Lucerna Extincta: Spiritual Promiscuities in Performance and Installation Art, 1970s-80s

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Abstract

***Lucerna Extincta:* Spiritual Promiscuities in Performance and Installation Art, 1970s-80s**

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This dissertation examines how artists in Bogotá, Port of Spain, London, and Los Angeles during the 1970s and 1980s engaged in what I term *spiritual promiscuities*—the purposeful synthesis of Indigenous, Afro-Diasporic, Asian, and European belief systems—as creative platforms to challenge modernist, colonial hierarchies and forge subaltern social coalitions. By analyzing key yet understudied performance and installation works, I argue that these artists navigated sacred and profane expressions of the otherworldly, complicating and resisting aesthetic distinctions, state repression, racialized exclusion, and, to varying degrees, the commodification of spiritual traditions.

Drawing on archival research, oral histories, comparative religious studies, and art historical analysis—as well as feminist, queer, and performance theory—this study situates these artistic interventions within the broader sociopolitical transformations of the countercultural, post-Civil Rights, and postcolonial era. The selected case studies reveal how these artists transformed ritualistic practices, community engagement, and site-specific installations into strategies of artistic and social resistance that blurred the boundaries between public and private devotion, as well as trained and self-taught artistic traditions.

By foregrounding the intersections of spirituality, corporeality, and performative agency, this dissertation contributes to discourses on decolonial aesthetics while critically engaging spirituality within modern and contemporary art historiography. In doing so, it illuminates how alternative and hegemonic epistemologies coalesce in spiritual, artistic, and sociopolitical conversations across the Americas and the Caribbean in the second half of the twentieth century.

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goddaughter Philippa, for whom I can only hope to leave a world filled with inspiring ideas for revelry and action.

Dedication

A mi madre Lebell Inirida y a mi padre Luis Orlando. Sin su amor y cuidado continuo nada de esto hubiera sido posible. A Daniel, mi hermano, y Susana, mi cuñada, por los momentos restauradores juntos en familia y en la naturaleza. ¡Lo logramos!

To my chosen family and partners who have generously shared their heart and souls with me throughout the years. Friends, you have sustained me with your laughter and levity. Lovers, you have been, in the absence of elders, teachers, students, conspirators, and ancestors. We keep growing, healing, and learning together. Thank you.

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Introduction

"A la sombra de lo diferente con amor y asombro."
Gonzalo Arango to Simón González Restrepo, 1974

The sociopolitical juncture at which I am completing this doctoral dissertation from New York City can only be described as a state of emergency. A general turn towards a form of an extreme, reactionary right-wing politics has taken hold in the United States as well as certain parts Latin America and Europe in the last decade. Signaling the demise of the liberal cultural and institutional hegemony in place since the 1990s, a peaking conservative populism of autocratic tendencies has publicly rejected decades of social inclusion efforts by debasing essential tenets of critical race and gender theories, even embracing unapologetic expressions of neo-Nazism in political rallies. Just over the course of February and March of 2025, Donald J. Trump's inaugural executive orders of his second term as President of the United States eradicated all Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives from public offices, established English as the official language of the country, and critically slashed all funding of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). His administration has been quick to attack higher education institutions, threatening penalties and funding cuts for those advocating racially based affirmative action, teaching, and researching. This battle against initiatives and institutions aiming to address the structural, historical, and hierarchical status quo inherited from colonial and plantation-based extractivism, and its subsequent neocolonial and imperialist treatment of otherness, is as historically revisionist as it is polarizing. Aiming to empower Euro-American and heteronormative supremacy, the U.S.-American conservative turn seethes with contempt for alternative and imaginative worldviews. It seeks to standardize, via political,

economic, and educative coercion, subaltern epistemologies and ontologies, whether expressed through grassroots communities or intellectual milieus, or the combination of both. The modus operandi at play is straightforward: Tearing the social fabric and relying on the exclusionary gravitas of modern history to sediment a new, macabre expression of a return to order. The next four years, if not more, of this radical political scenario present a challenge to a civil society interested in coalitions as expressions of solidarity, growth, and generous will.

Simultaneously, however, cultural and artistic trends invested in trauma healing, community building, and expressions of spirituality across demographics, geographies, and periods have emerged in the last ten years. Coinciding with the beginning of my graduate studies in New York City, first as an MA student at New York University and then as a PhD student at Columbia University, I witnessed, studied, and experienced the movements of this spiritual turn, which was exacerbated by the two years of social confining resulting from the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2021. In Colombia, for instance, a general trend of urbanites reconnecting with rural areas has led to the creation of self-sustaining creative and spiritual communities, whose reclaiming of Indigenous heritages and rituals has encouraged, not without controversy, a higher consumption and demand of psychotropic substances, such as psylocibin, Ayahuasca or Yagé, and Peyote.[1] The same can be said of the United States where, in addition to similar social movements, a resurgence of psychedelic research in universities like John Hopkins in Baltimore or Harvard University in Cambridge evidences a sustained and serious engagement with the possibilities of mind-altering experiences and subaltern knowledges as mechanisms of

[1] Jean Paul Sarrazín, "Espiritualidad y chamanismo: Rituales de ayahuasca bajo el giro subjetivo en Colombia" 57, no. 3 (2022): 646-661. See: Luis Eduardo Luna and Steven F. White, eds., *Ayahuasca Reader: Encounters with the Amazon's Sacred Vine*, New edition (Santa Fe, NM: Synergetic Press, 2016).

community empowerment and strengthening of the social fabric.[2] Though not unproblematic as dynamics of appropriation and extraction of historically marginalized communities still exist, this social and cultural direction is notable for its general desire to supersede the immediate constraints of everyday life. It also calls attention to an increasing social predisposition to engage with non-hegemonic epistemologies and worldviews which are imbued with a greater sense of human and non-human interconnectedness, raising awareness of the need for sustainable futures and an ethics of care for ourselves and others. At a moment where social antagonisms in the public sphere seem to be at an all-time high, civil society's rooting in spiritually based explorations point in the opposite direction. Their permeable, atomized, and decentralized nature is hard to categorize and control, effectively becoming a platform for unstructured social and political resistance that resembles the expansiveness and unruliness of erotic desire and pleasure.

Decidedly responding to the needs of its time, my dissertation presents a historical study aiming to trace a roadmap for spiritually based coalition building through the arts in the face of political repression, social inequality, and widespread disease. Here, spirituality is understood in a broad sense that encompasses a belief in the otherworldly that can manifest in sacralizing as well as sacrilegious forms. By looking into the 1970s and 1980s, a time when a distinct but resonant historical juncture emerged out of the liberated countercultural movement of the 1960s, the following pages discuss the ways in which performance and installation artists engaged with non-hegemonic spiritualities and spiritual transgression as a form of sociopolitical resistance. This study takes comparative religious scholar Mircea Eliade's description of the witches' orgiastic rites of communion with the devil during the Sabbath known as *lucerna extincta*, a

[2] See, for instance, the initiatives advanced at John Hopkins Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research as well as the Havard Divinity School's Centers for the Study of World Religions research on psychedelics and spirituality: https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/psychiatry/research/psychedelics-research, and https://cswr.hds.harvard.edu/research-programming/transcendence-transformation/psychedelics-spirituality.

Latin expression meaning "extinction of lights" as a metaphor for spiritual alliances privileging queering desires and aesthetics beyond visually overdetermined signposts.[3] To do so, the argument proposes the term "spiritual promiscuity" as a theoretical and methodological framework contending that the permeability of spiritual explorations from this era constituted a platform for mutual understanding across social groups through ongoing redefinitions of what is deemed to be sacred. Invested in an overlapping exploration of subaltern spiritual systems emerging from the Civil Rights Movement, second-wave feminism, gay liberation movement, and witchcraft and paganism, artists engaged with themes of race and gender in unorthodox fashions. Their creative processes evidenced an acknowledgment of the value of life, community, and nature beyond the social constraints of a politics of respectability and minority representation characterizing much of the period of study. In superseding, albeit to varying degrees, the pigeonholing dynamics of a capital-driven multicultural era, these creatives presented innovative forms of expression that ranged from spectacularizing collective ritual performances to sadomasochistic-coded experiences of ecstatic rapture and transcendence. These actions presuppose a necessary sense of levity and irreverence towards identity boundaries as bridges for interconnection rather than invalidation or banalization of others' life experiences and cosmogonies.

[3] Mircea Eliade, *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions; Essays in Comparative Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 85-92. From a comparative religious and mythological standpoint, Mircea Eliade describes the term *lucerna extincta* in context as: "Ritual orgies—in some cases preceded by the extinction of lights—are attested among populations as different as the Kurds, the Tibetans, the Eskimos, the Malgaches, the Ngadju Dyaks, and the Australians. The incentives are manifold, but generally such ritual orgies are carried out in order to avert a cosmic or social crisis—drought, epidemic, strange meteorological phenomena (e.g. the aurora australis)—or in order to lead magico-religious support o some propitious event (a marriage, the birth of a child, etc.) by releasing and heightening the dormant powers of sexuality. Over against a dangerous crisis as well as an auspicious event, indiscriminate and excessive sexual intercourse plunges the collectivity into the fabulous epoch of the beginnings." He ends his assessment by stating: "All these have to do with the same fundamental drive: to go beyond one's parents' and grandparents' world of meanings and to recover the lost significance and beatitude of the 'beginnings' and thereby the hope of discovering a new and *creative* mode of existing in the world."

Titled "*Lucerna Extincta:* Spiritual Promiscuities in Performance and Installation Art, 1970s-80s," my dissertation is both an academic endeavor as it is a political manifesto. It investigates a model for intersectional social interactions and solidarities that seek to strengthen, through the lens of spirituality, humanistic and artistic discourses based on identity politics. While my intention squarely aligns with the fight for social justice based on class, racial, sexual, and gender-based categories, the research offers a critique to the way in which the discussion around identity politics today reproduces much of the multicultural golden cages of self- and community identification of the 1980s. The unflinching sanctity in which we have upheld our diverse identities in the past five decades, despite concepts like intersectionality gaining widespread attention, became evident to me while pursuing my graduate studies. We have learned to establish boundaries as necessary mechanisms for self-protection and trauma-processing at the expense, however, of the sedimentation of rigid discourses and positions of what is acceptable, permissible, and socially sanctioned when experiencing the world of others. While I cannot speak on behalf of everyone, I have repeatedly corroborated my view of the presence of an increasing sense of hypervigilance and fear amongst us over the course of the years. Instead of playfulness, wonderment, and curiosity for the marvelous world of human diversity and interactions, these attitudes have led to social avoidance, resentment, mockery, and fragmentation. I see this as one of the leading reasons as to why conservative reactionaries have picked on the so-called "woke agenda" and "gender ideology" as one of their scathing critiques of what they perceive as an obligated liberal doctrine that does not allow conceptual space for flexibility. On the contrary, queer and transgender experiences and ideas offer us essential insights today into the value of indeterminacy, fluidity, and contradiction as springboards for human communion with abundance of care for our bodies and communities. For me, dance

floors and sex parties—spaces for exploration, vulnerability, and induced ecstasy for many queers of color—have become illuminating and affirming spaces to understand and extrapolate ideas on corporeal promiscuity not as banality but rather as a form of tapping into a source of a continuum between eros, creativity, spirituality, and transcendence. Liberal and conservative perspectives sublimated in an ethos of human connection through the lens of a higher consciousness, call it art, pleasure or spirit.

The dissertation is divided into three chapters, each addressing a different case study in which "spiritual promiscuity" serves as the predominant ethos for action-creation in performance and installation practices. This concept foregrounds the interaction between hegemonic and non-hegemonic spiritualities in shaping bodily and spatial repertoires for artistic expression, employing sacralizing and desacralizing strategies to challenge social and aesthetic modernist hierarchies. Geographically, the dissertation addresses cases from Bogotá, Port of Spain and London, and Los Angeles. The first chapter examines the Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería (First World Congress of Sorcery, as per the original translation), a large-scale event held in Bogotá in August, 1975. Featuring over twenty academic panels, along with thematically related art exhibitions and ritualistic performances, the congress functioned as a collective performance reclaiming witchcraft as an umbrella term for an amalgam of demonized spiritual systems. It publicly addressed key issues of spectacularity and authenticity within Indigenous and Afro-diasporic spiritual traditions in Latin America and the Caribbean. The second chapter focuses on the early career of Trinidad's pioneering performance artist A k u z u r u during the late 1970s and 1980s in Port of Spain and London. Initially a fashion designer, A k u z u r u transitioned to performance and installation art, incorporating elements from the ecstatic carnivalesque, Zen Buddhism, and Obeah as guiding principles for her ritualistic *aktions*. Her practice, which began

in the Notting Hill Carnival and picked on the atomized cultural explosion of London at the time, reflects a synthesis of these influences. The third and final chapter explores the work of four artists associated with Chicana/o/x aesthetics in Los Angeles during the punk and post-punk movements in the late 1970s and early 1980s. By examining the contributions of Jerri Allyn, Jerry Dreva, Alice Bag, and Gerardo Velázquez within artistic collectives and music bands, this section highlights their fusion of Catholicism, occultism, and paganism as a platform for self-sacralization and the healing of racial, gender based, and sexual marginalization. Together, these chapters offer three original perspectives supporting the use of "spiritual promiscuity" as an innovative theoretical framework for writing modern and contemporary art histories.

Gaining a perspective on the nature of the sacred in the arts and ourselves through the lens of promiscuity, usually understood as an undesirable expression of profanity or carnal excess, seems to offer a contradiction in terms. As someone from Barranquilla who profusely enjoyed Carnival every year until my mid-teens, however, I have always seen transgression, profanity, and irreverence as mechanisms to tell truths and pursue higher states of being in rituals of dance and visual excess. Recently, Professor Julia Bryan-Wilson brought to my attention art historian and critic Douglas Crimp's text "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," for which I am grateful. This text offers an insightful reflection on the importance of resisting and resignifying portrayals of queer affect and desire in times of hardship. Written in 1987, a moment where the HIV/AIDS pandemic had claimed the life of many gay men in the Western world, Crimp's article argued that it was precisely a promiscuous ethos towards sex what allowed gay men to rethink the possibility of safe sex as a pleasurable new standard. Crimp underscores the promiscuity was, in fact, a conduit for developing an ethics of community protection and care: "Our promiscuity taught us many things, not only about the pleasures of sex,

but about the great multiplicity of those pleasures."[4] In her own engagement with Crimp's reclaiming of promiscuity, Bryan-Wilson discusses the work of LTTR (originally meaning "Lesbians to the Rescue"), the journal then transformed into art collective, as an expression of "critical promiscuity". Since the 2001, the art historian and curator contends, LTTR's work has explored screenings, exhibitions, performances, read-ins, and workshops, exploring queer sensibility of exuberance that defies genres and generates "all-important moments of unexpected connections."[5] Interestingly, both Crimp and Bryan-Wilson examine promiscuity as a vehicle for human interconnectedness besides prescriptive identity formations. It is in that space of communion where the sacred and sacrilegious potential of spirituality lies within the purview of the present analysis.

Promiscuity, much like spirituality, is a porous concept that resists categorization by virtue of its ubiquity and accessibility, particularly in Western, liberal societies, which is perhaps one of the reasons why it has remained virtually at bay from or glanced over in art historical inquiry. A year later after Crimp's text, writer and novelist Andrew Holleran wrote, in 1988, a series of concatenated thoughts titled "Notes on Promiscuity." Capturing the ambivalence of how the term was perceived in popular culture at the time, Holleran's text makes a case for what Bryan-Wilson describes as the "risks and rewards the term implies."[6] In it, he presents promiscuity through a kaleidoscopic lens from a self-degrading act to a revolutionary idea, stating in contradictory terms: "Promiscuity is now inseparable from the dread of AIDS" and "Yet promiscuity must be separated from the issue of AIDS if one wants to evaluate it, because

[4] Douglas Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," *October* 43 (1987): 237–71, 253.
[5] Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Repetition and Difference," *Artforum International* (Los Angeles, 2006), 109.
[6] Ibid., 110.

no one in the past was promiscuous knowing it would lead to what it led to."[7] Indeed, the association between the term promiscuity and the AIDS epidemic remains heavy today in our collective consciousness, which has prompted certain reactions of interest mixed with discomfort from, for instance, curators and scholars when sharing about my research proposal: "This could be disrespectful for survivors" or "Try to make it sound more than just a shock bomb." However, thinking of Holleran's assertion and the fact that the spread of HIV/AIDS has been dramatically lowered through viral suppression and preventive medication, though mostly in privileged, urban spaces, can we assess differently our understanding of the term as we move forward, or backwards, into the future? There is no way to predict another epidemic, whether sexual or not, from happening and affect us in the way that AIDS or COVID-19 did in a world that keeps growing more and more interconnected. However, our purview of how to deal with our relationship with physical touch and intimacy—as well as spirituality and identity as this research aims—can be greatly benefited, and indeed healed, if we attempt to release our judgments of sexual promiscuity as an act of carelessness.

Authors and activists Andrew Spieldenner and Jeffrey Escoffier have recently argued that gay men and queer people with preference for promiscuous behavior were more likely to develop, following sociologist Etienne Meunier, a type of "collective intimacy." Described as familiarity that comes from multiple sexual encounters with people in public and in groups, this term highlights a type of untraditional form of personal relating that is specific of sexually open communities. As an unorthodox form of community building, they argue, promiscuity is even important for those who do not practice it on the account that it embodies "an existential attitude of openness and engagement" and that "the promiscuous literally create sexual opportunities [for

[7] Andrew Holleran, "Notes on Promiscuity, 1988," in *A Pill for Promiscuity: Gay Sex in an Age of Pharmaceuticals*, eds., Andrew R. Spieldenner and Jeffrey Escoffier (Rutgers University Press, 2023), 16.

others]."[8] Moreover, author Michelle Tea asked in her edited volume *SLUTS: Anthology* a series of poignant questions inquiring on the range of attitudes that can be associated with promiscuity as a theoretical lens rather than just sex-determined: "Can one be culturally slutty? Can one be a slut within the bounds of monogamy? Is Slut an identity, like Queer, that can go through various iterations throughout a lifetime?"[9] As these authors' provocations demonstrate, taking promiscuity out of the lens of a moralistic interpretation, one that certainly predates the AIDS pandemic in the 1980s, opens new avenues to consider the term as applicable to a broader range of life experiences. Promiscuity, therefore, has the potential to be further explored, as Crimp and Bryan-Wilson contended, as both ethos and well as method for cultural as well as art historical inquiry. Methodologically, there is much to gain if we consider promiscuity as a space of unusual yet exciting connections, an enabler of collective intimacy, a philosophy of readiness to engage with others, and as a safeguard of our wonderment towards cultural connections—always in a state of permanent flux.

In his influential writings, queer theorist and performance art scholar José Esteban Muñoz similarly argued for the term "cruising," or the act of looking for sporadic sexual encounters in public spaces, as more than just libidinal excess. Instead, Muñoz encourages us to see queer cruising as an attitude and metaphor for openness to navigate across academic disciplines, material and spiritual realms, and regimes of perception.[10] The linkage between queerness and spirituality, therefore, come together in Muñoz's writings to deeply question our ontological assumptions of how we relate to the world around us: What constitutes the threshold

[8] Andrew R. Spieldenner and Jeffrey Escoffier, eds., *A Pill for Promiscuity: Gay Sex in an Age of Pharmaceuticals* (New Brunswick, Camden ; Newark, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2023), 131-132.
[9] Michelle Tea, ed., *SLUTS: Anthology* (Pasadena, CA: Dopamine, 2023), 10.
[10] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 18.

of the real? What is our degree of acceptance and incorporation of alternative truths? And how do we reconfigure our relationship with visuality as the dominant regime of perception, in favor of other senses or experiences? The 1970s allowed a moment of fruitful exploration in this regard, before the crackdown of conservative politics from the Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher eras that ensued, particularly in the work of feminist women writers. As I have elsewhere argued, Pulitzer Prize winner Annie Dillard is, to my knowledge, the first person to have coined the term "spiritual promiscuity," in reference to her permeable attitudes towards spirituality when writing her book *A Pilgrim on Tinker Creek* in 1974.[11] Shaped by her simultaneous engagement with Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Sufism in crafting her personal mythologies, Dillard's book recounts her year-long journey through Virginia, where nature consistently reveals itself as an immanent expression of the sacred. In this view, a capacious understanding of divinity as manifested in the natural world constitutes, as Muñoz astutely highlights, a form of cruising across spiritual systems. While upholding a reverence for these sacred traditions, Dillard's writing is an example of spiritual reinterpretation as an act of reclaiming personal autonomy as well as irreverent disobedience.

As a concept, "spiritual promiscuity" remains critical of the dynamics of capitalistic appropriation and exploitation of cultural difference, otherworldly belief systems included—a prevalent dynamic during the countercultural era.[12] The pop culture treatment of Asian, Middle Eastern, and Western occult spiritualities, for instance, led to the ultimate ridicule of the New

[11] Julián Sánchez González, "Spiritual Promiscuity, Psychedelic Interdependence, and The First World Congress of Sorcery," *Psychedelic Intersections*, Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, 2024, https://cswr.hds.harvard.edu/publications/psychedelic-intersections/spiritual-promiscuity-gonzalez#references. See: Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974); Annie Dillard, "Religion," accessed February 13, 2024, https://anniedillard-blog.tumblr.com/biography.

[12] See Antoinette Molinié, "The Invention of Andean New Age: The Globalization of Tradition," in *New Age in Latin America: Popular Variations and Ethnic Appropriations*, eds. Renée de la Torre, Cristina Gutiérrez Zúñiga, and Nahayeilli Juárez Huet (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2016), 291-315.

Age movement as a passing trend, positioning it as a cultural taboo offering no significant contributions other than essentializing and tokenizing what was perceived as an exotic other. Together with the then persecuted breakthroughs of the psychedelic era and the rise of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the link between spirituality, eroticism, and promiscuity, unsurprisingly, receded to a subsidiary place in intellectual and artistic engagements when neoliberal capitalism ushered in the 1990s. Alternatively, "spiritual promiscuity" departs from the contributions of Black lesbian intellectuals, such as Audre Lorde and M. Jacqui Alexander, insisting on the value of the erotic as a form of strengthening queer communities. Following cultural anthropologist Jafari Allen's inquiry on the development of the idea of Black gay/queer as an identity marker in the 1980s, this study sees "spiritual promiscuity" as also highly influenced by Black lesbian radical thought and community activism since the 1970s.[13] Fittingly, the idea of promiscuity appears numerous times in Allen's writing as a conceptual vehicle to supersede traditional forms of sociality such as the heteronormative family. It also contends with the term as a queering attitude to postsructuralist notions of "relationality," as per Édouard Glissant, or the "rhizomatic," as per Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, ultimately seeking, without shame, the generative encounters it may bring.[14] Beyond reifying and transactional interactions, promiscuity seeks to serve as a model for sustained and careful rapprochement to otherness.

Lorde's influential prose locates the notion of the erotic within female and spiritual registers which are "rooted in the power of our unexpressed or underrecognized feeling."[15] Appealing to the embrace of non-rational knowledges, the feminist author is careful to not equate

[13] Jafari Allen, *There's a Disco Ball between Us: A Theory of Black Gay Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 8.
[14] Ibid., 1-23.
[15] Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," in *The Selected Works of Audre Lorde*, ed. Roxane Gay (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020), 29.

the erotic with the idea of "god" or an "afterlife," for these concepts, as representative of organized religion, defer the enjoyment of sexuality and the body in one's lifetime.[16] Much like Dillard, this notion brings agency to the self and its immediate surroundings as an expression of spirituality, or the sacred, always with a sense of responsibility and accountability towards the experiences and feelings of others.[17] Lorde's view of the erotic as the mediating force between spirituality and politics, one could argue, is central to her call for greater interdependency and solidarities between women of color. She also underscored: "Within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being."[18] Thinking of the liberatory qualities of the union of subaltern differences from a spiritual purview as a platform for political action structures the theoretical framework of this research. Moreover, Alexander, following Lorde's path, notes that a politics of opposition, necessary to gain minority spaces for visibility and action, are not sustainable to fulfill a human need for interconnectedness.[19] For the Trinidadian feminist theorist, separation, whether racial, economic, or enforced contradict our sacred connection with one another as it is mediated by eroticism and the divine.[20] By proposing a joint study of Vodou and Santería, for instance, Alexander attempts to delve into the cosmologies through which a great number of women in the world "make their lives legible."[21] Both Lorde and Alexander, therefore, offer a generative platform for seeing the intersections of spiritualities

[16] Ibid., 34-36.
[17] Ibid., 35.
[18] Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *The Selected Works of Audre Lorde*, ed. Roxane Gay (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020), 41.
[19] M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 282.
[20] Ibidem.
[21] Ibid., 299.

as legitimate sites of embodied, political action. They insist on the need to infuse intersectionality with interspirituality to account for non-hegemonic life experiences and epistemologies.

In its political implications and intersectional scope, Alexander's thinking is deeply attuned to the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, leading voices in Chicana lesbian feminism and spiritual activism in the 1980s, and whose writings, though varying in scope and aims, have profoundly guided my research. Both authors were instrumental in developing a vocabulary that articulated the marginalization of sexual and gender difference within the complexities of border cultures between Mexico and the United States. In 1981, describing their approach to spirituality as a political platform, Anzaldúa and Moraga asserted: "The vision of our spirituality provides us with no trap door solution, no escape hatch tempting us to 'transcend' our struggle. We must act in the everyday world."[22] Their conceptualization of *El Mundo Zurdo*, a space for communion among "colored, queer, poor, female, and physically challenged" people, was an explicit call for coalition-building with spiritual undertones: "Change requires a lot of heat. It requires both the alchemist and the welder, the magician and the laborer, the witch and the warrior, the myth-smasher and the myth-maker."[23] Interracial and interspiritual in nature, Anzaldúa and Moraga's editorial work was ambitious and nothing short of heroic, given the exclusion, marginalization, and financial precarity they faced. Anzaldúa's doctoral research from the 1970s, posthumously published as *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, develops her theories around *Nepantla*, a Nahuatl term for in-betweenness, describing the experience of Chicanas and sexually diverse individuals at odds with white, heteronormative culture. Expansive in scope,

[22] Gloria Anzaldúa, "El Mundo Zurdo," *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, eds., Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015), 195.
[23] Ibid., 196.

Anzaldúa's writing seeks to create kinship "*entre todas las gentes y cosas*" ("amongst all kinds of peoples and things"), arguing that *nepantleras* are spiritual activists who resist exclusions based on race and class.[24] Committed to a project of social healing grounded in communion rather than opposition, Anzaldúa and Moraga—alongside Lorde and Alexander—advocated for minority solidarities as a means of resistance and intellectual visibility. Religion and spirituality played a crucial role in structuring their thoughts, as these authors, in a spiritually promiscuous ethos, inverted the traditional notion of the sacred as distant from the self and apolitical in nature.

Arguing for "spiritual promiscuity" as a theoretical model for studying performance and installation art in the 1970s and 1980s also requires considering how comparative religious studies have engaged with interspiritual and interdenominational cultural expressions as sites of inquiry. Scholars Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell produced groundbreaking studies in the 1940s and 1950s on the similarities between mythical structures and rituals across religions. Though controversial, their work continues to shape the study of non-hegemonic belief systems in relation to dominant religiosities, seeking commonalities in their expressions of the sacred. Born in Romania in the early twentieth century, Eliade exemplifies an intellectual who espoused—and never disavowed—fascist, ultra-nationalist, and anti-Semitic ideological stances throughout his career.[25] Nonetheless, his methodological contributions remain of interest, particularly his attempts to link pre-Christian or pagan, Christian, and Hindu religious traditions, myths, and rituals. In *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1954), Eliade argues that through the repetition of ritualistic archetypes—such as sacrifices or dances—communities enact an abolition

[24] Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating, *Light in the Dark = Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 83. See Gloria Anzaldúa, Norma E. Cantú, and Aída Hurtado, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012).
[25] Krzysztof Czyżewski and Timothy Snyder, "Sacrum, Fascism, Eliade," in *Toward Xenopolis: Visions from the Borderland*, ed. Mayhill C. Fowler, 117–32. Boydell & Brewer, 2022. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv24tr89r.17

of linear time, returning to the moment of a myth's original revelation.[26] He describes this as the "anhistorical character of popular memory" in what he considers archaic humanity, offering a counterpoint to the modern perception of time as constant novelty and inescapable irreversibility.[27] A few years earlier, Campbell, studying the mythical traditions of ancient Greek, Roman, Native American, and South and East Asian societies, identified the figure of the hero as a metaphor for the sources of human life and thought from which the possibility of renewal emerges.[28] According to Campbell, it is the hero's responsibility "to return to us, transfigured, and teach the lessons he had learned of life renewed."[29] He sees mythological figures as statements of spiritual principles that, much like in Eliade's framework, manifest through cyclical returns—a concept he describes as the "cosmogonic cycle."[30] Our understanding of myth and ritual has evolved to recognize them as direct responses to their historical contexts, expressed through various linguistic and performative forms. However, Eliade's and Campbell's comparative propositions remain important as scholarly attempts to challenge the growing Enlightenment rationality of modernity, which emphasized progress and linearity. More recent approaches to the cyclical worlds of non-Western societies have been addressed in the work of Leda Maria Martins, for instance, who argues for a conception of "*tempo espiralar"* when discussing the performative religious rituals and dances of Afro-Brazilian cultures.[31]

Conceptually, the work of Catholic monks and theologians has also been instrumental in the definition of terms for this research and the development of the concept "spiritual

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[26] Mircea Eliade, Willard R. Trask, and Jonathan Z. Smith, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 35.
[27] Ibid., 46-48.
[28] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, electronic resource, (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008), 24-25.
[29] Ibidem.
[30] Ibid., 186-187.
[31] See Leda Maria Martins, *Performances do tempo espiralar, poéticas do corpo-tela* (Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil: Cobogó, 2021).

promiscuity." In *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions*, Wayne Teasdale distinguishes between spirituality and religion, framing them as individual and collective pursuits of growth, respectively. Teasdale writes: "Being *religious* connotes belonging to and practicing a religious tradition. Being *spiritual* suggests a personal commitment to a process of inner development that engages us in our totality." [32] He further argues that spirituality encompasses contemplative practices, a disposition toward depth and meaning, and a search for ultimate direction and belonging.[33] Teasdale is known for coining the term "interspirituality" to describe the interdependence of religious traditions, emphasizing an "openness of people who have a viable spiritual life, coupled with their determination, capacity, and commitment to the inner search across traditions." [34] Resonating with the spiritual-political perspectives of Black and Chicana lesbian feminists, Teasdale—though rooted in a different intellectual tradition and subject positionality—presents interspirituality as a socially grounded tool that transcends the confines of nationalism and tribalism in contemporary society.[35] His proposition is deeply informed by the work of Trappist monk and theologian Thomas Merton, who was instrumental in fostering dialogue between Catholicism, Hinduism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Comparative theologian Francis X. Clooney, S.J., often cites Merton as a central figure in modern-day linking of Eastern spiritualities and Catholicism. Clooney suggests that one of Merton's greatest contributions to interreligious dialogue was his emphasis on contemplation as a mystical act, offering a bridge between traditions hailing from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.[36] He underscores that Merton's writings from the 1950s explored how Asian

[32] Wayne Teasdale, *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 1999), 17.
[33] Ibidem.
[34] Ibid., 26.
[35] Ibid., 4-5.
[36] Francis X. Clooney, "Thomas Merton's Deep Christian Learning across Religious Borders," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 37 (2017): 56-58.

spiritualities allowed Christian doctrines to reconceptualize the relationship between self and God in less rigidly divided terms, embracing a more expansive vision that includes the natural world.[37] Merton, Teasdale, and Clooney, therefore, share a vision of interspirituality as a catalyst for human communion and door into a deeper understanding of the shared experience of the sacred.

After the Second Vatican Council of the early 1960s, the Catholic Church underwent a significant transformation, seeking a more direct and less hierarchical relationship with its congregation. In Latin America, two key strategies emerged: a greater acceptance of Indigenous and Afro-diasporic belief systems, reflecting an interspiritual approach, and a stronger engagement with disenfranchised urban and rural communities.[38] This redefinition of the Church's role among its popular base led to the rise of Liberation Theology, which, as theologian Eddy José Muskus notes, called for the Church's direct involvement in eradicating poverty and injustice.[39] Peruvian priest and theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, a leading thinker of Liberation Theology, emphasized the present and temporal dimensions of individual self-realization. Rather than prioritizing an eternal afterlife, Gutiérrez, through a Marxist lens, challenged reductionist interpretations of the gospel that upheld the status quo and dominant classes.[40] It is noteworthy, therefore, that Alexander credits Liberation Theology as a historical reference for Third World solidarity in her writings.[41] Similarly, literature scholar Alma Rosa Alvarez has linked Anzaldúa's contributions to an ethos aligned with Liberation Theology, particularly because, like her concept of *mestiza* consciousness, this class-based proposition is both permeable and

[37] Ibid., 53.
[38] Eddy José Muskus, *The Origins and Early Development of Liberation Theology in Latin America: With Particular Reference to Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2002), 133-136.
[39] Ibid., 11.
[40] Ibid., 14.
[41] Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 322-329.

postmodern in its spiritual outlook.[42] The intersection of spirituality and politics was also central to the work of Nicaraguan priest and poet Ernesto Cardenal. Having studied under Thomas Merton at the Trappist monastery in Gethsemani, Kentucky, Cardenal later founded a school for self-taught artists in the Solentiname Islands in the mid-1960s. Scholar Marcela Raggio argues that Cardenal's work represents a form of mysticism that engages with the contemplation of God through praxis and political action.[43] Following Merton's mentorship, Cardenal developed a growing interest in Indigenous cosmogonies of Central and South America, including those of Colombia, where he lived for a time, and Peru. The development of a grassroots, left-wing political project within Catholicism thus contributes to the sense of locatedness, presentness, and activism in favor of marginalized communities proposed in the concept of "spiritual promiscuity."

In discussing interspirituality, Teasdale acknowledges that the concept is not of his making, as religious intersections naturally occur when societies come together—whether voluntarily or, I would add, under forced circumstances. Rather, his work seeks to conceptualize these intersections through their mystical and transcendental potential. Indeed, in Latin America and the Caribbean, cultural and religious intersections have been widely examined in anthropological, sociological, and art historical research, leading to the popularization of terms such as *mestizaje*, creolization, and hybridization, among others. Regarding the first term, performance art scholar Diana Taylor argues that *mestizaje*—denoting biological and cultural fusion—was initially deployed in the early twentieth century to legitimize nation-state building by promoting an illusion of social unity that disregarded racial, gender, and sexual

[42] Alma Rosa Alvarez, *Liberation Theology in Chicana/o Literature: Manifestations of Feminist and Gay Identities* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), 62-63.
[43] Marcela Raggio, "Ernesto Cardenal: A Latin American Liberation Mystic," *Religions* 14, no. 5 (2023): 3.

differentiation.[44] However, she notes that Chicana feminist theorists have since reclaimed the term to emphasize the unresolved aspects of Mexican-American identities, shaped both by cultural intersections and by the experience of living in a liminal border space.[45] Conversely, the philosopher Édouard Glissant extensively explored *créolisation*, describing it as :"*Son fait […] est d'entretenir relations entre deux ou plusieurs 'zones' culturelles, convoquées en un lieu de rencontre"* ("Its role […] is to maintain relationships between two or more cultural 'zones,' brought together in a meeting place"). As an ongoing relational process, he bases *créolisation* in the formation of creole languages, which retain distinct linguistic variations despite their fusion.[46] Meanwhile, Néstor García Canclini popularized hybridization to describe sociocultural processes that merge to form new structures, objects, and practices. His approach sees cultural intermixing within a broad, globalized framework that extends beyond race, religion, and language to include the influence of advanced technologies and modern and postmodern social processes.[47] García Canclini describes an additional term, syncretism, as belonging to a larger process of hybridization, signaling a "religious fusions or traditional symbolic movements."[48] With this conceptual framework in mind, the term "spiritual promiscuity" aligns with García Canclini's framing of syncretic processes within the broader category of hybridization. However, this text's contribution also foregrounds a queer ethos of refusal, serving as a sociopolitical platform for coalition building that reminisces Black and Brown feminist thought as well as

[44] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durhamm NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 94-98
[45] Ibid., 99-100
[46] Édouard Glissant*, Traité du tout-monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 25. Glissant notes in this publication when referring to *créolisation* as a socially determined occurrence "Son fait […] est d'entretenir relations entre deux ou plusieurs 'zones' culturelles, convoquées en un lieu de rencontre, tout comme une langue créole joue à partir de 'zones' linguistiques différenciées, pour en tirer sa matière inédite."
[47] Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), XXXII-XXXIV.
[48] Ibid., 11.

progressive Catholic theology. As such, it seeks to carve out an alternative discursive space that redefines the relationship between spiritual and political activism beyond an academic sociological undertaking.

More recently, an interdisciplinary group of researchers, including Gustavo Morello S.J., Catalina Romero, Hugo Rabbia, and Néstor da Costa, described the Latin American religious landscape as one shaped by ongoing interactions between institutionalized religions and individual spiritual beliefs. By foregrounding the concepts "enchanted modernity" and "lived religions"—the personal and communal spaces of spiritual practice and negotiation—the authors emphasize believers as active creators and agents of their own traditions rather than passive recipients of religious impositions and dogmas.[49] More importantly, their argument highlights the role of marginal religious and spiritual developments in shaping Latin America's colonial and modern histories, where simultaneous expressions of Catholicism, Afro-diasporic, and Indigenous beliefs coalesced. This historical background continues to influence the region's religious composition today, including, for instance, the rise of Pentecostalism as an emerging denomination. The group contends that Latin American believers have thus been shaped as "modern, autonomous subjects who craft their religiosity in dialogue with different traditions."[50] The lens of enchanted modernity, therefore, emphasizes an agency-driven approach to the development of religiosities and spiritualities in Latin America, moving beyond dichotomies between public and private, as well as sacred and profane.[51] Similarly, the concept of "spiritual promiscuity", as outlined in my argument, stems from the volition of individuals and communities to craft their own notions of the sacred from a bottom-up perspective. However, by

[49] Gustavo Morello SJ et al., "An Enchanted Modernity: Making Sense of Latin America's Religious Landscape," *Critical Research on Religion* 5, no. 3 (December 2017): 1-19
[50] Ibid., 318.
[51] Ibid., 317.

focusing on case studies from the aftermath of the countercultural era, the term also underscores queering tactics that resist predetermined assumptions of respectability, particularly in relation to racial, gender-based, and sexual identifications.

Cultural historians Ricardo Martínez-Esquivel and Pablo A. Baisotti further assert that the interactions between the religious and the secular, as well as belief systems considered to be outdated and modern are a staple in the Latin American social, cultural, and political context.[52] In the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, the authors underscore, beliefs systems in the region were subject to a "market situation" where individuals had more liberty to engage with religious and spiritual traditions. Including Christianity as well as Judaism, esotericism, Freemasonry, Theosophy, and Orientalism, individuals crafted new and original religious systems that exceeded theological dogmatism, leading to a "more ambiguous pursuit of the sacred."[53] Much like Morello and associates, Martínez-Esquivel and Baisotti locate in the Latin American context a distinctive expression religious experiences foregrounding pluralism and a proliferation of religiosities and beliefs directly influencing a revival of Afro-diasporic and Indigenous spiritual interest in the beginning of the twenty-first century.[54] Within this framework, a spiritually promiscuous approach based on case studies from the 1970s and 1980s seeks to highlight a pivotal moment in artistic creation where the confluence of these religious and spiritual systems coalesced before the advent of the new millennium. Expanding on the "enchanted modernities" approach and the permanent confluence of non-Western and Western spiritual systems, this study aligns with the idea that this intersection of belief systems allowed a redefinition of the sacred, positioning the body and the self at the center of this shifting dynamic.

[52] Pablo Alberto Baisotti and Ricardo Martínez Esquivel, eds., *Modernity of Religiosities and Beliefs: A New Path in Latin America from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Century* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021), 3.
[53] Ibid., 5.
[54] Ibid., 6.

As a result, "spiritual promiscuity" is a proposition that is rooted in the particularities of the religious experiences of Latin America and the Caribbean. It signals these cultural intersections as forerunners of a contemporary cultural process of widespread spiritual miscegenation taking root in spaces outside of the region as an ethos of sociopolitical resistance.

Indeed, the emergence of a "global occult" in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries saw the rise of, as historian Nile Green reminds, "alternative intellectual exchanges, cultural hybridity, and transcolonial networks between distinct culture zones."[55] For Green, the term "occult" refers to the different outputs of new religious beliefs that emerged during this time as they claimed access to hidden knowledge and power while performing specialized techniques.[56] Three years before the publication of Morello's article on the Latin American enchanted modernity paradigm, art historians Christopher M. Scheer, Sara Victoria Turner, and James G. Mansell engaged with the principle behind global occultism by launching the exhibition *Enchanted Modernities: Mysticism, Landscape, and the American West*, accompanied by a publication in 2019. This curatorial project offered an innovative perspective on modern art practices in the United States, highlighting the influence of non-hegemonic spiritualities—particularly Theosophy—on the arts of California, Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico.[57] Following Helena Blavatsky's vision of the American West as a site for humanity's "re-enchantment," a term later discussed, the authors provided a groundbreaking avenue of inquiry that positioned spirituality as central to the development of artistic languages. This perspective broadened our understanding of the work of painter Agnes Pelton and the New Mexico-based Transcendental

[55] Nile Green, "The Global Occult: An Introduction," *History of Religions* 54, no. 4 (2015): 384.
[56] Ibidem.
[57] Christopher Scheer et al., eds., *Enchanted Modernities: Theosophy, the Arts and the American West* (Lopen, Somerset, United Kingdom: Fulgur Press, 2019), 1-13.

Painting Group of the 1930s and 1940s, including members Emil Bisttram and Florence Miller.[58] Similarly, Tracey Bashkoff's 2018 exhibition *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future* at the Guggenheim Museum contributed to a mainstream reassessment of the Western modern art canon, centering non-hegemonic spiritualities as a critical framework. Af Klint's groundbreaking painterly practice emerged from her participation in *The Five*, a spiritist group active in early twentieth-century Sweden, preceding the work of male abstract painters such as Piet Mondrian or Wassily Kandinsky. The collective's ritualistic invocations and channeling led af Klint to create a series of monumental abstract paintings in collaboration with her fellow mediums.[59] By challenging the rationalist narrative of abstract art's development, these two projects exemplify recent historiographical shifts in Western art history that resonate with emerging theorizations in Latin American religious studies. Altogether they give shape to an emerging intellectual constellation of shared scholarly concerns around the study of the global occult across disciplines and geographies. As a term, therefore, "spiritual promiscuity" highlights its indebtedness to Latin American and Caribbean intellectual histories, but also contends that the intersections between spirituality, politics, and artistic practices are not exclusive to so-called non-Western world.

It is therefore essential to address two key art historiographic references that recurrently emerge in the literature relating to occult spiritualities and Western art. While gaining increasing attention in recent years, Wassily Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, originally published in 1911, was foundational to pioneering curatorial and publication projects throughout the twentieth century. In this work, Kandinsky asserts that a non-materialistic approach to artmaking is the only means of expressing higher states of consciousness, achieved through the

[58] Ibidem.
[59] See Tracey Bashkoff, ed., *Hilma Af Klint: Paintings for the Future* (New York, NY: Guggenheim, 2018).

channeling of feeling and emotion.[60] Although he reinforces a typical modernist dichotomy between "primitive" and "civilized" cultures, Kandinsky's ideas echo Blavatsky's Theosophy, which incorporated elements of Indian religiosity to access a suppressed inner knowledge. He viewed this opening as essential to countering the materialistic excesses of his time, a condition he and many artists attributed to the Industrial Revolution of the previous century.[61] Similarly, curator Maurice Tuchman's *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, organized at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) in 1986, directly referenced Kandinsky while offering a comprehensive examination of the relationship between occult spiritualities and modern and early postmodern Euro-American art. Drawing on twentieth-century art historical scholarship—particularly from the 1910s-30s and the 1960s-70s—Tuchman identified unmediated access to a spiritual source as central to the mystical-occult explorations of these periods, in contrast to the hierarchical structures of institutionalized religion. He further argued, as Green would later affirm, that these alternative spiritual systems amalgamated diverse influences, from canonical texts such as the Bible to mystical writings, heretical sects, Native American beliefs, and Eastern philosophies and religions.[62] Through this richly illustrated study, Tuchman outlined five primary "impulses" or modes of engagement with spirituality through abstraction: cosmic imagery, vibration, synesthesia, duality, and sacred geometries.[63] While neither Kandinsky nor Tuchman directly addressed the issue of cultural appropriation or the presence of Afro-diasporic thought and spiritualities as essential to the rise of modernism, both

[60] Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. Michael Sadleir (Auckland, New Zealand: The Floating Press, 1911), 40.
[61] Ibid., 23; 42-43.
[62] Maurice Tuchman, ed., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985* (New York, NY: Abbeville Press, 1986), 19. Also refer to: Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1983); Charlene Spretnak, *The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art: Art History Reconsidered, 1800 to the Present* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
[63] Ibid., 32.

acknowledged—albeit from distinct perspectives—that spiritual approaches to artmaking facilitate connections across belief systems through acts of referencing, borrowing, and visualization. Methodologically, Tuchman's insights are particularly relevant to the development of this dissertation's conceptualization and analysis, as his comparative study delineates a specific set of artistic expressions within a broader discourse of exploratory interspiritual understanding through the arts.

A year after Tuchman's exhibition at LACMA, curators Holliday T. Day and Hollister Sturges organized *Art of the Fantastic: Latin America, 1920-1987* at the Indianapolis Museum of Art. This comprehensive exhibition featured artists of diverse nationalities, defining fantastic art as the "juxtaposition, distortion, or amalgamation of images and/or materials that extend experience by contradicting our normal expectations formally or iconographically."[64] The show positioned the fantastic as a central artistic theme in Latin America throughout the twentieth century, identifying key visual strategies such as metamorphoses, incongruous hybrids, dislocations in time and space, and shifts in scale and materials—all of which disrupt the perceived natural order.[65] Unlike Tuchman's exhibition, however, *Art of the Fantastic* did not explore the presence of the fantastic in abstract or concrete art, instead focusing on figurative, surrealist, and expressionist styles across three generations of artists, including, for instance, Tarsila do Amaral, Beatriz González, and José Bedia Valdés. The curators argued that religions and spiritualities of Western European, Indigenous, and Afro-diasporic origins—and their intermixing—were significant in shaping fantastic expression in the region. They also contended that, unlike their North American peers, the selected Latin American artists explored the fantastic

[64] Holliday T. Day and Hollister Sturges, *Art of the Fantastic: Latin America, 1920-1987* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press; Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1987), 38.
[65] Ibidem.

as a means of reflecting on the sociopolitical systems in which they lived.[66] Day and Sturges traced an evolution in fantastic expression across generations: from the utopianism characteristic of early avant-garde artists to the existentialism, and finally to coping mechanisms such as humor, irony, and theatrical exaggeration in the 1980s.[67] While the exhibition served as a valuable thematic roadmap for transnational inquiry, it is notable that, even after Tuchman's significant contribution linking spirituality and politics, the curators persisted in framing North and South American engagements with the fantastic and spirituality as inherently distinct. Even as they sought to avoid the stereotype of Latin America as a realm of atemporal or backward mythologies, their omission of contemporary research and curatorial projects exploring similar themes—particularly relating to different cultural and geographic contexts—ultimately reinforced this view. The issue was not only the superficial association of Latin America with the fantastic and the spiritual, which remains a necessary and important undertaking, but also the implication that these themes were, in general, particularly more political and pronounced than in the Euro-American world.

Art of the Fantastic preceded the groundbreaking yet controversial exhibition *Magiciens de la terre*, held at the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Grande Halle de la Villette in Paris in 1989. Curated by Jean-Hubert Martin, this monumental exhibition brought together artists from diverse artistic traditions—both formally trained and self-taught—across Africa, Europe, the United States, Oceania, Latin America, and the Caribbean.[68] Credited with ushering in an era of neoliberal and globalized exhibition-making, *Magiciens de la terre* challenged the anachronistic

[66] Ibidem.
[67] Ibid., 41; 121-122; 175.
[68] Household names and lesser-known artists from the latter two groups included an all-male selection: José Bedia, Bien Aimé, Julio Galán, Enrique Gómez de Molina, Alfredo Jaar, Felipe Linares, Mestre Didi, Georges Liautaud, Cildo Meireles, and Ronaldo Pereira Rego.

tendency of Western societies to relegate so-called "archaic" artists to a separate temporality, denying them a contemporaneity.[69] Seeking to dismantle aesthetic hierarchies between academic and popular arts, Martin deliberately employed the terms *magie* and *magiciens* (magic and magicians) as alternative descriptors for art and artists, circumventing the historical and ideological weight these concepts carry in Western discourse. However, given that such terms do not always exist in the cultural frameworks of non-Euro-American artists, Martin instead proposed, in a manner reminiscent of the Romantic sublime or the ineffable, that magic and art share an inexplicable, yet powerful, influence on the viewer.[70] As literary scholar Maureen Murphy observes, a notable aspect of the exhibition was Martin's invitation for artists from "non-Western" contexts to create *in situ* works imbued with a magical and spiritual dimension, countering their decontextualized perception as atemporal.[71] Yet, as literary scholar El Hadji Malick Ndiaye underscores, *Magiciens de la terre* ultimately placed greater emphasis on popular artists in an effort to position magical and spiritual forces as integral to Western art, thereby reinforcing a politics of obliged representation and, as a consequence, exclusion.[72] Much like *Art of the Fantastic*, *Magiciens de la terre* sought to draw connections between various spiritual systems but lacked methodological and conceptual rigor in doing so. Addressing this historiographic tension and lacuna is a central aim of this dissertation's proposal of "spiritual promiscuity" as a theoretical framework.

The mixed international reception of *Art of the Fantastic* and *Magiciens de la terre* contributed to Latin American historians and curators distancing themselves, with counted

[69] Jean-Hubert Martin et al., eds., *Magiciens de La Terre* (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1989), 8.
[70] Ibid., 9.
[71] Maureen Murphy, "Des *Magiciens de la terre*, à la globalisation du monde de l'art: retour sur une exposition historique," *Critique d'art*, no. 41 (June 24, 2013): 3-4.
[72] El Ndiaye, Hadji Malick, "Review of *Making Art Global (Part 2): Magiciens de la terre 1989; Magiciens de la terre : Retour sur une exposition légendaire* by L. Steeds, A. Cohen-Solal, & J.H. Martin," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 56, no. 223 (2016): 756-757.

exceptions, from themes related to spirituality throughout the 1990s.[73] Instead, they prioritized engagements with socioeconomic and political issues, as well as racial and gender identities. Mari Carmen Ramírez's critique of 1980s art historical surveys on Latin American art exemplifies this shift. She argues that such endeavors "led […] to the compilation of a vast reservoir of 'primitive,' 'exotic' sources that since the early part of the twentieth century has resulted in an alternative projection of modernity based on the irrational, the primitive and the unconscious."[74] Focusing on *Art of the Fantastic*, Ramírez contends that the exhibition relied on a primal, ahistorical, and instinctual portrayal of the region, positioning the fantastic as "something outside the real, predicated in opposition to the real, and articulated around the Latin/European, irrational/rational dichotomy."[75] In her sharp critique, she underscores how this pervasive dynamic of othering confines Latin American and Latina/o artists—representing a vast array of cultures—within one or two conceptual frameworks, forcing them to continually demonstrate or stage their "authenticity" as a means of resisting external, dominant cultural narratives.[76] In the anthology *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America* (1995), Gerardo Mosquera echoes Ramírez's argument, highlighting the expectation—

[73] I am grateful to art historian and curator C. Ondine Chavoya for pointing at a number of exhibitions of Latino/a/x in the United States that kept a thematic throughline grounded in spirituality throughout the 1980s and 1990s. These include, among others, *Chicano Expressions: A New View in American Art* at INTAR Latin American Gallery (1986); *Carmen Lomas Garza, Lo Real Maravilloso /The Marvelous: The Real* at the San Francisco Mexican Museum (1987); *Ceremony of Memory: Contemporary Hispanic Spiritual and Ceremonial Art* at Center for Contemporary Arts – Santa Fe (1988); *El Corazon Sangrante/the Bleeding Heart* at the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston (1991); *Ceremony of Spirit: Nature and Memory in Contemporary Latino Art* at San Francisco Mexican Museum (1993); and *Imágenes e Historias/Images and Histories: Chicana Altar-Inspired Art* at Santa Clara University's De Saisset Museum and Tufts University Gallery (1999). In this regard, architect Warren James also pointed at El Museo del Barrio's *Reaffirming Spirituality* exhibition from 1999, curated by then director of the institution Susana Torruella Leval.

[74] Mari Carmen Ramírez, "Destabilizing Categorizations," in *Resisting Categories: Latin American and/or Latino?*, Critical Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art, v. I, eds. Héctor Olea, Mari Carmen Ramírez, Tomás Ybarra-Frausto (Houston, TX: Museum Fine Arts Houston, International Center for the Arts of the Americas, 2012), 921.

[75] Ibid., 923.

[76] Ibid., 928.

particularly among European and North American audiences—that Latin American art should embody the marvelous. Seeking to counteract this tendency, Mosquera's editorial project aimed to fairly represent the vernacular's profuse presence in Latin American cultures, balancing the portrayal of erudite and popular art as well as Afro-diasporic and Indigenous cultural expressions.[77] The work of Ramírez and Mosquera provided essential critiques against the Euro-American construction of the fantastic as a representational burden for Latin American artists—one that effectively excluded them from broader art historical and curatorial discourse for years. However, their analyses did not engage deeply with themes related to the role of spirituality, which, as Day and Sturges suggested, constitutes a key element of the fantastic as a whole. As a result, spirituality became sublimated in the rejection of the fantastic. Its potential as a site for creativity, liberation, and sociopolitical action remained largely overlooked, transforming it, paradoxically, into a discursive taboo deriving from a Euro-American essentializing impulse.

Building on Mosquera's contributions, art historian María Clara Bernal more recently critiqued *Art of the Fantastic* for establishing a restrictive framework for analyzing Latin American art. While the exhibition sparked curiosity about the region's artistic definitions and characteristics, Bernal argues that it also reinforced colonial and cultural myths.[78] Additionally, Bernal examines the conceptual origins of Cuban novelist and essayist Alejo Carpentier's *lo real maravilloso americano*, first coined in 1949. Carpentier described this phenomenon as the spontaneous manifestation of miracles, alterations, revelations, illuminations, and expansions of reality, leading to the sensorial experience of a "liminal state."[79] Arguing that this concept

[77] Gerardo Mosquera, ed., *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America* (London: The Institute of International Visual Arts, 1995), 15.
[78] María Clara Bernal, *Más allá de lo real maravilloso: el surrealismo y el Caribe* (Bogotá, Colombia: Universidad de los Andes; Ediciones Uniandes, 2006), 27.
[79] Ibid., 34-35.

represents a distinctly Latin American expression—where reality becomes *more real* through its marvelous qualities—Carpentier, Bernal contends, ultimately contributes to the myth of the region as fantastic, primitive, magical, and anachronistic, alongside its Indigenous and Afro-diasporic religious and spiritual landscapes.[80] While this position openly challenged surrealist interest in the otherworldly as an expression of the unconscious, it simultaneously reinforced an essentialized view of Latin American cultures. Much like Ramírez's critique of spirituality as an expression of the fantastic, Bernal subsumes the intellectual and sociopolitical potentials of spirituality within *lo real maravilloso*. Notably, both scholars deliberately overlook in their oppositional arguments that Day and Sturges did, in fact, acknowledge sociopolitical considerations and a sense of locatedness in the work of artists operating within their problematic rubric of the fantastic—especially those emerging in the 1980s and beyond. While Ramírez and Bernal offer critical insights into how definitions of Latin American culture have been shaped by essentializing lenses, their methodological approaches bypass a more nuanced engagement with spirituality as an analytical framework. By contrast, this dissertation is invested in the spiritual imaginations, redefinitions, and transgressions that coexisted with exhibitions like *Art of the Fantastic* and *Magiciens de la terre* in the 1970s-1980s. It embraces a spiritually promiscuous proposition—one that reclaims the supernatural and the otherworldly not as mere categorial pigeonholing but as a site where Latin American, Caribbean, and Latina/o/x creatives asserted their autonomy through deeply embedded sociopolitical commentaries at a transitional moment between modern and postmodern cultural expressions.

Unlike Day and Sturges' show, numerous Chicano art exhibitions during the 1980s engaged with spirituality to explain the development of the contemporary artistic processes of

[80] Ibid., 54; 78.

Mexican-American communities in more grounded, locally rooted terms. In 1986, the exhibition *Chicano Expressions: A New View in American Art,* curated by artist Inverna Lockpez, Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, Judith Baca, and Kay Turner, addressed, among other topics, the pre-Columbian revival of Chicano muralism, alongside its spiritual imagery and connotations, which was characteristic of the movement's artistic expressions in the 1960s.[81] Also relevant to this conversation at the time was the work of Texas-born artist Carmen Lomas Garza as well as California-born artist and curator Amalia Mesa-Bains. The exhibitions *Carmen Lomas Garza: Lo real maravilloso,* curated by Tomás Ybarra-Frausto in 1987, and *Ceremony of Memory: New Expressions in Spirituality Among Contemporary Hispanic Artists,* curated by Mesa-Bains in 1988 are key examples of an endogenous, legitimizing engagement of spirituality as an analytical category.[82] This trend would continue for Chicanx and Latinx art and artists well into the 1990s, with exhibitions, such as Olivier Debroise, Elisabeth Sussman, and Matthew Teitelbaum's *El corazón sangrante* from 1991, and *Ceremony of Spirit: Nature and Memory in Contemporary Latino Art* and *Images and Histories: Chicana Altar-Inspired Art,* both curated by Mesa-Bains in 1993 and 1999, respectively.[83] Altogether, these shows provide us with an example and counterpoint to the nuanced ways in which spirituality informed the curatorial purviews of exhibitions in the United States, particularly those related to Chicana/o cultures.[84]

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[81] Inverna Lockpez et al, *Chicano Expressions: A New View in American Art* (New York City, NY: The Gallery, 1986).
[82] Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, *Carmen Lomas Garza: Lo real maravilloso* (San Francisco, CA: The Mexican Museum, 1987); Carmen Lomas Garza, *Ceremony of Memory: New Expressions in Spirituality Among Contemporary Hispanic Artists* (Santa Fe, NM: Center for Contemporary Arts of Santa Fe, 1988).
[83] Olivier Debroise, Elisabeth Sussman, and Matthew Teitelbaum, *El corazón sangrante* (Boston, MA: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1991); Amalia Mesa-Bains, *Ceremony of Spirit: Nature and Memory in Contemporary Latino Art* (San Francisco, CA: The Mexican Museum, 1993); Amalia Mesa-Bains, *Images and Histories: Chicana Altar-Inspired Art* (Somerville, MA: Tufts University Art Gallery, 1999).
[84] I extend my gratitude to Professor C. Ondine Chavoya for bringing these exhibitions to my attention.

The turn of the century, moreover, gave way to a collaboration between religious scholar David Morgan and art historian James Elkins, setting a useful academic precedent for legitimizing the theorization of religion and spirituality in Euro-American art history. Preceding Morello's and Turner's research, Morgan and Elkins introduced the analytical categories of "enchantment," "disenchantment," and "re-enchantment" to highlight the cyclical processes of sacralization and secularization at play in modern societies.[85] In a separate text, Morgan defines enchantment as deeply imbued in human desire, manifesting in experiences of losing control to the forces of sex, ambition, power, and domination, among others. Indeed, to be enchanted, he notes, can also be understood as to be charmed or bewitched, positioning the subject in the agentic position of accommodating their desires or in the subjugated position of being subsumed in the power of an object or image.[86] As a relational experience, enchantment, and its opposite disenchantment, Morgan establishes, is a quintessentially irrational characteristic of modern life that does not only apply to the non-modern, be it, I would add, humans in alternative epistemic regimes or geographies.[87] The religious scholar further argues that myth is an inherent expression of enchantment and of human consciousness, offering purpose, power, hope, and social cohesion. He contends that within the tension between enchantment and disenchantment, social control by authorities coexists with strategies of resistance and emancipation—dynamics that permeate institutions such as the church, the military, corporations, governments, and the arts.[88] In extending a material culture approach to the study of enchantment in artistic practices hailing from the Euro-American world, Morgan is a leading voice against the fallacious premises of an

[85] David Morgan, "Enchantment, Disenchantment, Re-Enchantment," in *Re-Enchantment*, eds. James Elkins and David Morgan (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 13.
[86] David Morgan, *Images at Work: The Material Culture of Enchantment* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 2.
[87] Ibid., 10.
[88] Ibidem.

early to late modern rationality in both the making and reception of art. His work represents a momentous methodological contribution to the study of spirituality in art historical writing, as this project aims to do—not by questioning the existence of certain beliefs, but by focusing on the effects that images or performances related to spiritual and religious beliefs have on us and our worldviews.[89]

Elkins, meanwhile, observes that despite modernism's push toward secularization and its rationalized, Enlightenment-driven view of art's autonomy, traces of religious and spiritual beliefs persist in modern art throughout the twentieth century, manifesting in various forms from Theosophy to Christianity.[90] Though decidedly Western in scope, Morgan and Elkins' study provided an initial, multivocal, and non-hierarchical space for discussing the intersections of religiosity, spirituality, modernity, and art. In the seminar responses collected in their book, religious scholar Sally M. Promey and art historian Jens Baumgarten critique the universalizing Western framework that assumes these concepts apply across cultures. Promey, for example, challenged the "presumptive definitions of 'religion' and 'art' […] as outmoded as the secularization thesis of modernity."[91] Baumgarten, in turn, emphasized the need to recognize multiple modernities, arguing that in the Iberoamerican world—including his native Brazil—the supposed archaic-versus-modern dichotomy reflects both the legacy of European thought and the enduring proximity of religion to everyday life.[92] Unlike the way art historians and curators have dealt with the question of spirituality in the past, these interdisciplinary spaces between art historians and religious scholars established key insights for developing a greater sense of

[89] David Morgan, *The Thing about Religion: An Introduction to the Material Study of Religions* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 6.
[90] Elkins, "Enchantment," 72.
[91] Sally Promey, "Expanding Conversations: Theories, Histories and the Study of Contemporary Practices," in *Re-Enchantment*, eds. James Elkins and David Morgan (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 223.
[92] Jens Baumgarten, "Art and Religion Beyond…," in *Re-Enchantment*, eds. James Elkins and David Morgan (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 249-255.

sociocultural sensibility when discussing the link between artistic expressions and spirituality or religion.

As this study examines performative and installation art, it also seeks to engage with Promey's scholarship on religious practices through the lens of multisensory experience. Advocating for a sensorial turn that shifts the focus away from a materialistic insistence on religious practice, Promey aims to "dismantle the secularization paradigm," which has historically cast the religions of those deemed non-modern as fetishistic or merely "primitive." This framing, she argues, stems from the racialization of sensory perception, emotion, and materiality.[93] Promey further contends that modern secularization shaped the Euro-American paradigm of modern art history by "evicting the spirits" that were central to the so-called non-Western traditions from which many avant-garde artists drew inspiration. Modernity's preoccupation with the "primitive" other led to the rejection of fetishes and idols in artistic creation, reinforcing a binary between the civilized and the pre-modern, the desirable and the undesirable.[94] This, I contend, contributed to spirituality's flourishing in Euro-American artistic practices primarily through abstraction, as the figurative elements of both the fetish and the idol were suppressed. Abstract forms, perceived as evoking higher states of consciousness, aligned with what was perceived as corresponding higher aesthetic refinement. From an art historical perspective, Thomas Crow has also recently examined the overlooked influence of Christianity on modern art, highlighting religious paradigms in the work of major twentieth-century artists such as Mark Rothko and Robert Smithson. His critique of art history's enduring preoccupation with "revealing clarity of form [over] doctrinal meaning as the primary source of the field's

[93] Sally M. Promey, ed., *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 5.
[94] Ibid., 8.

intellectual magnetism" resonates with Promey's call for alternative epistemological approaches to the materiality of religious and spiritual expressions. Together, Crow's and Promey's scholarship signal a growing multidisciplinary interest in understanding belief systems within artistic practice—one that unapologetically positions private and public expressions of spirituality and religiosity across cultures as legitimate sites of research.

Given the importance of understanding the relationship between art, spirituality, and politics from a cross-cultural perspective, Baumgarten response to Elkins and Morgan's seminar is of particular relevance. His aim to propose bridging the gap between fine art and popular art is essential to accounting for hybridized expressions of religiosity and spirituality across Western and so-called non-Western traditions. This view aligns with Morello's later proposition of an "enchanted modernity" in Latin America, where lived, unmediated belief systems play a fundamental role in shaping the region's religious and spiritual landscape. It also resonates with philosopher and theologian Xavier Gravend-Tirole's discussion of "spirituality" as a more suitable term for describing various Indigenous ways of life. Rejecting the colonial weight of the term "religion," Gravend-Tirole highlights Native people's claims that the term spirituality—permeable and able to designate multiple believes surrounding the idea of divinity—better encapsulates their relationships with the land, territories, sky, and natural resources.[95] For Baumgarten, therefore, accounting for different systems of art and religion is necessary to establish a "meta-theoretical approach" that can discern a methodology for understanding the frictions, superimpositions, and contrasts between contemporary art and religion from a broader

[95] Xavier Gravend-Triole, "Quid le spirituel ? Généalogie et tour d'horizon euro-américain," in *Théoriser Le Spirituel, Approches Transdisciplinaires de La Spiritualité Dans Les Arts et Les Sciences,* eds.Claude Le Fustec, Françoise et Jeff Storey (Paris, France: Editions Modulaires Europeennes, 2015), 39. Gravent-Tirole's assessment follows after the final declarations of the 2013 symposium of Indigenous peoples at the United Nations in Geneva.

perspective.[96] This methodological challenge—situated at the crossroads of postcolonial and interdisciplinary thinking—helps explain why interspirituality has not been extensively addressed in art historical research, despite clear instances of such intersections taking place across regions and cultures in the modern and contemporary eras. As a theoretical proposition rooted in decolonial thought and practice, "spiritual promiscuity" recalls Walter Mignolo's rejection of universalizing frameworks as a strategy to dismantle the fictions of modernity—in this case, the aesthetic and religious/spiritual hierarchies that sustain them.[97] The atomized, city-based, and intellectually and spiritually permeable platform "spiritual promiscuity" proposes further reinforces what Mignolo describes as the *pluriversality* of the decolonial—a project that coexists in both conflict and collaboration with hegemonic epistemic and theological regimes.[98] As a result, the term seeks to open an unorthodox space for deliberation, bridging the methodological and disciplinary gaps Baumgarten identifies through the study of performance, ritual, ecstasy, and communion between human and non-human entities. Through this perspective, the recognition of the natural world as imbued with spiritual and otherworldly qualities that are accessed through the power of communal actions becomes paramount.

In addition to Alexander's contributions to a feminist lineage to Black Radical thought, Afro-Caribbean literary scholar and intellectual Sylvia Wynter also informs my argument on the validity of "spiritual promiscuity" as a "meta-theoretical" approach linking art, spirituality, and religion from a subaltern positionality. Like Mignolo, Wynter's exploration of the praxis of being human seeks to dismantle Enlightenment-era, rationalist epistemological hierarchies that have shaped Western conceptions of humanity. Rather than grounding the human condition

[96] Baumgarten, "Art and Religion Beyond…," 254-255.
[97] Walter Mignolo, "What Does It Mean to Decolonize?," in *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, eds. Walter Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 108-109; 111-112.
[98] Ibid., 147.

solely in biological determinism, Wynter argues that *logos* (words) or *mythoi* (myths) serve as fundamental storytelling mechanisms through which we define ourselves and, by extension, exist in relation to one another.[99] Building on Frantz Fanon's notion of human hybridity—where biological (skin) and sociological (masks) identifiers coexist—Wynter highlights the ecumenical, interconnected, relative, and relational nature of being human. She urges us to think *transcosmogonically* to acknowledge distinct yet interlinked narratives of human origins and ontologies, ultimately advocating for mutual comprehension across social groups, regardless of racial identification.[100] While rejecting a biologically determined ontology of humanity, Wynter also calls attention to the entanglement of modern racial and aesthetic hierarchies, which have been constructed in opposition to one another. This is what Wynter terms an essential act of "dysbeing," a neologism derived from Césaire's "désêtre" through which Afro-diasporic individuals were forced to exist in a state of ontological wrongness—both embodied and enacted through assimilationist tactics.[101] At the core of her argument, therefore, lies an invitation to coalition building if the premise of this organizing structure is unveiled. This awareness would require either rejecting the designation of non-being imposed on marginalized social groups, such as Black people, or recognizing the privileged position that defines what is considered human within white, heteronormative, and Christian hegemonies. By foregrounding queer theory and affect, a spiritually promiscuous perspective aligns with Wynter's thinking, particularly in its interspiritual or intermythical analysis and its refusal to conform to pre-established racial and aesthetic hierarchies of being.

[99] Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 16-18.
[100] Ibid., 54.
[101] Ibid., 60.

Wynter's scholarship guides my argument into the realm of performance art theory, further interweaving the study of the three proposed case studies. Her interest in the world-making potential of storytelling recalls the essential contributions of J.L. Austin's theory of the performative. Austin's theorization of an utterance's effectiveness calls for the presence of "appropriate circumstances," which typically require that "the speaker himself or other persons should also perform certain other actions, whether 'physical' or 'mental' actions or even acts of uttering further words."[102] For orally transmitted myth and its associated performative actions to be effective, Wynter and Austin suggest that a relational, communal aspect of legitimization through shared actions must also take place, granting them symbolic meaning and social gravitas—whether for inclusionary or exclusionary aims. In thinking about the Americas, performance art scholar Diana Taylor further develops this notion through her concept of the "repertoire," which encompasses performative, bodily, and ephemeral acts that accompany the appropriate circumstances of uttered words.[103] She highlights them as channels of embodied, rather than written or oral, memory. Taylor identifies such transient actions—including performance, gesture, orality, movement, dance, and singing—as vital to the repertoire's function.[104] Through embodied memory, the repertoire stores traditions, structures, and codes, enabling them to replicate, generate, record, and transmit knowledge.[105] As the case studies in this dissertation illustrate, performances and installations throughout the Americas and the Caribbean engage with a shared thematic repertoire dwelling on spiritual and religious considerations, combining sacred and profane elements. By incorporating ritualistic forms and

[102] J.L. Austin, 'Lecture I' in *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955* (Oxford, 1975; online ed., Oxford Academic, 3 Oct. 2011), 8.
[103] Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire,* 20.
[104] Ibidem.
[105] Ibid., 21-24.

interacting with popular gatherings—such as festivals, carnivals, and concerts—these works seek to create the "appropriate circumstances" for enacting and generating alternative realities that transcend corporeal or identity-based constraints. Each reflects the inner structure of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or "total work of art," in that they incorporate a synesthetic fusion of various art forms through unorthodox performative and installation strategies.

The study of performance and installation art practices from Bogotá, Port of Spain, London, and Los Angeles, which combine various cultural influences, also stem from a well-established discussion around theater and performance. Given its similar regional scope, the sustained work of Diana Taylor on these issues remains a central reference in this study. In her anthology *Negotiating Performance: Gender, Sexuality, and Theatricality in Latin/o America,* Taylor argues for the term "performance" as a response from culturally hybrid societies to the exclusionary and constrictive forms in traditional, text-based, and staged theater.[106] Stressing the lack of institutional support and a pervasive misogynist and racist colonialist mindset, she contends that theatrical expressions in and around Latina/o and Latin American cultures have systematically excluded the work of women as well as Indigenous and Afro-diasporic makers.[107] Alternatively, the case studies that follow are exemplary of what Taylor describes as "public performances" or an "organized and repeated action that takes place in a public space and that may or may not have artistic aspirations."[108] Whether featuring ritualistic demonstration, a masquerade band, or a punk gig, the case studies selected are understood as performance given that their spiritually promiscuous outlook imbued with agency their participating communities,

[106] Diana Taylor, "Opening Remarks," *Negotiating Performance: Gender, Sexuality, and Theatricality in Latin/o America,* eds. Diana Taylor and Juan Villegas Morales (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 10-11.
[107] Ibidem.
[108] Ibid., 13.

allowing for, as Taylor would assert, "resistance and oppositional spectacles."[109] The concept of "public performance," moreover, resembles what performance studies scholar Richard Schechner addressed as activist political theater—an art form inheriting the guerrilla and street theater movements arising in Western and so-called non-Western locales since the 1960s.[110] Both Taylor and Schechner point, therefore, to an essential political dimension in which the performances discussed here engage with: as they blur the lines between artistic genres and reclaim spirituality as a creative platform, they also respond to the pressing needs of the social contexts of their time. This political situatedness emerges in alignment with the rise of grassroots organizing among distinct yet intersecting groups: former colonies, Black and Indigenous peoples, women, and gay and lesbian communities.

Much like the theater-performance dyad, the tension between authenticity and spectacularity—germane to performance art studies—also permeates the overarching analysis presented in my dissertation. As a purposefully obscuring platform for artistic and sociopolitical engagement that simultaneously functions as one for creative and identity reinvention, the spiritually promiscuous purview challenges pre-conceived notions of autochthonous, eternal pasts, giving way to the politics of public spectacle as part of a repertoire of cultural opposition. In doing so, my choice of case studies resonates with recent theorizations on performance artistic practices by Afro-diasporic creatives. In her book *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s-1970s,* art historian and curator Kellie Jones establishes that African American artists engaging with African spiritual traditions sought to "celebrate the ancestral, link the present with the past, and provide a 'social unifier' in the living community and with the

[109] Ibid., 14.
[110] Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance* (London, UK; New York, NY: Routledge, 1993), 9.

community's dead […]."[111] Jones argues that these artists, including Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger, based their practices in African masquerade practices, such as Nigerian Gèlèdé, as a medium to devise new self-representation strategies, contributing to the "diasporic reinscriptions of African traditions."[112] Beyond reclaiming any specific link to authenticity, their performative works highlighted the tensions between visibility and invisibility between African and Afro-diasporic cultures, whether by choice, as in the case of secret societies and public festivities in Western and Central Africa, or by force, as a byproduct of the enslavement and vigilance of African societies.[113] Such state of liminality as a creative vehicle for Afro-diasporic artists in the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement is essential to the development of the argument on spiritually promiscuity as it showcases an agentic hindering of expected behavioral models and representation mechanisms. Highly mediatized, these performances and installations mobilized a sense of spectacularity to gain visibility to redefine modernist hierarchies but also readapt traditional cultural markers, including various belief systems, to the needs of their time. Though different in scope, these endeavors were not unlike similar initiatives in the Euro-American circuits of happenings and emerging performance art, such as Charlotte Moorman's Annual Avant-Garde Festival running from 1963 until 1978.[114]

Questioning what it means to be Black American within a global world of modern Blackness, performance art theorist Fred Moten, moreover, raised exemplary questions of the impossibility, or at least paradoxical nature, of authenticity within a diasporic social framework. In a discussion of artist Theaster Gates' collection building and installation practice, he asks:

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[111] Kellie Jones, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 204-265.
[112] Ibidem.
[113] Ibidem.
[114] See Lisa G. Corrin and Corinne Granof, eds., *A Feast of Astonishments: Charlotte Moorman and the Avant-Garde, 1960s-1980s* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016).

"What would it mean, will it ever have been possible, to be central to, or to authentically body forth the diaspora, its disciplines and its discourses? Can centrality and authenticity be, as any diasporic centrality and authenticity will have had to be, predicated on irreducible marginality?"[115] Describing Gates' work, Moten identifies his practice as "promiscuous repetition" of the fetish character of Blackness, recognizing that the only truly authentic feature of Blackness is, indeed, its position of marginality and minority, or what he also denotes as the "generative principle of differentiation."[116] Also hailing from the intellectual position of a Black Radical tradition, cultural theorist Stuart Hall foregrounded a similar stance in the mid-1990s, particularly when challenging identities as fixed and static, seeing them, instead, as an identification process in flux. Hall recognizes, for instance, in a Derridean fashion that identities are construed as a form "play" or *différance*, which emphasize a relational interaction between social groups and, more importantly, the fact that they are both strategic and positional.[117] Notably, Hall also asserts that for the case of post-colonial societies, identities are built from within and not outside representation, meaning that they "relate to the invention of tradition as to tradition itself" and that they communicate "not the so-called return to roots but a coming-to-terms-with our 'routes'."[118] Highlighting differentiation and *différance* as constitutive of an attitude of refusal that carries promiscuous or alternative interpretations of identity, both Moten and Hall established an intellectual space where we can see in the *playful* and wonder-full exploration of spiritual traditions a great liberatory potential. So far as authenticity is concerned, therefore, the reimaginations that the artists in the case studies engage with constitute generative

[115] Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 61.
[116] Ibid., 62.
[117] Stuart Hall, "Who Needs Identity?," in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (London, UK: Thousand Oaks, 1996), 3.
[118] Ibid., 4

practices where autonomy and creativity in self-representation are reclaimed as a practice of individual and collective healing.

The theoretical framework outlined thus far is both interdisciplinary and, in some ways, unorthodox in relation to conventional art historical narratives. It foregrounds resonances across intellectual networks that are not commonly considered together while also centering personal affect. Above all, it serves as a conceptual provocation in direct response to the protracted and divisive identity discourse prevalent today, emerging from both liberal and conservative fronts. While I recognize that further conceptual refinements are necessary, my dissertation seeks to build a scholarly "toolkit" to deepen our understanding of the relationship between performance and installation art through an interspiritual lens.

This perspective and the result of my archival research and analysis have led me to identify and explore four key thematic throughlines in my dissertation. First, the three chapters underscore that writing about spirituality is not just a detached, otherworldly endeavor but rather an essential approach to understanding the social and political movements of the second half of the twentieth century. Racial, sexual, gender-based, and economic identities in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Latina/o/x communities—*as well as in the Euro-American world*—have evolved in tandem with religious and spiritual identities. The artists and community organizers examined here actively participated in these interactions, using their platforms to reimagine reality and their bodies through spiritual and social frameworks. Second, the presence of collective actions that subvert the traditional European theatrical structure is central to my analysis. Rather than adhering to rigid, stage-bound performances, these artists embraced interactive spaces—festivals, carnivals, concerts—where spirituality played a defining role. This shift highlights the importance of communal ritual as a relational expression of intersecting

belief systems, with bodies serving as vessels of non-human forces. Third, my dissertation engages with the tension between the sacred and the profane in all three case studies, examining how artists resignified their relationship with institutionalized religions, such as Catholicism, while simultaneously exploring new spiritual frameworks and configurations. In desacralizing hierarchical belief systems, they resacralized everyday life through corporeal means, encouraging a deeper awareness of themselves, their communities, and their environments. Finally, the chapters outline the influence of proto-punk, punk, and post-punk irreverence and aesthetics as the basis for the discussed spiritual transgressions. A shared commitment to enacting public performances in defiance of the politics of respectability of their local contexts enabled artists and community organizers to adopt unexpected identity markers and artistic expressions. These themes are essential to arguing for "spiritual promiscuity" as an artistic ethos during these two decades, establishing intersectionality, interspirituality, and intermediality as its defining characteristics.

Methodologically, my dissertation undertakes a comparative analysis of three case studies, examining how artists engaged with both hegemonic and non-hegemonic belief systems to develop innovative repertoires and resistant, fragmentary identities. Through historical accounts of performances from the Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería in Bogotá, A k u z u r u's career in Port of Spain and London, and the work by Jerri Allyn, Jerry Dreva, Alice Bag, and Gerardo Velázquez in Los Angeles, my study presents a polyvalent portrayal of public performances and installations that, to varying degrees, engaged with Indigenous, Afro-diasporic, and occult or pagan spiritual traditions. These performances and installations—ranging from staged presentations and street interventions to gallery exhibitions—varied in scale and format while maintaining a sociopolitical and spiritual activist stance that addressed the needs of

marginalized and minority communities. Offering an unorthodox artistic outlet within the art histories of their original contexts, each chapter examines how these transgressions and deviations unfolded, engaging with previous contributions of local scholars and exhibitions. The academic and disciplinary scope of this project is broad, encompassing art history, history, performance studies, religious studies, queer studies, theater, anthropology, philosophy, literary studies, and the published work of spiritual practitioners. These varied intersections align with the atomized explorations of artists and community organizers who played a pivotal role in bringing these practices into the world, privileging generality over specificity. For instance, postcolonial and decolonial analysis is frequently paired with descriptions of religious and myth structures, while ethnographic accounts of various communities are examined alongside the study of the theatrical and carnivalesque. As the core argument centers on performative and installation practices, it also references other art forms as visual and conceptual support. As such, this text—like the case studies it analyzes—is both interdisciplinary and intermedial, calling attention to the emergence of an irresolute postmodern condition through which all three case studies sought to build social coalitions and resists, albeit with controversial and contradictory viewpoints, modernist hierarchies supporting an exclusionary status quo.

The primary and secondary sources supporting this dissertation were gathered from collections and archives in San Andrés and Providencia, Bogotá, Medellín, Port of Spain, London, Los Angeles, and Santa Barbara. Research took place in public libraries, cultural centers, university research centers, museum libraries and archives, and private residences. This process yielded a rich array of printed materials, newspapers, photographs, artworks, videos, publications, manuscripts, and ephemera, all systematically cataloged in a centralized database. Given that the themes and scope of this dissertation remain largely unexplored in art historical

scholarship, the written and visual archives I consulted provided only a fragmented narrative, requiring further investigation and analysis. In evaluating these materials, I proceeded cautiously, assuming their veracity only when they came from reputable sources or, in cases where provenance was uncertain, when corroborated by multiple sources. To supplement archival gaps, I conducted numerous interviews with artists and participants involved in the public performances and installations, with particular emphasis on the first and second chapters. The third chapter requires further attention in this regard, presenting an area of opportunity for future research. Some interviews were recorded, while others were documented in my research travel logs; whenever possible, direct quotes from these conversations were incorporated into the dissertation. These oral histories proved essential for my research on Colombia and Trinidad and Tobago, where institutional access to archival materials is less robust than in the United States and England. Consequently, collaboration and intellectual exchange with artists, curators, and scholars were integral to developing my insights.

One final, yet equally significant, methodological note concerns the role that psychotropic substances and spiritual rituals have played—and will continue to play—in guiding my academic research. Typically considered taboo in scholarly discourse, except perhaps within anthropological circles, these experiences should be openly acknowledged in humanistic work that engages with so-called non-Western epistemologies. It is encouraging that this shift is increasingly gaining recognition in academic institutions across the United States and Latin America, offering reassurance in disclosing these nontraditional sources to a broader public. My experiences in Puerto Nariño, Amazonas Department, and San Francisco, Cundinamarca Department in Colombia, with the gracious and generous communities who introduced me to yagé as *medicina*, were integral to my personal healing journey—particularly in relation to my

body, sexuality, and desire as a queer, European and Indigenous hybrid. Among the many profound experiences I encountered, three proved especially transformative: first, visualizing the intersections of spiritualities across cultures, from Indigenous cosmogonies to ancient Greece mythology; second, experiencing ecstatic rapture through interstellar travel, when seeing a jaguar—symbol of strength, power, and spiritual connection—leaping into my heart; and third, embodying the form of a seed within a sacred triangle of healing masculinities, where I came to recognize the sacred value of my own body and my own seed as a living being. These visions were powerful premonitions of how this research project could mutate and evolve into what it is today. Plants speak to us through symbols—the language of art, eroticism, love, creativity, and expression. Their wisdom, along with that of the *taitas* and facilitators who guided me, revealed the ineffability of immanence, something that can only be conveyed through the notion of interconnectedness. Additionally, my participation in a ceremonial ritual of the Orisa community of Claxton Bay in Trinidad was one of the most profound experiences of my life. There, I witnessed and felt the power of drums as spiritual technologies that manifest the spiral shape of time and space. The endurance of memory in and through the body could not have been clearer to me that day, attesting to the resilience and infinite greatness of Black communities, particularly of women, to whom I owe so much—the richness of my cultural matrix, birthplace, and carnival. Through my academic work in recent years, I have attempted to translate—even if imperfectly—the cumulative force of these experiences into the term "spiritual promiscuity:" a resacralizing, liberatory practice of being together without fear.

Finally, I conclude these introductory remarks with a more detailed overview of each dissertation chapter. The first chapter, **"Bogotá Brew: The First World Congress of Sorcery"** proposes a previously unexplored art historical narrative of the massive event held in Bogotá.

The chapter's argument departs from Colombian businessman and politician Simón González Restrepo and his then-wife Claudia Restrepo's conceptualization of the Congress as a large-scale event taking witchcraft as a vindicatory umbrella term. As collective public performance, the chapter argues, the Congress made visible and established connections between non-hegemonic spiritual systems emerging at the time, including Indigenous, Afro-diasporic, pagan, and occult traditions. With Josefina del Valle acting as logistics coordinator, González Restrepo developed a four-day gathering featuring over twenty academic presentations by scholars and practitioners from Latin America, the Caribbean, the United States, and Europe. Deeply connected to the Nadaísmo avant-garde movement through his father, the writer Fernando González, González Restrepo used the Congress to challenge societal codes of behavioral propriety in a largely Catholic and conservative Colombia. The chapter also examines a monumental exhibition of *Arte Brujo* (Sorcerous Art), organized by María Teresa Guerrero, then Deputy Director of the Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá, featuring an estimated six hundred artworks. Through close analysis of works by Alejandro Obregón, Hernando Tejada, Luis Durier, and Feliza Bursztyn, this study identifies an undercurrent in Colombian art history that embraces occult and pagan spiritualities as vehicles for creative expression. Further, the chapter investigates the Congress's Haitian delegation of scholars, gallerists, and artists, who introduced audiences to the religious, philosophical, and aesthetic tenets and languages of Vodou. The participation of Galerie Nader from Port-au-Prince—one of Haiti's leading art institutions to this day—marks the first fully fledged exhibition of Haitian art in Colombia. The chapter concludes by examining the spectacular nature of the ritualistic performances coordinated by Colombian choreographer and folklorist Delia Zapata Olivella as part of the Congress. Featuring national and international troupes performing Vodou, Candomblé, María Lionza, and Lumbalú rituals, as well as traditional

dances from the Barranquilla Carnival, these performances highlighted tensions between authenticity, ritual, and spirituality in public spaces.

The second chapter, **"A k u z u r u: Fashioning Afro-Asian Interspirituality,"** is monographic in scope, focusing on the early career of the Trinidadian fashion designer and performance and installation artist as she lived between London and Port of Spain. This chapter highlights A k u z u r u's intermedial, intersectional, and interspiritual sensibilities, shaped by her participation in both the Trinidadian and Notting Hill Carnivals. These engagements not only shaped her aesthetic language but also carried profound sociopolitical, racial, and gender-based liberatory potential. As a young fashion design student in London, A k u z u r u was an active participant in the Yaa Asantewaa Cultural Centre carnival celebration, working alongside a generation of dancers and performance artists—including Greta Mendez and Keith Khan—who were transforming the landscape of Caribbean cultural expression in England in the aftermath of postcolonial and Civil Rights movements. Drawing from a Trinidadian context where Afro-diasporic and Asian-diasporic cultures have intersected since the nineteenth century, A k u z u r u's early designs and installations staged a dialogue between traditional West African garments and avant-garde Japanese aesthetics. This convergence gave rise to an interspiritual praxis, where Afro-diasporic Yoruba spiritualities and Zen Buddhist principles informed the deconstructed, sculptural nature of her sartorial expressions. Her work thus resonated with contemporary definitions of "Black" identity in England, which, at the time, functioned as an inclusive solidarity marker bridging Afro-diasporic, Asian, and other marginalized communities. Further, A k u z u r u's role as designer and leader of her own carnival mas' band situates her within the lineage of mas' making in both Trinidad and England. The chapter foregrounds A k u z u r u's unique contributions to carnival making as a continuation of mas' men Wayne Berkeley's and

Peter Minshall's exploration of spirituality, while also emphasizing her departure from conventional Trinidadian theater and dance traditions. Finally, the chapter examines the influence of LeRoy Clarke, A k u z u r u's mentor in Port of Spain. As one of Trinidad's most prominent painter and later spiritual chiefs of Obeah, Clarke's mystical reclamation of Afro-diasporic thought and aesthetics inspired A k u z u r u's shift from fashion toward performance art. Through this transition, she further developed her Afro-Asian creative matrix of intersectional solidarities, proposing a transcendental view of interconnectedness across cultures and geographies in much of her later artistic career.

The final chapter, **"Pagan Unorthodoxies: Sacroprofane Levity in Chicana/o/x Los Angeles,"** examines the performative and installation-based practices of artists working within Chicana/o/x aesthetics in the wake of the Chicano movement. This section focuses on the work of Jerri Allyn (as a member of The Waitresses and Sisters of Survival collectives), Jerry Dreva (affiliated with Les Petites Bonbons and Asco), as well as Alice Bag (of the punk band The Bags) and Gerardo Velázquez (of the synth-punk bands Nervous Gender and Beelzebub Youth). By situating these artists in relation to the continuities and ruptures between their generation and the earlier Chicano movement, the chapter explores their engagement with religious and spiritual systems—including Catholicism, Mesoamerican cosmogonies, witchcraft, and occult or pagan traditions—to highlight the tensions they foregrounded between sacred and profane spiritualities through public performances, installations, and music. At the core of this argument is the inheritance of Mexican and Mexican-American popular theater traditions, which employ levity, irreverence, and humor to transgress the boundaries between the holy and the pagan, serving as vehicles for sharp sociopolitical critique. This theatrical sensibility converged with the punk movement's deliberate rejection of cultural and social conventions of respectability, allowing

Chicana/o/x artists and audiences to actively shape Los Angeles' emerging punk and post-punk scenes. By subverting and embodying sacred archetypes, such as priests and nuns, Allyn and Dreva, though not culturally Chicana/o but operating near post-Chicana/o movement artists, enacted Baroque transubstantiation tactics, reclaiming spiritual iconography to resacralize their lived experiences as gender and sexual minorities. Each artist employed distinct strategies to exceed and destabilize normative gender and behavioral expectations: Allyn, for instance, turned to feminist reinterpretations of the Great Goddess and the witch, while Dreva utilized mass-reproduced images to fabricate new popular icons in his own image. Conversely, Bag and Velázquez explored spirituality within their musical and performative practices through ritual, ecstasy, and eroticism, themes that later informed their studies in philosophy and comparative religion. Rooted in a Catholic-Indigenous matrix, Bag's artistic identity drew upon the Día de los muertos carnivalesque iconography, incorporating references to death and the afterlife in her self-fashioning, performances, and visual aesthetic. Velázquez, on the other hand, approached religious experience through biochemical and ritual processes, using visual art, music, and performances as sites for transgressive explorations of sadomasochism, Satanism, and witchcraft. Much like Bag, these strategies worked as affirmations of non-hegemonic sacredness that vindicated Chicana/o/x identities and corporealities.

Chapter 1
Bogotá Brew: The First World Congress of Sorcery

Set against a yellow and white background depicting a full moon night, four purple and black figures—two female and two animal—form a dynamic, orgiastic composition in the poster design for the Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería (First World Congress of Sorcery, as per the event's original translation) (Fig. 1.1). In the lower register, a woman soars diagonally outward with arms extended and legs contracted, her voluptuous body and exposed sex prominently displayed. She is faceless, nearly nude, except for a ragged black fabric draped from her knees, and gives birth to five yellow and purple diamond-shaped figures. Her left foot, delicately tilted, mirrors the hoof of an aroused male goat flying in the opposite direction. Beside them, a veiled pregnant woman sits gracefully, holding a pair of horns in her lap in place of a flower bouquet. Behind her, a massive fighting bull—twice her size—bears an *estoque* (bullfighter's sword) piercing its back. Despite its wound, the bull's darkened form provides a resting place for the seated bride, evoking a scene of unsettling contrast between violence and repose. In this composition, witches and demons intertwine in a dynamic, promiscuous dance that captivates the viewer through its unapologetic theme and masterfully executed imagery. Drawing on common Western historical tropes associated with witchcraft, this composition, which was created by artist Alejandro Obregón Rosés in 1975, brings forth common lore about witches espousing the devil as well as the way in which the witch archetype has been portrayed as a form of oversexualized femininity.

The poster publicized an influential yet nearly forgotten event in Colombia's cultural history. Organized by Colombian businessman, engineer, and later politician Simón González Restrepo, the Congress' controversial theme—centered on witchcraft practices—drew significant

attention, making it a widely debated topic in major news outlets across Latin America, the United States and Europe. Heralding the slogan "*A la sombra de lo diferente con amor y asombro*" ("In the Shadow of the Unknown with Love and Wonder"), the four-day proceedings sought to convey a message of radical spiritual unity.[1] By positing witchcraft or *brujería* as an umbrella term that included a wide array of non-hegemonic spiritualities, including those of Indigenous and Afro-diasporic origins, the Congress aimed to vindicate the way in which these belief systems had been vilified during and in the aftermath of the colonial era. In doing so, the gathering became a collective space for critique to the conservative, hierarchical attitudes toward human difference that prevailed in Colombia at the time. Its purview was decidedly spiritual in the sense that it contended with non-institutionalized otherworldly beliefs, which communities and individuals were actively redefining in the intermixing of various traditions at the time. Paradoxically, González Restrepo also carried out the event as a capitalistic venture tied to his newly founded travel agency La Rana, making of the event a polysemic and controversial occasion. Despite its scale and public resonance, historians and art historians have largely overlooked the Congress' significance, failing to position it within the broader transnational context of the 1970s counterculture.

González Restrepo's motivations for organizing the Congress were manifold, driven not only by a desire for social change but also by financial profitability. Humanist and communicator Claudia Restrepo, González Restrepo's wife at the time—a woman with an inherited sensibility toward esoteric and occult knowledge—claims to have first conceived the idea for the

[1] A preliminary Spanish-language version of this chapter can be found in: Julián Sánchez González, "Activismo espiritual y contracultura souvenir: el Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería, 1975," *Boletín Cultural y Bibliográfico*, Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango, ed. Julián Sánchez González, vol. 57, no. 104 (2023): 4–24. As editor, I also dedicated this volume to the relationship between contemporary art and spirituality in Latin America and the Caribbean, inviting contributors from Colombia, Chile, and Haiti: Julián Sánchez González, ed., "Espiritualidades no hegemónicas y arte contemporáneo en América Latina y el Caribe," *Boletín Cultural y Bibliográfico*, Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango, vol. 57, no. 104 (2023).

monumental gathering around 1973. During a conversation with a group of German investors visiting Colombia in search of opportunities, led by industrialist Klaus Vollert, Restrepo suggested creating an event where people from diverse cultures and belief systems could share their engagement with psychic phenomena such as clairvoyance and divination. Though González Restrepo ultimately developed the Congress on his own—without Restrepo's direct participation, as the couple divorced shortly thereafter—it is significant to acknowledge her initial ideation and sensibility, as well as her connection to the mystic Beatriz Caro, as the sources of the idea for the event. In an interview conducted by renowned journalist Gloria Valencia de Castaño for Colombian public radio in the days leading up to the Congress, González Restrepo—who had by then fully refined and expanded the idea—stated:

> *"El Congreso empezó a tomar fuerza y forma, viendo que los sistemas tradicionales educativos nuestros, y aun en el turismo nuestro, faltaba un elemento extraño, un elemento que tiene que mucho que ver con la naturaleza y con el hombre sudamericano; que es, precisamente, esa vivencia que tenemos entre la naturaleza y el hombre para poder crear una reacción que, quizás, los países más desarrollados han olvidado mucho. Entonces, yo veía ahí un abismo, y yo decía: aquí falta algo en todo lo educativo, en todos los mensajes que estamos lanzando en nuestro país, y pensé entonces en los brujos. Porque, realmente, el brujo es un enamorado; el brujo es la imagen de la fuerza de todo aquello que no es materialista, sino del espíritu. Y de ahí nacieron las primeras formas del Congreso de Brujería."*[2]

[2] Simón González Restrepo, interview by Gloria Valencia de Castaño, *HJCK and Señal Memoria Archives,* April 13, 1975.URL: https://catalogo.senalmemoria.co/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=23036&query_desc=kw%2Cwrdl%3A%20%22simon%20gonzalez%20restrepo%22%20gloria%20valencia. English translation: "The Congress began to gain momentum and take shape when we realized that our traditional educational systems—and even our tourism—were missing a strange element, something deeply connected to nature and to the South American man. It's precisely that experience we have between nature and humanity that can spark a reaction perhaps long forgotten by more developed countries. I saw a gap there, and I

While Restrepo has remained unacknowledged in this and virtually all public statements about the event, González Restrepo—a highly educated man from a family of intellectuals and politicians—was a loquacious public speaker who articulated many of the shared preoccupations of his time. In this interview, González Restrepo, for instance, purposefully pitched spiritual traditions in South America with an industrialized other, calling attention to the importance of humanity's connection with nature, communion, and interdependence. Transcendence, for him, remained, above all, an experience of love, disavowing any attachment to material goods. While his words essentialized Latin America by playing with the tropes of the fantastical as well as Magical Realism, the actual proceedings and their content, both scholarly and symbolic, warrant further study given that they provide us with a more nuanced picture about González Restrepo's vision for the event. These presentations and panels encapsulated a wide array of intellectual, historical, and political processes that exceeded the confines of the Colombian context, living on their own s contributions that, while enabled by the Congress, were not necessarily underpinned by González Restrepo's vision and entrepreneurial purview.

The dual, irresolute character of the Congress made it a widely discussed sociocultural phenomenon. Throughout the five-day event, a reported three-thousand people from across the globe gathered in academic panels and public performances to discuss and witness non-hegemonic spiritual practices, including their material cultures, rituals, cosmogonies, and underlying philosophical principles.[3] The more than twenty conferences featured well-researched discussions in the studies and practice of anthropology, ethnobotany, literature, comparative

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thought, 'something is missing'—in our entire educational approach, in all the messages we're sending out in our country. And that's when I thought of the witches. Because, truly, the witch is a lover, the witch embodies the power of everything that is not materialistic but spiritual. And from there, the first forms of the Congress of Witchcraft were born."

[3] Alegre Levy, "La ciencia se abrió paso," *El Tiempo* (Bogotá, Colombia), August 26, 1975.

history of religion, and illusionism from the Americas, the Caribbean, and Europe. These presentations foregrounded, for instance, historical accounts of the image of the devil, the beliefs and rituals of Haitian Vodou, the intersection of Indigenous and Afro-diasporic cultures in the Americas, and the uses and rituals associated with medicinal plants. Further, discussions on paranormal experimentation, illusionism, hypnosis, telepathy, astrology, and extraterrestrial contacts were also an integral part of the conversations, adding scientific and scientific-adjacent undertones to the usage of witchcraft as a transversal term to denote alternative epistemologies and worldviews gaining popularity during this time. The event's schedule strived for bridging a geographic gap across various countries from southern and northern latitudes, attesting to a hemispheric exploratory impetus around non-hegemonic spiritualities and newly discovered scientific interests. In doing so, the Congress signaled the growing international interest in exploring other forms of knowledge beyond a highly positivist, rationalized perspective, which had gained renewed momentum in Western and westernized societies following the emergence of countercultural and postcolonial movements in the late 1950s and 1960s.

In addition to structured, scholarly panels, the event featured three simultaneous visual art exhibitions, showcasing a diverse array of works from Colombia, Haiti, and Ecuador. Organized as a major *Salón de Arte Brujo* or Sorcerous Art Salon, the exhibition was curated as an individual endeavor by María Teresa Guerrero, then Deputy Director of the Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá (MAMBO). Guerrero adopted a non-hierarchical, open-ended curatorial approach featuring an open call for applications and direct invitations to selected artists, ultimately displaying an estimated six hundred pieces. Complementing this expansive show were *Nader's Haïti*, an exhibition of Vodou-inspired art, and *Mundos extraños*, a monographic display of works by Ecuadorian painter Dimitri Borja. Beyond these exhibitions, González Restrepo also

brought together an extensive cultural program in collaboration with leading figures across artistic disciplines as coordinators. Actor Carlos Muñoz organized *Cine fantástico*, a film festival at the Cinemateca Distrital de Bogotá, featuring works such as Jean Cocteau's *Orpheus* and Friedrich Murnau's *Nosferatu* (Fig. 1.2).[4] Meanwhile, actress Mónica Silva oversaw a series of theatrical productions, including Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade*, directed by Manuel Espinel, and John Osborne's *Luther*, directed by Raúl Santa.[5] The *Salón de Arte Brujo* and the Congress' film and theater programming offer an alternative reading of Colombian cultural history—one that foregrounds themes historically concealed or deemed taboo in public, highly mediatized spaces, but always nurturing as a creative undercurrent.

Moreover, folklorist and choreographer Delia Zapata Olivella presented a series of dances and performances, including Lumbalú funerary rituals from the maroon community of San Basilio de Palenque and traditional dances from the Barranquilla Carnival with her troupe Grupo de Danzas Folclóricas Colombianas.[6] Alongside González Restrepo and other collaborators, she also helped organize ritual performances by international troupes and individual artists. These included Les Ballets Bacoulou d'Haïti from Port-au-Prince, a Candomblé ensemble from Salvador de Bahia, and Beatriz Veit-Tané's María Lionza rituals from Caracas. The prominent presence of Vodou, Candomblé, and Lumbalú rituals reflected the Congress' broader aim of exploring a transnational Afro-Diasporic dialogue through spirituality, corporeality, and public engagement. Together with its academic and visual art offerings, the event's performative programming underscored a commitment to exploring spiritual interconnections as a platform for social communion and transformation. As these performances

[4] Carlos Muñoz, *Cine Fantástico,* Bogotá, Colombia: Cinemateca Distrital de Bogotá, 1975. Image courtesy of Roberto de Zubiría, LaPost Estudio.
[5] "Cine, teatro y danza en el congreso de los brujos," *El Tiempo,* August 24, 1975.
[6] Ibidem.

took place as closing rituals after each one of the days of the Congress, their presence raised meaningful inquiries around the authenticity and effectiveness of performing sacred spiritual traditions within a highly mediatized context. The public visibility of these actions, whether enacted by groups close or affiliated with each these traditions, allows us to consider the possibilities of ritual reinvention and resignification as a form of cultural autonomy and agency amidst reifying dynamics of massive public consumption.

By analyzing the conferences, exhibitions, and performances of the Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería, this chapter argues that, despite its capitalistic and controversial nature, the event's academic and artistic platform sought to challenge the racialized and marginalizing effects of Colombia's modernist cultural project. Multidimensional and contradictory, the Congress represents an unprecedented case study of the spiritual as an exploratory practice of social and cultural resistance to power, bringing non-hegemonic European, Afro-Diasporic, and Indigenous belief systems into dialogue through various cultural expressions. In doing so, the event exemplifies an ethos of "spiritual promiscuity," demonstrating how the permeability of spiritual explorations attempted to foster mutual understanding and coalition-building across social groups while contesting rigid definitions of the sacred. Through installations and public performances, the Congress activated diverse artistic repertoires, employing sacralizing and desacralizing strategies to disrupt social and aesthetic hierarchies. This chapter further contends that the Congress, as a whole, functioned as a performative festival of opposition, leveraging mediatized shock aesthetics to establish a counterhegemonic space of spiritual and political communion. As a creative platform, it illuminated overlooked south-to-south artistic networks and connections, underscoring their thematic relevance within the profound cultural shifts of the 1970s. By proposing both scholarly and artistic alternatives to restrictive sociocultural

frameworks—particularly regarding gender, class, and race—the event constituted a counterhegemonic space of collective reimagination.

González Restrepo's work spearheading the Congress prefigured what theorist Walter Mignolo would later insist in as the need to define what the decolonial is and entails from a local perspective.[7] Though steeped in capitalist dynamics, the event dared to build an unorthodox platform of spiritual and political interactions in defiance of conceptual, religious, and aesthetic propriety, gaining him adepts as well as detractors. At the heart of this conversation laid González Restrepo's close association with writer and diplomat Pedro Gómez Valderrama as a noted intellectual of witchcraft in Colombia. Gómez Valderrama acted as one of the board of directors and investors of La Rana travel agency upon its foundation in the early 1970s. His most influential book on witchcraft, however, dates to 1958. In these lines, the historian notes: "*La hechicería es una constante de la humanidad […]. A los cultos supervivientes de la fertilidad se agrega la idea de lo mágico, y se agrega, también, la parodia de la religión dominante."*[8] By refusing the possibility of ascribing one single meaning to witchcraft as a concept, Gómez Valderrama acknowledges, however, a series of essential characteristics that emerged through the passing between the pre-modern to the modern eras. These features include witchcraft's public and social nature centered on women, their femininity and sexuality, both adored and terrified; the witches' relationship with nature as a form early science in the Middle Ages; and the practitioners' connection with pagan fertility rites which rest upon sexual rituals of liberation, which have been duly persecuted.[9] These three broad defining traits, though not the only ones the

[7] Walter Mignolo, "Closing Remarks," in Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, eds., *On Decoloniality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 235.
[8] Pedro Gómez Valderrama*, Muestras del diablo: justificadas por consideración de brujas y otras gentes engañosas, En el reino de Buzirago y El engañado* (Medellín, Colombia: Sílaba Editores, 2017), 21. In English: "Witchcraft is a constant in humanity [...]. To the surviving fertility cults, the notion of magic is added, along with a parody of the dominant religion."
[9] Ibid, 23-33.

author describes, are illustrative of the conceptual backbone of the Congress inasmuch as it prominently featured women scholars and practitioners, explored the relationship between spirituality, magic, and science, and sought to create communal spaces of ecstasy through public performances and rituals.

Further, González Restrepo's surviving library holds a 1973, dedicated copy of Gómez Valderrama's *La procesión de los ardientes,* a short story originally written in 1967, where the author explores religious syncretism in the Caribbean coast of the Viceroyalty of New Granade, present-day Colombia, during the XVIII century. The text, as literary scholar Josefina Pizano argues, explores sacred and profane scenes centering on the figure of the witch and the devil. It describes, moreover, alliances between women of African and European descent, where the former transmits occult knowledges to the latter, such as divination and herbalism, to resist patriarchal colonial oppression.[10] In alignment with his previous publications, Gómez Valderrama foregrounds the role of the woman as witch, sorceress, and priestess, Pizano contends, mediating between the erotic, the material, and the sacred.[11] Temporally located in a moment where the Spanish Inquisition conducted witch trials in Cartagena de Indias, *La procession de los ardientes* shapes in literary, imaginative forms Gómez Valderrama's longstanding preoccupation with the role of witchcraft as a decisively modern phenomenon in the Americas, foregrounding racial, class, and epistemological divisions. Additionally, González Restrepo's knowledge on historical processes of witchcraft also found fodder in broader introductory texts to its history in a global perspective, namely through W.B. Crow's *A History of Magic, Witchcraft & Occultism.* Published in 1968 and reprinted 1972, the publication

[10] Pizano Josefina, *La misma oscuridad en todas las hogueras: brujas, demonios y hechiceras en cinco cuentos de Pedro Gómez Valderrama* (Bogotá, Colombia: Ediciones Uniandes, 2019), 55.
[11] Ibid., 57.

addressed the origins of various nature-bound or non-hegemonic spiritual systems from prehistoric times to ancient civilizations across the world and the advent of Theosophy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[12] Altogether, these sources evidence González Restrepo's awareness of the multifarious origins of witchcraft as a cultural and social practice of resistance to power structures. It is no coincidence, therefore, that he invited Obregón to design the poster given that his practice, ever since his definitive move to Cartagena de Indias, has been invested in the entangled histories of the Colombian Caribbean.[13] Similarly, his sustained engagement with Gómez Valderrama also denotes a consciousness around the possibilities of witchcraft as a platform for coalition building amongst marginalized communities, which was a defining aspect of the Congress as a public event.

The Congress's aim to overturn aesthetic hierarchies between high and low art is also one of its defining features, which is evident, for instance, in the conflation of trained and self-taught artists from various cultural backgrounds and spiritual traditions under its exhibition spaces. This subversion is also clear in the fact that the Congress' associated *Feria bruja* or Witch Fair essentially a spiritual traditions and public goods market, was a signpost of its programming. Much of this resistance to concede to hierarchical views on artistic and cultural expressions is indebted to González Restrepo's closeness to the Nadaísmo avant-garde movement emerging in Colombia in the late 1950s. His father, the writer Fernando González, was the mentor of poet Gonzalo Arango and others who found the movement based on a nihilist *nothing-ism*, engaging in inflammatory writings and public actions which initially caused a revolt in Colombian society. Their transgressive creative ethos, which I contend could be interpreted as a link between avant-

[12] See H.B. Crow, *A History of Magic, Witchcraft, and Occultism* (Abacus, 1972).
[13] See Carmen María Jaramillo, *Alejandro Obregón: el mago del Caribe* (Bogotá, Colombia: Asociación de Amigos del Museo Nacional de Colombia, 2001).

garde Dada and the aesthetic provocations of punk, influenced the conceptualization of the event as a disruptive cultural arena. Further, the Nadaísmo's defiance of Catholicism as the cultural matrix of a conservative and reactionary Colombia was most notable in the movement's search for spiritual alternatives to build better, different worlds. Their evolving radical stances encapsulated various trends of spiritual resistance coming together and burgeoning in Latin America and the Caribbean by the 1970s. These incorporated spiritual strands related to mysticism, Surrealism, Magical Realism, Liberation Theology, and the practices of Afro-diasporic herbalism. In addition to González Restrepo's own studies, these various epistemological strains also served as a cultural backdrop and source of inspiration for the interspiritual platform he devised, though not unproblematically, through the Congress.

By addressing the spiritual as a legitimate source of scholarly interest and creativity, this chapter seeks to consider artistic practices related to various non-hegemonic belief systems as worthy of an art historiographical discussion. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to the art historiography of Latin America, which has traditionally been focused on the politics of the Cold War, armed violence, and dictatorial regimes as influences in the emergence of national and regional visual languages. This is particularly true for a country like Colombia given that its protracted armed conflict, which started after the 1959 onset of the Cuban Revolution, made politics, war, land distribution, and healing or reparation mechanisms central to discussions of art practices for most of the second half of the twentieth century. While these historical contexts remain an important source of study for the region's cultural and material histories, focusing on spiritual practices as a source of creativity and political engagement brings to the fore an analysis on exhibitions, artworks, and artists which have been historiographically neglected. Accordingly, this chapter looks to fill in for such absence, reverting the way in which spirituality has become a

largely subsidiary theme for art historians in Colombia, despite its relevance for a multitude of artists' creative processes and the building of national cultures at large.

Following an interdisciplinary perspective integrating art history as well as comparative religious studies, this chapter explores spiritual themes and issues of self-representation and sociopolitical inclusion. It will first address the Congress' monumental *Salón de Arte Brujo,* officially called the *Salón de Artes Visuales* (Visual Arts Salon). The analysis will depart from a discussion of exhibition making practices in Colombia at the time, transitioning into the consideration of specific artworks exhibited as part of the show by Colombian artists Hernando Tejada, Luis Durier, and Feliza Bursztyn. These artists' thematic engagement with pagan and occult traditions are notable as they differ from the themes that their peers were exploring at the time, namely governmental politics, land distribution inequality, and the impossibility of a fixed national identity in a country as culturally diverse as Colombia. Secondly, the chapter will address self-taught Haitian artworks brought to Bogotá by Georges S. Nader from the Galerie Nader. Facilitated by a delegation of scholars from Port-au-Prince, namely Jean-Baptiste Romain and Joseph-Mompoint Mondésir, the exhibition showcased works by Lyonel Laurenceau, the Obin family, Georges Liautaud (attributed), and Paul Neremours. These artists' works will be discussed in comparison to previous exhibitions of individual pieces of Haitian art in Colombia, particularly a few scarce examples from the Bienal de Coltejer exhibitions. Framed through the lens of Vodou, the installation of artworks shown at the Congress offered a broad range that reminisced temple aesthetics as well as trained and self-taught styles. Both exhibitions, therefore, attest to a desire to reclaim social autonomy via the engagement with non-hegemonic spiritualities, insisting on their potential to exceed artistic, racialized or gendered constraints.

Finally, this chapter examines the work of three women dancers and choreographers who participated in the Congress as coordinators of their respective national dance groups: Odette Wiener from Haiti, Gessy Gesse from Brazil, and Delia Zapata Olivella from Colombia. While each presented distinct ritualistic performances of Vodou, Candomblé, and Lumbalú, their joint work allows us to analyze the ways in which the spectacularization of mixed Black and Indigenous cultures was essential to dance troupes' assertion and reclamation of previously suppressed spiritual systems. This analysis recognizes the culturally specific implications of these performances in their places of origin, shaped in part by nationalist and tourism-driven agendas. At the same time, it highlights their role in fostering open discussions on alternative and original visions of the sacred in public spaces. By framing ritual as performance, these troupes reenacted via corporeal means, as Diana Taylor would contend for the performative repertoire, memories of the legacies of enslavement and marginalization. However, these troupes' corporeal expression of Afro-Indigenous spiritual matrixes also created a space where collective agency and visibility questioned exoticizing or reductive racial representations. In doing so, they navigated the complex dynamics of staged spectacle by securing a means to assert a public presence as well as exploring transnational connections of their spiritual systems' rituals and dance forms.

Seen as a whole, the artistic expressions of the Congress reflect a transnational collective drive to enact performative roles that uphold and defend non-hegemonic spiritualities and marginalized social groups. Far from being resolved at the time—or even today—the tensions between market dynamics and visibility, as well as between authenticity and spectacle, underscore the transitional moment in which rigid modernist frameworks were increasingly challenged by new identity formations and spiritual explorations. In this sense, the Congress's

diverse and often uncategorizable events serve as a generative case study for a spiritually promiscuous framework, illustrating that the path to identity recognition and coalition building—a process of resacralizing both communities and selves—must be continually negotiated among different actors and circumstances within Latin American and Caribbean contexts, even when emerging from the most radical decolonial leanings.

1.1 An Unparalleled Exhibition of "Arte Brujo"

Organized by María Teresa Guerrero, the *Salón de Arte Brujo* was an art show of unprecedented scale in Colombia. While recently appointed Deputy Director of the MAMBO under the direction of Gloria Zea, Guerrero worked independently as a curator for the Congress. Her task was to fill the walls of a vast hangar-like space at the Feria Internacional de Bogotá with artworks that aligned with what the organizers loosely termed *arte brujo* or sorcerous art.[14] A major event venue in Bogotá, the Feria—now known as Corferias—also hosted the Congress itself, including nightly performances of Vodou, Candomblé, María Lionza, and Lumbalú rituals. With ample space and sufficient resources, the exhibition reportedly showcased six hundred works[15], featuring now-renowned artists such as Feliza Bursztyn, Olga de Amaral, Sara Modiano, Omar Rayo, and Hernando Tejada, alongside lesser-known figures like Luis Durier, Deoscórides Pérez, and Fanny Salazar. Guerrero secured participation through direct invitations, asking artists to submit works with any relation to the world of witchcraft, whether direct or indirect.[16] Participants were required to send a minimum of two pieces, a curriculum vitae, and a

[14] María Teresa Guerrero, interview by Julián Sánchez González, August 26, 2018. At the time, Guerrero was also the spouse of the prominent art critic Juan Gustavo Cobo Borda, who, according to the curator, had most likely recommended her name to Simón González Restrepo to organize the exhibition.
[15] Alegre Levy, "Llegaron los brujos," *El Tiempo,* August 21, 1975.
[16] María Teresa Guerrero to invited artists, 1975, María Teresa Guerrero's personal archive, Bogotá.

price range in both Colombian pesos and U.S. dollars, as the exhibition also had a commercial dimension. While the open-ended theme and curatorial permeability compromised conceptual rigor, this fluidity echoed González Restrepo's own understanding of witchcraft as a capaciously pagan, syncretic practice. As an unorthodox gathering, the Congress' art show embodied a resistance to propriety and expectation that was artistically and spiritually promiscuous. This context offers a fertile avenue for historical research, particularly when contrasted with concurrent, more traditional curatorial ventures in Bogotá.

Even though the majority of the original archive of the exhibition is no longer retrievable, clues from alternative archival sources and oral histories tell us a partial story of the show's scope and importance. Images from *El Espectador* newspaper and its unpublished archives, as well as video stills from discarded strips of a documentary film shot by Francisco Norden during the days of the Congress, contain a number of relevant installation images of the exhibition (Figs. 1.3-1.4).[17] These pictures speak, firstly, of the variety of artistic media included in the show, namely painting, photography, drawing, and sculpture. In addition, the pieces also feature a wide range of formats and styles, going from the abstract to the figurative, making it difficult to determine a linking thread between these besides the general theme of the show. The seemingly free-for-all nature of this exhibition and obscure concept, however, also indicates a non-hierarchical curatorial model which was unusual at the time. I argue that the *Salón de Arte Brujo* opened a door for an unlikely conversation in the museological and art historical fields in Colombia. Thus, the exhibition challenged expected professional standards, largely emulated from international institutions, and a sense of intellectual propriety with its theme. This is notable as the field of art history, museum collecting, and curatorial practice, a relatively young set of

[17] *Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería,* directed by Francisco Norden (1975, Bogotá, Colombia). Archival film strips in Patrimonio Fílmico Colombiano Archives, Bogotá. Courtesy of Roberto de Zubiría and LaPost Estudio.

disciplines in a country like Colombia, were becoming increasingly professionalized as they aimed to establish a stronger cultural field nationally. This process resonated with the work of museums and other cultural institutions in major metropolitan centers across the Americas during the second half of the twentieth century.[18]

During the 1960s and 1970s, the MAMBO held a wide variety of exhibitions, privileging the monographic format over group or thematic shows. The museum showcased artists who are now central figures in Colombia's twentieth-century art canon, including Fanny Sanín, Hernando Tejada, and Juan A. Roda in 1965, as well as Álvaro Barrios, Carlos Rojas, and Bernardo Salcedo in 1967. In the 1970s, it presented exhibitions on Enrique Grau (1973), Feliza Bursztyn and Hernán Díaz (1974), and Leonel Góngora (1977), among others. In 1972, in collaboration with The Museum of Modern Art's International Council, the MAMBO hosted *El arte del surrealismo* (*The Art of Surrealism*), curated by Bernice Rose. The exhibition featured leading figures of the European avant-garde, including Wifredo Lam and Roberto Matta Echaurren. Other Latin American artists who gained greater recognition through solo exhibitions at the MAMBO included Peruvian Fernando de Szyszlo and Mexican José Luis Cuevas in 1973, as well as Barbara Hepworth in 1977. By consciously fostering a regional artistic dialogue, the MAMBO consolidated a cultural space where local audiences could engage with international styles and metropolitan art circuits—albeit through a limited yet privileged lens. One month before the Congress, the museum launched *Paisaje 1900-1975*, a major exhibition curated by Eduardo Serrano with support from Beatriz González, exploring Colombian artists' diverse interpretations of the natural landscape. In her introduction, Zea described the exhibition as "the representation of the natural scenery of our life," which "reaffirms that which is ours, recalls

[18] The professionalization of museums in Colombia during this decade was exemplified by MAMBO's construction of a new building in downtown Bogotá in 1975, designed by architect Rogelio Salmona.

nationality as a concept, and underscores essential aspects of our social organization and idiosyncrasy."[19] Serrano observed that in the second half of the twentieth century, landscape painting in Colombia—once a central artistic concern—had become increasingly indirect in its references.[20] This exhibition, alongside the museum's emphasis on solo retrospectives, reflected the MAMBO's role in constructing a national art historical framework. While this endeavor was crucial for Colombian art history, the museum's institutionalized approach left little room for experimentation or dissent.

While distancing from these thematically accepted curatorial practices, the *Salón de Arte Brujo* was not unique in its efforts to reformulate the exhibition making that had been established in previous decades. A case in point of preceding shows shifting the canon of exhibition making in Colombia was the *XXV Salón Nacional de Artes Visuales*, organized a year earlier in 1974. Responding to a major fallout with artists the previous year over claims of favoritism, this exhibition—much like the *Salón de Arte Brujo* that followed—embraced an open-ended concept with no admissions committee, allowing for broader participation and curatorial fluidity.[21] Although keeping a panel of mostly artist judges, whose work was to decide on an honorary mention and scholarships to support other artists' careers, the show's scope was ultimately eclectic and multimedial, including photography, installation, textiles, found objects and videos.[22] Fittingly, Zea, *grande dame* of Colombian culture and at the time also the Director of the Instituto Colombiano para la Cultura (Colcultura), declared the 1974 exhibition as "popular" in nature and one "where any artist will have the possibility and the right of exhibiting their

[19] Gloria Zea, *Paisaje, 1900-1975* (Bogotá, Colombia: Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá, 1975).
[20] Eduardo Serrano, *Paisaje, 1900-1975* (Bogotá, Colombia: Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá, 1975).
[21] Camilo Calderón Schrader, ed., *50 años del salón nacional de artistas* (Bogotá, Colombia: Instituto Colombiano de Cultura, 1990), 191.
[22] Ibidem.

work, without elitist classifications; without an anticipated selection of a few pieces."[23] The event represented a major shift from the notorious close relationship Colombian art institutions had with a largely male-centered generation of painters and sculptors who redefined, in the 1950s, the visual languages of the arts of the country, transitioning into the intersections of modern expressions such as neo figuration, expressionism, surrealism or geometric abstraction. These included figures such as Fernando Botero, Norman Mejía, Omar Rayo, Alejandro Obregón, and Cecilia Porras, among others. With a staggering number of six hundred participating artists, the *XXV Salón Nacional de Artes Visuales*, therefore, prefigured in style and scale the *Salón de Arte Brujo* as both shared an indiscriminate curatorial criterion for accepting works to be exhibited as part of these shows.

Considering the horizontal exhibition strategies of the *XXV Salón Nacional de Artistas*, it is notable that, despite engaging in similar experimental propositions, the *Salón de Arte Brujo* has been virtually absent from historical accounts of 1970s art. Much of the modern and contemporary discourse in the country has prioritized themes dealing with political corruption, social inequality, rapid urbanization, and the escalating armed conflict between guerrilla groups, the military, and, later, drug trafficking networks, gravitating toward materialist and politically explicit concerns. Art historians and curators Carmen María Jaramillo, Juliana Suárez, and María Wills recently posited a distinctive analysis on these lines through the exhibition *El arte de la desobediencia: Colección MAMBO 1965-1984*.[24] Additionally, the curatorial collective Equipo TRansHisTor(ia), composed of Camilo Ordóñez and María Sol Barón, set forth the groundbreaking exhibition and research project *Múltiples y originales: Arte y cultura visual en*

[23] Ibidem.
[24] María Wills, Carmen María Jaramillo, and Sylvia Suárez, eds., *El arte de la desobediencia. Colección MAMBO 1965-1984* (Bogotá, Colombia: Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá, 2018), 105.

Colombia, años 70.[25] Rooted in archival research of popular culture sources, ephemera, and new media, their work also demonstrates how institutions and artists actively engaged with the complex political landscape of Colombia during this time. Notably, both projects largely overlook discussions on emergent spiritual formations in Colombia, precluding a deeper consideration of alternative belief systems as vehicles for social transformation. By virtue of its unconventional theme and spectacular nature, the Congress has remained at odds with dominant artistic narratives in the country, evading prevailing frameworks of political and material critique that continue to shape Colombian art history today.

Both exhibitions, however, express interest in accounting for how artists deal with the presence of institutionalized religion, that is the Catholic Church, in Colombia. These visual propositions are mostly concerned with the transgression of the iconographic canon of Christianity through various vehicles of expression, such as pop art aesthetics and the mass reproducibility of the image. In *El arte de la desobediencia,* artists Nirma Zárate and Diego Arango Ruiz's *Sin tíulo* (Fig. 1.5) and Beatriz González's *La iglesia está en peligro* (Fig. 1.6) operate as visual testaments on the uses of crude irreverence and blasphemy as essential instruments of cultural resistance as a form of pop art. As the curators expressed in the critical texts for the exhibition's publication: "[...] irony is directed at those values that were used to build the notion of national identity on the foundation of cliché and on models of perception which numbed a critical sense and took advantage of traditional iconography, kitsch, and the media to hinder any contempt."[26] In effect, the former piece portrays a bourgeois couple in formal attire leading a Ku Klux Klan procession. Created in collaboration with the left-wing

[25] María Sol Barón Pino and Camilo Ordóñez Robayo, eds., *Múltiples y originales: arte y cultura visual en Colombia, años 70* (Bogotá, Colombia: Editorial Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2019).
[26] Wills, Jaramillo, and Suárez, *El arte de la desobediencia,* 105.

artist collective Taller 4 Rojo, Zárate's image sharply critiques the complacency of the Colombian state and Church in the face of organized violence. The latter work, in turn, humorously depicts Pope Paul VI, the highest authority of the Catholic Church in the 1970s, wearing an Indigenous feathered headdress, drawing attention to the histories of colonialism and forced religious conversions in Colombia and beyond. Both Zárate's and González's works were part of a broader wave of artistic explorations in Colombia that, at the time, confronted violence against marginalized communities—whether physical, political, spiritual, or symbolic. Employing the fluid visual language of a transnational pop art movement, these artists sought to engage a wider audience while critiquing power structures. Through prints and printmaking practices, they mobilized sharp critiques against the historically fraught relationship between Catholicism, colonialism, and political authority in the country.

Criticism of the Catholic Church and its complicity with the status quo had gained traction in Colombia with the rise of Nadaísmo, an avant-garde movement founded in Antioquia in 1958 by lawyer, poet, and later mystic Gonzalo Arango. Literary critic Juan José Escobar López describes Nadaísmo's oppositional strategies as rooted in irony and the subversive appropriation of publicity mechanisms to disseminate provocative slogans that foregrounded eroticism, wordplay, and mockery of governmental and official institutions.[27] Active throughout the 1960s and 1970s—albeit in shifting configurations, with and without Arango—Nadaísmo became emblematic of the growing disenfranchisement among Colombian youth, who felt increasingly alienated from the country's bipartisan politics and prevailing conservative social order. Historian Álvaro Tirado Mejía argues that the 1960s in Colombia saw unprecedented sociopolitical transformations, including the establishment of the Frente Nacional, a power-

[27] Juan José Escobar López, "Incendiario" in *Manifiesto Nadaísta* (Colombia: Fallidos Editores, 2018), 10.

sharing agreement between the Liberal and Conservative parties designed to prevent General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla from assuming dictatorship. While the Frente Nacional, which lasted until 1974, curtailed third-party political participation—partially fueling the rise of guerrilla movements in rural areas—it also spurred increased youth involvement in left-wing urban organizations.[28] Rather than engaging in direct political action through social movements, Nadaísmo sought to destabilize the rationalistic fixities of the existing social order through art and literature. In the movement's first manifesto, Arango asserted: *"La poesía Nadaísta es la libertad que desordena lo que ha organizado la razón, o sea, la creación inversa del orden universal y de la Naturaleza"* while proclaiming, *"El Nadaísmo estará abierto a todos los inconformismos y todas las irreverencias de tipo cultural, estético, social y religioso."*[29] Nadaísmo's oppositional stance—which extended to religious and spiritual structures as entangled with modernist power—laid the groundwork for the Congress as a whole, informing González Restrepo's vision of building spiritual coalitions.

One of the most noted public actions of the early Nadaísmo movement took place in 1960 at a congress organized by the Catholic Church and Catholic intellectuals at Universidad de Antioquia in Medellín. During this event, Arango disrupted the proceedings by staging a provocative intervention, halting the convening and scattered copies of his *Manifiesto al Congreso de Escribanos Católicos* into the air. In this manifesto, he issued a direct challenge to the Church, declaring:

[28] Álvaro Tirado Mejía, *Los Años Sesenta: Una Revolución En La Cultura* (Bogotá, Colombia: Debate, 2014), 19, 208.
[29] Gonzalo Arango, "Primer Manifiesto Nadaísta (1958)," in *Manifiesto Nadaísta* (Colombia: Fallidos Editores, 2018), 17; 24. In English: "Nadaista poetry is the freedom that disrupts what reason has organized—that is, the inverse creation of universal order and of Nature," while proclaiming, "Nadaísmo will be open to all forms of nonconformity and all irreverence of a cultural, aesthetic, social, and religious kind."

"Ustedes llevan dos mil años prometiendo el paraíso y la redención, la justicia y la paz. ¿No es suficiente su fracaso milenario? Permitan el acceso al conocimiento, del pensamiento científico y la lógica histórica. Permitan que una política de la inmanencia restituya sus posibilidades de salvación y de solidaridad humana que ustedes le negaron… ¡Y no apesten más!"[30]

By invoking a *"política de la inmanencia"* and aligning Nadaísmo with the figure of the Devil, Arango deliberately blurred the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, resisting the notion that divinity exists beyond oneself. A similar impulse emerges in the second Nadaísta manifesto, written by Amílcar Osorio—also known as Amílcar U—who, like Arango, embraced the role of a prophet, using his word, or utterance, as a vehicle to sacralize himself and those belonging to the movement.[31] He described Nadaísmo as existing within the "*oscuridad de lo poético*," a space defined by an embrace of absurdity and "irreality." Moreover, he framed Nadaísmo as a confluence of spiritual traditions, drawing from the teachings of Krishna, Confucius, Jesus, and others to construct an interspiritual vision of unity, healing, and human salvation.[32] Similarly, Arango described Nadaísmo, in a 1964 text, as a "Reconstructive Revolution" against the oppressive dogmas of reason, declaring: *"Por eso somos profetas y religiosos, depositarios de un nuevo fervor cósmico, portadores de fulgurantes verdades para dar el salto a la salvación. La pasión de nuestro pensamiento gira en una órbita de santidad."*[33]

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[30] Gonzalo Arango, "Manifiesto al Congreso de Escribanos Católicos," in *Manifiesto Nadaísta* (Colombia: Fallidos Editores, 2018), 44. In English: "You have spent two thousand years promising paradise and redemption, justice and peace. Isn't your millennial failure enough? Allow access to knowledge, to scientific thought and historical logic. Allow a politics of immanence to restore the possibilities of salvation and human solidarity that you have denied... And stop spreading your stench!"

[31] Amílcar Osorio, "Manifiesto poético 1962: explosiones radioactivas de la poesía nadaista," *Mito: revista bimestral de cultura* (Bogotá, Colombia) 8, nos. 41–42 (March–April, May–June 1962): 257–60.

[32] Ibidem.

[33] In English: "That is why we are prophets and religious visionaries, bearers of a new cosmic fervor, carriers of dazzling truths to make the leap toward salvation. The passion of our thought revolves in an orbit of holiness."

Such proclamations foreshadowed the movement's mystical turn in the 1970s, when Arango and other Nadaístas relocated to the Caribbean archipelago of San Andrés, Providencia, and Santa Catalina. There, they sought seclusion to establish the *Nadasterio*—a wordplay on *monasterio*—as a communal retreat. [34] More significantly, Arango's and Osorio's writings prefigured González Restrepo's vision of interspirituality as a political force against Enlightened rationalism, laying the groundwork for the Congress's ethos of transgression and communion.

The politics of oppositionality espoused by Nadaísmo—rooted in notions of nothingness, obscurity, the irrational, the mystical, and the immanent—emerged, in part, from Arango and his associates' close relationship with González Restrepo's father, the writer and philosopher Fernando González Ochoa. Literary scholar Carolina Sanín describes González Ochoa as a writer whose style defies convention and form, exemplifying what this study identifies as a promiscuous approach to structures of expression through the written word.[35] She further argues that González Ochoa's practice of confession as a means of understanding temporality—along with his oscillation between offering public social, political, and cultural critiques and seeking a life of seclusion—recalls the works of Catholic monks and mystics such as Teresa de Jesús and Fray Luis de León.[36] Fittingly, one of González Ochoa's most noted publications from 1929, *Viaje a pie*, offers a series of philosophical ruminations derived from a walking journey across the Andean mountain range. This pilgrimage, undertaken as an attempt to free himself from the religious and social strictures of his native Envigado, becomes a meditation on the nature of belief. In it, he redefines his relationship with Catholicism, writing:

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[34] See Gonzalo Arango, *Providencia* (Barcelona, España: Plaza & Janes, 1972); Julián Sánchez González, "The Issue of the 'Double-Outlier': Contemporary Art from the Caribbean and Archipelago of San Andrés, Providencia, and Santa Catalina" (Master's Thesis, The Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 2018).
[35] Carolina Sanín, "La sillita de Otraparte," in Fernando González and Carolina Sanín, ed., *Pasajes de Fernando González* (Bogotá, Colombia: Lumen, 2015), 15.
[36] Ibid., 16.

"El camino es casi toda la vida de hombre; cuando está en él sabe de dónde viene y para dónde va. Caminos son los códigos, y las costumbres, y las modas. El método es el camino. Por eso Jesucristo, cuando quiso manifestar su infinita importancia, dijo que Él era El Camino." [37]

This mystical journey, reminiscent in some ways of Jack Kerouac's later publication *On the Road*, centers on the contemplation of nature as a means of perceiving the sacred—both within the natural world and within oneself. [38] More significantly, *Viaje a pie* presents a radical critique of Catholic hegemony in Colombia. González Ochoa provocatively describes the country as "the land of the Devil," challenging the presence of this figure in the national imagination as a construct of the Church, used to enforce social control and maintain conservative power structures.[39] This assertion draws a direct throughline from González Ochoa's writings to González Restrepo's own interest in reclaiming the sacred within everyday life, as well as his effort to vindicate witchcraft as a marginalized practice of subaltern agency.

As part of a continuum of artistic and intellectual redefinitions of the sacred and the role of Catholic Church in society as outlined by González Ochoa and Nadaísmo, Zárate's and González's engagement with blasphemy also contends with an oppositional repertoire linking both political and otherworldly concerns. This assessment aligns with art historian and curator Eduardo Serrano's text from the time "Los años setentas: y el arte en Colombia."[40] In the article,

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[37] Fernando González, "Viaje a pie," in Fernando González and Carolina Sanín, ed., *Pasajes de Fernando González* (Bogotá, Colombia: Lumen, 2015), 63. See original: Fernando González, *Viaje a Pie* (Paris, France: Le Livre libre, 1929). In English: "The path is almost the whole of a man's life; when he is on it, he knows where he comes from and where he is going. Paths are codes, and customs, and fashions. Method is the path. That is why Jesus Christ, when He wanted to express His infinite importance, said that He was *The Way*."
[38] Ibid., 72-73.
[39] Ibid., 67-68.
[40] Eduardo Serrano, "Los años setentas: y el arte en Colombia (1980)," in María Wills, Carmen María Jaramillo, and Sylvia Suárez, eds., *El arte de la desobediencia. Colección MAMBO 1965-1984* (Bogotá, Colombia: Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá, 2018), 147-166.

the author discusses critical issues of the arts in the 1970s, mentioning, among other preoccupations, the growing interests of Colombian artists in what he deems as an expression of a decadent spirituality. He notes that the resurgence of a spiritual and faithful outlet in artists' works can only be explained by virtue of the decay of moral values in Colombia.[41] Acknowledging the long-standing tradition of the proximity between art and religion—even dating to Plato's discussions on the morality of aesthetics—Serrano also claimed that the spiritualization of the arts of his time evidenced the crisis of the modern state and consolidated the artist as a type of spiritual leader.[42] Bringing to mind an increased presence of painterly practices within religious architectural spaces in Colombia as well as a rise in the construction of churches, Serrano further stressed the transition of praying practices in religious spaces to contemplation practices in secular spaces, such as museums.[43] As a result, his analysis on the attitudes of artists towards religion is circumscribed to understanding the influence and transgression of Catholic and Western beliefs nationally, identifying sacralizing and sacrilegious impulses dealing with politics in the public arena. While responding to his local context and providing us with an accurate read of the partial relationship between spirituality and politics, therefore, Serrano tended to also overlooked spiritual forms of resistance based on non-hegemonic beliefs, such as those coming from Afro-Diasporic, Indigenous, or Occult backgrounds. Both historical and contemporary exhibitions and writings by prominent figures in the Colombian art scene attest to the areas of opportunity that a broader spiritual framework could bring to developing a more socially inclusive perspective in the arts.

[41] Ibidem.
[42] Ibidem.
[43] Ibidem.

Conversely, the *Salón de Arte Brujo* served as a permeable platform which enabled a conversation not solely dedicated to Catholic and anti-Catholic considerations when addressing the realm of spirituality. It also evoked an interest, if not practice, of non-hegemonic spiritual systems in Colombia. Besides Obregón's poster for the Congress, news outlets in Colombia also focused, for instance, their attention on Hernando "Tejadita" Tejada's *Berta, la mujer puerta* (Fig. 1.7). Calling it "one of the symbols of the Congress," *El Espectador* newspaper described the piece as representing a witch with powers to predict the future.[44] This polychrome wooden sculpture, part of a larger series of female figures problematically fused with utilitarian objects, depicts a woman wearing a long-sleeved dress, pointed black boots, and a flowing bandana adorned with encrusted colored crystals. She also wears a large ring on her left hand and holds a cat. Berta's breasts, characteristic of *Tejadita's* series, are conspicuously rendered as round wooden volumes, with her left breast featuring a small door that opens to reveal an empty compartment for storing items. Created in 1970, five years before the Congress, this sculpture reflects two of the artist's recurring motifs—women and cats—while also alluding to the sartorial choices of the countercultural generation. By showing this work in the *Salón de Arte Brujo*, Tejada picked on the sartorial shifts from this decade as increasingly associated with the transgressive archetype of the woman as a witch. As part of an exhibition such as the *Salon de Arte Brujo, Berta, la mujer puerta* could be read as an ambiguous work that straddles between the reification of women's bodies as well as their sexual and spiritual liberation—a tension that could arguably also account for its popularity. His interest in the portrayal of this archetype is further exemplified in a portrait that Tejadita made in the 1960s of Alegre Levy, a reporter that would later cover the events, in quite a positive light, taking place during the Congress for *El*

[44] Alberto Duque López, "El Congreso de Brujería: ambiente festivo con lechona," *El Espectador*, August 25, 1975.

Tiempo newspaper in 1975 (Fig. 1.8). In this image, a depiction of the artist's known wood reliefs flanks a composition where Levy, centerstage, is depicted gazing directly at the viewer while wearing a white robe with red accent stripes as well as stone rings on her fingers. Both artworks, despite their material and visual differences, ultimately resemble each other in their interest in depicting women responding to the fashion trends of their time as an act of creative and bodily autonomy.

Further, *Berta, la mujer puerta* also reveals dynamics associated to the iconicity of images as catalysts for cultural change. This piece served as a vehicle to bring to a public forum, and to a certain extent normalize, unusual discussions otherwise deemed unsuitable for its scandalous and taboo nature. For instance, the *Revista Cromos* stated: *"¿Qué es esto? Asuntos de brujería. Este enorme cuadro [sic] lo encontrará usted cuando ingrese al 'tenebroso mundo' del Congreso Mundial de Brujería."*[45] Mentions such as this one evidence the rising presence and growing acceptance of non-hegemonic spiritual beliefs in the popular culture and collective imaginaries in Colombia. Despite not directly referencing occult practices in its title or materiality, the fact that this sculpture was exhibited in the *Salón de Arte Brujo* speaks to the permeability of its iconography. More importantly, it acts as a mirror of the growing popularity that witchcraft practices were gaining during this time. In a sense, this artwork's presence in the exhibition, only enabled as the artists had to directly submit it to the organizers, ultimately belied its reifying character, allowing its reception to tune in with the themes of cultural change around the formation of new, non-hegemonic, and hybrid spiritualities. This piece's exhibition as sorcerous art brings to mind issues of self-representation of women posed by second-wave

[45] "¡Alerta, brujos! El aquelarre ya comienza," *Revista Cromos*, no. 3004, August 13-19, 1975. English translation: "What is this? Matters of witchcraft. You will find this enormous painting [sic] when you enter the 'dark world' of the World Congress of Witchcraft."

feminists in Colombia and abroad, despite having been made by a male artist like Tejada. It could be argued, then, that *Berta, la mujer puerta*'s reception and afterlife within the context of the Congress contributed to consolidating its polysemic quality, opening a critical space of heteropatriarchal conventions about women and spirituality in the Colombian cultural sphere.

Another artist who exemplifies the significance of alternative spiritual systems as a theme for artmaking in Colombia during the 1970s is the Cartagena-born graphic designer and painter Luis Durier. Not entirely unknown as an artist in Colombia at the time, Durier, the nephew of the acclaimed artist Enrique Grau, had been exhibited in five individual and two collective shows in Colombia, and had prospects of being exhibited in Woodstock, New York. Due to the mediatized nature of the Congress, however, his work gained further visibility as it dealt with themes related to chiromancy or palm reading, necromancy or divination by invoking the dead, and witchcraft, receiving extended coverage from Colombian newspapers and magazines.[46] According to press accounts, Durier exhibited in the *Salón de Arte Brujo* at least four works, including *La hora del aquelarre* (Figs. 1.9-1.10) and *Carmela Murciélago* (Fig. 1.11). Painted in acrylic on canvas, both pieces reference, much like the works of Tejada and Obregón, the archetype of the witch as a figure connected to the natural and occult worlds. The first, simpler in composition, portrays a naked woman lying down, calm, with eyes closed under the full moonlight. Her forehead opens to reveal several clocks with different time markings, symbolizing the possibility of time and space travel as part of the witches' orgiastic reunion with the devil during the Sabbath. The second piece depicts a woman intently gazing at the viewer while showing inscriptions on her palms, indicating her ability to read the future. Her floating hair, parted in the middle, evokes the wings of smaller bats included at the bottom of the composition, hinting at her ability to fly

[46] Hernando Jiménez Pérez, "La pintura nigromántica de Luis Durier," *Revista Cromos*, no. 3004, August 13-19, 1975.

across the sky. With their bright color palette and sinuous lines, both paintings draw from pop art and art nouveau aesthetics, while incorporating elements from the graphic design and advertising worlds to which Durier was professionally connected.

Further, the long blue robe worn by *Carmela Murciélago* also echoes the sartorial choices in Tejada's depiction of *Berta, la mujer puerta*, suggesting that this figure belongs to a coven engaged in magical acts. According to *El Tiempo* newspaper, Colombian art historian and critic Germán Rubiano described Durier as an artist who was riding "the wave" of spirituality at the time, a commentary highlighting the prevalence of the magical as a subject matter for artists as well as Durier's involvement in the world of publicity.[47] This is particularly notable given that the same year as the Congress, Cartagena inaugurated the *Pabellón de Brujería* (Witchcraft Pavilion) a material culture collection and display of the historical witch hunts that took place in Durier's hometown during the colonial era.[48] Housed in the *Palacio de la Inquisición* (Inquisition Palace), the Catholic Church's office where interrogations and tortures of suspects were held, the *Pabellón* honors the history of witchcraft in the Caribbean city. According to its founder and director Eduardo Lemaître, the exhibit reflects the "union of witchcraft practices from medieval Europe and the rites of African and Indigenous peoples."[49] By describing this iteration of occult practices as a form of *mestizaje* and a "diversified form of demonology," Lemaître echoed Simón González's underlying ideas that drove the creation of both the Congress and the *Salón de Arte Brujo*. It is no surprise, then, that the show featured many artists hailing

[47] "Luis Durier expondrá en 'La Galerie', *El Tiempo,* August. 4, 1975.
[48] Alfonso Martínez, "¡Este es el altar de la misa negra!," *Revista Cromos*, no. 2999, July 9-15, 1975.
[49] Ibidem.

from the Caribbean region, such as Obregón and Durier, as this was the geographical space where such spiritual and racial intermixing took place to a high degree.[50]

In addition to suggesting a Caribbean connection, I would like to further emphasize how Durier's *Carmela Murciélago* correlates the witch or priestess archetype with the sartorial choices of the countercultural movement, particularly those of the presenters and attendees of the Congress. These fashion choices constituted cultural expressions that signaled, via aesthetic means, the rise and consolidation of a generational shift with implications for social and political change, including gender-based, sexual, and spiritual. A selection of images and photographs published by *El Espectador* newspaper described, for instance, the event as a domestic Tower of Babel and a *"verdadero desfile de modas, un auténtico espectáculo con rostros y expresiones nacionales y extranjeros."*[51] Two of these images show the conspicuous fashion of some of these visitors as they don black outfits with organic elements as well as oversized robes (Figs. 1.12-1.14). Further, the *Revista Planeta* also featured a series of unique high quality color photographs of the event taken by Madalena Schwartz, which captured various instances of sartorial creativity, including the María Lionza ritual presented on the fourth day of the proceedings (Fig. 1.15). In this image, priestess and public figure Aura Beatriz Correa Casanova, popularly known as Beatriz Veit-Tané, is seen midway through her performance wearing a long, faded, orange robe with stripes at the bottom, wide sleeves, and a multicolor feathered headdress. The photograph, moreover, shows a group of accompanying musicians who, while playing flutes and drums, also replicate Veit-Tané's fashion style, wearing headdresses and robes similar to the ones present in Durier's and Tejada's works. Alluding to the mixed cultural origins of the

[50] See Luz Adriana Maya, *Brujería y reconstrucción de identidades entre los Africanos y sus descendientes en la Nueva Granada, siglo XVII* (Bogotá, Colombia: Ministerio de Cultura, 2005).
[51] Alberto Duque Lopez, "Lente Brujo," *El Espectador,* August 27, 1975. English translation: "A veritable fashion parade, a genuine spectacle showcasing national and foreign faces and expressions."

Venezuelan belief system, based on an Indigenous purview of the sacred immanence of natural phenomena, their attires are composed by syncretic cultural symbols.

Part of the Congress as a whole, these artworks and fashion styles can be understood as being in conversation with one another, illustrating intermedial and interspiritual symbols of a break from conservative cultural codes of conduct as expression of non-hegemonic ritualistic practices. This connection becomes most evident when considering the historical relationships that women, across different geographies and cultural backgrounds, have forged with diverse spiritual traditions as a means of liberation from patriarchal social structures designed to control them. As Gómez Valderrama as well as artist and witch Starhawk have noted, such dynamic is notable in the rites of witches during the Middle Ages, the mediumistic practices of women during the XIX century, or the revival of the Goddess archetype in Feminist circles during the second half of the XX century.[52] Art historian and curator Susan Aberth reminds us, moreover, that in Mexico and the United States women associated with the Surrealist movement during the 1930s and 1940s appropriated the tropes of the witch in the collective imaginary, reaffirming their own independence and agency as individuals and artists away from heteronormative models.[53] Thus, the iconic function ascribed to Tejada's and Durier's work by the press speaks, on the one hand, to the shifting lives and circulation of artworks beyond the original intent of their makers. More importantly, the mechanisms of iconicity associated with *Berta, la mujer puerta* and *Carmela Murciélago* show how the Congress garnered its popularity and exposure

[52] Starhawk, "Witchcraft as Goddess Religion," in *The Spiral Dance* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999 [1979]), 25-40; Ronald Hutton, "Finding a Goddess," in *The Triumph of the Moon. History of Modern Pagan Witchraft* (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 32-42; Gómez Valderrama, *Muestras del Diablo,* 15-68.
[53] Susan Aberth, "Harbingers of the New Age: Surrealism, Women and the Occult in the United States," in Tessel M. Bauduin, Victoria Ferentinou, and Daniel Zamani, eds., *Surrealism, Occultism, and Politics: In Search of the Marvellous* (London, UK: Routledge, 2018).

via means of cultural shock and transgression which unapologetically embraced previously rejected feminine archetypes.

The intersection of popular culture, occult traditions, and controversy is also evident in the *Salón de Arte Brujo* through the exhibition of artist Feliza Bursztyn's moving sculpture *El bebé de Rosemary*. Although not as widely publicized in press accounts of the show as Tejada's or Durier's pieces, Bursztyn's installation—originally created in 1972—sparked intrigue and controversy, as its title evoked mythologies of women bearing the spawn of the devil in their wombs, a recurring trope in witchcraft traditions and lore. As a nudge to American culture from the late 1960s, such as Ira Levin's eponymous horror novel and Roman Polanski's psychological thriller film, this piece presented the viewer with an austere installation in which a white, metal bed frame holds an unspecified volume covered with a gray, silk sheet. The entire piece is set up to vibrate with the aid of an internal mechanism, further adding to the piece's sense of estrangement and alienation. Its inner mechanism reminds us of Bursztyn's *Camas* series, to which *El bebé de Rosemary* belongs, as a body of work that gained the artist national recognition for offering a poignant critique of stereotypes around femininity, eroticism, and domesticity prevalent in Colombian society. During the *Salón de Arte Brujo*, the piece, painted black, was exhibited on a white pedestal with a black satin sheet, which differed from the white frame of its exhibition at the recent show *Feliza Bursztyn: Welding Madness* (Fig. 1.16-1.17).[54] In this last iteration, a dramatic, bright white light brings our attention to the piece, accentuating its voluminous, shimmery, and sculptural quality alongside its eerie, cryptic, and uncanny composition. In doing so, Bursztyn's piece develops a visual proposition that reminisces Surrealism's interest in addressing the forbidden via the exploration of the unconscious. The

[54] See Marta Dziewańska and Abigail Winograd, *Feliza Bursztyn: Welding Madness* (Milan, Italy: Skira, 2022).

unorthodox and unexpected juxtaposition of objects, such as a bed frame, silk fabric, and motorized elements, defy the conventions of rationality of everyday life, and catapult us into the realm of the irrational and nonsensical.

Different from Tejada, Durier, and Obregón, Bursztyn's take on the theme of witches as women engaging in sexual activity with the devil denies the viewer the possibility of seeing, and therefore consuming, an eroticized rendition of the female body. This is relevant to note as Bursztyn's work had been framed, up until the year of the Congress, as that of a woman artist solely dedicated to the use of scrap metal as a primary material. One year prior to the *Salón de Arte Brujo,* literary critic Hernando Valencia Goelkel wrote, for the occasion of the artist's exhibition at the MAMBO, that her established artistic language conveyed "nothing 'feminine'" in her use of materials.[55] The author further argued that the *Camas* series constituted a sophisticated joke generating discomfort and nervous laughter among its viewers, ultimately disguising "in a chaste manner, the unexpected shame of the motor and metals."[56] Contrary to Valencia Goelkel, I would argue that *El bebé de Rosemary*, alongside its exhibition as part of the *Salón de Arte Brujo,* had no hints of chastity in its denial of bodily consumption. Quite the opposite, the piece offers a clear commentary on the commodification as well as the lack of self-representation of women and their bodies. In the context of the Congress, the piece's reflection grappled with the transgression of the erotic and the spiritually abject as they intersected in the public space of a gallery setting. This series, *El bebé de Rosemary* included, sacrificed direct referentiality to women's bodies to highlight how a male-driven cultural sphere—as it was the case with the works by Tejada and Durier—tended to reduce the feminine other to consumable symbols of conspicuous fashion through the lens of the male gaze.

[55] Hernando Valencia Goelkel, *Feliza Bursztyn* (Bogotá, Colombia: Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá, 1974).
[56] Ibidem.

El bebé de Rosemary, therefore, references the myth of the witch who willingly gives life to the devil's offspring, while also offering a poignant commentary on the female body violated by forces out of its own control. In doing so, the installation can be read alongside Obregón's *Aquelarre*—the Spanish term for coven—an ink drawing the artist created and dedicated to art critic Juan Cobo Borda, at the time Guerrero's husband, before designing the poster for the Congress (Fig.1.18). In this piece, Obregón envisions a more visceral scene than the poster's erotic dance between witches and the devil, instead depicting a brutal birthing moment in which a male goat is violently expelled from the body of a supine woman. The intensity of the scene is heightened by the rapid strokes outlining the woman's head and raised arms, suggesting that her entire body is being dragged across the floor as she gives birth to what is presumably the spawn of the devil. While employing diametrically opposed visual strategies in their engagement with the female body, Bursztyn and Obregón draw from popular culture references to witchcraft to underscore the dual position of women within the plural histories of this non-hegemonic belief system. Their works simultaneously highlight conditions of subjugation and marginalization while evoking experiences of liberation, rapture, and ecstasy—rejecting the commodification of the corporeal through concealment and symbolic abjection. These artistic imaginings resonate with Gómez Valderrama's writings on the historical negotiations surrounding witchcraft during colonial times, as well as with González Restrepo's vision of the Congress as an event of multifaceted and contradictory proportions.

Aquelarre, furthemore, represents a thematic continuation of one of Obregón's most noted artworks, *La Violencia*, an oil on canvas painted in 1962, in which the artist fuses the body of a murdered pregnant woman with the topography of the Andes mountain range. The composition calls attention disproportionate impact that the Colombian armed conflict had on

women's bodies during the second half of the XX century, highlighting, at the same time, the disputed territorial claims of the guerrilla warfare in the conflation of a woman's body with the land. I further contend that Bursztyn's *El bebé de Rosemary* can be understood in tandem with Obregón's artworks from the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in its engagement with alternative spiritualities as a vehicle to communicate deeply seated sociopolitical concerns in the immediacy of her local context. The installation, therefore, negates the female body as a site of consumption and one where warfare is also enacted in Colombia's rural areas. This obscuring visual strategy precedes an indexical impulse that would become paradigmatic of Colombian art in later years. Indeed, as art historian Margarita Malagón-Kurka argues, the appearance of the indexical as a visual strategy in 1990s Colombia sought to describe the emotional and psychological impact of warfare, superseding the graphic exploitation of violence.[57] Because of this indexical proposition*, El bebé de Rosemary* questioned gender-based and sociopolitical issues of its time through a spiritual purview, while also prefiguring future artistic developments of contemporary Colombian art.

In addition to Obregón, the three artists discussed within the context of the *Salón de Arte Brujo*—Tejada, Durier, and Bursztyn—illustrate, above all, the paradoxical and capacious nature of the Congress as a spiritually promiscuous event. Visited by thousands, the *Salón de Arte Brujo* used its mediatized platform and open-ended curatorial purview to deliver, perhaps unknowingly, an interspiritual message of social openness and inclusion. Thes pieces discussed, moreover, allow us to understand the way in which spiritual considerations can permeate our understanding of critical cultural shifts, such as a generational change in fashion, the rise of

[57] See María Margarita Malagón-Kurka, *Arte como presencia indéxica: la obra de artistas colombianos en tiempos de violencia: Beatriz González, Óscar Muñoz y Doris Salcedo en la década de los noventa* (Bogotá, Colombia: Universidad de los Andes, 2010).

second-wave feminism, and the human struggles resulting from the expansion of the armed conflict nationally. Though a modest selection of the massive exhibition, the artists discussed in this section highlight how their engagement with iconicity and iconoclasm was rooted in a non-hegemonic spiritual purview, ultimately developing a sacralizing and desacralizing repertoire. By proposing a less hierarchical model, moreover, the exhibition shifted away from entrenched art historical discussions establishing hierarchies between artistic movements and styles, particularly in the modern-era tensions between figuration and abstraction. While some of the artworks discussed in this section reproduce marginalizing aesthetics in relation to women's bodies, their unique thematic approach embracing a transgressive spiritual position broadly challenged the prevalence of Catholicism and conservatism in Colombian culture.

Far from being an isolated phenomenon in Colombia, the Congress' exhibition and associated programming demonstrated the potential for transnational interconnections fostered by the rise of the countercultural movement across the hemisphere. In Latin America and the Caribbean, this movement contributed to the increased visibility of long-repressed Afro-Diasporic and Indigenous cultural and spiritual traditions while also encouraging the exploration of Western and Eastern spiritual practices. A striking example of this was Galerie Nader's Haitian art exhibition within the *Salón de Arte Brujo*, which presented works by prominent figures of modern and contemporary Haitian art through its ongoing engagement with the culturally rich, racially diverse, and ever evolving Vodou tradition.

1.2 Vodou Art in Bogotá: *Nader's Haïti* Exhibition

The participation of a large delegation of Haitian scholars and dancers, alongside a gallery-organized art exhibition, was central to the programming that González Restrepo

envisioned for the Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería. This unprecedented binational exchange in Colombian history was made possible through González Restrepo's efforts to secure the presence of professionals who demonstrated how Vodou beliefs permeate Haitian history, culture, and everyday life. The presentations featured a wide range of approaches centering on Vodou as a hybrid spiritual system: historical and sociopolitical panels, ritualistic and performative practices, and an exhibition featuring the work of self-taught painters and sculptors. While controversially playing with exoticizing tropes and recalling racialized power dynamics, the Haitian delegation's presence in the Congress sought to demystify the historical portrayal of Vodou as an evil practice, relying, I contend, on a decolonial and simultaneously spectacularizing strategy of displaying otherness. A first attempt to showcase the value of Haitian spirituality in Colombia, the delegation's participation in the Congress, in line with the ethos of the event and the nature of witchcraft as described by Gómez Valderrama, was as revelatory as it was contradictory. The Haitian participation reflects broader cultural trends of the 1970s aimed at fostering appreciation for Afro-Diasporic heritages in Colombia through the lens of a vindication of witchcraft as a cultural practice, aligning with and expanding similar efforts across the Americas. Examining its reception adds nuance to the histories of countercultural movements in the region, which, as the Congress exemplifies, embraced a spiritually promiscuous ethos. This position sought to bring diverse belief systems together as a form of sociocultural resistance, building bridges between marginalized groups.

In collaboration with the Colombian ambassador to Haiti, Lácides Moreno Blanco and the banker Eduardo Nieto Calderón and diplomat Clara de Ponce de León (née Nieto Calderón), González negotiated and secured the participation of the Haitian delegation by corresponding with anthropologist Jean Baptiste Romain. At the time the Chair of the École d'Ethnologie and

Director of the Centre de Recherche en Sciences Humaines et Sociales of l'Université d'État d'Haïti, Romain confirmed by July of 1975, that the Haitian delegation would be composed by scholars Gerson Alexis, Max Benoit, Joseph-Mompoint Mondésir, and Jeanne Philippe.[58] In the ends, the archival documents seem to suggest that Alexis, Benoit, and Philippe did not make it to the event. Additionally, the Haitian scholar invited as part of the delegation the participation of Les Ballets Bacoulou d'Haïti, a dance group directed by Haitian choreographer Odette Latour Wiener, stating a total headcount of eighteen dancers. According to Moreno Blanco, the delegation had also offered to bring a selection of paintings and ritualistic objects of Vodou ceremonies, which Romain later confirmed with the participation of the Galerie Nader, directed by its founder Georges S. Naer, from Port-au-Prince.[59] These artworks, as stated by Moreno Blanco to the then Minister of Foreign Affairs in Colombia, Indalecio Liévano Aguirre, would resemble those exhibited by Haitian delegates in Dakar years prior.[60] Most likely referencing the participation of Haiti in the First World Festival of Black Arts from 1966, Moreno Blanco's highlights Colombia's investment, as a country, in fostering diplomatic connections with African or Afro-Diasporic cultural movements across continents, whether Africa or Latin America.

Coetaneous to the participation of Haiti in the Senegalese gathering was the foundation of the Galerie Nader in Port-au-Prince. With a special focus on self-taught Haitian painters and sculptors, the gallery is, up to this day, one of the most significant institutions contributing to the establishment of a discourse around Haitian art and Vodou practices. By the 1970s, the commercialization of Haitian self-taught or naïf artists was widespread, leading to the assiduous

[58] Jean Baptiste Romain to Lácides Moreno Blanco, July 10, 1975, in Simón González Restrepo Archive, Corporación Otraparte, Envigado.
[59] Lácides Moreno Blanco to Eduardo Nieto Calderón, June 11, 1975, in Simón González Restrepo Archive, Corporación Otraparte, Envigado.
[60] Lácides Moreno Blanco to Indalecio Liévano Aguirre, June 10, 1975, in Simón González Restrepo Archive, Corporación Otraparte, Envigado.

reproduction of similar figurative and nature-bound motifs which became characteristic of the so-called primitive school of the Centre d'Art.[61] One notable reason for this occurrence, art historian Peter L. Haffner contends, was the increased flow of tourists to Haiti in the early 1970s following the initial "Golden Age" of tourism of the 1940s and 1950s. Despite the continued dictatorial regime of the Duvalier family, the Haitian art market peaked during this time as foreign visitors overflowed into the Caribbean nation.[62] A number of pictures of the Galerie Nader's exhibition brought to Bogotá are indicative of the modest yet comprehensive scope of objects included in the show (Fig. 1.19-1.20). Capturing a fragmented view of the installation organized by the gallery, these images show figurative paintings and iron sculptural works as they fill a rectangular drywall surface that also reads "Nader's Art Gallery Haïti." In front of this installation, a soaring centerpiece catches the attention of passersby who look intently, perhaps with apprehension, at the floor drawings made with white powder on the floor. Referring to *vèvè* or inscriptions used in ceremonial Vodou settings to call the presence and power of *lwas* or spirits, these inscriptions enacted a sacred and altar-like character within the gallery exhibition space. In the middle of the installation, a *potomitan,* a symbol of the connection between the earthly and spiritual domains, was placed with lit candles alongside the inscription "Nader's Haïti." As portrayed in the images, the curiosity that the exhibition sparked responded to the novelty of its display.

For Guerrero, curator of the *Salón de Arte Brujo*, the exposure to the art featured in Galerie Nader's exhibition as well as the Vodou rituals performed was eye-opening for an audience with little knowledge of Haitian culture.[63] A closer look at the archival photographs

[61] Gérald Alexis, *Peintres Haïtiens* (Paris, France: Cercle d'art, 2000), 224-225.
[62] Peter Haffner, "Tourism and Connoisseurship in the Collection Histories of Haitian Art in the United States," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History*, accessed March 27, 2025, 8.
[63] María Teresa Guerrero, interview by Julián Sánchez González, August 26, 2018.

reveal what kinds of artists and themes visitors were able to see. The upper left corner of the salon-style drywall layout featured a selection of five paintings by artist Lyonel Laurenceau, a leading figure of symbolic expressionism in the Caribbean and one of the most established trained painters of Haitian modern art. The acrylic on canvas *Rara* (Fig. 1.21) depicts a scene where two men donning traditional straw hats are fused with a bamboo wind instrument, a swirling snake, a goatskin *petwo* drum, and geometric figures resembling *vèvè.* This painting references the Rara annual festival in Haiti, a carnival-like celebration resulting from the creolization of Indigenous, Afro-Diasporic, and Western cultural traits.[64] This piece illustrates, on the one hand, the long-standing interest of artists in Haiti, as well as the Caribbean at large, to engage with local celebrations and spiritual traditions—at times through an ethnographic lens.[65] Further, Laurenceau's *Rara* reasserts the presence of a regional ethos of spiritual crosspollination or hybridity which was germane to González Restrepo's vision of the Congress. This is relevant to note as the latter had numerous contacts with the Caribbean islands of San Andrés and Providencia before the planning of the Congress. This sustained relationship with the archipelago and its inhabitants exposed González Restrepo to the Afro-diasporic herbalist traditions of the Caribbean—which are locally known in San Andrés and Providencia as Obeah, witchcraft, or black magic—encouraged his interest in building the south-to-south conversations defining much of the culture-shifting goals of the event as a spiritually promiscuous gathering.

The presence of metal sculptures as part of the exhibition is also indicative of a specific trend in Haitian art, rising at the beginning of the twentieth century and embracing Vodou as a

[64] Elizabeth McAllister, *Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and Its Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 3-4.
[65] Gerald Alexis, "The Caribbean in the Hour of Haiti," in Deborah Cullen and Elvis Fuentes, eds., *Caribbean: Art at the Crossroads of the World* (New York, NY: El Museo del Barrio, 2012), 118-121.

source for creative expression.[66] The sculptures hung on the lower section of the walls of "Nader's Haïti" reminisce the style of artists from the town of Croix-de-Bouquets and, more specifically, that of the renowned sculptor Georges Liautaud.[67] These artists became more prominent as symbols of Haitian art and national identity in the mid-twentieth century by virtue of the work of American entrepreneurs Dewitt Peters and Selden Rodman, founders of the Centre d'Art, in the 1940s.[68] The piece on the lower left of the photograph depicts a crucifixion scene—a common trope in Liautaud's *oeuvre* as seen in similar pieces from his mid-century production. Conflating Catholic imagery with the ceremonial drawings of *vèvè* in the Vodou tradition through the symbol of the cross, both pieces are reflective of the creolized nature of spiritual practices in the Caribbean nation. Iconographically, the works tend to fuse in one single being the figure of the historical Christian prophet with various *lwas* such as Papa Legba, spirit of the crossroads, or Baron Samedi, spirit of the dead. Championed by the Centre d'Art, Liautaud, as well as other now towering figures of Haitian art such as Hector Hyppolite, are examples of how the rise of self-taught art in Haiti attempted to subvert the established categories defining the divide between "civilized" and "primitive" art, while also fixing local art making practices under the umbrella term "naïf."[69] Therefore, the inclusion of "naïf art" as part of the exhibition made visible the complex art historical development of Haitian art—one of the most conspicuous modern art narratives of the region. As part of the Congress at large, the exhibition resonated with González Restrepo's interests in softening the rigid hierarchies

[66] Carlo A. Célius, *Création plastique d'Haïti: art et culture visuelle en colonie et postcolonie* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2023), 5.
[67] Georges T. Nader, interview by Julián Sánchez González, September 15, 2021.
[68] Luis M. Castañeda, "Island Culture Wars: Selden Rodman and Haiti," *Art Journal,* 73, no. 3 (2014): 56.
[69] Carlo A. Célius, "La création plastique e le tournant ethnologique en Haïti," *Gradhiva. Revue d'anthropologie et d'histoire des arts* 1 (2005), 8.

between high and low art and aesthetics, particularly in a country like Colombia which privileged the work of modern artists invested in formalist explorations.

The championing and conflating of Vodou practices with the work of self-taught artists happened, as art historian Carlo A. Célius argues, in tandem with the development of the intellectual contributions proposed by the Haitian school of ethnology. While not directly addressing the visual arts during the 1940s, these scholarly pursuits were concerned with theorizing local views on concepts like the "primitive" and the "folkloric." These propositions had an impact on how self-taught art was later reframed as essential to the development of a collective identity for the nation-state, influencing emerging artistic networks and positioning Vodou beliefs as a pivotal cultural practice to be reclaimed.[70] Even when opening the space for analyzing a rising trend that equated "naïf" art as Haitian art, however, ethnographic studies remained distanced from discussing specific artistic practices, according to Célius, even as late as the 1970s. For the author, Jean-Baptiste Romain's *Africanismes haïtiens. Compilations et notes*, one of the Haitian ethnographer's most significant publications, is a clear indication of such apprehension.[71] *Africanismes* discussed art in Romain's home country as partially embodied by African roots, an aspect readily seen in the utilitarian spirit of religiosity which was conveyed in sculptures, paintings, and *vèvè* drawings alike.[72] Romain's thinking confines Haitian art's sphere of influence to the ritualistic and ceremonial, thus leaving behind any grounding discussions on biographical or art historical data. His scholarly interests are evident in the organization of the delegation traveling to the Congress, as Romain oversaw the logistics to secure the participation of the dance troupe performing Vodou public rituals.

[70] Ibid., 9-16.
[71] Ibid., 18.
[72] Ibid., 19.

The Haitian presence in the Congress corroborates, for the most part, Célius' assessment of the work of Haitian ethnologists and sociologists in the 1970s. On the one hand, Romain's and his colleague Joseph-Mompoint Mondésir's scholarly presentations, titled respectively "General Summary of Haitian Vodou" and "The Magical Nature of Vodou," evidenced an absence of the visual arts as an integral expression of Vodou as a religious system.[73] Romain, for instance, addresses themes related to Vodou's philosophy, social structure, spiritual pantheon, and moral precepts, only to briefly mention symbols such as the *potomitan* and the *Guinea*—a rhomboid-shaped figure symbolizing "the totality of Black Africa"[74] (Figs. 1.22-1.23). Similarly, Mondésir made a case in his presentation for the rites of passage of this religion, including instances of spirit possession, disease, and curative treatments with a special emphasis on the figure of the *zombi* or *zonbi* as a type of living dead or "robot in service of a Vodou priest."[75] Both scholars presented their research with a clear interest in giving an overview of the sociological aspects of the Haitian spiritual system, instead of delving into the particularities of the iconography or imagery culturally associated with it. Although involved in bringing Georges S. Nader's gallery to Bogotá, Romain, as well as Mondésir, sidestepped in their presentations any mention of the Haitian art show or the arts of Haiti as permeated by the already established influence of self-taught art and aesthetics. It is clear, from these proceedings, that both scholars, perhaps because of their disciplinary affiliation, discussed Haitian spirituality through the lens of reigning sociocultural modes of behavior and mythologies, placing specific artmakers in a secondary

[73] Jean Baptiste Romain, "Resumen general del Vodou haitiano," August 25, 1975. Proceedings of the Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería, Simón González Restrepo's archives, Corporación Otraparte, Envigado.
[74] Ibidem. Interestingly, Catholic priest Francisco Montoya Arango introduced Romain's lecture and worked closely with Simón González Restrepo in organizing the Congress proceedings. In 1972, Montoya Arango, in collaboration with the Misioneros de Yarumal Congregation, founded the Museo Etnográfico Miguel Ángel Builes in Medellín.
[75] Joseph-Mompoint Mondésir. "Los aspectos mágicos del Vodou," August 25, 1975. Proceedings of the Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería, Simón González Restrepo's archives, Corporación Otraparte, Envigado.

space. The tension, therefore, between Romain's interest in featuring the Port-au-Prince-based gallery and the contents of his intervention could be indicative of social connections unaccounted for in scholarly narratives, presenting an area of opportunity for further research.

It is worth mentioning, however, that the Congress' archival conference records include an address by Haitian poet Serge Saint-Jean which was not included in the official programming of the event. In the Congress' memoirs, Saint-Jean—at the time already an author of publications on artists such as Hector Hyppolite—is placed side-by-side with the group of visiting Haitian ethnographers with his talk titled "Art, Witchcraft, and Vodou." In his presentation, the poet declares having been assigned with the task of discussing the selection of Haitian artists brought by the Galerie Nader to Bogotá, an undertaking that Romain and Mondésir did not engage with. For the author, art, including that of Haitian origin, could only be discussed as a type of witchcraft, for it requires an act of "substitution," a term he indebted to his reading of art historian Ernst Gombrich. By conflating the creative act with the alchemical pursuit, Saint-Jean argues that artists and sorcerers both live in worlds traversed by transmutation, and that this sensibility extends to witchcraft as an art form rooted in prehistoric times. More interesting is the fact that, for Saint-Jean, Vodou practices, which are spiritually syncretic in nature, allowed the proliferation of magic and witchcraft lore as they adopted what he denotes as the "terrors of the Middle Ages" such as *zombi* or bogeymen.[76] Saint-Jean's interest in highlighting the oppositional character of Vodou as a spiritual system that values what has traditionally haunted the Western imagination was, precisely, that which the Congress attempted to explore as a countercultural event. It is no wonder, then, that this intervention was highly praised by González Restrepo in the markings he made in his personal copy of the event's memoirs.

[76] Serge Saint-Jean, "Arte, brujería y Vodou," August 25, 1975. Proceedings of the Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería, Simón González Restrepo's archives, Corporación Otraparte, Envigado.

Unlike Romain and Mondésir, Saint-Jean addressed specific artists such as Lyonel Laurenceau, Wilson Bigaud, Sisson Blanchard, or Diudenné Cédor, commenting on their brilliance in fusing modern aesthetics with the ancestral knowledge of masters of Vodou and witchcraft. He also highlighted Jacques-Enguerrand Gourgue as an artist who creates a "synthesis of black magic practices typical of the Pétro rite," and Rose-Marie Desruisseaux who, he contends, is known for "fixing on canvas the terrifying pleasures and voluptuous cruelties of Erzulie Danton." Saint-Jean added a final thought presenting the art exhibited in the Congress as a reminder that witchcraft practices are not mysterious and far-fetched, but rather part of everyday life and available for those who are willing to embark on their search.[77] Therefore, the poet's remarks, and the panel of the Haitian delegation as a whole, attest to how varied was the response of scholarly thought to the popular cultures of Haiti and self-taught art during the 1970s. His presentation foregrounded the development of art historical research dedicated to the study of Haitian self-taught art, which grew exponentially in subsequent decades.[78] The simultaneous presence of these two seemingly disarticulated perspectives as part of the same panel, however, speaks of the Congress' interest in holding an open discussion around the value of Afro-Diasporic thought and arts in a moment of important cultural shifts related to the countercultural movement. The entire panel's joint efforts to work from different fronts against the historical mystification and demonization of Haitian Vodou—and of self-taught art in particular—deeply resonates with the various spiritual revindications sought after by the Congress as well as postcolonial social movements across the region.

[77] Ibidem.
[78] See Donald Cosentino, *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995).

Further archival materials of the exhibition *Nader's Haïti* show visitors' engagement as well as the novelty that showcasing Haitian artists represented for the local public. A case in point is the photograph of a woman carefully taking the picture of a painting representing an everyday communal action or scene in a rural space (Fig. 1.24). The piece being photographed is flanked by two figurative paintings and an elongated wooden bust in its lower register. The style of the former two closely resembles the prominent artworks of the Obin family from Cap-Haïtien, a historically significant port in the transatlantic slave trade in the Caribbean. Composed by Philomé and his sons Antoine, Télémaque, and Gérard, among many other family members, the Obin family gained national and international prominence, like many other artists from the mid-twentieth century, via their affiliation with the Centre d'Art.[79] Although varying in their individual styles, the Obins shared a common interest in painting angular architecture, the use of bold colors and planes, and a schematic rendition of perspective. With a distinct approach to detail in their compositions, the younger generation—Antoine, for instance—focused on creating less saturated landscapes. Thus, the painting in the photograph could be attributed to Antoine, whom had already made a name for himself as a self-taught painter by the time of the Congress. Similarly, the solid colors and sinuous lines of the fragment of the painting on the left of the Obin piece notoriously resembles in style the work of Paul Nemours, a Haitian artist who had also gained a growing recognition during this time. His depictions of roosters, alternatively known in Haitian creole as *kok kalité*, are representative of cockfighting practices as well as Vodou ceremonies (Figs. 1.25-1.26). The Obins and Nemours were artists who kept holding a prominent position within the histories of self-taught art in the Caribbean nation. The latter, moreover, is of particular interest for this section as his work articulates what Saint-Jean

[79] LeGrace Benson, "Obin, Philomé," *Oxford African American Studies Center*, May 31, 2017. URL: https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-74683

described in his intervention as the relevance, or for the purposes of this research sacralizing, aspect of Vodou practices in everyday life.

While identifying these artists remain important for questions of authorship and recognition, it is more pertinent here to look at how works by the Obins and Nemours, as well as other Haitian artists included in *Nader's Haïti,* furthered an appreciation for Vodou spirituality and self-taught art and aesthetics in Colombia. Framed by the interest in the spiritually promiscuous purview underpinning the Congress, Nader's exhibition foregrounded the work of mostly self-taught artists in a highly publicized platform in Bogotá. The nation-based approach to the exhibition remains trailblazing for Colombian art history, particularly when considering previous endeavors exhibiting the work of "popular artists," as they are commonly referred to, in the country. The Bienal Iberoamericana de Pintura Coltejer in Medellín during the late 1960s and early 1970s is a case in point, for it tackled through a panoramic, regional perspective the work of established artists in Latin America and the Caribbean, both educated and self-taught. The Biennial marked the first significant instance of an international artistic dialogue in Colombia, positioning Medellín as a central hub for discussions on contemporary Latin American art.[80] According to Rodrigo Uribe Echavarría, President of the Coltejer company, the first three iterations of the Biennial—1968, 1970, and 1972—sought to foster a heightened cultural self-affirmation and consciousness for Colombia and Latin America as a region.[81] Curatorially led its first two iterations by Leonel Estrada and for its third iteration by Jasia Reichard, Gillo Dorfiles and Brian O'Doughert, the event grew exponentially in numbers every year, including 60, 120,

[80] Alexa Halaby, "Bienales de Arte Coltejer 1968, 70 y 72: seis años de revolución cultural en Medellín, Colombia." Guggenheim UBS Map Latin America, September 2, 2015. URL: https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/map/bienales-de-arte-coltejer-1968-70-y-72-seis-anos-de-revolucion-cultural-en-medellin-colombia#_edn1

[81] Rodrigo Uribe Echavarría, "¿Por qué Coltejer se inquieta por el arte?" in *Tercera Bienal de Arte Coltejer* (Medellín, Colombia: Coltejer, 1972), 7-8.

and 220 artists, respectively.[82] Its open-ended thematic scope and artists selection seemed to foreground, at least partially, ideas that would be further explored during the days of the Congress.

The second edition of the Biennial brought to the exhibition grounds an approximate of 170.000 visitors, achieving, according to Estrada, "a means of communication between cultural zones that are not aware of each other." Having as grounds the museum of the Universidad de Antioquia, the show, both educational and recreational, "alternated the static and the dynamic, the world of the mathematical and the intellect with that of feeling, dreams, and magic." In addition to an expansive selection of artists, the Biennale opened its space for the participation of the famed Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAyC) from Buenos Aires, which presented an exhibition on "Art and Cybernetics."[83] Altogether, the artistic styles included as part of the Biennale went from geometric abstraction and kinetic art, to informalism and the first explorations in electronic art, among others. In its expansiveness, then, the exhibition sampled the work of self-taught and trained artists, including, for instance, one piece from the women-object series by Hernando Tejada and documentation of Argentine artist Lea Lublin's public performances. Further, the Biennial featured works by other self-taught artists, including the Jamaican Osmond Watson, the Honduran José Antonio Velázquez, the Costarican Enrique Hidalgo, and the Haitians Montas Antoine, Préfète Duffaut, and Sénèque Obin. While a commendable selection, this last category of artists, however, was relegated to a superficial mention in the final pages of the exhibition catalog, denoting their importance and artistic contributions as secondary.

[82] Halaby, "Bienales de Arte Coltejer."
[83] Leonel Estrada, "II Bienal de Arte realizada en Medellín" in *Segunda Bienal de Arte Coltejer* (Medellín, Colombia: Coltejer, 1972), 3.

The subtle yet telling distinction between the works of Sénèque Obin and Velásquez in the Biennale underscored the significance of everyday scenes—markets, streets, and daily life—depicted by self-taught artists during the 1970s. The Biennale and the *Salón de Arte Brujo* were not isolated instances of a growing appreciation for the figurative art of so-called outsider creatives, as the dominance of abstraction in the region was already waning by the decade's end.[84] The reappraisal of artists working at the margins of traditional art circuits had, in fact, been championed by Cuban art critic José Gómez-Sicre in his role as Chief of Visual Arts at the Organization of American States in Washington, D.C., from 1948 to 1976.[85] Positioning self-taught artists as representatives of a distinctly Latin American and Caribbean identity, Gómez-Sicre developed a sustained discourse—and an associated major collection—that established an aesthetic paradigm later echoed in exhibitions across the region.[86] Although at times essentializing and instrumentalizing, Gómez-Sicre's advocacy for underrepresented artistic expressions was significant in that it, perhaps unwittingly, laid the groundwork for open discussions on popular culture and spiritual practices within art exhibition spaces. The exhibitions *Nader's Haïti* and *Mundos extraños* by Ecuadorian self-taught painter Dimitri Borja—both presented within the context of the *Salón de Arte Brujo* despite limited documentation—serve as examples in Colombia of how this conversation was publicly realized.

While not necessarily looking into spiritual motifs as related to self-taught artists, the second iteration of the Bienal de Coltejer could be understood as a precursor of González and Guerrero's *Salón de Arte Brujo* and its associated art show, *Nader's Haïti*. The Biennial's all-

[84] Fabiana Serviddio, *Arte y crítica en Latinoamérica durante los años sesenta* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Miño y Dávila Editores, 2012), 54.
[85] Claire Fox, "The Panamerican Union Visual Arts Programs and Latin American Art," in *Making Art Panamerican. Cultural Policy and the Cold War* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 7; José Gómez-Sicre, "From Latin America," Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1957.
[86] José Gómez-Sicre, "Al lector," *Boletín de Artes Visuales,* January 1963, 3–4; José Gómez-Sicre, "Al lector," *Boletín de Artes Visuales*, October 1959, 3–4.

encompassing nature featuring reckonings on "magic" and popular culture speaks of an awareness of the importance of lived religion and spirituality as a social phenomenon in Latin America and the Caribbean. Recent sociological studies have understood this occurrence as a byproduct of a type of "enchanted modernity" that developed endemically in the region, calling attention to the ways in which cultural hybridization played a role in the diversification of belief systems.[87] Further, these studies posit that the historical development of the various regional spiritualities constitute "personalized convictions or constructions that help people to make sense of daily life not just dogmas that are institutionally imposed."[88] The Biennial, then, encapsulated an interest in breaking down, even if not completely, a narrative of separation between so-called high and low art. If we take the thesis on a differentiated spiritual modernity in Latin America and the Caribbean to be true, then, the Bienal de Coltejer, and by extension the art shows of the Congress, can be seen as exposing the crossroads of two cultural trends in the region. One concerned with a countercultural exploration on themes related to alternative spiritualities, and another focused on the recognition of a longstanding cultural hybridization process that historically grounds a newfound interest of the former. Acknowledging these cultural subtleties is significant, for it gives nuance and specificity to the artistic endeavors of the 1970s contending with spiritual matters, allowing the emergence of the term "spiritual promiscuity" as a coalition building strategy that expanded on previous processes of spiritual and religious.

Taking these ideas as a point of departure for further analysis of the artistic components of the Congress allows us to see these exhibitions as more than a one-time historical oddity, despite the fact that the event did not have subsequent iterations. Instead, this context locates the

[87] Gustavo Morello, S.J., *Lived Religion in Latin America: An Enchanted Modernity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), 317.
[88] Ibid., 316.

exhibition *Nader's Haïti*, and the overall idea behind the *Salón de Arte Brujo,* within a generative field of historical changes germane to Latin America and the Caribbean. This section, therefore, reveals the simultaneous presence in the Congress of a rising defense of the arts of the Black Atlantic Diaspora, particularly those of the Caribbean, alongside an exploration of alternative spiritual practices and an increasingly solidified regional appreciation for self-taught art and aesthetics. These insights conceptually bridge the artistic moving parts of the Congress together, positing their unique scope as a testament of a shared interest which explains its popularity and controversial reception. Further, the consideration of Haitian sociological thought and Gómez-Sicre's Pan-American purview as influences, exceeds an interpretation of the sociocultural phenomenon spurred by the Congress as derivative or repetitious of parallel spiritual explorations in Europe and the United States. Therefore, it is possible to argue that the spiritually promiscuous emphasis in which the Congress presented its art shows spurred a greater and timely exposure of underrepresented artists in a large-scale public platform.

1.3 Staged Blackness: Afro-Diasporic Public Ritual Performances

Following González Restrepo's invitation, Delia Zapata Olivella took on the role of curator for a series of performances of religious dances and rituals at the end of each day of the Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería. In addition to carnival dances from the Colombian Caribbean coast, the presentations included displays of Vodou, Candomblé, María Lionza, and Lumbalú ceremonial rituals. Together, they highlighted the importance that regional spiritual systems had in González Restrepo's attempt to reframe belief systems historically associated with witchcraft as an evil or demonic practice. Much like the art exhibitions featured in the Congress, the exposure of these dances and rituals presents us today with a series of

controversial issues, particularly those related to the performativity of race and otherness as a political or nationalistic endeavor, as well as claims of authenticity in staged public ritual performances. Mirroring the Congress' south-south spiritually promiscuous interests, these presentations do not exist in a vacuum, connecting, instead, to various movements reclaiming social justice and racial equality throughout the 1960s and 1970s in the Americas and the Caribbean. To consider these performances in relation to each other, however, also brings to the forefront questions of cultural agency, self-representation, and the otherization of difference, which become particularly poignant when discussing Afro-diasporic spiritual traditions from these decades. The presentations of traditions from Haiti, Brazil, and Colombian are indicative of such layered implications, serving as a useful point of departure for expanding our understanding of these performative practices from a regional perspective.

During the opening of the Congress on August 24, 1975, John Bryson, a noted photojournalist affiliated to *LIFE Magazine,* captured an image of a group of red-clad Haitian performers dancing around a *potomitan* located at centerstage (Fig. 1.27). Their attire included pants, skirts, and headbands—referencing the traditional dress used for Ibo and Nago dances in Haiti—and their accessories notoriously included horns bearing flames. Having its roots in the culture of the Igbo from West Africa, these dances commemorate Black Haitians' liberty from enslavement through wide limbic gestures, which are reinforced through frontal motions resembling positions of attack and defense. Conversely, the use of fire and red clothing also reminisces of Haiti's Petwo or Petro dance, dedicated to the eponymous pantheon of *lwa* or spirits, which is thought to be foundational in Vodou's structure and mythology. Further, a second act featured the same group of performers clad in white as they danced around the *potomitan* with slower movements. This group also featured the use of ritualistic objects, such as

Haitian *drapeaux* or flags, and beaded necklaces (Figs. 1.28). This performance recalls the Haitian dance of Yanvalou, a Vodou-associated form of communication with Damballah, a guiding ancestral spirit able to connect peoples across continents.[89] Thus, these dances presented to a largely unspecialized audience two performances which encapsulated central, overarching aspects and beliefs of Haitian Vodou as an Afro-Diasporic religion.

Performed at the Congress by the Les Ballets Bacoulou d'Haïti, these Vodou performances were part of a series of ongoing international tours which the troupe had advanced since its foundation in 1959.[90] Created by Odette Wiener Latour, a hotel industry businesswoman and later nightlife entrepreneur, the troupe soon became one of the international leading voices of a surge of folkloric dance taking place in the Caribbean country since the 1930s. The scholar Dimitri Béchacq underscores that dancing and performing Vodou rituals nationally and internationally became central for the building of a national identity in Haiti.[91] As previously discussed, these forms of artistic expression were initially championed by Haitian ethnographers and sociologists in previous decades, whose work reproduced exoticizing renditions of the popular masses, mostly Black, in the conceptual triangulation of race, Vodou, and Africa in the years 1920-30s.[92] Similar to Célius' assessment of the development of *naïf* painting alongside a local appreciation of Vodou, the case of the ritualistic, performative, and staged Vodou dances came alongside a public interest to counteract anti-superstitious campaigns being advanced since the 30s.[93] The foundation of Wiener's troupe, therefore, was one of the results in the

[89] Celia Weiss Bambara, "Yanvalou's Elliptic Displacements: Staging Spirit Time in the United States," *Journal of Haitian Studies* 15, no. 1/2 (2009), 290-292.
[90] Dimitri Béchacq. "L'ethnologie et les troupes folkloriques haïtiennes. Politique culturelle, tourisme et émigration (1941-1986), in Jhon Picard Byron, ed., *Production du savoir et construction sociale. L'ethnologie en Haïti* (Port-au-Prince, Haiti: Éditions de l'Université d'État d'Haïti; Presses de l'Université Laval, 2014), 145.
[91] Ibid., 122.
[92] Ibid., 125.
[93] Ibid., 128.

development of a government supported cultural policy which sought to improve Haiti's image abroad, presenting Vodou as an exotic, marketable, and consumable cultural product.[94] Making its way through the newly-founded Bureau d'Ethnologie as an intellectual hub, these policies not only benefited the government of Élie Lescot in the 1940s, but also paved the way for Vodou's instrumentalization for political gains during the prolonged dictatorial regime of François Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude during the 1950s and 70s.[95] Although opening a space for a restructuring of the cultural sphere in the country, the presence of the dance collective and other pioneering dance groups were fully inscribed in a Haitian political system still grappling and negotiating the pervasive legacies of colonialism.

Offering classes on "Modern Theatrical Dance," "Haitian Dance," "Drumming," and "Social Dance" as early as 1961 in newspaper advertisements, Les Ballets Bacoulou d'Haïti counted with a roster of regular professors, scholarships, and programming for professional dances at the Hotel Majestic in the Petionville neighborhood of Port-au-Prince.[96] Making their work public through the English-language newspaper *Haitian Sun,* the troupe, in line with Béchacq's thinking, catered their programming to both a local as well as an international audience. Much like the Galerie Nader's participation, their involvement with the Congress was possible through Colombian Ambassador Lácides Moreno Blanco's negotiations with third parties, which in this case included the Haitian Office of Tourism. While it is possible to infer that this public office would have been interested in securing the troupe's participation given that tourism in Haiti was at its highest towards the end of the 1960s, it is worth also pondering Moreno Blanco's own motivations. His letters to González Restrepo and the Nieto Calderón

[94] Ibid., 122- 129.
[95] Ibid., 142.
[96] "Les studios de danse Bacoulou" and "Bacoulou Cabaret Theatre Adds Fun to Entertainment," *Haiti Sun*, October 2, 1961.

siblings were indicative of an interest in "higher concerns that should animate the national spirit" as well as securing the communication of the Congress' "message to humanity," although a mention to an undisclosed payment in dollars it is, indeed, included in a letter sent weeks after the end of the event.[97] For Wiener, as an archival letter attests, Les Ballets Bacoulou d'Haïti's participation in the Congress was part of a larger international operation. She shares with González Restrepo that their Bogotá stint would continue with a six-week stay in France as well as Switzerland. Expressing her gratitude for a joyous and successful trip, Wiener also congratulated González Restrepo for his tenacity in organizing the Congress—a gesture that adds to the cultural relevance of the event for its participants.[98]

Further, Professor Mondésir also shared similar sentiments of appreciation when referencing the Congress in letters to González Restrepo. These archived documents show his positive impression of the event, declaring that its conception and organization was a "complete success" while thanking González Restrepo for "having offered an opportunity to dissipate the mysterious atmosphere surrounding Vodou." The Haitian scholar also described Colombia as a "dream or a fairytale" and Bogotá as a city with a "high intellectual culture," and went as far as declaring González Restrepo as the "most prominent Colombian of the year 1975."[99] Together, Wiener's and Mondésir's letters to González Restrepo speak how participating in the Congress was a memorable feat for the Haitian delegation, furthering a sense of agency to their work in the fields of cultural promotion and sociological research.

[97] Simón González Restrepo to Lácides Moreno Blanco, October. 27, 1975, Simón González Restrepo's archives, Corporación Otraparte, Envigado.
[98] Odette Wiener to Simón González Restrepo, October 15, 1975, Simón González Restrepo's archives, Corporación Otraparte, Envigado.
[99] Joseph-Mompoint Mondésir to Simón González Restrepo, January 13, 1976, Simón González Restrepo's archives, Corporación Otraparte, Envigado.

Expanding on Béchacq's research on the instrumentalization of Vodou dances and performances outside of Haiti during this time, I also contend that Wiener's and Mondésir's letters evidences an interest in building partnerships and reclaiming cultural agency not necessarily ascribed to governmental instrumentalization. While it is true that the Haitian's delegation participation in the Congress could have been used in the service of a larger governmental program solidifying Haiti's heralding of Vodou in the international arena, a dynamic that, as previously discussed, had been put in place by the Bureau d'Ethnologie since the 1940s, it is also worth pondering its involvement as part of the spiritually promiscuous platform the Congress proposed. If seen through the lens of what the Congress attempted to achieve as a countercultural event connecting various spiritual beliefs under a unified exploratory platform of subaltern coalition building, the Haitian delegation's participation gains depth and complexity. Their reckonings of Vodou as a historically rooted cultural practice could be seen, then, as a contribution to a larger, interconnected movement retrieving local cosmogonies from Afro-diasporic, Indigenous, and pagan backgrounds.

The artistic conversation that the "Great Haitian Group," as named by González Restrepo, established with other delegations deserves further analysis, as it highlights the use of performative rituals as a liberatory, yet paradoxical, practice—particularly during the 1970s. A case in point is the Brazilian delegation, which was coordinated by Gessy Gesse, one of the leading figures of the Cinema Novo movement in 1960s and 1970s Brazil, to participate in the Congress. Invited by González Restrepo, Gesse presented the show *Lendas dos Orixás da Bahia*, an hour-long performance featuring Candomblé inspired dances, music, and rituals.[100] Captured in its splendor in Norden's documentary of the Congress, the presentation, which featured ten

[100] "Orixás da Bahia são temas do espetáculo," *Jornal a Tarde*, August 18, 1975.

dancers, included several acts, including solo dances and group performances. According to Gesse, the dances were presented with the approval of the appropriate spiritual denominations and religious groups in Salvador de Bahia and were showcased for the second time in the international arena, being Nancy in France their first destination.[101] Resembling the experience of the Haitian delegation, Gesse's group had been involved in promoting Afro-Brazilian culture nationally and internationally, making it as one of its top priorities the demystification and estrangement attached to these beliefs systems by outsiders. This comes at a key moment where, as scholar Roberto Conduru has argued, Afro-Brazilian material culture had been increasingly decriminalized. This shift is best seen in the fact that ritualistic objects previously seized by the Brazilian police for being considered demonic were finding a newly found appreciation, especially since the 1960s, in the eyes of the general public and museum collections.[102]

Gesse's troupe's presentation had as its central figures Iansã or Oya, orixá of winds and storms; Oxum, orixá of vanity and water (Fig. 1.29); and Xangô, orixá of justice, as part of a narrative which portrayed the competition of the first two for the love of the latter.[103] The presentation further featured Omulu or Babalú Ayé, orixá of smallpox and diseases (Fig. 1.30), and Iemanjá, orixá of femininity and love, in order to narrate the tragedy of their son-mother relationship, which culminated in the former's eventual abandonment by his maker. For Gessy, these performances were "not necessarily a Candomblé ritual but, rather, a choreography of the beliefs from Bahia," a description of their work that notably resonates with the aims set by Wiener's troupe.[104] The actress and choreographer also acknowledged that their participation in

[101] Ibidem.
[102] Roberto Conduru, "Esse "troço" é arte? Religiões afro-brasileiras, cultura material e crítica," *MODOS. Revista de História da Arte* 3, no. 3 (2019), 98-114.
[103] "Orixás da Bahia são temas do espetáculo."
[104] "Bruxaria, Baianos Abafaram no Festival," *Jornal da Bahia,* October 9, 1975.

the Congress would allow them to "exchange ideas with the most varied mystics" and highlight "(...) the connection between Witchcraft and Candomblé, which can't be made public." Similar to the Haitian delegation's experience, Gesse asserts, more importantly, that the event would help people recognize that "the Witch possesses a force and knowledge that is not only maleficent but also beneficial."[105] The role of portraying Afro-Brazilian myths, in this case, served more than just performing hitherto unseen cultures in an international setting, but rather to call attention to a broader decolonizing impulse which had demonized marginalized groups in society, such as women and Afro-diasporic communities. Gesse's curiosity for interconnectedness across spiritual denominations is precisely what this study defines as a spiritually promiscuous ethos.

In press accounts of the Congress, the figure of Luiza Marques Souza also comes to the fore as essential to the visit undertaken by the Brazilian delegation. The noted Brazilian folklorist was invited by González Restrepo and Norma Ramos—Brazilian cultural attaché in Bogotá at the time—to select her country's troupe to present at the Congress, bringing the voice of an expert with stakes in the assessment of the event as a whole.[106] Her opinions are indicative of the broader controversies and debates that González Restrepo's event sparked in the public opinion. For Marques, for instance, it was a disappointment that the Brazilian press covering the Congress "had not been concerned with the scientific part, which had been widely discussed through conferences of renowned figures," and that "it was sad to verify that people were more interested in buying souvenirs (*bijuteria)* than in actually deepening their knowledge of the occult sciences."[107] Interestingly, Marques further comments that "God is a matter of attitude," as "He

[105] "Orixás da Bahia são temas do espetáculo."
[106] "Baiana vai ao Congresso de Bruxaria, em Bogotá," *Jornal Tribuna da Bahia*, July 29, 1975; "Poucos entenderam sentido do Congresso da Bruxaria," *Jornal Diário de Notícias*, September 14, 1975.
[107] "Poucos entenderam sentido do Congresso da Bruxaria."

can be in Catholicism as well as in Umbanda, Esotericism or any other sect, in any part of the world. Inside of oneself."[108] In this respect, both Gesse and Marquez point in one direction through their declarations to the press, which is resonant with González Restrepo's aims for the Congress, namely to dismantle the negative connotations of the concept and practices of witchcraft. Their opinions also contend with the important movement between desacralizing and resacralizing aspects of everyday life, including the self, as illustrated in the work of the Haitian self-taught painters previously discussed. Connecting with Marques' impressions, González Restrepo's publicly declared when promoting the event that "the devil was not invited," calling attention to a constructive interspirituality as one of his primary interests.[109] The Brazilian and Haitian delegations established a close rapport with this vision for the Congress, leading us to consider their participation beyond the politics of their unique national context. Instead, these collaborative threads based on interspiritual considerations attest to a panoramic view of Afro-diasporic cultural expressions interested in redefining and reclaiming a collective past and identity.

Despite being influenced by their own national politics as well as by the fair-like, spectacularizing nature of the Congress, these performances should not be solely seen as banal representations of sacred rituals in a space perceived as secular. Following Diana Taylor's theorization of the repertoire of performance as an expression "embodied memory," which are, she contends, "usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge," it is possible to argue that the Haitian and Brazilian performances constitute legitimate instances in the transmission of sacred Afro-diasporic thought.[110] In performing rituals deriving directly from the

[108] "Baiana vai ao Congresso de Bruxaria, em Bogotá."
[109] Margarita Vidal, "El diablo no está invitado," *El Tiempo,* August 10, 1975.
[110] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 19.

traditions they seek to portray or as reconfigurations of them, these national troupes resorted to performative forms that derive from a corporeal repertoire rooted in the spiritual traditions of their cultures. In doing so, they reimagined new possibilities for expressions of the sacred, which challenged idealized expectations of authenticity in the enacting of rituals of Afro-diasporic as well as Indigenous communities. They reflect what Taylor denominates as "public performances," a permeable term for "organized and repeated actions that take place in public space and that may or may not have artistic aspirations."[111] Evoking pioneer performance art scholar Richard Schechner, Taylor connects the idea of "public performance" with that of "restored" or "twice-behaved behavior" to open the grounds for understanding performance practice in a broader perspective. For her, the former two terms reference, among other actions, sacred and secular rituals, which can include the celebration of carnival.[112] This conception of performance as publicly straddling between spiritual and artistic realms aptly describe the participation of the Haitian and Brazilian delegations, exceeding a Western paradigm or fixation on originality that attempts to identify primary and secondary or reproduced corporeal enactments. Thus, as Taylor suggests, even though the embodiment of the repertoire changes, "their meaning might very well remain the same."[113] Performed in a different setting from traditional spaces of worship, the Vodou and Candomblé public performances did, however, take place within the context of what could be considered as a sacred space in its own right—the Congress itself.

Taylor's and Schechner's contributions to the study of public performances amidst sacroprofane spaces, like that of carnival, has paved the way for newer scholarship to emerge

[111] Ibid., 13.
[112] Ibid, 19.
[113] Ibid, 19.

around this relationship in Latin America. More recently, performance art scholar Daniela Bany Polito Moraes, for instance, reflected on the relationship between theatricality and Candomblé, positing that, at least for the case of *Afoxé* or carnival celebrations with magical connotations, the resignification and restaging of the dance of the Orixás outside of *terreiros* brings the "possibility of accessing ancestral gestures, which are already presented in each artist."[114] For the author, these ancestral expressions brought into the contemporary era stem from the dancers' awareness of their energetic and bodily potential, which blossoms through the stimuli of elements little considered by the body on a daily basis.[115] In doing so, a liturgical procedure is enacted in the artistic, theatrical space of the performance, for the ecstatic experience triggered through dance requires that the artists, very much like in a ceremonial space, also embody the forces of nature represented by the orixás.[116] Polito Moraes, therefore, reasserts the notion that through bodily and performative practices dancers, regardless of a specific location, are able to access spaces that are sacred to the specific traditions they attempt to reenact. This same logic applies to the troupes invited to the Congress given that communal, musical, and ritualistic elements coalesced in a carnivalesque display of their traditions.

Moreover, the Lumbalú funerary rites from San Basilio de Palenque presented during the Congress, organized by Delia Zapata Olivella, offer a similar situation than the public performances of Vodou and Candomblé. Popularly known as Palenque, this maroon community is located close to the city of Cartagena de Indias, which, in addition to its witch hunts, also served as one of the most important enclaves for the trade of enslaved Africans in the Caribbean

[114] Daniela Bany Polito Moraes, "Gestualidade ancestral: o trânsito entre o Candomblé e o teatro," *Conceição* 7, no. 1 (2018), 121.
[115] Ibid., 124.
[116] Ibid., 126.

during the colonial era.[117] Granted freedom by the Spanish Crown in 1713, almost a century before the Haitian Revolution, Palenque has become since the mid-twentieth century a referent of the survival of Bantu cultural traits from Congo and Angola in the Americas. Their funerary rites known as Lumbalú—*lu* meaning collective and *mbalú,* melancholia—include chants, music, and dances in which mourning comes together with a desire to help the spirit of the deceased to transcend into a different realm beyond earthly existence, usually thought of as a return to Africa.[118] Deeply spiritual as it directly reckons through its dancing and chanting with Kalunga, the supreme deity of death as well as the oceans and seas in Bantu cosmogony, Lumbalú poses death as a crossing into an underwater world, making ancestors and nature an integral part of its philosophy.[119] Although visual registers from the Lumbalú performance held during the Congress have been difficult to locate the numerous mentions of it in the press speak of the importance it had for the public opinion.[120] As a performance rooted in the culture of maroon communities with a long-standing history in the Colombian Caribbean coast, the presence of Lumbalú in the event also begs the question of how the spectacular form of its presentation could have enacted or embodied the sacred in a public setting. Its inclusion as part of the Congress, nonetheless, signaled a strong interest from the organizers, including González Restrepo, in establishing an Afro-Diasporic dialogue, which also included Colombia—a country less associated with Yoruba traditions—as a notable participant.

Delia Zapata Olivella's work from the 1940s and up to the 1970s provides us with insights about her engagement with the Lumbalú traditions as well as the decision to feature it as

[117] Nina S. de Friedemann, "Lumbalú: Ritos de la muerte en Palenque de San Basilio, Colombia," *Filología y Lingüística* 16, no.2 (1990), 51- 52.
[118] Liliana Parra-Valencia et al., "El Lumbalú y las mujeres tejedoras de lo espiritual y comunitario," *Psicología e Sociedade* 33 (2021), 5-10.
[119] de Friedemann, "Lumbalú: Ritos de la muerte," 58.
[120] "El vudú rito, posesión y comunicación," *El Tiempo,* July 15, 1975.

part of the witchcraft rubric the Congress heralded. Similar to the Haitian and Brazilian experiences, Colombian officials and creatives used popular culture and dances as a mechanism to sediment a national identity by the mid-twentieth century.[121] As a country with centralized politics having Bogotá, the capital, as the epicenter of cultural conversations, the artistic expressions from the Pacific and Atlantic coasts—with a majority of Afro-Diasporic populations—were highly racialized in the establishment of this nationalistic canon.[122] Delia Zapata Olivella's work contributed to the creation of a critical Afro-Colombian cultural discourse through corporeal, performative, and movement research, while addressing the lack of social and political visibility of marginalized communities—a colonial legacy in the South American country. Like Katherine Dunham, with whom the choreographer spent a year as a student in her Dance School in New York City in 1966, Delia Zapata Olivella saw dancing as an intellectual pursuit with political resonances directed towards the betterment of Black communities through an Afro-diasporic purview.[123]

Although at times deemed strict on gender roles and essentialist in its racial portrayals, the intellectual and corporeal pursuits of Delia Zapata Olivella, as director of the Ballet de Danzas Folclóricas de Colombia, was significant as it allowed a retrieval of the symbolic loss of a collective memory in Black communities in the country.[124] Resulting from the transatlantic slave trade, enslavement, and historical status of marginalization, this amnesia manifested, for Delia Zapata Olivella, in the stripping of the ritualistic and ancestral rites associated with certain

[121] Iván Jiménez, "Variaciones del sentimiento nacionalista: una problemática en los estudios descentrados en torno a la danza en América Latina," *Arte da Cena* 7, no.1 (2021), 91-92.
[122] Ibidem.
[123] Juan Suárez Ontaneda, "The Ruses of Memory in the Cinematic Choreographies of Delia Zapata Olivella: Dancing to Build Gender in the Public Space," in Ofosuwa M. Abiola, ed., *Fire Under My Feet: History, Race, and Agency in African Diaspora Dance* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 94; Joanna Dee Dass, *Katherine Dunham: Dance and the African Diaspora* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3.
[124] Suárez Ontaneda, "The Ruses of Memory," 94.

cultural expressions, which survived, nonetheless, in funerary, religious, carnival, and dance formats.[125] Hybrid by nature, such expressions not only had, and continue to have, European, African, and Indigenous ancestry, but also encoded deep-seated spiritual meanings, which could only be revived, according to this view, in the activation of the body through music.

Referring to Vodou in an interview with the Colombian press previous to the Congress, the noted folklorist stated *"aunque el convencimiento de la posesión no puede asegurarse por la impresión que recibamos viendo, sino solo cuando experimentemos el ritual en nuestros cuerpos."*[126] This embodied experience, therefore, was as intellectual as it was political and spiritual—a poignant intersection signaling a cultural shift towards the sacralizing potentialities of the body, as it was the case with Wiener and Gesse, to find new avenues for understanding cultural traditions. The spectacular or staged format of their work did not establish any claim for authenticity but was rather an invitation to generate curiosity and rapport to make of the interaction one that was relational and thus communally sacred. It is no surprise, for instance, that Delia Zapata Olivella's personal archive—which is held at Vanderbilt University—features a special section on spirituality, denoting her interest in African, Caribbean, Occult, Christian, and South Asian belief systems.[127] Far from banal or merely entertaining, Delia Zapata Olivella's efforts helped consolidate, particularly since the 1960s onwards, a scholarly conversation on the contributions and importance of Afro-Diasporic cultures in Colombia.[128] This scenario opened a hitherto unexplored public setting for community visibility and action, one that Delia Zapata Olivella would resist turning into consumable commodities for tourists, despite its pitfalls in

[125] Ibidem; Carlos Alberto Valderrama Rentería, "Folclore, raza y racismo en la política cultural e intelectual de Delia Zapata Olivella. El campo político-intelectual Afrocolombiano," *Revista CS* 12 (2013), 282.
[126] "El vudú rito, posesión y comunicación." English translation: "Although the conviction of possession cannot be assured by the impression we get from watching, but only when we experience the ritual in our own bodies."
[127] Spirituality Series, in Delia Zapata Olivella Papers, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN. URL: https://collections.library.vanderbilt.edu/repositories/2/archival_objects/431207
[128] Valderrama Rentería, "Folclore, raza y racismo," 265.

formulation and degree of nuance.[129] Both her coordination of the dances at the Congress as well as the Congress itself show similar ambivalent stances towards the idea of spectacularizing difference while, nonetheless, bringing to the table a decisive historical and cultural contribution.

Delia Zapata Olivella alongside her brother, the doctor, writer, and anthropologist Manuel Zapata Olivella were pioneering figures in Colombia in that they spearheaded the fight for Black liberation locally, resonating deeply with the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Manuel Zapata Olivella also participated in the Congress with a scholarly presentation titled "*Medicina y brujería*"("Medicine and Witchcraft") in which he outlined the Afro-Indigenous solidarities that were essential to the survival of enslaved Africans in the Americas and the Caribbean, developing a botany and herbalist knowledge that combined aspects of various cultural matrixes from both groups.[130] This deserves to be mentioned as it reasserts Delia Zapata Olivella's shared ethos of establishing solidarities amongst marginalized groups as a form of collective survival but also resistance to dominant power structures. While Manuel Zapata Olivella is not the focus of this study, his presentation for the Congress as well as his academic and literary work evidence a spiritually promiscuous throughline that sought to debase European social and aesthetic hierarchies instilled in Colombian society. In 1974, Manuel Zapata Olivella also participated in the *Coloquio Négritude y América Latina* in Dakar, Senegal in 1974, following an invitation from the then President Lépold Sédar Senghor, founder of the eponymous Négritude movement.[131]

[129] Suárez Ontaneda, "The Ruses of Memory," 99.
[130] Manuel Zapata Olivella, "Medicina y brujería," August, 1975. Proceedings of the Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería, Simón González Restrepo's archives, Corporación Otraparte, Envigado.
[131] Silvia Valero, "Archivos del Primer Congreso de la Cultura Negra de las Américas: debate internacional, tensiones y consensos," *Esclavages & Post-esclavages* 5 (2021), 2.

The participation of the Zapata Olivella siblings in the Congress preceded, furthermore, their role as organizers of the *Primer Congreso de la Cultura Negra de las Américas* in 1977. As Alejandro de la Fuente has stated, this event, which was held in Cali, Colombia, was not an isolated event in the Latin American context as it had as one of its main goals to uphold Black culture in the Americas while discussing issues related to racism and discrimination.[132] With over two-hundred delegates from the Americas and Africa, the *Congreso de la Cultura Negra* counted with conferences and panels with major figures, such as Larry Neal, Abdias do Nascimento, and Wole Soyinka, as well as an arts and culture section, which was coordinated by Delia Zapata Olivella and anthropologist Aquiles Escalante.[133] In their panel titled "Artistic Creativity and Materiality" both figures acknowledged that while spectacularity is an important aspect of African-rooted dances, it should also not become an all-encompassing rubric to discuss them.[134] In tune with the politicized nature of the gathering, they called for an understanding of Black culture that would enable Afro-diasporic communities to achieve a social and spiritual liberation.[135] The theme linking spectacularity and spirituality together with its ambiguities and controversies, is, therefore, a connecting thread in both the Bogotá and Cali gatherings. For Delia Zapata Olivella, the spectacular forms act as a prelude to higher spiritual states, for which she insists that it should not be seen as the end point but rather as a point of departure. This cautionary tale is indicative of her awareness of Afro-diasporic communities being forced to reproduce exoticizing tropes, yet in her work through public performances the activation of the

[132] Alejandro de la Fuente, "Afro-Latin American Art" in Alejandro de la Fuente and George Reid Andrews, *Afro-Latin American Studies: An Introduction* (Cambridge, MA; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 386.
[133] Valero, "Archivos del Primer Congreso," 5.
[134] Valderrama, "La política cultural de la negritud en Latinoamérica: Debates del Primer Congreso de la Cultura Negra de las Américas, Cali, Colombia, 1977," *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 26, no.1 (2021): 114.
[135] Ibidem.

body alongside the hybrid spiritualities and cultures that shape it becomes a site of social and political resistance to memory loss, oblivion, and marginalization.

Together, the work of the three participating dance troupes from Haiti, Brazil, and Colombia led by three female choreographers—Odette Wiener, Gessy Gesse, and Delia Zapata Olivella—are indicative of similar yet distinct political and cultural movements in the region. Emerging from and against the grain of their respective nation-states seeking to build collective and cohesive identities through the reclamation of local cultural practices, the performances of Vodou, Candomblé, and Lumbalú in the Congress uniquely responded to the needs for visibility, connection, and mutual understanding of the various Afro-Diasporic cultures in Latin America and the Caribbean. The spectacular aspect of their performances as an enabler in the pursuit of spiritual meaning and transcendence offers a clear linking thread between the choreographic and conceptual work that Wiener, Gesse, and Delia Zapata Olivella advanced for their troupes. Evidencing cultural and spiritual hybridization processes in the spiritualities of the African Diaspora in the region, these presentations also come together as a larger spiritually promiscuous platform building collective knowledge and consciousness through the lens of witchcraft as a reivindicated term for social, political, and spiritual activism. Calling for a public act of resistance against inherited social hierarchies based on race and national origin, these presentations brought together by Simón González Restrepo and Delia Zapata Olivella, carried along a statement of human agency and creativity in the guise of a series of spectacularized cultural expressions. Their form and staging combined the sacred with the marketable and consumable, making a far from "perfect" alliance that was nonetheless necessary for garnering visibility and legitimacy in the public arena.

1.4 Conclusion

This chapter focused on the exhibition, installation, and performance art practices that shaped a significant portion of the cultural programming Simón González Restrepo devised for the Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería. While the scholarly panels were not examined in depth, the text analyzed the *Salón de Arte Brujo*, the exhibition *Nader's Haïti*, and the staged public ritual performances of Afro-Diasporic spiritual systems. The argument sought to demonstrate that the Congress embodied a spiritually promiscuous ethos—interweaving interspirituality, intermediality, and intersectionality—to challenge exclusionary modernist hierarchies of class, gender, and race in Latin American and Caribbean societies. In its ample diverse academic and cultural scope, the event paralleled how witchcraft has evolved historically as an amalgam of various nature-based, pagan, or non-hegemonic belief systems across geographies and cultures, empowering communities traditionally marginalized in terms of gender and race. In doing so, I argue that the Congress fostered instances of connection and collaboration, building social coalitions and solidarities, or at least greater awareness and understanding, as a strategy for collective empowerment and survival. Though the Congress was ultimately a commercial enterprise—highly mediatized and unsustainable in subsequent iterations—its for-profit nature paradoxically enabled it to materialize and build these social connections within the constraints of a predominantly conservative and Catholic country like Colombia. The event sent shockwaves across the nation and beyond, underscoring, according to González Restrepo, the importance of cultivating love and wonderment for difference and the unknown. This poetic stance can be attributed to González Restrepo's connection with the *Nadaísmo* literary avant-garde movement, whose radical opposition to the status quo became a catalyzer for social change in Colombia and Latin America in the second half of the twentieth

century. The Congress extended *Nadaísta* thought by rejecting social conventions—whether spiritual, cultural, or political—infusing a sense of individual and collective agency into those who participated from diverse corners of the world.

The various artistic expressions analyzed in this chapter also reflect what I refer to, partially borrowing from Diana Taylor, as spiritually promiscuous repertoires, which my dissertation seeks to identify in the artistic and social movements emerging from the 1970s and 1980s. Through the work of Alejandro Obregón, Hernando Tejada, Luis Durier, and Feliza Bursztyn, the discussion explored the tension between physical overexposure and underexposure—or indexicality—particularly in relation to the female body. Their practices underscored the significance of self-fashioning and bodily autonomy, whether through erotic coding or deliberate opacity, as mechanisms for embodying alternative corporealities, identities, and realms of consciousness. The exhibition of Haitian Vodou art, brought to the Congress by Galerie Nader as part of a broader delegation of Haitian scholars and dancers, exemplified the "lived religion" approach intrinsic to Afro-Diasporic spiritualities. Through its *potomitan* and *vèvè* installation and featuring artists such as the Obin family and Paul Nemours, the exhibition engaged with Vodou's sacred worldview, in which everyday life is inherently sacred. This perspective was reinforced by poet Serge Saint-Jean's intervention, "Art, Witchcraft, and Vodou," which drew parallels between artists and witches or sorcerers, suggesting that both realms are shaped by experiences of transmutation and the fluid interplay of the sacred and the profane. Bringing awareness to syncretic religious systems from the Americas and the Caribbean—especially those with an Afro-Diasporic matrix—was central to the Congress' aims.

The performances of Odette Wiener's Les Ballets Bacoulou d'Haïti, Gessy Gesse's Candomblé troupe from Salvador de Bahia, and Delia Zapata Olivella's Grupo de Danzas

Folclóricas Colombianas highlighted the tension between spectacularity and authenticity in the public performance of Afro-Diasporic spiritual traditions. These staged rituals, however, functioned as conscious strategies for reimagining the sacred beyond rigid notions of originality, instead fostering curiosity and relationality. By activating corporeal memory, these performances tapped into non-material archival sources, establishing a diasporic creative methodology that connected sacred ritual spaces and practices across time and space. Taken together, these artistic expressions illuminate an unorthodox interspiritual—or spiritually promiscuous—perspective that sought to counteract the enduring effects of the colonial enterprise in the Americas and the Caribbean: heteropatriarchy, misogyny, and structural racism.

As a closing thought, I would like to offer that the Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería functioned as a collective performance where organizers, panelists, artists, and attendees played a central role in creating a spiritually promiscuous space in festival form. The overwhelming reception it had both nationally and internationally, with thousands of people traveling to Bogotá to participate, is an aspect that deserves further attention, as it tapped into the interests and needs of a population searching for spiritual alternatives. Variegated in its spiritual and ritualistic purview, the Congress is exemplary of the impetus of postmodern, fragmented spiritualities to craft their pantheons, cosmogonies, rituals, and iconographies according to an amalgam of beliefs responding to an also fragmented sociopolitical context. In Colombia and other parts of Latin America, this was a moment where urban centers grew exponentially from rural migrations, highlighting another iteration of European, Indigenous, and Black cultures miscegenation in the second half of the twentieth century. It is no wonder that the Congress' "Witch Fair," for instance, was such a popular destination for visitors. Through public demonstrations of rituals and new scientific explorations, bold sartorial choices, and artistic and

musical displays, the Congress offered a wholesome space for curiosity, while also foregrounding the importance of revindicating the term witchcraft as a spiritual practice of resistance to the status quo. As a one-time event that was both praised and vilified by the press, and then tabled for oblivion, the Congress' impact is hard to assess, which adds to its contradictory nature as well as beauty as a site of historical research. The intellectual and artistic constellations that the event was able to bring together, however, enables the building of networks for exchange and solidarities that resonate deeply with the needs of our own convoluted era.

Chapter 2
A k u z u r u: Fashioning Afro-Asian Interspirituality

In 1999, Trinidadian artist A k u z u r u premiered *SMOKE-Translucency of Spirit* at the Goethe Institut in Lagos, Nigeria, a performance piece combining fashion design, sculpture, and ritualistic dances (Figs. 2.1 and 2.2). "Clothing encompasses space like all sculptural form. The human frame completes the repertoire. My clothing is sculpture, painting, dance, theatre, and the drum beat that acknowledge my ancestral heritage," A k u z u r u remarked in a succinct yet layered description of this work at the time.[1] In her characteristic mystical writing style, the artist further asserted "[...] The clothing transforms the spirit, transcends boundaries. The dance is fetus, the birth of a new quest. The Ritual of Smoke is my Art."[2] This performance piece was a collaborative effort which included the participation of a group of female dancers from the National Troupe of Nigeria, such as Marian Nduku Opene, Becky Umeh, and Omena Owoferia, who wore A k u z u r u's garment designs. Moreover, the artist, journalist, and film critic Shaibu Hussein contributed to the choreographic elements of the piece.[3] Each of the garments featured as part of the performance had thematic titles that reveal aspects of A k u z u r u's creative process at the time: "Pan is Ogun II," "Let Us Merge and Unite," "African Unity," and "Oriki," to name a few.[4] Considered one of the pioneering figures of performance art in the Caribbean region, A k u z u r u, whose birth name was Arleen Joan Harriett Weekes, developed this collaborative practice through an itinerant life story that took her from the carnival celebrations of Port of Spain in Trinidad and Tobago and London, where she studied fashion design in the

[1] *Smoke—Translucency of Spirit*, 1999. A k u z u r u's personal archive, Port of Spain.
[2] Ibidem.
[3] Sonja Sinaswee, "Smoke in Nigeria," *The Trinidad Guardian,* March 30, 2000. Courtesy of Nicholas Laughlin.
[4] Nduka Nwosu, "Dressing and dancing," *The Guardian Nigeria,* December 11, 1999. Courtesy of Nicholas Laughlin.

1980s. Later, she would move to Lagos, Kaduna, and Zaria in Nigeria, furthering her education in textiles in the 1990s, remaining in the West African country for seven years. During this time, A k u z u r u developed an interest in interspirituality, intermediality, and intersectionality in ways that were unorthodox and unexpected for all three countries. Her avant-garde practices and unique fashion style was seen as unusual by locals in Nigeria who started to know her as juju or Obeah woman—a sorceress and witch.

Far from frightful, A k u z u r u's practice during her time in Nigeria signaled her maturing style and consolidation of a personal aesthetics, focusing on themes of healing, transcendence, and a sustainable connection with the natural world. Her fashion designs and performance practice alluded to attainment of elevated states of consciousness and the idea of the sacred, mobilizing the body as resource, as method, and as tool. The promiscuous, unorthodox usage of materials which progressively characterized her work led her to experiment with unusual fabrics and textiles, where textural and asymmetrical elements became essential to her compositions. Her work from this period incorporated, as A k u z u r u acknowledges, "sculptural elements of African masks and the essence of Masquerade body suits through space, movement and the natural environment".[5] A garment design from the late 1990s shows A k u z u r u's investment in exceeding the corporeal form to express innovative ideas around movement and deconstructed sartorial compositions (Fig. 2.3). Alongside the knotted and sewn two-piece cape and headdress, simple in its geometric design and use of color, the artist also included organic materials such as raw silk, wood sticks, and seed pods. Reminiscing the stripping down of form from Hélio Oiticica's *Parangolés* from 1960s Brazilian avant-garde aesthetics, this piece, as well as many others the artist crafted during this time, playfully intersected volume and

[5] A k u z u r u, interview by Julián Sánchez González, April 24, 2025.

pattern in ways that recalled the surrounding natural world. Through its free-flowing, creative movement between artistic genres and materials, moreover, A k u z u r u's early period progressively emphasized the dematerialization and ephemerality of the body to evoke the otherworldly, superseding traditional expectations about femininity and Blackness. Another design from this time, a conical-shaped garment with large front pockets and bold patterns, also sought to contest one-directional, easy readings of corporeal markers. Instead, it functioned as a shielding tunic whose wearer, donning a protective amulet around her neck, defiantly, but assuredly gazes at the viewer (Fig 2.4). Tasteful and classy, A k u z u r u's Nigerian works reflected a decade-long growth journey in the Caribbean, Europe, and back, where her own background and learned realities in Afro-Asian crossings and solidarities greatly impacted her artistic vision.

A testament of excellence and great talent from an early age, A k u z u r u studied in the Western African country with the support of a scholarship from the Nigerian government at the Ahmadu Bello University, a public institution just outside of Zaria in the country's inland. Halfway through her studies she held the fashion show "Fourth Dimension" at the Alliançe Française in Kaduna in 1994, and after graduation she exhibited "A Rhythm of Interpenetrations" at the Muson Centre in Lagos in 1997. While surviving materials from these two exhibitions are scarce, the themes note a continuous engagement with her interests in alternative realities and the synesthetic quality of interconnectedness between human and non-human entities. In a written statement for the latter, she notes: "Clothing is one of the oldest art forms, but my work is not about fashion. I don't make fashion. Clothing is the ultimate rhythm. It is like music which pervades space, as clothing encompasses space like all sculptural form."[6]

[6] *A Rhythm of Interpenetrations*, 1997. A k u z u r u's personal archive, Port of Spain.

Creating without the burden of categorization, therefore, has been at the heart of A k u z u r u's artistic career—meaning is elusive while at the same time the uplifting, defense, and care of the feminine form remains a constant. In 1999, once back in Port of Spain, where she would settle for the rest of her career, A k u z u r u created a garment for the African Queen Show, recalling the artistic prowess of the Ancient Kingdom of Mali. Her garment, as she contended, aimed to break boundaries, experiment, and seek to amaze, while making the creative process ritual, and function as the "Ultimate."[7] Cheekily titled *VICISSITUDE caresses the MANGO SEED in my CALABASH*, the design for this dress was futuristic in style: avant-garde, deconstructed geometric forms and lines overlaid a blue, airy robe while an intricate red and blue headpiece wrapped around the head and neckline (Fig. 2.5). The center panel referenced fertility cycles and birth as a form of metamorphosis and transformation, while the textured lines evoked the continuous flow of the river as a metaphor for our connection with times past.[8]

Altogether, these designs speak of many of A k u z u r u's early influences, but perhaps most importantly of Pan-Africanism and the Black Power Movement, prominent political discourses in both Trinidad and England in the second half of the twentieth century. A k u z u r u's career grew alongside these movements' search for transnational unity, self-affirmation, and liberation. Moreover, the local culture of Trinidad and Tobago, including the tradition of Carnival or mas'—short for masquerade—and steelpan music, also provided a fruitful context for the inclusion of a performative element to the piece. During the 1970s and early 1980s, the visual, corporeal, and creative output of the Trinidadian Carnival had been transformed by a number of designers whose work foregrounded A k u z u r u's practice as an emerging artist.

[7] *VICISSITUDE Caresses the MANGO SEED in my CALABASH*, 1999. A k u z u r u's personal archive, Port of Spain.
[8] Ibidem.

SMOKE-Translucency of Spirit as well as her designs from the Nigeria years, made while the artist was in her mid to late twenties, were rooted in Afro-Diasporic religious beliefs, referencing Yoruba deities and establishing a direct connection between West African and Caribbean ontologies and spiritualities. Its Afro-Diasporic purview was part of a broader scholarly and artistic conversation on the trans-Atlantic connections of Caribbean art, challenging the nationalistic tendencies present in Trinidadian art during the twentieth century.

This chapter explores A k u z u r u's formative years in the United Kingdom and in Trinidad and Tobago, presenting an original study of how she developed the visual language and spiritual sensibility that culminated in her intermedial, performative practice including spiritually diverse sources. This process included studying fashion design in London from 1985 to 1990, where A k u z u r u looked closely at the volumetric designs of traditional West African garments as well as the aesthetic disruptions of the Japanese avant-garde fashion taking hold in Europe since the 1960s. During her time in the English capital, A k u z u r u also participated in the celebration of the Notting Hill Carnival, an annual pan-Caribbean celebration with strong Trinidadian roots, both as a band member and as a band designer. This engagement proved central for the artist's development of a type of multidisciplinary, expansive practice, which she would later in her career refer to as "Total Art." During this time, the artist was also exposed to the growing influence of punk and later post-punk cultures in London, which was rapidly transforming underground culture aesthetics and then going into mainstream culture, as was the case with noted designer Vivienne Westwood. After moving back to Trinidad for a short, year-long stay in 1991, A k u z u r u established a transformative connection with the late painter LeRoy Clarke as a friend and mentee. Their bonding came at a key moment in Clarke's career where he had created and exhibited his *El Tucuche* series of paintings, consolidating his visual,

philosophical, and spiritual reckonings on the liberation of Black and Third World peoples. Transformative for A k u z u r u's practice, this period saw the fusion of her object-based art with her long-standing interest in kinetic and sensorial expressions, leading to the establishment of her "Aktions"—a term used to describe her performative practice.

A k u z u r u's early work foregrounded her artistic investment in principles of interconnectedness and unity of human and non-human forces, signaling a growing interest in spirituality as a vehicle for social commentary and cohesion. Over the course of the 1980s, I contend, the artist developed a spiritually promiscuous ethos that sought to build bridges between non-hegemonic spiritual systems and build solidarities amongst marginalized groups, while simultaneously reclaiming autonomy as an Afro-Diasporic creative. Further, the artist's formative years led to her development of a healing practice, which is primarily concerned with the tearing of the social fabric and raising consciousness around issues of ecological sustainability. She has described this pursuit as a journey to "reconnect with self and to rebuild and reconstruct."[9] A k u z u r u's restorative and all-encompassing art practice developed, I further contend, a personal style combining Afro-Asian cultural elements, building upon the culturally hybrid context of her native Trinidad and its annual celebration of mas'. By proposing a new visual language based on mas' design, traditional African garments, and Asian avant-garde fashion, A k u z u r u's creative ingenuity offers a critical position to existing essentialist views of the Caribbean region as retrograde, derivative, or exotic. Further, this chapter illustrates that A k u z u r u's Afro-Asian motifs contributed to the development of an Afro-Diasporic aesthetics, conversing with and exceeding an Afrocentrist discourse that had been essential for the Black Liberation movement in Trinidad and the United Kingdom in the two decades before

[9] *Akuzuru CCA Exhibition 2005*, Anonymous Banyan Archive, 2005, https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/akazuru-cca-exhibition-2005.

her move to London. This position allowed the Trinidadian artist to explore a deliberate yet socially conscious intermingling of cultural and spiritual systems, with the intention of imbuing her artistic practice with a nature-bound, inclusive, and feminist perspectives.

This chapter's findings are based on archival sources from Port of Spain and London, featuring unpublished materials documenting A k u z u r u's early career development. Firstly, the text includes the artist's memories of her own career path, which are drawn from a series of sustained conversations and collaborations with her over the past five years.[10] The contents of these discussions have been essential to better locate her work as part of a broader network of Caribbean, Black British, and African performance and contemporary art. Further, the chapter analyses a series of photographs of the artist participating in the Notting Hill Carnival, as well as paintings, photographs, and installation shots of her fashion designs from her time in London and Port of Spain—all housed in a range of private and public collections across the Atlantic. Materials pertaining to the work of mas' designers George Bailey, Wayne Berkeley, and Peter Minshall will be central to locate her work as part of a large genealogy of mas' invention and creativity from Trinidad. Similarly, the paintings of LeRoy Clarke will further complement the analysis of A k u z u r u's influences, particularly in her contention with the intellectual and stylistic underpinnings of the Black Liberation movement. Given the scope of these materials, Afro-Diasporic theorists and art historians from the Caribbean region, the United States, and England, such as David A. Bailey, Kobena Mercer, and Sylvia Wynter, will be central to ground the ideas presented in this chapter. Their contributions to the understanding of Afro-diasporic

[10] My first encounter with A k u z u r u was in the summer of 2019 when I visited Port of Spain as an Alice Yard Research Fellow. Christopher Cozier, Nicholas Laughlin, and Sean Leonard, the co-directors of Alice Yard, kindly introduced me to the artist as well as the vibrant community of creatives in Trinidad.

spiritualities, sociopolitical forms of cultural resistance, and multidisciplinary artistic outputs were valuable tools for analyzing A k u z u r u's first projects as an itinerant artist.

By describing A k u z u r u's career development moving from fashion design into performance art, this chapter seeks to highlight how otherworldly purviews enable artists with creative possibilities as well as historically grounded reflections. A k u z u r u's artistic path is a testament of a deeply personal, yet conscious and strategic incorporation of spiritual explorations that worked against an essentializing classification of artistic and political positions based on racial categories. The Afro-Asian motifs present in the artist's work resonates with post-colonial propositions, while also privileging notions of unity and interconnectedness across social groups. Instead of aligning with only one spiritual purview, discourse or style, A k u z u r u's practice proposed, and remains to this date, a permeable practice, signaling an ongoing engagement with spiritual promiscuity as a creative platform. A k u z u r u's work is therefore a unique and decisive contribution to Afro-Diasporic and spiritually based artistic practices from the second half of the twentieth century in both the Caribbean region and the United Kingdom.

2.1 "Ah Have a Mind:" Cross-Cultural Solidarities in Notting Hill

In 1985, nineteen-year-old A k u z u r u moved from Port of Spain to London to begin her undergraduate studies in Fashion Merchandising and Design at the American College in London, now Intercontinental University, supported by a Commonwealth scholarship. Two years after her arrival, she became involved in the Notting Hill Carnival celebrations, joining dancer and choreographer Greta Mendez's (MBE) Black Inventors Band in collaboration with the newly founded Yaa Asantewaa Cultural Centre. The Yaa, as it is popularly known, is a community center dedicated to the promotion of carnival and performance arts of Afro-Caribbean cultures in

West London starting operations in 1986. A photograph from that year's parade shows the young artist wearing an all-black armor ensemble with curved silver appliqués attached to her limbs. A soaring metal structure strapped to her shoulders and waist rose from her back, featuring undulating silver shapes as part of her masquerade (Fig. 2.6). Playing the character "Electricity," A k u z u r u joined other sections of the band, such as "Halos of Genius," "Atoms," and "Heat Pulse," signaling a theme of ingenuity and creativity. The Black Inventors Band, designed by Trinidadian-British artist of Indian descent Keith Khan, aimed to publicly celebrate Black minds that made significant contributions to science and technology. The performance was socially and politically minded. Greta Mendez stated in a brochure for the band's annual fundraiser event: "Knowledge is vital / Knowledge is crucial / Knowledge is power."[11] Playing an uplifting yet provocative mas' was pivotal at a time when regulation of the two-day parade was necessary for its establishment as a socially accepted, revenue-earning event.[12] Within this context, Afro-Diasporic communities in London continued to push for self-affirmation initiatives, demanding equal treatment and recognition from the English state.

The Black Inventors Band also followed the tradition of the Trinidadian carnival by choosing a King and Queen, who were provided with a special masquerade, normally more conspicuous than those of the band members. Afra Raymond, today a notable Trinidadian transparency activist, took the royal honor that year, parading the streets of London as King with a regal, shiny, and spiraling outfit, titled "Ah Have Ah Mind." Honoring the work of African-American inventor Lewis Howard Latimer, who is attributed one of the most significant

[11] *Black Inventors Band*, brochure, 1988. A k u z u r u personal archive, Port of Spain.
[12] Tony Moore, *Policing Notting Hill: Fifty Years of Turbulence* (Sherfield on Loddon Hook, Hampshire: Waterside Press, 2013), 323; Gerladine Connor and Max Farrar, "Carnival in Leeds and London. Making New Black British Subjectivities," in Milla Cozart Riggio, ed., *Carnival: Culture in Action: The Trinidad Experience* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 261.

scientific developments that led to Thomas Edison's invention of the lightbulb, Raymond's mas' symbolized the energy fields that surround us.[13] Two photographs of the piece show a self-assured Raymond wearing a vertical metal structure rising up and to the sides, sporting lavish undulating decorative shapes with a glimmering quality that reflected the sunlight (Figs. 2.7-2.8). In the first image, a group of people marching fully dressed in regular clothing in the background contrast with the exuberance of the masquerader's presence, highlighting the value of the puncturing moment his performance offered, quite poignantly, to the rhythm of calypsonian David Rudder's "Madness."[14] The costume's emphasis on the unequivocal historical presence of Afro-Diasporic excellence and intelligence challenged historical stereotypes built around Black corporeal expression in the form of mas', ritual, or dancing. By aligning the Black performing body with Latimer's ingenuity, Raymond's mas' pushed against the common dichotomy that separates the body from mind. Instead, it celebrated their complementary relationship, while also adding in the words of Greta Mendez, a sensuous dimension that was essential to the design.[15] Here, Black genius is represented without contradiction in the interplay of costume design and corporeal performativity.

Two years prior to A k u z u r u's participation in the Black Inventors Band, Mendez and Khan had collaborated in a project called Keepers of the City, which sought to bring attention to the relevance of masquerade practices and Afro-Caribbean cultures to the English capital. These series of workshops and artistic events catered to the North London communities in collaboration with the Roundhouse, a staple venue in the music history of England.[16] Keith's designs for this project as well as for the Black Inventors Band also included the masquerades "Freedom Lights,"

[13] Greta Mendez, interview by Julián Sánchez González, August 31, 2024.
[14] A k u z u r u and Afra Raymond personal communication, July 12, 2024.
[15] Greta Mendez, interview by Julián Sánchez González, August 31, 2024.
[16] "Keepers of the City," The Roundhouse. Brochure, 1986. Greta Mendez's personal archives, London.

a celebration of Garret Morgan's invention of the traffic light, and "Tears of the City," a representation of city-dwelling suffering.[17] An episode of Alter Image Magazine for England's Channel 4 from 1989 showcased these designs in movement, as they danced to Trinidadian musician Timothy "Baron" Watkins's nostalgic "River of Tears."[18] In joyous and liberating scenes, the performers highlighted the ethereal and surreal qualities of Khan's garment designs. The video reinforced the overall theme of the Black Inventors Band by presenting, through a mas'-based theatrical performance, alternative realities where revelry and dance became forms of social liberation. By affirming the legitimacy of masquerade and carnival as artistic expressions on broadcast television, "Keepers of the City" also addressed the state and police repression faced by Caribbean diasporic communities in England, particularly during the second half of the twentieth century. Indeed, the piece publicly acknowledged the inheritance of the cultural shifts that the Windrush Generation from the 1950s brought to the English nation, which art historian and curator Alex Farquharson has aptly described as the "Caribbeanisation of British culture and society."[19]

A k u z u r u's involvement in the Notting Hill Carnival follows a convoluted and turbulent history of the annual celebration in London throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Tam Joseph's *Spirit of Carnival*, a dynamic 1988 print where a blockade of policemen and a snarling dog trump the movement of a colorful, raffia-clad masquerader, encapsulates this violent and culturally tense scenario, which culminated in the notable riots of 1976 and 1987 (Fig. 2.9).[20] Joseph's art, as curator David A. Bailey underlines for the work of Caribbean British

[17] Greta Mendez, interview by Julián Sánchez González, August 31, 2024.
[18] Keith Khan, "Keepers of the City," Alter Image, 1989. URL: https://vimeo.com/246236359
[19] Alex Farquaharson, "Foreword," in Alex Farquharson and David A. Bailey eds., *Life between Islands: Caribbean-British Art, 1950s - Now* (London, UK: Tate Publishing, 2021), 6-7.
[20] Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2006), 151-156.

artists from his generation, speaks to African spiritualities in the diaspora as well as unresolved issues of "urbanization, policing, education, and institutionalized discrimination."[21] The carnival is intimately tied to these explosive interactions that go back to the housing riots of 1958, when Caribbean migrants resisted the dire living conditions and systematic racism they were exposed to upon their arrival to England. Indeed, Claudia Jones—activist, community organizer, and member of the Communist Party—spearheaded the first congregations of Caribbean migrants in London to fundraise, through social and community-oriented events, for bailing out protesters.[22] It took many years, however, for activist Rhaune Laslett to announce the organization of the Notting Hill Festival in 1965, and almost a decade more for Leslie Palmer, at the time a school teacher, to revolutionize the celebration's structure with an established two-day parade with numerous participating masquerade bands during the August Bank Holiday of 1973.[23] As scholar Angela Burr argues, the Notting Hill Carnival empowered Afro-Caribbean communities in London and across the United Kingdom to claim their right to walk the streets, much like formerly enslaved Africans did in Trinidad in the nineteenth century during the Canboulay or Cannes Brûlées celebrations following emancipation, more specifically, throughout the 1830s.[24]

Moreover, the celebration of the Notting Hill Carnival was deeply intertwined at the intellectual and social levels with greatly influential struggles for racial justice, namely those pursued in the American Civil Rights Era and the Black Power Movement.[25] The Africanist and Afrocentric positions taking root as a strategy for social liberation were echoed in the mas'

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[21] David A. Bailey, "Caribbean Movements in Britain" Alex Farquharson and David A. Bailey eds., *Life between Islands: Caribbean-British Art, 1950s - Now* (London, UK: Tate Publishing, 2021), 29.
[22] Moore, *Policing Notting Hill,* 143-144.
[23] Ibid, 146-147.; AC Christie, interview with Leslie Palmer, 2019, https://ilovecarnivall.co.uk/pioneers-of-notting-hill-carnival-leslie-palmer/.
[24] Angela Burr, "The 'Freedom of the Slaves to Walk the Streets': Celebration, Spontaneity and Revelry versus Logistics at the Notting Hill Carnival" in David Picard and Mike Robinson, *Festivals, Tourism and Social Change: Remaking Worlds* (Clevedon, UK: Channel View Publications, 2006), 87-89.
[25] Bailey, "Caribbean Movements in Britain," 27-31.

designs showcased in London during the 1970s and 1980s. A case in point is "Me, Myself, I: Warrior!," a 1986 mas' design from the Mangrove Mas' Band, one of the most long-standing groups in the English capital's carnival. In its lavish constructions and bellicose connotations, this masquerade expresses a desire to connect with the aesthetics and forms of defense and protection of the Burkinabe people from Burkina Faso. If looked through a more context-responsive sense, it also evokes the positions of the armed factions germane to these political movements of racial self-determination, namely those espoused by the Black Panther Party and prominent figures such as Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X.[26] By bulking up their body proportions with shields and weapons, these masqueraders effectively sent a two-fold message of commitment to the recuperation of an idea of an ancestral heritage, and the legitimization of armed resistance for self-defense in the urban space. Further, the Mangrove name called to mind the trial and acquittance of the Mangrove Nine, a group of Black political activists accused of violence towards police officers in 1969 and 1971.[27] This legal outcome signaled a milestone in the government's public acceptance of racial hatred of the Metropolitan Police towards Afro-Caribbean communities in Notting Hill. It also set the record straight for the cultural importance of the Mangrove Restaurant, where this group of activists, some associated with the Black Power Movement, established as their stomping grounds.[28] Indeed, the late-night soul food eatery had become a place for congregation of artists, performers, and scholars since the 1960s, including figures like Lord Gifford, Sammy Davis Jr., Nina Simone, Vanessa Redgrave, and C.L.R. James.[29] Therefore, the Mangrove Mas' Band was essential to the history of the carnival, with its

[26] See Stokely Carmichael and Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Times of Stokely Carmichael* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2003).
[27] Rob Waters, *Thinking Black: Britain, 1964-1985* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019), 96.
[28] Ibid, 95-97.
[29] Moore, *Policing Notting Hill: Fifty Years of Turbulence*, 17.

steelpan orchestra admired for its dexterity and prowess, while also serving as a symbol of the grassroots activism of Black communities in Notting Hill during the 1960s and 1970s.

A year after the Black Inventors Band, A k u z u r u participated in the Notting Hill Carnival once more as a member of We de Aethiopians Band, designed by Keith Khan, for the Yaa. A picture of the parade shows the artist as she struts triumphant donning a garment coded in black, green, yellow, and red, signifying the celebration of Pan-Africanism as well as Rastafari culture. At the same time, the performer holds a rounded and conic shaped structures in these same colors, alluding to the *tadjahs* or mosque-shaped model floating tomb that are commonly used during Hosay, a Muslim Indo-Caribbean yearly religious commemoration from Trinidad as well as other Caribbean countries (Fig. 2.10). On the one hand, the We de Aethiopians Band resonates with the Africanist theme that proliferated in the London carnival during this time. As authors of the first historical account of the Notting Hill Carnival celebration Kwesi Owusu and Jacob Ross contended, this thematic decision "is an act of historical reclamation [that] connects to the creative energy of the African experience."[30] In furthering a view on the Black genealogies of carnival, they also assert that it has retained "its African character and spirit in spite of the momentous dislocations of African people through the Atlantic slave trade."[31] Examples of these African-based expressions of mas' in London can be found in the Mangrove Mas' Band's "When the Spirit Moves" from 1985 and the Yaa's Band "Lespwi Tan Nou—Spirits in Our Time."[32] On the other hand, however, Khan's design, as embodied by A k u z u r u and other masqueraders, showcases a key interplay of African and Asian cultural references, introducing a uniquely Trinidadian perspective. We de Aethiopians is, therefore, a notable example of the manifold

[30] Kwesi Owusu and Jacob Ross, *Behind the Masquerade: The Story of Notting Hill Carnival* (Edgware: Arts Media Group, 1988), 10.
[31] Ibid, 4.
[32] *Yaa Asantewaa Carnival Group Lespwi Tan Nou,* 1988. A k u z u r u personal archive, Port of Spain.

references to spiritually mixed explorations at play in the Notting Hill Carnival and coexisted alongside the more radical racial politics from the time. It is the expression of the spiritually promiscuous framework that would start to define A k u z u r u's career as a multidisciplinary artist.

As a young designer, A k u z u r u was influenced by the work of other Caribbean women who played active roles in the mas', dance, and theater scenes in London. One key figure was Greta Mendez—the intellectual architect behind Keepers of the City and the Black Inventors Band—whose career as a dancer and community organizer greatly influenced A k u z u r u. Mendez left Trinidad at a young age to join the Scottish Ballet in the 1970s and later became a driving force in the consolidation of Black British independent dance expression.[33] One of Mendez's most significant early contributions was her role as co-director, choreographer, and dancer for the Minority Arts Advisory Service (MAAS) Movers from 1977 to 1979.[34] In collaboration with Evrol Puckerin, Ray Collins, Louis St Just, and Jan Murray,[35] Mendez and the dance troupe debuted at the Oval House Theatre in Brixton, leading to a second show and receiving accolades from the press.[36] A photograph of Mendez performing during this opening is a testament to the troupe's dynamism and energetic output (Fig. 2.11). Dubbed the first professional Black dance group in Britain,[37] the MAAS Movers—though short-lived—paved the way for the emergence of other Black dance companies, as author Emilyn Claid notes.[38] Similar to Keith Khan's cross-cultural proposition for the We De Aethiopans Band, however, Mendez's work with the MAAS Movers pursued an artistic ethos that went beyond the confines of an

[33] Greta Mendez, interview by Julián Sánchez González, August 31, 2024; Zinzi Minott and Greta Mendez, conversation, 2019, https://independentdance.co.uk/library/black-women-in-dance-zinzi-minott-and-greta-mendez/.
[34] Greta Mendez, correspondence with MAAS Movers, 1977-1979. Greta Mendez personal archive, London.
[35] Emilyn Claid, *Yes? No! Maybe…: Seductive Ambiguity in Dance* (London, UK: Routledge, 2006), 105.
[36] Ibidem.
[37] Angela Levin, *Observer Magazine*, September 3, 1978. Greta Mendez's personal archive, London.
[38] Claid, *Yes? No! Maybe*, 106.

Afrocentric perspective. For her, learning the spiritual and ritualistic depths of Caribbean folk dance was as important as training in Western modern and contemporary dance styles, such as those of pioneers like Martha Graham. After leaving the MAAS Movers, Mendez, who comes from a racially mixed background, reflected on the purpose of Black dance in England in a press interview: "The Movers are British people, and we've got to find ways of relating to *that* reality, not just harking back to Africa or the West Indies (…)." [39]

In addition to Mendez's work, the rise of women's participation in the Notting Hill Carnival was also advanced by the establishment of Lion Youth, Beti Campbell and Leslee Will's first all-women band in 1976.[40] Inspired by the contributions of Trinidadian-born Pan-Africanists Sylvester Williams and George Padmore to anti-colonial thought, the band's name referenced the royal insignia of the Ethiopian Empire—the Lion of Judah.[41] This symbol was also prevalent in the rise of Rastafarianism in the Caribbean since the 1930s, as adepts to this religion equated, through interpretations of biblical passages from the book of Revelations, Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I with the figure of the "Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah." This symbol served, as scholar Michael Barnett asserts, as the inversion of the "colonial dependency syndrome and submissiveness which Africans have been taught to accept."[42] Unlike Mendez and Khan's artistic visions, the Lion Youth Band aimed to express an idea of African authenticity in the Notting Hill Carnival, critiquing Trinidadian mas' practices for being too nationalistic and limiting the participation of other African and Afro-Diasporic cultures.[43] They also challenged the glamorized aesthetics of the Trinidadian Carnival, which they referred to as

[39] Interview with Greta Mendez, *Cosmopolitan Magazine,* March, 1981. Greta Mendez's personal archive. London.
[40] Owusu and Ross, *Behind the Masquerade,* 62-67.
[41] Ibidem.
[42] Michael Barnett, *The Rastafari Movement: A North American and Caribbean Perspective* (London, UK: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 21; 80.
[43] Lion Youth, *The History of Lion Youth,* newsletter, 1979. Carnival Material Collection, Notting Hill Carnival Bands, 1978-2006, CVL/2/2/4, George Padmore Institute, London.

"butterfly mas'."[44] This band offers an interesting counterpoint to A k u z u r u's participation in Khan's We De Aethiopians Band, as both groups explored a similar theme—Ethiopia, the only non-colonized African territory—but with contrasting visions and creative approaches. Despite these differences, both Campbell and Will, as well as Khan, shared an ongoing interest in spiritually based performances. For example, the Lion Youth Band selected the theme "White Fowl, Drum, and Candle" for their 1981 band, exploring a religious theme that connected spiritual systems from Africa and the Caribbean.[45] A decade later, Khan organized the dance and theater piece *Flying Costumes, Floating Tombs*, expanding on the religious cross-cultural merging of Indian and Afro-Caribbean performance that had begun with the We De Aethiopians Band. According to Khan, the piece was "an integration of Caribbean festival arts, dance, movement, music, drama, and speech patterns."[46] A rare photograph of A k u z u r u performing in this piece shows her center stage, enacting a choreography by "H" Patten, which drew on the rituals of the Hosay Festival as its cultural base (Fig. 2.12).[47]

The performances by A k u z u r u, Mendez, Campbell, and Will, though varied in scope, broadly resonated with the growing participation of women in the Trinidadian Carnival during the 1970s and 1980s, both as band members and, to a lesser extent, as band leaders.[48] Such is the case, for instance, of the often-unacknowledged work of Elsie Lee Heung and Lil Hart, central figures in the development of mas' celebrations in Port of Spain during this time. An example of Hart's work is the band Antony and Cleopatra, co-organized with her husband Edmond in 1982,

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[44] Owusu and Ross, *Behind the Masquerade,* 62-67.
[45] "Lion Youth Carnival Band presents Launching of Mas 81 'White Fowl, Drum & Candle.'" Carnival Material Collection, Notting Hill Carnival Bands, 1978-2006, CVL/3/1, George Padmore Institute, London.
[46] Keith Khan, *Flying Costumes, Floating Tombs Project Description*, 1991. Moti Roti Collection, Records of Productions and Projects, 031, Future Histories Archive, Goldsmiths, University of London, London.
[47] Ibidem.
[48] Garth L. Green and Philip W. Scher, "Introduction: Trinidad Carnival in Global Context," in *Trinidad Carnival: The Cultural Politics of a Transnational Festival* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 17-18.

which had three thousand two hundred members, ninety percent of whom were women.[49] As a young mas' performer, therefore, A k u z u r u participated, as it was the case with many other Afro-Caribbean women, in an emerging yet relentless tradition of women who challenged the expected behaviors of corporeal self-restrain and self-denial typical to the dynamics of respectability in this region.[50] Instead of adhering to what art historian Pamela R. Franco describes as the "societal standards of good, respectable, public dress, and conduct for mothers," A k u z u r u's participation in the Black Inventors Band reflects a desire for intellectual autonomy and creative independence that would become a hallmark of her artistic career.[51] Her involvement in the Black Inventors Band diverged from the traditional band costumes of Trinidad, such as the Midnight Robber, Sailor, Indian, or Pierrot Grenade. It also demonstrated her early interest in engaging with her Trinidadian background to express her African heritage in innovative ways. A k u z u r u's celebration of Black and female ingenuity and autonomy in London laid the foundation for much of the independent thinking and intersectional approach that would define her career. This vision also transcended what Franco identifies as the symbolic inheritance of a masculine, post-independence Trinidadian state, where traditional mas' served to control and exclude female bodies.[52]

Following the creative path of Mendez and Khan, who acknowledged their Trinidadian backgrounds, A k u z u r u's early work developed a cross-cultural, interspiritual, and intermedial sensibility, fusing African and Asian artistic expressions. As an Afro-Trinidadian woman, however, A k u z u r u engaged with the racial and feminist politics of London in a distinctive

[49] Ibidem.
[50] Richard D. E. Burton, "The Carnival Complex," in Richard D. E. Burton, *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition, and Play in the Caribbean* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 158-169.
[51] Pamela R. Franco, "The Invention of Traditional Mas and the Politics of Gender," in Garth L. Green and Philip W. Scher, eds., *Trinidad Carnival: The Cultural Politics of a Transnational Festival* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 41.
[52] Ibid, 42.

way. During this period, she began creating fashion designs based on Afro-Asian motifs, primarily tailored to Black feminine physiques, reflecting her interest in expanding self-fashioning options for Afro-Diasporic women. In crafting these designs, A k u z u r u both engaged with and exceeded, though without fully rejecting, the influence of Afrocentrism and Second Wave feminism. This is significant because it challenged these movements' limited inclusion of ally minority groups, as they grappled with the pervasive effects of heteropatriarchal and racist societal structures. Her contributions, which in its method and scope resonate with spiritual promiscuity as a guiding creative ethos, mark a generational shift—one that responded to her immediate context while also showcasing her creative prowess from an early age.

2.2 The Building Blocks of Designing Afro-Asian Fashion

As a fashion student in London in the mid to late 1980s, A k u z u r u, developed a body of work which formally explored asymmetries, expanded volumes, and garment construction through an architectural or structural lens. A number of watercolor sketches located at the artist's personal archive show her inventive and layered creative process, in which fusing African and Asian cultural references became a central concern. By virtue of its deconstructive nature and formal explorations, these drawings also mirror A k u z u r u's awareness of the influence that avant-garde fashion design had in Europe, particularly in Paris and London, during the late 1980s. Two of A k u z u r u' outstanding designs from this period depict Black models wearing wide gowns covering their bodies and limbs, with the exception of wrists and ankles, emphasizing their overall rectangular shape (Figs. 2.13 – 2.14). Decorated with repeating floral or geometric circular patterns on their lower section, these garments combine solid color fabrics with sheer transparencies that reveal sections of either arms or legs. As two-set pieces, these

designs also include a removable component hanging from the shoulders and falling to the front and back of the models, where geometric designs, whether angular or circular, become the focus point of the structure and composition. The contrasting colors of the draping components add further dynamism to the pieces, accentuating their repeating geometric patterns. A choice of accent accessories, such as stacked or circular rings, hanging earrings, beaded necklaces, and platform heels, tie together the volumetric concept, which is further reinforced by the models' afro hair style.

Two traditional garments, the West African *agbada* or *boubou* and the Japanese *kimono*, inspire the creation of a number of designs that A k u z u r u made at the outset of her career as a fashion designer. Meaning "voluminous attire" in Yoruba, the *agbada* is found in various parts of West Africa and it is understood, following art historian Babatunde Lawal, to have originated in the Middle East and introduced to Africa by merchants from the Maghreb.[53] Three sections normally compose the *agbada*: a rectangular, embroidered centerpiece that is flanked by wide sleeves or *awosoke*, an undervest or *awotele*, and a pair of trousers or *sokoto*, with the addition of hats, also named *fila,* and other optional accessories.[54] An example of an *agbada* from the first half of the twentieth century housed in the Saint Louis Art Museum, furthermore, shows the intricacies of their geometric pattern designs—featuring spirals, grids, a fine like work, and organic shapes—as well as their craftsmanship with indigo dying (Figs. 2.15-2.16).[55] In A k u z u r u's design, the *awosoke* and *awotele* are creatively reimagined with structural elements that differ from the more traditional designs. In the case of the former, the draping qualities recede to create a more rigid overlayer with a precise geometric construction that resonates with its own

[53] Babatunde Lawal, "Agbada," in Valerie Steele and Gale Group, eds., *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion*, electronic resource, Scribner Library of Daily Life (Detroit, MI: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2005), 30 – 32.
[54] Ibidem.
[55] Ibidem.

decorative geometric pattern. As an underlayer, the latter acquires a vaporous and lighter nature that covers the totality of the arms, instead, as custom has it, extending up until elbow-length. Evoking a sense of protection and elevation through style of the female body, A k z u r u's own take on the *agbada* as a traditional garment reflects her long-held view of her fashion designs as a type of armor that brings a sense of strength and fearlessness to the wearer.[56]

A broader understanding of A k u z u r u's early designs, however, would not be possible without accounting for her coetaneous investment in the constructive elements of the *kimono,* a traditional garment that can be worn by both men and women for secular as well as sacred purposes.[57] Asian art dealer Alan Kennedy describes the *kimono*, which translates from Japanese as "a thing to wear," as a T-shaped, body-length garment made from a single bolt of silk, making it a piece of notable surface design rather than of tailoring or weaving.[58] The general structure of the *kimono* requires that the sleeves have the appearance of a pouch, whether short as with the *kosode* or long and flowy as with the *osode.*[59] In A k u z u r u's designs, we see the referencing of the osode's longer sleeve all the whilst she incorporated, particularly for the case of the circular garment, a smaller opening through which the hand passes, a defining feature of the *kosode.* The floral design boldly covering the underlayer of the artist's first design also reminisces the intricate embroidery work of chrysanthemums in the *kimono* ensembles from the early twentieth century in Japan. A piece from the Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection, for instance, shows how these pattern designs would at times be employed solely in the lower section of the garments' compositions, privileging the use of a deep monochrome blue dye in the

[56] A k u z u r u, interview by Julián Sánchez González, June 6, 2024.
[57] Alan Kennedy, "Kimono," in Valerie Steele, ed., *The Berg Companion to Fashion* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2010), 459.
[58] Ibidem.
[59] Ibidem.

upper section of the front, back, and sleeves (Figs. 2.17-2.18). The see-through sections of the artist's earlier designs also reference the T-shape of the Japanese garment, highlighting its constructive intersection with the West African *agbada,* as well as the geometric shape obtained when opening and displaying a *kimono*'s back end.

In the late 1980s, A k u z u r u crafted one of her first garments based on a combination of Afro-Asian motifs, which emphasized the simultaneous presence of solid geometric patterns and the deconstruction of form (Figs. 2.19-2.20). Crafted as a two-piece set, the burgundy and pink ensemble consisted of a circular-shaped robe with a front pocket functioning as an overlayer, and an asymmetrical long-sleeved underlayer with a ripped lower section tied in knots. Referencing both the structural elements of the *agbada* and the *kimono*, this piece features prominent geometric appliqués in front and back that call to mind the intricate design of the kente cloth, a sartorial staple of the Asanti people of modern-day Ghana (Fig. 2.21-2.22). Considered to be a symbol of Pan-Africanism, this pattern reinforces the presence of an Afro-Diasporic ethos that reflected the artist's involvement in the Notting Hill Carnival celebrations and its push for racial justice in predominantly Black communities. Adding to the centrality of African and Afro-Diasporic geometric designs in A k u z u r u's formative years, the circle on the front of the overlayer piece references, according to the artist, fertility and regeneration, and, more specifically, the steel pan instrument from Trinidad and Tobago as a twentieth century musical invention.[60] From a broader perspective not necessarily linked with the artist's intention, the central design also calls to mind the Kongo cosmogram or *dikenga.* In Afro-diasporic cosmogonies and spiritual systems, such circular shapes, as scholar Robert Farris Thompson has

[60] A k u z u r u, interview by Julián Sánchez González, March 27, 2025.

noted, serve as the representation of the coexistence of the worlds of the living and the dead.[61] As such, these two pieces exemplify the artist's emerging sensibility to the spiritual meanings of geometric patterns, positioning her work in conversation with a rich history of Trinidadian culture as well as African abstraction.[62]

Moreover, A k u z u r u's garment's deconstructed lower section connects with a different lineage of fashion design, namely the avant-garde creations from the trailblazing generation of Japanese fashion designers from the 1970s and 1980s in Paris and London, particularly that of Rei Kawakubo. A key influence on A k u z u r u's early practice, Kawakubo's work—following Issey Miyake's initial forays into European capitals—disrupted established notions of sensuality and beauty standards for women through both concept and execution. Kawakubo purposefully introduced a worn-down aesthetic that challenged the Western preference for polished and clean-cut styles in fashion. Consequently, A k u z u r u's early tearing and knitting as gestural treatments of her fabrics resonate in concept an execution with Kawakubo's designs of her watershed collections from the early 1980s, which centrally explored monochromatic fabric deconstruction and asymmetries (Fig. 2.23). For the Japanese designer, following curator Akiko Fukai, the principle of non-ornamentation was essential, taking as its philosophical base the term *wabi-sabi* or an aesthetic of warping and distortion*,* preferring flawed, shredded, dangling, and ripped forms.[63] Other scholars have described Kawakubo's contributions to fashion design as, on one hand, moving away from the outlines of the body in a redefinition of what we consider erotic, and, on the other, collapsing the hierarchies between inexpensive and expensive, as well

[61] Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 108-117.
[62] See César Paternosto, *The Stone and the Thread: Andean Roots of Abstract Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996).
[63] Akiko Fukai, "Couture Clash," in *Rei Kawakubo: For and against Fashion,* ed. Rex Butler (London, UK: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2023) 14-15.

as between revealing and concealing.[64] All of these inflection points we see also at play in A k u z u r u's early designs.

From a spiritual standpoint that resonates with the Trinidadian artist's emerging art practice, one can link Kawakubo's work—marked by its radical embrace of imperfections and simplicity in materials—to the ascetic principles of Zen Buddhism.[65] Popularized in the Western world by the mid-twentieth century as a form of "universal mysticism," this strain of Buddhism emphasizes meditation techniques and a rejection of dualistic thinking. A strict adherence to monastic rules also underpins this spiritual tradition, despite the fact that it later became a symbol of iconoclasm, antinomianism, and anti-intellectualism in mainstream culture.[66] While it is difficult to determine how closely Kawakubo incorporated traditional or popular versions of Zen Buddhism throughout her career, her designs from the 1980s clearly prioritized an exploration of empty or negative space, which can be seen as an interpretation of the stillness of mind that arises from meditation practices. Kawakubo's brand, Comme des Garçons, resisted the polished, finished look of conventional garments through the use of this negative space, which could be seen as a reflection on the Zen Buddhist concept of emptiness. Here, subjective positions or endpoints are ultimately void of inherent value or judgment, evoking the idea of emotional detachment as a form of human liberation.[67] An argument can be made, therefore, about the Japanese designer's revolutionary aesthetic of incomplete and irreverent fashion as linked to a spiritually complex, centuries-long religious system. This aspect of Kawakubo's practice deserves further attention and interest.

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[64] Rex Butler, "Introduction," in *Rei Kawakubo: For and against Fashion*, 1-8; Barbara Vinken, "The Empire Designs Back," in *Rei Kawakubo: For and against Fashion,* 20-21.
[65] Vinken, "The Empire Designs Back," 20-21.
[66] Seiso Paul Cooper, *Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism: A Realizational Perspective* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2023), 8.
[67] Ibid., 9.

A k u z u r u's embrace of the proposals of avant-garde Japanese fashion designers is also present in numerous other sketches and garments which the artist made during her time in London. The influence of designer Issey Miyake was the artist's first introduction to Japanese contemporary fashion when he broke into the Paris fashion scene in the 1970s with experiments using fabrics and textiles that resulted, as A k u z u r u describes, sculptural works of art.[68] One of these sketches, though never realized in an actual clothing piece, shows a model donning a deconstructed tunic where the idea of negative, empty space is central to the outfit's composition (Fig. 2.24). Draping from the side of the shoulders and arms, and held in place at the neck, the tunic reveals the upper body in its entirety through a clear geometric cut in the shape of a bell where the fabric is absent. Underneath, a polka dot cropped blouse adds an element of urban fashion. The celestial bodies and orbits printed on the mid-section of the tunic, together with the also sculpted afro hairdo and the animal print ankle cuff evoke an Afro-Futuristic aesthetic. Though the artist does not explicitly identify with Afro-Futurism as an artistic and political movement, it is noteworthy that one of her enduring influences has been the avant-garde American jazz composer and musician Sun Ra.[69] The unfinished form and asymmetries also take center stage in a dress A k u z u r u made in the late 1980s, where a fitted *kimono/agbada*-styled body and sleeves and a wraparound neck piece come together in shades of purple and angular geometric planes (Figs. 2.25-2.26). Also made as a two-piece set, this garment is constructed through numerous diagonal lines in front and back that create a dynamic and edgy composition, making it elusive to pin down where one section ends and the other begins. In both sketch and garment, A k u z u r u made a conscious reference to the experimental propositions of designers

[68] A k u z u r u, interview by Julián Sánchez González, April 24, 2025.
[69] A k u z u r u, interview by Julián Sánchez González, July 31, 2024.

such as Kawakubo, while imprinting her own signature rooted in Afro-diasporic cultural expressions.

A k u z u r u's relationship with the punk fashion bourgeoning in London since the late 1970s was also essential in the development of her personal and visual language, particularly in relation to the work of Viviene Westwood. Sociologist Nick Crossley describes the Do It Yourself (DIY) aesthetics as essential to the development of punk as a countercultural movement. The conflation of high and low cultures became a staple in punk, as well as post-punk later in the 1980s, as a form of confrontation and provocation to pre-established norms and hierarchies.[70] In London these experiments took a hold of the music underground bringing to the fore notable bands such as the Sex Pistols, the Clash, and Siouxsie and the Banshees, whose styles and performances mixed loud, theatrical, and irreverent elements. The Clash, more specifically, became known for incorporating reggae music in their sounds, highlighting the growing presence of Afro-diasporic communities in London whose embrace of Rastafarianism as a religion became prominent. Sartorially, Crossley contends, the DIY aesthetics were also central to the development of an oppositional ethos in clothing, emphasizing the use of old and repurposed clothing. Fabrics were deliberately ripped and held together with the iconic safety pin which became symbolic of the movement as a recurrent accessory, and pieces were intervened with paint and household items.[71] Designers like Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood emerged from this scene due to their deconstructed, avant-garde forms which redefined the aesthetically pleasing, through still controversial, sartorial trends of the 1960s that privileged harmony in form and style. Two notable examples of these designers' collaborative works are

[70] Nick Crossley, *Networks of Sound, Style and Subversion: The Punk and Post-Punk Worlds of Manchester, London, Liverpool and Sheffield, 1975-80* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2015), 4.
[71] Ibid., 5

the pieces *Bondage Suit* from 1976 and *Witches* from 1983-84 (Figs. 2.27-2.28). In addition to exploring monochromatic compositions in all black and all white, these pieces thematically reference social and cultural taboos associated with so-called deviant sexualities and spiritualities, such as Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, and Sadism and Sadomasochism (BDSM) and popular imaginary of witchcraft in the Euro-American world. By going against the grain of propriety in design and thematic choices, these works evidence the profound impact that fashion design in punk culture had in A k u z u r u's practice.

Curator Claire Wilcox has argued that McLaren and Westwood's collaboration emerged from an antiauthoritarian position as well as a rejection of the middle-class store boutique model that had become standardized in the fashion industry since the 1960s.[72] In the mid-1970s, for instance, McLaren and Westwood transformed their recently opened store 430 into SEX, a fashion boutique featuring the "closed world of perversity," which brought a wide variety of disenfranchised clientele, including voyeurs and sex workers, as well as a proto-punk youth.[73] Interestingly, Westwood acknowledged that the uses of everyday items, such as safety pins, were inspired by the talismanic qualities of accessorizing in Indigenous and Afro-diasporic cultures, in which, I would add, the repurposing of everyday materials for ceremonial and ritualistic purposes is a widespread spiritual practice.[74] Much like the musical trend that bands like The Clash explored, this aspect of McLaren and Westwood's collaborations reassert the cross-cultural interests that Western creatives engaged with as African and Afro-Caribbean cultures prominently emerged in the London art scene in the 1980s. By allowing women to dress assertively, as Wilcox notes, McLaren and Westwood's designs are indicative of an interest,

[72] Claire Wilcox, *Vivienne Westwood* (London, UK: Victoria & Albert Museum, 2004), 11.
[73] Ibid., 12.
[74] Ibid., 14.

though not unproblematic, between of intersectional artmaking as well as Second Wave Feminism. As a Black woman from Trinidad, A k u z u r u's illustrations and sartorial designs from London years beg the question of how they interpreted and reappropriated Westwood's referencing of Indigenous and African cultures from an Afro-diasporic perspective. In a movement of turns and returns between Euro-American and Afro-diasporic cultures, a conversation that harks back to the beginning of European modernism in the early twentieth century, A k u z u r u's engagement with punk brings to light the decided influence of Black culture in the emerging of this underground scene in the English capital. This fruitful coexistence of punk and Afro-diasporic artistic expressions recalls Isaac Juien's *Young Soul Rebels* film from 1991, which purports a positive outlook on interracial relationships taking place in London in the convoluted period of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Seeing her work as the African and Afro-diasporic response to the work of Kawakubo and Westwood, A k u z u r u also attempted to deconstruct the separation between Western and Eastern cultures, finding inspiration in both designers' audacity and fearlessness.[75]

In March 1990, just months before graduating with Magna Cum Laude honors from her undergraduate program, A k u z u r u held her first solo show in London at the Yaa, titled "Afro/Works Fusion" (Fig. 2.29). The space allowed the artist to translate her artistic process into a spatial format, incorporating influences from the Black Power movement, avant-garde Japanese trends, and irreverent and experimental punk design. This exhibition would be followed by another, similar show in 1991 at Pamela's Restaurant, titled "Vestiges of the Past Today." Reaffirming her interest in merging Afro-Asian motifs, the former exhibition featured numerous sketches and garments she had created since the start of her studies, sharing the fruits of her

[75] A k u z u r u, interview by Julián Sánchez González, April 24, 2025.

university work with the Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Diasporic communities of Notting Hill. One photograph from "Afro/Works Fusion" shows the emerging artist alongside a wall of white panels displaying her designs, including two richly printed tunics that highlight her creative process at the time (Fig. 2.30). These two pieces, based on the traditional *kimono* and *agbada* designs, were sewn using batik fabrics purchased in London and sourced from West Africa. The horizontal layout of these garments emphasized their graphic and constructive qualities, akin to how such textiles are typically exhibited in museums. In the second photograph, a mannequin wears an indigo batik sleeveless dress with flowing asymmetries and spiral patterns across the chest and neck, evoking the shield-like geometric elements seen in A k u z u r u's sketches—one of which is positioned at the center-right of the scene (Fig. 2.31). The back of the dress, with its quilted hood opening was also a sculptural element representing African women carrying their babies tied to the back, referencing the centrality that fertility had, and continues to have, as a concept in the artist's work.[76] Throughout the show, the artist installed long, thread-like fabrics, symbolizing cultural exchange and interconnectedness across geographies and fashion styles, attesting to the importance of upholding creative autonomy in the artist's creative process.

Although unique in its visual approach and intermediality, A k u z u r u's incorporation of Afro-Diasporic and Asian elements in her work aligns with a long history of Afro-Asian cross-cultural exchanges in Trinidad and Tobago and the wider Caribbean. These intersections date back to the early twentieth century, most notably exemplified by artists of Chinese descent, such as Amy Leon Pang and Sybil Atteck, who played pivotal roles in establishing a professional network of artists in Trinidad and Tobago.[77] Through the founding of the Society for Trinidad

[76] A k u z u r u, interview by Julián Sánchez González, April 24, 2025.
[77] Patricia Mohammed, "Intersecting Trajectories: Chinese and Indian Artists in Trinidad in the Early Twentieth Century," in Alexandra Chang, ed., *Circles and Circuits: Chinese Caribbean Art* (Los Angeles, CA: Chinese American Museum, 2018), 162-165.

Independents in 1939 and the Art Society of Trinidad and Tobago in 1943, these artists brought together creatives and intellectuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Among these figures were notable individuals like Marxist historian C.L.R. James, a key proponent of the Black Radical tradition in social studies and the arts, and painter and carnival bandleader and designer Carlisle Chang, whose work was essential in shaping a hybrid, multifaceted national identity for Trinidad and Tobago.[78] By the mid-1960s, the cultural environment in which A k u z u r u was born emphasized collaboration between marginalized communities as well as Third World solidarity. Though contentious, as minority groups often clashed for visibility and resources before and after independence, this ongoing negotiation was crucial to the country's development as a postcolonial nation and the formation of a polysemic national identity. Therefore, A k u z u r u's practice, both as a fashion designer and mas' player with the Yaa, reflects Édouard Glissant's call to recognize the culturally diverse and creolized reality of the Caribbean through collective affirmation and activism.[79]

Furthermore, A k u z u r u's designs follows in the steps of the Caribbean Arts Movement that emerged in London during the 1960s, which included several Trinidadian artists and intellectuals, such as the trailblazing textile designer and painter Althea McNish.[80] More broadly, A k u z u r u's work represents a fashion-based, mas'-inspired, and spiritually driven contribution to what art historian Kobena Mercer described as a Black cultural renaissance in Britain during the 1980s, particularly in film, visual arts, and publishing.[81] Her commitment to reasserting Afro-Asian continuities and solidarities reinforces and exceeds, by virtue of its

[78] Ibidem.
[79] Édouard Glissant, "Toward Caribbeanness," in *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville, NC: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 221-222.
[80] Althea McNish, interviewed by Anne Walmsley, February 1, 1987. The Caribbean Artist Movement: Papers of Anne Walmsley, CAM/6/51, George Padmore Institute, London.
[81] Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), 16-24.

spiritual overtones, Mercer's notion of "cultures of hybridity," referring to Caribbean, Asian, and African cross-cultural collaboration as a response to the political crisis of authority and the increasing policing of marginalized communities during the British and American neoconservative political turns of the 1980s.[82] Although not as overtly political as many of her contemporaries, A k u z u r u's early practice also reflects the fluidity with which the term "Black" was conceptualized in Britain at the time, being an all-encompassing identity marker that brought together Afro-Diasporic, Asian, and other marginalized communities under the same roof.[83] This sociocultural construction emerged from a need for visibility but soon became problematic, as it forced many artistic collectives to homogenize their proposals in order to receive government funding, as was the case with Greta Mendez's MAAS Movers. An exhibition like "Afro/Works Fusion" mirrored a broader conversation within diasporic communities in Britain, actively challenging the concept of nationhood through a monolithic lens while paradoxically drawing on the Trinidadian multicultural context as a unifying thread.

By intertwining Afro-diasporic and East Asian avant-garde forms with references to spirituality, A k u z u r u can be seen in direc dialogue with African-American artists exploring similar themes in the second half of the twentieth century, such as Senga Nengudi. Art historian and curator Kellie Jones underscores that Nengudi's work, beyond its reinvention or reinscription of African traditions, also engaged with Japanese theatrical and artistic influences, which she explored during her travels to Japan in the mid to late 1960s.[84] Most notably, Nengudi's *Ceremony for Freeway Fets* from 1978—her first full-length collaborative

[82] Ibid., 3-4.
[83] Keith Khan, interviewed by Julián Sánchez González, August 30, 2024; Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities (1988)," in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, eds. Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 246-256; Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 28.
[84] Kellie Jones, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 207-208.

performance, staged beneath a Los Angeles highway—bridged West and Central African masquerade traditions with pre-Buddhist and pan-Asian shamanic trance performances (Fig. 2.32).[85] In the hour-long piece, Nengudi dons a flowing yellow fabric that drapes gracefully over her body as she moves with outstretched arms. Atop her head, she wears a crown-like structure composed of fabric and pantyhose. Drawing on art historian Robert Farris Thompson's analysis, Jones argues that Nengudi's "tent-like structure," combining fabric and movement, evokes the transformative power of masquerade traditions, where cloth carries intrinsic spiritual significance.[86] Jones further highlights how Nengudi's engagement with anti-art aesthetics—rejecting pristine or elaborate performance settings—stemmed from her interest in contemporary Japanese theater forms, such as Butoh.[87] A decade later, and without knowledge of Nengudi's practice, A k u z u r u pursued a similarly intersectional, cross-cultural approach, shaped by her Trinidadian background. Her training in the carnival traditions of Port of Spain and later in London infused an Afro-Caribbean perspective into explorations akin to Nengudi's, contributing to artistic developments in the wake of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements from a transnational perspective. Moreover, A k u z u r u's engagement with Japanese avant-garde fashion designers, such as Rei Kawakubo, parallels—albeit through the lens of fashion studies and design—Nengudi's investment in theatrical expression. Seen as part of a continuum, Nengudi and A k u z u r u are exemplary of Afro-diasporic artists redefining the meanings of the sacred through a spiritually promiscuous perspective that sought interconnection and communion.

[85] Ibid., 201-209.
[86] Ibid., 197.
[87] Ibid, 210.

A k u z u r u's early designs, moreover, contribute to the history of racial and political resistance in fashion through a feminist lens. By reimagining garments like the *agbada*—traditionally worn by male members of the upper echelons of West African societies—the artist seeks to find alternative forms of female sensual expressions not solely rooted in the body.[88] This approach is particularly poignant considering that A k u z u r u made these designs in the wake of the international rise of the Black Panther Party (BPP) and its notably masculinist sartorial codes, which defined its public image in the 1960s and 1970s. Kara Keeling's analysis of the cinematic and gendered effects of the BPP's uniform is especially relevant as a counterpoint to A k u z u r u's designs. Comprising leather jackets, berets, and guns, the BPP's attire drew inspiration from contemporary armed revolutionary movements, emphasizing a masculine public image that challenged both the historical feminization of Black men and the sensual consumption of Black women's bodies.[89] Unlike the BPP's rejection of femininity—not of women's participation—as a means of Afro-Diasporic liberation, A k u z u r u, working with sufficient historical and geographical distance from the California-born movement, was free to explore the feminine as a liberatory category in Black fashion. In doing so, her work also converses with Isaac Julien's experimental film *Territories* (1984), where the British filmmaker critically reflects, using footage from the Notting Hill Carnival, on the reduction of the annual celebration and of dance as a form of sexual misconduct and debauchery.[90] Through its expanded volumes and references to mas', A k u z u r u's work continued the revolutionary impulse of resisting the objectification of the Black female body, while simultaneously challenging the false narrative that femininity is an inadequate or insufficient platform for Black liberation.

[88] A k u z u r u, interview by Julián Sánchez González, June 6, 2024.
[89] Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 75; 84-85.
[90] Isaac Julien, *Territories,* 1984 in British Film Institute Mediatheque, London.

2.3 Mas' Designs and Interspirituality in Action

One year after "Afro/Works Fusion," A k u z u r u designed her first and only masquerade band for the Notting Hill Carnival, in yet another collaboration with the Yaa. Invited by the late carnival entrepreneur Vernon "Shabaka" Thompson, director of the institution, A k u z u r u brought a contemporary take of the historical roots of Trinidadian mas' to London. Titled "Roots of Mas': A Street Theater Experience," A k u z u r u's band was small in size and featured a selection of traditional characters from the Trinidadian Carnival (Fig. 2.33). These included, for instance, the Bèlè or Belair dancers, a traditional Afro-Creole dance of spiritual and political undertones practiced in some parts of the Caribbean, as seen in a watercolor and two photographs of the garments in the parade (Figs. 2.34-2.36). Just like Bèlè, which was performed during times of slave trade to conceal African forms of worship as court dancing,[91] the band's subtitle emphasized the original theatrical aspects of mas'. It sought to further legitimize the annual celebration as an art form in its own right, highlighting its narrative and moral qualities. Moreover, the characters of Roots of Mas' established a thematic continuity with the folklore of Trinidad and Tobago, where myths of semi-human and supernatural beings play an active role in the popular imagination, continuously feeding the artistry of carnival. Stemming from an otherworldly, Trinidadian perspective rooted in carnival traditions, A k u z u r u's band contributed to the histories of twentieth-century mas' design and theater in both her home country and London.

The link between alternative epistemologies, non-hegemonic spiritualities, rituals, and carnival is an essential feature of its celebration in the Americas and the Caribbean. As a practice

[91] Camee Maddox-Wingfield, "The Quest for Spiritual Purpose in a Secular Dance Community: Bèlè's Rebirth in Contemporary Martinique," in Yolanda Covington-Ward and Jeanette Selma Jouili, eds., *Embodying Black Religions in Africa and Its Diasporas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 175-76.

of hierarchical inversion of colonial power, both before and after the end of slavery and colonial rule, carnival has traditionally carried an important sociopolitical message of emancipation. Philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, writing in the mid-1960s, showed how much of these transgressive forms of opposition to structures of power come from European conventions associated to the celebration. He observed that in the Middle Ages and Renaissance the culture of folk or popular humor, which mocked official rituals and social conventions, was commonly expressed in the celebration and procession of carnival. For Bakhtin, however, these comic rituals were completely deprived of any mystical or magical character, as well as ecclesiastical dogmatism, for these purviews were their targets for reversal.[92] In the Caribbean, these conventions took on a different connotation as Afro-diasporic and Indigenous cultures hybridized with the European cultural matrix, while seeking to keep cultural and spiritual expressions afloat. Literary scholar Richard D. Burton, for instance, underscored the intimate relationship between carnival and spiritual possession rituals as mirror practices of performative empowerment in the Caribbean, whether individual or collective. For him, ritual possession's theatricality and relational nature, which necessitates of a group in communal celebration, parallels the way that masquerade enables embodying alternative archetypes or characters which are recognized and *played* with by the wearer and the community.[93] The enactment of otherness through carnivalesque practices in the region, carried a double ritualistic aspect both as European sense of reversal and derision in the form of folk humor, as well as in the reproduction of possession rituals through the uses of masquerade. This is an essential aspect of the carnivalesque forms A k u z u r u explored as part of her practice which highlighted reversal of

[92] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 4-8.
[93] Burton, *Afro-Creole,* 238-239.

expected codes of conduct as well as exceeding the limits of the corporeal as a form of transcendence.

Furthermore, performance and carnival art scholars Richard Schechner and Milla Cozart Riggio have addresses the spiritual and otherworldly elements embedded in the celebration of carnival in Trinidad and Tobago, which links to the popular lore of the country as well as non-positivist conceptions of the body, time, and space. Schechner, for instance, argues that the convergence of Shango, Christian, Hindu, and Islamic practices in the Trinidadian carnival gives way to a cultural tension that is conducive for creativity. He further contends that in this interspiritual, syncretic interaction the cosmologies of African and South Asian cultures have prevailed in time over those deriving from a European Christian and Jewish religious matrix.[94] Riggio, on the other hand, asserts that carnival allows for the celebration of the power of the imagination and fantasy over the logic of reason. She underscores that carnival, as an annual celebration, contends with the cyclical rhythms of the seasons, offering a counterpoint to the modern linear time scheme that structures the industrialized world.[95] In doing so, the celebration, Riggio further contends, privileges matters related to the spirit instead of material or phenomenological concerns, allowing for a higher emphasis on the commemoration of ancestry as well as community building.[96] This is of particular importance to analyze A k u z u r u's work in London given her connection with the Yaa as a center dedicated to the promotion of Afro-Caribbean culture in the English capital. The center recalled the name of Nana Yaa Asantewaa, the Queen Mother from the Asona royal family of the Asante state of Ejisu, who commanded an

[94] Richard Schechner, "Carnival (theory) after Bakhtin" in Riggio, ed., *Carnival: Culture in Action,* 10.
[95] Milla Cozart Riggio, "Time Out or Time In?" The Urban Dialectic of Carnival in *Carnival: Culture in Action*, 23.
[96] Ibid., 27.

army of warriors to confront the British and their allies at the turn of the twentieth century.[97] Directed by Vernon "Shabaka" Thompson for over twenty-five years, the Yaa was squarely rooted in his vision that carnival could be used to develop, unite, and sustain us as human beings, as well as in the liberation of African peoples via economic means.[98]

Two sketches A k u z u r u made in preparation for Roots of Mas' depict the characters Pierrot Grenade and the Negue Jadin in stylized attire, referencing the histories of carnival in the Caribbean nation while maintaining her distinctive aesthetic sensibility in fashion design (Figs. 2.37-2.38). The first sketch portrays the quintessential jester of carnival, the Pierrot Grenade, a satirical figure based on the original sixteenth-century French Pierrot—known for scholarly expression, including full-length Shakespearean passages—through witty spelling and rhymes. In A k u z u r u's design, some original elements of the masquerade are preserved, such as the burlap gown, sewn fabric strips, and whip. Consistent with her previous work, however, the mask covering the character's face and the garment's overall design feature an avant-garde asymmetric construction. The Negue Jadin, on the other hand, is an early nineteenth century masquerade that represents the emancipated enslaved African's imitation of their former masters. Although now considered an extinct masquerade, the Negue Jadin profusely appears in a modified version in Carnival stick-fighting performances up to this day. A k u z u r u's interpretation of this "ole mas'", a term used to refer to the first characters developed in the Trinidadian carnival tradition, retains key costume elements such as knee-length pants and a wooden stick. Similar to the Bèlè dancer and the Pierrot Grenade, this watercolor also incorporates volumetric and deconstructed features in both the upper and lower sections. By

[97] Harcourt Fuller, "Commemorating an African Queen: Ghanaian Nationalism, the African Diaspora, and the Public Memory of Nana Yaa Asantewaa, 1952-2009," *African Arts* 47, no. 4 (2014): 58-61.
[98] Seani B, "Shabaka Will Stay in Our Hearts," *The Voice,* July 31, 2023. URL: https://www.voice-online.co.uk/entertainment/2023/07/31/shabaka-will-stay-in-our-hearts/

referencing satire, moreover, A k u z u r u's designs evoke the way enslaved Africans used mockery and irony as a form of symbolic resistance and cultural reaffirmation.[99]

By drawing from traditional Trinidadian masquerades, A k u z u r u's band acknowledges the diverse cosmogonies that have shaped the Caribbean since European settlement in the late fifteenth century. It also evokes the spiritually infused oral traditions that inform Trinidadian myths and folklore, such as the nature-bound legends of forest protectors like Papa Bois, the old man of the woods, or Mama Dlo, the monstrous mother of the waters. During A k u z u r u's involvement with the Notting Hill Carnival, these traditions had become less and less popular from the usual mas' repertoires, both in Port of Spain and London. The celebrations had shifted toward new expressions of mas' focused on lavish and fantastical presentations of design ingenuity, along with efforts for Afro-diasporic and Asian-diasporic reaffirmation. In recalling the subversion of hierarchies and norms embodied by traditional characters in Trinidad, A k u z u r u's band brings to mind what Cozart Riggio describes as carnival's "inherent capacity to appropriate spaces and transgress boundaries in order to manifest and celebrate aspects of human community."[100] Their irreverence also suggests, as scholar Krista Thompson highlights, the way performers "forge alternate relationships to their labor and the capitalist economy, [and] create new forms of community across diverse constituents locally and transnationally."[101] In this sense, Roots of Mas' sought to bring awareness to the original purpose of the annual celebration, beyond extraordinary designs or an overly determined racial discourse. This socially engaged

[99] "Ole Mas'," *Trinidad Carnival Magazine,* 1973. Nasser Khan Carnival Collection, Carnival Magazines, National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain.
[100] Riggio, "Time Out or Time In?," 15.
[101] Krista Thompson, "'Our Good Democracy': The Social and Political Practice of Carnival and Junkanoo Aesthetics," in Claire Tancons and Krista A. Thompson, eds., *En Mas': Carnival and Performance Art of the Caribbean* (New York, NY; New Orleans, LA: Independent Curators International (ICI), Contemporary Arts Center, 2015), 31.

approach was further grounded in the Yaa's support of her work as a grassroots community organization.

A k u z u r u's design for the Midnight Robber character deserves special attention, as it further demonstrates her interest in visually exploring Afro-Diasporic legacies and connections. Like the Pierrot Grenade, the Midnight Robber's character is known for its menacing and exaggerated use of prose. Educator and publisher Rhona Baptiste notes that this personality trait both mocks the master's command of the English language and continues the storytelling traditions of West African griots.[102] In her watercolor, A k u z u r u's preserves the character's sartorial signifiers, including a wide-brimmed, fringed hat influenced by 1920s Western cinema in Trinidad and Tobago, and a black cape with a printed skull motif, underscoring the Robber's devilish nature (Fig. 2.39). Given this stylistic hybridization, the Midnight Robber costume, according to playwright Rawle Ribbons, shows how "African masquerades transferred readily to the Carnival context, losing some of their specific religious values but gaining as creative entities."[103] Ribbons further argues, nonetheless, that alongside Moko Jumbies or stilt walkers, African warriors, Black Indians, and other masquerades, the Midnight Robber embodies the deep connection between carnival with Afro-Diasporic spiritualities. This is a link that practitioners of Orisa, also known outside of Trinidad as Shango, traditions in the Caribbean have actively kept as well as enacted during Carnival.[104] Though A k u z u r u's connections with these spiritual groups from Trinidad would come a year later after her return to Port of Spain, the "Robber" prefaces her sensibility for an oral tradition of West African origin.

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[102] Rhona Baptiste, "Vintage Mas'- Five traditional characters in Trinidad and Tobago Carnival," *Caribbean Affairs*, Vol.7, No. 6 (1997), 146.
[103] Rawle Ribbons, "Influence of Orisa on the Popular Arts in Trinidad and Tobago," 1995, 3. Special Library Collection, University of the West Indies, Saint Augustine.
[104] Ibidem.

Recent scholarship by theologian Dianne M. Stewart has outlined a historical, theological, and sociocultural context of the development of the Yoruba-Orisa tradition of Trinidad and Tobago since its emergence in the nineteenth century. Though sharing a Western African matrix as other spiritual systems that came into the Caribbean islands during colonial slave trade, Yoruba-Orisa practices took definitive root in the country after slavery was abolished in the 1830s, making it one of the most predominant beliefs amongst Afro-diasporic communities in which, Sango or Shango, plays, indeed, a central role as one of many deities from the Yoruba pantheon. Stewart identifies the key tenets of the Yoruba-Orisa beliefs as invested in building a culturally-specific, Africana nationhood and sovereignty, protecting kinship and family, defending social belonging, and projecting acts of "motherness" or of caring and healing.[105] Despite being associated with other systems of beliefs of East Asian, Native American, and European-Catholic origin, Yoruba-Orisa, Stewart further contends, should be seen against the predominant discourse of religious syncretism in the Afro-Caribbean world. Instead, the development of this spiritual system, later sanctioned as religion, should be seen, according to the theologian, as having been able to preserve distinct Western African structures across the centuries, even building solidarities between various Africana nations.[106] From vilified as a type of obeah or black magic and evil in a decidedly colonialist mindset present in Trinidad, the practices of Yoruba-Orisa have been, nonetheless, extensively recognized in the Caribbean nation and abroad. During Ak u z u r u's studies in London in the 1980s, Orisa went through a period of increased acceptance in Trinidad, including government-sanctioned protections as a result of the rise of the Black Power Movement in the country in the 1960s. In the 1990s, the

[105] Dianne M. Stewart, *Obeah, Orisa & Religious Identity in Trinidad: Africana Nations and the Power of Black Sacred Imagination* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 11.
[106] Ibid., 16-17; 47.

National Council of Orisa Elders was established to steer the direction of the various strains of Orisa spiritualities and palaces or shrines, places or Orisa worship, in Trinidad.[107]

In addition to connecting with Trinidadian Afro-Diasporic culture and spirituality, A k u z u r u's inclusion of the Midnight Robber in the Roots of Mas' Band also highlights the growing history of Afro-Asian cultural intersections in Trinidad. In 1978, Midnight Robber masquerader Ali Rahaman Mohamed from Couva compiled and self-published a manual of the carnival character's speeches—a personal effort to educate others about its lore and behavior. His opening speech emphasizes the Robber's otherworldly nature, including his mastery of sorcery and witchcraft, and his connection to the devil to frighten and steal from his victim.[108] As the son of an Indian indentured laborer who arrived in Trinidad in 1912, Mohamed's story reflects the increasing involvement of East Indians with Afro-diasporic cultures in Trinidad since the 1970s. More broadly, it also reflects this group's engagement with the Shango or Orisa spiritualities during this period, as Trinidadian scholars Noor Kumar Mahabir and Ashram Maharaj have noted. This cultural mingling resulted from a softening of racial prejudices and competition between minority groups in the Caribbean, leading to wider interactions between their spiritual practices.[109] Mahabir and Maharaj also highlight similarities between the Orisa religion and spirit possession in the Hindu Kali-Mai or Black Mother cult, as well as the reverence for ancestors in the Indian Shia Muslim observance of Hosay.[110] Much like Keith Khan's designs, A k u z u r u's work can be seen as a challenge to Afrocentric positions that resisted collaboration with East Indian communities. Black Panther Party leader Stokely Carmichael, later known as Kwame

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[107] Ibid., 7.
[108] Ali Rahaman Mohamed, "King Calabar Robber Speeches," 1978, booklet, 9. Nasser Khan Carnival Collection, National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain.
[109] Noor Kumar Mahabir and historian Ashram Maharaj, "Hindu Elements in the Shango/Orisa Cult of Trinidad," Institute of Indo-Caribbean Studies, 1988, 6. Special Library Collection, University of the West Indies, Saint Augustine.
[110] Ibid., 8-9.

Ture, famously upheld this view, distinguishing Black Panther Party revolutionaries from, though not opposing, similar efforts by East Indians.[111] While not immediately apparent, A k u z u r u's Robber can indeed function as a symbol of cultural interdependence and interconnection between African and Asian-rooted traditions, as well as a reclamation of non-hegemonic spiritualities demonized in the colonial enterprise. It is the symbol of a spiritually promiscuous purview that rooted deeper in her early practice.

The cross-cultural, historical focus of Roots of Mas' also responded to the increasing emphasis on revelry and excess that both the Trinidad and Notting Hill Carnivals had fully embraced.[112] A k u z u r u's band engaged with a decades-long debate within carnival circles regarding the rise and dominance of "pretty" or "fancy" mas' during the latter half of the twentieth century. This carnival aesthetic, which coincided with the oil boom and the brief economic prosperity of Trinidad in the 1970s, featured flamboyant depictions of royalty-inspired concepts from various cultures, replacing the tradition of satirical "ole mas'."[113] Although lavish costumes dominated Port of Spain during this period, one notable example from 1977 was Raoul Garib's "Tiffany's Treasure," an award-winning masquerade worn by Tessa John for the Universal Lights Bands (Fig. 2.40). With its focus on a symbol of refinement and design craftsmanship, the costume reflects an era of shifting social and artistic values. According to cultural historian Nasser Khan, this new style allowed Trinidadian designers and masqueraders to "widely use their creativity and artistry to portray mainly tangible and non-abstract costumes

[111] Selwyn Ryan, "Black Power of Black Powerlessness?" in *Art and Culture. The Quarterly Journal of the National Cultural Council*, 1972. Nasser Khan Carnival Collection, The National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain; Kwame Ture, "Banned but Not Silenced. Kwame Ture Speaks," *Spare Rib Magazine,* 1991, 17. Notting Hill Carnival Media and Publicity, 1978-2005, CVL/3/4, George Padmore Institute, London.
[112] A k u z u r u, interview by Julián Sánchez González, September 7, 2024.
[113] Riggio, "Time Out or Time In?," 15.

that transformed our streets into a thematic visual spectacle of color and living theatre." [114] However, some, like Aubrey Adams, a cultural authority in Trinidad, lamented as early as the 1960s that carnival celebrations were moving away from "the good old, gay creole fête that it used to be" and were becoming more like "a Hollywood pageantry."[115] As a London-based band, Roots of Mas' was twice removed from its cultural and geographical origins, providing a contribution that, far from being simple or traditionalist, engaged in poignant social commentary.

Despite its stylistic distance and historical positioning, A k u z u r u's Roots of Mas' conversed with other masquerade designers' efforts for racial and cultural reaffirmation. Her work follows in the steps of what African-American scholar and anthropologist Lyndon K. Gill describes as the "royalty of masquerade design in the 1970s," which includes renowned figures such as George Bailey, Carlisle Chang, Stephen Lee Heung, and Wayne Berkeley.[116] Their influence on the Trinidadian Carnival extends back to the 1950s, a fruitful period that allowed designers to explore new creative outlets and materials following the end of World War II. Bailey, a household name defining the era of "pretty" mas', gained public recognition as a creative prodigy when his band Back to Africa won him his first Band of the Year title in 1957 (Fig. 2.41). In a photograph of the procession by A.C. Fung, an imagined African King and Queen parade in regal attire, adorned with a European-style crown and umbrella, as well as lavish robes featuring animal prints and abundant feathers. In a typical carnivalesque reversal of the social and racial hierarchies established by the English Empire overseas, the monarchs stride confidently in their magnificent garb, followed by their court, conveying a message of dignified

[114] Nasser Khan, "Legendary Bandleaders of Yesteryear: Call that George," in *The Trinidad Guardian*, January 29, 2011. Special Heritage Collection, National Library of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain.
[115] Aubrey Adams, "Independence Carnival," *The Humming Bird*, 19. Nasser Khan Collection, National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain.
[116] Lynd Lyndon Kamaal Gill, *Erotic Islands: Art and Activism in the Queer Caribbean* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 36-37.

Black beauty. Considered, as journalist Joan Rampersad noted, the "most celebrated band in the history of modern Carnival," Back to Africa challenged the prevailing "stereotype of poor, miserable Africa by drawing on the elaborate pomp typically associated with bands depicting the history of Europe."[117] In defiance of the tradition favoring light-skinned carnival queens—evident, for example, in photographs from the Jaycee's Carnival Queen show, a regional beauty pageant historically tied to Caribbean carnivalesque aesthetics (Fig. 2.42)—Bailey's band delivered a radical message of Black liberation. This daring proposition inspired future band designers, and, in a way, also prefaced the ideological tenets of the Black Power Movement in Trinidad—an influence in A k u z u r u's early practice.

Furthermore, the prolific collaboration between band leaders Elsie and Stephen Lee Heung and seminal artist and band designer Carlisle Chang during the 1960s and 1970s highlights the influence of Asian-Diasporic cultures in the celebration of the Trinidadian Carnival. Their first collaboration, the band Japan: Land of the Kabuki (Fig. 2.43) from 1964, featured mime elements from the Japanese theatrical tradition, while the band China: The Forbidden City from 1967, a visual spectacle of traditional Chinese imagery and costumes, won Band of the Year. Reflecting on his career, Chang stated that his work with the Lee Heungs "developed hand props into a fine art," while also introducing new elements to the carnival scene such as Chinese drums and East Indian tassa drummers.[118] In his writings, Chang also traced the public presence of Chinese migrants in Trinidadian Carnival back to the 1920s, noting that the 1940s and 1950s marked a decisive period of emerging new talent.[119] Other designers of Asian

[117] Joan Rampersad, "Bailey Changed the Face of Mas," *Trinidad Express*, May 6, 1993. Special Heritage Collection, National Library of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain.
[118] Carlisle Chang, "Chinese in Trinidad Carnival," *TDR (1988-)* 42, no. 3 (1998): 218.
[119] Ibid., 217. The emergence of Asian band designers like Manzai Lei, Lyle Ackrill, and Robert Ammon directly influenced future prominent, non-Asian bandleaders, such as Harold Saldenah and Edmond Hart.

origin, such as Neville Aming, sought to explore a broader pan-Asian cultural connection with bands such as Lost City of Angkor from 1978, which signaled a growing proclivity for showcasing the splendor of ancient South Asian civilizations. Aming, who also rose to prominence in the 1950s as a band designer, created an impressive "pretty" mas' interpretation of the found ruins of Cambodia's tropical forests, complete with warriors, temple guards, flag bearers, and court dancers.[120] Together, these designers left an indelible mark of Asian cultural expressions in the Trinidadian public sphere, playing crucial role in shaping Trinidadian Carnival bands before A k u z u r u's move to London.

Chang and the Lee Heungs' final collaboration, the band We Kinda Ah People from 1975, advocated for the intercultural Trinidadian ethos also prevalent in A k u z u r u's practice, serving as another historical precursor to the artist's career. Advocating for national unity over a decade after Trinidad's independence from British rule, Chang's band proclaimed the slogan "All ah we is one" to signify and reaffirm the ethnic and racial diversity of the Caribbean nation.[121] Winning Best Band of the Year, the band We Kinda Ah People featured the "Kite Festival" King and "Nylon Pool" Queen masquerades, evoking the cultural celebrations and natural landmarks of Trinidad and Tobago.[122] More significant for this study is that the band also highlighted the coalescence of African and Asian cultures, including sections such as "We limbo," referencing the limbo dance tradition originating from Afro-Diasporic culture in Tobago, and We chinee, an ode to the Chinese migrants in the island nation. These sections mas' showcased, first, shields inspired by the Zulu people's ceremonial and warfare traditions.

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[120] Neville Aming. Lost City of Angkor. *Trinidad Carnival Magazine,* 1978. Nasser Khan Carnival Collection, Carnival Magazines, National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain.
[121] Judy Raymond, "Carlisle Chang," *Caribbean Beat Magazine*, Issue 31, 1998. URL: https://www.caribbean-beat.com/issue-31/carlisle-chang#axzz8mHdKOUze.
[122] CDC Parade of Bands, Official Program, 1975, 3-6, Nasser Khan Carnival Collection, National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain.

Located in modern-day South Africa, Zulu culture's Nguni shields are a highly specialized craft, which denotes group affiliation, as well as protection, through specific pattern designs.[123] Second, the band also featured Chinese hats evoking traditional red and gold sculptural ornaments (Figs. 2.44-2.45). Thus, the merging of Afro-Asian references in Chang's mas', performed by revelers from various racial and cultural backgrounds, underscores the centrality of cultural intersectionality in Trinidadian society, reinforcing the importance of inclusivity and solidarity between social groups. Chang's cross-cultural, nationalistic inspiration would also form the creative foundation of future masquerades, most notably bandleader Irving McWilliams' Mama Look Ah Mas' Band from 1973, a visually updated review of "ole" mas' traditions, and the band Know Yuh Country from 1978, an award-winning band of three thousand members that focused on landscapes and significant sites in Trinidad.[124]

However, Wayne Berkeley's groundbreaking designs are the ones that most closely resemble A k u z u r u's art practice's cross-cultural and interspiritual explorations. While Berkeley, a representative of the "pretty" mas' tradition, was not directly involved in A k u z u r u's creative process, his designs engaged with the futuristic, esoteric, and spiritual currents of the 1970s countercultural movement. These contributions transformed the visual languages of the Trinidad Carnival before A k u z u r u's involvement as a participant and designer. Self-described as a "creator of creeds" and "invoker of spirits,"[125] his fascination with the otherworldly is clearly expressed in the band Secrets of the Sky from 1973, which he co-created with Robert Ammon, a designer of Asian descent. Inspired by space-age bands such as Chang's

[123] "Zulu Shield," Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford. URL: https://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/weapons/index.php/tour-by-region/oceania/africa/arms-and-armour-africa-32/index.html
[124] "Mama Look Ah Mas'. Runner Up Band of the Year," *Trinidad Carnival Magazine*, 1973. Nasser Khan Carnival Collection, National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain; "Irvin McWilliams. Know Yuh Country. Band of the Year," *Trinidad Carnival Magazine*, 1978. Nasser Khan Carnival Collection National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain.
[125] Wayne Berkeley, *Wayne Berkeley. Costume Design Vol. 1* (Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, 1999).

Conquest of Space Band from 1970, Berkeley commented on Secrets of the Sky as a symbol of human kind's "attempts at space travel and physical exploration of the planets and outer space."[126] The band earned Berkeley and Ammon numerous accolades, including Band of the Year. Two watercolors and photographs of the masquerades "Venus," played by local personality Helen Humphrey (Figs. 2.46-2.47), and "Aurora," performed by Erica Williams, daughter of then-Prime Minister Eric Williams (Figs. 2.48-2.49), captured the fantastic theme blending art deco, rococo, miniskirts, and Afro-Futurist trends. These designs foreshadow A k u z u r u's watercolors and garments exhibited in "Afro/Works Fusion," which also explored Afro-Diasporic, otherworldly aesthetics through sculptural and volumetric elements.

Spirituality and ritualistic practices were central to the evolution of Wayne Berkeley's mas' designs in the 1970s and 1980s, highlighting his sensibility towards various belief systems across cultures. After a six-month visit to Asia in 1978, Berkley designed The Ritual Band in 1979, a troupe initially inspired by the theater and religious practices from Bangkok, Thailand.[127] When introduced to the Trinidadian Carnival, the press promptly misinterpreted the band as an expression of Berkeley's "dark side," drawing "on the black arts around the world," with central themes of "Sacrifice, Vultures, and Death."[128] However, the photos and watercolors for the band's sections "Mambo" (Figs. 2.50-2.51) and Bamboo Bier (Figs. 2.52-2.53) suggest a more nuanced interpretation of Berkeley's work. These images reflect his deep exploration of the structural elements of religiosity, establishing parallels between Afro-diasporic and Asian-diasporic spiritual practices, inviting them to come together in masquerade. The designs

[126] Wayne Berkeley, "Secrets of the Sky," 1973. Special Heritage Collection and Wayne Berkeley Collection, National Library of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain.
[127] Wayne Berkeley, "The Ritual," 1979. Special Heritage Collection and Wayne Berkeley Collection, National Library of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain; Berkeley, *Wayne Berkeley.*
[128] "The Ritual. Wayne Berkeley," *Trinidad and Tobago Magazine,* 1979. Nasser Khan Carnival Collection, Carnival Magazines, National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain.

juxtaposed the West Indian Mambo dance and what appears to be a reference to Haitian Vodou priestesses, also called Mambo, with the material culture of Hindu funerary rituals, framing them as part of a spiritual continuum. Berkeley's descriptions of the individual sections of the bands sidesteps cultural specificities, focusing, instead, on the performative archetypes of the concept of "ritual" as a whole. For example, "O'beah," an Afro-Caribbean religious system, is described by the term "gesticulation;" "High Priest" by "celebrant of the ceremony;" and "Sacrifice" by "invocation."[129] Considering this conceptual and abstract approach to these spiritual practices, it is fitting that the designer referred to the two-thousand member band as a "manner of performing divine service [and] a code of ceremonies."[130] His aim was to capture the spiritual and ritualistic parallels of cultures seemingly estranged or distant, including Afro-Asian crossovers, which find common ground in Trinidad as well as the Caribbean region.[131]

Berkeley's reference to Obeah offers a significant reflection on the spiritual and religious landscape in Trinidad as well as the Caribbean region. Historian of religion Tracey E. Hucks, describes Obeah as a complex Africana nomenclature that encompasses a variety of African spirituality and thought systems of a healing or constructive nature, as well as of a harmful or destructive quality. These uses include Obeah as a source of lethal poisons, weaponry, and warfare, and as a site for priestly authority, divine revelation, and expertise in midwifery.[132] Because of this dual characteristic, she contends, African Obeah was largely misconstrued through a series of negative Westen imaginations of African spirituality, the Black body, and

[129] Wayne Berkeley, "The Ritual," 1979. Special Heritage Collection and Wayne Berkeley Collection, National Library of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain.
[130] "The Ritual. Wayne Berkeley," 1979.
[131] Berkeley was recognized with the highest honors of the Trinidadian Carnival for six years in a row during the period 1989-1994, attesting to his life-long influence on the Caribbean celebration. In London, he also designed the masquerade "Hallucination" (1988) for the band Cocoyea, led by Dexter Khan, as well as "Raining" (1992) and "Elements" (1998).
[132] Tracey E. Hucks, *Obeah, Orisa & Religious Identity in Trinidad: Africans in the White Colonial Imagination. Volume I: Obeah* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 2-3.

projected undesirable behaviors, giving way to persecutions, trials, and prohibitions across the Caribbean region.[133] Both Hucks and Stewart have identified this Western fixation with African Obeah as colonial obeah, a sided and incomplete interpretation of African-derived beliefs and practices misinterpreted so as to create the idea of an *other.* Much like Orisa, Obeah was subject to governmental persecution for being considered dangerous and evil, most particularly through the Obeah Prohibition Ordinance if 1868, repealed until the year 2000, which paralleled the Shouter Prohibition Ordinance from 1917, which was also repealed, tough much earlier, in 1951.[134] Obeah, therefore, occupied the predominant place as an African religious repertoire in Trinidad before the advent of Yoruba-Orisa in the mid-nineteenth century.[135] This was particularly true due to the fact that, as Hucks argues, Obeah's knowledge of esoteric and botanical technologies served an essential medical role in a society that had not attended to this basic need for the African population.[136] It is interesting to note that alongside Obeah, the post slavery period also saw a series of prohibitions related to carnival masquerading, insisting on a continuum that links Afro-diasporic botanical, spiritual, and material culture as "degenerate in the legal ordinances."[137] For these reasons, Berkeley's public celebration of Afro-diasporic belief systems in colorful attire and stylized forms was an affront to epistemological and epistemic oppression at work in Trinidad at the time.

Moreover, Berkeley's interspiritual and cross-cultural designs find notable parallels—albeit in different styles—with Peter Minshall's mas' and theater stage designs. According to scholars Garth L. Green and Philip W. Scher, Berkeley and Minshall were part of a generation of

[133] Ibid., 10.
[134] Ibid., 85.
[135] Stewart, *Obeah, Orisa & Religious Identity,* 4.
[136] Hucks, *Obeah, Orisa & Religious Identity,* 142.
[137] Ibid., 150.

artists in Trinidad who redefined the language of mas' through their unprecedented craftsmanship and experimentation with materials.[138] Minshall, globally renowned for his inventive and groundbreaking masquerade designs, has been the focus of extensive scholarly and curatorial attention, particularly for his revolutionary mas' trilogies from the 1980s and 1990s. Similar to A k u z u r u, Trinidadian folklore, spiritualities, and ole mas' designs inform Minshall's lifelong sources of inspiration, which he later transformed into avant-garde, Bauhaus-inspired works. Scholar Milla Cozart Riggio recently emphasized the spiritual underpinnings of Minshall's mas', highlighting his celebration of the sacredness of life—best seen in his conflation of the terms "play"—as in "play mas'"—and "pray."[139] Additionally, Gill has noted the presence of an "expanded spiritual consciousness" in Minshall's work, one that transcends any specific religion or spiritual system, instead speaking to a broader understanding of the sacred and the transcendental.[140] In a manner akin to A k u z u r u and many other Trinidadian creatives, Minshall attributes his spiritual fluidity to "having been raised on an island with many of the world's most populous religions."[141]

Although A k u z u r u did not have direct contact with Minshall during her formative years, the performative, spiritual, and cloth-based contributions of the mas' designer have been an artistic reference for the Trinidadian and British carnivals since the 1970s. As it is the case with A k u z u r u, Minshall sought to distance himself from the "pretty" mas' school that had dominated Trinidad since the 1950s, prioritizing functionality in his designs and drawing inspiration from traditional masquerades such as the Bat, Wild Indian or Warahoon, and Fancy

[138] Green and Scher, "Introduction: Trinidad Carnival in Global Context," 15.
[139] Milla Cozart Riggio, "Dancing the Divine: Hallelujah, Song of the Earth, Tapestry," in *The Last Mas'. Minshall in the Carnival of Trinidad and Tobago* (Brooklyn, NY: Dapayo; Canada: Friesens, 2024), 41-45.
[140] Gill, *Erotic Islands,* 70-73.
[141] Ibid., 73.

Sailor. His iconic and fondly remembered "Humming Bird" from 1974, an independent masquerade designed for his foster sister Shelly-Ann Guy, encapsulated, early in his career, these three historical references (Fig. 2.54). Minshall's reinterpretations amplified the Bat masquerade's wing mobility, reimagined the Wild Indian's large headpiece as an elongated beak, and reintroduced the Fancy Sailor's surreal and shiny dress using shimmery, reflective fabric shaped like feathers (Figs. 2.55-2.57).[142] These innovations are significant when contextualizing A k u z u r u's work in a broader perspective. Her Roots of Mas' Band resonates with Minshall's interest in historical masquerade during a time when designers were focused on alternative thematic innovations. Furthermore, A k u z u r u's expansive, volumetric designs for Afro/Works Fusion" also echo Minshall's use of large areas of cloth to enhance a masquerader's performance. For these reasons, the Roots of Mas' Band represents a natural extension of her work from the late 1980s and early 1990s. It is also a milestone for A k u z u r u's career as a performance artist since the reinterpretation of historical mas' traditions kept informing her garment and installation designs.

Another parallel between A k u z u r u and Minshall is that both of their designs draw from otherworldly and fantastical elements of traditional Trinidadian lore. Minshall's first trilogy of bands—River from 1983, Callaloo from 1984, and The Golden Calabash: Princes of Darkness and Lords of Light from 1985—thematically explored the intersection of folklore and spirituality through a complex, multifaceted approach. For Minshall, these interconnected, successive mas' bands embodied his vision of Carnival as an independent art form, blending music, film,

[142] "Band of the People's Choice. Band of the Year. Peter Minshall's Carnival of the Sea," *Trinidad Carnival Magazine,* 1979. Nasser Khan Carnival Collection, National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain; Peter Minshall, Richard Schechner, and Milla Cozart Riggio, "A Voice to Add to the Song of the Universe," in Riggio, ed., *Carnival: Culture in Action,* 111-112.; Debbie Jacob, "The Greatest Show on Earth: Trinidad Carnival," in *Minshall: The Man and His Mas'* (Port of Spain, Trinidad: Trinidad Express Newspapers, 1991).

painting, and ballet.[143] The processional and ritualistic elements of these performances enabled him to further innovate on mobility and artistry in traditional masquerade, which he had begun to refer to as "dancing mobiles" or "walking sculptures."[144] Minshall's second band, Callaloo—named after a popular Creole Trinidadian dish—was based on a literary epic he wrote in vernacular Trinidadian English, which provided the narrative framework for the entire trilogy. Titled *Callaloo and De Crab*, it told the story of Callaloo, a hero-like figure, the son of La Belle Washerwoman and Papa Bois, whose pure, loving energy defeated the forces of evil embodied by Man Crab and his daughter, Madame Hiroshima. The narrative also informed the mas' designs, such as the Moon of the Callaloo and the Crab and Moon of the Bongo characters, who, in celebration of Callaloo's victory, wore round, white-and-silver garments in a carnivalesque festival of "love and togetherness" (Figs. 2.58-2.59).[145] The use of colors to describe various characters in the story, on the other hand, also represented metaphors for humanity's racial diversity and ultimate harmony, mirroring Minshall's utopia for a united Trinidadian nation and society (Fig. 2.60).[146]

The masquerade that brought life to the Children of the Moon characters in Minshall's Callaloo featured a wide array of hourglass-shaped garments constructed with flexible circular forms made of white jersey and fine nylon rods.[147] The accompanying round headpiece, made of concentric circles, was silver for section leaders and white for general masqueraders. The design referenced the avant-garde Bauhaus theater and costume design, more specifically Oskar Schlemmer's *Spiral* from the 1926 *Triadic Ballet*, which made use of geometric forms in kinetic,

[143] Interview with Peter Minshall, *Observer Magazine*, 19 August, 1979, 27. Heritage Collection, National Library of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain.
[144] Minshall, Schechner, and Riggio, "A Voice to Add to the Song of the Universe," 121.
[145] Ibid., 59.
[146] Ibid., 19.
[147] "Heralding a New Age: 16 Years of Minshall Mas'," in *Minshall: The Man and His Mas'* (Port of Spain, Trinidad: Trinidad Express Newspapers, 1991).

human-worn sculptures to attain elevated states of consciousness.[148] Schlemmer, who commonly created intricate geometric and stereometric patterns on stage, described this guiding system as a way to awaken and "bewitch" the performers to the dimensions of space, inspiring a renewed consciousness around movement.[149] This resonates with Minshall's pursuit for an ecstatic experience of carnival, and calls to mind how the mas' designer also equates the social and spiritual role of the artist with that of the priest.[150] This parallel evokes the long-standing inquiry in performance art theory on the artist as a shaman or channeling agent, a notion introduced to Euro-American networks chiefly through Joseph Beuys' 1970s New York City performances.[151] Thus, Minshall's designs for Callaloo prefaced the geometric constructions and spiritual purview of A k u z u r u's garments from "Afro/Works Fusion," as well as some of the designs for Roots of Mas'. This connection is significant as it links A k u z u r u's early visual forms to the developments in Trinidad's mas' celebration during the 1970s and 1980s in a spiritually promiscuous ethos that sought the aim of human interconnectedness.

Furthermore, Minshall's band concepts and designs aimed to position masquerade as a form of street theater, legitimizing it as an artistic expression—a proposition central to A k u z u

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[148] Peter Minshall represented Trinidad and Tobago in the 19a Bienal de São Paulo, 1987 with an installation of *Callaloo* mas' designs, sketches, and performative activations. In the exhibition catalogue, Brazilian historian Nicolau Sevcenko said of Minshall: "The man revolutionized everything. He is a kind of uncontrolled dynamo, a crushing creative force," as well as "His greatest secret lies in the conception of costumes as a mixture of living sculptures with dancing machines, creating fantastic contraptions that reach twelve meters in height by ten in diameter, yet are at the same time extremely light and perfectly articulated, allowing the reveler great freedom of movement, because what matters is dancing." See: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, ed., *19a Bienal Internacional de São Paulo: de 02 de outubro a 13 de dezembro de 1987, Pavilhão Engo. Armando de Arruda Pereira, Parque Ibirapuera, São Paulo: catálogo geral* (Bienal Internacional de São Paulo, São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 1987), 72-73.

[149] Oskar Schlemmer, "From New Stage Forms (1928)" in Richard Drain, ed., *Twentieth-Century Theatre: A Sourcebook* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1995), 46-47.

[150] Gill, *Erotic Islands,* 71-72.

[151] Victoria Walters, "The Artist as Shaman: The Work of Joseph Beuys and Marcus Coates," in *Between Art and Anthropology: Contemporary Ethnographic Practice,* eds., Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright (Oxford, UK: Berg Publishers, 2010), 37-38; Dawn Perlmutter, "The Subjugation of the Spiritual in Art," in *Reclaiming the Spiritual in Art: Contemporary Cross-Cultural Perspectives,* eds., Dawn Perlmutter and Debra Koppman (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1999). 6 – 17.

r u's historical turn for her Notting Hill Carnival band.[152] Both Minshall and A k u z u r u sought to transcend the influence of modern theater in Trinidad, viewing it as a limited platform for showcasing Caribbean folklore, dance, and spirituality. This history is deeply rooted in the work of influential dancer and choreographer Beryl McBurnie, who founded the Little Carib Theatre in Port of Spain in 1948. Much like Greta Mendez in London, McBurnie dedicated her career to raising national and international awareness of Caribbean dance forms and themes, often incorporating modern dance techniques beyond fantastic exoticisms associated with the region.[153] The theater's early productions, Bèlè and Talking Drums, focused on masquerade traditions and diverse dance forms, striving to recover, innovate, and build a shared regional identity.[154] The programming for the theater's inaugural event included a blend of Afro-diasporic, Indian, Indigenous, and Brazilian performances and music.[155] McBurnie also championed other art forms, such as steelpan, which, like Afro-diasporic dance and folklore, had been stigmatized as "lesser" art forms.[156] This purview conflating so-called high and low art forms through public demonstrations recalls Diana Taylor's theorization around public performances as a type of organized and repeated action that defies the traditions of European theater by foregrounding intermedial and interactive elements.[157] As a result, her work established the Little Carib Theatre as a cultural landmark in Trinidad, fostering nationalism

[152] Keith Smith, "Minshall: The Man, the Magic, the Mas'," in *Minshall: The Man and His Mas'* (Port of Spain, Trinidad: Trinidad Express Newspapers, 1991).
[153] Molly Ahye, *Cradle of Caribbean Dance: Beryl McBurnie and the Little Carib Theatre* (Petit Valley, Trinidad and Tobago: Heritage Cultures, 1983), 33; Bruce King, *Derek Walcott & West Indian Drama* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1995), 26.
[154] Ibid., 34.
[155] Judy Raymond, *Beryl McBurnie* (University of the West Indies Press, 2018), 45-46.
[156] Ibid., 54-55.
[157] Diana Taylor and Juan Villegas Morales, eds., *Negotiating Performance: Gender, Sexuality, and Theatricality in Latin/o America*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 13.

before and after independence from British rule.[158] In their views of expanded theater, Callaloo and Roots of Mas' explored, as Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez note for Black performance art more broadly, the public meanings of vernacular and non-textual expression through dance, mediation, literature, and sexuality.[159]

In its fusion of traditional masquerade, multidisciplinary art forms, cross-cultural references, and avant-garde design elements, A k u z u r u's Roots of Mas' anticipates the description of her work as a form of "Total Art."[160] This term echoes, firstly, the term *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or "total work of art," given that it incorporates a synesthetic fusion of various art forms in one single public expression. Further, the concept recalls the idea of "total theater," which Saint Lucian Nobel laureate Derek Walcott championed in Trinidad since the 1950s. Walcott's exposure to New York City's theatrical avant-garde, including performances in classical Noh and Kabuki styles, along with an early collaboration with McBurnie's Little Carib Theatre, were key to his conceptualization of a distinct, artistically informed type of West Indian drama. As founder of the Trinidad Theatre Workshop, Walcott integrated McBurnie's dancers' "body rhythms, movements and gestures (…) as the basis for an acting style," while also drawing from Western theatrical traditions ranging from Shakespeare to Bertolt Brecht.[161] In a 1979 note for *Express Carnival* in Trinidad, Walcott referred to the annual celebration as "total theater" in recognition of its intersecting art forms, including music, dance, costume, and drama.[162] He also publicly challenged playwright Errol Hill's view that masquerade practices in

[158] Errol G. Hill, "The Role of the Arts in Nation-Building," The Dr. Eric Williams Memorial Lecture Series, 1987. Nasser Khan Carnival Collection, National Archive of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain.
[159] Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez, "Introduction," in *Black Performance Theory* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2014), 12-13.
[160] A k u z u r u, "Praxis and Biographical Statement," 2019. A k u z u r u personal archive, Port of Spain.
[161] King, *Derek Walcott & West Indian Drama,* 25.
[162] Derek Walcott, "Yes, Call It Total Theater," *Express Carnival,* 1979, in Nasser Khan Carnival Collection, National Archive Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain.

Trinidad were inherently theatrical, arguing that a native theater must incorporate both Western and non-Western dramatic forms for full artistic development.[163] Consequently, Walcott supported Minshall's work as a mas' designer, finding common ground, as curator Claire Tancons notes, in their shared inclination for epic narrative forms.[164] As an arts reporter for the *Trinidad Guardian*, the Saint Lucian playwright also praised the Afro-Asian elements that were characteristic of Stephen Lee Heung and Carlisle Chang's mas' designs.[165] Walcott's contributions to theater provides further historical grounding for the idea that A k u z u r u's early designs are a continuation of Afro-Asian and historical masquerade traditions in the work of Trinidadian creatives.

Moreover, A k u z u r u's fusion of artistic forms and styles in Roots of Mas' resonates with the vibrant theatrical scene of 1980s London, where Blackness, as previously mentioned, had often been equated with other minority groups in the push for resources and visibility. Nonetheless, this was a time, as philologist Paola Prieto López notes, that witnessed an unprecedented "emergence of Black-led theatre companies devoted to the production of Black theatre."[166] Like the founding of the Little Carib Theater and the Trinidadian Theater Workshop, the creation of community organizations, spaces, and events was crucial to strengthening the theater productions by minority groups in London. For instance, the Black Theatre Forum organized, from 1985 to 1990, the Black Theatre Season, an annual festival to foster "greater equality of opportunity for Black people within the mainstream of British Theatre."[167] Other

[163] King, *Derek Walcott & West Indian Drama*, 49.
[164] Minshall, Schechner, and Riggio, "A Voice to Add to the Song of the Universe," 116; Claire Tancons, "Through the Peacock's Screen, Peter Minshall's Sense of the Epic," in *The Last* Mas, 49-52.
[165] George Tang and Ray Funk, *We Kind Ah People: The Trinidad Carnival Masquerade Bands of Stephen Lee Heung* (Port of Spain, Trinidad: Tang Productions/Carnival Studies Press, 2014), 106.
[166] Paola Prieto López, *Black Women Centre Stage: Diasporic Solidarity in Contemporary Black British Theatre*, (London, UK: Routledge, 2024), 4.
[167] "Black Theatre Season '87," Black Theatre Forum Brochure, 1987. British Theater Festivals Papers, LRA/06/01/02/01/03, Geore Padmore Institute, London.

organizations such as the Asian Co-Operative Theatre, the Black Theatre Co-op, and the Carib Theater, alongside Tara Arts Company and Temba Theatre, further emphasized the importance of Afro-Asian creative solidarities. Visual artists and scholar Alda Terracciano underscored this creative surge as a successful reinterpretation of "histories and theater traditions [through] the new hybridised condition of post-colonial Britain."[168] Key to this cultural reframing, as drama and performing arts scholar A. Ruth Tompsett highlighted, is that African and Asian theaters gravitate toward performance skills and languages not seen as "belonging only and separately to dance, drama, music or visual arts."[169] The parallels between Tompsett's theorization of African and Asian theater and Walcott's notion of "total theater" provide further conceptual depth to A k u z u r u's mas' band as well as her future work.

A k u z u r u's proximity to the Yaa is also notable, as the institution embraced theatrical expressions in its programming, including Trinidadian playwright and actor Shango Baku's "One Bad Casa" in 1986 (Fig. 2.61). Originally written and staged in 1984 in Port of Spain, Baku's play premiered for British audiences at the Yaa and later toured schools across the United Kingdom in 1987—the year he co-founded the Cultural Exchange Through Theatre in Education with Len Garrison and Vernon "Shabaka" Thompson.[170] In the London iterations of "One Bad Casa," A k u z u r u participated as one of the cast members of the play. Keith Khan was also a board member of this initiative, while simultaneously developing, with Greta Mendez and Franklyn Ward, the aforementioned Keepers of the City project at the Roundhouse Theater. Through this initiative, they sought to facilitate carnival-themed workshops at the Swiss Cottage

[168] Alda Terracciano, "Mainstreaming African, Asian and Caribbean Theatre: The Experiments of the Black Theatre Forum," in *Alternatives within the Mainstream: British Black and Asian Theatres*, ed. Dimple Godiwala (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press), 42.
[169] A. Ruth Tompsett, ed., *Black Theatre in Britain*, Performing Arts International (London, UK: Routledge, 1996), 3
[170] Shango Baku Productions, "One Bad Casa," flyer, October 23, 1986. The Yaa Asantewaa Arts & Community Centre Papers, LRA/06/01/01/01/42, George Padmore Institute, London.

Community Centre, using the Roundhouse's branding in their promotional materials (Figs. 2.62-2.63).[171] Moreover, Khan, Mendez, and Ward's workshops came at a pivotal time for the Roundhouse, as debates arose over whether the venue should focus exclusively on Black artistic expressions—adding to its notable history as a hub for rock music, experimental theater, poetry, and Black Liberation activities since its reopening in 1966.[172] The fact that the Keepers of the City brochure described the venue as an institution serving "the arts of Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean and their communities in Britain"[173] highlights the politics of visibility behind such a statement. It also brings to mind the pushback it received for being perceived as a homogenizing venture, leading to fragmentation and competition within minority groups and ultimately an inability to establish the venue into a space dedicated to non-hegemonic theater groups.[174] This context further illuminates A k u z u r u's band and early designs as part of a broader, politically charged, and creatively fruitful dialogue between theater and masquerade practices in 1980s London.

Despite its small scale and singular occurrence, Roots of Mas' stands out for its artistic vision, uniting a spiritually infused concept, culturally specific sartorial forms, a racially conscious dialogue between artistic disciplines, and a broad creative network. By employing carnival's strategies of levity, irreverence, and transgression as a form to create cross-cultural connections and coalitions, her mas' work was not only spiritually promiscuous in scope, but also reminiscent of the punk aesthetics and ethos that was predominant in London during this time and deeply influenced her work. Moreover, in exploring the cultural roots of carnival

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[171] "Keepers of the City" workshops, brochure, 1986. Greta Mendez's personal archives, London.
[172] Alda Terracciano "Mainstreaming," 34-35; Brian Morton, "The Roundhouse at 50: From gin joint to cultural tonic," *BBC,* 2016. URL: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/2cWgJC0KCGj7SbKYZjg093B/the-roundhouse-at-50-from-gin-joint-to-cultural-tonic
[173] "Keepers of the City" workshops, brochure, 1986. Greta Mendez's personal archives, London.
[174] Alda Terraciano, "Mainstreaming," 35.

costuming, the band materialized A k u z u r u's desire and vision to visit the African continent. This is an aspiration she realized just a year later when moving to Zaria to further her studies in textiles.[175] However, in November 1991, the artist embarked on a temporary journey back to Trinidad and Tobago, which further expanded her spiritual sensibilities as a designer, performance, and installation artist.[176]

2.4 Dematerializing / Sacralizing the Body

Upon her return to Port of Spain from London, A k u z u r u underwent a significant personal transformation, fully embracing her African heritage. This shift motivated her to adopt a new name before gaining recognition in local exhibition spaces and receiving coverage in the Trinidadian press as an emerging voice in the arts. Following in the footsteps of the identity reclamation that became central to the Black Liberation movement in her home country and beyond, the artist chose her new name using Nigerian languages. The name *Akuzuru*, derived from the Igbo phrase meaning "there's enough wealth in abundance to share," was combined with the Yoruba notions of *Ayetoro* and *Ayo*, meaning "peace" and "joy," respectively. Though the words come from different linguistic traditions, Akuzuru Ayetoro Ayo, according to the artist, expresses the idea that "there's enough wealth in abundance to share around with peace and joy in the world."[177] The spacing in between letters came at a later stage in her career as a poetic gesture to highlight the linguistic and semantic limitations of written language. In an interview with the *Sunday Guardian* of Trinidad, A k u z u r u publicly articulated her own independence from a British colonial identity, stating: "My work is very African-oriented, and

[175] A k u z u r u, interview by Julián Sánchez González, July 17, 2024.
[176] Ibidem.
[177] A k u z u r u, interview by Julián Sánchez González, October 2, 2024.

everything about me must project that image, including my name."[178] Part of this transition founds explanation in A k u z u r u's passing through London as well as a newly found mentoring relationship with groundbreaking artist LeRoy Clarke. A k u z u r u's formative experience with Clarke deeply influenced her work, leading to the support of the Aquarela Galleries, now Medulla Art Gallery, where she held her first solo exhibition in Trinidad, "Alkebu-lan: Sewing the Seeds of Global Magnificence" in 1992. Simultaneously, A k u z u r u exhibited her work at the in the group show "1492 to 1992 a New Look at the Caribbean," at Algico Plaza which was held as part of that year's iteration of the Caribbean Arts Festival or Carifesta. The exhibition included works by artists from the region, including Trinidadian trailblazers such as Ken Chrichlow, LeRoy Clarke, Chrisopher Cozier, and Wendy Nanan.[179] Continuing her trajectory, however, A k u z u r u's art practice, while delving further into an African-based perspective, remained experimental as well as culturally and stylistically diverse.

The exhibition's name used the term "Alkebu-lan," a concept self-trained historian Yosef Ben-Jochannan, one of the pioneers of African studies and leading figure of Afrocentrism and the Black Power Movement though of disputed reputation, used to describe one of the alleged original names of the African continent.[180] It further played on the dual meanings of "sowing" and "sewing" as well as the epic linguistic style of Trinidadian mas' that influenced her London years. In its multidisciplinary grandiosity. A k u z u r u's show at Aquarela Galleries continued an exploration reminiscent of Walcottian "total theater." Invited by the late gallery owner Geoffrey MacLean, A k u z u r u exhibited previously showcased pieces from London along with new garments, drawings, batiks, and accessories. A photograph of the artist at the exhibition

[178] "Creative Clothing Designs by A k u z u r u", *Sunday Guardian*, February 2, 1992. A k u z u r u's personal archive, Port of Spain.
[179] "A Caribbean Collection," *Sunday Guardian Magazine,* August 30, 1992.
[180] See Yosef Ben-Jochannan, *Black Man of the Nile and His Family,* 1972.

shows her wearing one of her designs, flanked by two of the twenty-six exhibited ensembles, characterized by bold color contrasts and expansive sculptural forms (Fig. 2.64). In a written statement, A k u z u r u explained, "My clothes are (…) traditional, yet not traditional. The very silhouette of the garment and the artwork on the cloth are symbolic."[181] This symbolism marked a significant evolution in her fashion designs, showcasing a deeper emphasis on draftsmanship, with graphic elements and painterly gestures integrated into her new garments. Her drawing for the exhibition brochure reinforced this idea, depicting a calabash atop the faces of a Black couple, female and male, to symbolize, in the artist's words, their celestial union (Fig. 2.65).[182] One garment in the composition floats mid-air, with the body of the wearer dissolving into particles, suggesting that the design enabled a disembodied, spiritual experience of symbolic transcendence. By juxtaposing the depiction of Black figures with the idea of a dematerialized body migrating as a seed, A k u z u r u articulated an Afro-diasporic view that also challenged rigid, racially coded definitions of Blackness. Moreover, by linking the diasporic state of Black cultures—a consequence of the trans-Atlantic slave trade—with the acts of sowing seeds and sewing garments, the artist foreshadowed a career-long interest in healing through reconstructing identity with clothing designs.

Two pieces from the exhibition, *All That Encompasses Truth* and *He Who Strides Majestically Is Worldly,* provide a closer look at how A k u z u r u integrated her painterly practice into garment design (Figs. 2.66-2.67). Building on her stylistic developments in England, these ensembles fuse traditional African and Japanese clothing with asymmetrical, irregular, and volumetric avant-garde elements. Suspended from wires or wooden rods, the

[181] Letter from A k u z u r u to the Trinidadian Press, 1992. Aquarela Galleries/Medulla Art Gallery Archives. Port of Spain.
[182] A k u z u r u, interview by Julián Sánchez González, October 2, 2024.

garments suggest movement, while their bone, bright teal, and pink colors reflect A k u z u r u's expansive aesthetic choices. Her interventions on the garments, referred to as "gesture works,"[183] feature either precise black line work forming geometric shapes or free-flowing scribbles, resulting in graphisms of various colors that interact with each other. These painterly compositions resonate with the theme of bodily transcendence, central to the exhibition's concept as seen in the promotional brochure, and the triangles and circles, shared motifs in both pieces' chest and sleeve areas, reference the sacred significance of geometric designs in African and Afro-diasporic belief systems. According to the artist, *All That Encompasses Truth* depicts "symbols of Enlightenment embraced by Knowing Hands," while *He Who Strides Majestically is Worldly* communicates a "celestial communication amongst the various star systems."[184] The illegible inscriptions, part of a cryptic, personal language the artist developed, represent a form of artistic expression aimed at channeling unconscious visual forms imbued with spiritual, otherworldly meaning. This approach mirrors avant-garde surrealist explorations of automatism and also aligns with Afro-Diasporic artistic gestures that emerged during the Black Power movement, when abstraction, figuration, and spirituality revived in art circles across the Americas. A notable influence for A k u z u r u is Jean-Michel Basquiat, whom the artist cites as an important figure in her work, while contextual references might include American artist Cynthia Hawkins' rune-like gestural abstraction. By integrating painterly elements into her garments, A k u z u r u reaffirmed her commitment to an intermedial methodology—a defining feature of her work since the beginning of her career.

The transcendent quality in A k u z u r u's garment designs at this time sought to connect with the African heritage of her Trinidadian background and, more profoundly, to liberate the

[183] A k u z u r u, "A k u z u r u: Praxis and Biographical Statement."
[184] A k u z u r u, interview by Julián Sánchez González, October 2, 2024.

body from a shared human experience of historic trauma. This is evident in *Amniotic Bliss*, a drawing also exhibited at Aquarela Galleries, where a female figure with outstretched arms, wearing one of A k u z u r u's designs, is surrounded by heads emerging from a womb, cellular-like matrix, evoking themes of birth, ecstasy, and release (Fig. 2.68). The deconstructed garment with graphisms drapes from her elbows, and her spine extends and arches over her head, resembling a masquerade structure, not unlike the ones she wore in London, leading into another compositional plane with a crying skull. *Amniotic Bliss'* visual narrative, along with its masquerade qualities, evokes Sylvia Wynter's redefinition of our idea of what it is to be human, which combine two key axes: biology and storytelling.[185] Building on Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire's non-biological frameworks for understanding human experience, Wynter advocates for a *bios/mythoi* model that opens new ontological paradigms, recognizing multiple forms of existence, each with its "discursive formations, aesthetic fields, and systems of knowledge."[186] From a Black feminist perspective, which Wynter shares, *Amniotic Bliss* depicts a rapture and rebirth of the female self into specters and ancestors, reversing the Western notion of humanity as secularly and biologically defined. It also calls for Afro-diasporic and Afro-Asian solidarity in creating new myths of origin. The work, while spiritually grounded, carries a notable political charge aimed at empowering marginalized groups—a position that is rooted in A k u z u r u's involvement with the artistic expressions of carnival, fashion, and theater.

The visual language and spiritual outlook of A k u z u r u's first solo show responds to her newly found connection with artist LeRoy Clarke as well as the Shango spiritual communities in Trinidad. Despite the many controversies surrounding his public persona,

[185] Katherine McKittrick, ed., *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 16-17.
[186] Ibid., 31.

Clarke's legacy to the arts of the Caribbean region cannot be understated. His multimedial art practice, which included drawing, painting, and also the written word belonged to a generation that, as scholar Clinton Hutton asserts, responded to the crossroads of the Civil Rights struggles, Black Power, Pan-Africanism, and Pan-Caribbeanism.[187] Beginning his career in Port of Spain and New York City in the 1960s, Clarke received prompt attention from artistic institutions in both cities, including an artistic residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem from 1971 to 1974. During this time, he developed and exhibited his series of "poem-paintings" *Fragments of a Spiritual*, which addressed the fractured nature of Afro-Diasporic lives in the Americas. Also exhibited in Trinidad and Tobago, *Fragments of a Spiritual* evidenced the artist's maturing signature style and laid down the stepping stones for his lifelong mystical journey.[188] Similarly, Clarke's *Douens* series from 1974 to 1979 drew on Trinidadian folklore to critique the persistence of a colonialist and colonized mindset after independence, focusing on the symbolic figure of the douen—a spirit of an unbaptized baby trapped in spiritual limbo. Shown at Howard University in Washington, D.C., and in Port of Spain in the late 1970s, these works conveyed the enduring dispossession of Blacks from the legacies of the slave trade and plantation system. Similar to A k u z u r u's interest in building cross-cultural solidarities, the series also aimed to compel viewers, as described by the press at the time, "to experience the agony, historical and continuing, of all Third World people."[189]

Clarke's depiction of "douendom," the state of marginalization, ignorance, and oppression symbolized by the folkloric douen, also came alongside a possibility for redemption.

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[187] Clinton Hutton, "Pedagogy and LeRoy Clarke's Philosophy of Being, Freedom and Sovereignty," in LeRoy Clarke, *Parables of Our Joyless Days* (Port of Spain: Paria Publishing Company, 2014), 379.
[188] *Fragments of a Spiritual at Saint Mary's College*, LeRoy Clarke, brochure, 1972. West Indiana Collection, University of the West Indies Archive, Saint Augustine.
[189] "Leroy Clarke's vision takes him full cycle through mas' and man to god," *Trinidad Carnival Magazine,* 1977, 97 in Nasser Khan Carnival Collection, National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain.

Breaking away from this state is rooted in Clarke's philosophical engagement with the practice of Obeah—a religious, magical, and scientific belief system of African roots practiced in the British Caribbean—which he began exploring in the 1970s.[190] Besides its interest in destigmatizing African and Afro-diasporic spiritualities, Clarke's take on Obeah claims it as an universal act that describes: "A people's or a race's (…) core-essential, resilient factor of organizing and enhancing their way of life."[191] Aligning with Wynterian thought, which parallels A k u z u r u's art practice, Clarke further described Obeah as a "Performance in the Faith of signifying Being in unfolding Becoming."[192] In recreating the self through the *mythoi* of reclaiming spirituality, Clarke also urges to keep in mind the artistic, "all-inclusive" endeavor required in performing the self, highlighting, as Wynter contends, the fact that being human is a *praxis*.[193] Prefacing A k u z u r u's "Total Art," Clarke draws from the traditions of Trinidadian masquerade the possibility of reinventing oneself—a liberatory practice that was vital to the reinvention of enslaved Africans, and, according to the artist, tradition worth preserving.[194] Clarke's connection with Derek Walcott, both as a mentee and as a stage designer for the Trinidad Theater Workshop,[195] fostered his engagement with "total theater" as a performative mode of self-expression. Clarke's reinterpreted principles of Obeah and his proximity to Walcottian thought, which included a preference for the format of the epic, reveals a creative parallel to Minshall's masquerade designs and A k u z u r u's future performative work.

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[190] LeRoy Clarke, "OBEAH Intro," in *Parables of Our Joyless Days* (Port of Spain: Paria Publishing Company, 2014), 126.
[191] Ibid., 132.
[192] Ibid., 130
[193] Ibid., 132; Sylvia Wynter, *Being Human as Praxis*, 33-34.
[194] LeRoy Clarke, "Masks & Mas," *Trinidad Carnival Magazine,* 1978. Nasser Khan Carnival Collection, National Archives of Trinida and Tobago, Port of Spain.
[195] Trinidad Theater Workshop, brochure, 1987, LeRoy Clarke Collection, National Library and Information System Authority (NALIS). URL: https://library2.nalis.gov.tt/gsdl/cgi-bin/library.cgi?e=d-01000-00---off-0leroycla--00-1---01-10-00---0---0direct-10----4-------0-0l--11-en-50---20-preferences---00-3-1-00-00--4--0--0-0-11-10-0utfZz-8-00&a=d&cl=CL2.1.11&d=HASH09aa2bf5bfa4b592a23f38.2

El Tucuche painting series from 1981 to 1992 was the artist's central focus for over a decade and arguably his *magnus opus,* later extending into his literary work.[196] Inspired by El Tucuche, Trinidad's second-highest peak, the series symbolizes a hero's journey toward national liberation. It calls for a collective movement away from douendom and toward transcendence over an imposed "historical, mythical, and psychological barrier."[197] Key paintings from this series, *Full Moon in Aripo* from 1988 and *Towards the Apotheosis of El Tucuche* from 1989 further evidence his influence in A k u z u r u's work in Trinidad (Figs. 2.69 and 2.70). In both pieces, Clarke rhythmically blends organic and geometric forms with color transparencies, where a central, round, womb-like motif creates tension with a larger triangular shape, symbolizing a movement toward ascension. Similar to the central role that womanhood holds in A k u z u r u 's *Amniotic Bliss,* these oils on canvas depict, following the artist's words, "the female principle [which] informs the all-embodying image of being ness [sic]."[198] Art historian and curator Nimah Muwakil-Zakuri underlines that this feminine throughline in Clarke's work is an intentional, though at times reductive, recuperation of the sacred role of women as goddesses and as conduits of Mother Earth in African societies.[199] While Clarke's view of the feminine influences A k u z u r u's work, her depiction of a woman within a womb-like space also challenges this essentialist vision. It suggests, instead, a rebirth of the feminine principle on its own terms, expanding the representation of womanhood beyond her mentor's interpretation.

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[196] See LeRoy Clarke, *De Distance Is Here: The El Tucuche Epic: 1984-2007* (Port of Spain, Trinidad: UTT Press, 2007).
[197] LeRoy Clarke, "El Tucuche Is It," in *Parables of Our Joyless Days* (Port of Spain, Trinidad: Paria Publishing Company, 2014), 74-76.
[198] LeRoy Clarke, "FULL MOON in Aripo. ANATOMY of a Painting," in *Parables of Our Joyless Days* (Port of Spain, Trinidad: Paria Publishing Company, 2014), 138.
[199] Nimah Muwakil-Zakuri, "Mujer y herencia Africana en la pintura de LeRoy Clarke (1975-1995)," 2007, 52-57. Undergraduate thesis. Universidad de Oriente.

To emphasize the self-determination of women in Afro-Diasporic emancipation and mystical transcendence, A k u z u r u's opening of "Alkebu-lan: Sewing the Seeds of Global Magnificence" invited a group of women to activate her garment designs. A photo of the performance shows one of the models confidently walking through the gallery space, wearing A k u z u r u's piece *Woman wid Children* from 1990 (Fig. 2.71). This two-piece set consists of a top and skirt with angular and organic geometric designs. The top, draped from the model's shoulders, recalls the structure of an *agbada* and features four conical sculptural forms pointing downward, alluding to women's breasts as symbols of fertility and motherhood. A later photoshoot of the garment offers a clearer view of its geometric and volumetric avant-garde construction, as well as its feminine spiritual symbolism, with the model enacting an offering scene in nature (Fig. 2.72). Created in London and also exhibited in "Afro/Works Fusion," *Woman wid Children* reflects A k u z u r u's ongoing exploration of motifs such as the inverted triangle and womb-like forms, seen previously in *Amniotic Bliss*. The piece's activation through collaboration and participation laid the groundwork for A k u z u r u's later Nigerian performances, such as *SMOKE—Translucency of Spirit*. By incorporating female performers as part of her vision for the show at Aquarela Galleries, A k u z u r u advocated for community building as a means of social, spiritual, and racial liberation. As a result, her work contrasts with Clarke's more insular approach to art-making, which, despite its profound influence on subsequent generations of artists, has faced criticism for being at times inaccessible to both educated and uneducated audiences.[200] Though A k u z u r u's avant-garde designs can be assessed through a similar lens, it is essential to acknowledge the ways in which her layered and complex process has consistently found public engagement outlets for interaction. These started

[200] Therese Kaspersen Hadchity, *The Making of a Caribbean Avant-Garde: Postmodernism as Post-Nationalism* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2020), 33.

with the designs for Roots of Mas' and have continued up to this day in one of her ongoing artistic series called *Earthology.*

Despite these differences, which reflect generational shifts, subjective positions, and personal itineraries, the opening of A k u z u r u's first solo show in Port of Spain evidenced the local community's support for her designs and artistry. A picture from that night shows A k u z u r u wearing one of her garments—a volumetric, hourglass black dress with asymmetric cuts on the chest—while LeRoy Clarke reads his opening remarks (Fig. 2.73). To her left, JaJah Oga Onilu, a Trinidadian musician who coordinated the sounds for Roots of Mas' in London, listens attentively while holding two percussive instruments. He had been invited to play his music later that night as the performers activated A k u z u r u's designs. Though not in the picture, the artist fondly remembers that choreographer and dancer Beryl McBurnie also attended the show, giving A k u z u r u her blessing and approval for the quality and concept behind her creations.[201] McBurnie's presence at the opening of "Alkebu-lan: Sewing the Seeds of Global Magnificence" symbolizes a full-circle genealogy connecting her to A k u z u r u through the work of dancer Greta Mendez in London. As an emerging figure in Trinidadian arts, A k u z u r u established, much like in London, meaningful artistic connections while remaining critical and innovative in her practice.

2.5 Conclusion

Dedicated to the early life and work of Trinidadian artist A k u z u r u, this chapter historicized the development of her multimedial practice through her engagement with Afro-diasporic and East Asian spiritualities, particularly masquerade practices, Zen Buddhism, Orisa,

[201] A k u z u r u, interview by Julián Sánchez González, July 31, 2024.

and Obeah. In the triangulation of travels between Port of Spain, London, and Zaria, A k u z u r u's work and life story is as unique as it is trailblazing for an artist from her generation, particularly from the Caribbean region. Her itineracy is inextricably linked to her own spiritual and artistic journey, leading, as I argued, to a spiritually promiscuous purview that sought cross-cultural interactions to explore ideas of interconnectedness and coalition building amongst marginalized groups. Though espousing ideas related to the rise of Afrocentrism and the Black Power Movement, a predominant ideological tenet of postcolonial Trinidad, A k u z u r u's experimental, avant-garde installation, performance, and fashion design practice exceeded the limits of an ideologically or racially constraining position. Quite the contrary, her work, via her interspiritual underpinnings, was deeply invested in themes related to more-than-human concerns, including sacredness, transcendence, and immanence, that were as theological as they were political. By developing her practice amidst mas' celebrations, the avant-garde aesthetics of Japanese and punk designers, and the spiritual reclamations of Afro-diasporic cosmogonies, A k u z u r u's artistry, largely misunderstood and understudies in local circles, should be seen through a diasporic ethos of permeability, flux, and genre-bending innovation. For these reasons, her artistic development, truthful to her own free-spirited personality, built upon and expanded narratives about behavioral propriety for Black women in the celebrations of carnival as well as the struggle for Black liberation after the Civil Rights movement. Instead of overt sociopolitical action, A k u z u r u's practice delved into the intricacies of spiritual healing of inherited colonial wounds, which aimed to sacralize and empower the Black feminine body, thus questioning its historical oversexualization, segregation, and spiritual vilification.

A sketch from her first year in Zaria encapsulates A k u z u r u's interest in visualizing Afro-diasporic transcendence while resacralizing womanhood. A sketch from her first year in

Nigeria, illustrates one of the artist's avant-garde garments while floating mid-air in an ascending motion (Fig. 2.74). As the figure's hands and arms merge into the energetic fields in the background, her head—a sacred site in African religious traditions also known as *oriki*—connects through a red beam to a round figure that resembles both the steelpan instrument from Trinidad and the shape of a cell or molecule. A rhythmic musical element emerges in the composition as a steelpan orchestra becomes part of this transcendental vision rendered in visual form. Constant exploration of dematerialization or expansion of bodily constraints is therefore one of A k u z u r u's most prominent elements of her public performative repertoire. Her designs from Nigeria in the late 1990s emphasize this interest with great craftsmanship, becoming more ethereal, deconstructed, and infused with abstract geometries (Figs. 2.75-2.76). Further, by appealing to the creation of a "Total Art" which stemmed from the multimedial carnivalesque tradition in which she was trained through sound, movement, taste, and smell, A k u z u r u's repertoire traverses promiscuously across genres without specific categorizations nor disciplinary affiliations.[202] This rejection of being subjected to a single, unidirectional reading is also part of a repertoire of refusal essential to understand the artist's work during this decade and over the course of her career. It also responds to the manifold cultural influences that A k u z u r u has incorporated in her practice, both in Trinidad and abroad. Instead of a universalizing or utopian purview, however, A k u z u r u's treatment of the cross-cultural elements in her oeuvre speak from an alternative aesthetics where empty spaces, incompleteness, and irregularities speak of an unfinished and contested process of cultural and spiritual hybridization. Her

[202] Later in her career, A k u z u r u developed the terms "Ak-tionisms" and "Experiential Art" to refer to her multimedia practice inspired by the Trinidadian Carnival traditions, evoking her view of the celebration as a: "Superstructure of multiple genres which include multiple locations of various sound expressions, dance, costume, spatial, orchestral, processional—a total performative genre within genres." A k u z u r u, interview by Julián Sánchez González, May 22, 2025.

investment in the carnivalesque traditions of her native Trinidad, moreover, leads us into the third element of her spiritually promiscuous repertoire which uses conspicuous visual and sartorial languages that reassert a sense of space, location, and presentness, while also functioning as defensive and healing mechanisms of the self.

A k u z u r u's artistic quest for expressing in her designs, installations, and performances her vision of the transcendental is nothing short of a life-long epic and ode to the pressing need to redefine our rationalistic and identity-determined Western ontologies. Her work echoes in artistic and prose expressions Sylvia Wynter's philosophical reckonings on the importance of recognizing humankind as made in the combination of biological and mythological praxis. A k u z u r u's constant interpellation of human and non-human entities, including spirits and the natural world, reflects this epistemological redefinition that defines much of her career. Her engagement with the Yaa Asantewaa Cultural Centre in London and mentorship with LeRoy Clarke in Port of Spain during early in her career merged in her practice a polarity between public and private expressions of spirituality, which has given way to offering processional and ritualistic performances later in her career. While upholding a sacred quality in her work, A k u z u r u, as this chapter attempted to demonstrate, employed in her early career a spiritually promiscuous ethos that, while irreverent and resistant to normalization, emerges from a constructive desire to rebuild the fragmentation of the social fabric. In doing so, the artist contributed to redefining racial and gender-based roles for Black women like her through a fluid creative methodology of diaspora.

Chapter 3
Pagan Unorthodoxies: Sacroprofane Levity in Chicana/o/x Los Angeles

Between 1988 and 1989, Chicana/o[1] visual artists Yreina D. Cervantez and Leo Limón worked together under the moniker "Los Dos de Los," a word play referencing their collaboration as two Los Angeles-based creatives, to create the serigraph *Estrella of the Dawn* (Fig. 3.1). Printed at the community center and print workshop Self-Help Graphics in East Los Angeles, this vibrant piece shows a figure stripped free from barbed wire by two brown hands pulling from opposite sides of a diamond-shaped geometric figure. On its rim, a surrounding inscription from the *Popol Vuh,* the surviving XVI century text recounting Mayan mythology, reads*: "Nosotros somos los vengadores de la muerte. Nuestra estirpe no se extinguirá mientras haya luz en el lucero de la mañana /* We are the avengers of death. Our race will never be extinguished while there is light in the morning star.*"*[2] The figures of Mesoamerican deities loom large on the top and bottom registers of the central composition, namely Quetzalcoatl, or plumed serpent, and Balam, or jaguar, contending a protective element to a scene that references, through its bleeding hearts, the perils of border crossings between Mexico and the United States. More broadly, *Estrella of the Dawn,* with its bilingual title and texts, addresses the Chicano experience of living in the borderlands or *nepantla*, a fragmented state of mind noted writer Gloria Anzaldúa described as one of permanent disjuncture, irresolution and in-betweenness.[3] In

[1] Following scholars Jennifer A. González, C. Ondine Chavoya, and Chon Noriega, the term Chicana/o will be used as a historically responsive descriptor of the artists mentioned in this chapter. More contemporary interpretations of gender identifications or theories will be presented with the term Chicanx instead. See: Jennifer A. González and C. Ondine Chavoya, eds., *Chicano and Chicana Art: A Critical Anthology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).
[2] In English:
[3] Gloria E. Anzaldúa, "Border Arte: Nepantla, el Lugar de la Frontera," in AnaLouise Keating, ed., *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (Durham, [NC]: Duke University Press, 2009), 180.

its claim for liberation of Chicana/o migrants from imposed borders, Cervantez and Limón's print builds on the politics of the Chicano movement which emerged in full force during the Civil Rights Era of the 1960s. Its recognition of the presence and cultural differences of Mexican-Americans in US American culture is indicative of the rooted effects of the movement in Cervantez and Limón's generation, which, coming of age in the 1970s, redefined its nationalist and masculinist tenets through greater access to artistic, intellectual, and educational networks.[4]

Estrella of the Dawn, moreover, follows in the tradition of iconographic merging of Catholic and Indigenous spiritual systems in the arts of the Americas; a strategy of syncretism, hybridization, and survival of colonized societies since the arrival of European settlers in the late XV century. Following scholar Laura E. Pérez's thinking on the relationship between art and spirituality for Chicana/o artists, this print is reflective of the politics of memory that is essential to this demographic's engagement with their belief systems as it enables creatives to maintain their consciousness, recall, and reintegrate otherworldly purviews through colonial and neocolonial relations.[5] Cervantez and Limón's reference to the Sacred Heart, both on the barbed wire and at the top left corner of the print, for instance, correlates the suffering of the Chicana/o immigrant with the biblical story of Christ's sacrificial love for humanity. Redemptive in nature, this image symbolically stresses the importance of community support as well as Mesoamerican cosmogonies—both allegories of cultural rootedness—as vehicles for social liberation. The blooming nopales below the jaguar deity Balam, along with the blending of the central figure's

[4] Paul Schimmel, "California Pluralism and the Birth of the Postmodern Era," 18 and Thomas Crow, "Art of the Fugitive in 1970s Los Angeles: Runaway Self-Consciousness," in *Under the Big Black Sun: California Art, 1974-1981,* ed., Paul Schimmel (Munich; London: Prestel, 2011), 49-50.
[5] Laura E. Pérez, *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 23.

color with its desertic background, link Chicana/o identity to the land's flora and fauna further grounding the composition in a sense of propriety over the border territory. In its narrative quality, the print by Los Dos de Los resonates with the pedagogical visual strategies of the Mexican and Chicano muralists, which used, at various stages of the twentieth century, popular symbols as vessels for communicating messages of a political and ethical nature for community organizing. The spiritual theme in *Estrella de Dawn* insisted on a key focus for Chicana/o artists in the aftermath of the Chicano movement, as new forms of understanding *Chicanidad* emerged. These artists referenced pre-Columbian spiritual traditions as a platform for creation, sociopolitical resistance, and strengthening of the social fabric of marginalized groups.

Alongside Cervantez and Limón many other politically committed Chicana/o creatives, such as Michael Amescua, Amalia Mesa-Bains, and Linda Vallejo, were highly invested in depicting the spiritual and mythological aspects of Chicana/o cultures. This impetus resonated with the proclamation of the *Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* at the Youth Liberation Conference in Denver, Colorado in 1969, many years prior. Organized by Mexican-American boxer, writer, and civil rights activist Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales, one of the Conference's outcomes was the *Plan* which positioned the notion of Aztlán, or the mythical homeland of the Aztecs, as a site of cultural nationalism and recuperation of Chicano identity.[6] In addition to equating Aztlán with the American Southwest, that is the lands the United States forcefully bought from Mexico through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which ended their binational war in 1848, the *Plan,* though mythological in scope, was devoid of deep-seated spiritual reckonings. Instead, issues of labor, self-defense, and education featured prominently in a rhetoric reminiscent of the left-wing

[6] "The National Chicano Youth Conference and El Plan Espiritual De Aztlán (The Spiritual Plan of Aztlán), 1969," in Roger Bruns, ed., *Documents of the Chicano Movement*, (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2018), 88-90.

sociopolitical movements arising in Latin America since the late 1950s.[7] The *Plan* uses the term "spirituality," as political scientist Benedict Anderson would assert, to build an imagined community sharing an alleged consciousness of the "spirit of a new people."[8] Such spirit, the *Plan* argued, was located at the intersection of land and ancestry, forming a shared identity of a "bronze people with a bronze culture."[9] While spiritually motivated, therefore, the *Plan* relegated any reference to spirituality to an analogy for what the Youth Liberation Conference's participants deemed as more pressing sociopolitical issues. Cervantez and Limón's works, as well as other Chicana/o artists' practices, are therefore exemplary of the way in which expressions of *Chicanidad* seriously engaged with spirituality after the rise of the *movimiento* in the 1960s.

Building on the conceptual foundations of the *Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* and the work of Chicana/o visual artists who fused Catholic and Indigenous spiritual systems in the aftermath of the Chicano movement, this chapter traces the continuities and disruptions introduced by performance artists engaging in spiritual promiscuity through an aesthetics of abjection found in Chicana/o/x artists as well as artists in close proximity to them in California. Broadly understood as a belief in the otherworldly through personal, non-hierarchical means, "spirituality" in this context serves as an encompassing term that includes Catholic corporeal precepts of sanctity and purity, as well as Indigenous, occult, and pagan belief systems. More specifically, the chapter examines practices that deploy sacralizing and sacrilegious corporeal languages to queer prescribed and confining conceptions of sex, gender, and racial identity during the late 1970s and

[7] A notable exception to the left-wing skepticism toward spirituality as a vehicle for social and political resistance in Latin America was the rise of Liberation Theology. Figures such as Camilo Torres in Colombia and Ernesto Cardenal in Nicaragua are widely recognized as catalysts of social change, seeking to reconcile the Catholic Church's precepts of human solidarity with the Marxist ideology of class struggle taking root in the region.
[8] "Plan Espiritual," 88-89; Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised ed. (London, UK: Verso, 2016).
[9] "Plan Espiritual," 88-89.

the 1980s. The chapter explores two analytical rubrics, "'Unwholly' Nuns and Priests" and "Ecstatic and Erotic Perversion," to discuss the work of Jerri Allyn and Jerry Dreva, and Alicia Armendariz (Alice Bag) and Gerardo Velázquez, respectively. Working as part of artistic collectives in and out of Los Angeles, Allyn and Dreva actively used the imagery of clergywomen and men in the Catholic tradition to develop their work in performance, activism, and mail art. On the other hand, Bag and Velázquez's active participation in the punk and later post-punk scenes of Los Angeles explored notions of Catholic and anti-Catholic rituals and religious ecstasy as essential to the transgressive nature of their work. Seen altogether, I argue that Allyn, Dreva, Bag, and Velázquez offered a performative body work that can be understood as "pagan unorthodoxies," deviating from canonical belief systems and identity markers from a disruptive spiritual standpoint. Their work testifies to the formation of an interspiritual creative model that enables identity fluidity beyond the constraints of respectability politics in self- and community representation. Ultimately, these practices reflect disillusionment with the suppression of individual difference within minority communities and normative culture at large, proposing self-sacralization as a utopian strategy to reenchant and reunite a fragmented world through social coalition building.

Indeed, *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán,* as scholar Rafael Pérez-Torres contended, was insufficient in articulating the historical and mythical elements essential to the formation of Chicano nationalism.[10] In addition to overlooking the entrenched identitary complexities associated with the border experience, *El Plan* also proposed a prescriptive and gendered blueprint for the work of Chicana/o artists. In that it should be "appealing to our people and relates to our revolutionary culture," and geared for unification and education of the "family of

[10] Rafael Pérez-Torres, "Refiguring Aztlán," in Chon A. Noriega, ed., *The Chicano Studies Reader: An Anthology of Aztlán, 1970-2000* (Los Angeles, CA.: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2001), 213.

La Raza towards liberation with one heart and one mind," *El Plan* set an orthodox popular standard for the role of the artist in society.[11] The National Chicano Youth Conference's write-up reflected a symptomatic perspective within the first wave of the Chicano movement, which prescribed artistic agency to sociopolitical messages of race, reproduction, and homogenization. This outlook shaped the public reception of Chicano/a art for decades. Pioneer Chicana artist Judithe Hernández, for instance, publicly wrote, in response to art historian and critic Shifra Goldman's 1981 review of her work for *Artweek*: "Why is it wrong for Chicano artists to exhibit their current work and not be held responsible for the entire art history of our culture?" She continued: "Why should changes in my work and social-political attitudes be construed as compromising my commitment to my Chicanismo?"[12] By challenging Goldman's assertion that Chicano artists were located at a crossroads between choosing politically engaged public art and privately secluded gallery work at the outset of the 1980s, Hernández's fierce response captured the discontent that she and many other artists felt towards the need to adhere to expectations surrounding an idealized notion of *Chicanidad*—understood as a heteronormative loyalty to notions of "Raza," family, and nation—in the arts.

The 1970s saw an atomization of Chicana/o artistic expressions which controverted the necessities of a politically determined art supporting the needs of "Brown Power," an initiative correlated to the "Black Power" slogan heralded by African American activists and artists during the Civil Rights era. While upholding its predecessors' defiance of the hierarchies between so-called popular, vernacular, and high cultures, as art historian Víctor Zamudio-Taylor reminds us, Chicano/a art from 1975 to the early 1990s was "no longer directly linked to a political or

[11] "Plan Espiritual," 88-89.
[12] Judithe Hernández statement on Shifra Goldman's review of the exhibition *Murals of Aztlán: Street Painters of East Los Angeles* at the Los Angeles Craft and Folk Art Museum, June 26, 1981. Sean Carrillo Papers. Special Collection Library, University of California, Santa Barbara.

ideological agenda, reflecting the evolution of political practices and countercultural movements."[13] In part due to the strengthening of artistic education in universities across California as well as the proliferation of community centers dedicated to grassroots artmaking, the rise of a new generation of Chicana/o artists felt empowered to explore beyond the constraints of a racially determined group identity as well as in innovative formats, including performance and installation art.[14] The work of the loosely formed conceptual art group Asco (1972-1987), for example, remains a pioneer example of an artistic proposition that contradicts the politics of respectability of *Chicanidad* through negative affects and abject aesthetics.[15] Asco members recognized, as art historians C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita González previously noted, the power of abjection to regulate social hierarchies, appropriating it as a catalyst in their work for social change.[16] Moreover, performance art scholar Leticia Alvarado posits that this affective heuristic of opposition "directs our attention to modes of community formation and social critique rooted in […] a refusal of identitary coherence […] that nonetheless coalesce into Latino affiliation and possibility […]."[17] Meaning "nausea" or "disgust" in Spanish, Asco's name prefaced a queer ethos of uncivic participation and unbelonging, or an "abject structure of feeling," reflected in their unstructured formation as a collectivity as well as their transgressive performative work.[18] For the Los Angeles based group, therefore, challenging the parameters of

[13] Víctor Zamudio-Taylor, "Inventing Tradition, Negotiating Modernism. Chicano/a Art and the Pre-Columbian Past," in Jennifer A. González and C. Ondine Chavoya, eds., *Chicano and Chicana Art: A Critical Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 128
[14] Peter Frank, "Plural Isms: California Art and Artists of the Mid- to Late 1970s" in Paul Schimmel, ed., *Under the Big Black Sun,* 23.
[15] C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita González, eds., *Asco: Elite of the Obscure, a Retrospective, 1972-1987* (Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2011), 45; Leticia Alvarado, *Abject Performances: Aesthetic Strategies in Latino Cultural Production* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 11; 60. Composed by Harry Gamboa Jr, Willie Herrón, Glugio "Gronk" Nicandro, and Patssi Valdez, Asco also included a plethora of floating, occasional participants, such as James L. Bucalo, Diane Gamboa, and Marisela Norte, among many others.
[16] Chavoya and González, eds., *Asco: Elite of the Obscure,* 45.
[17] Alvarado, *Abject Performances,* 5.
[18] Ibid., 61-63.

the *movimiento* pursued counterintuitive yet generative visual and performative strategies for expanding Chicana/o sociability and self-identification.

In the landmark exhibition *Asco: Elite of the Obscure. A Retrospective, 1972-1987,* Chavoya and González addressed the work of the Chicana/o collective as a direct response to the unequal living conditions of Mexican-American communities in Los Angeles as well as the war-prong sociopolitical climate of the United States during this time.[19] For most historical accounts, the Los Angeles Chicano Walkouts or Blowouts (1968) and the Chicano Moratorium (1969-1970)—a series of peaceful protests against educational segregation, the Vietnam War, and anti-Mexican racism ending with police brutality—marked a watershed moment for the Chicano movement.[20] Featuring a broader engagement of young protestors, these public manifestations reeled in new voices and perspectives, shifting the grounds of the traditional nationalistic agenda of the *movimiento.* As Chavoya asserted elsewhere, young members of Asco, such as Harry Gamboa Jr., were an active part of these demonstrations, solidifying their nascent interest in the confluence of activism and performance.[21] Developing the pioneer genre of the "No-Movie" or "pseudographic film stills that circulated as examples of 'authentic' Chicano-produced motions pictures," Asco satirized Hollywood cinema while critiquing the traditionalist purview of the Chicano movement.[22] Pieces like *Decoy Gang War Victim* from 1974, for instance, offered a grim, yet beautifully rendered image intersecting such concerns around politics and the veracity of media. With artist Guglio "Gronk" Nicandro laying down on of an empty, dimly lit street, the

[19] Chavoya and González, eds., *Asco: Elite of the Obscure*, 45-56.
[20] Harry Gamboa Jr., "Renegotiating Race, Class, and Gender: Street Works, Performance Art, and Alternative Spaces," in Selene Preciado, ed., *Mex/L.A."Mexican" Modernism(s) in Los Angeles, 1930-1985* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011), 91; Chon Noriega, "The Dissention of other Things," in *The Chicano Studies Reader: An Anthology of Aztlán, 1970-2000* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2001), ix-xv.
[21] C. Ondine Chavoya, "Pseudographic Cinema: Asco's No-Movies," in González and Chavoya, eds., *Chicano and Chicana Art: A Critical Anthology*, 293.
[22] Ibid., 294.

image contends with what performance art scholar Joshua Javier Guzmán describes, following scholars Kobena Mercer and José Esteban Muñoz, as a perverse literalization of the "burden of representation" and the "burden of liveness."[23] By comparing *Decoy Gang War Victim* with works by artists Chris Burden and David Hammons, art historian and curator Kellie Jones also contends that artists during this time were concerned with making visible the violence against the body in urban centers in Southern California.[24] Thus, Asco's avant-garde artistic approach rejected homogenous identitary formulations solely ascribed to Chicana/o artists, while also focusing on community livelihood and survival.

In addition to public protests, Asco's performative work incorporated processional forms from Catholic traditions. In their first performance piece *Stations of the Cross* from 1971, for instance, artists Willie Herrón III, Harry Gamboa Jr., and Gronk emulated, among other actions, Christ's martyrdom before his crucifixion to publicly mourn the murder of journalist and civil rights activist Ruben Salazar during the Chicano Moratorium (Fig. 3.2).[25] In the performance *Walking Mural* from 1972, Valdez, Herrón, and Gronk processed along Whittier Boulevard as a mourning Virgen de Guadalupe, a Christmas tree, and a mobile mural with three ghastly heads, respectively (Fig. 3.3). Their action was a direct response to the city's cancellation of the East Los Angeles Christmas parade, which followed public disturbances caused by police intervention after the Chicano Moratorium.[26] Engaging with and expanding upon the traditions of Catholic public rituals, as well as the histories of Mexican and Chicano muralism, these performances

[23] Joshua Javier Guzmán, *Dissatisfactions: Queer Latinidad and the Politics of Style* (New York: University Press, 2024), 59; Kobena Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation," *Third Text* 4, no. 10 (1990): 61–78; José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 181–200.
[24] Kellie Jones, *South of Pico*, 237-238.
[25] Crow, "The Art of the Fugitive in 1970s Los Angeles," 49-50. According to this account Patssi Valdez participated in this performance/procession. This is a misattribution as this artist did not partake of the public act.
[26] Karen Mary Davalos, *Chicana/o Remix: Art and Errata since the Sixties* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 200.

highlighted the central role that the tension between sacredness and profanity played in Asco's early years. A case in point is art historian Catha Paquette's assertion that Asco's use of Christian iconography was transversal to the collective's intermedial work, and that Valdez's costume, more specifically, straddled the line between identity opposition and religious faith.[27] Pérez, on the other hand, contended that Valdez's costume expressed an "interest in the aesthetics rather than the religiosity of the Virgin Mary," seeking to explore the Madonna as a "representation of racialized beauty." [28] However, she also reminds us that Valdez's reinterpretation of the Virgen de Guadalupe attempted to go beyond the "demonization of the paganism of the non-Western 'dark races,'" refashioning the Virgin as an interpretation of Guadalupe, the goddesses of the Nahua, and other non-Christian pantheons.[29] Through this lens, Asco's confluence of Indigenous and Catholic spiritual systems can be read as a continuity of the interspiritual forms of sociopolitical commentary that Chicana/o artists, like Yreina D. Cervantez and Leo Limón, were also exploring at the time.

Expanding on this context of interspiritual contacts, the present chapter aims to expand our understanding of the intersections of race, politics, and spiritual iconographies in the aesthetics of abjection of Chicana/o and associated performance artists. Beyond the dyad Catholicism-Indigenous cosmogonies, occult and pagan spiritualities also played a key role in shaping these artists' explorations of abject affects and negative aesthetics. Asco's performances *Mystics and Other Kicks* from 1976 and *Double Genie* from 1981, for instance, are indicative of a sustained referencing of non-hegemonic belief systems in the collective's work, even if through

[27] Catha Paquette, "Re(Visions): Sacred Mothers and Virgins" in Preciado, ed., *Mex/L.A:"Mexican" Modernism(s)*, 53.
[28] Tere Romo, "Conceptually Divine: Patssi Valdez's Virgen de Guadalupe Walking the Mural," in Chavoya and González, *Asco: Elite of the Obscure,* 276.
[29] Pérez, *Chicana Art,* 267.

the lens of satire and humor. Photographed in the conventions of the "No-Movie" genre developed by Harry Gamboa Jr., these actions contended with the archetypes of the Romani fortune teller as well as the practice of astrological divination in connection with supernatural beings capable of granting wishes. Though rooted in ancient traditions from the Indian subcontinent, where Romani people are believed to originate, and the pre-Islamic and Islamic world, where demon-like creatures known as *jinn*—later Westernized as genies—exist alongside humans, Asco's pieces reference and parody the portrayal of these figures in leisure spaces and popular media in the United States. The proliferation of, for instance, the Zoltar fortune telling machines in the early twentieth century in the United States and the release, in 1940, of the British movie *The Thief of Bagdad* are two examples of this type of popular mysticism. Consistent with the blurring of lines between reality and fiction, the sitters of these images simultaneously reproduce and belie—through their intense, defiant gaze—the exoticizing appropriation of cultural differences in mass culture. Further, Guillermo "Billy Starr" Estrada's embodiment of a powerful, mafia-like mystic and Víctor Herrera-Lutz and Patssi Valdez's self-Orientalizing in a gender-bending play of the male and female binary create visual oxymorons that veer on the illogical and absurd. These photographs invite an inquiry into how mystical and magical tropes of the otherworldly served as a recourse for Asco and other performance artists of their generation to question, and even transcend, racial and cultural pigeonholing.

Chicana feminist writer and artist Marisela Norte, a key member of Asco, made a rare illustration in 1981 that further shows how artists from her generation interpreted the otherworldly by merging spiritual imagery with interplanetary references (Fig. 3.4). In this drawing, Norte depicts an evanescent body connecting with an intergalactic dimension populated by floating hands—possibly of spirits or ancestors—that reach out to the figure through beams

emanating from its raised palm. The composition juxtaposes a grotesque vaporization of the figure's head on the left with an immanent scene of interconnectedness on the right, creating a dualistic structure. Additionally, the shining bright star, possibly the sun, and the specific hand gestures establish links to Indigenous cosmogonies, astrology, and references to divination, or necromancy, in occult traditions. The drawing's space-like elements align with Chicano scholar Robb Hernandez's recent work on Chicana/o artists of this period, who engaged with science fiction tropes as a means of exceeding their material circumstances and resisting racial classifications and the stereotypes of the immigrant as an illegal "alien."[30] It also expands on art historian Chon A. Noriega's analysis of the phantom-like elements in Chicana/o art following the decline of the Chicano movement in the 1970s. By suggesting the abandonment of corporeal constraints and a longing for transcendence through spiritual and interplanetary dimensions, Norte's artwork exemplifies how Chicana/o artists redefined their identity beyond the Chicano movement's nationalist agenda. This response, Noriega explains, stemmed from their struggle to express themselves and be heard, leading to the experimentation with new artistic expressions and genres.[31] Norte's piece embodies, therefore, the intersection of science fiction and "phantasmagoric" quality of post-Chicana/o art—invisible as well as ephemeral, fugitive, and permeable—where the intergalactic and supernatural intertwine.[32]

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[30] Robb Hernández, "Alien Skins," in Robb Hernández, Tyler Stallings, and Joanna Szupinska-Myers, eds, *Mundos Alternos: Art and Science Fiction in the Americas* (Riverside: UCR ARTSblock, University of California, Riverside, 2017); Robb Hernández, "Alien Skins: Cosmic Couture for a New Millenium," Gale Memorial Lecture Series, University of New Mexico, November 10, 2023. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2dqxaQTTM4&t=1894s&ab_channel=UNMArtDepartment;

[31] Chon A. Noriega, "The Orphans of Modernism," Rita González, Howard N. Fox, and Chon A. Noriega, eds., *Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement* (Berkeley, CA: Los Angeles: University of California Press; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2008), 19-20.

[32] Rita González, Chon A. Noriega, and Howard N. Fox, "Introduction," in *Phantom Sightings,* 13-16; Thomas Crow, "The Art of the Fugitive in 1970s Los Angeles," 50; "Brown in Black and White. Café en blanco y negro" Harry Gamboa Jr. solo exhibition at California State University, Los Angeles, May 18-June 11, 1982. Sean Carillo Papers. Special Collection Library, University of California, Santa Barbara. Gamboa states: "To a great extent, Chicanos are viewed as a phantom culture, more of a rumor to the national consciousness than a reality. It is difficult to accept, the blatant indifference that is cast onto such a large group of people."

Norte's and Asco's pieces continue a broader twentieth century tradition of California-based artists engaging with themes related to alternative spiritualities and science fiction. In the show *Sci-Fi, Magick, Queer L.A.: Sexual Science and the Imagi-Nation*, recently held at the University of Southern California's Fisher Museum of Art, curators Alexis Bard Johnson and Kelly Filreis mapped how artists in California used these two cultural trends to "create lives that were less restricted by societal norms" between the 1930s and 1960s.[33] Through creative renditions of alter-egos, costumes, rituals through otherworldly, decadent or erotic forms, many of the artists of the exhibition, the curators assert, developed what is known today as a queer aesthetic.[34] This assertion is particularly true for Kenneth Anger's film *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954-66) and Cameron's painting *Holy Guardian Angel According to Aleister Crowley* (1966). Referencing the renowned occultist leader Aleister Crowley's religion Thelema and his involvement with the Ordo Templi Orientis secret society, which he spearheaded from 1925 to 1947, both pieces establish ritual, whether sacrificial, sexual or psychic, as means to connect with alternative modes of being as spiritual quests. Johnson and Firleis' historical insights, therefore, prefigure what curator Paul Schimmel, in reference to the California artistic scene of the 1970s and 1980, described as one where "the singular rubric of modernism, itself informed by notions of progress, purity, and transcendence, was collapsing under the collective weight of pluralism."[35] Such active engagement with the occult as a form of societal and cultural resistance resonates with the transgression of Catholic imagery and ritual together with the embrace of paganism that Chicana/o performance artists incorporated as the locus of their

[33] University of Southern California Fisher Museum of Art, *Sci-Fi, Magick, Queer L.A.: Sexual Science and the Imagi-Nation,* press release, August 22, 2024.
[34] University of Southern California Fisher Museum of Art, *Magick* (wall text, *Sci-Fi, Magick, Queer L.A.: Sexual Science and the Imagi-Nation*, October 16, 2024).
[35] Paul Schimmel, "California Pluralism," 17.

creative output. In their conflation of alternative spiritualities and a critical purview of race, these artists were uniquely located to make a decisive contribution to explorations of the otherworldly, whether spiritual or extraterrestrial, in vogue at the time.

As the following sections address, the desire to transcend immediate material and corporeal constraints through the evocation of spiritual intermixing and identitary play lies at the heart of Chicana/o deployment of abject and negative resources in performance art. Feminist and queer thought bourgeoning since the 1960s in various capacities in California and elsewhere was essential to the incorporation of spiritual and otherworldly references as part of these artists' public performative repertoire. It is telling, for instance, that Norte also wrote during this time poems such as "La bruja y la señorita" and, in collaboration with María Elena Gaitán, plays like *La condición femenina.* These pieces contended with contrasting feminine archetypes of deviance and respectability, for the case of the former, and class-based tensions between the *barrio* culture and technological life through a feminine lens for the latter (Figs. 3.5-3.6). More poignantly, Norte and Gaitán presented *La condición femenina* alongside Asco's *Phantom Fashions*, an avant-garde fashion show taking place at the Hispanic Urban Center in Los Angeles in 1982, featuring designs by Sean Carrillo, Diane Gamboa, Armando Norte, Patssi Valdez, and Gronk. The flyer for the soirée featured a solitary woman with her face painted as a skull, reflecting the customs of Día de los muertos and engaging, more broadly, with the visual imagery of death in popular Mexican and Mexican-American cultures (Fig. 3.7). Through incursions in self-fashioning and ruminations of the afterlife, as the flyer suggests, Chicana/o artists contended with feelings of dissatisfaction and disenfranchisement. Their performative practices provided critical perspectives on sexuality, gender and spirituality, strengthening a repertoire of dematerialization of form and content which warrants further attention.

3.1 "Unwholly" Nuns and Priests: Jerri Allyn and Jerry Dreva

The mid to late 1970s in California, art historian and curator Peter Frank reminds us, saw an unprecedented and unorthodox innovation in visual and performative art practices, particularly from artists linked to feminist, Chicano, and sexually diverse social movements.[36] Part of the challenge to the heteropatriarchal, Western structures of privilege in a state as racially and economically segregated as California had its roots in the engagement of spiritual alternatives to monotheistic, institutionalized religion, such as Catholicism and Christianity, in the debated countercultural movements of the 1960s. Contending with non-hegemonic spiritual lineages and epistemologies as legitimate sources of knowledge, many scholars, artists, and practitioners—indiscriminately labeled over time under the moniker "New Age"—diversified their spiritual landscapes, drawing from various cultural standpoints. Two key examples of these transformative cultural shifts and contributions were the publication of anthropologist Carlos Castañeda's *The Teachings of Don Juan* (1968) and feminist artist and self-professed witch Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance* (1979).[37] While controversial for an alleged lack of scholarly rigorousness in its anthropological methods, Castañeda's work became influential for its popularization of Yaqui Indigenous culture from the Sonora desert, alongside their use of peyote, an entheogenic cactus used in sacred and divination rituals, to a broader audience.[38] Similarly, Starhawk's influential embrace of witchcraft as a nature-based spirituality, centered on the archetype of the Goddess or the feminine sacred, faced scholarly resistance for its perceived

[36] Peter Frank, "Plural Isms: California Art," 22-23.
[37] Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968); Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999 [1979]).
[38] Juan Carlos González Faraco and Anita Gramigna, "El antropólogo como aprendiz. A propósito de Carlos Castaneda y Las enseñanzas de don Juan, cuarenta años después," *Gazeta de Antropología* 25, no. 1 (June, 2009).

essentialism regarding women and reliance on questionable anthropological sources.[39] Both authors' unorthodox writings attempted to supersede the confines of Enlightened spiritual and ontological rationalistic purviews via narrative and autobiographical methods, challenging standards of authorial authenticity and originality.

As previously discussed, issues surrounding non-hegemonic spiritualities in the art historical writing of underrepresented social groups—such as Latinx, Latin American, and Afro-diasporic communities—have faced persistent reticence since the latter half of the twentieth century. In the case of Chicana/o artists, this is notable in the way that Asco's performative actions during Día de los muertos are solely seen as ironic to ritual, presumably leaving behind any intention to reference folklore and authentic features of Mexican and Mexican-American cultures.[40] In contrast, the scholarly work of Laura E. Pérez has set a significant precedent by positioning spiritual studies as a site of rigorous academic inquiry through a feminist and queer lens, particularly in relation to altar-making practices and other media. Addressing the work of artists such as Amalia Mesa-Bains, Yreina D. Cervantez, and Ester Hernandez, Pérez's scholarship highlights Chicana artists' engagement with what she describes as "post-1960s spiritualities that are engaged in politically oppositional and decolonizing ways."[41] These artists' use of the otherworldly as an unapologetic springboard for artistic creativity, Pérez argues, "criticized the sexism, racism and heterosexism of traditional institutionalized religions" while incorporating "neo-pagan, Buddhist, African diasporic, feminist goddess, and diverse ancestral indigenous worldviews."[42] Through their interspiritual interests, many of these artists mobilized

[39] Joan Haran, "Bound in the Spiral Dance: Haraway, Starhawk, and Writing Lives in Feminist Community," *Auto/Biography Studies* 34, no. 3 (September 2, 2019): 10-13.
[40] Chavoya and González, eds., *Asco: Elite of the Obscure*, 55.
[41] Laura Elisa Pérez, *Eros Ideologies: Writings on Art, Spirituality, and the Decolonial* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 33.
[42] Ibidem.

visual strategies of both sacralization and desacralization. For instance, Carmen Lomas Garza's carefully crafted altar *Don Pedrito Jaramillo* (1976–1991) exemplifies the former, while Alexis Donis's intimate portrayals of religious figures, such as *My Cathedral (Pope John Paul II and Gandhi)* (1997), reflect the latter. This study seeks to bridge a thematic and methodological gap between these two seemingly divergent variants on the interpretations of spirituality for post-Chicana/o artistic practices, whether avant-garde or closer in form and style to the visual conventions of the Chicano movement.

The scholarly push to reevaluate the role of spirituality in the work of artists from the second half of the twentieth century is not unique to Chicana/o artistic expressions. Pérez's investment in Chicana/o/x artists, for instance, prefigures art historian Thomas Crow's inquiry into the spiritual dimensions of modern and contemporary artists, focusing on Western Euro-American figures. Central to Crow's argument is Robert Smithson's well known land art intervention *Spiral Jetty* (1970) as an expression to his deeply rooted belief in Catholicism. He notes that the spiral motif and red-and-white coloration of the piece, located at the Great Salt Lake in Utah, stem from the doctrine of Eucharistic transubstantiation—the ritual transformation of Christ's Passion.[43] Smithson's preoccupation with this theme is evident in earlier, more explicitly Catholic works, such as *Man of Sorrow (The Forsaken)* (1961) and *Blind Angel* (1961), where he depicts stigmata-like wounds on the figures' palms. With this in mind, it is possible to assess that both Chicana/o artistic practices and related art historical studies have set a precedent that permeates studies beyond the purview of its own demographic. This dynamic underscores the resilience of culturally marginalized artistic expressions, and how the modernist

[43] Thomas Crow, *No Idols: The Missing Theology of Art*, Power Polemics (Sydney, Australia: Power Publications, 2017), 11-12; 94-101.

Euro-American interpretative frameworks are opening up to its contributions beyond essentialisms and identity reductions.

Due to its historical ties to Mexico and the Iberoamerican world at large, California's relationship with Catholicism has deep roots in its cultural and spiritual landscape. This religion's associated symbols and imagery—rich in scenes of sacrifice, martyrdom, and redemption—have become the focus of attention of numerous artists in the aftermath of the Chicano and countercultural movements. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, artists Jerri Allyn and Jerry Dreva incorporated and transgressed the Catholic archetypical figures of female and male purity and carnal abandonment, such as nuns, priests, the Virgin Mary and Christ, into their performative and mail art practices, respectively. Allyn and Dreva's works are illustrative of the thematic tension that sacredness and paganism, part of a continuum in the study of spiritually influenced artistic practices, played in their work as openly sexually diverse artists in proximity with Chicana/o artistic communities and aesthetics. In mobilizing queer desire together with Catholicism as an iconographic and conceptual base both artists defied gender and sexual conventions and stereotypes assigned to their bodies, favoring, instead, appropriating the semblance of saintly figures as a form of self-sacralization. In performing this identity exchange, I argue, both Allyn and Dreva appealed to a Baroque sensibility of metaphysical dematerialization and renewal that reminisces, for instance, the saintly experience of heart exchange with Christ in the Catholic tradition.[44] Following Crow's study on Smithson, Allyn and Dreva's exploration of new artistic genres can be read as repurposing the doctrine of transubstantiation, or, more specifically, the transformation of bread and wine in the flesh and blood of Christ, as a queering performative strategy for redefining the intrinsic value of their

[44] Gerald Parson, *The Cult of Saint Catherine of Siena: A Study in Civil Religion (London: Routledge, 2017),* 10.

cultural backgrounds and sexualities, though in varying degrees. Seen through this lens, their purposeful perversion of revered figures in Catholicism brings them to an "unwholly" state, or incomplete in their historical articulations of sanctity, contending with the potentialities of performance art to enact and therefore cast new sacred realities.

A leading figure in feminist performance art since the late 1970s, Allyn's career has been influential, firstly, as co-founder, with artist Anne Gauldin, of the collective The Waitresses in 1977. The group emerged from Allyn and Gauldin's gatherings with fellow artists at the Female Studio Workshop (FSW) in the Woman's Building in Los Angeles—a landmark space for the feminist art movement, and founded in 1973 by Judy Chicago, Sheila de Bretteville, and Arlene Raven. Through their performances in public spaces, The Waitresses drew from their experiences in the service industry to offer deep-seated yet playful critiques on women's historical and fraught relationship with work, money, sexual harassment, food production, and stereotypes as mothers, servants, and sex objects.[45] In 1981, members of The Waitresses and the Feminist Art Workers—another performance art group having also formed at the FSW in 1976 by Nancy Angelo, Candace Compton, Cheri Gaulke, and Laurel Klick—joined forces to form a new art collective, the Sisters of Survival (S.O.S.). As Gaulke describes, S.O.S., which was active in Los Angeles and New York City, counted with the participation of Angelo, Allyn, Gauldin, Sue Maberry and herself, forming a "sisterhood" that was "ordered around nuclear disarmament and world peace."[46] Their performative repertoire included wearing rainbow-colored habits, publicity photos, graphics, and signaling S.O.S. with semaphore flags, strategies

[45] Suzanne Lacy, "The Waitresses Over Time," Jerri Allyn and Anne Gauldin, eds., *The Waitresses Unpeeled: Performance Art and Life* (Los Angeles, CA: Ben Maltz Gallery, Otis College of Art and Design, 2011), 4.
[46] Cheri Gaulke, "Sisters of Survival Signal S.O.S" in Meiling Cheng and Gabrielle H. Cody, eds., *Reading Contemporary Performance: Theatricality across Genres* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2016). 72.

that directly responded to the anxieties of human annihilation during the strained political moment of the Cold War's nuclear threat under Ronald Reagan's administration in the United States.[47] Most recently, Chavoya and curator David Evans Frantz addressed Allyn's collaborative piece *Laughing Souls, Espíritus Sonrientes* from 1978, a ritualistic performance partially drawing its sartorial and stage design references from the Día de los muertos celebration and procession hosted by Self Help Graphics and Art in Boyle Heights. The curators included this performance as part of a broader continuum of conceptual Chicana/o avant-garde art practices in their exhibition *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.* (Figs. 3.8-3.9). This piece commemorated Allyn's feminine ancestry, exploring themes related to trauma, death, and sexual abuse.[48] Allyn's career from the 1970s and 1980s attests, therefore, to thematic explorations at the crossroads of gender, sexuality, racial politics, and spirituality.

In 1980, Allyn, alongside S.O.S collaborators Angelo and Maberry, presented *Visions* at the American Hotel in Los Angeles. This interactive piece guided participants—one pair at a time—through a journey of sensorial and Baroque self-discovery.[49] In the performance, participants assisted each other in crossing a long hallway: one with their vision obscured and the

[47] Ibid., 73.
[48] C. Ondine Chavoya and David Evans Frantz, "Axis Mundo: Constellations and Connections," in *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.* (Los Angeles, California: Munich, Germany: ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the USC Libraries; DelMonico Books-Prestel, 2017), 32.
[49]Allyn, Angelo, and Maberry premiered *Visions* as part of the *Public Spirit Live Art Performance Festival* in Los Angeles, a two-part event organized by Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE). In collaboration with Highland Art Agents, a collective composed by founding editor of *High Performance Magazine* Linda Frye Burnham with artists Chip Chapman, John Duncan, Paul McCarthy, and Barbara T. Smith, LACE heralded *Public Spirit Live Art Performance Festival* as the first of its kind in Los Angeles. Art historian Liz Hirsch recently argued, however, that there had been other instances of public performance art displays in the streets of the sprawling city, namely the celebration of the *Día de los muertes* organized by Self Help Graphics and Art in East Los Angeles since 1973. The programming, nonetheless, was admirable, establishing an ongoing series of performances during May and October of that year. In addition to including the organizers, the festival featured leading artists in the happening and performative medium on the West Coast, including Chris Burden, Mike Kelley, Allan Kaprow, the Kipper Kids, Suzanne Lacy, Leslie Labowitz, and Johanna Went, among many others. See: Liz Hirsch, "Inevitable Associations: Art, Institution, and Cultural Intersection in Los Angeles, 1973–1988" (Ph.D., United States -- New York, City University of New York, 2021).

other moving on a dolly, instructed not to use their legs. As the "sound of chanting nuns filled the space at the end of the hallway," the pair encountered two distinct revelatory scenes.[50] In one, the "blind" participant's head was placed on Maberry's fur-covered lap while they listened to stories of Saint Bernadette of Lourdes—her multiple visions of the Immaculate Conception and the resistance and accusations she endured as a mystic in XIX century France. In the other, the mobility-limited participant entered a dimly lit room, where candles on the floor and a black light overhead illuminated two pregnant nuns—Jerri Allyn and Nancy Angelo— dressed in black and white habits (Figs. 3.10–3.11). Once settled, the visitor was given glasses that induced a tunnel-vision effect, narrowing their view as the nuns enacted a ceremonial gesture—bending down together and lifting the outer layer of their habits to reveal sequined, feathered, and stuffed aprons covering their genitals.[51] As the nuns lifted their aprons, they "gave birth" to black balloons painted with pink and white fluorescent spirals, which floated toward the ceiling. By the performance's end, the room was filled with glowing balloons, creating a dreamlike atmosphere, after which the nuns would turn their backs to the audience and the visitors would be guided out of the room. Two messages by Allyn and Angelo were distributed to participants after the performance reflecting on the role of magic and religious or psychic vision as mechanisms of feminine resistance and transcendence. These messages addressed the imposition of shame—exemplified by Eve's use of leaves to cover her body—and the grievance of state persecution to visionary women, as seen in the resilience of Carmelite nuns who upheld their beliefs during the French Revolution.[52]

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[50] Jerri Allyn, "Visions," 1980. *High Performance Magazine* Records, Special Collection Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
[51] Ibidem.
[52] Jerri Allyn, "Cunt Coverings," 1980; Nancy Angelo, "Dialogue of the Carmelites," 1980. *High Performance Magazine* Records, Special Collection Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. In her text Allyn underscores: "Most people think Eve's leaves are worn because of modesty and shame. Historical accounts claim

Although cryptic and mysterious, *Visions* remained, above all, a participatory piece that fused Catholic mythologies, ritualistic elements, and Baroque strategies of sensorial stimulation through deprivation and intimate touch. Drawing from a surrealist aesthetic of the uncanny, or the joining together of two or more contradictory compositional elements, *Visions* coupled the figure of the untouchable nun with haptic materials such as sequins, feathers, and fur alluded to feminist strategies of gender-based dissociations *avant la lettre*, such as Meret Oppenheim's iconic *Le Déjeuner en fourrure* (1936). In doing so, Allyn, Angelo, and Maberry offered a feminist critique of the historical contempt toward women visionaries and pushed back against the narrative absences of the body of the Virgin Mary as a mother in the Catholic tradition. More poignantly, the performance offered an interspiritual take on the issue of femininity and motherhood by replacing the offspring of the nun, a stand-in figure for the mother of Christ, with a floating spiral, which, as Starhawk reminds us, has a strong presence in the Wiccan and pagan traditions of witchcraft as a symbol of renewal, divine femininity, and humankind's ever-lasting spiritual quest.[53] In replacing the figure of the male born son of God with an abstract symbol of feminine connection with the cycles of earth, *Visions* presented the participants with an alternative genealogy of the sacred in corporeal and erotic terms. The piece, therefore, took on a prophetic and emancipatory tone, guiding participants from a state of physical limitation, a metaphor for the historical weight of heteropatriarchal religious lineages rooted in sacrifice and suffering, toward the revelation of an elevated mysticism emerging from the nuns' folded habits. The activation of their accoutrements as a vaginal site of liberation resonates with witchcraft's

they were shields of magical strength, representing fertility. Does a charming, modest 'creature' differ from one with magical, fertile strength? Who gets protected by each interpretation of what Eve's leaves are?"
[53] Starhawk, *Spiral Dance*, 1979.

potentialities as an elusive and uncontrollable religious system allowing women greater sociability and autonomy.

Allyn's interest in exploring pagan unorthodoxies as part of her performative practice is informed, in part, by the work of her early artistic collaborators. The Waitresses piece *Ready to Order?* from 1978, in which Allyn participated, reflected the collective's historical, intellectual, and spiritual explorations within the broader countercultural feminist movement. Staged in multiple restaurants across Los Angeles between April 25 and May 1, the piece combined impromptu performances with public workshops, panels, and discussions.[54] Gauldin and fellow artist Denise Yarfitz manifested their interest in non-hegemonic spiritualities by developing a character based on the Great Goddess Diana, the Roman deity of fertility. Performed by Gauldin as a waitress and "multi-breasted mother," Diana's character aimed to highlight the condition of oppression of women in their role as nurturers, or servers, to, as Yarftiz noted, "howl in outrage at her current debasement"[55]. Art historian Marlena Doktorczyk-Donohue recalls that The Waitresses sough to reverse the "male reinvention of female 'serving'" which had its earliest connotations in practices of "alchemy, healing, mysticism, procreation, fecundity, and assistance" as attitudes of passivity and servitude.[56] In a review for the *New Art Examiner,* art historian and curator Arlene Raven, moreover, described the piece as revealing the "line drawn, then straddled, between the ordinary and mythic world," which, she further argued, "is, for women, an aspect of reality and a cultural fact: women with new vision live in that space

[54] Jerri Allyn, "Ready to Order?," 1978. *High Performance Magazine* Records, Special Collection Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
[55] Denise Yarfitz, "The Great Goddess Diana," 1978. The Waitresses Collection, Special Collection Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
[56] Marlena Doktorczyk-Donohue, "The Waitresses in Context," in Jerri Allyn and Anne Gauldin, eds., *The Waitresses Unpeeled: Performance Art and Life* (Los Angeles, CA: Ben Maltz Gallery, Otis College of Art and Design, 2011), 13

between the worlds, where we can see clear."[57] Doktorczyk-Donohue's and Raven's assertions as well as Yarftiz and Gauldin's character highlighted spiritual strategies of reaffirmation and liberation that women have enacted from a position of marginality in heteropatriarchal contexts, namely the reaffirmation and sacralization of their identitary irresolution. As an integral member of The Waitresses, Allyn worked closely alongside an exploration of pre-Christian and pagan themes as the base for the development of the collective's performative repertoire and body of work.

A related performance held at the Guadalupe Church in San Francisco in 1978, *The Waitress and the Witch* joined forces, as Allyn asserted, with two fellow witches, artist Chutney Gunderson, who would later become part of The Waitresses, and writer and poet Terry Wolverton.[58] Preserved ephemera from the performance include two small hand-held cut outs of a female devil figure as well as a feminine silhouette of a witch with a black cat on her lap (Figs. 3.12-3.13). Their inscriptions speak of an interchange between the two characters. The devil's message reads: "The waitress gives the witch practicality, humor, organization and the power to receive freely," and the witch's text contends: "The waitress now wishes of physical comforts, learns from the woman who calls herself witch, knowledge of a world of magic not familiar to her."[59] In a symbolic act of solidarity between feminine archetypes, these inscriptions further reassert the spiritual purview of the entire series, calling attention to the interplay of material and otherworldly realms in uplifting women's historically imposed oppression as servers, evil, or dangerous. In yet another interesting iteration of the intersection of magical explorations and

[57] Arlene Raven, "The Circle: Ritual and Occult in Women's Performance Art," *New Art Examiner*, 8, no. 2, (November 1980): 8-9.
[58] Jerri Allyn, "Ready to Order?," 1978.
[59] The Waitresses with Chutney Gunderson and Terry Wolverton, *The Waitress and the Witch*, 1978. The Waitresses Collection, Special Collection Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

science fiction, Allyn acknowledges the role of Gunderson and Wolverton in the play *Femina: An IntraSpace Voyage*, performed at the Woman's Building in June of 1978 (Fig. 3.14).[60] This piece, as Ron Pennington described for the *Hollywood Reporter* at the time, fictionalizes women's uses of their psychic powers to project themselves to another planet, Femina, upon the looming destruction of the Earth.[61] Reading the slogan "The future is closer than you think," *Femina*'s poster features a photomontage of three women positioned in a totem-like structure, arms wide and hands open, while surrounded by planets and securely holding the constellation of Aquarius in their grip. A popular belief of humankind's spiritual renewal, the age of Aquarius is here infused with female futurity and, as per Allyn's description, witchcraft as related to astral traveling and a mechanism for women to exceed their immediate constrictive realities.

From a conceptual standpoint of Chicana sensibilities, The Waitresses' Goddess Diana and *The Waitress and the Witch* symbolized an ontological ambivalence that squarely resonated with writer Gloria Anzaldúa's state of *Nepantla* as a byproduct of Chicana/o experiences of migration and its associated cultural traits of *mestizaje* or miscegenation.[62] It also recalls postcolonial theoretician Chela Sandoval's pursuit for an epistemic shift that considers a Third World feminist oppositional consciousness, in this case the inherent wisdom coming from women's roles as mothers, nurturers, servants or witches, as a site of rigorous scholarly inquiry.[63] It is fitting, then, that a year later, Allyn's *Laughing Souls / Espíritus Sonrientes* continued the performative play between feminism and spirituality while referencing the Día de los muertos celebration. Dedicated to her mother—described as a *bruja* or witch in past lives—the three-part piece, performed on October 31, invoked paganism and witchcraft in both form and content. The

[60] Jerri Allyn, "Ready to Order?," 1978.
[61] Ron Pennington, "Femina: An Intra Space Voyage," *Hollywood Reporter*, June 1, 1978, 16.
[62] Gloria E. Anzaldúa, "Border Arte," 180.
[63] Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 57-63.

invitation to the performances, for instance, featured a diverse array of imagery, including pre-Columbian glyphs, skeletons referencing the influential artistry of Mexican draftsman José Guadalupe Posada, and stuffed animals wearing black robes. This last element evidences the incorporation of popular *occulture*—the countercultural fascination with alternative religious milieu in the West—that was particularly prominent at the time.[64] Further, the performance's *Witches' Howl* segment explicitly commemorated Hallowmas, or All Saints' Eve, a Christian observance with roots in the Celtic festival of Samhain, an ancient celebration of earthly renewal and divination. Now widely known as Halloween, Hallowmas remains a hybrid event that honors Catholic saints, the newly departed, and symbolizes a liminal moment of connection with the netherworld.[65] The interplay of Catholic and pagan elements in *Laughing Souls/Espíritus Sonrientes* is, therefore, spiritually promiscuous in scope, serving as a linking theme of Allyn's spiritual investment as part of The Waitresses and of Sisters of Survival collectives.[66]

In 1983, S.O.S. performed *At Home in the Nuclear Age?* as part of the conference "Artists and War" at the Long Beach Museum of Art. According to Blaise Tobia and Virginia Maksymowicz, the performance took place on a city rooftop, where four nuns with their faces and hands painted as skeletons swept up a white powder symbolizing detritus from a nuclear explosion (Figs. 3.15). Additionally, the collective projected images of nuclear blasts and statistics about radioactive fallout—traced from the Nevada testing site to Los Angeles in the 1950s—onto neighboring buildings. Multimedial and interactive, the performance invited

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[64] Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Volume 1 Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 67.
[65] Nicholas Rogers, *Halloween: From Pagan Ritual to Party Night* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2003), 12-13.
[66] Between 1993 and 1995, Allyn brought to Arts Space in New York City and Galería de Arte de Oaxaca the exhibition of her *Six Moons Over Oaxaca* series, a project that facilitated an exchange between US and Mexican artists around the Día de los muertos and of death as a part of the life cycle. I thank Professor C. Ondine Chavoya for bringing this project, as well as his participation in it.

participants to reflect on their own location during past fallout events, extending S.O.S.'s public interventions as a form of anti-nuclear activism.[67] As Gaulke noted, the collective's initial interest in death imagery as a protest motif was inspired by a 1980 *Time* magazine cover depicting a West German protester dressed as a skeleton and wearing a soldier's helmet.[68] Their response, shaped by the cultural milieu of Los Angeles, infused *At Home in the Nuclear Age?* with Catholic imagery and scenes of female domesticity, reasserting their mission as "artist ambassadors of peace […] through our people-to-people civic engagement."[69] Reflecting on the collective's use of the nun figure, Allyn observed, "Nuns are a highly charged symbol. People become enraged, respond on a gut level, and are confused." She further remarked, "We feel the nuns to be a truly redefined image of sisterhood, reflecting the bonding we feel as women."[70] As a feminist strategy of reclamation and redefinition, S.O.S. juxtaposed a figure traditionally associated with purity and passivity against the imagery of animistic death, engaging in a seemingly futile, parodic action. Considering Allyn's prior engagement with Día de los muertos iconography—particularly the skeletal face and body painting in Los Angeles' annual public parade—*At Home in the Nuclear Age?* can be understood as another iteration of her efforts to incorporate Chicana interstitial and interspiritual perspectives into feminist collective practice.

Viewed through the lens of its cultural ties to Chicana/o traditions, *At Home in the Nuclear Age?* becomes part of a genealogy of women artists exploring the intersection of spirituality and domesticity tropes as a site of feminine agency and societal healing. Negotiating the tension between sacralization and desacralization, S.O.S.'s public performance dialogues, for

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[67] Blaise Tobia and Virginia Maksymowicz, "Sisters of Survival: Performing against nuclearism," *The Witness,* November 1991. Sisters of Survival Records, Special Collection Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
[68] Cheri Gaulke, "Sisters of Survival Signal S.O.S", 71.
[69] Ibidem.
[70] Jerry Allyn, "Elective Answers to *Heresies* 16 Questionnaire," 1982. Sisters of Survival Records, Special Collection Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

instance, with Carmen Lomas Garza's *Barriendo de Susto* from 1986. Echoing the flattened, schematic style of ex-voto paintings, this gouache on paper— as Pérez notes—depicts a scene of intimate family and community healing rooted in the spiritual and ritualistic traditions of Mexican and Mexican-American rural cultures.[71] By sweeping out or healing the *susto*—the "frightening" in one's body-mind that justify cultural subjugation as a result of colonial and neocolonial processes—Lomas Garza's piece centers on a popular practice of decolonial resistance.[72] Pérez further argues that her work manifests a spiritual purview through personal cultural practices and identity, thus affirming "that which is familiar to one, that which already constitutes a particular self, and from whose violent alienation—through racist shaming—pain, loss, and disintegration ensue."[73] While differing in medium, style, and stance on the sacred and respectable within spiritual traditions, *At Home in the Nuclear Age?* and *Barriendo de Susto* share not only iconographic parallels but also visual strategies that mobilize affect to call for sociopolitical liberation through an engagement with otherworldly themes. Drawing on recognizable symbols from Catholic, Indigenous, and pagan spiritual traditions, both works—created just a few years apart—propose a discourse on cleansing as a vital act of spiritual renewal, whether through domestic or dystopian scenarios. Moreover, through its tongue-in-cheek ironic aesthetics, *At Home in the Nuclear Age?* extends beyond Chicana/o cultural references, establishing the strategies of desacralization as a generative space for critique of normative codes of conduct that strengthens community action. Naturally, S.O.S. were active participants in the L.A. Artists for Survival collective, a chapter of the Southern California Alliance for Survival. Their 1983 *Fallout Fashion* performance and exhibition aimed to "raise

[71] Pérez, *Chicana Art*, 106.
[72] Ibidem.
[73] Ibidem.

consciousness of the nuclear threat through art" with a plethora of participants, including Sean Carrillo, Victoria Delgadillo, Diane Gamboa, and Daniel Villarreal, some of whom were also associated with Asco (Fig. 3.16).[74]

Allyn's performative practice from the late 1970s and early 1980s foregrounds the possibilities of reinvention and sacralization of the self through the queering of tropes associated with femininity and domesticity. By adopting religious and pagan symbols—such as body adornment, props, and accoutrements—Allyn privileged identitarian transformation through strategies of substitution and transgression. This exploration fostered a new consciousness of self-fashioning, not only for herself, but also for other women as agents of social and cultural change. Similarly, artist Jerry Dreva, closely associated with Asco, pursued an ever-evolving exploration of new personas, copiously incorporating his own semblance into his work. The references to Catholic symbols and imagery are numerous in Dreva's work, evidencing a hitherto little explored throughline of his practice in which the artist enacted the role of priest, martyr, and prophet. As co-founder in Milwaukee, in 1971, of the collective Les Petites Bonbons—alongside Robert Lambert and Chuckie Betz—Dreva, as noted by art historian and curator Nicolas Ballet, explored themes of gender identity, celebrity status, and the influential power of media through postcards, fanzines, photographs, and fashion items.[75] An undated mixed-media collage, signed as Big J and the Bonbons and titled *Heaven's Only 50¢ Away*, exemplifies the group's interest in the parallel between myth fabrication in popular culture and the mythologies of transcendence in the Catholic tradition (Figs. 3.17-3.18). The work features alternating strips of iridescent metallic paper and 50-cent vouchers affixed to a cardboard square, with an

[74] Joyce Dallal, Gera Golden, Stuart Timmons, and Lauren M. Kasmer, "Fallout Fashion," exhibition brochure, 1983. Gronk Papers, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California, Los Angeles.
[75] Nicolas Ballet, "Jeans as a Fact of Art: Détournements glam du groupe Les Petites Bonbons," Jean-Philippe Garric, ed., *Matières à inventer* (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2021), 207-209.

inscription on the back that reads: *"I am a sky soul, a sea soul / an earth soul. I have no wings, but I walk the earth in gratitude for the ever-changing piece of sky in my heart…"* By assigning a low commercial value to and recognizing in the self the Catholic ideal of eternal communion with God, *Heaven's Only 50¢ Away* encapsulates Dreva's irreverent yet personal approach to religion. This fragile piece also contends with the artist's pursuit for self-recognition as a sexually diverse artist and, simultaneously, as an everyday manifestation of the sacred.

Ballet's assertion of Dreva's transversal thematic interests partakes in a broader analysis that Chavoya and Evans have proposed of the artist's general interest in pushing against and confounding identity markers.[76] Dreva's mail exchanges from Milwaukee and his time spent in Los Angeles during the 1970s grew these aesthetic and intellectual interests in his contacts with an upcoming generation of experimental Chicana/o artists, including, most notably, Gronk from Asco. Resonating with post-Chicano movement artists exceeding the limits of prescribed identities, Dreva wrote, in a lengthy, undated letter to an acquaintance named Richard, that Les Petites Bonbons were, firstly, an "overtly gay band of cultural revolutionary guerrillas," and because of which the collective "did not abandon [its] radical politics, but began to realize that the convention of radical politics was of its very nature an anti-gay medium—or at least un-gay if not anti-gay." The mail artist further contended: "We defined 'gay' much more in terms of liberated and liberating lifestyle, the unification of fantasy and reality, art and life, than in the limiting terms of sexual identity." And finished by saying that his "work transcends the 'punk' label just as it transcends the 'gay' label and the 'Catholic" label.'[77] When acknowledging the intersection of spirituality, sexuality, and avant-garde transgressive aesthetics as central to his

[76] Chavoya and Evans, "Axis Mundo: Constellations and Connections," 30.
[77] Jerry Dreva letter to Richard, February 1980. *High Performance Magazine* Records, Special Collection Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

work, yet not as definitive or as an end point, Dreva made explicit in this intimate account the tensions that existed between the qualities of sacred and profane in his creative process. Mobilizing the religious as a site of transgression served Dreva as a strategy to challenge and playfully transgress the discourses around identity politics. Seen through this lens, Dreva's artistic interests are further intertwined with Allyn's, as well as with fellow artists and friend Teddy Sandoval's, for whom, as Chavoya, Frantz, and writer and artist Raquel Gutiérrez have noted, the visual and queer transgression of Catholic symbolism, particularly that of the cross, was a central motif of his practice.[78]

The performance and exhibition *Dreva at 33 1/3*, held at Milwaukee's Water Street Arts Center in 1978, corroborates Dreva's interest in referencing Catholicism as a springboard to explore mythologies and fictions of self and social identifications. In reference to the age of Christ at the time of his crucifixion, a symbol of renouncement and sacrifice in this religious tradition, *Dreva at 33 1/3* celebrated the artist's birthday with a gathering of reportedly five hundred fellow creatives, two performing punk bands—The Lubricants and the Ruthless Acoustics—, the publication of a twenty-page zine, and the exhibition of fourteen photo-booth razorblade crosses which Dreva hung on "black velvet in a specially designed anti-chapel."[79] Made of numerous photographs of the artist staring directly at the camera, the crosses were lined with sharp razor blades on their perimeter, invoking bodily harm and mutilation as well as Christ's Passion (Fig. 3.19). In writing about the razorblade series that same year, Diego Gamboa noted that these pieces were initially intended to be sent as mail art, prompting its recipients,

[78] C. Ondine Chavoya and David Evans Frantz, *Teddy Sandoval and the Butch Gardens School of Art* (Los Angeles, CA: Inventory Press; Independent Curators International, 2023), 21-22; Raquel Gutierrez, "Lost in the Valley of Tears," in *Teddy Sandoval and the Butch Gardens School of Art,* eds. C. Ondine Chavoya and David Evans Frantz (Los Angeles, CA: Inventory Press; Independent Curators International, 2023), 52.
[79] Jerry Dreva, "Artist Statement," 1980. *High Performance Magazine* Records, Special Collection Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

despite Dreva's warning on the envelope, to get cuts on their hands.[80] The installation of the razorblades also included, according to news accounts from that time, red sanctuary candles as well as a kneeler, adding a ceremonial, ritualistic, and interactive dimension to the viewers' experience.[81] On a metaphysical sense, the crosses and associated installation, or anti-chapel, raised the exhibition pagan and abject qualities, which the press also described as being invested in death and resurrection.[82] Consequently, this piece can be interpreted, as initially proposed, as a manifestation of the doctrine of transubstantiation as proposed by Catholic traditions. By suggesting the interchanging of his semblance with that of Christ, Dreva simultaneously challenged spiritual and aesthetic hierarchies through references to martyrdom and the transformation, or laceration, of the flesh.

The thematic engagement with bodily transgression and suffering that Dreva explored in his photo-booth razorblade series offered a conceptual and relational take on the historically charged relationship between Catholicism and sexuality. Its tantalizing proposition conflated Christ's martyrdom with that of sexually diverse individuals, in this case Dreva himself, asking the viewer to tread lightly or partake in an experience of shared pain. Discussing the development of gay and queer identities in early and late modern-day Britan, cultural historian Dominic Janes highlights the centrality that "queer martyrdom," or embodied Christian suffering in sexually diverse individuals, played in building social relations. Ranging from quasi-religious devotions of nationalism to gender equality, the scope and interactive nature of queer martyrdom served for causes such as accommodating for sexual deviance within Christian morals as well as the sexual liberation movement. More importantly for the purposes of this argument, queer

[80] Diego Gamboa, "A Decade of Life/Art," 1980. Gronk Papers, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California Los Angeles.
[81] James Auer, "He Calls It a Throaway: 'Lifeart'," *Milwaukee Journal*, June 4, 1978, 4.
[82] Ibidem.

martyrdom, Janes contends, opened a two-fold space of cultural recognition and redemption of sexually diverse individuals: One of victimhood, instead of aggression, and one of erotic abjection and perversity instead of effeminacy or asexuality.[83] As such, Dreva's crosses, which originally demanded an active relationship with their recipients as mail art, dialogue with Catholic symbols that have been appropriated by queer communities, such as the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian. This saint's symbolic vindicative imagery also responded to the surge of the gay liberation movement of the early 1970s, which enabled many sexually diverse artists to engage with this imagery. Gronk from Asco, for instance, made a collage conflating Antonio and Piero del Pollaiuolo's rendition of the saint, a cross-dressing figure, and references to Mexican machismo, alluding to the particularities of this form of queer martyrdom from a Chicano standpoint (Fig. 3.20). Dreva's exposure and direct involvement with the cause for sexual equality since the explosion of the Stonewall Riots of 1969 gave rise, as he wrote a decade later, to the creation of Les Petites Bon Bons in 1971.[84] In transforming queer desire and pain into artworks for personal healing and public circulation, Dreva also prefigured much of the queer artistic processes that would ensue with the breakout of the AIDS epidemic during the 1980s and 1990s.

As an artist closely associated with the Chicana/o avant-garde conceptual circles of Los Angeles, Dreva's practice aligns with what Hernández describes as these artists' underlying multidirectional, queer iconoclasm.[85] The impulse for the destruction and reconstitution of symbols, which informed much of the work artists associated with Asco, redefined, as previously

[83] Dominic Janes, *Visions of Queer Martyrdom from John Henry Newman to Derek Jarman* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 26.
[84] Jerry Dreva, "Artist Statement," 1980.
[85] Robb Hernández, *Archiving an Epidemic: Art, AIDS, and the Queer Chicanx Avant-Garde* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 46.

mentioned, the heteronormative propositions of Chicano nationalism. A key example of this attitude of refusal is the pioneering work of performance artist Robert "Cyclona" Legorreta's and his infamous piece *Caca-Roaches Have No Friends* from 1969. In this public presentation, the artist simulated, among other actions, a public fellatio. Further, Joey Terrill's *Homeboy Beautiful* digest, published between 1977 and 1979 fictionalized homoerotic imagery and the homosocialization of Chicano working-class men from the *barrio*, bringing queer erotic desire to masculinist tropes in Mexican and Chicano cultures. As Hernández argues, these works engaged "the offensive limits of hate speech, the repulsive power of language, and the repellant detection of same-sex desires."[86] Dreva's exploration of these themes, moreover, resonate with Chavoya's recent assertation that Catholic transgressions were ubiquitous in Chicana/o art after the *movimiento.*[87] In a photobooth strip he mailed to Gronk in 1976, Dreva poses clad in priestly attire for four black-and-white photographs, gazing directly at the viewer with expressions that range from mysterious and astonished to frightening and defiant. The back of the strip bears the inscription: "For Gronk of East Los / from Jerry of Nowhere" (Figures 3.21-3.22). By embodying various emotional states as a priestly character—traditionally expected to emanate centeredness and solace—Dreva's unsettled performance playfully defies the expectations of male respectability within the Catholic tradition. His previous investment in the gay liberation movement renders this photobooth performance a reflection on the controversial homosociality normally associated with Catholic priesthood. Furthermore, by emphasizing placelessness in his inscription to Gronk, Dreva uproots himself from place and tradition, challenging genealogies and location as sources of personal identification.

[86] Ibid., 49.
[87] Chavoya and Frantz, *Teddy Sandoval,* 29.

By deploying visual strategies of repetition, Dreva's roleplay as a priest breaks down the auratic quality of the photographic medium as well as the holiness of this subject as a vessel of Christ's martyrdom—think of clergy vows of poverty and celibacy. Materializing the "unwholly" or incomplete through the serialization of the photobooth strip, this piece offers a desacralizing act that, paradoxically, positions Dreva as a sacred subject himself. Such a visual strategy converses with pop artist Andy Warhol's career-long usage of the visual languages of mass culture reproduction through a direct engagement with Catholic imagery, including crosses, skulls, and the Virgin Mary. Curator José Carlos Díaz underscores that Warhol's faith, who was raised in the Byzantine Catholic tradition, inspired him "to evoke the immanence of God through his art,"[88] featuring tongue-in-cheek references to popular culture and, of course, himself. Less evidently religious imagery in Warhol's oeuvre, however, was decidedly more spiritual and abstract, such as the film *77 of **** (Four Stars) ("Sunset"),* a commission from the de Menil family funded by the Catholic Church, where the artist associated the sunset as a natural phenomenon with a manifestation of the sacred. As an admirer of Warhol's work and persona since the early 1970s, Dreva's practice, which also sought to bring art and life close together, resonated deeply with Warhol's treatment of his fame as an artwork in and of itself. Dreva contended: "I am fascinated/obsessed with the idea of the great star—the person who is famous for being famous than for any specific role or individual work of endeavor" and followed with "certain people are able to transcend their art and take their place in the pantheon of the truly famous." In an almost religious tone that seems to draw from the biblical narrative of the Genesis where God is said to have created Christ in his own semblance, the Milwaukee-born artist contends that "the greatest artist are always those who have fashioned themselves into their

[88] José Carlos Días, ed., *Andy Warhol: Revelation* (Pittsburgh, PA: The Andy Warhol Museum, 2019), 9-14

greatest work."[89] For Dreva, therefore, religious adoration of icons and the cultural transmission of these practices strongly resembled the mechanisms in which popular culture enshrined certain personalities through the power of media. While his work appropriates and ironizes this dynamic, it also conserves a religious and sacred dimension which is centered on his persona.

Two additional pieces, which Dreva mailed to Gronk also in 1978, hijack the form of religious stamps and the Holy Bible, further evidencing the influence of Warholian avant-garde tactics of conflating the use of mass distribution media and the myth-making practices of Catholicism (Figs. 3.23-3.24). The former appropriates a popular religious stamp depicting the biblical story of Christ's resurrection, with Dreva's own birth date—January 8, 1945—printed on the back, and featuring two other dates, June 4 and 5, 1978, assigned to his death and resurrection. The last two dates coincided with the prelude of the opening of his exhibition at the Water Street Arts Center in Milwaukee on June 11. The stamp also includes quotes by mystic and musical luminaries, such as William Blake, "The eternal body of man is the imagination," and Patti Smith, "i am an american artist, and i have no guilt." This strategic play between image and text with Catholic icons constitutes a poignant critique of the deliberateness of origin stories in religious traditions. They unapologetically place Dreva's queer persona at the center of the spiritual narratives central to the Catholic dogma, positioning imagination as the vehicle for transcendence and pushing back against feelings of guilt, a locus for behavioral control and social cohesion in Catholicism. Through this desacralizing action Dreva, moreover, exposes the overarching reach that the narrative of Christ's resurrection is offered as humanity's redemption. Therefore, Dreva's assuming Christ's persona recalls performance scholar José Esteban Muñoz's writings of minority disidentification strategies that "resist and confound prescriptive patterns of

[89] Jerry Dreva, "Artist Statement," 1980.

identification."[90] In challenging the uniqueness of the experience of redemption, this piece also resonates with Muñoz's claim that disidentifications revise exclusionary dynamics that pretend universalizing narrative thereby excluding alternative minority experiences.[91]

Further, Dreva's intervention of a Little Bible voided the contents of the holy scripture, only to leave inside one of the artist's photobooth pictures and a red pin commemorating his collaborative exhibition with Gronk from March 1978 (Figs. 3.25-3.26). Titled *Dreva/Gronk 1968-1978: Ten Years of Art and Life*, the survey show took place at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), a nonprofit exhibition space which Gronk had co-founded, aiming to explore and promote formal experimentation through installation, performance art, and video outside the art market and in tandem with the community.[92] The exhibition featured the artists' almost daily epistolary exchanges for four years, alongside other artworks such as photos, documents, and ephemera made a decade prior, including Dreva's razorblade crosses series. More prominently, the show advertised to "take down the gallery walls and take art to the streets" in an epic union of art and punk, bringing bands, such as The Bags to play on stage.[93] Though differing in styles both artists shared, as the local press acknowledged at the time, a "common concern for erasing the fine line between art and life and are committed to the creation of their own lives as their most important works of art."[94] Dreva's use of the pin to create yet another mail artwork is not only self-referential, and particularly so after the reported chaotic outcome of the evening, but also an act of sacralization of himself and of his relationship

[90] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 25-28.
[91] Ibid., 31.
[92] Max Benavidez, *Gronk* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2007), 57.
[93] Jerry Dreva and Gronk, "Art Meets Punk" flyer, 1978, Gronk Papers, Chicano Research Center, University of California, Los Angeles; Thomas Crow, "Art of the Fugitive in 1970s Los Angeles," 55-56.
[94] "Dreva and Gronk exhibit at L.A.C.E," 1978. *High Performance Magazine* Records, Special Collection Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

personal and creative, with the Chicano artists belonging to Asco. Portable and reproduced en masse like a stamp, the Little Bible featuring Dreva as the personification of the word of God relies on the humor of the unexpected to playfully reverse and appropriate hegemonic spiritual narratives mythologizing the origins of humanity.

Dreva's pursuit to conflate life with art, partially by sacralizing his persona and his community through artistic gestures in ephemera, is indicative of what Pérez describes as the "mundane sacred." For the Chicana scholar, this concept is an acknowledgement of the sacredness of life and the human body that holds a particular vindicative power for minority communities who have grown to generate feelings of self-loathing as a byproduct of racial, sexual, and gender-based hierarchies.[95] A case in point is the figurative work of painter Yolanda López reimagining herself as a triumphant Virgen de Guadalupe from 1978. Conceptually, Dreva's practice belongs to a constellation of initiatives across minority communities taking Catholic references as a point of departure to debase heteropatriarchal, modernist dynamics of exclusion and segregation. Much like Jerri Allyn's work as part of The Waitresses and Sisters of Survival from the late 1970s, Dreva also contends that everyday acts can be seen as an expression of holiness. Both artists engage in visual and performative languages to undo and fragment, or render "unwholly," preconceived notions of that which is sacred.

3.2 Ecstatic and Erotic Perversions: Alice Bag and Gerardo Velázquez

The contributions of Chicana/o musicians and performers to the bourgeoning punk and post-punk cultures of Los Angeles of the late 1970s and early 1980s has been, and continues to be, the center of attention of multiple scholarly studies and curatorial projects, though

[95] Laura E. Pérez and Julián Sánchez González, "Laura E. Pérez on Altars, Eroticism, and the "Mundane Sacred," *MoMA Magazine,* January 10, 2024. URL: https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/1005

intermittently, for over two decades. The pioneering work of scholars Michelle Habell-Pallán, Pilar Tompkins Rivas, and Colin Gunckel brought to light inquiries and archival materials that have established the central role that Chicana/o/x musicians played in diversifying the West Coast scene. Through a feminist lens, Habell-Pallán, for instance, has posited that the Chicana/o rasquache aesthetics, or the cultural practice of making do with limited resources, found a strong resonance with punk's Do It Yourself ethos, enabling a greater degree of participation of this demographic in what was initially a Euro-American musical genre and social scene.[96] She further argues that in critiquing the status quo as well as issues of sexuality, gender violence, class, inequality, and warfare, the rise of the punk scene in Los Angeles resonated with many Chicana/o youth living through disenfranchisement in a highly segregated city.[97] Tompkins Rivas, on the other hand, noted how through an active engagement with punk culture, women musicians, such as Alice Bag from the band The Bags and Teresa Covarrubias from the band The Brat, placed themselves outside restrictive conventions of appropriateness for Mexican-American women, thus making of their performances "a process of vocalizing a countercultural stance."[98] From an art historical standpoint, Gunckel established that punk cultural expressions in Los Angeles intimately intertwined with the artistic experimentation of the Chicana/o avant-garde, which notably included members of Asco.[99] Altogether, these scholarly contributions highlight how Chicana/o punk and post-punk bands pursued new expressions of identity beyond the heteronormative and patriarchal purviews heralded by the Chicano movement since its

[96] Michelle Habell-Pallán, *Loca Motion: The Travels of Chicana and Latina Popular Culture* (New York: University, 2005), 150-151.
[97] Ibid., 151-152.
[98] Pilar Tompkins Rivas, "Ways of Living and Models of Action," in *Vexing: Female Voices from East L.A. Punk*, eds., Pilar Tompkins Rivas and Colin Gunckel (Claremont, CA: Claremont Museum of Art, 2008), 7-8.
[99] Colin Gunckel, "Vex Marks the Spot: The Intersection of Art and Punk in East Los Angeles." in Pilar Tompkins Rivas and Colin Gunckel, eds., *Vexing: Female Voices from East L.A. Punk* (Claremont, CA: Claremont Museum of Art, 2008), 13-14.

establishment during the 1960s. At the same time, the arguments aim to position Chicana/o punk musicians as part of a larger conversation of experimental performative practices that sought to open spaces for unorthodox forms of expression in Los Angeles and beyond.

More recently, Guzmán homed in on the work of Velázquez as part of the Los Angeles-born electropunk band Nervous Gender. He argued that the Chicano musician and artist's performances contributed to the development of the queercore movement, a subgenre of punk culture focusing on sexual deviancy, gender-bending, and lyrics about gender and sexuality.[100] The band's usage of violent, sacrilegious, and sadomasochistic imagery, Guzmán notes, enacted a form of "dissatisfaction" or "discontent"—a structure of negative feelings and style of politics of unbelonging with the potential to enact social change from a working class perspective.[101] Gunckel, moreover, also argued that Nervous Gender's performances were an expression on the quintessential link between art, queerness, and Chicana/o culture in the punk and post-punk scenes of Los Angeles.[102] Resonating with Alvarado's proposition for a negative aesthetics of liberation, Guzmán further analyzes punk performers Bag and Covarrubias deployment of lo-fi aesthetics as an expression of disenchantment and resistance. The former's iconic screams and use of a bag over her head as part of the early performances of the band marked the early Los Angeles punk scene, and the latter's feminist bad attitude against patriarchy and expected social roles for women are evidence of their interest in redefining standards for artistic expression and gender norms.[103] These strategies of artistic engagement, as Habell-Pallán reminds us, respond to the assiduous pigeonholing the press subjected these female-led bands to, describing them under

[100] Joshua Javier Guzmán, *Dissatisfactions: Queer Latinidad and the Politics of Style* (New York: University Press, 2024), 2.
[101] Ibid., 16.
[102] Colin Gunckel, "People Think We're Queer 'Cause We're Queer," *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.* (Los Angeles, California: Munich, Germany: ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the USC Libraries; DelMonico Books-Prestel, 2017), 275.
[103] Guzmán, *Dissatisfactions,* 90-93; 100-109.

the Latin or exotic rubrics.[104] This scholarly thread insists on the transgressive nature of these bands' performances as not only defying traditional Chicano culture but also resisting assimilationist propositions from the racially exclusive stances of the first wave of feminism, and, as Guzmán also contends, the drive for standardization in the gay liberation movement.[105]

Essential to the development of the musical and performative practice of these and many other Chicana/o punk and post-punk bands was the opening, in 1980, of Self-Help Graphics, the community center dedicated to the Chicano community in East Los Angeles, to also function as a live performance venue. With the approval of Sister Karen Boccalero, founder of Self-Help Graphics, Willie Herrón III, member of the band Los Illegals as well as founding member of Asco, and entrepreneur Joe Suquette, opened the Vex. The space, through short lived, offered a daring for a space originally founded under the premises of Catholic piousness to support, educate, and empower a segregated and disenfranchised Mexican-American youth.[106] In a written proposal for the Vex addressed to Sister Boccalero, Suquette describes the purpose of the space as providing entertainment and attracting people besides "Hispanics" into East Los Angeles, promoting the bands from the neighborhood and breaking its stereotypes.[107] Explaining the name's selection in a meeting with Sister Boccalero, Herrón contended that they chose it "because the music being played by the musician represents a form of protest against society […] and therefore can be vexing (annoying, irritating)."[108] Further, cultural historian Josh Kun and Chicana/o/x studies scholars Karen Mary Davalos and Tatiana Reinoza argue that the Vex

[104] Habell-Pallán, *Loca Motion,* 156.
[105] Guzmán, *Dissatisfactions,* 17.
[106] Gunckel, "Vex Marks the Spot," 15-16; Sean Carillo, "East to Eden," in Exene Cervenka et al, eds., *Forming: The Early Days of L.A. Punk* (Santa Monica, CA: Smart Art Press, 2000), 42.
[107] Joe Suquette, "Purpose of Vex & Mag.," 1979. Self Help Graphics and Art Collection, Special Collections Library, University of California, Santa Barbara.
[108] "Vex," minutes from a meeting between Willie Herrón III, Joe Suquette, and Sister Karen Boccalero, 1980. Self Help Graphics and Art Collection, Special Collections Library, University of California, Santa Barbara.

also became a space for intermedial experimentation, joining punk performances together with fashion design, painting, and photography.[109] Closing after six months due to a riotous night when the band Black Flag played, the Vex, as Gunckel asserts, achieved legendary status, establishing a space where Chicana/o/x artists challenged themes of gender, race, and sexuality.[110] The appearance of this venue established a direct historical link between the work of Self-Help Graphics and the development of the musical and performative languages of punk and post-punk cultures in Los Angeles.

A notecard made in the 1970s at Self-Help Graphics and signed by Miguel Rodriguez reads the inscription: "*Muerte, Muerte, Muerte. No te tengo miedo."* The illustration of a silhouette of a person hovering features center in the composition while four grinning and menacing skulls rest in each corner (Fig. 3.27). Designed, most likely, as part of the artistic workshops that Self-Help Graphics offered to the public to commemorate Día de los muertos, this print indicates the close relationship that Mexican and Mexican-American communities hold with the experience of death and the notion of the afterlife. Its representation of an ambivalent perception of death resonates with the celebratory parade for Día de los muertos that Self-Help Graphics organized in East Los Angeles since 1973, bringing together numerous community members in a carnivalesque procession to the Evergreen Cemetery in the Boyle Heights neighborhood. This type of community engagement highlighting joviality, irreverence, and humor towards death reflects what Chicano studies scholar Yolanda Broyles-González identifies, following philosopher Jorge Portilla, as the phenomenology of *relajo.* Understood as the

[109] Josh Kun, "A Space for the Possible" in Pilar Tompkins Rivas and Colin Gunckel, eds., *Vexing: Female Voices from East L.A. Punk* (Claremont, CA: Claremont Museum of Art, 2008), 22; Karen Mary Davalos and Tatiana Reinoza, eds., *Self Help Graphics at Fifty: A Cornerstone of Latinx Art and Collaborative Artmaking* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2023), 8-9.
[110] Gunckel, "Vex Marks the Spot," 15.

deployment of humor and laughter as part of the Mexican popular performance tradition, *relajo* is, above all, a tactic of negation of prescribed modes of conduct. Broyles-Gonzàlez further argues that *relajo* was essential to the development of the performative repertoire of El Teatro Campesino, a theater troupe that assiduously contended with imagery of death and the afterlife.[111] Founded in 1965 by Luis Valdez, El Teatro Campesino emerged of the lived experiences of workers, migrants, and union organizers from the San Joaquin Valley, offering an "aesthetic tool of oppositional consciousness," as Dávalos contends, that challenged racial stereotypes as well as social inequalities.[112] Rapidly proliferating in California and other states, El Teatro Campesino became a reference of Chicana/o public performances, and, as theater and performance art scholar David Román argues, to contemporary Latino theater as well.[113] This led, for instance, to El Teatro Campesino's inclusion as a closing act for the Self-Help Graphics' Día de los muertos celebration of 1978 with the play *El fin del mundo* (Fig. 3.28).

Coincidentally, this was a milestone year for the explosion of punk and post-punk cultural forms in Los Angeles as well as the development of Chicana/o avant-garde conceptual art, which, as a historical synergy, warrants further attention.[114] Therefore, Alice Bag and Gerardo Velázquez's performative practices—opposing identity classification and employing a negative aesthetics—should be understood, I further contend, as a feminist and queer interpretation of the popular cultural forms proliferated across California by El Teatro Campesino during the 1960s and 70s. These forms include *relajo* as a challenge to the status quo

[111] Yolanda Broyles-González, *El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 28-29.
[112] Karen Mary Davalos, "Performing Politics," in *The Chicano Studies Reader: An Anthology of Aztlán, 1970-2000,* ed. Chon A. Noriega (Los Angeles, Calif.: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2001), 243.
[113] David Román, "Latino Performance and Identity," in *The Chicano Studies Reader: An Anthology of Aztlán, 1970-2000,* ed. Chon A. Noriega (Los Angeles, Calif.: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2001), 457.
[114] "Self Help Graphics' Dia de los Muertos Celebration Set," 1978. Newspaper article. Self Help Graphics and Art Collection, Special Collections Library, University of California, Santa Barbara.

via means of mischievous attitudes, as well as El Teatro Campesino's, as Broyle-González notes, "sacroprofane fusion" or the expression of a spiritual dimension within a set of sociopolitical relations of domination and subordination.[115] An analysis from a theatrical and spiritual standpoint seeks to highlight these two overlooked or little unexplored aspects of Bag and Velázquez's performative practice as members of punk and New Wave bands in Los Angeles. Indeed, both Bag's published autobiography and Velázquez's archive, held at the ONE Gay and Lesbian National Archives, demonstrate a deep-seated interest in spirituality as a creative source of their work. The fact that Bag and Velázquez simultaneously studied philosophical and religious topics at California State University, Los Angeles at the beginning of the 1980s when pursuing their Bachelor of Arts, for instance, indicates the role that the spiritual held for them as a source of inquiry. For Bag, a pioneer figure in the Los Angeles punk scene, attending college allowed her to retroactively reflect on her work as band leader of The Bags. For Velázquez, whose work offered an innovative synthpunk sound, spending time in college enabled him to develop the groundwork for Nervous Gender's visual identity. Highlighting elements related to pre-Columbian, pagan, Catholic religious and spiritual systems as part of their respective explorations on sex, gender, and cultural traditions, Bag's and Velázquez's work repurposed, intermixed, and transgressed otherworldly beliefs which became an essential aspect of their work as Chicana/o performers and musicians. By establishing a parallel between El Teatro Campesino's repertoire of the sacred and the profane and Bag's and Velázquez's own radical and heretical work, this section seeks to broaden our understanding of the diverse manifestations of Chicana/o culture within the emergence of punk and performance artistic expressions.

[115] Broyles-González, *El Teatro Campesino,* 62.

Formed in 1977 and active until 1988, the Bags was first ideated by music aficionadas Alice Bag, born Alicia Armendariz, and Patricia Morrisson, born Patricia Anne Rainone, aiming to create an all-female punk rock ensemble in Los Angeles. Despite various attempts, their first show ultimately included male and female members, such as Geza X (Gedeon), Joe Nanini, Janet Koontz, and the aid of Nickey Beat (Alexander), Bag's partner at the time and drummer of punk band The Weirdos. The initial configuration of the band would change over the years, notably including guitarist Craig Lee who would also play with other prominent bands of the Los Angeles punk scene, such as Catholic Discipline. Following Morrisson's suggestion, the band wore for their first performances brown paper bags on their heads as makeshift masks, which, according to Bag, was a ritual gesture taking the group from "an ordinary state of being into an extraordinary one."[116] The paper bags, as Bag would further note, would function as a form of protection and enabler of freedom, allowing the performers to remain incognito and thus free of judgment in public (Fig. 3.29). The band's first publicity stunt consisted of a daring parade down Sunset Boulevard in which the four initial members walked down wearing paper bags on their heads as well as outfits flaunting urine, fake blood, tampons, plastic dolls, and public semi-nudity (Fig. 3.30).[117] While the women of the group only partook in the sensuous dressing by donning tights, miniskirt, and vinyl dress, the overall aesthetics of shock proved effective as it called passersby's attention as well as the police's, who expediently demanded the public display to be over.[118] The Bags' Los Angeles debut as a band made explicit a deployment of a Do-It-Yourself aesthetics, which bourgeoned in the emerging punk expressions of the time in major metropolitan cities such as Los Angeles, New York City and London. For as unusual as it might

[116] Alice Bag, *Violence Girl: East L.A. Rage to Hollywood Stage: A Chicana Punk Story* (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2011), 212.
[117] Ibid., 204-205.
[118] Ibidem.

have been at the time, The Bag's performance was far from an anomaly as they tapped into a transnational movement that pushed against public appropriateness and aesthetic hierarchies through performance.

Numerous scholars have noted that the Los Angeles punk scene was unique given that the Do-It-Yourself aesthetics strongly resonated with Chicana/o cultural formations, namely a *rasquache* sensibility of making do with what is available. This resonance allowed Chicana/o/x youth an entry point into the movement, whether as performers or spectators.[119] *Rasquachismo* was an aesthetics, as Chicano studies scholar Tomás Ybarra-Frausto contended in the late 1980s, deriving from strategies of hybridization, juxtaposition, and integration in everyday living and in artmaking. For Ybarra-Frausto, being *rasquache* conveyed the adaptability and style of the working classes as forms of survival and resilience.[120] The gleeful and nonapologetic use of paper bags, crayons, and markers to create their own masks, allowed the Bags to express themselves in a fashion that blended punk and Chicana/o aesthetics. By making public use of human bodily fluids—typically perceived as private and undesirable—alongside ritualistic elements of transcendence as "an extraordinary state of being," their first performance blended profanity and sacredness, much like the work of El Teatro Campesino and the public actions of the Asco avant-garde group. As already mentioned, Asco's pieces *Stations of the Cross* and *Walking Mural* are illustrative of the resignification of the values of the sacred, including the processional element of their performative structure. This new generation of Chicana/o artists raised through various, innovative means public awareness around the violence and

[119] Guzmán, *Dissatisfactions,* 78; Karen Mary Davalos, "Self Help Graphics & Art's Contributions to Chicana/o/x Art Histories," in Davalos and Reinoza, eds., *Self Help Graphics at Fifty.* 173-177; Habell-Pallán, *Loca Motion,*152; 170.
[120] Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, "Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility," in *Chicano Aesthetics: Rasquachismo*, exh. cat. (Phoenix, AZ: MARS, Movimiento Artístico del Rio Salado, 1989), 5–8. URL: https://icaa.mfah.org/s/en/item/845510#?c=&m=&s=&cv=2&xywh=-837%2C-412%2C3329%2C2198.

discrimination against their bodies and culture in a segregated Los Angeles. The carnivalesque and humorous aspect in the Bags' parade, therefore, falls in line with the performative forms of Asco's earlier public interventions, including their engagement with religion and spirituality. Furthermore, The Bags' parade reflects the then recent history of public, celebratory religious processions commemorating the Día de los muertos organized by Self-Help Graphics. Given Bag's political commitment to supporting her community in the aftermath of the Chicano Moratorium—an effort unfortunately constrained by narrow-sighted preferred modes of conduct in the Chicano youth—it is fitting to view her paper bag performances as her own form of sociopolitical protest from a Chicana perspective.[121]

Superseding any overt references to Catholic imagery yet keeping in with the processional aspect of the Self-Help Graphics Día de los muertos, the Bags' parade offered a space for a reinterpretation of Bag's cultural background deploying a negative affect and aesthetics. Referring to the development of punk aesthetics in the work of Chicana artists, Davalos describes it as an expression of *bricozaje,* a word interplay between bricolage and *mestizaje* initially coined by scholar Mary Thomas to describe "a blending of multiple aesthetic traditions within the social contexts from which they emerge."[122] Bag's punk *bricozaje* can be further studied in photographer's Dawn Wirth well-known photoshoot of the Bags at the Hollywood Memorial Cemetery (Fig. 3.31). Shot in 1978 to celebrate the entrance of Craig Lee to the band as well as the temporary participation of Nickey Beat as drummer, the photograph portrayed the Bags sensually and assuredly posing on graves and mausoleums. Bag donned an all-black knitted and mesh outfit with high stilettos, bold, angular makeup, and hanging metal chains attached to her chest and waist. Morrison, on the other hand, fashioned a white button-

[121] Bag, *Violence Girl,* 102-103.
[122] Davalos, "Self Help Graphics & Art's Contributions to Chicana/o/x Art Histories," 182-183.

down shirt, black stocking, stilettos, and a pale foundation that contrasted with her long bangs and hair. Their sartorial choices recalled a female vampire aesthetic, evoking the original name with which both performers confabulated to initially christen the band: Femme Fatale.[123] Such archetypes had been made a staple of Hollywood television of the 1950s, for instance, with actress and hostess Maila Nurmi's role as Vampira. In the emerging performance art circles of Los Angeles, moreover, artist Rachel Rosenthal also developed a vampire-like persona through the pieces *Grand Canyon* from 1978 and *The Death Show* from 1978 to 1980, reflecting on issues such as the othering of nature, excess food consumption, and the looming presence of death in everyday life.[124]

As an expression of *bricozaje*, the photoshoot at Hollywood Memorial Cemetery evokes the Chicano procession to Evergreen Cemetery in East Los Angeles and the active participation of the Chicana/o/x communities during the Día de los muertos celebrations. A Seymour Rosen photograph of Asco taken years prior at this cemetery as well as the picture of four young adults—Martín Espino, Consuelo G. Flores, Armando Norte, and Maris Zains—by another photographer also speak of this composition as a common occurrence or trope (Fig. 3.32). Furthermore, women took a central role during the parade as participants and performers. An image from 1979, for instance, shows a group of three women with their traditional masks during the procession, while an image from 1981 portrays mime Judith García dressed as a skull, wearing a long black robe and striking black-and-white makeup, performing atop a stage adorned with *papel picado* as well as a painted prop of a female skull, reminiscent of Gronk's painterly

[123] Bag, *Violence Girl,* 153.
[124] M. Virginia B. Bettendorf. "Rachel Rosenthal: Performance Artist in Search of Transformation." *Woman's Art Journal* 8, no. 2 (1987): 33–38.

style, to her right (Figs. 3.33).[125] Diane Gamboa—a participant of Asco during the 1980s—was also an active participant in Día de los muertos celebrations, often painting her face with detailed skull designs.[126] Her engagement with the parade's popular theater culture informed her artistic practice as a paper fashion designer, a medium that, as Pérez argues, critiques the arbitrary symbols, status markers, and gender roles imposed by the fashion industry.[127] In the first paper fashion show organized by Gronk in 1982, for instance, a photograph captures Gamboa applying makeup to one of her models (Fig. 3.34). In this act of collaborative creation, Gamboa applies a white base and dark eye contour, rendering the model's face ghostly and skull-like. Much like Bag, Gamboa's incorporation of Día de los muertos imagery hints to an interest in the otherworldly, anchoring their shared aesthetics within the scope of ritual, theatrics, and performance.

Teresa Covarrubias' work as a lead singer of the punk band The Brat also evidenced her interests between religion, death, and the afterlife as a Chicana and a countercultural figure. In a pose for a photoshoot for the band's first EP, *Atittudes,* Covarrubias is flanked by her band mates while wearing an all-black ensemble as she crosses her arms on her chest, conveying a vampire-like persona (Fig. 3.35). Recorded with Fátima Records, a Chicano-owned label, and released in 1980, the EP included songs such as *High School,* where Covarrubias describes herself as being at odds with her religious upbringing, indicating the possible source of her abject aesthetics: "Catholic school's just a game / Driving kids like me insane." This position of defiance and aesthetic negativity toward Catholic tradition would materialize in a Sean Carrillo photograph a

[125] This photograph also recalls Broyle-González's recognition of Olivia Chumacero as a key informant to Luis Valdez on the *pastorela* (shepherd play) tradition. Originally performed by El Teatro Campesino from 1977 to 1979, this genre narrates the journey of the pastores to the Nativity site, though, as Broyles-González notes, it evolved into a highly comedic form, prioritizing humor and parody over theological concerns.
[126] "Día de los muertos," *La Opinión,* 1981. Self Help Graphics and Art Collection, Special Collections Library, University of California, Santa Barbara.
[127] Laura E. Pérez, *Chicana Art*, 68-69.

year later, where Covarrubias is dramatically portrayed holding a decapitated Christ figurine on her right hand, while her left hand shows the head to the viewer (Fig. 3.36). The fraught relationship with Catholic school and Catholic indoctrination would also be a transversal theme in Bag's autobiography. While questioning her core beliefs around God and Catholicism from an early age, Bag noted that her participation in the Liturgical Club and the Christian Action Club at the Saint Mary High School taught her the value of ritual, or repetitive communal actions such as praying, to aid the group in their quests for spiritual growth.[128] When performing in frantic energy bursts on stage years later, Bag would better understand her engagement with ritual as a punk musician, seeing in the release of anger a kind of personal exorcism.[129] A picture of Bag performing in the late 1970s portrays her screaming into a microphone, suggesting an experience of intense ecstasy as she is flanked by her skull-clad bandmate and a concert-goer donninng a white t-shirt with the words *"Coma Caca"* or "Eat Shit" in the ubiquitous Coca-Cola typography (Fig. 3.37). In the photograph, the performer inhabits the liminal space between corporeal presentness and energetic transcendence, which, alongside the self-fashioning of her unruly stage persona, proposed a daring *bricozaje* of various cultural strains reminiscing death and the afterlife. Bag's performances therefore offered a unique conceptual synthesis of various visions of the otherworldly, allowing her to publicly claim, as it was the case for Covarrubias, creative autonomy and agency as a woman of Mexican-American roots.

Bag's sacralizing and desacralizing performative tactics align with a broader tradition of popular theater in Southern California due to their politically charged expressions grounded in grassroots subjectivities. The Bags first and only EP, *Survive,* recorded in 1978 with the Dangerhouse label, included an eponymous song where Bag declared: "Set in your monotony /

[128] Bag, *Violence Girl,* 128.
[129] Bag, *Violence Girl*, 211-13.

I'll desecrate commodities / Make you all into paste / All your rancid blood I'll taste" as well as "Survival is the game / Can't stop us now, it's all in vain." In her lyrics, gore and profanity came together as a battle cry against the status quo and youth disenfranchisement, raising awareness for the need for visibility and community action. This transgressive message is reinforced in the EP's cover which shows Bag's face against a pitch-black background staring intensely at the viewer from below, as if emanating from the shadows (Fig. 3.38). Though embodying what seems to suggest a position of subordination, her confrontational body language and unflinching, wide-open gaze say otherwise, infusing her enactment of an underdog position with defiance. Sexual abjection also permeated the band's songs. The lyrics to an unreleased track further attest to the role that a perverse take on death served as a vehicle for feminist critique. The song, which tells the story of a frustrated sexual encounter between an urged man and an unresponsive woman, describes the latter as: "Her reaction: a blank stare" and "She is the living dead." Towards the end of the song, however, it is impossible to assess whether the woman does not move because of a lack of desire or because she is, in fact, dead: "He's like some mad prince called Hamlet / but she's no sweet Ophelia / loving her is necrophilia" (Fig. 3.39). Though macabre, the song's narrative arch proposes a twist that is mischievous and almost humorous, a strategy that reminisces the uncomfortable comedy or parody of Mexican-American popular theater. More importantly, the lyrics also offer a poignant social commentary on the expressions of sexual desire for women and men, as well as the practices of consent in the face of heteropatriarchal *machismo*.

The Bags' deployment of masquerade practices to embody another self and facilitate a connection with alternative realities and state of beings resembles the Mexican-American sacroprofane theater traditions heralded in the work of El Teatro Campesino. Parallelly, the late

1970s and early 1980s saw an increase of underground sexual cultures, including communities engaged in sadomasochistic practices and leather fetishism, also actively exploring masking to transcend corporeal constraint and the limits of pleasure. Two flyers promoting performances by the Bags are indicative of the conflation of eroticism, pain, and masquerading as a visually engaging vehicle that tapped into the transgressions of sexual taboos and stigmas that were characteristic of this era. The first, a photocollage made in 1978 for the Bags' first and only performance at the Troubador, an influential music venue that catapulted the careers of many rock music acts, features a juxtaposition of violent and sexually ambiguous imagery (Fig. 3.40). The composition included scenes of sensory deprivation and bondage, the targeting of individual faces with a sniper scope, and masked hypersexualized nude bodies. Two figures with paper bags on their heads reference the band's signature early public performances, while also highlighting anonymity and secrecy within the visually charged space. The second features two illustrations of voluptuous women wearing tight leather or neoprene corsets while gagging and blindfolding one of their equally sexualized victims (Fig. 3.41). Also designed in 1978 for a Bags' gig at the Rock Corporation in Los Angeles, the promotional flyer plays with the tropes of submission, sadomasochism, and, given that one of the women also embodies the archetype of a heroine or villain, fantasy and science fiction. Altogether, these image medleys, though not necessarily made by the band, poked at shared interest in the thorny space of blurring the lines between pain and pleasure using an aesthetic of shock.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, art historian and curator Branden W. Joseph contends, flyer and zine production engaged a dialectic rooted in the tension between art and popular culture—an interplay of high and low aesthetic expressions that ultimately privileged the

latter through cultural and subcultural alliances.[130] The makeshift nature of these copy-machine pieces, whether serving as promotional materials or a form of mail art, I contend, resonated with how masquerade practices enabled artists' public performances to address similar themes. This intermedial resonance between zine-making and masquerade-making is evident across Chicana/o/x and fetish communities in the late 1970s and early 1980s. For instance, the infamous Gronk/Dreva party at LACE in 1978 drew on the homoerotic imagery of muscular Mexican luchadores—wrestlers clad in traditional masks—in combat (Fig. 3.42). That same year, Paul McCarthy's *Hollywood* performance featured himself wearing and violently tearing apart a monstrous, bleeding mask, underscoring the inhumanity of the Los Angeles film industry's stardom machinery (Fig. 3.43). On the East Coast, David Wojnarowicz asked queer friends and acquaintances to wear a cutout of Arthur Rimbaud's face in various urban and staged settings, drawing parallels between the historical oppression of sexually diverse communities during the avant-garde poet's time and the late 1970s (Fig. 3.44). Finally, a 1982 photograph of ((SPK)), an Australian post-punk band, performing at Al's Bar in Los Angeles captured its lead singer, Graeme Revell, wearing a leather mask and gloves, referencing sadomasochistic gear (Fig. 3.45). ((SPK))'s name itself reflected the band's engagement with the *Sozialistisches Patientenkollektiv* (SPK), a German radical group that advocated for the use of illness as a weapon against capitalism. Resonating with the Bags' use of masquerade to evoke anonymity and transcendence, these examples demonstrate how masking fostered a shared visual and performative language among subaltern dissident groups resisting exclusionary sociopolitical dynamics.

[130] Branden W. Joseph, "Zines by Artists: Post-Pop Punk Art," in Branden W. Joseph and Drew Sawyer, eds., *Copy Machine Manifestos: Artists Who Make Zines* (London, UK; New York, NY: Phaidon Press Limited and Brooklyn Museum, 2023), 65.

While studying at California State University, Los Angeles at the outset of the 1980s, Bag attended lectures on religion, feminism, and philosophy, which encouraged a growing interest in ritual magic. Her exploration with the world of witchcraft led her to reformulate her relationship with spirituality to recognize her own sacred worth as a Chicana: "If God was omnipresent, then God was present in me—why had I been robbed of this knowledge?"[131] During this time, Bag also met Gerardo Velázquez from the newly formed band Nervous Gender, who was also a student of similar subjects at the same university. Much like Bag, two texts Velázquez's wrote during the first half of the 1980s attest to his deeply seated intellectual engagement with the nature of the religious experience as it relates to human consciousness. The first, a seminar paper titled "Endorphins: Chemical Links between the Anima and the Divine?", explored the correlation between the human experience of religious transcendence and the use of psychoactive substances, such as hallucinogens or opiates (Fig. 3.46). Velázquez describes this transcendence as the "indisprovable [sic] possibility of an afterlife" and offers a parallel on how bodily abuse or sadomasochism can also induce similar states of being.[132] In the second text, a series of notes for an unpublished treatise titled "Religion and Biology," Velázquez theorizes a model to explain human religiosity through a lens of hedonism and immediacy which considers experiences of ecstasy with psychotropic substances as well as the physicality of sexually deviant acts. These assertions logically conclude the irrelevance of arguing for the existence of God, for in his view all experiences of the otherworldly are equally valid, prompting the need for a general theory that goes beyond any individual belief system to agree on the possibilities of

[131] Bag, *Violence Girl,* 349.
[132] Gerardo Velázquez, "Endorphins: Chemical Links between the Anima and the Divine?," 1981. Gerardo Velázquez Papers, ONE Gay and Lesbian National Archives, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

various ultimate realities (Figs. 3.47-3.48).[133] Velázquez brings to the band's flyers and promotional materials these insights under the motto: "On the banality of spiritual transcendence." In searching for a deep understanding of the sacred aspects of the feminine and sexually diverse sacred, Bag and Velázquez's interests during their college years provide us with grounds for further understanding Chicana/o/x performative practices as an expression of transgressive spiritual solidarities. It is no wonder that when Bag met Velázquez during this time, they, together with Nervous Gender lead singer Phranc, promptly started a parallel musical project called The Imports, which never played live.[134]

As the creative force behind Nervous Gender's visual identity, Velázquez developed a body of work that consistently engaged with spiritual themes through printmaking, collage, and performance. Born in 1958 in Mexico, Velázquez migrated at a young age to Los Angeles with his family. In 1978 he co-founded Nervous Gender alongside Michael Ochoa, Phranc, and Edward Stapleton. Despite internal divisions within the band's original lineup since the mid-1980s, Ochoa and Velázquez remained active members until Velázquez's death in 1992 from AIDS-related complications, which ultimately marked the band's dissolution. Gunckel has described Nervous Gender's musical and aesthetic vision as transgressive, even within the avant-garde explorations of the late 1970s Los Angeles post-punk scene. Their outsider status within an already underground movement, Gunckel argues, stemmed from the band's refusal to adhere to conventional notions of medium specificity and musicality while simultaneously exploring "gay sexuality, violent nihilism, caustic humor, religious (or sacrilegious) reference, and sci-fi futurity."[135] Moreover, Chavoya, Gunckel, Frantz as well as art historian and curator Julia

[133] Gerardo Velázquez, "Notes on Religion and Biology. The Treatise," 1985. Gerardo Velázquez Papers, ONE Gay and Lesbian National Archives, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.
[134] Bag, *Violence Girl*, 346-347.
[135] Gunckel, "People Think We're Weird 'Cause We're Queer," 274-275.

Bryan-Wilson have framed genre permeability as a capacious creative strategy central to avant-garde Chicana/o artistic practices—one that resisted categorization and the constraints of market-driven dynamics. Their writings further contend that this artistic porosity is inherently promiscuous grounds, that is fluid, free-flowing, and resistant to fixed definitions.[136] Velázquez's self-described theology, and by extension that of Nervous Gender, aligns with a promiscuous outlook combining media and spirituality. In his notes for the "Religion and Nature" treatise, he writes: "During a period of transition, society's nervousness will manifest in the individual's sexual behavior—promiscuity or abstinence, depending upon the individual's history." Following a sacroprofane logic common in Mexican and Mexican-American popular culture, he adds: "Sexual compulsiveness may lead to abstinence via the tolerance-addiction-saturation operator of the human organism. A slut like St. Augustine can therefore become abstinent."[137]

Guzmán argues that while Nervous Gender's lyrics were sexually offensive and shocking, they were also delivered with an "insincere, bitingly humorous anger."[138] Much like the Bags, I further contend that this irreverence resonates with the parodic and spiritual quality of El Teatro Campesino's work, situating Nervous Gender's levity and religious transgressions within a lineage of negative aesthetics in Chicana/o popular performance. A case in point is the band's first EP, *Music from Hell*, which included both the original band name as well as a second name—Beelzebub Youth. Visually, the album cover featured Velázquez's signature collage style, combining figurative and abstract elements on a grid (Figs. 3.49–3.50). The front displays a bold red grid, within which an anatomical illustration of a man's front and back appears upside

[136] Colin Gunckel, "Vexing Questions: Rethinking the History of East LA Punk," *Aztlán* 37, no. 2 (September 1, 2012): 146; Julia Bryan Wilson, "Be Easy but Look Hard": Conceptual Currents in Queer Chicana/o Art," in Chavoya and Frantz, *Axis Mundo*, 206; Chavoya, *Teddy Sandoval,* 29; Frantz, *Teddy Sandoval,* 62.
[137] Velázquez, "Notes on Religion and Biology."
[138] Guzmán, *Dissatisfactions,* 3.

down, partially positioned on a floating cube made of black lines. The color and vanishing point of the cube contrast sharply with the background, creating visual noise and dissonance. This effect is heightened by the grid folding in on itself at the lower right corner, revealing another black grid inscribed with a blurred musical score. On the right side, furthermore, the artist added a prominent hypodermic needle with blood, further reasserting a clinical take on the body in what seems to be a rendition of a confusing hell. On the back, Velázquez incorporated a mirrored image of the band's names, upright and upside-down photographs of its members, a tunnel-like red structure rising from below, and an inverted cross outlined by the album's song titles. Songs like *Cardinal Newman* reasserted the sacrilegious aim of their musical project: "SS treatment early in the morning / Religious instruction with Christian guilt / While they pray on bleeding knees / They'll suck your will until its dry." Nervous Gender's *Music from Hell,* at face value, manifested a provocative embrace of anti-Catholic symbols presented as mysterious and seemingly indecipherable.

Though credited to Stapleton as a songwriter, the art direction for the music video for *Cardinal Newman* (1981), where Catholic imagery and attire meet domination and subjugation as well as sadomasochism play, closely relates to Velázquez's spiritual theorization of sexuality and pleasure. His college text exploring the chemistry of the soul and divinity identifies bodily abuse as one of the ways in which to reach religious or mystical experiences, mentioning tactics such as deprivation of sleep, nutrients or the senses as ways to achieve states of transcendence.[139] Directed by Michael Intriere, *Cardinal Newman* offers a linked yet more radical view of these insights by deploying the leather fetish aesthetics and BDSM practices. In addition to Nervous Gender's band members, the video features the participation of Ron Athey, a figure that queer

[139] Velázquez, "Endorphins."

theorist and scholar Jennifer Doyle has described as one of the most prominent and transgressive of the emerging performance art scene in Los Angeles.[140] She also argued of Athey's work as a carnal, non-mystical, and "emphatic refusal of the turn of the eye to the heavens, an insistence on both the magic and the banality of flesh."[141] As the clip progresses, Athey is shown as both a martyr and a prophet, subjected to scenes of torture, violence, seduction, and reverence by a group of sexualized nuns, a punk cross dresser, and naked young men in white jockstraps. In the meantime, Velázquez and Stapleton sing the track's transgressive lyrics conflating Nazism, Catholicism, and sexual perversion, while wearing white military costumes and black leather jockstraps (Figs. 3.51-3.52). Resonating with Athey's performative practice, as Doyle describes, and his portrayal in the video, Velázquez's writings of the time also attempt to bring an element of spiritual transcendence to the bodily aspects of the self through scientific and measurable ruminations. He states: "Neurological facts show us that the way to "expand consciousness" is not by the mind's mysterious hurling into a world of super consciousness where only an elite few can go, but by the descent into the subconscious where there are enrapturing impressions and sensations subject to the higher brain's interpretations."[142] Velázquez's use of the term subconscious gives us a clue as to the possible meanings of the EP's cover showing a grid folding upwards revealing an occult dimension. In debasing the hierarchies of the Catholic traditions and adopting those of BDSM play, Athey and Velázquez actively redefined their relationship with spirituality alongside their notions of what is sacred as queer creatives.

[140] Jennifer Doyle, "Ron Athey's Disassociated Sparkle," in ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, *Cruising the Archive: Queer Art and Culture in Los Angeles, 1945-1980* (Los Angeles, CA: ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, 2011), 140. Doyle also identifies that the fluidity between music scenes and performance art practices central to Athey's practice was also an essential characteristic of the work of Asco's link to the punk scene of Los Angeles in the 1970s and 1980s.
[141] Ibid., 143.
[142] Velázquez, "Endorphins."

Like the role distribution one enacted in the video *Cardinal Newman*, two archival photographs from the early 1980s show Velázquez, Stapleton, Athey, and one unidentified male in a scene of domination and subjugation in leather fetish (Figs. 3.53-3.54). These images attest to the band's continuous interest for exploring sexually deviant motifs in personal and performative ways. In his latest scholarship, cultural anthropologist J. Lorand Matory argues that religious imagery often conveys elements of romance and erotic desire, as evidenced in medieval monks' and nuns' mystical experiences through self-punishment and flagellation. When translated to the consensual bodily transgressions presupposed in BDSM play, Matory notes, pain and subjugation serve as a vehicle for ecstatic pleasure to achieve states of renunciation of the ego and generate self-acceptance. By conflating the hierarchical structures of religion and BDSM, he further highlights its appeal for both hegemonic and non-hegemonic social groups, whether as a form of absolution or empowerment. Looking to fulfill "emotional longings" absent from secular, Enlightened nationalism, these individuals resort to both religion and BDSM, which have similar social structures, as a way escape the "futile avoidance of subordination to others" and "the incessant economic competition that is capitalism."[143] I would contend that these two photographs of Velázquez portray him as part of an abject scene of ecstatic and religious pleasure that supersede narratives of individualistic self-reliance, empowering him as a queer Chicano to see his own corporeal sacredness as a healing agent for himself as well as for others—his chosen community. Though operating from a negative aesthetics standpoint, this scene is not unlike the aims of emerging associations of gay men in the United States pushing for the recognition of their own sacredness through an embrace of their sexuality during this time. A

[143] J. Lorand Matory, "Slavery in the Heart of Freedom: Race, Romance, and Religion through the Lens of BDSM," conference paper delivered at Florida State University, March 12, 2022. URL: https://religion.fsu.edu/sites/g/files/upcbnu446/files/media/files/conference/matory-slavery_in_the_heart_of_freedom_lecture-aar.pdf

photograph taken in 1979, for instance, shows Harry Hay, co-founder of the Radical Faeries in a wholesome intergenerational dance at their inaugural conference as a nascent organization, a three-day gathering in Benson, Arizona (Fig. 3.55). Profanity and sacrality, therefore, were poles of a spiritual continuum serving the higher aim of gay and queer liberation.

The band's second name, Beelzebub Youth, alongside its distinct imagery exploring Satanist, demonic, and witchcraft themes, further reflects Velázquez's interest in linking theology and sexuality through a transgressive, negative aesthetic. As with other projects, the band's embrace of shock value played a central role in asserting their countercultural and marginal position within both mainstream and alternative cultures. In 2023, the Nervous Gender surviving members released an expanded version of *Music from Hell*, featuring a tongue-in-cheek track titled "Praise the Lord." The recording includes a voice-over from a man describing the album after its 1981 release, noting the band's two seemingly contradictory names and the inclusion of an upside-down cross. He sternly declares: "Punk not only is promoting violence […] I'm seeing it now moving to a more scary aspect of promoting, you know, Satanism." The original lyric supplement included with the LP presented a striking and confrontational selection of illustrations dealing with this subject. Each side of the album was framed by macabre imagery, beginning with Italian Symbolist artist Alberto Martini's *Allegoria della guerra* made around 1905, a haunting depiction of hell portraying a victorious figure emerging from within the shadows (Fig. 3.56). Corresponding with Nervous Gender's Catholic-inspired *Martyr Complex* theme—explored in numerous of their flyers—Side A featured one of Velázquez's illustrations depicting a chained man in a surreal, otherworldly setting. It also included an image of the *Pilot* or *Space Jockey* character from the movie *Alien* from 1979 and a dismemberment scene from Francisco de Goya's print series *Los desastres de la guerra* made between 1810 and

1820. Side B, in contrast, opened with Beelzebub Youth's logo in gothic font flanking a reproduction of French occultist Éliphas Lévi's iconic depiction of the androgynous, demonic figure Baphomet from 1854 (Fig. 3.57). This section also featured prints from Francisco Maria Guazzo's witch hunter's manual *Compendium Maleficarum* of 1608, an undated image attributed to Hans Baldung Grien titled *The Rape of Helen*, and the sigil for the demonic invocation of Lucifer from the grimoire *Grimorium Verum* of 1750. Together, these images of violence, abjection, despair, and dystopian afterlives position gender-bending queerness—nervousness and androgyny—as an expression of non-hegemonic theological deviancy, suggesting its potential as a conduit for identity-based empowerment.

Religious studies scholar Julian Strube has noted that Éliphas Lévi's depiction of Baphomet—an amalgamation of a goat's head with a pentagram on its forehead, angel wings, and both male and female body parts—emerged from Lévi's interest in pursuing a "universal harmony," synthesizing elements of science, religion, and philosophy. He would later frame this intersection of knowledges as an expression of "magic."[144] More interestingly, Strube argues that Lévi's Baphomet dialogues with his earlier socialist writings, which he published in the 1840s under his civil name, Alphonse-Louis Constant. Advocating for what he called a "true Catholicism" free from the corruption of the Church, Lévi envisioned a new social order based on a hierarchical, meritocratic system that would enable an *association universelle*—a form of ultimate solidarity between different cults and peoples.[145] Though it is unclear whether Velázquez was fully aware of the specific history of Lévi's Baphomet as outlined by Strube, it is remarkable that his undergraduate writing exploring the nature of the religious experience was

[144] Julian Strube, "The 'Baphomet' of Eliphas Lévi: Its Meaning and Historical Context," *Correspondences* 4 (December 1, 2016), 74.
[145] Ibid., 60-64.

similarly interested in the intersection of scientific and spiritual knowledge. Velázquez's early research, therefore, follows in the steps of a larger occultist tradition that harks back to Lévi as well as other notable figures he influenced, such as spiritual leader Helena "Madame" Blavatsky, co-founder, in 1875, of the Theosophical Society in New York City. Moreover, it is worthwhile thinking, in rather a rather unorthodox point of view, the ways in which Lévi's linkage between politics and spirituality could parallel El Teatro Campesino's engagement with the imagery of death and the afterlife as part of a political project of revindication of Mexican-American farm labor. As a queer Chicano artist, Velázquez's work could be seen as a link of this unusual confluence of two quite distinct yet interrelated strains of non-hegemonic and transgressive spiritual activisms. In both cases, the appeal to otherworldly creatures related to what is perceived as macabre and evil is, in actuality, an overt resistance to a Western Catholic status quo, whether social or institutional, calling attention to the potentialities of the polytheistic human and non-human communion germane to pagan beliefs.

Beelzebub Youth's *Exorcism*, a track credited to Jesus Pagano Lozada, presents a dialogue between a priestess and a group of sergeants, in which the listener performed as an "innocent victim" is urged to renounce Christ in exchange of embracing "hypertechnology." The priestess commands: "Disassociate [sic] fear from your concept of death / if you are a demon then hell is your lair / discard all your guilt, surcome [sic] to your lust / let go of your God to see the purpose of life." Meanwhile, the sergeants enact a ritualistic prayer: "Out, out, body of Christ in the name of lust and sanity" (Figs. 3.58-3.59).[146] Anti-Catholicism, alongside an emphasis on immediate pleasures and the enjoyment of the flesh, were central to the rise of the Church of Satan in California in the mid-1960s. A self-declared Black Pope, musician and author Anton

[146] Beelzebub Youth, lyric supplement to the *Music from Hell* EP, 1981. Stuart Timmons Papers, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

Szandor LaVey extensively used Lévi's Baphomet illustration to establish the visual identity of this spiritual denomination. Rejecting Catholic tropes of self-sacrifice, suffering, and guilt, LaVey argued: "To me, Christianity as it has been practiced or advocated is a life-denying rather than life-affirming thing," adding, "Satan is not a person that walks out there, rather someone that walks among us […]."[147] By the late 1980s, after two decades of promoting a Satanic philosophy centered on carnal enjoyment, punk zines such as *Search and Destroy* described LaVey as "one of the most original (and relevant) thinkers alive on the planet […]" and the "progenitor of much under-documented yet pioneering performance art."[148] As Walter Fischer's photographs attest, LaVey's performative practice relied heavily on a negative, abject aesthetic and theatricality, key to crafting a persona that was feared, loathed, and revered in the public eye. In this light, *Exorcism* presents another compelling intersection between Chicana/o popular cultural expressions and the rise of Satanism as a philosophical system. As performed by Velázquez, the song's lyrics evokes the deep connection between Mexican and Mexican-American cultures and death—echoing the Self-Help Graphics notecard *"Muerte, muerte, no te tengo miedo"*—as well as the Satanic emphasis on embracing pleasure in one's lifetime.

By including a reproduction of a print from the *Compendium Maleficarum*, which depicts a group of witches pleading with the devil to erase their names from the Book of Light—God's record of those destined for heaven—and instead inscribe them in the Book of Death, its hellish counterpart, the lyrics supplement presents *Exorcism* in a way that unequivocally asserts its profane character. Further exploring this theme, Nervous Gender included *Exorcism* as part of a larger piece called *A HOMILY,* a synth operatic performance composed of three controversially

[147] Jim Goad, ed., "Calling Dr. Satan," *Answer Me!* 1992. Larry Harmon Collection, Special Collections Library, University of California, Los Angeles.
[148] Introduction to LaVey, *Search And Destroy*, 1988. V. Vale Collection, Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles.

titled acts: “One Earth, One People (selective annihilation for the betterment of the species)”, “Let the Children Come on to We” (the structural advantages of the molested child)”, and “Fun-Time Apocalypse (the promised world of hypertechnology).”[149] Following the narrative structure of *Exorcism*, *A HOMILY* included a priestess, sergeants, and victim, as well as two dead madonnas as characters. A photograph of the performance shows Velázquez enacting the role of one of the sergeants, clad in black military attire and leather boots, singing directly onto the microphone the lyrics to the second act, assuming the heteropatriarchal role of a man who despises women’s questioning of the gendered “natural bio-order of things”: “Trammeled in a sea of piscine frumps and uteromaniacs / Cliteromaniacs, sharkish spitfire hell hags, / whose to live with one or without one / It's best to use them and knife them / No man alive can suffice them / A boy finds out before fourteen that they are / Simply not human at all” (Fig. 3.60).[150] Typical of punk’s poking at culturally sensitive issues with a sense of unapologetic irreverence, *A HOMILY* also contended, as Gunkel reminds us, with taboo issues of a sexual nature, including, and I add here a full list, pedophilia, coprophilia, necrophilia inversa, zoophilia, homophilic scopophilia, and algolagnia or sadomasochism.[151] By assuming the role of oppressors in their performance, Nervous Gender critiqued social hierarchies and structures, while maintaining a sense of dark playfulness and humor.

Under the direction of Michael Intriere and the art direction of Gronk—who included a painting of a crucified figure's torso and head draped in a white cloth reminiscent of Christ’s Passion—the first iteration of *A HOMILY* never fulfilled its promise of a third act. A later performance, presumably from 1983, expanded the script of the final section, incorporating a

[149] Nervous Gender, “A HOMILY,” 1981. Gerardo Velázquez Papers, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.
[150] Ibidem.
[151] Gunckel, “People Think We’re Weird ‘Cause We’re Queer,” 275; Nervous Gender, “A Homily,” 1981.

lengthy dialogue in Latin. In this scene, the cast performs an inverse spiritual cleanse or *purgatio*, an extension of the exorcism featured in the piece's second act. The victim, a devout believer in God, is injected with a medicine to induce her to embrace the love of the Devil, along with his teachings of joy and pleasure, leaving behind the envy of boredom and the shame of the body inscribed in Catholic doctrine.[152] Developing into a violent crescendo that references blood and murder as the Devil's teaching, the opera ends in a state of ecstatic rapture, where Satan is summoned to purify the victim and the adepts through a deluge of his urine, recognizing him as the *"maxima forma dei es"* ["the greatest form of God"].[153] Thus, by deploying confrontational forms of sexual and spiritual transgression, *A HOMILY* contributes to a larger body of work focused on abject transgressions of content and aesthetic appropriateness in performance art that took root in Los Angeles in the 1970s. A notable example of this artistic direction was the collaboration of British musicians and performance artists Genesis Breyer P-Orridge and Cosey Fanni Tutti as COUM Transmissions, who performed the piece *Cease to Exist* at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art (LAICA) in 1976. Another influential intervention was German performance artist Hermann Nitsch's *Orgies Mysteries Theater*, a project initially developed in the 1950s, which he presented at LAICA in 1978 (Fig. 3.61). These performances, which included the unrestricted use of bodily fluids—human and animal—such as blood, urine, and vomit, as well as eroticism and nudity, shocked audiences, opening new creative avenues for Angeleno artists. Common to these works, as with *A HOMILY*, was an energetic, ritualistic climax that conflated religious and sexual ecstasy as a manifestation of the sacred or the divine.

Much like Nervous Gender, Genesis P-Orridge and Cosey Fanni Tutti's experimental music band Throbbing Gristle, founded in 1975, explored spirituality and issues related to

[152] Nervous Gender, "A HOMILY," 1981.
[153] Nervous Gender, "A HOMILY," 1981.

witchcraft and magic as vehicles of empowerment. In a 1978 interview with Charles Kemp, P-Orridge declared that Aleister Crowley, by virtue of his unapologetic and vivacious persona, had been an early influence on their life: "His version of magic was sexual magic […] The idea of giving power and drawing power through sexual orgasms […]. Magic takes place in everyone's life all the time […]. It's even in Christianity: Have I not said that faith can move mountains. That's all it is."[154] Velázquez's work with Nervous Gender and Beelzebub Youth foregrounded a similarly heretical yet politically astute perspective, engaging in dialogue with the pagan elements within Christianity as a hegemonic religion—most notably through the band's use of the archetype of the Devil. Their engagement with the otherworldly, magic, and imagery of death also extended a sociopolitical tradition embedded in El Teatro Campesino's sacroprofane, irreverent performances, which were rooted in a philosophy of *relajo*. Velázquez's theological reckonings on religious experience as a chemically and physically induced state resonated with the philosophies of Satanism and witchcraft, bringing the sacred into the self. By reinvesting the body with will and autonomy and seeking communal pleasure as a form of transcendence, Velázquez's performances and theoretical outlook responded sharply to his own condition as a queer Chicano whose health was increasingly compromised by HIV/AIDS towards the end of the 1980s. Far from simply spiritual or confrontational, Velázquez work from this time was a groundbreaking contribution for a grassroots artist located at the interstices of various cultural milieus within a position of vulnerability, segregation, and marginalization.

Velázquez's intellectual explorations and staged performances from the 1980s thematically foreshadowed the works he pursued while completing his Master of Fine Arts at California State University, Los Angeles, in 1990—two years before his death. This period

[154] "Conversations. Genesis P-Orridge and Charles Kemp," 1978. V. Vale Collection, Special Collections Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

included the zines *The Gay Death List* and *First the Fag*, as well as his graduate exhibition *Piss N' Blood*. The latter, positioned as a manifesto of queer sensibility and refusal, declared: "In defiant protest against the many conservative factions that are promoting their unnatural moralities; that are restricting what substances we can and cannot ingest; that are vilifying those sexual acts which threaten their established order; that are trying to control what thoughts we can and cannot communicate"[155] (Fig. 3.62). Further, Velázquez research project from the winter of 1990, *Osculum Infame*, underscored his interest in linking the histories of witchcraft and devil worship with the spiritualities of pre-Columbian cultures—portrayed through colonial frameworks as deviant or demonic. Its title referenced the "kiss of shame," the ritual kiss that witches were accused of giving to the Devil's buttocks, anus, or genitals as a sign of allegiance during medieval and early modern witch trials. However, its subtitle pointed to a distinct research focus: "Images of Male-Male Anal Penetration in Pre-Columbian Art: Religious Significance and Possible Social Functions" (Fig. 3.63). Though projects like this deserve further study and attention, this project suggests Velázquez's ongoing engagement as a Chicano artist with his Indigenous heritage—as this section has attempted to demonstrate—in ways that were not easily legible at the time. Notably, the image he used as a cover for his project, depicting a masked and restrained brown-skinned, naked man—perhaps himself—was also Nervous Gender's image pick to commemorate their tenth anniversary in 1988. This conceptual and sublimated engagement with racial politics responded to the enduring constraints of respectability politics and Chicano activism still prevalent during Velázquez's time. His spiritual and erotic perversions, therefore, served as a conscious, pioneering, and imaginative strategy for expressing queerness in musical, visual, and written forms.

[155] Gerardo Velázquez, "Piss N' Blood," 1990. Gerardo Velázquez Papers, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

3.3 Conclusion

This chapter analyzed the work of Jerri Allyn, Jerry Dreva, Alice Bag, and Gerardo Velázquez, demonstrating their sustained engagement with sacred and profane attitudes across various spiritual systems, including Catholicism, Mesoamerican beliefs, witchcraft and paganism. It argues that these artists incorporated baroque sensibilities, popular culture, and otherworldly perspectives to develop an original performative and installation repertoire that contend with feminist and queer purviews. Their work from the 1970s and 1980s attests to the centrality of abject and negative aesthetics in expressing non-hegemonic desires and affects. By navigating multiple spiritual systems and repurposing or transgressing conventions of holiness and profanity, these artists reimagined exclusionary, hierarchical narratives of a Western, heteropatriarchal social order. The most evident outcome across the works discussed is their assiduous self-positioning—in all their gender, sexual, and racial intersections—as sacred subjects within their spiritual reckonings and journeys. They achieved this through specific strategies: Allyn and Dreva, for instance, reimagined the mystical experience of transubstantiation, while Bag and Velázquez made fierce sociopolitical commentaries following the traditions of Mexican and Mexican-American rural theater. Their work not only engaged with but also exceeded the politics of representation associated with women and sexually diverse individuals, adopting a post-Chicano movement sensibility that foregrounded humorous irreverence, at times macabre and dark, alongside genre and spiritual promiscuity as essential tools. In this chapter, levity emerges as a Chicanx critical attitude of resistance and refusal, tracing its lineage to Maya and Aztec performative traditions that survived in El Teatro Campesino performances in late-1970s California, including Los Angeles. Chicana/o/x

performance and installation art provided a culturally resonant foundation from which many artists and participants, from within and without Hispanic communities, thrived within the also emerging punk and post-punk scenes of this period.

From a broader perspective, I have also examined how the spiritual promiscuities of Allyn, Dreva, Bag, and Velázquez engaged with and contributed to evolving discourses on feminism, Chicano/a identities, and the gay and lesbian liberation movements. By working within a spiritually permeable creative framework, these artists assumed an intersectional standpoint on such countercultural movements, ultimately moving them toward an interwoven postmodern conception of identity. Examples of these accomplishments can be seen in Allyn's Catholic nuns masked as skulls and Dreva's *Little Bible* sanctifying his 10-year collaboration with Gronk. Bag's punk performances, characterized by ritualistic ecstasy and sexual liberation, and Velázquez's reimagining of the mundane through a theology of religious transcendence grounded in sexual and chemical bodily processes also grappled with complex, overlapping, and at times contradictory expressions of identity. This position of irresolution was a direct response to the sociopolitical climate in which these artists produced their work—marked by the rise of a confining multicultural politics, the hardening of political conservatism, the persistent exclusion and marginalization of racial and sexual minorities, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and the looming threat of nuclear destruction as the Cold War escalated into the 1980s. Their refusal to be legible, contained, or governed posed a scathing critique of the status quo, transgressing even the limits of acceptability within their own alternative communities. Surpassing the material plane of their immediate surroundings through spiritual mechanisms—often accompanied by an emerging thread of science-fiction imaginings—required these artists to redefine their relationship with

corporeality as presentness while also envisioning alternative futures, including conceptions of life after death.

Conclusion

Exhibitions and research projects dedicated to the retrieval and preservation of non-hegemonic spiritualities in Latin America and the Caribbean have gained prominence in museums both nationally and internationally over the past decade. These engagements serve as art historical and curatorial responses to shifting societal attitudes toward spirituality as a vehicle for creative expression, healing, community organizing, ecocritical projects, and sociopolitical resistance. Paradigmatic in this conversation are the exhibitions *NKAME: A Retrospective of Cuban Printmaker Belkis Ayón*, held at El Museo del Barrio in 2017, and *Axé Bahia: The Power of Art in an Afro-Brazilian Metropolis*, presented at the University of California, Los Angeles' Fowler Museum in 2018. Also at El Museo del Barrio, this year's exhibition *Mestre Didi: Spiritual Form* offers a monographic look at the artist's sculptural and ritualistic works. Reasserting the centrality of Afro-diasporic belief systems such as Abakuá and Candomblé in the work of contemporary artists in Cuba and Brazil, these projects have deepened our understanding of their philosophical, ontological, and societal roles.[1] Additionally, the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac launched *Visions Chamaniques*, an exhibition dedicated to artistic and creative expressions associated with Ayahuasca or Yagé ceremonies in the Peruvian Amazon. The show prominently features the work of artists such as Pablo Amaringo, co-founder of the painting school Usko-Ayar in the 1980s, and Sara Flores.[2] In Mexican studies, modern art expatriates Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo have been receiving increased recognition through the

[1] Patrick Arthur Polk et al., eds., *Axé Bahia: The Power of Art in an Afro-Brazilian Metropolis* (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2017); Katia Ayón, ed., *Nkame: Belkis Ayón* (Madrid, España: Turner, 2010).
[2] David Dupuis, ed., *Visions chamaniques: arts de l'ayahuasca en Amazonie péruvienne* (Paris, France: Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac; Réunion de musées nationaux-Grand Palais, 2023); Luis Eduardo Luna, "El arte visionario de Pablo Amaringo y la Escuela de Pintura Amazónica Usko-Ayar: crónica de un proyecto (1985-1994)," in *Boletín Cultural y Bibliográfico,* Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango*,* ed. Julián Sánchez González, vol. 57, no. 104 (2023): 45-65.

lens of spirituality in projects such as *The Tarot of Leonora Carrington* from 2022 and *Remedios Varo: Science Fictions*, an exhibition held at the Art Institute of Chicago in 2023. Meanwhile, the catalogue raisonné of Cuban abstract and mystical painter Rafael Soriano was published in 2024, and a major retrospective of Wifredo Lam—whose syncretic avant-garde forms shaped the course of modern art—is set to open at the Museum of Modern Art this year as well.[3] In Colombia, the exhibitions *De lo espiritual en el arte. Obertura*, held at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Medellín in 2016, and *Carlos Rojas: abriendo el sistema*, shown at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá in 2018, signal a growing interest in alternative spiritualities and epistemologies within modern and contemporary art.[4]

At the Museum of Modern Art, Inés Katzenstein, Curator of Latin American art and Director of the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Research Institute for the Study of Art from Latin America, is currently developing a project titled "Bridging the Sacred: Spiritual Streams in Twentieth Century Latin America and Caribbean Art, 1920-1970."[5] I was fortunate to work as the project's first Research Fellow for a two-year period from 2022 to 2024, developing the conceptual building blocks and scope of this endeavor connecting Afro-diasporic, Indigenous, Catholic, Jewish, and pagan belief systems in the arts across a vast region and comprehensive time span. Together, we built a cohort of research fellows and network of scholars and curators from numerous countries to discuss the state of the art of the renewed relationship between art and spirituality in the region, accounting for the perils of essentialist tropes and the pervasive

[3] The Rafael Soriano Foundation, " Rafael Soriano: Catalogue Raisonné," 2024. URL: https://catalogue.rafaelsorianofoundation.org/

[4] María Iovino, "De lo espiritual en el arte. Obertura," 2016, Museo de Arte Moderno de Medellín. URL: https://archive.org/details/de-lo-espiritual-en-el-arte.-obertura; María Iovino, *Carlos Rojas: abriendo el sistema* (Bogotá, Colombia: Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá, 2018.

[5] The Museum of Modern Art, The Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Research Institute for the Study of Art from Latin America, "Bridging the Sacred: Spiritual Streams in Twentieth Century Latin American and Caribbean Art, 1920-70." URL: https://www.moma.org/research/cisneros/research-topics/bridging-the-sacred

colonialist and modernist dynamics of indiscriminate appropriation. Through a series of internal study sessions, reading groups, and collection viewings we established fruitful insights in the way that artists engaged with spirituality throughout the development of modern artistic practices in the region. A series of public engagements based on this research project will further expand the growing scholarship and curatorial endeavors which take spirituality as a legitimate site of research and inquiry in the arts.

My contributions to the "Bridging the Sacred" project were motivated by my own research on spiritual promiscuity as a theoretical framework to better understand the public performative repertoires of artists in the Americas and the Caribbean during the 1970s and 1980s. As outlined in this dissertation's case studies, spiritual promiscuity underlines the importance of interdisciplinary research at the crossroads of art history and comparative religious studies, where intermediality, intersectionality and interspirituality serve as tools to reimagine new models for cultural and sociopolitical association and coalition building in times of political hardship. This challenging context featured a growing disenfranchisement and disenchantment due to various circumstances, including a lack of political participation and guerrilla warfare, conditions of coloniality and postcoloniality, and the growing racial and economic inequality and segregation in sprawling urban centers. As I hope to have demonstrated, artists and community organizers working through a spiritually promiscuous ethos operated through a socially engaged perspective without overtly determining their discourse in sociopolitical narratives, leading to the creation of innovative visual and corporeal languages By discussing the Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería*,* A k u z u r u's early career, and the sacroprofane work of Jerri Allyn, Jerry Dreva, Alice Bag, and Gerardo Velázquez, the argument highlighted how this strategic, purposeful genre and spiritual permeability challenged the constraining identity politics of the

multicultural era. Engaging with the traditions of public theater, the carnivalesque, and the festival, these different actors resorted to capacious strategies of blurring, opaqueness, masquerading, and abjection to consciously resist categorical reductions, ultimately attempting to debase monolithic racial, gender, class, and aesthetic hierarchies. Reimagining their engagement with identity politics as well as the expectations associated with their own cultures' politics of respectability was therefore a queering, controversial platform to reject mechanisms of social control.

As we enter a new cycle of political hardening and spiritual renaissance in the arts not unlike the one lived during the 1970s and 1980s, it is worth pondering the value of the syncretic-based strategies of spiritual promiscuity for today's artists, activists, and grassroots communities. At the heart of this project, therefore, lies a desire to steer from a theoretical and historical standpoint a contemporary conversation around art, spirituality, and politics that still needs to see beyond racial and cultural anchors, propelling the discourse into broader categories of sacredness and transcendence as platforms for strengthening community and social cohesion. Different from a universalizing or utopian modernist treatment of spirituality in the arts, this proposition is squarely rooted in the irresolute and at times contradictory cultural clashes of the modern and postmodern eras, highlighting, nonetheless, queer permeability, curiosity, and acceptance as a method to approach otherness with an ethics of care and respect. At a moment when racial, gender, and sexual theoretical propositions have proved insufficient to build strong coalitions among liberals and the left and is under attack and grueling scrutiny by conservative and authoritarian forces, new models for social engagement are desperately needed. As a strategy to supersede the protraction of the state of identity politics today, a spiritually promiscuous platform would be less interested in effacing difference by subsuming identity categories in new

redefinitions but rather departing from culturally specific notions of what is most sacred and valuable to establish analogies and points of departure for communion and joint action. This proposition is above all an exercise in radical imagination that, by virtue of its unorthodoxy, has the potential to supersede persecution and yield into newly found coalitions and expressions of solidarity across cultures. While the specificities of how this series of interactions might develop in a broader sociopolitical platform of civic engagement are outside the scope of this dissertation, the public performative repertoires explored herein open avenues for further inquiry based on their thematic interests as well as operating strategies.

A transversal exploration in the case studies discussed in this study seeks to redefine the physical constraints of the body—whether racial, gendered, or sexual—through various artistic expressions and metaphorical devices. The Congress' call to lovingly embrace difference in the shadows—*"a la sombra de lo diferente con amor y asombro"*—proposes a playful submersion into darkness as a means of transcending preconceived notions of the unknown. The interplay between *sombra* and *asombro*, or the shadows contained within wonderment, encapsulates a conceptual proposition in Spanish that resonates with Édouard Glissant's later embrace of *opacité* (opacity)—a stance that acknowledges and accepts the hidden and irresolute aspects of ourselves and others as historically creolized, hybrid beings.[6] The dematerialization of the body in the absence of light and the presence of darkness parallels the way Chicana/o/x artists have contended with public perceptions of their culture as phantasmagoric—marked by invisibility despite their essential contributions to U.S. nation-building. By appropriating and subverting this imposed obscurity, post-*movimiento* Chicana/o/x artists devised strategies of bodily reformulation that embraced an oppositional aesthetics of death and the afterlife. This included

[6] Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la relation* (Paris, France: Gallimard, 1990), 203.

Alice Bag's vampire-like self-fashioning and skeletal or skull motifs drawn from Día de los muertos iconography. Artists of the same generation also developed an interplanetary and galactic aesthetic, reclaiming the derogatory label of "alien" to assert cultural difference as an otherworldly force. These Chicana/o/x explorations, in turn, resonated with A k u z u r u's futuristic designs during her years in London, where she foregrounded expansive, deconstructed fabrics as both empowering and protective garments, particularly for Black women. Her engagement with dematerialization deepened upon her return to Port of Spain, as she gained greater insight into the sacred world of Afro-diasporic spiritualities, leading to the evolution of her practice as a performance artist. Seen together, these corporeal redefinitions were rooted in the intersections and interactions of multiple spiritual systems, including Afro-diasporic, East Asian, Catholic, and pagan traditions.

Alongside these bodily redefinitions, the three chapters outlined a conscious appropriation of negative and queer aesthetics, using performance and installation art to express interspiritual connections. Unconventional and unorthodox, this oppositional artistry employed various communicative mechanisms, including public shock, desacralization, sexual fetishes, and deconstructed forms. A k u z u r u's incorporation of Japanese and punk avant-garde aesthetics privileged organic materials, asymmetries, and expanded volumes, offering an original approach to Afro-Asian fashion design. Her garments—ripped, cropped, and knotted—often appeared unfinished and exploratory, evoking Afro-diasporic creative intermediality. At the same time, her work resisted a monolithic Afrocentrist perspective, instead reflecting multiple instances of Afro-Asian spiritual and cultural solidarities forged in both Trinidad and England. A similar dynamic shaped Velázquez's imagery and performances with Beelzebub Youth, which followed in the footsteps of Asco by challenging the boundaries of respectability and sexual norms within

Chicano culture. Embracing popular imagery of the devil, BDSM practices, and sexual fetishes, the band's sacrilegious positions—though polemical—sought to interrogate the very definition of the sacred, both individually and collectively, as reflected in Velázquez's theological writings. By framing "witchcraft" as an umbrella term for the radical embrace of alternative spiritualities and epistemologies, the Congress drew considerable attention in a predominantly Catholic and conservative Colombia. Its contentious theme aligned with the provocative public actions of Nadaísmo in the late 1950s and early 1960s, particularly those directed against the most rigid factions of the Catholic Church. Witchcraft also served as an expansive conceptual framework, allowing the Congress to create a permeable space for exhibition-making and ritualistic performances that blurred the boundaries between so-called high and low art. Through the embrace of negative aesthetics, these three case studies actively questioned and redefined the tensions between sacralization, desacralization, and resacralization, drawing attention to both the body and its immediate surroundings. The link between negative and queer aesthetics and the notion of the mundane sacred becomes evident in the analysis of these three chapters, establishing a complimentary rather than mutually exclusive relationship.

The active interplay between sacred and pagan themes throughout this dissertation highlights artists' visual and corporeal strategies of substitution and transubstantiation. Nadaísmo's frequent use of the word "prophet" to describe Gonzalo Arango and other members of the movement challenged religious dogma while elevating the poet, writer, and artist as visionary figures dreaming of a new society. Similarly, after organizing the Congress, González Restrepo became popularly known as *El Brujo* or The Sorcerer, reinforcing his persona as a countercultural figure with access to alternative knowledge and truths. In their performative and installation works, Jerri Allyn and Jerry Dreva repeatedly employed transubstantiation

mechanisms, embodying the figures of nuns and priests to render themselves holy. Drawing on a Baroque sensibility of sensory stimulation, they created participatory experiences that invited immersion and corporeal interaction through performances and public events. Dreva, in particular, hijacked the mass reproduction mechanisms of popular culture, positioning his persona at the intersection of iconicity and iconoclasm—ultimately challenging how sacred figures emerge in the public imagination. Operating within a similarly communal and interactive ethos, A k u z u r u's sculptural and painterly garments sought to transform women's relationships with their bodies, functioning as sacred accoutrements. By bringing an otherworldly perspective to Black women's embodiment, her practice asserts the sacred feminine in connection with the natural world as a formidable force. As art historian and curator Kellie Jones argues in relation to Senga Nengudi's use of fabric as a second "skin,"[7] A k u z u r u's deconstructed and reconstructed designs work to recompose Black womanhood in the wake of the historical traumas of slavery and colonialism. This dissertation thus contends that in embodying these acts of corporeal transformation and substitution, artists challenged dominant narratives perpetuating social hierarchies as the status quo. This critical position opened a space for engaging with processes of recovery and healing from an inhabited space of alterity and marginalization.

The fifth and final commonality I wish to highlight among these case studies is their engagement with theater and theatrics to simulate alternative worlds, which, through ritualistic utterances, became realities by virtue of their relational nature. By merging scholarly research with performative actions and convening a large-scale gathering that functioned as a

[7] Kellie Jones, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 202. See: Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface*, Second edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2023).

performance, the Congress created the conditions for experiencing reality anew. Employing strategies of spectacularity—both celebrated and contested at the time—the event challenged and blurred notions of authenticity, posing an epistemological challenge to the rationalist, Enlightenment view of knowledge. Similarly, A k u z u r u's participation in the Trinidad and Notting Hill carnivals, both as a dancer and designer, engaged with the multimedial experience of masquerade to inhabit critical public spaces where gender and racial visibility were at stake. At a time when women's participation in Trinidad's carnival was met with contempt for transgressing norms of respectability, and when the Afro-diasporic celebration of carnival in London was emerging from a contested decade, A k u z u r u's presence and creative force—alongside the women she collaborated with—signaled shifting grounds for inclusivity and access in both contexts. In California, the staged performances of Bag and Velázquez generated bursts of energy that resembled experiences of ritualistic ecstasy, fostering a sense of communion with their audiences in a dynamic feedback loop mediated by sound and theatrical personas. Rooted in their engagement with religious and spiritual studies, both Chicana/o/x performers accessed this communal experience from different angles—whether by invoking magic, witchcraft, heightened sexual arousal, or the channeling of overwhelming emotions such as anger. Taken together, these instances reflect a profound commitment to self-fashioning, infusing installation and performative actions with symbolic meaning and enabling participants to experience them as shared, transformative rituals. For these case studies, expressing art through sensorial and synesthetic means—or "Total Work of Art"—was central to communicating experiences of the sacred and the transcendent. Though highly sophisticated in their artistic intent, these works also draw upon primal forms of human ritualistic interaction, underscoring the essential role of relationality and community in artistic expression.

By examining the intersections of spirituality, art, and community building in the 1970s and 1980s, my dissertation proposes that a public performative repertoire must account for strategies of dematerialization, negative aesthetics, substitution and transubstantiation, and theatrics and self-fashioning. As a hemispheric study spanning archival materials across seven cities in four countries, my aim has been to demonstrate that this repertoire is not an isolated phenomenon but rather part of a broader historical trend that warrants deeper scholarly engagement. The disciplinary stakes for art history and comparative religious studies are particularly significant, as scholars from both fields are increasingly recognizing the value of cross-disciplinary inquiry. Art historical discourses on materiality are enriching religious studies, just as theological frameworks are providing art historians with more nuanced approaches to spirituality as an integral dimension of human creativity. From a socially engaged perspective, this study presents interspirituality and spiritual promiscuity as platforms for solidarity and coalition building. While this dissertation marks a first attempt at theorizing, through a queer lens, the role of spirituality in performance and installation art, it also serves as a signpost for individual and collective action toward more inclusive and sustainable futures. Ultimately, it calls for attunement to the spiritual worlds of others, offering an approach to bridge differences and foster deeper understanding through our shared experiences of what we consider to be sacred, or not.

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Figures

Chapter 1



Figure 1.1 - Alejandro Obregón Rosés, poster for the Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería, 1975. Digital color print, 23.6 x 39.3 in (60 x 100 cm). Private collection. Bogotá, Colombia.



Figure 1.2 - Brochure for the "Cine Fantástico" Festival, Cinemateca Distrital de Bogotá, 1975. Private collection. Courtesy of Roberto de Zubiría.



Figure 1.3 - Exhibition view of the Salón de Arte Brujo at the Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería, 1975. Digitized negative. *El Espectador* photographic archives. Bogotá, Colombia.



Figure 1.4 - Video still of the installation of the Salón de Arte Brujo at the Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería, 1975. Digitized film strip of documentary by Francisco Norden, Patrimonio Fílmico Colombiano. Courtesy of Roberto de Zubiría. Bogotá, Colombia.



Figure 1.5 - Nirma Zárate and Diego Arango Ruiz, Untitled, 1973. Silkscreen print, 7/60, 26.9 x 38.5 in (68.5 x 98cm). Courtesy Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá. Colombia.



Figure 1.6 - Beatriz González*, La iglesia está en peligro,* 1976. Silkscreen print, 22/25, 21.4 x 19.6 in (54.5 x 50 cm). Courtesy Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá. Colombia.



Figure 1.7 - Hernando “Tejadita” Tejada, *Berta, la mujer puerta*, 1970. Polychrome balsa and cedar woods with stone or crystal fixtures, 62.9 in (160 cm) in height. Photo by Hernán Diaz. Private collection.



Figure 1.8 - Hernando “Tejadita” Tejada, *Alegre Levy*, 1967. Drawing, 39.3 x 27.5 in (100 x 70 cm). Photo by Federico Orozco. Private collection.



Figure 1.9 - Video still of Luis Durier's *La hora del aquelarre* at the Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería, 1975. Digitized film strip of documentary by Francisco Norden, Patrimonio Fílmico Colombiano. Courtesy of Roberto de Zubiría. Bogotá, Colombia.



Figure 1.10 - Luis Durier, *La hora del aquelarre* (detail), ca. 1975. Acrylic on canvas, dimensions unknown. Image originally published in *Revista Cromos*. Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia archives. Bogotá, Colombia.



Figure 1.11 - Luis Durier, *Carmela Murciélago*, ca. 1975. Acrylic on canvas, dimensions unknown. Image originally published in *Revista Cromos*. Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia archives. Bogotá, Colombia.

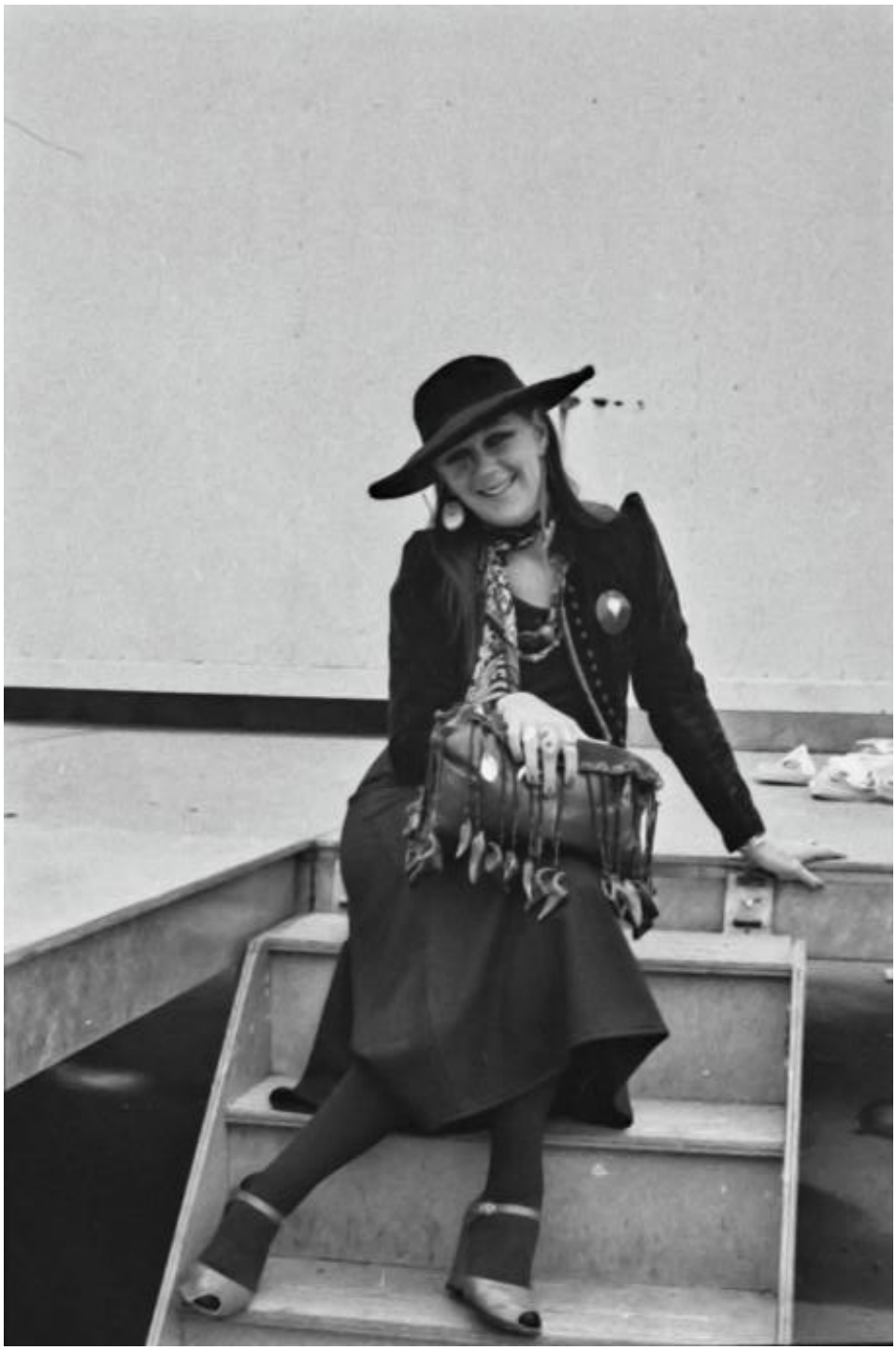


Figure 1.12 - Attendee to the Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería, 1975. Photo by Madalena Schwartz for *Revista Planeta*, Brazil. Digitized negative. Courtesy of Instituto Moreira Salles. São Paulo, Brazil.



Figure 1.13 – Guides to the Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería, 1975. Photo by Madalena Schwartz for *Revista Planeta*, Brazil. Digitized negative. Courtesy of Instituto Moreira Salles. São Paulo, Brazil.



Figure 1.14 – Guides to the Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería, 1975. Photo by Madalena Schwartz for *Revista Planeta*, Brazil. Digitized negative. Courtesy of Instituto Moreira Salles. São Paulo, Brazil.



Figure 1.15 – Video still of Beatriz Veit-Tané during her presentation and performance of María Lionza rituals from Venezuela at the Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería, 1975. Digitized film strip of documentary by Francisco Norden, Patrimonio Fílmico Colombiano. Courtesy of Roberto de Zubiría. Bogotá, Colombia.



Figure 1.16 – Feliza Bursztyn's *El bebé de Rosemary* at the Salón de Arte Brujo, Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería, 1975. Digitized negative. Photo by Madalena Schwartz for *Revista Planeta*, Brazil. Courtesy of Instituto Moreira Salles. São Paulo, Brazil.



Figure 1.17 - Feliza Bursztyn, *El bebé de Rosemary*, ca. 1972. Installation with metallic bed frame, black fabric, and internal engine, 49.6 x 37.9 x 24.8 in (126 x 96.5 x 63 cm). Private collection. Photo by Ernesto Monsalve. Courtesy of Óscar Monsalve. Bogotá, Colombia.



Figure 1.18 – Alejandro Obregón Rosés, *Aquelarre*, ca. 1974. Ink on paper. Collection of María Teresa Guerrero. Bogotá, Colombia.



Figure 1.19 - Installation shot of the exhibition *Nader's Haïti* at the Salón de Arte Brujo, Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería, 1975. Digitized negative. *El Espectador* photographic archives. Bogotá, Colombia.



Figure 1.20 – Vèvè drawings for the *Nader's Haïti* exhibition at the Salon de Arte Brujo, Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería, 1975. Digitized negative. Photo by Madalena Scwhartz for *Revista Planeta*, Brazil. Courtesy of Instituto Moreira Salles. São Paulo, Brazil.



Figure 1.21 - Lyonel Laurenceau, *Rara*, 1975. Acrylic on canvas, 43.9 x 15 in (111.7 x 38.1 cm). Courtesy of Myriam Nader Art Gallery. Miami, Florida.

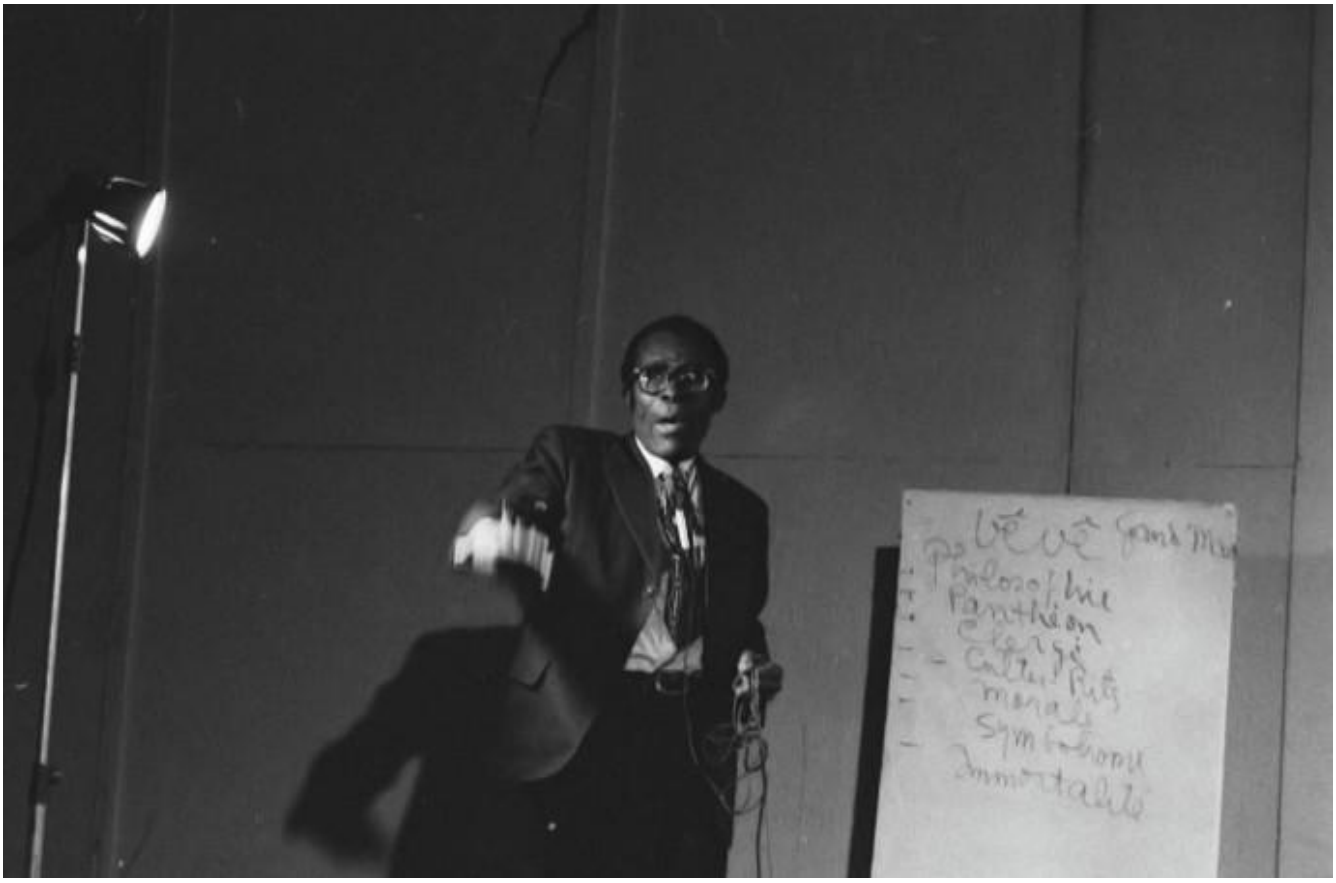
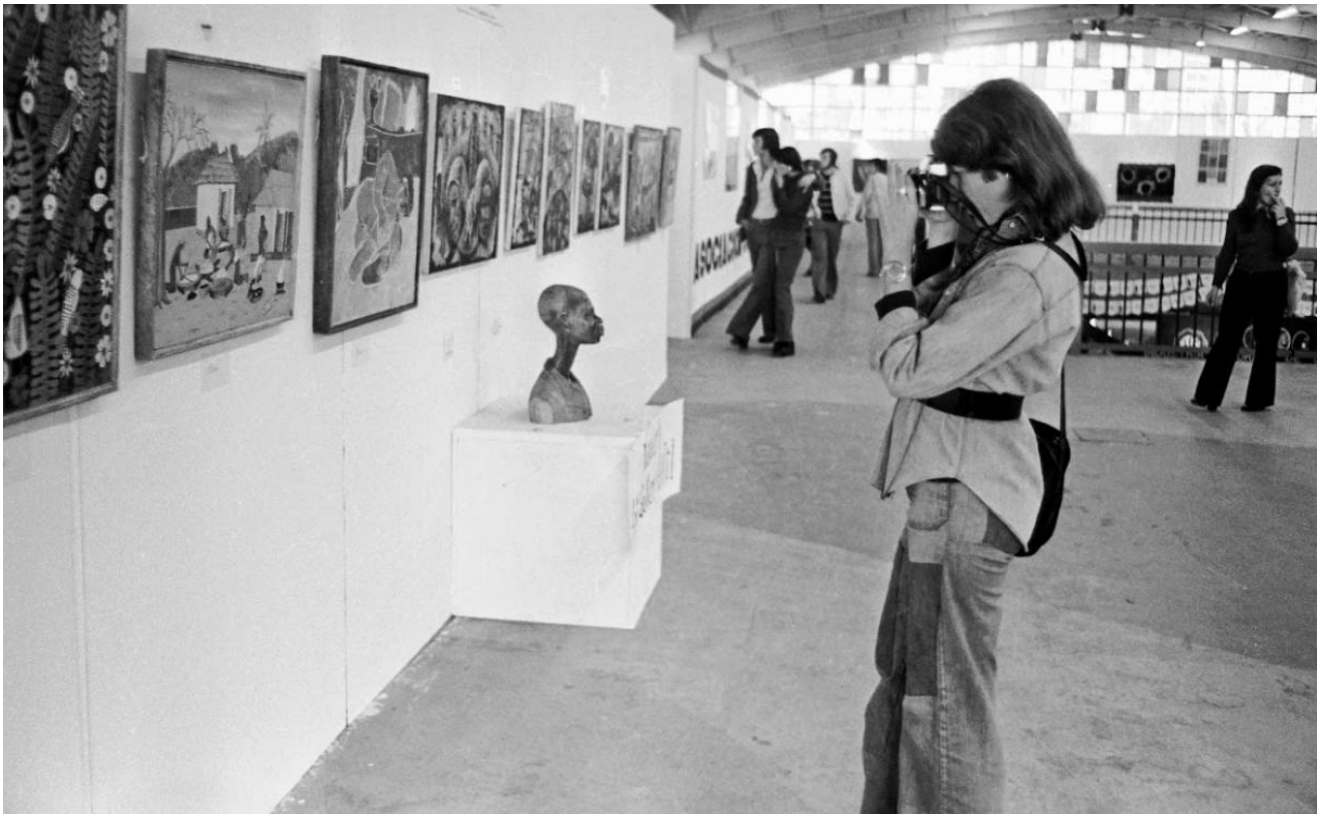


Fig 1.22 - Jean Baptiste Romain giving his lecture “General Summary of Haitian Vodou” at the Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería, 1975. Digitized negative. Photo by Madalena Schwartz for *Revista Planeta*, Brazil. Courtesy of Instituto Moreira Salles. São Paulo, Brazil.



Figure 1.23 - Video still of Jean Baptiste Romain being introduced by Father Francisco Montoya Arango at the Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería, 1975. Digitized film strip of documentary by Francisco Norden, Patrimonio Fílmico Colombiano. Courtesy of Roberto de Zubiría. Bogotá, Colombia.



Figures 1.24 - Installation shot of the *Nader's Haïti* exhibition at the Salón de Arte Brujo, Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería, 1975. Digitized negative. *El Espectador* photographic archives. Bogotá, Colombia.



Figure 1.25 - Video still of a work by Paul Nemours at the *Nader's Haïti* exhibition at the Salón de Arte Brujo, Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería, 1975. Digitized film strip of documentary by Francisco Norden, Patrimonio Fílmico Colombiano. Courtesy of Roberto de Zubiría. Bogotá, Colombia.



Figure 1.26 - Paul Nemours, *Coqs en una jungla,* undated. Oil on canvas, 20 x 24 in (50.8 x 60.96 cm). Courtesy of Myriam Nader Haitian Art Gallery. Miami, Florida.



Figure 1.27 - Vodou ritual performed by the Ballet Bacoulou d'Haïti at the Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería, 1975. Courtesy of Getty Images, The Chronicle Collection. Photo by John Bryson for *LIFE Magazine.*



Figure 1.28 - Vodou ritual performed by the Ballet Bacoulou d'Haïti at the Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería, 1975. Digitized film strip of documentary by Francisco Norden, Patrimonio Fílmico Colombiano. Courtesy of Roberto de Zubiría. Bogotá, Colombia.



Figure 1.29 - Candomblé ritual performed at the Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería, 1975. Digitized film strip of documentary by Francisco Norden, Patrimonio Fílmico Colombiano. Courtesy of Roberto de Zubiría. Bogotá, Colombia.



Figure 1.30 - Candomblé ritual performed at the Primer Congreso Mundial de Brujería, 1975. Digitized film strips of documentary by Francisco Norden, Patrimonio Fílmico Colombiano. Courtesy of Roberto de Zubiría. Bogotá, Colombia.

Chapter 2



Figure 2.1 – A k u z u r u, *SMOKE-Translucency of Spirit*, 1999. Performance and garment designs. Goethe Institute, Lagos, Nigeria. Color photograph. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.2 – A k u z u r u, *SMOKE-Translucency of Spirit*, 1999. Performance and garment designs. Goethe Institute, Lagos Nigeria. Color photograph. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.3 - A k u z u r u, Untitled, ca. 1995. Raw silk and found organic materials. Color photograph. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.4 - A k u z u r u, Untitled, ca. 1995. Courtesy of the artist. Color photograph. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.5 – A k u z u r u, *VICISSITUDE caresses the MANGO SEED in my CALABASH,* 1999. Courtesy of the artist. Color photograph. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.6 – A k u z u r u performing “Electricity,” designed by Keith Khan, in the “Black Inventors” Band with the Yaa Asantewaa Cultural Centre in Notting Hill, London, 1987. Black and white photograph. Photo by Tony Boyce. Courtesy of A k u z u r u. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.7 – Afra Raymond performing “Ah Have a Mind,” designed by Keith Khan, in the Black Inventors Band with the Yaa Asantewaa Cultural Centre in Notting Hill, London, 1987. Black and white photograph. Photo by Tony Boyce. Courtesy of A k u z u r u. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.8 – Afra Raymond performing “Ah Have a Mind,” designed by Keith Khan, in the Black Inventors Band with the Yaa Asantewaa Cultural Centre in Notting Hill, London, 1987. Color photograph. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Greta Mendez. London, United Kingdom.

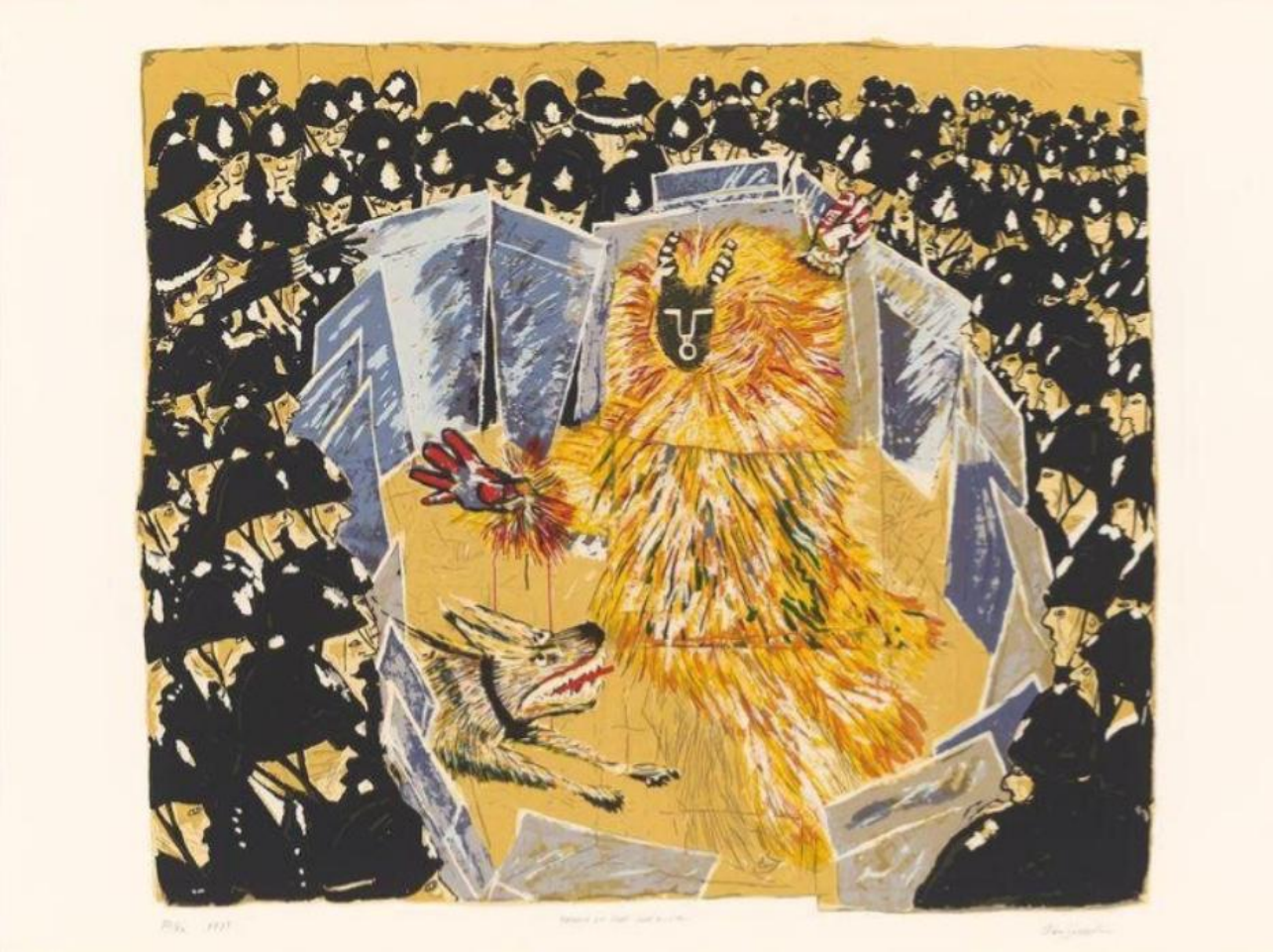


Figure 2.9 – Tam Joseph, *Spirit of the Carnival*, 1988. Color screenprint, 30.3 x 40.5” (77 x 103cm). Victoria & Albert Museum. London, United Kingdom.



Figure 2.10 – A k u z u r u performing in the We De Aethiopians Band, designed by Keith Kahn, with the Yaa Asantewaa Cultural Centre at the Notting Hill Carnival in London, 1989. Digitized 35mm slide. Copyright Ali Zaidi, Moti Roti as part of Future Histories and Goldsmiths Special Collections and Archives, University of London. United Kingdom.



Figure 2.11 – Greta Mendez (front) and dance troupe performing the piece “Spirits” with the Minority Arts Advisory Services (MAAS) Movers at the Oval House in London, 1977. Black and white photograph. Photo by Christopher Davies for *Echo Newspaper.* Courtesy of Greta Mendez. London, United Kingdom.



Figure 2.12 – A k u z u r u (center left) and dance troupe performing in Keith Khan's *Flying Costumes, Floating Tombs* in Bristol, 1991. Digitized 35mm slide. Copyright Ali Zaidi, Moti Roti as part of Future Histories and Goldsmiths Special Collections and Archives, University of London. United Kingdom.



Figure 2.13 – A k u z u r u, Untitled, ca. 1988. Watercolor on paper with black marker, 23.5 x 16.5 in. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.14 – A k u z u r u, Untitled, ca. 1988. Watercolor on paper with black marker, 23.5 x 16.5 in (59.6 x 41.9 cm). Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.15 - Yoruba artists, Man's Robe (*agbada),* early to mid-20th century. Dyed cotton, 50 x 96 in. (127 x 243.8 cm). Saint Louis Art Museum. Missouri.



Figure 2.16 – Yoruba artists, Man's Robe (*agbada),* cotton, early to mid-20th century. Dyed cotton, 50 x 96 in. (127 x 243.8 cm). Saint Louis Art Museum. Missouri.



Figure 2.17 - Kimono Ensemble with Chrysanthemums, silk, metallic thread, Taishō period, 1912-26. (a): H (shoulder to hem) 62 in. (157.5 cm); W (wrist opening to wrist opening) 49 in. (124.5 cm); (b): H (shoulder to hem) 62 5/8 in. (159 cm); W (wrist opening to wrist opening) 49 3/4 in. (126.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York City, New York.



Figure 2.18 – Kimono Ensemble with Chrysanthemums, silk, metallic thread, Taishō period, 1912-26. (a): H (shoulder to hem) 62 in. (157.5 cm); W (wrist opening to wrist opening) 49 in. (124.5 cm); (b): H (shoulder to hem) 62 5/8 in. (159 cm); W (wrist opening to wrist opening) 49 3/4 in. (126.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York City, New York.



Figure 2.19 – A k u z u r u, Untitled, ca. 1988. Cotton drill and printed cotton. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.20 – A k u z u r u, Untitled, ca. 1988. Cotton drill and printed cotton. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure. 2.21 – A k u z u r u, Untitled (back detail), ca. 1988. Cotton drill and printed cotton. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.

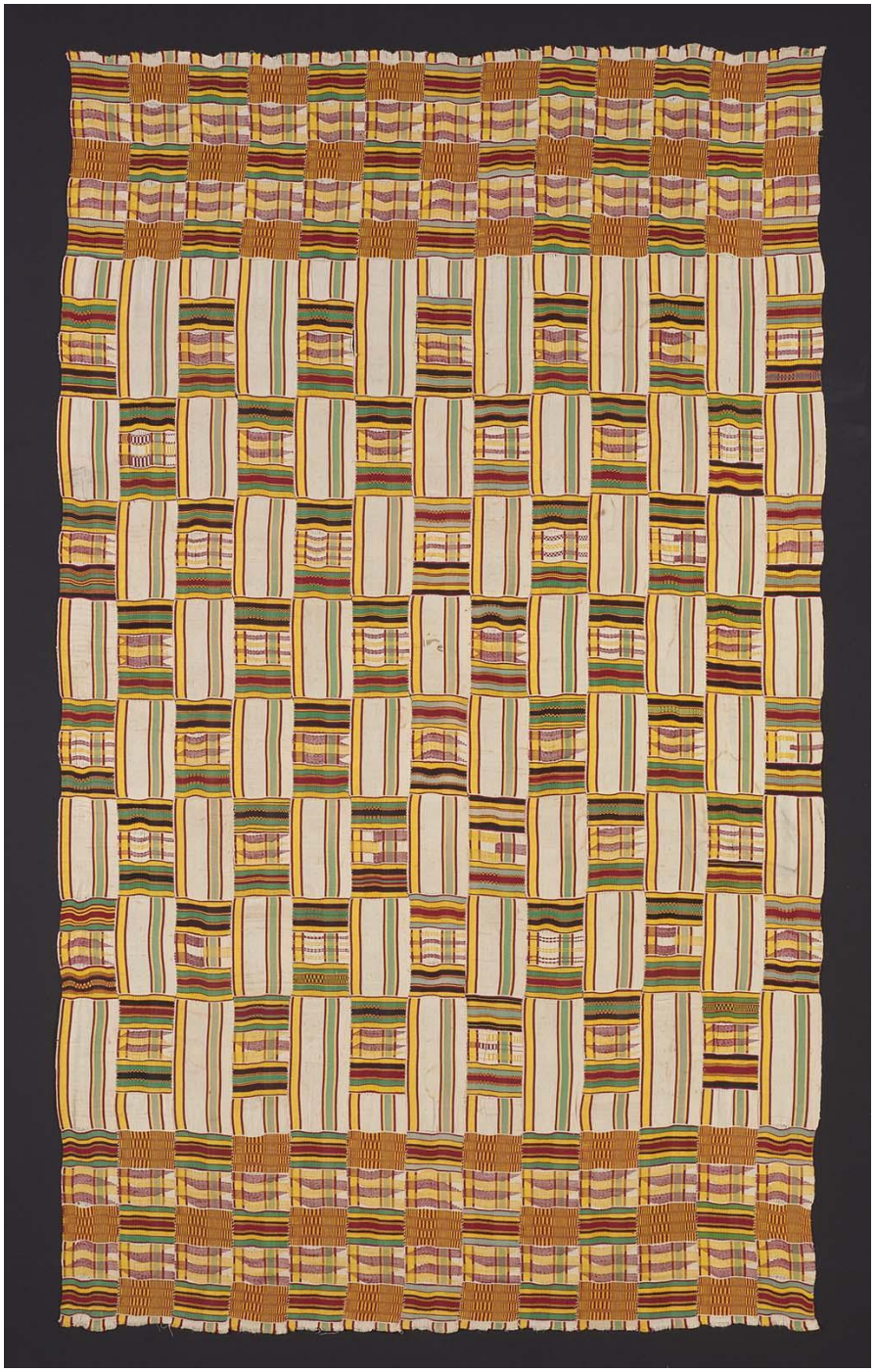


Figure. 2.22 – Asante people, Cloth (kente), 20th century, 1950-2000. Rayon and silk, 79 x 46 in (200.7 x 116.8 cm). Museum of Fine Arts Boston. Massachusetts.



Figure 2.23 – Rei Kawakubo, Jumper and Skirt, 1982. Padded cotton jersey, machine-sewn, 39.7 x 26.1” (101cm x 66.5cm). Victoria & Albert Museum Collection. London, United Kingdom.



Figure 2.24 – A k u z u r u, Untitled, ca. 1988. Watercolor on paper with black marker, 23.5 ins x 16.5 in (59.6 x 41.9 cm). Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.25 – A k u z u r u, Untitled, ca. 1988. Cotton drill and printed cotton. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.26 –Model wearing one of A k u z u r u's designs from her time in London, 1992. Color photograph. Photo by Brian Ng Fatt. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.27 - Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren, bondage 'Punk' suit consisting of a jacket and trousers in black cotton, 1976. Victoria & Albert Museum. London, United Kingdom.



Figure 2.28 - Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren, cotton raincoat and belt 'Witches', 1983-84. Victoria & Albert Museum. London, United Kingdom.

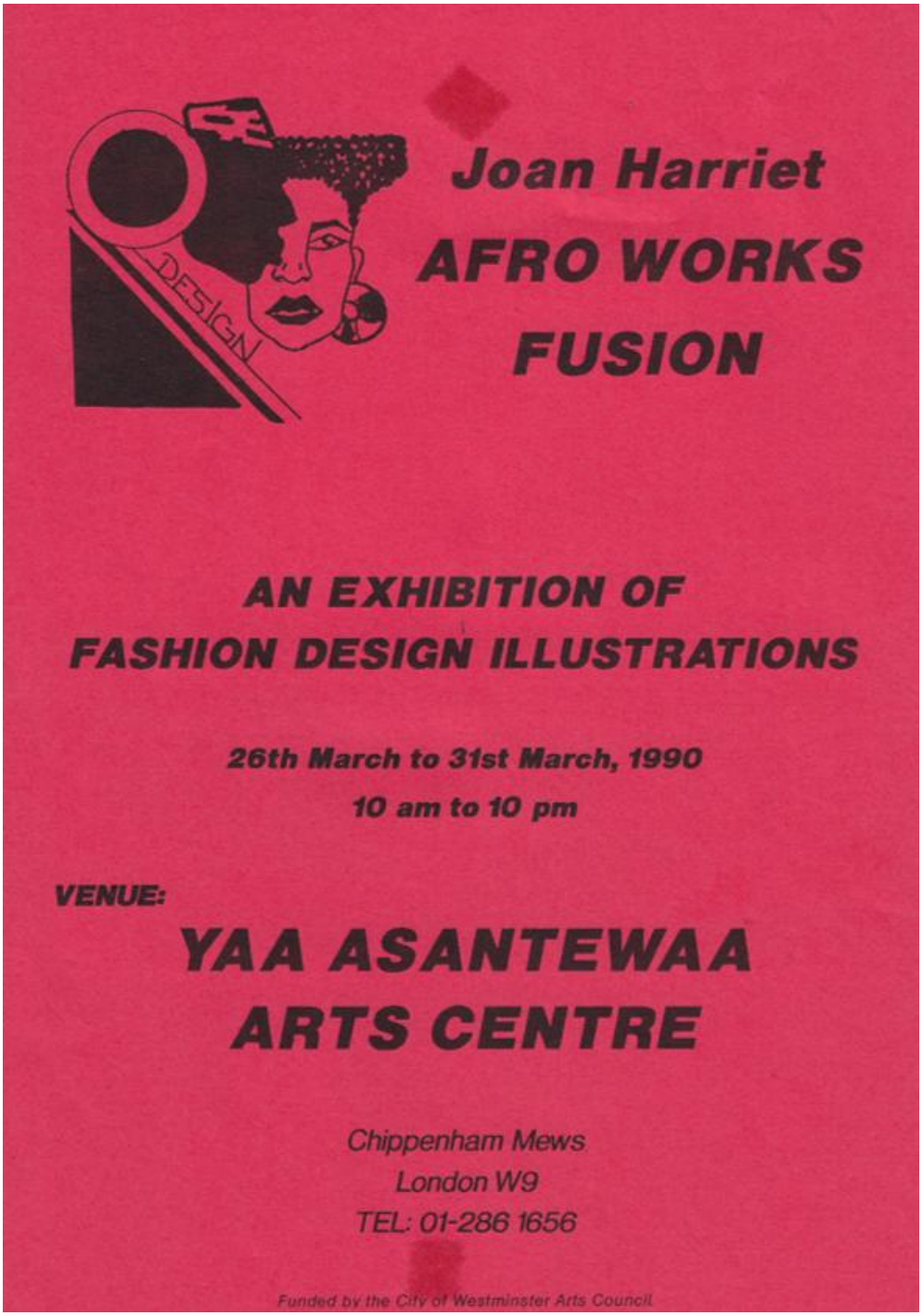


Figure. 2.29 – Flyer of A k u z u r u's first solo exhibition in London, *Afro-Works/Fusion*, at the Yaa Asantewaa Cultural Centre, 1990. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.30 –A k u z u r u's first solo exhibition in London, "Afro-Works/Fusion," at the Yaa Asantewaa Cultural Centre, 1990. Color photograph. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.31 – Installation shots of A k u z u r u's first solo exhibition in London, "Afro-Works/Fusion," at the Yaa Asantewaa Cultural Centre, 1990. Color photograph. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.32 - Senga Nengudi, *Ceremony of Freeway Frets,* 1978. Color photograph. African American Performance Art Archive, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. North Carolina.



Figure 2.33 – Parade of Roots of Mas', A k u z u r u's carnival band for the 1991 Notting Hill Carnival with the Yaa Asantewaa Cultural Centre. Color photograph. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.

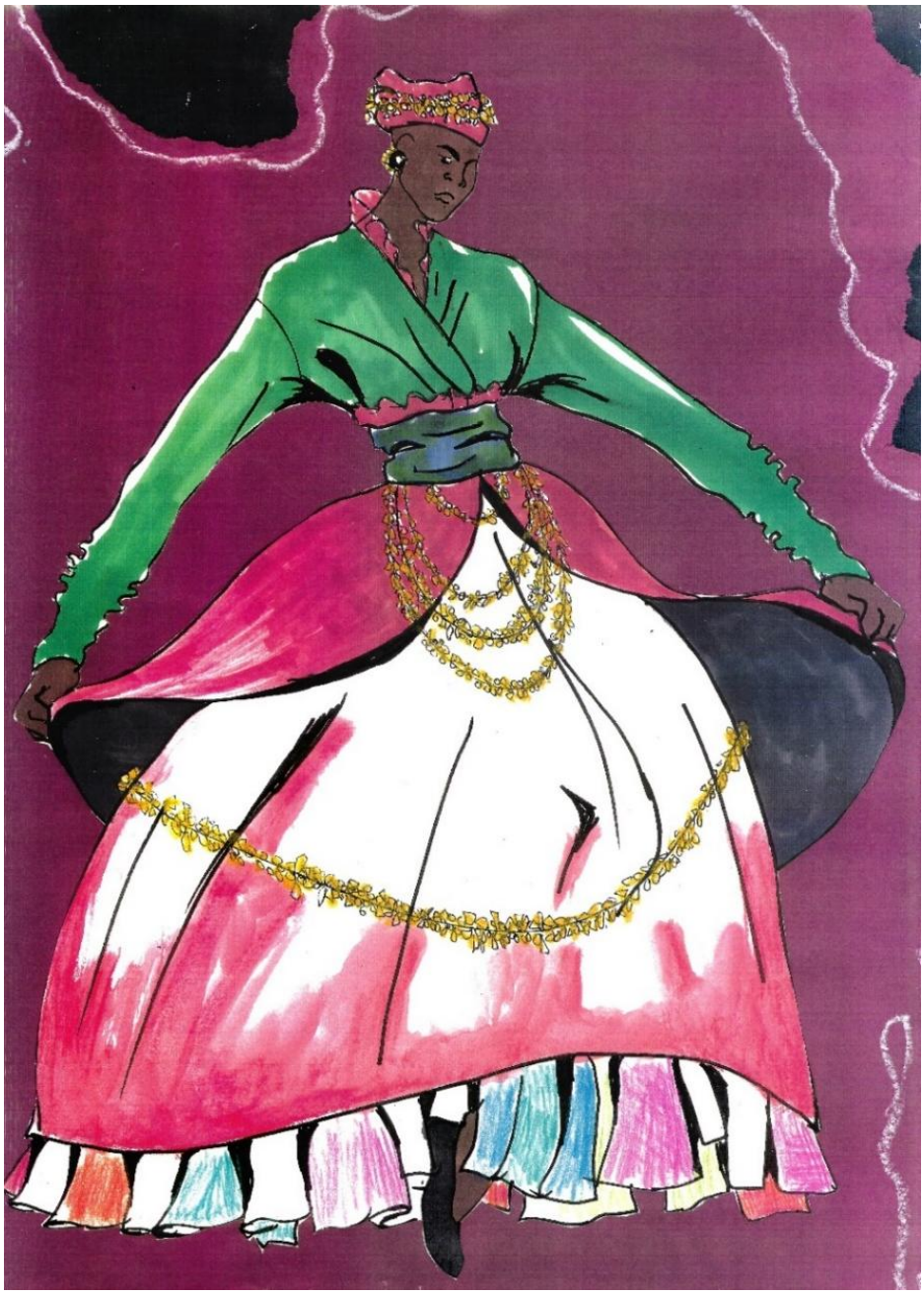


Figure 2.34 – A k u z u r u, *Bèlè Dancer*, 1991. Garment design for the Carnival Band "Roots of Mas'" for the Yaa Asantewaa Arts Centre. Inkjet print of original watercolor on paper. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.35 - Bèlè Dancer from A k u z u r u's band "Roots of Mas'" for the Yaa Asantewaa Arts Centre, 1991. Color photograph. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.36 - Bèlè Dancers from A k u z u r u's band Roots of Mas' for the Yaa Asantewaa Arts Centre, 1991. Color photography. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure. 2.37 - A k u z u r u, *Pierrot Grenade*, 1991. Masquerade design for the carnival band “Roots of Mas” for the Yaa Asantewaa Arts Centre. Inkjet print of original watercolor on paper. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.38 - A k u z u r u, *Negue Jadin*, 1991. Masquerade design for the carnival band “Roots of Mas” for the Yaa Asantewaa Arts Centre. Inkjet print of original watercolor on paper. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.39 - A k u z u r u, *Midnight Robber*, 1991. Masquerade design for the carnival band "Roots of Mas" for the Yaa Asantewaa Arts Centre. Inkjet print of original watercolor on paper. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.40 - Raoul Garib's "Tiffany's Treasure," worn by Tessa John for the band Universal Lights, 1977. Inkjet print on paper. *Trinidad Carnival Magazine,* Nasser Khan Carnival Collection, National Archive of Trinidad and Tobago. Port of Spain.



Figure 2.41 – Procession of King and Queen in the Back to Africa Band, designed by George Bailey, 1957. Color postcard. Photo by A.C. Fung. University of the West Indies Institutional Repository for Research and Scholarship, Michael Goldberg Collection. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.

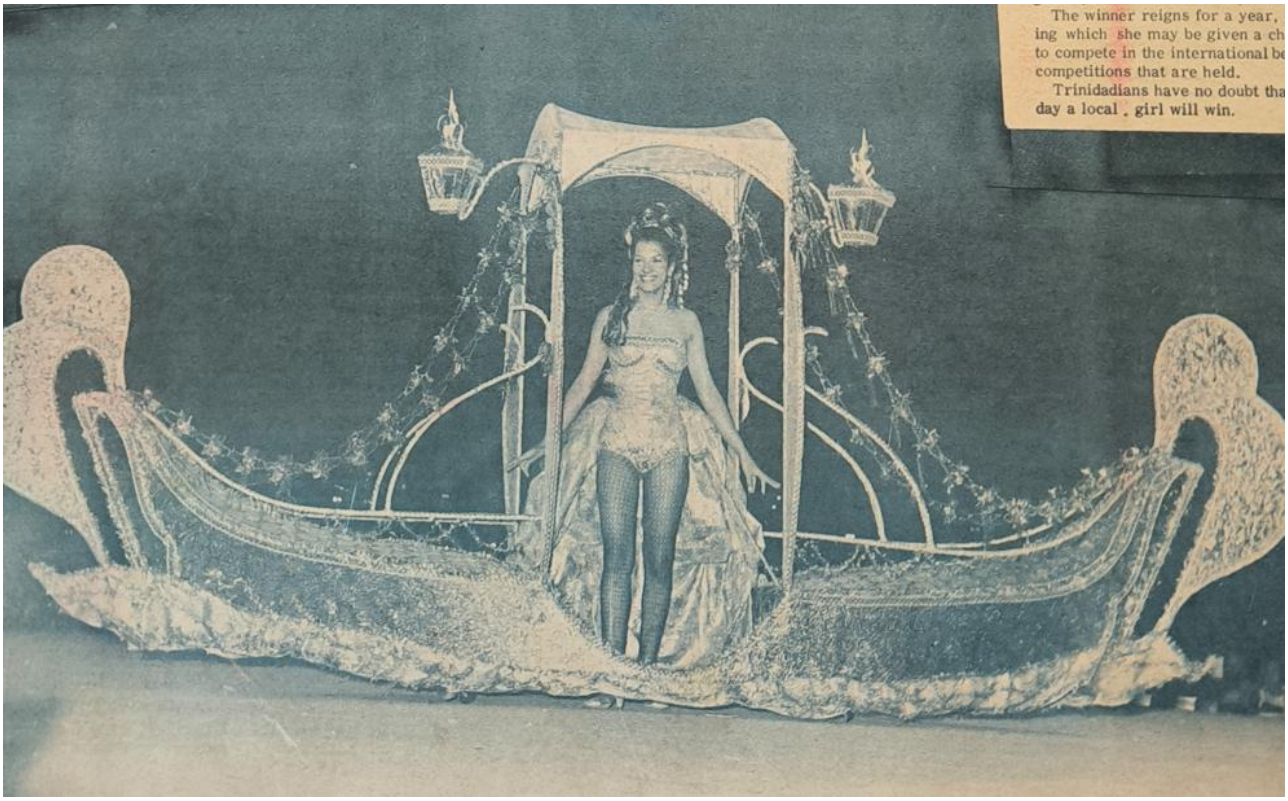


Figure 2.42 – Jaycee's Carnival Queen Show, 1968. Inkjet print on paper. *Express Carnival Magazine*. Nasser Khan Carnival Collection, National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago. Port of Spain.



Figure 2.43 – Carlisle Chang's band *Japan: Land of the Kabuki*, led by Elsie and Stephen Lee Heung, 1964. Digitized film strip. Video produced by George Tang and Stephen Lee Heung. The Banyan Caribbean Archives. Bridgetown, Barbados.



Figure 2.44 – “We limbo” section from Carlisle Chang’s band *We Kinda Ah People*, led by Elsie and Stephen Lee Heung, 1975. Digitized film strip. Video produced by George Tang and Stephen Lee Heung. The Banyan Caribbean Archives. Bridgetown, Barbados.



Figure 2.45 – “We chinee” section from Carlisle Chang’s band *We Kinda Ah People*, led by Elsie and Stephen Lee Heung, 1975. Digitized film strip. Video produced by George Tang and Stephen Lee Heung. The Banyan Caribbean Archives. Bridgetown, Barbados.



Figure 2.46 – Wayne Berkeley, *Venus,* 1973. Masquerade design for the band Secrets of the Sky. Watercolor on paper mounted on board. Special Heritage Collection and Wayne Berkeley Collection, National Library of Trinidad and Tobago. Port of Spain.

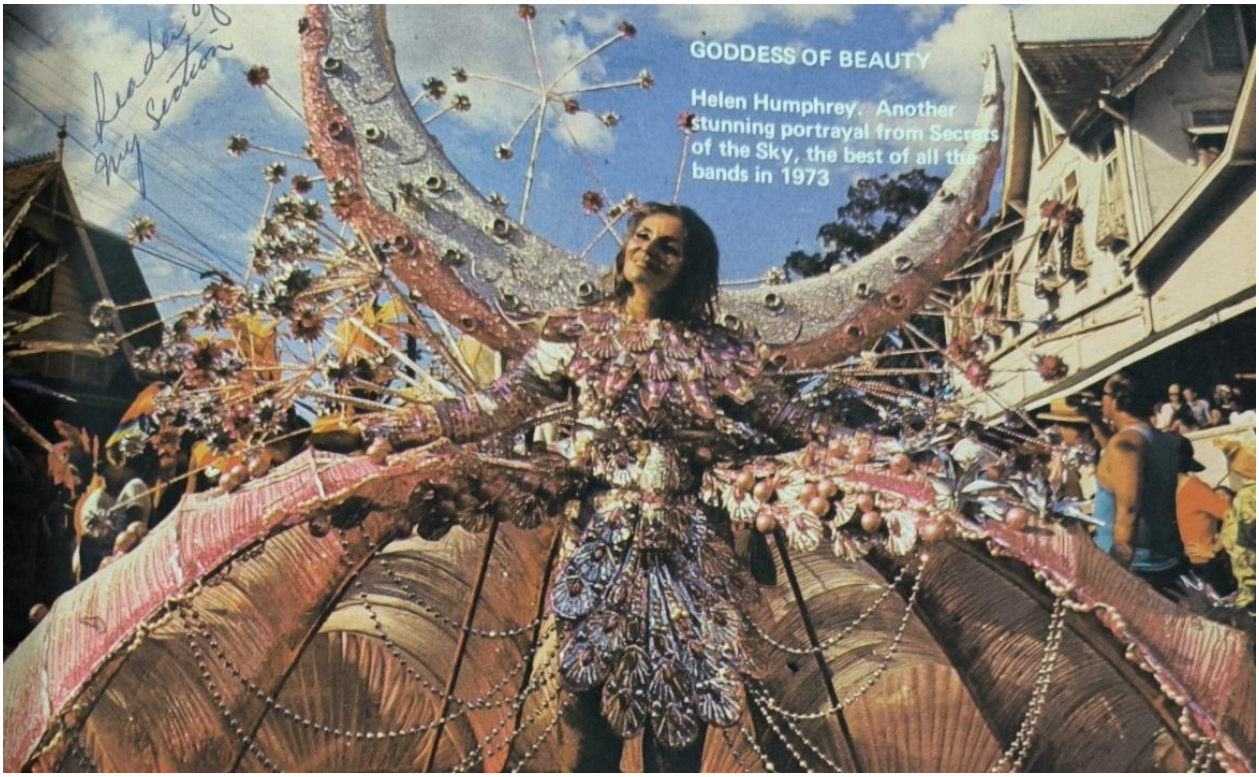


Figure 2.47 – Helen Humphrey playing "Venus" for the band Secrets of the Sky, designed by Wayne Berkeley and Robert Ammon, 1973. Inkjet print on paper. Photographer unknown. *Trinidad Carnival Magazine*. Nasser Khan Carnival Collection, National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago. Port of Spain.



Figure 2.48 – Wayne Berkeley, *Aurora,* 1973. Masquerade design for the band Secrets of the Sky. Watercolor on paper mounted on board. Special Heritage Collection and Wayne Berkeley Collection, National Library of Trinidad and Tobago. Port of Spain.



Figure 2.49 – Erica Williams, daughter of then Trinidadian Prime Minister Eric Williams, playing "Aurora" for the band Secrets of the Sky, designed by Wayne Berkeley and Robert Ammon, 1973. Inkjet print on paper. Photographer unknown. *Trinidad Carnival Magazine*. Nasser Khan Carnival Collection, National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago. Port of Spain.



Figure 2.50 – Wayne Berkeley, *Mambo,* 1979. Masquerade design for the band The Ritual. Watercolor on paper mounted on board. Special Heritage Collection and Wayne Berkeley Collection, National Library of Trinidad and Tobago. Port of Spain.

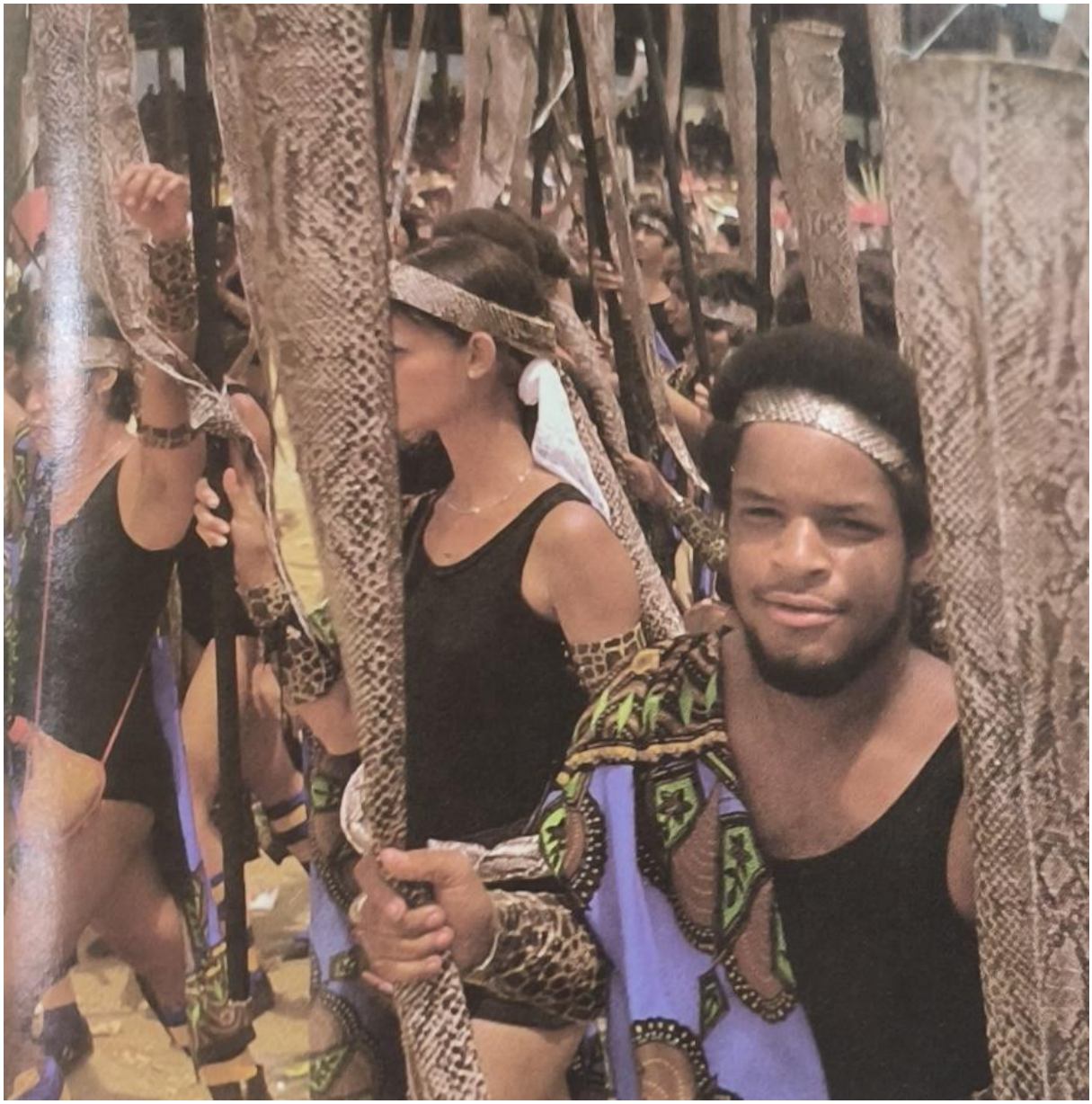


Figure 2.51 – Masqueraders performing Mambo for the band *The Ritual*, designed by Wayne Berkeley, 1979. Inkjet print on paper. Photographer unknown. *Trinidad Carnival Magazine*. Nasser Khan Carnival Collection, National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago. Port of Spain.



Figure 2.52 – Wayne Berkeley, *Bamboo Bier,* 1979. Masquerade design for the band *The Ritual.* Watercolor on paper mounted on board. Special Heritage Collection and Wayne Berkeley Collection, National Library of Trinidad and Tobago. Port of Spain.



Figure 2.53 – Masqueraders performing *Bamboo Bier* for the band *The Ritual*, designed by Wayne Berkeley, 1979. Inkjet print on paper. Photographer unknown. *Trinidad Carnival Magazine*. Nasser Khan Carnival Collection, National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago. Port of Spain.



Figure 2.54 – Sherry-Ann Guy performing Peter Minshall's mas' character From the Land of the Hummingbird in the Trinidad Carnival, Port of Spain, 1974. Courtesy Peter Minshall and The Callaloo Company. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.55 – Masqueraders playing as Bats at the Trinidad Carnival, 1966. Black and white photograph. Photo by Chan Studio. Courtesy of the Carnival Institute of Trinidad and Tobago. Port of Spain.



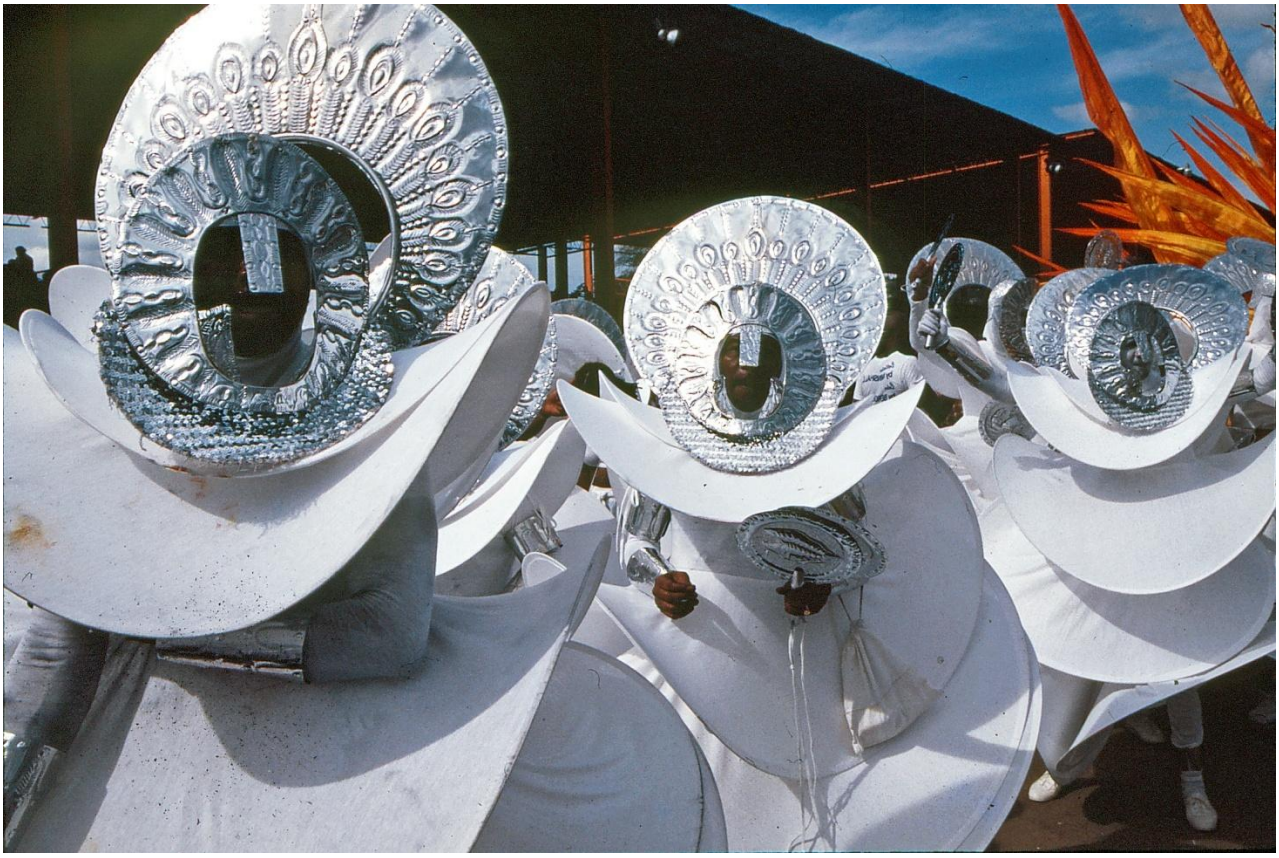
Figure 2.56 – Masqueraders playing as Wild Indian, 1909. Color postcard. Photographer unknown. Michael Goldberg Collection, University of the West Indies Institutional Repository for Research and Scholarship. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.57 – Masqueraders playing as Fancy Sailors at the Trinidad Carnival, 1964. Color photograph. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Carnival Institute of Trinidad and Tobago. Port of Spain.



Figure 2.58 – Masqueraders performing “Moon of the Callaloo and the Crab” in Peter Minshall’s Callaloo band in the Trinidad Carnival, 1984. Photo by Derek Gay. Courtesy of The Callaloo Company. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figs. 2.59 – Masqueraders performing “Moon of the Callaloo and the Crab” in Peter Minshall’s Callaloo band in the Trinidad Carnival, 1984. Photo by Derek Gay. Courtesy of The Callaloo Company. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.60 – Masqueraders performing “Moon of the Bongo” in Peter Minshall’s Callaloo band in the Trinidad Carnival, 1984. Photograph by Derek Gay. Courtesy of The Callaloo Company. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.

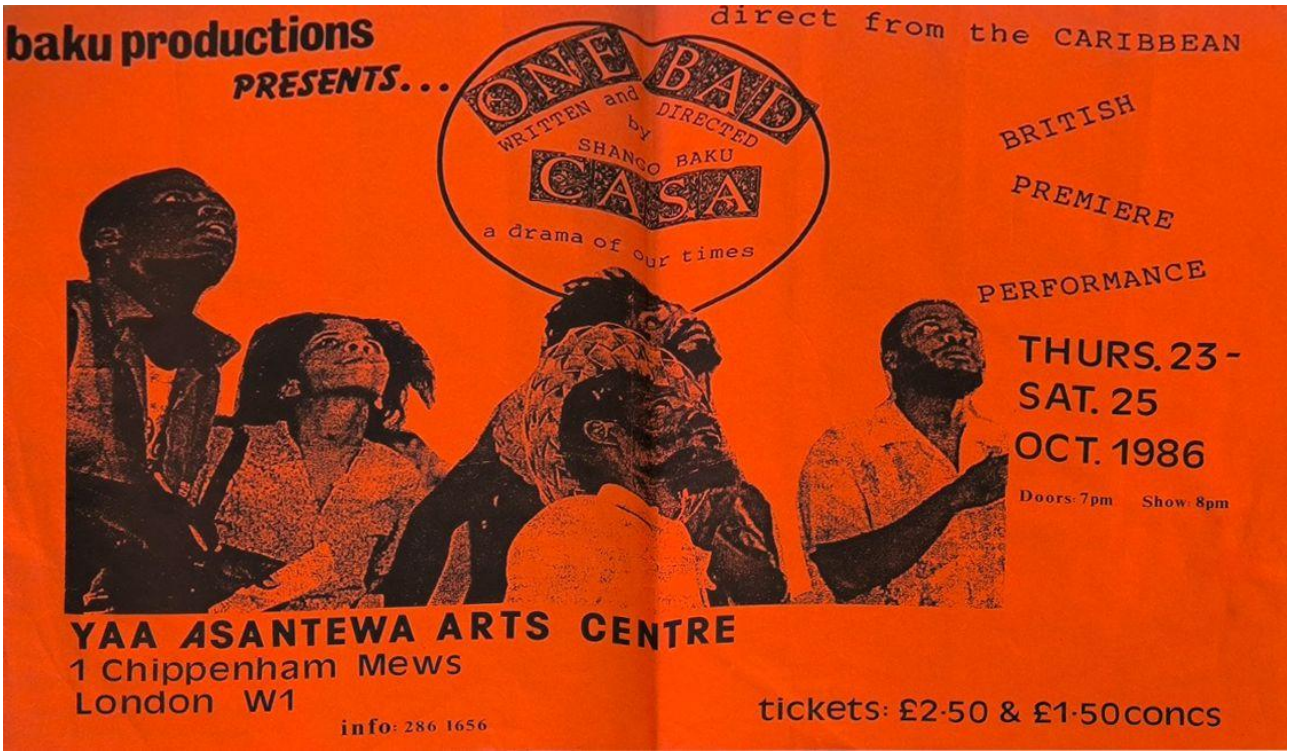


Figure 2.61 – Flyer of Shango Baku's play *One Bad Casa* at the Yaa Asantewaa Cultural Centre in Notting Hill, London, 1986. Personal Papers of John La Rose, 1940s-2010s collection, The George Padmore Institute Archives. London, United Kingdom.

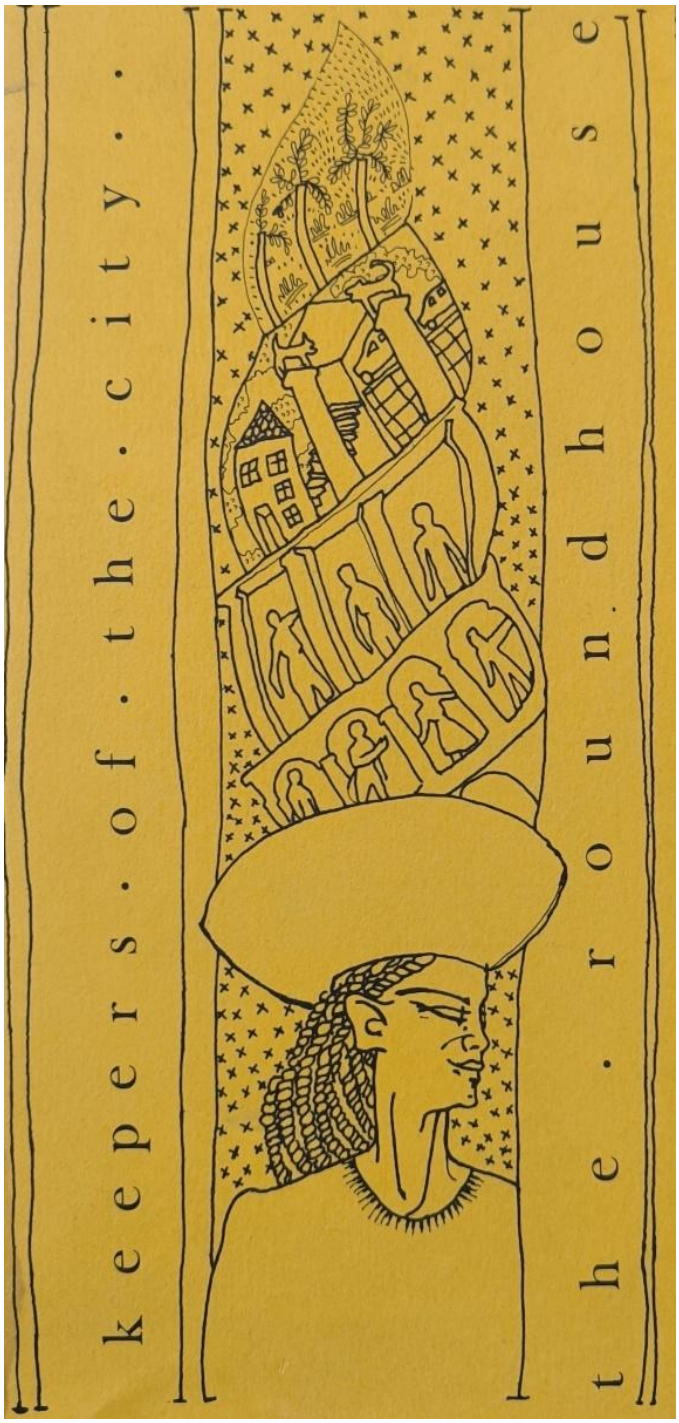


Figure. 2.62 – Flyer promoting workshops for Greta Mendez, Keith Khan, and Franklyn Ward's *Keepers of the City*, 1986. Inkjet print on paper. Courtesy of Greta Mendez. London, United Kingdom.

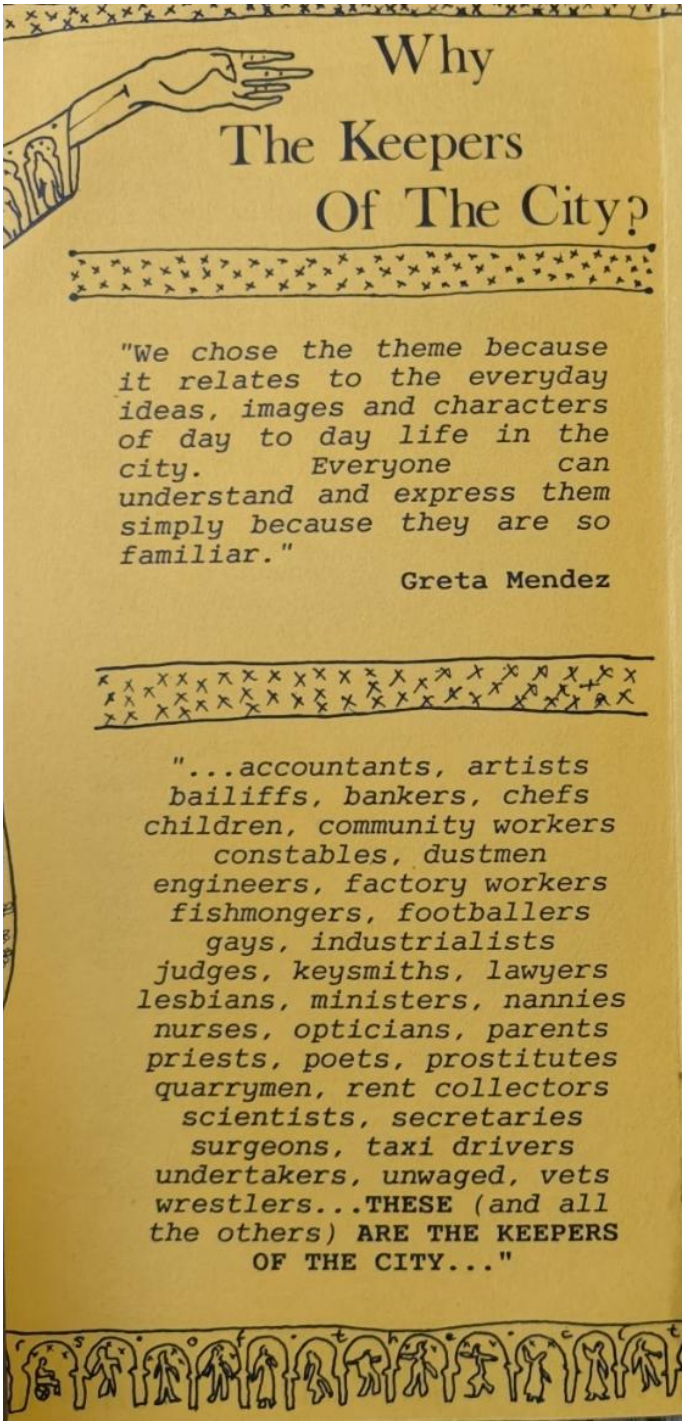


Figure 2.63 – Flyer promoting workshops for Greta Mendez, Keith Khan, and Franklyn Ward's *Keepers of the City*, 1986. Inkjet print on paper. Courtesy of Greta Mendez. London, United Kingdom.



Figure 2.64 – A k u z u r u posing in front of two of her designs for the exhibition *Alkebu-Lan: Sewing the Seeds of Global Magnificence* at the Aquarela Galleries, 1992. Color photograph. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.65 – A k u z u r u's drawing for the brochure of the *Alkebu-Lan: Sewing the Seeds of Global Magnificence*, her first solo show at the Aquarela Galleries in Port of Spain, 1992. Inkjet print on paper. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.66 – A k u z u r u, *All That Encompasses Truth*, 1992. Cotton drill. Exhibited in the show "Alkebu-lan: Sewing the Seeds of Global Magnificence" at the Aquarela Galleries in 1992. Color photograph. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.67 – A k u z u r u, *He Who Strides Majestically Is Worldly*, 1992. Cotton velvet. Exhibited in the show "Alkebu-lan: Sewing the Seeds of Global Magnificence" at the Aquarela Galleries in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. Color photograph. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.

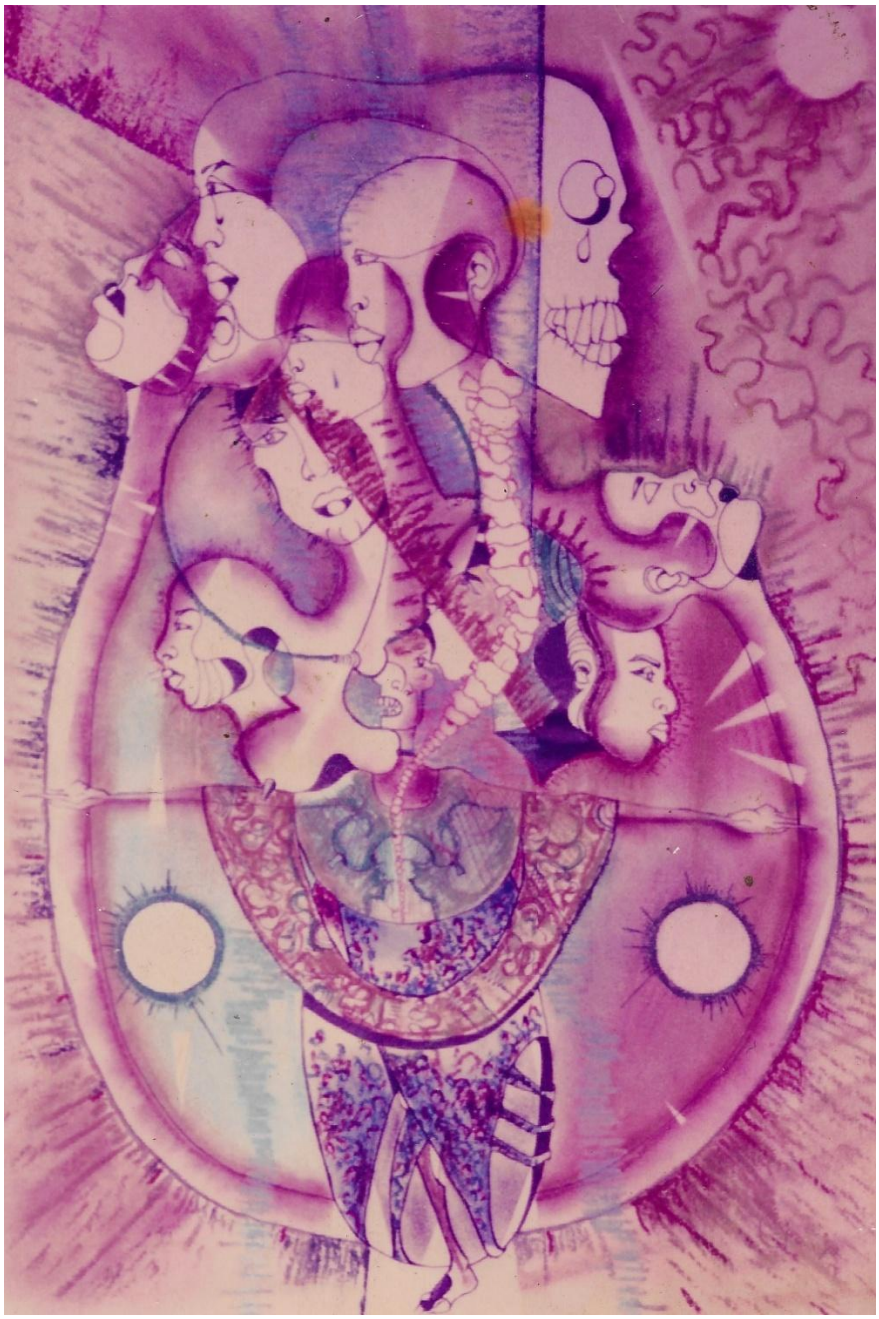


Figure 2.68 - A k u z u r u, *Amniotic Bliss*, 1991-92. Watercolor and pen. Exhibited in the show "Alkebulan: Sewing the Seeds of Global Magnificence" at the Aquarela Galleries in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, 1992. Color photograph. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.

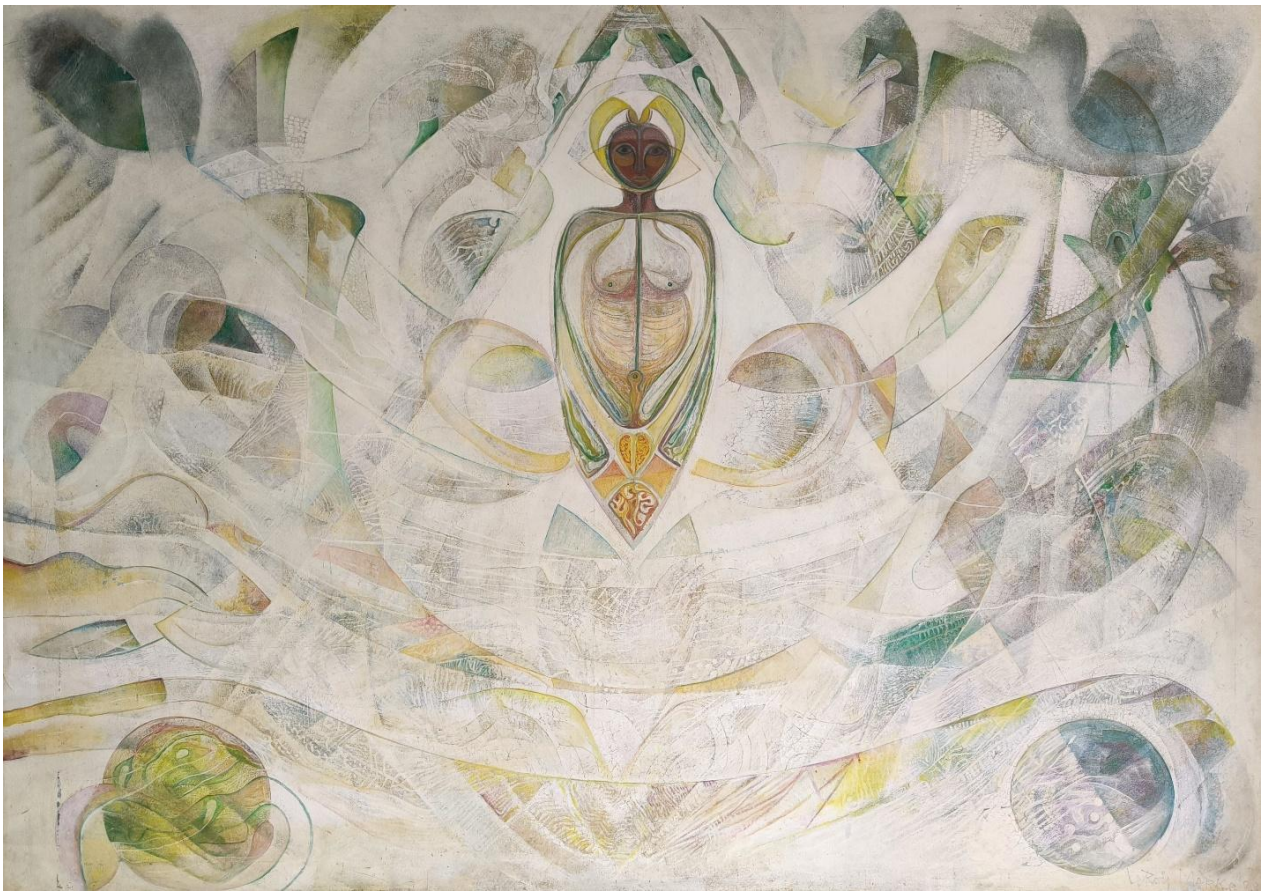


Figure 2.69– LeRoy Clarke, *Full Moon in Aripo,* 1988. Oil on canvas, 66 x 96" (167.6 x 243.8cm). Courtesy of Adaeze Clarke and the Legacy House. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.70 – LeRoy Clarke, *Towards the Apotheosis of El Tucuche,* 1989. Oil on canvas, 90 x 60” (228.6 x 152.4cm). Courtesy of Adaeze Clarke and the Legacy House. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.71 – Model wearing and performing with A k u z u r u's *Woman wid Children* at the opening of *Alkebu-lan: Sewing the Seeds of Global Magnificence* at the Aquarela Galleries, 1992. Color photograph. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.72 – A k u z u r u, *Woman wid Children,* 1990. Wax print cotton and wool fabric. Color photograph. Photo by Brian Ng Fatt. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.73 – A k u z u r u at the opening of "Alkebu-lan: Sewing the Seeds of Global Magnificence" at the Aquarela Galleries with JaJah Oga Onilu (left) and LeRoy Clarke (right), who gave his opening remarks, 1992. Color photograph. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.

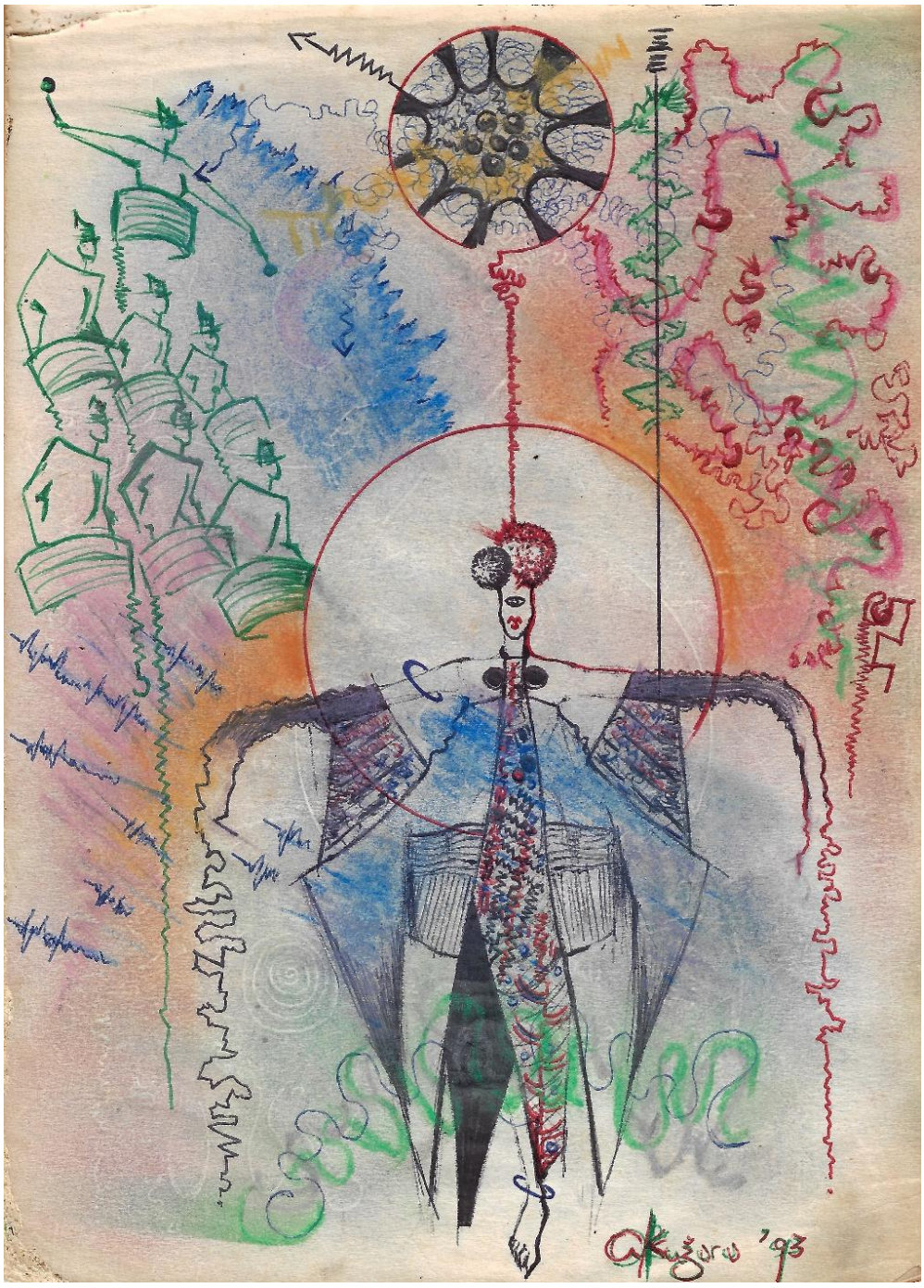


Figure 2.74 – A k u z u r u, Untitled, 1993. Colored pen. One of the first sketches of the artist upon her arrival to Nigeria in 1992. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.75 – A k u z u r u, Untitled, ca. 1998. Color photograph. Photographer unknown. Modeled by A k u z u r u. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 2.76 – A k u z u r u, Untitled, ca. 1998. Color photograph. Photographer unknown. Modeled by A k u z u r u. Courtesy of the artist. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.

Chapter 3

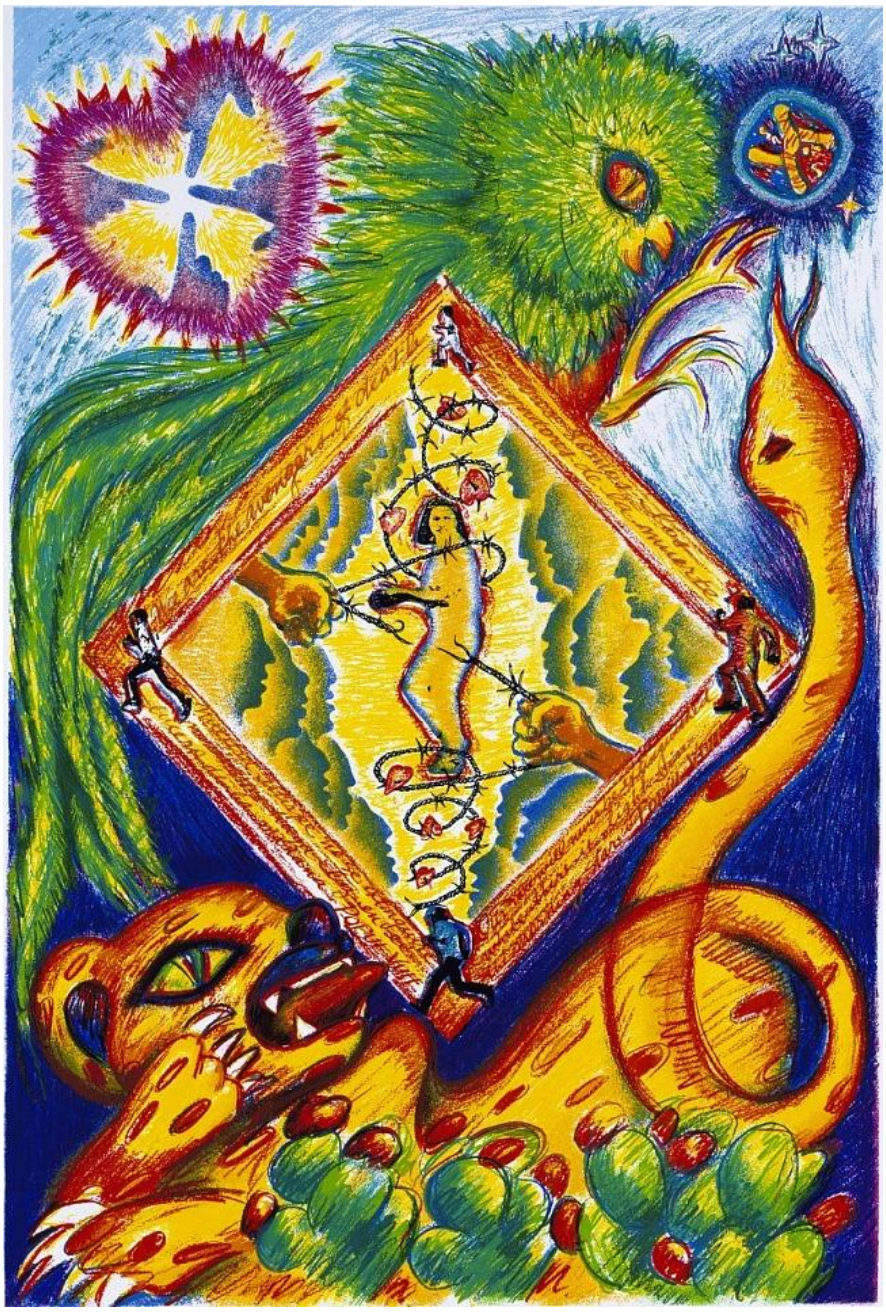


Figure 3.1 - Los Dos de Los (Yreina D. Cervantez, Leo Limón), *Estrella of the Dawn*, from the National Chicano Screenprint Taller, 1988. Screenprint, sheet: 40 1⁄8 x 27 1⁄8 in. (101.9 x 68.9 cm), Smithsonian American Art Museum. Washington, D.C.



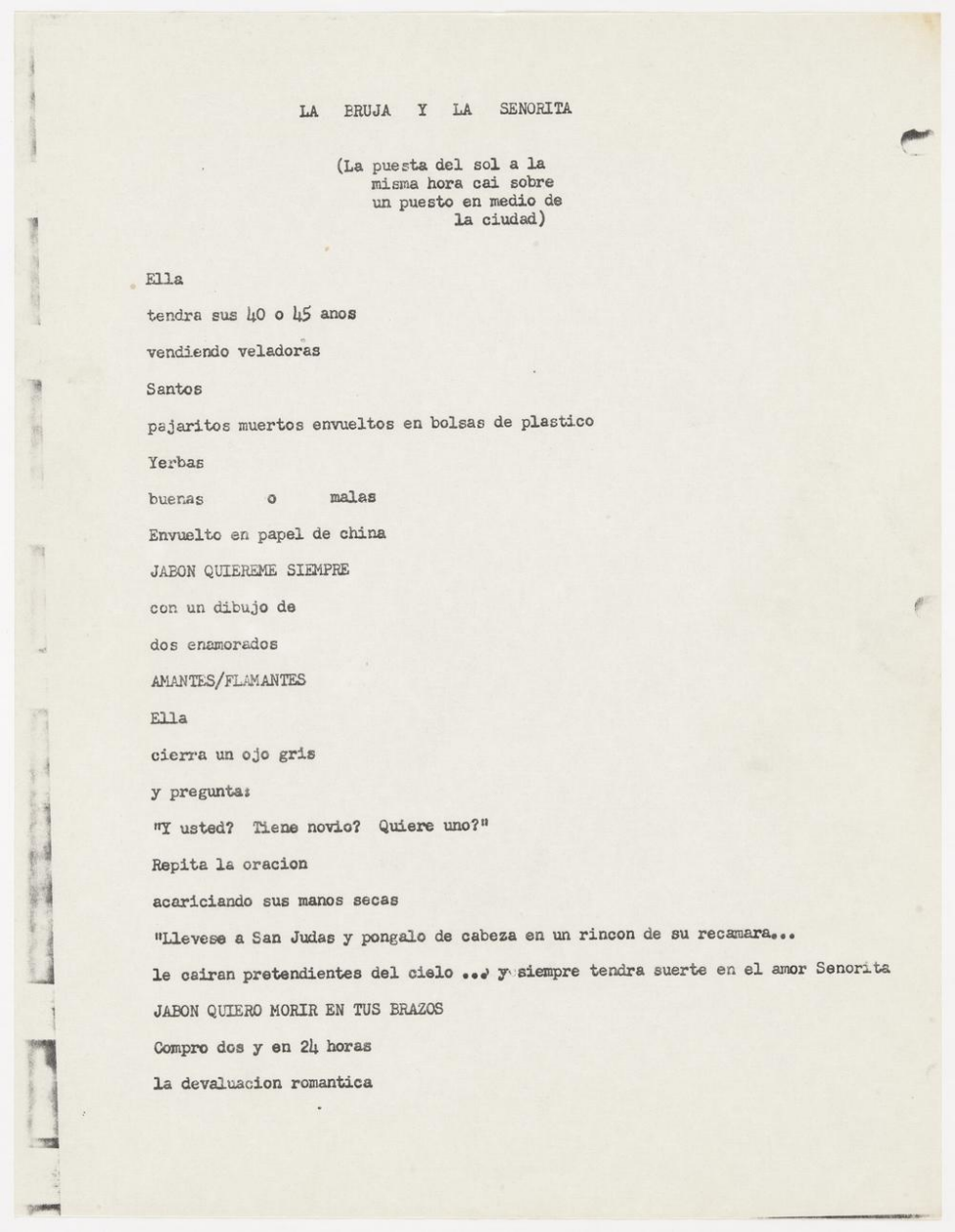
Figure 3.2 - Seymour Rosen, Asco's *Stations of the Cross*, 1971, printed 2018. Gelatin silver print, 8 × 10 in. (20.3 × 25.4 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum. Washington, D.C.



Figure 3.3 – Harry Gamboa Jr, *Walking Mural*, 1972. From the Asco era. Color photography. ©1972, Harry Gamboa Jr. From left to right Patssi Valdez, Willie Herrón, and Guglio "Gronk" Nicandro. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3.4 – Marisela Norte, Untitled, 1981. Ink on paper. Gronk Papers, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California, Los Angeles.



LA BRUJA Y LA SENORITA

(La puesta del sol a la
misma hora cai sobre
un puesto en medio de
la ciudad)

Ella

tendra sus 40 o 45 anos

vendiendo veladoras

Santos

pajaritos muertos envueltos en bolsas de plastico

Yerbas

buenas o malas

Envuelto en papel de china

JABON QUIEREME SIEMPRE

con un dibujo de

dos enamorados

AMANTES/FLAMANTES

Ella

cierra un ojo gris

y pregunta:

"Y usted? Tiene novio? Quiere uno?"

Repita la oracion

acariciando sus manos secas

"Llevese a San Judas y pongalo de cabeza en un rincon de su recamara...

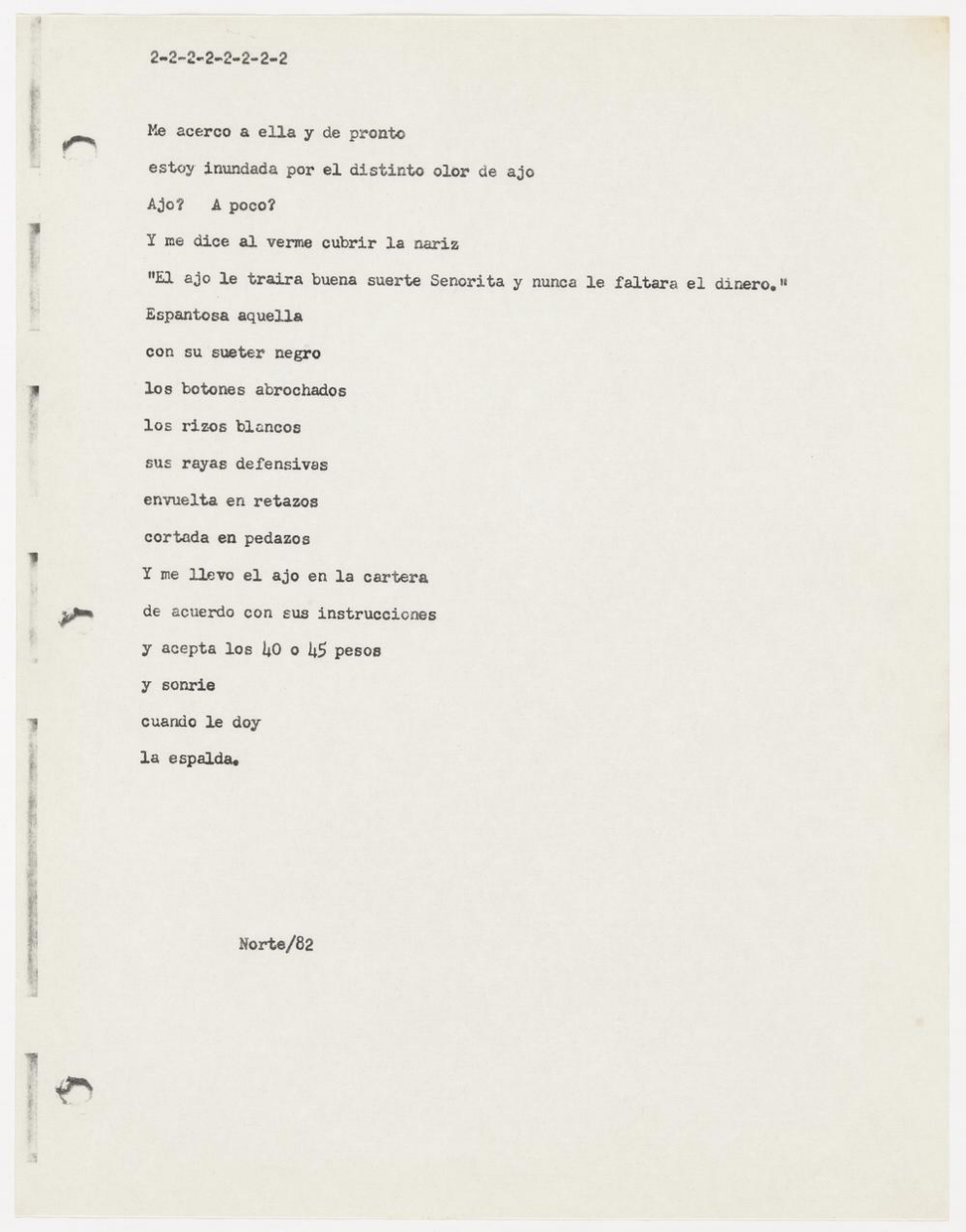
le cairan pretendientes del cielo ... y siempre tendra suerte en el amor Senorita

JABON QUIERO MORIR EN TUS BRAZOS

Compro dos y en 24 horas

la devaluacion romantica

Figure 3.5 – Marisela Norte, "La bruja y la señorita," 1982. Ink on paper. *High Performance Magazine* Records, Special Collection Research Library, Getty Research Institute. Los Angeles, CA.



2-2-2-2-2-2-2-2

Me acerco a ella y de pronto
estoy inundada por el distinto olor de ajo
Ajo? A poco?
Y me dice al verme cubrir la nariz
"El ajo le traira buena suerte Senorita y nunca le faltara el dinero."
Espantosa aquella
con su sueter negro
los botones abrochados
los rizos blancos
sus rayas defensivas
envuelta en retazos
cortada en pedazos
Y me llevo el ajo en la cartera
de acuerdo con sus instrucciones
y acepta los 40 o 45 pesos
y sonrie
cuando le doy
la espalda.

Norte/82

Figure 3.6 – Marisela Norte, "La bruja y la señorita," 1982. Ink on paper. *High Performance Magazine* Records, Special Collection Research Library, Getty Research Institute. Los Angeles, CA.

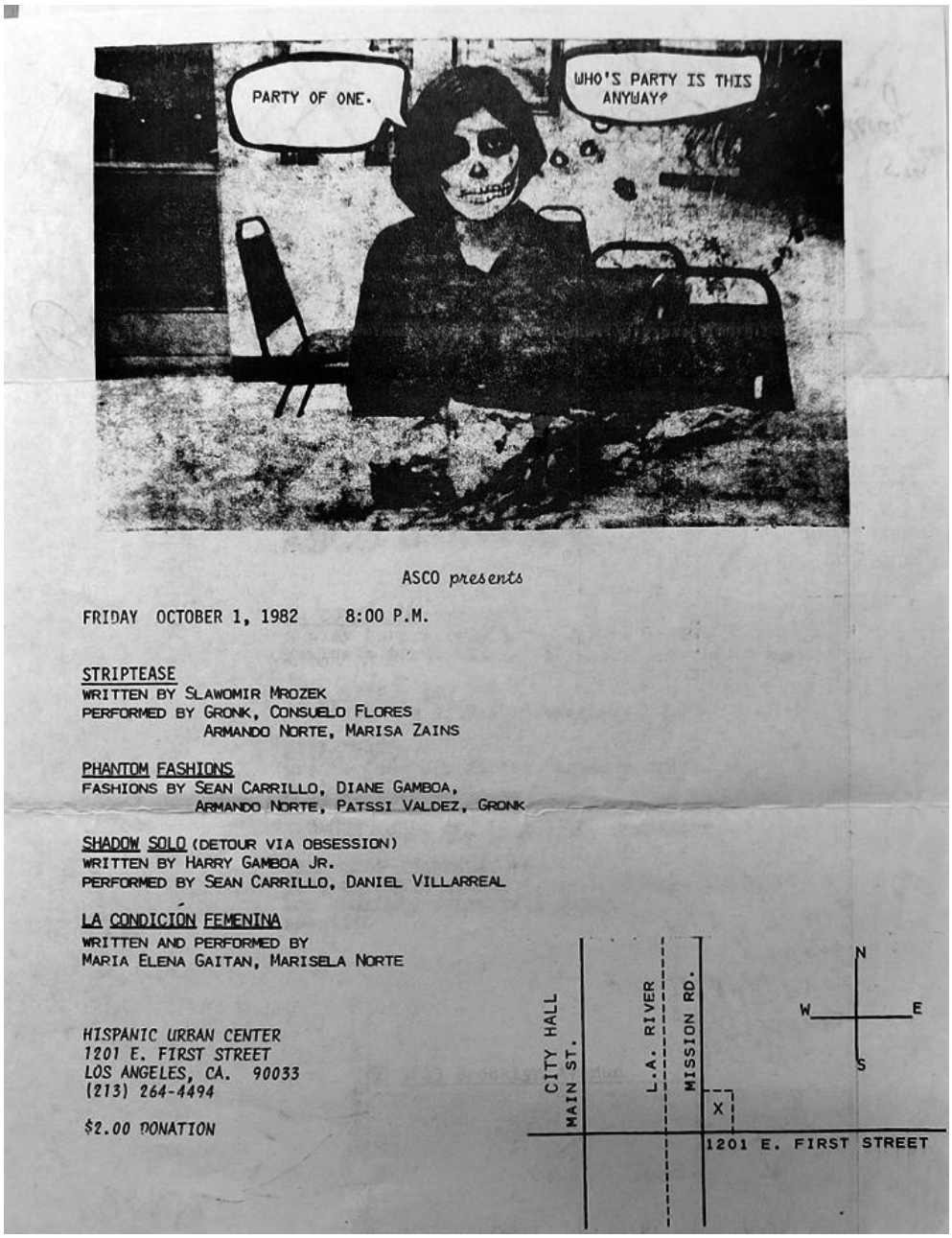


Figure 3.7 – Flyer promoting Asco performances at the Hispanic Urban Center in Los Angeles, 1982. Paper photocopy. Sean Carrillo Papers. Special Collections Library, University of California, Santa Barbara. Courtesy of Harry Gamboa Jr.



Figure 3.8 - Jerri Allyn and The Girls, flyer for *Laughing Souls, Espíritus Sonrientes,* 1979. Inkjet print on paper. *High Performance Magazine* Records, Special Collection Research Library, Getty Research Institute. Los Angeles, CA.

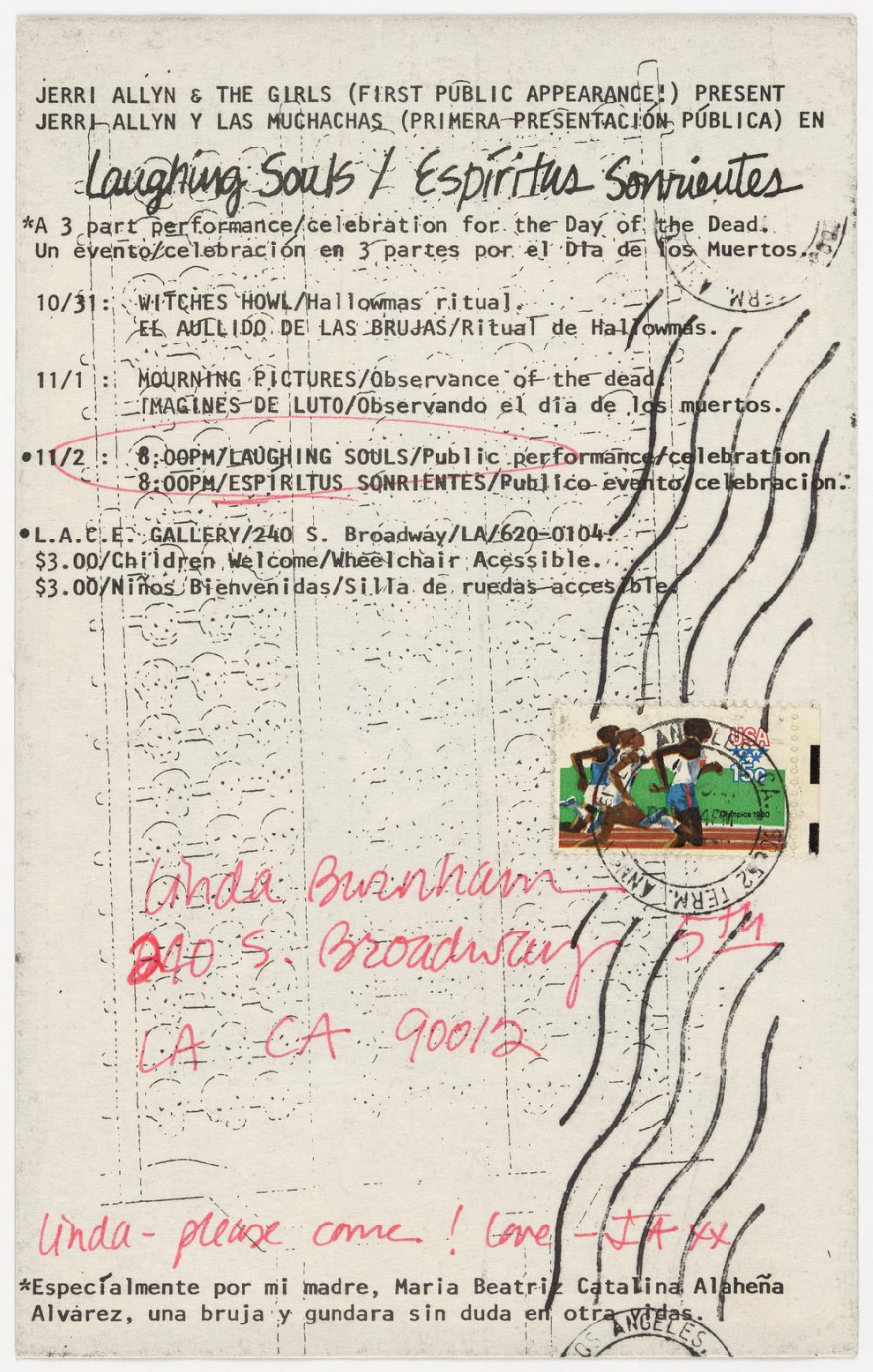


Figure 3.9 - Jerri Allyn and The Girls, flyer for *Laughing Souls, Espíritus Sonrientes,* 1979. Inkjet print on paper. *High Performance Magazine* Records, Special Collection Research Library, Getty Research Institute. Los Angeles, CA.



Figure 3.10 - Jerri Allyn and Nancy Angelo, *Visions,* 1980. *Public Spirit Live Art Performance Festival*, Part II. Black and white photograph. *High Performance Magazine* Records, Special Collection Research Library, Getty Research Institute. Los Angeles, CA.



Figure 3.11 - Jerri Allyn and Nancy Angelo, *Visions,* 1980. *Public Spirit Live Art Performance Festival,* Part II. Black and white photograph. *High Performance Magazine* Records, Special Collection Research Library, Getty Research Institute. Los Angeles, CA.



Figure 3.12 - The Waitresses with Chutney Gunderson and Terry Wolverton, props for *The Waitress and the Witch,* 1978. Ink on paper. The Waitresses Collection, Special Collection Research Library, Getty Research Institute. Los Angeles, CA.

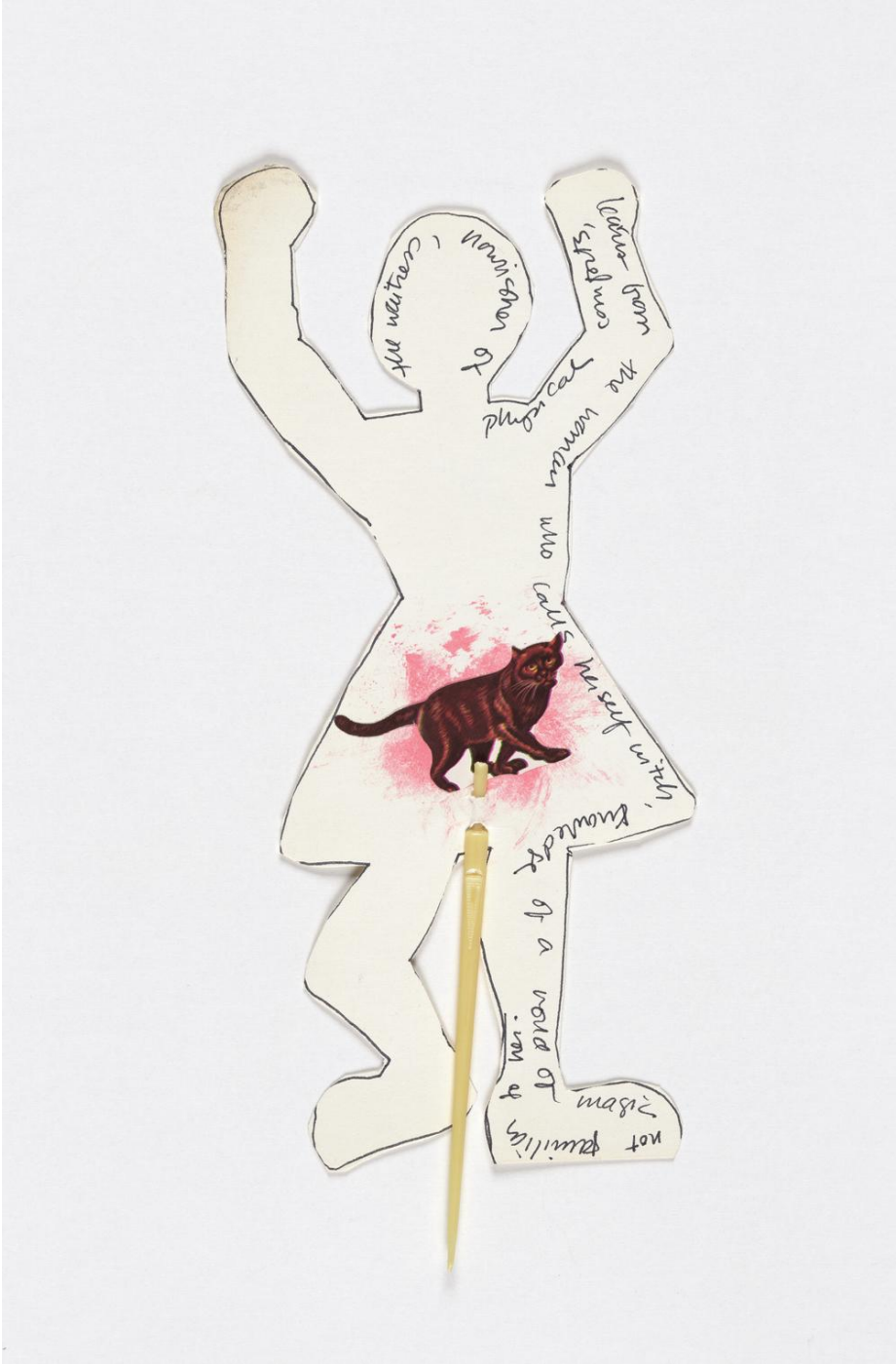


Figure 3.13 - The Waitresses with Chutney Gunderson and Terry Wolverton, props for *The Waitress and the Witch,* 1978. Ink on paper. The Waitresses Collection, Special Collection Research Library, Getty Research Institute. Los Angeles, CA.

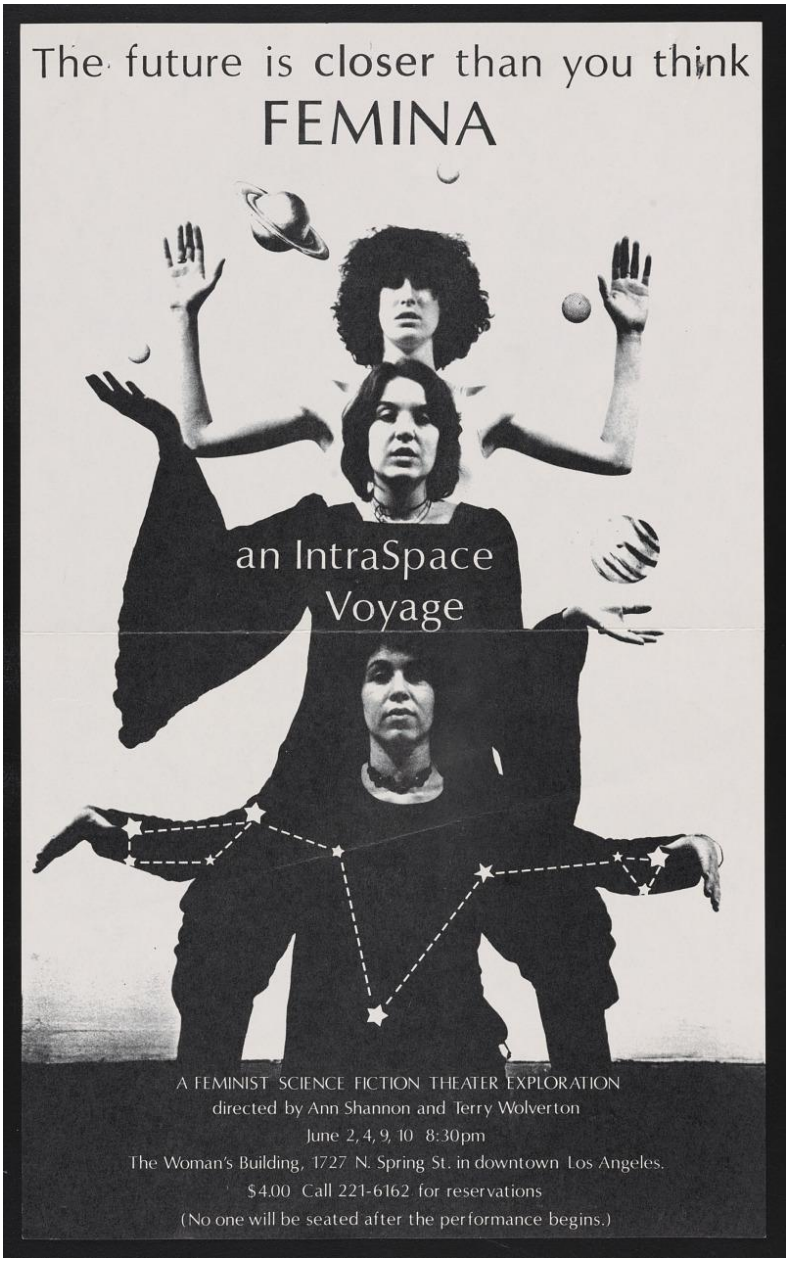


Figure 3.14 – Ann Shannon and Terry Wolverton with Chutney Gunderton, *Femina: An IntraSpace Voyage*, 1978. Inkjet print on paper. Smithsonian Archives of American Art. Washington, D.C.



Figure 3.15 - Sisters of Survival, *At Home in the Nuclear Age?,* 1983. Black and white photograph. Photo by Sheila Ruth. Sisters of Survival Records, Special Collection Research Library, Getty Research Institute. Los Angeles, CA.



Figure 3.16 - Joyce Dallal, Gera Golden, Stuart Timmons, and Lauren M. Kasmer, *Fallout Fashion,* exhibition brochure, 1983. Inkjet print on paper. Gronk Papers, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California, Los Angeles.



Figure 3.17 - Jerry Dreva (Big J) and Les Petites Bonbons, *Heaven's Only 50¢ Away* (front), undated, mixed media collage. Gronk Papers, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California, Los Angeles.

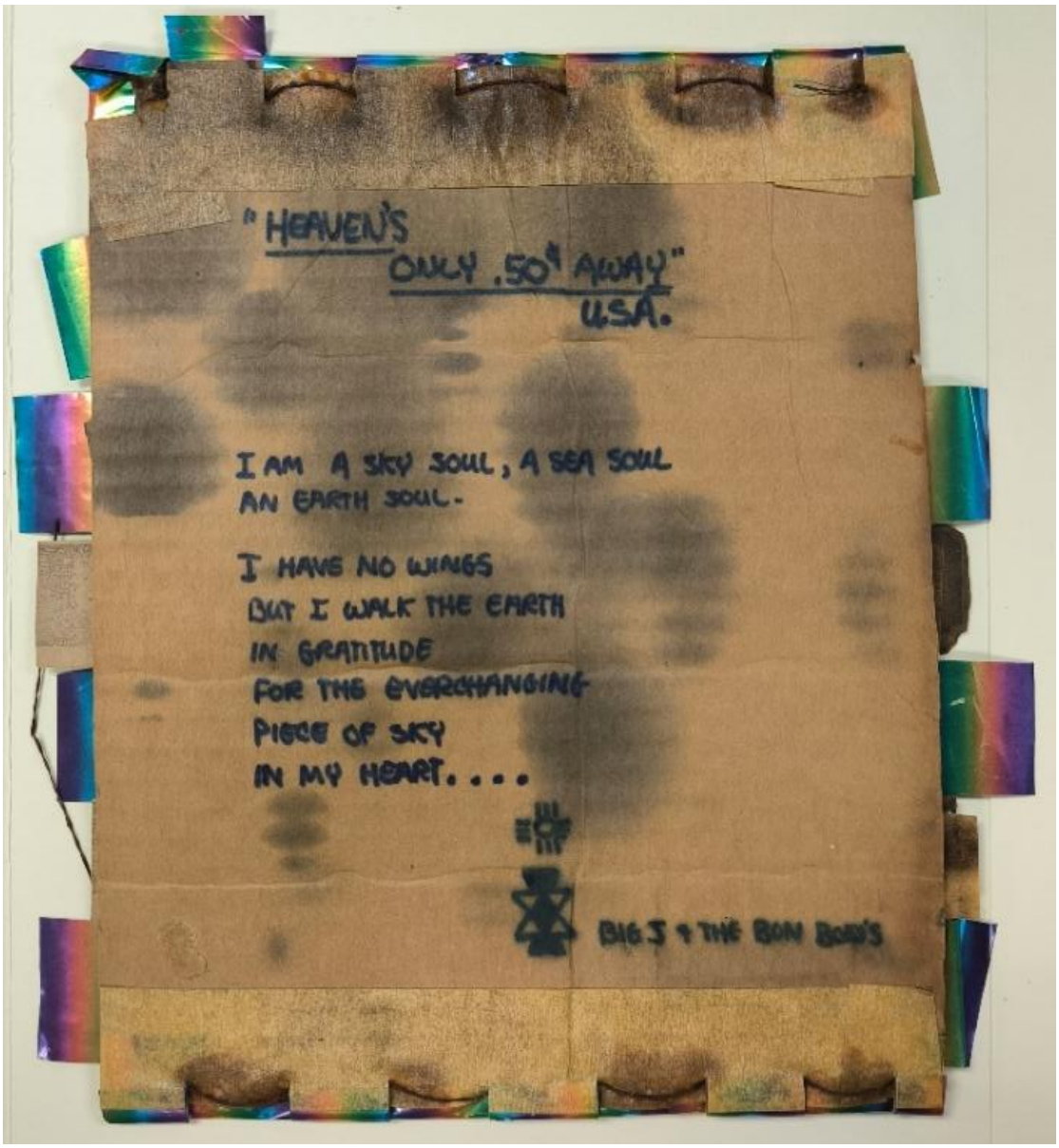


Figure 3.18 - Jerry Dreva (Big J) and Les Petites Bonbons, *Heaven's Only 50¢ Away* (back), undated, mixed media collage. Gronk Papers, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California, Los Angeles.



Figure 3.19 - Jerry Dreva*, Death Wish 77 (Razorblade Cross),* 1977. Black and white photographs with razor blades. Sent to *Art Rite Magazine*. Courtesy of Gallery98.

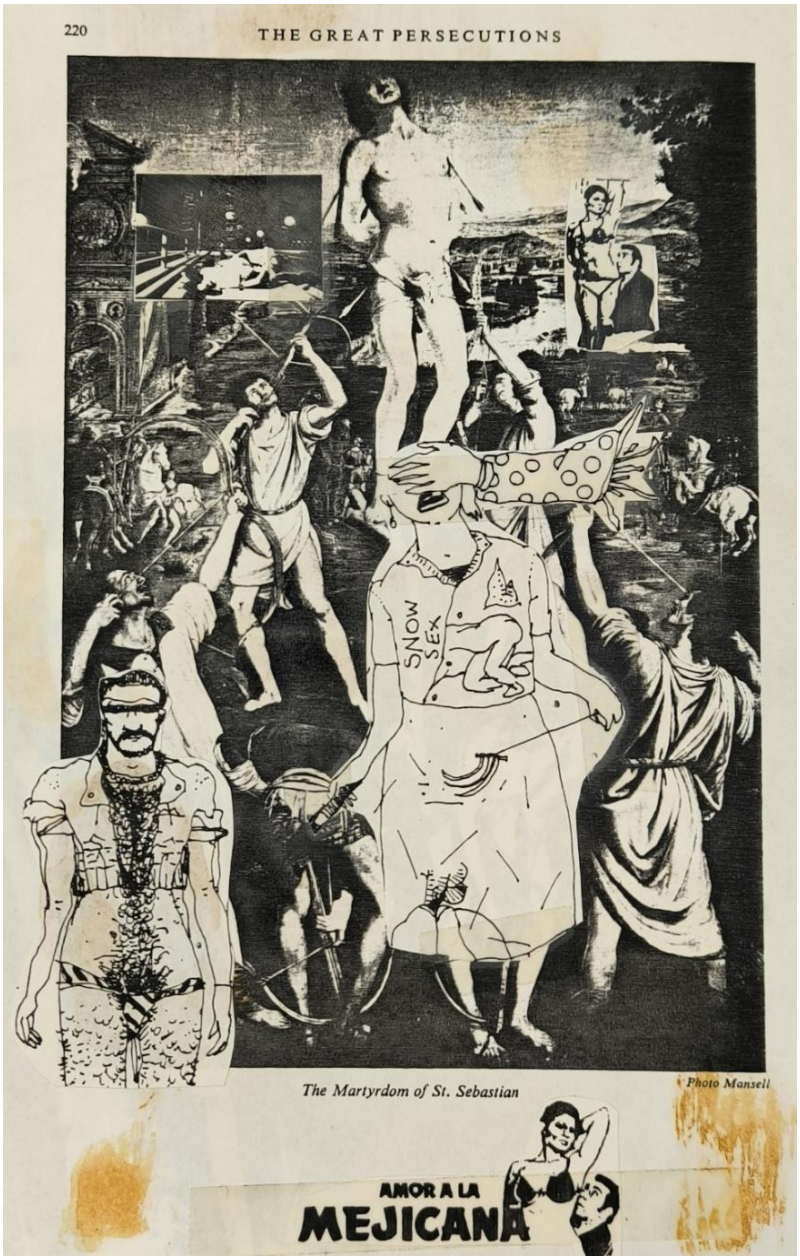


Figure 3.20 – Gronk, Untitled (The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian / *Amor a la mejicana*), undated. Gronk Papers, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California, Los Angeles.

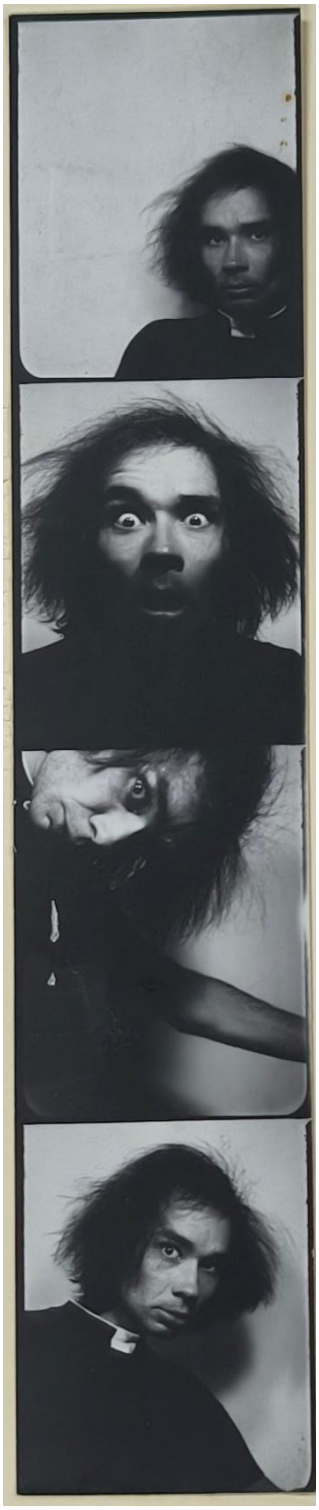


Figure 3.21 - Jerry Dreva, Untitled (Priest) (front), 1976. Gronk Papers, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California, Los Angeles.

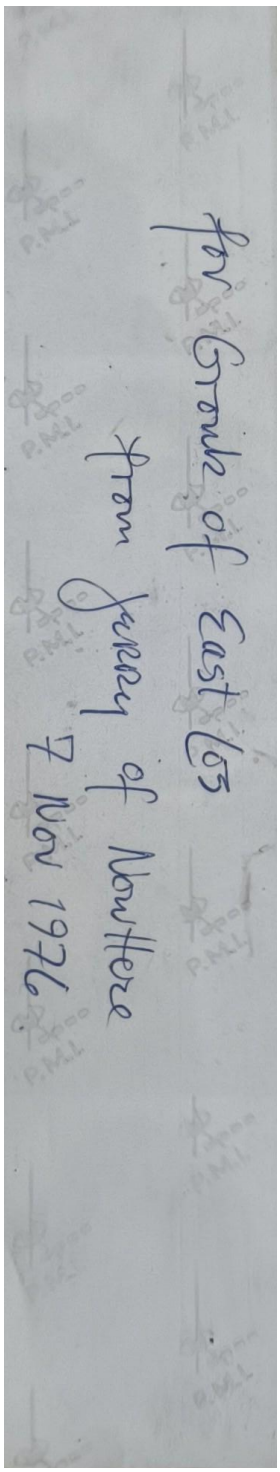


Figure 3.22 - Jerry Dreva, Untitled (Priest) (back), 1976. Gronk Papers, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California, Los Angeles.

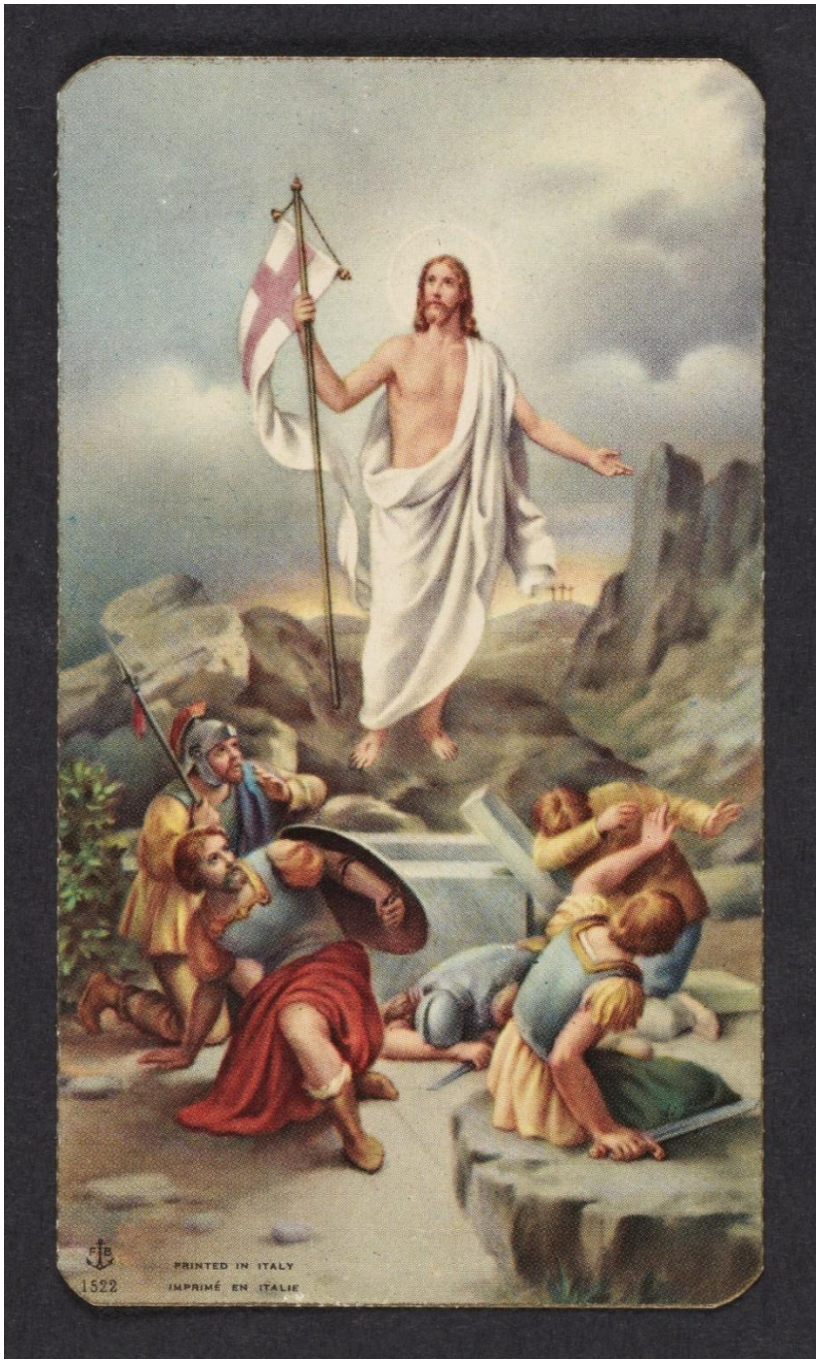


Figure 3.23 - Jerry Dreva, Untitled (Resurrection) (front), 1978. Prayer card. *High Performance Magazine* Records, Special Collection Research Library, Getty Research Institute. Los Angeles, CA.

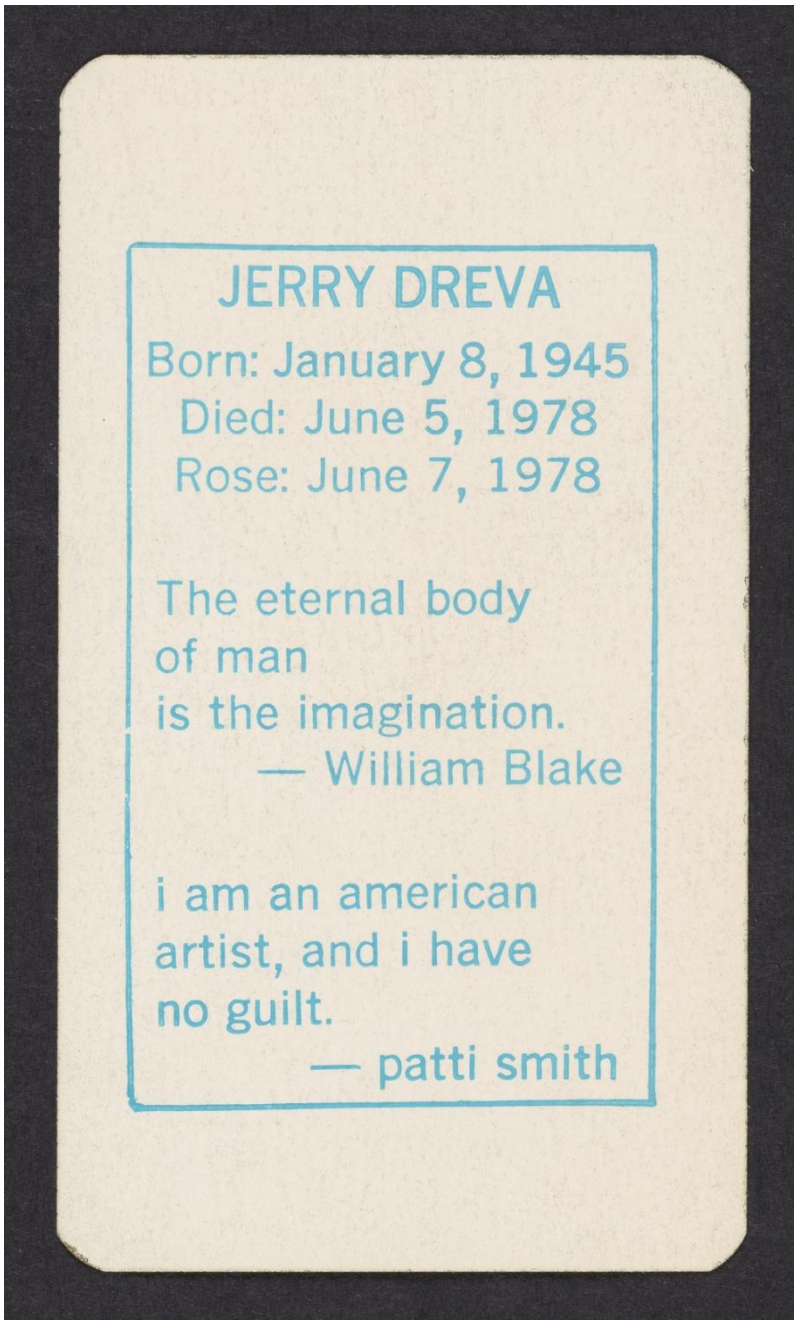


Figure 3.24 - Jerry Dreva, Untitled (Resurrection) (back), 1978. Prayer card. *High Performance Magazine* Records, Special Collection Research Library, Getty Research Institute. Los Angeles, CA.

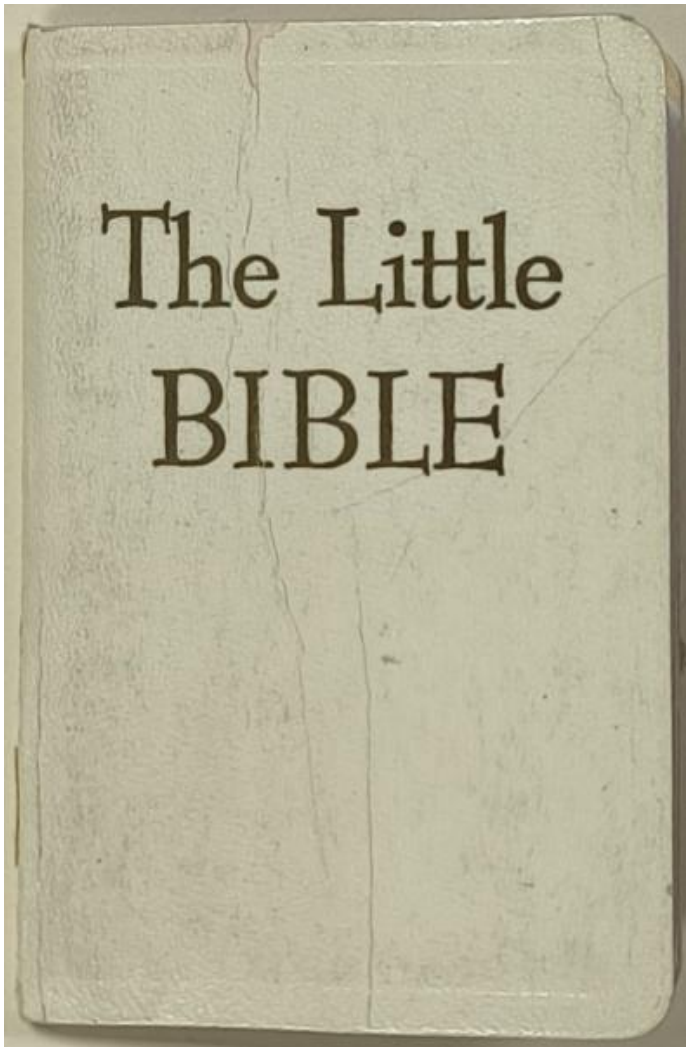


Figure 3.25 - Jerry Dreva, Untitled (The Little Bible), ca. 1978. Inkjet print on paper. Gronk Papers, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California, Los Angeles.



Figure 3.26 - Jerry Dreva, Untitled (The Little Bible), ca. 1978. Mixed media collage on paper. Gronk Papers, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California, Los Angeles.



Figure 3.27 – Miguel Rodriguez, Untitled (*Muerte, muerte muerte. No te tengo miedo*), undated. Self-Help Graphics Collection, Special Collections Library, University of California, Santa Barbara.

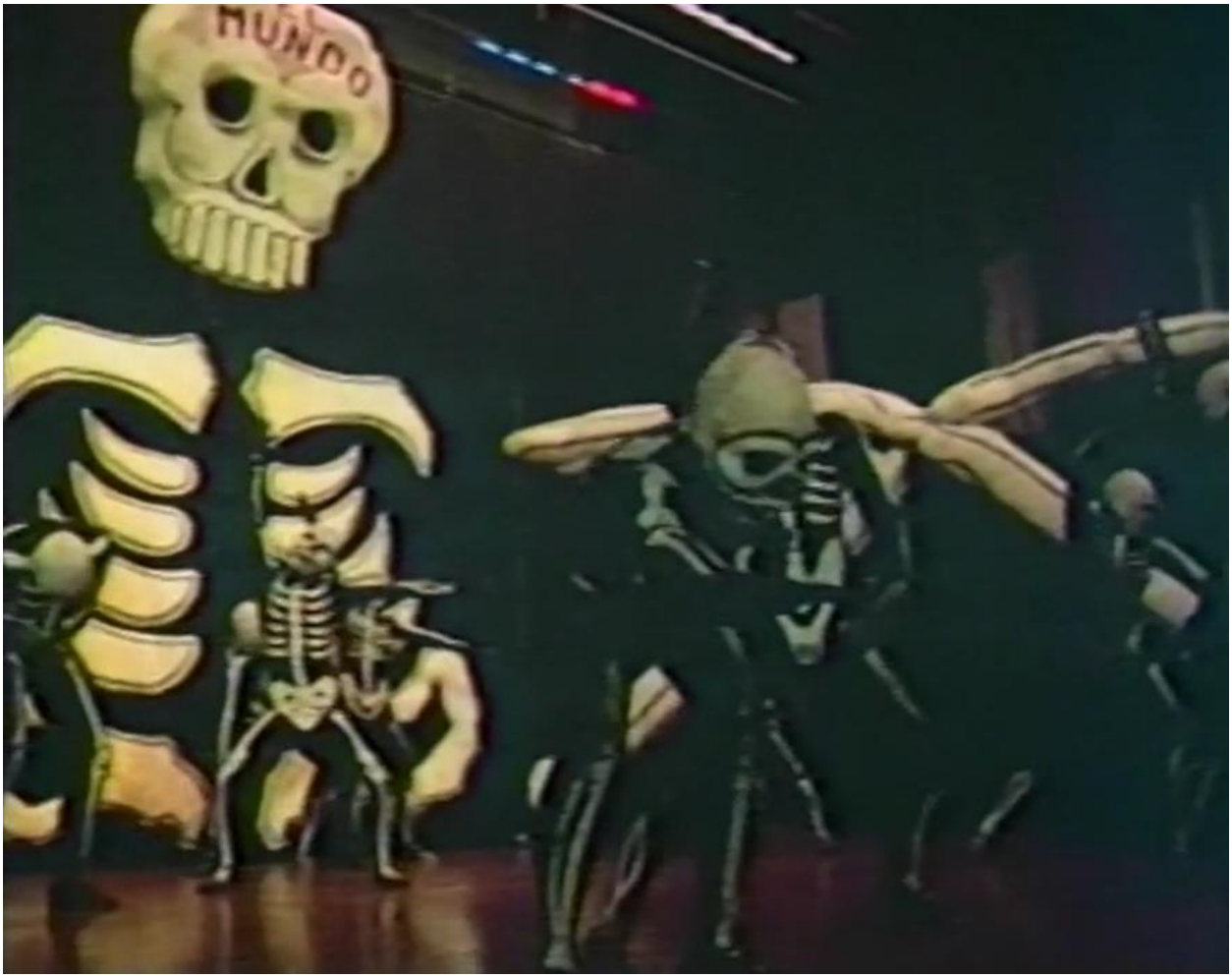


Figure 3.28 – Film still of El Teatro Campesino's *El fin del mundo* theater piece, 1978. URL: https://californiarevealed.org/do/c88dc04d-113c-4bac-99a7-2d5403ce3fd9



SLASH MEETS THE

BAGS

(Some kind of interview)

There were a few problems. Douche Bag, Flea Bag, Barf Bag, Trash Bag and Grab Bag walked in and just wouldn't take the fucking things off. Some of us (well, one of us) were in no conciliatory mood or something, it was argued that it was impossible to talk to faceless bodies and it was replied it shouldn't matter, blah blah blah, a very shaky truce was made. That is where we will start.

Slash: Why do you wear fuckin' bags on your heads? (Still not friendly. —Ed.)

Bags: It gets us reaction.

—If we were called the Shits we would not do it.

—Quite simply, we don't want our identity known.

Slash: Are you ugly?

Bags: *Really* ugly!

Slash: Alice is not ugly, ***she*** takes her bag off. (Alice is the singer, she can't manage to keep her bag on throughout a set. —Ed.)

Bags: When we met we were not wearing bags. But we insisted on the bags so we wouldn't have to look at each other.

Slash: How old are the Bags?

Bags: Couple of months.

Slash: What came first, the music or the bags?

Bags: (all) The bags!

Slash: Were you in other bands before?

Bags: Nothing very prominent.

Slash: Do you take your music seriously?

Bags: We're crazy about playing, really.

Slash: Don't you think it's hard for people who happen to like your sound to relate to a bunch of bags?

Bags: Look at Kiss. (Kiss? —Ed.) Their fans identify with them.

Slash: Do you always have the same expressions on your bags?

Bags: No, they change every time.

Slash: Who influenced you, musically speaking?

Bags: The Weirdos.

Slash: Were you surprised by your success at the Masque?

Bags: Totally. We started as a joke, and suddenly this...

Slash: Are you second generation L.A. new wave?

Bags: Why?

Slash: Well, the first generation was influenced by England, and you're influenced by them.

Bags: Depends how far back you wanna go. You gotta change quick. After the Ramones played here a year ago punk was black leather jackets.

Slash: How old are you?

Bags: The average age is 20.

Slash: How do you feel about all these rules as to what punk is, what it is not . . .?

Bags: —I think it's a deadly and hideous practice, making up those rules. It could crush whatever life there is in the "movement."

—We're a rebellion against all that.

(The discussion then went on and on about poseurs, political attitudes, and who's copying who. Since that's all anybody's talking about these days, we'll skip that—partly. —Ed.)

Bags: . . . we all can see the parallels with the '60s, that is anyone who's lived longer than 15 years. The situation then also started out with everybody going: "What am I supposed to do, what's the style, where do I fit in???" Some people just copied everything they saw, others altered the style into their own form, and others hung back for a long time, eventually ending as the most important spokesmen of that era. But there was a very confused period with just a bunch of copycats. That's what we're against.

—We don't understand all these punk new wave definitions.

—Especially after listening to Blondie. I like Blondie, but where do they fit in?

—We're anti-boredom rock.

Slash: Who do you hate musically?

Bags: I don't want to say any names but the Germs come to mind.

—Hey, don't pick on the Germs!

—Yeah, lay off the Germs!

—I hate the Deadbeats. (?? —Ed.)

Slash: Will you ever take off the bags?

Bags: Yeah, when we reach the point where it does not matter anymore.

Slash: Why are you doing this?

Bags: For kicks. It's the only thing we do well.

Slash: Do you work?

Bags: I'm a librarian.

—I sleep 12 hours a day.

—I'm an auto mechanic.

—I write for SLASH.

Slash: Possibly. There're so many.

Bags: None of us are rich.

Slash: What else should we know about the Bags?

Bags: Most of us are ex-Catholics . . . also we have a secret language, a code . . .

Slash: Like?

Bags: Really attractive girls are called dead girls. A tuba is an ugly one. Girls in general are sniffs, being horny is being rabid . . . Anything else you wanna know?

Slash: Yes. What do you look like?

Figure 3.29 – *Slash Magazine,* "Slash Meets the Bags,"1977. *Slash Magazine* Collection no. 7099, Regional History Collection, Special Collections, University of Southern California. Los Angeles.

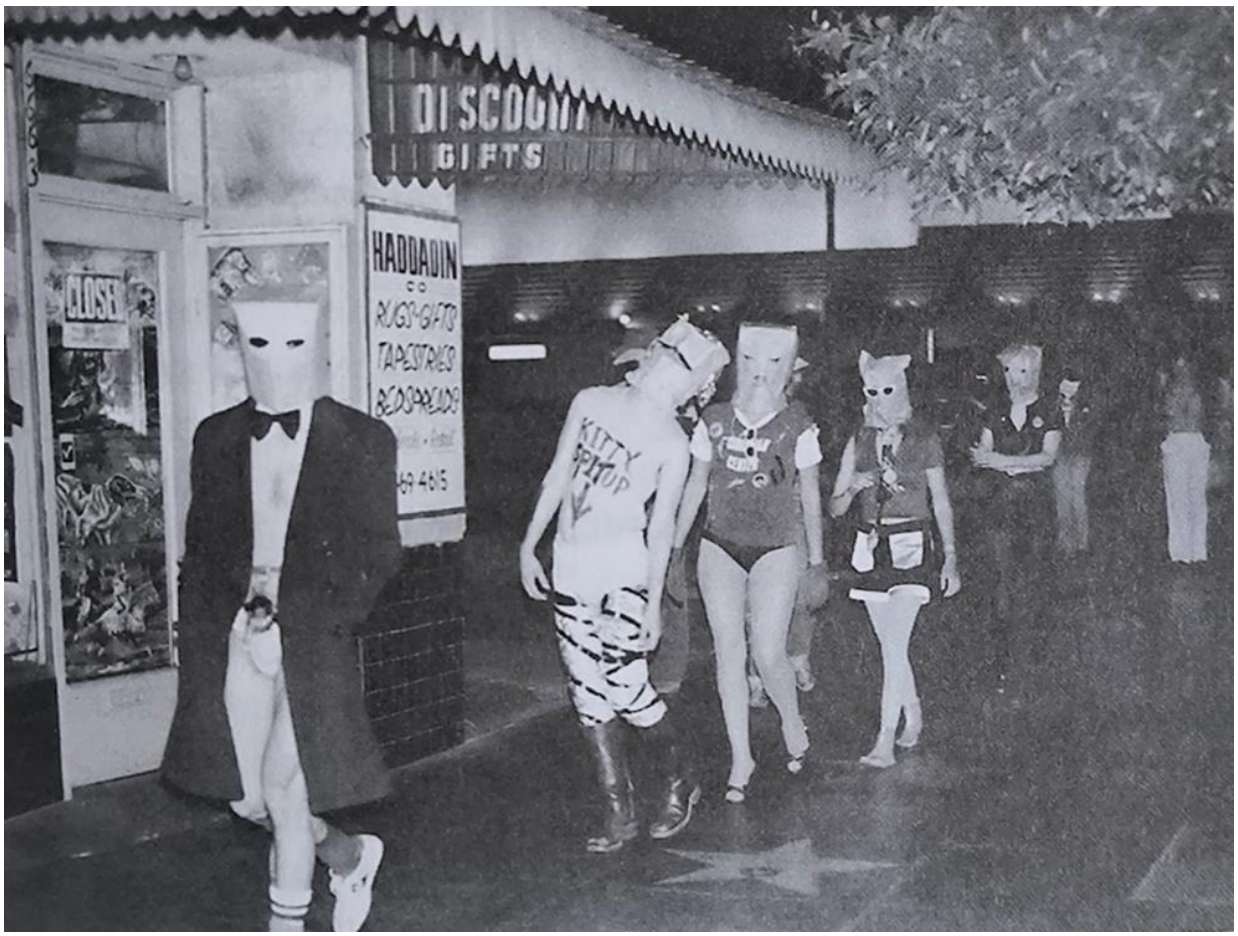


Figure 3.30 – The Bags' first public performance down Sunset Boulevard, 1977. Digitized black and white photograph. Courtesy of Alice Bag.



Figure 3.31 - The Bags at the Hollywood Memorial Cemetery, 1978. Sepia photograph. Photo by Dawn Wirth. Craig Lee Papers, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California. Los Angeles.



Figure 3.32 – Mario Villafuerte, Martín Espino, Consuelo G. Flores, Armando Norte, and Maris Zains celebrating *Día de los muerto*s at the Evergreen Cemetery, 1981. Inkjet print on paper photograph in *La Opinión*. Self-Help Graphics Collection, Special Collections Library, University of California, Santa Barbara.



Figure 3.33 – Judith Garcia performing on stage at the *Día de los muertos*, 1981. Inkjet print on paper photograph in *Los Angeles Times*. Photo by Paula Adkins. Self-Help Graphics Collection, Special Collections Library, University of California, Santa Barbara.



Figure 3.34 – Diane Gamboa preparing one of her models for Gronk's *Paper Fashion* show, 1982. Digitized contact sheet photograph. Photo by Ricardo Valverde. Self-Help Graphics Collection, Special Collections Library, University of California, Santa Barbara.



Figure 3.35 - The Brat in a band photoshoot in 1980. Digitized contact sheet photograph. Photo by Daniel Villarreal. Chicano Punk-Rock Collection, Special Collections Library, University of California, Santa Barbara. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3.36 – Teresa Covarrubias holding a statue of a decapitated Jesus, 1981. Black and white photograph. Photo by Sean Carillo. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3.37 - *Slash Magazine,* Alice Bag performing with The Bags, 1978. Inkjet print on paper. *Slash Magazine* Collection no. 7099, Regional History Collection, Special Collections, University of Southern California. Los Angeles.

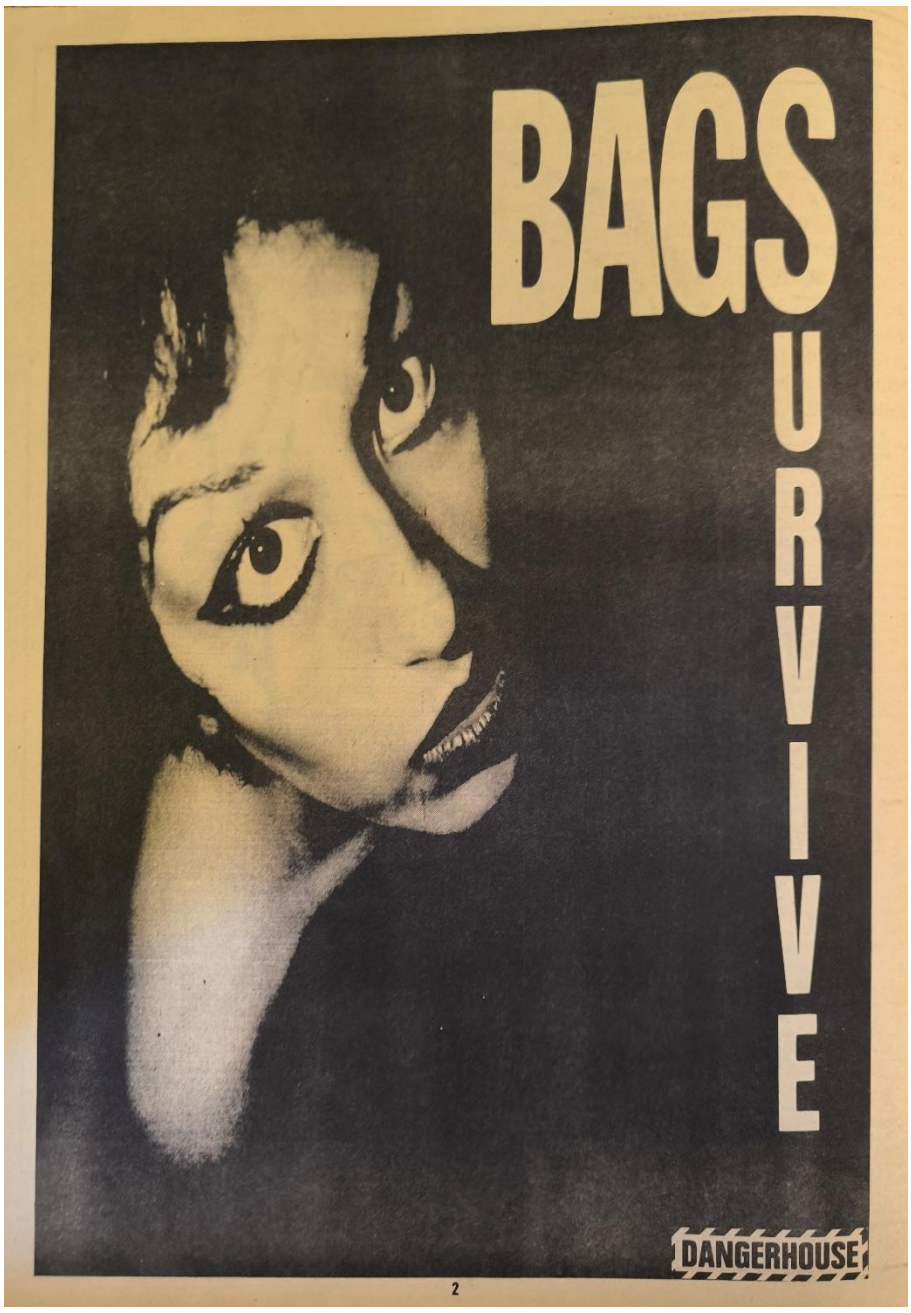
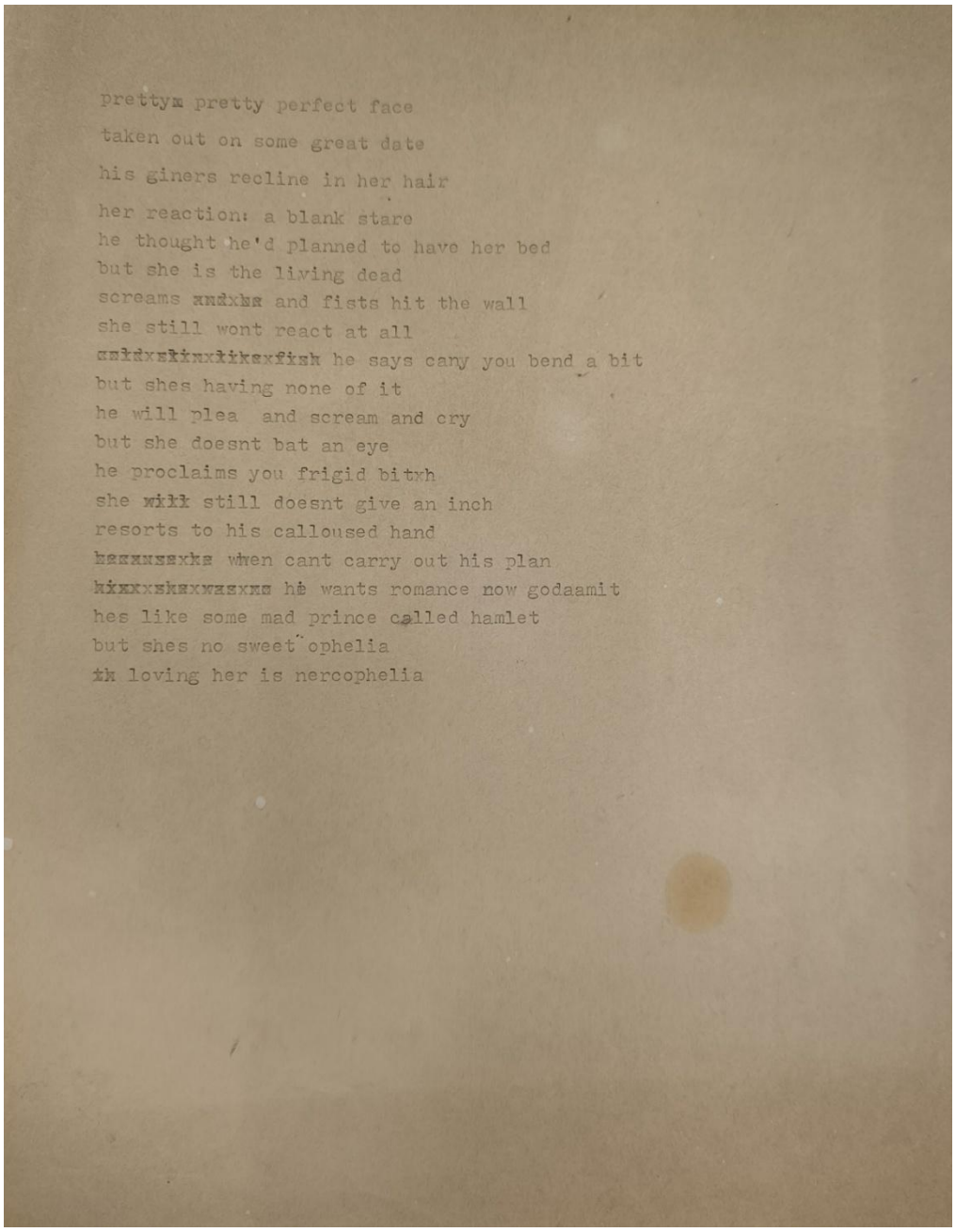


Figure 3.38 - *Slash Magazine,* The Bags' *Survive* EP cover, November 1978. Inkjet print on paper. Photo by Melanie Nissen. *Slash Magazine* Collection no. 7099, Regional History Collection, Special Collections, University of Southern California. Los Angeles.



prettyx pretty perfect face
taken out on some great date
his giners recline in her hair
her reaction: a blank stare
he thought he'd planned to have her bed
but she is the living dead
screams xndxhx and fists hit the wall
she still wont react at all
xxhdxshhxxhihxxfixh he says cany you bend a bit
but shes having none of it
he will plea and scream and cry
but she doesnt bat an eye
he proclaims you frigid bitxh
she wkkt still doesnt give an inch
resorts to his calloused hand
hxxxxxsxxhx when cant carry out his plan
hixxxxshxxxxsxxx hi wants romance now godaamit
hes like some mad prince called hamlet
but shes no sweet ophelia
xh loving her is nercophelia

Figure 3.39 - The Bags, untitled lyrics (Necrophilia), undated. Ink on paper. Craig Lee Papers, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California. Los Angeles.



Figure 3.40 - Flyer for The Bags, The Plugz, and Ripper concert at the Troubador, 1978. Black and white photocopy. Stuart Timmons Collection, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California. Los Angeles.

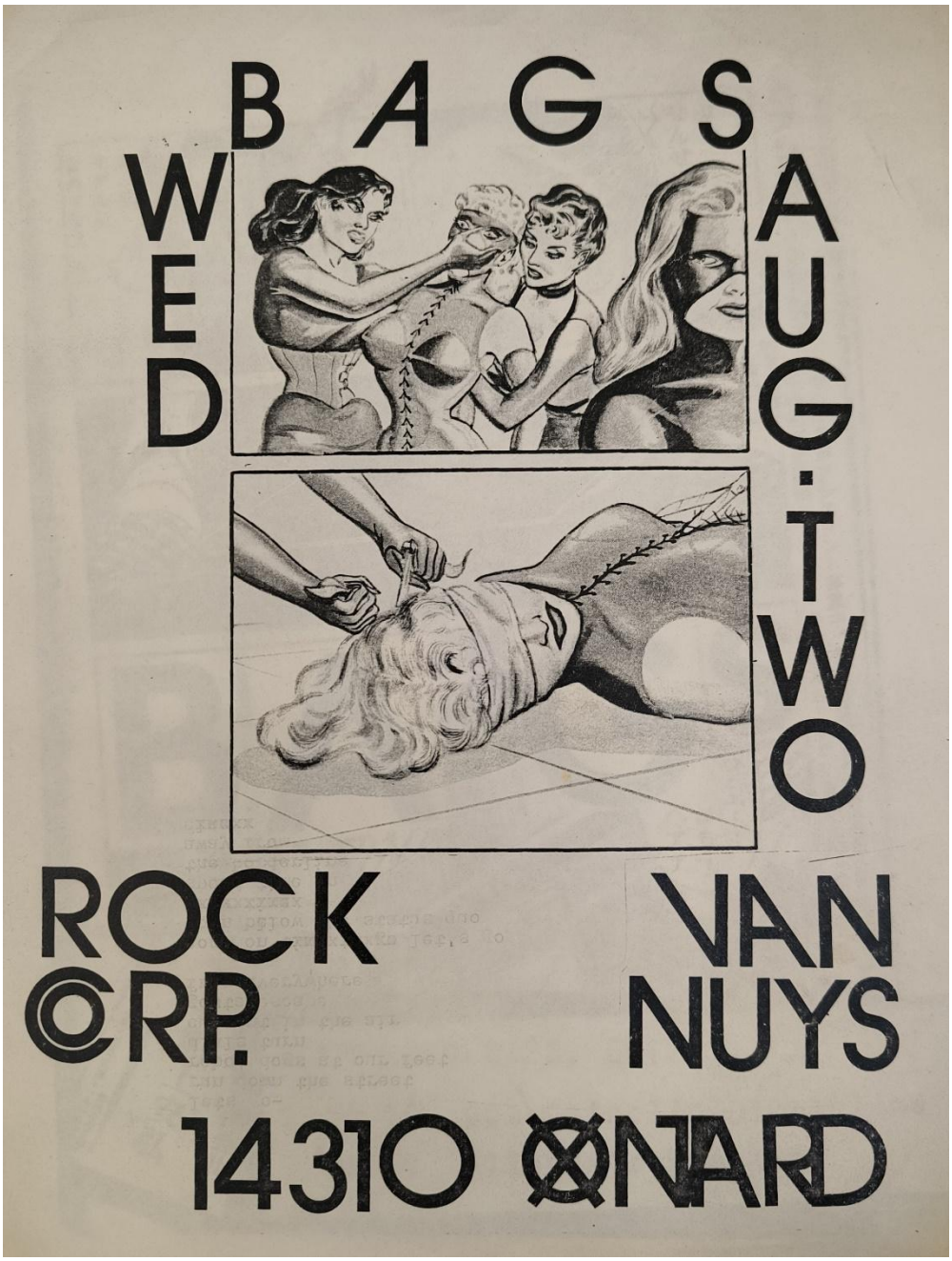


Figure 3.41 – Flyer for The Bags concert at Rock Corporation, 1978. Black and white photocopy. Craig Lee Papers, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California. Los Angeles.

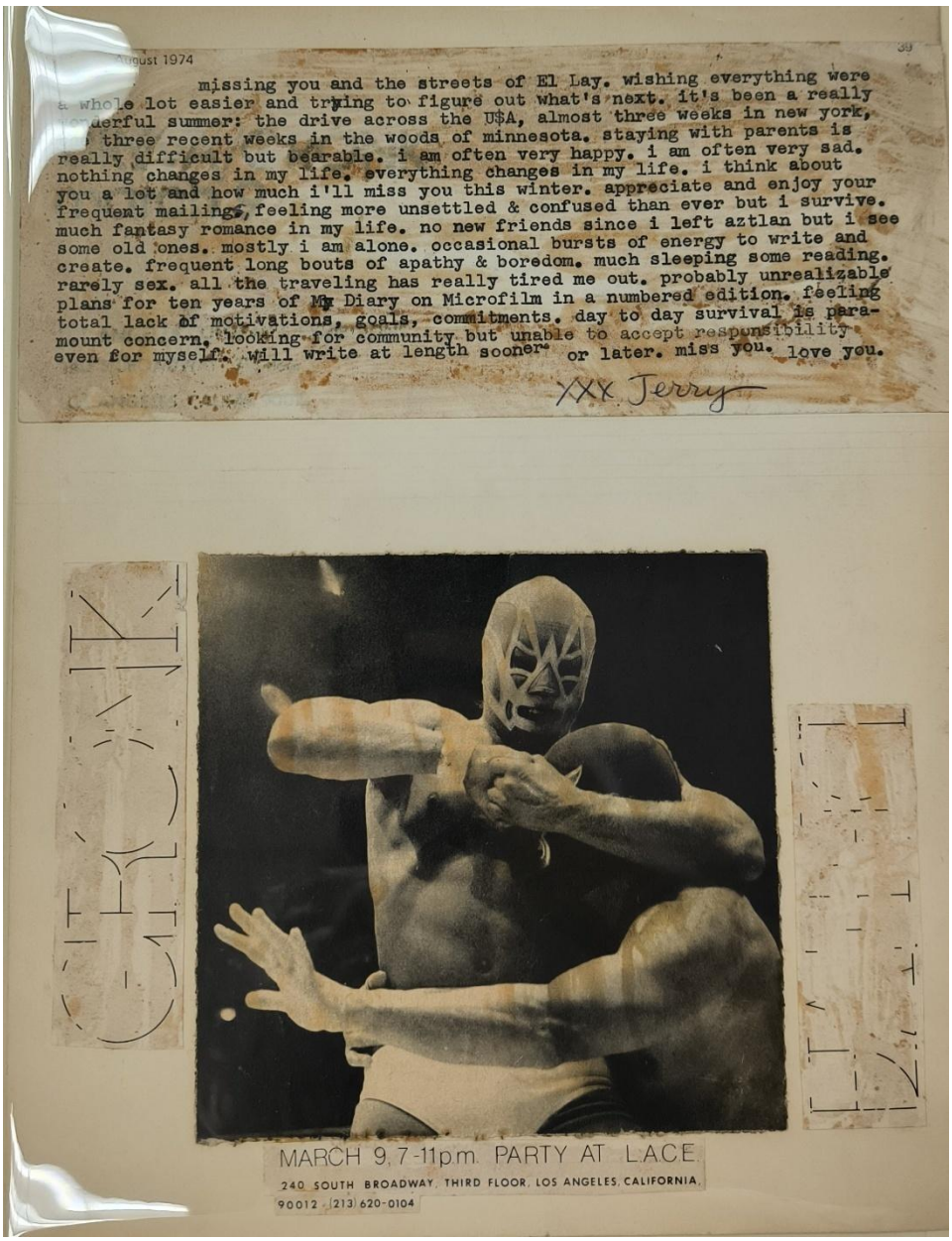


Figure 3.42 – Promotional flyer for *Dreva/Gronk 1968-1978 / Ten Years of Art and Life* at LACE, 1978. Paper collage. Gronk Papers, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California, Los Angeles.

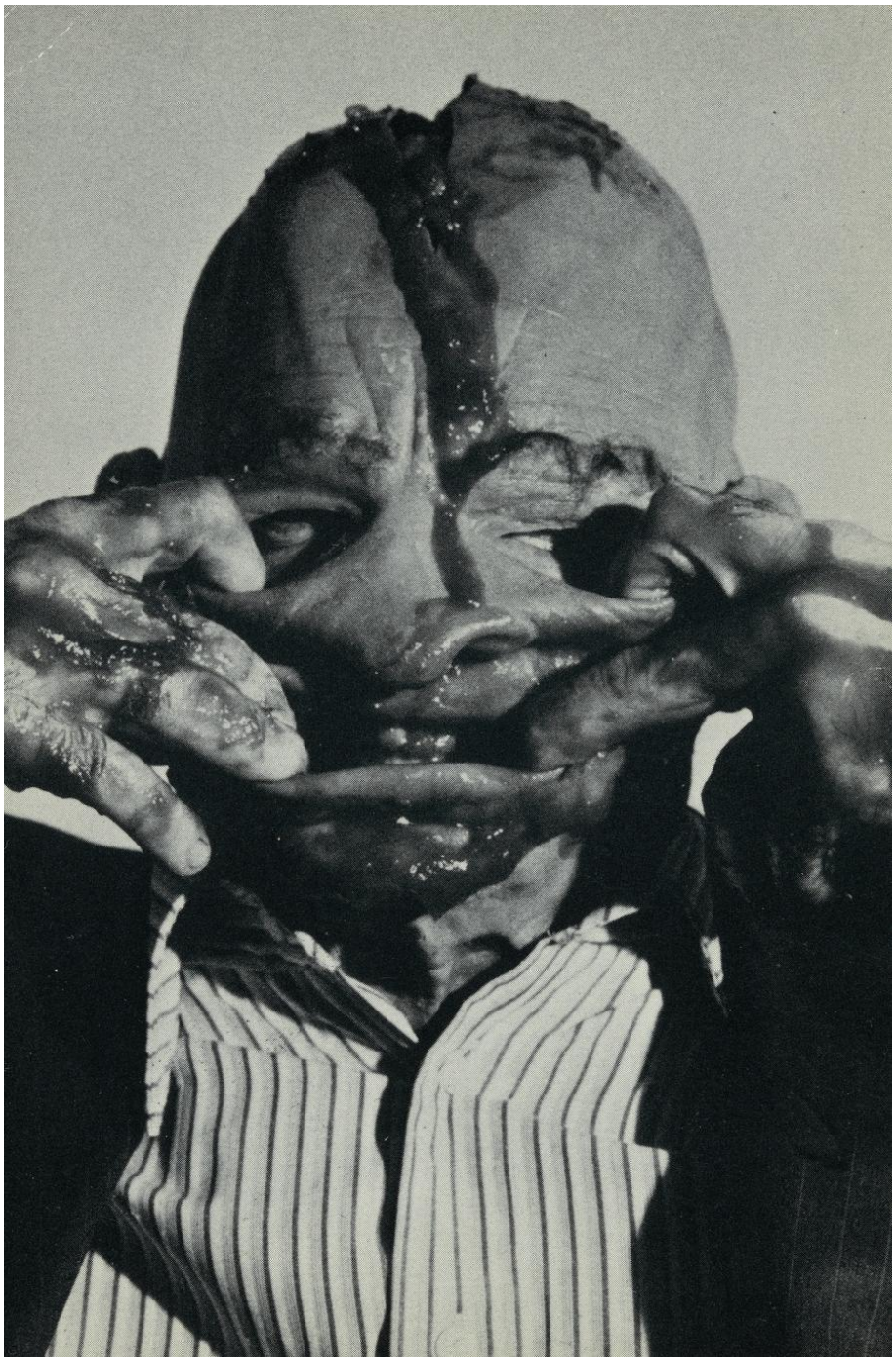


Figure 3.43 – Paul McCarthy, *Hollywood*, 1978. Black and white photograph. *High Performance Magazine* Records, Special Collection Research Library, Getty Research Institute. Los Angeles, CA.



Figure 3.44 - David Wojnarowicz, *Arthur Rimbaud in New York*, 1978–1979. Gelatin silver artist's print on paper, 9.6 x 12.9 in (24.6 × 32.8 cm). Museo Nacional de Arte Reina Sofía. Madrid, Spain.



Figure 3.45 – Ed Colver, ((SPK)) playing at Al's Bar, 1982. Inkjet print on paper. *Presence Records Annual Report Zine,* no. 1.V. Vale Collection, Special Collections Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

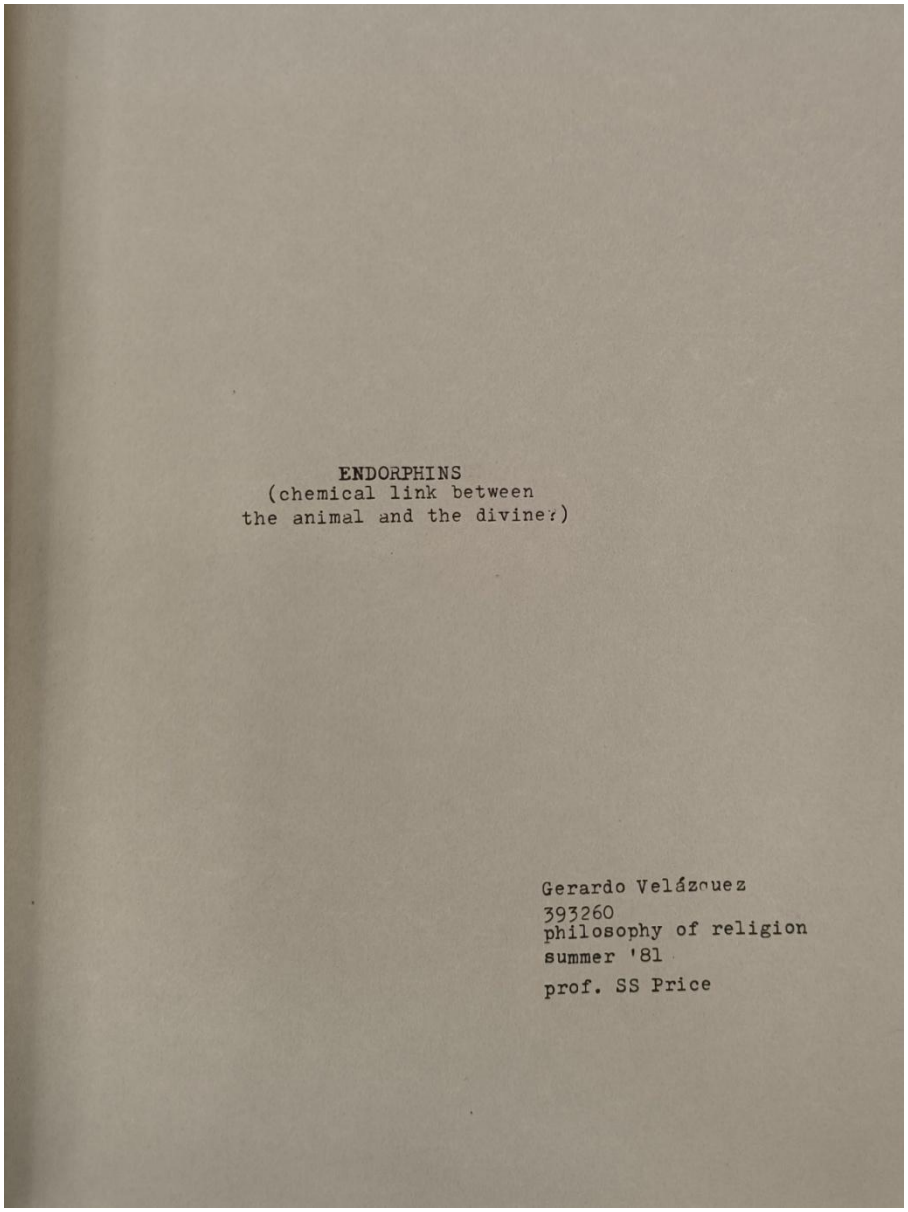


Figure 3.46 – Gerardo Velázquez, “Endorphins: Chemical Links between the Anima and the Divine?,” 1981. Ink on paper. Gerardo Velázquez Papers, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California. Los Angeles.

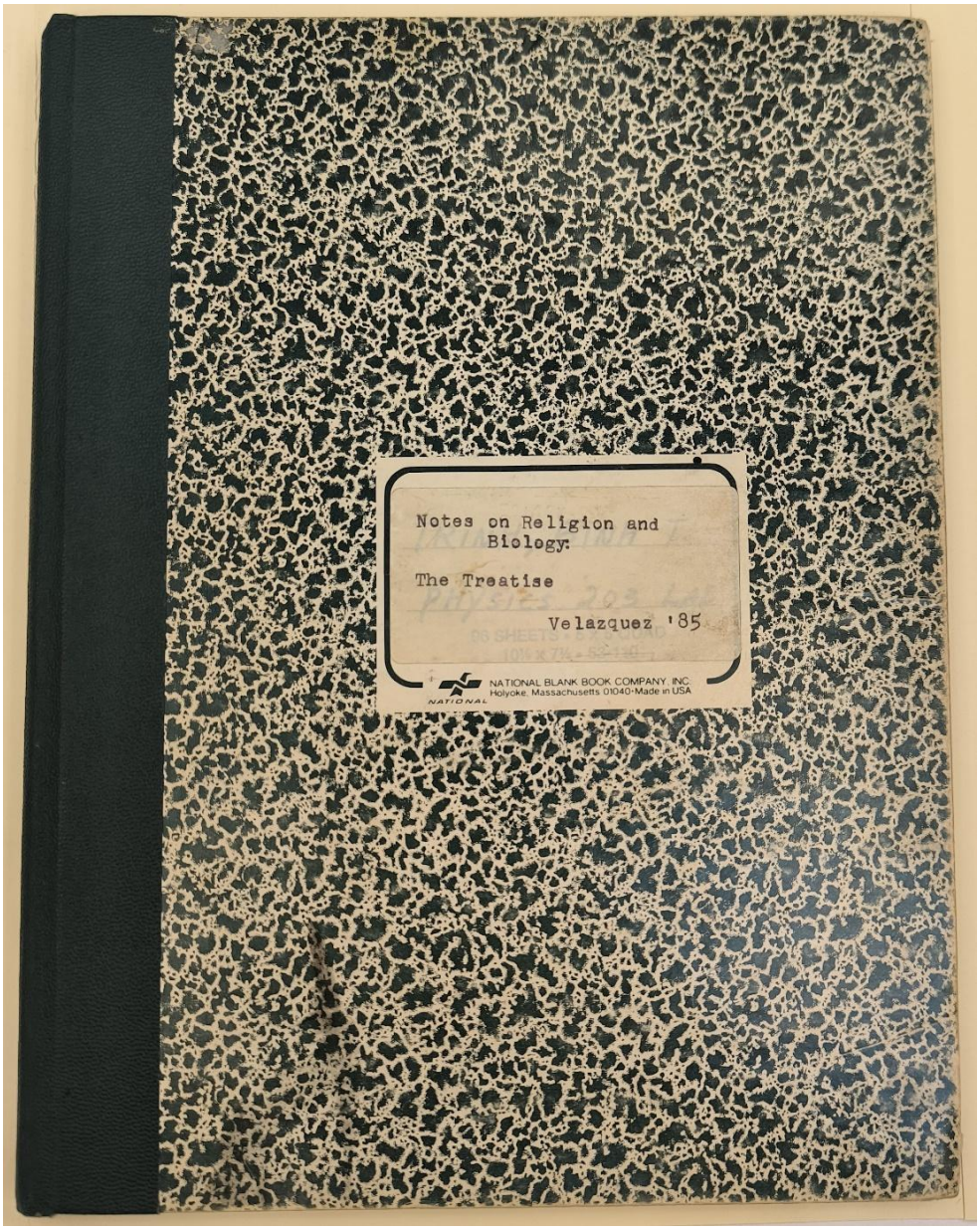
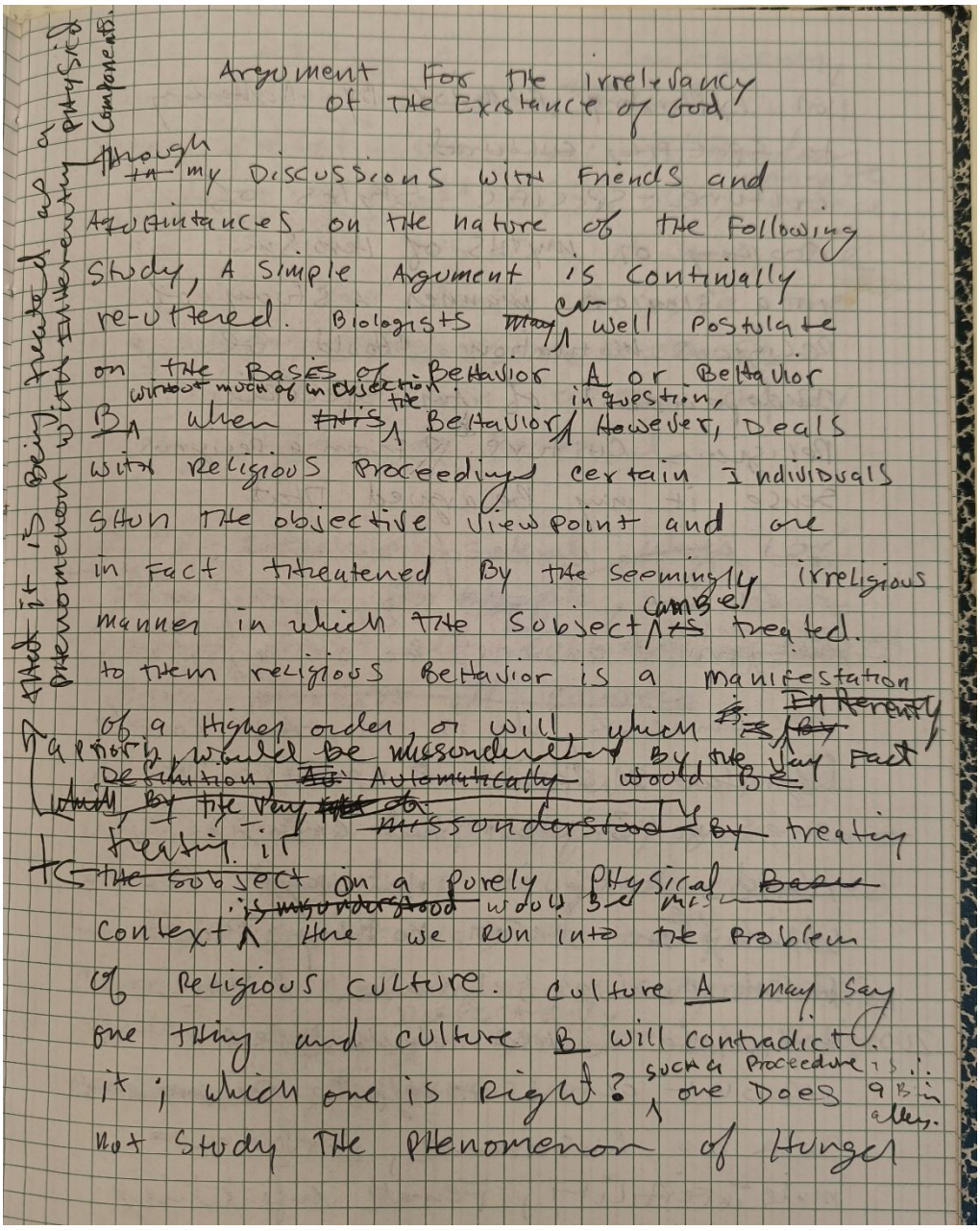


Figure 3.47 - Gerardo Velázquez, “Notes on Religion and Biology. The Treatise,” 1985. Notebook. Gerardo Velázquez Papers, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California. Los Angeles.



Argument For the Irrelevancy of the Existance of God

Through my Discussions with Friends and Acquaintances on the nature of the Following Study, A Simple Argument is continually re-uttered. Biologists ~~may~~ or well Postulate on the Basis of Behavior A or Behavior B when this Behavior without much of in question. the Behavior in question, However, Deals with Religious Proceedings certain Individuals shun the objective viewpoint and are in Fact threatened By the seemingly irreligious manner in which the Subject cambe treated. to them religious Behavior is a manifestation of a Higher order, or will which ~~Is~~ ~~Is~~ ~~Inherently~~ a priori would be Misunderstood By the Way Fact Reduction, ~~As~~ Automatically would Be ~~Lowered~~, By the Way ~~this is~~ ~~Misunderstood~~ By treating it. ~~The Subject~~ on a Purely Physical ~~Basis~~ ~~is misunderstood~~ would Be ~~Mis~~ context. Here we Run into the Problem of Religious Culture. Culture A may say one thing and culture B will contradict it; which one is Right? such a Procedure is; one Does a B in alley. Not Study the Phenomenon of Hunger

Phenomenon with Interventing Components.

Figure 3.48 - Gerardo Velázquez, “Notes on Religion and Biology. The Treatise,” 1985. Notebook. Gerardo Velázquez Papers, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California. Los Angeles.



Figure 3.49 – Nervous Gender / Beelzebub Youth, *Music from Hell* EP cover, 1981. Courtesy of Edward Stapleton.

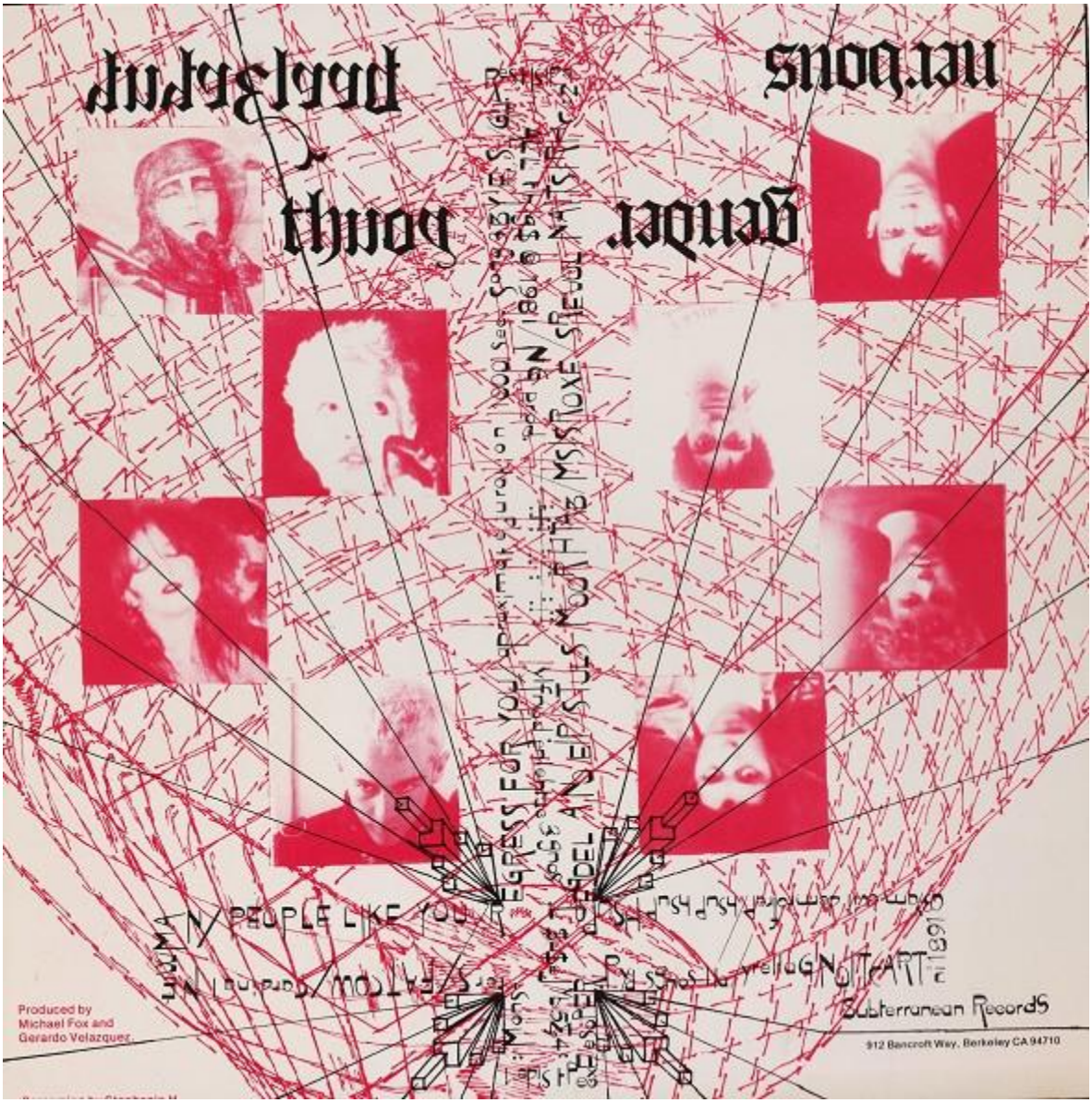


Figure 3.50 – Nervous Gender / Beelzebub Youth, *Music from Hell* EP cover, 1981. Courtesy of Edward Stapleton.



Figures 3.51 – Nervous Gender, C*ardinal Newman,* 1981. Video still. Directed by Michael Intriere. Courtesy of Michael Intriere.



Figures 3.52 - Nervous Gender, C*ardinal Newman,* 1981. Video still. Directed by Michael Intriere. Courtesy of Michael Intriere.



Figures 3.53 – BDSM Photoshoot with Gerardo Velázquez, Edward Stapleton, and Ron Althey. Undated. Color photograph. Gerardo Velázquez Papers, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California. Los Angeles.



Figures 3.54 – BDSM Photoshoot with Gerardo Velázquez, Edward Stapleton, and Ron Althey. Undated. Color photograph. Gerardo Velázquez Papers, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California. Los Angeles.

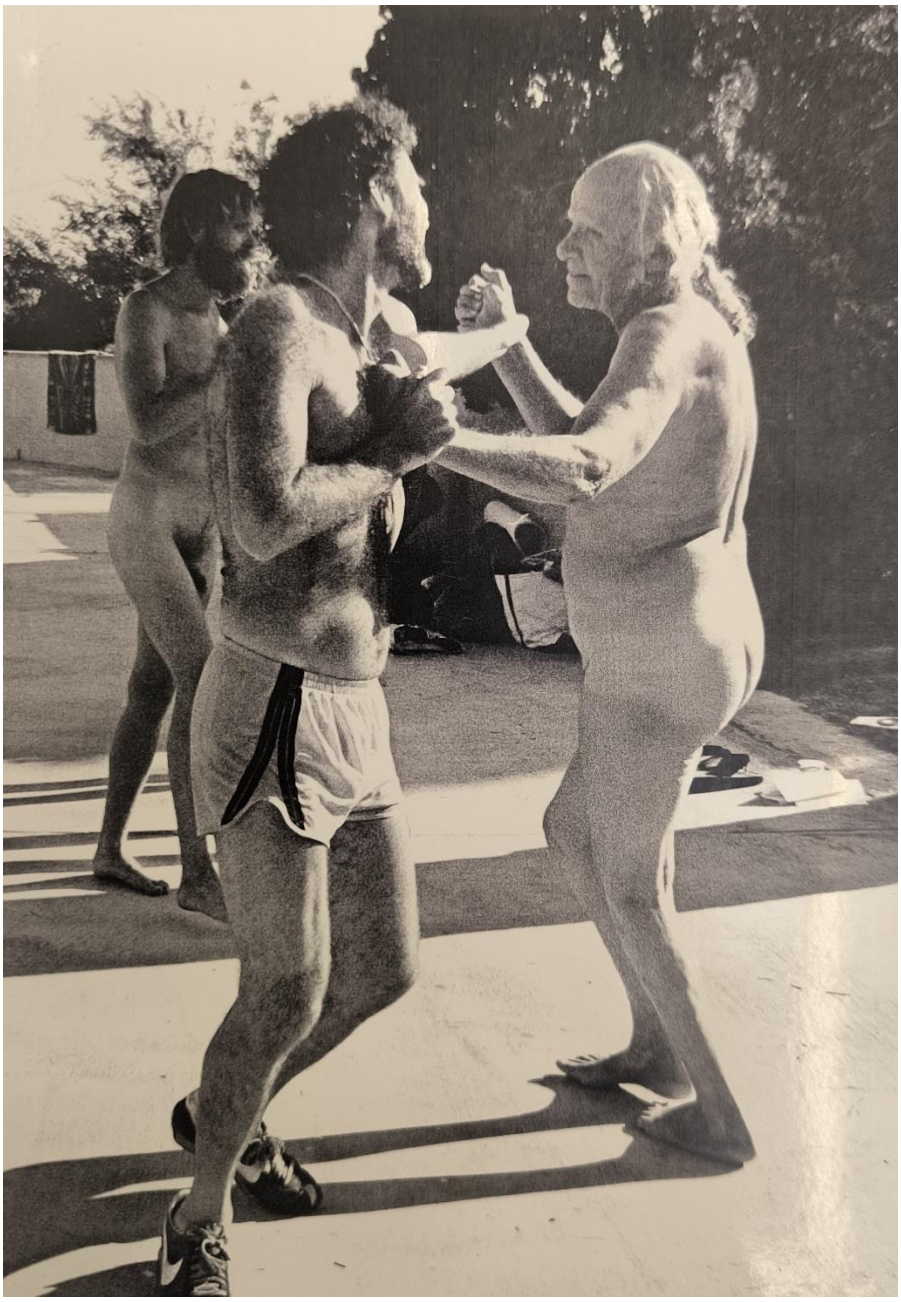


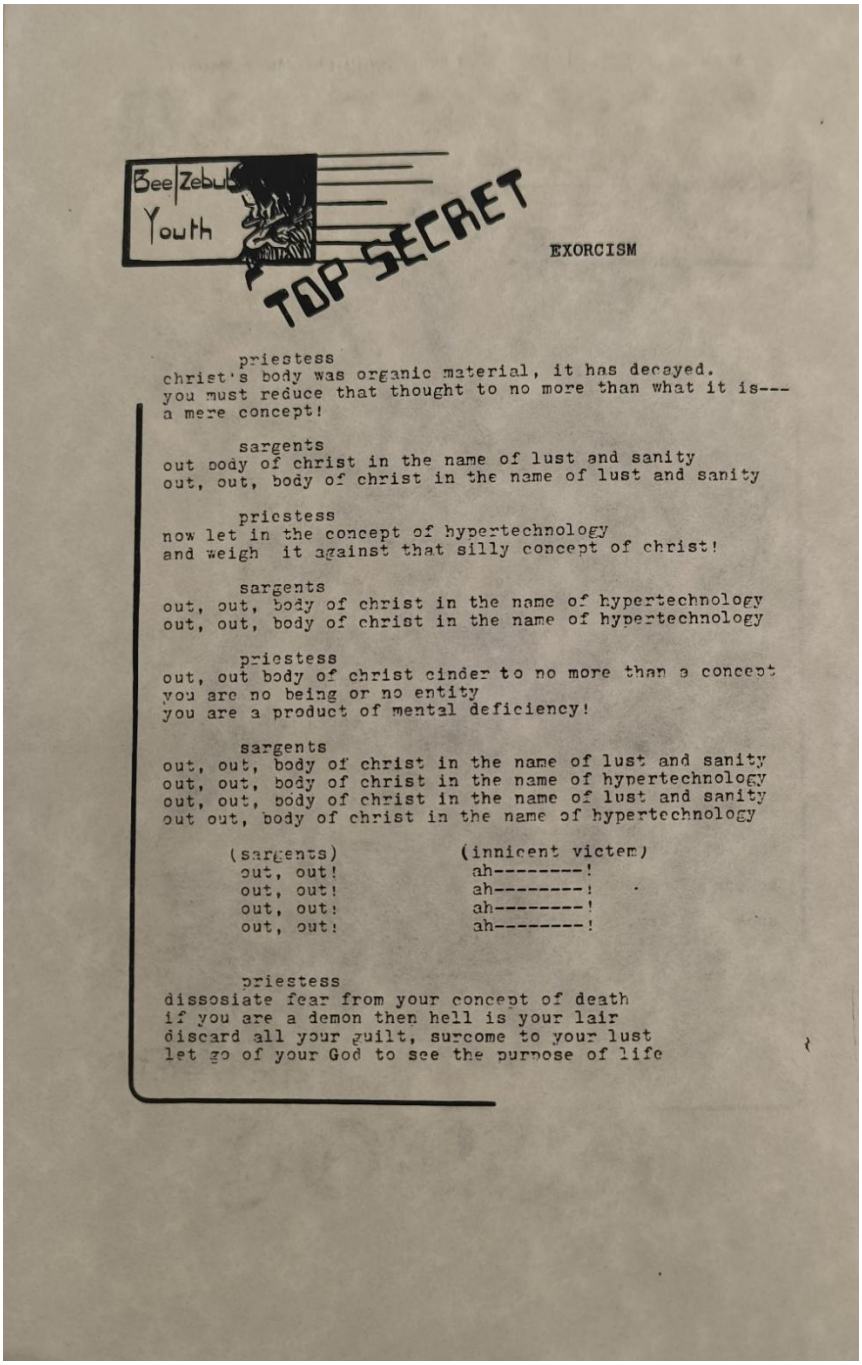
Figure 3.55 – Harry Hay dancing with participant at the Spiritual Conference for Radical Faeries, 1978. Black and white photograph. Stuart Timmons Papers, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California. Los Angeles.



Figure 3.56 - Alberto Martini, *Allegoria della guerra,* ca. 1905. Pen and ink on cardboard, 19.6 x 14.1 in (50 x 35.8 cm). Civiche Raccolte Grafiche e Fotografiche. Gabinetto dei Disegni. Milan, Italy.



Figure 3.57 – Nervous Gender/Beelzebub Youth, Baphomet by Éliphas Lévi including band's name, 1981. Inkjet print on paper. Stuart Timmons Papers, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California. Los Angeles.


Bee Zebub Youth
TOP SECRET
EXORCISM

priestess
christ's body was organic material, it has decayed.
you must reduce that thought to no more than what it is---
a mere concept!

sargents
out body of christ in the name of lust and sanity
out, out, body of christ in the name of lust and sanity

priestess
now let in the concept of hypertechnology
and weigh it against that silly concept of christ!

sargents
out, out, body of christ in the name of hypertechnology
out, out, body of christ in the name of hypertechnology

priestess
out, out body of christ cinder to no more than a concept
you are no being or no entity
you are a product of mental deficiency!

sargents
out, out, body of christ in the name of lust and sanity
out, out, body of christ in the name of hypertechnology
out, out, body of christ in the name of lust and sanity
out out, body of christ in the name of hypertechnology

(sargents)	(innicent victem)
out, out!	ah--------!
out, out!	ah--------!
out, out!	ah--------!
out, out!	ah--------!

priestess
dissosiate fear from your concept of death
if you are a demon then hell is your lair
discard all your guilt, surcome to your lust
let go of your God to see the purpose of life

Figure 3.58 – Beelzebub Youth, lyrics to *Exorcism*, 1981. Inkjet print on paper. Stuart Timmons Papers, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California. Los Angeles.

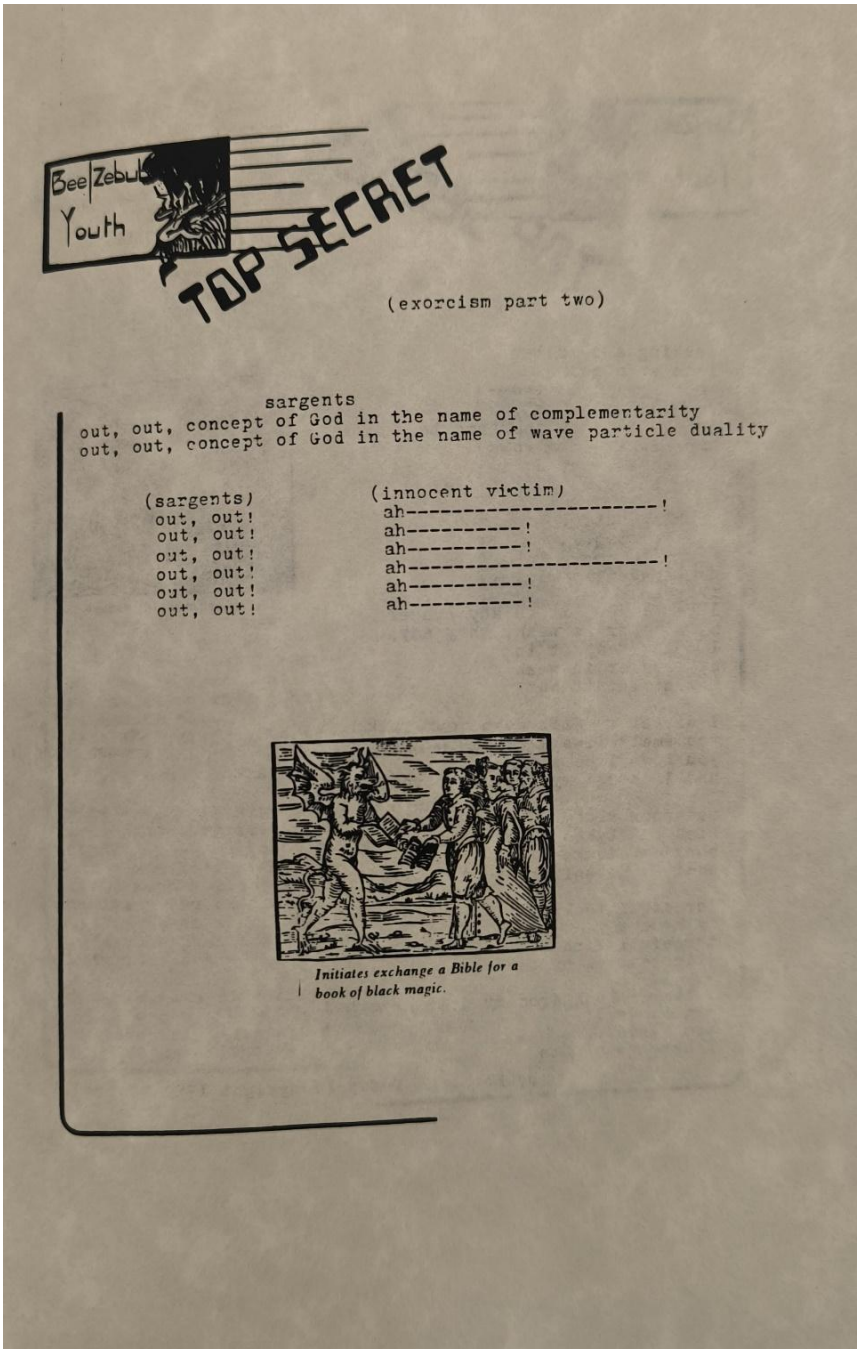


Figure 3.59 – Beelzebub Youth, lyrics to *Exorcism*, 1981. Inkjet print on paper. Stuart Timmons Papers, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California. Los Angeles.



Figure 3.60 - Nervous Gender, *A HOMILY,* 1981. Paper photocopy of original photograph. Gerardo Velázquez Papers, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California. Los Angeles.

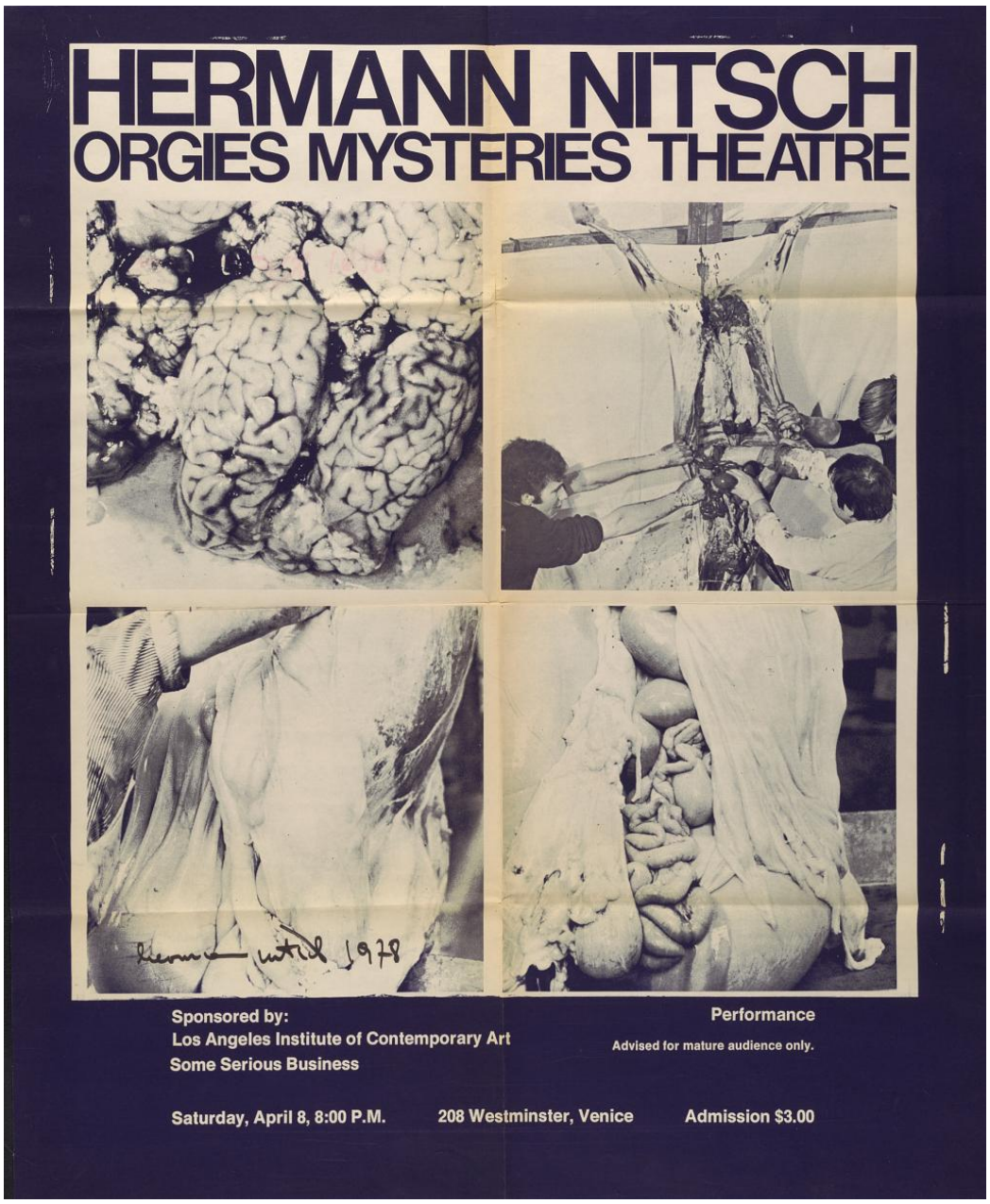


Figure 3.61 - Exhibition poster for Hermann Nitsch's *Orgies Mysteries Theatre* at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, 1978. Inkjet print on paper. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Washington, D.C.

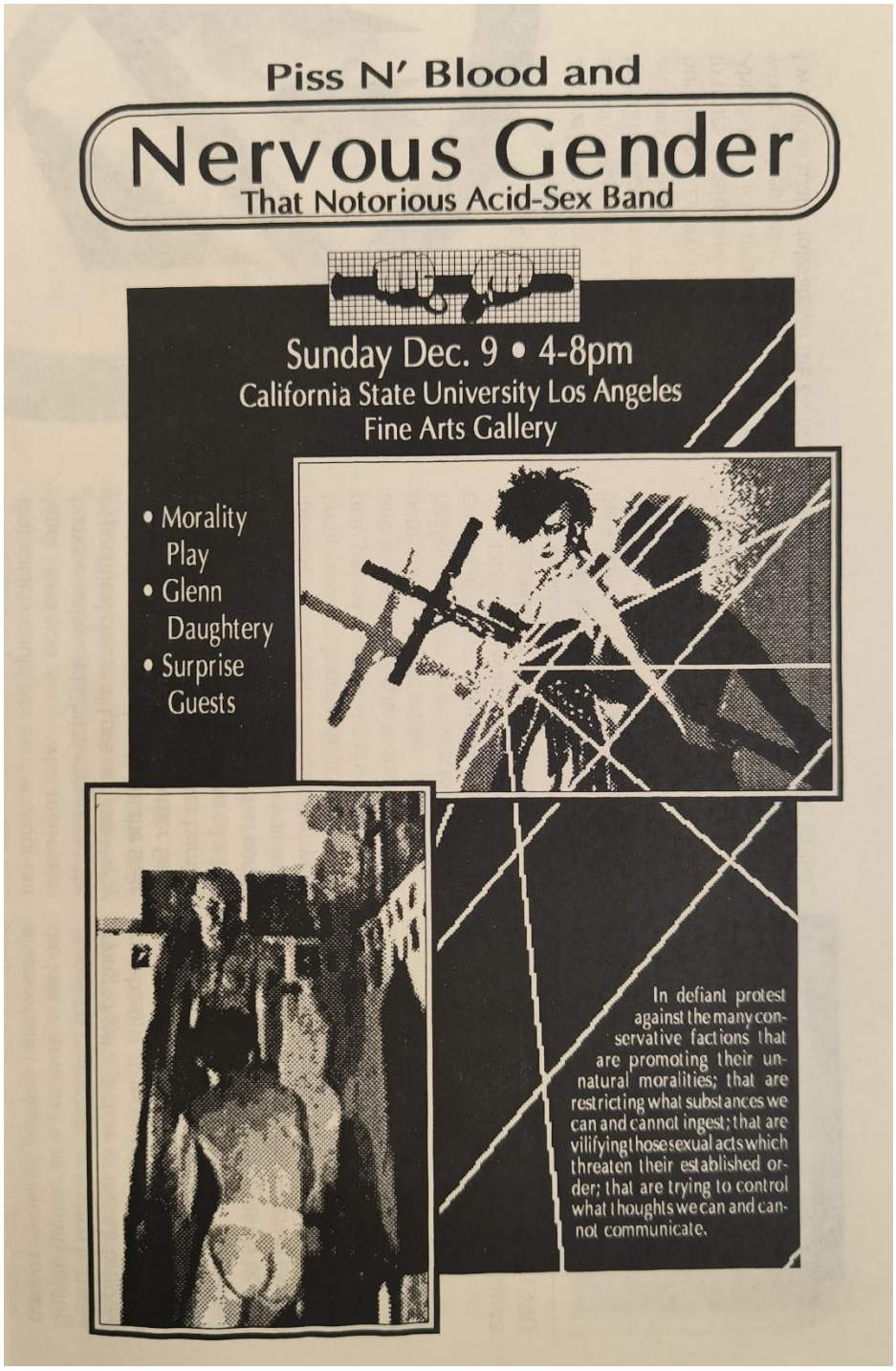


Figure 3.62– Gerardo Velázquez, *Piss N' Blood,* 1990. Paper photocopy flyer. MFA exhibition at California State University, Los Angeles. Gerardo Velázquez Papers, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California. Los Angeles.



Figure 3.63 – Gerardo Velázquez, *Osculum Infame*, 1990. Inkjet print on paper. Gerardo Velázquez Papers, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California. Los Angeles.

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