

Book review: Beliso-De Jesús, Aisha. 2015. *Electric Santería: Racial and Sexual Assemblages of Transnational Religion*. New York: Columbia University Press.

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Electric Santería is not so much of a linear kind of book. Open its pages at any point, commence from any chapter, even the epilogue, and its ambience and arguments will most probably get to you shortly after a few lines. Only two scholars writing on Afro-Cuban religiosity have provoked to me a similar sense: the late Joel James Figarola (2006) and Todd Ramón Ochoa (2010). Some might object to its 'postmodernist' feel but there is more than style to it. Its apparent circularity manages to delve into things in minutiae ethnographic detail, without though becoming just *another* Santería ritual manual. On the very contrary, it manages to blend organically the more ritual and cosmological dimensions to either everyday habitual events that would initially seem incidental or peripheral to Santería; or to broader socio-historical dimensions, such as the politics of race, gender, social class and, crucially, 'transnationalism'. The latter is perhaps the most predominant, provocative and clearly articulated 'theme' of the book.

In the skilful writing hands of Beliso-De Jesús, transnationalism does not merely reflect the fact that Santería travels in the most literal of senses beyond Cuba, through migration, religious tourism and an ever-proliferation of initiations, to the American continent, the European or back to the African one; nor the dynamics of such multiple flows. Transnationalism is a broad and encompassing field of affects, percepts and concepts which create a very peculiar Santería-imbued experiencing of being-in-the-world. More particularly, through a detailed description of its sensorial aspects, Santería transnationalism is not a universalizing and totalizing experience of sameness but, on the contrary, a unique way of *being different*. As Beliso-De Jesús calls it, it is a 'being-strange-in-the-world' (p. 117) or a 'queer racial ontology' (p. 146), that draws on 'alternative sources of power' (p. 100). These sources of power, or else, 'copresences' and 'assemblages', create a 'non-transcendental', 'kinesthetic' kind of transnationalism, the author suggestively argues. Therefore,

processes of mediation are not bridges to the transcendental and an imperialistic kind of universalism (see particularly her critical theoretical discussion in pp. 71-78), but *electrified* instantiations of Santería's *being-strange-in-the-world*.

For instance, new media technology, such as videos and the internet 'mediate', that is, shape and are shaped by Santería's 'copresences', sometimes leading people to get possessed through them. Thus, an apparent division between attending a ritual and watching a video of it categorically collapses. One could thus say that the 'modernity' of a camera or a computer screen is provocatively merged with the 'traditionality' and affective capacities of Afro-Cuban drums (see pp. 61-65) and, thus, the former become equally 'traditional', just as the latter become equally 'modern'. Such an approach moves 'away from a representational analysis' (p. xiv) and, thus, the book is a welcome addition to a relatively recent scholarly current in Afro-Cuban religiosity of a similar approach (see Holbraad 2012; Espírito Santo 2015; Espírito Santo and Panagiotopoulos 2015). Nevertheless, rather than dismissing altogether representation, Beliso-De Jesús skilfully manages to put it into dialogue with only its apparent opposite, namely, an analysis putting the emphasis on the more 'ontological' dimensions. In that way, the originality of the book lies in the fact that a representational or epistemological analysis is not necessary incompatible with an ontological one. On that broader analytical level too, Beliso-De Jesús manages to go beyond 'transcendence', in a creatively and Santería-like fashion; this time, beyond the academic transcendence often created between ontology and representation.

Perhaps the most ambiguous part of the book is the politics of race, gender and social class even though they nominally take centre stage. These politics are indeed central to many analyses in Afro-Cuban religiosity, especially to those that are coming from a North American-influenced academic environment; a constant preoccupation that may not only reflect the importance of the issues on Cuban soil, but on North American too (perhaps even more so). The book links these politics to the general statement of 'being-strange-in-the-world'. Although there are ethnographic

examples given, especially for the issue of gender (through the highly contested issue of the initiation of women in the Ifá tradition; see pp. 183-211), I am still left with a relative and partial puzzlement about what is specific of Santería in relation to race, gender or social class. This ambiguity is arguably not necessarily a flaw of the book itself but an element of the very context the book is depicting. Of course, through the study of Afro-Cuban religiosity, one bears witness to some obvious racial, gendered and classicist dimensions, both in their dominating and resisting instances, as well as in their historical and current manifestations. Yet, my own ethnographic sense which has been inextricably put into dialogue with my reading of *Electric Santería*, makes me wonder whether Afro-Cuban 'copresences' do not only affectively engage with issues of race, gender and social class but, simultaneously and paradoxically, not just try to resist their established 'structures', but also 'magically' elude them as a way of astute critique that, even though it acknowledges their socio-historical significance and presence, it also and at the same time strives to avoid them (exactly because of their otherwise marginalizing effects). To paraphrase the author then, maybe 'copresences' are also accompanied by significant and actively pursued 'co-absences'. Perhaps, in that unusual way, issues of race, gender and social class also lose their transcendental character too.

References

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