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Josefina Báez's *Dominicanish*[1]

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POSITIONING JOSEFINA BÁEZ IN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S ARTS TRADITION

One of the highlights of the African American Arts: Activism and Aesthetics Conference, held at Bucknell University in the fall of 2016, was the performative poetic delivery by famed playwright and poet from the Neo-Black Arts movement era, Ntozake Shange. I was pleasantly surprised by the selection of poems that Shange chose to perform. I was reminded of how she has always woven the African diaspora experience of New York City into her poems. One of the poems performed by Ntozake Shange acknowledged Hector Lavoe, a Puerto Rican singer and musician from the 1970s, who along with Nuyorican Willie Colón and Panamanian American Rubén Blades, produced salsa music that at times included songs for social justice.[2] Ntozake's embrace of the cultural plurality of New York City in her work is evident throughout her extensive artistic career over the years. An analysis of her work clearly indicates an acceptance of cross-national cultural aesthetics in her presentation of an African American blackness.

Vanessa Valdes, author of the article "'There Is No Incongruence Here': Hispanic Notes in the Works of Ntozake Shange," brilliantly reminds us that Ntozake showcases a cosmopolitan outlook in her African American poetic aesthetics.[3] Her Black experience includes multiple and nuanced performativities of blackness that reinforce the macramé formed from the Latin American and Caribbean hybridities that are so much a part of the Black experience in multiple New York City circles. Ntozake's poetic choice at the conference affirmed my own introduction of Josefina Báez's performance text as part of the celebration of African American activism and artistic aesthetics.

Báez's work highlights what I see as a continuation of the Afro-Caribbean and Latinx influence on the design of Black art and the struggle for equality and social justice for people of African descent in the United States. This holds true particularly in the case of New York City, where Afro-Caribbean artists and activists have undoubtedly contributed in shaping African American culture.[4] Among these were those of Afro-Latino descent such as Arturo Schomburg from the Harlem Renaissance era. However, there were also the activists, artists, and writers from the 1960s and 1970s onward, such as Jesús Colón, Thomas Piri, Pedro Pietri, Miguel

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Algarín, Denise Oliver, Felipe Luciano, Iris Morales, and Pablo "Yoruba" Guzman, who have affirmed the parallels of the multiple racial and gender struggles for equality in the United States during that time. There are also the more contemporary artists from the 1990s onward, such as Maria "Mariposa" Teresa Fernández, who continues to shape New York City Africana aesthetics by highlighting her transnational and transcultural understanding of Black Latinx and American identities and experiences through poetry and spoken word.

Because of these hybrid and parallel Black experiences in the United States, I find it imperative to explore an American blackness that forgoes any attempt at essentializing African Americanness as an isolated development loose from multiple syncretisms. African American blackness evolved from and continues to be shaped by the Africana experience in the Americas, the Caribbean, and beyond. Moreover, the United States has known its share of Afro-Caribbean contributions to the direct and indirect evolution of African American artistic aesthetics.[5] I argue that Báez's performance and poetic arts lie firmly in the Afro-American artistic syncretism that has been created from the introduction of Black bodies in the Americas since the 1500s. This chapter affirms Báez's work as an expansion upon the type of African American blackness that Ntozake Shange manages to successfully highlight with her transcultural Black women's performativity through theatre, poetry, dance, and music.[6]

I examine Báez's work with Ntozake Shange's African American cultural multiplicity in mind, as I believe that Báez's performances and texts further expand on this notion of cultural multiplicity in the contemporary Black experience of the United States. Báez skews and diffuses the ways in which the Dominican Republic and the United States have historically used race and gender to homogenize and create dominant national culture and identity. I theorize that Báez's work ultimately reinforces the idea of a "de-territorial cultural nationalism." By this I mean that the creation of her culture and cultural citizenship is not restricted to assimilation into dominant national cultural portrayals in the United States or the Dominican Republic. Rather, Báez creates her personal culture by pushing back against normative and official cultural interpretations delineated across Caribbean and North American geographical borders, allowing for complete liberation from national cultural restrictions.[7] In validating her transcultural nationalism beyond national borders, Báez also guides her audience/reader to do the same. Furthermore, Báez's work reaffirms that global Black cultures are informed by international migration, which has in turn allowed for a continued hybridization of African American culture in the United States. I therefore reiterate that a full understanding of African American arts can only occur within a transnational and transcultural analytical context.

It is important to note that even as Báez chooses to perform de-territorial cultural nationalism, she is also practicing a "strategic essentialism" as described by postcolonial literary scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.[8] Strategic essentialism emphasizes the occasional necessity for groups to come together based on their alignment to achieve a tactical goal. In the case of Báez's *Dominicanish*, it seems she embraces her locational race and gender affiliations in calculated ways so as to call for liberation, social justice, and equality for marginalized Black women and men in the United States and, by extension, the Dominican Republic. Hers is also clearly a Black woman's project that associates with the tradition of African American women's performance and poetic aesthetics in the United States. Both bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins assert that sexism and racism are experienced in similar ways by women of the African diaspora across the globe. This could in part explain how Báez's artistic project for liberation and self-determination of the individual self and the community line up with the advocacy struggles of African American women.

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JOSEFINA BÁEZ: THE POET AND PERFORMER

Josefina Báez lives her existence in a fused transnational and transcultural milieu. She was born and raised in the Dominican Republic in the city of La Romana till the age of twelve.[9] She then moved to the United States and gradually made metropolitan New York City her home and theatrical stage. Báez is identified as a U.S. Afro-Latina of Dominican descent. According to sociologist Rubén Rumbaut's assertions on first- and second-generation citizens in a national context,[10] Báez could be considered a one-and-a-half generation American, as she arrived in the United States by the age of twelve. Her generational status possibly speaks to a very early symbiosis in her identity as a Black Dominican in the United States. Consequently, her consciousness as a Black woman seems to have, in part, been informed by existing Black identity constructs in the United States.[11] Báez's hybrid American and Dominican identity is visible as she fuses African American dictum and music, while at the same time philosophically delving into the meaning of the color black and notions of blackness in general. I will expand on Báez's syncretized ideas on blackness later in this chapter. However, for now, it is important to note that this approach to identity adjustment is typical in the work of many Spanish-Caribbean-American artists whose understanding of blackness becomes influenced by established racial frameworks in their host countries—in this case, the United States.[12]

Much like many other artists of African descent who have journeyed to the United States, Báez autographs her experiences as part of her art. In this case, it is her Dominican American experiences on display in the onstage performances and performance texts. It is clear that Báez is following in the footsteps of other Afro-Caribbean immigrants who have over the years migrated to New York City and have influenced the poetic, performance, and literary aesthetics of Black identity in the United States. Josefina Báez, like many Caribbean/African American artists who have preceded her, mixes street and in-home performances to capture the full spectrum of her Black experience in New York City.[13] She eventually moves from street performance, starts her AY OMBE theatre in the 1980s, and later expands her popularity with the steady performance of *Dominicanish* in the 1990s. She gave the final tenth-anniversary performance of *Dominicanish* on the Harlem Theatre stage in 1999.[14]

Báez's artistic popularity in New York City was firmly established with the publication of *Dominicanish* as a performance text in the year 2000. This text captures Báez's onstage aesthetic performance moves and her poetry. The text showcases Báez's ambiguous and contradictory identity politics. As Latino studies scholar Juan Flores notes in *The Diaspora Strikes Back*, Báez might have just been ahead of her time, as U.S. Dominican performing artists that came on the scene after her adhere to much of her performance and artistic rhetoric in general.[15] Báez's success comes in part from her ability to affirm her difference that stems from her urban city environments—both New York City and La Romana. As best described by Claudio Mir[16] in his contribution to Báez's text, "*Dominicanish* is Josefina's journey through the past and future."[17] This voyage includes Báez's migration from the Dominican Republic to the United States, as she is able to transport her audience to both regions during her onstage performance.

As presented in the work of Dominican studies scholar Silvio Torres-Saillant, Dominicans come from a history of state-sanctioned anti-Black terrorism and U.S. political and military interventions that corroborated ideas of Black racial inferiority on the island of the Dominican Republic.[18] The Dominican dictator General Rafael Trujillo traumatized Black Dominicans and Haitian-Dominicans from 1930 through 1961.[19] Crooked ideologies on race and gender which suggest that an inferior black skin should be rooted out of the Dominican Republic

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and that women's position should remain relegated to domesticity were strong components of Dominican national ideals of progression and modernization.[20] The Black body, with all its features, regardless of gender, was "othered," considered inferior, and thus was dispensable and made an invisible part of the national culture. Crimes committed against Black bodies were secretly sanctioned in the Dominican Republic during this time. Trujillo's demise in 1961 did not come until after the savage killing of the revolutionary Mirabal sisters in 1960. These sisters were central female figures in the movement to overthrow Trujillo and his ideals on race and gender.[21] Still, as noted by Torres-Saillant, Dominican culture continues to maintain a position of Black denial. What we see, according to Torres-Saillant, is an appropriation of Black inferiority and backwardness in the psyche of many Dominicans.[22] I would add that the position of women in society also continues to be perceived with limitations.

With its own sociohistorical and cultural variations these Dominican ideas on race and gender are in many ways similar to those in the United States, where racism and sexism have also shaped American sociology and artistic responses. Like Ntozake Shange's artistic works that are in part responses against sexism and racism, Josefina Báez's performances and poetry push back against the cultural memories of state-sanctioned terrorism on Black bodies and normative acceptance of women's domesticity. This is evident from the ways in which she unapologetically includes her self-established Black Dominican difference onto the geographies of New York City and the Dominican Republic. Her performances liberate the Dominican body from the confines of post-Trujillo cultural productions of race and gender, and equally liberate the U.S. Black/African American gendered body from repressive enactments and appropriations.

AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S ART: A PROJECT OF SELF-DETERMINATION

A principal way in which Báez liberates the Black woman from territorial cultural restrictions is through the use of a bilingual fusion consisting of poetic declamations and theatrical performances. Báez molds and brings to life the African American and Afro-Dominican woman through a linguistic verbalism that embraces Dominican York slang, offering thus a sociopolitical literacy to interpret the transcultural conjoins she lives. Her performance of a transcultural Black woman is evident in her Spanish poem entitled "Origen" [Origin].[23] The poem speaks of the childhood recollection of a woman who boasts of her confidence when she was a little [Dominican] girl. This gifted little girl is proud and determined to claim her own English vernacular. Though her pronunciation is weak, and while she does not fully articulate the words, "[leaving them] on the first syllable,"[24] she maintains confidence and repeats English words over and over again, while not allowing outside criticism to discourage her.

In this poem Báez lays claim to her own vernacular, centering her own linguistic standpoint. Through her self-affirmation and play with words, the little girl in "Origen" (whom I interpret as Báez) values the correctness in incorrectness. For example, the use of the incorrect and unofficial spelling of the word *Belle* as "Bel"[25] in the poem highlights linguistic doubling in the presentation of the Black woman's experience.[26] In so doing, "Origen" embraces a suspension in privileging hierarchal ranks in grammar and spelling of the English language in interpreting the Black woman's experience. The poem "Origen" is in reality affirming Báez's English, even if it is tinted with Spanish modulations.

The symbiosis of English and Spanish that Báez produces is similar to Shange's poetic synergies with languages in that these appear to be somewhat carnivalesque to those not familiar

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with the Spanish aphorisms, phrases, and words. But in introducing this Spanglish cuisine, Báez's work liberates African American blackness from the confines of English, thus welcoming a cross-section of Afro-descendants' experiences as part of the African American arts project. Báez then belongs to the school of Black women theatrical poets whose work is meant to allow transcultural Black women to feel validated in the incongruences of their American lives. Furthermore, she is creating a pronounced writing of Black women of Latinx descent into the African American theatrical and poetic space of the United States, thus making the realities of their Black American lives visible.

Comparable to Ntozake Shange, Báez is affirming a "living culture" in her poetry and onstage performance. Though used somewhat differently, I borrow from Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldúa's coined term "living culture"[27] to clarify that Báez's onstage performances and performance texts capture instant and spontaneous experiences of the transcultural Black woman in a specific environment. Her theatre performances and poetry then operate like visual and physical autographs of her lived experiences as a Black Dominican Caribbean transplant in New York City. Báez's (2000) "living culture" is clearly described in a section of the poem entitled "Pikin epanis" [Speaking Spanish], where she calls her New York condition and "living culture" *Dominicanish:*

> *Yo soy una Dominican York. Y esta condición me otorga una infinidad de estimulos constantes y variados. Enriqueciendo mi cultura personal en formas inesperadas. El texto, al igual que la puesta en escena de Dominicanish ilustra la creación y estado de mi universo personal. Y viva, cambiante, llena de contradicciones y possibilidades, estoy en camino a la casa de lo constante. Sólo ahí, en lo constante, tengo guarantee.* [I am a Dominican York. And this condition grants me an infinity of constant and varied stimuli. Enriching my personal culture in unexpected ways. The texts, similar to the visual scenes in Dominicanish illustrate the creation and state of my personal universe. Alive, constantly changing, full of contradictions and possibilities, I am on my way to the home of constancy. Only there, in constancy, do I have guarantees. (p. 7)

Báez's description here of her "living culture" reinforces the triad of *constancy-contradiction-possibility* as central to her personal universe in New York City. Flores notes how it is within this New York City universe that Báez maintains "a view toward [the Dominican Republic] and [remains] in dialogue with the cultural reality [in her Dominican hometown of La Romana].[28] Hence, it seems the contradictions afforded in New York City allow Báez to maintain a continuity with her Dominican sense of self. The continued affirmation of a Dominican York identity is then central in her quest for constancy. In fact, her Dominican York identity is a constancy among all contradictions. This syncretized identity is one of the conducting lines that Claudio Mir, the director of Báez's *Dominicanish* theatre, writes of in "Vital."[29] Mir interprets Báez's need for constancy in her performance as the need for *una línea conductora* [a conducting line].[30] Her Dominican York identity or *Dominicanish* existence is a conducting line that allows her the possibility to navigate through her New York City space in search of her own sense of stability.

LIBERATORY AND COMMUNAL PRACTICES IN BLACK WOMEN'S ARTS AESTHETICS

The establishment of conducting lines that facilitate Black people's navigation through their lives have, in the United States, traditionally included songs, spirituals, oral stories, uplifting

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racial ideologies, specific musical genres, patterned physical motions, and at times, complicity and resistance to dominant racial and gender norms. Ntozake Shange has even acknowledged food as a conducting line in the African diaspora communal experience.[31] Reminiscent of Shange, Báez too uses the said conducting lines in consort to give her access to physical and geographical spaces outside of New York City without necessarily being present in these locations. These conducting lines in Báez's performance text and in her onstage performances provide her with unlimited access to different spaces, thus allowing her to cross the physical and mental limitations imposed by the city. Báez's onstage and textual performances provide in this manner sketches of a liberatory practice for women of color in the United States—Báez gives these women examples of how to experience physical, mental, and spiritual freedom.

Báez also invites her audience (the community) to experience this liberatory practice for themselves. Báez's performance entails the use of repetitive tunes, controversial cultural notions from a situated time period, word choices with double and triple meanings, cultural word play, and critical observations of race and gender in society. The onstage performances include Báez's physical presence in dark regalia accompanied by spoken word and "random" expressions. Through her hybrid cross-national and bilingual onstage declamations accompanied by idiosyncratic body motions and expressive gazes, Báez compels the audience to be fully present in her obscurity. It suddenly becomes possible for her spectator to transcend the theatre and connect with her subjectivity in the moment. It is in this way that Báez's audience gains access to localized-territorial and cultural Dominican and American spaces without necessarily being physically present in these locations. Hence, they too become a part of the ways in which Báez memorizes the geographical and cultural places and peoples that have strongly demarked the ways in which she has come to understand and see herself as a Black woman in the United States. The audience is in fact introduced to Báez's exacting version of a Black woman's experience in a metropolitan U.S. city. In many ways, Báez's *Dominicanish* gifts the audience and reader with access to "indefinite spaces"[32] without the legal limitations set forth by established national borders.

I do believe that in order for readers of her text to embody the full experience of Báez's "living culture" and performance autology,[33] they must be able to access images of the movements and dances performed by Báez. The text *Dominicanish* provides the reader with just that—access to her dance aesthetics. Every page in this text provides images of Báez in motion. If one flips through the pages from front to back or vice versa, one will witness a fluid dance scene of asymmetrical upon symmetrical body politics. The dance moves come from *kuchipudi*, a classical dance from India that easily interprets Báez's experiential *Dominicanish*.[34]

I see this dance as completely inhabiting alterity. Báez is not only voicing her difference and contradictory subjectivity through a semiotics that locates logic outside the dominant Euro-centered structural frameworks of language, but she also uses her body to simulate non-Western aesthetics to reinforce the fact that she lives and moves in this alterity. Together, both Báez and her audience/reader come to inhabit this space of divergence, thus suggesting that an Other-space only remains on the margin when left unexplored by the majority. Once these marginal spaces are acknowledged, explored, and centered, the realization arises that these spaces are integral parts of the whole—difference is then undistinguishable.

Certainly, it appears that Báez is inverting and transcending Western dichotomous modes of thinking in order to highlight her difference as normalcy. By allowing her reality/normalcy to take center stage in her performative public visibility, her audience and reader are invited to experience and live through glimpses of Báez's Black otherness. At that point, neither skin color nor location produce a divide between her and the audience/reader. Rather, they produce

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a space of inversion, mirroring, transition, and connection. Báez's onstage performance introduces cyclical visual reminders of Dominican culture that transition into visual reminders of New York City by way of songs, music, physical expressions, and verbal maneuvering of English and Spanish vowels and words. In that way, she is reflecting upon the social and psychological acculturation of her immigrant blackness, and her audience is freely gazing at and coliving with Báez's de-territorial subjectivity.

Báez's approach here again speaks to an Ntozakian view of understanding Black women's subjectivity in that she is not only affirming a way of living wherein the Black woman's body and reality are fully visible and dominant, but she is also giving voice to "the collective in the individual."[35] The collective here however includes the audience that becomes a part of Báez's multidimensional constructions. In Báez's onstage performance we see the audience routinely captivated and mesmerized by Báez's physical, linguistic, and cultural contortions. The pin-drop silence in the room is sometimes interrupted by occasional laughter from the audience. This audience reaction happens when they connect with the irregular moments of irony and familiarity in the performance. For example, Báez notes in her onstage performance and text how learning English reluctantly forces one's mouth to become all twisted, like a baseball glove. She utters this narrative in Spanish: "No me voy a poner la boca así como un guante."[36] This portion of the expression receives chuckles from certain audience members[37] as they are able to understand the cultural comedic sentiments that this Spanish expression emits. They too might connect with the psychosocial experience of non-English speaking immigrants who learn English and are forced to contort their mouths in uncomfortable ways to pronounce English words. Regardless of the reasons for the emotional reaction to Báez's expressions, it is clear that the audience/community is as much a part of her performance as she is. This collective involvement has been ingrained in the history of Báez's work which, as mentioned earlier, included street performances built into the community.[38] Báez's epistemological approach then upholds a frame of reference that factors the public into her polyphonic immigrant experiences as a Black woman in America. This suggests that her poetic efforts toward Black and women's liberation in the United States endorse a community-centered Black immigrant experience which is also a part of the continuity of contemporary Black arts and aesthetic movement in the United States.

BLACK WOMEN'S VOCALITY: INTERRUPTING OFFICIAL NATIONAL DISCOURSE

As already noted, Báez centers her subjective experiences in the Black poetic and theatrical world of the United States by interrupting Western dichotomous and binary thinking. She maneuvers dominant social symbolic realms that are upheld in the sociopolitical, cultural, and economic imaginaries of society—in this case, those upheld in New York City and, by extension, La Romana. This is evident in her claim, "Home is where theatre is."[39] In other words, every day and every instance is a performance and we make ourselves comfortable in these performances. A theatre here refers to multiple presentations of the self in various locations and under various conditions. One's social and interactive location at any given point in time determines one's theatrical performance(s).[40] In the case of Báez's performance text, we see descriptions of a versatile and eclectic global city with so many cross-fertilizations in identity and culture, thus suggesting that there are multiple performances upon performances. I liken this to a *performance matrix*, where doubling and tripling of realities become a natural component of the multidimensional Black woman's existence.

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Báez's performance matrix becomes immediately evident in *Dominicanish*. The entire performance text reads like someone taking mental notes of the signs and advertisements visible in the city topography, producing a critical and reflective experiential visual motion picture of New York City. This is the way in which Báez captures and fuses distinct ethnic, racial, cultural, and linguistic norms as she sees and experiences them. The following excerpt with inserted translation exemplifies the note-taking of the multiples in the city space:

> Brujo haitiano brujo colombiana
> [Haitian witchdoctors Colombian witchdoctors]
> Brujo de las matas
> [Bush doctor]
> Rooms for rent GED ESL free classes
> GED ESL Citizenship classes
> Smokeshop 24 hours calls 39 cents a minute
> STD ISD PCO STD ISD PCO
> Fax to let *best of both worlds*
> For hire please sound horn veg. Non veg.
> Hotel Fresh tickets (Báez, 2000, p. 24)

Ultimately, Báez's Black female performativity in the text, just as in the onstage performance, shows a blurring of national performances on U.S. soil. Her gendered ethnovisual literacy introduces the reader to the fluidity and proximity of cultural multiplicities in a compact New York City space. The still images of Báez that accompany the poetic literacy on every page of the text replicate what Báez does in the onstage performance of *Dominicanish*. She performs symmetrical, asymmetrical, and linear *kuchipudi* dance moves within the spatial limits of her arm and leg spans. Báez's performance text inscribes in this way the self in the city, all while illustrating the city's reach to fully capacitate dense identities much like the voluminous and concomitantly abstract shapes and writings that Báez creates.

Báez's ethnovisual literacy also indicates the use of a "parodic subversive strategy."[41] Caribbean literary scholar Evelyn O'Callaghan reflects upon the ways in which women writers of the Caribbean diaspora have used parodic subversive strategies to subvert patriarchal ideas of nationalism. These women writers use a female comic vision in their writing that "[interrupts] the language of official [national] discourse and literature with a women's vocality."[42] In this excerpt from *Dominicanish* we see a freestyle applied to some of the font in the text; also, there are satiric and sharp identifications of social contrasts in the commercial landmarks, and there are references to outlandish ads coupled with Báez's eccentric aesthetic motions. Collectively, these artistic features devise an unconventional performance that does not meet the standards of Western patriarchal or African American patriarchal theatre. However, this is exactly the poetic and theatrical challenge presented by Báez who, like Ntozake Shange, seeks to affirm her experiences and identity, demanding the inclusion of her Black female *difference*.

Nothing about this excerpt from *Dominicanish* speaks to a typical American landmark.[43] However, it is in fact an American neighborhood as seen through the eyes of a transcultural immigrant Black woman. What she sees is the portion of the American Black self often abstracted or discontinued in dominant African American patriarchal artistic discourse. This Black abstraction was done within the Black Arts movement of the 1960s to essentialize a

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concrete African American blackness. This move, unfortunately, flattened some of its rich and complex diasporic connections. As noted already, Báez, similar to Ntozake Shange, disrupts this singular lens of African American cultural production by introducing a more complex gendered Black difference located in multiple connected historicities. The difference here is that Báez has the ability to not only influence the artistic presentation of African American aesthetics but her affirmed Dominican York identity also allows her to directly manipulate transnational Dominican ideas of blackness. Therefore, as a subjective and collective text, *Dominicanish* is impacting two national fronts at once, thus minimizing the divide in their cultural territorial differences on Black arts and aesthetics.[44]

BÁEZ'S ETHNIC CLAIMS TO BLACKNESS

I return here to my exploration of Báez's claims to blackness because, along with her gender assertions, come her complex modes of being Black. Báez claims to be an Afro-Dominican or a Black woman, and though blackness is used as part of her conducting line, her text reflects upon her butterflying into a New York blackness that takes shape in her sensibility to and tripling of language, music, and consciousness of historically situated cultural conditions and ideas. To highlight her thoughts on blackness, I adapt Báez's words in her poem titled "Spanglish," with an insertion of English translations for clarity. Báez (2000) writes:

> Aquí los discos traen cancionero
> [Here the music brings songs].
> Discos del alma con afro
> [Afro soul music].
> Con [With] afro black is beautiful.
> Black is a color. Black is my color.
> *My cat is black*. (p. 26)

Claiming blackness to Báez is not a mark of her affinity to a skin color, for her cat is also black. Claiming blackness entails a sensibility that lies beyond the skin. Thus, she is subverting dominant notions that equate blackness to a skin color. In doing so, she is responding to and unmaking territorial-national Dominican ideas of race that are fixated on skin complexion.[45] To her, the affinity to blackness lies in the sensibilities of race in one's "living culture." This means that her social experiences in black skin determine her understanding of blackness—this strategic approach is more akin to definitions of ethnicity.

Blackness or the act of being Black is a socially constructed sensibility to which she has come to find a connection. Báez references the Isley Brothers,[46] their music and records, as her teachers. They become central to Báez in facilitating her learning of English and becoming a Black American: "In a cloud of smoke I found my teachers. In an LP jacket I found my teachers [. . .] In that cover I found my teachers."[47] Báez (2000) further writes:

> Last Saturday my teachers sang in Soul Train
> Now I don't care how my mouth look I like
> what I'm saying
> Boy girl loves you she does she doesn't
> *A mor And more* (p. 28)

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Here Báez performs an English and a blackness that conflate the linguistic semantics of Spanish and English, as well as the cultural aesthetics of periodized U.S. songs and historically situated Afro-American cultural expressions. It is clear from her text that the songs, with their ability to periodize the moment, function as constancies amid the ever-changing space—these songs operate as conducting lines.

In this same breath, the reader learns of Báez's sensitivity to signs that reflect class differences, injustices, inequalities, and urban New York cultural production of gender norms as she sees them in her surroundings. In her piece entitled "Washington Heights List"[48] Báez provides another visual reading of this very Dominican side of New York City. Her reading of the signs and images in Washington Heights provides a mental picture of Dominican culture in the city. Báez's visual autography, meaning her mental interpretation of that which she sees and experiences in her New York City space, consists of, first, signs that reflect a continued connection to mainland Dominican Republic; second, a cultural transplantation of food, language, and other Dominican modalities; third, the struggles in this part of the city with crime, drugs, and police brutality; and finally, the location of the Dominican and Black woman in the city.

Particularly in this section of her autography, I see Báez presenting a complex urban phenomenon that cannot be interpreted without analyzing cultural occurrences as overlapping with multiple linkages. If one wants to find the areas in her visual reading and performance that provide a clear and unambiguous display of resistance to national conformity on race and gender, one should turn to the recurrent themes in Báez's urbanity,[49] poetic diction, and physical contours used to express her "living culture" in *Dominicanish*. One recurrent theme that remains at the forefront of not only "Washington Heights List" but also throughout Báez's text is the idea of a corrupted city. Báez evidences her rhetoric of a corrupted city with the analogy of a "crooked city."[50] A crooked city implies a fraudulent, false, or dishonest space wherein the public visibility decenters reality; and so, what we see is an incomplete reality, or a reality that is not concurrent with what is really happening in the city.

Báez references the social institutions designed to serve and protect the city as partaking in the efforts of this fraudulent space. She writes of the "city glorifying the finest brutality in blue";[51] she reads the signs visible in the city and chooses to autograph "la maldita policia" [the bad cop][52] and "Marcha en contra de la brutalidad policial" [March against police brutality][53] in her text. The institution of law and order is presented as upholding a fraudulent city space. This juridical system and its umbrella branches are presented as partaking in the socialization of individuals into the dominant material and symbolic orders.[54]

I find Báez's choice to centralize the law and its semiotic meaning in the public signs important because of similar ideas about the institution of law and order circulating within certain circles of African American urbanities in New York City. This similarity of ideas is mainly evident in the urban expressive cultures and performance poetry of New York City (such as hip hop culture) where blackness, Latinidad, and African Americanness merge.[55] Báez herself is an evolving product of this African American and Latina convergence. This is evident throughout her text, but particularly on the pages where she uses seemingly African American aphorisms to produce Dominican eulogies. Báez (2000) provides an entire account about this conjunction. I highlight the following translation of this account:

Craqueo chicle como Shameka Brown
Hablo como Boricua
y me peino como Morena

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> [I cracked bubblegum like Shameka Brown
> I speak like a Puerto Rican
> and I comb my hair like a Black Girl] (p. 43)

This translation from Báez's performance text implies a character that is publicly affirming a theatrical urbanity that blends Latinidad and African Americanness with ease—this then is another indication of her ethnic claim to blackness. In these theatrical urban performances are references to the Black woman/the Brown woman/*la Morena* plastered all over the text. This is Báez's attempt to manifest a subjectivity and identity to *la Morena* whose multiplicity can be found in many masks throughout the *false* city. She is sometimes "Shameka Brown"; other times she is "a Señora seria" [serious lady/professional lady][56] or "la Morenita éste" [that Black girl][57] or just a "muchacha de buena presencia" [a nice looking girl].[58] Never is the Black woman or the Dominican woman described on her own terms; she is always *an act* that someone is advertising for, looking for, stereotypically signifying, or publicly performing. Báez tackles this very notion that both "African American women and Latinas, as part of the Afro-diasporic cultural community in New York City,"[59] are contained within the symbolic realm by the very institutions that are supposed to facilitate the subjective self to transcend into *the real*.[60]

NEW YORK CITY AND BLACK WOMEN'S ARTISTIC AGENCY FOR LIBERATION, FREEDOM, AND JUSTICE

Regardless of the restrictive features in the sociology of New York City, Báez simultaneously realizes that this metropolitan space can be used as a realm of critique and resistance to facilitate one's journey into *the real*. Beyond Lacanian terms, for whom the real is unattainable, Báez chooses to highlight certain urban signs such as the "crooked city" to subsequently reference modes of subverting social institutions and to enter a journey of self-liberation beyond local or national cultural divisive restrictions. This liberation is a path toward the real:

> For example you see a rope and think it is a snake.
> As soon as you realize that the rope is a rope,
> your false perception of a snake stops, and
> you are no longer
> distracted by the fear which it inspired.
> Therefore, one who wants to liberate herself must
> know the nature of the real self and the
> unreal. (Báez, 2000, p. 45)

This passage expresses a conscious attempt to unlock the real so as to attain liberation. Báez is presenting ways to disrupt the act of doubling and tripling to ultimately see reality and avoid falsity. Báez argues further that "when appearances cannot distract you anymore, then comes knowledge; then comes complete discrimination of the real and the unreal."[61] In this regard, Báez is again suggesting the need to develop a consciousness that can discriminate between what is and what isn't, for "when our false perception is corrected, our misery ends."[62] What Báez is in essence suggesting is that city dwellers reevaluate their intimacy to the city and that they alter their consciousness in relation to the city. A new spectatorship should be employed in order for a *real self* to emerge. The city harnesses difference, and thus holds the key for its

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inhabitants to move beyond the cultural restrictions imposed by its institutions. One can in fact move beyond singular representations of African Americanness in New York City. For example, the African American Latina or the African American Caribbean are very real ethnic presences in the city.

Báez implies that the true self is thus sustainable in the city, for it is in New York City that she has been able to foster and perform a syncretized and transnational blackness as part of her gender identity. She is in fact fully using New York City to affirm herself in her journey to constancy. As she notes in *Dominicanish*, once "you are real you are constant."[63] The city gives Báez the ability to find the real. However, she acknowledges throughout her text how the chaotic and fragmented city has the ability to present the marginal side of difference as something fantastic and burlesque. This could obscure the ways in which gendered and racialized city dwellers come to see themselves. The dominant ways of knowing can mask the realities of marginal people to the point of passive acceptance of interpretations made on their Black bodies. What happens as a result is that their existence in the unreal is normalized, and they appropriate the unreal dwellings they subjectively inhabit. The ability to unravel the real or even consider a different existence becomes unfashionable, even if the psyche is destabilized in the present.

This unreal vision of the self in the city could prevent urban citizens from attaining authentic subjectivity—meaning they become unable to experience a self that fully capacitates, among other things, the "transcultural black identity." Ironically, Báez's *Dominicanish* is a nonexilic framework in nourishing this transcultural Black identity. She performs entirely in the city. At no time in the text does she physically leave her locale and material New York City environment to (re)turn to a Caribbean space for resignification of the self. Her transnational existence already embraces cultural geographies from the Dominican Republic.[64] She presents a search of the soul in "the poetry of the senses, the poetry that leads to acts of love"[65] available to the self in the material and chaotic city. Hence, New York City in and of itself contains the conducting lines that lead to alternate and fluid spaces in time, memory, and consciousness.[66] Each subject can "groove to"[67] these alternate fluid spaces that, in split seconds, can lead to the unraveling of alternate self-consciousness.

I contend that Báez's presentation of New York City as a significant symbol in the design of a conscious and liberated self can be traced to non-Western spiritual traditions that center the relevance of the self and the environment in the quest for conscious self-affirmation. Also, within this non-Western spiritual tradition, as asserted by Joni L. Jones in her analysis of Diedre Bádéjò's *Osun Seegesi*, lies the importance of feminine ways of knowing. Jones notes that "female powers lies in the union with nature and in an understanding of practical knowledge."[68] Thus, maternal interstices of birth, consciousness, knowledge, and renewal are available throughout the environment—in this case, the city. The spiritual realism in which the city and the feminine are embroiled is clearly evident in the poem entitled "Poor, Sick, Dreamers and Fools Exile." In this poem we see Báez describing the "the city as a woman."[69] An analysis of the complete poem also illustrates Báez's nonlinear presentation of the Afro-Dominican York reality to undo asymmetrical power relations between genders in the urban space. Her work, which represents the congregation and convergence of difference, illustrates the equal interdependence of males and females in the design of the city. An excerpt of the poem reads as follows:

Crooked cupid
A woman named City
Hips swing male or female

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We swing creating our tale
Male or female we swing. (Báez, 2000, p. 41)

What this poem shows is that together, both women and men are equally responsible to uphold the integrity of the city, even in the face of what Báez addresses as a corrupt or "crooked" metropolis. According to Báez both men and women city dwellers choose to ignore the crookedness and corruption around them while they continue to glorify the institutions that maintain the skewed structures that affirm gender, racial, and minority oppression.

In referencing the city as woman, Báez entices a feminine urban cosmology. The city is thus regarded as the "mother" or the contour that can absorb multiplicities, and that can create well-rounded men and women. Thus, the city, as the contextual urban ecology, is highly involved in the design of the healthy self. This explains why without any consideration for gender norms "hips swing male or female." Thus, this city is indifferent to gender customs as both males and females are products of "Woman" (the city). No longer is Báez referring to male or female but to "*we* swing creating our own tale." Hence, collectively, both men and women are central to fostering a healthy design of the city. Male and female here are regarded as a unitary part of a broader structure. They are the "we," the similitude of a marginal city collective. But this collective is crooked and happy in its crookedness, or so it seems. Báez's poem is placing a mirror in the face of "we" or "the marginal city collective" to reflect upon the ways a corrupt city culture is designed, supported, and normalized by its inhabitants. Like Ntozake Shange, Báez too is asserting the knowledgeable feminine space (symbolized in this case as the city) in the consciousness-raising process of Black women and the collective Black community. As noted by Jones in "Conjuring as Radical Re/Membering in the Works of Shay Youngblood," the feminine space of wisdom that many African American women artists embrace, motivates social activism.[70] This clarifies why Báez's artistic work is at once a call for resistance against patriarchal gender and racial oppression, and a renewed connection to the city, one that allows for a "*just* cupid" where crookedness and repression are no longer embraced.

As is the case with the entire text, Báez's performative articulation in this poem operates to further transcend the normativities and restrictions imposed on Black women in the United States and the Dominican Republic. The elasticity of her body motions reflect the struggles that she manages to bypass in order to fit instantaneously in both locations. Her nationalism then is one of multiple identities that she manages to affirm across borders. It is in this way that she performs a de-territorial cultural nationalism that makes democratic liberation and transcendence possible for her. Báez's performance of her "living culture" speaks to the futurity of the African diaspora in the United States and beyond. African American history is in part a transnational history that can be traced through multiple geographical spaces and cultures. The ability to navigate through local, national, and (inter)national cultural historicities of blackness could re-ignite "forgotten" templates of agency that could foster creative new ways of individual and collective liberation and psychic freedom.

NOTES

1. This chapter is an adaptation of portions of my doctoral dissertation (2012) in which I address the decolonization of racial and gender performativity in Josefina Báez's performance text *Dominicanish*. Translations in this chapter come from my adaptations or versions already positioned in the performance text. .
2. These artists created music under the Fania music label in New York City. Their music spoke to the U.S. Latinx population and to those beyond New York City and the United States borders. These Latinx artists,

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in many ways, autographed the self in the environment as they sang about everything from the New York subway trains to the economic and social disparities in Latin American countries.

3. Vanessa Valdes, "'There Is No Incongruence Here': Hispanic Notes in the Works of Ntozake Shange," *CLA Journal* 5, no. 23 (2009): 131–144.

4. Both Caribbean immigrants and U.S.-born children of Caribbean parents have made their mark in shaping crucial turning points in the development of African American identity. A few of these Caribbean descendants are Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and Shirley Chisholm.

5. Daryl Cumber Dance, "African American Literature by Writers of Caribbean Descent," in *The Cambridge History of African American Literature*, ed. Maryemma Graham and Jerry W. Ward Jr. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 377–404.

6. For an example of Ntozake Shange's transcultural Black women's performativity, see her choreopoem "for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf: a choreopoem." New York: Macmillan, 1977.

7. Though Emilia Durán-Almarza does not define Báez's performative strategy as "de-territorial cultural nationalism," she does acknowledge Báez's ability to circumvent dominant national cultural ways. Durán-Almarza, "At Home at the Border: Performing the Transcultural Body in Josefina Báez's *Dominicanish*," in *Transnationalism and Resistance: Experience and Experiment in Women's Writing*, ed. Adele Parker and Stephenie Young (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), 45–68.

8. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is an Indian American postcolonial literary critic and theorist known for her work in subaltern studies and transnational feminism.

9. As noted by Camilla Stevens, Báez moved to the United States in 1972. Stevens, "'Home Is Where Theatre Is': Performing Dominican Transnationalism," *Latin American Theatre Review* 44, no. 1 (2010): 46.

10. Rubén Rumbaut, "The Crucible Within: Ethnic Identity, Self-Esteem, and Segmented Assimilation among Children of Immigrants," *International Migration Review* 28, no. 4 (1994): 748–794.

11. Báez's reflections on race, color, language, African American language, and U.S. Black artistic culture in the text *Dominicanish* provide evidence of her understanding of her situatedness as a Black woman in the United States.

12. Silvio Torres-Saillant reiterates Jorge Duany's assertion that international migration influenced Puerto Rican and Dominican understanding of Black identity and negritude. Torres-Saillant, *Introduction to Dominican Blackness* (Dominican Studies Institute Research Monograph) (New York: CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, 2010).

13. Ramón Rivera-Servera, "Apartarte/Casarte by Josefina Báez, New York City, 21 May 1999," *Theatre Journal* 52, no. 1 (2000): 110–112.

14. BWW News Desk, "Harlem Stage Presents 10th Anniversary of Dominicanish, 11/6," *Broadway World*, November 6, 2009, https://www.broadwayworld.com/article/Harlem-Stage-Presents-10th-Anniversary-Performance-of-DOMINICANISH-116-20091105.

15. Juan Flores, *The Diaspora Strikes Back: Caribeño Tales of Learning and Turning* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 193.

16. Báez asserts in "In Inglis" that Claudio Mir arranged the performance texts and directed the performance piece. Josefina Báez, "In Inglis," in *Dominicanish: A Performance Text* (New York: I Ombe Press, 2000), 6.

17. Claudio Mir, "Orchestrating a Journey," in *Dominicanish: A Performance Text*, by Josefina Báez, 11.

18. Silvio Torres-Saillant, "The Tribulations of Blackness: Stages in Dominican Racial Identity," *Latin American Perspectives* 25, no. 3 (May 1998): 126–146.

19. Isabel Zakrewski Brown, *Culture and Customs of the Dominican Republic* (London: Greenwood Press, 1999), 30–37.

20. Ibid., 30–37, 57–60. Jesse Hoffnung-Garskoff, *A Tale of Two Cities: Santo Domingo and New York after 1950* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 1–43.

21. Bernard Diederich, *Trujillo: The Death of the Goat* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978), 71.

22. Torres-Saillant, "The Tribulations of Blackness," 126–146.

23. Báez, *Dominicanish*, 7.

24. Ibid. This is a translation of the passage in Spanish from "Origen" in *Dominicanish*, which reads: "Dejaba las palabras en la primera sílaba."

25. The poem pens "American Bel" as opposed to "American Belle" which in and of itself is a transliteration from French to English to Spanish on the characterization of the traditional southern depiction of the American woman. This woman is often White, docile, and dolled up according to traditional standards. As a Black

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Dominican, the little girl in the poem "Origen" is challenging this classical and folkloric representation of the American woman.

26. Linguistic doubling is a strategy frequently used by Ntozake Shange, who also introduces Spanish cues as a form of doubling in her own poetic and theatrical English language presentations of the Black woman's experience.

27. I use the term "living culture" to clarify that Báez's performances are produced as conditions experienced by her. Her poems express the experiences of herself as a subject in the moment.

28. Flores, *The Diaspora Strikes Back*, 191.

29. "Vital" is Mir's critical analysis of Josefina Báez's performance philosophy. Claudio Mir, "Vital," in *Dominicanish: A Performance Text*, 11.

30. Ibid., 9.

31. Ntozake Shange, *If I Can Cook/You Know God Can* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998).

32. Báez, *Dominicanish*, 9.

33. Báez calls her performative style, which combines poetry, music, Dominican York vernacular, and *kuchipudi*, a performance autology.

34. Alicia Arrizon, *Queering Mestizaje: Transculturation and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 44; Silvio Torres-Saillant, "Frontispiece," in *Dominicanish*, 13–14.

35. The multiple parts that comprise the individual.

36. *Dominicanish* (first performance), 1999, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpFY7GMoWGU, video.

37. Ibid.

38. Rivera-Servera, "Apartarte/Casarte by Josefina Báez," 110–112.

39. Báez, *Dominicanish*, 37.

40. Camilla Stevens also acknowledges Báez's reference to "Home is where theatre is." In Stevens's observation, theatre allows for "participat[ion] in a multi-local public sphere" (p. 43). Stevens, "'Home Is Where Theatre Is': Performing Dominican Transnationalism." *Latin American Theatre Review* 44, no. 1 (2010): 43. Liamar Almarza Durán conducts an interview with Josefina Báez to acknowledge her interpretation of "Home is where theatre is." Durán deduces, like Stevens, that "home is a portable site" (p. 53). Durán-Almarza, "At Home at the Border: Performing the Transcultural Body in Josefina Báez's *Dominicanish*," in *Transnationalism and Resistance: Experience and Experiment in Women's Writing*, 53.

41. Evelyn O'Callaghan, *Woman Version: Theoretical Approaches to West Indian Fiction by Women* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993).

42. Ibid., 87.

43. It is not typical to see signs about Colombian and Haitian witchdoctors in Spanish. Neither is it typical to read about bush doctors on signs in the representative American landscape. However, it seems like the autographer in *Dominicanish* is reading a typical Dominican sight in New York City.

44. Both Camilla Stevens and Liamar Durán Almarza acknowledge the ways in which Báez fuses and defuses cultural borders through her performances and/or texts. Stevens, "'Home Is Where Theatre Is': Performing Dominican Transnationalism." *Latin American Theatre Review* 44, no. 1 (2010): 29–48. Durán-Almarza, Liamar. "At Home at the Border: Performing the Transcultural Body in Josefina Báez's *Dominicanish*," in *Transnationalism and Resistance: Experience and Experiment in Women's Writing*, 53.

45. Torres-Saillant, "The Tribulations of Blackness," 1998.

46. Popular African American music group from the 1970s.

47. Báez, *Dominicanish*, 26.

48. Ibid., 55.

49. I use the notion of "Báez's urbanity" to refer to the ways in which she engenders the spirit of the city. She is sharing the common knowledge of the city. I think Báez is presenting this common knowledge through her visual reading by centralizing those aspects in her surroundings that are commonly assumed and understood in her city space.

50. Báez, *Dominicanish*, 42.

51. Ibid., 42.

52. Ibid., 55.

53. Ibid., 56.

54. I use Santiago-Irizarry's chapter to introduce the system of law and order as another institutional structure that is presented by Báez as partaking in the maintenance of symbolic subjects that are complicit in the

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dominant social order, thus maintaining the continued colonization of modern racialized female subjects. Vilma Santiago-Irizarry, "Deceptive Solidity: Public Signs, Civic Inclusion, and Language Rights in New York City (and Beyond)," in *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York,* ed. Augustín Laó-Montes and Arlene Dávila (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 473–491.

55. Raquel Z. Rivera describes the analogous social reality of lower-class urban Latinos and African Americans in the New York City social environment. Rivera, "Hip Hop, Puerto Ricans and Ethno-Racial Identity in New York," in *Mambo Montage*, 237.

56. Báez, *Dominicanish*, 55.

57. Ibid., 57.

58. Ibid., 59.

59. Rivera, "Hip Hop, Puerto Ricans and Ethno-Racial Identity in New York," 254.

60. I explain the idea of *the real* in the following segment of the chapter. It is in essence the ability to experience freedom, equality, justice, and self-expression without institutional marginalization or restriction.

61. Báez, *Dominicanish*, 46.

62. Ibid., 46.

63. Ibid., 46.

64. Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, "Crossing Hispaniola: Cultural Erotics at the Haitian-Dominican Borderlands," in *Performance in the Borderlands,* ed. Ramón H. Severa-Rivera and Harvey Young (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 97–127.

65. Báez, *Dominicanish*, 32.

66. Liamar Almarza Durán also contends from her critical analysis of Báez's *Dominicanish* with New York City that this city-space allows for unique (re)creations of hybrid cultures that are informed by marginal Spanish Caribbean cultures. Durán-Almarza, "At Home at the Border: Performing the Transcultural Body in Josefina Báez's *Dominicanish*," in *Transnationalism and Resistance: Experience and Experiment in Women's Writing*, 50–51.

67. Báez, *Dominicanish*, 34. In her text, Báez utilizes the cliché "groovin' with soul," which was popularized during the 1970s in African American culture. She adopts it through her memories of the Isley Brothers and their music as she references that listening to their music allowed her to groove with soul. Her moments of "groove" nourished her intellect and senses. These moments were not attainable nor supported in other social institutions. Nothing else mattered during these moments. I use Báez's conceptual understanding of this cliché in the same way, thus to embody Báez's notion of a "conducting line" and her ability to attain moments of subjective refashioning through the poetics of sensibility oftentimes nourished in and around the very city that hampers these emotional responses.

68. Joni L. Jones, "Conjuring as Radical Re/Membering in the Works of Shay Youngblood," in *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora*, ed. Paul Carter Harrison, Victor Leo Walker II, and Gus Edwards (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 229. Author now known as Omi Osun Joni L. Jones.

69. Báez, *Dominicanish*, 41.

70. Jones, "Conjuring as Radical Re/Membering," 228–229.

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