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Gisell Rondon April 12, 2022

“Adonde Nos Lleva El Espiritu…Where Does the Spirit Take Us?”: A Theological Meditation on Afro-Dominican Women’s Understandings of Apocalypse, Afterlife, and Survival

By

Gisell Anais Rondon

Dr. Dianne M. Stewart

Adviser

African American Studies

Dr. Dianne M. Stewart

Adviser

Dr. María M. Carrión

Committee Member

Dr. Joyce Flueckiger

Committee Member

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Abstract

"Adonde Nos Lleva El Espiritu…Where Does the Spirit Take Us?":

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Afterlife, and Survival

By Gisell Anais Rondon

Interrogating the persistence of faith and hope in a world that often feels relentless in its implementation of cruelty, violence, and oppression is a central preoccupation of liberation theology. The juxtaposition of maintaining hope in the midst of hopelessness is specific to the positionalities of Christian Afro-Dominican women as they learn to survive and make meaning of the world through their faith and religious devotion. As we think critically of what Black liberation looks like in a fallen world, we must ask how Christian theology is tending to the needs, priorities, and concerns of Afro-Dominican women. How are Christian Afro-Dominican women building a theology and spiritual vernacular in a world that denies them their humanity and being? In this project, I argue that Afro-Dominican women's Christian theology not only centers a practice of survival and sustenance, but also faith in a God of destruction and creation. More specifically, I contend with the nihilistic and Afropessimistic concerns and priorities of Afro-Dominican women's theology, as well as how Afro-Dominican women's theological imagination is providing a new language of liberation and salvation through apocalyptic visions of the destructions of the world. I derive theological insights and conceptual tools for this investigation from the works of Black and Latin American liberation, mujerista, and womanist theologians like Delores Williams and Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz, as well as black critical theorists like Calvin Warren and Christina Sharpe. Placing black critical theorists in conversation with liberation theologians allows me to explore and meditate on my project's central intellectual pursuit through analytical frameworks that situate Afro-Dominican women existentially, spiritually and socio-historically. Through engagements with these and other scholars, I address what it means for Pentecostal Afro-Dominican women to invest faith and hope in apocalypse in order to witness the possibility of liberation through the divine. In so doing, I examine how a foundational apocalyptic understanding of the world frames their daily rituals, practices, and vernacular. As the scholarship of these authors provides the theoretical framework for my project, my research methods rely heavily on oral histories in order to document the specific vocabulary, imagination, and theory that Afro-Dominican women are cultivating in their communities.

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Thank you to my mother Yadira, grandmother Susana, and all my aunties who are the root of my research and consistently remind me of my passion for this work. Without their love, support, and invaluable knowledge, I would not be here today.

Lastly, I want to thank my friends who have been so helpful throughout this process. Whether it was listening to me ramble about my chapter ideas or forcing me to sit down and write, I am so thankful for your constant support and the joy you all bring every day.

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Introduction:

Dios, si tu dejas que yo y mi hija sobrevivamos, te prometo que le enseñaré sobre ti…
God, if you let me and my daughter survive, I promise that I will teach her about you…

My mother distinctly remembers uttering this prayer as she struggled with my birth. Surrounded by scrambling doctors and nurses, she found herself hemorrhaging on a bed in New York Presbyterian Hospital. As the possibility of death confronted both of us that night, my mother's prayer revealed an unrelenting devotion to God during moments of suffering, fear, and uncertainty. More than just a plea for survival, my mother made a commitment to teach me about God, his disposition toward the world, and what that means for us.

I used my honors thesis as an opportunity to explore what it could mean for me to fulfill this promise and learn about my mother's God, I began with my first fundamental question: How are Christian Afro-Dominican women constructing a theology and spiritual vernacular in a world that denies them their humanity, being, and liberation? Going back to the site of my birth and the many stories that my mother told me growing up, I found myself making a connection between faith and struggle in Afro-Dominican women's negotiations with Christianity. Over and over, I would see how God sustained my mother and became present during these moments of despair, comforting her and providing her with hope to persist in the face of hardship.

However, as I learned more about the characteristics of my mother's faith, I found myself increasingly curious about what lies behind this imagery of God's presence, the kind of justice God favors, and the theological ideologies that Afro-Dominican women with similar faith

commitments to those of my mother embrace. Was their God a God of redemptive suffering? A God of endurance and resilience? A God that advocated for the improvement of an unjust world?

As these questions plagued me, my theological investigations and reflections shifted from attempting to understand and recount my mother's Pentecostal and Baptist faith journey to constructing a thorough theological meditation and intervention concerning the not readily detected radical nature of Afro-Dominican women's Pentecostal faith. Although often stereotyped by labels that characterize Pentecostals and other fundamentalist Christians as apolitical, conservative, and uncritical, I argue that the Afro-Dominican women's Pentecostal faith and gospel interpretations I examine in this thesis are centered around a radical *nihilistic* understanding of the world and a God that responds to the inescapable condition of Black suffering. The foundational argument of this thesis claims that Afro-Dominican women have chosen to pour faith into an Afropessimistic God who promises them liberation through the cataclysmic destruction of the world. It is by way of an apocalyptic vision that Afro-Dominicanas make sense of their position in the world as Black women and cultivate hope around divine destruction rather than earthly parameters of political progress.

The theoretical framework of this project primarily depends on an interdisciplinary conversation between philosophers of Black critical thought, the archival work of scholars who have interrogated dominant historical narratives of the Dominican Republic (DR), and the contributions of theologians who privilege the faith and social location of the oppressed in their research. The scholarship of Black critical theorists like Calvin Warren, Christina Sharpe, Hortense Spillers, and Frank B. Wilderson III lays a groundwork of language regarding concepts of ontology, being, and self that allows me to theorize about the subjectivity of Black Dominican women. Historians and ethnographers like Lorgia García-Peña, Griselda Rodriguez, and Caridad

Cruz Bueno offer indispensable analysis of the legacy of colonialism and white patriarchal supremacy in the Dominican Republic and the importance of highlighting Afro-Dominican women's daily conflicts with the island's social and political institutions. Lastly, Black and Latin American liberation, *mujerista*, and womanist theologians like James Cone, Delores Williams, and Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz are crucial conversation partners as I strive to produce theological meditations that are rooted in a tradition of scholars who are continuously searching for deeper meanings behind God's ethic of resistance and struggle against injustice for marginalized people around the world.

My principal methodology is Christian liberation theological inquiry, hermeneutics, and source analysis which involves: (1) contextualizing the historical, social, cultural, and economic experiences of communities of faith, which are also liberation theologians' communities of accountability, and (2) engaging the sources of Christian faith for communities under study, such as scripture, doctrine or church teachings, devotional practices, and reason (often termed the epistemological privilege of the poor and oppressed in the liberation school of thought). In this project, the poor and the oppressed are Afro-Dominicanas, and accessing their modes of religious reasoning and epistemologies involves narrative theology, which consist of primarily telling a personal and collective story of Afro-Dominican women's faith, their theorizations of self, and the ways they have come to define God. By responding to the works of the authors outlined in my theoretical framework, I aspire to make a unique theological intervention in womanist and *mujerista* theologies that recognizes the agency in Afro-Dominican women's constructions of a Black nihilistic Christianity that affirms the existence of Black women.

Originally, I intended to conduct an ethnographic study of Afro-Dominican women's daily lives and their interactions with Christianity. However, due to complications with COVID-

19, and disruptions to my research plan, I adopted a theoretical approach and began thinking of ways to launch a distinct interrogation of Afro-Dominican women's faith by drawing data from published ethnographies and other academic scholarship as well as by pondering my own religious upbringing in conversation with Black philosophers, theologians, and Dominican ethnographers.

The first chapter of my thesis, "Diagnosing the State of the World," focuses on understanding the parameters of the social world that Afro-Dominicanas have inherited, as well as the ways that these boundaries shape the *kind of* God they venerate and the demands of their faith. I begin with a historical analysis of how the Dominican Republic's legacy of colonization and imperial rule has uniquely shaped a national Christian identity that has created a false God who is more interested in upholding structures of white colonial order and authority, than addressing the marginalized positions of Black women. The nation's flag, often waving high in the air from poles mounted on municipal buildings, schools, hospitals, and other governing institutions across the Dominican Republic is the ideal symbol to explore, for it is no less than a metonym of national Christian identity.

As a way of resisting the construction of the DR's "national" God, I subsequently travel down to the ground to scavenge for signs of a theological lexicon where Afro-Dominican women's faith is centered in a rhetoric of Christ's return and his promise of violently eradicating the sin and suffering that has consumed the earth. By interrogating the disconnect between national and vernacular images of God, I place Black Christian theology and Black critical theory in conversation in order to analyze how Afro-Dominican women are allowing their ontological despair to supplement their faith in a God who has also lost hope in the redemption of a broken world.

The second chapter, "Apocalyptic Hope: The Eschatological Imagination of Afro-Dominican Women," delves into the imagery of destruction in God's gospel and addresses how the disaster and violence of apocalypse actually cultivates hope for Afro-Dominican women rather than terror. The chapter then explores the significance of a theological vernacular of destruction within the Black literary imagination and analyzes how divine conceptualizations of death, afterlife, and heaven particularly attend to the existence of Black people throughout the diaspora. Challenging the idea that divinity and Black nihilism must be polarized, I subsequently argue that eschatological perspectives allow Black Dominican women to imagine an alternative state of being through the worship of the Spirit. Through digital materials that feature Dominican Pentecostal congregations in devotional spaces, I elucidate the location of God's presence as a position *outside* of the world that consistently renews and pours hope in the souls of Afro-Dominican women. I argue that the spatial location from which this spiritual renewal originates is a testament to God's nihilistic objective and refusal to appeal to a world that is irredeemable.

The third chapter, titled "Sustaining the Flesh in the Midst of Mutilation," grapples with the question of how Afro-Dominican women of Pentecostal and other similar faiths exhibit resilience as they wait for God's promise of apocalypse to be actualized. I argue that in orienting themselves through "the Spirit and the flesh," Afro-Dominican women are committing to a practice of survival in order to continue feeling God's sustenance. It is through this endurance of suffering that Afro-Dominican women's ontological predicament is best understood as they find no escape from the abuse of anti-blackness on earth. This chapter emphasizes that Black Dominican women's endurance of suffering is not redemptive, but instead a commitment to staying alive through the limitations of the flesh in order to continue receiving and feeling God's guidance.

At the heart of this thesis, I seek to tell a story that honors the faith, hope, disillusion, anger, and survival of the Afro-Dominican women that have poured life and knowledge into me. It is through the love I have for my mother Yadira Vicioso Mena, my grandmother Susana Mena, and my aunts Tia Gloria and Tia Lourdes that I hope to not just celebrate the brilliance of Afro-Dominican women, but to also produce of piece of work in which they can see themselves and their radical faith reflected.

Chapter 1: Diagnosing the State of the World

"Cristo Viene! Buscalo. Arrepientete…" Christ is coming! Find him. Repent…[1]

These are words that one will often find scribbled on walls, storefronts, and billboards as one walks around the streets of La Romana in the Dominican Republic, where my mother grew up. Although "Cristo Viene" may seem like a peculiar place to start when thinking about Afro-Dominican women's negotiations with liberation, apocalypse, and survival, Jacob Olúponà's concept of "indigenous hermeneutics"[2] guides my scholarship in its theorizing about the social worlds of Afro-Dominican women and how their spiritual vernacular is shaped by deeply ingrained structures of colonization, imperialism, and authoritative constructions of race and gender. According to Olúponà, indigenous hermeneutics are a way of "exploring paradigms and modes of interpretation that are explicitly embedded in the traditions we study."[3] It is through a Christian tradition that is centered around a point of apocalypse that indigenous hermeneutics can be utilized to understand how Afro-Dominican women are interpreting Christ's destructive return through their positionality as Black women in the Dominican Republic. In addition, Ada María Isasi-Díaz's explorations within *mujerista* theology[4] emphasize the importance of prioritizing the quotidian experiences,[5] struggles, and knowledge of Latinas who interpret their faith through a praxis of liberation. Isasi-Díaz's and Olúponà's frameworks encourage me to start

[1] See Figures 2, 3, 4, 5 on pgs. 31-32.
[2] Jacob Olúponà, *City of 201 Gods* (California: Univ of California Press, 2011), 1.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha* (Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1993).
[5] Ada María Isasi-Díaz, "Lo Cotidiano," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 10, no. 1 (2002): 5-17.

from the literal ground rather than from “official” theological documents located in the ivory tower to speculate about the ways Afro-Dominican women are thinking and talking about God, especially since their vernacular theologies are oftentimes ignored or cast aside.

Through the ethnographic phenomenon of “Cristo Viene,” this chapter begins to theorize about the ways Afro-Dominicanas are making sense of their realities as Black women in the Dominican Republic. With these words, the promise of Christ’s return lingers in the consciousness of Dominicans as they go about their daily lives. The push to connect to their faith and repent for their sins before Christ’s arrival is a constant reminder of the fragility of the material world they inhabit and the time of apocalypse that is quickly approaching. This chapter will focus on the ways that the physical and theological presence of “Cristo Viene” on the ground and in the consciousness of Afro-Dominican women serves as a framework for an Afropessimist diagnosis of the state of their world. The chapter attempts to address two central questions that guide my research, reflections, and contributions to a womanist/mujerista theology rooted in an Afro-Dominicana religious consciousness, namely: How does a promise of apocalypse and destruction frame the daily vernacular and religious meaning-making of Afro-Dominican women? And how can “Cristo Viene" be a window into understanding the essential connections between Christian theology and Afropessimism within Afro-Dominican women’s faith?

Growing up in a family of Baptist and Pentecostal Dominicans, I had an understanding that our faith was grounded in an unbounded optimism in God’s promises of salvation. This optimistic hope in God is what has given my mother and grandmother strength and resilience to persevere during difficult times and has provided them with an image of liberation and relief that they find encouraging. However, as I have reflected on my religious upbringing and the constant

presence of suffering and survival, I have become curious about the ways the promise of salvation is tied to the presence of death, destruction, and apocalypse. By re-framing Christ's gospel as nihilistic, Christ's return to earth does not just promise salvation and redemption, but also guarantees a necessary and violent destruction of the world. If Christ can be understood as one who has lost faith in the redemption of our material world and condemns its sinfulness, Christ's disposition can influence how Afro-Dominican women perceive their world and look forward to his arrival.

In order to understand Afro-Dominicanas' rationalized understanding of the futility of their world, we must lay a basis for how their interpretations are grounded in a larger framework of Afropessimism and Black critical thought. Definitive thinkers within the schools of Afropessimism and Black critical thought such as Fred Moten,[6] Frank B. Wilderson III,[7] Saidiya Hartman,[8] and Hortense Spillers[9] grapple with the meaning of Black subjectivity and existence in a world ordered by whiteness. These authors contemplate the false allures of liberalism and social "progress," the state of non-being that is produced by the exploitation of Black flesh, the problematic of Black suffering, and the question of whether there is an end to it. Wilderson's *Afropessimism* is useful for assessing how Afro-Dominican women might be perceiving the world through a nihilistic Christ. Wilderson explains that "the structure of Black suffering in comparison to the presumed universal structure of all sentient beings" is fundamentally different because "Blacks are not Human subjects, but are instead structurally inert props, implements for the execution of White and non-Black fantasies and sadomasochistic pleasures.[10]" His

[6] Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness," *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (2008): 177-218.
[7] Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2020).
[8] Saidiya V Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (England: Oxford University Press on Demand, 1997).
[9] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65-81.
[10] Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 14.

conclusions are essential for theorizing about Afro-Dominican women's Black radical Christ because he distinguishes the "condition of suffering" that Black people experience as one that has no solution or redemption.[11] Building upon this foundation, I propose that Afro-Dominicanas have utilized their diagnosis of the world and their suffering as Black women to redirect their hopes of redemption in a radical Christ who is aligned with their concerns through a gospel of destructive salvation.

Black critical thought and nihilism can give theologians the tools to think about Christian theology as a practice of Black radical deconstruction, as well as a faith that is concerned with what liberation looks like beyond the fabric of a society structured by white patriarchal supremacy. Calvin Warren's scholarship on Blackness, nihilism, and emancipation provides a crucial foundation for understanding how Christ as a nihilist is concerned with liberating Black people from a position of non-humanness and non-being through apocalypse and destruction. In his article, "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope," Warren offers a precise analysis of the ways Black suffering quite literally feeds the American Dream and idealistic tropes of political progress and redemption. Warren asks, "Is perfection predicated on black death? How many more black bodies must be lynched, mutilated, burned, castrated, raped, dismembered, shot, and disabled before we achieve this 'more perfect union'? In many ways, black suffering and death become the premiere vehicles of political perfection and social maturation."[12] Warren's analysis of how fatalistic (literally and figuratively) the fabric of American society is for Black people is

[11] Ibid., 15.
[12] Calvin L. Warren, "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 15, no. 1 (2015): 217-218.

no less an urgent appeal to deconstruct the ways our world thrives on the existence of Black pain and trauma. The DNA of our world is so insulated in the dehumanization of Black people's bodies, minds, and spirits, that any "progress" our society makes will always demand the endurance of suffering and resilience. Thus, the solution to this state of relentless and consistent marginalization must be located in destruction and apocalypse. As Warren conceives it, "Black emancipation is world-destructive; it is not an aperture or an opening for future possibilities and political reconfiguration."[13] Through his Black nihilist interpretation of the state of the world, Warren maintains that true liberation for Black people requires the destruction of the world, its systems, and its institutions. Freedom cannot be met through practices of reform, compromise, and negotiation. Nihilism directly confronts and does not avoid the terror of Black people's marginal positions within our societal structures. To conceptualize Black liberation through a nihilistic lens is to understand that emancipation will only be possible by leaning into the prospect of apocalypse and tearing down our reality and the anti-Black structures upon which it is built.

Although some might interpret nihilism as a framework that swallows up the optimism and hope that is crucial to religious faith, I argue that recognizing nihilist thought within Christian theology can provide us with theoretical language that accounts for the ontological negation of Black people, the broken state of the world, and the possibilities of Black liberation through the Spirit. In addition, it is important to recognize that the presence of nihilistic thought is not foreign or unfamiliar to Black Christian theology. In *A Black Theology of Liberation,* James Cone insists that "what we need is the destruction of whiteness, which is the source of human misery in the world."[14] Cone contends that the fundamental sin of America is its refusal

[13] Ibid., 239.
[14] James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 2010), 139.

to acknowledge the moral depravity of a world devised through whiteness. According to Cone, America's collective sin contradicts God's principles of universal love and justice for the oppressed, creating a state of being that cannot be redeemed through fleeting efforts of progress and social change. It is through this common language of destruction, shared by theologians and Black critical theorists, that we can identify the powerful intersection of nihilism and Christian theology. Although Cone is not specific about the ways he envisions the dismantlement of whiteness, I would argue that God's love and justice for the downtrodden and oppressed culminates in an act of violence and cataclysm that severs the tether the world has on Black suffering. As much as God's gospel is rooted in love, it is important to recognize that this love is rebellious and dictated through a judgment day that brings death and apocalyptic destruction to our world. God's love is not composed and serene. Instead, God's love is best expressed through a wrath and outrage that is representative of his disillusion with a world where whiteness has won. For white people, this wrath and outrage can strike fear into their individual and collective conscience and force them to grapple with their salvation. However, for Black people who are in limbo between life and death, God's anger feels empathetic, comforting, and reassuring in the certainty that their suffering should not be the status quo. If the world rejects Black humanity and being, then God responds by rejecting the world and stripping it of its power and ability to continue perpetuating a state of nothingness for Black people.

Cone's articulation of a nihilistic Christ that favors the redemptive demolition of the world is best found in his analysis of eschatology, in which he describes a world that must come to an end if Black suffering and oppression are ever to end. It is a world "where the brutal reality of inhumanity makes its ungodly appearance, turning persons into animals" and where "the

oppressed…encounter the overwhelming presence of human evil without any place to escape."[15] Eschatology presents itself as an ideal window into Afropessimist readings of Christ's gospel because it directly confronts the inescapability of Black suffering on earth and the reality that death becomes the prime catalyst between sin and salvation. In the eyes of a nihilistic Christ, the perverse nature of whiteness has created an ethical void in the world that cannot be filled with scripture or prayer. Therefore, "Cristo Viene" exemplifies the return of a Christ that is witness to the subjection and existential suffering of Afro-Dominicanas, and who utilizes death as a vehicle of justice.

The Dominican Republic is a crucial geography to scrutinize when thinking about the conception of a nihilistic Christ invested in the destruction of a white world because of the nation's complicated history with Spanish colonization, U.S imperialism, anti-Haitianism, and anti-Blackness. The DR's national flag is an ideal symbol to study when considering how the country's intricate constructions of race, nation, and faith have inflicted a permanent state of ontological horror upon Afro-Dominican women. At the center of the flag lies the image of the *escudo* or coat of arms that holds the Bible, the cross, and the words *"Dios, Patria, Libertad"* ("God, Homeland, and Liberty") framed above it.[16]

[15] Ibid., 89.
[16] Figure 1.

Figure 1

The fact that the Dominican Republic's flag is the only national flag that incorporates an image of the Holy Bible has become a significant point of pride for Dominicans on the island, who see themselves as a devoted and God-fearing people. However, I argue that the dominant narratives of Christianity the flag represents echo representations of a God that is more concerned with upholding hegemonic structures of white colonial power than an apocalyptic rupture that responds to Afro-Dominican women's ontological realities. Lorgia García-Peña's, *The Borders of Dominicanidad*,[17] and Milagros Ricourt's, *The Dominican Racial Imaginary*,[18] both interrogate how the voices of the Spanish colonial and creolized elite have silenced and consumed the narratives of Black Dominicans throughout the Dominican Republic's history. Ricourt particularly analyzes how anti-blackness in the Dominican Republic is uniquely shaped by anti-Haitian rhetoric, as she combs through archives and scrutinizes texts that capture the genesis of a Dominican national identity shaped by the Spanish Criollo elite's race for empire against the French on the Western side of the island. Books published by educated mulattos in

[17] Lorgia García-Peña, *The Borders of Dominicanidad* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2016).
[18] Milagros Ricourt, *The Dominican Racial Imaginary* (New York: Rutgers University Press, 2016).

the 18th century like Antonio Sánchez Valverde's, *Idea del valor de la isla Española y utilidades que de ella puede sacar su monarquía* or *A Conception of Value of the Island of Hispaniola and of the Use which the Monarchy Could Make of It*, are fundamental to understanding the construction of a fervent allegiance to a Spanish colonial power, a distorted imagination of a homogenous Hispanic mixed race, and a national conduct of respectability and order.[19]

As these formations of Dominican citizenship and "self" were emerging, Haiti simultaneously became the antithesis of all that the Dominican Republic wanted to represent. Haiti's reputation as the first Black republic that achieved its independence through radical revolution was abhorrent to the Dominican elite, who had declared an unbending loyalty to Spanish authority and codes of behavior. In particular, Haitian people's resistance against French colonial authority painted Haitians as "'barbarians'" as they rejected the "planters, cattle ranchers, and the Catholic clergy; slavery was abolished, land was confiscated, slaveholders fled the country, and the Catholic clergy was expropriated of land, houses, convents, and hospitals, and their salaries were reduced."[20] For Haitians fighting for their autonomy, Catholicism was an extension of colonial power and subjugation. Instead of being perceived as a spring of religious faith and spiritual sustenance, the institution of Christianity was understood as a colonial strategy for the French to maintain control over nation and state, and thus had to be upended. The Dominican elite reacted to this rupture between church and state with a rage that would be felt until the present day, most notoriously documented through the 1937 Parsley Massacre which resulted in the genocide of 30,000 Haitians. The legacy of tensions between the Dominican Republic and Haiti would inspire also a line-up of leaders like Arturo Peña Batlle, Joaquín Balaguer, and Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, who maintained a burning commitment to condemn

[19] Ibid., 9.
[20] Ibid., 10.

Haiti for its revolutionary principles. Such leaders "blam[ed] Haitians for all traces of African influence in the Dominican Republic" and encouraged a rhetoric of identity formation that "positioned the Haitian people in opposition to Dominicans: whatever qualities Haitians did not possess, Dominicans did."[21] If Haitians were Black, Dominicans were white (or as close to white as they could be). If Haitians destroyed and burned through the plantations of their slave owners, Dominicans would take up an unwavering conduct of deference and respect for Spanish rule. If Haitians rejected Christian structures of authority, Dominicans would become irreversibly fused to the church through their religious devotion.

The Dominican Republic's approach to citizenship, religion, and race forces us to consider the consequences of marrying nation and God in a country that has been so persistently and violently anti-Black and anti-Haitian. Indeed, it is critical to ponder how this violence impacts the reputation of a God who is bound to the haunting legacy of the Dominican Republic's flag, political institutions, and ideologies. I argue that the God that is addressed in the flag's motto and symbolism and in the dominant realms of Dominican society is a God of injustice, a God that submits to colonial power, and appeals to the interests of colonial rule rather than the needs of downtrodden people. A God that is tethered to nation is one that encourages passivity and redemptive suffering for the sake of stifling revolutionary destruction and preserving the harmony of a sinister world that thrives on Black people's existential displacement.

It is in the streets, local congregations, and daily lives of Afro-Dominican women that we can find a God of destructive Black liberation. Through this social location on the ground, we can recover the radical theologies and cosmologies of a demographic that has been ignored by

[21] Ibid., 13.

the nation's silencing narratives of a colonial God. Ricourt calls this social location the "apocalyptic eternal debasement" where the cries of despair and frustration of a people who have been overlooked echo in the "abyss" of Black existence.[22] Through the faith of Black Dominican women, I can begin to unveil a theological imperative that emerges from this "apocalyptic debasement," one that reveals a profound disillusion with the institutions of our world and craves for something more.[23]

When I ask my mother how she describes the world, she states, "*Nosotros vivimos en un mundo caído*. We live in a fallen world." As I construct a theology attentive to a nihilistic Christ that tends to the spirits and existence of Afro-Dominican women, I must also carefully find how this "fallen world" is lensed by the specific experiences of Black Dominicanas and the how they navigate the social institutions of the Dominican Republic that are stained by a legacy of white patriarchal supremacy. It is necessary to address the specific characteristics of Afro-Dominican women's "fallen world" in order to clarify how their daily experiences are more than just a position of escapable, but a demonstration of how they have leaned into the unchanging condition of their torment.

The ethnographic and sociological studies of scholars who focus on the livelihoods of Afro-Dominican women provide a blueprint for me to find a connection between the ontological abyss Afro-Dominicanas inhabit and their theological vernacular. Caridad Cruz Bueno conducts an ethnographic study of how Afro-Dominican women who are domestic workers navigate a neoliberal economy and grapple with the unfair expectations and work conditions imposed on

[22] Ibid., 17.
[23] Ibid.

them as poor Black women on the island.[24] In addition to documenting the anecdotal experiences of discrimination within the workplace, in her article, "Stratification Economics and Grassroots Development: The Case of Low-Income Black Women Workers in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic," Bueno also engages in an analysis of how grassroots community building and organizing allows Afro-Dominican women to build a consciousness around an improved quality of life. Through workshops on labor rights, exploitation, and social hierarchy, participants in her study were able to express their frustrations with a world that consistently devalues their positions as Black women and their desire for better living conditions. Milagros, a domestic worker in her late thirties, stood up during one workshop and declared, "'*ya se acabaron los dias que yo trabajo trece horas cuidando los niños de otra gente, cocinarle a otra gente, limpiar la casa de otra gente, para llegar a mi casa a limpiar, planchar, cocinar, y acostarme con mi esposo si estoy muy cansada...y las cosas no son asi'* ('The days are done when I would come home from a 12-hour work day, cooking, cleaning, and watching other people's children, to my own home to carry water, cook, clean, iron for my husband, and also be pressured into having relations with him if I am too tired')."[25] Although Milagros renounces the ways that she has been relegated to a life of exploitation and servitude for her employers and even for her own family, I interpret her statement as a perfect example of the ways Afro-Dominican women consistently wrestle with what the order of the world *should* be and what it unfortunately *is* for them. Milagros's declaration of an end to "those days" can be read as an effort to claim agency over the trajectory of her life and marginalized position in the world. However, for Afro-Dominican Christian women who find themselves in the same position as Milagros, her declaration can be

[24] Caridad Cruz Bueno, "Stratification Economics and Grassroots Development," *The Review of Black Political Economy* 42, no. 1-2 (2015): 35-55.
[25] Ibid., 49-50.

interpreted as a cry for God to literally *end* the days in which her existence is defined by a state of depletion and struggle. Milagros's exhaustion with her condition can be understood as a common predicament for working class Black Dominican women, and a lens through which a plea for God to step in and take control becomes rational.

Bueno's study not only highlights the temporal triumphs of Afro-Dominican domestic workers as they are able to individually and collectively empower themselves through education and a reclamation of their rights, but it also captures the glimpses of desperation that they feel in their negotiations with institutions of white patriarchy and capitalism. Gabriela, a 24 year old mother who had to abandon her studies to support her children, states, "'*ay Cruz, yo tengo que salir de aqui…aqui no hay nada para mi'* ('Oh Cruz, I have to get out of here…there is nothing here for me')."[26] In addition, another response that Bueno frequently received was, "'*ay Cruz…aquí no hay desarrollo…aquí no hay progreso'* ('Oh Cruz…there is no development here…there is no progress')."[27] Beyond the small victories that Afro-Dominican participants in Bueno's research study were able to achieve, there was also a growing sense of distress coming from those who could not see any escape from the difficult conditions that surrounded them. In a neoliberal economy shaped by a history of colonialism and slavery, Afro-Dominican domestic workers recognize that progress is oftentimes a myth that does not align with their realities. The perception of being trapped in a world where no development or progress is possible affirms God's intent of finding a solution to their state of misery through an undoing of life on earth. I argue that it is this lack of response from their worldly surroundings that drives Afro-Dominican women to take on a more fatalistic perspective of the world, one in which God becomes present and affirming of their discouragement and disaffection with myths of progress.

[26] Ibid., 48.
[27] Ibid., 50.

Caridad Cruz Bueno also cites the work of Ginetta Candelario's *Black Behind the Ears: Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty Shops* to further emphasize the despair that consumes the lives of Afro-Dominican women as they confront the colorism and phenotypic stratification[28] that permeates the everyday language of racial identity in the Dominican Republic.[29] Through her fieldwork in Dominican beauty salons, Candelario is able to investigate this vernacular of anti-blackness by asking participants to rank people of different races based on their attraction. Candelario found that Dominicans tended to rank those that had more "Hispanic or Iberian" features such as "[olive-complexion]"…with long wavy hair" the highest, while ranking "visibly dark-skinned black women, especially those with 'black hairstyles'" the lowest.[30] The results of this study reveal not only an implementation of standards of beauty that harm dark-skinned Dominican women, but also one that derives from a history of fidelity to Spanish conquest and a fabricated racial identity of an ambiguous non-black Dominican country.

Claudine Valdez's "Género, discriminación racial y ciudadanía: Un estudio en la escuela Dominicana" ("Gender, Racial Discrimination, and Citizenship: A Study in the Dominican School") adds to Candelario's scholarship by exploring how anti-black beauty standards and harmful notions of white desirability and worth impact Dominican children's association of unfavorable living conditions with darker-skinned Dominicanas.[31] In a similar research experiment, Valdez asks Dominican children in schools to assign jobs and occupations to a series of people based on their appearance. Valdez found that "more children consistently assigned dark-skinned black women with natural hair to positions such as office cleaners, domestic

[28] Dianne M. Stewart, *Black Women, Black Love* (New York: Seal Press, 2020).
[29] Ginetta Candelario, *Black Behind the Ears* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007).
[30] Ibid., 40.
[31] Claudine Valdez, "Género, discriminación racial y cuidadanía," *Miradas desencadenantes: Los estudios de género en la República Dominicana* (2005): 231-264.

workers, street sweepers, informal vendors, and *friturera* (a woman who sells food from a street cart)."[32] Valdez's fieldwork shows that the Dominican racial imaginary goes beyond just the association of beauty with whiteness, but permeates and impacts the quality of life that dark-skinned Dominicans experience. Citing Valdez's research conclusions, Caridad Cruz Bueno emphasizes that her experiments similarly reveal that "'Black people in the Dominican Republic are born, raised, multiply, and die in spaces where being afro-descendent is not accepted, where everything associated with being black is negatively charged, and where the dominant model is opposed to their characteristics, phenotype, social and cultural being.'"[33] Through the ethnographic research methods that Candelario and Valdez employ, they are able to analyze the ways that Afro-Dominicanas are suspended in a state of nothingness in the Dominican Republic as the humanity of their existence is completely rejected. There is no ethical ground or landscape for Afro-Dominican women to walk on as they are plagued with violent standards of beauty, impossible conditions of labor, and a lexicon of Dominican racial identity that refuses to embrace Blackness.

Griselda Rodriguez's "Mujeres, Myths, and Margins: Afro-Dominican Women within a Capitalist World-Economy" further attempts to understand this nothingness that absorbs Black women's existence through an extensive analysis of how structures of capitalism and globalization have "led to [the] racialization and feminization of poverty in the Dominican Republic."[34] Through the institutionalization of systems that promote cheap labor like sex work, patriarchal structures of the "male breadwinner," and the "myth of racial democracy" that is promoted across and beyond the Dominican Republic, Rodriguez analyses how such structures

[32] Ibid., 40.
[33] Bueno, "Stratification Economics and Grassroots Development," 41.
[34] Griselda Rodriguez, *Mujeres, Myths, and Margins* (New York: Syracuse University, 2010), 6.

"entrench Afro-Dominican women into compromising conditions."[35] This ontological entrenchment speaks to the ways that working class Afro-Dominican women are consistently haunted by the façade of a world that is supposedly progressing towards something better, as they continue to face the realities of a life that confines them within a subjugated state of social and economic anguish.

Effie Smith's "Livelihoods in the Balance: Haitians, Haitian-Dominicans and Precarious Work in the Dominican Republic" specifically explores the existential trepidation that Black people in the Dominican Republic face through the extensive history and institutionalization of anti-Haitianism.[36] Smith focuses on the geography of the *bateyes* as a rural location on the ground that reveals the plight that Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans have to face as they are pushed to the margins of society, stripped of their literal and ideological citizenship, and forced to live under inhumane conditions. The *batey,* which is where Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans "adapt to precarious circumstances and patch together sources of employment and income to create a livelihood," serves to position the ways Blackness assumes a state of constant dismemberment in order maintain the stability of institutions of white supremacy on the island.[37] I avoid interpreting the survival of Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans in the *batey* solely as an act of admirable agency because it is a conclusion that is far too lenient on a world that has deliberately had a hand in maintaining the everlasting persecution that they cannot seem to escape.

Beyond the state of despair that absorbs the *batey*, legal discrimination against Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans and their collective struggle to attain citizenship reveals the ways

[35] Ibid., 7.
[36] Effie Smith, "Livelihoods in the Balance," (Masters Thesis, Pennsylvania State University, 2020), https://etda.libraries.psu.edu/files/final_submissions/22049.
[37] Ibid., iii.

Blackness is located on the polar opposite of "universal humanity" or the idea that we all share the unifying experience of being human. One policy implemented by the Dominican government in 2001 is particularly cruel to Haitian immigrants as it "formally excludes workers in 'irregular migratory situations' from receiving retirement pensions."[38] Policies such as these reveal the insidious nature of Black nonbeing because they strip away the ability for immigrant Haitian workers to access the benefits of their underpaid labor as they age. Without the possibility of retirement, they are either forced to work for survival until they die or have no choice but to be deported from the country. The Dominican government's refusal to recognize Haitian and Haitian-Dominicans as citizens is much more than just a conflict of power between two nations, but instead reflects a violent and ruthless search to annihilate and distance Blackness from humanity. For Dominicans, a war against Haitians is a consequence of a war against Blackness, which helps preserve the order of a world fueled by Black ontological terror.

The research of Bueno, Valdez, Candelario, Rodriguez, and Smith helps outline how Afro-Dominican women exist day-to-day under the shadow of a state of the world that is validated through Black nonbeing. I argue that from the location of the *batey*, the Dominican beauty salon, and the streets that Black Dominican women navigate, grows a desperation, a desire to escape, and a theology that is characteristically built for Afro-Dominican women's nihilistic critiques of the world. This gospel is born and bred from the depths of Afro-Dominican women's social locations on the ground, directly contravening the idle and apathetic Christ that floats with the national flag and upholds the stagnant white pillars of Dominican political and economic institutions.

[38] Ibid., 24.

Womanist theologians ponder the state of the world alongside Afro-Dominican women's diagnoses by contending with the presence of evil and suffering for Black women on earth and asking where God's divine intervention lies in the midst of their hardship. Catholic womanist theologian Jamie T. Phelps confronts God as an "all-good, all-powerful Creator of the universe" by asking: "How could an all-good God be the source of evil? How could an all-good God permit evil? Why doesn't an all-powerful God prevent or eliminate evil?"[39] Phelps is not just calling God's reputation as a timely force of justice and salvation into question, but she is also diagnosing the state of the world as one that breeds and cultivates Black women's ontological suffering. Phelps's definition of evil goes beyond the "natural" suffering that the earth breeds through natural disasters, to consider a purposefully chosen and constructed "moral" suffering that is embedded within the fabric of society.[40] Phelps's queries and conclusions attempt to reconcile how a just and merciful God could stand by as his children navigate the ethical void of the world. My scholarship attempts to make an intervention in womanist theological studies by addressing the silences of Afro-Dominican women's theological perspectives in academia and defining God as one that has lost faith in humanity's ability to redeem itself without an act of disaster. In God's eyes, the only way to redeem the monstrosity taking place on earth is through death, apocalypse, and destruction. God's divine intervention is definite, singular, and catastrophic. Therefore, God's lack of intervention amongst the evils of the world is not rooted in apathy or lack of concern. Instead, God's priorities and actions emerge from a conviction that the world is irreparable and inconsolable. A redefinition of Christ as a nihilist urges his followers to redirect their faith away from the hopeless prospects of humanistic "progress" and towards the certainty of an end of time that is transformative and liberatory.

[39] Emilie Townes, ed. *Troubling in My Soul* (New York: Orbis Books, 2015), 48.
[40] Ibid.

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

Chapter 2: Apocalyptic Hope: The Eschatological Imagination of Afro-Dominican Women

As Afro-Dominican women navigate what they describe as a "fallen world," they begin subverting the terror that plagues their existence as Black women into hope through their eschatological visions. Calvin Warren's *Ontological Terror* describes this horror as the "deep abyss" of Black ontological experience and discusses the unavoidable truth that "there [is] no solution to the problem of antiblackness." Rather, "it will continue without end, as long as the world exists."[41] According to Warren, this dooming predicament is a state of "nothing," in which it is impossible for the Black to claim a sense of being through humanism.[42] My study aligns with Warren's conclusions, revealing that at the vernacular level, Afro-Dominican women have arrived at a clear understanding of the reality of Black non-being through their experiences with gratuitous suffering as Black women in the Dominican Republic. As a result of their unending captivity, they have chosen to use their faith as a way of investing in alternative possibilities through an imagistic theology of divine apocalypse.

Anthony Dyer Hoefer's *Apocalypse South: Judgment, Cataclysm, and Resistance in the Regional Imaginary* explores the influence of biblical eschatological visions in African American Southern literature and how the genre wrestles with the terror of living in the rural South for Blacks in the twentieth century.[43] Hoefer conducts a close reading of Richard Wright's fictional works and personal wrestlings with religion to analyze the appeal of divine cataclysm for Black people living under the racial terror of white supremacy. Wright, who grew up attending his austere grandmother's Seventh Day Adventist church, was disturbed by the images

[41] Calvin Warren, *Ontological Terror* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2018), 3.
[42] Ibid., 5.
[43] Hoefer, Anthony Dyer, *Apocalypse South* (Ohio: The Ohio State University Press, 2012).

of catastrophe that littered her spiritual imagination; "'a gospel clogged with images of vast lakes of eternal fire, or seas vanquishing, of valleys of dry bones, of the sun burning to ashes, of the moon turning to blood, of stars falling to the earth….'"[44] Although this imagery can trigger feelings of horror as it did for Wright, I argue that the brutal images of world-ending disaster across genres of Christian scripture mirrors the terror of the Black condition on earth. At the center of this disaster is a nihilistic Christ that answers to his people's despair and longing for an alternative state of being, for something beyond the nothingness of the material world. Instead of striking anguish in the hearts of his followers, God's promises of divine destruction reawaken the spirits of Black people and allows them to pour hope into the possibility of an afterlife. However, Hoefer describes how Wright saw this possibility as a "passive *hope*, which implies waiting on something beyond oneself." [45] Instead, Wright demands a tangible "aspiration" where there is a "vision of progress and work over time toward a definite goal."[46] Wright's frustrations reside in his yearning for resistance that changes the material conditions of Black people under Jim Crow, particularly as he explores a Marxist ideology that calls for the revolutionary destruction of a hierarchical socio-economic order. Although Wright understood how Christian theologies guided by apocalypse and Christ's return gave African Americans in the South a way to sustain their spirits and survive, he believed that religion was insufficient for moving Black people towards taking up a position of radical change and instead allowed them to become complacent with their own conditions of suffering. Wright's perpetual dilemma of weighing the fatalistic faith of his grandmother against his desire for social change places him in a position where he refuses to confront and accept the inescapable terror that consumes Black existence.

[44] Ibid., 63-64.
[45] Ibid., 70.
[46] Ibid.

Although Wright might understand apocalyptic hope as a form of passive submission to an unchanging world, I contend that placing faith in God's timing and day of judgment reveals a profound understanding of the nature of our world and serves as a form of resistance against ineffectual models of humanism that are not invested in the deconstruction of anti-blackness. Hoefer's close reading of Richard Wright's short story, "Long Black Song," reveals how a reliance on God's divine timing provides guidance, comfort, and escape from the physical limitations of the world. In "Long Black Song," the protagonist Sarah is enraptured by the sounds of the spiritual, "When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder," heard from a record player as she has a sexual encounter with a white salesman. Although it is unclear whether this encounter was an example of the uneven power dynamics present in relationships between white men and Black women at the time, Sarah finds herself undergoing "a deep existential yearning to exist in time" as the words of the spiritual echo in the background[47]:

"'*When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound…*
and time shall be no more…
And the morning breaks…
eternal, bright and fair…
When the save[d] of the earth shall gather…
and when the roll is called up yonder…
I'll be there…'" [48]

[47] Ibid., 71-72.
[48] Ibid.

Through these verses, Sarah finds herself transported to an effervescent state in which matters of the earth and flesh fall to the background. Sarah's existence becomes guided by God's timing as the imagery of salvation and escape tends to her spirit. God's "sacred, prophetic time" becomes an example of an Afropessimistic gospel because it provides Black women like Sarah with alternativity; with a structure of time that falls outside of the structures of a violent and sinful world.[49] Even though Sarah is unsure of when the Lord's trumpet will sound or when the day of redemption will come, she creates a cosmology that reflects her understanding that her earthly condition as a Black woman offers her no remedy or consolation.

Hoefer explains that the solace that Sarah finds in God's promise of deliverance causes dissatisfaction within Wright as he views this spiritual comfort as a disinvestment from the world's need for historical revolution rather than theological apocalypse. However, Elizabeth Phillips's "Narrating Catastrophe, Cultivating Hope: Apocalyptic Practices and Theological Virtue" effectively reassesses apocalyptic hope as a framework through which marginalized people are able to mourn their collective suffering and claim agency.[50] Phillips utilizes a variety of sources in order to discredit common misrepresentations of apocalypticism as an "escapist fantasy" and conceptualizes apocalypse as a way for the oppressed to "'dissent from a culture that they find oppressive or otherwise unacceptable.'"[51] In addition, Phillips employs trauma theory to explain how marginalized communities live in a state of constant horror in which "danger mechanisms are engaged, but they can in no way stop or ameliorate the event," causing "a psychological flight when there can be no fight."[52] Thus, imagery and vision of eschatological destruction provides a way for Black people who are in a state of perpetual trauma to grieve over

[49] Ibid., 73.
[50] Elizabeth Phillips, "Narrating Catastrophe, Cultivating Hope," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 31, no. 1 (2018): 17-33.
[51] Ibid., 21-22.
[52] Ibid., 23.

a world that holds no possibility for them. Upon the realization that there can be no conflict that fundamentally destroys structures of anti-blackness, Black folks like Sarah in Wright's fictional works or the Afro-Dominicanas I grew up with, see the violent calamity of God's judgment as a chance to take flight towards a sacred eternal life that transcends their lived realities.

Although eschatological imagination is a significant characteristic of Afro-Dominican women's faith, it is also important to note that God's gospel is not just world-ending, but it is also spiritually nourishing. God pours sustenance into the souls and spirits of Afro-Dominicanas just as much as Afro-Dominicanas pour hope into God's promise of deliverance. This reciprocal relationship between God and his people is necessary because the violence of Black existence does not just attack the flesh, but it also wears down the spirit. Calvin Warren ponders the impact of "antiblack violence, abuse, inveterate neglect, and routinized humiliation" through the report of a teenage boy who filed a complaint after being strip-searched in Baltimore.[53] After filing the complaint, the police officer -- "intoxicated by unchecked power over black bodies, wanted to injure something else" -- stopped the boy again, grabbing his genitals as he strip-searched him.[54] Warren describes this act as a "systemic destruction of a spirit, a soul, a psyche."[55] The disintegration that Warren illustrates can be located in the stories of Afro-Dominicanas like Cauris Calcaño, a 21 year old who became one of various women in the Dominican Republic who have fallen victim to disfigurement at the hands of an attack of "*acido del diablo"* or "the devil's acid" (muriatic acid used to drain pipes) from her vengeful ex-husband.[56] While Calcaño sat on her porch with her mother and children, her ex-husband ragefully appeared without

[53] Warren, *Ontological Terror,* 169.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Marta Florián, "El Estigma De Los Celos Y La Venganza En República Dominicana," *Chicago Tribune*, Nov 20, 2012, https://www.chicagotribune.com/hoy/ct-hoy-8207242-el-estigma-de-los-celos-y-la-venganza-en-republica-dominicana-story.html.

warning, after Calcaño rejected his attempts to reconcile their romantic relationship, and altered the trajectory of her life as the acid he lunged at her completely melted parts of her face and back away. For Calcaño's ex-husband, this act was more than just a strategy of asserting dominance over Afro-Dominican women, but a way of inflicting Calcaño with "*una muerte emocional"* (an emotional death) and "*una tortura permanente*" (a pemanent torture).[57] Enraged by Calcaño's attempt to claim agency over her existence as a Black woman, her ex-husband aimed to indefinitely extinguish her spirit through the maiming of her physical body. It is through Calcaño's physical dismemberment that Afro-Dominican women's ontological terror can be witnessed. As a result of their physical and spiritual deterioration, we must ask: How is God's nihilistic gospel creating a form of spiritual renewal for Afro-Dominicanas that resists this mutilation? What is being sourced from the divine and a vision of eternal life that nurtures the spirits of Afro-Dominican women in the midst of harmful systems of anti-blackness?

Beyond the "pearly gates, golden streets, and long white robes" that often make up popular images of the afterlife for Christians, there is a particular sacred process that occurs between God and Afro-Dominicanas, in which the vision of a divine existence beyond death cares for their spirits.[58] In the edited volume, *Otherwise Worlds: Against Settler Colonialism and Anti-Blackness,* theologian and cultural critic J Kameron Carter theorizes the "sacred otherwise" as a means of creating and imagining alternative ways of Black being and existence outside of the limits of our material world.[59] Carter's definition of the sacred otherwise is rooted in an analysis of the state of the world as an "unencloseable…unsettleable earth."[60] By understanding

[57] Ibid.
[58] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation,* 91.
[59] J Kameron Carter, "Other Worlds, Nowhere (or, The Sacred Otherwise)," in *Otherwise Worlds: Against Settler Colonialism and Anti-Blackness*, ed. Tiffany Lethabo King, Jenell Navarro, and Andrea Smith (London, England: Duke University Press, 2020), 158-209.
[60] Ibid., 163.

the world as inherently unbalanced, Carter embraces a world that is permanently unsalvageable and interrogates the possibilities of how a "malpractice" or subversion of the sacred can disrupt and fragment the futility of a World of Black non-being.[61] Carter states, "To dwell in the World's nullification gets close to what I am trying to get at with the idea of malpractice–the malpractice of the sacred or sacred malpractice".[62] However, in Carter's theorization of otherwise worlds, he makes a clear distinction between the sacred and the divine. Accordingly he writes, "the sacred, as I am given to thinking about here as figuring a poetics of malpractice (religious) study, is neither transcendental, pure, nor beneficent, but rather base, stank, low to the ground, underground, of and with the earth."[63]

Carter's definition of the sacred is distant from traditional theological definitions of purity and divinity. Instead, he grounds and tethers the sacred otherwise by rooting it in the liminality of Black flesh and existence. Thus, the sacred malpractice that Carter analyzes is one that is atheological and defined as a "*godlessmysticism"* that "contests, refuses, and objects to the god-terms. It contests them because in its thingliness Blackness moves excrementally as extraceremonial excess, as the re-ritualization of life at the scene of political death.... Blackness ruptures the god-terms in the interest of some other practice of the sacred…in the interest of a material otherworldliness without world."[64] For Carter, a *godlessmysticism* is necessary because representations of the sacred and God are often aligned with a world-order of antiblackness and Black non-being. Thus, if the God-terms are framed by an order of the world that is not interested in the disruption and unruly nature of the Black sacred otherwise, the necessary

[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid., 169.
[64] Ibid., 169, 195.

malpractice of the sacred must move away from concepts of transcendental divinity and purity. However, I argue that the gospel that Afro-Dominican women proclaim has reinterpreted the god-terms and God's intentions, in which the sacred otherwise does not have to differentiate itself through a form of *godlessmysticism.* Through a theological reframing of God's priorities and concerns with the destruction of an oppressive and violent world order, we can understand the god-terms as being aligned with Blackness and its search for alternative possibility. As a result of this reframing, the concept of God's purity and transcendental nature can be reconsidered as one that can work *on* the spirits of Black people and help them move towards the sacred otherwise. By understanding God as one aligned with the nullification of the world, the divine can be shifted from a sacrosanct force guided by whiteness to one that is pulled down to the ground level of Black existence and its search for fragmentation, disruption, and radical possibility.

Although Carter finds a disconnect between the sacred and God's divinity, his assertion that "Blackness is enfleshed spirit" inspires me to argue that there is a mystical process that occurs between Afro-Dominicanas and God during their times of worship that tethers their "enfleshed spirit" to somewhere better, without pain or suffering, where they can fully be.[65] It is within God's divine presence that they locate the sacred otherwise; it is there that they find a gospel that meets them where *they are*—in the midst of an existential turmoil that only Black women suffer.

In order to substantiate these claims, I analyze sites of worship in the Dominican Republic where one can witness the spiritual sustenance that God provides to Afro-Dominican women. Giving attention to songs, communality, and language in a characteristic Pentecostal

[65] Ibid., 177.

church, I analyze how Afro-Dominican women's faith is much more than an idealistic infatuation with apocalypse, but instead a sincere interrogation of how hope in the divine can be a site of resilience and resistance against a predicament of Black nothingness. The Iglesia Pentecostal Unida República Dominicana's virtual display of its services offers a window into the substance of Afro-Dominicana's apocalyptic vision. In one of its videos, Soranyi Vasquez Rodriguez renders an arresting solo of "*Yo Vine Aqui A Buscar Poder"* or "I Came Here To Find Power":

Yo vine aquí para buscar poder… estoy aquí para recibir…

I came here to find power…I am here to receive…

Señor llename con fuego del altar… Llename con tu poder…

Lord fill me with fire from the altar…Fill me with your power…

Tu me empujaste con violencia, a ver si me caía… Pero en la mano de Jehová, a mí me sostenía.

You pushed me with violence to see if I would fall…But the power of Jehovah sustained me. [66]

As Rodriguez leads a lively band filled with guitars, *tamboras,* and *güiras,* she captures the fervor and intensity of God's presence in her small Pentecostal congregation. Rodriguez's performance is permeated with shouts and calls to the (virtual) audience as she exclaims "*Aleluya!"* between verses, her hands waving with passion and praise for God. Through the words of the song, Rodriguez demonstrates her search for God's power and articulates the trust

[66] Iglesia Pentecostal Unida República Dominicana, "Coro Pentecostal de Fuego," October 11, 2020, YouTube Video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJ2zT2jsCK4.

she places in God to deliver and fill her with "fire from the altar." The "fire" that God imparts on Afro-Dominican women is a fire of destruction, that extirpates all sin from the world, and ultimately renews and strengthens the spirits of his people. It is crucial to understand the ways in which this nourishing fire is being sourced from an altar that exists outside of earth and is only accessible through the practice of worship. As Afro-Dominicanas praise God in their churches, Christ's hand reaches out from the location of a safe haven on the other side of death to guide Afro-Dominicanas to the end, lowering himself down to their lived experiences in order to fulfill his promise of redemption from a world lost to evil.

Another example of the ways Afro-Dominican Pentecostal worship expresses the distinctive spatial location of a God that provides for his adherents through a promise of destruction can be found in the song, "*Quema Tu Baal"* or "Burn Your Baal." In a video featuring a Dominican Pentecostal church on the island, one can witness a large congregation of Dominican families filling up a plaza at night as the vivacious sounds of *"Quema Tu Baal"* enliven the crowd.[67] Mothers and fathers wave white handkerchiefs as they sing and dance along, while dozens of children run around the plaza in a state of innocent joy and exhilaration.

Cuando los profetas clamaron a Baal

When the prophets cried out to Baal

"Baal, Baal!" No respondio

"Baal, Baal" did not answer

Pero cuando Elias clamó a su Dios

But when Elijah cried out to his God

[67] Junior TV, "Quema tu Baal Coro de Fuego," February 24, 2013, YouTube Video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jttnr8ur5kY.

Se quemó la leña, se quemó el becerro, y el Espíritu Santo del cielo bajo.
The firewood was burned, the calf was burned, and the Holy Spirit came down from Heaven.

As the prophets call out to Baal, a god of fertility worshiped in Canaanite mythology, the Hebrew's hear no response. Baal's unresponsiveness becomes a symbol of God's disapproval of idolatry, emphasizing the power in the Lord's promise of salvation. It is only through monotheistic communication that the Holy Spirit falls from Heaven and brings the fire of destruction that Afro-Dominican women crave. From another angle, God's denunciation of Baal can also be understood as God's rejection of the idolization and worship of a white world that does not respond to the needs of Black Dominican women. Elijah becomes an example to Afro-Dominican women of the destructive power that God reserves. God has the power to incinerate all obstacles in the way if he is called upon through persistent and earnest worship. Although some may interpret the relationship between Elijah and the Lord as suffocating, the demands of this faithful commitment align with Afro-Dominican women's nihilistic perspective of the world. The burning fire of the Holy Spirit becomes the only solution to a world that cannot be healed through methods of incremental progress. In addition, the consistent pattern of God's intervention through "fire" discloses that God's presence is not docile and tame. Through a raging temperament, God allows for Afro-Dominican women to imagine an attainable eternal life that is only made possible through fire and brimstone. However, Afro-Dominican women's investment in the imagery of eschatology and the afterlife does not distract them from their commitment to their flesh and existence on earth. While their Christianity seeks an alternative state of being, it does not abandon or flee from the realities of antiblackness and hopelessness

that they must face on earth. It is through their simultaneous refusal of the world and resolve to continue surviving within it that we find radical significance and knowledge in the eschatological visions of Afro-Dominicanas.

Chapter 3: Sustaining the Flesh in the Midst of Mutilation

"I am Spirit, and I am flesh."

- Yadira Vicioso Mena, the author's mother.

My mother's declaration of her ontological position in the world reveals a profound understanding of the ways the Spirit acts as a compass for Afro-Dominican women who live despite the limitations of the flesh. It is not through the tangible feeling of being "alive" that my mother orients her existence, but through the spiritual renewal that her faith provides her. This positioning of the Spirit in relation to the flesh understands that flesh is temporary while the Spirit lasts beyond death, mutilation, and trauma. It is through this understanding of self and the world that Afro-Dominican women commit to a tradition of survival, resilience, and resistance as they wait for God's apocalyptic promise. As Caridad Cruz Bueno's ethnographic research shows, Afro-Dominican women stay put even as the terror and violence of anti-blackness and capitalism drives them to feelings of anguish that search for a way out.[68] This conviction "to stay in the hold" stems not just from an understanding that there is no way out that is not through God's cataclysmic involvement, but also a dedication to protect the deteriorating flesh as a way of continuing to give life to the Spirit.[69] Thus, while remaining in this fallen world, a main priority and concern for Afro-Dominican women is to find ways to sustain a practice that allows the Spirit to work *on* the flesh, to allow the flesh to survive, so that it is ready for Christ's return.

Hortense Spillers analyzes the limitations of Black women's flesh as it inherits the legacies of the transatlantic slave trade and takes on the perverse imaginations of white

[68] Bueno, "Stratification Economics and Grassroots Development," 35-55.
[69] Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010), xi, 132, 279.

patriarchal supremacy.[70] It is through the metaphorical and tangible manipulations of Black women's flesh that conceptions of race, gender, and class have become cemented into the grammar of our world. However, Spillers argues for the embrace of Black women's flesh, and the "monstrosity" that has consumed it in the midst of ontological terror.[71] Instead of attempting to find a way out of the malformation of Black females' flesh or recovering a fabled construction of the flesh that could have existed before the implementation of white supremacy, Spillers learns to work *with* the deformity of the flesh and creates an alternative form of empowerment for Black women that does not need to run from nor conform to the violent manipulations of the white imagination. I argue that my mother's and other nihilist-leaning Afro-Dominicanas' understandings of the flesh build upon the empowerment that Spillers is creating through the monstrous Black female flesh. It is through her broken and mutilated flesh that my mother can intrinsically claim a Spirit that is renewing and restorative. Although her flesh is broken –twisted and distorted beyond her control– she is able to feel and receive God's presence through that very flesh, which proves to be the most meaningful part of committing to the conservation of it.

Delores Williams's analysis of Hagar's narrative in the Bible particularly speaks to Afro-Dominican women's orientation of the Spirit and flesh because she defines God as a God that is not automatically liberatory but instead one that provides Black women with the tools to survive and create a quality of life. Out of Williams's theological interventions within womanist theology, one can draw out that while God does not abandon Black women in their daily struggle, he also cannot promise immediate liberation to Black women because liberation can only come alongside the destruction of earthly life. Williams's re-reading of Hagar in her book, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, ponders God's intentions, as

[70] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 65-81.
[71] Ibid., 80.

she positions Hagar as a symbol of Black women's subjugation and precarity.[72] In the Bible, Hagar is the slave and surrogate who bears a child for Sarah and Abraham, over which the infertile Sarah has maternal rights because she is the legitimate wife of the patriarch Abraham. During this process of becoming a handmaid, Hagar endures abuse and exploitation due to her lack of power and authority as an enslaved woman. As a means of escaping the mistreatment that Hagar experiences at the hand of Sarah, she flees into the wilderness with her child. In this position of isolation, powerlessness, and danger, Hagar finds a direct connection with God. God reveals himself to Hagar through the form of an angel and asks her from where she has come and whither she is going. After Hagar responds that she is fleeing the mistreatment of Sarah, instead of encouraging Hagar to keep fleeing, the angel tells Hagar to go back and submit herself to Sarah. At this moment, one can ask: Why did God not immediately liberate Hagar? If he empathized with her plight, why did he not take her out of her position of suffering? However, if we understand God as a God that empathizes with the relationship between flesh and Spirit that Black women navigate, then we can determine that God is more concerned with Hagar's survival and quality of life because liberation is not attainable within the cruel and violent world she inhabits. It is only through re-submission under Sarah that the possibility of liberation is attainable for Hagar because she will have the tools to survive rather than perishing in the wilderness by herself. Hagar weighs her options and fundamentally understands that a survival with God is better than a desolate death without God. It is through her obedience and the sustenance of her flesh (even if it means that she will continue living in a state of subjugation) that God's promise of destructive redemption remains alive. An Afro-Dominicana Christian nihilist interpretation of Hagar's encounter with God would view God as providing Hagar with

[72] Dolores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness* (New York: Orbis Books, 2013).

guidance, encouraging her to wait for that day of apocalypse where Christ deconstructs the broken and oppressive world her flesh occupies, and transports her Spirit into a divine realm where emancipation is tangible. Williams describes this faith and devotion that Black women cultivate with God as "God's presence in the struggle" and a testament to the ways divinity manifests "in the midst" of Black women's "personal suffering and destitution."[73]

It is in the metaphorical wilderness where Afro-Dominican women learn to grapple with the tension between the desperation that a futile world generates and the promise of apocalyptic escape that God bestows upon them. This wilderness is desolate, terrifying, and dejected from the rest of the world yet deeply comforting because it is where God's gospel is heard most clearly. Afro-Dominican women become comfortable with the space of the wilderness because it is a space that recognizes their unique negotiations between flesh and Spirit. Stuck in a bind between tormented life and the prospect of a redeemable death, Afro-Dominican women understand that when their flesh ceases to exist at the hands of an unforgiving world, they can no longer orient or feel the Spirit that gives them meaning and purpose regarding the possibility of a liberated existence. This does not mean that Afro-Dominicanas run towards circumstances of subjugation as a means of remaining "alive" in our broken world or internalize a romantic image of redemptive suffering and martyrdom. Instead, Afro-Dominicanas identify the wilderness as a space in which God responds to their nihilism within a divine timeline that outlines an end-of-times that they can anticipate and that demands a pledge to survival.

Brian K. Blount's, *Can I Get A Witness: Reading Revelation through African American Culture* helps me define the theological work that Afro-Dominicanas are doing in the wilderness as a way of becoming a witness for God through their reading of the book Revelation.[74] Blount's

[73] Ibid., 6, 19.
[74] Brian K. Blount, *Can I Get a Witness?* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

scholarship on the books of John and Revelation in the Christian Bible excavates God's intent through John's proclamations of "Jesus's cosmic power and eternal majesty" and "a barrage of otherworldly images" of violent catastrophe "that are supposed to have a decidedly this-worldly instructional impact."[75] For Blount, the social location of the reader is what ultimately attaches meaning and consequence to John's proclamations in Revelation, encouraging him to explore how the African American experience renders the scripture's language of apocalypse and wrath as compelling. Through his "cultural location" Blount concludes that "John was interested not so much in creating a church of martyrs as he was in encouraging a church filled with people committed to the ethical activity of witnessing to the lordship of Jesus" in an irredeemable world (I would add).[76] Blount argues that when African Americans interpret Revelation, they see themselves as counterparts who experience economic, social, and physical abuse paralleling that which John endures in the Bible. John's refusal to accommodate the Roman empire's authority, his commitment to Christ's ethical condemnation of human sin and evil, and his dedication to spreading the word of God in his churches inspires African Americans to interpret his apocalyptic vernacular as more than just a blind desire for destruction, but instead as a rational and ethical response to an unjust world. They are witnesses to God's consistent disapproval of the wickedness of human sin on earth and are encouraged to carry out his pursuit of justice in their daily lives.

For Afro-Dominican women, to be a witness is more than simply agreeing with God's wrath of destruction in favor of the oppressed. Instead, witnessing requires Afro-Dominican women to stay alive even as they suffer. It is only through their direct confrontation with the

[75] Ibid., 2.
[76] Ibid., (ix).

suffering and the abyss of existing while Black –an abyss that threatens to consume their lives– that they can devise cosmologies that are transformative and reflective of a gospel that is genuinely invested in Black liberation.

Afro-Dominican women's nihilistic theological meditations are a form of what Christina Sharpe calls "wake work," which is an analytic that Sharpe argues emerges from what is left in the aftermath of "blackness' ongoing and irresolvable abjection."[77] In her widely cited volume, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being,* Sharpe argues that although the wake makes the ultimate effort to swallow up Black existence with a nothingness that holds no substance or worth, the act of survival and resilience within that chasm gives birth to alternative ways of caring and nurturing the Spirit and the soul. Afro-Dominican women's unwavering commitment to their survival is an example of wake work because they "liv[e] in and with terror" and "becom[e] the *carriers* of terror" in the effort to continue unfolding a life that is meaningful through the Spirit.[78] It is important to clarify that Afro-Dominican women's faith is not to be confused with a form of religious devotion that is masochistic, even as they commit to enduring the mutilation of their flesh. Instead, Afro-Dominican women's faith utilizes the Spirit as an intrinsic compass that guides them *through* the refusal of a death not redeemed by God's wrath and a life not sustained by God's presence or *towards* the promise of an afterlife free of Black suffering. It is through their faith and survival that they begin to ask and answer: *Adonde Nos Lleva El Espiritu*?... *Where Does the Spirit Take Us*?...as they search for a higher purpose and trajectory that transgresses the trauma and abjection our world offers them.

The Afropessimistic theology of Afro-Dominicanas excavates a fundamental understanding that God is not invested in the humanist project of bettering the world. In contrast

[77] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2016), 14.
[78] Ibid., 15.

to standard Black and womanist theologies of hope and liberation, Afro-Dominicanas recognize and find a God that does not care for the improvement of the world nor promotes a naïve hope in their ability to fix their living conditions. Although the liberation theologies of Cone and Isasi-Díaz rightfully locate a God that supports the implementation of justice and champions a gospel of ethical righteousness for the oppressed, the theologies of Afro-Dominicanas find a God that is just as disillusioned with the world as they are. It is not through protest against the structures of society that Afro-Dominicanas are sustained, but through a total rejection of the possibility of change in a broken world and a full investment in God's promise of the *other*: the afterlife, heaven, salvation, and escape.

The comforting quietude of Afro-Dominican women's nihilistic faith is most felt through the stories of women who have experienced the peak of an ontological death and nothingness, such as those who have become victims of muriatic acid attacks in the Dominican Republic. As the deformation of their bodies and spirits confirm the abyss of nonbeing that occupies their existence, Afro-Dominicanas often find themselves being comforted through their lament, stating, "*Sólo me conformo con llorar*" ("I am only comforted with crying"). It is in this vacuum of nothingness that they decide to put themselves "in the hands of God" ("*en manos de Dios*"*)* because they don't know what else to do ("*no sabe[n] 'que más hacer*'")[79]. As Afro-Dominicanas commit to no longer have hope in the world, they give control to God and allow him to work their spirits and guide them to a restored existence made possible through the promise of violent destruction.

[79] Florián, "El Estigma De Los Celos".

Conclusion

Through the theological meditation that I propose in this thesis, I hope I can help my mother fulfill the promise she made to God as she gave birth to me. Her teachings and her negotiations with her faith first inspired me to construct an argument for a God who is profoundly discontent with the evils of our world and who operates from a framework of apocalyptic justice to redeem the suffering of Afro-Dominican women.

My mother's life and earnest devotion to her faith has encouraged me to not simply understand how God is present in her life, but to explore also the socio-historical and religious experiences of other Afro-Dominicanas with similar convictions. Their collective Christian witness allowed me to make a case for a Christian tradition that refuses to accommodate the futility of the world and cultivates the imaginative cosmologies of Afro-Dominican women. My thesis opens with the genesis of my motivations, a vivid memory of my birth passed down to me through the oral history and storytelling of my mother. It is through this anecdote that I am able to begin understanding the ways that Afro-Dominican women confront a state of perpetual death even in the midst of life. As my mother was attempting to bring life in the world, she unexpectedly faced the immediate terror of losing hers. However, the terror of death was not intimidating as she was instinctively called to rely on the God who could soothe her worries, orient her Spirit, and remind her of a higher purpose in the midst of the chaos. My mother's use of faith as a guiding compass in times of desperation sparked a curiosity in me that encouraged me to interrogate how Afro-Dominican women's Christianity is born from their positionality, accessed during times of trouble, and developed as a response to a morally corrupt world.

The geography and history of the Dominican Republic reveals the unique ways in which the country is represented by a hybrid image of fervent Christian devotion and patriotic pride. As the legacies of this patriotism and faith are unpacked, the aftermath of white patriarchal supremacy, colonialism, and anti-Haitianism are unveiled behind the imagery of a nation that is divinely blessed by God. Yet through the archival explorations of Dominican and Haitian historians, this popular narrative is deconstructed; we can see how the Dominican Republic's "official" Christianity is derived from a legacy of white colonial power and authority. It is through this dominant religious narrative that the Dominican Republic constructs a God that is seemingly noble and protective of the nation's citizens. However, I argue that this is a God that prioritizes the concerns and self-serving motivations of the Dominican elite, while it neglects the downtrodden positions of Black Dominican women on the island. The façade of a Dominican nation that is "chosen" and highly favored by God conceals the ontological terror that Afro-Dominican women know in their flesh and spirits.

In order to expose the wide cleavage between the white colonial façade and Black female flesh, my scholarship considers lofty spaces where "official" representations of Christianity in the Dominican Republic rule as well as the furtive ground of Black Dominican women's livelihoods. Through the ethnographic traces of God's apocalyptic promise located on the walls of Afro-Dominican women's neighborhoods, I am able to identify and translate the language and mood of a God that emerges from the abyss of Black women's existence. "Cristo Viene!" becomes a starting point from which I begin to define what exactly is God's promise to Afro-Dominican women and how he will execute his vision of apocalyptic redemption. It was through this theological vernacular written on the storefronts and billboards that I commenced my search for the ways that Afro-Dominican women are coming up with this theological theorization from

their daily experiences, frustrations, and disillusions with the confines of a broken world. The sociological and ethnographic explorations of Dominican and Haitian scholars helped me to grasp the internal life of Dominican women who struggle with the futility of Black existence, as well as speculate about their motivations and internal feelings. This historical and ethnographic context and my own theological curiosities encouraged me to find credible sources to fill the gaps between what is openly shared about Afro-Dominican women's faith and what must be investigated, imagined, and cautiously theorized.

I leave this study concluding that the Afro-Dominican women of faith I engaged for this project, either directly or through secondary sources, are not interested in investing in the humanistic ideals of the world, but instead adhere to a practice of sustenance and pledge their commitment to live long enough to witness Christ's return to earth. Through this practice of survival, Afro-Dominican women are creating an internal understanding of self that is guided by the flesh as a capsule or engine for the Spirit. Through the sustenance of the flesh, they can continue to maintain an apocalyptic hope that gives them a higher purpose beyond the cursed state of the earth.

Afterword

The process of completing this thesis took me on a difficult journey of self-reflection and a constant questioning of my own resilience. Guided by an urge to contribute a theological analysis that was constructive, innovative, and accountable to Afro-Dominican women proved difficult beyond anything I anticipated, as I was met with the obstacles of an archive consumed by silence around Afro-Dominican women's negotiations with Christianity. However, learning to strategically research and consult secondary sources that provided me with a foundational understanding of Dominican history, theological language, close readings of Biblical scripture, and ethnographic interpretation proved to be incredibly helpful to the development of my ideas.

Another challenge that I faced as I wrote this thesis was learning to trust myself and my ability to produce scholarship that is in conversation with my peers in the academy, but also original and honors the knowledge that has emerged from my personal experiences alongside that of Afro-Dominican women like my mother and my aunts. As a woman of color working within academia, it is easy to feel overwhelmed by imposter syndrome and the idea that one's own intrinsic knowledge is not "valid" enough to be included in academic scholarship. However, I hope that through the completion of this thesis, I have demonstrated that the knowledge that we grow up with as marginalized people can be a valid source of meaningful scholarship that seeks to deconstruct harmful structures of power and authority within the academy.

Throughout this process, I learned to fall back on the passion and curiosity that sparked the fundamental questions of this thesis when I felt like I could not write anymore. I learned to ask for help when I felt stuck or like I was writing in circles. I learned to give myself grace, but to also try my best to hold myself accountable for to community, my mentors, and the folks that have been my backbone and fortitude throughout this research process. Lastly, I learned that this

work is always able to grow and evolve. Thoughts and conclusions can change and take on a life of their own. Although academic writing often feels like it has to be pristine and perfect, I want to give this work the space to develop into a lifelong project of thinking and theorizing about Afro-Dominican women's faith and the significance of their concrete experiences and understandings of the world.

As I envision the future of this research, I want to think about this thesis as a theoretical blueprint for ethnographic field work that will one day allow me to travel to the grassroots sites of Afro-Dominican women's faith in the Dominican Republic. I aspire to have the opportunity to allow Afro-Dominicanas to reflexively respond to my theological meditations, see if they reflect the realities that they experience on a day-to-day basis, and personally be witness to the nuances of Afro-Dominican women's worship and Christian devotion that are easy to miss when one is not consistently present with the community. I also want to allow space for Afro-Dominican women to disagree with my theorizations about their faith, complicate my conclusions and the narratives that I choose to engage, and ultimately allow my scholarship to grow through a push and pull –a call and response – between participants and me.

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