

**Review / Reseña**

Hey-Colón, Rebeca L. *Channeling Knowledges: Water and Afro-Diasporic Spirits in Latinx and Caribbean Worlds*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2023. 280 pp.

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Water is all around us and inside us. It is life-giving, sacred, and transformative. For decades, water has surfaced as a central image and actor in Afro-Latinx cultural production. Yet, despite its ubiquity, it has remained an understudied topic in Afro-Latinx scholarship writ large. Rebeca Hey-Colón's interdisciplinary monograph, *Channeling Knowledges: Water and Afro-Diasporic Spirits in Latinx and Caribbean Worlds*, breaks this silence by inviting us to reflect on the "life-giving, life-sustaining" and healing power of water through an examination of its role in Afro-diasporic religious confluences in Afro-Latinx and Latinx literature and art (1). Methodologically grounded on an Afro-diasporic religious framework, the book "surfaces a discussion of water's sacred infusions" to reveal its disruptive and transformative power through its erosion of "chronological, epistemological, and geopolitical borders to (re)connect us to pasts, presents, and not-yet-imagined futures" (1). Hey-Colón's approach to water is expansive and groundbreaking, as the book engages with saltwaters (Atlantic and Pacific Oceans) and freshwaters (Río Bravo/Río Grande and the Massacre River), unsettling the disciplinary boundaries that have traditionally linked these bodies of water to either Caribbean or Latinx Studies. Challenging these paradigms is, in my opinion, one of the most important contributions of this book. As such, *Channeling*

*Knowledges*, which is part of the “Latinx: The Future Is Now” series run by the University of Texas Press, represents a crucial and timely contribution to Afrolatinx, Caribbean, Border, and Religious Studies.

The way in which this book centers Afro-diasporic religious knowledges is important on at least two fronts. First, its focus on Blackness destabilizes traditional conceptions of Latinidad by challenging the myth of *mestizaje* and unveiling the anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity that sustains it. The understanding of Blackness as central to Latinidad leads to the questioning of “the place of Haiti in Latinx and Latin American studies,” which this book addresses, among other ways, through its discussion of Haitian Vodou in the works of Firelei Báez (5). Second, the attention given to Afrodiasporic religions—which are often invisible, misunderstood, and stigmatized in most Western societies—serves to elevate and center them. The study successfully bridges “literary analysis and spiritual realities,” showing how a focus on religion can significantly enhance and bring nuance to critical literary analysis (3). Engaging with a broad spectrum of theorists from various fields—including M. Jacqui Alexander, Christina Sharpe, Frances Aparicio, Stuart Hall, Agustín Laó-Montes, Frances Negrón-Muntaner, Milagros Ricourt, and Silvio Torres-Saillant, among many others—the author seamlessly blends more traditional scholarship with that produced about Afro-diasporic religions. In fact, the centering of these religious traditions pushes against the primacy of Western-sanctioned (i.e., white) forms of knowledge, disrupting white hegemony. This is also evident when the author invites readers to “consider the very making of scholarship as a spiritually inflected process,” thus blurring the borders of the spirit-mind dichotomy (3).

*Channeling Knowledges* consists of a prologue, four chapters, and an epilogue. The chapters focus on the works of Afro-Puerto Rican Mayra Santos Febres (Chapter 1), Dominican Rita Indiana Hernández (Chapter 2), and Mexican-American Gloria Anzaldúa (Chapters 3 and 4). The prologue contains an analysis of the *Bloodlines* exhibit by Firelei Báez, an Afro-Latinx visual artist of Haitian and Dominican descent. One of the pieces that Hey-Colón examines in detail is Báez’s painting *Ode to la Sirène (and to muses beyond Jean Luc Nancy’s Canon)* (2014), inspired by the *lwa* Lasirèn, “a vital aspect of the visibility of Haitian Vodou” (10). The author states, “Báez’s avowal of the *lwa* as muses is a sharp repudiation of the invisibility of Afro-diasporic art in the European canon and an affirmation of the importance of considering Afro-diasporic thought as integral to Western culture” (12). This very impetus to show how integral Afro-diasporic cultures are to Western thought and cultural expressions (including Latinx

literature and art) is at the heart of the book. This section also offers a brief but invaluable introduction to the role that water plays in Afro-diasporic religions, tracing it as a key element in Haitian Vodou, La 21 División (also known as Dominican Vodou), and Cuban Santería/Regla de Oché initiations. Because water is where many *lwa*, *misterios*, and *orishas* reside—connecting the “living and the dead, the secular and the sacred”—Hey-Colón posits that water is an archive (16). She concludes the Prologue stating, “My research has shown me that water is a physical and metaphysical site of submerged importance in Latinx and Caribbean studies,” and in the following chapters shows how this is so (25).

Chapter 1, “Channeling the Undocumented in Mayra Santos-Febres’s *boat people*,” focuses on Afro Puerto Rican author Mayra Santos Febres’s poetry collection called *boat people* (2005). Hey-Colón’s analysis of selected poems is a significant contribution, especially considering the lack of critical attention that this important collection has received. The chapter dives deeply into the poems “boat people,” “ah mi morenita cae”, “el aire falta”, “cambiar de nombre”, and “aquí al fondo danzan concejales”. Despite my prior deep familiarity with the poems, I found her reading to be quite illuminating, as it centers Afro-diasporic spirituality in a way that only a scholar with knowledge about Afro-diasporic religions could. As such, Hey-Colón’s interpretations of the poems add spiritual nuance to our understanding of the role that water plays in the poems. Paying attention to how “the body in Santos-Febres’s poetry is inextricably linked to the religious undercurrents of the text,” the author offers a detailed analysis of how Santería/Regla de Oché, Haitian Vodou, and La 21 División inform the poems (33). Above all, the author highlights how “*boat people* defy the trope of victimhood that dominates narratives of undocumented maritime migration” (33). In addition, as the author puts it, “The centering of water in *boat people* allows Santos-Febres to identify the echoes of undocumented migrations beyond the Caribbean Basin,” such as resonances with the U.S./Mexico border (30). I want to emphasize the importance of this chapter given that the topic of undocumented Caribbean migration has not received the attention it deserves within the field of Latinx Studies.

Chapter 2, “The Techno-Resonances of Rita Indiana’s *La mucama de Omicunlé*,” offers an in-depth analysis of Rita Indiana Hernández’s novel. Here, Hey-Colón coins the concept of “techno-resonance” as a tool to explore the connections “between cyber and spiritual worlds and between distinct Afro-diasporic spiritual traditions” in the work of Hernández (to whom she refers as Indiana) (56). She offers a new reading of the novel that departs from the more traditional interpretations of the work as “science

fiction or ecological disaster” (55). Instead, the author focuses on the “currents of Afro-diasporic spirituality that run throughout the book” (55). Grounded on theories of copresences in Santería/Regla de Ochá, the author reads time travel in the novel not as an indication of science fiction, but rather as a “convergence between the secular imagination and Afro-diasporic religious consciousness” (57). In the end, the analysis “challenges the prevailing view that Afro-diasporic religions are primitive traditions that have no place in the contemporary world” (57).

Chapter 3, “Afro-Diasporic Currents in the Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa Papers,” offers a fascinating exploration of the role of the *orisha* Yemayá (Santería/Regla de Ochá) in the writings of Gloria Anzaldúa based on the archive of the Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa Papers, housed in the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin. Given Anzaldúa’s Mexican American background, her deep kinship with Yemayá offers an opportunity to connect Mexico-U.S. border studies to Caribbean Studies, an area of inquiry that remains largely unexplored. Centering Anzaldúa’s “relationship to water as a whole,” Hey-Colón “provide[s] a spiritual genealogy of Anzaldúa’s communion with water” (84). It is an understatement to say that Anzaldúa is a towering figure in Chicanx and Latinx Studies, but she “remains undertheorized” (86). By delving into “the development of her spirituality”—especially the influence of Afro-diasporic religions in her life—Hey-Colón opens new and underexamined areas of inquiry in Anzaldúan studies (86). In light of the criticism that Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* has received in recent years for erasing Chicana/o African heritage, this and the following chapter provide a complex portrait of Anzaldúa that forces us to grapple with even more questions about her life and writings.

Chapter 4, “*Orishas* in the Borderlands,” remains focused on Anzaldúa, but this time zeroing-in on the role of *orishas* in her groundbreaking text *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. As Hey-Colón points out, the criticism on this text “has largely glossed over the spiritual presence of Afro-Latinidad in the text” (114). In seeking to fill this gap, this chapter represents a significant contribution to Chicanx Studies. As the author puts it, “By reading *Borderlands* as a text suffused with the energies of Afro-diasporic waters, this chapter addresses how Anzaldúa’s work productively engages with Blackness” (114). The chapter also offers a nuanced discussion of the presence of “borderwaters” in *Borderlands*, departing from the focus of most readings on the “borderlands.” As the author points out, “The first body of water [*Borderlands*] presents is the sea, and the last one it references is the Rio Grande/Río Bravo,” and water is

“the conduit by which Anzaldúa channels Yemayá and other *orisbas* (115). Here, the concept of “rippling borders,” which Hey-Colón coins, “emerges from the need to address the particularities that arise when water is made to serve as a border” (116). In other words, “rippling borders” resist “control” and “hegemonic power” (116).

The book’s Epilogue, titled “Water and Light: The *Bóveda* as Counter-Archive,” examines the grassroots collective Border of Lights (BOL) and the work they have done to memorialize the lives lost during the Haitian and Haitian-Dominican Massacre ordered by Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo in 1937 along the Haiti-DR border. The author reads “BOL’s candlelight vigil as edifying a spiritual *bóveda* (altar) at the banks of the Massacre River/Dajabón River” (138). A *bóveda* is a practice of Espiritismo that consists of “an altar consecrated to a person’s ancestors and guiding spirits” (142). The section concludes with a powerful analysis of Firelei Báez’s painting *TC/0168.13 (Anthropophagist wading in the Artibonite River)* (2014), inspired by *La Sentencia*, the ruling passed by the Dominican Constitutional Tribunal on September 13, 2013, that denationalized hundreds of thousands of Dominicans of Haitian descent in the Dominican Republic.

*Channeling Knowledges* is a book that speaks to the spiritual and religious presence of freshwaters and saltwaters in Caribbean and Mexican American and Latinx cultural production. Hey-Colón utilizes Caribbean and Afro-Latinx literature and art to provide an in-depth analysis of the role that water plays as a sacred and central element in Afro-diasporic religions, specifically in Haitian Vodou, *La 21 División* (Dominican Vodou), and Cuban *Santería/Regla de Ochá*. The way in which the author applies her nuanced and deep knowledge of these Afro-diasporic religions to the critical analysis of works of literature and art fills a significant vacuum in Afro-Latinx Studies, and it is one of the aspects of this book that I appreciate the most. Written in a clear, accessible, and elegant style, Hey-Colón’s interdisciplinary monograph will be of interest to scholars and students in the fields of Caribbean, Afro-Latinx, Latinx, Border and Religious Studies, as well as those in adjacent fields such as Literature, Visual Arts, Anthropology, Sociology, Gender and Sexuality, Women, and Cultural Studies. Given the ubiquitous presence of Afro-diasporic religious references in contemporary Caribbean, Latinx, and Afro-Latinx cultural production, this book offers a blueprint for future studies that integrate and center Afro-diasporic spirituality.