

THE LIBRARY OF GLOBAL ETHICS AND RELIGION

General Editors: Joseph Runzo and Nancy M. Martin

- Volume I, *The Meaning of Life in the World Religions*, ISBN 1-85168-200-7
- Volume II, *Love, Sex, and Gender in the World Religions*, ISBN 1-85168-223-6
- Volume III, *Ethics in the World Religions*, ISBN 1-85168-247-3

RELATED TITLES PUBLISHED BY ONEWORLD

- Avatar and Incarnation*, Geoffrey Parrinder, ISBN 1-85168-130-2
- Believing - An Historical Perspective*, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, ISBN 1-85168-166-3
- Celebrate*, Margo Westheim, ISBN 1-85168-199-X
- Concepts of God*, Keith Ward, ISBN 1-85168-064-0
- Faith and Belief: The Difference Between Them*, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, ISBN 1-85168-165-5
- The Fifth Dimension*, John Hick, ISBN 1-85168-191-3
- God and the Universe of Faiths*, John Hick, ISBN 1-85168-071-3
- God, Chance and Necessity*, Keith Ward, ISBN 1-85168-116-7
- God, Faith and the New Millennium*, Keith Ward, ISBN 1-85168-155-8
- In Defence of the Soul*, Keith Ward, ISBN 1-85168-040-3
- Jesus and the Muslim*, Kenneth Cragg, ISBN 1-85168-180-9
- Life After Death*, Farnáz Ma'sumián, ISBN 1-85168-074-8
- Muhammad and the Christian*, Kenneth Cragg, ISBN 1-85168-179-5
- Muslims and Christians Face to Face*, Kate Zehiri, ISBN 1-85168-133-7
- Patterns of Faith Around the World*, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, ISBN 1-85168-164-7
- The Phenomenon of Religion*, Moojan Momen, ISBN 1-85168-161-2
- Religious Truth for our Time*, William Montgomery Watt, ISBN 1-85168-102-7
- The Sense of God*, John Bowker, ISBN 1-85168-093-4
- Sexual Morality in the World's Religions*, Geoffrey Parrinder, ISBN 1-85168-108-6
- Ultimate Visions*, edited by Martin Forward, ISBN 1-85168-100-0
- The Universe Within*, Anjam Kirsheed, ISBN 1-85168-075-6
- A Wider Vision*, Marcus Braybrooke, ISBN 1-85168-119-1

LOVE, SEX

and gender

in the world religions

EDITED BY

Joseph Runzo and Nancy M. Martin

Volume II
in

The Library of Global Ethics and Religion
General Editors: Joseph Runzo and Nancy M. Martin



ONEWORLD
OXFORD

2000



Plate 6 Papa Gede, the spirit associated with sexuality and death, possessing a Vodou priest and taking a comic mock karate stance. Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Photo: Chantal Regnaud

6

LOVE, SEX, and GENDER EMBODIED: THE SPIRITS of HAITIAN VODOU

Elizabeth McAlister

If you ever visit Haiti and are lucky enough to be invited to a *dans*, or religious service, you must prepare yourself to view something like a long, danced opera. If you are not yet initiated, you will be seated in a hard-backed chair in a place of honor, facing the ritual space where you can view the drummers on one side, and the chorus of worshippers singing and dancing on the other. There you will sit all night, doing your best to follow the complex and beautiful ritual, which passes from a “cool” regal dance into a “hot” fiery one. You will arrive mid-evening, so that by five o’clock in the morning it will be hard to keep your eyes open despite the music, heat, and closeness of others sitting next to you.¹

It is in these wee hours of the morning that the Gede spirits (pronounced GEDD-eh) will come to “*monte*” (ride) the dancers (see plate 6). And what a change there will be from the decorum of last evening. Both women and men will powder their faces white, don sunglasses missing one lens, and let out strings of unspeakable words in a nasal whine: “*zozo-koko-eya-eya-eya*” (“cock-pussy-yeah-yeah-yeah”). And they will direct the greatest vulgarities at the most respectable people present as they sing.

Women, “ridden” by the *Iwa* (spirit), will become men. Grasping walking sticks – some with penises carved at the top – they will begin the *goyard*, a grinding, *wining* dance of the Banda, a stylized parody of sexual intercourse. Judging by the songs some of these women-turned-men are singing, you will guess they have become homosexual men. As the songs for the Gede continue, men will also seem like *masisi*, “faggots.” One man even seems to have become a woman, who is busy gossiping primly to a group of her fans.

All of the Gede whirling around the room hips first are bawdy, irreverent jokers. If they are not embarrassing you, they are making you laugh. If you are a visiting professor and make the mistake of introducing yourself as "Dr.-so-and-so," the Gede spirits will tell you that their zozo (penis) hurts, and ask you for a treatment. The congregation around you will howl with laughter. If you are pregnant, the Gede will perform a special blessing over your womb, since these spirits live in the cemetery and are specialists in ushering souls from one world to the next. Gede are living corpses, great healers, great workers, and the ultimate drama queens in a divine theater of power and gender.

The Gede spirits display, mimic and caricature gender and sexuality in order to get at cultural knowledge and memory, the pain and truth of which only they can withstand. The Gede are almost always dark-complexioned spirits of former colonial slaves, and if you get to know them, they will tell you how they were tortured, how they suffered, and how they died. At the ceremony, after you have been ridiculed and forgotten and as you rise to leave the next morning, you will still be able to hear the Gede inside, singing with nasal voices, "*Miyò miyò miyò*, faggots and dykes, Oh ..."

A central project across academia has been to examine the ways in which class, race, gender, and sexuality are constructed, and indeed are mutually constitutive. Scholars have been interested in the ways these aspects of culture and identity change in historical process, as well as across diverse localities. Only too rarely does such work take religion into account. This is ironic, since religious systems are in the business of constructing the world and then naturalizing its meaning as "true." It stands to reason that we cannot fully understand the ways in which love, gender, or sexuality operate in a given society without attending to the role of religion and its multiple powers.

This chapter, like the others in this volume, seeks to examine the complex relationship of religion to the construction of love, gender, and sexuality. What religious processes produce particular emotional, sexual, and gendered practices? And what are the meanings of particular practices in any certain location? Here I explore how the adherents of the Afro-Haitian religion called Vodou shape their identities using historical, national, and transnational tropes of love, gender, and sexuality. To speak of gender and sexuality within Vodou is a charged subject, since Vodou has too often been hypersexualized by foreign writers. Since the colonial period, the sexual lives of Africans have been the object of fascination for

outsiders. It is true for Haitians that "the exoticization of colonized peoples was achieved by the eroticization of their lives."² I argue here that in Haitian Vodou, the terms of a specific construction of gender and sexuality exist apart from, yet in conversation with, dominant (Catholic) discourse. Inscribed through religious ritual and performative understandings of supernatural forces, these creole constructions of gender and sexuality reveal how power takes hold of and constructs bodies in particular ways.³

The physical body is at the center of Vodou, akin to shamanistic systems and other so-called spirit possession religions. When the spirits come to *monte* ("ride") their *chwal* ("horses"), they transform ordinary people into divinities capable of teaching, healing, and transcending the here and now. While most academic studies of religion center on textual analysis — on texts usually written by elite males and recorded as revelation or prescription — Vodou has no such texts. Or if it does, its texts are the altars, the operatic danced rituals, and the songs created by ordinary women and men and by the spirits dancing in their heads. To interact with Vodou elders, or with spirits who have possessed them, is to open oneself up to learning, potentially even to epiphany. The body is always the site of instruction and learning, as Vodou is an initiatory system whose *konesans* or "knowledge" is arrived at through direct experience.

Vodou is a religious system, but it is more than that. As in other agricultural societies, philosophy, cosmology, medicine, religion and justice systems are often rolled into one worldview. The majority of Haitians are agriculturalists and have been for the whole of their nation's difficult history. Begun as the French colony of Saint-Domingue, Haiti was the site of brutal torture as the plantation system generated immense wealth for planters and utter misery for enslaved people. These African peoples, versed in various African religions, met with the conversion practices of the French Catholic Church. What gets called Vodou is actually a variety of practices from diverse nations in Africa (including the Dahomean, the Yoruba, and the Kongo) in forced conversation with the Catholicism of the colonial masters. Their God is the same — a high God who created the world. But *Gran Mèt-la* (God) is remote and uninvolved, while the spirits are immediate and responsive to their *seviyé* (human "servants").

In a country with a literacy rate of fifteen percent or less, Vodou has grown into a creolized blend of African and (to a lesser extent) European knowledge, focused not on texts but on embodied forms of spirit work. Rather than speak about "a religion called Vodou," practitioners will more likely explain that they *sevi lwa* ("serve the spirit"). Afro-Haitians work

with a complex pantheon of divinities who both shape and reflect the world for their spiritual "children." What outsiders and academics know of this complex system is arrived at through engagement with the religion and its practitioners – through ethnographic fieldwork.

"IF YOUR HUSBAND DIES, YOU'LL FIND ANOTHER"

In its early phases, the academic study of gender focused on women's experiences, while constructions of masculinities and other gendered structures were not yet under investigation. Accordingly, most fieldwork and writing on gender and sexuality in Vodou focuses on the spirit or goddess Èzili. Split into many versions of female divinity, Èzili has two main faces: Èzili Freda and Èzili Danto. Together, their stories reveal how the racialized and sexualized histories of certain types of bodies can shape religious meaning.

Èzili Freda is depicted as light-skinned, wealthy and dripping with gold. She is pathetically childless, for she had a baby, but she sold the baby for jewels. She is called "the goddess of love" and is known as *Mètès* or "Mistress," a term that goes quite directly back to slavery days. Then, the mulatta creoles of Saint-Domingue formed a class apart of mistresses, concubines, and sex slaves of the wealthy white planter men. On the eve of independence from France, out of seven thousand mulatta women counted in the colony, five thousand were "kept" by white men.⁴ Freda recalls these mulatta prostitutes, who were famous for their beauty and high style, and dressed in silks and laces in the competitive decadence of Saint-Domingue.⁵

Women (and more uncommonly, men) who are "ridden" by Èzili Freda dress in pink satin and ask for mirrors and perfume. They mimic the decorum and postures of today's wealthy, light-skinned, elite women who are the historical descendants of the creole mulattas. Freda is above all an icon of romantic love, a coquette and a fiercely heterosexual femme. She parades around the ritual space batting her eyes at the men, blessing them and asking their hands in marriage.⁶ Queen of overblown drama, she typically spurns any women present, appraising them as possible rivals in the enterprise of heterosexual romance. She has a special relationship with effeminate gay men and is often considered their *mèt tèt* (patron spirit, literally "master of the head").⁷

How can we understand this heterosexual femme goddess, this bejeweled yet miserable paramour? What does she mean for poor Haitians who "serve" her? Surely she is the product of a specific female experience of

brutal subjugation, of torture, even, by virtue of her female body and her in-between racial status. Historian Joan Dayan invites us to recall the domination mulatta women often experienced "under another name, something called 'love.' In that unnatural situation where a human became property, love became coordinate with a task of feeling that depended to a large extent on the experience of servitude."⁸ Dayan reads Èzili Freda as a remembering of a certain kind of sexual violence and bondage dressed up as *eros* and romance. The bodies of the Vodouists enact this, remembering through the ritual of spirit possession where romantic love and its props of courtship are exalted and made divine.

The way that Èzili Freda embodies both romance and frustration can be read as a kind of critique of the real lives of poor Haitian women and men. In fact, poor Haitian women are quite unlikely to find themselves objects of romantic subsidy. Women typically support children and male relatives in an economy that devalues male labor. For the growing numbers of country people displaced to the cities, even traditional systems of *plajaj* ("living with") have been disrupted. In a culture where women have long been market vendors and family treasurers, it is poor urban males who now find themselves unemployed and unable to contribute to family finances. This scenario is all the more frustrating for poor men, who see the nation's wealthy men carrying out traditional Western patriarchal roles of provider and head of the house. Love, courtship, and couplehood are difficult to sustain in these conditions.⁹

In her classic wisdom, the Vodou priestess Mama Lola comments to her biographer Karen McCarthy Brown, "Poor people don't have no true love. They just have affiliation." Brown comments that "romance – its language, its style, its wardrobe, and its dance – belongs to the top ten percent of the Haitian population that controls the lion's share of Haiti's wealth."¹⁰ Èzili Freda also embodies a kind of critique of class inequalities while at the same time she becomes a route to the experience of *eros* and romantic love for the disenfranchised poor.

Love relationships, along with the economic advantage couplehood can bring, are a deep desire for many Vodouists. The scores of priests and priestesses I have interviewed all maintain that clients most typically seek their help for one of three main reasons: money, health, and love. Numerous *wanga*, or spiritual "works," are effected to "make somebody see you, make them love you. Once they love you, the spirits can make them stay with you and only you."¹¹ In these cases clients seek the help of a priest or priestess privately for a session in the inner altar room of the temple. There,

wanga can also reconcile two lovers, make a wayward spouse faithful, or break apart a budding adulterous liaison. In most relationships, however, romantic love and sexual pleasure are only one part of a complex exchange that inevitably involves finances or resources. "Americans can afford to marry for love," a Haitian friend once commented. "We Haitians have to marry for money."¹²

One spirit or goddess who is not searching for romantic partnership is the other important Ezili, Ezili Dantò. She is in many ways an opposite of Freda: dark-complexioned, strong-willed, independent, poor, and a single mother. Depicted in Catholic iconography as the "Black Virgin," Our Lady of Czestochowa, Dantò bears a scar on her cheek and carries a child in her arms. I can remember how thrilled I was when somebody explained to me who the child was. The child she carries is not the baby Jesus and is not even a boy. Her baby, significantly, is a little girl. This Ezili, her daughter, and her mother, Gran Ezili, recall the triple aspect of the child, crone, and mother goddesses of other traditions, and present womanhood in multiple roles.

When Dantò "rides" her devotees, she manifests as a fierce and powerful force. She sometimes asks to hold the doll that represents her daughter, embodying the image of mother-and-child that is in many ways the most primary and most lasting relationship in Haiti. When she manifests as her more fiery self, *Ezili ge wonj* or "red-eyed Ezili," she stammers "ge-ge-ge-ge." They say her tongue was cut out as she fought for freedom in the Haitian revolution. Closely associated with the military tropes of Haitian nationalism, Dantò wears the blue and red of the Haitian flag.

Unlike Freda, Dantò's persona is that of Haitian poor women. She ultimately presents a picture of female strength and independence — a fighter who provides for her children. Dantò can also be read as a psychic remembering of slavery, where dark-complexioned women suffered specific kinds of brutality centered on overwork, physical torture, and sexual abuse but nevertheless fought in the struggle for freedom.

Ezili Dantò and her daughter manifest the fruits of the highest value in Haitian personhood: fertility. Motherhood is one of the few roles available to poor women and crucial in a culture where children provide one's support in old age. Everyone — whether single, disabled, or homosexual — all women and men are expected to have children. Ezili Dantò is a divine representation of the Haitian wisdom that the mother-child bond is far more important than the bonds of romance and marriage. One of the prayer songs for Ezili reminds us that while lovers may come and go, the mother is irreplaceable:

Ezili, if your mother dies, you will cry. (X3)
If your husband dies, you'll find another one.

Ezili, si manan w' mouri, w' ap kriye. (X3)
Si mari w' mouri, w' a jwenn youn lòt, O.

Dantò "works" for people in ways different from Freda. Concerned with maternal bonds and women's independence, she protects women from domestic abuse and sex abuse.¹³ She can be heterosexual, but she can also be a *madivin*, or *madivinez* ("lesbian"), and men and women who are homosexual are considered to have been "blessed" or "worked" by her. As Freda is a heterosexual femme figure, Dantò performs independent, woman-centered sexuality and financial control.¹⁴ Although Ezili Dantò is a spirit who is pro-homosexual, I have never heard any elaboration on who her female spirit lovers might be.

As in many societies, being labeled a lesbian in Haiti is one of the worst stigmas and is usually an insult reserved for women whom particular men find too powerful or too independent. While it can ruin reputations at the national political level, among the poor who practice Vodou, many women consider themselves to be *madivin* and will acknowledge it in discreet ways. In some congregations I have visited, virtually all of the worshippers — both men and women — are homosexual. I have also met two lesbian priestesses who each had several sexual partners, in the polygamous style of the rural Haitian man. One of these women also had a husband who lived in Miami. As poor women struggle to cobble together lives that include both resources and pleasure, fixed identities are less important than the ability to be fluid and adaptable in both economic and sexual partnerships.

While the term *madivin* translates as a pejorative term for women who engage in erotic relationships with women, it is unclear what the full range of meanings for this terms really is in the context of Vodou. Of all the anthropologists who have been fascinated with Vodou, none has taken its (homo)sexualized aspects as a serious topic of study and theorizing. It will not do simply to accept Dantò as a "lesbian," since sexual acts may have different meanings and social significance depending on how they are understood in different cultures. There is no certain relationship between sexual acts, meanings, and sexual identities, since sexual acts do not carry with them a universal social meaning.¹⁵

One thing we can see is that Freda and Dantò represent a range of gendered possibilities that are not offered by Roman Catholicism. Whether she

comes as heterosexual paramour, as her daughter's mother, as lesbian, warrior, or grandmother, the Ezili are more complex and present far more diversity than the female figures of the New Testament. Unlike the Virgin Mary, the Ezili are sexual beings who lead complicated mythological love lives.

Although their official state religion has always been Catholicism, Haitian women have drawn knowledge from both Catholic theology and from Vodou. The spirits offer Haitian women creolized understandings of love, gender, and sexuality apart from the dominant French-based Catholic culture. In a society that is oppressive to women in multiple ways, the two worst insults that can be hurled at a woman in Haiti are *bouzen* (whore) and *madivin* (lesbian). It is significant that two major spirits or goddesses are divine recuperations of these stigmatized identities.

"I AM A SOLDIER, I WILL NOT SLEEP"

While the female divinities of Haiti are known for their emotional and familial relationships, the male spirits have two main associations: work and militarism. Generally speaking, each male spirit controls a different expertise, whether it be blacksmithing, agricultural work, or sea captaining.¹⁶ Most are also soldiers in an invisible spiritual army within an elaborate web of military designations.

Ogou is one of the oldest male spirits and is now one of the most "served." In great numbers Vodou temples are devoted to him, initiates are adopted by him as spiritual children, and women marry him in elaborate spiritual marriages both in Haiti and its diaspora. He can be traced all the way back to the Yoruban and Dahomean kingdoms that were undone by events leading up to the slave trade. The Yoruba knew him (and know him) as Ogun; he was (and is) Gu in Dahomey (now Benin). He is a divine blacksmith, a master iron-worker and keeper of the secrets of metalwork and forging. He is also known as a god of war.¹⁷

In Haiti, Ogou is a military officer who represents engaged battle, discipline, and self-control. In the Catholic imagery associated with him, he appears as Sen Jak (Saint James) atop a rearing white horse. In these Catholic icons Saint James brandishes a sword, triumphing over the bodies of infidels lying trampled beneath his horse's feet. Haitians reading this image recognized military triumph, and for them Sen Jak recalled Ogou, the powerful god of war. Just as there are many Ezili, there are also many Ogou.

Ogou's masculinity lies in his physical strength, high military rank and self-discipline. Generally speaking, when Ogou "rides" an initiate, he asks for two red scarves to be tied around his arms in an instant uniform, broad-casting strength and authority. He also often asks for a sword or machete, which he ritually brandishes during the ceremony. Above all, Ogou is in control and in command of both the people around him and of many of the other spirits. He is a divine version of a "big man," a leader with many loyal followers. To pledge allegiance to Ogou is to receive blessings, protection, and a psychic masculine "shoring up." "*Mèt gason sou ou*," (literally, "put on your maleness") I once heard him say.

While Papa Ogou has many "children" — initiates — he has no mythological children, nor is he particularly known for being a lover or husband.¹⁸ A childless, wifeless *patron*, his masculinity is nevertheless heterosexual and hinges on his independent "big man" status as a martial force. Papa Ogou will tell you that he loves you, but it is the distant love of a strict and exacting father.

Karen McCarthy Brown characterizes Ogou helpfully as an exploration of the constructive and destructive uses of power.¹⁹ We can also read his domain as particularly that of normative Haitian masculinity, concerned with public politics, war and policing. Given the history of Haiti, it is not surprising that this warrior divinity has become a dominant masculine force in Vodou. Haiti won its independence from the French colonists in the only successful slave revolution in history. Since that long war, the country has been ruled by one military president after another, culminating in the infamous thirty-year Duvalier dictatorship.

This prayer song for Ogou portrays him as a "man of war" who is a sentryman on a night watch:

Ogou Badagri what are you doing?
On watch, they put me on watch
I won't sleep, Feray I won't sleep
I'm a warrior, I couldn't sleep
I was at war, they put me on watch

Ogou Badagri sa w' ap fè la-a?
Se veye, yo mete'm veye
M' pap dòmi Feray m' pa dòmi
M' déjà gason lagè m' pa sa dòmi
Nan lagè'm te ye yo mete'm veye

Here Ogou is a sentryman put on watch against the enemy, and like a

responsible "big man" he will not sleep and abdicate his duty. A *nèg serye* ("serious man"), he has been given a job to do which he takes seriously and lives up to. As a watchman in wartime, Ogon is in charge of the national security of an entire people in a hypermasculine protector role.

One thing about the cryptic nature of many Vodou songs is their flexibility for use in different contexts. It is sure that songs for Ogon carry a different valence during each political era in Haiti. During the coup against President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1991, for example, this song was used in Carnival as a *pwen* ("point" or "message"). It used the divine authority of this masculine warrior to indicate the need for witness and for struggle on the part of the Haitian majority who opposed the coup. Carnival musicians segued from this song into a second Ogon song that said, "I'm a warrior, an iron rod. What can they do to me? Guns don't scare me!" ("Se *nèg lagè m'ye, se baton fè anye. Ki sa yo ka fè mwem? Kamò pa fè mwem pè!*") In the context of the political crisis in Haiti, Ogon served as an encouragement for people to acknowledge their opposition to the coup and to recall their history of freedom struggle.²⁰

GEDE'S SEXUAL PARODY: CRITIQUE AND LIBERATING

LAUGHTER

Urban Vodou ceremonies usually finish with appearances by the Gede, so let us now return to these most explicitly sexualized divinities in Vodou. The ultimate destabilizers, Gede mediate yet disrupt dichotomies. They manifest as *malere* (poor) but are the spirits of money who nevertheless prefer gifts of cigarettes or *kleren* (cane liquor). Spirits of the dead who live in the cemetery, they usher the living in and out of this world. They feel no physical sensation, yet they are spirits of sex. Androgynous yet vulgar, they perform an ambiguous gender scheme where both femininity and masculinity are parodied and ridiculed. Linking sex irrevocably with satire, the Gede are the ultimate social critics in Vodou, uniquely able to make political commentary both in domestic and national arenas.

Just as Ogon has historical roots in West Africa and has creolized into an American entity, so does Gede begin as the Yoruban Eshu-Elegbara and the Fon Legba. This trickster divinity is crippled but nevertheless displays a large erect phallus. Owner of crossroads and doorways, first to be invoked in prayer, the African Elegha is also divine mouthpiece between the living and the dead. Papa Legba, in Vodou, inherited this station at the crossroads, but his phallus and social satire seem to have been passed on to the descendants of the Dahomean Guede-vi.²¹

In Haitian cosmology, the Gede are the closest spiritual beings to humans, since they were once ancestors who lived real lives. Many were slaves in the French colony. "They cut off my legs for running away, and I bled to death," one Gede told me. "I was eighteen years old." The persona of the Gede is usually that of a poor person, and occasionally they "walk with" other spirits as their servants or slaves. Known for their uniring capacity to "work," the Gede are usually the primary healing spirits for working priests and priestesses. They may be invoked on a daily basis for clients behind the scenes, to do works for health, money or love.

In possession appearances Gede will don old clothes, sit on the floor, and drink liquor (which they call their "medicine") straight from the bottle. "That's my wife," said one heterosexual male Gede possessing a lesbian priestess. He/She pointed to the wild boar with protruding incisor teeth on the Gordon's Gin label. Pals of laughter was the response from most present, while a few sucked their teeth in friendly disdain.

While Ezili Freda is a melodramatic romantic, Gede parodies both the sentiment and the sentimentality of love. Assigning it to the false and hypocritical realm of all things French, one Gede spun love into a mock French lesson: "... singing in childish syllables, I love, you love, he loves, she loves, what does that make? (Chorus, drawn out) 'L'Amour'!"²² Very like drag queens in the United States, the Gede are brilliant social critics of gender, are inveterate gossips, and are capable of a quick "read" of the politics of either domestic or national power. The Gede are also quick to satirize the ruling order in general, and with it, anybody in authority or in positions of respect. Donald Cosentino writes of an amusing and elaborate display in Port-au-Prince by the chief of the Gede family, Bawon Samdi:

Bawon mounted his godson Edner, in Gesner's *ounfò* [temple]. He held his phallic cane like a baton, leading a troupe of Gedes through a martial display, every few steps pausing to execute a bump and grind. The brass band hired for the occasion was playing "Jingle Bells." Gesner's *ounfò* had been a favorite of Baby Doc, and the crowds were roaring in derision at this parody of the military that had replaced him.²³

How do the Gede spirits work across the seemingly contradictory fields of religion, sexuality and political satire? What is it about sexuality that lends itself to performances of social critique? Part of the answer has to do with the politics of "high" and "low" culture and the way that in Christian cultures sexuality is assigned to the latter and religion to the former. The Gede spirits in particular use sexuality as a sort of language of knowledge,

embodying a type of Haitian, the *wakabon* or undisciplined sexual male. Whenever the Gede make appearances, they inevitably use the form of Kreyòl speech called *betiz* (humorous vulgarity). To *di betiz* (say vulgarities) is to enter the deep Kreyòl of *wakabondaj* (male sexual prowess). This kind of language is the special province of the Gede and is also reserved for Carnival and Rara songs, and for some Konpa (popular music).²⁴ At its sophisticated best, *betiz* is full of double and triple entendres, making for multiple layers of humor.²⁵

I see Gede as a counterpart to the heterosexual masculinity and the "big-man-ism" of Papa Ogo. Gede can be understood as sort of queer "small man" who occupies the lowest end of the divine/social order. He displays one side of the personality of the poor male in Haiti who is usually unemployed and socially devalued. While most Haitian men maintain heterosexual identities in a homophobic society, Gede parodies even that hetero-normativity. While Gede spirits are usually male, it is not uncommon for them to be ambiguously gendered and ambiguously sexual.²⁶

When the Gede (or the boisterous Carnival bands) sing *betiz* songs, they are enacting a form of popular laughter that comprises the only public form of speech possible for the disenfranchised poor. Under military rule, oppositional political speech is repressed and becomes impossible. Under these conditions, Gede's sexualized *betiz* songs affirm not only the existence but also the creative life of a people in the face of the brutality and everyday violence of their countrymen. Sexualized popular laughter constitutes a kind of national politics in which divine "small men" use sexual imagery to "read" gender relations and also the social order. Gede's *betiz* songs are political "readings" at the deepest level of Haitian Kreyòl.

From this perspective, Gede's sexualized satire can be seen as the last bastion of uncensored speech in Haiti. Herein lies one of the ironies of Gede's great power: the spirits of former slaves who are still harnessed by the living for spiritual work are the harbingers of a particular kind of freedom. Not only does Gede call the gendered body into question, but he also questions the entire social order from the bottom to the top. Through Gede's jokes and *betiz*, the freedom to question, to parody, and to laugh is enacted on a daily basis. While Gede's politics is not an engaged political movement, it is a politics of liberation nonetheless. Gede opens a philosophical space for opposition and rejection of the suffering of the world through laughter. Gede are very much the spirits of slaves, but they can also be seen as transcendent *manwon* (maroons, runaways from slavery) who use gender to reject even the most basic terms of the social order.

The official religion of the social order in Haiti has been Roman Catholicism, ever since colonial times. But the Afro-Haitian religion of the majority operates with drastically different premises from those of Christianity. For Haitians, scripture does not represent the word of God, or if it does, it is not as immanent as the many spirits who populate the universe, claim initiates, and work on their behalf. The spirits are not beings in whom it is necessary to have faith. Rather, they materialize from time to time in the bodies of their initiates and in the works they perform. Vodou is ultimately a moral system, and it involves taking responsibility for desires and actions and working within social bounds.²⁷

While many priests and priestesses of Vodou attend mass regularly and observe the Catholic sacraments, the Gede spirits are decidedly not Catholic. For the Gede, the divinities, priests, trappings, and teachings of the Church are "high culture" authorities it is best to parody. They sing obscene parodies of Catholic hymns, often beginning in French but deliv-ering their ridiculous sexualized punch-lines in Kreyòl. Here *betiz* is used in a classic form of the "code-switch," where the alternating use of "high" and "low" language is employed strategically for humor (or anger, or seduction). Gede always uses "low culture" to perform rebelliousness toward bourgeois Catholic culture. In this way, the sexualized silliness of Gede depends on Catholic decorum for its humor.

I like to understand this sexual explicitness in the context of conservative morality as a politics undermining order. It is a metaphysical revolt against the ruling powers and reminds people that there is an alternative way to imagine authority. Gede presents a psychic and philosophical attitude that works in the face of generations of military rule where outright resistance was met with violence and death. For Gede even death — especially death — is an enormous cosmic joke that he has come to help humans play.

LOVE, GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND RELIGION

To try to analyze all of the ways that love, gender, and sexuality work in any one religious system would require far more space than a single chapter in a volume. Here I have suggested some possible ways to understand these processes in the context of Afro-Haitian religion. Not a purely African or purely European tradition, Haitian Vodou creates and presents a creolized set of gendered structures. It is a religious culture that arose out of the institutionalized violence of slavery and still remains embedded in a system of

unequal relations of power. The diverse personalities of the spirits reveal an autonomous set of values that are in dialogue with the hegemony of Catholicism but which are separate from it. These values and structures can be understood as religious and philosophical encounters with power in its many forms.

The spirits of Vodou present clues to historical realities in Haiti, and the ways in which power was enacted, acted upon, and reacted to. Many of the historical and present struggles are over people and their bodies. In Vodou, knowledge about love, gender, and sexuality is focused and enacted not in texts, but on and through the bodies of practitioners.

I have argued several main points. Following the work of Karen McCarthy Brown and Joan Dayan, I have described how heterosexual romantic love is imagined as an upper-class prerogative in Vodou. Romantic love carries specific historical class associations, and its trappings of courtship and economic exchange in a universe of childlessness leave it outside the reality of the Haitian majority. Still, the power of the history of sexual slavery and the enduring images of romance in Western culture make the spirit Ezili Freda a potent presentation of its possibilities.

Ezili Dantò, in contrast, presents a more realistic portrait of the poor Haitian woman's life. She is a strong, fierce, independent spirit, representing the love relationships between women, particularly mothers and daughters, that are the glue of Haitian families and lives. Dantò also embodies a fluidity in sexual identity and pleasure not present in the dominant heterosexual discourse.

Ogou and Gede, I suggested, are counterparts in a conversation about masculinity. Ogou presents a militarized "big man" who recalls the war for national independence while Gede is a "small man" who subverts the dominant order with sexualized laughter. Ogou is "a dominating, heterosexual male hero, while Gede performs an ambiguous sexuality open to homosexual possibilities. Both spirits use their sexualized personas to present ways of knowing and ways of acting in the world that are different from Catholic narratives.

Vodou is a case where structures of gender and sexuality cannot be understood without attending to the role of religion, as well as history. In Haiti, spiritual beings represent diverse sexualities to create a key language that articulates an alternative, creole philosophical stance in the face of the structures of domination. The entry of the life-affirming value of sexuality is a direct challenge to the dominant Catholic discourse which would banish it from the religious sphere except in terms of condemnation and

control. Sexuality can be a language of independence, of shock and reversal, of laughter in the face of suffering, and of affirmation of life when survival is in question.

NOTES

1. The way that religious rituals proceed is actually quite different across the various regions of Haiti. The characterizations in this piece refer to the urban ceremonies of Port-au-Prince and its outpost, New York City.
2. Evelyn Blackwood and Saskia E. Wieringa, ed., *Same Sex Relationships and Female Desires: Transgender Practices Across Cultures* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 43.
3. See Blackwood and Wieringa, ed., *Same Sex Relationships and Female Desires*, p. 2 and Moira Gatens, "Power, Bodies and Difference," in *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, ed. Michele Barrett and Anne Phillips (Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 132.
4. C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (New York: Vintage, 1963), p. 32; cited in Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 57.
5. Dayan, *Haiti, History and the Gods*, p. 57.
6. Quite a few of the spirits can marry people in elaborate marriage ceremonies modeled on the Christian hetero-normative model. They then serve as special protective forces for their human spouses. In this article, I do not describe the elaborate kinship networks in the religion among humans — "fathers" and "mothers" who initiate "children" who become "twins" and the ways that spirits "marry" people. Nor do I have space in this chapter to describe how the schemes of love, gender, and sexuality presented here in Vodou work in the daily lives of Haitian people. For a more complete picture, see Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). Also see Ira P. Lowenthal, "Marriage is 20, Children are 21: The Cultural Construction of Conjugality and Family in Rural Haiti" (Ph.D. dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 1987).
7. For fuller discussions of the spirits and their attributes, see Brown, *Mama Lola*; Dayan, *Haiti, History and the Gods*; and Leslie Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).
8. Dayan, *Haiti, History and the Gods*, p. 56.
9. Brown, *Mama Lola*, p. 234.
10. Brown, *Mama Lola*, p. 246; cited also in Dayan, *Haiti, History and the Gods*, p. 132.
11. Interview with Manbo Camille, Brooklyn, 1986.
12. Interview with Sanba Legba, Manhattan, 1997.
13. Manbo Racine, personal communication, Port-au-Prince, 1993.

14. I do not mean to argue that Dantò is necessarily a feminist goddess. Though she is a defender of single mothers, she does not particularly advocate alliances among women, nor does she shy away from "working" for the interests of men.
15. Carol Vance, "Social Construction Theory: Problems in the History of Sexuality," in *Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality?*, ed. Dennis Altman et al. (Amsterdam: An Dekker/Schorer, 1989), pp. 13-34; cited in Gloria Wekker, "What's Identity Got to Do with It? Rethinking Identity in Light of the Mari Work in Suriname" in *Same Sex Relationships and Female Desires*, ed. Blackwood and Wieringa, p. 119.
16. These *lwa* are Ogun, Kouzen Azaka, and Mèt Agwe, respectively.
17. See Suzanne Preston Blier, *African Vodun: Art, Psychology and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) and Sandra T. Barnes, ed., *Africa's Ogun, Old World and New* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).
18. Certain Ogun are said to be consorts of certain Èzili, but these relationships are not performed in ritual nor depicted in art in the way of other Vodou couples, like Danbala and Ayida Wedo and Kouzen and Kouzin Azaka.
19. Karen McCarthy Brown, "Systematic Remembering, Systematic Forgetting: Ogun in Haiti," in ed. Barnes, *Africa's Ogun*, p. 70.
20. This version is abridged; the whole version can be heard in the 1993 Boukman Ekpéryans carnival song "You Male", on their album *Libète Pran Pou Pran!* / *Freedom Let's Grab It*. Compact Disc published by Island Mango, 162-539946-2 (1995).
21. For Dahomey, see Blier, *African Vodun*; for the Yoruba, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
22. Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New York: Chelsea House, 1953), p. 103; cited in Donald J. Cosentino, ed., *The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), p. 412.
23. Cosentino, *The Sacred Arts*, p. 411.
24. For work on Carnival and Rara see Elizabeth McAlister, *Rara! Vodou, Power and Performance in Haiti and its Diaspora*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming).
25. The popular Konpa singer Coupe Cloue was a particularly sophisticated master of sexual double entendre, and in one song ("Madame Marcel") he is introduced as "Papa Gede." Many of his songs were ballads that contained multiple, drawn-out jokes. The jokes had double and triple entendres but were "clean" to the innocent ear.
26. Within the Haitian majority population there is a range of gender practices and sexualities. However it is unclear (to us outsiders) how these creole sexualities are practiced by Haitians and what their meanings are. More research is needed on the full practices and meanings of Haitian gender and sexuality, and their relationship to religion.
27. The full relationship between Vodou and Catholicism is far too complex to address here. See Brown, *Mama Lola: Desmanacles, Faces of the Gods*; and Elizabeth McAlister, "Vodou and Catholicism in the Age of Transnationalism: The Madonna of 115th Street Revisited," in *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration* ed. R. Stephen Warner (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), pp. 123-160. For a more detailed discussion of Vodou as a moral system, see Karen McCarthy Brown, "Haitian Vodou: The Distinct Self and the Relational World," in *The Meaning of Life in the World Religions*, ed. Runzo and Martin, pp. 235-250.