

based religion and the independence of white aspirational Indians who often teach Indian practices for profit. Myke Johnson's matching account of 'Wanting to be Indian', reprinted from the Internet, provides an insightful critique of New Age theft of North American Indian culture. Johnson's often-personal narrative goes beyond critique to also suggest a constructive programme for creatively engaging with Indian spirituality.

Roderick Main's commissioned chapter 'Religion, Science and the New Age' contains a few thoughtful illustrations of the relationship between religion and science, including an extensive discussion of the relevance of evolutionary theory for religion and of Jung's theory of synchronicity and his role in the New Age. However, the chapter overlooks much recent scholarship that has problematised the concept of the New Age and did not provide a strong account of what New Age practitioners might actually do. There was no corresponding reprint of material on the New Age in the second section of the book. Perhaps one less chapter on Witchcraft and another reprinted article on the New Age would have made the book more balanced.

Overall, at first glance this would seem a possible text for courses on alternative spirituality. It has certainly demarcated this as a sensible textbook area. However, the chapters on Witchcraft over-emphasise historical issues and are sometimes tendential, lacking a rich ethnographic account that would bring Witchcraft to life for students. The chapter on the New Age does not engage with many of the contemporary debates and is insufficient on its own. The book also lacks a discussion of contemporary social changes, of which these 'new' forms of belief might be a part. That being said, the matching chapters and readings on Celtic spirituality and aspirational Indians provide excellent resources.

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Randy P. Conner with David Hatfield Sparks, *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Participation in African-Inspired Traditions in the Americas* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2004), 390 pp., \$24.95 (paper).

In the conclusion of his book, *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions*, author Randy P. Conner discusses the impetus for his research and his result: "When I commenced this project, I rather naively envisioned it as one that would demonstrate an expression of queer spirituality within a specific context... *I could hardly have been more mistaken.*" (311). It is Conner's admittedly naive presumption of a queer "community" within African Diasporic traditions and his in-text admission of being frequently "disheartened" and "surprised" when matters on the ground did not match his hypothesis that weaken a potentially very important and necessary study. While being surprised by one's own ethnographic data potentially opens up new avenues of inquiry, it is clear upon reading Conner's text that he was working from a personal vision and from many inaccurate assumptions, which he was unwilling to release. Rather than entering the field with a question to be answered, Conner entered with his own answer in mind, so it is no wonder that he was frequently surprised. Conner, who has made his mark in previous publications discussing queerness in religious and spiritual traditions around the world, turned his attention to the traditions of Vodou, Santeria, Lucumi, and other variations of African Diasporic religions to look for and

document evidence for queerness in African cosmologies and African societies, as well as the participation of gay, lesbian, transgender (and other) people in these traditions. As a result, Conner's text reads like two books, rather than as one cohesive work. The chapters that let practitioners speak for themselves are very successful; less so are the chapters where he wades into the ethnographic history of Africa looking for queers.

My hesitancy to lay out all the labels utilized by Conner as subsumed under "queer" reveals one slight problem with the reading of Conner's book: the assumption that his audience is very clear on queer terminologies and gender studies, but not on African religions, which he spends a painstaking amount of text space explaining in nuanced detail. (I have a strong background in African traditions, but I am still navigating the varieties of transgender identifications – I was the wrong audience for this section of the book.) One facet of the gender whirlwind he stirs up is simply attempting to discern how Conner distinguishes terms like "homosexual male," "transgender male," "homoerotically inclined male" as separate identity categories (likewise "lesbian" and "amazon"); the only help Conner offers is a list of queer literature and scholarship for readers to explore on their own.

A more prominent problem is Conner's use of the same labels to analyze African gender identities, both contemporarily and in the ethnographic record. Anyone with a rudimentary understanding of the anthropology of gender knows that one set of cultural identifiers cannot simply be laid on top of another for the purposes of understanding gender roles, yet this is precisely what Conner does. It is difficult to determine on what basis Conner re-classifies "other gendered" characters in ethnographies written in the 1700s and 1800s; in many cases, where the older ethnographies documented perceived homosexuals in Africa and the Americas, Conner feels justified in stating that they were probably misclassified transpersons. No substantive reason is given for Conner's reclassifications in the text, which is very problematic. In other cases, while conducting interviews, many diasporic informants mentioned that, while there was certainly homosexuality in their respective cultures, it was not something people sat around talking about. Conner jumps to the conclusion that this was a "don't ask, don't tell" policy, forgetting, or perhaps unaware, that when something is a cultural norm, it becomes commonsensical and depoliticized. It begs the question whether Conner was really looking for queer identities or, in fact, queer politics. His descriptions of the traditions, origins, syncretisms, and mythologies of Santeria, Vodou, and Lucumi are where Conner begins to hit his stride. In fact, in his effort to be as detailed and nuanced as possible regarding these traditions, he bombards the reader with information that is occasionally repetitive and somewhat disjointed. Cross-tradition analogs are done away with (e.g., Oshun in Santeria is Ezili in Vodou) in favor of presenting each pantheon within its specific tradition, which is where much of the redundancy of stories in myths comes in. The information itself is remarkable – clearly Conner's research was exhaustive – but the presentation began to read like a checklist after a while. It is easy to forgive, however, when one realizes that this book contains pioneering research; Conner has bravely entered into academic discourse with a groundbreaking topic that will be referenced for a long time to come.

The first chapters of the book outline a problematic history of the study of African religions and culture and their diasporic expressions – which is, not surprisingly, a racist tangle. The ethnographic record on Africa is largely made up of the accounts of slave traders, missionaries, and colonizers, and we may very well only now be getting

some sense of what African cultures may truly be like, largely because the voices of African scholars are now being heard. Then Conner attempts an analysis of the scholarship of the existence of LGBT communities or identities in African, Creole (African/European/Native American blends), and African-American societies. What Conner makes clear is that the discourse on queerness and African culture is still violently contentious, with many scholars and practitioners insisting that homosexuality never existed in Africa prior to European incursion, and many others insisting that the very categories scholars use to discuss gender identity are inherently Western and biased, not taking into account the uniquely fluid concepts of gender in African societies. Consequently, the very study Conner attempts to do is one where gender, religious affiliation, and “race” cannot be examined separately, yet he tries to keep the focus strictly on gender (as his questionnaire in the appendix shows) occasionally to the detriment of his analysis. As a result, many potential informants refused to be interviewed by Conner because he was gay, or “white,” or both, regardless of his status as a Vodou/Santeria practitioner. Conner’s own telling in this book of being shouted down at a Cuban religious conference in 2003 by Yoruba priests for his presentation on queerness makes it clear that Conner realized he was stepping into a minefield; one wonders if it took this event, despite his research, to become truly conscious of it. Conner was sure it was the topic of queerness that angered many. I am forced to ask a blunt question that Conner seemed not to have considered: could it be that the Yoruba priests interpreted Connor’s research as another case of a white academic projecting onto African culture? It is an extremely pertinent question in light of the history of African scholarship.

The book strengthens considerably in its discussion of African religious myths and cosmologies; Conner and Sparks’s collection of the *orishas’* queer escapades in story are put forward as evidence for the existence of fluid gender identity in African culture and, frequently, a reason for LGBT-identified practitioners to feel welcome in them. Again, a snag: does gender fluidity, specific to African cultures and those cultures’ interpretations, necessarily equate with Western notions of queerness? Conner does not explain this. Following this are several chapters of interviews with LGBT religious practitioners themselves, many of them Latino-American, Cuban, and interestingly Euro-American. (I found it intriguing how many Santeria and Lucumi practitioners were former Wiccans and Neo-Pagans. Perhaps Conner has inadvertently opened up another avenue of research here.) These “snapshots” of practitioners speaking for themselves are invaluable primary source material; I found myself questioning the inclusion of long-deceased people like Audre Lorde, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Hector Hippolyte, however. Is someone truly a willing informant if they are deceased and their stories are taken from past conversations, inferences, or supposition?

What is fascinating to note is that, queer-identified or not, Conner’s informants have a range of opinions with regard to the place of sexuality and gender identity in religious spaces, interpretations of “queered” mythologies, and the roles—or the refusal of roles—in particular traditions. Conner states in his book repeatedly that he was often “surprised” at gay and lesbian practitioners’ “phobia” of transpersons; accounts like this say more about Conner’s borderline essentialist situatedness than about the complexities of conflict around identity in queer subculture. In addition, Conner seems unable to discern stereotyping of queers even within the communities that accept them. Reading about informants finding queers welcome in the “house” because they are more spiritual than straights, or more creative, or better performers

in ritual and frequently artists smacks of the dominant culture's appreciation of queers because they are entertaining or make better interior designers. Conner certainly could have been more critical here for the benefit of his readers and for the benefit of his discipline.

Other strings are left hanging that are puzzling: I find his citation comparing Vodou possession episodes to drag ball voguing to be unconvincing, for example. Nonetheless, Conner's and Sparks's study remains very important; despite Conner's admission that this was not the book he was hoping to write, the documentation of these conflicts, disagreements, nuances, and surprises are necessary to accurately portray a cultural phenomenon rather than romanticize it. Conner and Sparks have presented a rich garment with a few wrinkles in it; further scholarship and discourse on *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions*, which is potentially very exciting, will undoubtedly help smooth things out.

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