Santería Copresence and the Making of African Diaspora Bodies

By Aisha Beliso-De Jesús

Abstract

In Santería priesthoods, practitioners are "made" into African diaspora bodies in what is called "making santo." These embodied epistemologies reveal not only the complex historical practices that have emerged through processes of racialization and enslavement but also how a body logic resituates the formations of diasporic feeling and sensing. I argue that practitioners’ everyday acts redefine the capacities of and for action as part of a spiritual habitus. The various rituals, works, and spiritual acts in Santería thus culminate in a different form of bodily engagement with the world, operating in racial space. This article examines Santería body logics, showing how what I call copresences are activated in somatic racial ontologies. I suggest that these diasporic sensings resituate anthropological universalisms, arguing for a disruption in the debate between mediation and practice in the anthropology of religion. Rather than assuming notions of presence, copresence allows for an intervention that hails Santería’s embodied epistemology as a form of diasporic sensing.

Keywords

race; Santería; habitus; embodiment; religion; Cuba; United States

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The copresence at the heart of her ethnographic study is eminent santero Alfredo Calvo. The Black Migrant Athlete: Media, Race, and the Diaspora in Sports By Munene Franjo Mwanki University of Nebraska Press, 2017. Santería is an African-inspired, Cuban diaspora religion long stigmatized as witchcraft and often dismissed as superstition, yet its spirit- and possession-based practices are rapidly winning adherents across the world. Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús introduces the term “copresence” to capture the current transnational experience of Santería, in which racialized and gendered spirits, deities, priests, and religious travelers remake local, national, and political boundaries and reconfigure notions of technology and transnationalism. Aisha Beliso-De Jesus allows us to see the densely intertwined modes of becoming that include the racing, sexing, and engendering of bodies. - John L. Jackson Jr., author of Thin Description: Ethnography and the African Hebrew Israelites.