

## Introduction

Tropical aromas waft to the entrance of the house, enveloping visitors as they brush the snow from their shoulders. Men, women, and children have braved this winter night to honor the god of the ocean's depths with an array of culinary delights. Aglow with purpose, the head cook accepts compliments on her bronze blazer and dress. Clad in white from sneakers to head-kerchiefs, her teenage assistants dash from the shrine room to the basement, site of the ritual about to take place. At the kitchen table, a young priest waits. He adjusts his chunky-knit cap, takes a sip of espresso, and plays a melody on his laptop. Unadorned but for a kiss of coral lipstick, his mentor raises her voice in song. The space between her two front teeth is a West African mark of beauty, called *éji* in the Yorùbá language. Earthenware plates crowd the kitchen counter: corn on the cob; red snapper fried whole, then drizzled with mouth-wateringly tart parsley sauce; balls of yam flour, sour as buttermilk and the same shade of pale; beans savory with hambone stock—twenty-one dishes in all. At a lull in the song, a cook at the stove suddenly turns and stage-whispers a rap verse, all the more comical for being so dramatic. Other women scour pots, scrub bowls, and fold spoonfuls of steaming grits into banana leaves. They are ready to work, and be worked by their religion.

In Caribbean and Latin American religions of African origin, the gods feel. They crave the sight of symbols and gestures; the sounds of oracles and instruments; the scent of breath and cigar smoke. They also want food. Their hunger for it dictates the ceremonial calendar in houses of worship, the division of labor within religious families, and the allocation of monetary funds and other resources. While major rituals such

as initiations require banquets for the gods and communal meals for practitioners, even most smaller ceremonies call for an offering of some refreshment for the spirits. Priestly elders and novices alike render service to them by anticipating their culinary desires, differentiating between the dietary preferences of distinct entities and training others to do so. Among those responsible for feeding the deities and ancestors in Haitian Vodou, Brazilian Candomblé, and Cuban Lucumí—among other traditions that crystallized during the transatlantic slave trade—recipes circulate through printed manuals, handwritten notebooks, and word of mouth.

Practitioners talk while they cook. They chat around kitchen tables; over charcoal grills, wood fires, and gas stoves; on temple floors; in bungalow basements and the courtyards of tenements and compounds. They not only speak in divination verses, myths, and proverbs, they use their own words to enact their worlds. Practitioners define their traditions as moral-ethical communities through the informal genres of communication that accompany food preparation.<sup>1</sup> In common acts of religious self-definition, practitioners share the stories of their lives, and tell how they came to serve the gods. They do so with such regularity, in fact, that the swapping of these anecdotes should be regarded as a ritual in its own right. Nourishment of the deities stimulates discussion about practitioners' nurturance by them, often unfolding at the far threshold of sacred spaces. Transcribed into oral histories by generations of researchers, they are now critical to the scholarship on West and Central African traditions in the Americas.

This book focuses on domestic labor in the kitchen of one house of worship, and the conversations that arise in the context of fixing sacred food. It considers the flavor of everyday religious experience in a Black Atlantic tradition. Practitioners conversant with the gods' tastes already know that they respond to requests only if and when their hungers are satisfied. Accordingly, this book investigates food preparation for the relationships it structures and the types of bodies—both divine and human—that it produces. It reconceptualizes the role of race, gender, and sexuality in the way that people become subjects of a particular religion. It reveals that the seemingly trivial kinds of activities involved in ceremonial cooking turn out to be emotionally and somatically intricate sites in which individuals are socialized.<sup>2</sup>

The gods' hunger is no more a metaphor than their reality, and practitioners conceptualize divine sense perception with special reference to oral consumption. Yet cooking for the deities remains inadequately appreciated as a ceremonial endeavor rife with cosmological significance, inviolable taboos, and reckoning of sacred time.<sup>3</sup> Despite a few exceptions, scholarly neglect of religious food preparation may be traced back to an ingrained suspicion of gastronomic pleasure and shallow estimation of day-to-day cookery in the Western philosophical tradition. Classical Enlightenment texts vigorously reinforced the negative connotations attached in Christian moral thought to appetite and other sensations. Casting the tongue as an organ of indulgence rather than discernment, influential treatises, commentaries, and lectures put taste at the bottom of the sensory hierarchy. They excluded gustatory events from the ranks of experiences able to deliver a morally valuable encounter with beauty, deeming the judgments of the palate too fickle and instantaneous to qualify as universal.<sup>4</sup>

This attitude relied in part on the relationship seen to obtain between food, women from the European "laboring classes," and enslaved Africans whose prowess was counted on to turn raw ingredients into edible fare.<sup>5</sup> Not coincidentally, the same texts laid the foundation for modern definitions of religion, and dismissed people of African descent as having none. They depicted both continental Africans and Black folk in the Americas as prisoners of primitive instincts and passions, trifling in sentiment as well as intellect, with neither culture nor past. It is no wonder, then, that many scholarly attempts to confer validity on maligned Caribbean and Latin American traditions have proceeded by accentuating their similarities with those esteemed as "world religions"—most typically, monotheisms endowed with imposing edifices, universalizing scriptures, and literate male clerics, among other criteria for legitimacy.<sup>6</sup> A number of Black Atlantic religions diverge strikingly from Eurocentric classificatory schemes not only in valorizing spirit possession and sacrifice, but also in prizing food preparation.<sup>7</sup> It should not come as any shock, then, that explaining the culinary ingenuity involved in feeding the gods and the moral-ethical imperative to do so has historically received much lower priority than tackling the bleakest of stereotypes.

The gods have been obliged to adhere to the same politics of respectability that have constrained people of African descent throughout the

Americas.<sup>8</sup> Since the late nineteenth century, when social scientists “discovered” African-derived traditions in the New World, Black Atlantic spirits have had to uphold bourgeois standards of propriety, decorum, and restraint in order to count as religious, rather than as criminal remnants of fetishism or idolatry. Their travails have resembled those of Black men and women compelled to surpass their white detractors in education, refinement, and Christian piety in order to achieve some measure of professional advancement and legal protection. Even as people of African descent have aspired to middle-class ideals of masculine industry and feminine virtue in a strategic bid for the rights of citizenship, the gods of various Caribbean and Latin American traditions have had to verify the authenticity of their Africanity, investment in cultural and political resistance, and usefulness for a range of nationalist movements.<sup>9</sup> These deities have been policed by states no less than by ideologues and elites, leading their worshippers to partner repeatedly with scholars in hopes of securing accurate, or at least advantageous, representation.<sup>10</sup>

To be accepted as rational actors and rehabilitate their gods, practitioners of Black Atlantic traditions have highlighted certain areas of salient religious concern: theologies, cosmologies, genealogies, and mythologies. Scholars, in their turn, have illuminated the *logos* of these traditions, elucidating beliefs and observances correlated with reason, logic, terrestrial order, and heavenly law, particularly as laid down by men. Although this approach has endorsed a culturally specific construal of religion as an issue of personal faith and private conscience—heart and mind rather than body and community, creed as opposed to ritual—it has corrected some long-standing misconceptions about Black Atlantic religions.<sup>11</sup> It has also allowed for the study of them to reach an extraordinarily high level of theoretical and analytical complexity. On the other hand, an emphasis on elevated modes of religious conduct and discourse has overshadowed the less lofty aspects of religious experience. Fleeting, humble acts such as those involved in food preparation may not be enshrined within the “world religions” paradigm, yet they have historically determined the texture and density of practitioners’ everyday lives.

Similarly, casual conversation—the lifeblood of social relations—has not tended to figure prominently in the analysis of religious utterances. Light banter and storytelling pale in grandeur when set against prayers,

songs, oracular signs, folklore, and spirit possession trance speech, especially as recorded in Black Atlantic sacred registers: Vodou's *langaj*, Santería's *Lucumí*, and Candomblé Ketu's *Nagô*, to name a few.<sup>12</sup> The assumption that everyday verbal interaction lacks meaning and purpose runs deep. Idioms in American English commonly allude to talk as "hot air": long-winded, breezy, empty, frivolous, small, loose, and cheap. To be "all talk" is to be without action; fast-talk, big-talk, sweet-talk, and double-talk skirt the truth.<sup>13</sup> Consonant expressions in other lexicons invite gendered comparisons between the vapor of womanish words and the substance of manly deeds. Ritual "speech acts" have usually escaped consignment to the first half of the dichotomy only by dint of their performative power, association with learned men, and amenability to analysis as symbolic of national struggles over sovereignty and identity.<sup>14</sup>

While everyday talking and cooking have occupied analogous positions on the periphery of religious scholarship, the literature on Black Atlantic traditions abounds with allusions to the importance of making food for gods and ancestors, for instance, in Belizean and Honduran Garifuna; Afro-Surinamese Creole Winti; Grenadian Shango; and Big Drum dance in Carriacou, Trinidad, Tobago, and elsewhere. Trinidadian Spiritual Baptists hold *Kabala* banquets; Guyanese *Comfa* practitioners put on English and Chinese Dinners; Jamaican *Kumina* and Revival Zion both have "tables."<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, references to food preparation itself seldom go beyond the cursory. It may be extrapolated from recent studies concerning the geography of women's domestic "kitchenspaces" that religious cooking furnishes participants with occasions to enforce and oppose norms for gendered conduct, as well as to collaborate on the creation of collective memory.<sup>16</sup> Trailblazing ethnographies of lived religion in sites that are not avowedly "sacred," including airports and nail salons, point toward the ways that religions can be rethought to prioritize what practitioners actually spend much of their time doing—whether or not it has appeared sufficiently religious to outsiders—and what they say when they talk about it.<sup>17</sup> Black Atlantic traditions also foster modes of speech and action uniquely rooted in the enterprise of feeding the spirits, requiring research embedded in mundane arrangements of ritual behavior within specific houses of worship.

This is easier said than done. Only after prolonged scrutiny do the little things—the micropractices—that simultaneously feed the gods and

foster fellow feeling between practitioners come into sharp focus.<sup>18</sup> The word “feeling” is key here, because religious micropractices mobilize emotions ranging from delight to disgust as a means of cultivating highly valued states and sensibilities. Practitioners gradually learn to master these micropractices through intensely sensory apprenticeships to authoritative members of their communities. Micropractices habituate or “season” them into the social relations and signifying systems of Black Atlantic religions bit by bit, plate by plate, as they serve not only their divine patrons but also their human elders. Over time, micropractices instill a palpable sense of the spirits’ reality—including the unapologetic urgency of their desires—while inculcating obedience to the religious leadership of a tradition. Since micropractices inhere in the everyday routines of local institutions, they can become difficult, if not impossible, to discern as anything other than unremarkable background noise, or grunt work incidental to more serious ritual business taking place elsewhere.

### Cooking the Book

Although there are several Afro-Cuban religious formations, this book concentrates on Lucumí, popularly called Santería. During the colonial period, sugarcane cultivation called for the unprecedented movement of accumulated capital and unfree labor from Europe, Africa, and Asia to the Americas. Most enslaved peoples from West and Central Africa disembarked in Cuba between 1764 and 1868; during the middle third of the nineteenth century, many hailed from linguistically related semi-autonomous groups—Egba, Ife, Ijebu, Ileṣa, and Oyo, among others—later to be called Yorùbá. Referred to as “Lucumí” in Cuba, these men and women carried with them the memory of festivals and calendrical rites; verses of different oracular forms; rituals of spirit possession and rites of passage; sacred drums and vestments; the account of a universal creator’s origin from a primordial energy termed *aché*; and a category of divine patrons called *òrìṣà* (orisha). Distinguished by preferences in food, dress, emblems, environment, and spheres of influence, orishas possess distinct characteristics and personae.<sup>19</sup> Lucumí, the religion, emerged in Havana, as devotees of the orishas began to pass on their beliefs and practices through initiation not only to others of African descent, but to anyone willing to assume its rigors.

Some worshippers observed correspondences between orishas and Roman Catholic saints, and—entirely in line with African interpretive precedents—went on to adopt appealing Christian representational modes and iconographic objects (such as chromolithographs and statues) to venerate them. For this reason, by the middle of the twentieth century, devotion to the orishas would be termed *Santería*—saint worship—by its detractors and *Lucumí*, *Lukumí*, or *regla de ocha*, “the rule of the orishas,” by adherents.<sup>20</sup> The orishas are treated as embodied in material objects, such as stones and shells maintained on altars in vessels, mainly porcelain tureens and lidded bowls. Practitioners receive personalized versions of these and other consecrated items in a series of ceremonies that culminate in priestly ordination. Since the late nineteenth century, their communities have been organized into house-temples or *ilé*. *Ilé* means “house” in Yorùbá, and refers to both physical structure and an extended kinship unit in the context of religious practice. As in the case of “church,” *ilé* denotes both a religious fellowship and architectural edifice, and *ilés* have mostly been located in private homes where leaders live with their relatives.

It was in the community called *Ilé Laroye* (pronounced “la-RO-yeh”), led for over almost thirty years by the *Lucumí* diviner and praise-singer Ashabi Mosley, that I became acquainted with everyday religious experience in a Black Atlantic house of worship.<sup>21</sup> I first entered Ashabi’s home on a day of feasting, during a party celebrating the fifteenth anniversary of her initiation. She had been initiated in 1986 as a child of *Elegguá*, deity of communications, master of crossroads, and messenger of the gods. That day in her bungalow on the South Side of Chicago, my eyes returned repeatedly to the greenery of her “birthday” altar, a tropical forest in miniature sprouting from a corner of her living room. I watched intently as visitors unfurled a woven mat before the altar, then saluted the orishas within it with rattles and the ringing of bells—some lying flat on their stomachs, others propped up on their elbows and hips. What met my ears as the sounds of Afro-Cuban religion were the syllables of Yorùbá terms overheard between snatches of English and Spanish. If I went in the kitchen, it was to ask for a cup of water, but I did not think to linger.

Ashabi was, and remains, a medium in the tradition of Puerto Rican *Espiritismo*, and had been inducted into the Kongo-inspired Afro-

Cuban religion of Palo Monte Mayombe.<sup>22</sup> She had traveled to Nigeria and Cuba to enlarge her understanding of Black Atlantic religions and strengthen the transnational linkages that had enabled her admission into them.<sup>23</sup> She directed a satellite community of practitioners in St. Louis and regularly hosted priests from New York City and the Detroit area assisting in initiations and other rituals, as she did theirs. Like Ashabi, most members of *Ilé Laroye* were African American, born and raised in the United States, becoming practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions as adults. Ashabi's relationships with them were ordered less in a sprawling network—the dominant contemporary social and technological metaphor for “making connections”—than in an ornate fretwork cut into durable shapes by religious kinship ties and ownership of specialized ritual knowledge.<sup>24</sup> Inside her home, she carved out the time to venerate orishas as well as other spirits, deftly alternating between the ritual protocols observed for each set of beings, and drilling her protégés in their service.

With my Cuban American upbringing, I might have expected that studying patterns of religious experience would entail more than gazing at shrines. To the contents of the standard ethnographic toolkit—notepad, pencil, voice recorder—I added a knife and sponge.<sup>25</sup> In *Ilé Laroye*, practitioners' wordcraft testified to the vital presence of the gods in their everyday lives. Their fingers, with no little eloquence, precisely described the movements needed to turn the flesh and bone of sacrifice into sacred meals. Watching the process was instructive; to attempt to replicate it, serrated blade in hand, was to be schooled both in the requirements for mastery and in the importance of food preparation as ritual performance. After years of kitchen chores and so-called chitchat, I came to question their relegation to the footnotes of publications on Afro-Diasporic traditions. To insert these activities in the body of a text is to invite a reconsideration not merely of their existence at the edges of “lived religion,” but of religious embodiment itself.

This book is meant to extend just such an invitation. It argues that cooking and talking are at the very quick of Black Atlantic religions. It asserts that to feed the gods and speak of them is to make them real to others, and to keep their namesake traditions alive. It shows that tasks like butchering, although manual, are far from menial, and “idle chatter” does a surprising amount of heavy lifting in Afro-Diasporic houses of

worship. My thesis is that such material and discursive acts get under the skin of practitioners, equipping them with the repertoire of skills, dispositions, and habits necessary for religious norms to be internalized, then reproduced. To substantiate my more provocative claims for the visceral effects of domestic labor and conversational interaction, I rely on several years of “observant participation” in Ilé Laroye. I marshal evidence from both the ethnographic and archival record to establish that, although I reached my conclusions through engagement with one tradition, the models sketched in this case study are relevant across analogous religious formations.

This book centers on two commonplace yet transformative kinds of kitchen work and talk: preparation of food for the gods and narration of stories about ritual experience. These undertakings are best described as “micropractices”: routine and intimate sequences of operations that can be broken down into more minute units of activity. Micropractices accumulate and leave residues of experience in the larger processes fundamental to the preservation of social institutions.<sup>26</sup> Despite their modest scale and narrow limits, micropractices sustain religious formations by naturalizing the conventions that govern particular communities. In Black Atlantic religions, micropractices are carried out at the fringes and in the gaps of ceremonies such as divination sessions, rites of consecration, and drum feasts. Although inconsequential to outsiders, micropractices like plucking chickens and trading anecdotes organize space, time, and intensities of affect for participants.<sup>27</sup> They also progressively implicate their performers in the material and conceptual worlds of religious authorities.<sup>28</sup> I demonstrate that the transformation of individuals into the subjects of Black Atlantic traditions does not result in, but follows from, their enactment of micropractices at the spatial and temporal interstices of better-known rituals.<sup>29</sup>

This book maintains that to understand Black Atlantic religions, one must grasp not only their ethics and aesthetics but also their synaesthetics—the somatic and emotional dimensions of practitioners’ everyday experience.<sup>30</sup> This is not to deny the artistry involved in cooking and talking; in fact, it is crucial for my project to yoke the aesthetic and ethical to the multisensory. In so doing, I build on contemporary scholarship exploring the sacred arts of Vodou, Candomblé, and Lucumí, including their signature styles of beadwork, altar display,

sculpture, textile design, and manufacture of devotional objects, such as divination implements. Afro-Diasporic culinary techniques betoken creative genius, as diverse efforts to document them so richly attest.<sup>31</sup> Yet sacred cuisine continues to escape contemplation as an art form, due in part to the difficulty of cataloguing and assessing preparation methods; distinguishing the tolerable execution of dishes from the virtuosic; putting their sacrificial components in perspective; and exhibiting perishable artifacts without destroying them. In addition, the composite, transitory, and interactive nature of food preparation makes cooking more closely akin to multimedia installation than to the plastic arts.

The very physicality of food preparation has militated against its sustained examination. Its dependence on muscle memory and the “secondary” or “animal” senses of touch, smell, and taste complicate any analysis predicated on the preeminence of visual and sonic phenomena. Over the last two decades, scholars engaged in the academic study of religion have increasingly come to regard the human body as a malleable multisensory interface continually reconfigured through ritual practice. Researchers in the sociology and history of religions have profited immensely within their own disciplines from anthropological and neuroscientific studies of emotion, synchronized ritual movement, and the enlacement of sensorimotor and conceptual repertoires with material objects.<sup>32</sup> Such developments may be viewed as a product of the “sensory turn” in the social sciences that succeeded the “literary turn” of the mid-1970s to early 1990s. However, the matter of sacred food preparation calls for an especially acute sensitivity to the most fugitive and contingent aspects of religious experience.

By insisting on the significance of heretofore undertheorized micropractices, this book ventures into lines of inquiry that have opened up in the anthropology and history of religions regarding the stylized expression of sentiment, corporeal regimes, affective registers, and the culturally specific configuration of sensory faculties and apprehensive modalities called the sensorium.<sup>33</sup> It is intended to supplement, rather than supplant, projects tracking the transnational social and cultural networks that link religious practitioners to their communities.<sup>34</sup> It benefits from work with compatible premises and complementary approaches to cooking and talking, as well as from projects exploring other aspects of Black Atlantic religions, such as the “religious cosmo-

politanisms” engendered by televisual recording of rituals.<sup>35</sup> Such studies exemplify the insights to be reaped from attention to the substance of everyday religious life, down to the observable goose bumps raised on practitioners’ arms when viewing video footage of ceremonies. They also stand as a necessary corrective to more linear and logocentric accounts of Afro-Diasporic traditions that have attained nearly canonical status.<sup>36</sup> Although this book surveys domestic labor and conversational interaction in just one Lucumí house of worship, it answers the need to look beyond valorized genres of ritual action to see the centrality of micropractices in fashioning sacred selves, spaces, and societies.

The principal objective of this book is to help reorient the study of Black Atlantic religions toward an interrogation of religious micropractices. It proposes that micropractices hold the chief ingredients for the survival of Black Atlantic religions because they develop the faculties, sentiments, and expertise indispensable for their viability and spread. To hazard this conjecture is to imply a degree of cultural continuity between diverse traditions that may seem dubious at best, bearing in mind the deliberate construction of them as discrete “religions” by both practitioners and researchers.<sup>37</sup> I share the hermeneutic of suspicion that should accompany efforts to evaluate apparent similarities between temporally and spatially remote phenomena. However, to arrive at a more complete account of religious life in the African Diaspora, we need to navigate between the extremes of cultural particularism and the generalizing comparativism once associated with the history of religions.<sup>38</sup> I thus conclude this book by bringing my argument to bear on religion as a social formation, and suggest that every religion depends on a “secret recipe” of micropractices responsible for its perpetuation.

What we stand to gain from an investigation of cooking and talking in a Black Atlantic religion is more than the satisfaction of curiosity about underestimated forms of embodied perception. It has the potential to provide a more accurate understanding of women and gay men—particularly those deemed effeminate—as social actors within Afro-Diasporic houses of worship.<sup>39</sup> As the literary scholar Meredith Gadsby writes, “Black feminist theorists such as Barbara Smith have already reclaimed the kitchen as a space of women’s power and creativity.”<sup>40</sup> To shed light on both the gendered and racialized landscape of everyday religious experience, this book locates the kitchen on the

“Diasporic horizon” of Lucumí.<sup>41</sup> This is the field of possibilities for action envisioned as practitioners clock the distance of current ritual protocols from those of the remembered Afro-Cuban past, and yearn for a collective future in greater alignment with the dictates of tradition. While cooking, practitioners speculate on the legitimacy of the sacred world their aesthetic decisions have created, in effect setting the limits of ethical practice.<sup>42</sup> The role played by women and homosexual men in demarcating these boundaries has yet to be fully realized. In order to understand their place at the table, we need to get in the kitchen.

### Utensils: Research Methods

And I'll have you know I'm fed up with both the young lady and her “qualities.” Studying me as if I were a play or a blueprint, how I walk, talk, think, act, sleep. . . . As it happens, there are particular aspects of my life to which I would like to maintain sole and exclusive rights and privileges.

—*All about Eve*

It is in poor taste for a guest to bemoan the richness of the dinner set before her. Yet that was the temptation, after almost two years of dissertation research had yielded a record as lavish as a banquet: fieldnotes, headnotes, videocassettes, compact discs, photographs, and quotations jotted on everything from coffee filters to cereal boxes. In the early 2000s, there were only fifteen or so houses of worship in Chicagoland for practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions.<sup>43</sup> Yet on any given Saturday, there were any number of Afro-Cuban drumming rituals being performed within the city limits: a *tambor* for the orishas, during which a set of consecrated *bátá* drums would be played; a *cajón pa' muertos* for the ancestors; a raucous “Congo party” for the spirits of Palo Monte Mayombe; and so on. Large numbers of Puerto Ricans came to the Midwest in search of manufacturing jobs in the 1950s, and the concentration of Boricuas in Chicago made Puerto Rican Spiritism, or Espiritismo, a feature of many communities.<sup>44</sup> The religious supply stores called *botánicas*, owned by Latino/a Lucumí initiates, dotted the North Side of the city. West Indians, along with Central and South Americans, were a vital and visible presence in houses of ocha.<sup>45</sup>

I was fortunate to have received my introduction to Ashabi at an opportune moment from the scholar and senior priest Miguel “Willie” Ramos, after having attended the 2001 exhibit co-curated by him, “At the Crossroads: Afro-Cuban Orisha Arts in Miami,” at the Historical Museum of Southern Florida. I began jotting journal entries based on trips to the *ilé* in 2003, and continued to add the odd line to my fieldnotes well into 2007, but my IRB-approved research period lasted for twenty months, from 2005 to 2006. After an initial set of discussions with Ashabi and her son Fadesiye over the possibility of conducting research on *Ilé Laroye* in 2004, in person and through e-mail messages, I brought the matter to the elders in an *ilé* meeting. After I obtained their informed consent for the project, my observant participation largely entailed assisting in the portions of ceremonies I had permission to join in as an *aleyó*, or uninitiated person. I was one of the assistants coordinated into shifts for one rite of passage called a *pinaldo*, five initiations (two of these with “twins,” or two novices) in Chicago, and one initiation in Miami, as the guest of an affiliated house of worship. I served as “scribe” for over a dozen Spiritist ceremonies called *misas blancas*.<sup>46</sup>

I largely rejected formal discussions in favor of more sustained interaction, chiefly in the kitchen, and in “go-alongs,” during which I accompanied practitioners on outings of both a secular and religious nature.<sup>47</sup> Whether on ordinary trips to the grocery store, or to the park (“forest”), river, or dumpster to dispose of religious offerings, I tried to flow with others in ever-fluctuating streams of activity that brought me closer to their “environmental perception[s], spatial practices, biographies, social architecture and social realms.”<sup>48</sup> Upholstered in warm acoustics, the inside of automobiles proved to be the most confessional of fieldwork sites, yet my interlocutors took the driver’s seat on our excursions and in all our verbal exchanges. During such outings, I recorded portions of one-on-one conversations that approached life history interviews in my fieldnotes, as interlocutors related details of their upbringing, educational experiences, professional preparation and aspirations, family lives, and religious practices.

I pursued Ashabi in particular to such an extent that I sometimes expected her to utter the words of the epigraph above, drawn from one of her favorite films, although any one of my interlocutors would have been justified in expressing the same sentiment. Nevertheless, I

attempted to proceed ethnographically in such a way as to allow ethical relationships to unfold.<sup>49</sup> During the research itself I focused less on overcoming limitations to identifying with others than on entering into multivocal dialogues. However much I may have wanted to put myself in others' shoes, I knew that I was stuck not only with my own clumsy feet, but also with my walk, so to speak, shaped in relation to my cultural center of gravity and sociopolitical location. It was not an option to borrow another's stance to position myself or to employ it as a data-gathering instrument. Yet the approach to fieldwork I took demanded that I "see it feelingly"—to quote the blind Gloucester's description of how he manages to grasp the world.<sup>50</sup> It called for a comparably "sensuous ethnography" to illuminate the instability, dynamism, and non-linearity of embodied perception and behavior as thrown into relief by religious practices, especially those seldom acknowledged as such.<sup>51</sup>

Although I conducted my research in Ilé Laroye—whether in Ashabi's home, or in its temporary relocation to other spaces—the kitchen became the micro-site of my ethnography. In kitchens, I worked, doing whatever I was asked. I worked under a group of ten initiated elders, ranging in age from early twenties to mid-sixties, and with another fifteen uninitiated people.<sup>52</sup> I collected much of my information through engagement in ritual labor highly attentive to "delicate distinctions upon which depended the differentiation between fit and unfit foods . . . and between permitted and forbidden activities."<sup>53</sup> Since the kitchen frequently served as a holding cell for the conveyance of exceptionally potent sacred matter from the living room to the back porch, problems of purity, danger, and contamination seldom left my mind. Such concerns were brought home in close quarters and potentially compromising situations, as when I once drew near to, and almost grazed, an unassuming white soup tureen containing the consecrated objects of the orisha Obatalá placed on the kitchen table. My presence at the ilé late in the evening, often after midnight, only increased the chances that an accident would occur, and that I would see or touch what I, as an uninitiated person, should not. What I learned of ritual prohibitions sometimes came at the cost of almost unwittingly transgressing them.

The circumstances of data collection were structured according to the Lucumí economy of secrecy and power. I had to read between the lines while communicating with my interlocutors not only to do the

research, but simply in order to stay out of the way. My uninitiated status prevented me from receiving completely candid answers—or at least uncensored ones—when I posed questions both thorny and banal. Coping with a similar set of methodological issues, the ethnographer and historian of religions Paul Christopher Johnson found that even if the religious knowledge called “secrets” in Afro-Brazilian religions may circulate among scholars, the transmission of the same information from person to person acts to reinforce the hierarchy between initiates and non-initiates, as well as to accentuate gradations of status among initiates with differing levels of seniority.<sup>54</sup> Part of my work entailed becoming comfortable with circumlocution and the fact that acknowledging ignorance—knowing that one does not know—is a precondition for knowledge.

Elders regarded kitchen work as a prelude to eventual initiation. This is part of my argument. I did feel a heady sense of being “way beyond seduction” by the community, pulled into what Luce Giard has called “Kitchen Women Nation”: that space in which the feminine—yet not entirely female—labor of cooking creates bonds of belonging.<sup>55</sup> When my mentor Arlene praised my habit of organizing quartered poultry on a cutting board as if depicted in an anatomical diagram, she beamed with pride that was of a piece with her hope that I would someday assume the mantle of the ritual cook, or *alashé*.<sup>56</sup> I had become a presence, and no longer what she once described, in comparing my investigations to those of a shadowy detective, as a “partially invisible sleuth.”<sup>57</sup> Partly by virtue of the “mimetic empathy” induced by research, I did inhabit the subject-position of servant to the orishas.<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, in a range of academic disciplines, “narratives of conversion are used as a practice of representing/constituting ‘discoveries’ in texts that claim to proffer new kinds of knowledge.”<sup>59</sup> As a historian of religions, I am doubly at risk of describing my “find”—should it be so judged—according to this template, an irony always pulsing beneath the surface of what follows.<sup>60</sup>

The figure of the white male anthropologist has become a much-burlesqued commonplace: fountain pen in hand, camera dangling from sunburned throat. The writings of Black womanist and feminist ethnographers of color suggest other ways of problematizing the status of the researcher in the field. To import an image from provocative recent ethnographies of Black and Dominican beauty shops, I would nuance

the cultural dimensions of embodiment in my research by evoking the historically African American definition of “kitchen”: “The patch of hair at the nape of the neck” that “most transgressively resists processing, straightening, and conditioning.”<sup>61</sup> It was often in the architectural kitchen of Ashabi’s home that members of the community made the sacred necklaces called *elekes*, their arched fingers stringing hundreds of beads onto nylon cords in the chromatic and numerical patterns appropriate to each orisha. Curls sometimes became snagged between the tight strands of these necklaces, causing discomfort and, when forcefully dislodged, pain. It is possible to see *elekes* as shaping practitioners’ sensorimotor repertoires and affective responses, training them gradually to accept *mazos*, the much heftier, more elaborate necklaces donned ceremonially at the start of the ordination ritual and during other pivotal moments in initiates’ lives.

Both types of kitchen await more careful and culturally sensitive theorization as sacred spaces than I am able to offer here. By invoking the double meaning of “kitchen,” I am interested in situating myself within the specific research environment to be encountered in the following pages, particularly with regard to race/ethnicity, gender, and class. The enskilled bodies of scholars are among those that most urgently need fleshing out, and not merely in textual reflections on past projects, but in the midst of social scientific praxis. Due to my coloring and features, I was frequently perceived as racially white and correctly seen to have “skin privilege” outside Ilé Laroye, a matter of life and death in the twenty-first-century United States.<sup>62</sup> My Cuban parentage and fluency in Spanish afforded me further privileges in the form of access to both Hispanophone Lucumí elders and writing on the tradition. I was not just working in the kitchen of Ashabi’s home; I was, at times, a pain in the neck. What a scholar takes away from research is often predicated on what interlocutors make of her body, and the tall demands her very presence makes on their persons.<sup>63</sup>

My interlocutors peppered interviews with stories of film footage illicitly obtained, conversations misquoted, sacrifices sensationalized in print. I have struggled to ensure that my narrative decisions were motivated neither by nostalgia for the empathetic solidarity of fieldwork nor by the “fable of rapport” that in ethnography “permits the writer to function in his subsequent analyses as an omnipresent, knowledgeable ex-

egete and spokesman.”<sup>64</sup> Through fieldnotes and ethnographic vignettes designed to be thick—both “contextualized” and, in the sense sometimes heard on the South Side of Chicago, “voluptuous” or “zaftig”—I give passing glimpses into the lives of distinct individuals. Their biographical trajectories may seem elliptical, but they reveal the play of larger sociocultural and historical forces.<sup>65</sup> While I present certain social patterns as representative, descriptions of the recent past gesture toward the particularity of experience as it exists beyond—and flagrantly in excess of—the ethnographic present.

### Place Setting

The remaining chapters are arranged as follows. Chapter 1 locates Ilé Laroye within the historical context of Chicago’s South Side and treats the everyday conversion of architectural spaces in Ilé Laroye. I introduce Ashabi Mosley herself and the changes wrought in her domestic environment according to the requirements of her religious office. Chapter 1 then unfolds into a brief history of the Lucumí house-temple before turning to Ashabi’s home in particular. Attention to the aesthetics of interior décor and spatial organization leads to the analysis of Ilé Laroye’s institutional structure and religious ethos. Finally, I consider ritual time in the ilé during the course of my research and the ilé’s ceremonial calendar, as its members honored multiple traditions—Lucumí, Palo Monte, and Espiritismo—under one roof.

Chapter 2 enters into the kitchen of the ilé and the way that members’ relationships with the orishas are shaped by the act of consumption. I open with the construction of divine hunger and its satisfaction as organizing an awareness of the orishas’ personhood and subjectivity. I pivot off the foundational characterization of Lucumí cooking by the larger-than-life twentieth-century historian and self-taught ethnologist Fernando Ortiz to examine the space of Ashabi’s kitchen as a matrix of tradition—with reference to both African roots and routes to Cuba—as well as innovation in pedagogical method. I review some of the dishes served to the orishas on ritual occasions within the ilé and the care taken to prepare them. Then, with an eye toward the use of food as media for the absorption and dissemination of divine energy, I elaborate on the idea that eating makes for kinship.

Chapter 3 takes on ritual performances that are a *sine qua non* of Lucumí ceremonial and community life: the preparation of food for the orishas in the wake of sacrifice. After rituals of initiation and consecration, slain animals—mostly birds and goats—must be dressed, cleaned, and roasted in a highly systematized manner to be turned into meals for the gods. I document the cumulative impact of elders’ “scaffolding” as they instructed their juniors to anticipate the orishas’ gustatory desires. I argue that the kitchen of the *ilé* was a veritable laboratory of embodied cognition, wherein the mastery of technique went hand in hand with the recalibration of emotions, reflexes, and affective responses, such as disgust. I show that cooking to the elders’ exacting specifications fostered a sense of camaraderie among the uninitiated that bolstered preexisting sentiments of affinity and led to firmer affiliation with the *ilé*.

In Chapter 4 I address issues of race, sexuality, and the gendered division of labor that obtains in the Lucumí kitchen, as well as in other spaces of food preparation in Black Atlantic religions. Even scholarship anchored in feminist and queer theory has been prone to misrepresent the roles played by women and gay, nonbinary, and genderqueer men in houses of worship, for the religious undertakings usually privileged—including drumming, sacrifice, and Ifá divination—tend to exclude them. I therefore turn to the much larger literature in Afro-Brazilian religions on cooking, gay men, and transgender/transsexual female practitioners as a partial corrective. Even in this broadened context, however, much of gay, nonbinary, and genderqueer men’s ritual labor apart from spirit possession has hitherto gone unremarked. This chapter therefore renders explicit the extent and nature of their engagement with the primary modalities of everyday praxis that convert homes into houses of worship throughout the African Diaspora.

Of the micropractices discussed in this book, part 3 reckons with those of the least magnitude and greatest prevalence. Chapter 5 details the ubiquity of incapacitating illness, injury, and adversity in everyday talk as the impetus for priestly service to the orishas. I make the case that narratives of initiation, frequently recounted around a kitchen table, teach interlocutors the appropriate manner of verbalizing, and therefore comprehending, the relationship between human beings and the spirits. I observe that they belong to a distinct speech genre that has given

full-throated voice to practitioners' distress, delivered an endorsement of religious norms, and constructed the feeling of affliction as an urgent summons to the priesthood. I attribute the persuasive force of conversational micropractices to interlocutors' absorbing enactment and emplotment of their recollections. For instance, practitioners often employed discursive modes rooted in Black talk, most notably "testifying"—the bearing of witness to common experience—when ascribing sickness to their lack of attention to the spirits.<sup>66</sup>

Chapter 6 zooms in on the quips and asides of my interlocutors as they reflected on rites of passage. Most of the statements transcribed in this chapter were made in the kitchen, and the historical marginality of that space mirrors the peripheral position of such utterances in the study of Afro-Cuban religions. I expand on them in order to devise a genealogical account of the practitioner "life cycle" according to my interlocutors' interpretations of ritual efficacy, rather than the theological concepts purportedly encoded in ceremonies or the African origins of the same. I chart practitioners' movement through bodily terrain suddenly made strange by new proscriptions and prescriptions in order to underscore the role of feeling—including physical pain—in navigating communal experience. I aim to convey the progressive, reciprocal transformation of corporeal and spatiotemporal spaces in religious practice. Religious subjectivity and the reality of the orishas are bound together in a process of coproduction, as individuals come to acquire and display proficiency in the Lucumí spirit idiom.

The brief glossary is meant to assist with unfamiliar terminology, but there is no lengthy synopsis of Lucumí's historical genesis, its West and Central African influences, central concepts, and ceremonies in a separate chapter, along with a table of correspondences between Roman Catholic saints and orishas as a shortcut to exposition. More thorough accounts than I deliver here may be found elsewhere.<sup>67</sup> I address the religious life of Ilé Laroye in the ethnography itself, rather than abstract its salient features into an "ideal type," leaving criteria for legitimacy unproblematized. I am wary of perpetuating a fundamentally theological discourse of orthodox Lucumí practice, held up as such by virtue of an adherence to reconstructed Yorubá precedents. My interlocutors sometimes criticized the innovations of communities or individuals as spurious "inventions," but this is not my prerogative.

As will emerge in due course, many of the ilé's members shared family histories of migration to Chicago from the rural South and encounters with such church movements as Black Spiritualism. A handful of excellent studies have established motives for religious disaffiliation and commitment among African Americans involved in orisha worship; this book concerns the mechanisms that transformed their religious subjectivity. Since religious identities are ineluctably intertwined with local configurations of race/ethnicity, gender/sexuality, and class, my argument incorporates Black feminist and womanist thought regarding the intersectionality of these axes of oppression. Some religious micro-practices can be plotted along these axes; for example, I contend that my main interlocutors came to inhabit a spirit idiom articulated in a distinctively African American vernacular. Yet I insist that practitioners' religious trajectories cannot be reduced to either their social positions or their cultural locations.

### Consumer Advisory: A Note on Transcription

The argument that I am making comes shrink-wrapped in academic prose that has little in common with the expansive linguistic rhythms in which my research was conducted. I have tried to preserve the prosodic features of my interlocutors' speech without reinforcing stereotypes of African American Vernacular English as a socially stigmatized dialect. It is a task made difficult by the frequent use of the rhetorical genre called *prosopopoeia*, or speech-in-character, to introduce another person or a fictitious character in a dialogue.<sup>68</sup> Most often this fictional character was a version of the speaker herself, whose advent would be announced by an interruption of her conventional diction with elements of "street" phonology, morphosyntactical features, and lexemes—including malapropisms, copula and auxiliary deletion, double negatives, multiple negation, and subject-verb non-agreement. By engaging in these linguistic practices to impersonate "ghetto" folk, my interlocutors constructed comic foils for themselves while expressing a more sober critique of ghettoization as a form of social violence.

Language is never not political. In the Afro-Atlantic world, attitudes toward everyday speech are both gendered and racialized; national and

regional “grammars of racism” have undergirded associations of Black talk with not just linguistic but also moral and mental incompetence.<sup>69</sup> The caricature of Black speech in an array of minstrelsy genres throughout the Americas has undoubtedly factored into the tendency to treat informal dialogues—particularly in local vernaculars—as superficial and bereft of gravitas.<sup>70</sup> The academic bias in favor of more formulaic and solemn liturgical language can be connected to anti-Black stereotypes as well as the abiding interest in locating material evidence of African customs and processes in the New World so as to refute the image of Africa as a “land without history.” Ironically, the emphasis placed on “survivals,” cultural continuities, and authentic African origins has tended to bolster the equation of religion with Eurocentric notions of the same.<sup>71</sup> The resulting inattention to ordinary modes of religious communication has mirrored the scholarly avoidance of activities that seem monotonous, squalid, or simply irreligious when compared against an implicit Christian prototype.

Speech as an index of racial, gendered, and class difference reaches an apotheosis of sorts in Afro-Cuban spirit possession, when orishas converse in a combination of the esoteric, Yorùbá-based liturgical language called *Lucumí* and the sociolect *Bozal*, while the spirits of the dead speak almost exclusively in the latter. In my research, however, the conversational “I” was seldom to be understood as “a secure index of the self within language.”<sup>72</sup> “I” was, instead, an edifice erected at a particular moment, toward specific ends, in relation to an immediate interlocutor as well as with reference to more distant audience. As the comedian Dave Chappelle has stated, “Every Black American is bilingual. We speak street vernacular, and we speak job interview.”<sup>73</sup> Members of *Ilé Laroye* switched between class-marked racialized speech registers in order to get their meanings across, often in descents into bathos that left no doubt as to either the thrust of particular remarks or the fact that speakers were uncontroversibly talented in self-expression.<sup>74</sup> The quotations extracted from my fieldnotes for the purpose of analysis come from neither plays nor blueprints, but from streams of conversation that deviated far away from me, laden with relations of power only dimly intimated in my vignettes. I may have the last say here, yet I write as if no word is final, counting myself among those who speak with borrowed tongues.