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Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús, *Electric Santería: Racial and Sexual Assemblages of Transnational Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 304 pp., $32 (cloth), $95 (hardcover), $31.99 (ebook).

Through in-depth ethnographic interviews with practitioners in both the United States and Cuba, Beliso-De Jesús explores how Santería is tangibly experienced in the body through the concept of "copresences:" spirits (both dead and alive) who influence the everyday lives of practitioners through electric currents, television, and media; divination; and smells tied to specific spaces and places. Beliso-De Jesús's thesis is that these copresences serve as useful frameworks for understanding the experiences that Santería practitioners have with expanding travel between the United States and Cuba, particularly with respect to tourism. Indeed, her central argument is that Santería is a transnational and even translocal religion, whose practitioners shape their definitions of what they consider to be "authentic" spirituality in response to the "gaze" of the foreign tourist, or other ways of practicing the religion within different provinces in Cuba.

Beliso-De Jesús begins with a discussion about the paradoxes within academic research for ethnographer-practitioners in Santería, correctly pointing out that many scholars who study African-derived religions are themselves practitioners, thus rendering complicated and blurry the lines between anthropologists and the "subjects" whom they study. Using the concept of copresences, however, Beliso-De Jesús persuasively argues that the discipline of anthropology itself is constructed through the dead (28), and that perhaps it might be helpful to compare the way that the spirits of the dead are "present" with anthropologists in the same way that the *oricha* (the saints in the Yoruba diaspora) of Santería are mounting the bodies of practitioners. This set-up at the beginning of the text dovetails nicely with later discussions about what it means to be an ethnographer who suddenly steps out of the role of an ethnographer and "becomes" a local in Cuba. In other words, some Cubans stopped viewing Beliso-De Jesús as a *yuma* (foreigner) "on the streets of Havana" (172).

Beliso-De Jesús's central theoretical framework involves a critique of dualistic understandings of religion that split spirit and matter. She argues that these understandings affect the way that scholars talk about transnational religion, including the relationships between

religion and media. The first chapter of *Electric Santería*, entitled "Electric Oricha," describes how practitioners view the video-recording of rituals and ceremonies. There is a long history of persecution of African-derived religions in Cuba, where these traditions have been perceived to be "superstition" or "witchcraft;" indeed, these perceptions still exist, both inside Cuba and in the United States. Therefore, some practitioners refuse to be recorded. On the other hand, Beliso-De Jesús described a striking ethnographic experience: a local Cuban practitioner watched a DVD recording of a batá drumming ceremony, and the on-screen oricha Ochún traveled via electric current through the screen and mounted the head of the Cuban in possession. Beliso-De Jesús argues that through media that travels transnationally back and forth to Cuba, Santería copresences "expand [their] electrifying relationship with practitioners," like light waves spreading out through time and space (43). The text's description of these experiences is notably grounded within a deep understanding of the complexities of life on the ground in contemporary Cuba. At the time of her fieldwork, for example, DVDs were illegal in Cuba; the public display of these players, "with the plastic manufacturer stickers still on" (40), seemed particularly memorable for Beliso-De Jesús. Further analysis of how Santería practitioners interpret electrical fields helps us better understand why this may have been so memorable: the DVD videos "lend an ephemeral density to the matter of spirit copresences and their electricity,"and these "electrical fields are considered to change the surrounding space and can be measured by the power felt in the room by practitioners" (41). Interpretation of the use of videos in Santería has shifted over time, however. The practice has historically been prohibited (42), and Beliso-De Jesús seems to connect this to an historic criminalization and repression of Santería and a general caution against visibility by outsiders (45). Some practitioners now see videos, however, not just as tools for spreading information, but as "active sites of spiritual transmission" (67).

The text's analysis of media and travel expands into a larger discussion of oricha traveling back and forth with their practitioners as copresences, protecting them within the challenging context of traveling to and from Cuba. Since the 1990s, when the Cuban state began promoting tourism in order to offset the tremendous economic difficulties of the "Special Period" crisis following the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, *santurismo* (traveling to Cuba in order to become initiated into African-derived religions) has expanded significantly. Beliso-De Jesús argues throughout the book that this increase in transnational

travel raises important concerns for *santero* travelers who face economic, racial, and sexual discrimination. Although Santería and other African-inspired religious traditions have been viewed as sites for potential empowerment and agency for practitioners, they are also sites where heteronormative views of sexuality and power are reinforced. We see this play out in particular within *Electric Santería*'s analysis of the contentious debates that have arisen surrounding female initiation into Ifá, the Yoruba system of divination that has been part of a complex process of cosmopolitan diasporic travel between Nigeria and the Americas.

Through a discussion of projects surrounding national identity, Beliso-De Jesús analyzes competing definitions of religious orthodoxy. The Yoruba Cultural Association of Cuba (ACYC), which Beliso-De Jesús describes as a "sanitized nationalistic tourist space," issued a proclamation to practitioners worldwide asserting that women could not be initiated into Ifá. At the opposite end of the debate, African-style ifá practitioners are calling for a return to "authentic" rituals and practices prior to their "corruption" through slavery and colonialism (187). Within Cuba, African-style priests claimed that colonial "Cuban misogyny" (183) was behind the prohibition against women's initiation into Ifá. A Cuban iyanifá (female priest of Ifá), for example, stated that the main issue surrounding the controversy was tied to the interpretation of signs brought down through the Ifá divination system (187). While Cuban-style Ifá claims that no woman can have access to Odu (the female oricha of Ifá), African-style Ifá interprets the signs as restricting women's access to Odu to some degree, but not prohibiting it (187). Underlying these definitions of orthodoxy are heteronormative views of sexuality, where "effeminate" males, homosexuals, and practitioners who are "mounted" by the oricha are viewed in terms of an "abnormality" that can be discerned through divination (190). There are also intriguing Cuban responses to interpretations of Ifá that are described as "imperialist feminisms" brought in from the outside, which also reinforce heteropatriarchal definitions of gender and womanhood through the lens of *Cubanidad* and nationality.

Rather than viewing Santería as a romanticized space for utopian interactions, Beliso-De Jesús argues these regional interpretations of African-diasporic religions illustrate complex negotiations of power that are embedded within politics of regional and national authenticity. Afro-Cubans from the province of Matanzas, for example, illustrate these negotiations by distinguishing their forms of Santería

practice from Santería practiced elsewhere in Havana or Santiago de Cuba; they do this by arguing that Santería in Matanzas is "authentically" African in general, and "Congo" specifically. Haitian blackness, on the other hand, is perceived as a colonized "inferior" influence that "dilutes" the ability of practitioners to access the oricha (123). Beliso-De Jesús connects this politics of authenticity to a desire on the part of practitioners to "draw on situated religious power through place" (123). The strength of *Electric Santería's* analysis of these racialized and political reactions lies within the author's ability to ground description within a larger macro context tied to Cuba's socio-economic and political history. Beliso-De Jesús notes that this description of religiosity in Matanzas as "authentically" African and Cuban is actually in demand globally (123).

It is at the micro level, however, where this book stands out, as a truly engaging ethnography that moves beyond idealizations of Cuba as a nation stuck in a 1959 postcard. In the chapter titled "Scent of Empire," Beliso-De Jesús describes in vivid detail how contemporary tourism is impacting everyday life on the ground in Havana. In one poignant scene, she reveals the moment when she underwent "un-yumification" (173), where she was no longer seen as a *yuma* on the streets of Havana, but someone sharing in the everyday, on the ground experiences of local Cubans dealing with the complex reality that faces them: they are paid in local Cuban pesos, but foreigners (and Cubans who work in the tourism industry) have access to the convertible peso roughly on par with the dollar. As they say in colloquial language in Cuba, "*es complicado*" (it's complicated). Her witness to the experience of bifurcation between the transnational economy and the local economy constituted her "un-yumification" moment in the eyes of the local community.

From a theoretical perspective, *Electric Santería's* arguments were stronger in some sections than in others. The critique of dualistic understandings of transnationalism, for example, is grounded within a larger theoretical discussion in scholarship that analyzes Christian conceptualizations of divinity in the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. These discussions, which are predominantly within the first chapter and the Epilogue, could have been connected more clearly to the ethnographic case study examples throughout the text. The analysis of the doctrine of transubstantiation, which Beliso-De Jesús argues was "about changing the location of Christ's transcendental power to the Church," (217), could be strengthened by addressing theological analysis of non-institutionalized and popular forms of Catholicism,

the growing literature on the indigenization of Christian ideas and practices, or the debates surrounding "heterodoxy" vs. "orthodoxy" in global varieties of Christianity.

Beliso-De Jesús's theoretical discussions on tourism, however, were particularly strong; she clearly connected her fieldwork done on the ground within the larger context of United States-Cuba relations that contains both intimacy and hostility. The theme of copresences, and the theoretical discussions behind it, becomes particularly clear when the author is describing the complex nature of relationships in Santería. Readers learn that the author herself is embedded within these relationships; Padrino Alfredo, a famous figure from Matanzas who practiced Regla Ocha, Palo Monte, and Abakuá, met her father in 1994. At the heart of the text lies a deeper narrative about relationships, and this is perhaps what makes the book particularly memorable. *Electric Santería* will be of interest to not only scholars working in Cuban studies, but also to scholars interested in gender, sexuality, and African-derived religions, as well as the protean flux of spiritual power through mechanisms of globalization.

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