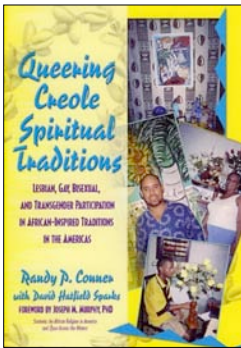


Reviews

Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Participation in African-Inspired Traditions in the Americas, Randy P. Conner with David Hatfield Sparks

(Harrington Park Press, 2004, 390pp, \$29.95)



It is refreshing when a book comes along that expands Queer studies into a new area. Randy Conner and David Sparks new book opens the door to one such territory. In *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions*, Conner and Sparks reveal a world that may not have been exactly secret, but has remained relatively unexamined by religious scholars and Queer theorists. This book examines the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender involvement in African-inspired traditions, such as Santeria (Lucumi, Regla de Ocha), Vodou, Candomblé, Macumba, Palo Mayombe, Ifá, Umbanda and Abakúa.

It is difficult to determine the numbers of people practicing Yoruban or Yoruban-inspired religions. Estimates put the number of

adherents at approximately 100 million world-wide, placing it within the top 10 most-practiced world religions. By way of comparison, Buddhists are estimated at approximately 360 million and Judaism accounts for 14 million worldwide. Despite this large number of practitioners, very little is known of Yoruban religions outside of those countries and communities where the traditions predominate—e.g. Cuba, Haiti, New Orleans and Florida. Even less known is the involvement of LGBT individuals within the traditions.

While reading *Queering Creole*, the first thought that comes to mind is the sheer scale of LGBT involvement in the religious traditions. One of the book's interviewees, santero (priest) Eric K. Lerner notes that 30-40% percent of practitioners in Cuba and Brazil are homosexual. Considering the estimated number of adherents, such a figure, even if high, makes for a staggering level of LGBT participation. Conner and Sparks show that homosexual involvement is more than simply a modern migration toward the tradition. It has been, in fact, a historically significant component of the practice—one likely brought with the slaves from their Yoruban homeland. The authors show that homosexual spiritual houses, including prominent priests, *oungans*, *santeros* and *manbos*, have been common elements historically in both Cuba and Brazil.

Conner and Sparks have spent more than 20 years researching their subject, investigating African-derived spirituality throughout the Americas. The project began when a friend, knowing of their interest in gay spiritual issues, introduced them to two Lucumi practitioners in 1981. Since that encounter, Conner and Sparks have conducted numerous interviews with practitioners in the USA, Cuba, Haiti and Brazil.

The book begins with a detailed discussion of sexual and gender complexity in Africa. They highlight the marked differences between the conception of sexuality and gender in Yoruban cultural and the Western. The authors also raise the inherent problems of cultural anthropology and the dangers of imposing one's own conceptions onto other cultures.

This accusation has been leveled against the study of gender complexity in particular. Conner and Sparks raise the issue and then make a surprising and compelling counter-argument. They suggest that the negative critiquing of gender analysis in cultural anthropology may itself derive from homophobia and culturally inculcated resistance within the critics.

The book proceeds with a discussion of several of the key divinities within the various traditions. They show how the divine itself at times exhibits gender complexity. Through myths and stories surrounding the divinities, they show the evolution of practitioners' understanding of the gods and goddesses.

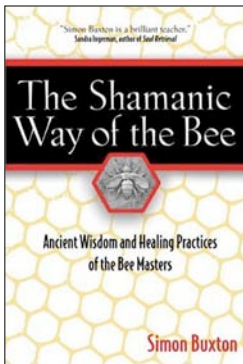
Conner and Sparks provide a detailed analysis of various aspects of the traditions and how they intersect with LGBT issues. In addition to the historical participation of homosexuals, they examine AIDS and HIV/AIDS education programs in Brazil, and the participation of transgendered individuals. Despite the comparatively large numbers of LGBT participants, there also exists a strongly rooted resistance among some practitioners. Conner and Sparks discuss spiritual houses that prohibit LGBT involvement and the arguments behind such prohibitions. They also examine certain historical taboos against gender complex persons and women from taking up certain tradition roles within the spiritual practice, such as playing the *bata*, or sacred drums, an integral component in many ceremonies.

The majority of the book is given over to discussions of the numerous interviews the authors conducted over more than twenty years. These they break into two sections, the first of practitioners and priests and the second of artists, musicians and performers who have a connection to African-diasporic traditions. The interview subjects dramatically demonstrate the involvement of LGBT peoples in the spiritual traditions—both contemporary and historically through acknowledgement of their lineage.

Having previously written *Cassell's Encyclopedia of Queer Myth, Symbol and Spirit*, the authors are ideally suited to their subject. They approach the project with academic rigor, while producing an incredibly readable book. The publication of *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions* is a landmark in LGBT studies and a watershed in the anthropological examination of gender complexity in spiritual practice.

The Shamanic Way of the Bee: Ancient Wisdom and Healing Practices of the Bee Masters, Simon Buxton

(Inner Traditions, 2004, 206pp, \$20.00)



The Bee Master Knows: BUZZ WORD: READ THIS BOOK!!!

Simon Buxton has turned out one of the best books that this reviewer has had the pleasure of reading in a long time. When I was assigned this book, I will confess that I had some doubts and even postponed reading it as long as I could. I had thought, “Oh boy, more new age pablum.” I am so delighted to confess that I was very, very wrong. The content is brilliantly presented by an entertaining storyteller of no small ability. *The Shamanic Way of the Bee* is simply one of those books that, if you should pick up, will have a very hard time putting down.

There is a nice rhythmic flow to the dialogue and one hardly realizes that thirty pages have flown by:

After my bath, I headed out to the orchard.
With the Gate of Transition before me once
more, and the trepidation of crossing its

threshold now long extinct, I passed through, feeling that the mystic green landscape beyond had a far richer connection to my soul. Kipling reverberated through my mind: 'Our England is a garden.' Here were still, rural regions, peaceful and beloved, where tranquil rivers flowed, rolling meadows shone in the sun, and castles and cathedrals sat serenely, much as they do in the Britain of storybooks. A little farther a field were grim moors, abrupt hills, and threatening islands. And beyond and behind this outer landscape—I now knew this with certainty—there was a hidden world all around me, a world full of magic, mystery, and adventure, and I considered how the character of the British people was molded and informed as much by the quiet secluded valleys and the steep crags as the mysteries that emanate from behind the trembling veil that separates the unseen world from this one.

Mr. Buxton tells the story of how he got involved in, not only the keeping of bees, but also the mysteries of the lore that surrounds the tradition of bee keeping. It is an odyssey of his personal journey into the realms of the shaman, how he was selected, and is a worthy recapitulation of his apprenticeship with a mysterious 'Don Juan Matus' type character named 'Bridge'. Even though one will find similarities between this account and the work of Carlos Castaneda, there are some striking differences as well—the context of Celtic, Welsh and British lore not being among the least. There are also adventures with intriguing characters such as the Bee Mistress and her Melissae. There are the

ordeals and the trysts and the exhilarating intoxication of those who are totally absorbed in their actions.

The author begins his account by telling us about his seemingly unfortunate experience with encephalitis at the tender age of nine. The doctors had given up on him and told his parents that they should resign themselves to the inevitable. However, the fates that oversee this life have a different design for young Simon. A kindly man of great experience, who had befriended the young boy two years before, known as 'Herr Professor' facilitates a miraculous recovery by employing healing techniques shunned by modern science but long known amongst those mysterious figures sometimes called shamans. From this time onward he teaches the young boy the intimacies of the Austrian forests and the connection that we each have with the great ebb and flow of life. Herr Professor is also a keeper of bees and this provides the foreshadowing of the author's future experiences.

Mr. Buxton describes how in 1986 he wandered onto the bee keeping estate of 'Bridge', and after an interesting ordeal, that I'll not spoil by revealing, Simon becomes the apprentice of Bridge and begins to learn the ways of bee keeping and the magical and matriarchal life of the hive.

This book is chock full of interesting anecdotes that reveal not only the wisdom of the 'path of pollen', but one abundant with the love of life and a ready comprehension of its mysteries. Although, I ordinarily would ordinarily give a fuller recounting of the story in terms of the development of plot, setting, characters and so on ...this read is simply too fast, and it would be unfair for those of you who are wise enough to take my advice and READ THIS BOOK, to spoil the majesty revealed in this true and moving tale.

Simon Buxton is still, to this day, a beekeeper and also a teacher in various techniques of shamanism. Anyone interested in learning from keen mind should contact Sacred Trust.

Further information can be found at www.sacredtrust.org

I give this one a five out of five stars and will conclude by saying that if you don't go get this book and read it, you are missing out. You can read ten technical treatises on shamanism and magick and not get half of the information content that you will find in this charming and compelling tale.

Jesus and the Shamanic Tradition of Same-Sex Love, Will Roscoe

(Suspect Thoughts, 2004, 224pp, \$16.95)



While a graduate student at Columbia University, Mortan Smith was invited to catalogue the holdings of the Mar Saba monastery library, near Jerusalem. Smith began his work in the Spring of 1958. He discovered several interesting, though not earth shattering, manuscripts among the collection, including new scholia of Sophocles. This was the case until, in his words, an “afternoon near the end of my stay, I found myself in my cell, staring incredulously at a text written in a tiny scrawl.” (Smith, *The Secret Gospel of Mark*, 1973, p. 12) This text, written in the blank back pages of a 17th century edition of Voss’s *Epistolae genuinae S. Ignatii Martyris*, purported to be a partial transcription of a much older manuscript—a letter from Clement of the Stromateis to a follower identified only as Theodore.

Known more commonly as Clement of Alexandria, the author was an important second century neo-platonic church theologian. In the Mar Saba letter, Clement is responding to questions raised by his follower stemming from a debate the latter had with the Carpocratians, a heterodoxical sect. The questions posed by Theodore relate to a variant version of the gospel of Mark used by the Carpocratians in their

arguments. Clement does not attack the authenticity of this ‘secret gospel of Mark.’ Instead he tells Theodore that it is held by the Alexandrian Church, who utilizes it in their initiations, and then proceeds to quote from his personal copy.

The 1972 publication of Smith’s findings in two editions, one general and one scholarly, caused a stir in biblical academic circles. Though debate continues, many scholars now accept the letter as authentic. Yuri Kuchinsky has set out a detailed case demonstrating the near impossibility of the document being a modern forgery—an accusation leveled by some. Indeed, the letter is included in the scholarly edition of Clement’s collected works.

What remains more controversial is Smith’s exegesis of the text and subsequent interpretation. Smith proposed that the text of Secret Mark alluded to a secret baptismal rite conducted by Jesus. Within the ritual, the postulant was dressed only in a single piece of linen (similar to a shroud) over his naked body. In the context of the baptizing Jesus was able to transfer (directly) to his disciple a direct vision of the kingdom of God.

The manuscript’s discovery and resulting scholarly debate is fascinating. Roscoe does a superb job retelling the story and capturing in detail the import of discovery and the debate surrounding it. He also provides a clear analysis of Smith’s interpretations of Secret Mark—bringing into the discussion many supporting instances (and telling omissions) from the canonical synoptic gospels. *Jesus & the Shamanic Tradition* is, in part, a scholarly work and adheres to the necessary rigors of that discipline. Though some readers may indeed find the level of detail daunting, it provides a necessary background from which Roscoe jumps into the interpretative second half of the book.

At the outset of his work Roscoe is careful to point that his is not (another) book retelling the life and a gay Jesus. “For the record,” Roscoe writes, “I do not believe that [The Secret Gospel of Mark]

provides any evidence regarding Jesus' emotional or sexual orientation." He does, however, propose that it "provides compelling evidence that the first Christians, including Jesus, engaged in mystical practices involving intimate same-sex contact." For Roscoe the moments of the mystical (shamanic) Jesus glimpsed in the Secret Gospel of Mark provide for gay people "an opportunity to read themselves into the heritage of Western religion and spirituality as a whole."

Jumping off of Smith's interpretation, Roscoe theorizes that Jesus practiced a baptismal ritual based on same-sex contact, yes perhaps sexual in nature, in which he imparted a mystical vision of heaven or the kingdom of God. This is not dissimilar from other shamanic practices in other parts of the world. Roscoe spends a good portion of the book discussing these other traditions and distilling from them similarities which help in an understanding of the conduct of the mystical initiating Jesus.

Roscoe is a respected scholar. His earlier works have included studies of gender and third-genders among the Zuni, Africans and Native Americans. He brings his unique wealth of knowledge to bear on his interpretive arguments relating to Jesus as a shaman, without allowing it to overwhelm his core discussion.

Secret Mark seems tied to gay spirituality. Smith's book came into Roscoe's hands from those of Harry Hay, the legendary founding father of the modern gay rights movement and the radical faeries. "I think there's something in here we should be concerned with," he told Roscoe cryptically.

His is a unique and at times powerfully beautiful interpretation of *agape* (Love). The egalitarian notion of love expounded by Hay during his life, and its connection to the mystical side of Jesus' teachings and ritual practices, was brought into sharp relief for Roscoe when the AIDS epidemic hit the gay community. "It was the epidemic that enabled me

to see the real significance of the Secret Gospel of Mark. Love between equals and sames—agape, subject-subject love—is heaven and earth.”

Roscoe has set himself no small task... yet he carries it out flawlessly. He grounds his revolutionary theory in canonical and apocryphal scriptural sources and teams this with an expert’s background in cross-cultural anthropology of gender and sexuality.

For more information see:

Wieland Willker’s Secret Gospel of Mark Homepage

http://www-user.uni-bremen.de/~wie/Secret/secmark_home.html

Yuri Kuchinsky’s SECRET MARK webpage

<http://www.trends.ca/~yuku/bbl/secmk.htm>

Psychic Vampire Codex: A Manual of Magick and Energy Work,

Michelle Belanger

(Red Wheel/Weiser, 2004, 284pp, \$19.95)



Let me begin this review with a caveat: This was a difficult review for me to write since I have little interest in the life of vampires, and even as pop-culture curiosities, my interest in them has been marginal at best. In fact, my exposure has remained rather confined to Dracula, and “The Fearless Vampire Killers”

(Strains of: *It’s Too Late to Love Sharon Tate.*)

I’m not a person who is very drawn to gothic culture but can confess somewhat of an incidental interest in ‘Goth’ as the product of over three generations of the mass consumption of television and comic books. Shows like Buffy The Vampire Slayer,

Angel and Charmed feed the current newbies with all sorts of regurgitated fanciful images ...with, I might confess, superior special effects. In my own generation, this was represented by Barnabas Collins of Dark Shadows fame, or Grandpa and Eddie Munster. One can easily see a difference in attitude toward what has come to be known as gothica. ..After all, Batman USED TO BE a funny guy.

Some have said that Anne Rice put it over the top with her Interview With A Vampire. Such strong imagery has found a resonance with a growing number of people as the 'Children of the Night' are finally coming out of the broom closet. Enter Michelle Belanger's: "The Psychic Vampire's Codex". (Weiser Books 2004) This was initially a work that emerged from cyberspace, as computers created a means for people of like interest to communicate and organize. The Codex has been circulating on the web for a few years as a general ethical guide but the recently published work has a ton of background material and additional information that makes this a 'must have' for those with an interest in vampires as a 'real' feature on the culture-scape. As I indicated above, it has a certain anthropological value in that it portrays a modular representation of a mind-set in today's world.

This book is for the person coming into the vampire lifestyle. It is apologetic to some degree and establishes some guidelines. It gives one an insight into the vampire community: the way it has organized itself, what it feels it has to offer for those who participate in it, the 'laws of the land' as it were and so on.

As the founder of House Kheperu and the articulator of the Kheprian Mysteries, Belanger has been a significant focalizer in the Vampire (Vampyre or Kheprian) culture and so is able to define a unique and authoritative perspective in this work. Owing to this, she quite definitely presents an 'insider's view.' I found her writing style to be fluid and accessible, which made this review far less a chore than it could have been otherwise. For that she has my gratitude.

She also illustrates a broad base of learning and uses the book to put forth numerous ideas for those with interests beyond vampires. There is a great deal of information on psychic energy and the role of the 'vampire' not merely as a parasitic figure, but as the answer to the detriments of 'surplus energy':

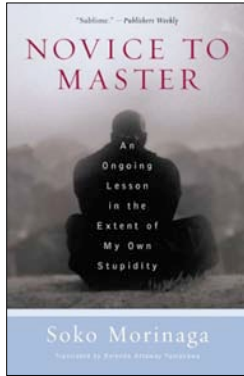
“The basic premise of the Codex is that all being participate in a universal cycle, and a psychic vampire’s relation to energy is an integral part of this participation.

...Taking energy away can be as helpful and healing as giving energy to another person. Too often energy becomes blocked and stagnant, and this blocked energy must be removed from a person’s system to maintain a healthy flow. Furthermore, when energy is removed from a person, their system naturally responds by generating more energy to replace it. This new energy is fresher and more vital than that which was removed, and typically the individual feels cleansed, refreshed, and renewed.” p. 40-41

What follows are numerous psychic energy exercises and techniques culled from a wide variety of sources for grounding, centering, meditation, and visualization and so in this sense offers some practical endeavor for numerous disciplines that extends beyond the vampire community in particular to those more general practitioners of the occult. As I said at the beginning, for those with an interest in these subject matters, this is a very nice addition for one’s personal curriculum. I give it a 4 out of 6 fangs.

Novice to Master: An Ongoing Lesson in the Extent of My Own Stupidity, Soko Morinaga

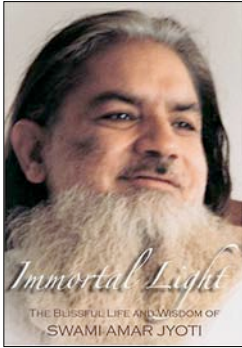
(Wisdom, 2004, 154pp, 11.95)



Occasionally one is lucky enough to come upon a book which can be described by a single word: Wonderful! Subtitled “an ongoing lesson in the extent of my own stupidity,” *Novice to Master* takes one through the subtle, water-flowing philosophy of Zen, while avoiding being too philosophical or too religious or too Zen. Soko Morinaga (1925-1995) received the seal Dharma transmission from Sessō Ōta Rōshi. Morinaga served as the head of Hanazono University, the primary training school of the Rinzai sect. Morinaga’s book is first-and-foremost an autobiography following the author’s journey from his adolescence to entering his first monastery to becoming a Zen master. Through his tale Morinaga imparts wisdom that is easy to access and based on traditional Zen commonsense. The reader also receives unique glimpses into the heart of Zen Buddhist monastic life—in a way that envelopes the reader in the tradition as opposed to allowing otherness to block one’s access. Morinaga is a gifted storyteller, self-deprecating, where appropriate, and possessing a perfect sense of timing. There are gems and Dharma treasures throughout the book: “You must puzzle out your own unripeness,” Morinaga points out. This book is for anyone interested in engaging a practical and, simultaneously, spiritual life. The beginner and the advance student will both come away from it with much in hand. This is a story of a life and, more importantly, the wisdom gained from a full and spiritual life. This is not a book of esoteric teachings or intricate extrapolations of sutra. This is a work for all interested in an engaged life. Morinaga’s tale is a masterpiece of 20th spiritual writing.

Immortal Light, Swami Amar Jyoti

(Truth Consciousness, 2004, 492pp, \$24.95)



Swami Amar Jyoti was one of the Indian gurus who brought Yoga and Vedanta to the West in the latter part of the 20th century. Jyoti split his time between Indian and the United States. He established ashrams in both Pune, India and Boulder, Colorado, USA. Jyoti's personal philosophy was of a Divine godhead that was both Mother and Father. Like other spiritual leaders of his era, Jyoti attempted to meld the

central spiritual cores of various historic religious teachers together into a single universal philosophy. *Immortal Light* is a spiritual autobiography pulled together from various talks Jyoti gave on his life and spiritual awakening. The work is well edited by long-time Jyoti disciple Sita Stuhlmiller. Despite being drawn from Satsangs (spiritual discourses) given over the course of several years, *Immortal Light* avoids the disjointed feel that often flaws such compilations. The work follows chronologically Jyoti's spiritual quest, journey to the Himalayas and eventual spiritual awakening. His tales impart wisdom gained from his interaction with his own teachers and spiritual guides he met along the way toward his own enlightenment experience. Jyoti through his discourses on his own life also introduces his spiritual philosophy drawing on both traditional Yoga and Vedanta while bringing in his own syncretic philosophy of a universal spirituality.