



Songs for Ezili: Vodou Epistemologies of (Trans) gender

Author(s): Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley

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*Songs for Ezili:
Vodou Epistemologies of
(Trans)gender*

Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley

*Manman mwen, manman mwen kote ou ye
Nou tande nan dlo
Kote ou ye. manman mwen
Pwoche lakay o*

*My mother, my mother where are you?
We are waiting in the water
Where are you, my mother?
Come to the house*

—Traditional song for Ezili

IN KINGSTON, JAMAICA, at the Caribbean Studies Association Annual Conference in June 2009, I presented a paper on a panel entitled “Centering Sexuality: Desire between Women.” The session’s presentations, which focused on literary representations and metaphors of female same-sex eroticism, engendered a lively question-and-answer period that ended with an extremely astute and thoughtful query posed to the entire panel. A colleague asked if, in tracing newly queered tropes of the region, we were not running the risk of once again hypersexualizing the Caribbean—of again portraying its islands as the warmest, sexiest, juiciest, most open-watered lay of the hemisphere’s land. The novel that I discussed in my presentation was the beautiful, rich *Erzulie’s Skirt*, by Ana-Maurine Lara; and my quick response—as time ran out and we were rushed from the room—was that perhaps the way out of that conundrum was precisely through Ezili (also known as Erzulie, as in Lara’s novel), the Haitian Vodou *lwa* (spirit) of femininity and sensuality.¹ That is, perhaps one way

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to escape the impossible choice between rendering Caribbean sex and sexuality either invisible or hypervisible might be through serious engagement with the ways of knowing gender, sexuality, and personhood enunciated in the epistemologies of Afro-Caribbean religions, epistemologies that could be engaged in ways not easily recuperated by global Northern voyeurisms.

Fully explaining how Vodou and other Afro-Caribbean religions function in regional epistemologies is far beyond the scope of this (or any) article; instead of attempting such an impossible task, I will only—and purposefully opaquely—trace some of this system's most basic outlines. The Kreyòl (Haitian Creole) word Vodou was transculturated from the Fon kingdom of Dahomey (now Benin) in West Africa, where sacred energies were called *Vodun*. Haitian Vodoun practitioners work to communicate with these sacred energies, here called *lwa*—literally, “law,” as in “law of nature,” forces of nature including the ocean (*Agwe*), land and agriculture (*Azaka*), metals (*Ogou*), and death (*Gede*)—in order to achieve personal harmony and fulfill their life purposes. This spiritual and epistemological system is literally revolutionary. The Haitian revolution—the world's only successful slave revolution, in which enslaved Africans emancipated themselves and went on to defeat Napoleon's army to form the world's first black republic in 1804—began during a Vodou ceremony, in which enslaved Africans called on the *lwa* to support them in their fight to reclaim their freedom. Before and since that time, national and foreign governments alike have considered the system a potentially subversive power, and its practice has been repeatedly outlawed into the twentieth century. Indeed, while same-sex sexual practices have never been outlawed in Haiti, Vodou consistently has. Although the day-to-day practice of this religion is dominated by women, few of its *lwa* are feminine (or “women”) spirits. The pantheon of spirits known as *Ezili* is the richly, expansively, riverinely, powerful exception to this rule: Gran *Ezili*, *Ezili Fréda*, *Ezili Danto*, *Ezili Mapyang*, *Ezili Taureau*, *Lasyrenn*, and others are immensely influential for those practitioners who embody and/or desire femininity. And, since VèVè Clark introduced me to *Ezili*'s complexities when I was an undergraduate almost twenty years ago, she has been an

important figure through which I have come to understand Caribbean genders.

This article, then, is an attempt to begin to give Ezili her due, to spirit out a fuller, if still very partial, answer to what a queer Caribbean Vodou epistemology might encompass. My loving, unfinished song to Ezili seeks to open space to consider how, as Karen McCarthy Brown writes of the pantheon of lwa, “[t]hese female spirits are both mirrors and maps” for gender and sexually complex practitioners of Vodou. Thus I ask: how might engagements with Ezili “not only,” as David Valentine writes of engagements with the term “transgender,” “*explain* non-normative genders but also *produce*” them? My refrain will not be a (somewhat familiar) argument that spirituality allows gender and sexually complex people particular kinds of “self-expression” (although I am certainly sympathetic to such claims). My choice to follow the lwa instead explores how a variety of engagements with Ezili—songs, stories, spirit possessions, dream interpretations—perform black feminist intellectual work: the work of theorizing Caribbean genders in a way that elucidates a way of knowing sex, bodies, and personhood. This is the kind of theorizing that Barbara Christian asked us to take seriously when she reminded feminist scholars that “people of color have always theorized. . . . And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and in proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking.” In listening to and singing back to this theorizing, I look to situate a discussion of Caribbean gender and sexual complexity not primarily through queer or transgender studies but within a lineage of woman of color feminisms: a lineage that pushes me to ask what it would sound like if scholars were to speak of Ezili the way we often speak, say, of Judith Butler—if we gave the centuries-old corpus of texts engaging this lwa a similar explanatory power in understanding gender and sexuality.²

My discussion here focuses on a close reading of Ezili’s representation in *Of Men and Gods*, Anne Lescot and Laurence Magloire’s 2002 documentary about gender and sexually complex Haitians in Vodou. Settling in Haiti in 1997, Lescot studied Vodou for over ten years as an anthropologist,

using video as an ethnographic tool. In 2001, she and Magloire created a production company whose first release was *Of Men and Gods*. Billed as “a frank look at a largely unexplored area,” the documentary showed widely at lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) and African diaspora film festivals in Haiti, Barbados, Puerto Rico, the United States, Canada, France, Norway, Italy, the Netherlands, Greece, Indonesia, and New Zealand, winning the 2003 Voices of Women Trophy for Activism, Courage, and Achievement in Film at the Festival Dwa Famn in New York.³ Despite the film’s title, its interviewees refer to themselves not as “men” but as *masisi*, a Kreyòl word that references male femininity or womanness in conjunction with male same-sex desire.⁴ Although the word may be related to *sé* (sister), Roberto Strongman intriguingly speculates that it is in fact derived from the Fon word *mamisi*, for devotees of Mami Wata, an African counterpart of one of Ezili’s emanations; *mamisi* are either female women or males who dress and braid their hair like—or perhaps, *as*—women.⁵ Nor is this film about “gods” but rather about *lwa*, the spirit forces of Haitian Vodou, and about how these forces show up in practitioners’ way of being in the world. The film follows a cast of *masisi* to markets, beauty salons, churches, *peristyles* (Vodou temples), living rooms, nightclubs, and pilgrimages, recording their thoughts on how gender and religion weave through their day-to-day lives. Although a rare negative review in the *Chicago Reader* complained that *Of Men and Gods* “delivers few insights beyond the fact that they face pervasive discrimination,” the film’s determination to maintain such indeterminacy, opacity, and ambiguity regarding its subjects emerges as precisely that which makes it a rich study in Vodou gender epistemology.⁶

THE SPIRITUAL AS EPISTEMOLOGICAL:

THE (WOMEN’S) WORK THAT EZILI DOES

“Ezili o! pa Ezili sa” (Ezili, oh! That’s not Ezili!).⁷ Ezili is not (only) singular but also plural—not just one *lwa* but the name given to a pantheon of spirits. Embodying the divine forces of love, sexuality, pleasure, femininity, maternity, creativity, and fertility, her paths include Ezili Fréda, the luxurious mulatta who loves perfume, music, flowers, sweets, and laughter but always leaves in tears; the fierce protector Ezili Danto, the (often single)

mother syncretized with the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, who appeared during the 1791 ceremony at Bois Cayman that began the Haitian Revolution; and Lasyrenn, a mermaid who swims in lakes and rivers where she invites female passersby to join her and initiates them into mystical (erotic?) knowledge.⁸ Complex and intriguing as each lwa is, however, my purpose is neither to document nor distinguish between the many faces of Ezili (as anthropologists including Brown, in *Mama Lola*, have already done extensively). Rather than evoking the pantheon as a set of culturally specific deities, my reverent call to Ezili—and all the ways that she channels sex, desire, womanness, fluid-bodiedness, and creativity—as a theoretical principle for thinking Caribbean gender complexity attempts a serious, quite literal response to M. Jacqui Alexander's call in the final chapter of *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. Here, Alexander pushes readers to consider what it might mean “to move beyond the more dominant understanding of African spiritual practice as cultural retention and survival, to get inside the meaning of the spiritual as epistemological, that is, to pry open the terms, symbols, and organizational codes that the Bantu-Kongo people used to make sense of the world.”⁹ What differentiates Alexander's emphasis on the “spiritual as epistemological” from other scholars' is her insistence that this way of knowing the world stands to transform not only African diaspora but also feminist scholarship; that because most of the world's women understand their bodies, identities, actions, and desires in relation to spirits and spirituality, feminism misses the boat—misses the Crossing, misses the Middle Passage—when it fails to take this knowledge base seriously.

Enunciating a similar black feminist praxis, Lisa Ze Winters's circum-Atlantic examination of the figure of the mulatta evokes the corpus of stories, memories, and songs about Ezili as an expansive archive of the history of women of African descent, which, following Brent Hayes Edwards, she defines not as a physical structure housing records but as “a discursive system that governs the possibilities, forms, appearance and regularity of particular statements, objects, and practices.”¹⁰ Winters delves into this archive to make sense of African and North American mulattas' economic ventures, interracial heterosexual relationships,

search for beauty, religious practice, and expansive understanding of maternity. But also contained in this archive, I want to emphasize, are complex understandings of what masisi are: understandings that see these gender- and sexually complex practitioners not as “sexual minorities” but as part of the large family of Ezili’s protégés who live out femininity and desire in creative ways. Drawing deeply from this archive, the spiritual as epistemological pushes scholars to consider as fact the claim that Haiti’s masisi may be understood not (only) as Caribbean variations of transgender people, but also Ezili’s children, and to seek out the social, economic, sexual, and kinship connections between masisi and other Vodou practitioners that this understanding entails.

But why sing for Ezili, and only Ezili? Certainly, she is not the only lwa who protects gender- and sexually complex children: Danbala, the simultaneously female and male rainbow serpent; Gede, the hypersexual lwa of death and sex; and Nana Baruku, the primordial, androgynous moon-sun, all inspire and protect creative genders and sexualities.¹¹ But Ezili is, as Joan Dayan notes, the most textualized of lwa, whose faces prominently mark not only Lescot and Magloire’s film but also work by Haitian women novelists from Marie Chauvet to Edwidge Danticat and by queer Caribbean novelists and performers including Ana-Maurine Lara, Nalo Hopkinson, Assotto Saint, and Mildred Gerestant.¹² She is also the focal point of two theoretical texts that make key interventions in Caribbean gender studies and whose lyrical writing my own song to Ezili riffs off of: namely, Joan (Colin) Dayan’s 1994 “Erzulie: A Women’s History of Haiti” and Roberto Strongman’s 2008 “Transcorporeality in Vodou.”

In her fiercely insightful, unrelentingly iconoclastic essay, Dayan argues that through stories and songs, the pantheon of Ezili, with their intimate, obscured connections to enslavement and emancipation, offer a more complex way of knowing Haitian womanhood than hegemonic feminism can produce—one that preserves “histories ignored, denigrated, or exoticized” by standard historiography and “tells a story of women’s lives that has not been told.” This is a story that complicates feminine sexuality, for “[t]hough a woman, Erzulie vacillates between her attraction for the two sexes.” And, although artistically, gloriously feminine, Ezili also quite spectacularly explodes gender binaries: “She is not androgynous,

for she deliberately encases herself in the trappings of what has been constituted in a social world (especially that of Frenchified elites) as femininity. . . . She takes on the garb of femininity—and even speaks excellent French—in order to confound and discard the culturally defined roles of men and women.”¹³ While denaturalizing feminine heterosexuality, however, Dayan’s meditation on Ezili does not move toward denaturalizing feminine femaleness: that is, it stops short of enunciating that some of Ezili’s children—some of the women who take on hyperfemininity to simultaneously celebrate and confound womanness—are male, are masisi.¹⁴ Signifying on this, I want to ask what it means to theorize a Caribbean “story of women’s lives that has not been told” that not only includes, but also centers, male women and to ask how hearing Ezili as a masisi history of Haiti reveals the limits of what global Northern queer and transgender theory produces.

In his generously lyrical, theoretically rigorous follow-up to Dayan’s work, Strongman writes “Transcorporeality in Vodou” under the sign of—and beautifully, beginning with a story of possession by—Ezili’s most elusive manifestation, Lasyrenn. Calling on this figure who is at once fish and human, land and water, black and white, female and male, he begins by reflecting on Vodou as a philosophical system that challenges Western notions of discrete selfhood by imagining that “[t]he oceans of consciousness are not contained, but are an endless expanse without a gulf, basin, or seabed”; he then goes on to explore how gender and sexuality also become such a basinless, shifting expanse for practitioners. Strongman considers spirit possession as a way of knowing self and embodiment in which personhood in general, and gender and sexuality in particular, emerge as porous, fluid, and subject to change during any ceremony—when a female may become a masculine lwa like Gede or a male a feminine spirit like Lasyrenn, and their sexual desires change and multiply accordingly. He anchors his exploration of sexual fluidity in close readings of texts including René Depestre’s *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*, Frankétienne’s *Adjanoumelezo*, and Lescot and Magloire’s *Of Men and Gods*. Concluding with his discussion of the film, Strongman levels several compelling criticisms including a caution against its linguistic carelessness in translating masisi and madivine as “gay”/“lesbian” in subtitles when “these men use Kreyòl terms to name their lived experience: masisi,

madivinez, en kachet."¹⁵ But while calling readers' attention to the importance of language, he does not interrogate or problematize his own use of the noun "men" (when many of the film's subjects call themselves not only masisi but also *fi*, fanm—girl, woman) or the pronouns "he" and "his" (when the Kreyòl third-person pronoun *li* is ungendered) to refer to *Of Men and Gods'* masisi. So where Dayan stops short of stating that some women devotees may be male, Strongman stops short of considering that some of Ezili's male children may be women. Pushing Strongman's claims of gender "*without gulf, basin, or seabed*" further, I want to ask what happens when we take seriously not only that masisi does not "mean" gay man but that it also may not mean any kind of man—when we resist global Northern terminology, certainly, but also resist queer readings that privilege the language of nonnormative sexualities while remaining curiously without language around nonnormative genders.

I sing for Ezili, then, as a story of Haitian women; as a principle of Caribbean gender; as a femme queen, a mermaid, and a theory. But I also choose her for another reason. In her watershed study, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, Maya Deren writes of Ezili as "that which distinguishes humans from all other forms: their capacity to conceive beyond reality, to desire beyond adequacy, to create beyond need. . . . In her character is reflected all the élan, all the excessive pitch with which the dreams of men soar, when, momentarily, they can shake loose the flat weight, the dreary, reiterative demands of necessity."¹⁶ In other words, Ezili is the lwa who exemplifies imagination. And the work of imagination is, as other scholars have already beautifully stated, a central practice of black feminism—indeed, it remains a black feminist necessity to explicate, develop, and dwell in realities other than the secular Western empiricisms that deny black women's importance in knowing, making, and transforming the world. As Saidiya Hartman writes, the deepest, most pathbreaking black feminist scholarship around sex and sexuality may not be to "document" but to imagine new possibilities for black women's bodies, stories, desires: "to imagine what cannot be verified . . . to reckon with the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance."¹⁷ Reaching even more broadly, Grace Hong asserts: "Calling for a black feminist criticism is to do nothing less than to imagine another system of

value, one in which black women have value.”¹⁸ And as a principle of both femininity and imagination, Ezili calls out a submerged epistemology that has always imagined that black masisi (male women) as well as black fanm (female women) create their own value through concrete, unruly linkages forged around pleasure, adornment, competition, kinship, denial, illness, shared loss, travel, work, patronage, and material support. Ezili theorizing womanness, and Ezili theorizing imagination, I want to sing, are not only principles of black or Haitian feminism, as Winters or Dayan contend. They are principles of black masisi feminism, which calls on creativity to speak with and against hegemonic feminisms and transnational transgender discourses.

TO MAKE THE COCK SING: RECOMPOSING GENDER

“Ezili Fréda, pale ti moun-la yo; Ezili Fréda, rele miwazan-e; Gen youn tan ou a sonje m” (Ezili Fréda, tell all the children; Ezili Fréda, call the community; It’s time for remembrance).¹⁹ That most famous of Vodou documentaries, Deren’s *Divine Horsemen*, opens in silence that frames a lone, unspeaking bio-woman who, clad in white and balancing a basket on her head, walks a forested path toward the motionless camera, finally meeting the viewer with a smile.²⁰ The opening scene of *Of Men and Gods* seems to cite this iconic moment—but changes its direction in more than one way. Lescot and Magloire introduce viewers to a setting in turn-of-the-millennium Haiti, in an urban setting where we will soon meet a cast of seven masisi Vodoun devotees. Like Deren’s, their film also begins in silence, centering on a woman in white carrying her merchandise to market. But rather than catching and isolating this subject in a frontal shot, the unsteady, hand-held camera weavily follows—but never quite catches—the straight, willowy back of a masisi, Blondine, as she makes her way through a crowd to the stall where she sells tobacco. And while a disembodied male narrator speaks over the woman in Deren’s film, the first words in *Of Men and Gods* are Blondine’s voice-over: “If I can’t be who I am in Haiti I’d rather die, or go live in the Dominican Republic.”²¹ The camera then similarly follows a white-clad, swaying Innocente into a salon where she greets Jean-Marcel with a kiss and applies lipstick at the mirror; trails Denis into a Catholic church where she fervently prays at a shrine of the Virgin; and

swiftly cuts to Innocente, now in ceremonial whites, smiling, spinning, and dancing for Ezili at a Vodou ceremony. As her feet come to a momentary rest, another voice-over remarks: "Ever since I was a child I've heard that it's not God that makes people that way, it's a lwa called Grande Erzulie." The title then appears on screen as drumming fades into a voice singing a cappella a Kreyòl song neither translated nor subtitled, which, holding and extending the final, open-throated vowel, repeats: "Se li menm ki fe tout kok chante. . . ." ²²

Literally setting viewers on the path of the most prominent of the film's masisi, then figuratively locating these masisi on Ezili's path, this opening prefigures a long debate the masisi later engage on the role that this lwa plays in their gender and desire. Blondine explains that she is masisi because family spirits decided from birth that she would be a girl, and Innocente similarly claims that Ezili Danto "gate-m" ("spoiled me," meaning showered with gifts and/or marred) as a child. ²³ Jean-Marcel and Denis spiritedly affirm that yes, of course, Ezili can suddenly turn anyone who disregards her *that way* but fervently deny this is their story, keeping their own relationship to the lwa out of frame. Breaking in, in counterpoint, Érol and Fritzner charge that many initiates cite Ezili as an excuse for their male femininity or homosexuality, but since Ezili does not possess her initiates all the time—while a masisi like them is masisi all the time—she cannot possibly be credited as the cause of gender or sexual variance. The *houngan* (Vodou priest) Érol adds, however, that as lwa of fertility and sexuality Erzuli does protect masisi—not because their gender and sexuality is different from bio-women's or heterosexuals'—but precisely because she loves all femininity and sexuality equally. And other masisi concur that, unlike their experience on the streets or in churches, they find themselves welcomed and valorized in Vodou temples by lwa and houngan alike. Far from answering questions about Ezili, this unresolved debate recalls what Dayan writes about the lwa: that everything stated about her can be contradicted and that "the contradictory images she evokes, re-enact for a community, not granted a voice" the complex power dynamics through which narrating masisi-ness at once explains and denaturalizes supposedly ontological gender differences. ²⁴ *Of Men and Gods'* masisi also follow Ezili in refusing to cast their gender or sexuality as

a unitary identity that they share, instead voicing gender complexity as a set of contested, contradictory experiences.

But how these masisi mirror Ezili emerges particularly provocatively at the film's closing, long after the debate over her influence has finished. Moving with Vodou rhythms of cyclical time, *Of Men and Gods*' ending circles back to its opening. The last words spoken before the credits roll are Blondine's, her first voice-over now replaying as part of an interview where she faces the camera defiantly. The scene then cuts to Érol singing, in closing, the song that played over the title screen. As the song concludes, the screen momentarily goes black, then Érol, smiling, reappears in an inset box to offer an interpretation of the song's still untranscribed, untranslated lyrics: "This is a lament. It's my word [ma parole] you don't want to hear. It's my way of being you don't accept. But it's this way of being that makes the cocks sing. It's this way of being that moves life forward!"²⁵ And as Érol says "cocks sing," his name flashes beside his image. The screen then once again goes black as a saxophone version of the song begins to play. Afterward, one by one, each of the interviewees appears in a brief clip, speaking in an inset box as her name appears beside her; and in between each, two bars of saxophone music play to a black screen. When each of the documentary's subjects has been acknowledged in this way, the rest of the credits roll to uninterrupted saxophone accompaniment.

Figuratively, even more than literally, this nameless tune that recurs like a refrain throughout the film is the song for Ezili that *Of Men and Gods* composes from beginning to end. Its continual replay first as a voice-over, then as a performance by Érol, and finally as an acoustic saxophone piece parallels the continual reperformance of gender and sexuality undertaken by the film's subjects. Here, variations on a single musical piece model the possibility of continual recombinations of gender as of musical composition—a Vodou epistemology, or better, musicology of gender performance, where traditional Haitian songs and dances of femininity, masculinity, and desire can be recomposed in different meanings, keys, and instruments. Citing North American musical forms, the final saxophone version of the "lament" concludes the film with what Enoch Page and Matt U. Richardson call a "black blues eruption," a song whose fluid, improvisational form

refuses fixed scores much in the same way that African American sissies or Haitian masisi rewrite “‘White’ gender and sexual standards imposed on [Africans in the Americas] as part of religious discipline.”²⁶ A blues counterpoint that recasts sexual as well as musical standards, Érol’s song models how Vodou musical and/as epistemological repertoires hold space for alternative archives of gendered expressions where no version of lyrics, femininities, or desires is ever either final or dominant.

And within this open-ended repertoire of gender and sexuality, the song’s lyrics evoke an Ezilian multiplicity of meanings. You don’t want to hear my word [ma parole], but that’s what makes the cock sing: this sexual double entendre recalls Blondine’s earlier contention that male lovers “like us better because they say we’re tighter than girls,” because men “sleep better” with masisi who work harder than bio-women do to please them—who make cocks sing louder, honoring Ezili’s divine call to learn the art of feeling good. The Kreyòl *ars erotica* encoded here echoes the double entendre-laden songs of same-sex desire that have long, very public traditions throughout the Caribbean, particularly in the songs and dances of Surinamese *mati* (female same-sex lovers) who playfully work with other animal metaphors—of snakes (penetration) and aardvarks (clitorises), for example—to sing out their sexual prowess in communal yards and public squares.²⁷ But this particular song might be sung not only by masisi or mati but also by sex workers, single mothers, “outside” women, practitioners of nonpenetrative sex, and all the nonnormative gender and sexual formations whom Ezili protects. And it intones a reminder that these queers make the world go round, that my speech that you don’t want to listen to—those expressions of difference that become unintelligible within a heteronormative gender matrix—are what makes the cock crow to start each new day. This call to listen to all the inspirations of the cock’s crow puts different lyrics to Cathy Cohen’s insightful appeal in “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” to complicate our understandings of “both heteronormativity and queerness” by paying attention to what “a wide continuum of sexual possibilities”—bulldaggers, black single mothers, and others of (what I would call) Ezili’s children—have in common and by taking seriously “both historical and current examples of heterosexual

relationships which have been prohibited, stigmatized, and generally repressed . . . to identify those spaces of shared or similar oppression and resistance.”²⁸ “Ninety percent of Haitian men are homos,” Flanise proclaims during the same sequence in which Blondine explains how masisi hold on to their men. And in addition to understanding this statistic literally, viewers might also recognize this as a metaphorical way of expressing that most Haitians (and Caribbeans) live their gendered and sexual lives well outside a monogamous, heterosexual gender logic—that most dance to an Ezilian musicology that creatively searches out other ways to make cocks crow.

The final clips of the film’s interviewees that play in the breaks of the saxophone version—and, indeed, seem to stand in as the song’s new lyrics—speak to key elements of what this Ezilian gender musicology sounds like. As deity of fertility Ezili is also lwa of creativity, and the closing clips highlight masisi’s creative understanding of relationships between sex, gender, and sexuality. With a mock shiver, Innocente’s voice-over divorces sex from gender as she states: “Even if I can’t have children, even if I don’t have my periods, in my mind I’m a woman.” But while this is a fairly well-rehearsed claim, the first account of masisi gender is Blondine’s more complex formulation. “Mwen se masisi,” she begins flirtatiously—“I am masisi”—then follows this identity statement not with a self-description but with a hypothetical: “If I meet another masisi who I like, we’ll get together and become *madivine* (a female same-sex couple).”²⁹ Blondine doesn’t explain masisi-ness with negative statements, focusing on lack as does Innocente; rather, she foregrounds what she shares with others like her. And that, she says, is an ever-unruly desire: desire not to be women or be with men, but desire *to be and be with her own kind*. And this, she suggests, connects her both to other gender nonnormative females and gender nonnormative males—makes her a masisi and a masisi-loving madivine. The complexity of Blondine’s self-description reminds us of Valentine’s claim that “even using locally derived terms for people does not capture the range of (sometimes contested) meanings that animate people’s understandings of themselves in particular contexts.”³⁰ Or, perhaps more to the point, it recalls Dayan’s description of Ezili’s endless complication of gendered and sexual identity: “Ezili o! Pa Ezili sa!” Someone calls her

name, thinking they have defined her person, and she responds, 'That's not me.'³¹

As the spirit of feeling good, Ezili is also the lwa of prosperity; and as the clips continue, her musicology also sounds like a call for material sustainability, for her children to enjoy not only their gender and sexuality but also work and living incomes. Denis, who has been unsuccessfully looking for work throughout the film, now explains that she can only look for "travay fanm" (women's work),³² that she has gender-specific employment needs that she's perhaps been praying for at the shrines visited throughout the film: "If I had to leave the country to go work elsewhere, I wouldn't be able to hold a man's job. The only work I can do is for women: seamstress, hairdresser, manicure, or pedicure. Those are jobs I'm comfortable with." Flanise, much more direct about her economic desires, holds up a prayer card of the Black Virgin syncretized with Ezili Danto and addresses it spiritedly, tapping the Madonna vigorously with her long nails: "This is the lwa who brings us luck and who made us masisi. She *has* to give us work. Ezili Danto, give us money, give us money!"³³ Although shots of the masisi's homes and workplaces show that (with the probable exception of the French-speaking Érol) most are not members of the elite, the film is careful not to reproduce clichés about Haitian poverty. Nonetheless, moments like these make clear that material gain is a substantial part of what the masisi seek through Vodou devotion. Participation in the practice allows many of the film's subjects, including Innocente, Érol, and Fritzner, to make money directly as priests. Innocente reports that becoming a houngan has earned her a lot of respect—and cash—that she did not previously have access to: "They used to call me masisi, masisi, masisi. They made fun of my clothes and my hair. Since I've become a houngan, they've stopped. Now they come knocking on my door, asking me to call the lwa, to give them a remedy for this and that." Others find that serving Ezili remunerates them indirectly. Blondine is emphatic that her faithful attention to the lwa has kept her from suffering spells, beatings, or anything else that would interfere with her work; "I love the lwa; they protect me," she states. Such material concerns are especially important for these practitioners, given how gendered as well as classed division of labor limits economic opportunities for

the gender nonnormative. Flanise's cry, "Ezili, give us money!" reminds viewers that a masisi politics will not necessarily be one of identity but will certainly be one of economic justice. For these subjects, religious as well as gendered self-definition is not primarily a matter of "self-expression," as it might be for elites or global Northern transgendered persons. Instead, it is part of strategizing for the greatest material advantage possible from the racialized, classed, and gendered positions they maneuver within.

Of course, Ezili is best known as the lwa of love, and the closing song the masisi compose to her is also about unexpected reconfigurations of relationship. In these final clips speakers make clear that for them, serving Ezili is in no way about securing lovers. "Ezili Fréda is my woman," Fritzner states, then explains that his devotion to Ezili precludes any relationship with female partners—"any creature with tits"—and even serious relationships with males, whom he goes with only to "have fun." And with dramatic flair and raised eyebrows, Jean-Marcel emphatically proclaims: "I would have to be really crrrazy to ask St Yves for a man. A man you can find in any garbage heap. . . . Ask for a man . . . never!"³⁴ This comment echoes an earlier beauty shop scene in which Jean-Marcel, Innocente, and Flanise—leaning toward each other, in overlapping remarks—tell the interviewer, "We're girls, sisters," and Flanise, facing the camera, adds, "Nou bien, nou mache ansanm [we're good with each other; we walk together]."³⁵ Jean-Marcel then quips, "Men, huh! There are plenty of them to go around." It also sounds like a complement to Innocente's declaration that the most important thing that the lwa bring her is a network of friends—that through serving them she is able to "make friends, friends who are like me," other masisi, "and also serious people, like engineers, lawyers, doctors, and nurses who also serve the spirits. The lwa give me all I have."³⁶ Ezili's musicology, then, is not primarily a couple's dance but an arrangement that brings together diverse dancers who move and move with each other as a group.

Rather than an identity-based LGBT "community" in the sense used by global Northern gay activists, this Ezilian friendship network acts as what Jasbir Puar calls a queer assemblage, "a series of dispersed but mutually implicated and messy networks . . . that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency."³⁷ Or, to

borrow a phrase from Flanise, we might call this set of connections *make ansanm*—forging commonality not through gender, sexuality, or other identities but through walking together, through shared activity, experience, and support. This phrase loops viewers back once more to the opening of *Divine Horsemen*, when, after the lone woman in white is joined on her path by three other load-carrying women, the film's first (male) voice-over tells us: "There is a Kreyòl expression: to walk together. Where life is hard, people depend upon and help each other. Haiti amalgamated different tribes in a common religion known as Vodou, so that man may pray together to praise the same moral principles and together reaffirm them."³⁸ *Of Men and Gods*' portrait of masisi's many, complicated intimacies, with each other and with the lwa, in many ways acts as an extended meditation on this classic commentary on Vodou. But it does so while consistently complicating the idea of "man" praying together, documenting a Vodou that is neither gender neutral nor masculinist but that instead offers conceptual and physical space to map and mirror all the creative femininities of Ezili's children. And the song composed by these masisi equally troubles the idea that *make ansam* is something that Haitians do only where life is hard. Yes, here, *girls, sisters* also walk together where *nou bien*, where they are good, creative, prosperous, funny, sexy, loved, where these and all black women have value. And that is in the space where diverse femininities and sexualities sway precariously together under the umbrella of Ezili's skirt.

Ezili, si maman mwen mouri, m'ap rele

Si papa mwen mouri, m'ap rele

Ezili, if my mother dies, I'll cry

If my father dies, I'll cry

—Traditional song for Ezili

When she comes to a ceremony, Ezili Fréda always laughs, yes, and laughs beautifully; but she also always leaves in tears. And, respecting that balance, I do not want to end this song for Ezili on too rosy a note, with too much *nou bien*. No, in fact, just before Érol's lament replays, Denis and Blondine very inconclusively close *Of Men and Gods* by discussing visions of their future—or rather, their inability to envision clearly a future. Denis worries that it is unlikely that she will ever have a child and

“can’t stand the idea” of her dying without someone to bury her and inherit anything that (if she finds work) she would be able to acquire; she cannot stand the idea that all of her might completely dissipate, “go to other people.” Then Blondine squarely faces the camera and states: “I’m twenty-three years old. I can’t see what the future holds for me.” These moments of contemplating death and an unknown future are particularly haunting to watch in the wake of Haiti’s January 12, 2010, earthquake. The quake devastated the *maché* and the nation’s gender and sexual minorities, immediately killing fourteen members of SEROvie, the only Haitian organization working exclusively with men who have sex with men and transgender women. Seven of them died when the SEROvie building collapsed to its foundations, and the organization’s director, Reginald Dupont, pulled the dying, dead, and injured from the rubble. No longer focused on defending gender and/or sexuality as identities, the organization’s activist work has currently shifted to providing material as well as emotional support to quake survivors, as the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission reports:

In makeshift tents . . . SEROvie’s staff continues its efforts to provide services to the community. Many in this community have been left without food, shelter or identification—and more still have lost close family members and friends. SEROvie has distributed food and medication to LGBT people in Port-au-Prince, Haiti’s devastated capital, and have begun to re-launch their important work in 5 regions (Le Nord, L’Ouest, Le Sud-Est, Artibonite, le Sud) around the country. They are also trying to help LGBT people in the makeshift camps for the displaced in Port-au-Prince . . . offering encouragement and understanding to a marginalized group of people that, in the span of 37 seconds, was rendered substantially more vulnerable.³⁹

The 7.0-magnitude earthquake also devastated the physical and social structures of many of the country’s Vodou peristyles including that of venerated houngan Max Beauvoir, who both denounced the slowness with which aid reached his followers and expressed hope that the quake might eventually emerge as a unifying force for Haitians.⁴⁰ Like Beauvoir’s followers, numerous Vodou devotees whose temples were destroyed were not only left without the material, emotional, and spiritual support their

peristyles would have otherwise provided in a time of crisis. They were also faced with choices between continued participation in their temples and food and shelter, as some Christian groups refused to distribute aid to servitors of the lwa unless they agreed to convert and join churches.⁴¹ In response, North American peristyles and pagans began to organize aid specifically to go to Vodou devotees.⁴² When the ground became precarious under Haitians' feet, all Ezili's children—and all the children of Danbala, Gede, Nana Buruku, Ogou—not only found themselves particularly vulnerable; but out of necessity they also found themselves imagining particularly creative ways to organize for survival. And perhaps this makes listening to Blondine, Innocente, and Flanise—to Ezili's devotees' calls for creativity, economic justice, and support networks—even more compelling now than when the cameras rolled.

NOTES

1. Many thanks to this panel, organized by Emily Taylor Meyers and featuring presentations by Allison Donnel, Evelyn O'Callaghan, and Keja Valens, for wonderful thought-provoking papers and reflections. For my presentation, entitled "She Emerged from the Waters, Whole and Broken: Caribbean Desires in Ana-Maurine Lara's *Erzulie's Skirt*," I focused on Ana-Maurine Lara, *Erzulie's Skirt* (Washington, DC: Redbone Press, 2006). Several spelling variations of this spirit's name are common in English, including Erzulie, Erzuli, and Ezili. For consistency, I have opted to use Ezili—the most common spelling in Kreyòl—throughout.
2. Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 221; David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: Ethnography of a Category* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 14; Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," in *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press, 1990), 336.
3. *Of Men and Gods (Des Hommes et Dieux)*, directed by Anne Lescot and Laurence Magloire, Documentary Educational Resources, 2002, www.der.org/films/of-men-and-gods/html.
4. As the film shows, *masisi* references a spectrum of male femininity that might include those called "effeminate gay men" in the United States as well as those who might be called "transgender women." This distinction is not made by those who use the term in the film, who all nonetheless consider themselves to fall in the category *masisi*. In keeping with this, then, I will discuss *masisi* as a gender category that (in global Northern terminology) falls in the transgender spectrum and includes a variety of gender expressions.

5. Roberto Strongman, "Transcorporeality in Vodou," *The Journal of Haitian Studies* 14, no. 2 (2008): 25.
6. Ted Shen, "Of Men and Gods," *The Chicago Reader*, www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/of-men-and-gods/Film?oid=1056382.
7. This is from a traditional song for Ezili, quoted by Joan Dayan in "Erzulie: A Women's History of Haiti," *Research in African Literatures* 25 (Summer 1994): 22.
8. The color differences between these paths of Ezili—two of her emanations being mulatta, while Ezili Danto is dark-skinned—have important implications for how race, class, and gender intersect in Haiti and elsewhere in the Caribbean. Although these divisions of racialized gender are not my focus here (as they are in *Of Men and Gods*), they deserve an in-depth look in a wider study of representations of Ezili.
9. M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 293.
10. Lisa Ze Winters, citing Brent Hayes Edwards in "Specter, Spectacle, and the Imaginative Space: Unfixing the Tragic Mulatta" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2005), 23.
11. For more on the queer paths each of these lwa, see Randy P. Connor with David Hatfield Sparks, *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Participation in African-Inspired Traditions in the Americas* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2004), 56-64. Thanks to the anonymous reviewer who suggested that I consider other lwa associated with sex and gender complexity.
12. On Ezili as the most textualized of lwa, see Dayan, "Erzulie," 18. On the presence of the lwa in the works of Saint and Gerestant, see Jana Evans Braziel, *Artists, Performers, and Black Masculinity in the Haitian Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 85-142; and on *Erzulie's Skirt*, see Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," in "Special Issue on Queer/Migration," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14 (April 2008): 191-215.
13. Dayan, "Erzulie," 5, 6.
14. Dayan also does not address Ezili Taureau, whose children are often masculine females. For more on Ezili Taureau, see Conner, *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions*, 59.
15. Strongman, "Transcorporeality in Vodou," 7, 26. Strongman does not translate these terms, in order to maintain their specificity and opacity. *Masisi* and *Madivine*, of course, refer to male and female gender and sexually complex people, respectively, and *en kachet* roughly translates as "hidden" (comparable to "in the closet").
16. See Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (Kingston, NY: Documentext, 1983 [1953]), 138.
17. Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 26 (June 2008): 12.
18. Grace Hong, "The Ghosts of Transnational American Studies," *American Quarterly* 59 (March 2007): 38.
19. This was transcribed and translated by Phyllis Galembo, in *Vodou: Visions and Voices of Haiti* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2005), xxiii.
20. Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen* (Mystic Fire Video, 1985). This documentary is part of the research included in her book. See note 16 above.

21. Unless otherwise noted, the translations cited here follow those contained in the film's subtitles. Where the subtitles lost some nuances that I felt were important, however, I have added my own translations and transcriptions of the original Kreyòl.
22. Transcription mine.
23. Transcription mine.
24. Dayan, "Erzulie," 7.
25. Transcription and translation mine.
26. Enoch Page and Matt U. Richardson, "On the Fear of Small Numbers: A Twenty-first-Century Prolegomenon of U.S. Black Transgender Experience," in *Black Sexualities: Probing Powers, Passions, Practices, and Policies*, ed. Juan Battle and Sandra L. Barnes (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 62, 63.
27. For more on *mati* in general and *mati* songs in particular, see Gloria Wekker's excellent *The Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). On the metaphors of *mati* songs, see Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, "'Rose Is My Mama, Stanfaste Is My Papa': Hybrid Landscapes and Sexualities in Surinamese Women's Oral Poetry," in Tinsley, *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism between Women in Caribbean Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
28. Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 4 (1997): 453, 438, 453.
29. Transcription and translation mine.
30. Valentine, *Imagining Transgender*, 124.
31. Dayan, "Erzulie," 22.
32. Transcription mine.
33. Transcription and translation mine.
34. Translation mine.
35. Transcription and translation mine.
36. Translation mine.
37. Jasbir Puar, *Territorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 211-12.
38. Deren, *Divine Horsemen*.
39. Cary Alan Johnson, "LGBT in Haiti, Three Months after the Quake," International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission Report, 13 Apr. 2010, <http://iglhr.wordpress.com/2010/04/13/lgbt-in-haiti-three-months-after-the-quake>.
40. Jennifer Wells, "Voodoo disciples are Haiti's outsiders: Even after the Tragedy, Adherents Are Being Persecuted, Leaders Say," *The Star.com*, 13 Feb. 2010, www.thestar.com/news/world/article/764890-wells-voodoo-disciples-are-haiti-s-outsiders.
41. Sean Scullion, "Haiti: The Hidden Holocaust," www.afoolinhaiti.me.uk/2010/03/02/the-hidden-holocaust.
42. PRLog: Free Press Release, "'We Need Your Help': Le Peristyle Haitian Sanctuary Calls for Help," www.prlog.org/10683862-we-need-your-help-le-peristyle-haitian-sanctuary-calls-for-help.html.