1 Introduction
Heading to the Gut

For religion is a part of the whole of the people – a part of what comes out of their belly.

Althea Prince (2001: 27)

Academics spend a lot of time in their heads. Historians and anthropologists live in other people’s heads too, or at least try to imagine what it might be like there. And to be a scholar or practitioner of Black Atlantic traditions – particularly of initiatory ones like Haitian Vodou and Brazilian Candomblé – is to know the head as a vessel for the gods’ divine power. In Afro-Diasporic religions, the crown of the skull is the focus of forceful, recurrent ritual intervention. The word for head in the West African Yorùbá language, orí, refers to both the physical head and the sacred embodiment of one’s personal destiny dwelling within it. The West African oracular system called Ifá is not only highly cerebral but also thematizes orí, and Ifá’s ongoing globalization has done much to promote the head as a central spiritual site. According to this religious ideology, just as a person’s physical head (Orí-Ôde in Yorùbá) is unique, so too is their inner self or fate (Orí-Inú). Not every Black Atlantic tradition shaped by these principles – directly or indirectly – regards the head in the same way, but its preeminence over the rest of the body is unquestioned (Johnson 2002; Pérez 2013b).

In my first book, I concentrated on the manual labor that sustains the deities (Pérez 2016). The religious community at the heart of that study was – and remains – dedicated to the practice of Lucumí (popularly known as Santería), Espiritismo, and Palo Monte. I sought to capture the synesthetic feel of preparing sacred food and the sense that kitchen work comes to make for practitioners as it remakes their corporeal sensoria. I argued that it is in kitchenspaces that speaking about the gods and feeding them makes them real. In so doing, I pointed out that Afro-Diasporic religions, like armies, march on their stomachs (Mason 1999: 62). That is, they are mobilized by the hungers of the gods and the need to supply food to those toiling in their service. I left a good deal unsaid, however, about the stomach and indeed the entirety of the gastrointestinal tract as a privileged experiential zone, amplified in countless divination verses, proverbs, myths, rituals, and recipes for ethnomedical remedies.

1 Key to this globalization has been the dissemination of Wande Abimbola’s magisterial work as well as that of Rowland Abiodun and Babatunde Lawal.
2 Rowland Abiodun (2014: 219) glosses Orí-Inú as “the determiner of one’s lot on earth.”
3 According to Martin Holbraad (2012: 286), “Not only are references to such ideas [destiny and fate] largely absent in [Cuban] babalawos’ [or Ifá diviners’] discourse, but also in Cuba adoration of ori (the head), which the Yoruba consider the locus of individual destiny, is not prevalent.”
What follows is an alimentary tract, a brief treatise on the gut in Black Atlantic traditions that crystallized during the transatlantic slave trade. The purpose of this book is not to dethrone the head as the king of the Afro-Diasporic religious body, but to secure acknowledgment that it is not the only place in the body where thought takes shape. Practitioners have long possessed and imparted insights about the “thinking gut” and its indispensable role in the consolidation of religious families and communities. The extensive connections between the human gut and brain feature prominently in recent immunological research on the “gut microbiome” and in the emerging field of neurogastroenterology. Although the concept of the “thinking gut” has gained significant traction within the past decade, religious studies as a discipline has yet to grapple with this paradigm shift — with the growing consensus that the gut not only deliberates but has definite opinions (Lucas 2018; Modern 2021).

In pursuing this line of argument, I want to avoid reinscribing the mind-body dualism that has become synonymous with modern post-Reformation approaches to corporeality. In Lydia Cabrera’s 1954 classic El Monte: Igbo, finda, ewe orisha, vititi nfinda, one of her interlocutors, Bangoché (Ibae), declares that “the head rules the body” then tells her what happened when one day the anus, Oriolo, insisted that he was king.4 He said that he could prove it:

What did the Oriolo do? He closed! A day passed, two, the head felt nothing. On the fourth, the head was fine, if perhaps a little heavy, but the stomach and funó, the intestine, were quite uncomfortable. On the sixth day, ilú, the belly was hugely fat, wò wò. The liver – odosú – [was] hard as a stick and Ori began to feel bad. Very bad. Elúgó, fever, made its appearance … The situation worsened after the tenth day, because everything was already working badly and the head, arms, legs could not move. What entered – the laxative guaguasis – did not exit. The head could not rise from the floor mat to carry the body. She and all of the organs had to beg the ori to open. He showed how important he is, even though nobody gives him any thought [nadie lo considera], there where he is, in the darkness and despised by all.

(Cabrera [1954] 1968: 393)5

This story is a patakín, a traditional Afro-Cuban oral narrative embedded in the verses of the Ifá and Diloggún divination systems (Brown 2022). I cite it here to illustrate that practitioners of Afro-Diasporic religions have envisioned a split between mind and body, although a less extreme one than the Cartesian type.6

4 Bangoché was the priestly name of José Calazán Herrera (Sánchez 2004: 155–6). “Ibae,” “praise be [to them],” is said after the name of a deceased initiate.
5 All of the translations in this Element are mine unless otherwise stated.
6 A similar joke has circulated online since at least 2004 (https://bit.ly/3MYiUED). The moral usually given is colored by class politics and corporate culture; it holds that there are no other qualifications for being a “boss” other than being an asshole. Variations on this joke are likely
For some Lucumí initiates, the head is an *orisha*, a deity, in its own right; Oriolo is not. Bangoché’s tale reflects an amply corroborated understanding that the head and the digestive system cooperate and, at times, compete for dominance. They are material entities endowed with intentionality, such that the gut’s maneuverings (not to say machinations) impact the head acutely. Yet in the history and anthropology of religion – as in Bangoché’s tale – the entrails still lack consideration and languish in obscurity. Practitioners’ insights regarding the gastroenteric manifestations of neurological disorders – and the mental health implications of problems with and in the gut – have been dismissed as mere “folk wisdom.”

I have now used the word “king” twice, and we cannot visit the body’s “nether regions” without invoking divisions between the upper and lower body that map onto entrenched social hierarchies. The conflation of the lower body with subaltern and subordinate groups may not be universal but it is pervasively cross-cultural. In the modern era, this association has tended to rest on the hegemonic naturalization of dominant groups as equipped with superior intellectual faculties and loftier claims to rationality, which in turn grant them cultural authority and political sovereignty. The distinction between head and gut across cultures may be interpreted in terms not only of class and station but also of age, gender, race, and ethnicity. In conditions of “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” the parts of the body judged unhygienic, closer to the ground, and prone to moral deviance are infantilized, feminized, and “Othered” as Black or brown (hooks 2000). If the head is religion, the gut is magic.

Practitioners of Black Atlantic traditions have modified these taxonomies to create their own versions – and occasionally to flip them upside down. In Lucumí, the owner of all heads is the cool, reasonable, elderly Obatalá, thought to have female manifestations (or “paths”) but generally referred to as male. Accounts of the Trinidadian Orisha initiation rite and the placement of “Obatalá’s stool” in some shrine compounds allude to his special relationship to the head. Among Vodouisants, the head is linked to Danbala, the deity that corresponds to Obatalá, but the ceremony of *lav tèt* (sometimes glossed as a “ritual baptism”) and the object called *po tèt* emphasize the head’s connection to an individual’s patron deity (Strongman 2013: 106). In Candomblé Nagô and Ketu, the Brazilian Oxalá governs the head, along with the primordial female
Saramaka, Ndyuka, Kumina, Komfa, and Shango traditions, among others, identify the head as the physical container in which guardian spirits reside, and these are always senior and “higher” relative to the devotee (Herskovits and Herskovits 1934: 153, 227; Platvoet 1982: 123; Price 2007).

In several of these traditions, the gut belongs to certain less elevated, more down-to-earth and subversive deities, like the mischievous path opener (and closer) Elegguá. In due course, I tackle these anatomical cum cosmological relationships. But such correlations leave many questions unresolved about the gut’s place in religious practice. Black Atlantic “embodied physiology,” storytelling, and ceremonies that thematize the gut have emphasized the gut’s ability to act decisively and produce knowledge (Daniel 2005: 74). The gut’s vulnerability to magic and sorcery, particularly through the ingestion of noxious substances, has given rise to a rich pharmacopeia. Indeed, among the chief undertakings of Afro-Diasporic healers and diviners has been the alleviation of suffering caused by the stomach and intestines. Their ministrations have implicated patients in the world of the gods and ancestors, leading not infrequently to their clients’ transformation into religious subjects. As practitioners, they have discovered that, to serve the spirits, they must occasionally – and sometimes permanently – surrender control over their guts. Even today, devotees are obliged to consume special foods in rites of passage and consent to the imposition of food taboos that may be lifelong.

The gut is experienced in perhaps the most intense and memorable way through sensations suddenly perceived within it, and practitioners of Afro-Diasporic religions have historically singled out abdominal aches, pains, and twinges as messages from the gods and ancestors. The murk of the gut conduces to the play of concealment and revelation that characterizes Black Atlantic symbolism and ritualization. To grasp the significance of gut feelings, instincts, and reactions, it is necessary to probe into their discursive construction (as common idioms that may not index actual sensations at all) as well as their tangible materiality. Sometimes people say they feel something in their gut because they do; at other times they cite gut feelings in the absence of somatic stimuli as verbal shorthand for hunches and sentiments that should not – or cannot – be ignored.

What can be gleaned about the gut from the speech genres in which it appears? For some compelling answers, we might look to affect theory. But despite its conceptual and methodological sophistication, the contemporary scholarship on affect and emotion tends to dichotomize mind and body – brain and belly – to a greater extent than Afro-Diasporic religions do. In this corpus as in everyday parlance, the gut is synecdochic of the body and the really...
real, an undeniable quantum vibrating with untold potentiality that no representation can fully capture (Mazzarella 2009: 299). I nevertheless take abundant inspiration from Sara Ahmed’s ([2004] 2014) trenchant exploration of the “stickiness” of feeling, along with other scholars attentive to sentiment and sensation in the formation of subjectivities.

Gut Check

GUTs [Grand Unified Theories that sought to unite the strong, weak, and electromagnetic quanta in a sympathetic symmetry that would include gravity and overturn the bolt-it-together-somehow methods of The Standard Model] had their heart in the right place; they wanted to recognise the true relationship between the three fundamental forces. Now, more than ever, crossing into the twenty-first century, our place in the universe and the place of the universe in us, is proving to be one of active relationship.

Jeanette Winterson (1997: 99)

What is the gut in this book? Colloquially, the guts are the human body’s soft innermost insides: the stomach and the small and large intestines. I take my cue from Black Canadian novelist and essayist Althea Price (2001: 27):

“The belly” I use to refer to the place where emotions are held, the stomach, the center of the body. (When a Caribbean woman really bawls, she does so holding her belly and saying, “Ooi, me belly! Me belly!”) I speak of the belly also as the understanding of it as a place where nourishment is processed, the place where food is digested, stored, and then dispersed to the rest of the body.

Technically, the gut also comprises the mouth, esophagus, rectum, and anus, but these digestive cavities and passageways figure less conspicuously in the present Element. The slang phrase “getting in someone’s guts” means “having penetrative sex with,” but genitals and reproductive organs are beyond the scope of my study.9 Within its purview are the singular and plural forms of gut in sundry gradations of meaning.

I offer no Grand Unified Theory of the gut or guts in Black Atlantic traditions. While my method is comparative, I specialize in the study of Lucumi and the lion’s share of my examples are drawn from Afro-Cuban religious formations. Sections 2 and 3 examine gut feelings and the beings that reside in the belly. Section 4 considers possible West and Central African precedents for the Afro-Diasporic “gut-brain axis” (Bruce and Lane Ritchie 2018). Section 5 discusses the offering of guts to gods and ancestors as the object of racist fantasy and

9 I regret not being able to tease out the gut’s relationship to sexuality in this Element. “Gut politics” is profoundly gendered, as in its presumption that cisgender women and homosexual men do not have the “guts” of heterosexual cisgender men (Babatunde 1992: 92–3; Carden-Coyne 2005; LeBlanc 2010: 169).
ordinary material reality. Sections 6 and 7 establish that the stomach and intestines figure in ritual practice and the collective historical memory of religious ancestors. Section 8 connects the literal gutting that transpires in kitchenspaces to the figurative spilling of guts that accompanies it. Combining participant observation and archival research, The Gut gestures tentatively toward the “active relationship” mentioned in the passage from Jeanette Winterson’s novel Gut Symmetries, as expressed in Afro-Diasporic religions.

My aspirations are modest, to the point that it might be prudent to urge my reader against looking in these pages for [E]nlightenment. This master trope, reliant on the symbolism of knowledge as light and ignorance as darkness, gave its name to a philosophical movement that ascended to ideological supremacy on the backs of enslaved peoples. Their becoming Black led to the birth of whiteness as a category and condition (in the sense of stipulation) for selfhood and citizenship (Derrida and Moore 1974; Hornback 2019).

As Black feminist scholars like Cynthia B. Dillard (2000) have established, the racialized and gendered visual metaphors we use to convey our findings have the ability to shape their reception quite apart from our best intentions. Without adopting an “endarkened feminist epistemology,” I have been sensitized to the ways that terms like clarify and illuminate not only continue to uphold the negative connotations of darkness (and, by extension, Blackness) but also reinforce the overwhelming ocularcentrism of scholarly discourses.

I ask my reader to sit with the discomfort caused by the unaccustomed tack taken here. In keeping with my argument, I lean into an interdisciplinary analysis of the gut that prioritizes haptics, tactility, and the unnerving “interceptive sensations” felt deep within the abdomen (Machon 2009; Stroeken 2008: 468). Since these perceptions are at times so complex as to be unverifiable, I strive for precision in the portrayal of gut phenomena as a means of advancing scholarly debates on embodiment, emotion, and cognition in religious studies. By concentrating on Afro-Diasporic examples in their circumstantial particularity, I hope to uncover historical patterns and enable what Jonathan Z. Smith (1990: 53) dubbed the “magic” of serious cross-cultural comparison, “an active, at times even playful enterprise of deconstruction and reconstruction” that has the power to redescribe the world, thereby changing it.

Throughout I touch on themes currently under investigation in the cognitive science of religion, in the interest of providing a non-Euro-American model of “mind” that locates it as one coordinate on the gut-brain axis. In doing so, I do not simply seek representation for people of African descent routinely excluded from theorization of “human nature” or “the body,” in a rhetorical move analogous to the institutional diversity, equity, and inclusion work some of us
are called to do within our colleges and universities (Ahmed 2012). Defining the Afro-Diasporic “thinking gut” as one more “local theory of mind” is not sufficient to decolonize disciplinary formations organized by “settler colonial logics” and informed by evolutionary, behavioral, and developmental psychology (Avalos 2018, 2020; Lloyd and Wolfe 2015; Luhrmann 2014; Taves 2014). Moreover, the attainment of nuanced, nontokenizing representation is no simple task. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl’s La mentalité primitive (1922) also aspired to correct the logocentric record with its speculation on the prelogical thought and “mystical participation” of “savages.”

To open up the gut in Black Atlantic traditions now is to broach a sensitive subject in gut-wrenching times. To be “gutted” means to be in mourning, doubled over in grief and sick to our stomachs. Physiologically, we can say why this is so, from the vagaries of the vagus nerve, to the reflux that accompanies the extinction of gut flora by antibiotics. There is a political dimension to this pain, however. To encapsulate what is happening to hard-won civil rights and environmental protections in the United States, commentators often reach for the term “gutted.” The term “politics of the belly” was coined in the context of West African experience, but it well applies to the eviscerating violence of the Afro-Diasporic present (Bayart 1989). The knots in our stomachs sound the alarm of intersubjective and social emergency. An inquiry like The Gut risks heaping insult onto injury and exposing practitioners for the nth time to the glare of unscrupulous anti-Black scrutiny.

With this very real danger comes the outside chance that we might be able to realize the gut’s outsized role in Afro-Diasporic religious thought. The Gut commits to relativizing – or, better yet, provincializing – the brain as the sole locus of reason, as per secular-liberal political frameworks for thought and agency (Chakrabarty 2000). What we stand to gain from broadening the category of “cognitive” along these lines is akin to the recognition that distinguishing between black (and/or Black) magic and religion has little heuristic value, but in practice has served to justify the marginalization of stigmatized and minoritized groups (Chireau 1993). As Diana Paton (2009: 2) writes, “the concept [of] ‘religion’ has acted as a race-making category: a marker of the line between supposedly ‘civilized’ peoples (who practice religion) and ‘primitive’ peoples (who practice superstition or magic).” The expansion of “mind” promises to recast Afro-Diasporic religions as more than bottomless wells of magic spells and inspiration for pop-culture appropriation. Expanding “mind” to incorporate the gut may assist us in coming to grips with the anti-Blackness that has prevented Black Atlantic knowledges from being accepted as such.

Accordingly, this Element owes less to Rabelais (1854: 257) – “Et tout pour la trippe!” – than it does to Bangoché. Like the alimentary tract in his story, a
book is a dense bundle of fibers, a conduit for both gross matter and subtleties. Only after it closes does its power become plain.

2 Gut Feelings

Deep folklore is a riff, a refrain, a gut feeling and a gut reaction, a theory of sensing and sensation, of movement across space and through time. 

*Kay Turner (2021: 10)*

Within the past decade, scientific research on the gut has challenged assumptions about moral-ethical decision-making, consciousness, and volition. In biology and the emerging field of neurogastroenterology, discoveries about the gut as a “second brain” and site of embodied cognition have led to a surge in the publication of journals and monographs to disseminate the latest findings.

The growing acknowledgment of the “enteric brain” in the 1990s coincided with (but does not seem to have influenced) the “sensory turn” in the social sciences and humanities. The motto for this turn could be summed up as “the body knows.” It succeeded in redirecting scholars in religious studies toward the study of affective states, corporeal knowledge, and the “stuff” (objects, spaces, and media) of everyday ritual practice.

Contrary to the impression generated by debates over the value of the liberal arts, the hard sciences have been playing catch-up to these developments. In June 2021, the journal *Nature* reported on an article in which the authors asked, “has the increasingly recognized impact of affective phenomena ushered in a new era, the era of affectivism?” (Dukes et al., 2021). For anyone acquainted with the “affective turn” and the emergence of affect theory in the early 2000s, the question would seem oblivious at best.

Some insights concerning the enteric nervous system and alimentary canal in particular have since been pursued in isolated studies by scholars interested in the potential of cognitive science for illuminating religious experience. These insights have yet to be addressed within the context of a particular set of religious formations. I say “addressed” and not “applied” because this Element exists in part to recognize Black Atlantic knowledges, which should not be reduced to raw material for theory but acknowledged as the product of theorization (Wiredu 2004).

Asserting that these knowledges are knowable leaves me open to charges of reification, bearing in mind the intricacies involved in stitching together disparate accounts of “inescapably historical entanglements of matter, praxis, and language” experienced by generations of different practitioners into something resembling a corpus of “deep folklore” (Palmié 2018: 805). Anthropologist Rane Willerslev’s critique of the term “worldview” and studies predicated on it
might be apposite here; for Willerslev (2007: 156), worldview implies “that a body of context-free, propositional knowledge about spiritual beings, their characteristics and interrelations, lies fully formed inside people’s heads.”

Although greater contextualization of the knowledges attested here would be optimal, I should explain that propositional knowledge is not a core component of them. Formal propositions of the sort practitioners “believe in” are few and far between, as Afro-Diasporic religions do not have creeds. They are orthopraxic rather than orthodoxic – that is, they focus on correct actions in everyday conduct and ritual over proper thought and belief(s). Personal knowledge and procedural “knowledge how” to do things with skill – to felicitous effect – has taken precedence in these traditions over propositional “knowledge that” something is true based on empirical facts (Carr 2003: 20). While my invocation of “knowledges” in these pages might arouse the same skepticism “worldview” does, I nevertheless stand with scholars whose studies have documented “embodied knowledge(s)” of myriad types within the Black Atlantic world. In groping toward an appreciation of the gut as the basis for religious knowledge, I rely on practitioners’ words, in addition to historical and ethnographic documentation, to ascertain what they can plausibly be said to have known. As we will see, their conceptualizations of the gut have not been – and are not – “purely” anatomical, but incorporate feeling and possess cognitive dimensions that in previous epochs would have been written off as unscientific, magical, and/or inherently religious.

**Trusting Your Gut**

The phrase “gut feelings” is used so often in English, it is hard to pin down what people mean by it. When people announce that they are “operating from the gut” – say, on social media – the statement is meant to inaugurate a new phase of personal integrity and candor. They are declaring that, from now on, they are doing only what feels right. Tweets and memes exhort readers to “pay attention to your gut” or “listen to your gut,” as if these phrases point to self-evident and universal sensations. When queried, people state that gut feelings feel sharp (but not razor-sharp), peculiar, prickly, nebulous, like a menstrual cramp, like the onset of flatusence, a dull poke in the side, or percussive taps (Flora 2007). Survivors of violence and those who suffer from chronic anxiety report difficulty in separating gut feelings from physiological responses like a “nervous stomach” (or an uncanny sense of impending doom). The dread that one is about to lose control of one’s bowels or succumb to illness may be traces of traumatic

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10 Procedural knowledge does entail some propositional knowledge, but it is not at the fore in this epistemological category.
bodily memory. Recent studies have outlined the role that neurotransmitters and gut flora play in producing these feelings, although they do not fully explain them.

Gut feelings do not always translate into other languages, even to those historically spoken by practitioners of Black Atlantic traditions in the Caribbean and Latin America. The Dutch gut reactie and buikgevoel (“gut reaction” and “gut feeling,” respectively) are the closest to the English denotatively; onderbuikgevoel (“underbelly feeling”) carries the negative connotation of prejudicial judgment. The Spanish for “gut instinct” is presentimiento or instinto visceral, both of which insinuate a premonition of future events akin to a “sixth sense.” The closest term with a somatic component would be corazónada, a hunch or impulse that originates in or fills the heart. In French, avoir du cran means to have the guts (in the sense of courage) to do something, but “gut feeling” is rendered as pressentiment, intuition, or instinct, with much the same connotations as their English cognates. The Portuguese for “gut feeling” is pressentimento; “guts,” as a synonym for courage, is fígado (liver) or estômago (stomach). In Haitian Kreyòl, the words grenn, kran, zantray, and zenba refer to the entrails, insides, or vitals, but – like heart in English – they also connote bravery and determination. Relatedly, grenn and zantray mean close or intimate friend. In both French and Kreyòl, estomaqué (or estomake) means to take offense, to be scandalized by something, or “[t]o be angry because of injured pride, because your feelings have been hurt” (Targète and Urciolo 1993: 62).

Given the substantial volume of scholarship on religion, emotion, and sentiment, the analysis of gut feelings as a component of religious experience has a surprisingly recent history. As often as they feature in first-person and ethnographic accounts, they have not been the object of sustained inquiry within religious studies. In the anthropology of religion, gut feelings have been interpreted primarily as facilitating the conversion process by registering assent to particular messages and legitimating the authority of religious leaders (Lohmann 2003). For one practitioner in a study of conversion to Christian Spiritualism, “the interactions with [a] medium ‘helped explain things to me in ways consistent with my gut feelings’ in ways that the ‘Christian spiel’ never had” (Brown 2003: 141). Similarly, most theological and philosophical

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Zantray means guts and is “an acronym for Zanfan Tradisyon Ayisyen (Children of the Haitian Tradition), an organization for the defense of the Vodou religion . . . formed because of the lynchings of Vodou priests after the departure of President Jean-Claude Duvalier in 1986” (Hebblethwaite 2012: 302). The usage of zantray in this context recalls the adoption of GUTS as an acronym for Gay Urban Truth Squad (sometimes jokingly referred to as the Gay Urban Terrorist Squad), a Dallas activist group founded in 1987.