Review Of "Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, And Transgender Participation In African-Inspired Traditions In The Americas" By R. Conner And D.H. Sparks

Yvonne Patricia Chireau
Swarthmore College, ychirea1@swarthmore.edu

This book is a recent addition to writings that explore gender and sexuality in African-based religions. Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions documents gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender/transsexual participation in
African-based religious traditions with data from interviews, ethno-
graphic sources, and academic studies. Conner and Sparks explore the
interrelationship of spirituality and same-sex orientations by looking at
the experiences of individual practitioners, the prevalence of gendered
manifestations of the divine, and homoeroticism in the practices, beliefs,
and myths of the religions of the African diaspora, with an emphasis on
the Yoruba-derived religions of Santería and Candomblé, and to a lesser
extent Haitian Vodou. As gay men, insider-participants, as well as schol-
ars of these traditions, the authors bring a multifaceted perspective to
the sensitive and often contentious issue of the LGBT presence in
African-based religions.

Homophobia, coupled with persistent discrimination against practi-
tioners of African-based religions, has tended to foster a climate of
secrecy among gay participants in these faiths. In the opening section of
the book, Connor chronicles his own personal academic and spiritual
journey, providing the rationale for his decision to undertake this proj-
ect. One guiding issue was the desire to understand how “gay spiritual-
ity” has been expressed in “other spiritual movements and traditions . . .
beyond Christianity and Judaism” (6). Much more so, the book is a response
to the suppression of the voices of “queer-identified practitioners and
artists” in African-based religions and an attempt to honor the same
while historicizing sexual complexity in these traditions.

The questions that *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions* raises go beyond
a celebratory narrative of sexual orientation. The authors do not employ
a lone methodological or theoretical approach, but choose to synthesize
their conclusions about the relationship between same-sex intimacy and
spiritual experience in a series of heavily annotated and excerpted chap-
ters with titles such as “Divinities and Spirits,” “Children of the Spirits,”
and “Snapshots,” the latter an assortment of portraits of devotees inter-
viewed by the authors in the United States, Cuba, and Brazil. Among the
general issues covered are: sex and gender complexity in African and
New World cultures; divine androgyny; ritual transvestism; and the
impact of HIV-AIDS on believers and their practices. It is not possible for
the book to explore all these issues in depth, but Conner does a good
job of distilling most of the current literature and highlighting some of
the recent issues and controversies facing LGBT practitioners. His pres-
etration of the debates over the prohibitions of the initiations of homo-
sexual priests and priestesses in Ifá, for example, provides perspectives
from both sides of the issue. Other observations concerning the dearth
of transgender/transsexual and bisexual members in African-based
spiritual communities—communities that revere androgynous and
gynandrous divinities, including some òrìshàs—are noteworthy. The
final chapter, “To Make the Spirit Manifest,” is a presentation of promi-
nent writers, musicians and other artists involved with African spiritu-
ality who have embodied gender complexity in their lives and work,
including folklorist Lydia Cabrera, musician Gilberto Gil, ethnographer Pierre Verger, visual artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, and others.

While *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions* is a welcome text that bridges literature on African-based religions, queer studies, and gender studies, some might find that its excessively partisan tone makes for uncritical reading. The book may be most useful as a guide and a resource, a courageous and sensitively written account of participants in New World African religions whose stories, for the most part, have been untold.

Yvonne Chireau, Swarthmore College