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Review Of "African American Folk Healing" By S.Y. Mitchem

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African American Folk Healing. By Stephanie Y. Mitchem. New York: New York University Press, 2007. x + 190 pp. \$20.00 paper.

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judgments about the worth of “other” religions—that is fruitfully analyzed as a *practice* of piety.

Mormon and Protestant missionary practices in the Pacific are the subject of Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp’s essay. By contrasting missions by Protestants and Latter-day Saints in the Pacific Islands, Maffly-Kipp demonstrates the relationship between the colonial dimensions of nineteenth-century U.S. imperialism and the ideology of religious, cultural, and racial supremacy. The crux of her analysis concerns the way these notions compelled American missionaries to focus on establishing an apartheid society and eradicating the cultural practices of Hawaiians and Tahitians even more urgently than beliefs (although Mormon missionaries were at times more accommodating toward native practices). This, in turn, stimulated a reciprocal focus on the quotidian actions of missionaries themselves as boundary markers between savage and civilized, heathen and Christian.

Other contributors to the volume examine practices such as journal writing, forgiveness, the honoring of elders, the nurturing of nationalism, architectural renewal, prayer, dance, and visual art. The fact that such a broad array of practices is examined as religious ritual further undergirds the editors’ explicit efforts to intervene theoretically into conceptualizing the category. All the essays are grounded in primary research and compellingly support clear theses that portray Protestant practices as regulating and inhibiting religious subjects while also supporting and enabling a productive exercise of identity and subjectivity. By delivering a well-crafted coherence, the essays indicate equally well the theoretical currents that have shaped this volume, especially the maxim that Protestant Christianity, despite claims to the contrary, comprises immense concern for right actions and ritual, not merely beliefs. The result is a very readable and theoretically astute collection of essays that brings to light valuable conclusions drawn from original research. Readers will easily appreciate the value of this volume for teaching and research.

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***African American Folk Healing.* By Stephanie Y. Mitchem.**

New York: New York University Press, 2007. x + 190 pp.

\$20.00 paper.

Stephanie Y. Mitchem provides a fresh perspective on the healing traditions of black people in the United States in this fascinating analysis of African

American folk healing, described as a complex of social practices and cultural beliefs. Even as it supports a “holistic epistemology” (1), folk healing is an orientation to well-being that Mitchem finds “embedded in . . . religious life, art, social activism, and . . . relationships” (4). Hybridized in its manifestations, folk healing encompasses systems of therapeutic knowledge that extend beyond institutionalized and biomedical forms. From its origins within enslaved black American communities, folk healing has been sustained in diverse religious expressions that have been preserved, even in the present day.

In the first three chapters, Mitchem sets out to define African American folk healing and to sketch a historical outline of healing practices. She emphasizes that healing should be viewed as a diverse set of “culturally centered” (3) responses to affliction—broadly interpreted as disease, imbalance, misfortune, and social conflict—that are enacted in specific therapeutic strategies that draw upon human intent, elemental energies, organic substances, and spiritual forces, such as divinities and ancestors, to treat illness. In black American experiences, healing occupies a conceptual space that embraces physical and material dimensions in addition to the relational and transcendent aspects of existence. Mitchem emphasizes the notion of “relationships” as the integral idea in the larger framework and assumptions in which African American folk healing traditions operate: nature, humanity, and God are linked together by bonds of interdependence and reciprocity. Hence, the intersection of healing and religion is evident, and viewed most notably in the overlap between many of the practices of African American faith traditions, such as the black churches, indigenous African and New World religions, and healing works such as Hoodoo and Conjure, in which a strong emphasis on holistic spirituality exists.

The second section of the book focuses on the persistence of black folk healing. African American healing traditions were sustained within socially marginalized black communities in the post-Emancipation era. As they were subsequently dispersed from their geographical origins, they adapted to new contexts, growing and thriving in a variety of settings and places. Mitchem finds that the retention of black folk healing traditions in the present day has as much to do with African Americans’ recognition of the limitations of the institutionalized medical industry and the availability of alternative practices and practitioners as it does with continued belief in the efficacy of these distinctive forms of healing and the value of systems that treat “the whole person” rather than “isolated symptoms” (72). In this regard, Mitchem examines healing not only as an individual spiritual practice, but as social action and community struggle, arguing that present-day forms of African American folk healing seek to address the past effects of injustice—including, for example, slavery and racial discrimination—

through collective efforts at curing social ills with political activism, public rituals, identity politics, reparations, and reconciliation.

African American Folk Healing is an interdisciplinary study, and as such Mitchem utilizes methodologies from folklore, religion, history, and cultural studies in order to tease out what she calls the “mystical” and “intellectual” foundations of healing. Identifying sources for researching African American folk healing traditions over time and place presents an interesting challenge, for discerning the meaning of healing involves “tangling with layers of racism and centuries of separatism that created limited, unreal images of black Americans” (11). Mitchem takes a perspective that is both historical and ethnographic, making liberal use of both archived documents and case studies in her analysis of the roots and emergence of healing traditions. The strength of this approach is readily seen in her recovery of heretofore overlooked sources. It is through the voices of the informants who populate her narrative, black men and women who speak through interviews, oral histories, and personal testimonies, that one recognizes that African American folk healing represents a submerged but vibrant history of the everyday lives of the black “folk,” their spiritual practices, their medical traditions, and their acts of cultural resistance.

Of note is Mitchem’s characterization of folk healing as an adaptable but amoral system. Healing practices, says Mitchem, can be used for “good or evil” (27). One wishes to know more about this, though Mitchem only gestures toward a systematic interpretation of the ways that moral considerations inform the rich traditions of healing, prevention, and protection that address embodied sickness. Likewise, while one learns much from this book about African American healing as a process toward wellness, there is less space given to understanding the same complex of ideas and actions as they relate to constructions of affliction. What, for example, do the sources tell us about how black folk have theorized the very objects of healing—the experiences of physical suffering, disease, and illness that are understood to be the converse of wellness and health?

Readers across diverse fields and disciplines will benefit from this text. Nonspecialists will enjoy its earnest, jargon-free style, and practitioners, including ministers and clinicians, may discover new possibilities for conceptualizing the intersection of healing and religion in this timely and insightful resource.

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