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PART I

VODOU

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OF DREAMS AND NIGHT MARES

Vodou Women Queering the Body

The matrix of Haitian Vodou scholarship contains an as-yet-uncharted anthropological narrative thread that is distinctly female authored. Making up a veritable genre of Vodou *écriture féminine*, the corpus of this work coheres around the themes of embodiment, desire, and homosociality. All of these texts share the common narrative of a female anthropologist integrating herself into a Vodou community, originally for the sole purpose of writing a scholarly memoir and gradually becoming a practitioner and initiate. The narratives share a preference for dreaming as leitmotif and metaphor for mediumship. They nearly always begin with an explanation of the horse and rider metaphor and end climactically with a trance possession experience, ideally the author's own but also those experienced by close acquaintances. In so doing, the narratives can be understood as constituting oneiric, abstracted, condensed, and abruptly ended Vodou ceremonies. In this first chapter, the ethnography as ceremony refracts the initiatory chamber metaphor developed in the introduction and foreshadows the notion of transcriptuality revealed in the conclusion.

In order to understand the construction, evolution, and impact of this genre, this chapter examines the initiatory-critical works of five female anthropologists to study how women's perspectives on Haitian Vodou corporeality problematize the Cartesian mind/body problem. These five texts were published at an average interval of eighteen years from the early twentieth century to the early twenty-first century. These are, in chronological order, Zora Neale Hurston's *Tell My Horse* (1938), Maya Deren's *Divine Horsemen* (1953), Katherine Dunham's *Island Possessed* (1969), Karen McCarthy Brown's *Mama Lola* (1991), and Mimerose Beaubrun's *Nan Dòmi* (2010). Through the notion of transcorporeality, I propose that there is a feminist and queer convergence in the common deployment of Vodou potentialities to develop more enabling models of embodiment.¹

The very title of the most recent book of this collection, *Nan Dòmi*, highlights the important role that dreams play in the process of becoming a Vodouisant. This latest book in the tradition outlined here stands as the culmination of an intertextual conversation that deploys dreaming as a metaphor for entering the metaphysical dimension of trance possession, initiation, communion with the divine, and mystical knowledge. Throughout the text, Beaubrun provides the reader with extended descriptions of dreams that function as commentaries, warnings, and exhortations about the waking world. Dreams become such an important part of the narrative that we begin to question whether dreams are in fact derivative from the so-called real. Perhaps dreaming is primary and the source of our waking actions, Beaubrun makes us ponder: "Le rêve, pour moi, c'était un monde imaginaire de souvenirs cachés. . . . Mais, pour tante Tansia, le rêve était un état du monde inconnu qui n'avait aucun rapport avec l'imagination. 'Il est réel,' m'apprit-elle" (2010, 41). "Dreaming, in my view, consisted of an imaginary world of hidden memories. . . . But for Aunt Tansia, dreaming was a state of the unknown world that had no connection to the imagination. 'It is real,' she taught me" (2013, 41). Paradoxically, the sleeper's eyes are open: "Rêver c'est voir. . . . Un rêveur est un *médium voyant*, un témoin de l'Inconnu" (2010, 73). "To dream is to see. . . . A dreamer is a medium, a witness to the unknown" (2013, 71).

Under the tutelage of her mentor, Aunt Tansia, Beaubrun begins to understand the importance of dreaming: "Rêver . . . c'est non seulement avoir la capacité de regarder le monde connu mais aussi d'être témoin de l'Inconnu" (2010, 68). "The purpose of dreaming was to develop the ability to see the known world, but also to be a witness to the Unknown" (2013, 67). This unknown world is populated by ancestral and divine spirits from Africa, a continent that is known mystically in Vodou as Ginen: *Nan Dòmi* is a state to mas-

ter, “les manifestations de l’Esprit et le sèvis Ginen” (Beaubrun 2010, 45); “the manifestations of the spirit and the service of Ginen” (2013, 45). Regarding the referent for Ginen, Bien-Aimé, another spiritual mentor, deflects Beaubrun away from clear physical geographies: “‘Qu’est-ce que le Ginen?’ Il me répondit: ‘Se sa w pa wè a’” (C’est l’Invisible)” (2010, 34). “‘What is Ginen?’ He answered, ‘Se sa w pa we’a’ (It is the Invisible)” (2013, 34). Dreaming is more than traveling or returning to an ancestral land; it is accessing an existing parallel dimension of knowledge and being. And for that it becomes necessary to expand one’s sight. Much of Beaubrun’s apprenticeship with Aunt Tansia involves learning how to access and manage spiritual technologies of dreaming: “Pour entrer en état de rêve, me disait encore tante Tansia, il faut savoir faire silence en soi; il faut faire taire toutes les pensées” (2010, 68). “‘To enter into the dream state,’ Aunt Tansia repeated to me, ‘it is necessary to silence oneself. One must silence all thoughts’” (2013, 67). The stilling of the mind renders the Vodouisant clairvoyant: “Le moun Ginen le peut, parce qu’il a le *Je* (pouvoir surnaturel de voyance, don de clairvoyance . . .)” (2010, 34). “Moun ginen can do it because he has *Je* (literally ‘eye,’ or ‘opening,’ can refer to supernatural power of seeing, clairvoyance . . .)” (Beaubrun 2013, 34). Katherine Dunham also records mystical eyes as referents for clairvoyance: “*Prix des yeux*: ‘Prize of eyes,’ or ‘price of the eyes’; clairvoyance. Highest degree of vaudun initiates” (1969, 279).

Through the aperture provided by *Nan Dòmi*, we are able to appreciate the importance of dreaming in the worldview of Vodou and just how female ethnographers have been able to comment on the development of this mystical vision. Maya Deren, whose birth name is Eleanora Derenkowskaia, deploys the Sanskrit name for dreams and illusion—Maya—to craft a mystical authorial identity for herself. Her seminal book and film, both called *Divine Horsemen*, utilize stream-of-consciousness techniques to achieve a surrealistic, dreamlike quality of great psychological depth. She describes her trance possession at the end of her book as a dream (Deren 1970, 259). In contrast to this tail-end figuration of dreaming, Zora Neale Hurston, in *Tell My Horse*, presents how the spiritual journey starts with dreams: “How does a man know that he has been called? It usually begins in troubled dreams” (1990, 122). Dreams bookend the initiation narration of these female anthropologists, and this narrative frame encapsulates various other dreams, forcing us to consider how, if the book is a microcosm and mirror of life, perhaps we are dreaming that/what we are reading. In *Mama Lola*, Karen McCarthy Brown (1991, 206, 207, 213, 255) records how her informant’s mother, Philo, communicates with the lwas in dreams. When

Philo wants to end her pregnancy, a white woman comes into her dreams to warn her against aborting (209). This old white woman tells her not to come to her house, the hospital, to have the baby (211). The hospital bears the name Our Lady of Lourdes, syncretized with Ezili Dantò. As a result of this warning, the baby is born into the chamber pot, at home, escapes an epidemic at the hospital, and receives a name that is a creolized form of the Catholic saint, Aloud or Alourdes (212). Years later, Dantò appears to Aloud in a dream—as she did to her own mother—to counsel her to keep her child (240). Here, McCarthy Brown reiterates Hurston’s idea that the calling begins with a dream by narrating how these dreams do in fact launch the spiritual journeys of female mambos.

Constituents of the Self

Just as dreaming functions as a descriptor for the phenomenon of trance possession, we can see how the self itself is dreamed—that is, imagined, projected, symbolically represented—as constructed of many material and immaterial constitutive parts in the worldview of Vodou.

The constituents of the self in Vodou are multiple. There are three components that are understood as bodies. First is the *kòkadav*, or the physical body. Second is the *nannan*, an astral body that serves as a double, normally enveloped by the *kòkadav*. However, in the dream state, the physical body that represents the *gwobonanj* is contained by the *nannan* “pour pouvoir protéger le rêveur en lui donnant un sentiment de solidité” (Beaubrun 2010, 89); “to protect the dreamer by giving him a sense of solidity” (2013, 86). Third, there is the *nannan-rèv*, which is the dream body (Beaubrun 2010, 89; 2013, 86).

Among the immaterial aspects of the self, three are of central importance in the construction of the body in Vodou. There is some debate in the literature as to which one is the repository of the personality or character of the individual and which is more akin to the Western notion of the soul, but the important point to apprehend is that like the various bodies, the psyche in Vodou is multiple.

The first one is *esprit*, which can be translated as “intelligence,” “energy and action of the mind,” “source and the act of judgement, decision, desire and all of the motivation and the will projected in a man’s visible action” (Deren 1970, 25). The *esprit* is a “person’s ‘life principle,’ his nature or char-

acter rather than in an exclusive or mystical sense. In this sense it approximates English 'spirit' as in the 'spirit of the times'" (18).

The remaining parts of the psyche are given considerably more attention in the literature, as these are more active and engaged in the processes of living, dying, and trance. These two parts are the *tibonanj* or little guardian angel, and the *gwobonanj* or big guardian angel.

The *tibonanj*, also called *lanvè* or *selidò*, is the spiritual body, a portion of God, which controls the dream state: "The universal commitment towards good, the notion of truth as desirable, all that conscience which, in our culture is understood as a function of the soul is, for the Haitian, the function of a third element, the *ti-bon-ange*" (Deren 1970, 26), which is automatically liberated at the moment of death, is objective conscience, and, consequently, cannot lie (44).

On the other hand, the *gwobonanj*, known also as *ladwat* or *sèmèdò*, functions as the mental world or intellect (Beaubrun 2013, 42), personality, or consciousness (McCarthy Brown 1991, 384), the invisible nonmaterial character of an individual, as distinguished from the physical body—which is more like psyche than soul (Deren 1970, 18). The *gwobonanj* is the "metaphysical double of the physical being . . . the immortal twin of mortal man . . . similar to what we understand by a man's soul, if we think of the soul as duplicating the man and not as a moral force of a 'higher' nature . . . the repository of a man's history" (Deren 1970, 26–27).

It is the elucidation and the functioning of the *gwobonanj* to which most of the literature of body corporeality is devoted because this is precisely the part of the psyche that is movable during trance: "Those who serve the Vodou spirits believe that, in possession, the *gwobonanj* leaves the body and floats loose in the world" (McCarthy Brown 1991, 352). Deren explains that the *lwa* is itself a *gwobonanj* and it is this very nature that allows it to replace temporarily the *gwobonanj* of the devotee during trance:

Man has a material body, animated by an *esprit* or *gros-bon-ange*—the soul, spirit, psyche or self—which, being non-material, does not share the death of the body. This soul may achieve . . . the status of a loa, a divinity and become the archetypal representative of some natural or moral principle. As such, it has the power to displace temporarily the *gros-bon-ange* of a living person and become the animating force of his physical body. This psychic phenomenon is known as "possession." (1970, 16)

As the most recent book among this collection of female-authored initiatory ethnographies, Beaubrun's *Nan Dòmi* is the most profoundly personal and

the narrative that most clearly states the need to transcend the egoic self-hood that is the gwobonanj. Her book begins as an anthropology thesis and then becomes a personal journey (Beaubrun 2013, 32). Her movement from detached, idealized objectivity to a participatory subjectivity forces her to confront her strong sense of individuality. Aunt Tansia keeps telling her that she is limited in her growth by clinging to her personality, her “Moi/I” (Beaubrun 2010, 67; 2013, 66): “Tu n’es en sécurité que lorsque tu trouves des explications” (2010, 81); “You only feel safe when you have explanations” (2013, 78). “[Il faut] te défaire de ta raison” (2010, 74); “Free yourself of your reason” (2013, 72), Aunt Tansia tells her. “Danse, ma fille, danse. . . . Tout danse, l’univers et tout ce qu’il contient, les énergies dansent” (2010, 75). “Dance my child, dance. . . . Everything dances. The entire universe and everything it contains, the energies dance” (2013, 72–73). Throughout the narrative, Aunt Tansia urges Beaubrun to lose her personality. Her teaching insists that one’s personality is not one’s being: “Ta personnalité a été fabriquée par ce monde-ci et pour le fonctionnement de ce monde. On t’a donné un nom, une classe et une éducation” (Beaubrun 2010, 105). “Your personality has been constructed by this world for the functioning of this world. You have been given a name, a class, and an education” (2013, 101). According to Aunt Tansia, societal norms and prohibitions play a large role in the construction of the personality. She urges Beaubrun (2013, 101) to look deep inside for that being who is a mystery. Many of Beaubrun’s challenges in the transcending of her egoic self lie in her attachment to language. Aunt Tansia kindly chides her: “Tu aimes trop les mots. Tu deviens dépendante. C’est ce qui cause le blocage des poètes. Prisonniers des mots, ils restent d’éternels nostalgiques d’un monde qu’ils ont perçu sans pouvoir vraiment le décrire” (2010, 96). “You love words too much. You become dependent on them. That is what causes blockages in poets. Prisoners of words, they remain eternally nostalgic for a world that they have perceived, but never truly been able to describe” (2013, 93). Finally, in the epilogue, Beaubrun succeeds in her attempt to shed the egoic self. When her husband, Lòlò, tells her, “Tu vas laisser ta trace à travers ce livre” (You are going to leave your mark through this book), she firmly replies, “Non, au contraire, je vais plutôt l’effacer” (No, on the contrary, instead I am going to erase it) (Beaubrun 2010, 279; 2013, 267).

The modular nature of these different parts of the self becomes evident in various Vodou life-cycle rituals. *Kanzo* is a fire ritual of initiation that creates a composite life made up of the lwa, the initiate, and the sacrificed animal in the pòtet (Deren 1970, 220–22). The ritual of *desounnen* separates all three parts of the initiate upon death: the body, the gwobonanj (the personal soul

or self), and the *lwamètèt* (the spirit who is the master of the head; Deren 1970, 44). The gwobonanj, now liberated from the bond with the lwa and the material body of the deceased, is now free to become a lwa or a tutelary family spirit (45). The ritual of *retirer d'en bas de l'eau* is a ceremony that takes place one year and a day after the death of the initiate. It is the feast in which the spirit is freed and then reclaimed from the waters of the abyss to embody a *govi* (27, 220–22, 336). This *govi* becomes a replacement for the deceased body: “The clay jar, or *govi*, in which it is placed at this ceremony is a substitute for the vessel of flesh which once contained it. Out of the mouth of the jar issue the counsels and wisdoms by which the deceased continues to aid and advance his descendants” (28). The fact that the jar can substitute for the body underscores the image of the body as receptacular in nature.

Zombification is a process of desubjectification that further evidences the multiplicity of the immaterial self, the removal and substitution of these various parts, the role of the body as container, and the modularity of the dreamed, constructed self. Katherine Dunham provides a most apt definition of the zombie:

The first definition of the creature is that of a truly dead person who by the intervention of black magic has been brought back to life, but by such a process that memory and will are gone and the resultant being is entirely subject to the will of the sorcerer who resuscitated him, in the service of good or evil. (1969, 184)

Perhaps the dread of zombification curtailed the need for specificity, for in the explanation of this matter Deren relapses into using the word “soul,” which she finds so inadequate in the context of Vodou: “The dread zombie, the major figure of terror, is precisely this: the body without a soul, matter without morality” (1970, 42). Zora Neale Hurston also uses the terminology of “soul,” this time evoking the image of it as “the breath of life,” which can be sucked out, inhaled, and possibly smelled:

After the proper ceremony, the Bocor in his most powerful and dreaded aspect mounts a horse with his face toward the horse’s tail and rides after dark to the house of the victim. There he places his lips to the crack of the door and sucks out the soul of the victim and rides off in all speed. Soon the victim falls ill, usually beginning with a headache, and in a few hours is dead. (1990, 181–82)

After this, the houngan keeps the soul, either in a bottle or in his hand. He calls the dead body at midnight using the soul as bait. Then, “the dead man answers



FIG. 1.1. Zora Neale Hurston drumming in Haiti. Library of Congress, *New York World-Telegram and the Sun Newspaper Photograph Collection*, 1937, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/98511782/>. *World-Telegram* staff photographer.

by lifting his head and the moment he does this, the Bocor passes the soul under the nose for a brief second and chains his wrist” (Hurston 1990, 182).

This feminine dreaming of the body becomes most visibly gendered in the mythical role that the womb plays in the construction of the Vodou body. In Haitian folklore, the phenomenon of *pèdysion* is the popular belief in the

possibility of withheld pregnancies (McCarthy Brown 1991, 243). After conception, a pregnancy can be halted and resumed so that women may say that they have actually been pregnant for years. This allows women to claim that men with whom they had sexual relations in the distant past are the fathers of their newborns. This mythical imagining of the womb outlined by Karen McCarthy Brown illuminates Mimerose Beaubrun's statement, "La matrice, dit-elle, porte toutes nos frustrations, nos peurs, nos complexes, etc." (2010, 76); "The womb . . . contains all our frustrations, our fears, our complexes, and the like" (2013, 74). This is why Aunt Tansia urges her to *woule vant*, to roll her belly to exorcise her fears:

Elle m'apprit le mouvement *woule vant* (danse du ventre), dans le deux sens, qui consiste à faire rouler la peau de mon ventre à partir de mon bassin en montant, puis dans le sens inverse. Elle me conseilla de faire ce mouvement jusqu'à ressentir une sensation pareille à celle de l'orgasme. Son dessein était de me porter à découvrir la perception de rouler avec ma matrice. (Beaubrun 2010, 76)

She taught me how to do the *woule vant* (belly dance) in two directions. The dance consisted of rolling my stomach from my pelvis up, then doing the same thing in the opposite direction. She advised me to perform this movement until I felt a sensation similar to an orgasm. Her plan was to lead me to become aware of the belly dance in the womb. (Beaubrun 2013, 73–74)

Herein we see the great allure of women's exploration of models of embodiment that could present an alternative to the soul-encased body schematization inherited from Descartes. If the gwobonaj, as the principal immaterial aspect of the self, can be external, removable, and temporarily replaced, how might a female subjectivity, particularly a queer female subjectivity, dream of using such a novel model for her own advantageous self-crafting?

Vodou Non-heteronormativities

The modularity of the self, preserved in these African-diasporic religions, allows for the temporary substitution of the gwobonanj by the lwa, allowing for cross-gender identifications to take place during trance:

If a male loa possesses a female devotee, the name of the loa or the pronoun *he* will be used (as it always is in Voudoun) when referring

to the acting subject responsible for all events transpiring during that possession; and conversely, if a female loa possesses a male, the pronoun will be *she*. (Deren 1970, 17)

This regendering of the body has some very visible sartorial effects:

Baron Samedi delights in dressing his “horses” in shabby and fantastic clothes like Papa Guedé. Women dressed like men and men like women. Often the men, in addition to wearing female clothes, thrust a calabash up under their skirts to simulate pregnancy. Women put on men’s coats and prance about with a stick between their legs to imitate the male sex organs. (Hurstons 1990, 224)

The phenomenon of possession that enables this performative regendering of the body in the ritual context, far from being contained within the sacred space, spills over into the realm of the profane. For example, Carnival is one event in which such regenderings are visible:²

It is common for men and women to exchange clothes, perhaps with the desire to satisfy homosexual inclinations. With nightfall, all possible remaining restrictions are automatically cast aside, and the play element becomes decidedly orgiastic. . . . Homosexual activity is very common to these mass bands. It is not at all unusual to see two men in the embrace of the *gouillé* dance. A person who, in everyday life, shows no abnormal inclinations will, under the increasing momentum of the Mardi Gras, seek out persons of the same sex for the erotic dances. (Dunham 1983, 44–45)

Dreaming the body with the technologies of Vodou corporeality implies the possibility of constructing a gendered subjectivity with greater freedom and flexibility than that allowed by the interiorizing model of the European philosophical tradition. The cashew-nut-like external and removable anima allows for a modular bodily schema, accounts for trance possession, and enables the regendering of the female body in the sacred and profane realms of Haitian cultural life. In all of these accounts there is a diffused and buried self-awareness of an enabling malleability of the self that is alluring to the female and queer ethnographer. Yet it is the role of the critic to give voice to the impetus behind such research on Vodou embodiment, since for many of these female ethnographers, likely due to sociotemporal conventions, the desires animating their inquiry remain something of a taboo.

Transcorporeality, as the modular aspect of the self that allows the ritual and everyday flourishing of non-heteronormative performance and identifications, underpins the varied forms of female homosociality we encounter in this tradition of Vodou ethnographies written by women. Mimerose Beaubrun's husband is Theodore "Lòlò" Beaubrun (2013, 27), but he is largely absent from the body of the narrative. He is introduced at the beginning of the spiritual diary that the book is and only returns in a significant way at the end of the narrative, when one could almost say she is reconciled to him, as if there had been a marital estrangement. The fact that his nickname, Lòlò, means "penis" in Martinican Kréyòl seems to reduce him to a mere reproductive and practical sexual object. The renewed intimacy occurs as Beaubrun discovers her husband's spiritual sensitivity and intuition and learns that their "intimacy went beyond the marital bond" (Beaubrun 2013, 257; *intimité allait au-delà des liens maritaux*) (2010, 269). In the body of the narrative, the main relationship is that between initiate and mentor, Beaubrun and Aunt Tansia, who share a deep sensuous bond.

Nan Dòmi has an arc that begins and returns to the marriage between the author and her husband. This relationship seems to adopt Aunt Tansia and then evacuates her—she appears to be expiatorily sacrificed in her death—allowing the heterosexual couple the experience of a quasi-sexual trial that, in the end, serves to deepen their bond. Beaubrun (2013, 74) explicitly declares her love for Aunt Tansia, something she never does for her husband. Beaubrun composes a love poem, directed presumably to the earth, yet it seems obliquely addressed to Aunt Tansia. Using language that conveys a sense of erotic ecstasy and bliss, she writes,

*Je veux te remercier Maman chérie!
Bénie sois-tu, Mère secourable
Oh! comme je t'aime!
J'aime ton odeur . . .
Apprends-moi à l'exhaler
Dans les grains
De poussières qui forment
Ton temple, ma chair
Fais-la-moi sentir dans l'air que je respire
À chaque seconde*

*Apprends-moi à vibrer suivant ton rythme
J'ai tellement besoin de toi!* (2010, 243)

*I want to thank you dear Mother!
Bless you helpful Mother
Oh! How I love you!
I love your scent . . .
Help me to exhale it
In the particles
Of dust that form
Your temple, my flesh
Make me sense it in the air I breathe
At every moment
Teach me to vibrate to your rhythm
I have such need of you!* (2013, 233)

Beaubrun is sensuously captivated by Aunt Tansia's appearance: "Tansia était très belle. C'était la plus belle femme du pays. Elle avait la peau couleur de pêche, elle avait les cheveux épais et ondulés, des dents blanches, des yeux marron clair et mesurait un mètre soixante-quinze" (2010, 55). "Tansia was very beautiful. She was the most beautiful woman in the country. Her skin was the color of a peach, her hair thick and wavy, her teeth white, eyes a clear brown, and she was five feet seven inches tall" (2013, 55). The gaze of desire is perceptible enough that Aunt Tansia must question her about its nature:

Pendant qu'elle parlait, son visage se transforma; ses traits devinrent ceux d'une jeune femme. Elle était très, très belle. Elle détacha son chignon, ses cheveux avaient une couleur de miel. Elle était agile, à l'aise, et se déplaçait avec coquetterie. Si ce changement d'apparence physique était surprenant, son changement d'humeur l'était encore plus. J'étais ébahie, je n'en croyais pas mes yeux. Elle vit ma surprise et me dit: "Pourquoi me regardes-tu comme ça." (2010, 54)

While she was speaking her face was transformed; her features became those of a young woman. She was very, very beautiful. She unfastened her chignon. Her hair was the color of honey. She was agile, at ease, and moved coquettishly. If this change in her physical appearance was surprising, her changed mood was even more so. I was astounded. I could not believe my eyes. She saw my surprise and said, "Why are you looking at me like that?" (2013, 54)

Beaubrun describes her closeness to Tansia in a thinly veiled erotic language. The relationship is close enough for Aunt Tansia to tell Beaubrun to remember to wash her “*bouboun* (pubis)” (2010, 64; 2013, 64). Also, recalling the postlude of one of her possession/dreaming episodes, she writes, “Il faisait noir. J’ouvris grand les yeux, un moment je perçus du jaune safran puis du blanc, et je me réveillai blottie dans la jupe de tante Tansia. Mon corps tremblait, secoué de spasmes. Elle me fit boire l’eau, en passa sur mon visage. J’avais chaud” (2010, 58). “It was all black. I opened my eyes wide; at one moment I saw saffron yellow, then white, and I awoke nestled in Aunt Tansia’s skirt. My body trembled, seized by spasms. She had me drink some water, pouring it over my face. I was hot” (2013, 58).

This coded lesbianism is also perceptible in Katherine Dunham’s lifework. One of her biographers reads the caption describing the “gay good spirits” of Dunham’s company as coded queerness. The male dancers’ jutting hips only accentuate the queer implications. Many of the dancers were associated with Carl Van Vechten’s gay social circle. George Chauncey’s oral history confirms the reputation of the Dunham Company as one center for gay life in Harlem during the mid-twentieth century (Manning 2005, 262). Dunham’s (1969, 60–61) *Island Possessed* is pervaded by sensuous descriptions of extremely close bodily contact with other female initiates in ceremonies. This culminates in a thinly veiled homoerotic situation:

Guédé Nimbo should have waited before mounting the woman in my lap. . . . She had slept heavily since inserting herself again between us, angled backward into my lap, scarcely waking when we turned. . . . She breathed open-mouthed and I could smell Guédé’s alcohol and pipe tobacco. (Dunham 1969, 78)

Her biographer identifies this woman as a lesbian (Aschenbrenner 2002, 76). Commenting on the non-heteronormativity that pervades popular and peasant culture in Haiti, Dunham writes, “There has been a fusion of the forms of polygamy which flourish in variety in Africa, to produce the Haitian system” (1969, 83). She appears to have lived and loved in accordance with this non-heteronormative polyamory, in which she had as lovers deities, men, and several unnamed, ungendered, anonymous people. Judging from the suggestions and intimations outlined above, would it be far-fetched to assume women were among them?

At the time of my wedding to Damballa I was already married, though hardly mature enough of spirit to realize it, to someone who would

FIG. 1.2. Katherine Dunham as *Woman with a Cigar*, undated. Photograph by Alfredo Valenti. Used courtesy of Library of Congress. From Special Collections Research Center, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.



perhaps rather remain anonymous; I felt myself in love with a dear friend who might also rather remain anonymous; I was smitten with one or more college professors, fascinated by Dumarsais Estimé, and engaged in more ways than one to Fred Alsop. (Dunham 1969, 111)

Lastly, this coded lesbianism is evident in her stage performance and commercial self-portraiture. In *Tropics—Shore Excursion*, Dunham performs “as the ‘Woman with the Cigar.’” Personifying the phallic woman, Dunham uses the cigar to regender her body but also to “allude to the religious practices of Santería, a fusion of Yorùbá and Catholic practices that originated in Cuba. On the other hand, Dunham based the dance on Caribbean market women known as Madame Sara, market women who often supported ‘wives’” (Manning 2005, 262). The fact that the body functions as the receptacle of an external anima allows for an imagination, a dreaming, of the relationship between sex and gender to be less fixed than in the Cartesian model of bodily soul entrapment. This allows for an exploration of female homosociality in the sacred and profane aspects of Haitian culture, even if these forms of same-sex bonding and queer desire require critical decoding to make them visible.

The Trope of the Tragic Lesbian

One of the distinguishing features of the corpus of female-authored Vodou initiatory ethnographies is their frank exposition of lesbianism, a bold move especially for those writing before the 1970s. Nevertheless, the presentation of same-sex-loving women largely ends in tragedy, evoking an early trope in the depiction of lesbianism in modernist European cultural works such as Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) and Leontine Sagan's *Mädchen in Uniform* (1931).

The first instance of lesbianism in these female-authored ethnographies is found in Zora Neale Hurston's *Tell My Horse*:

A tragic case of a Guédé mount happened near Pont Beaudet. A woman known to be a Lesbian was "mounted" one afternoon. The spirit announced through her mouth, "Tell my horse I have told this woman repeatedly to stop making love to women. It is a vile thing and I object to it. Tell my horse that this woman promised me twice that she would never do such a thing again, but each time she has broken her word to me as soon as she could find a woman suitable for her purpose. But she has made love to women for the last time. Tell my horse to tell that woman I am going to kill her today. She will not lie again." The woman pranced and galloped like a horse to a great mango tree, climbed it far up among the top limbs and dived off and broke her neck. (1990, 222)

The fact that this scene immediately follows the revelation of the meaning of the title of the book highlights the importance accorded to same-sex desire by the author. Beyond illustrating the title of book, this passage is presented at a culminating point of the book, very near the end of the narrative. Given the thematic and narrative location of the scene, we could argue that the axis of the book is lesbian and that *Tell My Horse* is non-heteronormatively centered. Her discussion of lesbianism in 1938 is groundbreaking for the fields of black Atlantic religions and anthropology. The death of the lesbian is a literary cliché of the times, and it may have been the only way in which such a representation would have endured editorial censorship. Nevertheless, it remains important to note that it is spiritual infidelity, not necessarily homophobia, which prompts the lwa to kill her horse.

A similar rendition of the tragic lesbian occurs in Karen McCarthy Brown's *Mama Lola*, in the chapter "Dreams and Promises" when it is revealed that the spiritual grandmother of Alourdes is a lesbian:

"In Santo Domingo, there was a woman, a *manbo*. Madame Gilbert was her name, and she had a very strong spirit named Agèou. He worked, worked, worked. People came from all over the Dominican to see Madame Gilbert and her Agèou. Any problem—any problem!—Agèou could treat it.

"But Agèou became angry with Madame Gilbert. She was . . . you know . . . a lesbian," Philo said, dropping her voice, "and she was always buying things for women. She bought them clothes . . . perfumes . . . jewelry. All her money she spent on those women. She did not give Agèou even one candle! She expected him to work, but she gave him nothing! There was one day Agèou came in Madame Gilbert's head, and he got so mad, he made her cut off her finger. He did that!" Philo sighed, and, for the first time since she began talking, she looked Rapelle in the eye. "That woman—so stupid!"

Philo's voice quickly fell back to its somber cadence, and her eyes locked on the cup of herbal tea she held in her hand. "Madame Gilbert changed nothing. She went right on buying, buying for all those women. She did not offer one little thing to Agèou. So he made her sick. She got tuberculosis . . . consumption. She started to vomit blood. They took her to the hospital. Finally she died—and do you know what happened?" Rapelle did not attempt to answer. "Not one of those women came to see her in the hospital. Not one came to the funeral. Not one." (1991, 206–7)

Also here, it becomes important to note how the mambo's death is not brought about by homophobia per se, but through sacramental infidelity, the neglect of spiritual duties and the jealousy that this produces in the lwa. In the passage, there is no hint of social condemnation for same-sex desire. Instead we find a frank discussion of sexual non-heteronormativity and the acceptance of women-loving women by the lwa, as long as they can maintain a balance between their sexual and spiritual lives. Nevertheless, the fact that narratives of same-sex-loving women are permitted so long as the love story ends in tragedy and death remains problematic and indicative of powerful heteropatriarchal force in the discourse of Haitian cultural life.

Similarly, Alourdes loses a baby when her jealous husband kicks her as he misinterprets her sisterly affection for the maid as sexual (McCarthy Brown 1991, 240). Rather than a condemnation of lesbianism, what we have here is an exposure of the affront to patriarchy that such bonding between women represents. The tragic lesbian in this literary tradition is not a morality tale

in which reproductive heterosexuality asserts itself as victorious and virtuous. Rather, the power present in female homosociality and same-sex desire between women is presented as a force that husbands and gods seek to channel for themselves at all costs. The fact that the tragedy in these lesbian narratives is incongruent with the overall story line points to tragedy's role as an insincere disclaimer and forced retraction driven by discursive conventions.

The Two Erzulies: Freda and Dantor

Driven by a feminist impetus, the female ethnographers who composed the canon of work studied here focus on the female *lwa* par excellence, Erzulie, whose avatars, Erzulie Freda and Erzulie Dantor, respectively illustrate the paths of sensuality and maternity. Like oil and vinegar, these two aspects of femininity remain separate in the Vodou worldview, perhaps not to uphold but instead to grapple with the patriarchal expectations of women in Haitian popular culture. In order for Freda to remain sexually available, she must remain childless, but what to do with the offspring of such copious copulation? Freda hands over her little girl, Anaïs, to her maternal sister, Dantor, who cares for her as if the child were her own. While it would appear that these split manifestations of Erzulie only serve to uphold reproductive heteropatriarchy by preventing the representation of women's coarticulated identities, these writers prove that the overdeterminacy of her divine imagery enables potent queer possibilities. Deren makes clear the heterosexual desire radiating from Erzulie: "Mistress Erzulie, in all her various aspects and aliases, is the divinity who most frequently—more than any of the other *loa*—requires such a marriage with the men who serve her" (1970, 263). Hurston clarifies how, this heterosexual inclination notwithstanding, Erzulie Freda also sabotages and forestalls opposite-sex coupling. Hurston points out how she sets "aside for herself young and handsome men and thus bar[s] them marriage," and when they are already married she "throws herself between the woman and her happiness" (1990, 122). Dunham reminds us that anyone can marry Erzulie, including women: "Once married to Erzulie there is no mystery of life or love left unknown and man, woman or child may be chosen by the goddess of love" (1969, 61). Certainly, these women would be in same-sex divine marriage, transgressing heterosexuality, at least symbolically. Furthermore, Hurston tells us that the few female devotees of Erzulie Freda are already outside the system of reproductive heteropatriarchy: "Women do not give her [Erzulie] food unless they tend towards the hermaphrodite or

are elderly women who are widows or have abandoned the hope of mating” (1990, 122).

McCarthy Brown reports on the widespread speculation among devotees that Erzulie Dantor is in fact a lover of women:

Dantò is . . . a frequent participant in marriages with *vivan-yo* (the living). . . . When gossip is the mode, people in Alourdes’s community admit that some of these marriages are with women. Thus the portrait emerges of an independent, childbearing woman with an unconventional sexuality that, on several counts, flouts the authority of the patriarchal family. (1991, 228–29)

Further complicating the rumors of Erzulie’s sexual inclination toward women, McCarthy Brown (1991, 228) reports on popular tales that say that Ti-Jan Petwo, her son, is also her lover. With her characterization as a *madevinez*—the Haitian Kreyòl word for women-loving women—and her presentation as an incestuous pedophile, Dantor’s status as a non-heteronormative divinity becomes readily apparent.

Narrating Possession

What accounts for these cross-gendered identifications and same-sex desires, even when they are veiled in codedness and tragedy, is the transcorporeal representation of the body of Vodou in which the immaterial aspect of the self, the *gwobonanj*, can be substituted with the *lwa* during trance possession. In these narratives, the descriptions of this evacuation and replacement of the self during the experience of trance possession circulate around the metaphors of ridership, loss, travel, surrender, drowning, ecstasy, and ravishment. The withdrawal of the ego resulting from trance possession is a sought-after experience that acquires sexual connotations in most of these metaphors. The very fact that these possessions are presented as a form of human sacramental copulation with the divine renders them non-heteronormative and therefore capable of generating a radical politics of alterity.

Most of these female-authored ethnographic Vodou accounts begin with an explanation of the horse and rider metaphor for trance possession, move through an initiatory journey in the middle chapters, and end with the near or full possession of the female author by the *lwa*. As the title of her auto-ethnography suggests, Maya Deren describes the initiate as a horse that

surrenders its will to a riding lwa: “The metaphor is drawn from a horse and his rider and the actions and events which result are the expression of the will of the rider” (1970, 29). Similarly, the title of Zora Neale Hurston’s account is also evocative of the horse and rider metaphor. Hurston provides an explanation of the title of her book toward the end of the journey to close the narrative frame. In this illustration of the title, she explains how the community must relay to the entranced initiate the words that the lwa has spoken regarding him or her: “Parlay Cheval Ou’ (Tell My Horse), [is the signal that] the loa begins to dictate through the lips of his mount and goes on and on” (Hurston 1990, 221). It is significant that all the female ethnographers have chosen the horse and rider metaphor as a foundational mode for understanding embodiment and possession, and it seems only fitting that a critical feminist reading of this corpus of Vodou scholarship should reveal the gender of the equine as feminine through the figure of the mare invoked in the title of this chapter. The concavity of the saddle, the vessel-like quality of the horse, and the synergy between the horse and its rider evoke a receptacularity that is distinctly female and laden with sexual connotations that present trance as a mystical union and foreshadow the important image of the *femme cheval* discussed in chapter 4.³

In complementary fashion, Mimerose Beaubrun describes possession as a state of sleep and dreaming, a metaphor that she deploys beginning from the very title, *Nan Dòmi*—literally “In Sleep [State/Mode].” Beaubrun describes feeling her eyes heavy, dancing without conscious control, having a sense of falling into a deep sleep, yet not being asleep. She then explains how her limbs swayed without subjective control, as she saw yellow and then white. Using the language of fainting, she finds herself dancing, not knowing how to stop (Beaubrun 2013, 47). Experiencing something akin to lucid dreaming, Beaubrun feels drowsy, yet awake and unable to talk (48). Paradoxically, dreaming implies closing one’s eyelids, and it is only in this state that one acquires enviable vision: “Entrer Nan dòmi, c’est avoir la capacité de voir ce que les autres ne perçoivent pas” (Beaubrun 2010, 238); “Nan Dòmi is to have the capacity to see what others do not perceive” (Beaubrun 2013, 227).

Maya Deren also evokes dreaming as a foundational image for the trance possession experience with which her narrative culminates:

As sometimes in dreams, so here I can observe myself, can note with pleasure how the full hem of my white skirt plays with the rhythms, can watch, as if in a mirror, how the smile begins with a softening of

the lips, spreads imperceptibly into a radiance which, surely, is lovelier than any I have ever seen. It is when I turn, as if to a neighbor, to say, "Look! See how lovely that is!" and see that the others are removed to a distance, withdrawn to a circle which is already watching, that I realize, like a shaft of terror struck through me, that it is no longer myself whom I watch. Yet it *is* myself, for as that terror strikes, we two are made one again, joined by and upon the point of the left leg which is as if rooted to the earth. (1970, 258–59)

In this passage, which is the climax and ending of her book, Deren's description of her trance uses the images of the dream to convey an image of her self doubling, refracting as she experiences a deep sense of depersonalization prior to the temporary evacuation of her ego. Evoking some of the great mystics of Christianity—St. Theresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross come to mind—Deren presents this union with the divine as ecstasy. This orgasmic sentiment is echoed by Beaubrun when she declares, "*Je me plaisais dans cet état entre deux eaux: profondément endormie et pleinement consciente de moi-même*" (2010, 48); "I experienced pleasure in that state between two waters: profoundly asleep and fully conscious of myself" (2013, 48). Along these lines, I read Deren's mystical union with Erzulie as homoerotic:

The white darkness moves up the veins of my left leg like a swift tide rising, rising; is a great force which I cannot sustain, or contain, which, surely, will burst my skin. It is too much, too bright, too white for me; this is darkness. "Mercy!" I scream within me. I hear it echoed by the voices, shrill and unearthly: "Erzulie!" The bright darkness floods up through my body, reaches my head, engulfs me. I am sucked down and exploded upward at once. That is all. (1970, 260)

As presented in this extended quote from Deren, devotees who experience trance often feel a surge of power rising through their bodies. When the power reaches the head, they experience a sense of drowning and then black out. McCarthy Brown confirms the widespread nature of this experience when she reports on Alourdes's description of what it is like to enter into trance:

When the spirits come into your head, you feel light, light like a piece of paper . . . very light in your head. You feel dizzy in your head. Then after, you pass out. But the spirit come, and he talk to people, and he look at the table you make for him . . . you know. . . . Then he leaves . . .

and you come very, very, very far. But when the spirit in your body, in your head, you don't know nothing. They have to tell you what the spirit say, what message he leave for you. (1991, 353)

As she narrates her first possession experience, Alourdes's daughter, Maggie, reverberates her mother's and Maya Deren's focus on their heads just prior to lending their bodies to the lwas: "I started to be Miss Invisible—The Invisible Woman! . . . I'm losing my foot. . . . I'm losing my arm. . . . I'm losing my body, and it's just going. . . . Once it hits your head, that's it! It's black, and then I don't know nothing. Nothing!" (McCarthy Brown 1991, 353). It is important to note in both experiences here cited as well as in others in *Mama Lola*, a language of corporeal loss, of feet not touching the ground, of water running over the body, of high blood pressure and a sense of floating. What proceeds from trance is invariably experienced by the initiate as a state of unconsciousness followed by amnesia. Alourdes's experience of return from travel after the departure of the lwa is also echoed by Beaubrun when she discusses "la transe qui fait voyager dans les régions lointaines mais consciemment, celle que l'on appelle la transe de l'extase" (2010, 237); the "trance of ecstasy . . . in which one travels to faraway lands, but in a state of consciousness" in which one's "voyages resemble dreams, but dreams experienced in a wakened state" (2013, 227).

The experience of trance possession is such a staple of the female-authored Vodou ethnography that four out of the five anthropologists studied here experience and include it as the pivotal and culminating scene of their accounts. Only Katherine Dunham is left with the disappointment of not having gone into trance for her lwa, Dambala: "After my marriage to Damballa I longed for some inkling, some indication of 'possession'" (1969, 228). Dunham never formally experienced possession (Aschenbrenner 2002, 81), yet her company's dancers would often go into trance in New York during practices, and it was she who would have to teach the dancers how to remain in full control of their bodies during choreographies based on ritual dances (78). Yet even in this narrative in which the author fails to go into trance, she includes, as if in proxy for her own missing account, the observed description of her friend Julien's trance for Dambala:

Flat on the ground, his hands clasped behind his back, he advanced; smiling and undulating, he advanced toward the offering. His body rippled, his neck became elongated, his tongue darted rapidly in and out between his open lips, and the familiar ric-a-tic of the serpent god filled the improvised tent. (Dunham 1969, 233)

Here Dunham reminds us that for the forlorn and destitute, there always remain the vicarious pleasures of the voyeur.

An aerial view of the field of anthropology of Haitian Vodou reveals a distinct line of inquiry that is characterized by female-authored accounts in which scholars fully integrate themselves into Vodou communities as initiates. These ethnographers have harnessed the unique transcorporeal nature of the body of Vodou in which the *gwobonanj* can be temporarily replaced by a *lwa* to open up possibilities for cross-gender identifications, non-heteronormative associations, and queer desires in their accounts. The initiatory journeys of their authors culminate in trance possession experiences described in the final pages of the accounts. In this way, the ethnographies become the tangible textual corporeality of their authors, subjectifying their literate audiences as divine, scanning their way from the feet to the crown, from introduction to conclusion, until the final merger, the closing of the book, the blacking out, the postegoic bliss to be enjoyed prior to hearing the revelations—the reviews, the critical analyses—that the divine readers, as riders, will certainly convey to their dreaming horses.