

## **Special Topic Seminar**

**Instructor: Alicia M. Díaz**

**Fall 2021 – LAS 3000**

### **A Thousand Faces – A Thousand Names: Black Gods and Latinidad**

Words have power; they have their own Aché.

**Dr. Marta Moreno Vega, b. 1942 East Harlem, NYC**

**Founder, Caribbean Cultural Center – African Diaspora Institute (CCCADI) and Creative Justice Institute. Lukumí Priestess - Omo Obatala.**

#### **ABSTRACT**

This seminar examines the intersections of contemporary Latinx identities and the West and West Central African Diaspora spiritual systems that took root in the Americas in the wake the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Our Learning Community will primarily focus upon the faiths know as Candomblé, Lukumí (Santería), Palo Mayombe and Vodou; a 21<sup>st</sup> century global ‘religioscape’ with millions of ethnically diverse adherents spanning from Benin to Berlin.<sup>ii</sup> This course will take an interdisciplinary approach in its exploration of the profundity of these world religions which rest at the secular and spiritual core of Latinidad from the perspective of the following representative topics:

- Revolution and Regime Change
- Popular Culture
- Women and Power
- Queer Theory
- The Politics and Economics of Religious Racism
- Ethnomusicology
- Decolonization of Cultural Spaces
- Unity and conflict between Latinx and African Americans
- Prospective futures of Latinidad and its religioscope as the 21st century progresses.

## BACKGROUND

. . . [I]t doesn't matter where in the world, this spirit is no citizen, no national, no one who is christened, no sex, this spirit is washed of all this lading . . . and only holds its own weight which is nothing, which is memoryless and tough with remembrances, heavy with lightness, aching with grins. They wander as if they have no century, as if they can bound time, as if they can sit in a café in Bruges just as soon as smoke grass in Tucson, Arizona, and chew coca in the high Andes for coldness. . . . Their coherence *is* incoherence. . . (**emphasis added**)

**Dionne Brand, b. 1953 Trinidad and Tobago**  
**Canadian Poet. Past Poet Laureate of Toronto. Member, Order of Canada.**

Even in the advent of DNA technological advances, the global digitization of archives and the democratization/decolonization of genealogy beyond academia and those anxious to preserve caste, class and purity of bloodline, precious few family and personal stories survived among the millions of African American descendants of the Transatlantic Slave Trade.<sup>iii</sup> “One imagines people so stunned by their circumstances, so heartbroken as to refuse reality . . . to *live* in this inexplicable space.” (Brand, 5) (emphasis added).

Unlike the incalculable number of individual narratives lost in the Middle Passage, the millennia-old spiritual systems housed within the collective consciousness of those taken, would not only survive, but would endure to create spaces in which they could be fully human and thereby transform the alien slave societies of the Americas which were dependent upon their de-evolution from being people to becoming *black*.<sup>iv</sup>

Students will collectively and individually be afforded opportunities to engage in critical thinking and assessment through a) group discussion, b) each student serving as a lead discussion facilitator c) weekly journal entries and d) the development of a capstone research project. Academic and scholarly research will be partnered with multidisciplinary artistic works, speculative fiction and memoir within assigned and presented material. Prospective guest speakers include Dr. Marta Moreno Vega, PhD, Saladin Ahmed (creator of Miles Morales character) of Marvel Comics and Juanita Anderson, WSU Faculty member and Co-producer on the film *Daughters of the Dust* (released in 1990) a ground breaking feature length work on African diaspora spirituality.

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Collectively construct a Learning Community premised upon meaningful, inclusive exploration of the spiritual traditions presented including but not limited to their relationship and impact upon other global religions including Islam and Christianity. **Ara eniyan lore wa.** (*All humans have inherent values from which others may derive benefits.*) (English translation from the Yorùbá.)
- Develop an introductory framework for the origins religious traditions that arose in the Afro Atlantic world and their evolution into global religions. There will be a particular emphasis upon the faiths of the Yorùbá, FonEwe and Bantu-Kongo peoples and the transference of ancestral worship into the practice of Espiritismo.
- Recognize the impact of diaspora African religious consciousness within the work of selected historic and contemporary Latinx multi-medium artists and writers.
- Explore the writings of established and emerging scholars of the AfroAtlantic religions focused upon within this seminar.

## TARGETED STUDENT POPULATION (Enrollment: 15 students maximum)

- Pre-requisite class standing: Rising Juniors and above or with prior approval by Instructor.
- Latin American Studies Minors (Students previously/concurrently enrolled in LAS 2250/AFS 2250 will be afforded the opportunity to engage in a semester long examination (i.e. a deep dive) of the basic concepts of the diaspora spiritualities and their intersections with Latinx identities
- African American Studies (Majors/Minors) (Possible equivalent with AFS 3500)

## SOURCES

1. Dionne Brand, *A Map To The Door of No Return*. (Vintage Canada, 2002).
2. Toyin Falola, editor, *Èṣù, Yoruba God, Power and The Imaginative Frontiers*. (Carolina Academic Press, 2013)
3. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Black Church: This is our Story, This is our Song*. (Penguin Press, 2021)
4. Rachel E. Harding, *A Refuge in Thunder*. (Indiana University Press, 2000)
5. Quiara Alegría Hudes, *My Broken Language*. (One World, 2021)
6. Jacob K. Olupona and Terry Ray, *Òriṣà Devotion as World Religion*. (University of Wisconsin Press, 2008)

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> The concept of “Latinidad” is increasingly fraught within efforts to enable it to either contain the disparate legacies and voices within it or be abandoned in search of language and identities more reflective of decolonization. See e.g. Miguel Salazar, “The Problem with Latinidad” *The Nation*, (September 16 2019), where “accepted” definitions of the notion of Latinidad were reconstructed as “a fabricated geopolitical identity that contains the complexities of immigration, colonialism, legal status, class some nation(s) one language and erases Black and Indigenous experiences.” (Emphasis in the original).

<sup>ii</sup> The term *religioscape* is used to reflect the ethnic diversity of adherents being from within and outside of the African Diaspora. (Olupona and Rey, 8-9)

<sup>iii</sup> Except where otherwise stated, the phrase African American encompasses herein the African diaspora across the Americas. (Harding, xiii).

<sup>iv</sup> The use of the term *black* in the lower case is intentional to reflect “race” as a means of perpetual inferiority and subjugation. For a recent fictional depiction of this concept from the perspective of the West African deity, Anansi, see “Mr. Nancy Tells a Story”, *American Gods*, Season 1, Episode 2, originally broadcast on HBO, May 7, 2017 and interview with actor Orlando Jones who portrayed Mr. Nancy, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zShwbIoQLiU> , accessed on May 18, 2021.