

Dances with Spiders: Crisis, Celebrity and Celebration in Southern Italy.

By Karen Lüdtke.

New York: Berghahn Books, 2009.

224 pages.

For years, few critical texts on Apulian tarantism and *tarantella* have been available to Anglophone readers. Most of the studies were in Italian and, sometimes, French, German, and Latin. In 2005, Ernesto De Martino's seminal book, *La terra del rimorso*, originally published in Italian in 1961, was translated into English by Dorothy Louise Zinn as *The Land of Remorse*. *Dances with Spiders* complements the translation of De Martino's study by offering Lüdtke's accounts of her personal experience and lengthy stays in the Salento, a cultural region of Apulia in southern Italy. Lüdtke's extensive academic research and her personal involvement with the cultural life of the Salento make this study an excellent text on tarantism and *pizzica*, a local form of *tarantella* music and dance. Comprised of a preface, an introduction, four parts, nine chapters, and an epilogue, *Dances with Spiders* is a wonderful blend of the theoretical and the personal, an optimal balance to attempt to describe, contextualize, and critically frame the ritual of *tarantismo* and its contemporary forms of revitalization.

In the introduction, Lüdtke explains what tarantism is, how its symbolism has acquired strength and meaning over the centuries, why it is documented in the Salento, and how she came to travel to this area where she began her research in 1996. More than ten years later, the author's theoretical writings, personal accounts, and mixed media are available here for readers interested in the fields of social studies, medical anthropology, anthropology of performance, performance studies, history, music and dance, psychology, and psychoanalysis.

The author's subtle tone is present throughout the study, weaving with the voices of other scholars, local artists, healers, and *tarantati*. Of special interest is Lüdtke's personal experience with Evelina, a *tarantata* (a woman bitten by a tarantula). The author witnesses Evelina's struggles to cope with the affliction caused by the bite and the physical, emotional, and spiritual consequences of being different. Lüdtke conveys Evelina's spiritual relationship with St. Paul, the protector of the *tarantati*, throughout the process of requesting a "grace," a miraculous healing. Lüdtke's reflexive preface and epilogue are a poetic account of the author's departure from Evelina's home and Evelina's receiving of a grace. Ultimately, the narrative of Evelina's healing ritual and eventual grace frame the more theoretical and historical analysis and descriptions, allowing the reader to understand a complex cultural system otherwise difficult to access. Across chapters, Lüdtke constantly translates Salentine dialect and Italian into English, one culture into another culture, physical and acoustic gestures into words; this is no small enterprise.

In the two chapters of Part I, "Past and Present Spider Webs," Lüdtke introduces the *taranta*, the local spider at the center of the ritual system of tarantism, and gives a historical perspective on how discourse on this ritual has changed over time and in different political and social contexts. Chapter 1 starts with the author's personal experience in Galatina, a small town in the Salento. Lüdtke's choice to start her book with a personal experience sets the tone for the entire study in which personal experience and academic analysis intertwine. Her description of the ritual performed in the church of

St. Paul in Galatina in 2001 is of great value for it is only through the author's commitment to the local culture, the hours and months dedicated to slowly building trust, that she is allowed to enter the chapel during the festivities of St. Paul on June 29. Chapter 1 ends with key questions that will return throughout the book: As the ritual is changing and disappearing, how is the local population today dealing with these changes? What are the ways in which the potential of the *pizzica* to heal is preserved and used? The author sets forth the example of Ada, a dancer and osteopath, who has used *pizzica* to restore her sense of well-being after a series of life crises. Chapter 2 moves from the modern and the personal to a historical perspective of the ritual, its origins in legends as well as in historical documents, and the role of Ernesto De Martino's 1961 book in widening the awareness of this ritual on a national and European scale. It also highlights the role of other writers, including doctors and philosophers, in framing tarantism throughout the centuries. The two key points inherent in the socioeconomic, medical, and anthropological discussions of tarantism and the spider's bite that are at the heart of this system are underlined: the musical (the effects of music on the body) and the medical (focusing on curing the bite's symptoms).

The three chapters of Part II, "The Spider's Cult Today," provide the reader with ethnographic details on the evolution and changes of the healing ritual and how in the Salento today tarantism and its contemporary revitalization of neotarantism intertwine. The author is very careful in analyzing various ritual performances—both staged and spontaneous—in which the healing effects of the spider's music and dance are evoked and sought. Chapter 3 includes two interviews with members of the local population, both of whom address the questions of belief and faith in popular healing systems of which tarantism is an example. In the following chapter, Lüdtke analyzes *pizzica* mega-concerts, comparing and contrasting them with the more private ritual forms or with smaller festivals. The obvious differences in both form and intent support the author's awareness that the revitalization of *pizzica* in show business could cause a loss of its social power. Yet, at the same time, the author carefully insists on the performance arts' potential to heal, even in more modern contexts. Chapter 4 continues and broadens this discussion through the analysis of local festivals varying in size, popularity, and intent. The final chapter of Part II contains local artists' narratives on "personal motivations and experiences" when using *pizzica* to recover well-being.

Part III, "From Ritual to Limelight," comprises three chapters all centered on the definition of *tarantata* in both a historical and contemporary context. Who are those bitten by the tarantula? What is the worldview that supports such a system of affliction and healing? How is this system of folk healing framed in Western medical discourse? The four key aspects of ritual—place, time, props, and techniques—are analyzed in historical narratives and compared to their contemporary counterparts in the modern-day Salento.

The conclusion, Chapter 9, "Dancing Beyond Spiders," draws together the various theoretical threads present in the book. Among those, two are of particular importance: (1) Performance arts, of which *tarantella* music and dance are a form, have a transformative potential that can be used to heal, restore, and support; and (2) despite the disappearance of the "traditional" tarantism ritual today (as described, e.g., by De Martino in the 1960s), many of the afflictions that were at its base still persist today under different names. *Pizzica* music and dance can be of help—and are—to those

seeking a tool to regain well-being. Lüdtke ends the book with an intimate tone, sharing her personal account of Evelina's participation in a healing ritual in the chapel of St. Paul in Galatina.

Overall, this book is very well researched and beautifully written. It is a great resource for all—scholars and laypeople—interested in Italian culture and folklore, medical anthropology, and the relationship between the performing arts and healing.

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Religious Festive Practices in Boston's North End.

By Augusto Ferraiuolo.

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291 pages.

In this well-researched but sometimes frustrating book, Augusto Ferraiuolo explores the complex and vibrant community life of Italian Americans living in Boston's North End. Although he focuses on the cycle of religious festivals that spans every weekend of the summer, Ferraiuolo persuasively demonstrates the far-reaching effects of these performances beyond the periods of their enactment. Each *fiesta* represents the collective labor and long-term planning of a voluntary association originally based on regional and even village ties to Italy. Ferraiuolo shows how these groups are fundamentally social and political institutions that have different, and at times overlapping, constituencies shaping the day-to-day lives of Italian Americans in the North End. This includes who drinks coffee together at which bar, who attends which church and supports which political candidate, and who helps whom with donations of money and labor when times get rough.

Ferraiuolo opens with two largely historical chapters: The first explores the cultural and political geography of the North End going back to the seventeenth century, whereas the second focuses on the successive waves of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century immigration that shaped the neighborhood's ethnic character. Both of these chapters are data rich but also include information that does not seem directly relevant to the book's overall project, such as a lengthy discussion of topographical changes in the eighteenth century or tables of transportation and housing costs from the 1840s. Ferraiuolo then moves in a more interesting and appropriate direction in the third and fourth chapters, both of which were based to some degree on ethnographic research. In these chapters, he explores the community's concern for orthopraxy, or correct historical behavior and action, which requires that each religious festival maintain practices that are rooted in the Italian past while accommodating the Italian-American present. For example, the statue of a saint must be carried on the shoulders of the faithful rather than pulled through the streets in a cart because to do otherwise would break with local tradition in the North End. Practice is key in Ferraiuolo's analysis, for there seems to be little concern for