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REVIEW ESSAY

Religion: Recent publications on religion among Puerto Ricans and in the Caribbean

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Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo
By Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert.
272 pages; $20.00 [paper]

El Iris de Paz: el espiritismo y la mujer en Puerto Rico, 1900–1905
By Nancy Herzig Shannon.
159 pages; $9.95 [paper]

Witchcraft and Welfare: Spiritual Capital and the Business of Magic in Modern Puerto Rico
By Raquel Romberg.
335 pages; $24.95 [paper]
military power. Prejudices against religious phenomena in general and more specifically against religions on the periphery of society have dominated scholarship. The books I review here attempt to combat and rectify this scholarly myopia—for the most part quite successfully.

Anthropologist Raquel Romberg’s book is the result of many years of ethnographic research as a participant observer of Puerto Rican spiritism during the 1990s in Puerto Rico. Although she places her conclusions within a larger historical, theoretical and global context, most of her research, ideas and conclusions arise from her major informant, Haydée, a bruja from Villas de Loíza.

Romberg begins her book by addressing some of the theoretical issues regarding the decline or disappearance of religion as a result of secularization and modernity. She begins by arguing that if one followed the propositions of enlightenment thinkers and the persecution by colonialist religious and political ideologues, religions, especially vernacular religions such as Espiritismo, should have disappeared. She argues, however that the opposite has held true. Espiritismo in Puerto Rico has not disappeared or even declined, but thrived and flourished instead. Romberg states: “After centuries of persecution by the Catholic Church in Europe and the Americas and against enlightenment, brujería has not disappeared with modernity; it has just changed its face” (2003:1). Romberg argues that most post-emancipation Latin American states had co-opted Eurocentric and U.S.-based notions of a new world propelled by reason and not by the pre-modern era of religion. Within this cultural and political milieu Puerto Rican spiritism emerged in late 19th- and early 20th-century Puerto Rico.

Although spiritism began to take a hold of Puerto Rican society in the late 19th century, Romberg makes the point that with the U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico in 1898, the political, juridical and religious stage for the expansion of spiritism was set. Romberg suggests that with the advent of U.S. colonial rule, the national religious and political discourses coming from the religions closest to the center of power (i.e. Protestant denominations and Roman Catholicism) were very critical of spiritism. However, Romberg continues to assert that with the U.S. capitalist notions of economic free markets came the legal and political notions of U.S. understanding of a free religious market. No longer was there any legal or ecclesiastical power to hold back the vernacular spiritual practices and aspirations of the Puerto Rican people. With the U.S. colonial government also came the separation of church and State.

According to Romberg, during the 1860s and onward, the influence of French Kardecian spiritism (known as Scientific Spiritism) began to take hold among the Puerto Rican left wing, upper elite class. Eventually French Kardecian spiritism would be incorporated into the indigenous spiritism practiced by the lower class majority. The spiritism of the masses was a hybridization of African-based traditions
daily lives of people within the diasporic populations throughout the United States. They go on to suggest that these manifestations demonstrate that spiritual Afro-Caribbean traditions continue to strongly influence people living in the region. This in turn, requires a greater understanding of Afro-Caribbean belief systems by those who intend to understand Caribbean diasporic communities. In this introduction Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert speak of the creolization of Caribbean religion as opposed to syncretism. They define “creolization” in the following manner:

the malleability and mutability of various beliefs and practices as they adapt to new understanding of class, race, gender, power, labor, and sexuality—is one of the most significant phenomena in Caribbean religious history (2003:4).

Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert also provide an excellent historical analysis and concise definition of the polemical and pejorative history of the term syncretism. They discuss how the term has been used to render illegitimate any religion that was outside the center of power. It is made clear that Caribbean religions have been vulnerable to this denigration.

Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert offer a very helpful discussion of certain shared characteristics between the different Caribbean Creole religions. This issue is essential to discuss, because the analysis moves beyond a discussion of similarities to view differences, as well as making it clear these characteristics emanate from divergent cultures and historical trajectories. For too long it has been assumed that because many African-based religions in the Caribbean have their origins in Yoruba traditions, the influence of other African cultures has been ignored. Belief systems with origins in the Congo, Fon, Ewe, and Bantu traditions have been ignored by scholars. As is demonstrated throughout this book, many other African cultures are represented among the religious practices of Caribbean people and their corresponding diasporic communities. In a brief but informative historical sketch, Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert place these different religious traditions within their sociohistorical and political settings, including the role that the African-based religious traditions has played in sustaining the African people through horrible colonial periods. Religious practices were central in fueling the underlying force behind the revolutionary and liberation movements of the late 18th century, such as in the case of Haiti.

Upon my initial examination and review of the content of this book, I became immediately curious to ascertain whether the authors had examined the religious
another by Teresa Yáñez vda. de Otero. These authors are both insiders, and although their books have value, they were written as subjective defenses of the movement rather than from a social scientific perspective.

Scientific Spiritism in Puerto Rico traces its roots to French Kardecian Spiritism rather than to either native or African indigenous religious practices. Unlike other Caribbean religions that are considered erotic and therefore worthy of study, Scientific Spiritism breaks that mold. In this respect Herzig takes on a research project traditionally ignored but for which modern historiography has helped to encourage research. Interestingly, her research is conducted on women, an oppressed group who, rather than passively accepting the status quo, resist in a religion that was not serving the interests of those on the political and economic margins of Puerto Rico society. In fact, although Scientific Spiritism was outside the mainstream religious culture of early 20th-century Puerto Rico, it was a religion that was mainly practiced by many radical intellectually and politically savvy Puerto Ricans, such as Ana Roqué de Duprey, Rosendo Matienzo Cintrón and others. Women are the majority of the practitioners in most Caribbean and U.S. religious organizations, but studies ignore their role with descriptions of the movements offered from the heterosexist perspective. This book is an excellent contribution to gender studies as it regards Puerto Rican society in the late 19th and early 20th century.

The title of this work is borrowed from the most important magazine of Scientific Spiritism in Puerto Rico, El Iris de Paz, which began to circulate in December 1899. According to Herzig Shannon, this magazine was extremely important to Scientific Spiritism in Puerto Rico for several reasons. It helped the spiritist movement become a national movement. It connected the Puerto Rican spiritist movement with other spiritist movements internationally. In addition it played a major role in founding La Federación Espiritista in 1903 and led to the consolidation of its leadership. It also provided the movement’s ideological orientation. Through a detailed analysis of the articles found in the magazine, Herzig has traced the ideological and political development of women in the movement.

Herzig quite convincingly begins this work by explicitly describing her theoretical approach in understanding the development of feminist consciousness within different social, historical and religious contexts. She builds her theoretical framework upon the work of María de Fátima Barceló Miller, who has conducted extensive research on the suffragist movement in Puerto Rico. Barceló Miller’s study focused on the contradictions found in the early stages of the feminist movement in Puerto Rico, when the traditional roles assigned to women by society were challenged and at the same time affirmed. To understand this seemingly contradictory perspective, Herzig Shannon follows Barceló Miller’s use of what other historians have called feminismo social (social feminism). Herzig Shannon describes social feminism with an example:
to support their husbands in order to maintain the natural order of things. Whether these voices in the struggle for liberation used this as a tactical argument is unknown.

The director of the magazine El Iris de Paz, from its inception in 1899 through 1912, was a woman named Agustina Guffain. It was not unusual for many of the articles in the magazine to be related to women's issues and concerns since five of the ten contributors were women. Herzig identifies three constant themes that were emphasized in El Iris De Paz: the condemnation of the Catholic Church and its hierarchical structures, the spiritist vision that a new era of modernization would bring great changes in the upcoming century and the emphasis on women being the agents of change in the family and society at large. The strong emphasis on women's issues leads Herzig to suggest that this magazine should be considered a woman's press, an idea that presently has not been fully researched.

Herzig demonstrates that underlying the women's views of these issues were strong ideological and spiritist beliefs, such as the view that the world was in an historical epoch ripe for a modern and egalitarian society. In addition, they believed that the soul did not have a gender and, therefore, there was essentially no difference between men and women. On a local level, for the Puerto Rican Spiritist this implied the political, cultural and social modernization and renovation of Puerto Rican society. On a host of controversial issues, including marriage and prostitution, Herzig's analysis of the articles written by women in El Iris de Paz helps to show the early stages of feminist critique in the making. For example, on the subject of prostitution, they condemned the women for selling their bodies, but they saved their harshest critiques for the men who participated in prostitution, but were not affected by the laws of those days, whereas women were.

The three books that I have had the pleasure of reviewing for this essay make genuine contributions in discovering the histories, beliefs and manifestations of culture as well as the philosophy, theology and politics of Puerto Rican/Caribbean women and men who have been on the underside of history. These books and the research contained in them can be situated with other significant research in Puerto Rican and Latina/o studies that have been fueled by post-colonial theory/studies. It should no longer be acceptable to ignore the histories, including the religious life, of those who have been on the margins of society as if they have not been actively negotiating, resisting and engaging in being active agents in the destiny of their particular communities.