“Put the Brassiere on the Cross”
Performing “Spanish” Fem(me)ininities and Sexualities through Komfa in Guyana

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Abstract

Komfa is a Guyanese practice involving elaborate rituals dedicated to “the Seven Nations” of ancestor-spirits who re/present colonial British demography. Komfa’s Spanish nation is most frequently understood as presenting queer subjecthood through overtly sexualized and (trans)gendered performances. To Guyanese, “Spanish” generally refers to Venezuelans. Pre- and post-emancipation histories of mobility within the borderlands of Guyana and Venezuela illuminate how Komfa practitioners embrace ambiguities of “noncompliant” genders and sexualities. Devotees who embody Spanish spirits tend to be transgender, identify as gay or antiman, and/or share intimate relations with partners of the same sex. Many also engage in sex labor. Such orientations, identifications, and occupations performed during trance possession and “secular” contexts of daily life may be re-valued through Komfa, providing non-conforming Guyanese with a refuge from societal discriminations through which they transform conceptions of selfhood by embracing the agencies and lived experiences of “non-Guyanese” within a symbolic economy of erotic alterity.

Keywords

There was something superstitiously holy about such an unholy woman...
The demon’s sex and gender was as confusing as the origin of the chase. Was it half-man, half-woman they pursued? Could any creature truly change its sex at will and take on a different subtlety and cruel intention?

Wilson Harris 1985:310

Queer Guyana is a borderland... The marginalization that encompasses life in the borderland has resulted in a counterstance.

Renatta Fordyce 2018:143

Central to this space is a painting by a young Guyanese woman called The Yard. It is a place of water and fire and flowers and trees, filled with Caribbean women and children working and playing and being.

Audre Lorde 2020 [1986]:155

“There is a saying in Guyana that most men who are in the Komfa arena, they are gay,” Winston Noel explained, “because, reason being, they have a female entity, and that is who they manifest,” or ritually embody through processes of “possession.” “Likewise it goes with the females,” Winston added. “Those who are gay, lesbians, they would say that they have a master in them which is a man. So we find that because of such, people say that only gays and lesbians are in the Spiritual Church. It’s not true. There are both gay and straight people, males and females.”

1 The 2020 edition cited lists the original publication date for the essay/diary as 1988, but the date Lorde records for this particular diary entry is 1986.
Winston is a middle-aged high-school teacher and Komfa devotee who has thought considerably about the roles of gender and sexuality in the ritual performances of his Spiritual family members. For instance, Winston further elaborated on reasons why “sometimes we find that a male who is not gay, sometimes within a function or a service they will portray a feminine action. Likewise, the female will portray a kind of male action. But when they get back to themselves, they don’t know what it was that they had done a minute or two before. People will have to tell them.” Casually encapsulating profound cosmological knowledge—Komfa philosophy—Winston shared that “males will have female entities and females will have male entities. It just is so, and Spiritualists understand that. That’s how people are. Gay or straight people.”

Winston’s luminous analyses did not stop there, as he proceeded to unpack the entangled ways in which Guyanese gender, sexual, and ethnoracial assemblages intersect and interact specifically within Komfa ritual performance. Speaking of two male-identifying Spiritual leaders of vibrant congregations, Winston described how, “for example, Arch[bishop] Mark, he has in the Indian realms a man, which is Mr. Singh. With the Spanish, he has a female Spanish lady within him. For the African and the Dutch it’s a man. So we find that the only female entity he has within is Spanish.” He followed up adding that this dynamic of men manifesting spirits identified as Spanish women was familiar. “With [Bishop] Conrad, too. Conrad has a female entity in the Spanish nation. She is Anita.”

“Gay people find comfort within the Spiritual Church,” according to Winston and many other practitioners. “Rather than the Pentecostal Church or the Anglican or so, they find comfort here. Reason being,” he offered, “that the Spiritual churches, they cover for them, knowing that the entity that they come up with—we find that because of the life that they’re living, the church expects them to have the entity that they have. So that’s how it’s allowed and understood within the Spiritual—a comfort gays wouldn’t find in the other churches, where on the pulpit they get torn-down and preached against.”

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2 This essay is based on 22 months of field research in Guyana, between 2014 and 2018. Research took place at Spiritual churches in Georgetown and villages in East Coast Demerara, East and West Bank Demerara, Mahaica, Mahaicony, West Coast Berbice, New Amsterdam, and Linden—but primarily with six churches in the Georgetown area. The methodology for this study comprised most explicitly of what Geertz (1998) has termed “deep hanging out,” or what Guyanese often call gyaafing (Allsopp 2003:249). Along with participant observation and interviews, methods also included collecting oral family and personal histories of practitioners and of their spirit-guides—a methodology proposed in large part by devotee-communities.
Komfa ritual is devoted to “the Seven Nations,” or “realms,” as Winston indicated—expansive families of ancestor-spirits whose gendered and ethnoracialized identities re/present colonial British demography. Spirits from the Spanish nation provide practitioners with a direct means to explore gender and sexual subjectivities, as well as to embody noncompliant personhoods. As Winston’s account presages, mediums realize transgressively gendered and sexualized practices through manifestation or embodiment of ancestors identified as “Spanish.” An introduction to Komfa cosmologies and their articulations with African diasporic onto-epistemologies provides a needed context for understanding the significance of these practices, ways of deeply knowing and being, for people’s lives. Taking seriously practitioners’ appreciation of the instrumentality of spirits—listening to mediums and ancestors—is also necessary for “a real restructuring of postcolonial and sexuality studies” in the Caribbean, which, as Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley (2010:28) has justly contended, “will only take place when the academy listens to other kinds of theorists,” such as Winston and others whose perspectives are presented herein. Understood as the most outwardly erotic of Komfa’s families of presences, attending to the theorizations of Spanish spirits in particular has much to offer. For “the erotic,” after all, “is the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge” (Lorde 2020 [1978]:33).

After briefly introducing Komfa, this article then describes a ritual event during which the manifestation of Spanish spirits was tied to affirmative self-expressions of Guyanese sexual minorities. Connections between queerness and the Spanish nation of spirits emerged in the Guyana hinterlands, as cultural spaces which continue to present vital resources for Komfa cosmologies of the more populous Atlantic coast. The presentation of queer subjecthood through overtly sexualized and (trans)gendered performances in Komfa contrasts with dominant homophobic and transphobic Guyanese attitudes and stereotypes. Examining these aspects of historical, geographical, and social context will be key to further exploration of the performance of gender and

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3 The Seven Nations of Komfa ancestors are generally understood as African, Amerindian/Indigenous, Chinese, Dutch/Surinamese Maroon, English/White, Indian, and Spanish. See Asantewa 2016 and Gibson 2001. As discussed below, one of Guyana’s pre-independence motto holds that Guyana is the Land of Six Peoples, referring to Africans, Amerindians/Indigenous, Chinese, European/White, Indian, and Portuguese.

sexuality in Komfa, before then situating the Guyanese practice in broader discussions of Caribbean alterity.

1 The Komfa Arena

As a profoundly communal set of ritual practices, Komfa is a unifying feature of what are known in Guyana as Spiritual churches. Devotees—the majority of whom are Afro-descendant women—refer to themselves as Faithists, Spiritualists, Spiritual People, or Komfa People. For most Guyanese, however, Komfa refers explicitly to an altered state of being or “possession,” when one is said to “catch Komfa” or “manifest spirit” (Asantewa 2016). For those who engage in such practices, Komfa is much more amorphous, expressing the “synaesthetic totality” (Rubin 1974:6) of ritual performance and its lived efficacies. Heavily costumed devotees embodying “entrees,” as spirit representatives of the seven major ethnoracialized groups of colonial Guiana (now written Guyana) are known, dance to their own repertoire of songs around a lavishly decorated and stocked altar. According to practitioners, the between-worldly social interaction that happens around such altars responds to the felt needs of those gathered. For many Komfa People, seeking affirmation of their erotic “counterstance” permits opposition to the cruelties of heteronormative society.

Practitioners describe Komfa as a practice of deeply understanding, knowing, and continually becoming one’s “ancestors,” and thus oneself through them (compare Espírito Santo 2015). Such associations support practitioners to embrace ambiguities and inherited traumas of racialization, ethnic self-identification, and interpellation by others (compare Pérez 2011). Komfa People tend not to explicitly extend such thinking about race to gender and sexuality. Their ritual performances, however, demonstrate that spirits have much to teach the living about the role of gender creativity and nonheterosexualities in the lives of the spirits, in the social contexts during which they once lived, and among survivors they continue to visit.

Manifestation allows Spiritualists to interrogate, historicize, and “desediment” social categories that generally remain unquestioned, or unquestionable, as natural. Many come to know themselves through trance as heritors of

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See Chandler 2014. As Wolfe (2016:6) demonstrates, “the well-worn piety that race is a social construct does not get us very far.” Spiritualists deconstruct and desediment the ontological ground of social categories through ritual works, often trying to explain “how ... races /[genders/sexualities are] constructed [and sedimented], under what circumstances, and in whose interests?”
complexly layered personal heritages, although their ancestors may not have direct biological or genealogical connections. Such performance events cannot be restricted to one of the “available” racialized ethnic designations. Popularly termed “The Land of Six Peoples,” many Guyanese understand a (potential) “seventh people” to be Dougla, or those of “mixed” ancestry. Komfa ritual cosmologies, however, envision Spanish (as well as Portuguese and Dutch) ancestries in ways that are incongruent with conventional Guyanese racial ideologies. Through embodying the spirits, practitioners often come to recognize ancestries—and themselves—as inherently multiple and mutable (compare Wekker 2006), and so tend to “entertain” all the ancestors alike, as their own. Sexual and gender ambiguities likewise emerge through spirit manifestation and its underlying ontology, as Winston alluded to, and as illustrated in the ritual described below.

2 Aunty/Antiman Altar-Performance

Komfa’s Spiritual services are elaborate rituals. One moment of an all-night event, held in honor of a local bishop’s birthday and attended by about 25 people, mostly women, will be considered here. Many were dressed in body-length robes of white, blue, or “African-print” fabric.6 In his opening remarks, presiding bishop Conrad McDonald explained that he had created the shrine to invite “Yemanja, Mother of Waters, and the Spanish nation,” as his first-ever attempt to perform such work.7

This moment occurred after the initial “Celestial” or “Heights” portion of the service had concluded and just prior to the “Terrestrial Nation Work” of ancestral spirits (see Asantewa 2016; Gibson 2001). After hymns, Bishop Conrad lit candles and incense, anointing those gathered with oils, perfumes, holy blackwater, and liquors assembled on the altar.8 The bishop then withdrew from the ritual space. Drinks and snacks were distributed to guests and music was

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6 On global histories of African-print textiles, see Quick et al. 2017.
7 Orisha, such as the divinity Yemanja/Yemoja/Yemayá, are of West African Yoruba heritage, introduced to Guyana and the world through the transatlantic and other slave trades (see Otero & Falola 2013). Typically known as “African Powers” in Guyana, Orisha are conceptualized within Komfa as representatives of the African nation.
8 Blackwater, or blacka, the minerally, tannically, and botanically rich waters emanating from sources deep within the Amazonian highlands, is near-universal in its efficacious applications in socially relating with spirits. As Gibson (1992:103) describes, “Comfa practitioners consider the water [held in vessels on altars] to be life, and black water collected from the creeks is symbolic of spirits who can cure illnesses.”
started on a portable sound system. Within a few minutes, Bishop Conrad reappeared, now in trendy, tight-fitting clothes, carrying a bouquet and beer bottle in one hand and a cutlass in the other, a cigarette between his lips.9

Attendees were enjoying refreshments when someone in the crowd yelled out, “Them Spanish spirit arrive!” Another added, “Put the brassiere on the cross!” which was met with laughter from the guests. A reggae-soul version of Ben E. King’s “Spanish Harlem” blazed through the speakers as drummers scurried to their Komfa drums, saxophone, and keyboard and began playing along. In response to someone placing a lacy purple bra atop the horizontal beam of a large wooden cross that sanctified the Heights altar in the room, someone seated near me said, disapprovingly and loudly, “They make a antiman altar.”

Most snickered at the comment, but no one objected to the impromptu assemblage. Rather, the “bra on the cross” became a locus of community attention, a crux between cosmological and temporal realms, as altars and items

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9 In Creolese, or Guyanese Creole language, cutlass is a general term for any blade, especially machetes, perhaps the most common of Guyanese tools. For an illuminating examination of the cutlass in relation to gender-based violence in the Caribbean, particularly Guyana and Trinidad, see Parsard 2016. Creolese terms and grammar usage employed by interlocutors is maintained throughout the essay.
comprising them are understood. Conrad responded to the comment and laughter, clarifying for those gathered, “Is not a antiman altar. Is a Spanish altar. Not a Catholic Spanish. You know who I mean. Them Spanish-girl altar. You could call it antiman if you want.” As the night progressed, more Spanish spirits arrived, and many of their performances—by women and a few men alike—included momentarily donning the sanctified purple bra. Bishop Conrad’s concession that, after all, “you could call it antiman” pointed to the transformations that went otherwise unremarked.

“Antiman” is understood polysemously, designating both anti-man (against or opposing “man”) and aunty-man (“aunty” being the primary Creolese honorific for adult women regardless of relation) (Burton 1997:154,269; Fordyce 2018). Many LGBTQI+ Guyanese have accepted and redirected the derogatory epithet. Yet, the bishop reappropriated the homophobic and hyperheterosexist conceptions of antiman (as unwell, immoral, and “demonically possessed”) by linking antiman sexuality with “Spanish” ancestral ethnicity (Carrico 2012).

3 Hinterland Horizons and the Spanish Nation of Ancestors

Spirits come from the past, but the work they perform is in the present for the future. While people’s relationships with their spirits can improve their current and future lives, spirits are old, so interrogating their historical emergence within Guyanese jumbi-scapes is important to understanding what they mean and do for Komfa People who continue to manifest them. Komfa cosmologies, pedagogies, and relationships cultivated between spirits and devotees comprise special forms of what Jacqui Alexander (2005:5–7, 172–75, 300–1) has viewed as “subordinated knowledges,” ones certainly “worth considering as legitimate epistemologies” (Nixon & King 2013:7).

Faizal Deen explains that “the antiman is both a negation of man but also an auntieman as in a womanish man—a man who keeps company with aunties, with women. That’s how I understood the antiman when I was growing up in the 1970s. I have noticed these days the default is the antiman but I grew up with both spellings and both ideas” (Cummings, Mohabir & Deen 2018:19). For “Aunty-man” glossed as “hermaphrodite,” see Quow (1899:39), and for “Antiman” as “a sodomite,” see Kirke (1898:348). For “Aunty Men” as “those very fond of acting as if they were of the opposite sex,” see the coverage of an 1884 marriage ceremony between two men in Georgetown in “An Extraordinary Story / Alleged Marriage of Two Men in Camp Street,” Demerara Daily Chronicle, Sunday, September 28, 1884, p. 3.

Jumbi(e) are often considered as “ghosts” or “spirits.” On “spiritscapes,” see Roberts & Roberts 2018.
In Venezuela, whence Komfa’s Spanish spirits descend, gender and sexual identities have developed in ways different than in Guyana. Transgender and transsexual Venezuelan women refer to themselves as transformistas, constructing an identity category that local Guyanese interpretations have not afforded (Ochoa 2014). The same holds true for travesti identities in Brazil (Kulick 1998; Silva & Ornat 2015). Komfa’s Spanish spirits, like those manifested at the bishop’s birthday celebration, can be traced to the social circumstances and locations connecting colonial Guiana and newly independent Venezuela. Conceptions of this liminal borderland—known as the Essequibo—have long encouraged the “informal flow” of people, goods, and ideas, including those about sexuality and gender. Most Komfa churches, including Bishop Conrad’s, are located in and around Georgetown on the country’s coast. Yet the Essequibo region and other outlying “interior hinterlands” are fundamental to Komfa ritual geographies and practices, as these locales are also connected to the daily lives of many “coastlanders.”

3.1 The Essequibo

While at first a “backwater” in an already obscure and distant set of colonies known as the “Wild Coast,” the Essequibo became important to Dutch, Spanish, and later British, Venezuelan, and Guyanese interests because of minerals and other resources located in the area. People enslaved in Africa were brought to or through the Essequibo territory, including after the Slave Trade Act of 1807, and Indigenous and other people were forcibly moved throughout the region and beyond before and after formal abolition. Significant trade in “bush” medicines—tonics, oils, and other materia medica of plant, animal, and mineral origin—and their accompanying knowledge continues in the region (Van Andel et al. 2015). Such means of therapy are vital to many Guyanese, Komfa People in particular.

Mines, and the camps and villages surrounding them in the Essequibo, became an extension of (and in many ways prototypes for) plantation economies and labor regimes—political structures regulating productive and reproductive labor through which male control of women’s bodies played central

13 Struggles over control of Essequibo resources continue today, as do the Venezuela–Guyana border dispute over sovereignty of the entire Essequibo region; see Tamboli 2019.
14 Eltis 1972; Horne 2007. Tituba, the infamously maligned woman of Salem, Massachusetts, is a probable example of an Indigenous Guianese who was enslaved and sent to North America via Barbados; see Breslaw 1995.
material and symbolic roles (Russell-Wood 1977; Thompson 1987). While many men were drawn to the Amazon by the 1890 “gold rush,” fewer women are remembered as accompanying them (Josiah 2011). The skewed sex ratio encouraged gender-based violence, forced prostitution, and sex labor, first among Indigenous women and girls living near mining areas and later among primarily coastal Afro-descendants, as well as those from neighboring Latin American colonies and nations (Forte 1998; Kempadoo 2004).

Guyanese on the coast tend to stereotype all women working in “the bush” as so-called “prostitutes.” By extension, they associate Venezuelans, or Spanish, and often Indigenous “Amerindian” women and girls, with sex labor (Trotz & Roopnaraine 2009). With the unrelenting political and economic crises facing Venezuela—which along with Guyana claims the whole of the Essequibo region as its sovereign territory—Venezuelan women make up a sizable proportion of Georgetown-area sex workers. They are joined by other Spanish-speaking women, primarily from the Dominican Republic but also Cuba and Colombia (Red Thread 1999; Tamboli 2019:431). Translocal iterations of anti-Black colorism and tropes of exoticization attached to Latinas in Guyana and elsewhere contribute to contemporary associations between “Spanish people” and Spanish spirits, as well as to understandings of gender performance by, and sexualities of, both groups.

15 Consider also, as discussed below, how in Curaçao all Spanish-speaking women are referred to as “SanDom,” a term locally synonymous with “prostitute” (Kempadoo 2004:105).

16 Sharpe & Pinto (2006:251n.2) observe, for instance, that “unlike the Dominican women whose island they share, Haitian women are not a significant part of the migrant sex labor
3.2 “Have You Ever Heard of a Woman Porknocker?”

Folk traditions that draw from understandings of Guyanese histories and socio-cultural contexts, particularly in the hinterlands, also inform Komfa practice. Individual sex workers—particularly in the “interior” bush—have over generations been memorialized in Guyana’s robust “folksong” and storytelling traditions. A local oral genre about “ole-time bushman and bushstory” (Cambridge 1987:116), sometimes called “porkknocker story,” records the lives of “porkknocker ladies,” the female prospectors and women supporting mining communities through domestic labor, treating illnesses, and commerce of all kinds, including sex work (Josiah 2011:45–47). While the narratives are not necessarily about the miners but rather “tales believed to have originated among them or told by them,” “bushwomen” feature prominently as characters portraying both everyday and extraordinary experiences of “bush-life.”

Singing folk songs and reciting folklore, including porkknocker tales, are central—yet often underregarded—elements of Komfa performances. Some gatherings sing and recount folk stories as ritual interludes, especially as the night turns to morning and the ancestors require intensified “entertainment.” In more exceptional instances, practitioners repurpose the “graphic names” of bushwomen featured in these aural representations as false names, or affectionate apppellations for their own Spanish spirit guides. Komfa practitioners initially come to know their Spanish ancestors, as with their other guides, as archetypical personas, often with a generic name and a nebulous biography only to be fleshed-out through revelatory dreams, visions, divination, and trance possession. Repetition of folk songs and porkknocker tales helps practitioners connect with their Spanish guides, providing tangible links to reawaken “memory [as] the raw material of history” from which to reenact the lives of forebears, spawning embodied, performative “counter-narratives” of the past (Le Goff 1992:xi, quoted in Roberts & Roberts 1996). These stories, often centering on experiences of “traveling women,” present opportunities for “critical fabulation” (Hartman 2008) through what Angelique Nixon (2015:63)

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17 Quote is from Genetha, the final novel in Roy Heath’s “Guyana trilogy” (1981:148).
20 See Viarnes (2010:332) on spirits’ names and “generic” stereotypical “slave names” used in Cuba to conceal an ancestor’s “secret, original name known [possibly] only to the devotee.”
has identified as “alternative narratives” performed “at the intersections of race, gender, class, nation, and sexuality” (compare Glave 2008:10).

4 Gender and Sexuality in The Land of Six Peoples

Spiritualists’ understandings of gender and sexual diversity, and the related practices exploring queer subjectxhood through the manifestation of Spanish ancestors, often run counter to typical heteronormative and homophobic Guyanese attitudes, which are reinforced through colonial legal precedents that criminalize sexual acts between consenting adult men (Jackman 2017). Guyanese who present nonnormative genders and embrace queer sexualities are commonly pathologized through pejorative associations with cross-gendered spirit—or “demon”—possession21 grounded in conservative and evangelical Christian, Hindu, and Muslim doctrines (Carrico 2012).

While many Komfa communities do serve as refuges—offering “comfort” and “cover,” in Winston’s words—other Spiritualist churches sustain societally entrenched discrimination against LGBTI people.22 Leaders of a certain church warned me: “You must be careful going by them and them and any-old-body. There’s a whole set a antiman in this thing here. You might not know it, yet.”23 However, a common conception expressed poignantly by a friend holds that “those Spanish ways are part and parcel of our national and spiritual inheritance.” By describing them as “Spanish ways,” this friend was making sure I understood that antiman ways were to be embraced and honored like other features of the “national and spiritual” inheritance—ancestors.

Labels like “queer,” “gay,” and “lesbian” are not always embraced in Guyana as they are in other contexts. As in much of the Caribbean, some Guyanese do not see such identities as directly pertinent to their lives and self-conceptions (compare Campbell 2014; Glave 2008:9; Kempadoo 2004). In conversation with Audre Lorde, Surinamese-Dutch writer Astrid Roemer described how “simply doing things, without giving them a name” helps in “preserving rituals and secrets between women.” Roemer explains that “in the community from which


22 Scholarship on adjacent Black Atlantic religious formations has begun to explore gender and sexual diversity within these traditions. For examples see Allen 2012; Beliso-De Jesús 2015; Conner & Sparks 2004; Escalante 2019; Gill 2018a; Pérez 2016; Strongman 2019; and Wekker 2006.

23 On the utility of rumor, gossip, and other forms of fugitive speech for studying Caribbean histories, see Derby 2014.
I come, there is not so much talk about the phenomenon of women having relations with other women. There are, after all, things which aren’t to be given names—giving them names kills them.” Tellingly, she goes on: “But we do have age-old rituals originating from Africa by which women can make quite clear that special relations exist between them. For instance, birthday rituals can be recognized by anyone and are quite obvious.” What she describes is not capitulation to prevailing heteropatriarchal homophobia but rather a way of “remaining loyal” to self and “to the ways in which expression has been given from of old in my community to special relationships between women.”

4.1 **Sex Labor in Guyana**

The marginalization of the LGBTQI+ community sometimes entails the conflation of nonnormative sexualities with sex labor. While most accounts of sex workers center their portrayals and analyses on experiences of cisgender women, “the trans sex worker” features in these same accounts as “an often-mentioned, complex, and titillating curiosity: positioned as both sideshow oddity and piteous rhetorical object in much writing on sex work” (Rev & Geist 2017:112). While such representations “customarily allude to the latent entanglement between trans identity and trans sex work,” these connections are seldom meaningfully explored or contextualized (Rev & Geist 2017:112). Much as when other entrees manifest in Komfa ritual to work through and desediment ethnoracial stereotypes, Spanish ancestors often present themselves as trans sex workers to implore their interlocutors to take seriously historically entangled sentiments and their ramifications for gender-, race-, and religion-based oppressions today.

Uncritical references to trans women within sex-labor narratives perpetuate widespread stigmatization of trans individuals, whose mere presence in public spaces too often incites unwanted attention and violent aggression from law enforcement and men looking for sex. In Guyana as elsewhere, violence

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24 In Wekker (1993:152–54), who is quoting from a “public discussion” between Roemer and Lorde held in Amsterdam in the summer of 1986. As Deen attests above, circulation of LGBTQI+ identity terms has shifted in the decades since Roemer’s comments (Cummings, Mohabir & Deen 2018).

25 Through what is widely known as “walking while trans,” “transgender women of color are often profiled by police as engaging in sex work for simply being outside and going about their daily routines” (Strangio 2014). Contrastingly, sex workers who are men, including trans men, are made invisible in most accounts, as are women as consumers of sex labor. On the widespread violence—including murder—committed against Black trans women in the United States, see Rick Rojas & Vanessa Swales, “18 Transgender Killings This Year Raise Fears of an ‘Epidemic,’” *New York Times*, September 27, 2019; and Snorton 2017.
against trans women and other LGBTQI+ people is rampant, in part because of assumed associations with sex labor. Similarly, while two main critical approaches to studies of prostitution have emerged, namely economic and antipatriarchal analyses, more recent and region-specific scholarship such as that by Kamala Kempadoo has demonstrated the necessity of intersectional perspectives that foreground race, ethnicity, and nationality as central components conditioning the historically embedded power dynamics of sex labor. Consider, for instance, as Kempadoo urges, the ways that ethnoracialized and national identities have converged in the construction of “a category of women on the island” of Curaçao “known as the ‘SanDom’—a synonym for prostitute” applied by residents and visitors to not only Dominican women but “any Spanish-speaking woman on the island” (Kempadoo 2004: 88, 105).

4.2 Performing Spanish Ancestors

Perhaps reflecting Guyana’s limited “Spanish colonial experience” (Khan 1993: 191), as well as the marginalization faced by many “Spanish” people and their lingering spirits in Guyana, this ancestral nation tends to compel the fewest material—and bodily—re/presentations in Komfa churches and ritual praxis. During her research with practitioners in early-1990s Guyana, Kean Gibson reported that she was never “privy to an invitation” to a service dedicated to Spanish ancestors. She also affirmed that many practitioners shy away from entertaining the Spanish nation, characterizing such spirits as “prostitutes” and the mediums who manifest them as “promiscuous homosexuals and lesbians” (Gibson 2001:80). Few altars and shrines are dedicated to Spanish ancestors within Spiritualist churches. The aforementioned Spanish Work was one of the rare times I observed a Spanish spirit “arrive” outside of all-nation banquets during which spirit representatives from all seven nations are entertained (Gibson 2005:210). “The bra on the cross” was also one of the few times I witnessed a material creation index Spanish spirit presence. While other nations tend to be well-represented through permanent altar installations, only infrequently have I observed small ceramic statues or cloth dolls on altars that devotees identified as “Madamas,” or “old Spanish” “slave” women.

27 Polk (2010:405n2) notes that in Black Atlantic religious formations of Cuba, Brazil, and elsewhere, particularly those traditions influenced by Kardecist Spiritism, “adherents routinely embody masculine and feminine entities variously called congos, madamas, negros, or pretos velhos that are broadly categorized as African.”
Figure 3  A “Spanish Entree” manifests at an all-nation banquet  
Source: Gibson 2001
5 Komfa Performances of Gender and Sexuality

5.1 Manifest(ing) Spirit
Komfa People typically develop intimate, enduring relationships with the spirits they manifest. Sustaining bonds with these ancestors often amounts to a lifelong journey of self-discovery. Spirit “copresences” inspire devotee-descendants to examine the lives of their spirit-guides and their own life (Beliso-De Jesús 2015; compare Alexander 2005). Ancestors encourage practitioners to study the precedents informing their experiences—and in the process, in one’s own way, to live up to the expectations and aspirations of one’s predecessors. Through such practices one gains knowledge of oneself by transcorporeally accessing insights into the dead. Komfa People devote themselves to continually “becoming one’s ancestors,” always emphasizing an unending plurality of antecedents (compare Espírito Santo 2015). In presenting the past lived experiences of trans sex workers, antiman cocoa panyols, cockson creoles, porkknocker ladies, and bush women of all stripes, spirits of the Spanish nation encourage practitioners to remember family and community histories long repressed and obscured through generations of grief and survival.28

28 These Creolese descriptors, pejorative in some cases, are discussed further below.
5.2  **Komfa Transcorporealities**

Roberto Strongman contrasts African diasporic ontologies with European Enlightenment-derived, Western understandings of personhood that espouse a Cartesian “unitary self that is fixed within the body,” or a “unitary soul within the hermetic enclosure of the body” (Strongman 2019 7, 21). Black Atlantic cosmologies, including Candomblé, Santería, and Vodou, instead conceptualize self and soul as “removable, external, and multiple.” The transcorporeality found in the religious tradition of Vodou, for example, “enables the assumption of cross-gender subjectivities,” particularly through rituals of possession, wherein practitioners “manifest” a spirit gendered differently from the medium’s self-identification when not in trance (Strongman 2008:17). Komfa practitioners—or, more accurately, their spirits—deploy the ambiguities and dynamism of gender and sexuality, transcending society’s rigidities through mediumship, informed by an “African Diasporic discourse of personhood” (Strongman 2019:21). Likewise, Alejandro Escalante notes that “spirit possession reveals subterranean genderqueer modes of being”—or trans* ontologies—that point to “the fugitive ways that black people have moved throughout society in an attempt to survive” (Escalante 2019:387, 394).

The “bra on the cross” and other such altar creations can be considered physical extensions of social relationships nurtured between spirits and their mediums, as well as among devotees. Writing about the “agency-relations” exemplified by Kongo minkisi, Alfred Gell (1998:59:62) suggests that “an instructed person” who approached a “power sculpture” would “not see a mere thing, a form” to be engaged only “aesthetically” (Strother 2000:63). Rather, in approaching this object of devotion and insight, the person might experience a “compressed performance” (Pinney 2004:8, quoted in A. Roberts 2019:4). As Gell holds, they would momentarily witness “the visible knot which ties together an invisible skein of relations, fanning out into social space and social time” (Gell 1998:62). Altar objects are neither primarily symbolic nor representative, but instead are agentive presences that, along with mediums’ bodies, bridge the lives of devotees and the insights of the dead (compare Espírito Santo & Tassi 2013; Johnson 2014).

5.3  **The Erotic Power of Becoming (Spirit/s)**

Transgressive embodiment and “alterities of desire” undergird many of the “counter-discourses,” “counter-memories,” and “repertoires” deployed through Komfa work to confront conceptions of ordinary moral life.²⁹ Komfa People

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do not only explore together the marginalization faced by sex workers, LGBTQI people, and women over countless generations through their performances. Rather, they aspire to erotically become these impossible Guyanese, incorporating their otherwise dismissed subjecthoods into their past, present, and future selves-in-the-making. The resource of erotic power, “which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person” (Lorde 2020 [1978]:33), is broadened and amplified through forms of relationality presented by possession. Komfa mediumship “forms a bridge between the sharers”—both living and dead—“which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference” (Lorde 2020 [1978]:33). As Strongman (2019), Escalante (2019), and Visisya Pinthongvijayakul demonstrate in quite divergent contexts, “ritual performance by spirit mediums materially vocalizes an expanded and more diverse repertoire of desire” through the experiential variances that a multiplicity of personhood makes accessible to practitioners and their guides (Pinthongvijayakul 2019:101). Embracing alterity within oneself, and specifically the enigmatic, erotic powers inherent in assimilating dissimilarities and “apprehending otherness,” often entails defiant revalorization of dispossessed ways of being in the world, not only socially determined identities or historically ingrained categories of being (Dean 2001:135).

Spiritualists tend to express discontentment in knowing a guide only through distant, ethnoracialized personas, and struggle to summon the patience, devotion, and insight necessary to recognize the empathic, erotic, and intersubjective coming together that spirits offer through their presence. Practitioners describe such aspirations as an affective yearning, a process of learning to feel as one’s guide feels, sensing and experiencing the world as they
once did and now can again through their medium. Such processes are, as Brian Massumi’s (2002:118) work demonstrates, based in conceptions of the body that accentuate an “openness to human and nonhuman forces vibrating through the flesh” (Pinthongvijayakul 2019:104). Pinthongvijayakul explains that “in mediumistic ritual, religious and sexual ontologies melt into the same bodily organs and zones of skin” through a transcorporeal expansion of becoming another, as the example of Mother Myrtle shared below helps illuminate (Pinthongvijayakul 2019:110). For mediums manifesting Spanish spirits, the “religious and sexual ontologies” one inhabits often involve intimately sensuous desires of the sort disparaged in most Guyanese settings as antiman or Dougla-minded. Dougla, an all-pervasive Creolese term, describes the broad-scoped Guyanese concept of “mixed-race,” as well as those individuals identified, and increasingly identifying themselves, as such. Incorporating notions of foreignness within oneself can be an empowering maneuver of Komfa ontologies.

6 Embodying Doña Madama

Illuminating the origins of her own Spanish spirit-guide, an elder practitioner living near Georgetown, Mother Myrtle, explained that “being a slave, working the field, you can’t be a woman for do man’s work, while you still must care the children them and mind everybody need.” Correspondingly, scholarship has demonstrated the ways that enslavement in the Americas has denied Black women’s femaleness. Mother Myrtle continued with her incisive account, sharing how “is from Black woman, slaves, them not being allowed to be woman, or womanlike, here in Guyana, make they stay like them Spanish lady, them that come over from Vene[zuela] and Trini[dad] ... and they must come from Brazil too.” Tinsley observes how “black queer women’s exclusion from femininity is doubled, as black lesbians are always already assumed butch by virtue of their race and sexuality” (Tinsley 2018:32). Mother Myrtle’s narrative talks not only about the development of Komfa’s Spanish nation, but also about histories of Black queer genders and the flux within racialized hierarchies of sexuality. “Spanish ladies” of colonial Guiana whom Mother Myrtle describes

30 Barratt & Ranjitsingh 2021; Kempadoo 1999a; Reddock 2014; Regis 2016; Richards-Greaves 2020.
31 Keeling 2007; M. King 1975; Snorton 2017. Davis (1983:5) writes that enslaved people in the Americas were "genderless as far as the slaveholders were concerned."
come for work, and once they there here, enough gone for live with a buck, or what they used to call boviander ... [and] cobungru ... and work in the bush and make they own house, or a ranch, you understand? Them mind cow, and horse, and them thing. Must work gold ... or keep a shop ... Well enough was just woman come alone, bare woman, for work. You know enough a them come together, just woman, and they make they way together, working, working, you understand?  

32 Buck is a pejorative Creolese term used to describe Indigenous people, while boviander (or buffiana) describes those who descend from Indigenous and non-Indigenous people living in colonial Guiana, particularly “Dutch” settlers and enslaved and formerly enslaved free Blacks. See Hernandez-Ramdwar (1997) and Reddock (1999:395n.9). For discussion of boviander communities as refuges for Maroons, as well as their other “highly rebellious” efforts, see Rodney (1979:281). For “allegedly hot-blooded ... ‘boviander’ women,” see Parris (2013:8). Cobungru or kabukru was used to describe people considered “half-Indian, half-negro” (Thurn 1883:89), and while not used commonly today the term may be etymologically connected to the much more pervasive caboclo (see Allsopp 2003:113; Swan 1957:186; Thurn 1880:468).
Mother Myrtle acquired her historical awareness through profound communion manifesting her Spanish ancestor, Doña Madama, over many years. Though Mother Myrtle is not clear about where the copresence might fit within her personal genealogy, Doña Madama revealed that she was born as a male into slavery a few years before emancipation at the height of Venezuela’s revolutionary period. She remembers as a young boy growing up that her father—a “Black Spanish Creole” and former cocoa estate “driver”—left for what seemed like years, returning with tales of leading formerly enslaved forces into battle under the command of Pedro Camejo, famed “Negro Primero” as the only officer of African descent in Simón Bolívar’s ranks (Ross 2009).

**Performing Gender and Sexuality with Spanish Spirits**

Spanish spirits’ presentation of hyperfem(me)inized gender and their association with sexual labor are central to their personhood and to the Spiritual work they perform. Preity Kumar (2019:4) has contextualized the gender performance of “femme-ness” embodied by “light-skinned,” “middle-class” LGBTQ Guyanese women as a means of countering anti-cauxin discrimination and associated violence that nonconforming Dougla, or “mixed,” and Black women, as masculinized females, face (Barratt 2016; Kempadoo 1999a; Peake & Trotz 2002). Cauxin, also spelled cockson or koksen, is a gendered Creolese alternative to antiman, a term that is also structurally gendered but used to refer to people of any gender.⁵³ Cauxin, on the other hand, is employed to condemn overly masculine or “butch” attributes presented by women, often nonconforming or queer individuals, especially those open about maintaining intimate or sexual relations with other women (Kumar 2019).

By reanimating their Spanish ancestors in ritual, and as copresences throughout their days, Komfa practitioners “intentionally mobilize” responses to cauxin subjectivation as they “embody and deploy femme-ness to resist the high levels of violence that are meted out against them as sexually nonconforming” people, forming for themselves “an ideological, psychological, and physical safe space” (Kumar 2019:2). By embodying “strategic femme-ness,” nonconforming Guyanese “re-write scripts and take ownership of their sexuality” (Kumar 2019:8), their choices in partners, participation in sex labor versus sex (Kempadoo 1999b), and their gendered expressions, while often continuing “to conceal those choices within a culture of violence” (Kumar 2019:8).

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⁵³ Kumar 2018; Red Thread 1999:288n.12. A standardized orthography is still being developed for Guyana’s Creolese language.
Certain Komfa gatherings do serve as “safe spaces” for Guyanese to express themselves genuinely, with Komfa People and their communities nurturing special sensitivities to damaging heteronormative precepts in responding to popular perceptions linking Spiritualists to queerness and nonnormativity. A medium at a Georgetown-area church confided that “when you going for a work you does feel free, free-up to be yourself, whoever you want that you does hide in your life, your normal living. You does feel free to love ... how you want to love,” the practitioner explained, “like man or woman, without taking up a whole set of vexation like scene you does get from everybody else. When even you own family and friends is a cross, pulling you back, is to this here Spiritual family you must turn,” they said, gesturing to the altar before us. “Spirits give a strength. Show you how to be you own self.”

Spirit possession, as a quasi-“anonymous speech genre” (Derby 2014:124) presents “the ultimate *indirection*” in facilitating a dialectic of concealment and revelation (Bourguignon 2004:572; emphasis added). Spirit manifestation is implicated in gender and sexual nonconformity. Even in secular contexts unrelated to Komfa ritual, Guyanese people often comprehend creativity in gender identification and expression through spirit manifestation and affirm a “transcorporeal” appreciation of personhood that features widely in Black Atlantic social worlds. During possession, an individual’s performance of gendered self is read through agencies of “spirit,” not one’s “own” agency. Mediums cannot necessarily be held accountable as individuals for the behaviors, attitudes, and often transgressive perspectives conveyed through their manifesting...
personages. They can choose to “take credit” or not for the works of their spirit
presences. Practitioners explain the ambiguity surrounding authorial agency
of the things spirits or their mediums do and say as reinforcing Komfa's signif-
icance as a social site of comfort, care, and sanctuary. These opacities of spirit
agency also contribute to Komfa's primacy as a site of “counter-memory,” where
reckonings with subjugated pasts can be imagined into being through “subver-
sive ... ontological alternatives” that encourage people to feel histories as their
own (Roberts & Roberts 1996:30; compare Nora 1989). The ancestors’ experi-
ences thus constitute the ever-becoming self (compare Espírito Santo 2015).

8 Embodying Alterity

By performing erotic alterity, Spiritualists harness the ambiguities of histor-
ically and culturally sedimented notions of self and community, including
“nation.” Komfa People’s practices and attitudes contribute “to a queering of
Caribbean history and a decentering of the West in global histories of sexu-
ality” by looking to, and charting, South-South intercultural exchanges (Chin
2019:324; compare Lionnet & Shih 2005). Foregrounding such translocal dy-
namics evades the “homoimperialist tactics” through which North American
and European transnational advocates have often misrepresented the life expe-
riences of Caribbean people, undermining homegrown activisms (Attai 2017:
113; compare Gill 2018b; Puar 2001). Looking toward Guyanese neighbors also
avoids “positioning queerness as originating in Euro-American discourses and
imposed on the Caribbean” (Kumar 2018:123) or uncritically privileging “African
retentions” such as those Roemer mentions above as the most helpful starting
points for understanding expressions of gender supported by rituals of Komfa
manifestation.34

In a now-classic essay asking “What is ‘a Spanish’?,” Aisha Khan (1993) inter-
rogates ambiguities of “mixed ethnicity” within Trinidad’s plural society, which
shares much with Guyana. Khan shows how for Trinidadians, and similarly for
Guyanese, “Spanish” operates to distinguish among locally salient “intermedi-
ate categories (that is, ‘mixes’),” chiefly contrasting with “coloured” or Dougla
to signal a fusion “beyond ‘black’-plus-‘white’ ” or Asian (Khan 1993:81–82).
This something additional—alien, yet an(other) ingredient of the “callaloo
nation”—occupies “a particular symbolic space in Indo- and Afro-[relations],"

34 See also Gill 2018b; Kempadoo 2004; R. King 2008, 2014; Tinsley 2008, 2018; and Wekker
2006.
representing a “diluted or ‘softer,’” not necessarily Europeanized, but nonetheless Whitened “form of ‘African’ or ‘black’ identity,” unlike local understandings of Chinese or Portuguese, who came, like South Asians, under terms of indenture (Khan 1993:184). Because of Trinidad’s (and Guyana’s) limited “Spanish colonial experience,” “the Spanish” are identified “as a more or less neutral, or benign, colonizer”—not a straightforward importer nor exploiter of (those who became “Guyanese”) ancestors (Khan 1993:191).

Guyanese across a spectrum of sexual orientations and gender identities, sex workers of various orientations and identities, and those who love and care for them see themselves represented through Komfa’s Spanish ancestors. For, as Mother Myrtle reported, “remember now … and not even all them Spanish spirits is Spanish! Understand? Enough a them is just other bush woman … and enough more even never yet seen the bush!”

Whereas Aisha Beliso-De Jesús (2013:45) emphasizes that “the homosexual santero is simultaneously imagined as both a cursed and necessary subject in Afro-Cuban Santería,” Komfa People who “entertain the Spanish” sincerely value these spirits’ queerness and often the queerness of their mediums, who can—at least provisionally—circumvent pernicious social boundaries transcorporeally by becoming these transgressive ancestors.

There remains much to be learned about the interplay among post/colonial constructions of race, gender, sexuality, class, and religion through developing more nuanced transnational historiographies of the sort charted by Doña Madama. Recounting the lives of Spanish spirits contributes to the “scattered information about West Indian [and other] women’s responses to the transition from subordination to an owner to subordination to a husband/father” that accompanied emancipation, wherein people who had for generations...

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35 In both Guyana and Trinidad, “European” is conceived as a circumscribed ethnoracial category that excludes the “Portuguese,” who comprise their own “kind”, as do the “Spanish” (see Williams 1991; Khan 1993; Reddock 1999). Reddock (1999:390) notes that in the Caribbean “racial mixture has traditionally been seen as a basis for social mobility,” yet for certain demographic groups “this has not been the case … as ‘douglas’ in Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana, ‘cocoa panyols’ (or ‘Spanish’) in Trinidad, and ‘bovianders’ of Guyana are examples of marginalized multiracial groups who have not benefited from their mixed ancestry.” On “Whiteness” as distinct from “Caucasian” or “European” in Trinidad and Tobago, see Khan (2004:75) and Tate & Law (2015).

36 For one telling example of the heterogenous cultural makeup of bush-life from which the life stories of Spanish spirits are born, see Hungarian writer Maria Leitner’s reportage from the interwar years. Leitner (1932) describes “working women of many nationalities on the move” throughout the Americas and the world, “such as a woman from Poland who had immigrated to New York, gone along with a friend to Venezuela, and ended up as a prostitute in the mining areas of British Guiana” (Poore 2000:46, 148).
been controlled by overseers and colonial law could begin defining their social and reproductive relations for themselves (C. Sharpe 2010, 2016; Williams 1996: 131). Seeking more detailed accounts of how gender ideologies transformed—or not—in the wake of emancipation is particularly relevant for Guyana and the small, closely related states of the southeast Caribbean, where standard approaches to national histories fail to convey the significance of mobility—geospatial, social, temporal, and ontological—within people’s lives (Putnam 2014).

Incorporating conceptions of alterity into their ritual performances honoring Spanish ancestors, Spiritualists draw power from relationships they cultivate with spirits from “outside” who bestow novel, creative means of addressing crisis, personal distress, and “gendered duress” (Simpkins 2019). Through the expanded horizons of being/s that Spanish entrees imagine together with their mediums, Komfa People, particularly LGBTQI+ practitioners, manifest “spirit technologies” to protect themselves against the brutalities they face in society (J. Roberts 2006: 231–32). Spanish ancestors offer healing as “an antidote to oppression” for the generations-old trauma that continues to resurface (Alexander 2005:31). Devotion to Komfa’s Spanish nation exemplifies how practitioners communicate and commune with spirit-presences—through empowered objects on altars, in ritual performances, and in mystical visions or divination, shared with and through one’s Spiritual family.

Most profoundly, such devotion exemplifies what it means to intersubjectively, empathically, and corporeally become “another.” The Spanish “Other” is not only a non-Guyanese “alien” presence. Rather, “the Spanish” is usually a woman, as are most practitioners—but often a trans woman, an antiman or queer person, and generally one who engages in sex work. Within Komfa’s prismatic performances of “ethno-erotic” alterity, communities exchange knowledges and practices that convey self-respect and adoration through the sensual appeals of spirits within. Ultimately, acts of possession and mediumship are processual exchanges, continuous offerings that protect, heal, and revitalize Komfa communities by re-engendering social intimacies and revalorizing subjugated personhoods. Listening to Spanish spirits, and their devotees, reassure that “you could call” (queer) Guyana’s borderlands “antiman if you want,” with pride, as a subversive “counterstance” to prevailing prejudices.

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37 See Meiu 2017 on conceptions of “ethno-erotic economies” of alterity.
Acknowledgments

As with everything I do, this essay is dedicated to Enoch Jabbar. Give thanks to Mother Myrtle, Winston Noel, Bishop Conrad McDonald, and Archbishop Mark Hunte. For feedback on earlier drafts, I thank Robin Derby, Jeremy Rehwaldt, Judith Roback, Kathy Smith, Vikram Tamboli, and, above all, Allen Roberts. Thanks also to commentators at the 2019 ALARI conference, particularly Alexandre Bortolini, Barbara Cruz, and Johana Caterina Mantilla Oliveros. Research was supported by the Fowler Museum at UCLA, UCLA Institute of American Cultures, and the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA.

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