

Review of Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesus, *Electric Santería: Racial and Sexual Assemblages of Transnational Religion*, New York and Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press 2015, xiv + 282 pp., ISBN 978-0231173162

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Aisha Beliso-De Jesus' 2015 book *Electric Santería: racial and sexual assemblages of transnational religion* is a formidable book about the transnational sustaining and enriching of *regla ocha* practices, or Santería for outsiders. Santería is a Yoruba-inspired, African-imagined, diasporic religion that centers around Cuba, and more specifically, Havana, that has been formed through histories of slavery, imperialism, and colonialism. Having slowly shed its reputation from racialized witchcraft to a state-recognized religion, Santería has evolved into a transnational religion that not only uses but also mobilizes media technologies to grow. By drawing on assemblages, Beliso-De Jesus focuses not on identitarian formations of Santería, but on the 'intensities and affective economies of religious feeling through co-presences' (p. 13). Concretely, Beliso-De Jesus asks how (perceived) religious and transnational connections between uneven and differently located practitioners are envisioned and experienced: 'What sentiments, modes of feeling, perceiving, and ontological reformulations of religious practice are enabled, halted, and transformed by these connections?' (p. 24).

To answer this question, the book zooms in and out of mapping transnational intra-actions and circulations of Santería by drawing on assemblages; investigating the interplay, tensions and negotiations between different scapes at work (p. 24). The book is divided into five chapters that follow a theoretically dense introduction. Throughout the book, the author weaves her academic narrative through retellings of her own experiences with practitioners of Santería, whether gained as an ethnographer or as an insider. In Chapter 1 (*Electric Oricha*), Beliso-De Jesus investigates the role ritual video plays in expanding Santería sensibilities through her concept of 'co-presences': 'the sensing of a multiplicity of being (and beings joined together) that are felt on the body, engaged with spiritually, experienced through television screens and divination, and expressed in diasporic assemblages' (p. 9). In this chapter Beliso-De Jesus argues that, despite the initial dismay to the use of technology in religious

practice, videoscapes have helped in the growth of Santería fluidity due to its potential to move electric spiritual currents through space and time.

Chapter 2 (*Transnational Caminos*) shifts the attention from sensations aroused by travelling recordings that are played out on local bodies, to the physical transnational journeys of practitioners. Here, Beliso-De Jesus uses the concept of *caminos*, mythical pathways and political roads of Santería, to explore the history and development of transnational travel through its political, legal, and economical dimensions. Chapter 3 (*Pacts with Darkness*) ties together the travels of Santería practitioners to Cuba with contestations about race, authenticity and landscapes through an exploration between two places, Matanzas and Havana. Beliso-De Jesus then develops a particularly interesting investigation of smellscape as a way of mapping the Self and (foreign) Other in terms of race, nationality and sexuality to perform belonging in Chapter 4 (*Scent of Empire*). In her last chapter (*Contaminating Femininities*), Beliso-De Jesus goes forward with the notion of contamination to study negotiations of power, authenticity and authority through the global controversy around female initiations. By highlighting what she herself calls the 'fluidity of living' in each chapter, Beliso-De Jesus concludes with a suggestion to rethink a 'nontranscendental transnationalism' based on Santería ontologies (p. 219).

A personal highlight of the book is the author's continuous critical engagement and reformulation of the ontologies she needs to make her argument and situate her research. Or alternatively: the methodological choices act simultaneously as methodological interventions to the discourses her work is framed by. Beliso-De Jesus openly discusses her positionality, situatedness and field access on multiple occasions. While identifying as an anthropologist born and raised in the United States, she also describes and ponders her position as a godchild of Padre Alfredo who grew up in a household that practiced *regla ocha*. Her ability to fit in and pass as native in different ways and situations allowed her to gain access to those she encountered, which makes for an interesting read that simultaneously reflects the politics of gaining knowledge.

The author also explicitly upholds to 'methodologically respect Santería's protection of ritual spaces by focusing on moments that noninitiated people would be allowed to access' (p. 24). This ethical consideration shows not only a methodological choice on the author's part, but also reconfigures how we, as scholars of religion, should position ourselves in terms of access and audacity. Again, the double layer of making methodological decisions serves at once as methodological interventions. Another interesting point is Beliso-De Jesus' consideration of the problematic situatedness of the concepts 'mediation', 'transcendence' and 'transubstantiation', and their threat of imperializing universalism (p. 72–73). Each of these terms are basked in Christian and imperialist ontologies which do enable the tools needed to further her argument. Beliso-De Jesus' solution to the well-elaborated problematic implications of these concepts is the use of entanglements, which thus holds another methodological intervention.

Furthermore, the author questions methodological paradigms around objectivity, neutrality and the sustainment of the Other-as-object. By drawing out her relation to different theoretical discourses (religious studies, gender studies, material studies and so forth), Beliso-De Jesus not only situates and accommodates her argument very well, she also connects important questions of religious ontologies to questions of epistemologies in the study of religion.

Concluding, I argue that *Electric Santería* is a much-needed innovative interdisciplinary work for scholars of different disciplines. Beliso-De Jesus concludes the book with her memory of the last moments of Padre Alfredo's life and it is in the fabric of their encounters that the theoretic insights are woven. At once affective, inspiring and educative, *Electric Santería* makes a great contribution to the shift and reappreciation of the body, and the experiences it produces, as situated in transnational cultures and the designations those cultures throw onto the body. Simultaneously however, as Beliso-De Jesus shows, there is a curious tension between the designations thrown upon the body by hierarchies of signification (i.e. racialization) on the one hand, and the cosmologies and ontologies practitioners find themselves in and through. The epistemological choices Beliso-De Jesus makes to facilitate her ontological arguments raise critical questions for reflecting on one's own practices of doing research on religion in terms of discourse, ontologies, interdisciplinarity and accountability. In addition to the rich insights, arguments and experiences Beliso-De Jesus wove into her narrative, the book also serves as a methodological treasure that, in its kicking against, draws out new potentials for the study of religion.