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Book Review

***Excited Delirium: Race, Police Violence, and the Invention of a Disease* (Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús).** Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024. Paperback ISBN: 978-1-4780-3055-3; Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-4780-2632-7.

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In *Excited Delirium: Race, Police Violence, and the Invention of a Disease*, Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús examines excited delirium, a pseudo-racialized medical diagnosis that has been used to explain the deaths of Black and Brown people in police custody. Beliso-De Jesús argues that excited delirium is used to legitimize police violence against people who are stigmatized as "the drug-addled, unhinged, superhuman Black persons." Through this book, and this is the most important aspect for me in reading this book, Beliso-De Jesús shows that Afro-Latine religious traditions, especially the practices of *copresences* (taking *spirits* and *spiritualism* seriously), can serve not only to understand this racial violence, but also to heal.

Beliso-De Jesús begins, epistemologically and methodologically, elaboration by asking the question of "what does it look like to take seriously what people are saying about their religious experiences," especially by taking seriously Afro-Latine religious practitioners' engagements with the "dead" as her "racial laboratory." By this question, Beliso-De Jesús uncovers that "excited delirium" is not a legitimate medical condition, but an invented-racialized tool used to sustain White supremacy and to relegate Indigenous religious traditions into unconvincing practices.

When I first read this book, I did not understand why Beliso-De Jesús incorporates personal/daily journals between chapters, until I finished it and got her reasons. The daily journals inform readers about her academic-personal struggles while researching and/or writing this book, which also strengtens the method she uses: *copresence*. This can be seen also as her positionality and her way to dismatle "White objectivism" and "Western positivism." For instance, in one of her journals, she writes:

> *"I know that the spirits of the Black women and girls who were murdered are helping me through my research… when the Black women spirits reached out to me, I tried to find a healthy way for me*

> *to respond to them that honored my family's traditions and my own academic practice. I used my journals to let them write what they wanted me to know. Just sitting here, emptying my mind, they take over. My hands seem to have a mind of their own"* (Beliso-De Jesús, 2024, p. 59).

For me, this method is powerful because it looks like this "research topic" can (and perhaps can only) be done through this kind of approach: taking *spirits* seriously. As Beliso-De Jesús writes, "these copresences account for the embodied ways that Afro-Latine religious practitioners navigate the world… the copresences have worked to make this book happen… it was Jeremy Ellis's spirit who first showed me that there was more to the story of excited delirium" (Beliso-De Jesús, 2024, p. 8–9). Even more, these Afro-Latine practices enable Beliso-De Jesús to access what she acknowledges as "my Afro-Latine traditions' attunement to spirits provid[ing] a unique perspective to access their stories…" (Beliso-De Jesús, 2024, p. 198), acknowledging that *copresences* and *spirits* shape her/their lives, something that White objectivist-positivist perpectives have disminised as mental illness.

What I find particularly important here is how Beliso-De Jesús shows that White Western positivism consistently fails to understand Black spiritual practices, instead labeling spiritualists as "lunatics and swindlers, contending that spiritualism constituted mental illness, manifesting as neuroses, mania, delirium, and even insanity" (Beliso-De Jesús, 2024, p. 66). In fact, through Beliso-De Jesús's research, she discovered that the medical examiner who coined the term "excited delirium," Charles Wetli, was a self-proclaimed expert on Afro-Caribbean "cults". She illustrates that Wetli's problematic methods in studying Afro-Cuban religions paralleled his approach to establishing excited delirium as a medical condition. This discovery becomes a crucial entry point for the book's broader exploration of how racialized knowledge is produced through medical authority.

As a person and scholar born and raised within Afro-Latine religions, Beliso-De Jesús takes this position to answer her initial skepticism of "why is excited delirium everywhere when Black and Brown people die during police intervention?" In this process, as we can see throughout the book, *spirits* lead her to find the answer. As Beliso-De Jesús acknowledges, for example: "I had decided to present on excited delirium syndrome and deliberately chose to include how dead spirits had led me to this discovery" (Beliso-De Jesús, 2024, p. 118); "Jeremy's spirit also deserves credit for taking me on this journey of discovery to uncover what excited delirium really is: it is the distorted gaze of White supremacy" (Beliso-De Jesús, 2024, p. 198); and "I credit Cissy Floyd's spirit with ripping open the workings of excited delirium" (Beliso-De Jesús, 2024, p. 201).

This decolonial approach she chooses begins from a standpoint that different understandings of being or ontologies shape how people experience the world. Beliso-De Jesús critiques "positivism" not only as the sole source of "truth" for White supremacy but also as one of the reasons behind why non-Western cultural perspectives are often seen as implausible, because they are not considered "verifiable science," based on "empirical evidence," or supported by "mathematical calculations," as positivists demand. For this reason, as Beliso-De Jesús writes:

> *"Positivism has such a powerful hold on truth claims that non-Western cultural perspectives are always diminished as fanciful 'beliefs.' Even anthropologists who claim to deeply submerge themselves*

> *in other cultural formations are unable to acknowledge or admit to engagements with spiritual entities without being dismissed as having 'gone native'"* (Beliso-De Jesús, 2024, p. 118).

And,

> *"…this systematic criminalization of spiritualism extended to Afro-Latiné religions, and criminologists emphasized the importance of reinforcing Western medicine to uphold White values and prevent what they deemed "racial degeneration"* (Beliso-De Jesús, 2024, p. 67),

and, therefore,

> *"…doctors… viewed spiritualists as a threat… physicians, particularly neuroscientists claiming expertise in the understanding of the mind, launched a campaign against spiritual mediums. They labeled spiritualists lunatics and swindlers, contending that spiritualism constituted mental illness, manifesting as neuroses, mania, delirium, and even insanity"* (Beliso-De Jesús, 2024, p. 66).

In short, Beliso-De Jesús's approach exemplifies a decolonial method that takes "spirits as seriously as the people we work with do" (Beliso-De Jesús, 2024, p. 118) and through that process, she lets the spirits lead her way to see how the White supremacist system of knowledge works.

Her method of copresence (taking *spiritualism* seriously) also receives its conceptual legitimacy from W. E. B. Du Bois, a sociologist, historian, activist, and writer whose scholarship engaged deeply with the Black church. For example, when Beliso de Jesus discusses George Floyd's "spiritual" interaction with his mother, Cissy Floyd, she explains how this interaction is ignored because of Western positivist ways of thinking. This interaction can be understood not only as copresence (Floyd experiencing the presence of his deceased mother) but also as "second sight" by Du Bois (See more Du Bois, 2014, p. 5), as I have explained above. As Beliso de Jesus notes, "…the interaction between Floyd and his deceased mother serves as significant evidence often disregarded in Western positivist analysis. I see this exchange as providing insight into Du Bois's 'second sight'" (Beliso-De Jesús, 2024, p. 199). She further writes, "Cissy's spirit is entangled with George Floyd's. When George cried out for her, she responded" (Beliso-De Jesús, 2024, p. 200).

In other words, the methods of copresence and second-sight or double consciousness meet here in ways that Western positivist approaches cannot understand. Western positivism views the phenomenon of George Floyd encountering his mother as "unacceptable," but Afro-Latine traditions would place Cissy Floyd as a spirit-member activist involved in many aspects of George Floyd's life. From this, it becomes clear that the method taken by Beliso de Jesus is indeed necessary for what Oludamini Ogunnaike refers to as bringing *theoria* into the discussion of religious phenomena (Ogunnaike, 2022).

Furthermore, when Beliso de Jesus extends her discussion of the 'abolition' as one of the solutions, she aligns with Du Bois's critique of legal reform, which continues to reproduce racial justifications for policing, arguing that "legal reform itself was not enough." As Beliso de Jesus writes, "Du Bois…argued that legal reform itself was not enough, because the oppressive conditions of slavery were not undone with its legal elimination" (Beliso-De Jesús, 2024, p. 202). Beliso de Jesus then offers, or exemplifies, the "decolonial abolitionist" Santeria church as "a radical Afro-Latine blueprint for imagining new institutions that foster

repair," because "this Santeria church is providing pathways to disrupting intersecting oppressions" (Beliso-De Jesús, 2024, p. 205–206). I interpret this as a way of liberating Black people by letting "the dead lead the way," spirits such as Jeremy's, Cissy's, and Mario's, who led Beliso de Jesus to uncover the invented disease and help many Afro-Latine people heal.

Ultimately, as I mentioned above, Du Bois's idea of "double consciousness" or "double sight" appears in Beliso de Jesus's work. Even, Beliso de Jesus's book format seems to incorporate this "double consciousness" by presenting parallel journal entries alongside academic analysis. I am not sure whether this is a way of embodying Du Bois's double consciousness, but this topic is elaborated through a very very interesting way.

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