evangelicals, for instance; while Catholics have had a long history in Cuba, the other groups, especially Evangelicals are increasingly becoming a force to reckon with in Cuba as well as in other locales throughout Latin America).[18] Be that as it may, it can be inferred that, despite their ill repute, Afro-Cuban religions have become an undeniable part of the Cuban cultural landscape that even atheists, agnostics or people from other faiths will seek counseling from their priests and priestesses. By the same token, Arocena's lyrics may also stand as a call to celebrate Santería openly, to celebrate being able to be out in the open and not be persecuted for it. Ultimately, it is a seemingly casual, yet deliberate call for legitimacy, for remembrance, for reclaiming a past, a legacy, and a culture all too often pushed to the fringes of any definition of Cubanness.

The official "Eleggua" video starts with Arocena reciting the chants lines mentioned above in an introspective prayer position with the Havana skyline at dawn serving as the backdrop. The location of the video is an old and empty Havana building and the home of an Afro-Cuban elder and Santera. A Black, male dancer engages in a dance performance. Although his moves do not replicate those of the dance associated with Eleggua, it is the nature of the dance itself (lively, playful, almost childlike) that is reminiscent of said Orisha; the dancer himself, Black, tall, sinuous, and agile, echoes modern representations of this Orisha. The images of the dancer are interwoven with those of the old Santera who seems to be praying to Eleggua: among one of the three

[18] Cuban Son legend Adalberto Álvarez also hints at this phenomenon in his song "Y tú qué quieres que te den." In this religious song, he refers to people who claim to be atheist and yet seek Santeros or Babalawos for consulation at ungodly hours in order not to be seen: "Hay gente que te dicen que no creen en ná y van a consultarse por la madrugá" ("there are people who claim not to believe in anything, and yet they seek consultation in the middle of the night" [Sic] (Álvarez; my translation).

bead necklaces she wears is Eleggua's, which the camera makes a point of highlighting.[19] In this video, the old, represented by the Santera, and the new, represented by Arocena herself as well as her music, blend and support each other in sustaining a long-standing tradition, which, much like Havana and the building shown in the video, proudly, yet desperately, strives to endure the struggles associated with oppression and the passing of time.

The title of Arocena's third album to date, *Sonocardiogram* (2019), is itself a neologism, and alludes to the content of the album: sounds from the heart. Not surprisingly, this is the album with a highest number of Santería songs. One might argue that as her international acclaim soars, so does the presence of Santería in her albums. For example, of the twelve tracks that comprise the album, the first four are religious songs. The opening piece, "Nangareo," bears the name of a drink concocted with ingredients such as milk, honey, and corn flower, and offered to the sun; its purpose is to ask for blessings, to ask for good things to come, and to communicate that an Iyawó is about to be born. As the track begins, we first hear the waves of the ocean—the beginning of everything, where Yemayá, Arocena's Orisha, resides—before any music or lyrics begin. "Nangareo" unfolds as a brief account of being born as an Iyawó, of being initiated into Santería. Since Yemayá's presence infuses the song under the guise of ocean waves, "Nangareo," which Arocena narrates rather than sings, can be read as an abridged autobiographical account of her initiation into Santería, or what in Cuba is referred to as "hacer Santo" or "coronarse." At one point in the short song she says, "corono de reina" ("I am crowned as a queen") and she immediately adds "logro predecir qué será de mí" ("I am able to predict what my life will be") thus referring to the *Itá* ceremony. Finally, the last verse of the lyrics, "ya estoy aquí" ("I have arrived") hints at rebirth, having arrived at this world again, but this time crowned with Yemayá ("Nangareo" by Arocena 2019).[20]

After "Narangeo," the trilogy "Oyá," "Oshún," and "Yemayá" ensues—a suite devoted to the three most revered eponymous female Orishas.[21] Yet again, Arocena dives into the archives of Santería chants to incorporate them into her own repertoire,

[19] Santeros wear bead necklaces with color combinations that represent the different Orishas. Eleggua's signature colors are red and black.

[20] The *Itá* is a divination ritual that is part and parcel of each of the different steps to be taken in order to become a full-fledged Santero/a. The *Itá* constitutes a roadmap of sorts that deciphers the main events to come in the person's life in order to help him/her navigate them.

[21] Oyá is the Orisha who reigns the cemetery and resides in the cemetery gates. She also reigns over the winds, tempests, and lightning. (Bolívar Aróstegui 2018, 299)

thereby granting Santería dignity, new life, and international exposure. Devoting three pieces to the three most powerful female Orishas invokes female energy and empowerment, a gesture that renders Santería as a source of strength for an even further disenfranchised community: Cuban Black women. This trilogy, which replaces "Eleggua" in the second album and "Madres" in the first one, hints at a revision of both Catholic and Santería traditions. First, an all-female trilogy of Black deities replaces the all-male Catholic trilogy; secondly, Eleggua, the male Orisha who is the first one to be revered, is also replaced not only by Oshún, and Yemayá, as in the case of "Madres," but also by Oyá. Furthermore, this time around each female Orisha from the group known as The Seven African Powers—Oyá, Oshún, and Yemayá—is honored with a song that also bears her name. Far from being a traditional opening to a Santería ritual, this is a clear homage to female, Black deities and, by extension, to Black women—a somewhat subtle contestation and reimagining of patriarchal religious traditions.[22]

"Interludio," which follows "Nangareo" and the trilogy, stands as a divider between the religious and non-religious songs. It's a *rumba* to Yemayá, which has the ability to transport the Santería-savvy listener to venues such as the Callejón de Hamel, perhaps the most noteworthy landmark of Afro-Cuban culture in Havana.[23] "Interlude" takes us back to Arocena's Havana roots, to the Afro-Cuban rhythms, locales, and cultures that serve as her foundation, both as a person and an artist, as well as the cultural foundation not only of a whole community, but also of Cuba writ large. Indeed, the song that follows "Interludio," "Porque tú no estás," hints at this idea by starting with a *rumba*, which in a matter of fifteen seconds unfolds into a contemporary jazz song. Arocena keeps us from overlooking the fact that her contribution to contemporary music spawns from a long history of iniquitous power dynamics and

[22] Arocena is in good company when it comes to challenging patriarchal Afro-Cuban religious beliefs and practices. See the work of Belkins Ayón, an Afro-Cuban printmaker who deftly contests the exclusion of women from the all-male Abakuá religious society. See also the work of Yesenia Fernández Selier, whose performances as well as the academic writings based on those performances revolve around the reimagining of both more feminist and contemporary Afro-Cuban religious beliefs and practices.

[23] *Rumba* is a music genre, mostly religious, that harkens back to the 19th century and with roots in the poor Afro-Cuban community. Although it was traditionally shunned by Cuban elites, with the advent of the Cuban Revolution, the government appropriated it in an attempt to show its support of the working classes and foment a genre believed to free Cuba from Western imperial influences. R*umba* still continues to be considered an Afro-Cuban music genre chiefly performed and danced by "dark-skinned or Black Cubans" (Payne Daniel 1994, 70). It is precisely the racialization of this genre alongside the stereotypes traditionally associated with Afro-Cubans that have kept it from being widely embraced and continue to relegate its performers to the fringes of the Cuban music scene (Bodenheimer 2018, 177-180).

resilience. She, Daymé Arocena, presents herself as the product of a people, a culture, and an epistemology, historically under siege.

This is not, however, Arocena's first incursion into *rumba*. The second track of her second album, *Cubafonía*, is actually a rumba titled "La rumba me llamo yo" ("*Rumba* is my name"). Arocena openly self-identifies with this genre, and thereby with its Afro-Cuban roots and humble origins. Although the opening sentence, "Dice mi madre," may be read at face value as motherly advice, as the song moves along, it becomes apparent that "mi madre" refers to Yemayá. Yet again, Arocena infuses this track with Santería by allowing it to unfold like an *itá,* the guidance that a Santería initiate receives from all the Orishas the third day of the week-long initiation ceremony. While the lyrics include advice such as "que no reparta mi gloria, para que no me quieran mal" (that I should not talk about my blessings, to avoid envy") and to avoid Black men—"que no los quiere a mi lao"' ("she does not want them close to me"), like any *itá*, it also discusses aspects related Arocena's fate.[24] For instance, it talks about Arocena being destined for greatness in the religion: "Dice mi madre, tu ocha no es Babalawo, pero si fueras un hombre, tambor fueras consagrao" ("My mother says: 'you cannot be a Babalawo, but if you were a man, you would'") ("La rumba me llamo yo" by Arocena, 2017);[25] it also talks about the protection she receives from the dead, the *eggun*, the ancestors: "Moyugba Eggun, que no te dejan caer, que van a la guerra contigo para que puedas vencer" ("Respects to the dead, who will not let you fall, who will go to war with you so that you will not be defeated"). The official video for this song shows Arocena and her musicians playing on a Havana rooftop for a small audience, supposedly Afro-Cubans, who are dancing to her rumba. These images of Arocena, her musicians, and a small audience engaging in a communal performance mirrors the performance of an Afro-Cuban religious ritual and reminds us that performance and community is key to Afro-Cuban religions, as it leads to the communion with the ancestors (Fernández Selier 2016, 62); these images also speak of "a production of Blackness that is felt in and through the body within the performatic/nondiscursive register that is a vital site of cultural transmission" (Berry 2016, 46). The images are juxtaposed with images of Cubans' daily lives in Havana: a barbershop; a woman consulting with a Babalawo with an image of Saint Barbara—syncretized with the Orisha Changó—in the back; people

[24] During my research trips to Havana, I learned that advice that refers to avoiding the company of a certain group of people (advice not exclusive to Afro-Cubans) is fairly common in readings and spiritual masses.

[25] In Cuban Ifá, women cannot be initiated as Babalawos, which are the highest religious authority in Afro-Cuban religions.

walking down the streets going about their daily lives; children dancing in their home, and more. These powerful images belie the preconceived Western notion that depicts Cuba as a monolithic country stuck in time. The track "La rumba me llamo yo" shares a life experience—perhaps the most important milestone in any Santero's/ra's life—thus making the song autobiographical while the video documents the lives of the people of Havana and therefore constitutes a collective autobiographical project of a city and a people. Including a downtrodden genre as *rumba* in a record vindicates the culture and the people from which it originated and elevates its status. Much like Arocena herself in the music industry, the presence of rumba in the record of a successful jazz musician challenges those who would exclude it from the realm of sophisticated music-making altogether and vindicates it. In turn, it reclaims a voice and an identity that have existed and continue to exist on the fringes of Cuban society.

For Arocena, Santería constitutes both an act of cultural contestation and a courageous act of remembrance, both personal and collective. She poses a challenge not only to the Cuban music industry and beyond, but to Cuban society and to the unchallenged racial narrative on which it stands. By choosing Santería as the underpinnings of her aesthetics, artistic, and musical choices, Arocena contradicts that narrative and unveils a formerly neglected account of a Cuba that has at times been coopted for financial gain. By presenting herself as a Santera and as a woman who refuses to adhere to Western standards of female beauty, Arocena refuses to let the music industry combine her into a product that fits this racial narrative and, instead, chooses to stress her talent as well her cultural and religious legacy, thus engaging in cultural contestation. In doing so, Arocena vindicates Black and biracial women whose image has been misused as music video props and exotic images for tourism brochures. As a dark, Black, full-figured Santera from Havana, the way in which Arocena chooses to present herself constitutes an act not only of self-reflection, but also of cultural contestation against a society that continues to hold dear Western values and aesthetics and that keeps pushing her and people like her (with their own histories, epistemologies, and struggles) to the fringes of society unless they are needed as lucrative props. Through her sartorial choices, Arocena employs a politics of aesthetics that speaks of a strong cultural legacy and of a vast epistemology that has consistently been belittled and often times, much like Black and biracial women, appropriated for profit.

Arocena's music projects are equally bold and political. She brings dignity to a religious system traditionally relegated first into the realm of superstition and witchcraft and later into theatrics. Her incorporation of Santeria deities, chants, and symbolism

constitutes both an act of remembrance and of cultural contestation: it places value on a belief system traditionally divested of it and unveils it in its dignified form for everyone to behold and appreciate. By incorporating religious music and symbolism, Arocena continuously engages in acts of remembrance and is in dialog with broader discussions concerning Cuban identity and Cubanness. Cuba is Santera due to the Middle Passage, which challenges the narrative of a white, European Cuba. Highlighting Santería and standing for its legitimacy as a religion also serves to add the island into the long list of nations and people that are part of the African Diaspora. In making this music, Arocena also walks a fine line between the devotional and the educational, as it reclaims and validates a belief system that transcends Cuba, and continues to engage in cultural contestation. The ways in which Santería, long mislabeled as witchcraft and considered the religion of poor and uneducated Blacks, informs Arocena's aesthetics and occupies a privileged position in her work as an internationally acclaimed jazz musician not only mirrors Arocena's own trajectory in the Cuban music industry, but in Cuban society at large.

Works Cited

Álvarez, Adalberto. "Y qué tú quieres que te den." *En Vivo*. Reyes. 2014. CD.

Arocena, Daymé. "Don't Unplug My Body." *Nueva Era*. Brownswood Recordings, 2015. CD.

___. "Don't Unplug My Body." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 22 July, 2015. Web. 21 April, 2020.

___. "Eleggua." *Cubafonía*. Brownswood Recordings, 2017. CD.

___. "Eleggua." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 31 May, 2017. Web. 1 February, 2019.

___. "Interludio." *Sonocardiogram*. Brownswood Recordings, 2019. CD.

___. Interview with Alejandro Van Zandt-Escobar. *AfropopWorldWide*, 09 March, 2017. https://afropop.org/articles/dayme-arocena-interview. Accessed 5 February, 2019.

___. Interview by Maria Murriel. *WGBH News*, 22 June, 2017. https://www.wgbh.org/news/2017/06/22/cubas-dayme-arocena-found-her-religion-through-music. Accessed 1 February 2019.

___. "La Rumba me llamo yo." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 19 April, 2017. Web. 1 February, 2019.

___. "Madres." *Nueva Era*. Brownswood Recordings, 2015. CD.

___. "Madres." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 11 May, 2015. Web. 1 February, 2019.

___. "Nueva Era." *Nueva Era*. Brownswood Recordings, 2015. CD.

___. "Narangeo." *Sonocardiogram*. Brownswood Recordings, 2019. CD.

___. "Porque tú no estás." *Sonocardiogram*. Brownswood Recordings, 2019. CD.

___. "Oshún." *Sonocardiogram*. Brownswood Recordings, 2019. CD.

___. "Oyá." *Sonocardiogram*. Brownswood Recordings, 2019. CD.

___. "Yemayá." *Sonocardiogram*. Brownswood Recordings, 2019. CD.

Bodenheimer, Rebecca M. "National Symbol or a "Black Thing"? Rumba and Racial Policies in Cuba in the Era of Cultural Tourism. *Black Music Research Journal* 33:2 (2013): 177-205.

Bolívar Aróstegui, Natalia. *La sabiduría de los oráculos y los caracoles: Ifá, los caracoles y el coco*. La Habana:Instituto Cubano del Libro, 2018.

Beliso-De Jesús, Aisha. M. *Electric Santería: Racial and Sexual Assemblages of a Transnational Religion*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

Berry, Maya. "From 'Ritual' to 'Repertory': Dancing to the Time of the Nation." *Afro-Hispanic Review* 29:1 (2010): 55-76.

___. "La movilización del tema afrodescendiente en La Habana, 2012-2014: un estudio de las posibilidades del performance." *Cuban Studies* 48 (2019): 276-302.

___. "'Salvándose' in Contemporary Havana: Rumba's Paradox for Black Identity Politics." *BlackDiaspora Review* 5:2 (2016): 24-54.

Carr, C. Lynn. *A Year in White: Cultural Newcomers to Lukumí and Santería in the United States*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015.

Casamayor-Cisneros, Odette. "Obama in Havana and the Racial Politics of Contemporary Cuba." *Transition. The Magazine of Africa and the Diaspora,* 120:1 (2016): 39-45.

Fernandes, Sujatha. "Proven Presence: The Emergence of a Feminist Politics in Cuban Hip-Hop." In *Home Girls Make Some Noise: Hip Hop Feminist Anthology*. Edited by Gwendolyn D. Pough, Elaine Richardson, Aisha Durham, and Rachel Raimist, 2007, 5-18.

Fernández Selier, Yesenia. "Ayabbas: Memory, Sacred Performance and the Restoration of Afro-Cuban Women Subjectivity to the Cuban Trans/nation." *Black Diaspora Review* 5:2 (2016): 55-80.

Ford, Tanisha. *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015.

Gold, Marina. "Healing Practices and Revolution in Socialist Cuba." *Social Analysis*, 58:2 (2014): 42-59.

González Mandri, Flora. *Guarding Cultural Memory: Afro-Cuban Women in Literature and the Arts*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006.

Howard, Philip. "Interpreting the Experiences of the African Diaspora in the Americas." Vanderbilt University *E-Journal of Luso-Hispanic Studies* 1:1 (2003): 135-148.

Lu, Angela. "Representations of Chinese-ness in Afro-Cuban hip hop during post-Soviet era Cuba." In *A Contemporary Cuba Reader: Reinventing the Revolution*. Edited by Philip Brenner, Marguerite Rose Jiménez, John M. Kirk, and William M. LeoGrande, 2007, 171-188.

Martiatu Terry, Inés María. "Tirando piedras y rompiendo cabezas. De deshacer tachaduras y exclusiones al discurso afrofeminista se trata". In *Afrocubanas: historia, pensamiento y practicas culturales*. Edited by Daisy Rubiera Castillo and Inés María Martiatu Terry. Kindle ed. Cuba: Ciencias Sociales, 2015.

Morejón, Nancy. "Interview with Pedro Pérez Sarduy." In *Afro-Cuban Voices: On Race and Identity in Contemporary Cuba*. Edited by Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs, 2020, 162-169.

Olavarría, Margot. "Rap and Revolution: Hip-Hop Comes to Cuba." In *A ContemporaryCuba Reader: Reinventing the Revolution*. Edited by Philip Brenner, Marguerite Rose Jiménez, John M. Kirk, and William M. LeoGrande, 2007, 369-372.

Ortiz, Fernando. *Los negros brujos*. Miami: Ediciones Universal. 2005.

Palmié, Stephan. 2013. *The Cooking of History: How Not to Study Afro-Cuban Religion*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Paynne Daniel, Yvette. "Race, Gender, and Class Embodied in Cuban Dance." *Contributions in Black Studies: A Journal of African and Afro-American Studies* 12 (1994): 70-87.

Rausenberger, Julie. "Santurismo: The Commodification of Santería and the Touristic Value of Afro-Cuban Derived Religions in Cuba." *Alma tourism: Journal of Tourism, Culture and Territorial Development* (2018): 150-171.

Saunders, Tanya. *Cuban Underground Hip Hop: Black Thoughts, Black Revolution, Black Modernity*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015.