

Jalane D. Schmidt, *Cachita's Streets: The Virgin of Charity, Race & Revolution in Cuba*. Durham: Duke University Press (2015). Paperback, 357 pp. ISBN: 9780822359371.

Aptly titled, *Cachita's Streets* centers on two primary subjects, *Cachita*, the Virgin of Charity of El Cobra, and the patron saint of Cuba. The book details the history of the Virgin's physical effigy and her cult of ardent devotees, which, over four centuries, has included Cubans ranging from Roman Catholics, to practitioners of Spiritism and Santiera, to the nominally otherwise religious. Schmidt's history of the Virgin and devotion to her among Cubans traces twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Cuban religions and their complicated relationships with the Cuban state and with Cuban identity. Schmidt offers up a history of the Virgin and her devotees, but in the process, she engages the reader in a sweeping narrative of Cuban politics, identity, race and religion over the past four centuries, tracing "the local permutations of devotion to the Virgin and the varying fates of religions in Cuba, particularly as these are expressed in relationships to changing racial, cultural, and political conceptions of Cuban Nationality." (9). The book is fascinating in its depiction of a "competitive religious and cultural landscape", wherein different groups, including the Cuban Catholic church, the evolving Cuban government, and the Virgin's often religiously, socially, and racially marginalized devotees, vied to advance their own interpretations of the Virgin (28). Although some romanticize devotion to the Virgin as a symbol of "creole religio-cultural unity," a universally beloved figure connecting Catholics, practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions, and the nominally faithful, Schmidt pushes back on this conception, describing the ways in which, in fact, shared devotion to the Virgin has fueled competition among these groups (28).

The physical effigy of the Virgin was legendarily found at sea in the Bay of Nipes by two indigenous men and an enslaved black child, collectively referred to as the "Three Juans" (Schmidt notes that only two of the men were actually named Juan, but this mythical naming emphasizes the "Everyman" nature of Virgin's origin story). The Virgin's effigy was soon placed in a shrine the hill next to the residences of the El Cobra's enslaved miners. It was there that the cult of the Virgin of Charity, and, almost concurrently, the use of the symbol of the Virgin in mobilizing various agendas, began. The slaves of El Cobre invoked their dedication to the Virgin in their appeals to the Spanish government for freedom from their condition as slaves, in a seemingly strategic move to gain sympathy in the Catholic recipients of their petitions, and were eventually successful.

Over the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries, Catholic clergy have viewed popular devotion to the Virgin among Cubans as an evangelization opportunity. Historically, devotees of the Virgin, and Cubans in general, have been mostly Catholic by baptism but, as Schmidt stresses throughout the work, minimally Catholic in practice. The push for a large base of practicing Roman Catholics in Cuba has never become a reality, despite the continuing popularity of devotion to the Virgin herself. This disconnect may exist in part because while Catholic clergy see belief in other deities and phenomena as mutually exclusive with Catholicism, many devotees of the Virgin see themselves as both Catholic and spiritist. Through anecdotal stories of Cubans who practice spiritism and Santeria, Schmidt reveals the ways in which Afro-Cuban faiths have been misunderstood, dismissed, marginalized, and at times exploited by the Catholic church, the Cuban government, and narratives about Cuban religion and history.

The book's second concern is the urban *streets* of Cuba, where devotion to Cachita has played out in large-scale public ceremonies her honor for centuries. Schmidt explores the ways in which the planners of these public spectacles mobilized the symbol of the Virgin "to promote their historically specific claims regarding religious practice, ascriptions of race, and political ideologies

of Cuban nationhood.” (9) As Schmidt points out, Cuban leaders have had various motives for alternately facilitating, discouraging, or allowing these spectacles. She describes several key moments in the Virgin’s history, such as the 1936 Coronation of the Virgin, the lively yearly feast day processions in her honor, her 1951-52 tour of the country, and two Papal visits to Cuba that honored her. Inherent in the stories of these events are the political and religious climates of the nation during these moments.

The book frequently refers to the contrast between *antes* (before) the 1959 Cuban Revolution and *después* (after), in terms of the implications for public religious ceremonies, as well as for Cuban religion and culture as a whole. Although some clergy aligned themselves with the Revolutionary cause, and the Virgin herself was invoked by some revolutionary leaders as a symbol of the fight for Cuban liberation from the Batista regime, relations between the Catholic church and the Cuban government soured as the new regime established itself as Communist and atheist. For decades, religious processions were outright banned, and replaced by revolutionary rallies in the streets. But, as Schmidt notes, in the 1990s and early 2000s, the government’s attitude toward both the Catholic church and Afro-Cuban religions began to thaw, and street processions have been reinstated.

Schmidt sheds light on the importance of the Cuban streets as a stage for political and religious leaders to influence their audience, the Cuban people. In the streets, culture, belief, and identity are not only celebrated—they are shaped. In examining the history of processions in honor of the Virgin of Charity, Schmidt paints a broader picture of the power of rhetoric, symbolism, and celebration in the shaping of Cuban national identity.

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