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BOOK REVIEWS



DIANA ESPÍRITO SANTO 2023. *Spirited Histories. Technologies, Media, and Trauma in Paranormal Chile*.

London & New York: Routledge, 202 pp.

DIANA ESPÍRITO SANTO is Associate Professor of Social Anthropology at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. She has already delivered several contributions to the anthropological study of spirits and mediumship, for example, on the Cuban Espiritismo and the social life of spirits. Her current work has been published in Routledge's series "The Anthropology of History" (edited by STEPHAN PALMIÉ and CHARLES STEWART), and accordingly, she focuses on alternative histories and micro-histories developed in paranormal and para-patrimonial practices. She explores occult topographies rearticulated as alternative forms, understandings, and productions of history as less representational than actual affective and experiential endeavors. With her focus on paranormal investigators throughout three years of ethnographic data collection (participant observation and interviews), she understands history as a continuous social practice.

Nonetheless, her report is also of value to medical anthropologists due to the initial question of how far paranormal practices may help to deal with individual and collective trauma produced throughout PINOCHET's violent dictatorship in Chile (1973–1990). According to the author, lingering trauma is connected to spaces or sites where human violations occurred. It keeps boiling beneath functional surfaces once that it has often been ignored in official strategies of remembrance due to the post-dictatorship democracy's emphasis on reconciliation and forgiveness, rather than justice or retribution. DIANA ESPÍRITO SANTO identifies ghosts as ripples in a particular space-time continuum, such as disappearances, affective absences, and the effort to break repression and silencing. She wonders how we can understand individual and collective suffering in this way and extends her focus from the dictatorship to earlier colonial violence and contemporary neoliberal inequalities, including the repression of protests against COVID-19 policies.

According to her, there are manifold traumas to be dealt with in Chile. Whereas she identifies political repression of the highest order, gravest violations of human rights, and brutalization re-

sulting in death and disappearances throughout the dictatorship, contemporary neoliberal economic models result in the massive privatization of fundamental rights, such as housing, education, and health. Referring to what she calls the dictatorship's B side, DIANA ESPÍRITO SANTO detects roaming questions of, e.g., what happened to the souls of those who were brutally assassinated and/or disappeared. Ghosts may be a symptom of what is missing, but also the means to tease it out. In this regard, she compares history to photography that captures random events and fragments, excluding both completeness and transience. It is about exploring the emotions and embodied affective stances of the victims.

The monography is subdivided into seven chapters (Introduction/Ghosts – Machines – Noise – Affect – Aliens – Play – Afterword) in which the author focuses on cosmology, discourse, and practices within social phenomena such as mediumship, paranormal investigation in historical spaces, and ghost tours in places such as former psychiatric hospitals, labor camps, or prisons as sites of torture, human experiments, murder, etc. She presents many vivid case studies and reports from her participant observation, including instances of autoethnography. These are framed by dense theoretical and philosophical discussions (e.g., on space-time, multidirectory dynamics of time, the plurality of history, hauntology, interference, noise/voice/sound, media/technology) that, in their complexity, may overwhelm the recipient at first sight. However, a thorough reading of her account reveals the central argument that periods of Chilean history are laid bare in paranormal investigations and ghost tours. Ghosts pull us into structures of feeling and produce resonance systems, activating and altering memories and setting in motion a collective will to know and commemorate; memory is constructed through affective involvement.

Accordingly, paranormal activities draw on a plastic reading of history, a history whose traumas are marked by unsilenceable traces, evoked as fragments of sound and images through specific apparatuses that, as a further development of

19th century's Spiritualist technologies, mark the digital turn in paranormal investigations. Wherever an increased activity is detected, the dead demand some reparation, operating through electromagnetic currents. The example of ghost tours in Santiago de Chile illustrates how such interferences create thrill and fear, generating affective atmospheres and sensations, moving people into certain physical and mental states, and producing historical experiences in correspondence with existent evidentiary formats of documents and archives.

In the end, the answer to the question of how exactly history and trauma are being recovered remains open. DIANA ESPÍRITO SANTO does not investigate the effectiveness of practices but argues for a perspective of history as unfinished and in-the-making, as sensational and embodied internal work that provides clues helping to understand past, present, and future individual and socio-political trauma fully.

In an excursus, the author also explores two cases of alleged Alien communication. The first are geoglyphs in the Atacama desert that are interpreted as information from and about ancient astronauts who supposedly interfered in the development of human culture, and the second are mediumistically received messages from hybrid human-aliens of the future that warn humankind of its self-induced annihilation. It illustrates the multidirectionality of histories in the past-present-future continuum. However, particularly the latter example can also be interpreted as a meta-commentary on contemporary neoliberal and capitalist structural violence, introducing alternative human development strategies from affliction to insight. Psycho-social trauma and political suffering thus may become a "metaphorical noise on a continual loop," and the author stresses the performative character of media and mediation in its broadest sense – the forming of forms interfering with environments, generating communion and facilitating communication with and about the past and the future. Enactments may trigger social memory and individual perceptions, excavating the past and envisioning the future in an empathetic approach. They provide a life of their own to alleged paranormal phenomena as narratives and (hi)stories. It is about historical possibilities rather than ontological realism.

It is a complex book due to its thorough discussion of variant theoretical and philosophical perspectives and their entanglement with the provided data. DIANA ESPÍRITO SANTO delivers a must-read for an interdisciplinary collegium and lay people interested in Spirit(ual)ism, mediumship, and paranormal phenomena affecting our well-being-in-the-world. Notably, her focus on affective atmospheres, corporeal engagements, and the aesthetical importance of voices/noises and (inner) visualizations makes it an essential contribution to an anthropology of the senses/sensory ethnography that, in the reviewer's opinion, is crucial to contemporary (medical) anthropology.

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