

BOOK REVIEW

Elizabeth Pérez, *The Gut: A Black Atlantic Alimentary Tract*

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In *The Gut*, Elizabeth Pérez offers a thought-provoking analysis of the belly's significance in the religious practices of Afro-Diasporic religions – particularly Cuban Lucumí, Brazilian Candomblé, and Haitian Vodou. The author's unique perspective is evident from the outset, with a delightful playfulness apparent in the book's many puns, beginning with the amusing subtitle and the disclaimer that she does not provide a Grand Unified Theory of the gut or guts in Black Atlantic traditions. While not giving in to the craving for generality, Pérez delves into the embodied physiology, storytelling, and ceremonies found in Afro-Diasporic traditions, emphasizing the gut's cognitive function to recognize Black Atlantic knowledges, not just as raw material for theory but as the product of theorization.

The book is divided into eight sections, each exploring different facets of the gut's role in religious contexts. After an introduction (section 1), Pérez examines gut feelings (section 2), the beings that reside within the belly (section 3), West and Central African precedents for the Afro-Diasporic 'gut-brain axis' (section 4), and the offering of guts to deities and ancestors (section 5). The author then draws on participant observation and archival research to shed light on the connection between the literal gutting that occurs in kitchen spaces and the figurative spilling of guts that accompanies it (sections 6–8). Through this exploration, Pérez challenges the notion that the brain is the sole locus of reason and seeks to decolonize disciplinary formations in religious studies. By exploring gut feelings, beings, history, delicacies, and the practices of commensality, dietary taboos, and food preparation in Black Atlantic traditions – highlighting the role of kitchen spaces as sites of religious socialization and the transmission of complex technical instructions and history lessons – Pérez succeeds admirably in challenging the dominance of the head in religion and brings it closer to where the magic truly happens.

The susceptibility of the gut to magic and sorcery has resulted in a rich pharmacopoeia from Afro-Diasporic healers and diviners, who alleviate suffering caused by stomach and intestinal ailments. *The Gut* underscores the deep connection between practitioners' guts and the world of the deities and ancestors, highlighting the transformative power of these practices. Crucially, Afro-Diasporic traditions exhibit what Pérez refers to as *ethnosymptomatology* – the belief that the body's various parts are owned by specific beings, and they may utilize their 'property' to convey messages. Sensations experienced in the gut are not mere bodily sensations but rather signals of spiritual beings manifesting within it. Consequently, *The Gut* delves into the relationship between somatic signatures, the

education of attention, and knowledge acquisition. Through somatic experiences and muscle memories, practitioners of Afro-Diasporic traditions develop intimate relationships with their protecting deities, and gut feelings become the media for communication between these entities and human beings. Thus, somatic signatures play a role in understanding religious cognition as embodied and extended beyond the confines of the head.

Pérez's emphasis on haptics, tactility, and interoceptive sensations felt deep within the abdomen adds a rich layer to the understanding of gut phenomena. By prioritizing precision in the portrayal of these phenomena, the author advances scholarly debates on embodiment, emotion, and cognition in religious studies. Moreover, Pérez underlines the importance of including non-Euro-American models of 'mind' along the gut-brain axis, arguing that the concept of religion has been a race-making category, perpetuating the marginalization of African and Afro-Diasporic traditions and reinforcing anti-Blackness. By broadening the category of 'cognitive' to incorporate the gut, Pérez seeks to recast Afro-Diasporic religions as more than mere repositories of magic spells, acknowledging their profound intellectual contributions and recognizing Black Atlantic knowledges as such. Such an attitude offers us a similar benefit to realizing that differentiating between black (and/or Black) magic and religion lacks significant practical value. Instead, such distinctions have often been used to justify the marginalization of stigmatized and minority groups.

I am confident that *The Gut* is water for the mill of those challenging the exclusion of numerous traditions from the philosophy of religion, as well as recommending that the discipline revise its methodology and expand its contact with neighbouring disciplines such as anthropology and ethnography. Kevin Schilbrack has diagnosed traditional philosophy of religion as narrow, intellectual, and insular, referring to its limited range of examples, neglect of religious practice, and remoteness from other disciplines within the academic study of religion and even within philosophy itself. This is why, among other reasons, *The Gut* should be read by philosophers of religion. It serves as an aid to religious illiteracy that spells out how embodied, situated, and materially extended practices are properly cognitive, while providing rich ethnographic sources for a contemplative approach to the philosophy of religion that seeks to do conceptual justice to the variety of forms of religious life – such as the one advanced by Mikel Burley. If one wants to philosophize about religious traditions in the absence of textual foundations and systematic theology, engaging with cultural anthropology and drawing from ethnography becomes a necessity, not a luxury.

Having finished reading *The Gut*, I was put in mind of a Brazilian saying: 'tamanho não é documento' ('size is not a document'). It roughly means that size and quality are not necessarily correlated. Although bite-sized like an appetizer, *The Gut* ends up feeling like a full, satisfying meal and gives the reader a lot to chew on. I'll be digesting this one for the foreseeable future.