



# Encuentro Maravillas: Queering the Sensory Experience of Santería

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Artwork by Molina Art Gallery, Miami FL

Omi Tutu, ona tutu, Ashé tutu, tutu ile,  
tutu laroye, tutu ariku babawa.

*(Fresh water, freshen the road, refresh my power. Freshen my home.  
Freshen Elegua in his path of Esu Laroy, bring us freshness that has no end.)*

To Maria,

for walking with me.

To Rafael,

for being brave.

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## 1. Introduction

In this thesis I will examine three strands: first, the 1994 movie *Fresa y Chocolate* (“Strawberry and Chocolate”), directed by Tomas Gutierrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabo, and based on Senal Paz’ screenplay *El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo* (“The wolf, the forest and the new man”). The second strand is the sensory experience of the Afro-Cuban religion Santería and its presence in the movie; finally, my third strand regards the position of the queer in Cuban diaspora, which connects to the first two strands.

### 1.1 Research question and methodology

My main focus is sensory experience and the role it plays in the three strands. Therefore, my research question is:

How is the sensory engagement with Afro-Cuban religion played in *Fresa y Chocolate*?

I will first examine how *Fresa y Chocolate* engages in a sensory relationship with the viewer through haptic visuality, and then analyze the role Santería plays in this appeal to the five senses. The methodology I use here is analysis through screen captures, as well as theory from Laura Marks and Vivian Sobchack.

As Santería does not fit neatly with Western concepts of religious systems and the senses, the second part of this thesis explores the sensory experience beyond the five senses. By outlining a theoretical framework around the concept of ‘feeling through the body’, I examine how *Ashé* (cosmic energy/life force that resides in humans, animals and objects) and animism relates to a different kind of sensory engagement. This forms the basis for a reflection on the embodiment of the Orishas (Santería deities) in both the movie and everyday life.

Finally, I conclude by addressing the etnocultural framework that positions the Cuban queer in diaspora spaces, through the memory of the senses, based on the *se dice nada, se hace todo* (“Say nothing, do everything”) attitude in a comparative position with the Western closet ideology.

I approach these strands as a gender and ethnicity scholar who works in an interdisciplinary manner, drawing from various fields (queer/feminist theory, sociology, religion) and with a particular focus on drawing out the intersectional perspective. I reflect on a different way of analyzing *Fresa y Chocolate*; not as a cinema theorist, nor with a specific political ideology, but to emphasize and uncover the importance of the sensory experience with Santería that is present in the film.

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## 1.2 Terminology

As I use several concepts that may not be well-known at all, I want to clarify some of my terminology. ‘Queer’ is intended as non-normative (and/or non-hetero) rather than specifically ‘homosexual’ as a sexual identity – in that sense, the Cuban queer does not necessarily need to be a self-identified ‘gay’ man. Diaspora refers to the concept that William Safran loosely defined as a culture/community created from the dispersion of people – in the case of this thesis, the dispersion of Africans to the Caribbean during colonial times, and in current day the dispersion of Cubans to the United States, where “...members of a diaspora retained a collective memory of ‘their original homeland; they idealized their ‘ancestral home’, were committed to the restoration of ‘the original homeland’ and continued in various ways to ‘relate to that homeland’” (Cohen 4). Because of this I work in an interdisciplinary manner, adopting the idea of crossroads with regard to cultures, disciplines and the spiritual to the human sensory experience, as “...implicit in the characterization of the Caribbean as a diaspora space is the idea of the crossroads” (Edmonds, Gonzalez 13). The link from this to Afro-Cuban religion leads to *Eleggua*, the deity of the crossroads in Santería. He is one of the Orishas, the gods/deities central in the religion. The belief is that the Orishas, as well as everything else, have been created from *Ashé* – a cosmic energy that resides in everything. Objects also are considered as being ‘alive’ because of the life force, which is related to the concept of animism; “...the belief that personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces have power over human affairs and, consequently, that human beings must discover what beings and forces are influencing them in order to determine future action and, frequently, to manipulate their power” (van Rheenen 20). The sensory engagement, or way a person is affected, can be with another human being, a spiritual force, objects and also the cinematic production of *Fresa y Chocolate* itself.



### 1.3 Explaining Santería

"Religion" in the normative Western sense of the term does not do justice to the complex system of systems that is Afro-Cuban religion, a comprehensive system that syncretizes, articulates, and reproduces extensive orders of knowledge in the areas of psychotherapy, pharmacology, art, music, magic and narrative. (Olmos, Paravisini-Gebert 39)

The quote above emphasizes how Afro-Cuban religion is more than particular systems of faith and worship, as it bleeds over into many other aspects of daily life. It is shaped by the individual experience of the practitioners, who often don't consider their Santería devotion as "being religious." When I asked a young Cuban woman how religious she considered herself, she said "I am not [religious] at all." Later, I discovered she had been practicing Palo<sup>1</sup> since childhood and had gone through three major initiations<sup>2</sup>, and she engaged in rituals/worship on a weekly basis. This exemplifies how ambiguous the interpretation and label of Santería as a 'religion' is. Additionally, with Santería there is generally no communal, central space of religious worship. Santería happens at home, in everyday life, on altars made by practitioners.<sup>3</sup> Initiated Santería priests are called *Santeros/Santeras* and *Babalawo's*,<sup>4</sup> and often lead figurative 'houses' or *botanicas*.<sup>5</sup> As the so-called gatekeepers of Santería, they are crucial in conducting divination and many ceremonies; for example, when a priest is part of the initiation of a new practitioner, they become *padrino* and *ahijado/ahijada* – godfather and godson/goddaughter.

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<sup>1</sup> La Regla de Palo Monte, whose origins are Bantú (sub-Saharan African), is also known as Regla Congo [and in Cuban worship it is] ...influenced by the Yoruba religion. (Edmonds, Ennis, Gonzalez 102)

<sup>2</sup> Highly secretive, these ritual initiations are to obtain a higher level (e.g. priesthood) in the religious hierarchy.

<sup>3</sup> Orisha worship often exists next to *Espiritismo*, where one pays respects to the spirits and ancestors (*Eggun*)

<sup>4</sup> A Santero is a priest of Santería, and a Babalawo a High Priest, with more initiations into divination. (*Santería: The Religion* 84, 94)

<sup>5</sup> A botanica is a Santería store with herbs, candles and ritual objects; sometimes they hold religious masses (misas).

Afro-Caribbean religions and practices developed during colonial times, when African slaves brought their culture(s) and folklore into new diaspora communities throughout the Caribbean. A syncretism of religion took place when practices of the Lucumí religion, with Orisha worship from the Yoruba people in Nigeria, fused with Catholic elements in the colonies. This formed a new belief system known as Santería, or La Regla Lucumí, in which the Orishas (African gods) became associated with Catholic saints.<sup>6</sup> As Mary Ann Clark describes, “...Orisha worship is based on a cosmological system that recognizes a single great god, known as Olodumare, and many subsidiary deities. These secondary deities, known as the Orishas, are the focus of ritual attention, and every portion of the religion revolves around them” (*Santería: Correcting the myths* 2). The legends (*patakis*) speak of the lives and characteristics of the Orishas, sketching out the embodiment of archetypes and specific objects that form the framework of each Orisha; for example, Yemayá rules the seas and Changó controls thunder, but they each have a specific set of colors, numbers, herb and objects assigned to them. These materials form an important part of rituals and, as in *Fresa y Chocolate*, are used to invoke the gods; the Orishas are not distant gods, but rather they constantly participate in Santería activities, as Vidal-Ortiz describes;

....contributing with their charms, personalities, even funny or possessive behavior.

Santería is centered on its appreciation, veneration, and dialogue with the Orishas. While

the deities are a force or energy, and not specifically human, given the weight of

Santería’s oral tradition, a lot of these Orishas are given form through anthropomorphic

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<sup>6</sup> “...slaves were able to preserve their belief systems through the phenomenon of syncretism, by which Catholic ideology was superimposed on traditional African belief systems. (...) Africans were able to continue worshipping their gods, now disguised as Catholic saints, without the reprimands from the church and colonial authorities”, Strongman writes (*Syncretic religion* 182). It should be noted that the element of ‘disguise’ and ‘fusion’ is crucial; e.g., while associated with each other, Santa Barbara and Chango are not inherently one and the same.



stories and embodiments. In fact, the energy of the Orishas is often referred to as Aché, the “word” or “power” that created the world”. (*Sexuality and gender in Santería* 29-30)

It is this life force/energy from *Ashé*, as well as the Orisha’s individual frameworks of objects, which I connect to theory in this thesis on the sensory experience within Santería.

### Orisha framework

There are many Orishas, but as Migene Wippler-Gonzalez explains, sixteen form the main focus of “...contemporary American practice. They are Eshu/Eleggua, Ochosi, Ogun, Osun, Obatalá, Shango, Yemayá, Oshún, Oya, Obba, Olokun, Agayu, the Ibeji [twin children], Babalu Aye, Inle along with Abata, and Orula/Orunmila”. (*Santería: Correcting the Myths* 45, 47-49) The Orishas each have their own framework of references; in this thesis I refer primarily to Changó, Eleggua, Oshún and Yemayá, so I am providing a chart with their characteristics.<sup>7</sup>

ORISHA	SAINT	COLORS	NR.	FORCE OF NATURE	OFFERINGS/ICONS
<b>Changó</b>	Santa Barbara	Red & white	6	Lightning, male sexuality, power, passion, force, balance, young man	Bananas, corn, horse, apples, red wine*
<b>Eleggua</b>	San Antonio	Red & black	3	[cross]roads, chance, messenger, mischief*	Sugar cane, guava, candy, rum, coffee*
<b>Oshún</b>	Virgen del Caridad del Cobre	Yellow	5	Sweet water (river), female sexuality, young woman, love*	Sunflowers*, pumpkin, honey, orange, fan, gold, brass
<b>Yemayá</b>	La Virgen de la Regla	Blue & white, crystal	7	Ocean, fish, maternity, moon, stars, wisdom*, mature woman	Watermelon, brown sugar, molasses, fan, mermaid, shells*

<sup>7</sup> Source: *Santería: Correcting the Myths* 45, 47-49. References marked with \* are added by myself.

#### *1.4 Fresa y Chocolate – a film summary*

David, a young revolutionary university student, meets the older and worldlier Diego, a gay man who is not only a writer but also involved with religious art exhibits. Diego tries to lure David to his apartment, which David reluctantly agrees to because he is interested in the books Diego is offering him; Mario Vargas Llosa, Jose Lezama Lima and other authors that are hard to find in the Havana of 1979 due to the charged nature of their ideology. When Diego makes sexual advances toward David, David leaves without any intention of ever returning. It is only upon the insistence of his best friend Miguel, who paints David's return as a sort of revolutionary duty, that David goes back to Diego's apartment to further investigate what activities Diego (as a queer, religious and anti-revolutionary man) is involved with. Despite this initial premise, Diego and David slowly but steadily develop a strong friendship; their different backgrounds, opinions and the fact that David is secular while Diego is involved with Santería, show the different sides of Cuba. As time passes, they both gain a better understanding of the viewpoints of the other, showing that a discourse of tolerance can be possible by focusing on similarities and being open-minded. This does not happen without considerable struggle, in particular regarding the topic of Diego's homosexuality which makes him, by David's extant opinion, not revolutionary. "With your posturing, nobody can take you seriously... all you think of is men", David tells him, after he first told Diego that surely it is his family's fault that he is gay, or that it's a medical deficit; "it's a problem that is in the glands". Diego responds with a fiery defense, making it clear that in no way is his identity as a man or a patriotic Cuban affected by the fact that he is gay. By the end of the movie, David seems to share that opinion and even jokes with Diego as they have ice cream at the place they first met. Flamboyantly he eats his ice cream, imitating Diego's performativity from their first encounter, to which Diego starts laughing and looks at David with

deep affection. “How beautiful you are, David. The only problem is that you’re not gay”. “Nobody is perfect”, David says with a wide smile, a response that is a 180-degree turn from the way he would have responded when they first met. With regard to David’s romantic interest, something blossoms between him and Diego’s friend Nancy, who has been interested in David from the start. Eventually the two get together – something that is encouraged by Diego, and Nancy tries everything – including many pleas to the Orishas – to keep David with her. Meanwhile, Miguel, David’s best friend, becomes very agitated when he realizes that David and Diego have become friends, since he considers Diego “not even faithful to his own sex” and only refers to him as *el maricón*, the faggot. He goes over to Diego and tries to get him to sign a paper that would get David expelled from the university; the intimidation ends in a physical fight between all three men, after which events focus Diego’s attempt to obtain a Cuban exit visa. David is distraught when he learns of Diego’s plans, but their final goodbye is – albeit sad – a sign of how strong their friendship has become as the two men hug, parting ways after they have both learned to understand each other’s views, allowing for an open-minded discourse on matters of tolerance, gay identity, politics and art.

## 2. Film analysis through the five senses

*Fresa* is not just a film, but a highly intercultural cinema production that goes beyond telling a story – it reaches out to touch the viewer through the use of the aesthetics, erotic and the creation of haptic visuality through atmosphere. As Laura Marks states:

Haptic images do not invite identification with a figure so much as they encourage a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image. Thus it is less appropriate to speak of the object of a haptic look than to speak of a dynamic subjectivity between looker and image” (*Touch* 3).

Throughout the film, camera framing switches between close-ups, two shots (filming two persons from the waist up) and long shots to create images which are, in my reading, haptic as they do not just represent an object, such as the saint statue, but they invite an engagement if the viewer’s subjectivity. Moreover, the film creates an eroticism of atmosphere – in particular in Diego’s apartment. “Haptic images invite the viewer to dissolve his or her subjectivity in the close and bodily contact with the image,” Marks clarifies, pointing out that “...the oscillation between the two creates an erotic relationship, a shifting between distance and closeness. But haptic images have a particular erotic quality, one involving giving up visual control. The viewer is called on to fill in the gaps in the image, engage with the traces the image leaves [... giving up one’s] own sense of separateness from the image” (*Touch* 13).



The camera angles also play with the eroticism of distance; while, as shown on the left, a high angle seems rather odd in such a compact apartment, it carries the sensory weight of overseeing the grand



picture of what is happening between the characters. The canted angle in the second screen capture shows Diego kneeling down, at eye level with David's waist as he offers him a book – an intimate point-of-view that involves the viewer in the dynamic between the two men; Diego, beaming hopefully at David, while David remains partly off-screen. The third screen capture is an over-the-shoulder shot from Diego's position, looking at David who's returning the look from behind the window frame; the viewer can't help but feel drawn into the setting, while the fourth screen capture allows a distance to observe rather than 'feel' the dynamic.

David is the main protagonist of the film, thereby steering the camera with a heterosexual male gaze.<sup>8</sup> Yet the eroticism is queered rather than heterosexual, as it is also an animistic eroticism that draws David and the viewer in; the books that lead him to Diego's apartment in the first place, the foreign decorations in the living room, even the music and whiskey that Diego present him –all are seductive to the senses. While it might be easy to classify religious items as a fetishation of culture, the objects are more than just that. In line with the belief in Santería that each person and object is made out of a cosmic energy, *Ashé*, this matches with Marks' discussion of animism in *Touch*. She describes author Robert Walser "...whose attitude towards objects in his writings have a life of their own not by virtue of their contact with humans, but for their own sake. (...) Walser addresses lowly objects with respect and even envy" (*Touch* 129), a

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<sup>8</sup> "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure, which is styled accordingly" (Marks 179),

behavior paralleled by Diego in *Fresa*: he talks to his malfunctioning refrigerator whom he lovingly calls Rocco. (“He’s Leo. Listen to him [roar]”.) Vivian Sobchack addresses the topic in *Carnal thoughts*, when she quotes Lévi-Strauss’ on how analysis of the practico-inert “...revives the language of animism. (...) At some deep foundational level there is something of mimetic ana-logic and animism operative in all cinema” (Sobchack 249, 89). By examining the objects in *Fresa* and placing them in the framework connected to the Orishas (for example: red flowers, the Santa Barbara statue and a double-headed red ax in Changó’s framework), the language of the Orishas is revealed and revived, enhancing and uncovering the sensory experience for the viewer. In Laura Marks’ work, she points out how Deleuze argues that experience cannot be represented directly and in its entirety:

...but only approached partially by the orders of the discursive and the visible, or the sayable and the seeable. These orders cannot be reduced one to the other. They are two incommensurable forms of truth that confront each other at a given historical moment." "What we see never lies in what we say', and vice versa" (Deleuze 1988b, 64; quoting Foucault). A given discourse must be broken open to find its implicit statements, which cannot be conceived of in the terms of the discourse. Similarly, things must be broken open to find the visibilities implicit in them: "Visibilities are not forms of objects, nor even forms that would show up under light, but rather forms of luminosity which are created by the light itself and allow a thing to exist only as a flash, sparkle, or shimmer". (*Touch* 30)

It is therefore not the mere presence of objects but the sensory response they trigger that envelopes the viewer into the haptic visuality on screen. While it’s doubtful that Deleuze was engaging with Santería when he wrote “forms of luminosity which are created by the light itself

and allow a thing to exist only as a flash, sparkle of shimmer”, the description comes rather close to the concept of *Ashé*, as the life force that created the world and the Orishas. Therefore, through screen captures I will explore how the haptic visuality of *Fresa* engages with the five senses, with a focus on the embodiment of Santería, where *Ashé* resides in objects that create a sensory relationship of their own with the characters and viewer.

### 2.1 Sight



The most prominent embodiment of Santería is found in Diego’s apartment; he has an altar dedicated to La Virgen de Caridad del Cobre, the Catholic representation of the Orisha Oshún, which has yellow candles, sunflowers and other small offerings. The walls of his apartment are scattered with photos, art, folklore and religious objects; most noticeably a double-headed red axe, the symbol of Orisha Changó.



The movie taps into one of the strongest senses, sight, to convey Diego’s diverse background and the presence of Santería. Similarly, Nancy has an altar dedicated to Santa Barbara, the Catholic representation of Changó, decorated in his colors: red flowers and white candles.



David is also touched by the sight of Diego’s apartment; he looks through books, uncovers statues





and goes through the contents of an envelope with homoerotic photos while Diego is in the kitchen preparing coffee.

## 2.2 Touch

Wippler-Gonzalez states how cowrie shells, stones, flowers and water form Santería; of those, the latter two are most prominently featured in the film (*Santería: The religion 20*).



When Nancy tries to seduce David, she picks up a sunflower from Oshún's altar and teases David with it, who is sleeping on the couch. She also takes a ritual



cleansing bath with herbs, a *despojo*, to keep David bound to her. "Tie him to me. I'll drink his heart's blood and take his heart from him", she prays. Touch in



the form of objects creates a dynamic of animism towards the main characters as well as the viewer. In particular books are important to both men; Diego



speaks with love about his literature collection and the dead writers, which intrigues David. Finally, importance is placed on the exchange of touch between characters, often connoted with colors from the Orishas; when Miguel looks after a hung-over David, he cradles him to him to rinse him under the tap,



wearing red shorts – Changó’s color. In the film’s closing, David is dressed in Yemayá’s blues, calm and graceful, and hugs Diego when he is told “I thought hugging you would make me feel cleaner”.

### 2.3 Hearing

Throughout the movie there are two strands regarding hearing: the first are actual spoken narratives to convey information; the second being the use of music, which exists out of the records that Diego plays for David, and the music of José María Vitier, which forms the soundtrack album to *Fresa*. The soundtrack is diverse in style, yet forms a unity in creating a musical framework for *Fresa*, ranging from tangos to samba and boleros. Vocals are minimal, and when used are not about the exact words but the melancholic or nostalgic atmosphere that the songs exude. Scholar Enrico Mario Santi also pays attention to the arrangements in his essay *The rhetoric of Cuban reconciliation*:

...the film resorts neither to heightened dramatic enactment nor to lyrical language but rather to music--the haunting pieces of Ignacio Cervantes and Lecuona, Benny Moré boleros, the framing devices of José María Vitier—as a way of suggesting that which cannot be stated out rightly (sic) but which nevertheless must take place. "The melos of melodrama," Caryl Flynn writes, "picks up where something else leaves off..." (Santi 18)

In particular the music by Cervantes embodies that which cannot and/or should not directly be put into words by the characters. "...The lost illusions refer to Diego’s illusions concerning David," says Alea, director of *Fresa*. "Diego has also lost his illusions with regards to the Revolution... [then it] treated him badly and marginalized him". (West 16-19)

As for narrative style in the movie, there are two different strands. The first is spoken narration—the dialogue between characters— but even more interesting, the dialogues had with the Orisha/saint statues. Both Nancy and Diego have an easy, unabashed manner of speaking to their *Santos*.



Diego in particular treats the Oshún statue as if she is present right there in mind and form. “You let me open my mouth and talk like a parrot!” he accuses her. Silence is his answer, and he threatens her:



“Bring him back or you'll live on bread and water!”

When Nancy tries to hang herself, she suddenly glares at the Santa Barbara statues, having heard the unspoken commentary. “Well, do you have a better idea?” she yells. The same hearing of the unspoken happens when she visits her godfather – she defends herself to Santa Barbara about why it may not work out between her and Diego, as she feels judged.



The second narrative style is through religious objects; the cowrie shells from the Santero that Nancy visits. The man does not speak, but the cowrie shells reveal the answer of divination that can be heard by those who have the knowledge. Nancy also uses her tarot cards when she is at home to look for an answer



about her and David, hearing what is said to her by the voices from ‘beyond’.

## 2.4 Taste

The title of the movie already places an emphasis on the sense of ‘taste’ – *Strawberry and Chocolate* is explained right at the beginning as Diego and David meet at an ice cream parlor. Taste, and thereby food, are both ordinary and extraordinary in *Fresa* – the film reflects on the first meeting of the two men by having them visit the parlor again at the end of the movie, right before Diego leaves Cuba.



“I love strawberry!” Diego exclaimed to David, trying to seduce him. David later refers to this when he speaks to Miguel about Diego, saying that it was obvious that Diego was *un maricón*. “You can tell right away. There was chocolate, but he took strawberry”. When the two visit the parlor for the second time, David chooses strawberry and playfully makes a show of eating it, imitating Diego’s initial performativity.



The characters are often shown having food, almost every time in the company of others; sharing meals is part of the cultural background, of being a good host.





In that sense, taste and food is ordinary, an everyday activity, but there are moments that stand out in significance, like the ice cream parlor and when they have the “Lezama lunch”, to honor the author’s books.

While there generally is no abundance of food, the sensory enjoyment of taste is translated in the way that food and eating/tasting is treated, especially by Diego; at all times he is rather expressive, but in particular with art and food, where it is easy to see how much he enjoys these things, taking his time to savor ice cream, whiskey and tea, for example.



The sensory engagement of taste is also connected to the offerings to the Orisha’s: Diego threatens to feed Oshún only water and bread if she doesn’t bring David back to him. When David shows up, Diego opens a new bottle of whiskey (the ‘drink of the enemy’), and pours the first serving on the floor. “For the Orishas”, he clarifies, referring to the Cuban tradition of giving the first of a new bottle of alcohol as an offering to the gods. Later, when Diego is depressed after having talked to his ex-girlfriend Vivian, he goes to Diego’s apartment and drowns his sorrows with the whiskey while listening to opera music.



## 2.5 Smell

Smell is arguably the most difficult sense to describe in a movie – even with food, while the viewer may experience a sense of smelling the dishes, it is enforced by the sight of the food – and even more intricate to connect to Santería in that sense. In *Fresa*, smell seems to mostly emphasize an atmosphere.



Diego is often shown with a cigarette, in particular when he writes or during serious moments. The imagined sense of smell of the cigarette, while we can never know for sure how it smells or what brand it is, creates a gloomy atmosphere and is clearly visible as the smoke creates shapes in the air. When Nancy visits a *santero* for advice, the mystic decorations and vibe of the small room suggests the smells of incense and herbs, not directly identifiable as such, but being a small aspect in the creation of the atmosphere; the same applies to scenes shot at the ocean, where the visuals and sounds contribute to creating the suggestion of smelling the ocean.

### 3. Feeling in/through the body: a different kind of sensory engagement

As Migene Gonzalez-Wippler describes in *Santería: The Religion*, the use of water, herbs and cleansing ceremonies is important to Santería practitioners: "...Santería is basically four things: water, herbs, seashells (cowries) and stones. (...) [Omi tutu (fresh water)] to "refresh" the saints. (...) Herbs: [as] plants, roots, leaves and flowers (ewe). (...) Every plant is "owned" by one or more of the Orishas and can be used for curses or for magic... Baths using combinations of plants are often recommended by the santeros". (*Santería: The Religion* 20-22) Not only are these elements used for cleansings, but also for offerings along with a request or simply to honor the deity. "Whatever is offered to an Orisha is transformed by that deity into pure energy – *Ashé* – which is then used by him or her to carry out the needs of the supplicant. Any type of magic requiring the help of a saint must employ materials that are attributes of that particular Orisha". (*Santería: The Religion* 20) This pure energy is *Ashé*, and resides not only in objects but also in people and animals, as well as the Orishas.

#### 3.1 *Ashé, Animism and Seselelame*

As said before, *Ashé* is the cosmic energy force that created the Orishas. It is this concept of nature, humankind and the divine being connected to each other that not only creates a position of respect, but also a tool of faith and worship similar to the idea of karma; you get back what you put out. Raul Canizares elaborates on the origins of *Ashé*, describing how:

...In the beginning was Ashe and Ashe was everything. When Ashe began to think, Ashe became Olodumare. When Olodumare began to act, Olodumare became Olofi, and it was Olofi who created Obatalá, the first Orisha. In those days there was no separation between heaven and earth, and Olodumare used to come down to earth very often. In one



of his visits, Olofi fashioned humankind out of mud, but he left the people without heads, wandering aimlessly. It was Obatalá who finished Olofi's work, giving humankind heads, which is the reason that to this day Obatalá is the owner of everyone's head. (Canizares 57)

*Ashé* as a life force creates balance and a state of well-being that cannot be expressed through simply the Western concept of senses. In that way, I'd like to argue that *Fresa* utilizes the animism aspect from Santería and literally brings it alive to reach out to the viewer. When Diego and Nancy talk to their statues of Virgin de Caridad del Cobre/ Oshún and Santa Barbara/Changó, a non-practitioner may see it as merely banter, or even prayer. Yet one enters into a new perspective when you take into account the importance of *Ashé* in Santería, and that this life force is amplified on the altars; when Diego brings sunflowers for his beloved Oshún, it gives life to her as the *Ashé* from the offering is used to help Diego in his plea for David to return. Therefore Diego is not just talking to a statue of a saint/Orisha, but to a representation that carries a vital life force within itself. It may be argued from a secular point of view that David returned to visit Diego on his own accord, but all the signs are there: Diego has asked Oshún for David's return, he has given her offerings to make it happen, and David indeed returns, to which Diego lights a yellow candle for Oshún to thank her – additionally, he opens a bottle of whiskey and pours the first serving for the Orishas. As Gailyn Van Rheen points out, there is a difference of opinion based on cultural and religious background as to how one explains a situation:

...Western (missionaries) naturalize what animists spiritualize. Animists do not object to these naturalistic explanations; they merely assume that there is some spiritual power behind the secular explanation. For example (...): Tribesman: This man is sick because

someone worked sorcery against him. White Doctor: This man is sick from malaria because he was bitten by an infected mosquito. Tribesman: Yes, he was bitten by a mosquito, but who sent the mosquito? (van Rheenen 173)

As one understands that the concept of *Ashé* crosses into the territory of animism, there is also an impact of *Ashé* that goes beyond the five senses; more specifically, in *Fresa*, animism is combined with, translated in and eventually becomes haptic visuality. I would like to suggest that this harmony of energies comes close to what Thomas Csordas refers to as ‘somatic modes of attention’; “Because we are not isolated subjectivities trapped within our bodies, but share an intersubjective milieu with others, we must also specify that a somatic mode of attention means not only attention to and with one’s own body, but includes attention to the bodies of others. Our concern is the cultural elaboration of sensory engagement, not preoccupation with one’s own body as an isolated phenomenon” (Geurts 41). Linn Geurts has done extensive research on this experience of the senses in Africa, where among the Anlo-African community she found the common expression *Seselelame*. She explains how the term can be glossed as “hearing or feeling within the body, flesh or skin”, where the body experiences sensations rather than feeling through the five senses. She illustrates this concept with examples, of which two suggest *Seselelame* can be seen as connected to a person’s exchange and reception of *Ashé*:

...when a person was falling in love or was sexually attracted to another person, Anlo speakers often mentioned physical sensations and charged feelings that occurred simply at the thought of the person or mention of the person’s name. They attributed this agitation or these perceptions to *Seselelame*. Second, when drummers beat out rhythms such as agbadza (a particular... form of music and dance) and a person felt inspired to

dance, many Anlo-speaking people suggested that it was *Seselelame* that moved the person into the circle. (Geurts 52)

In particular the mention of the drums, accompanied by the urge to dance, can easily be seen within the frame of Santería. The *Batá* drums are used in Santería ceremonies to call upon the deities:

...When properly consecrated Batá drums, played by initiated drummers called *alañas*, unite with the sound of faithfully executed vocal melodies and phrases, the Orishas descend from their heavenly abode and temporarily possess their devotees, thus initiating a mystic state of communion between the Orishas and the participants”. (*Santería: The Religion* 190)

This possession also means a possession of the senses, as a devotee mounted by an Orisha no longer is that person, but has now become the Orisha with all its power and *Ashé*.

### 3.2 *Embodying Orishas*

...one of [Oshún’s] children became possessed by the saint, who very promptly wrapped herself in a yellow-silk mantle and began to circulate among the guests. Never had Yey’e Cari been happier and more flirtatious. She laughed and joked and swung the fringes of her mantle from side to side with her inimitable sauciness. No one could have been more feminine and seductive, even though she was occupying a man’s body. (*Santería experience* 60)

As pointed out by Vidal-Ortiz, the Orishas are active participants in the religion and engage with the practitioners, enabling a person’s body to go beyond being-human – a

transcorporeality through possession. The description above of Oshún mounting one of her sons shows how there is a direct fusion of the deity and the person in ceremonies, through which also one's performativity and gender expression becomes 'changed'. When mounted, the practitioner is not a man, an individual person, but his body becomes the Orisha. While Oshún's gendered behavior is clear to see – her seductive behavior, her openly display of femininity even when occupying a male body for the time being, her femininity should not be mistaken as being from the man. When one of the practitioners does make that error, suggesting that the Orisha's flair 'makes' the man gay, it turns out to be a fatal faux pas:

...One of those at the party reached out an irreverent hand and jeeringly accused him of being an *invertido*, a homosexual. His action froze everyone in the room, which became cold and silent. Oshún stopped in her tracks. Very slowly she turned to face the man who had insulted her [and cursed him.]... Oshún's son *and* the man who had offended her died five days later of the same intestinal trouble". (*Santería experience* 60)

It is not so much a homophobic response, but a punishment for the lack of respect and proper treatment; a man should be treated as a 'man' (no matter how problematic that reasoning may seem from a feminist's perspective), and the Orisha should be treated as the god she or he is. Oshún's feminine performativity is not coming from the man whose body she uses on consignment, and most certainly cannot and should not be assigned as 'effeminate' by calling her son a homosexual. This incident is an example of how Santería has a strongly gendered framework, but at the same time shows how gender and even bodies are considered as rather flexible and fluid concepts through their connection with the divine.

Roberto Strongman suggests “...investigating sites within Latin American cultures that provide more genders from which to choose than are traditionally available” (*Syncretic Religion* 192), yet I feel that his use of “(more) genders” should be critically examined: in public spaces, as well as in the Orisha possession by Oshún, ‘gender’ does not seem the issue of marginalization/rejection of queers – it is the superimposed concepts of femininity and masculinity based on biological sex. Santería does not provide more genders – while some Orishas are considered to have ‘several paths’ which can be male and female, this is not a matter of ‘more genders’ -, it actually reinforces the binary gender labels. It does allow for a broader interpretation of masculine and feminine performativity, and thereby creates a wider, more fluid performative space for the biological sex of man and woman. A similar situation takes place when a woman is mounted by a male Orisha – she does not obtain a new gender, nor is the person referred to with a gender-neutral or new-gender pronoun. Vidal-Ortiz recalls the story told to him by an informant about a woman mounted by Changó:

*Changó* came down, she [the woman he took possession of] had a tampon, and *Changó* inserted the hand and took the tampon out, because *Changó* does not have anything inside him. *Changó*, I don’t know if you have seen when *Changó* comes down to earth he grabs [himself] like he had [male genitals] It happens—when a deity comes down, it is the deity not you. (*Santería: Gender and Sexuality* 134)

The experience of the body being taken over means allowing the body to give up sensory and mental control, as for a short period of time the person is merely an object/body used to give form to the Orisha. The senses do not belong to the human anymore as even the bodily endurance becomes altered: “I have seen a santero possessed by Changó take a lit cigar from the

hand of an unwary devotee and eat and swallow the glowing end with much relish, without burning his mouth” (*Santería experience* 42). Wippler-Gonzalez described a possession she witnessed:

The transformation was extraordinary (...) he stood towering over us, awesomely powerful, his body rippling with superhuman strength, his face an inscrutable ebony mask. (... he said ;) “Changó hungry. Changó wants to eat *amalá* and drink *cheketé*”. The food the Orisha demanded, prepared with okra and cornmeal, was soon presented to him in a *jicara*, or hollowed gourd. [He] used his fingers to bring the sticky amal’a to his mouth... “Ah,” he said, with a smile of satisfaction. “*amalá daradara*, very good, *aloguó*”. He held out the *jicara* filled with the unappetizing concoction to the people who formed the circle. “Who want eat *amalá* with Changó?” Although the taste of the *amalá* is less than palatable, the *Ashé*, the blessing that is received when one eats of Changó’s food is so great that everyone is willing to partake of this food when the Orisha offers it. (*Santería experience* 33)

As said before, the Orisha actively participates in the *Santería* rituals, creating his or her own sensory experience through the human: this way, Changó can experience touch, vision and speech. He requests specific foods and enjoys them, even shares them as token of his blessing, to give *Ashé* to the practitioners. He engages in dance, touches and lets people touch him; in short, he takes full advantage of his ability to enjoy the senses. While *Fresa y Chocolate* does not show any (ritual) possession, there are many moments where the characters utilize the frameworks surrounding certain Orishas.

Diego is the only character who embodies several Orishas throughout the movie; the presence of his altar with La Virgen de la Caridad Cobre suggests he has a close relationship to Oshún, but at other moments the framework of objects around him and his demeanor suggest he has moved into Yemayá and Changó.



### **Diego as Oshún**

Diego holds five sunflowers when he tries to seduce David, and even puts a yellow towel on David after a coffee spill, literally covering him with Oshún's love.



### **Diego as Yemayá**

Wearing the blue color of the sea Orisha, Diego tries to pace himself as he is now calmer and in control, representing Yemayá's wisdom.



### **Diego as Changó**

Featured during many scenes with Changó's double-headed red axe behind him, Diego's embodiment of Changó comes and goes with his passionate moods: anger, like the Orisha of thunder, defensive and upset.

The other characters in *Fresa* all have their own way of indicating their affinity with a particular Orisha, either on purpose (as Nancy does), or without being aware of it; David, Vivian and Miguel are not shown as being involved in Santería, but the styling of objects around/with them, as well as their behavior, can easily be placed in the frameworks of the Orishas.





### **Nancy as Changó**

Nancy channels Changó in every scene she appears in, hot-tempered, wearing red or pink, praying to Santa Barbara and going after what she wants. Even her attempt to hang herself is connected to a legend about Changó.



### **Miguel as Changó**

The homophobic Miguel constantly provokes people and encourages David to spy on Diego. Ironically, the most homo-erotic moment is when Miguel cradles a hung-over David against him, smacking his ass as he checks him out, wearing red shorts – Changó's color.



### **Vivian as Elegua**

David's girlfriend Vivian refused to have sex until they are married, but ends up marrying another man. Dressed in Elegua's colors (red and black) she suggests to David they have an affair, which he refuses: "You never loved me, you just played with me", he tells her, indicating her role as a trickster figure like Elegua, the unpredictable Orisha of the crossroads.



### David as Yemayá

At the end of the film, Diego is dressed in Yemayá's blue and sits at the ocean with Diego, embodying the sea Orisha's attitude: at last he is calm, relaxed, and instead of just 'following the Revolution', he has negotiated his own discourse regarding tolerance, thanks to Diego's friendship and books.

### 3.3 Memory of the senses: Embodying (the) queer in diasporic spaces

As Jose Quiroga states in *Tropics of Desire* about the many discourses and symbolism in *Fresa*: "Understanding them [the signs] entails understanding different cultural traditions, periods, references". (Tropics 130) I have already elaborated on some of these through the sensory exploration of Santería, and the haptic visuality *Fresa* uses to portray Cuba's diverse culture and politics, which leads me to the final part of this thesis. One of the major 'taboos' that is touched upon in *Fresa* is whether (a) queer can embody what a 'true Cuban' is supposed to stand for, therefore firmly rooting the issue of sex/sexuality into a discourse of nationalism. "You like women and I like men. It's perfectly normal since the beginning of time. I'm still decent and patriotic", Diego explains to David, who does not share that opinion. "But not revolutionary". "Who says I'm not?" Diego objects. "I've had illusions too, David (...) and what happened? This is a thinking head, but if you don't always say yes, or you think differently, you're ostracized".

## Nostalghía

While the position of the queer may not seem connected to sensory experience, I would like to argue otherwise. The manner in which the Cuban queer – both in the film, as well as in this current day and age – is located and treated in the diaspora community is connected to the memory of the senses by *Nostalghía*. Nadia Seremetakis elaborates on this concept, which is not exactly the same as ‘nostalgia’:

...*Nostalghía* is the desire or longing with burning pain to journey. It also evokes the sensory dimension of memory in exile and estrangement; it mixes bodily and emotional pain and ties painful experiences of spiritual and somatic exile to the notion of maturation and ripening. In this sense, *nostalghía* is linked to the personal consequences of historicizing sensory experience which is conceived as a painful bodily and emotional journey. (Seremetakis 4)

Cuban diaspora is a crossroads, where first of all – especially with relation to Santería – there is the diaspora that the African people brought to Cuba, from where it led to the Cuban diaspora spaces that were formed in the United States as Cubans left the island, settling down in cities like Miami and New York. The pride and patriotism for Cuba is strong and very much alive, but also still a part of a journey that through its cultural ties also carries a certain cultural pain: one cannot return to the Havana that is shown in *Fresa*, as ‘what used to be’ is not there anymore. Yet it is this nationalism that remains a defining factor in values and practices, the *Nostalghía*, which is a sensory experience. In the case of the Cuban queer, there is the struggle (which David voices in *Fresa*) that the nationalist pride of being Cuban seems to clash with being (a) queer. This ideology can be traced back to the ideology of Jose Martí. As Maniaci

states, "...often sanctified as "the apostle of the fatherland" (Bejel 9) [Martí] saw a threat in what he termed "the effeminate man". The homosexual... can be seen in Martí's writing as troubling to what Martí would term the "ideal national family" due in large part to the homosexual's perceived transgression of binary gender roles." Martí makes it implicitly clear that the Cuban is (or should be) virile, willing to struggle, fight and die for the cause of nationhood. Partly due to him, Maniaci points out, this vision of the ideal Cuban male remained "...entrenched throughout the twentieth century within the ideals of Cuban nationalism" (Maniaci 3). David initially questions whether Diego's family is responsible for him being gay, then reaches for a medicalized explanation: "Do you have family? For sure they rejected you. (...) It's a problem that's in the glands". While Diego tries to explain himself, it is exactly that sense of being put on trial that led many gay Cubans to defect with the Mariel boatlift.

Both in the cinematic narrative and the original play by Senal Paz, there are three terms used to name gay men: *homosexual*, *maricón* and *loca*. Loosely translated into English, one could match these terms with respectively 'homosexual', 'queer' and 'queen' – yet, as Quiroga states, it is the call to "...understanding different cultural traditions, periods, references" that gives weight to the names, and therefore are not nor should they be treated as comparable with the Western concept of gay. "Te voy a contar como me hice maricón", Diego tells David at one point. While the subtitles translate the sentence into "Here's how I became a fag", *hice* is a conjugation of the verb *hacer*, which means 'to do' or 'to make'. Linguistically, what Diego says is 'I'm going to tell you how I made/did *maricón*' in English. He indicates in that moment that he sees *maricón* as an action, as related to performative behavior rather than defining a complete identity. While language is obviously very personal and situated in culture, this linguistic use matches the hesitation or plain discomfort of adopting the Anglo-label of "gay": the sense of

‘this is not the defying aspect of my personality, and I am not comfortable with all the connotations that come along with calling myself gay’ – not to mention that, as said before, ‘gay’ does not cover the local terminology. Gloria Wekker points out a similar situation in her work regarding Afro-Surinamese women:

...Dividing up the world between those who have a sexual identity and those who engage in sexual activities, leaves unexamined the core problem of what will constitute "sex" or "the sexual" in either category. (...) when [Afro-Surinamese women] talk about their sexuality in terms of activity, when they use a verb, *m'e mati*/i.e., I am doing the mati work, instead of a noun, *mi na wan mati*/I am a mati, which would linguistically and grammatically have been equally possible. Yet, they do not use the latter construction at all, pointing to the importance of their cultural construction of same-sex sexuality [...but] there is no ambiguity whatsoever about what constitutes "sex" or "the sexual". (Wekker 72)

It is that similar recognition of ethno-cultural background that simultaneously plays a problematic as well as intriguing role in the naming and framing of ‘queer Cuban sex(uality)’. This raises three concerns involved in the labeling, as well as accepting ‘queer’ as indicative of identity, and thereby of the (self)value of a person: social class/status, nationalism or ‘being a good citizen of the motherland’, and respect and recognition of masculinity.

### **Social class**

Wekker recognizes in her research how ‘doing the mati work’ primarily takes place among working class women, and how the environment in Suriname has a strong power dynamics based on social class: “... She [Juliette] became strangely mute in middle-class

environments, where working-class people are often treated with disrespect”. (Wekker 21) For that reason, as well as the more practical parts of a relationship also based on caretaking, one would not use the expression ‘doing the mati work’ for middle or higher class women, while their actions and behavior might be perceived as similar – even as being lesbian, which it is not. Alea, one of the directors of *Fresa*, makes a point of describing Diego as “... a refined and cultivated man who is relatively mature, and he conducts himself as a normal person”, (West 19) thereby also addresses the issue of class and ‘decency’.

### **Nationalism**

With regard to nationalism, Diego is very vocal in expressing himself; at the same time he also feels the need to defend himself as being ‘decent’, being worthy like any other Cuban. “I’m still decent and patriotic”, he says to David, who tells Diego that he is not revolutionary. Diego grows agitated and stands up. “Who says that I’m not revolutionary? (...) What do you believe in?” Diego asks David. “[I believe] In this country”. “So do I”, Diego snaps. “So that people know what's good about it. I don't want Americans or anybody coming here telling us what to do! (...) To accept me, they [other Cubans] have to say I’m sick. Fuck it, I’m not! (...) I’m part of this country, like it or not! And I have the right to work for its future. I’m not leaving Cuba even if they burn my ass. Without me you’re missing a piece, you stupid shit!” Both men, albeit having different opinions, acknowledge that being gay has to do with nationalism and how much of a true (revolutionary) Cuban one can be while being gay; David by rejecting that possibility (“With your posturing, nobody can take you seriously... all you think of is men”), Diego by fiercely defending it, insisting that being gay does not devalue one’s nationalism.

## Respecting masculinities

Finally, the matter of ‘respect’ and ‘masculinity’ is both abstract and fluid. While interpretations and conceptualizations of masculinity differ per space, there is the unspoken mortal sin of ‘not being a man’ as the worst insult and burden to bear. Wekker touches upon this briefly, referring to research where “... analysis tried to capture what it means to be "a real man" by juxtaposing a "respect" and "reputation" system (...) According to Wilson, Caribbean men subscribe to the egalitarian value system of reputation, an indigenous counterculture based on the ethos of equality and rooted in personal as opposed to social worth”. (Wekker 110) Acknowledging one’s masculinity comes down to being as simple as to ‘admit one is a man’ and that one doesn’t fail in being this. Therefore when a man’s performativity gets classified as effeminate or, even worse, female, there is a lack of respect and denial of worth as man. To be (like) a female is to be *non-male*; as much as one could argue against this binary condemnation, this is how it is perceived. Vidal-Ortiz also addresses the linguistic implications of respecting masculinity in Puerto Rican and Cuban culture: “In many of these terms [like *maricón*], the notion of “taking” something in is referential: a gay man is presumably penetrated—like women—and, thus, the so-called *activo/pasivo* (as penetrator/penetree) system of social stigma follows. “Taking something in” is thus understood as being de-masculinized in these academic discussions”. (*Cuban and Puertorican Linguistic Practices* 913) ‘Gay’ might conjure up questions of ‘bottom’ or ‘top’, and from thereon might lead a person to wonder about how ‘queeny’ a person is – but Vidal-Ortiz emphasizes that *maricón* already has the referential embedding of ‘penetree’, thereby automatically de-masculinizing the person, which clashes with the Caribbean ideology of ‘respect’.

The queer is therefore seen as non-male, which on default suggests (as David does in *Fresa* about Diego) that he puts his sex/sexuality ahead of his nationalist duty and is not-Cuban, thereby taking away two identities (man and Cuban) from the queer. In that sense, Diego's verbalization of *maricón* as performative, like 'doing the mati work', is both to acknowledge and prevent a loss of identity: that *maricón* is neither a loss of being-man or being-Cuban nor can discredit his (self)worth and knowledge; forcing us to rethink the label of 'gay' outside of Anglo-discourses, since it cannot and does not capture all these cultural and social nuances – in particular in *Fresa's* Havana of the 1970s.

I believe that the most salient difference between United States gay and Latin American homosexual categories is not found in egalitarian and *activo/pasivo* frameworks. It lies in the issue of disclosure/secretcy, which in US gay discourse has been crystallized around the image of the closet. (*Syncretic religion* 180-181)

As Arguelles and Rich noted in their 1984 article *Notes towards an understanding of the Cuban Lesbian and Gay Male Experience*, "...se dice nada, se hace todo [say nothing, do everything] is the rule. It is a closeted life but by no means a secret one. While the homosexuality of many men and women is a matter of common knowledge, it is never a matter of public record". (Arguelles, Rich 695) Western contemporary societies tend to emphasize the important of disclosure, referring to 'silent' queers as being 'in the closet'. Along with the unifying label of 'Gay Pride' comes a demand: we need your voice in order to leave the margins, so we would like some disclosure. But this lacks nuance and the necessary ethnocultural framework of queers in Cuban diaspora, as it forces queer sex/sexuality/performativity into 'a gay identity' rather than queer behavior/actions. As Strongman remarks, "...the rupture of this silence by "coming-out" narratives enacts the birth of the gay subject in discourse while at the same time, ironically,



forfeiting some of the freedoms of not-being. Many native Latin American alternative genders and sexualities do not rely on the same notion of disclosure to exist: the performance of desire is a much more defining moment than the declaration; the act is more important than the speech-act". Imposing the Western label of 'gay' is therefore joined with a second label: disclosure. Accepting the 'gay' label, but refusing the label of disclosure will be attributed to "still being in the closet". As Strongman notes, it is not the homosexual act per se that is problematic in Latin America, but "... the alleged disclosure of it in the public sphere as 'public indecency'. Broadly speaking, the (North American) closet spells liberation through disclosure and many native Latin American homosexualities operate through freedoms afforded by secrecy" (*Syncretic religion* 180-181).

When one vocally announces themselves as different, this disrupts the ethos of equality in Wilson's "respect and reputation" system, where, as mentioned before, the egalitarian value system of reputation is crucial with regard to (social) worth. (Wekker 110) A closet-ideology is problematic as it creates friction in the Caribbean (diasporic) system of reputation and equality as being equal. Meanwhile, *se dice nada, se hace todo* does not get to that breaking point of disrupting masculinities as there is a public silence; one man having sex with another man is an action, maybe even repeated behavior and might make him *maricón* - but it does not make him the Western defining identity of 'gay'. The silence is not necessarily an unwanted or forced silence when it is part of the local discourse, as Vidal-Ortiz emphasizes with a statement from one of his female informants, who is heterosexual, a mother and holds a graduate degree:

... One man in particular, and how he's sort of theatrical, and some others would say, "Oh, I didn't know he was gay," which is another way of saying, "I didn't know that I should treat him differently," "I was treating him like a man," you know?" "I was treating

him like a man and now I realized I shouldn't have treated him like a man, I shouldn't have been allowing him in aspects of my life, because he is really not a man..." (*Santería experience* 107)

By not opting for the discourse of disclosure, the queer in Santería also preserves his masculinity (as perceived by others) and prevents being treated differently within the religious space. Despite of the use of binary gender categories and the importance of being 'male' (versus not-male), it is valid to state that there is more flexibility of gender expression and performativity within the Santería community, in particular with regard to condemning 'effeminate/gay' behavior. Therefore the practice of Santería, and thereby different manner of thinking about feminine/masculine traits of a person alongside transcorporeality, does allow for open-minded spaces where one finds many 'queers'; Ortiz-Vidal estimates the presence of "self-identified gay men between 30 to 50% of all men" (*Cuban and Puertorican Linguistic Practices* 907), which Clark confirms in her writing.

Sex, sexuality and identity, as well as religion in diaspora, have proven to be interdisciplinary fields – crossroads where a language of desire is created, of defining and of representation. The choice of the Cuban queer to position himself in diasporic spaces with a *se dice nada*-mindset is often consciously made and does not necessarily need to be a bad thing; the choice has to do with a personal preference, which relates to the sensory experience. Where *Seselelame* stands for "hearing or feeling within the body, flesh, or skin", this is precisely what the Cuban queer does. He should not and does not need the closet-ideology along with the demand of disclosure in order to feel within his body. To gloss this over with the insistence on terminology as 'gay' would only damage the balance of *Ashé* and portray a lack of respect for the cultural and historical background of the Cuban queer.

#### 4. Conclusion

While Santería, the Cuban queer and *Fresa y Chocolate* draw upon many strands and aspects of cultural importance, they come together to form a crossroad throughout this thesis. It is through haptic visuality that the viewer becomes engaged with the film, “invite[d] to dissolve his or her subjectivity in the close and bodily contact with the image” (*Touch* 13) as the film appeals to all the senses. The use of different camera angles and the oscillation of near-and-far distances create an eroticism of both characters as well as objects; in particular the statues of Catholic saints, as representations of the Orishas, bring the viewer close to the religion in a sensory experience.

This answers my research question: “How is the sensory engagement with Afro-Cuban religion played in *Fresa y Chocolate*?” A full sensory engagement with Santería is formed in the film, through the sight of the Catholic statues on their altars, the haptic visuality that suggests smell, taste and touch, as well as hearing the characters talk and listen to the Orishas. “Visibilities are not forms of objects, nor even forms that would show up under light, but rather forms of luminosity which are created by the light itself and allow a thing to exist only as a flash, sparkle, or shimmer” (*Touch* 30), Deleuze stated, and it is indeed not the mere presence of religious objects in *Fresa* that makes Santería visible, but the way that the characters engage with these forms, stemming from the philosophy that *Ashé*, the cosmic life force, resides in them and therefore makes them be alive and engaged with the viewer. The ritual cleansing through a *despojo* (herbal bath) is shown as the camera moves down the naked body, there are close-ups of prayers being uttered to the saint statues on altars, and an introduction to divination through cowrie shells and tarot cards, engaging the viewer with the religion and practices in a sensory manner beyond what any narrative would ever be able to do. Through haptic visuality, the

viewer also experiences the etnocultural and historical frame of Cuba(ns) and the protagonists in the film. The dynamic with objects such as Diego's treasured books, the Afro-Cuban art on the walls, the discourse of music that affects David and Diego so deeply, enjoyment of food and the need for touch in the relationships of the characters (both platonic and romantic); they create a full sensory experience for the viewer.

Yet the sensory engagement with Santería in everyday life goes beyond the five senses, because of the presence of *Ashé* residing in humans, objects and the Orishas. The spiritual connection and this spark of life cannot be classified in the Western categories of the five senses, yet is strongly present in a manner that suggests the feeling is through the body – like the concept *Seselelame*. This Anlo-African expression loosely translates as “hearing or feeling within the body, flesh or skin”, where one experiences “...somatic mode[s] of attention [which] means not only attention to and with one's own body, but includes attention to the bodies of others. Our concern is the cultural elaboration of sensory engagement, not preoccupation with one's own body as an isolated phenomenon”, as described by Thomas Csordas in Linn Geurt's work. This holds particular relevance as Orisha worship happens through transcorporeality, where not only objects are representative of the Orishas, but the deities mount the practitioners in ceremonies. It is no longer a human who is present when a body is mounted, but the divine Orisha, which also means the body gains supernatural strength and the sensory experience of the deity. This is manifested in the Orisha wanting to eat his or her preferred choice of food, touch the practitioners for healings and blessing, and a bodily transformation as a person could even ‘eat’ a cigar without getting wounded.

I have shown how within the film, as well as in real life, there is a full sensory engagement with Santería that first of all appeals to the five senses, and secondly goes beyond

the Western concept of senses by “feeling in the body”, a different kind of sensory experience. In the same manner, it is this journey of the memory of the senses that plays a major role in the perception and definition of the Cuban queer. Rather than a discourse on sexual identity, the attitude that prevails is *se dice nada, se hace todo* (say nothing, do everything) from the Cuban heritage that influences the Cuban queer in diaspora spaces. Strong tones of homophobia can be traced back to the works of the Cuban writer Jose Marti, who speaks with disdain of ‘the effeminate man’, a judgment that is based on a gendered framework where the Cuban man above all needs to be “virile—willing to struggle, fight and die for the cause of nationhood”, which includes the sanctity of the ‘ideal patriotic Cuban family’. Not living up to this ideal of being a heterosexual man therefore renders the Cuban queer as non-male. Naming of the Cuban queer does not happen through the Western concept of ‘gay’, nor should this happen, as terms like *homosexual*, *maricón* and *loca* name the queer based on notion of history, culture and nuances that one does not find in the Western label of ‘gay’. In addition to this, ‘gay’ enforces an ideology of disclosure based on visibility and ‘pride’, while the Cuban queer, because of the many nuances, does not engage in this public discourse of naming: one does not (need to) speak about and define aspects as sex, sexuality, preference, performativity, as this is considered private as well as relative (for example, flamboyant performativity is not exclusively related to the queer Cuban). In a connection to the spiritual, since Santería also engages with feminine and masculine traits of the Orishas who are connected to the practitioners, the gendered discourse of Santería on its own is already ‘queered’; the binary gender labels are there, but by the discourse of *se dice nada* and not naming a person as ‘gay’, the performativity of gender has a much wider space in which to navigate, or perhaps oscillate.

In conclusion, as Santería allows for a wider interpretation and representation of the spiritual and human, sensory engagement by feeling through the body, and a discourse of silence with nuances regarding the queer without using the Western label of ‘gay’, the Cuban queer should not and does not need the closet-ideology along with the demand of disclosure in order to feel within his body. In *Fresa y Chocolate*, Diego makes this very clear: despite his fondness for international authors and culture, he uses Cuban-specific terms to express his queerness. When David argues that people cannot take Diego seriously “because all you think about is men”, Diego makes it very clear that being a queer man does not make him any less of a Cuban, a man or a revolutionary, indicating that being a queer is *part of* who he is – instead of the definition gay being *what* he is. It is this queerness through background, culture, religion, behavior, performativity and preferences that allows the viewer to enter into a full sensory engagement with both Diego and Santería in *Fresa y Chocolate*, where there is no tightly controlled definition of ‘what’ - but a journey that, like Elegua, shows ‘how’ crossroads can come together.

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