

Beliso-De Jesús, Aisha. 2024. *Excited delirium. Race, police violence, and the invention of a disease*. Durham, London: Duke University Press. 320 pp. Pb.: \$28.95. ISBN: 9781478030553.

Book review by

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The medical community has a history of misjudging the cause of death. During the Middle Ages, European physicians linked illnesses to celestial influences and sorcery. Across ancient cultures, there was a widespread belief that death was never “natural,” stemming from a view that the human body is inherently robust and sound. Conversely, injury, disease, and death were seen as malevolent and aberrant.

In *Excited Delirium: Race, Police Violence, and the Invention of a Disease*, Aisha Beliso-De Jesús confronts medical misjudgment head-on, citing instances of minority deaths at the hands of police, deaths reportedly due to “excited delirium.” The author makes a case that this is a racially-charged, politically driven falsehood perpetuated by a medical examination system that, like any powerful institution, is tainted by influence and greed.

To support her argument, Beliso-De Jesús links the emergence of “excited delirium” as a diagnosis to the rise of Afro-Cuban religions in the 1980s. Charles Wetli, the book’s central figure and antagonist, was a self-proclaimed expert on both EDS and these “pagan” religions. She sharpens this connection by tying it to the Satanic Panic of the 1980s and ’90s, a time when televangelists, preachers, police officers—and even my Catholic school teachers—condemned rap music, violent video games, and crack cocaine as threats to the social order. They labeled “excited delirium” as the telltale sign, warning it could spark youth rebellion at its mildest or, at its worst, drive them to sacrifice children to Satan.

It's true: a core tenet of American Protestant thought is the aversion to such "hysteria." Is this rooted in a genuine concern for spiritual health? Or is it a shield for the white patriarchy? Whatever the reasons, such delirium was perceived as a serious threat to the Reagan-era establishment, and yet, the very administration that demonized Satanic hysteria, for fear it communed with the devil, made itself cozy with televangelist hysteria, for it communed with God himself!

Beliso-De Jesús exposes the Satanic Panic for what it was: a call for Protestant ethics—or, as she hints, masked white supremacy—in mass media. But failing this, the Moral Majority and other self-styled crusaders of righteousness turned to the dead, leaving their mark of "excited delirium" on countless death certificates, diagnoses which demand re-examination. I'm struck by parallels to autistic misdiagnoses—like the nonverbal "Wild Boy of Aveyron," labeled a "wild child"—where panic paves a quick path from 911 calls to psych wards, much like EDS fast-tracks blame away from police.

The author rejects "excited delirium" as the cause of death, instead targeting overpowered Tasers, dubious doses of ketamine, and systemic racism. Some of these hit the mark, but others take on a more spiritual dimension. Take her claim that five Black officers, who "embodied white supremacy," (p. 198) killed Tyre Nichols, a Black civilian. Here, much as the Greeks blamed Eris for strife, the author interprets white supremacy as an independent agent pulling the strings. In other areas, the author's Santería beliefs are more predominant. For instance, she claims the knife-wielding Mario Woods was shot "unjustifiably." As a 43-year-old, I can cover 20 feet from a stop in under two seconds, and Woods could have covered 12 feet in less than that time, but such details are sidelined in the interest of the spiritual arc of the book. Instead, Beliso-De Jesús proceeds to describe a spiritual encounter with Woods (p. 207), who reportedly employed "vibrational activism" to demand justice during Beyoncé's 2016 Super Bowl performance. Such spiritual claims might not sway everyone and may even evoke memories of 90s televangelists conjuring the dead, but these interspersed anecdotes are highly engaging.

Whatever one's opinions regarding close-range knife threats or the author's spiritual claims, like Woods's ritual "pathway" (p. 207) ku—, Beliso-De Jesús exposes "excited delirium" as a racialized myth without relying on any tired Darwinist tropes, appealing instead to our common humanity and calling for abandoning beastly violence myths. The author's personalized approach will also engage any reader interested in the current state of police-civilian relations.