Solimar Otero, *Archives of Conjure: Stories of the Dead in Afrolatinx Cultures*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. xv + 248 pp. (Paper US\$30.00)

Solimar Otero's latest book is not an easy one to read, even for scholars of Cuba and Brazil like myself. It is dense, weaves ethnography with literary and queer theory, and proposes novel terms that echo with postcolonial, *post-scholarship* scholarship. But the term "archives of conjure" itself evokes something that all scholars who have worked in the Afro-Latin world will at once recognize: that materiality matters, be it an archive, or an etching, or written transcripts of spiritual ceremonies, or forgotten field notes, or an inspired beaded or sewn piece of art. This is nothing new. The dead, the deities, *are* active agents in the world. They cannot possibly be reduced to mental representations, or even figments of social or historical memory. They exist as potent forces that impel and co-create material and human realities, futurities; they are not the past. But Otero produces something more, in my opinion, than an ethnography of Cuban religious aesthetics. The value of this book is in pointing out what lies at the margins, out of the official transcripts, ... what is only alluded to, what is *not* classifiable, what is only gleaned or available through gossip, or dreams, ... what sits outside the norm of scholarship with its claims to knowledge. This is the space of the "waters," Yemayá, Ochún, the two deities associated with salt and sweet water respectively, as well as Cuban Mama Chola and other figures "dangerous to the establishment and continuation of patriarchal, heteronormative, and dyadic racial orders" (p. 109). In this "space outside space," so to speak, Otero intimately explores the ways and fruits of flows. This is not a comfortable fluidity—conceptually, socially, historically—and it is not meant to be. It implies all manner of awkward, even heretical transgressions; it implies embracing forbidden, and to some, disdained, spaces, entities, emotions, and characteristics. This is the space where Otero excels.

The book is divided into four chapters, plus an introduction and conclusion. The first chapter, "Residual Transcriptions," explores the temporalities of materialities, stitching connections between spheres of the living and the dead, through the traces of spirits in *misas* (rituals for the dead) in Havana, and of the "unfinished stories" (p. 41) of both Ruth Landes in Brazil and Lydia Cabrera in Cuba. These examples lend themselves to an idea of the slow and steady accrual of stories, advice, and spiritual connections that are on the sidelines but that signal the need for "further work" (p. 41). Otero shows that "encoded information" and "auxiliary notations" are far from superficial imperfections to mediumistic or scholarly work, but central. In "Crossings," she hypothesizes that Spiritism's doctrine of transmigration—reincarnation—profoundly influenced Fernando Ortiz, Cuba's foremost scholar, in his narrative

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for Cuba: transculturation—a concept that explores a rhizomatic, problematic, and highly creative model of cultural encounter. But this coproduction of Cuban ethnic and racial multiplicity occurs in the very bodies of the mediums in their rites for the dead. Contrary to the anthropological project of producing “knowability,” there is a “relational logic of mobility” set in motion in such practices (p. 87).

In “Flows” and “Sirens,” Chapters 3 and 4 respectively, Otero seems to come into her own. In “Flows,” she explores the gender and sexual fluidity of both “waters”—Yemayá and Ochún—and their practitioners, those who embody and perform this transgression, in practice and in literature. These are mutable entities, alternately virgins and mulatas, both in mythology and in negotiations of kinship and possession. It’s never an either/or, but rather a both or an “and,” that’s at stake. In exploring Cabrera’s “countercurrents” (p. 127), Otero goes to the heart of a profoundly heretic queer Santería—one where the most feminine and masculine of entities are inverted at their sexual core, and where Cabrera’s *chisme*, or gossip, is taken to its lengths. In “Sirens,” Otero dives into the contradictions and fractures of Afro-Cuban religions’ complicated relationship with homosexuality, through the deity Irenle (Inle), arguing for a “transphysical *divine* subject” (p. 147), with its plasticity of gender, body, and sexuality. Performance here is a key notion, but not one with a simple definition. In her analysis of Santos-Febres’s novel, *La Sirena Selena vestida de pena*, which tells of a 16-year-old drag queen in Puerto Rico, Otero argues that performance here is not representation; it builds worlds, it’s a metatheater for the production of realities. Like the sea-foam that forms the trope of the conclusion, Otero reminds us in this book to look for incongruencies, multiplicities on and beneath surfaces, switches sudden and gradual, and what doesn’t fit the mold. This is her strength. At the same time, all of this also signals someone/something that has barely received a mention: the trickster, the very incarnation of transgression and paradox.

Diana Espírito Santo

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago, Chile

diana.espirito@uc.cl