Diana Espírito Santo

Developing the Dead: Mediumship and Selfhood in Cuban Espiritismo. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015. xvii + 320 pp. (Cloth US\$ 74.95)

Based on extensive fieldwork among religious practitioners and their clients in Havana, *Developing the Dead* makes a compelling claim that Cuban Espiritismo is Afro-Cuban in its materiality and thought, and that it participates in “the cosmo-politics of the wider spiritual spheres” in Cuban society (p. 38). Like Aisha Beliso-De Jesús’s *Electric Santería* (2015) and Elizabeth Pérez’s *Religion in the Kitchen* (2016), it argues for studying the ontology of Afro-Cuban religiosity within an ethnographic framework.

As Diana Espírito Santo rightly suggests, “paying homage to the dead in Afro-Cuban religion is not just a religious obligation but a way to constructing selves” (p. 38). Thus, developing the dead is constitutive of most Afro-Cuban religious practice insofar as any spiritual undertaking should be initiated by informing and consulting the dead. Espiritismo practitioners develop new forms of subjectivity in which spirits are an integral part of the living self. This relationship is presented as a fluid, ongoing process of ontogeny captured in the spiritual cord, a personalized collectivity of guiding spirits at the heart of the conceptual organization of the Afro-Cuban religious self. Such a fluid process has become “a part and parcel of new forms of subjectivity ... that crosscut myriad personal, institutional, familial, state-sponsored, and private spheres” in various aspects of Cuban society (p. 29). Expanding the borders of the self through an affective interaction with multiple spirits (*muertos*) opens up new avenues to understand the relationship between the living and the dead in the Cuban religious imaginary.

The first of the book’s five chapters sets out the theoretical and ethnographic context. Chapters 2 and 3 present a detailed account of contemporary Cuban Espiritismo, both its points of similarity and its departure from similar forms of religious practices such as Palo Monte and Santería as well as its connections to the politics, history, and daily life of its practitioners in Havana. Through the paths of Espírito Santos and her informants within the complex faces of the Cuban spiritual worlds, we are exposed to the way Santería, Palo Monte, and Espiritismo are complementary rather than antagonistic forms of worship through their harnessing of the dead as a space of religious knowledge and renewal. Espiritismo is not just one more option among them; rather it is a “connective tissue that enables transits and associations between practice domains, cosmologies, and ritualities” (p. 39).

Chapters 4 and 5 deal with four important concepts in Espiritismo practice that are integral to both Cuban Espiritismo forms of worship in general, and

specifically to its development of the dead: encounter, selfhood, multiplicity, and development. Encounters take on different forms between the author and her informants and between *espiritistas* and *muertos*. Throughout, questions of power and knowledge, and the spiritual status of the participants produce complex configurations of relations mirroring the relationships between the living and the dead. What we observe in these encounters is an ontological fluidity between the varieties of spiritual beings that interact with *espiritistas* in daily life. As work on Cuban spirits and Espiritismo by Stephan Palmié and Arcadio Díaz-Quinones suggests, the kinds of ontological negotiations that Espíritu Santo disentangles are also embedded in the historical dilemmas that these spirits manifest: race, colonialism, and competing versions of modernity. (See the essays by Palmié in Ruy Blanes & Diana Espíritu Santo [eds.], *The Social life of Spirits*, 2014 and Díaz-Quinones in *Lua Nova: Revista de Cultura e Política*, 2011.)

Describing mediums' trajectories and careers as *espiritistas* shows how one needs to learn modes of mediumistic attentiveness in order to discern relevant information about spirits in their own body and mind. According to Espíritu Santo, mediumship is the path through which knowledge of the spiritual world is apprehended and this is manifested through sensory experiences such as dreams, premonitions, and visions, as well as through material things such as effigies, rites, rituals, and everyday practices in which the self is put into motion by other entities, bringing forth "an itinerary of personal trans-historicity that subjects the self to the dissolution of its previous two-dimensionality and its reconstruction through a multiplicity of bits" (p. 8).

Developing the Dead offers fresh perspectives on the entanglement of Cuban Espiritismo with circum-Atlantic encounters and exchanges in shaping ritual acts associated with birth, death, healing, and protection. These rites of passage are embodied in a world in progress where humans and spirits make each other within a self-generative system realized through materiality and ritual practice. The book raises an exciting theoretical point about the reconceptualization of personhood, self, gender, and affect in the formation of religious identity, and will be an invaluable reference for scholars working in Atlantic studies, Religious studies, Latina/o studies, Anthropology of Religion, Caribbean studies, and African Diaspora studies.

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