# POETRY

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## INTRODUCTION: NEITHER CONFESSION NOR ARGUMENT?

I once made the mistake of talking about "las Américas" (the Americas) with friends in Venezuela. They looked at me confused. There is only one América, they told me. In Spanish, América usually refers to what in English are two continents. In US English, by a piece of imperialist hubris, America often refers to a single country. This piece of hubris was what implicitly made myself (like other US academics) pluralize America when referring to an entity that we divide into North and South.

Within an anglophone geoscheme, the island of Trinidad sits at the crossroads of two Americas, lying just off the coast of Venezuela at the southern margin of the Northern continent. Within the schemes of some other languages, the island sits at America's center. And from the perspective of Trinidad, the island is a center of the world—a crossroads of Africa, Asia, Europe, and America. In the nineteenth century, the British-controlled island was home to indentured laborers

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*American Religion* 2, no. 1 (Fall 2020), pp. 167–179
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Figure 1: Flags of the Spiritual Nations, Spiritual Baptist Church Yard, Trinidad, Photograph by Olivia Fern.

from India and China, escaped slaves from the US, Native Americans from Venezuela, and Yoruba communities from West Africa (amongst other groups that helped to form what African religions in Trinidad call "spiritual nations"). While this small island might be marginal within the geoscheme of America-as-nation, Trinidad is also a global crossroads of nations.

Like Trinidad, a crossroads is a center point that is also liminal, a space of convergence and divergence. Whether margin or center, the crossroads are a charged space of potentiality in the ritual practices of African religions in America. In the Yoruba-inspired practices of Trinidad, Eshu is the particular Orisha (spiritual power) of the crossroads and the first Orisha honored to begin "feasts" (rituals of spirit manifestation).[1] All ritual practices, however, are crossroads—charged points of convergence for radically different kinds of nations, powers, and beings in a particular spot of ground or water. The following poem is about one such ritual (a festival for Olokun, the Orisha of the deep sea) and one particular crossroads (the narrow gulf that separates Trinidad and Venezuela).

This crossroads at the center of America is now a particularly fraught one. In 2019, the Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard began intercepting the small ferry boats that regularly crossed the few miles of sea separating Trinidad and Venezuela. My mother-in-law and her teenage daughter were on one of the last ferry boats allowed to cross these waters, arriving for our wedding in Trinidad and staying for one month before returning to Venezuela. As we waited seven hours for them to clear immigrations, I heard harrowing stories of mistreatment and exploitation in Trinidad shared by Venezuelans waiting beneath the tamarind tree that provided the only shade outside of the port's security checkpoint. As we talked, I remained painfully aware that this dehumanization of Venezuelans in Trinidad was, to a considerable extent, the consequence of unprecedented acts of economic aggression against Venezuela committed by my own home country (the United States).[2] For me, the waters between Trinidad and Venezuela are

1 More elaborated "paths" (or forms) of Eshu (as *Echú* or *Exú*) also exist in Yoruba-inspired traditions in Cuba and Brazil.

2 This US aggression against Venezuela has included supporting coups and destabilization attempts, pressuring any international entity that engages in trade or humanitarian exchange with Venezuela, dispatching this century's largest US military deployment in the Western Hemisphere to Venezuela's borders, seizing the assets of CITGO (the foreign arm of Venezuela's national oil company) and eventually assigning them to the US-based right-wing Venezuelan opposition, and helping to block Venezuela's attempts to liberate a billion dollars of its frozen foreign reserves from the Bank of England and assign the money to the UN Humanitarian Response Depot to administer humanitarian assistance during the coronavirus pandemic.

thus a fraught crossroads of the Americas in ways that go beyond the particular Orisha sea ritual described in the poem below.

This ritual began a year and a half before my mother-in-law's crossing, in 2017, when members of a Yoruba-centric shrine in Trinidad, carrying drums and libations, boarded a boat in the island's Caroni Swamp. They made their way toward the sea separating Trinidad and Venezuela, where they would release a smaller boat filled with offerings for Olokun. This poem is dedicated to that shrine, the Egbe Onisin Eledumare, and their charismatic leader, known affectionately as Oludari. I am not a member of the shrine, but they have been kind enough to let me accompany them over the years as they have performed the world-altering work of what Oludari calls "Yoruba sacred science." I felt like that science deserved something more than social scientific prose, so I turned toward poetry.

The turn toward poetry, as other articles in this issue suggest, is an incipient and under-valued movement within academic writing, but a much-needed one. I feel like a significant block to valuing poetry and other creative forms in our fields is not so much an obsession with objectivity (haven't we beaten that horse to death?) but that academic writing works within the gate-keeping conventions of a certain genre. In cultural anthropology and religious studies (as well as many other fields) I would call that genre "the argument." In writing my first book, I found that I experienced the most pleasure in crafting the creative interludes that threaded and mirrored the more explicit arguments of the chapters. With the pressures of "the book" somewhat relieved by its completion, I began to experiment with creative forms that were responsible to more than an academic argument.

While I wanted to do something more than reproducing the form of the argument, I was equally wary of reproducing the generic form of much modern poetry—the confessional. In the 1980s, in response to a previous wave of the crisis of objectivity, the discipline of cultural anthropology had already flirted with confession, often calling such a move "reflexive." The hope was that confession could liberate ethnography from the colonial fiction of the distanced, objective observer by including the autobiographical reflections of the academic (if only as a section in the introduction). But reflexivity was critiqued for making the academic "I" even more central to ethnography rather than deconstructing the agency of the academic in relation to its subjects of research. In a confessional mode, I worried that poetry could also end up making the academic central, this time as a person with feelings as well as reasons.

So how can poetry do more than simply revealing that academics have personal lives and feelings, especially considering that the way "the personal" gets constructed is often the means through which structures of power are

maintained? Instead of unveiling a confessional "I," how could poetry make what Donna Haraway calls oddkin, lyrically transgressing constructs of family, citizenship, and the private sphere? I think that is precisely what the Egbe Onisin Eledumare does with the ritual practices they call "work" or "science." The piece below is just an attempt at writing down the Egbe's poetics of making "spiritual nations" of belonging based in diasporic ritual kinship rather than blood or the borders of countries on a map.

In the poem included here, I stayed within the descriptive bounds of ethnographic poetry, leaving the speaking "I" cloaked and uninterrogated. Backgrounding the "I" to tell the stories of others bucks the confessional bent of much poetry. Yet, such backgrounding of an ethnographic "I" has also been at the crux of field work as a colonial endeavor, in which scrutiny is nowhere near symmetrical and the observer has the gendered, raced, or classed privilege of disembodiment. So in the future, I would like to do in poetry what I attempted in the article "Don't Study People," in which I foregrounded the less-than-comfortable moments of frustration, conflict, and physical discomfort during long-term field research that I unconsciously excluded from other work in order to keep the ethnographic "I" in the background and the academic "I" intact. Reviewers told me that the article was beautifully written, but that I was not making enough of an argument or an intervention in the discipline. So in revisions I tried to present a case to a jury composed of my peers (other academics in a particular field) rather than simply telling a story in which the moral was visceral.

It's important to recognize these myriad ways that disciplines and fields exert informal mechanisms for disciplining how we write (and reinforcing the preeminence of writing itself). But it would also be limiting to underestimate the possibilities for different forms of expression. Apart from the ethnographic "I" of descriptive reportage (whether lyrical or dry) and the academic "I" of the critical argument, there are other possibilities. Elsewhere I've tried to experiment with surreal changes of subject, distributed affect, or hard cuts from personal trauma to TV news. I feel less comfortable submitting that poetry to the few academic journals that publish creative work and more comfortable with sending those poems to literary reviews. I suppose I still have this division between the subgenre of "ethnographic poetry" and what I consider to be out of bounds within academia. Perhaps this division unsettles the argument I've just been performing here, showing how transgressive the eruption of "the personal" into realms that get labeled "professional" or "public" can be. That eruption happens toward the end of the poem below, but it would be easy to miss without knowing about my own relationship to the waters between Venezuela and Trinidad.

In Spanish, the words for "genre" and "gender" are the same. Writing outside the conventions of the argument can bend the genre of academic production, and

Figure 2: Caroni Swamp, Olokun Festival 2017, Photograph by the Author.

poetry is ideally suited for this bending. Poetry is not about making arguments, staking a position, constructing a linear line of reasoning, and marshaling supporting evidence. Poetry does things with words, thinking with the ear. All the poetry I write is political, and there can be implicit arguments. But poetry is an action, and any argument is an echo that can only unfold as an aftershock resounding in wildly different architectures of experience. For this to happen, there has to be some initial impact, when words become physically piercing or impactful.

And now that I have begun to make an argument against the hegemony of the argument in our genre-ed performance as academics, let's just leave it there. After all, the point of this is to begin to value the act of poetry and other generic experiments, rather than privileging a second-order argument about it.

## A CELLULAR RITUAL

*(Olokun Festival, Egbe Onisin Eledumare, Trinidad)*

J. Brent Crosson

### 1.

With a Nokia phone in one hand
and a flip phone in the other,
he has Nigeria in the right ear
and Venezuela in the left.
He's balancing between continents,
standing up
on this fishing boat they're calling Ra
that bobs in the sea between
Trinidad and Venezuela,
North America and South.

### 2.

This cellular ritual begins at dawn
in a swamp that's sanctuary
for scarlet ibis flocks. They look maroon
in the shade of mangrove trees—
Trinidad's national bird,
colored by the shrimp of Venezuelan estuaries.
And as we leave the dock, so do the birds.

They set our course, and he stands up to urge
the drums of this fishing boat ministry
to play like they'd propel us
through the mangroves to the open sea,
preceded by the ibis
and guided by the hand of a pilot
named Ram Singh,
as we string together
the outboard staccato
and stutterless speech
of drums and pistons
into a melody sung for Ogun.

*There are older heads*
*marooned in the mangroves*, he says,
as we motor through water
colored by mud and dead leaves.
*They escaped sugar estates and history*
*but not the social media of the dead:*
*skin stretched*
*over hollowed tree trunks.*
*So don't stop drumming*,
he says as we pause to duck
a low-hanging branch
wrapped by a brown snake.

Then the trees open up,
and across the bay the sky
scrapers of Port of Spain
reflect back the sun.
Ram Singh cuts
the motor, lets the boat
drift slowly west
where mountains settle
in Venezuela like smoke.
That's when he asks
for another phone,
stands up to become
the leader of a cellular ritual
to make a nation out of water,

with his words bouncing
between Africa, outer space,
and a boat drifting
from one America
to the other,
        rehearsing
                with a song for the ocean
                        how to become African
                                        without land.

*Throw the anchor,*
*Ram Singh.*

**3.**

Inside the boat
bobbing between nations
there is another boat,
a fiberglass wedge filled with wedges
of melon—
offerings for the power
that lives
at the bottom of the sea.
And inside his cell phone
is another cell phone
held to the head
of his spiritual kin
in another land.
No common language
or carnal blood,
no means of translation
between heads
and cells and melons,
but still there's a nation
held together by a regression
of scale as infinite
as the sea receding to a horizon of smoke.

And inside this nation
of nationless ocean

Figure 3: Flags at a Hindu Temple in Trinidad, 2011. Photograph by Olivia Fern.

there is an island
that contains the nations,
each with their own flags on bamboo poles.
They jut above the concrete walls
of Caribbean yards.
Banners whose colors
are the colors of the powers
planted at their bases—
blue for Oshun or Shiva,
yellow for Hanuman,
St. Francis, or Osain.
Spanish, African, or Indian,
it all fits in
to a boat
or a cell
or an island.

## 4.

When the cellular triangle
of Nigeria, Trinidad, and Venezuela
meets at the solar apex
of this spiritual OPEC,
he says it's time to release the boat
held within this one.

Unlike ours it doesn't float,
leaves melons drifting
like shipwrecked bodies
on the surface while it sinks.
But just so,
when the drums begin to sound again,
the boat's prow
pops back up—
a compass needle
pointing at the sun.

He waves off the drums,
points at the boat
with his Nokia phone,

Figure 4: Gulf of Paria, Olokun Festival 2017, Photograph by the Author.

and tells us it's a sign
the work was done right.

But in Nigeria it's night,
and that sign has already set
on a continent that's hours ahead of us.
And soon there'll be no boat
that can cross the sea we're on,
because Venezuelans
won't be welcome
in Trinidad's ports.
The melons float
next to a capsized boat,
the memory of those—
unlike spirits, birds, and cell phones—
who are marooned in the ritual of crossing.

*This is an offering*
*for the god of the ocean*
*who dwells like shipwrecks*
*at the bottom of the sea.*

*Pull the anchor*
*and let us go,*
*Ram Singh.*