

**BOOK REVIEW ESSAY**

# Embodying Blackness in Latin American Religion

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This essay reviews the following works:

**Electric Santería: Racial and Sexual Assemblages of Transnational Religion.** By Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. Pp. ix + 271. \$30.00 paperback. ISBN: 9780231173179.

**Embracing Protestantism: Black Identities in the Atlantic World.** By John W. Catron. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2016. Pp. ix + 299. \$74.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9780813061634.

**Black Saint of the Americas: The Life and Afterlife of Martín de Porres.** By Celia Cussen. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. xi + 285. \$90.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781107034372.

**Afro-Cuban Religious Arts: Popular Expressions of Cultural Inheritance in Espiritismo and Santería.** By Kristine Juncker. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014. Pp. xi + 169. \$74.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9780813049700.

**The Black Christ of Esquipulas: Religion and Identity in Guatemala.** By Douglass Sullivan-González. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016. Pp. viii + 199. \$55.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780803268432.

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The works under review provide a cross-disciplinary perspective on the breadth of contemporary studies of the Afro-Latin American religious experience as it has played out in the colonial and postcolonial history of the Americas. This experience is centered on the power, possibility, and problematics embodied in blackness—people, practices, and artifacts—as these have been manifested in the lives of African-descent populations in South America (Cussen), Mesoamerica (Sullivan-González), and the Caribbean (Catron, Beliso-De Jesús, and Juncker). While focusing squarely on race and blackness as a marker of identity, the works show how tensions surrounding African heritage have simultaneously served as resources for confronting the legacy of slavery and shaping selfhood in the ongoing quest for social and political space in multicultural Spanish and Luso-America through five centuries. Fluidity and movement (of people and the defining power of black identity) are crucial in making sense of the African diasporic experience, and religion provides a compelling and often neglected lens for confronting readers with blackness as a determinant and multivalent signifier of personhood, while inviting reflection on the pluralism of worldviews present in the unfolding trajectory of Afro-Latin American religiosity.

John W. Catron's *Embracing Protestantism* sets out to re-center the discussion of the advent of Protestantism in the broader Atlantic world, wherein the flow of peoples and goods emanated from Africa and spread to the West Indies, North America, and Europe—sometimes even returning to Africa. Although it seems an odd place to begin since the Latin American region has long been synonymous with a perceived Catholic monopoly in the religious sphere, the work shows an interchange of ideas in which the “international Protestant evangelical religious movement” (2) shapes both resistance to and accommodation of slavery. The Caribbean emphasis reveals how the movement of people to and from the islands in response to the slave trade shaped life in the island region and throughout the coast of North America. Nevertheless, the initial scene in the work takes place in Freetown, Sierra Leone, and features the figure of Henry Beverhout, whose trajectory as a free person of color (mixed race) from St. Croix took him to Charleston, South Carolina, in the

1770s and to New Brunswick as a loyalist in the last year of the American Revolution before returning to Africa, where he immediately begins to question the discriminatory practices of the justice system and land distribution policies of the British colonizers (1–3).

Underlying this detailed historical narrative, Catron posits a process of identity formation that shifts from African to African American circumscribed in part by the creation of a “circum-Atlantic Afro-Christian culture” (2). This Afro-Christian culture is the fruit of African engagement with Methodists, Moravians, Baptists, and other representatives of Euro-Atlantic culture who also introduced some nascent abolitionist thought to those under their tutelage. One goal of the work is to accentuate “the role of Afro-Atlantic peoples in the eighteenth century’s international revival movement” (13), and the range of players is diverse—the different national and cultural contexts in Africa, Europe, and the Americas (including Nova Scotia, which serves as the jumping-off point for the Sierra Leone colony), various religious institutions, and a host of individuals who participated in the events narrated.

Methodologically, Catron’s work focuses largely on the archives of the Moravian Church in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, particularly documents related to the role of Moravian missionary activity in the Caribbean and the island of Antigua, which he considers to be “the center of Afro-Caribbean Protestantism” (56). In the eighteenth century, the island’s Protestant population of Moravians and Methodists (among all racial groups) widely outstripped their number in far more populous Jamaica. The reasons were complex—and not unrelated to the sugarcane-based slave economy “and the violence on which it rested,” which “contributed to the general atmosphere of crisis and despair that sometimes accompanies large-scale religious conversions” (57). Although the first Protestant missionary had gone to Antigua in 1756 (70), the relatively flat topography of the island, together with droughts, hurricanes, and a British embargo of food supplies during the American Revolution, created a situation of “natural and human-caused environmental catastrophe” (59). For Catron, this disaster opened the door to missionization in the early 1770s both for reasons of spiritual solace in the light of the silence of the older African gods and because some assistance in terms of physical aid might be forthcoming from the missionary organizations. So tied to slavery on one hand, Christianity nevertheless also provided a space wherein “the greater awareness of and contact with Atlantic-world Protestantism empowered many Afro-Caribbean residents to question slavery’s legitimacy as well as whites’ leadership position as arbiters of cultural and social affairs” (94).

The social organization of the German Moravian community in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, plays a large role in the narrative. Founded in 1741, the community was organized on a communal basis that inculcated Christian religious values in the faithful while allowing those who joined the community (including many people of African descent from the Caribbean) to experience “a program that went beyond other evangelicals’ ideals of spiritual equality before God to include true equality of condition” (116). Though it may be a bit overstated, the communal living conditions are said to show some affinity with Igbo lifeways in Africa, and Moravian views of slavery (although the church did continue to hold slaves) are presented as less harsh than others during the same period. Education, for example, was designed “to bring church members closer to God” (121), and the Great Awakening in the 1730s and 1740s provided a space wherein “the disenfranchised—women, blacks, Native Americans, and the poor—suddenly gained the power to preach not only to each other but to white men as well.”

It was in the crucible of slavery and the American Revolution where abolitionist ideas coalesced with religious ideas from this period through the end of the century to foment movement in the Atlantic world. At least some people of African descent could pursue dreams of freedom and establish identities as Afro-Atlantic Christians when they dispersed first from the Caribbean and later from ports such as Charleston, Savannah, and New York at the end of the Revolution. This exodus of leadership stifled the development of African American Christianity, but it contributed to a diaspora of leadership—black leadership—throughout the Atlantic world, including the West Indies (199–201), coastal North America, and, ultimately, back to Africa, where “an integral part of the Sierra Leone project was bringing Atlantic African Christianity to the land of their ancestors” (222). This on the continent with the largest number of Christians today, a pluralism coinciding with the sea change in the Latin American religious landscape indexed by Protestant or evangelical growth since the 1960s.<sup>1</sup>

In Latin American Catholicism, black identity and the meaning of blackness can be seen in religious iconography, popular veneration of the saints, and life narratives of people of African descent in the Americas. Douglass Sullivan-González and Celia Cussen deal with concerns that are ostensibly more traditional in

<sup>1</sup> On the changing demographics in world Christianity see Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Pew Research Center, “The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010–2050,” April 2, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>.

studies of the religious imaginary of Latin America. The scale of the analysis (both geographically and chronologically) demonstrates a persistent preoccupation with sainthood and pilgrimage in the study of Latin American religiosity.

Cussen's *Black Saint of the Americas* takes the life of San Martín de Porres (1579–1639),<sup>2</sup> mulatto healing brother of the Dominican order and the convent of El Rosario in Lima, to show both the limited mobility and power embedded in black and mixed-race identity in colonial Lima. Martín was a sought-after barber, nurse, and healer (*sanador*), the bastard son (*hijo natural*) of a low-level Spanish merchant and a manumitted woman of African descent from Panama—one of five people from the colonial period who called Lima home and achieved canonization. Set within the urban environment of Lima and the intellectual context of Roman Catholic responses to the Reformation (6), the work interrogates the cult of saints and the way in which Creoles in Peru sought “to prove to the Spanish Crown and lay Europeans their worth as members of the universal Catholic community” (8). Devotion to popular religious figures validated the colonial religious experience itself as well as the identities of those whose veneration persisted in calls for their beatification over time. Martín's bones were exhumed in 1664, he was beatified in 1837, and Cussen records how Afro-Peruvians and, ultimately, African Americans pushed his case for canonization through to its conclusion in 1962, a process that lasts nearly 325 years.

In seeking to balance “faith-propelled testimonies with a variety of notarial documents concerning [Martín's] life, sources that often corroborate the hagiographic record and occasionally correct it” (10), Cussen notes both the saint's circumscribed life opportunities as a person of color and his ability to connect with patrons because of his power to heal, which was partially attributable to his African roots (63) and role as an intercessor. He struggles throughout his life with social position even as he becomes known for his humility (seen in references to himself as a “mulatto dog,” p. 113), sacrifice and piety (seen in references to his self-flagellation, pp. 125–127), as well for as the compassion and healing prowess he demonstrates to *limeños* from all walks of life. Cussen provides nuanced descriptions of popular religious devotion (cults of the saints, relics, mysticism) in colonial Lima. As the hagiographies of Martín's life grow in number, so do the miracles attached to relics associated with his body and the legends about his kindness. Among the powerful relics is dirt from his grave (148), and both his kindness and ability to control nature can be seen in the story of how he once induced litters of kittens and puppies to share food from the same plate with a mouse in the convent (118). Saint making is grounded in the accounts of those who have witnessed the power of sacred intervention into worldly affairs, and Cussen shows in two chapters how Martín's reputation is popularized in art and artifacts from the colonial and post-independence periods. The book's conclusion begins with a vignette of a Mass in Manhattan where the priest constructs Martín's sainthood as a response to Christian racists—a stance that shows how the saint “had taken on an international dimension” (204). This patron of social, and even racial, justice evokes a vision of “social harmony” at the scale of global Catholicism while simultaneously transcending the boundaries of his native Peru—as this mulatto saint was said to have done in life by mystically appearing to oppressed believers on other continents without ever leaving El Rosario (121–125).

In *The Black Christ of Esquipulas*, Sullivan-González recounts how an image in a small, remote indigenous community in the captaincy general of Guatemala becomes a major pilgrimage site in Central America and symbol of faith for nonelite (indigenous, mulatto, and mestizo) Guatemalans, even as the color of the image changes over the centuries and references to the *señor crucificado de Esquipulas* as the *cristo negro* come to emphasize the image's blackness by the end of the twentieth century. Carved in Antigua, Guatemala, by a Portuguese immigrant in 1594 and transferred to Esquipulas in 1595 (2), a restoration analysis of the image completed in the 1990s attributes the darkness of the image not to the color of the balsam wood from which it was created but to impurities based on candle smoke and human touch through the centuries (156–157).

The story of the Black Christ is embedded in the vicissitudes of ethnicity and race in Guatemalan history, and Sullivan-González uses archival evidence, popular devotional materials such as novenas, and information from two personal visits to the shrine to demonstrate how the meaning embodied in the image (and its blackness) responds to shifting social and political agendas. He recounts how the concepts of *casta* and *limpieza de sangre* (“blood purity”) imbricate lineage purity by assuring that one's religious heritage is not tainted by Moorish or Jewish heritage—or by Amerindian beliefs and practices (28–29). Eastern Guatemala, where the shrine is located, was known historically as a place of habitation not only by native peoples (primarily Maya), who venerated a black deity in the past and who some contend gave an impetus to the power of the black Christ, but also by mulattos and mestizos or ladinos, a Guatemalan category that encompasses mulattos and other nonwhite racial categories that generally manifested Spanish cultural

<sup>2</sup> Cussen attributes the name “Porres” to a misspelling of “Porras” that comes from “an error in transcription at the Vatican” (20).

characteristics but who were not native (34–36). Blackness itself is somewhat elided in this categorization, but tensions surrounding ethnic and racial identity persist in Guatemalan society, and the shifting meaning of the Lord of Esquipulas for his devotees underlies the work.

For much of the colonial period, the image is known for its healing powers, and its color becomes both a divisive and unifying force at critical moments in Guatemalan history. In the Liberal-Conservative conflicts of the post-independence period, the Christ of Esquipulas becomes a symbol of the darker-skinned native and mulatto population at the very moment that citizenship agendas, particularly in its Liberal formulation, are being touted as the wellspring of national identity. Politically, this is reflected in the rise of Conservative caudillo Rafael Carrera, himself of mixed ancestry, who dominates much of the political scene from 1839 to 1865 (10, 85–93). Theologically, the dark color becomes problematic, and the image is somewhat whitewashed in a novena from the period, especially when compared with earlier exemplars that related the darkness to the believer's sin, as well from the flow of blood during Jesus's suffering on the cross (94–98). In Sullivan-González's words, "the changing color became a stumbling block for those who were attempting to create a notion of citizenship while disenfranchising those of darker hues" (158).

Not until the twentieth century does the Crucified Christ finally become the Black Christ of the pilgrim faithful. This happens in the context of attempts early in the century to rehabilitate the image as a symbol of healing and religious significance (without mentioning its blackness), and in the face of continuing criticism on the part of secularists and Protestants who saw it as idolatrous and, of course, "black" within the "base instincts so well ensconced within the scientific racism of the day" (123). By the 1930s, the image seemed to recoup its "multiclass and multiethnic character" among the faithful (134), and this provided space for the nationalization and politicization of the image during the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary moments at midcentury, when *el Señor* is co-opted in the overthrow of Guatemala's October Revolution in 1954 (151), following a national pilgrimage of a replica instigated by the anticommunist activities of Archbishop Mariano Rossell y Arellano in the prior year (146–150). Later in the century, the symbolism of the shrine is magnified when Esquipulas becomes the site of peace talks to quell the revolutionary violence that engulfed Central America in the 1980s (155). Meanwhile, the intersections between popular devotion and the daily living out of faith commitments continued in discussions surrounding the impact of liberation theology and, especially, regarding Pentecostal influences on Catholicism that persist into the present (154).

Today, the veneration of the Black Christ of Esquipulas is a Mesoamerican phenomenon that stretches from Chimayo, New Mexico, to Panama (and beyond).<sup>3</sup> The scale of this veneration gives the image a transnational cache that transcends its geographic location. Although the focus on ethnicity and race might seem like well-plowed ground, the study highlights intersections between religion and religious identity that come to life in social and political movements such as the Movimiento Maya in Guatemala, Evo Morales's Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) in Bolivia, or the Movimento Negro in Brazil. The pilgrimage to Esquipulas may well be the second largest in North America, after Mexico's Virgin of Guadalupe, the *virgen morena*, and the conclusion that the color of the Christ becomes "multivalent in the passionate pages of history" (160) is a thoughtful, if incomplete, reminder of how in symbol and ritual the faithful develop religious imaginaries in which the power of the sacred reflects their own identity and desires.

Kristine Juncker's *Afro-Cuban Religious Arts* focuses on the generational history of four women joined in fictive kinship relationships defined by Santería (La Regla de Ocha) initiation ceremonies. The work emphasizes networks of Afro-Caribbean religious practice extending from Puerto Rico and Cuba and including the Caribbean diaspora community in New York. Juncker's intent is to affirm the contribution that the four women have made to "Atlantic modernity" and the role that this "particular religious family" played in "the visual arts within the larger Afro-Caribbean religious movement" (4). Juncker combines the analysis of material culture in art and artifacts (altars, painting, ritual objects, photographs) with a gendered analysis to underscore the way Afro-Caribbean traditions not only embraced these women, who provided leadership in household temples for the initiation of hundreds of initiates throughout the twentieth century, but also thrived because of them.

Fictive kinship in this work is traced from Havana through Tiburcia Sotolongo y Ugarte (1861–1938), who was born on a slave plantation and moved to Havana where she was initiated into La Regla in 1899 by her godmother, a West African from a neighboring plantation.<sup>4</sup> Tiburcia incorporated practices from Catholicism, Spiritism, and La Regla, and an extended discussion emphasizes the layout of her house in

<sup>3</sup> See William V. Davidson, *Los cristos negros de Centroamérica: El Señor de Esquipulas y otros, con énfasis en Honduras y Nicaragua* (Managua: Fundación Uno, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> The use of the first names of the women in this essay follows the practice of the author.

Havana that even today preserves images of Cuba's patron saint, La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, in a public area of the living room, various figures related to La Regla in a private *bovedá* (altar) in the bathroom near her bedroom, and a male warrior figure of the guardian orisha Eleguá behind the entry door.

The work seeks to destabilize the canon regarding cultural hybridity and religious pluralism, approaches that seem to discount women actors and fail to recognize the interplay between actual religious practices (39–40). Juncker clarifies at the outset that terms like “creolization” and “transculturation,” both of which have long histories in Caribbean studies, imply “an exchange *between* cultures, occurring in various places at varying times and resulting in a new cultural dynamic” (11, original italic). In the spatial layout of the house, the “nested altars” (67) often exist in tension with each other—a reflection of how practitioners adhere more closely to one or another of the different traditions manifest in the artifacts.

Hortensia Ferrer (1906–1992) was adopted by Tiburcia, initiated in 1912, and inherited the house in 1938. Breaking with tradition at the time, Hortensia allowed her temporary altars related to Espiritismo to be photographed with the intent that “the photographs *should* prompt hours of discussion among audiences and repeat visitors to their household-temple” (79, original italic). This was a kind of public education that Juncker interprets as an invitation to engage with the range of Afro-Cuban religious traditions that was augmented by “public ceremonies of Espiritismo” (82), ceremonies wherein “audiences are encouraged to listen to, dance to, and sing along to music from other religions in order to improve mediumship and attract the presence of spirits of the dead from different backgrounds” (83). Juncker demonstrates the importance of adaptation and the continuity within her religious family, particularly with the Virgin of Caridad, who had also been central to Tiburcia's practices. Of note is the adaptation of technology, including the use of lighting in altar construction, as well as the construal of Caridad as a *mulata* in order to connect with “those who seek their black religious ancestry” (80), thus making Espiritismo more accessible for younger Cubans during the 1940s and 1950s (84). African references in her altars add another interpretive dimension because of their association with Pan-African sensibilities and resistance to the Batista regime. Although Hortensia did not use the term, the “syncretic references” to a broad range of cultural influences in Cuba had “the goal of creating stronger communities for black Cubans” (89).

In turn, Hortensia “crowned” Iluminada Sierra Ortiz (ca. 1918–1981) as an *espiritista* and initiated her into La Regla de Ocha. Iluminada's life journey took her from Mayagüez, Puerto Rico, to Havana, and eventually to Spanish Harlem in 1957, where she, along with Carmen Oramas Caballero (b. 1933), arrived in New York among many others who migrated “under the duress of the Caribbean political and economic policies” (100) near the time of the Cuban Revolution. She initiated Carmen into La Regla in the later 1960s, and their relationship is examined in the frame of the dearth of women's stories included in the history of the Americas, as well as in view of how their “altar work” contributed to interpreting reality even as their mediumship set parameters for the future practice of Afro-Caribbean religion (96–97).

Carmen established her Centro de la Fe Samaritana—named after the biblical Samaritan woman at the well (John 4.4–42) and identified with the parable of the good Samaritan—in Spanish Harlem in 1956, and Juncker draws attention to the diverse “Afro-Caribbean clientele” who interacted in the Centro over five decades (99). Of particular interest is Juncker's discussion of Carmen's spirit-doll that shows how interpretation of religious artifacts requires an interaction “with ideas of women in the past” (103) and, by extension, allows for complex meaning making in the present. The doll represents Francisca, an ancestral spirit believed to be Haitian but who had perhaps left Haiti to go to a Spanish-speaking country in the upheavals of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as Haitian slaves fought for independence. Adorned with a headscarf that keeps her spirit in the doll, the figure embodies both personal and ritual connections for the women who came to the Centro before Carmen moved it back to her house under the pressure of family obligations in the 1960s. Francisca's colorful dress, rosary beads, and seed necklace link her loosely to Christianity but more directly to Carmen's *oricha* (orisha) Oyá and other Santería practices tied to La Regla de Ocha, or even Vodou, again showing pluralistic knowledges (and power) embodied in the religious arts under consideration (105–107). The uncertain history of this ancestor resonates in the mundane lives of Carmen, Iluminada, and others who have made a connection with this woman from the past, who had also “survived a traumatic history [in plantation fields] to become a domestic worker” (110).<sup>5</sup>

Ritual objects in La Regla de Ocha are often destroyed at the time of death of *santeras* or *santeros*, although this is less common in Espiritismo (117–118). Those analyzed in *Afro-Cuban Religious Arts* maintain their power in part because memories (and meaning) are created in the wake of forgetting. The objects continue

<sup>5</sup> Juncker includes twenty-eight color plates of the popular art analyzed in the work, in addition to numerous photographs of other material artifacts and layouts of Tiburcia's house in Havana.

to influence devotees of the Afro-Caribbean religious traditions in subsequent generations—and this is true in the interaction with mass-produced objects related to the traditions or in the more finely crafted work that survives. Juncker points to the work of Paul Gilroy and Rita Felski and their use of the “popular sublime” to inform the notion that “the sublime emerges as a search for dramatic change through the collection of imagery or literary devices” (121). Religious art serves as an impetus for contemporary reflection on the diasporic experience even as it embodies the continuing creation of objects, memories, and identities in the context of the Afro-Atlantic experience.

Memory, identity, and religious art are constructed, and as altars are put together for specific purposes, in Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús's *Electric Santería* the contemporary experience and practices of Santería emerge as assemblages. Yoruba-inspired Santería moves, like an electric current, in waves of *corrientes espirituales* (41), both in the lives of transnational “travelers” who go to Cuba to engage in the practice of Regla de Ocha and others who experience the sensorial energy of copresences through video presentations of Santería ritual activity (40–43). These copresences include “spirits of the dead and oricha” (2) as well as “priests, video technology, and religious travelers that operate in contemporary transnational networks as active spiritual agents” (xiii). Beliso-De Jesús grew up with Regla de Ocha in the United States, and her father is a priest in the tradition. Continuing the theme of fictive kinship within Afro-Caribbean religion, Beliso-De Jesús frames her work on the person of her Santería *padrino* (godfather), “Padrino Alfredo” Calvo Cano, who is credited with initiating more than more than seven hundred people into Santería during a nearly sixty-six-year career as a priest (xii). Rituals surrounding his funeral celebration recounted in the book's epilogue “highlight the transnational *caminos*, media technologies and electric copresences” (214) on which the work is centered.

Methodologically, Beliso-De Jesús hews to an ethnographic approach emphasizing the connections between people who live in different places yet share religious sensibilities related to Santería practices. Using interviews, intense participant observation of Santería ritual activities, and viewings of (sometimes controversial) recordings of rituals, she analyzes the connections rather than the intimate religious spaces of Santería practice, which might violate the secretive nature of rituals and initiation rites (24). Movement (temporal and kinesthetic) intersects with “racialized ontologies” (7) and connects her work to the others while inviting reflection upon the sweep of Afro-Latin American religious practice in dense theoretical terms. These terms invite consideration of how even smells associated with Santería and *santourismo* (tourism associated with diasporic religions) (17) mark the “scent of empire” (Chapter 4). Empire cannot be separated from the historical processes of colonialism that fostered the development of Cuban Santería and interpenetrate nationalist identities and religious authority in the context of globalization. Although the material archive doesn't disappear—*orisha* inhabit, and move in, stones and shells (2); animals are still sacrificed; and the colors of bracelets and necklaces index the branch of Santería into which one is initiated—materiality is embedded in the assemblage of ritual work where *orisha* and other copresences are encountered in actual and virtual space.

From the perspectives of anthropology and religious studies, Beliso-De Jesús seeks to destabilize understandings of the nature of being itself by decentering the human and accounting for other ways of knowing that come from non-Western cultures. This is not “ontological anthropology” (13), however, and she attends to the affective and destabilizing dimensions of power to make sense of how “ontological questions of presence must be situated with the practices we explore” (32). People enter the space of Santería and emerge as *lukumí*, practitioners, upon their initiation (39). Increasingly, such transformations are documented and engaged in video recordings and other “technorituals,” including divination via telephone or online, which, like *batá* drumming, might be understood a kind of “long-distance messaging” that “extends the bodily capacities of *orichas* and other copresences, collapsing, time, space, and place” (62). Santería, then, travels from (and often returns to) the racialized and Africanized landscape of Matanzas, “the city of slaughters” (118–119), or from Havana to sites of practice in New York, Miami, San Francisco, or Los Angeles. Blackness and perspectives on gender and sexual orientation are examined within different loci of practice or “geontologies” (109) that destabilize notions of authenticity or purity.

Beliso-De Jesús works to move beyond apprehensions of the sacred that turn on the “binary” between practice and mediation (32), or Christian theological orthodoxy such as transubstantiation (217–218). In this phenomenological turn, she presents Santería as a “nontranscendental transnationalism” in which even “hierarchies of animism” are challenged (218) and the “*oricha* have ‘gone global’” (219). This is consistent with her argument that “focusing on more unifying aspects of diaspora centered on identity inadvertently forecloses notions of subversion, opposition, and agency” (7). Transnational movement and the forces of globalization become the fields where the transformative power of religion works to engage agency at different scales of experience.

Concern with personal meaning typically associated with apprehensions of the sacred is only lightly addressed in these works; instead, we see assemblages of religion(s) experienced in different modes in the Afro-Latin American world by those whose African ancestry links them with past generations and contemporary struggles. In studying religion and the impact of religion in the lives of the faithful, Sullivan-González rightly notes that the task is to “walk respectfully and somewhat distantly with the world of faith, and to understand the historical origins of the stories and narratives and how they have changed over time” (41). Others would want to include more directly the way in which practices continue to unfold in the moment, and these works do show how religion in Latin America has been transformational in the lives of those who have lived and tried to come to terms with violent “conquest” and middle passages, colonialisms that shape racial and ethnic hierarchies, and representatives of nation-states seeking to control the meaning imputed to religious symbols and practice within particular boundaries. In the contemporary world of sometimes perverse globalizations, attending to the valences of black identity—and embodiments of blackness itself—becomes revelatory for the lives of those who link their destinies to traditions, images, narratives, and movements that are larger than the individual and serve as knowledge bases for meaning making and solidarity.

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