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THE “QUEERNESS” OF CEREMONY:
POSSESSION AND SACRED SPACE IN HAITIAN RELIGION

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Dantò was not the only queer woman in this room. In a body-heated basement where all the candles were lit in celebration of Gede, the *lwa* of life, death, and sexuality, Haitian women draped a royal blue shawl around the brown-skinned devotee possessed by Ezili Dantò, the female warrior figure and *lwa* of motherhood.¹ Dantò approached and commanded me to have many children quickly, to which I responded that I could not at the moment because I had to finish my college degree first. As I spoke, I could not believe I was arguing with a goddess. In the fall of 2009, I was in the suburbs of Montreal, and I had rarely entertained the notion of being a mother. I stood tall defending myself, though I worried I might offend her. She opened her arms to me, called me her daughter, and said that that she loved me and I belonged to her. She mentioned how I had traveled many waters to be with her, and in the end, she would protect me. Her love was so overwhelming that I broke down and cried several times that evening. There we were, the two of us, wrapped in blue, intertwined in commitment to one another. Dantò will forever be with me.²

In multiple religious traditions, spiritual possession allows individuals to connect with the divine. These individuals are often women, who, in the moment of trance, challenge existing frameworks of gender and power. Focusing particularly on Haitian Vodou, scholars including Maya Deren, Katherine Dunham, Zora Neale Hurston, Elizabeth McAlister, and Karen McCarthy Brown have explored the gendered nature of possession performances.³ Brown and McAlister, for example, claim that possession provides a form of otherwise absent agency, giving women a space of power from which to interrogate social and economic inequities. In more recent scholarship, Roberto Strongman examines “cross-gender subjectivities,” where male and female deities take over the bodies of people of the “opposite” sex.⁴ However, despite this productive focus on the gendered experience of possession, more attention should be paid to the ways in which Vodou ceremonies offer a site for Black female bodies

to find healing and agency: spiritual possession disrupts standard notions of Western womanhood by offering subaltern expressions of sexuality and gender.

The basement in the suburbs of Montreal illustrates the slippage between queer embodiment and spiritual possession. The basement can be a neglected area of the house, relegated to storage, but for practitioners of this often stigmatized religion, the basement is reappropriated into a sacred space. The notion of queerness is a way to explore this space. My understanding of queer theory is largely influenced by Cathy J. Cohen's definition: "Queer theory focuses on and makes central not only the socially constructed nature of sexuality and sexual categories, but also the varying degrees and multiple sites of power distributed with all categories of sexuality, including the normative category of heterosexuality."⁵ In other words, queerness and queer theory are umbrella terms I used to describe sexual and gender fluidity within Haitian Vodou communities and assess disruptions to normative power dynamics in religious spaces. Through spiritual possession and through the liminality that is implicit in queerness, practitioners of Haitian Vodou are able to reappropriate the basement as a site of empowerment. The depth of Dantò's Black womanhood cannot be fully understood without these liminal spaces. Analyzing Dantò, the keeper of lesbians and transgender people, naturally requires the consideration of queer theory as a discourse to examine her place within Vodou. Focusing on Dantò illuminates gender performativities that challenge Western notions of womanhood and the very idea of what it means to be a woman. Vodou deities like Ezili Dantò invite discussions on whether certain needs and desires can be achieved within oneself and the community. Through ceremony, women of various sexualities and gender expressions hold her accountable for guidance and insight into their lives. When Dantò mounts a practitioner, they become a site to explore gender and sexuality through their interactions, where Dantò tells queer members of the community that she loves and accepts them as she affectionately embraces them and speaks to women about their relationships and their children.⁶ Dantò scolds members of the community for harmful actions, such as infidelity and domestic abuse. She is reflective of societal norms, like when she told me to have children, and yet not limited by them, because she provides an important space for questioning these ideas.

This article offers another lens to consider how the ceremonial space of Vodou functions as a queer site, allowing for experiences of spiritual possession by Vodou spirits, as well as unconventional expressions of gender and sexuality for participants, especially Black women. I draw from theorists of religion, gender, and diaspora studies in order to frame

this argument. Historian of religion Mircea Eliade develops the notion of “sacred space” to elucidate the participants’ transformation through direct contact with the divine.⁷ Religion scholar Tracey E. Hucks explains how Black women’s worship of and devotion to African-derived goddesses empowers them, grounding them with a strong sense of self-worth and history.⁸ Additionally, gender studies scholar Gayatri Gopinath expands definitions of queer diaspora, describing how “queer desires, bodies and subjectivities become dense sites of memory in the production and reproduction of culture and communal belonging.”⁹ Lastly, drawing from the work of Gina Athena Ulysse, Audre Lorde, and Zora Neale Hurston, I use an auto-ethnographic approach to analyze my own experiences within a Haitian Vodou community in Montreal as a participant observer in order to explore these complex notions of Black womanhood, motherhood, and sexuality.¹⁰ I also rely on ethnographic and historical research and interviews with practitioners on Haitian Vodou. It is my hope that this and other such studies will demonstrate the value of pursuing critical research on gender and sexuality in Haitian Vodou.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Within Vodou communities, sacred space provides an arena for gender and sexual diversity and also allows the existence of alternative notions of motherhood. The concept of *queerness* is used in this context as a general acceptance of sexual diversity, various orientations, and identities outside of heteronormative definitions and boundaries. I recognize that the terminology of “queerness” has its constraints and limitations when analyzing the relationships of sexuality and spiritual devotion outside of the United States. Scholar of humanities and LGBTQ studies Randy Conner echoes these sentiments as he describes how studies of sexuality that use Western vocabulary such as “transgender,” “lesbianism,” “bisexuality,” and “homosexuality” to describe Afro-Diasporic religions such as Haitian Vodou can both aid and hinder the exploration of these phenomena.¹¹

Vodou does in fact acknowledge sexual and gender diversity based on terms including (but not limited to) *makòme*, *masisi*, and *nan metye*, which are all used to refer to homoerotically or bi-erotically inclined males or to transgender people assigned male at birth, and *madivin* and *zanmi*, which are used to refer to lesbian or bi-erotically inclined females or to transgender people assigned female at birth.¹² Although there are terms that *Vodouizan* use to describe the diverse gender identities and sexual orientations of practitioners, Conner states that scholars as well as practitioners have tended to focus on the spiritual role of the erotic rather than the erotic in practitioners’ gendered behavior identity.¹³ Relying

on my fieldwork in Montreal and my role as a participant observer, I argue that the term “queer” can in fact be helpful within the Diaspora, as several of my interlocutors from the Haitian Diaspora in Montreal use this terminology to define themselves and the Vodou deities whom they serve.¹⁴ For this reason, I employ a queer lens to analyze the relationships between devotees and spirits during possession. Thus, the Diaspora is a site where we see Western ideologies being mapped onto Haitian identities in ways that might not be so in Haiti itself. Through possession, a Vodou sacred space becomes an excellent site to witness how lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer people, as well as people with various expressions of gender identity, find an opportunity to reimagine themselves in a religion that welcomes transnational terminologies from multiple geographic locations and provides a flexibility by acknowledging their whole selves—if not outwardly, then with quiet acceptance.

Dantò is a *lwa* who favors queerness in this sense, and it is within this sacred space of queer ceremony that women of diverse sexual identities and expressions of womanhood are able to meet on common ground. Most practitioners and scholars accept that Dantò herself is a woman who loves women sexually, and she has also been described as having transgender characteristics.¹⁵ Though there have been many discussions about Dantò’s own sexual preferences, what is for certain is that she represents a nonconformist gender positionality and manifests herself in many ways to the men and women who serve her. I argue that a community with a strong Afro-Caribbean religious foundation enables the proud proclamation of Black womanhood. This is critical to understand because Caribbean women have resisted colonial structures and found agency through religious means as well as through political, economic, and social gains.

QUEERNESS AND SACRED SPACE

This is where the soul lies. Claudine Michel’s words echoed in my head as I felt the heat radiating from the forehead of the Haitian initiate possessed by Dantò. Manbo Jacqueline Epingle’s wiry arms wrapped around my forearms as she joined the other Black women and myself, positioning ourselves face to face so that our foreheads connected.¹⁶ Instantaneously, while still connected to her forehead, I started mirroring the forward circular motions that she made with her arms and body. *This is where the soul lies.* In *Mama Lola*, anthropologist Karen McCarthy Brown illustrates the basic fundamentals of spiritual possession, or mounting, in Vodou. An initiate’s body is a vessel in which specific *lwa* can “ride” a person, and the divine and human join as one. In this temporal state, the spirit’s

voice and behavior take over the initiate, who then unconsciously delivers messages (good or bad) to people within the community or the world at large.¹⁷ Unlike in Christian theology, which places the soul near the heart, within Vodou, the soul is positioned within the initiate’s head.¹⁸ That is why initiates must undergo *lave tèt*, the second stage of initiation, in which they spiritually wash their heads in order to prepare for the spirit to enter their bodies.

The mounted woman continued to hold me as we danced in the middle of the room. She held me closely as if I were an infant. As we moved, several Haitian female initiates anointed my head with Florida Water, a potent perfume that was pleasant to my nose as each splash purified my very existence.¹⁹ The blue shawl was continually being wrapped around us because it kept falling off as we moved. I stopped being scared as I relaxed my grip and started following with more ease. I trusted these women. I trusted Dantò, and I allowed the process to consume me. Tears came rushing to my eyes; I was so overwhelmed with emotions. Dantò kept proclaiming that I was a beautiful woman, that I should stop crying, that I should not cry when I see my mother. She said, “Isn’t it me that you have been searching for? Well, I am here! I am here for you.” The female practitioners took us to a room, and I was aware that here, only initiates or followers being initiated into Vodou were present. Nobody could be allowed in this room if they were not already in the process of being initiated.²⁰ How had I been able to bypass this rule? Why had I been an exception? The women had insisted that I join them in this room, and maybe this was another queer moment brought about by the sacred space and the ceremony’s ritual rules. To this day, I still do not know the answer to this mystery, but because of this experience I know that within the ceremonial space, possession serves as an experience where Haitian women can operate outside the boundaries of heteronormative intimate relationships. It is through possession that one can see how seemingly “impossible desires” can gather.²¹ It is through possession within sacred space that women find sites of community and solidarity through their worship of Caribbean goddesses. Importantly, Vodou ceremonies are a site where women’s voices are afforded authority and power.

EROTIC SUBJECTIVITY

In his article “Transcorporeality in Vodou,” literary and gender studies scholar Roberto Strongman discusses the importance of possession in sacred spaces. His concept of *transpossession* explores how the gendered dimensions of a spirit can be expressed within the human vessel in complex ways because gender and sexuality manifest in diverse ways in both the

human and divine worlds.²² This is a helpful term when considering the gender and sexual expressions that can be perceived when someone is mounted by a *lwa*. Whether the *lwa* is male or female, the initiate's body can express gender in ways that are both conventional and nonconventional. Additionally, through possession, one can act out same-sex desires that the conscious self might not act on. This demonstrates how complex gender can be in Vodou, as any person can become a receptacle for either male or female *lwa* to enter, regardless of the gender or sexuality of the possessed person, or *chwal*. In her ethnographic account, Brown writes about how *manbo* Mama Lola (or Alourdes) describes the invocation of Ezili Dantò as providing agency to all women. Mama Lola is a heterosexual woman living in Brooklyn for over twenty-five years, whose interaction with the *lwa* provides her with skills to serve in her daily travails not only in ceremonies but also in everyday life. Brown observes how Mama Lola regards Dantò as her mother because “she both describes key circumstances of her life and identifies with some of her most important values.”²³ Mama Lola, like Dantò, is a proud and dignified woman, and they share a symbiotic relationship, each one providing for the other. Deep Vodou knowledge, known as *konesans*, includes lessons from the gods in how to rear children and be a hard worker.²⁴ Especially as a mother, Mama Lola can relate to Ezili Dantò's many-faceted selves, and she serves Dantò accordingly, making certain to “treat her well with caution.”²⁵

The Vodou altar is also a sacred space to serve the spirits. As Mama Lola describes her own practice, “any gift presented to Ezili Dantò—money, clothing, dolls (which the spirit loves)—stays right on her altar and is never used by any member of the family.”²⁶ Mama Lola does this with care and respect to avoid provoking Dantò's anger and also to channel the spirit's energy in a positive way while keeping her negative aspects minimized. The level of respect between the *lwa* and the devotee is remarkable. There is a sense of communality and solidarity, as well as an acknowledgment of the sacred space that the devotee and the *lwa* share with the altar. It makes sense that Mama Lola understands this space to be one of serious devotion and thus is very detail oriented in her worship of Ezili Dantò. The priestess provides offerings as another mode of service in gratitude for Dantò's protection. The *lwa* becomes a part of the devotee's life and home. In return, Mama Lola is assured of the goddess's love and care. This relationship is truly reciprocal as each party benefits from the other. Mama Lola is aware that Ezili Dantò is queer in terms of her gender/sexual identity and finds her immensely helpful for the tools, strength, and security she provides in navigating her daily existence. In this respect, Dantò is often called upon for the benefit of single Black working mothers raising several children, as Dantò does herself.

DIASPORA AND QUEERNESS

The discourse of queerness created in Vodou ceremonies is not limited to Haiti and those in the Haitian Diaspora. Other African-derived religions and epistemologies have also created new forms of expression and creativity with regard to gender and sexual identity. In *Sexing the Caribbean: Gender, Race, and Sexual Labor*, Kamala Kempadoo suggests the need for a different lens for thinking about Caribbean sexuality. She explains that African Diasporic expressions of gender and sexuality are more than just a fabrication of European imagination derived from the caricatures created during the era of slavery and colonization; rather, they serve as lived realities for Caribbean bodies.²⁷ Importantly, she highlights how Caribbean women and men find agency within various expressions of their sexuality. Both Kempadoo and Gopinath demonstrate that gender serves as a site to understand nationalism and globalism within diasporic spaces. In another part of the Caribbean, Cubans are constructing their own gender identities by grappling with the realities of their everyday lives. Jafari Allen’s book *¿Venceremos? The Erotics of Black Self-Making in Cuba* explains the significance of the ways in which Black Cubans (re)interpret racialized and sexualized interpellations of their identities in the current moment. He emphasizes the importance of being open and letting subjects recount their own stories, and he stresses that one must “attune [one’s] ears to meanings as they [are] expressed.”²⁸ Moreover, Allen suggests that Black Cubans have collectively resisted Western definitions of gender and sexuality through what he identifies as their erotic subjectivity.

Allen expands on Audre Lorde’s term “erotic subjectivity,” which she uses to describe a female energy and creative source of power that can be used as a critical lens for life.²⁹ Historically, in Cuba nonheteronormative males (and women) were seen as social pariahs and deviants to nationalism and citizenship. These social “others” were cast as scandalous, unruly, or “dangerously exotic,” and in order to protect “decent” Cubans, sexual minorities were contained, regulated, and eliminated by either community policing or a governmental police force.³⁰ Allen’s philosophy in interacting with and respecting his subjects is key and has dictated my own approach as a participant observer and the way I engage with my interlocutors within Vodou. In ethnography, it is also helpful to consider Gina Athena Ulyse’s notion of “alter(ed)native voices,” as she explains: “The term connotes an anti- and postcolonial stance, with a conscious understanding that the continuities of history mean that there is no clean break from the past.”³¹ These frameworks are useful for interrogating how I am shaped by my experiences as a first-generation Nigerian American woman: my identities

influence the way my research “speaks” to me, particularly in the context of an African Diasporic religious community. There is analytical power in understanding the ways in which my own reality affects my work and finding opportunities to examine my own experiences as illustrative of larger contexts regarding Black womanhood and sexuality in the Diaspora. In relating my own experiences within Vodou ceremonies, therefore, I recognize that I am informing the space that I inhabit. As I continue employing a Black feminist critique, I explore how sexuality, gender, and possession function in sacred spaces within Haitian religion, becoming more attuned with myself as well as the community that has invited me into its sacred space.

VISIT FROM THE GODDESS

In Montreal, though the *lwa* were accepting of queer expressions of women’s relationships in the ceremony I attended, it is curious that their insistence on childbearing was so firm. For me, the command to have children was not entirely troubling in itself, and I was more stunned than alarmed by the idea. However, the emphasis on motherhood does raise the question of whether the *lwa*—and, just as importantly, the communities engaging with them—still value archetypal constructions of what it means to be a woman. In Vodou, children can be representative of power and symbolic wealth, and the more children a woman has, the more powerful she is. But this can also be a narrow way of viewing the female body, suggesting the potential limits of women’s agency within this sacred space. Envisioning the female body as solely responsible for the production of children can be restrictive and problematic. Why should there be a choice in lovers, but no choice in childbirth? Why did the spirits make a point of telling me that children absolutely needed to be in my future? Was I told that childbirth was important because the *lwa* knew I was open to the prospect? These are difficult questions to grapple with, and they may have a multitude of answers.

Indeed, there might be more rigidity for women’s roles according to the *lwa* than Vodou practitioners are willing to accept in this day and age. In further research, it will be important to further analyze the necessity of motherhood in the tradition, and I hope to eventually interview practitioners who may not want children in order to explore their interactions with the spirits. In my own case, I remain open to children, but I argued with Ezili Dantò that I was not financially, professionally, or emotionally ready to have one. Moreover, I did not have a partner to help with rearing a child and I did not want to do so alone. I told the *lwa* that continuing my education was very important to me and that once I

finished my graduate studies and secured a steady job to provide for my family, I would be more comfortable with the idea of having children. The *lwa* informed me that this was permissible and that I would have all I wanted and more. Though the *lwa* gave me a command, it was within my power, as a non-initiate, to negotiate. While practitioners may have different experiences, they often seem able to mediate relationships with the *lwa*, regardless of whether these life decisions are always supported by the spirits.

Both Brown and Melville Herskovits mention that in ceremonies, not everyone easily gives up their “control” to spirits, and even experienced initiates still “show signs of struggle” when they are mounted.³² As Herskovits adds in *The Myth of a Negro Past*, since possession involves “los[ing] control of his [or her] conscious faculties and knowing nothing of what he [or she] does until he comes to himself [or herself],” it is not always desired by initiates, nor is it safe.³³ Age, ability, and mental state are all significant considerations when being possessed, and the initiate and the community have agency to make decisions based on the safety of specific people. This observation explains an instance when a male initiate in Montreal was mounted by Dantò and refused to let her in. His body contorted, writhing with pain while he screamed. Many initiates ran to him and helped remove the spirit. It was a violent interaction, and it took about six people to hold him down. As he struggled, his eyes went blank. A practitioner pressed their forehead against the man’s head and asked the spirit to leave his body. Eventually Dantò left him and he was able to rest. Another way that practitioners are able to remove the spirit from a particular person is through transference. Because the soul resides in the head, one initiate can go to another and place their own head in front of the other’s. With small gestures and murmured chants, a practitioner is able to transmit the deity into their own head and be mounted by that particular spirit. Once the *lwa* had left the man in Montreal, he breathed a deep sigh of relief and tried to calm himself. I later asked him why he did not want Dantò to be inside him, and he replied, “I just didn’t. I didn’t want to be possessed. I can feel her come, but I didn’t want her to come!”³⁴ It was not clear whether his desire had anything to do with Ezili being a female spirit. What was significant was that he had a degree of choice in this powerful exchange. Additionally, the community within this sacred space helped him actualize his choice. The body ultimately has to consent to being possessed, or else there can be a rupture, with disastrous results for the devotee. Throughout the ceremony, practitioners were making sure that people had the physical capacity to be mounted, depending on their ability and willingness to participate. In this way, the community protected people.

Also attending the ceremony was an elderly Haitian woman in a wheelchair who was almost mounted by Dantò. At first glance, she did not look like she had much mobility before possession, and then during possession, I watched her frail body move frantically as a spirit arrived and attempted to mount her. She mouthed inaudible words to practitioners as the *lwa*'s pull over her consciousness began to manifest. The woman tried to stand up to walk. Haitian *manbos* and *houngans* immediately rushed to remove the spirit from her, for fear that she could not handle it and the possession might harm her. Here, negotiations of possession within sacred space are just as significant to note because the sheer power of the *lwa*, whether male or female, might have been too much for this elderly woman. The community's concern for her health and the participants' fast actions solidified the removal of the spirit. The will of the spirits does not always dictate the will of the community, and members of the community are quick to assist their fellow practitioners in need. In the queerness of ceremony, there is often room for negotiation with the gods, even if this means removing a *lwa* from the head of a person whom the spirits have chosen to mount.

SEXUALITY AND COLORISM AMONG THE SPIRITS

Initiates' bodies act as vessels for spirits to reside in and send messages to other members of the community. The *lwa* becomes a guide, acting as a source of reason as the human body transforms into a site of spiritual knowledge, or *konesans*. People exercise agency in sometimes dissuading the spirit from entering the body. Body agency is about not only accepting but also *negotiating*, and sometimes initiates do not want to become vulnerable in possession. This is crucial to understand when considering sexual identity and gender awareness in Haitian religion, as devotees undergo negotiations of possession and transpossession within sacred spaces.

The different manifestations of the *lwa* Ezili reveal a great deal about women in Haitian traditions. Take, for instance, Ezili Dantò's counterpart, Ezili Freda.³⁵ Ezili Dantò and Ezili Freda's iconic representations allow for an invaluable perspective on color, gender, class, and sexuality within Haitian religion and the country itself. In regard to gender and sexuality, Brown explains that while Ezili Dantò and Ezili Freda are represented differently, one cannot exist without the other. The tension between these two *lwa* "speaks to a tension of women's lives"; Brown adds that "women, especially poor women are still being forced to make choices between essential parts of themselves."³⁶ She argues that the "parts of themselves" that all women, particularly Haitians, Blacks, and women of color, have to choose between are sexual exploration or motherhood.

Another dimension of Dantò and Freda’s multifaceted selves lies in their appearance. With regard to color, there are surface representations based on physical traits that do not elucidate the complexity of Ezili Freda. As Brown argues, “Ezili Freda imitates ideas of beauty that have social power and prestige.”³⁷ Freda’s lighter skin is deemed to be indicative of an elite class that has access to social and financial “solidity.” This is compared to her counterpart, the “poor,” “hard worker” Ezili Dantò who is “black, black, black.”³⁸ Ezili Freda is seen as the light-skinned *milat* or *mulatta*, the name given to the erotic and sexually desirable mixed woman during slavery, and also represents the symbol of the prostitute.³⁹ The mulatta, because of her lighter skin, is considered more attractive and sexually charged than her darker-skinned counterpart, a product of the complicated racial caste system that emerged during colonization. The mulatta was as much a social construction as the stereotypes surrounding other enslaved and oppressed peoples in Haiti, but the notion of light skin as a signifier for beauty and privilege has lost none of its potency. Ezili Freda reflects these constructions and during ceremonies often appears as a woman preoccupied with the attention of men and consumed by concern over her own appearance, gazing into mirrors and powdering her face.

In Haiti, like anywhere else, it would be nearly impossible to identify race, gender, or sexuality as the most defining characteristic of someone’s identity. As Kempadoo asserts, “Sexuality and race combine in inextricable yet very specific discursive and material ways in the Caribbean.”⁴⁰ Within the Caribbean, she argues, color dimensions during slavery defined people of mixed race, or *mulattas*, as particularly erotic:

If white womanhood represented the pinnacle of femininity, couched by the assumption of fairness, purity, frailty, and domesticity, and black womanhood the total opposite due to the presumed closeness to nature, dark skin, masculine physique, and unbridled sexuality, the combination of European and African produced notions of light-skinned women who could almost pass for white yet retained a tinge of color as well as a hint of wantonness and uninhibited sexuality of exotic cultures.⁴¹

Vodou does not escape this colonization of the mind, reproducing detrimental notions surrounding skin color that privilege whiteness at the top and position Blackness on the bottom of the social hierarchy. The footprint of French colonization and the constant degradation of dark skin have left an indelible mark on Haiti, even centuries after the 1804 revolution that destroyed the slave system subjugating African populations. Color

remains inextricably connected to privilege. Arguably, this connection to color exists in other instances in the Vodou pantheon. For example, Dantò and Ogou are categorized as Petwo and Nago spirits, which are defined by their fiery tempers and passion, and are also commonly depicted as dark skinned. In contrast, the Rada spirits Ezili Freda and Danbala are depicted as brown skinned or light skinned and are characterized by calmer, gentler dispositions. Ezili Freda and Ezili Dantò represent two different divine images of femininity and womanhood defined by Haitian history. As previously stated, Vodou is a religion deeply connected to the everyday lives of its believers. Within the Vodou world, skin color has a discernable effect on life chances and perceptions of people's worth. Therefore, this ingrained hierarchy imprints these racial constructions and representations of the *lwa* even in religious practices of the Diaspora.

Within Vodou, the erotic desire of both Ezili Dantò and Freda has potential healing power for Haiti, Haitian women, and Haitian culture. Brown adds about these *lwa*:

These female spirits are both mirrors and maps, making the present comprehensible and offering direction for the future. In the caricaturelike clarity of Vodou possession-performances, the Ezili sort out, by acting out, the conflicting feelings and values in a given life situation. By interacting with the faithful as individuals and groups, all the Vodou spirits clarify options in people's lives; and the Ezili do this especially well for women.⁴²

Ezili Freda, then, is not merely a shallow stereotype of female vanity but a "mirror" capable of showing to her followers the characteristics and strengths they possess within their own hearts and minds. Moreover, there is power in Ezili Freda's shameless, proud embrace of her overtly feminine qualities. They do not simply connote weakness or catty superficiality but represent parts of the female experience that practitioners can reflect upon and gain wisdom from in their own lives. She is a "map" because she offers paths of thought that value femininity, while also acknowledging some of its pitfalls as a constructed idea: vanity, the elevation of light skin over dark, jealousy, vying for male attention, encouraging female competition. Another Ezili to consider in relation to Dantò and Freda is Lasirenn, a mermaid *lwa* of water. Unlike Dantò and Freda, Lasirenn does not have a fixed skin color: sometimes she is dark skinned and other times she is described as light skinned, a consequence of living under the water, away from the sunlight. The fluidity of Lasirenn's color is a result of the same "mirror" offered by the Ezilis. The water not only

refracts and obscures Lasirenn’s appearance; it also provides a mirror of reflection for the practitioners attempting to catch a glimpse of her visage. If Dantò is dark and Freda is light, Lasirenn is both—a shifting representation of the politics of skin color, changing to fit the needs and assumptions of the practitioners calling on her, challenging or reinforcing their own perceptions of color and femininity. The Ezilis are not a *lwa* that can be easily quantified or simplified, and this is where their value lies. These evaluations, representations, and expanded definitions provide a more complex understanding of Caribbean notions of gender, femininity, womanhood, and sexuality in Vodou.

MY OWN JOURNEY

Vodou and the analysis of its constructions can provide personal insight for practitioners, and I have found this to be true since my first interaction with the religion. The classroom became a critical place for coming to terms with my womanhood. It was also a space for me to see how African-derived religious spaces could serve as a site for my studies of sexuality. Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, a renowned Haitian scholar and *houngan*, is an unapologetic lover of Vodou who is committed to studying the role of women within the tradition. I first met him at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in spring 2009 when as an undergraduate I was taking Afro-Diasporic Religions with Claudine Michel. Bellegarde-Smith lectured on religions in Cuba, Brazil, and Haiti and considered the effects these traditions have had on him as a *houngan*. I was intrigued, and I followed him intently when he delved into Haitian Vodou and the different *lwa* of the pantheon. He explained how each of us has a supreme *lwa* who is our guiding spirit and protector, or *mèt tèt*. As a *houngan*, he explained that having been trained in the tradition, he could look across the room and probably determine each of our supreme *mèt tèt*.

I sat on the edge of my seat, listening eagerly as he continued to talk about the characteristics of the *lwa* and their complex makeup, crossing between cosmology and humanistic attributes. Having become familiar with a few principles of Afro-Diasporic religion, I wanted to see whether he could help me answer a question that I had considered now for some time. I did not know what was at stake, and I could not have known that the question I asked would spark my interest in this field and change my conception of reality forever. I sat and waited to talk to Bellegarde-Smith after class. I watched him with great intent; I paced myself, nervous as I walked up to him. Leaning closer, I looked him squarely in the eyes and said, “So, Professor Bellegarde-Smith, would you be able to tell me who my *mèt tèt* is?” He smiled at me patiently, silently, watching. I stared

at him, trying to read his eyes, trying to figure out why he was smiling. Then he said to me, “Who do you think your *mèt tèt* is?” I tried to impress him by naming some of the Yoruba and Haitian deities that I had already known and studied: “Well, I’ve been told that I resemble Oya, Yemaya, Osun, La Sirenn, Ezili Dantò . . .” and then he smiled. “Oh, so it’s Ezili Dantò?” I asked. I looked at him, mystified, and tried to challenge him. *What audacity!* I thought, trying to figure out how he might be wrong. I was nervous about having someone, particularly a stranger, potentially see what I had sensed myself but was not willing to share with many people. I asked him now with a bold look, “How do you know?” “Well,” he said, “You are wearing blue and it radiates off of you!” I looked down and noticed that I was wearing all blue: blue scarf, blue shirt, a pair of white basketball shorts with blue trimmings, and blue sandals. I looked at him and sighed. “That’s not fair,” I claimed; “You can’t base my *mèt tèt* off of what I’m wearing!” But he explained it was not the material clothes that I wore, but an awareness of a deeper connection to blue and the spirit associated with this color. Bellegarde-Smith smiled at me again and said, “Little niece, I am also claimed by Dantò too! She is my mother, and she loves her spiritual children.” His ability to see what so many others could not was powerful and piqued my curiosity. His unusual perception and insight must have been due to his close relationship with the *lwa*. I wondered how much I might learn by engaging with the spirits myself.

I was off on a journey, in search for *myself*, in search of Ezili Dantò, whom I had been told I happened to resemble. I read several books about the complex pantheon of Haitian deities and the epistemology of Haitian thought. As I continued to read about Ezili Dantò, it seemed as if there were some missing pieces in the literature that were not questioned at all. In particular was the question of her sexuality. I watched, read, and observed how scholars and practitioners discussed the strength and power of Ezili Dantò but not her sexuality.⁴³ Sexuality is such an important part of life, and as she was a mother figure, I thought sexuality would be closely tied to the image of Dantò, since becoming a mother naturally implies the consummation of a relationship. However, it appeared as if motherhood and a woman’s expression of sexuality were presented as opposite ends of a binary. I wanted to demonstrate that Dantò could in fact be both sexual and a mother. I went to Michel and asked her how a *lwa* so great in power and held in such high esteem could remain so unexplored. She looked at me and smiled, “Well, Eziaku, maybe this should be your own research contribution.”

I know my story is simply one thread in the larger tapestry of what makes Vodou a lived experience for Haitian and Diasporic communities.

I have come to understand that Vodou’s complex cosmology and different variations of spirits allow for complex readings of gender constructions, sexual identity, and the queerness of ceremony and sacred space. Studying the *lwa* Ezili Dantò and Ezili Freda, considering how they manifest in ceremony, and coming to understand how practitioners and scholars view the two spirits can reveal many of their nuances, which in turn reflect the complexity of the devotees and communities who worship them. The *lwa* as well as humans are complicated beings who express emotions, experience interactions, and define their identities in parallel ways. The *lwa* appear through the means by which a person can receive them, often in the form of possession. Through my interviews with practitioners I have realized the ways that both Dantò and Freda can speak to various aspects of Blackness and womanhood. As Haitian scholar and activist Florence Bellande-Robertson expresses,

Too often here [in Haiti] [we] separate too many things . . . as part of our education. In Europe, in the Middle Ages, it all started with the church. It was a question of the virgin or the whore. [Europeans] educated us and for a lot of us Haitian women, it is unbelievable how religious education has impacted our sexuality, our femininity. If you allow the existence of your sexuality, you have to be a whore. And you cannot be a thinking force, an entity within society. And you see that once again they have compromised us; they chopped us from ourselves. And then you have all these men going to these women who are “whores” and who are living their sexuality. Once again they have done us in. And we have allowed ourselves to be done in. The “goody goodies” are the ones that are the angels of the earth. And the women who live their sensuality and sexuality, they are “evil whores”! No! We are both!⁴⁴

Bellande-Robertson perceives sexuality as an integral part of our being and argues that this key aspect should not be relegated to one specific deity, Ezili Freda, but rather should be investigated also within Ezili Dantò. She further states, “Our sexuality enhances our humanity, and if we can accept this . . . there will be no need for extolling a Freda or a Dantò but both, what they represent. That is important: it is the combination of strength and sexuality.” Indeed, in the literature and even among practitioners of the religion, Ezili Dantò and Ezili Freda are seen as binaries, or opposites. Through oral, literary, and imaginative representations, the perception of these *lwa* has indeed become fixed: one is sexualized and

the other is desexualized. These limited representations do not expose the full complexities of Freda and Dantò and their role in understanding femininity, womanhood, and sexuality in Haitian society.

The sacred space that I became part of in Montreal was one where diversity was intrinsic to the religion. In its rites of possession, Haitian Vodou allows for incredibly nuanced performances of gender and sexuality. Service to the *lwa* is not limited by gender identity or sexual orientation, and because of this, practitioners can vary greatly and serve a pantheon of equally complicated deities. It is in this complex space of the queer ceremony that I found an environment that gave other practitioners and myself a place to connect and exercise our agency as women, while communicating with spirits and principles that reach deep into African religious pasts. In this sacred space, I was able to express myself, find alternative definitions of mothering, and witness other expressions of womanhood. The ceremony offered healing by affirming the beauty and value of Black women's diversity and by presenting a sacred space where we could express ourselves in moments of catharsis, validating and supporting one another's needs. Moreover, though the *lwa* make demands, the community is composed of people fully willing and able to employ their agency, negotiating with the spirits' entry and at times removing them from fragile hosts. In my case, there was even the opportunity to debate what was requested of me so that the command would appropriately fit the realities of my life. Practitioners were able to negotiate with the *lwa*, while treating them with reverence and respect. My experiences with Haitian Vodou illustrate how it is a tradition rooted in the everyday lives of the devotees who worship at its altars. It is in the queer site of ceremony that women find mirrors and maps of themselves in the spirits who arrive, as the sacred space becomes defined by the tremendous diversity of spirits and practitioners alike.

Notes

Acknowledgments: There are two individuals I must highlight who have contributed greatly to my first article, and it is with honor that I am able to call them my dear friends. I am extremely grateful for my colleague Kyrah Malika Daniels, who has provided keen editing skills and intellectual insights throughout this process. Additionally, I would like to thank Brianna Eaton, who, with her uncanny wit, offered time and patience to critically engage with my ideas. These two phenomenal Black women have made this process full of productivity and laughs.

- ¹ *Lwa* (*loa* in French) is the Kreyòl term for spirit or deity. Ezili Dantò is a greatly renowned *lwa* of the *Petwò* nation. She is held in such high regard that people sometimes explain that the blue on the Haitian flag was dedicated to her spiritual greatness. Her Catholic iconic pair is the Black Madonna of Czestochowa, and she is known as the spiritual Mother of Haiti. The *Petwò* nation of Vodou cosmology is largely of Kongo origin; according to Robert Farris Thompson, this “hot side” of the Vodou pantheon has been associated with spiritual charms for healing and attacking forces (Thompson. *Flash of the Spirit*, 206).
- ² I had rarely entertained the notion of being a mother. Even now conversations about motherhood with my parents or friends disturb me, and I catch myself becoming very angry when this subject comes up. Interestingly, however, through my relationships with my friends, family, and colleagues, my “motherhood,” or maternal instinct, manifests in many different ways. In both family contexts and among friends, I love to take charge, protect, and guide, as a mother would do. Dantò has shown me that motherhood can be multifaceted and can take alternative forms.
- ³ Deren, *Divine Horsemen*; Dunham, *Island Possessed*; Hurston, *Tell My Horse*; Elizabeth McAlister, *Rara!*; Brown, *Mama Lola*.
- ⁴ Strongman, “Transcorporeality in Vodou,” 17.
- ⁵ Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens,” 437.
- ⁶ *Mounting* is a term used to talk about spiritual possession in Vodou. In this case a person is a “horse” (*chwal* in Kreyòl) who is “ridden” or “mounted” by the spirit. A number of scholars have spoken of “mounting” as being ridden like a horse. See Brown, *Mama Lola*; Deren, *Divine Horsemen*.
- ⁷ Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*.
- ⁸ See Hucks, “Burning with a Flame in America.”
- ⁹ Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 4.
- ¹⁰ Ulysse, “Papa, Patriarchy, and Power”; Ulysse, “Caribbean Alter(ed)natives”; Lorde, *Sister Outsider*; Hurston, *Tell My Horse*.
- ¹¹ Conner, “Rainbow’s Children,” 145.
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ Scholars like Conner have done great critical work on the influences of Western religions and ideologies on African religious practices as well as their different interpretations of gender and sexuality. Additionally, Protestantism and Catholicism have led many practitioners and scholars of Haitian religion to deny or denigrate sexual and gender diversity. Brown, Hurston, and others have documented the erasure of gender in African traditional religions and the Diaspora.

- ¹⁴ I recognize the constraints of these terms, in particular “queer,” in the context of Vodou as practiced in Haiti itself. However, the term has important implications for certain devotees in the Haitian Diaspora community.
- ¹⁵ It is widely understood that all Haitian Vodou spirits have both female and male manifestations. Although Ezili Dantò is perceived as a female-gendered spirit, it has also been said that she has no gender at all. See Brown, *Mama Lola*; Deren, *Divine Horsemen*.
- ¹⁶ Claudine Michel was one of my faculty mentors at the University of California, Santa Barbara. This was one of our many conversations we had in Montreal in fall 2009.
- ¹⁷ Brown, *Mama Lola*, 5. Also see Beaubrun, *Nan Domi*.
- ¹⁸ Brown explains that the *ti bonnanj* is the conscience that allows for self-reflection and self-criticism and the *gwo bonnanj* is the psyche, the source of memory and personhood. It is the *gwo bonnanj* that must be prepared well and separated from the initiate to allow the *lwa* to enter in its place (Brown, *Mama Lola*, 6–9). Also see Métraux, “The Concept of Soul in Haitian Vodou.”
- ¹⁹ Florida Water is a type of perfume used as a cleanser to purify altars and anoint ceremony participants.
- ²⁰ I did not have much time to reflect on the sea-green-painted room, though I noticed the small altars constructed for different deities as well a number of unfamiliar artifacts that I understood were used for initiation. Despite my short time in the space, I understood that I was privileged to be in this space as a non-initiate.
- ²¹ Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 2.
- ²² Strongman, “Transcorporeality in Vodou.”
- ²³ Brown, *Mama Lola*, 22.
- ²⁴ The Kreyòl term *konesans* means spiritual knowledge that often comes with much responsibility. Claudine Michel describes *konesans* as “knowledge + wisdom,” coming from both life experience and spiritual intelligence. Michel, “Le Vodou haïtien est-il un humanisme?,” 116.
- ²⁵ Brown, *Mama Lola*, 232.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 232.
- ²⁷ Kempadoo, *Sexing the Caribbean*, 1.
- ²⁸ Allen, *¡Venceremos?*, 5.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, xi.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.
- ³¹ Ulysse, *Downtown Ladies*, 7.
- ³² Brown, *Mama Lola*, 352.
- ³³ Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, 210.

- ³⁴ Interview conducted by the author in Montreal, November 2009.
- ³⁵ Ezili Freda is the *lwa* or spirit of love, sensuality, and abundance. She is mostly known in the Haitian pantheon for her material possessions such as gold necklaces, perfumes, and earrings that are encrusted with jewels and diamonds. She demands silk, satin, and pink and blue lace trimmings. These colors and fabrics are also present in altar representations. Her Catholic counterparts are the Virgin Mary, Nuestra Senora de la Caridad del Cobre, Mater Salvatoris, and Maria Dolorosa.
- ³⁶ Brown, *Mama Lola*, 256–257.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 255.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ *Milat* is the Kreyòl term for mulatta, both terms used for people who have both African and European ancestry. On the link to prostitution, see Kempadoo, *Sexing the Caribbean*, 38.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 37.
- ⁴² Brown, *Mama Lola*, 228–229.
- ⁴³ This seemed an unusual absence in the literature, as many other spirits are linked to other *lwa* as lovers and spouses. See Brown, *Mama Lola*.
- ⁴⁴ Interview with Bellande-Robertson, July 2009, Petionville, Haiti.

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