“POR EL MAR QUE NOS UNE:” *boat people*’s Living Waters

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Abstract: This article presents the first in-depth discussion of the Afro-diasporic spiritual world of *boat people* (2005), a brief collection of poetry by Mayra Santos-Febres, a leading Afro-Puerto Rican author. Critics have generally read *boat people* as recounting the plight of undocumented Dominican migrants who cross the treacherous ocean in an attempt to reach Puerto Rico (and by extension, the United States). I argue, however, that *boat people* cannot be geographically contained, and one of the primary ways in which the text places itself at the juncture of Caribbean and Latina/o/x Studies is by means of its engagement with water. In *boat people,* Santos-Febres transforms the sea into a powerful agential presence that absorbs the bodies and souls of the undocumented migrants who traverse its waters. Brimming with *aché* and having borne witness to the traumatic journeys of Caribbean bodies and spirits for centuries, Santos-Febres’s spiritualized sea is infused with the energy of the *orishas* of Santería/Regla de Ocha, the *iwas* of Haitian Vodou, Indigenous Taíno resistance, and the impetus of countless ancestral forces. In direct contrast to the erasure imposed on undocumented maritime migration by media and governments, *boat people* recovers and affirms the humanity of the drowned Black body, and especially of the Black female migrant body, evincing its contribution to current debates on migration and to the field of Afro-Latina/x feminisms. It also reveals water’s potential for fostering dialogue between Caribbean, Chicana/o/x, and Latina/o/x Studies.

Keywords: *Afro-Latina/x Feminisms, Afro-diasporic spirituality, borderlessness, Santería, sea, undocumented migration, Vodou, water*

In October 2012, Mayra Santos-Febres, a leading Afro-Puerto Rican author, signed my copy of *boat people*.[1] Originally published in 2005, *boat people* is a brief lyrical collection consisting of only twenty poems, some no longer than a page. Given its centering of undocumented maritime migration, the text is often read as a literary testament of the constant, yet rarely officially acknowledged, clandestine human journeys that take place on the perilous Mona Passage between the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico.[2] Santos-Febres's inscription in my copy, however, centered water, and indisputably connected it to Afro-diasporic spirituality. She wrote: "Por el mar que nos une. Aché" (For the sea that unites us. Aché). The word *aché*, which in the epistemological framework of Santería/ Regla de Ocha[3] is the divine life force that flows throughout the physical and spiritual world, is not found in *boat people* 's poems. Yet, by letting Santos-Febres's inscription guide my reading, it became clear that the collection's waters pulsate with spirituality, embodying Marta Moreno Vega's contention that *aché* is "the divine essence that allows potential to soar beyond limits" (1999, 56). To read *boat people* with an attunement for its entanglements with the Afro-diasporic religious world is thus to unleash its capacity for recovery and affirmation.

In *boat people*, Santos-Febres transforms the sea into a powerful agential presence that absorbs the bodies and souls of the undocumented migrants who traverse its waters. Brimming with *aché* and having borne witness to the traumatic journeys of Caribbean bodies and spirits for centuries, Santos-Febres's spiritualized sea is infused with the energy of the *orishas* of Santería/ Regla de Ocha, the *lwas* of Haitian Vodou, Indigenous Taíno resistance, and the impetus of countless ancestral forces.[4] Hence, the depths of the text are left unplumbed if its veiled engagement with Afro-diasporic spirituality is not centered. This component is especially vital given that many of the poems describe death and drowning, the reality of countless undocumented maritime migrants not only in Caribbean waters, but throughout the world.

While *boat people* has received some critical attention, an in-depth discussion of its complex Afro-diasporic spiritual world is still needed. In Santos-Febres's poems, the sea and the body are the places from which knowledge emanates and flows, a position that is clearly aligned with the epistemological tenets of Afro-diasporic religions. In Santería/Regla de Ocha, Haitian Vodou, as well as in other important traditions, spirituality is a gateway to a complex worldview where intimate ties exist between humans, nature, and the sacred. Thus, I argue that *boat people*'s living waters blur the lines between life and death by consecrating both aquatic and physical bodies as loci of epistemological power, transforming them into sources of complex and alternative systems of knowledge. In order to support this argument, I use the first three poems of the collection to create a compass that primes the reader to understand the fusion between body and spirit that Santos-Febres locates in and transcribes through the water. I then use this context to briefly address the collection's last poem, "20. aquí al fondo danzan concejales –," (here at the bottom, council members dance), which ultimately states that the boat people are claimed and housed by the sea.[5] In direct contrast to the erasure imposed upon undocumented maritime migration by media and governments, *boat people* recovers and affirms the humanity of the drowned Black body, and especially of the Black female migrant body, evincing its contribution to current debates on migration and to the field of Afro-Latina/x feminisms. It also reveals water's potential for fostering dialogue between Caribbean, Chicana/o/x, and Latina/o/x Studies.

***boat people*: Borders and the Sacredness of the Afro-Latina/x Body**

Before diving into Santos-Febres's poems, it is important to discuss the porousness of the collection's title. Surreptitiously, the term "boat people" both highlights and obscures the presence of the sea, zeroing in on the body while stripping it of nationality. Critics have commented that "boat people" is distinctly associated with Haiti and that it "functioned to not only strip away agency from the Haitians but also to conjure a specific image of race" (Banet-Weiser 2003, 164). In Santos-Febres's eyes, however, "boat people" is both historically and racially laden.[6] It also gestures towards the primacy of the ship in Paul Gilroy's conception of the Black Atlantic (1993). Referring not only to contemporary maritime migrants but also to the thousands of slaves forced to undertake the Middle Passage, the moniker "boat people" asserts the existence of a shared experience of violent migration that subsumes divisions erected by national boundaries. In this manner, Santos-Febres's collection responds to the call of oceanic studies to look to the sea in order to "derive new forms of relatedness from the necessarily unbounded examples provided in the maritime world" (Blum 2010, 671). The term "boat people" is thus employed precisely because of its borderlessness. To be at sea is to be nowhere and everywhere at the same time. Hence, *boat people* is not solely a Caribbean text. By refusing to be contained by the archipelago, it heralds the elasticity of water and its ability to provide connection in the face of trauma and truncation.

Just as Santos-Febres deconstructs national ideas of borders, she also reveals the fissures in our current understandings of citizenship and belonging through *boat people*'s organizational structure. Readers will quickly note that neither the poems nor the migrants in the text are easily identifiable, as both the printed and physical bodies of the collection are solely classified by numbers. Rita De Maeseneer and Jordi De Beule emphasize that, while numbering is commonly used in poetry, Santos-Febres's deployment of this convention underscores the violence of reducing undocumented migrant lives to mere statistics (2010). Taken alongside the author's decision to not capitalize the book's title and to largely eschew capitalization throughout her poems, *boat people*'s format reflects its indictment of "documentation" by resisting categorization. This stance helps us understand how and why the various nationalities of the collection's boat people (Cuban, Dominican, and Haitian) are referenced not by the mention of their countries of origin, but by the author's deliberate use of vernacular and orthography. This tactic is another way in which Santos-Febres refutes all imposition of borders in her text.

The fact that the text's title is in English also affirms the neocolonial presence of the United States in Caribbean/Atlantic waters, a reality previously evinced by Ana Lydia Vega's 1982 short story "Encancaranublado" ("Cloud Cover Caribbean"). In this much anthologized Puerto Rican text, Vega narrates the experiences of three Black Caribbean men (a Haitian, a Dominican, and a Cuban) who are "rescued" at sea by a U.S. ship manned by a crew that includes a Black Puerto Rican man. Although aligned through their inclusion of Blackness, Santos-Febres's poems disrupt the masculinist tone of Vega's story. Furthermore, while "Encancaranublado" revolves around ships and islands, thus heralding the primacy of nationality, *boat people* is undoubtedly anchored in the sea. By centering water, Santos-Febres's collection weaves a web of fluidity that is capable of asserting the echoes of undocumented migration beyond the Caribbean basin. For Chicana/o/x or Latina/o/x scholars this becomes particularly salient when, in one of *boat people*'s latter poems, Santos-Febres directly entwines the boat people's plight with that of migrants who are "vadeando algún río/trepando alguna verja/cruzando algún desierto" (wading through some river/climbing some fence/crossing some desert) (2005, 43). Given the importance of the river, the fence, and the desert in the discourse of undocumented migration on the U.S./Mexico border, Santos-Febres's verses create a powerful opening through which to explore the humanitarian crisis birthed by the hegemonic establishment and policing of borders in the Global South.[7] Not bound by the limits of geopolitics, Santos-Febres's acknowledgement of the migratory resonances between the Caribbean and the U.S./Mexico border gestures towards the possibilities of allowing a Caribbean-infused spiritualized understanding of water to instill life into fossilized identitarian constructs.[8]

Contrary to the government-sanctioned movement of bodies, the migratory transits of spiritual traditions are multidirectional and ever-shifting. As such, the spiritual plane becomes a rich place from which to identify points of contact between Caribbean, Chicana/o/x, and Latina/o/x studies. Given my interest in water and Afro-diasporic spirituality, the work of Gloria Anzaldúa quickly rises to the surface. In the opening poem of *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), Anzaldúa provocatively invokes Yemayá, a Santería/Regla de Ocha *orisha* (deity) connected to the sea, a crucial detail that is rarely addressed by scholars but that evinces a rich point of permeability in her work. Choosing to begin *Borderlands*—a text that addresses the lived experience of the U.S./Mexico border—at the water's edge by looking at how the border fence futilely attempts to reign in the ocean, Anzaldúa declares that "*Yemayá* blew that wire fence down" ([1987] 2012, 25). In one of the few published explorations of Anzaldúa's connection to Afro-diasporic spirituality, Micaela Díaz-Sánchez argues that by placing Yemayá on the U.S./Mexico border, Anzaldúa "challenges Indigenous/Spanish dichotomies prominent in Chicana/o scholarship and cultural production" (2013, 160). Exemplifying the power of non-binary femininity that often manifests in the Afro-diasporic religious world, Anzaldúa's Yemayá shows a blatant disregard for patriarchal power, a characterization that sets the tone for the transformative writing that follows. And, given Yemayá's connection to water and her role in Santos-Febres's collection, *boat people* affirms that in the Americas, an often submerged coalitional spirituality exists between the region's Indigenous and Afro-diasporic cultures.

Anzaldúa's portrayal of Yemayá as both generative and destructive is connected to the more avidly documented presence of Coatlicue and Coyolxauhqui in her work. These prominent emblems of Chicana/x Indigenous femininity are also evident in the work of writers such as Cherríe

Moraga, who in her essay "El mito azteca" (1996) states that while she has reverence towards Coatlicue, she identifies primarily with Coyolxauhqui: "She who has been banished, the mutilated sister who transforms herself into the moon. She is la fuerza femenina, our attempt to pick up the fragments of our dismembered womanhood and reconstitute ourselves" (69). Several years later, these statements were echoed by Irene Lara in her prelude to a 2001 interview with Anzaldúa entitled "Daughter of Coatlicue" (2005a), where Lara states that invoking Coyolxauhqui is a call to both recognize and "suture the wounds inflicted by patriarchy and eurocentrism" (41). The moon thus becomes another point of contact between these spiritual entities given that, due to her connection with the sea and the tides, Yemayá is also often associated with this celestial body (Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 2011). Hence, acknowledging the way in which Yemayá, Coatlicue, and Coyolxauhqui complicate and nuance the relationship between power, femininity, and the sacred portends the richness of creating a theoretical framework that allows the parallels between them to be affirmed and uncovered. An engagement with water, I propose, facilitates this endeavor.

Just as the figures of Yemayá, Coatlicue, and Coyolxauhqui underscore the importance of the body, so must the corporeality that abounds in Santos-Febres's collection be considered in light of the radical revisionary ethos of Afro-Latina/x feminisms. By centering the body, and in particular the Black female body, Santos-Febres affirms that the corporeal is epistemological. This assertion, which lies at the heart of the concept of "theory in the flesh,"[9] initially proposed in the ground-breaking anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), is also sustained by the tenets of Afro-diasporic spirituality. For example, in *Oshun's Daughters: The Search for Womanhood in the Americas* (2014) Vanessa K. Valdés states that in Santería/Regla de Ocha "there is no difference between the sacred and the secular" (2). Marta Moreno Vega also asserts this reality when she affirms that "[t]he colors, symbols, altars, and the body of practitioners serve as sacred receptacles for the sacred energy force, àshe, of the orisás" (2002, 158). The Black body is thus understood as a place from which numinous knowledge emanates and flows, in life as well as in death given the foundational role of ancestor worship in Afro-diasporic religious systems.

Precisely, inter-generational and ancestral relationships are intrinsic to Omaris Zamora's contention that in contemporary Latina/o/x writing, the Afro-Latina body becomes a site for "(trance)formation" (2017, 2), a multifaceted process intersected by the movements of migration, the experiences of trauma, and the charge of memory. In tandem with Zamora's concept, the submerged Black body in *boat people* becomes a part of an extraordinary underwater archive that spiritually counters incomplete historical narratives, which, as Lorgia García-Peña (2016) asserts, have often rendered silent the experiences of women, and in particular, Black women. Hence, *boat people* exemplifies how both water and the Black body become sites of epistemological power, nodes that can access unorthodox and multifaceted ways of knowing by tapping into ancestral reservoirs of knowledge in order to create new narratives and ontological practices that affirm our humanity.

"1. boat people"

Santos-Febres's first poem, "1. boat people," begins on the open sea with a graphic portrayal of physical death. Here, the boat people have already perished and are described as "carnes trituradas" (shredded flesh) surrounded by sharks and pelicans (Santos-Febres 2005, 9). These creatures of the sea's ecosystem represent both the deepest waters of the ocean and the sky above it, attesting to the totality of the sea's domain in the collection, as well as to the fact that the only witnesses to the boat people's demise are the watery currents and its non-human inhabitants. Nonetheless, despite the sobriety of the opening image, the subsequent verses reveal a subtle sense of communion:

cuerpos hinchados como moluscos	bodies bloated like mollusks
buscando en el fondo del mar	searching the bottom of the sea
el cielo	for the roof
de la boca	of the mouth
que es su vientre. (9)	that is their womb.

In these lines the shredded (and thus fragmented) flesh of the migrants that have perished at sea are sutured by water. As their skin and organs expand through the intake of fluid, water fills every ruptured crevice, giving them a new sense of "wholeness" and ultimately transforming them into mollusks. This visceral transmutation, facilitated by the permeability of the human body (which is also largely made up of water), reveals the inherent receptivity of the sea towards the migrants. The water's embrace is particularly stark when we consider that, even before getting on their vessels and setting out to sea, the boat people had already been reduced to human debris by neoliberalism and capitalism, the very drivers of their perilous voyage.

As a presumed end gives way to an ongoing underwater journey, the collection's opening poem evinces how the impetus to search for a better life is so entrenched within the migrants that it transcends death. The desperate yearning that saturates *boat people* is apparent from the collection's title; the migrants cast themselves unto the waters due to the unbearable hope that somewhere across the ocean opportunity awaits. As Milagros Ricourt states in her discussion of undocumented Dominican migration to Puerto Rico, people risk their lives at sea because "'there is no life here' (*aquí no hay vida*)" (2007, 226). Given that *boat people* centers the migrants that never reach another shore, the collection agonizingly underscores that even when faced with death, the boat people's longing for a better life neither ends nor is deferred. Instead, as their bodies descend to the bottom of the sea, yearning filters through the membranes of time and currents, becoming a beacon that leads them through the deepest folds of the water. The fact that Santos-Febres uses the gerund of "buscar," (buscando/searching) to describe the ongoing nature of their quest underscores the timelessness of their actions as "todo tiempo se detiene/ en medio del mar" (all time stops/ in the middle of the sea) (17). The boat people's seeking is thus always happening *right now* in a space that lies just beyond the scope of time and that can only be accessed through the maritime. The cessation of linear time that Santos-Febres situates in the water by means of the boat people's journey also reflects the chronological alterity of Afro-diasporic ceremonial time (Desmangles 1992), once again highlighting the importance of using a spiritual lens when navigating Santos-Febres's text.

The combination of the unrelenting nature of the boat people's search and their transformation into sea creatures (mollusks) conveys two key visual and corporeal elements: the mouth (la boca) and the womb (el vientre). The importance of the sensory in Santos-Febres's poetry is thus inextricably linked to the strong feminine undercurrents of her text, as well as to the spiritual energies she ascribes to the water. Specifically, the mouth and the womb connect to the act of speaking/ being silenced as well as to generating life. As Santos-Febres projects these body parts unto the water, a mutable vision of the sea emerges, one which resonates with the Santería/Regla de Ocha vision from which Yemayá, the *orisha* primarily connected with the ocean who is also considered "la madre del universo" (the universe's mother) (Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 2011, 52) emerges.

Yemayá's presence in the "new world" is laden with trauma; she arrived alongside her children on slave ships. In this manner, she, too, is a boat person, pushed into the sea by forces beyond her control. The slave trade forever altered Yemayá in many ways, one of the primary ones being that while in Nigeria her worshippers associated her with sweet waters and the River Ogun, in the Americas she is venerated at the ocean (Sellers 2013, 132). For Kimberley Juanita Brown, Yemayá is "the necessary repository for all earthly slave traumas" (2015, 143), a legacy Santos-Febres acknowledges in *boat people* by having the water not only recognize the plight of these maritime migrants, but also by giving her spiritualized sea the ability to claim and archive these undocumented lives.

By endowing Yemayá with the ability to shelter those who have perished at sea, Santos-Febres continues to highlight the unbounded nature of Afro-diasporic spirituality. For example, just as "Santería empowers Latinas, Afro-Cuban, and Cuban women to survive tragedies" (Méndez 2011, 127), Ylce Irrizary and Christina García-López argue that Afro-Latina/x and Chicana/x spirituality enable recovery and healing through writing (Irrizary 2016; García López 2019). Furthermore, as Lara Medina makes evident in her discussion of "nepantla spirituality," fostering a connection with Santería is a common practice among Chicanas/xs (2010, 205), one that is further aided by the fact that "[t]he Chicana feminist, who is of mixed European, Mexic Amerindian, and sometimes African and/or Asian origins, is making attempts at reviving the credos of her ancestors" (Castillo 2014, 153-154). One example of many can be found in the work of Irene Lara who, in her discussion of the importance of recovering the sacred for Chicana/x communities, identifies Ochún (*orisha* of sweet waters) as part of her spiritual pantheon (2005b). From the start of the collection, then, Afro-diasporic spirituality emerges as a pivotal framework from which to consider *boat people*'s movements while also generating cross-cultural conversations between Caribbean, Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x communities.

Within Santería/Regla de Ocha, life begins and ends in the water, as demonstrated in several *patakís* (mythological stories) that narrate the beginning of the world.[10] The beginning and the end of the lives of initiates are also marked by water, specifically those of the river, where Ochún, Yemayá's sister, dwells (Cabrera, 1996). Hence, water is not only an intrinsic part of the rituals and spiritual processes of Santería/Regla de Ocha, but is also a spiritual entity in and of itself, an understanding that is shared by other Afro-diasporic traditions, such as Vodou. Santería/Regla de Ocha thus reveals itself to be one of the central spiritual systems that Santos-Febres's living sea draws from; it is through an understanding of its underlying rituals and practices that we begin to apprehend the spiritual charge of its textual waters. *boat people*'s sea facilitates beginnings and endings, birth and death, silence and sound; its currents embrace contradiction without seeking to neutralize it. In this manner, Santos-Febres's emphasis on the complex femininity and spirituality that resides in the water distinguishes her approach from that of other well-known male Caribbean critics, as well as from the predominantly male vision of contemporary maritime migration.[11]

The Cuban balsero crisis is but one example of the masculinist tone that surrounds the discussion of undocumented maritime migration.[12] Of the thousands of people who set out on perilous rafts in the 1990s trying to reach Miami and escape the scarcity of Special Period Cuba,[13] none is better known than Elián González. Problematically, the story of this Cuban odyssey is typically told as one involving three males: Elián, the little boy miraculously saved by dolphins and found floating alone on an inner tube;[14] his father Juan Miguel González, who, from Cuba, was desperately trying to lay claim to his son; and the "monster," Fidel Castro, who, according to Miami Cubans, saw Elián as a pawn in a much larger and dangerous political game. In his editorial for the *LA Times*, Francisco Goldman describes the Elián story as a "biblical, mythical, magic realist, national epic: A story, essentially, about a miraculous boy savior sent by God to destroy the Monster" (2000). In his discussion of the Elián controversy, Goldman even mentions Afro-diasporic spirituality as much speculation existed in regards to Castro's engagements with Santería/Regla de Ocha. Yet, a key figure is missing from his narrative: the boy's mother.[15]

The omission of Elián's mother, Elisabet, triggers a larger conversation that leads us to consider one of the literary Caribbean's foundational mother/son dynamics, that of Caliban and Sycorax in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.[16] Elián became a balsero only because his mother, Elisabet Brotons, decided to take her chances at sea. Yet, like Sycorax, Elisabet is forgotten, whereas Elián became a symbol for the future of the Cuban nation. In this manner, his story parallels that of Caliban, who was transformed into a metaphor for the future of the Caribbean by the Cuban Roberto Fernández Retamar in *Calibán: Apuntes sobre la cultura en nuestra América* (1971). Elisabet's narrative elision is reinforced by the fact that her body was never recovered and her voice was never recorded, echoing the plight of the migrants that populate *boat people*'s pages, especially the female ones.[17] Silenced forever, Elisabet was discarded by the male actors who would soon take over her son's future.[18] This cycle of the devaluation of the feminine is connected to the muted and utilitarian presence of an often-feminized sea (Tinsely 2008).

In contrast, *boat people* buoys the lives of the undocumented female migrants drowned in its waters through the spiritualization of the water. In Santos-Febres's poems, Afro-diasporic spirituality becomes the vehicle through which these politically discarded lives are recovered and imbued with meaning, even in the advent of death. In stark contrast to the body of Elián González, who mobilized two countries and incited an international conversation, the bodies in *boat people* are those that no one seems to care for, and for whom no political saga has been written. They are bodies like Elisabet's. This fact in and of itself is another subversive act on Santos-Febres's part since "dangerous" maritime migration is normatively coded as male. In the Dominican context, for example, "[t]he great majority of yola migrants—about 70 percent, [...] —are Dominican males between eighteen and forty years of age" (Graziano 2013, 55). Nonetheless, studies such as Ricourt's "Reaching the Promised Land: Undocumented Dominican Migration to Puerto Rico" (2007) highlight the particular dangers experienced by women who undertake this journey. Santos-Febres's collection acknowledges these heightened stakes and seeks to make them legible, radically contesting their erasure by the media (Rivera 2011). Even the plight of the balseros in the United States did not receive much coverage until the break of the Elián González story, and arguably, when this happened the political stakes extended far beyond the balseros.

"2. ah mi morenita cae"

boat people's focus on the Black female body floats to the surface in the second poem, "2. ah mi morenita cae," (ah, my little Black one falls), which presents Santos-Febres's first unnamed female protagonist. While in the first poem the boat people have already perished, this poem depicts the act of drowning, an experience that is as relevant in current maritime migrations as it was during the trauma of the Middle Passage. Drowning is thus thematically and aesthetically important to the collection's proposal of community and to the pulsating spirituality of the water. Though it is a real threat faced by the boat people (and the author does not take this lightly), in *boat people* drowning proves essential to the text's message of transformation and spiritual affirmation. In fact, just as we saw in the opening poem in which the boat people's bodies become mollusks, the act of drowning in the second poem marks a vital change in the female migrant's trajectory, establishing a crucial link between these undocumented bodies, the region's past, and the churning currents of history.

The way the second poem is printed on the page literally emulates the woman's body succumbing to the waters:

cae	fall
cae	fall
cae	fall
y dale de comer a todo pez. (11)	and feed each and every fish."

By performing the act of drowning on the page, this poem once again shows body and water becoming inextricably linked. However, in contrast to the first poem where the boat people are given a sense of agency through the active searching that continues even after they are turned into mollusks, here the water is in complete control. The indefatigable currents triumph when the morenita's body becomes submerged, hinting at the relentless power play between humans and nature, with nature always having the upper hand. This view is supported by the fact that "cae" can be read as a description but also as an active command, demonstrating the water's agency vis-à-vis the drowning woman. As M. Jacqui Alexander states: "She [Ocean] will call you by your ancient name, and you will answer because you will not have forgotten. Water always remembers" (2005, 285). The initial sense of connection established between the boat people and the sea is thus furthered through the body's response to the call of the water.

Yet, Santos-Febres problematizes the act of communion by gesturing towards consumption. When the woman fully merges with the sea it is clear that the fish that dwell in its waters will ingest her. That this theme surfaces in a poem anchored on a female subject can be read as an acknowledgement of the way Black bodies, and in particular, Black women's bodies, are objects of consumption in contemporary society, an assertion that is exacerbated by Santos-Febres's continual use of the word "carne" (flesh) throughout the collection.[19] Furthermore, in tandem with the first poem's connection to the mouth and the womb, in "2. ah mi morenita cae" the sea is imbued with a human attribute, a voice. The water thus actively witnesses and narrates the woman's drowning, demonstrating its archival agency.

The second poem also gives us the first tangible connection to the *orisha* Yemayá, whose sacred number is seven. As the morenita falls into the depths "siete manos" (seven hands) receive her (11). Given Yemayá's role as the universal mother of the *orishas* and the fact that she is the only female *orisha* in "the unique position of and [with the] ability to speak for other male *orishas*" (Tsang 2013, 118), we can read her presence here as a portal. The number seven that synecdochally represents her can also simultaneously allude to the seven African powers (las Siete Potencias Africanas), which represent the core *orishas* of Santería/Regla de Ocha (Elegguá, Oggún, Obbatála, Orula, Changó, Yemayá, and Ochún). Hence, the spiritualization of the water that manifests in this poem helps us understand how and why the sea claims the woman's body even before she drowns, which Santos-Febres communicates through the water's use of the possessive pronoun "mi" (my), her use of the diminutive (morenita) which implies not only familiarity but also power, and the command "cae." Death, then, is also understood as a return to one's spiritual home, a place where the *orishas*, the ancestors, and other spiritualities await.

Given Santos-Febres's positionality as a Black Puerto Rican woman, critics have read *boat people* as primarily acknowledging undocumented Dominican migration to Puerto Rico, which takes place through the perilous Mona Passage (Moreno 2007). While this is a critical part of the conversation, by setting *boat people* at sea, Santos-Febres is also able to recognize the plurality of migrations that take place in the Caribbean and beyond. In line with this vision, in her second poem Santos-Febres underscores the transculturated spirituality of her ocean through her use of orthography, or spelling conventions. As she describes the morenita's body, which is thin given the pre-existing condition of hunger that pushed her to undertake this dangerous migration, Santos-Febres writes that many times the morenita went "sin harina/ sin más sal quel salitre" (without flour, without any salt but sea salt) (11). In the original Spanish text Santos-Febres uses the Haitian Kreyòl spelling "quel" when Spanish grammar rules would dictate the use of "que el." This acknowledgement of the cultural diversity that permeates the aquatic domain Santos-Febres is crafting goes back to her assertion of the sea's *aché* while also simultaneously moving past it, surfacing other important spiritual undercurrents.

boat people's inclusion of Kreyòl is a key moment of spiritual and historical kinship, two threads often intertwined in Afro-diasporic religious systems. According to Terry Rey, there is much pain infused into Vodou's waters due to the fact that the Haitian *botpipèl*[20] "seeking refuge *across the water* in America [...] tragically w[ound] up as ancestors *under the water* instead (2006, 198). Rey's assertion collapses time and space in order to give visibility to the Haitian migrants that took to the sea in the hopes of receiving political asylum in the United States.[21] Importantly, a large number of *botpipèl* took to the waters in the 1990s, coinciding with the influx of the balseros. And yet, not even an Elián story exists for the *botpipèl*, evidencing Haiti's haunting absence in an already abject world, a silence Santos-Febres's work actively addresses and refutes.

Rey's comment regarding the importance of movement both across the water and under the water in Haitian Vodou is reflected in Joan Dayan's description of the aquatic as a spiritual reservoir in "Voudon or the Voice of the Gods:"

> The loa [gods] live *en bas de l'eau*, under the waters, in an unlocatable place called "Guinée." Though clearly distinguished from les *morts*, the spirits of the dead, they share their home with the ancestors. When loa come to visit their "children," whether in a formal, public ceremony or in private times of dream or individual communion, they come by way of the *chemin d'leau*, or water road, which they share with the dead. (2000, 17)

Dayan's and Rey's research attests to water's capacity to become a communal site of spiritual power. Housing both the *lwa* and the ancestors, the sea becomes a vessel of transmission and connection as it is only by means of the "water road" that communion between the sacred and the secular occurs. The fact that in Vodou water becomes a portal for connection is also a result of the traumatic origins of this Afro-diasporic religious system, given that the word "diaspora" carries within itself both a destructive and a constructive energy (Pressley-Sanon 2017). During the Middle Passage, slavery's merciless uprooting of millions of people severed ancestral ties. As a result, rites that would typically take place at burial sites were transposed unto the water (Rey 2006). Water's central role in Vodou, then, is always tinged with pain, but also with the possibility for regeneration and transformation. A similar coexistence occurs in Santería/Regla de Ocha given that not only do Yemayá and other *orishas* reside in the sea, but the dead can also be found there (Alexander 2005).

In their initial exploration of *boat people*, Rita De Maeseneer and Jordi De Beule include the previous quote from Dayan in order to contextualize the presence of a particular *lwa*, *carfour* (one of the names of Papa Legba, the path opener) (2010). De Maeseneer and De Beule's observation is an important moment in the exploration of Santos-Febres's Vodou-infused sea because "Legba opens the way to memory, not fantasy," (Dayan 2000, 25) and in this collection water functions as a living archive of experiences. *boat people* thus presents us with an opaque and textured Caribbean Sea that contains not only the *lwa*, but also the *orishas*, the ancestors and, as the poems themselves give testimony to, the undocumented migrants that never reach another shore. By fusing the heart-wrenching pain of loss with the effervescence of spirit, Santos-Febres shows that, despite centuries of land-centered nationalistic discourse proposing otherwise, the potential for strength and unity for the Caribbean and its diasporic communities is indeed "submarine."[22]

"3. el aire falta"

Dayan's description of the spiritual realm of Guinée as an "unlocatable place" in the waters helps us dive deeper into Santos-Febres's next poem "3. el aire falta" (air is lacking). This poem, which is the first one in the collection to speak of a "ciudad ilegal al fondo de los mares" (the illegal city at the bottom of the seas) (13) centers on lack, the driver of the desperate searching described in the first two poems. The lack of air that characterizes the third poem makes manifest the denial of life that occurs when one is deprived of basic human rights such as food and shelter. Indeed, scarcity and lack are the reasons the boat people set out to sea in the first place and, devastatingly, the poem states that, yes, air is lacking underwater but "cuál la diferencia con arriba/ si arriba falta todo lo demás" (what is the difference with above/ when above everything else is lacking?) (13). While these lines certainly express hopelessness, it is important to remember that, although the boat people do not reach the places they believed would be their final destinations, they are not left adrift. Once underwater, the migrant's journeys veer towards "la ciudad ilegal al fondo de los mares" (13). Santos-Febres's inclusion of this site is perhaps the most important reason why a reading of the collection must be infused with a spiritual understanding of water.

Following Dayan's description of the spiritual realm of the ancestors and the *lwa*, *boat people*'s underwater city can be connected to the existence of Guinée, a vision that is echoed by Edwidge Danticat in her essay "We Are Ugly But We Are Here" (2017). In this work Danticat, a renowned Haitian-American writer who also centers women's stories, affirms the spirituality of the ocean in Haitian culture and the call of this submarine realm. As she concludes her discussion of the overall invisibility of the violence inflicted upon Haitian women (some of which are also boat people) she states the following:

> The past is full of examples of our foremothers showing such deep trust in the sea that they would jump of slave ships and let the waves embrace them. They believed that the sea was the beginning and the end of all things, the road to freedom and their entrance to Ginen. (2017, 25)

Although Danticat does not explicitly name the *lwa*, by mentioning Ginen (another spelling for Guinée) she implicitly acknowledges the currents of the spirits, as well as the "water road" depicted by Dayan, which in Danticat's case also becomes the road to freedom. Santos-Febres's *boat people* thus dialogues with both texts; her illegal submarine city is not only unlocatable on any map, it is also a place where the migrants hope to find freedom from the lack that has haunted them above water. In this manner, the underwater city echoes the spiritual and physical resistance historically imbued into "[t]he Quilombos of Brazil, the Palenques of Colombia and the remnants of maroon communities in Puerto Rico, Cuba and other locations [which] are spaces of

African affirmation" (Moreno Vega 2012, 78). Not coincidentally, these are also sites of Afro-diasporic religious practice and preservation. Hence, when the poem states that "entre las algas brillan unas lucecitas" (in between the algae, lights glimmer) (13) it offers literal glimmers of hope, the possibility that a place of respite for these undocumented lives exists somewhere in the spiritualized depths of the sea.

The illegality Santos-Febres infuses into her underwater city is also threaded with violence. The most readily accessible allusion refers to the migrants themselves, who are often described as "illegal" (im)migrants in news outlets and political discourse in order to strip them of their humanity. In terms of spirituality and memory, however, the transgressive nature of the submarine city places it in dialogue with the violence directed towards Vodou and other Afro-diasporic spiritual traditions, which have been targeted by hegemonic and heteronormative ideologies due to their presumed primitiveness and supposedly threatening nature. One example of this persecution is the 1941-1942 Haitian anti-Vodou campaign, or *campagne anti-superstitieuse* (anti-superstition campaign).

Spearheaded by the Catholic Church, the *campagne anti-superstitieuse* was not only "aimed at pressuring Haitians to renounce Vodou" (Dubois 2012, 307) but also raided sacred spaces in order to seize and burn ritual artifacts. As Kate Ramsey notes, however, the ritualized violence of this campaign echoed what had taken place earlier in Haiti during the 1915-1934 U.S. occupation of the island, making evident both the longevity and the cyclical nature of these spiritual assaults (2011). The desecration of Vodou continued when, in 1957, François "Papa Doc" Duvalier came to power. Beyond presenting himself as the (spiritual) father of the nation, "Papa Doc" Duvalier "constructed his persona through visual motifs of the Gede *lwa*, associated, in part, with cemeteries and the dead, and theatricalized such associations by donning the characteristic dark vestments and hat of these spirits and their leader, Bawon Samdi" (Ramsey 2011, 250). Such a reality transformed Vodou, a spiritual worldview that sought to provide resilience and hope, into yet another tool for terror and violence (Dayan 2000).[23] Significantly, Santos-Febres mentions Duvalier in the last poem of her collection, an inclusion that recognizes both the physical and psychic violence that the dictatorship inflicted on the Haitian people, which also lead to more bodies seeking refuge in the water.

"20. aquí al fondo danzan concejales –"

After the first three poems, *boat people* recounts a series of individual (though still unnamed) migrant accounts. Here, the sea speaks of the travails, the exploitation, and the fear the migrants experience before, during, and after their journeys. Through her use of language in these poems, Santos-Febres continues to reveal the wide-ranging cultural presence of her waters through the use of island-specific vernacular. For example, she discusses Cuban balseros when describing a migrant who takes off on a "balsa" (raft) and carries water in their "jaba" (bag) (17). She also uses the word "yolas" (rafts) and "tiguere" (hustler) to identify a Dominican migrant that perished when he was thrown overboard (23). In addition to these contemporary migrants, in the seventh poem "7. en el vientre de los nuevos animales" (in the belly of the new beasts) Santos-Febres describes the Middle Passage (21). Here, the author directly comments on the long history of undocumented migration on the Atlantic, one which was forced initially by slavers and is now propelled by the conditions created by the capitalistic society birthed by slavery and nurtured by (neo/disaster)capitalism. All of these stories reach their climax in the last poem of the collection "20. aquí al fondo danzan concejales –" (here at the bottom, council members dance).

"Aquí al fondo danzan concejales" reveals that the deaths of the maritime migrants are a "rito necesario" (a necessary rite) (48) embedded into the continual making and remaking of the Caribbean/Atlantic seascape and its memory. Death as a necessary rite echoes the concept of "residence time" discussed in Christina Sharpe's (2016) *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. According to Sharpe, residence time is "[t]he amount of time it takes for a substance to enter the ocean and then leave the ocean" (41). Given that "[h]uman blood is salty, and sodium [...] has a residence time of 260 million years" (41), Santos-Febres's constant mention of salt in *boat people* becomes not only a reference to the sea, but also to how the very lifeblood of the migrants continues to circulate in the water. Furthermore, the fact that the "concejales" are dancing leads us to consider the importance of bodily movements in the rituals of Afro-diasporic religions such as Santería/Regla de Ocha and Vodou, adding to *boat people*'s conception of the sea as an active site of recurring ceremony.

In the closing poem, Santos-Febres reveals that some of the underwater council members are "ciboyenes todavía suicidándose en rituales de mar" (ciboyenes still committing suicide in sea rituals) (47). The ciboyenes are one of the indigenous Taíno cultures of the region, and *boat people* affirms that for them the ocean is also a sacred place, and one towards which they turned in order to resist colonial violence and subjugation. Through her use of the word "todavía" (still) when referring to the death rites of the ciboyenes, Santos-Febres alludes once again to the borderlessness of the sea, where past, present, and future converge. Furthermore, given her mention of the ciboyenes during the final depiction of *boat people*'s submarine dwelling Santos-Febres addresses the fact that "[t]here is no [Latinx] or [Afro] without [indigenous], just as there is no [Latinx] without [queer]" (Lara 2017, 2).[24] In other words, contrary to what nation states, hegemonic cultures, and canonical texts have often stated Afro/Black, Indigenous, Latina/o/x, and queer identities are not mutually exclusive. The fact that the coming together of these seemingly disparate identities takes place underwater compounds Santos-Febres's fluid scripting of the sea as a culturally inclusive space of submersion/subversion, thus transforming it into a key site for the continuous emergence of Afro-Latina/o/x thought.

Another important way to acknowledge the spiritual reverberations of Santos-Febres's living waters is to consider how in *boat people* the sea is transformed into a "horizontal contact zone," a term proposed by Chaves Daza in her discussion of coalitional Latina practices. Informed by the work of Mary Louise Pratt and Gloria Anzaldúa, Chaves Daza defines horizontal contact zones as "spaces where *marginalized* communities come into contact with *each other* in everyday interactions that informally set the stage for more formal coalitional networks" (2020, 83). To be sure, indigeneity is intrinsic to the Afro-diasporic belief systems of Santería/Regla de Ocha and Vodou, as well as to the broader spiritual world of the Americas given the intimate contact between Indigenous and Afro communities as a result of colonization and slavery. It should not surprise us, then, that Santos-Febres places the ciboyenes and their resistance in communion with that of dissidents from the Trujillo, Batista, and Duvalier regimes, all twentieth century Caribbean dictatorships in the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and Haiti, respectively, as well as with maroon communities ("cimarrones") (47). Powerfully, Santos-Febres's decision to bring all of these peoples together towards the end of the collection is a direct subversion of how in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, and notably in Puerto Rico, the Indigenous ancestry of the nation is often exalted through the recollection of a nostalgic past while its Black heritage is relegated to the margins or erased (Herrera 2012). Hence, in *boat people* Santos-Febres's portrayal of Blackness is one which recognizes its profound entanglements with indigeneity, another important contribution the collection makes towards the development of Afro-Latinx feminisms.

boat people's closing lines leave no doubt as to the spiritual power Santos-Febres ascribes to the water:

esta es tu casa morenito	this is your house morenito
ven deja que te abrace	come let me embrace you
al fin estás conmigo	at last you are with me
al fin puedo dejarte de embrujar. (50)	at last I can stop bewitching you.

By the end of the collection, the reader has thus witnessed not only the boat people's transformations but also that of the water. While in the opening poem the sea appeared as an omnipresent but silent protagonist, in "20. aquí al fondo danzan concejales" the water is fully activated. Infused with the lineage of various Afro-diasporic and Indigenous traditions, as well as with the literal blood and bones of centuries of slave ships, shipwrecks, rafts, yolas, and more, the sea holds within its profundity more than it will ever disclose.

Such a realization leads us to consider the presence of Olokun, another Santería/Regla de Ocha deity, and one which is closely related to Yemayá. Miguel Barnet describes Olokun as "a deity who lives at the bottom of the sea tied to a chain, the sight of whom can bring sudden death" (2000, 92). A powerful and feared *orisha*, Olokun inhabits the depths of the ocean and represents the limits of the knowable. Possessor of great riches, they are also connected to the origins of life, and are believed to be both male and female (Cabrera 1996; Beliso-De Jesús 2015). Thus, the life-giving/preserving qualities of the ocean are asserted through Olokun's final embodiment of *boat people*'s waters, a presence that also adds nuance to Yemayá's initial invocation in the text. The way that these sea-dwelling *orishas* open and close the collection mirrors the boat people's journey; they start at the surface of the water (Yemayá's realm), and ultimately make their way to the depths of the ocean (where Olokun lies). Perhaps, this is the final piece of evidence we need to assert the profound role that Afro-diasporic spirituality plays in *boat people*. That Yemayá and Olokun guide us through our reading also reflects John Mason's affirmation that these two *orishas* "represent the means of salvation and rebirth for those that have been abandoned, exiled and given up for dead" (1996,17). Precisely, this labor of healing and recovery is what *boat people* sets out to do through its engagement with the living waters of Afro-diasporic religions.

In Santería/Regla de Ocha, there is a saying associated with Olokun that states: "Nadie sabe lo que hay en el fondo del mar" (No one knows what lies at the bottom of the sea). Mayra Santos-Febres's *boat people* acknowledges this chasm, as well as the mystery of the unspeakable and unknowable nature of water. In response, it enables the only entity able to testify to its history, the sea itself, to speak. Through the acknowledgment of the injustices, the scarcity, and the violence that leads the boat people into the water, as well as through her envisioning of a numinous yet illegal underwater city, Santos-Febres reminds us that water is paramount to spiritual life and resistance. Given *boat people*'s acknowledgement of this charge, the collection recurrently underscores water's potential for generating new collaborations within and between Afro-Latina/o/x feminisms and Caribbean, Chicana/o/x, and Latina/o/x Studies. Not bound by the constraints of governments or nationalities, engaging the living waters of the ocean can radically alter our understandings of community, of grief, and of survival, opening up possibilities of connections with other sacred reservoirs of healing and creation throughout the world.

Notes

[1] As will be discussed in the article, the title of Santos-Febres's text is purposefully not capitalized.

[2] The Mona Passage is an eighty-mile strait that lies between the island of Hispaniola (which encompasses the Dominican Republic and Haiti) and Puerto Rico. It also connects the Atlantic Ocean to the Caribbean Sea. For details regarding the dangers faced by migrants crossing these waters see Moreno 2007.

[3] Santería/Regla de Ocha, also known as Lukumí, is an Afro-diasporic spiritual tradition with roots in Cuba that is practiced throughout the Americas and beyond.

[4] The *orishas* are deities of Santería/Regla de Ocha, the *lwas* are deities of Haitian Vodou, and the Taíno are one of the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean. As I will discuss in the article, they all have profound connections to the sea.

[5] All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

[6] Importantly, the term "boat people" also connects to Vietnam as it was used to refer to people who began fleeing the Communist regime in 1975 (De Maeseneer and De Beule 2010).

[7] The U.S./Mexico border has a rich and complex literary legacy in which the physical presence and symbolic power of the Río Grande River, the fence, and/or the wall abound. Some notable contemporary authors who engage with these elements are Norma Cantú, Reyna Grande, Emmy Pérez, Jenny Torres Sánchez, and Luis Alberto Urrea. While a thorough discussion of how the the works of these writers can provocatively resonate with Santos-Febres's poems lies beyond the scope of this article, I hope that my discussion opens the door to more cross-cultural conversations regarding the lived experiences of borders and migration.

[8] The establishment of Little Haiti in Tijuana is but one recent example of the importance of understanding the growing Caribbean presence seeping into U.S./Mexico patterns of migration. Scholars such as April J. Mayes are avidly working on documenting these stories, as discussed in her November 5, 2020 virtual talk "To be Haitian Means to Leave: Refusal and Survivance from Brazil to Mexico."

[9] "Theory in the flesh" is an epistemological approach in which "the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity" (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015, 19).

[10] For some of these stories see *Yemayá y Ochún* (Cabrera 1996, 20-22).

[11] While the presence of Caribbean women writers in the twentieth century cannot be denied, the fact remains that many theorists of the region are male: the Martiniquais Édouard Glissant, the Bajan Edward Kamau Brathwaite, and the Cuban Antonio Benítez Rojo are some of the names with most resonance, representing each of the region's linguistic currents. In many of their literary and critical works, while the feminine and the sea are pivotal players, they are often used illustratively rather than given agency. For example, Benítez-Rojo states that the Atlantic Ocean is what it is today, a space of economic and political power "because it was the painfully delivered child of the Caribbean, whose

vagina was stretched between continental clamps" (1996, 5).

[12] "From 1985 to 1993, close to 6,000 balseros managed to reach the United States safely; more than 34,000 left just in the summer of 1994" (Pedraza 2007, 8). The early 90s were also years of heightened activity for the Haitian *botpipèl*; from 1991 to 1994 more that 90,000 Haitians took to the sea in an attempt to seek political asylum in the United States (Rey 2006). Hence, while the *botpipèl* traversed the water alongside the Cuban balseros during the same timeframe, their plight was much less visible given the politically distinct relationship that each island has to the United States. Santos-Febres's privileging of the term "boat people" is thus an assertion and inversion of this invisibility.

[13] The "Periodo especial en tiempos de paz" or "Special Period in Times of Peace" took place in Cuba in the 1990s. It marks a period of extreme scarcity on the island following the collapse of the Soviet Union, upon which the island heavily relied on for trade.

[14] Although Elián was actually rescued by fishermen, the narratives of his rescue have often supplanted the fishermen for dolphins (Banet-Weiser 2003).

[15] In her 2015 debut novel *Make Your Home Among Strangers*, Cuban-American writer Jennine Capó Crucet depicts the emotional toll of the Elián González case on Miami's Cuban American community. Lizet, the novel's protagonist, is haunted by the figure of Ariel Hernández, Capó Crucet's fictionalized Elián. In fact, the novel begins and ends with the figure of Ariel, and, just as in Elián's case, Ariel's mother dies at sea. Capó Crucet emphasizes the mother's absence through the inclusion of "Madres Para Justicia," an organization of Cuban-American mothers adamantly protesting Ariel's return to Cuba, which Lizet's mother zealously joins. The "Madres Para Justicia" were "always in head-to-toe black because they were in mourning, they said, for Ariel's mother" (2015, 297).

[16] Importantly, Shakespeare presents both Sycorax and Caliban as less than human, a fact connected not only to the presumed primitiveness of their culture and spirituality, but also to race. While Sycorax never speaks in the play and is depicted as a "hag" and a "witch," Shakespeare discloses that she was originally from Algiers, thus establishing her African roots.

[17] I was able to locate one narrative written by a female balsera, Carmen Vázquez-Fernández, titled *Balseros Cubanos* (1999). Yet even in her story (which, though based on real life events, is fictional) the dominant actors are male. Her main female character, Ana, spends her time at sea ill, tacitly turning into a passive passenger.

[18] By only invoking Elisabet as the nameless mother who sacrificed herself in order to give her son a better life in the United States, the media perpetuates long-established Latina archetypes of socially acceptable femininity and domesticity: the self-sacrificing, almost virginal ethnic mother who gives her happiness, in this instance her own life, so that her child may achieve the American dream of upward mobility (Molina Guzmán 2007).

[19] Even the cover for the book reinforces this reading as it shows a fish being used as bait.

[20] This is the Kreyòl spelling of "boat people," which is employed throughout Rey's text.

[21] Beyond his expertise in Haitian Vodou, Rey served as an interpreter during rescue missions for migrants at sea in the summer of 1994 (2006).

[22] Bajan Edward Kamau Brathwaite wrote his infamous line "The unity is submarine" in reference to the future of Caribbean thought (1975, 1).

[23] This terror also extended to "Papa Doc's" secret police, the *tonton makout*, who were "named after a childhood bogeyman" (Ramsey 2011, 251).

[24] The square brackets are part of the original text.

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