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Circling the Cosmograms:  
Feminist Art, Vodou, and Diasporic (Re)turns to Post-Quake Haiti

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## ABSTRACT

Circling the Cosmograms:  
Feminist Art, Vodou, and Diasporic (Re)turns to Post-Quake Haiti

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*Circling the Cosmograms* marks the first full-length study of second-generation feminist and/or queer art and performance in the Haitian *Diaspora* (Haitian Kreyòl spelling) following the January 12, 2010 earthquake in Haiti. Through archival research, visual and performance art analysis, and in-depth interviews, I document the ways feminist and/or queer Haitian-American artists use a Vodou aesthetic in their art practice to “circle the cosmograms,” to “(re)turn” back to Haiti physically, artistically, and spiritually. I animate the contemporary aestheticization of Vodou by feminist and/or queer 1.5 and second-generation Haitian-Americans to chronicle how Vodou has made it possible for a group of people, having been historically marginalized both in Haiti and in Diaspora, to (re)turn to Haiti, and by extension *Ginen*—ancestral Africa in the Vodou tradition.

Performance is used to frame the everyday and aesthetic applications of Vodou in the lives and art works of women in the post-quake Haitian Diaspora. I attend to how Vodou simultaneously *performs itself* and *is performed* by artist—how Vodou serves as a philosophical, moral, and aesthetic praxis. By attending to performance—in the everyday and in art—I archive the ways Haitian-American artists creatively share their own experiences witnessing the earthquake while simultaneously attending to the shifts in their political commitments as well as their art practices pre- and post-quake. In documenting these female and/or queer artists’ aesthetic, transnational, and political

shifts, I crystallize art as a means of indexing the effects of the earthquake on Haitian-American cultural practice, subject-formation, and feminist/queer interventions and organizing both in Haiti and the larger Diaspora.

I theorize circling the cosmograms—the return to Haitian Vodou—through a discussion of five artists and their works: Rejin Leys (b. 1966, mixed-media and paper artist); Lenelle Moïse (b. 1980, poet-playwright); Régine Romain (b. 1974, photographer); Gina Athena Ulysse (b. 1973, scholar-performer) and my own work as a storyteller-dancer-visual artist. Through these artists and our works I investigate the four tactics of “circling the cosmograms”: 1) seeing diasporically; 2) a Diasporic lakou praxis; 3) the aesthetics of the lwa; and 4) crossing pedagogies, bridging the sacred and the scholarly. The performance of each individual tactic structures how these artists use their given mediums to intervene, critique, and/or challenge representations of women, Haitian people, and Diaspora both within and beyond Haiti.

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To the faculty at New York University's Performance Studies Department, thank you for introducing me to the field. I “stumbled” into performance studies, but working



with José Estaban Muñoz, Barbara Browning, Diana Taylor, Karen Shimakawa, André Lepecki, and Richard Schechner reaffirmed that the universe makes no mistakes and that this field is my home. Lastly, my time at Northwestern introduced me to scholars who have informed my work in countless ways. I would be remiss if I did not thank D. Soyini Madison whose ethnographic works and art praxis are a guide to my own engagements with transcontinental performance activism. Thank you to Sandra L. Richards who served on my examination committee and brings a generosity of spirit to all that she does. Lastly, my great thanks to Richard Iton—the first person to ever call me “Dr. Souffrant.” My time working with Dr. Iton was brief but his impact on my work is without measure.

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## GLOSSARY

***Balanse*** – Spiritual balance

***Bondyè/Gran Mèt*** – God or “Grand Master” within the Vodou tradition

***Ezili Dantò*** – Haitian Vodou mother-warrior spirit; associated with Petwo nation; viewed as patron spirit of lesbian, gay, and queer identified people

***Ezili Freda*** – Haitian Vodou *lwa* (spirit) of love; associated with the Rada nation

***Ginen*** – Ancestral Africa within the Vodou tradition found beneath the sea

***Istwa*** – Story

***Konbit*** – Communal work force

***Konesans*** – Spiritual knowledge

***Lakou*** – Multi-generational family compound that facilitates sacred and/or secular work

***Lwa*** – Haitian Vodou spirit or deity

***Madivinez*** – Lesbian

***Mambo*** – Vodou priestess

***Masisi*** – Gay male

***Orisha*** – Spiritual force or deity within the Yoruba-Lucumí tradition

***Ougan*** – Vodou priest

***Ounfò*** – Vodou temple

***Petwo*** – Vodou nation of “hot” spirits from Kongo and developed in the New World under the conditions of slavery

***Poto Mitan*** – Centerpost/pillar around which Vodou ceremonies take place.

***Rada*** – Vodou nation or “cool” spirits from Dahomey

***Sèvitè/Serviteur*** – Individual who “serves” the spirits

***Vèvè*** – Ritual ground drawing used in Vodou ceremonies to summon individual *lwa*.

## NOMENCLATURE

My spelling of Haitian Kreyòl terms, where possible, follows the guidelines set by the Haitian government since 1979. I have also relied upon the spellings provided in Jean Targète and Raphael G. Urcilo's *Haitian Creole-English Dictionary* (Dunwood Press, 1993). In quoting scholars and artists I have maintained their own spelling. Because words in Haitian Kreyòl are not pluralized with an "s", I have chosen not to add an "s" to signal plurality; an honoring of Haitian Kreyòl's specificity that I learned from Kate Ramsey's scholarship. Lastly, at various points throughout the document, terms such as "black," "queer," "diaspora," and "women" appear capitalized. I have done this in order to mark solidarity and the shared experiences of groups of people in response to slavery, colonialism, and heteropatriarchy. I hope that my usage of terms is elucidated by the context in which they appear.

*To the Spirits.*

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**Introduction:**  
Circling Vodou in Post-Quake Dyasporas

Honor the questions that are coming to you.

*-M. Jacqui Alexander<sup>1</sup>*

Everything that I know about Vodou I have learned from books. These treatises on Vodou's historical developments, cultural legacies, as well as Vodou's cosmological frameworks have grounded my learning about a tradition that was forbidden in the home of my immigrant parents. For those children of Haiti born and/or raised in the Haitian *Dyaspora* (Haitian Kreyòl spelling), Vodou has been the practice that many of us were raised to fear and move away from. Vodou has been viewed as anti-modern and in the quest for modernity, respectability, and citizenship in our new host-countries Vodou has been a casualty in our immigrant efforts to be seen as venerable Haitian-Americans. As Haitian-American artist-scholar Gina Athena Ulysse argues, Vodou has been seen as anti-modern, "the blackest part of ourselves in a new world that prefers its black without the complexities of blackness."<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, when an earthquake struck Haiti on January 12, 2010, at 4:53pm, Vodou and the related tradition of Yoruba-Lucumí were the first things that entered my mind.

The evening of January 12, 2010 was dark. At 4:35pm, I was sitting in front of my computer screen as I worked to finish typing my final graduate school application. My left leg was stretched out on a chair, a requirement from my doctor following knee surgery for a torn ligament. My mother emerged from her bedroom to tell me that an

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<sup>1</sup> M. Jacqui Alexander, in conversation with the author, June 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Gina Athena Ulysse, "Going Home Again and Again and Again," *Geographies of the Haitian Diaspora*, ed. Régine O. Jackson (New York and London: Routledge Press, 2013), 274.

earthquake had just struck Haiti. I cannot remember what she said afterwards. I just remember that I did not think *too* much about it because earthquakes happen all the time.<sup>3</sup> It was not until I heard my mom start to panic about what she was seeing unfold on her screen, and the frenzy she began to exude as she moved back and forth between watching the news and trying to call her siblings in Haiti (no answer) that I realized the severity of the event.

In the midst of trying to get word from family abroad and trying to maintain my own sense of self, I remember making the calculated decision to turn off my computer. I remember trying not to look at any images of the earthquake. I also remember thinking, “what is my role in this right now? What are you trying to tell me/us, Universe?” I thought of Oya, Yoruba-Lucumí *orisha* (spirit) of cemeteries and whirlwinds and how she brings change, which masquerades as destruction. I thought of Legba who in both Yoruba and Vodou is the spirit of the crossroads; Legba always seems to have an answer when we humans are ambivalent. Lastly, I thought of my sheer dumb “luck,” how I was supposed to be in Haiti, in Port-au-Prince, at the time of the earthquake. How because of my knee surgery, my mother and I had to post-pone our already reserved flight, our return voyage to Haiti. My last trip to Haiti was in 1998, the summer that I turned 12 years old. I was looking forward to reconnecting with family members whom I only saw in exchanged family photos or spoke to in my broken Haitian-Kreyòl over the phone on major holidays. When I was initially told that I could not travel to Haiti I thought myself “unlucky” for having to miss out on such a momentous return trip. Following the

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<sup>3</sup> The National Earthquake Information Center, at the time of this writing, records 20,000 earthquakes per year, approximately 55 per day. See The U.S. Geological Surveys, <https://www2.usgs.gov/faq/categories/9830/3355>.

earthquake, and upon learning that my mother's family home in Port-au-Prince had collapsed during the quake, crushing and killing her youngest brother Vaudray, I remembered that luck had nothing to do with these events. I was reminded that within my Yoruba traditions, I existed in a world where Oludumare, 'owner of all destinies' breaths life and death.<sup>4</sup> It is Oludumare that we see before we arrive on earth, and it is before him that we kneel to choose our destiny and life on this earth. "We would have died too," my mother whispered to me once, in a tone of both guilt and gratitude at our shared survival. It was not luck that spared us; it was just not our time.

The guilt and gratitude swelled, their conflicting emotions sent me and my entire household into a shared panic that seemed endless, individuals weeping as we mourned from a distance and struggled to continue to observe the daily actions of our lives: going to work, attending school, and visiting the physical therapist. I was unable to sleep because of night terrors and finally, after a call from my *madrina*, my spiritual godmother, I was advised to do all that I *could* do to take care: tend to my altars. Vodou scholar and ethnographer Karen McCarthy Brown explains: "altars are the places where the living and the dead, the human and the divine, meet. Altars are places where healing happens."<sup>5</sup> This healing is made possible through "sufficient *konesans*," spiritual knowledge both gained through the study of herbs and divination as well as provided by the invisible spirits—the ancestors and the cosmic forces such as the Yoruba orishas or the Haitian Vodou *lwa* (spirits). Spiritual *konesans* "can orchestrate energy, human and

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Murphy, *Santeria: African Spirits in America* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993), 7-10.

<sup>5</sup> Karen McCarthy Brown, "Altars Happen," *African Arts*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Spring 1996): 67.

divine, to bring about healing.”<sup>6</sup> In my efforts to heal, I tended to my ancestral and spiritual altars, I wept and planned gatherings with members of my spiritual family, and I made ritual-inspired art. I turned to those African-derived traditions that my family (continues) to resist, those same traditions that were being seen as the cause of the quake: Vodou and other African-derived cosmological practices.

I (re)turn to this “scenario,” from time to time, of my learning of the quake, my feeling of being unable to aid, and my subsequent spiritual efforts to heal, regroup, and (re)turn to Haiti because it functions as a “meaning-making paradig[m]”<sup>7</sup> for my study of Haiti, Haitian Vodou, and arts practices in the Diaspora.<sup>8</sup> Performance scholar Diana Taylor argues that both in history and the present-day “scenarios” are a localized “paradigm for understanding social structures and behaviors,” that “allow us to draw from the repertoire and the archive.”<sup>9</sup> My understanding of the earthquake in spiritual terms points to the ways that my theoretical and archival understanding of African cosmology were immediately embodied in my repertoire, called upon in my quotidian life as a meaning-making device. In other words, faith became a measure of articulating and understanding the earthquake in Haiti, its impact on my local and international community, and my own involvement in post-earthquake efforts.

Scenarios, as Taylor reminds us, are “never for the first time”<sup>10</sup> and the earthquake was not my first experience understanding worldly phenomena, great and

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 28.

<sup>8</sup> I detail and distinguish my usage of “Diaspora” and “diaspora” in the following sections.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 28.

small, through the language of Spirit.<sup>11</sup> However, to date the earthquake remains the most cogent example of how ritual, scholarship, and art practice continue to shape and define the contours of my scholarly-activist pursuits. Thusly, this scenario is but one way that I heed the words of cultural scholar M. Jacqui Alexander and “honor the questions that are coming to [me].” I am cognizant that my own narrative is not unique, yet it nonetheless has become a point of departure for connecting with others and seeing the questions and practices—spiritual and art-based—that have enabled myself and other 1.5 and second-generation Haitian women to (re)turn to Haiti and African-derived spiritual practices, especially Vodou.<sup>12</sup>

In the days and now years that have passed since the earthquake, the questions that have “come to me,” remain the same and ever-more focused on these optics of faith, art, and these generational (re)turns. What does it mean for Haitian-Americans, particularly 1.5 and second-generation Haitian-Americans to (re)turn to Vodou? How has “Vodou,” as both a concept and practice, influenced our relationship to Haiti and spirituality? How are second-generation Haitian-Americans using Vodou to reclaim and rescue their/our relationship to Haiti, Haitian people, and ultimately, Vodou’s connection to West African Yoruba and KiKongo belief systems? Lastly, how has the (re)turn to Vodou by feminist and queer Haitian-Americans, reactivated Vodou’s potential and

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<sup>11</sup> When capitalized, “Spirit” is used to demarcate the totality of ritual practices, both within and beyond Yoruba traditions. Spirit is thus an umbrella term that I use to organize the ancestors, the orisha, the lwa, the Universe, and God, broadly defined.

<sup>12</sup> 1.5 generation, as I use it here, refers to Haitians born in Haiti and who migrated to the U.S. at a young age. Second-generation refers to those born in the U.S. to Haitian immigrants. For more on the definitions of first, 1.5, and second-generations Haitians see: Nina Glick-Schiller and Georges Eugene Fouron, *Georges Woke up Laughing: Long-Distance Nationalism and the Search for Home* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001); Flore Zéphir, *The Haitian Americans* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004); and The Migration Policy Institute, “The Haitian Diaspora in the United States.” Online Report (July 2014).

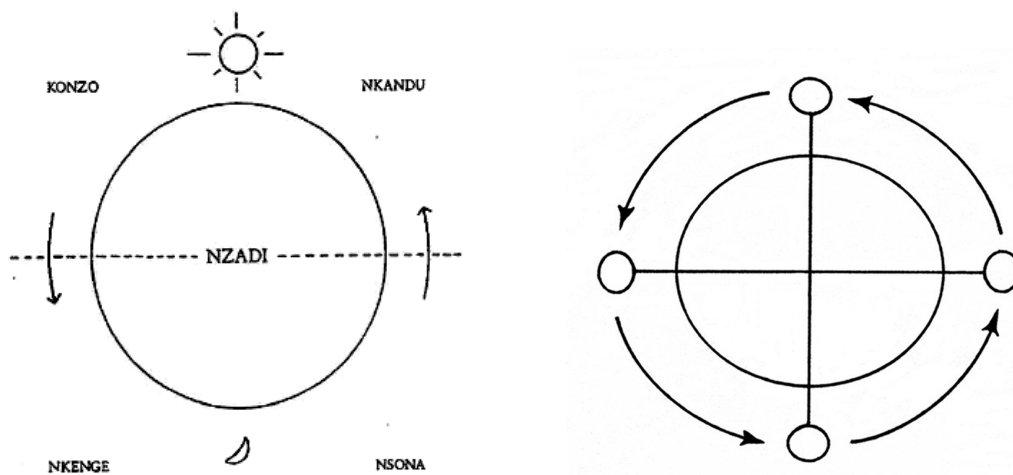
history as a democratic space for accessing agency, reconciling power discrepancies, and healing community fissures?

My dissertation, *Circling the Cosmograms: Feminist Art, Vodou, and Diasporic (Re)turns to Post-Quake Haiti* answers the questions above through case studies of Haitian-American artists who use a Vodou aesthetic in their art practice to “circle the cosmograms,” to “(re)turn” back to Haiti physically, artistically, and spiritually. *Circling the Cosmograms* marks the first full-length study of second-generation feminist and/or queer Haitian art and performance in the Haitian Diaspora following the January 12, 2010 earthquake. Through archival research, visual and performance art analysis, and in-depth interviews, my five case studies document the ways feminist and/or queer Haitian-American artists processed their own experiences witnessing the earthquake while simultaneously attending to the shifts in their political commitments as well as their art practices pre- and post-quake. In documenting these female and/or queer artists’ aesthetic, transnational, and political shifts, I crystallize art as a means of indexing the effects of the earthquake on Haitian-American cultural practice, subject-formation, and feminist/queer interventions and organizing both in Haiti and in the larger Diaspora.

*Circling the Cosmograms* uses performance to frame the everyday and aesthetic applications of Vodou in the lives and art works of women in the post-quake Haitian Diaspora, and how this engagement with Vodou enables their (re)turn to Haiti. I take my title from Kongo cosmogram drawings, which mark the passage of time, the four phases of the sun, and the separation of the land of the living (the horizontal plane) and the land of the spirits (the vertical plane). Anthropologist Wyatt MacGaffey notes that the Kongo cosmogram, which predates the European use of the cross, “corresponds to the

understanding in their [Kongo people] minds of their relationship to their world.”<sup>13</sup>

The cosmogram has four stages: (1) rising, beginning, birth; (2) maturity, responsibility; (3) handing on, death, transformation; and (4) existence in the spiritual world, eventual rebirth.<sup>14</sup> The stages of the cosmogram mirror the stages of life; the four “moments” of the cosmogram “[refer] therefore to the everlasting continuity of *all* righteous men and women.”<sup>15</sup> The cosmogram, as I understand and apply it then, is a visual representation of a cosmological ethos (Figure 1 and 2). In its form it represents both theory and praxis and its application as a diasporic image with counterparts in Haiti and other areas of the Black Atlantic. The cosmogram constitutes a mode for discussing the continuous (re)turns of people, spirits, and ideologies.



**Figure 1 and 2:** (Left) “The Reciprocating Universe,” BaKongo cosmograms as depicted by Wyatt McGaffey in *Religion and Society in Central Africa: The BaKongo of Lower Zaire* (Chicago, IL and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 44; (Right) popular interpretation of Kongo cosmogram as produced by Robert Farris Thompson in *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983), 109.

<sup>13</sup> Wyatt MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa: The BaKongo of Lower Zaire* (Chicago, IL and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 45.

<sup>14</sup> MacGaffey, 45.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983), 108.

I evoke the term “circling the cosmograms” to draw connections between the multiple temporalities and spaces at work in this project: Haiti, the United States, and Africa (specifically the Yoruba and KiKongo people); the past, present and future; the living and the dead; as well as visible and invisible spirits. More specifically, I am interested in how Vodou simultaneously *performs itself* and *is performed* by these artists, becoming at once, “a process, a praxis, an episteme, a mode of transmission, an accomplishment, and a means of intervening in the world.”<sup>16</sup> Stated differently, my analysis in the following chapters applies the broad definition of performance offered by scholars such as Erving Goffman who defines performance as “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants.”<sup>17</sup> Goffman’s definition enables me to configure a broad range of practices within the purview of performance. I move back and forth between the quotidian performances of Haitian-Diasporic female artists and their produced crafts, and attend to the ways that their relationship to Haiti and Haitian Vodou are performed through “embodied acts of self-presentation”<sup>18</sup> that are observable in their day-to-day lives and their cultural products.

I theorize circling the cosmograms—the return to Haitian Vodou—through a discussion of five artists and their works: Rejin Leys (b. 1966, mixed-media and paper artist); Lenelle Moïse (b. 1980, poet-playwright); Régine Romain (b. 1974, photographer); Gina A. Ulysse (b. 1973, scholar-performer) and my own work as a

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<sup>16</sup> Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 16.

<sup>17</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1959), 15.

<sup>18</sup> Joshua Chambers-Letson, *A Race So Different: Performance and Law in Asian America* (New York, NY and London: New York University Press, 2013), 6.



storyteller-dancer-visual artist. Through these artists and our works I investigate the four tactics of “circling the cosmograms”: 1) seeing diasporically; 2) a Diasporic lakou praxis; 3) the aesthetics of the lwa; and 4) crossing pedagogies, bridging the sacred and the scholarly. The performance of each individual tactic studies how these artists use their given mediums to intervene, critique, and/or challenge representations of women, Haitian people, and Diaspora both within and beyond Haiti. The performance of each tactic is highlighted in each dissertation chapter and discussed in the final section of this introduction. I animate the contemporary aestheticization of Vodou through these feminist and/or queer 1.5 and second-generation Haitian-Americans to document how Vodou has made it possible for a group of people, having been historically marginalized both in Haiti and in Diaspora to (re)turn to Haiti, and by extension *Ginen*—ancestral Africa in the Vodou tradition. I mark these (re)turns as both physical, spiritual, and ideological reinvestments in Haiti’s new narratives. These reinvestments in Haiti’s narratives therefore influence the ways feminist/queer Haitian American artists use their works to redress Haiti’s representation in the global sphere, the silencing of their voices, and the reclamation of Vodou aesthetics and rituals as a cultural ethos.<sup>19</sup>

In this introduction I elucidate the relationship between Diaspora, Vodou, and Vodou aesthetics and performance. The interplay between these concepts is fundamental to my ideation of “circling the cosmograms.” I discuss these concepts while detailing the

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<sup>19</sup>. My reference to Haiti’s “new narratives” comes from Gina Ulysse’s extensive writings on the subject of Haiti, representation, race, and colonial legacies. See Ulysse’s “Why Haiti Needs New Narratives Now More than Ever,” in *Tectonic Shifts: Haiti Since the Earthquake*, eds. Mark Schuller and Pablo Morales (Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, 2012): 240-244. With regards to “silences,” I am speaking directly to Myriam J.A. Chancy’s work on Haitian women writers and the ways their writing practices allow them to claim both a feminist and writerly space amidst the silencing of women as historical actors in Haiti and beyond. See Chancy’s *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels By Haitian Women* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

centrality of attending to queer and feminist pedagogies in my study of the post-quake Haitian Diaspora and situating my scholarship within the fields of Performance Studies, Religion, Visual Culture, and Haitian Studies.

### ***On Being, Performing, and Queering “Diaspora”***

The tensions at the heart of this dissertation are mirrored in the sensations of guilt that coursed through my mother and I upon realizing that we were not dead. For 1.5 and second-generation Haitian people, guilt has been one of the major forces in the construction of our Diasporic selves. Fundamental to my dissertation is the use of the Haitian Kreyòl spelling of *Diaspora*. When discussing Haitian Diasporic subjectivity, “Diaspora” is used in Haiti as a pejorative term to identify those Haitians who are “outside” of the nation-state. In this context, “Diaspora” brands those who are viewed as inauthentically Haitian because of their “outsider” status. Haitian scholar and historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot has attributed the negative usage of “Diaspora” to the Duvalierist dictatorial regimes of François “Papa Doc” Duvalier (1957-1971) and Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier (1971-1986). The Duvalier’s reign was characterized by a totalitarian grip on the nation-state; those perceived as anti-Duvalier were also perceived as anti-Haiti. Those individuals who left Haiti to escape the Duvaliers were seen as betrayers to the country, “Diaspora.” Haitians emigrants were not just labeled as “Diaspora,” but as “*Blan*” (white, European, Other). Thus any subsequent returns/re-entries into Haiti by Diasporas were viewed with suspicion—as outside threats to the nation-state.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Haiti: State Against the Nation: The Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990), 195-197, For more on Diaspora and suspicion see Nina Glick Schillers and Georges Eugene Fouron, *George Woke Up Laughing*

I critique and repurpose the pejorative handling of Dyaspora from its traditional outsider and anti-nation usage. The intention behind this repurposing is two-fold. Firstly, it allows me to follow traditions of this Dyasporic-repurposing by artists and activists such as Edwidge Danticat and the late radio activist Jean Dominique who argued that, “[t]he Dyaspora are people with their feet planted in both worlds. There is no reason to be ashamed of being Dyaspora. There are more than a million of you. You are not alone.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, there is a sizeable Haitian Dyaspora in the United States; Haitian Dyasporans are currently ranked as the fourth largest Caribbean diaspora in the U.S.<sup>22</sup> While the sizeable number of Haitians in the U.S. confirms that we are “not alone,” the increased numbers have also given rise to “authentic” narratives of Haitian im/migration, which tend to forward the accounts of first-generation Haitian Dyasporans (those born in Haiti and who migrated elsewhere). For 1.5 (those born in Haiti but who grew up in the United States) and second-generation Haitian Dyasporans, the overwhelming prominence of first-generation accounts of im/migration have elided our own narratives, further complicating our usage of Dyaspora. Thusly, my second purpose in using “Dyaspora” is to repurpose and expand the term through the insertion of second-generation and queer narratives, many of which are critical of the limited scope of diaspora/Dyaspora.

By intentionally naming and repurposing “Dyaspora”—that which has been primarily considered “outside” the home—I forcefully insert those bodies and narratives that, as diaspora scholar Gayatri Gopinath states, have been traditionally foreclosed in the

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(Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001); and Jana Evans Braziel *Duvalier's Ghosts: Race, Diaspora, and U.S. Imperialism in Haitian Literatures* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> Edwidge Danticat, ed. *The Butterfly's Way: Voices from the Haitian Dyaspora in the United States*, (New York: Soho Press, 2001), XV.

<sup>22</sup> Following Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Jamaica. [www.migrationpolicy.org](http://www.migrationpolicy.org)

hegemonic and patriarchal understanding of diaspora and the nation-state, namely non-heteronormative, second-generation, queer, and/or female bodies.<sup>23</sup> I carve a space for the voices of second-generation Dyasporans to both validate and index our experiences within scholarship on Haiti and the Haitian Dyaspora, expanding our notions of Haitian Dyasporic subjectivity beyond narratives of im/migration and those deemed “outside” of the nation.

Also central to my project is a critique of “diaspora” as it has been figured in popular discussions of Diaspora Studies. In its theoretical (and I would argue everyday) usage, “diaspora” has been used to describe what Robin Cohen refers to as “traumatic dispersal” outside of the homeland.<sup>24</sup> For theorists in agreement with Cohen, the diasporic condition produces a sense of “psychological alienation” resultant from being outside of one’s territory.<sup>25</sup> My use of “diaspora” works against and critiques such theories of diaspora as a traumatic dispersal from one’s homeland. I follow the critiques proffered by diaspora scholars such as Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur, who argue that such theories of diaspora grounded in the “metaphysical-geographical foundations of home, identity and exile,” privilege and reproduce the “home-nation as an authentic space of belonging and civic participation.”<sup>26</sup> Consequently, my usage of “diaspora/Dyaspora” throughout this dissertation necessarily decenters the “givenness” and authenticity of the

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<sup>23</sup> I engage with the uses of this queer critique later in this Introduction.

<sup>24</sup> Robin Cohen, “Conclusion: Diasporas, Their Types, and Their Futures,” in *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge Press, 1997), 180. See also Román De La Campa, “The Latino Diaspora in the United States: Sojourns from a Cuban Past,” in *Public Cultures* 6 (1994): 293-317 and Gerald Gold and Rina Cohen, “Constructing Ethnicity: Myth and Return and Modes of Exclusion among Israelis in Toronto” in *International Migration* 35.3 (1997): 373-392.

<sup>25</sup> Cohen, x.

<sup>26</sup> Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur, “Introduction” in *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 6.

home-nation as the privileged and only site of belonging.<sup>27</sup> Instead, I build on theories of diaspora that encourage us to think of diaspora as a *process* that destabilizes our notions of nations, nationalism, citizenship, as well as people's relationship to each other and the nation-state.

Caribbean cultural theorists Stuart Hall and Juan Flores have been explicit in the naming of diaspora as a process. In so doing, they not only debunk diaspora as a traumatic dispersal from the homeland, they attend to the political and ethical dangers of linking "diasporas" to an idealized person, mode of behavior, or fixed nation-state. As Flores writes, "diasporas are not about fixed states of social being but about process—what is clumsily but usefully called diasporization, meaning, how diasporas come into being and develop over time."<sup>28</sup> While this dissertation does not utilize "diasporization" as a concept, Flores's emphasis on process and how "diasporas come into being" orients us towards *bodies* and the importance of grounding diaspora theory in what Caribbean literary critic and writer Édouard Glissant has termed a "poetics of relations,"<sup>29</sup> a theory grounded in inter-relationality.

Stuart Hall further underscores diaspora as an inter-relational process that produces identity not through trauma, but in relationship to other bodies. Hall writes:

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<sup>27</sup> Where "Dyaspora" is used I am referring to people of Haitian descent. Where "diaspora" is used I am referring to larger theories and practices of diaspora.

<sup>28</sup> Juan Flores, *The Diaspora Strikes Back: Caribeño Tales of Learning and Turning* (London and New York: Routledge Press, 2009), 16.

<sup>29</sup> For issues of space I will not be diving into the many uses of Glissant's concept. However, his base definition of "Poetics of Relation" is grounded in what he terms "rhizomatic thought [...] in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other." It is this emphasis on interdependence and relationality that I apply to my usage of diaspora. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 11.

The diaspora experience [...] is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’, which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference (emphasis in the original).<sup>30</sup>

Hall’s conceptualization of diaspora as constitutive of hybridity and identity formation returns us to the importance of reconsidering diaspora(s) not as a traumatic dispersal, but as a negotiation between bodies, affect, temporalities, and materialities. Attending to these im/material conditions—bodies, feelings/affect, temporality, and cultural production—in addition to the physical homeland, enables a more nuanced understanding of the ways that, as performance scholar May Joseph argues, “citizenship is not organic but must be acquired through public and psychic participation.”<sup>31</sup>

I extend the work of performance and diaspora studies scholars such as Joseph, Hall, Flores, and Glissant, and use them to advance my opposition to constructions of Dyaspora/diaspora as “outside” the nation-state. Moreover, by repurposing Dyaspora to include alternative narratives that de-center the “homeland,” I, like queer Diaspora Studies scholars such as Gayatri Gopinath and Jasbir Puar—*queer* Dyaspora, critique its hegemonic circulation and production, often alongside the production of the mythic “homeland.” My use of queer, then, is multivalenced. “Queer” acknowledges “sexual and gender identities and practices that operate outside the logic of normative sexuality.”<sup>32</sup> Moreover, similarly to performance studies scholars, such as Ramón Rivera-Servara, interested in contesting the borders between nations, theory, and practice

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<sup>30</sup> Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” in *Theorizing Diaspora*, 244.

<sup>31</sup> May Joseph, *Nomadic Identities: The Performance of Citizenship* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>32</sup> Ramón Rivera-Servara, *Performing Queer Latinidad: Dance, Sexuality, Politics* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 26.

“queer” becomes an optic for identifying the process(es) by which “individuals engage, produce, and consume culture shaped by their positions as sexual and gender marginals.”<sup>33</sup>

My use of “feminist” throughout this dissertation, similarly to my use of “queer” is also an optic for identifying processes of engagement with culture and history. I adhere to the definition of “feminism” proffered by black feminist writer and activist Barbara Smith, that “feminism is a political theory and practice that struggles to free *all* [sic] women [irrespective of age, race, ability, and sexual orientation] anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement.”<sup>34</sup> While I wholeheartedly agree that “feminism is for everybody,”<sup>35</sup> I also acknowledge the ways that the very term “feminist” has racial, class, and academic implications that are as divisive as they are mobilizing. Women of color, poor women, as well as immigrant women and their daughters, have often *lived out* our feminism, negotiating political, social, and interpersonal relationships in calculated ways that are about survival. Or as Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa state, “our feminist politic emerges from the roots of both our cultural oppression and heritage.”<sup>36</sup>

My own feminism is simultaneously inherited from watching my own mother’s deliberate choices—in Haiti and the U.S.—and my own time in academia where

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>34</sup> Barbara Smith, “Racism and Women’s Studies,” in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1, National Women’s Studies Association: Selected Conference Proceedings, 1979 (Spring, 1980): 48.

<sup>35</sup> Here I play-off the title of bell hook’s *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000).

<sup>36</sup> Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, “Introduction,” in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, eds. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, (New York, NY: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1981, 1983), XXIV.

“feminism” both gave me analytical frames for articulating sexual and gender-based processes of oppression but, at times, denied the racial and cultural particularities of my Haitian identity. For these reasons, I move between terms such as “feminist,” “Black feminist,” “womanist,” and “womanish,” to honor and respect the various women-centered organizing and political orientations towards (or against) the term “feminist” held by the women of color, immigrant, and/or queer artists featured in this dissertation. I do this to acknowledge the many ways that our feminism are tied to our cultural roots.

The language of *process* is shared by and animates queer, feminist, and “diaspora/Diaspora.” Diaspora theorists such as David Scott, J. Lorand Matory, Jasbir Puar, and Brian Keith Axel, in various ways, define diaspora as a discursive and performative practice that highlights how “diasporas create their homelands.”<sup>37</sup> I emphasize Brian Keith Axel’s construction of the “diasporic imaginary,” moving diaspora away from singular discussions of “place as origin” and towards a reconceptualization of diaspora in relationship to “temporality, affect, and corporeality.”<sup>38</sup> Axel’s production of a “diasporic imaginary” moves Diaspora/diaspora from a place-based discussion—an “away” from home—to the ways that people produce the homeland through the constant negotiation of time, spatiality, and bodily performances. Jasbir Puar, reading Axel, poignantly emphasizes the importance of temporality and affect in producing diaspora:

I would argue that a focus on affect reveals *how actual bodies can be in multiple places and temporalities simultaneously, not (only) tethered through nostalgia or memory but folded and braided into intensifications*. The sensation of place is thus one of manifold intensities cathected

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<sup>37</sup> J. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>38</sup> Brian Keith Axel, “The Diasporic Imaginary,” in *Public Culture* Vol. 14, No. 2 (2002): 412



through distance. To extend Axel's formulation, the homeland is not represented only as a demographic, or geographical place, nor primarily through history, memory, or even trauma, but *is cohered through sensations, vibrations, echoes, speed, feedback loops, recursive folds and feelings*. Axel argues that the homeland is a spatial rather than a locational or place-based phenomenon, coalescing through corporealities, affectivities, and, I would add, multiple and contingent temporalities, as much as it is memory of place, networks (of travel, communication, and informational exchange), the myth of the imminent return to origin and the progressive telos of origin to diaspora (emphasis added).<sup>39</sup>

Puar and Axel enact a theory of the body that undercuts the fixity of the nation-state and instead grounds itself in memory, affect and the sensate. Diaspora is not merely about place, it is also very much about and grounded within the flesh—the ways that people inform one another and remake one another. Diaspora as a process of becoming is an assemblage of bodies, temporalities, affect, and memories. Rather than centering a theory of diaspora/Diaspora on a traumatic dispersal from the homeland, I move towards an emphasis on the ways that diaspora/Diaspora is performed between bodies, through aesthetics, and the constant (re)negotiations of place, space, nation, memory, and affect that has been central to the Haitian Diasporic experiences both pre- and post-quake.

I use such articulations of diaspora to posit the “Haitian Diaspora” as not merely a group of people living beyond the borders of Haiti, but a collective of people tied together by feelings (both negative and positive), memories, and a sense of Haiti as a place of ancestral origin. In many ways this definition of Diaspora is akin to more porous and affective constructions of “diaspora” offered by varying scholars such as Paul Gilroy and his analysis of the “Black Atlantic” which deterritorializes the “African diaspora” but centralizes the shared experiences of transatlantic migration, slavery, and

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<sup>39</sup> Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 171.

cultural production.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, the work of social anthropologist Prina Werbner and her study of religion and diaspora amongst Pakistani Sufis in Manchester, England, stresses that diasporas are “connected by ties of *co-responsibility* across boundaries of empire, political communities or (in a world of nations-states) nations.”<sup>41</sup> The emphasis on Diaspora as a shared experience of co-responsibility that looks towards the past and towards the collective future connects to the shared ethos and history of Haitian Vodou. In the following section, I explore why Vodou is a fertile site for studying the ways that Diasporans perform themselves and co-responsibility through these affective, sensorial, and memories of this African-derived cosmology.

### ***Circling Vodou: Why It Matters Now More Than Ever***

Vodou’s position as a taboo and polarizing subject in Haiti and the global imaginary was clearly evidenced following the January 12, 2010, earthquake. Contemporary discussions of Haitian Vodou after the earthquake were quick to either disparage Vodou for its role in producing the earthquake or to defend it as a cultural tool for survival and reconstruction.<sup>42</sup> Evangelical Christian minister and talk show host Pat Robertson notoriously proclaimed the earthquake was the consequence of a colonial “pact with the devil” made by the enslaved peoples of Haiti for their freedom.

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<sup>40</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London, England: Verso Press, 1993).

<sup>41</sup> Prina Werbner, “The Place which is Diaspora: Citizenship, Religion and Gender in the Making of Chaordic Transnationalism,” in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (January 2002): 121. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>42</sup> *The 700 Club*, “Operation Blessing Disaster Relief Fund,” Christian Broadcasting Network, January 13, 2010. Robertson’s remarks were quickly discredited as nonfactual and racist by popular platforms and scholars alike, including Haitian scholar, Elizabeth McAlister in “From Slave Revolt to a Blood Pact with Satan: The Evangelical Rewriting of Haitian History,” in *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, Vol. 41, Issue 2 (2012): 187-215.

Conversely, Haitian scholars such as Karen Richman and Claire Payton gathered oral histories from Haitian quake survivors to contest any singular narrative of Vodou's responsibility or role in the quake. Interviews with *Vodouist* (those who observe and maintain Vodou rites and rituals) hailed comments that defended the *lwa* (Vodou spirits), including Richman's interlocutor *Ti Mafi* ("My Little Girl") who stated, "[t]he lwa had nothing to do with it. The lwa did not cause the earthquake."<sup>43</sup> Richman's article also notes that following the earthquake, "[m]any Catholics converted to Protestant sects after the earthquake out of fear of dying," further suggesting that breaking all spiritual ties with Vodou was necessary if one wanted to live.<sup>44</sup>

Vodou would again be blamed for the ensuing cholera epidemic that began in October 2010. Haitian historian Kate Ramsey notes that prior to the etiology of the epidemic being traced to poor sanitation in U.N. camps along the Artibonite River, approximately 45 *ougan* (Vodou priests) and *mambo* (Vodou priestesses) were killed "having been accused of spreading the disease through occult means."<sup>45</sup> Regardless of what side of spirituality—Vodou or Christianity—one fell on, the events that followed the earthquake evidenced that "some of the most violent reverberations of the earthquake came at the level of spirit."<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, the threat of violence and death for Vodouist emphasizes the dire consequences individuals face when tragedy strikes the nation-state

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<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Karen Richman, "Religion at the Epicenter: Agency and Affiliation in Léogâne After the Earthquake," in *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, Vol. 41, Issue 2 (2012): 156.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>45</sup> Kate Ramsey, "Vodou, History, and New Narratives," *New Narratives of Haiti* special issue of *Transitions*, No. 111, (2013): 36.

<sup>46</sup> Claire Payton, "Vodou and Protestantism, Faith, and Survival: The Contest over the Spiritual Meaning of the 2010 Earthquake in Haiti," in *Oral History Review*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (September 2014): 232.

and blame is directed at Haitian Vodou.<sup>47</sup> These contemporary discussions underscore and extend Vodou's polarizing nature even before colonial Saint-Domingue's (present day Haiti's) independence in 1804.<sup>48</sup> While a full discussion of Vodou and Haitian history is beyond the focus of this dissertation, what I will address here are the major tenets of Vodou and how they have served as organizing and aestheticizing principles within the Haitian Diaspora.

If even a suspected affiliation with Vodou can result in death, why would individuals in the Diaspora (re)turn to Vodou? Why "circle the cosmograms" when the material consequences of Vodou, even by association, are so great? I would argue that the answer lies in Vodou as a signifier of *Haïtiannité*. *Haïtiennité* literally translates into "Haitianness." It can best be understood as the accrued modes of behaviors and performances that are legibly read and constructed as "Haitian." Caribbean scholar Jana Evans Braziel in her writings on Haitian performance, black masculinity, and art practice, describes *Haïtiennité* as a subject position, "as expressed through Kreyòl, proverbs, folklore, and Vodou iconography and beliefs, that distinguish these performers from

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<sup>47</sup> Ramsey's stunning investigation of Vodou, the law, and suspicion in Haiti provides other instances when Vodouists were accused of wrongdoings. More specifically, following the 1986 *dechoujak* (uprooting) of Jean-Claude Duvalier, hundreds of Vodou ougans and mambos from across the country who were suspected of aiding the 29 year Duvalier dictatorship (1957-1986) were beaten and murdered. See Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 11-12.

<sup>48</sup> Some of these arguments will be rehearsed in the following sections. For a historical account of these debates see Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004); Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (New York, NY: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1938); Michel, Claudine and Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, editors, *Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture: Invisible Powers* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); and Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, *Haitian History: New Perspectives* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012).

other African Americans (or African Canadians).”<sup>49</sup> Haïtiennité can thusly be understood as the deliberate presentation of the self as “Haitian” in everyday life as well as in one’s art practice; it is the reliance on cultural signifiers performed at strategic moments, to reaffirm one’s connection to Haiti, Haitian culture, and Haitian people.<sup>50</sup>

Braziel’s definition of Haïtiennité reflects performance studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson’s construction of “blackness” as a performance. Haïtiennité, similarly to performances of blackness:

[D]oes not belong to any one individual or group. Rather, individuals or groups *appropriate* [sic] this complex and nuanced racial signifier in order to circumscribe its boundaries or exclude other individuals or groups. When blackness is appropriated to the exclusion of others, identity becomes political.<sup>51</sup>

Haïtiennité as defined by Braziel and read through Johnson, is a lived experience and a repertoire that can be signified through speech, text, sound, and a wide range of aesthetic practices. The aesthetics of both Haïtiennité and blackness are not independently created constructs. As both Johnson and dance scholar Judith Hamera argue, these aesthetics are “inherently social,” and the successful engagement with Haïtiennité vis-à-vis Haitian traditions such as Haitian Kreyòl, folk tales, and Vodou produces “interpretive communities” and, consequently, boundaries capable of including or excluding members of the Diaspora based on successfully rendered performances.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Jana Evans Braziel, *Artists, Performers, and Black Masculinity in the Haitian Diaspora* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008).

<sup>50</sup> See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959).

<sup>51</sup> E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 2-3.

<sup>52</sup> Judith Hamera, *Dancing Communities: Performance, Difference and Connection in the Global City* (Baskington, England and New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 3.

My study of how various artists in the Haitian Diaspora circle the cosmograms is not meant to suggest that these artists are co-opting Vodou in order to successfully adopt “scripts” of Haitian identity, what sociologist John L. Jackson Jr., reading Kwame Appiah, describes as “guidelines for legitimate and illegitimate group membership.”<sup>53</sup> What I do proffer is that Vodou functions as a framework, an aesthetic language for articulating individual and collective narratives that are rooted in Haitian cultural constructs, but extend and complicate any singular representation of what it means to be “Haitian,” “Haitian-American,” and/or “Diasporic.” Circling the cosmograms is an attempt to perform a mode of cultural, Diasporic, and “racial sincerity,” what Jackson Jr., defines as a “liaison *between* subjects” that “presume[s] one another’s humanity, interiority, and subjectivity.”<sup>54</sup> These performances of the self as “Haitian” are political acts when they are used to authenticate one’s claims to Haiti, Haitian cultural identity, and diasporic/Diasporic belonging. For members of the Haitian Diaspora, Haïtiennité is a means of fortifying our relationship to Haiti and other Haitian people. Haïtiennité engages a repertoire that extends beyond the corporeal and territorial borders of Haiti and the Haitian body and describes a set of aesthetic choices and practices capable of being deployed by Haitian and non-Haitian artists.

In the groundbreaking volume *Vodou in the Haitian Experience: A Black Atlantic Perspective*, Celucien L. Joseph and Nixon S. Cleopha successfully argue that Vodou discourse pervades every aspect of the Haitian experience, be it in Haiti or in the Diaspora. Vodou is a trope, cultural phenom, and an important marker of Haitian identity,

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<sup>53</sup> John L. Jackson Jr., *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* (Chicago, IL and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 13.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

one that is “used in the intersections of memory, trauma, history, collective redemption, and Haitian Diasporic identity in literature both by Haitian male and female writers and cultural critics.”<sup>55</sup> Indeed, if Vodou can be understood as a trope capable of shaping Haitian cultural, social, and philosophical thoughts and relations, then we must also consider Vodou as a hermeneutic, capable of being charged and utilized by those of us, who grew up in Haitian homes that were unwilling (or scared) to *ouvri bayè-a* (“open the doors”) to the spirits.<sup>56</sup> I contend that the tropes that make Vodou a framework for Diasporic engagement and aesthetic practice include: Vodou as Africa reblended; Vodou as a communal philosophy; and Vodou as service towards liberation. I explore these key aspects of Vodou’s ideation in the following sections.

### *Vodou as Africa Reblended*

Central to my conceptualization of Vodou is an understanding of Vodou as a living and performed religion whose heritage is indebted to its African (Dahomey, Kongo, Yoruba), Indigenous (Arawak), and New World/Western (Catholic) heritages.<sup>57</sup> Vodou is what art historian Robert Farris Thompson has described as “Africa

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<sup>55</sup> Celucien L. Joseph and Nixon S. Cleopha, “Introduction: Contemporary and Transnational Vodou, and the African Perspective,” in *Vodou in the Haitian Experience*, edited by Celucien L. Joseph and Nixon S. Cleopha (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), pp. 1-2.

<sup>56</sup> The phrase “ouvri bayè-a” comes from a verse from a Vodou song to the lwa Papa Legba, keeper of the crossroads. Legba is called upon first in all Vodou ceremonies and he “opens the doors” between the worlds of the spirits and the mortal realm.

<sup>57</sup> I will not rehearse this history here as this chapter is part and parcel of a larger oeuvre on Vodou. However, contemporary works such as Mimerose Beaubrun’s translated auto-ethnography on Vodou, *Nan Domi: An Initiate’s Journey into Haitian Vodou*, further documents African ties and retentions in contemporary Haiti, including a Muslim-based Vodou tradition which Beaubrun found while conducting research on the compound system, *lakous*, in Northern Haiti. See Mimerose Beaubrun, *Nan Domi: An Initiate’s Journey into Haitian Vodou*, trans. D.J. Walker (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2013).

reblended.”<sup>58</sup> The word “Vodou” itself is descended from the word “Vodun” of the Fon language of Benin. African art historian Suzanne Preston Blier notes that the first use of “Vodun” appeared in 1658, in the *Doctrina Christina* produced by the West African King of Allada’s ambassador to the court of Philip IV of Spain. Blier notes, that in this document “Vodun” translates as “god, sacra, sacred or priestly.”<sup>59</sup> Moreover, the *Doctrina Christina* notes the cultural origins of Vodun in groups found in present day West Africa in Benin and Togo including “the language family of the Ayizo, to which the nearby Fon, Mahi, Hueda, Hwla, Ouatchi, Adja, Wemenu, Evhe, Mina, and Gen also belong.”<sup>60</sup> These groups were not the only people to arrive in Haiti. Scholars such as Robert Farris Thompson, Laënnec Hurbon, and artist-scholar Maya Deren have noted the strong presence of the Igbo, and especially the Yoruba and Kongo presence.<sup>61,62</sup> The African peoples forcefully enslaved and brought to Haiti would play a distinct role in shaping the cultural and spiritual traditions of Saint-Domingue and the rest of the New World. Sociologist, theologian, and Haitian Vodou scholar Laënnec Hurbon asserts the “displacement of millions of black slaves to the New World led to the rebirth of African

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<sup>58</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983), 64.

<sup>59</sup> Suzanne Preston Blier, “Vodun: West African Roots of Vodou,” in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Donald Cosentino (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Fowler Museum, 1995), 61.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> While these groups were not the only peoples to arrive in Haiti, the dominance of the Fon language and spiritual practice should be noted in its present day influence on Haitian Vodou. Laënnec Hurbon notes that around the Gulf of Benin the tensions and inter-tribal wars influenced the development and spread of religious life in the region; as Hurbon says, “at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the royal family of the city of Abomey, seeking to extend its power, decided to centralize voodoo [sic] by appropriating certain deities of its enemies, such as those of the Yoruba.” See Laënnec Hurbon, *Voodoo: Search for the Spirit*, 15.

<sup>62</sup> See Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: Living Gods of Haiti* (London, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1953), Laënnec Hurbon, *Voodoo: Search for the Spirit* (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995), and Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy*, (New York, NY: First Vintage Books, 1984).



beliefs and practices in the Americas, under various forms and names: *candomblé* in Brazil, *santería* in Cuba, *obeahisne* in Jamaica, *shango cult* in Trinidad, and *vodou* in Haiti.”<sup>63</sup>

### *Vodou as a Communal Life Philosophy*

Haitian Vodou<sup>64</sup>, similarly to the aforementioned traditions, is primarily a communal life philosophy. Haitian and African cosmology scholar Patrick Bellegarde-Smith defines “Vodou” as:

a coherent and comprehensive belief system and worldview in which every person and every thing is sacred and must be treated accordingly. In Vodun [sic], everything in the world—be it plant, animal, or material—shares basically similar chemical, physical, and/or genetic properties. This unity of all things translates into an overarching belief in the sanctity of life, not so much for the *thing* as for the *spirit* of the thing.<sup>65</sup>

Bellegarde-Smith conceptualizes Vodou as a communal life philosophy and integrated system that values the sacredness and interconnectedness of all things. This definition stresses the importance of Vodou as a way of life and a rhizomatic structure where all spirits including the *invisible* spirits such as the ancestors and lwa are connected.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Laënnec Hurbon, *Voodoo: Search for the Spirit* (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995), 13. I have left the first letter of these traditions uncapitalized as they appear in Hurbon’s monograph.

<sup>64</sup> My discussion of Vodou uses the current Haitian Kreyòl orthography. This spelling is recognized both in Haitian scholarship, the Library of Congress, and more importantly, by Vodouists. I have maintained the spelling of Vodou used by other scholars in previous works including: Vodun, Vaudoux, and Voodoo.

<sup>65</sup> Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, *Haiti: The Breached Citadel* (Boulder, San Francisco, and London: Westview Press, 1990), 12.

<sup>66</sup> My use of “rhizome” borrows from philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari who use the botanic term to describe a non-hierarchical system demonstrative of “[p]rinciples of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be.” The rhizome conceptualizes a network of connections and interconnections capable of both reproducing itself and adapting. Diaspora theorist Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin, apply this notion of the rhizome to thinking about diasporas as a coalition that further ground “diaspora” in a

Vodou is an interdependent tradition and healing practice where the honoring of life is about establishing cosmic harmony between people, the lwa, as well as the ancestors.

The interdependence of all life is stressed within other African cosmologies including those of the Yoruba and KiKongo people. Sociologist, performer, and Yoruba priestess Miriam Adenike Sharpley in her *Traditional Historical Concepts Paradigm* stresses that “the community supersedes the individual”<sup>67</sup> and that spirituality and the ritual arts produced within said community is functional; they serve to empower and uplift the community, all the while bringing its creators closer to God. West African writer and scholar Malidoma Patrice Somé confirms the importance of community in the development of an individual as the following:

Without a community you cannot see yourself. The community is where we draw the strength needed to effect changes inside of us [...] What one acknowledges in the formation of the community is the possibility of doing together what is impossible to do alone [...] What we want is to create a community that meets the intrinsic need of every individual. The individual can finally discover within the community something to relate to, because deep down inside each of us is a craving for an honoring of our individualism.<sup>68</sup>

Somé’s analysis attends to the sense of witnessing and belonging that is incumbent in African society and by extension, African cosmology. Yet, it is also an argument for co-presence. Performance scholar D. Soyini Madison, influenced by the work of Dwight Conquergood, refers to this ability to be “present” with the other as “coperformance.”

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network of people. See Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 28-31 and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 3-28.

<sup>67</sup> Adenike Sharpley, “The Traditional Historical Concepts Paradigm,” unpublished manuscript.

<sup>68</sup> Malidoma Patrice Somé, *Ritual, Power, Healing, and Community*, (Portland, Oregon: Swan/Raven & Co., 1993), 67.

Madison explains, “coperformance is doing with deep attention to and with others.

This is not a romantic or self-sacrificing absorption with Otherness [sic], it is the tension that is at the center of dialogue[.]”<sup>69</sup> Presence within community makes the individual just as the individual makes the community. This sense of co-witnessing and formation places the collective—the community—at the center of both witnessing one’s own individuality and forging one’s self-actualization as both autonomous and part of a whole.

The positioning of “community” as a place that both witnesses one’s individuality and effects self-actualization by “effect[ing] changes inside of us,” has broader socio-political implications. The work of philosopher Kelly Oliver is important for seeing the relationship between witnessing and social relations. Oliver writes, “our conceptions of ourselves determine our conceptions of others and our conceptions of our relationships with others.”<sup>70</sup> The inability to bear witness to another’s subjectivity is what reproduces the “pathology of oppression.”<sup>71</sup> Conversely, the act of “witnessing” oneself as part of a greater whole is a process tied to “address-ability” and “response-ability.” The ability to address and to respond to others honors the visibility and shared humanity/fate between beings.

I have discussed the ideation of Vodou as a communal life philosophy of interdependence, based on witnessing and co-performance in order to frame how Vodou might function as a trope in the Haitian Dyaspora. These are values that are evidenced in

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<sup>69</sup> D. Soyini Madison, “The Dialogic Performative in Critical Ethnography,” in *Text and Performance Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (October 2006), 323.

<sup>70</sup> Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 3.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

diasporas/Dyaspora as people move and maintain affective ties across borders. The sense of co-responsibility and coperformance is apparent in the ritual work of Vodou and most especially in the service of the *lwa*. In the following section, I turn to the ways Vodou functions as a religion of service and doing that benefits the collective good.

### *Vodou as Service towards Liberation*

As previously stated, the enslaved African ethnic groups that arrived to Haiti spoke various languages and recognized hundreds of spirits. Consequently, the term “Vodou” has been applied to a variety of spiritual beliefs and ritual practices. Haitian historian Kate Ramsey argues, “practitioners have tended not to objectify the religion in this way, but rather say in Kreyòl that they *sèvi lwa* (serve the spirits).”<sup>72</sup> Vodou rites are focused on serving the *lwa* (spirits). While there is a supreme God in Vodou, referred to as *Gran Mèt* (Grand Master) or *Bondye*, as religion and performance scholar Elizabeth McAlister notes, God within the Vodou tradition “is remote and uninvolved, while the spirits are immediate and responsive to their *sèvitè* (human servants).”<sup>73</sup>

Karen McCarthy Brown notes that the *lwa* are “much closer to the human drama” of life and it is for this reason that they are more accessible interlocutors in the fate of mortals.<sup>74</sup> Maya Deren, while observing Vodou rites and rituals in Haiti, notes that “[I]ike the saints, the loa [sic] were once human and are the immediate guardians of the people.

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<sup>72</sup> Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 6.

<sup>73</sup> Elizabeth McAlister, *Rara! Vodou, Power and Performance in Haiti and Its Diaspora* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2002), 10.

<sup>74</sup> Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 221.

Like the saints they have special provinces of action.”<sup>75</sup> The lwa personify and inhabit certain realms of the world: Ezili Freda, lwa of love, whose many aspects include *La Siren*, the siren, or mermaid of the sea; Ogou, lwa of war and justice; Baron La Croix, one of the Gede spirits of death, who presides over the cemetery; and of course Legba, keeper of the crossroads and transformation. These spirits are made apparent through the ritual “working”—the serving—of the spirit in ceremony, celebration, and offerings.

In effect, Vodou is what Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel have described as being less about belief and more about action. The “doing” of Vodou actualizes Vodou’s main purpose: to provide us humans in the earthly realm with a sense of guidance and purpose that is both communal in its intent and a means for individual and collective survival. As Bellegarde-Smith and Michel write:

This religion allows us to make sense of the world and to orient ourselves in the universe, but is also a step for survival, growth and continuity for our progeny. It brings meaning where there would otherwise be chaos, and ultimately, it connects us to community as well as with the divine. From Vodou, we derive (and perhaps also create) substantive purpose for our lives.<sup>76</sup>

Bellegarde-Smith and Michel remind us that Vodou is a practical and aesthetic tradition. The movement from chaos to collectivity, and thus knowledge, is necessitated by the praxis of Vodou: the necessary prescriptions that encourage both the spirits of the heavens (the *lwa/orisha*) and the ancestral spirits (the dead) to communicate messages of insight, clarity, and power to those of us in the living realm. Within this context, “serving the spirits” includes a wide array of rites and rituals: the making of food, the arrangement

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<sup>75</sup> Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: Living Gods of Haiti* (London, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1953), 56

<sup>76</sup> Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel, “Danbala/Ayida as Cosmic Prism: The Lwa as Trope for Understanding the Metaphysics in Haitian Vodou and Beyond,” *Journal of Africana Religions*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (2013): 463.

of an altar, and the movements of the body. All these practices implicate Vodou as a religion that continues to perform through multiple dimensions including the body, the visual, and the oral.

Serving the lwa, festivities, and everyday tasks vary depending on region, family and spiritual sect. More importantly, serving the spirits maintains social bonds and serves to transfer knowledge between and across bodies, time, and space. African diaspora scholar Joseph Murphy argues that the ritual traditions of the black Atlantic including Haitian Vodou, Brazilian Candomblé, Cuban Santería, Revival Zion, and the ‘Black Church’ in the United States, enact their relationship to the spirit through “working the spirit.” Murphy observes, “[e]ach diasporan community celebrates the spirit in ceremonies, and show in various ways, through the arrangement of symbolic objects and actions, a spirituality of interdependence between the community and the spirit.”<sup>77</sup>

Haitian Vodou manifests the working of the spirit through the “doing” of Vodou ceremonies, which “are accurately described as group healing sessions in which both individual and collective problems surface and are addressed. The community is therefore the subject and the product of Vodou ritualizing.”<sup>78</sup> Although the community is the subject and product of Vodou ritualizing, it is the act of possession that makes the healing and instruction of the individual/collective possible. The ultimate goal of any Vodou gathering or ceremony is to make contact with the divine through possession. Deren reminds us “the function and purpose of such divine manifestation is the reassurance and

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<sup>77</sup> Joseph Murphy, *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994), 2.

<sup>78</sup> Brown, *Mama Lola*, 230.

the instruction of the community.”<sup>79</sup> Ritual *konesans* (knowledge) is shared between the lwa and the collective with the goal of attending to any problems that may need to be addressed in the community. We can think of this moment of when the lwa comes down and speaks to the community as a way of both assessing the state of the community and providing the remedies for ensuring that cosmic balance is (re)instated. It is through the ritual acts of Vodou, including possession, that Vodou has shown itself to be a religion of doing/making, one that was central to the liberation of the enslaved Africans in colonial Saint Domingue.

Thus far, my discussion of Haitian Vodou has described Vodou as Africa rebledened, a communal philosophy based on the interdependence of all matter, and a tradition of “doing” that revolves around the service of the lwa. The lwa manifest themselves via spiritual possession, which enables the healing of the community by providing ritual knowledge. I want to stress that it is all these elements combined that have made Vodou such a threatening order to colonial powers. Vodou centralizes the divine nature of Black bodies in its cosmological ethos. The union between lwa and human at the center of Vodou possession and the Vodou faith is one that quite literally embodies Vodou’s premiere ethos. Not only is Vodou about maintaining cosmic balance and interdependence between all forces—visible and invisible—Vodou is also a tradition that values the divine in *all* beings. Religion scholar and cultural anthropologist Guérin C. Montilus has defined this aspect of Haitian Vodou as an extension of the Adja-Fon (Dahomey) principals of personhood. Montilus writes:

The concept of person is central to any human understanding and conceptualization of the world. ‘Person,’ in this context, refers to

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<sup>79</sup> Deren, *Divine Horseman*, 30.

the human being's ability to have a consciousness of the relationship of oneself to oneself and an awareness of the existence of the external world of beings, objects, events and facts—all of which intersect. While Christian theologians were discussing whether Africans have souls, these people were carrying on with the African meanings of personhood through their religion. While Christian catechisms made sinister associations with the color black as sinful, connecting it with death and mourning, enslaved Africans were defining their Black bodies as the centerpiece of personhood.<sup>80</sup>

Haitian Vodou places theory into praxis. Vodou's recognition of the divinity of Black bodies meant that despite colonial efforts to forbid the African practices of the enslaved peoples and baptize enslaved Africans as Catholic, Vodou's ethos served as a constant reminder of the injustices of chattel slavery.<sup>81</sup> In other words, if Vodou saw the balance of all life as central to its ethos, slavery was antithetical to this practice because it failed to recognize the personhood and inherent divinity of African lives. Vodou's ethos of personhood and the divinity of all beings, *including* enslaved Africans, were seen as threats to government and the institution of slavery. In fact, the 18<sup>th</sup> century creole and Martinique-born lawyer and writer Médéric-Louis-Elie Moreau de St. Méry, the first writer to produced an extensive analysis of Haitian Vodou rites, proclaimed, "Nothing is

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<sup>80</sup> Guérin C. Montilus, "Vodun and Social Transformation in the African Diasporic Experience: The Concept of Personhood in Haitian Vodun Religion," in *Haitian Vodou: Spirit, Myth, and Reality*, eds. Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 1.

<sup>81</sup> It is Vodou's attention to black personhood that made it such a threatening force in colonial Saint-Dominique. The 1685 passage of the "*Code Noir*," or "Black Code," France's Louis XIV's in addition to codifying how slaves should be treated, how long they should work, and when and how much they should be fed, also provided clear indications on what spiritual traditions the inhabitants of Saint Domingue should practice: "Article 2 stipulates, 'All the slaves in our islands will be baptized and instructed in the Catholic religion, apostolic and Roman.' And Article 3 insists, 'The public practice of all religion except Catholicism is forbidden...'" The Code Noir effectively banned any gathering of enslaved Africans for the practicing of their own religious traditions as it simultaneously inscribed the dominance of Catholicism. See Hurbon, *Voodoo: In Search of the Spirits*, 23 and Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990).



more dangerous than this cult of Vaudoux [sic].”<sup>82</sup> Vodou functioned as a democratic religion because “each believer has direct access to the spirit world through possession.”<sup>83</sup> The relationship between spirit(s) and ritual participants and the reliance of Vodou *serviteurs* upon the lwa reflected “relations of power [which] presumably, were acceptable only between master and slave.”<sup>84</sup>

Vodou was/is dangerous because it espouses a form of black liberation theology, for as James H. Cone contends, “[t]heology can never be neutral or fail to take sides on issues related to the plight of the oppressed.”<sup>85</sup> Liberation from enslavement was a direct by-product of Vodou’s commitment to maintaining cosmic balance. If all humans are divine, then the enslavement of Africans was a direct negation of their personhood and, more importantly, their divine creation as spirited/Spirit-filled beings. Liberation was nurtured in Vodou cosmology particularly in the adaptation of the two most popular and well-known rights of the tradition: *Rada* and *Petwo*. Art historian Robert Farris Thompson succinctly defines the distinction between Rada and Petwo:

*Rada*, predominately Dahomean and Yoruba, is the ‘cool’ side of *vodun*, being associated with the achievement of peace and reconciliation. *Petro*, predominately Kongo, is the hot side, being associated with the spiritual fire of charms for healing and for attacking evil forces. The great Haitian painter André Pierre [1914-2005], himself a *vodun* priest, has called *Rada* ‘civilian,’ *Petwo* ‘military.’<sup>86</sup>

The distinctions offered by both Thompson and Pierre are important for understanding how Vodou functioned in colonial Saint-Domingue and continues to function in present

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<sup>82</sup> Moreau as cited in Dubois, 45.

<sup>83</sup> Leslie Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti* (Chapel Hill, NC and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 3.

<sup>84</sup> Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*, 45

<sup>85</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 4.

<sup>86</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 164-165.

day Haiti. Petwo's military spirit embodies action, directness, and the "heat" of great urgency. When we remember that one of Vodou's basic tenets is the sacredness of all life, then we can understand why Maya Deren argues that "Petro [sic] was born out of this [cosmic] rage. It is not evil; it is the rage against the evil fate which the African suffered, the brutality of his displacement and his enslavement."<sup>87</sup> It was this sense of spiritual and righteous justice felt by Moreau when he termed Vodou as dangerous. It was this same spirit that led to the emancipation of the enslaved Africans, for it was a Petwo ceremony that gave birth to the Haitian Revolution.

The evolution of Petwo bespeaks how ritual practices are continuously adapted and improvised upon in order to meet the needs of their servers-practitioners. These adaptations model how Vodou is not a static set of practices but, similar to diaspora formation, is a *process*. Performance studies scholar Margaret Thompson Drewal argues "ritual practitioners as knowledgeable human agents transform ritual itself through play and improvisation."<sup>88</sup> This "actor-centered" approach to ritual traditions of the African diaspora enables what art historian and ritual scholar David H. Brown terms "innovation" within African-derived spiritual practices. These innovations "mark instances of experimentation and revision with respect to received rules, norms, and traditions (or the perceived lack thereof), resulting in altered or entirely new practices."<sup>89</sup> In tandem, "innovation" and Drewal's emphasis on improvisation are the frames for witnessing the evolvement of African Vodun in Haiti.

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<sup>87</sup> Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, 62.

<sup>88</sup> Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), XIV.

<sup>89</sup> David H. Brown, *Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion* (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 11.

Vodou as a liberating practice reached its summit in Saint Domingue on August 14, 1791, when a Vodou ceremony was held in the area known as *Bwa Kayiman* (Bois-Caïman). The ceremony was presided over by the Vodou *ougan* (priest) Boukman Duty and *mambo* (priestess) Cecile Fatima who, legend has it, was possessed by the Petwo spirit of Ezili Dantò. Scholar Leslie Desmangle has argued that the Petwo lwa “inspire violence and are associated with the rage of the slaves against their masters.”<sup>90</sup> Dantò was called upon because as a Petwo lwa she “derive[s] from the oppressive conditions of slavery.”<sup>91</sup> The Vodouist who called upon the Petwo lwa did so because these spirits provided the only paradigm for Black liberation, personhood, and humanity.<sup>92</sup> Historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot successfully argues that during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century as slavery grew in Saint-Domingue, the Enlightenment philosophies that swept across Europe produced “degrees of humanity,”<sup>93</sup> which “secured blacks’ position at the bottom of the human world.”<sup>94</sup> However, the cosmological principles of Haitian Vodou resisted such a viewpoint. Vodou, as Nixon S. Cleophas has argued, “embodies a political liberation ethic that has kept hope alive in Haiti. Through Vodou the oppressed have been able to conceive a better world, even in the face of social oppression and socio-political turmoil.”<sup>95</sup> The ceremony of Bwa Kayiman demonstrated the ways that Vodou served as a paradigm for rejecting the oppression of Black people in the colonial order. Ezili Dantò,

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<sup>90</sup> Leslie Desmangles, *The Face of the Gods*, 15.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> I deliberately capitalize “black” here because I am speaking to the ways in which personhood recognized the humanity of all people of African descent.

<sup>93</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 81.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>95</sup> Nixon S. Cleophas, “Haitian Vodou, a Politico-Realist Theology of Survival,” in *Vodou in Haitian Memory: The Idea and Representation of Vodou in Haitian Imagination*, eds. Celucien L. Joseph and Nixon S. Cleophas (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 112.

considered by many to be the mother of Haiti, was called upon to facilitate the “unthinkable”<sup>96</sup>: the liberation of the enslaved people of Saint-Domingue. A week later, on August 22, 1791, the revolution officially began and Ezili Dantò is said to have ridden into battle with her enslaved children in their quest for freedom.

On January 1, 1804, Haiti declared its independence from France. Haiti’s independence was unprecedented and disrupted the colonial order of the day. Kate Ramsey has argued that Haiti’s successful revolution has directly influenced conceptions of Haitian Vodou in the global imagination:

As the nation born of the world’s only successful slave revolution, Haiti was the preeminent locus for nineteenth-century debates about whether people of African descent had the capacity for government. Detractors of the ‘Black Republic’ pointed to the persistence and prevalence of what they called ‘the *vacuous* cult’ as primary evidence to the contrary.

Vodou, consequently, became a “metonymic gloss for Haitian ‘sorcery’ and *critiques superstitious* [superstitious practices].”<sup>97</sup> Following 1804, Haitian Vodou was/is perceived as a disturbance by Haitian figureheads, including Revolutionary figure Toussaint L’Ouverture, as well as foreign powers. Vodou was seen as so disruptive that from 1835-1987, the Haitian Code Pénal (Penal Code) banned Vodou. Despite these bans Vodou would continue to circulate the ideas that would become tropes in Haitians’ understanding of Vodou. As I argue throughout this dissertation, these understandings of Vodou as a communal life philosophy, African reblended, and a tradition of doing that enacts liberation and Black personhood/divinity, are evidenced in the sundry ways Vodou has been aestheticized.

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<sup>96</sup> See Trouillot’s chapter, “An Unthinkable History: The Haitian Revolution as a Non-event,” in *Silencing The Past*, 70-107.

<sup>97</sup> Ramsey, *The Spirit and the Law*, 1.

*Vodou as Aesthetic*

Twisted  
 Bodies  
 Intertwined  
 Struggle  
 Without  
 Interfering  
 With the  
 Union  
 Of the  
 Sexes

I  
 came  
 of  
 age  
 colonized  
 then  
 Rodin's Kiss  
 became

Dambala & Aidawedo

—Gina Athena Ulysse, “Rodin’s Kiss”<sup>98</sup>

Thus far I have detailed how I configure “Diaspora” as a process that is tied to the homeland, but also the material and affective performances of “Haitianness” vis-à-vis Vodou. These performances are not meant to decontextualize Vodou from its sacred uses. Rather, in this dissertation I suggest that female artists in the Haitian Diaspora rely upon Vodou’s ideation as a communal life philosophy and a tradition of “working the spirit” as frameworks for structuring their quotidian and aesthetic engagements with Haiti, other Diasporans, and the larger world. In other words, the performance of Vodou is not limited to the sacred realm of Vodou rituals. As a practical aesthetic and ritual tradition it can be understood as a worldview. This worldview is not limited to those who serve the spirits—for Vodou’s lore extends beyond the reach of temples. As art historians and

<sup>98</sup> Gina Athena Ulysse, “Rodin’s Kiss,” unpublished manuscript, 50.

ethnographers such as Donald Cosentino, Marilyn Houlberg, and Karen McCarthy Brown have argued, Vodou's influence on Haitian culture permeates the sacred as well as the secular realms. Brown has asserted that there exists a "Vodou ethos," that "[l]ife in Haiti (and to some extent, in the Haitian diaspora communities) is quite simply saturated with Vodou. Vodou is thus a way of thinking, a way of seeing things, a way of configuring the world. For this reason, in Haiti, it is difficult to point to any life arena where its influence is not present."<sup>99</sup> Alternatively, Katherine Smith has proposed that the "Vodou 'imaginary'" has made it possible for Vodou to move back and forth between the galleries and the *ounfò* (Vodou temple). Such movements between the fine arts and ritual aid the abstraction of Vodou and the production of iconographies around particular ritual codes, saints, and images—in effect a Vodou lexicon that can be drawn upon by artists and Vodou laypeople.<sup>100</sup>

Taken together, Brown and Smith create an entry point for understanding how Vodou's codes and iconographies can be used by 1.5 and second-generation Haitian-Americans who return to Vodou vis-à-vis their art practices. Vodou as an abstraction, an ethos, and an iconographic object becomes the penultimate signifier of Haitian identity. Thus, it makes sense that any female and second-generation artists raised with the (limited) knowledge of Vodou might turn towards Vodou as a means of articulating a

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<sup>99</sup> Karen McCarthy Brown, "The Art of Transformation: An Exploration of Vodou Cosmology and Vodou Aesthetics," *Tracing the Spirit: Ethnographic Essays on Haitian Art From the Collection of the Davenport Museum of Art*, ed. Karen McCarthy Brown (Davenport, IA: Davenport Museum of Art, 1993), 35.

<sup>100</sup> Katherine Smith, "Haitian Art and the Vodou Imaginary," in *Kafou: Haiti, Art, and Vodou*, eds. Alex Farquharson and Leah Gordon (Nottingham, England: Nottingham Contemporary, 2012), 36-39.

sense of female Dyasporic identity that is legible across generations, genders, class, as well as nations.

Circling the cosmograms as an aesthetic practice makes use of Vodou iconographies and practices of assemblage. The artists featured model both this (re)turn and the ways that Vodou serves as a trope for (re)interpreting the world. Haitian scholar-artist Gina Athena Ulysse, whose poem “Rodin’s Kiss” I cited above, demonstrates this ability. Ulysse’s poem presents us with two observations of the same statue, French sculptor Auguste Rodin’s *Kiss (Paolo and Francesca)* (1882). In the first stanza/column of the poem, Ulysse provides us with her objective description of the sculpture, “twisted bodies” entangled in their heterosexual courtship which “does not interfere with the union of the sexes.” Then the poem breaks, quite literally, and a large gap down the middle of the page divides the first stanza from the last. The gap between the columns signifies a gap in Ulysse’s historical timeline; it marks the period and distance required for her to “gain control of [her] mind,”<sup>101</sup> to come to see the *French* sculpture through her own Haitian and more specifically, Vodou eyes. Following her (re)education, *The Kiss*, with its intertwined heterosexual couple signifies “Dambala & Aidawedo,” the Vodou lwa and couple represented as a snake-rainbow. The couple’s representation as snakes/rainbows accentuates their ability to move between the earth and sky with ease, for as Vodou scholar Laënnec Hurbon writes, this couple is “responsible for ensuring the link between thunder (the sky) and the sea[.]” In learning to (re)see the intertwined bodies of French sculptor Rodin’s *The Kiss* as the Haitian Vodou lwa Dambala and

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<sup>101</sup> Jean Price-Mars, *So Spoke Uncle*, trans. Magdalene W. Shannon (Washington D.C.: Three Elements Press, 1990), 13.

Aidawedo, Ulysse demonstrates how Vodou now functions as a mirror for interpreting the world around her, and more importantly, for repossessing and decolonizing her world.

The (re)turns being made by artists such as Ulysse are significant not only because Vodou has long been feared and moved away from by our parents in the quest for civility both in Haiti and the U.S., but because these artists' Vodou aesthetic—their circling of the cosmograms—is political. Through our practices we not only “undo” the notions of “devil worship” and carnality typically associated with Vodou both in the U.S. and Haiti, we also rescue a sense of “Haitianness” or solidarity that foregrounds a larger African diasporic politics and paradigm of Black personhood. Moreover, these artists, including me, wrestle with the legacies and shame of Vodou, while also negotiating our status as women and second-generation people. Our status as women and “Diaspora”—a term that when used in Haiti marks our “outsiderness”—leaves us open to not only being perceived as “Americanized” on both sides of the water, but can easily reduce us to being marginal players in the patriarchy of the Diasporic community. Thus, circling of the cosmograms is not merely an artistic engagement with Vodou, but a political act of empowerment that recuperates Haitian Vodou's history, aesthetics, and connection to African arts for the sake of not only reconnecting to our Haitian roots, but ultimately to a Yoruba/KiKongo tradition of creating art to heal and uplift one's community. For as African art historian Babatunde Lawal writing about Yoruba art philosophy states:

Human creativity is most profound in *art for life's sake*, that is, when it is used to foster human hopes and desires. In dedicating his life to art, therefore, the professional artist is performing one of the greatest services that a man can render to his fellowmen, for the creative process is a



mentally arduous voyage of ‘discovery’ for the goodness and dignity of man.<sup>102</sup>

I apply this understanding of artists as performing a great service to humanity in my study of art practice in the post-quake Haitian Diaspora. By studying the ways 1.5 and second-generation Haitian women deploy Vodou as an ethos and aesthetic in their art works, we can observe how they construct new visions and narratives of what it means to be a woman-identified, Vodou embracing, Diaspora subject. In so doing, they teach us how “transnational processes are situated in cultural practices,”<sup>103</sup> and that these practices can be observed through the everyday and aesthetic experiences proffered by Diasporic subjects.

### ***Performance Studies Methodology and Chapter Summary***

*Circling the Cosmograms: Feminist Art, Vodou, and Diasporic (Re)turns to Post-Quake Haiti* is specific to the field of performance studies because of my use of performance as a methodology. While I reference Elin Diamond’s definition of performance as a “doing and a thing done,”<sup>104</sup> central to my study of the Haitian Diaspora is the use of performance to study what Bryant Keith Alexander terms “a wide range of human activity as expression.”<sup>105</sup> If performance allows for a study of the

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<sup>102</sup> Babatunde Lawal, *Art for Life’s Sake: Life for Art’s Sake* (Nigeria: Obafemi Awolowo University Press, 1987), 35.

<sup>103</sup> Aiwha Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 17.

<sup>104</sup> Elin Diamond, “Introduction,” in *Performance and Cultural Politics*, ed. Elin Diamond (London and New York: Routledge Press, 1996), 1.

<sup>105</sup> Bryant Keith Alexander, “Performance Ethnography: The Reenacting and Inciting of Culture,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, eds. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonne S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2005), 414.

quotidian expressions and “presentations of the self” as a methodology,<sup>106</sup> then I use performance as a tool for reading Diaspora and “Haitianness” as a performance—a set of practices and presentations of the individual and collective self accomplished through aesthetics (cultural arts as well as self-styling), affect, and cultural events. Thus, my research pursues performance as a tool and means of unpacking the ways that race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and art making practices are deployed and refashioned within the context of post-quake Haitian Diasporic mobilization.

I use ethnographic methods to situate cultural art and performance practices as moral, ethical, and political acts engaged in an “open dialogue with the world.”<sup>107</sup> Following the works of performance studies scholars and ethnographers Dwight Conquergood and D. Soyini Madison, I use ethnography as an embodied practice that closes the “aesthetic distance”<sup>108</sup> between the artist, art product, and the audience. I do so through an engagement with “performative witnessing,” whereby I speak “with” and not “to” my interviewees.<sup>109</sup> All interviews were conducted using the qualitative Michael Patton and James P. Spradley models as offered by D. Soyini Madison in her insightful *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics and Performance*. Formal interviews with artists took the form of oral histories, personal narratives, and topical interviews. Oral histories were used to narrativize the artists’ experiences as Haitian-Diasporic subjects in their own words, while topical interview questions permitted me to push the artists a bit further

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<sup>106</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (New York, NY: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1959).

<sup>107</sup> Dwight Conquergood, “Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance,” in *Literature and Performance*, Vol. 5 No. 2 (1985): 1.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>109</sup> D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics and Performance* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Press, 2012, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition), 25.

in their consideration of their art praxis, relational to global trends in Haitian art production, ritual, and postcolonial thought.

My research relies on performance ethnography, more specifically dialogical performance. I understand performance ethnography to be where ethnography and theories of performance studies meet their ethical imperative. If performance, as Diamond reminds us, is at “the core of cultural politics,”<sup>110</sup> then I see performance ethnography as a means of calling attention to the ways that performance “negotiates regimes of power” through the “paying of attention”<sup>111</sup>—the co-witnessing and documentation of the stories that get left out of the grand narrative. For me, these stories include not only the narratives of the Diaspora in witnessing the earthquake, but also the stories of queer subjects, women, and children within the Diaspora. The ethics of my project emerges in the embodied practices of ethnography, in paying attention to my research subjects through a listening and creating *with*, not just a documentation *of* their stories.

While performance ethnography is a means of recording the narratives of other Haitian Diasporans, for me auto-ethnography serves as an “internalized ethnographic practice,”<sup>112</sup> to borrow from Bryant Keith Alexander, that uses my own lived experience and personal history as a Diasporic art maker as a critical site of interrogation and investigation. Similarly to Alexander, I acknowledge that my scholarly work is motivated by my personal survival, and that auto-ethnography provides me a reflective (inward

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<sup>110</sup> Diamond, 2.

<sup>111</sup> D. Soyini Madison, “The Dialogic Performative in Critical Ethnography,” in *Text and Performance Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2006): 322.

<sup>112</sup> Bryant Keith Alexander, “Performance Ethnography: The Reenacting and Inciting of Culture,” 422.

contemplation) and reflexive (how my actions influence others) means of exploring and critiquing myself in the world. Yet I am also aware of some of the criticisms of auto-ethnography as solipsistic and self-indulgent navel gazing. D. Soyini Madison notes that one of the dangers of auto-ethnography is that in focusing on the “exclusive experience” of the author, we lose sight of the Other’s experience.<sup>113</sup> Auto-ethnography risks losing the co-presence and co-witnessing of the “Other” that performance ethnography aims so deliberately to keep.

The auto-ethnographic component to this research project maintains the ethical and theoretical imperatives of auto-ethnographic performances that use “lived experiences and personal history as cultural sites” of investigation.<sup>114</sup> I document myself as a Haitian Diasporic subject and witness to the quake in order to place my performing body, my “performative-I” on the line.<sup>115</sup> Through journaling, video recording, and photographing my artistic process and emotional (re)turn to Haiti, I record my engagement with the ambivalence of being a Haitian Diasporic witness of the earthquake—the simultaneity of being an inheritor of a place and feeling a connection to it, while also understanding the confines of what it means to be “Haitian.”<sup>116</sup> I detail my second-generation subjectivity as a field of memory—both inherited and my own—that now includes the witnessing of the earthquake. I see this praxis as part of an ongoing effort to find a language for narrating my experience as a Haitian-American, to understand my role in “rebuilding” Haiti, and to contextualize my art and scholarly work

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<sup>113</sup> Madison, *Critical Ethnography*, 197-199.

<sup>114</sup> Alexander, 422.

<sup>115</sup> Tami Spry, *Body, Paper, Stage: Writing and Performing Auto-ethnography* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc. 2011), 30.

<sup>116</sup> Much of this material did not enter the final dissertation, though it informed the process from inception to final edits.

in relation to previously mentioned more “tangible” ways of reconstructing Haiti. My own work reflects the tensions that I document in my research on Haitian Diasporic artists and their practices: the ways they/we use their/our work to understand themselves/ourselves and to speak to (perhaps unintentionally) what it means to be a post-quake Diasporic subject.

In approaching my research, I do so cautiously, with an awareness of the personal and epistemological benefits of auto-ethnography, as well as its dangers. Amidst such conflicting opinions, my scholarship remains steadfast in the notions of productive fragmentation offered by Trinh T. Minh-Ha; that my story, similar to the stories of those included in my project, is both a fragment and a whole.<sup>117</sup> My use of auto-ethnography is but one gesture towards self and collective accountability—a way of detailing the ways that my research and project are informed by my experiences as a queer second-generation Haitian-American artist. My research *is* inherently a search for my own “words, sentences, and syntax.”<sup>118</sup> I utilize auto-ethnography not as a means of staring into my own navel, but allowing my readers an intimate portal into Diasporic subjectivity post-quake, placing my body and praxis on the line in tandem with those artists who animate my larger project.

As I mentioned earlier in this introduction, I theorize the concept of circling the cosmograms—the return to Haitian Vodou—through a discussion of five artists and their works: Rejin Leys (b. 1966, mixed-media and paper artist); Lenelle Moïse (b. 1980, poet-playwright); Régine Romain (b. 1974, photographer); Gina A. Ulysse (b. 1973, scholar-

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<sup>117</sup> Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1989), 123.

<sup>118</sup> Minh-ha, 20.

performer); and my own work as a storyteller-dancer-visual artist. Through these artists and their works, I investigate the four tactics of “circling the cosmograms”: 1) seeing dyasporically; 2) a Dyasporic lakou praxis; 3) the aesthetics of the lwa; and 4) crossing pedagogies, bridging the sacred and the scholarly. D. Soyini Madison defines “tactics” as “creating a means and a space from whatever elements or resources are available in order to resist or subvert the strategies of more powerful institutions, ideologies, or processes.”<sup>119</sup> The performance of each individual tactic is highlighted in each dissertation chapter.

Chapter 2, “Régine Romain: Seeing Dyasporically and the Aesthetics of Cool and Hot,” investigates the first tactic of circling the cosmograms, “seeing dyasporically.” I explore post-quake photographs of Haiti and the ways they function as ritual objects capable of “heating up” or “cooling down” stereotypical representations of Haiti. I read selected images from two photo-books produced following the earthquake—*TIME Earthquake Haiti: Tragedy and Hope* and Wyatt Gallery’s *Tent Life: Haiti*—to typify the “hot” representations of Haiti and Haitian people as detritus (garbage), specters (ghostly figures), and a people/country in constant states of trauma.

I then turn to the works of Haitian-American photographer and writer Régine Romain and her post-quake photography series, “Portraits for a Self-Determining Haiti” (2010).<sup>120</sup> I discuss and read Romain’s photography project as a counter-archive that circumvents popular media images, such as those produced by *Tent Life* and *TIME*,

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<sup>119</sup> D. Soyini Madison, *Acts of Activism: Human Rights as Radical Performance* (Cambridge and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>120</sup> Many of the images from this larger corpus were included in an essay penned by Régine Romain, “Ayiti: Reaching Higher Ground,” published in the special issue journal of *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* Vol. 11, No. 1, (2011): 132-140.

producing instead images of Haitian people neither as specters and detritus, but as *human beings* endowed with dignity, history, and agency. Romain's work, as I theorize it, evokes a "cooling" *balanse* (spiritual balance) that reconciles the Diasporic desire to see images of Haiti while addressing the ethical dimensions of documenting Haitian/black bodies in states of crisis. Romain's photographs perform a Diasporic gaze that allows us to (re)turn to Haiti, to see what is happening *over there*, without being bombarded by the colonial and racist tropes of Haiti and Haitian people. As the first tactic of circling the cosmograms, "seeing diasporically" demonstrates the ways that Haitians in Diaspora rely on visual objects, memory, and desire to establish contact with Haiti. Seeing diasporically is therefore not the passive taking in of photographs. Seeing diasporically emphasizes the *work* of looking at photographs of Haiti from the Diasporic perspective - the inter-performance of memory, desire, and the biological act of looking. My positioning of historic and contemporary photos as ritual objects is meant to encourage the reading of these photographs as charged artifacts capable of "doing" things in the world, effecting and affecting the people who view them.

Chapter 3, "Rejin Leys: Mourning Elizée and Building Lakous in Diaspora," examines the second tactic of circling the cosmograms: the Diasporic lakou praxis. It details the ways that Haitians in the Diaspora recreate the Haitian *lakou* system (multi-generational compound) in their local communities. The Diasporic lakou praxis marks the way Haitian Diasporans perform cultural mores, relying on them to build local ties and reconcile everyday needs, all while maintaining international commitments. I document the performance of the Diasporic lakou system in the life and art works of Rejin Leys from the 1990s to 2013. Leys is an artist whose art creations in the 1990s and

early 2000s combined her social activism and Haitian ancestry. Her work was often a platform for expressing criticism against U.S. policies towards Haitian migrants, particularly Haitian boat migrants, derogatorily referred to as “boat people.” Yet following the January 12, 2010 Haitian earthquake Leys’s work did not engage in the earthquake directly. Rather, her art creations became a forced meditation for coping with the loss of her husband, activist and archivist Andre Elizée, who died two days before the earthquake on January 10, 2010. The chapter asks, how do you grieve the personal and local in the midst of the (inter)national crisis of the Haitian earthquake? And, what does it mean to be Haitian-American and to turn your attention, even if momentarily, *away* from the events in Haiti? How can we reconcile the Diasporic turn towards the local (here) with the transnational needs (there) to organize on behalf of and alongside Haiti and Haitian people? I answer these questions and the Diasporic tensions between here (Diaspora) and there (Haiti) through an analysis of Leys’s practice from 1990 to 2013. In so doing, I address the ways that the Diasporic *lakou* praxis serves as a framework for local and transnational engagement and community work.

Chapter 4, “Dantò’s Daughter: Lenelle Moïse’s Womb-Words for the Shameless *Madivinez*,” emphasizes the third tactic of “circling the cosmograms,” the critical deployment of the aesthetics of the *lwa* of Haitian Vodou. This tactic perhaps more so than the previous chapters, encapsulates the numerous ways in which artists deliberately activate and improvise the material, spiritual, and physical attributes of the Haitian Vodou pantheon in their art works, using ritual symbols, colors, and characteristics of these *lwa* to signify the spiritual forces. I focus on the aesthetics of the *lwa* through an analysis of the relationship and influence of the Vodou *lwa* Ezili Dantò on Haitian-



American and queer poet Lenelle Moïse. Dantò is known as the “mother” of the Haitian revolution (1791-1804) and the protector of women and lesbian people. The Vodou spirit is often evoked directly in Moïse’s performances by name or through altars produced for the lwa. I theorize the relationship between Ezili Dantò and Lenelle Moïse as one that facilitates a black lesbian shamelessness that undermines socially inherited Vodou, queer, and Diasporic shame. I position this black lesbian shamelessness as a by-product of being one of “Dantò’s daughters.” To be Dantò’s daughter is to speak on behalf of those people who are “protected” by Dantò: poor, black, women, lesbian and/or queer people. Dantò’s daughters are her mediums, enacting the lwa’s feminist imperatives in their everyday performances, both in their quotidian lives and their lives on the formal stage. I analyze Moïse published poems and performances from her post-quake book of collected poetry *Haiti Glass* (2011). Moïse uses poetry-performances to critique heterosexism, patriarchy, and gender-based violence in Haiti and the Haitian Diaspora. In so doing, she becomes “Dantò’s daughter,” speaking out against taboo subjects in Haiti including sexual identity and gender-based violence so that women, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and Vodou-loving people can be socially free, unashamed and unafraid.

My conclusion, “Gede and Oya go to School,” examines the final tactic of circling the cosmograms, crossing pedagogies, bridging the sacred and the scholarly. Using M. Jacqui Alexander’s theorization of “crossing pedagogies” as a theoretical framework for bridging the sacred and the scholarly, I analyze the works of two artists who bridge Vodou aesthetics in their performance and scholarly work: anthropologist Gina Athena Ulysse and my own work. I analyze the ways that both Ulysse and I rely on

two African-based spirits to organize our post-quake relief efforts and our own personal mourning following the loss of lives during the earthquake and the ensuing cholera epidemic. The Haitian Vodou lwa Gede, keeper of the dead, and the Yoruba-Lucumí *orisha* (spirit) Oya, keeper of the cemeteries, become respective “guides” and muses in Ulysse’s and my work as we produce performance-scholarship that addresses Haiti’s continued colonial condition. I analyze Ulysse’s TEDx talk “Untapped Fierceness/My Giant Leaps” alongside my own solo-performance *Picking Up Stones* to discuss the ways that Haitian Vodou as a spiritual epistemology is birthing new modes of scholarship that place spirit, performance, and embodiment at the center of analysis and inquiry. Using these two performances as examples I gesture towards the fate of Haitian Vodou in the Haitian Diaspora: as an ever expanding spiritual framework for understanding the world, critiquing oppression, and redressing popular perception of Haiti, Haitian people, and Haitian Vodou.

*Circling the Cosmograms: Feminist Art, Vodou, and Diasporic (Re)turns to Post-Quake Haiti* chronicles a small but mighty segment of the important political, social, and female-based work occurring in Diaspora on behalf and alongside of Haiti and Haitian people. It is my hope that through this work, the importance of art as a platform for new dialogues and (re)presentations of Haiti and Haitian people is evidenced. Time continues to distance the immediacy of the earthquake, yet Haitians in the Diaspora continue to mobilize, to organize, and to create work on behalf of and inspired by Haiti and its people. The work speaks to the needs for freedom and liberation made possible through the ethos of Vodou: the sacredness of all life and the forceful enactment of all powers in order to heal and uplift all peoples.

Several weeks ago, at the time of this writing, on a cold day in January, I woke up and went about my daily rituals. I lit candles, knelt down, and prayed to my ancestral and spiritual altars. As I tended to my altars, I noticed myself slowing down, taking a longer time than usual to ensure that my words, prayers, and offerings were deliberate, meticulous, and heartfelt. I moved through my day in an *unremarkable* way. I went to work, checked emails, wrote, and talked with colleagues. It was not until I returned home and talked to a Haitian-American friend and art-colleague that I realized, “Today is January 12. Today is the Anniversary.” The day had gone by and I had not *noticed* it. I stopped to reflect on this point with my friend and felt *guilty* for not having mourned, for what I thought was a failure to notice the events that occurred years ago. Then, I remembered the unusual care and time I had spent tending to my spiritual altars. I was reminded of the ways that Spirit works intentionally and unintentionally. I was reminded of the ways that both on January 12, 2010, and January 12, 2017, spirit continued to ride *through* me, so that I could do the work that I needed to do in order to bear witness to both lives lost and lives lived. This dissertation acknowledges the ways that January 12, 2010, was a day for grieving and mourning the thousands of lives lost. Yet, it is also a way of bearing witness to how women, the arts, and Spirit *work* to honor the dead and guide the living, in times of crisis and the everyday. This document archives only a few of those Haitian people doing the work to advance and rebuild a nation and its people, the world over. It is my hope that by attending to these case studies of Haitian women in Diaspora, we might learn how to apply Vodou’s shared sense of collective responsibilities to the challenges faced by others on the various corners of the globe-cosmogram.

**Chapter 2:**  
*Régine Romain:*  
 Seeing Dyasporically and the Aesthetics of Cool and Hot

Those images in the news or media never reflected images that were in my family album.

-Régine Romain<sup>121</sup>

In the summer of 2006, I took a family trip to Las Vegas with my parents and my sister. In our shared hotel room, amidst clothes, food, and other items for documenting our trip, I hid in my backpack a series of photography books I did not want my parents to know I had. The most important of these was Phyllis Galembo's *Vodou: Visions and Voices of Haiti*. The book was a collection of Vodou mambos and ougans, their altars, and images of sacred Vodou pilgrimages. The publication was one of the materials I was using for my undergraduate research fellowship and a vital tool in my *seeing* and learning more about Haitian Vodou rituals and art aesthetics. However, in my "Christian" and anti-Vodou household, I knew that the book would be considered contraband of the highest degree: an item that would confirm, yet again, that I was not the good Christian daughter that my parents wanted me to be.

Yet, the most surprising thing happened. After an evening of late night studying, I left the book out by mistake. In the morning, I awoke to find my father sitting quietly at our hotel table, gently leafing through the pages of *Vodou Visions*. He stopped at a photograph and called my mother over. "*Rosie, vin gade!*" ("Rosie, come see!") he exclaimed while pointing at a page. Together they looked in amazement at the photograph of a man whom they had known in their childhood. The man was dressed in the regalia of one of his *lwa* (spirits), and across from the photograph was a

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<sup>121</sup> Régine Romain in conversation with the author, November 18, 2016.

corresponding song for the deity. My parents began to sing the song, dancing as they talked about the man in the photograph, their memory of him, and their sheer surprise (and perhaps, joy) at uncovering his photograph. This was my first lesson in “seeing diasporically.” In this moment, I witnessed the potential of/for circulated photographs of Haiti and Haitian people: their ability to elicit stories from their Diasporic viewers; to recognize the familiar (friend, family member, ritual, etc.); and to call us home or to pass down stories of the homeland from one generation to the next. In the hands and eyes of the Diaspora, photographs of Haiti have the power to facilitate a (re)turn to Haiti. No longer a document of Haiti, they become something other than what they were originally intended—an intimate *gateway to Haiti* that crosses space, time, and memory.

The majority of the images found in Galembo’s *Vodou: Visions and Voices of Haiti* feature Haitian men and women who stare at the camera directly, their faces seemingly passive, poised, and sweet.<sup>122</sup> These are emblematic of the Africanist aesthetic of the “cool.” Art historian Robert Farris Thompson, in his study of the cool amongst Yoruba-KiKongo art both in Africa and the Americas, proffers coolness as both an

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<sup>122</sup> Sunglasses can be found worn amongst several of the individuals photographed. Sunglasses are ritual symbols of the Gede lwa of the dead. Sunglasses are believed to protect the Gede, who spend much of their time in the dark with the dead and thus need protection from the light when they surface in the land of the living. Gede is also known to wear sunglasses with one lens missing. Some spiritualists-theorist posit that this is because Gede moves between two worlds (the living and the dead) and others have argued that this represents the singular eye of the penis and reflects Gede’s relationship to procreation and the phallus, and his direct and often-times lascivious rhetoric. For more on Gede see Donald J. Cosentino, editor, *In Extremis: Death and Life in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Haitian Art* (Los Angeles, CA: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2012); Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 329-382; Maya Deren, *Divine Horseman: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New Paltz, NY: McPherson, 1983), 37-38, 102-114; Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (New York, NY: First Harper Perennial Modern Classics, [1938], 2009), 219-223.

aesthetic and character “exhibiting grace under pressure.”<sup>123</sup> Upon first glance the coolness of these photographs renders them as unremarkable artifacts of Haitian people and Vodou. However, when these images are placed in context with other images of Haiti that circulate across the globe, we can see the ways that their coolness in fact tempers the frenzied and graphic—hot—images of Haiti that dominate the visual landscape. Hot images of Haiti are the traditional way I have come to see Haiti in the everyday: as violent, trauma-filled and crisis-driven.

The powerful tropes of Haiti as crisis-filled were ever-present in the post-quake photographs that circulated on January 12, 2010, following the 7.0 magnitude earthquake that struck Haiti.<sup>124</sup> Upon learning of the earthquake, I did not and could not look upon the photographs. On instinct, I turned off my computer, shutting down any news sites, emails, and social media posts that could present images of Haiti that I trusted would be my emotional undoing. These images, which I knew were circulating globally, featured rubble and bodies—Haiti and the Haitian body as crumbled and as traumatized flesh.<sup>125</sup> In the end, turning off the computer and burying my head away from newspapers did not help. My home was flooded by sounds, unending news descriptions, conversations and

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<sup>123</sup> The Yoruba term for this coolness is “*itutu*.” See Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art in the Atlantic* (New York, NY: Random House, 1983), 12-16.

<sup>124</sup> The epicenter of the quake was near the town of Léogâne, Haiti, approximately 16 miles west of the capital of Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

<sup>125</sup> I take my cue from Hortense Spillers who marks the differences between the “body” and “flesh,” whereby flesh precedes the body, becoming that which is produced through torture, trauma, and the tearing into flesh. The flesh is *marked* and *marked upon*; it is “zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography.” Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” in *Diacritics*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Culture and Countermemory: The “American” Connection (Summer, 1987): 67.

wails exchanged between my mother, aunt, and father—at the center were the moving and still images of Haitian suffering.

The images of Haiti that circulated widely were inarguably more grotesque than most in their capture of the dead, dying and maimed. Chief art critic for the Washington Post Philip Kennicott in a late 2011 issue of *Afterimage: The Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criticism*, published an article lambasting the media coverage of Haiti post-quake. Kennicott writes that the images “allowed a return to the raw [...] Something about Haiti made it permissible to display human suffering without the usual fears of exploiting the victim and alienating the reader.”<sup>126</sup> For Kennicott, the reason why Haiti marked a break with the rules of “good taste” and “privacy” often afforded to the dead, dying and traumatized is quite obvious: Haiti has always been a nation that enters the U.S.’s consciousness through “violent epiphanies.”<sup>127</sup>

Scholars of Haiti and the African diaspora also took note of these excessive images of Haiti as raw and violent. Gina Athena Ulysse, Toni Pressely-Sanon, and Sibylle Fischer have argued that the uninhibited photographing of Haitian people at various stages of trauma and death are part of a larger colonial practice of objectifying and “othering” Haiti.<sup>128</sup> For Ulysse, writing in the immediate aftermath of the Haitian earthquake, this othering has been a fixture of Haitian history since 1804, when, after the successful slave revolution, Haiti became the first Black Republic and second

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<sup>126</sup> Philip Kennicott, “Codes of Exposure: Imaging the Body and Suffering in Haiti,” *Afterimage*, Vol. 39, No. 1-2 (July-October 2011): 12.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>128</sup> See Toni Pressely-Sanon, “Lucid Cameras: Imaging Haiti After the Earthquake of 2010,” *Journal of Haitian Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Fall 2011): 6-32; Gina Athena Ulysse, “Why Representations of Haiti Matter Now More Than Ever,” *NACLA Report on the Americas*, Vol. 43, No.4 (July/August 2010): 37-43; and Sibylle Fischer, “Haiti: Fantasies of Bare Life,” *Small Axe* 23 (2007):1-15.

independent nation in the Western hemisphere (after the U.S.). Haiti and Haitians, she argues, “remain a manifestation of blackness in its worst form because, simply put, the unruly enfant terrible of the Americas defied all European odds and created a disorder of things colonial. Haiti had to become colonialism’s *bête noir* if the sanctity of whiteness were to remain unquestioned.”<sup>129</sup> Haiti’s status as the *bête noir* of the colonial project echoes Sibylle Fischer’s argument that images of Haiti represent “bare life—*nuda vida*,” or “human life as indistinguishable from animal life.”<sup>130</sup> Informed by the work of philosopher Giorgio Agamben, Fischer, in her pre-quake expository on documentary photography in Haiti, reminds us that circulated images of Haiti are wedded to colonial imaginings of Revolutionary Saint-Domingue.<sup>131</sup> Fischer writes that the Saint-Domingue revolution was seen

not as a political event with political goals, an event to be understood in the context of the revolutionary age, but as a matter of bloodshed, rape, and boundless material destruction. The most circulated and repeated story was that of the insurgents using a white baby impaled on a bayonet as a standard on their marches, a story for which no eyewitness account exists and which is only reported as hearsay by a single French colonist. Accounts of that kind seem to have prepared the ground for *an imaginary that looks to Haiti to see only this: insurrectional bodies, tortured bodies, bodies in trance* [emphasis added].<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Gina Athena Ulysse, “Why Representations of Haiti Matter Now More Than Ever,” *NACLA Report on the Americas*, July/August 2010, 39.

<sup>130</sup> Sibylle Fischer, “*Haiti: Fantasies of Bare Life*,” *Small Axe* 23 (2007), 1. Fischer’s arguments are in reference to the photojournalist book, *Haiti* by Bruce Gilden (Stockport, England: Dewi Lewis Publishing, 1996). The book features a series of black and white photographs of Haiti taken between 1986-2002, many of them echoing the same rawness and lack of privacy that would reappear after the 2010 earthquake.

<sup>131</sup> Saint-Domingue was Haiti’s colonial name until 1804, when General Jean-Jacques Dessaline declared the nation and independent state after the last of Napoleon’s armies had been defeated. The name used, “Ayiti” or “Haiti,” was the original name for the island used by its earliest inhabitants, the Taino/Arawak peoples.

<sup>132</sup> Sibylle Fischer, “*Haiti: Fantasies of Bare Life*,” *Small Axe*, Vol. 23 (June 2007): 2.



Scholars such as Fischer and Ulysse are correct in their claims that present-day visual representations of Haiti showcase the historical and colonial imaginary. I most certainly agree with Fischer's observations that Haitian bodies are rendered as tortured and in trance. However, I contend that these arguments may not fully account for the importance of these visual renderings of Haiti for a Haitian Diasporic imaginary. These images have become a necessary visual "go-between" that allows the Diaspora to see at a distance—to "access" Haiti. In other words, there is an inherent value to *all* photographs of Haiti, including the "hot" sensational mass-media produced images and the unremarkable "cool" documents such as Galembo's *Vodou Visions*. Both styles of photographs are ways of witnessing-someone-else-witness-Haiti, of *seeing diasporically*. Both types of photographs are modes of circling the cosmograms, allowing a temporary (re)turn to Haiti vis-à-vis pictorial access to Haiti. I argue that this witnessing-someone-else-witness-Haiti, of *seeing diasporically*, is a critical part of the Haitian Diasporic experience, one that cultivates a practice of learning to (un)see what and how Haiti has been represented in the colonial imaginary.

As I detailed in my introduction, "Diaspora" is an on-going process in which a group is always (re)creating itself through the assemblage of affective relationships, material belongings, and creative self-fashioning or performances of "Haitianness." Cool and hot media-images of Haiti help to produce a Haitian Diasporic imaginary by functioning as material objects that allow the Diaspora to visually access and thereby respond to/perform contemporary Haitian news. This notion of media images of Haiti as a form of Diasporic access takes on added importance during periods of crisis such as the earthquake when, despite the power of the image to cause psychological distress, the role

of the media and media images takes on greater importance “for Haitians who cannot find out about the status or whereabouts of their family members, [and] may be turning to news coverage quite often.”<sup>133</sup>

Despite the violent epiphanies, I posit that photographs of post-quake Haiti served a practical need: they were a way of *seeing* Haiti, of learning what was happening, and connecting to the catastrophe from afar. I have wrestled with the paradox of this moment: the need to know what is happening on the ground in Haiti and the sheer *familiarity* of this moment—of witnessing-someone-else-witness-Haiti. I have grown accustomed to this *mediation* of Haiti through the frames of others, this *seeing dyasporically*. The act of seeing dyasporically creates a reliance upon the image—any image—as access to Haiti, while also acknowledging that viewing media representations is often an act of *unseeing*, of being able to critically undercut the discourses of Haiti as poor, broken, dirty, and Black that circulate in the photographs. Whether in the orderly photographs of Haitian Vodou or in the violent images of post-quake Haiti, seeing dyasporically has in actuality constructed my second-generation Diasporic experience, my haunted and inherited relationship to Haiti as my “homeland,” and my over-determined reliance and witnessing of Haiti through various forms of news media.<sup>134</sup>

This chapter focuses on the first tactic of circling the cosmograms, seeing dyasporically. It considers the political, ethical, and aesthetic contours of this “way of

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<sup>133</sup> Joseph Brownstein, “Haitian Quake Trauma May Strike People in the U.S.,” ABC News Medical Unit, January 14, 2010.

<sup>134</sup> The notion of second-generation as a haunting will be discussed later in the chapter.

seeing [diasporically]]”<sup>135</sup> through readings of post-quake photographs of Haiti as ritual objects capable of “heating up” or “cooling down” our Diasporic (re)turns to Haiti. My positioning of historic and contemporary photos as ritual objects is meant to encourage the reading of these photographs as charged objects capable of “doing” things in the world, effecting and affecting the people who view them. Rather than viewing photographs of post-quake Haiti as uniformly bad or good, I read them through the Vodou-language of *balanse* (balancing). Karen McCarthy Brown distinguishes between the colloquial and the ritual Haitian Vodou definition of *balanse*: “In ordinary speech, balancing merely refers to being caught in a dilemma not yet resolved [having to make a choice]. In the language of Haitian Vodou, balancing involves using forces that contradict each other to raise life energy.”<sup>136</sup> *Balanse*, both in its everyday usage and its spiritual definition, is about negotiating options and extremes. I apply this framework in my analysis of photographs of Haiti, particularly post-quake photographs of Haiti, and how seeing diasporically extends this negotiation of extremes (hot and cold images of Haiti<sup>137</sup>) in order to achieve more balanced representations of Haiti.

I begin with the premise that seeing diasporically is a central component to the second-generation Haitian-American experience that highlights the importance of *all* images in the construction of Haiti as “home/homeland”<sup>138</sup> However, I also foreground

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<sup>135</sup> John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* serves as guide for understanding how visual objects are loaded with social, historical, and cultural meaning. See John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London, England: British Broadcasting Company; New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1972).

<sup>136</sup> Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 374.

<sup>137</sup> I explore this aesthetic of hot and cold in the following section.

<sup>138</sup> I use “home” and “homeland” to situate Haiti as both a birthplace and an inherited point of reference established through lineage (i.e. the home of my parents, grandparents, etc.). This conception of home/homeland, while porous enough to include 1.5, second, and third-generation

the labor of seeing. Seeing diasporically is not the passive taking in of photographs, rather it emphasizes the *work* of looking—the inter-performance of memory, desire, and the biological act of seeing. In other words, seeing diasporically is about reading between the visual “lines” in any photographic representation of Haiti and Haitian people and finding the story of Haiti captured beyond the photograph, which for the Diasporic subject, becomes a gateway for balancing representation of Haiti by establishing alternative narratives and visions of Haiti. Thusly, one of my underlying concerns in this chapter is to “suss out” whether or not we can distinguish the difference between witnessing-someone-else-witness Haiti through the lens of the mass media versus the perspective of someone who is part of the Haitian Diaspora. In other words, is there a way that photographs of Haiti, produced by Haitian people, allow for a production of “coolness” that tempers traditional sensational photographs of Haiti? Furthermore, can this Diasporic looking teach and (re)frame the looking of others?

In what follows, I explore the tensions and labor of seeing diasporically and attempt to answer the aforementioned question in three sections. In the first sections, I detail seeing diasporically as method. My method is not objective but rather a way of documenting and trying to capture the way that photographs of Haiti, pre- and post-quake, *have worked* and *continue to work* on my own Diasporic body. I then go on to explore witnessing-someone-else-witness-Haiti through and examination of mass media representations of Haiti. Here I read selected images from two photo-books produced

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subjectivities, also accounts for the ways in which “homeland” is both synonymous with the territorial nation-state *and* an affective space produced through what David Scott terms “discursive practice.” Here I want to restate that it is the joint working of *idea* and the *material* place (the actual land) that produces Haiti as “home” and “homeland” for the second-generation Diaspora. See David Scott, “An Obscure Miracle of Connections,” in *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999): 124.

following the earthquake: *TIME Earthquake Haiti: Tragedy and Hope* and Wyatt Gallery's *Tent Life: Haiti*. These post-quake books typify “hot” representations of Haiti and Haitian people as detritus (garbage), specters (ghostly figures), and a people/country in constant states of trauma. The final section turns to witnessing Haiti through a Diasporic lens and the work of Haitian-American photographer and writer Régine Romain and her post-quake photography series, “Portraits for a Self-Determining Haiti” (2010).<sup>139</sup> I discuss and read Romain's photography project as a counter-archive that circumvents popular media images, such as those produced by *Tent Life* and *TIME*, producing instead images of Haitian people neither as specters and detritus, but as *human beings* endowed with dignity, history, and agency.<sup>140</sup> Romain's work, as I argue, is a deliberate performative shift in the dominant repertoire of looking at Haiti. Romain's work performs a “cooling” balance by providing an aesthetic (re)turn, intervention and middle ground between the Diasporic desire to see and thereby (re)turn to Haiti—to know what is happening *over there* and the ethical dimensions of documenting Haitian/black bodies in states of crisis. Consequently, I argue that Romain's work can be understood not as an isolated case study in post-quake photography, but as an extension of photographic interventions of how Haitian people have been seen and represented in

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<sup>139</sup> Many of the images from this larger corpus were included in an essay penned by Régine Romain, “Ayiti: Reaching Higher Ground,” published in the special issue journal of *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* Vol. 11, No. 1, (2011): 132-140.

<sup>140</sup> I borrow from Shawn Michelle Smith's description of a “counterarchive” in relationship to visual culture and race. While this paper does not address race and visual culture explicitly, undergirding my discussion is the notion that representations of Haiti are informed by historical imaginings of Haiti that include race, ethnicity, geographic location, language, exoticism, and religion. As I use it here, the counterarchive of Haitian images is one that contests the historical representations of Haiti as alien, backwards, voodoo-crazed, etc. I detail this further later in my chapter. See Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: W.E.B. DuBois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2004).

the media.

***On Method: Reading Photographs as a Diasporic Haunting***

At the heart of this chapter is a deep desire to rescue and understand the importance of all photographs in constituting second-generation Diasporic subjectivity. Thus, this chapter, for reasons that will be elucidated later on, takes a more personal approach to the objects of study. The point of departure for discussing and viewing these photographs are my own discursive movements through and analysis of the photographs, interweaving both my attempts at objectivity and the insertion of my own “punctums”—what literary and cultural critic Roland Barthes described as the “sting” or “prick” of the photograph that subsequently changes the meaning of the photograph.<sup>141</sup> It is the punctum that, for me, renders the photograph as a performing object—capable of reminding me of my Diaspora status and the memories of Haiti I have inherited as a second-generation subject.

Photographs, particularly family photographs, were the ways that I, as well as others in the Haitian Diaspora, came to know my/our extended family, culture, and inherited homeland. This transcontinental and intergenerational relationship to photographs is what famed Haitian-American writer and activist Edwidge Danticat has described as “heirlooms, calling cards to generations yet born.”<sup>142</sup> In other words, photographs are a “big deal” in the Diaspora for, as Danticat elaborates, “they were created for private use, but they also seemed, in a way, public: after all, taken with distant people in mind, even if those people happened to be my parents. To me, those

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<sup>141</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York, NY: Hill Wang, 1980/81), 45-57.

<sup>142</sup> Edwidge Danticat, “Look at Me: Photographs from Africa Past and Present,” *Harper’s Magazine*, Vol. 327 (December 2013), 66.

photographs [lost family photos] had an unshakable permanence—they seemed too monumental to simply vanish.”<sup>143</sup>

Tina Campt reminds us that images are important to members of the Black (African) diaspora because they are ways that we image and imagine ourselves.<sup>144</sup> Danticat’s discussion of her family photographs exemplifies how photographs are both private and public objects that connect generations across national boundaries; and when they are taken and circulated, they are done so with monumental care as to how the photograph will live and speak across generations. The power of photographs to serve as intergenerational and transcontinental heirlooms calls attention to their role as fetish objects, what film theorist Christian Metz described as personal “keepsakes”<sup>145</sup> by which we remember the dead and through which memory and the unconscious are called upon repeatedly. Photographs, unlike moving images (i.e. films of Haiti), fix the time and space of the image captured, thus allowing the viewer to repeatedly return to the moment captured in the frame, allowing us to (re)make the meaning(s) of the photograph whenever we turn to them. Photographs, unlike moving images, are a “pure index” of any given moment and “stubbornly [point] to the print of what *was*, but no longer is.”<sup>146</sup> One is not merely a spectator while viewing the image but is constantly put to work by the photograph and worked on by the photograph. Consequently, photographs, in the eyes of the beholding Dyaspora, become performing objects that elicit dialectics between the photograph and the viewer; it is a dialectic that is in tension with what the image publicly

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>144</sup> Tina Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 5.

<sup>145</sup> Christian Metz, “Photography and Fetish,” *October*, Vol. 34 (Autumn, 1985): 82.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 83, emphasis in the original.

renders and what the Diasporic viewer privately witnesses (memories, sensations, etc.).

The dialectic between the image and my viewing is an investigation of what African American and visual culture scholar Leigh Raiford refers to as “critical black memory.”<sup>147</sup> For Raiford, critical black memory is a strategy for assessing the importance of visual images of African American people in the face of the perpetual violences enacted on black bodies. Images trigger memories. These memories can in turn challenge and critique the narrative presented within the photographs. Stated differently, the memory/memories we bring with us to our viewing of photographs challenges the photograph’s proposed “truth,” as well as its rhetoric (i.e. its representation of black bodies). In the viewing of images of Haiti post-quake, critical black memory inserts itself in the: 1) reliance upon the images to document the earthquake as an event; and 2) in the critiques of the images themselves as reproducing narratives of Haiti as a failed and chaotic nation-state and the Haitian body in the constant state of terror. Régine Romain demonstrates this critical black memory during our interviews together when she professes, “Those images in the news or media never reflected images that were in my family album.”<sup>148</sup> These images that Romain, Danticat, and I reference in our memories are nearly the same staged performances with subtle differences: birthdays, graduations, and portraits captured and sent back and forth between family members in Haiti and the U.S..

Critical black memory, as I use it, argues for the importance of “memory-images”

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<sup>147</sup> Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in the Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 2011), 114-115.

<sup>148</sup> Régine Romain in conversation with the author, November 18, 2016.



in constructing the experiences of African-descended people. Cultural critic and philosopher Siegfried Kracauer has argued that “[m]emory-images are at odds with photographic representations,” that “[n]o matter which scenes a person remembers, they all mean something that is relevant to him or her without his or her necessarily knowing what they mean. Memories are retained because of their significance for that person.”<sup>149</sup> While Kracauer places memory-images at odds with photographs, I contend that memory-images *and* photographs of Haiti have co-created my Diasporic vision of and relation(ship) to Haiti. Memory-images and photographic representations of Haiti co-inform each other. In viewing images of Haiti, my Diasporic-self is (re)made and (re)assembled the moment I step into the photograph. I become overly concerned with the temporality of the photograph (*When was it taken?*), geography (*Where was it taken?*), familial connections (*Do my parents know this place? Have I visited this area?*), and the “author” of the photograph (*Who took this picture and why? Were they Haitian?*). All of these concerns and questions are a consequence of my Diasporic memory and viewing of the image. My memories of Haiti, the stories my elders have shared with me about Haiti, and the physical photograph all collapse on one another in the looking at photographs of Haiti.

I argue that to see diasporically is to call upon the image as a visual mediator between time, space, and affect. The *physical* and *psychic act* of looking oscillates between what we know as “real” (a memory or knowledge of the geographic place) and

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<sup>149</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, “Photography,” trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 19, No. 3 (Spring 1993): 425.

what is rendered as a distilled representation in the media.<sup>150</sup> To see diasporically is to *split in half*, to look upon the image and be reminded that one is *not “there” but “here,”* and that one *needs the image* to visually render and (re)turn back “there.” Seeing diasporically (re)produces a sense of disjunction, displacement, and dislocation through the act of looking.<sup>151</sup> The disjunction and displacement of looking recalls Jasbir Puar’s construction of “diasporic assemblage,” so that “actual bodies can be in multiple places and temporalities simultaneously, not (only) tethered through nostalgia or memory but folded and braided into intensifications. The sensation of place is thus one of manifold intensities cathected through distance.”<sup>152</sup> The *sensation of place*, a feeling of being there and going back, is one of the effects produced through seeing diasporically, and it is enabled by the here/there convergence that exists at the site of viewing the image.

The oscillation between past, present, and potential future is a haunting, what Avery Gordon has termed as, “a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening.” One must first deal with the ghost(s) in the room, the haunting of the image in order to know where “history and subjectivity make social life.”<sup>153</sup> Second-generation is also a haunting, or what visual theorist Griselda Pollock, reading the works of Israeli

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<sup>150</sup> Here I am inspired by Homi Bhabha’s discussion of the “exilic optic,” as it relates to the media apparatus. For Bhabha the exilic optic is characterized by its movement between the real (the memory of home) and the representation of the real. While this is a useful starting place for thinking through “seeing diasporically,” part of my project includes unsettling the very notion of “home” as a fixed-location in diaspora theories. As I see it, “home” is not static and actual but co-informed by various processes of nostalgia, myths of origin, desires, and multi-generational relationships to origin, birth, and nationality. For more on the exilic optic see Homi K. Bhabha, “Preface: Arrivals and Departures” in *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place*, ed. by Hamid Naficy (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), vii-xii.

<sup>151</sup> Hamid Naficy, “Introduction: Framing Exile: From Homeland to Homepage,” in *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place*, 5.

<sup>152</sup> Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 171.

<sup>153</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 8.

visual artist Bracha Ettinger, refers to as a “haunted subjectivity.”<sup>154</sup> Speaking to the lives of children of Holocaust survivors, the act of looking back at photographs of the Holocaust and the inherited family memories produces the haunting of the second-generation through “transposition [...] the uncanny experience where the past reality of the parent intrudes into the present psychological reality of the child.”<sup>155</sup> Transposition and the haunted subjectivity of the second-generation, according to Pollock, results in “the parents’ past usurp[ing] the current life of the child who may become aware that s/he must process what s/he did not experience on behalf of another unable to even know what has been transmitted to him/her.”<sup>156</sup>

I extend Pollock’s discussion of transposition and Gordon’s hauntings to include how for second-generation Haitian Diasporans photographs are not merely ways of inheriting trauma, but ways of inheriting the ancestral homeland. The inheritance is made possible through narratives of the home reproduced by family legacies and, as I argue, through a mediated relationship to media, specifically photographs. Seeing diasporically therefore convenes the multiple hauntings at work in the act of looking at images of Haiti: the haunting produced by photographs and the haunting of second-generation subjectivities. As it relates to images of post-quake Haiti, seeing diasporically is watching, through the gaze of others, moving and still images of Haiti for evidence of what is happening on the ground in Haiti. Seeing diasporically is, in many senses also a process and *labor* of *unseeing*; of viewing an image and being provoked by the image to

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<sup>154</sup> Griselda Pollock, “Dying, Seeing, Feeling: Transforming the Ethical Space of Feminist Aesthetics” in *The Life and Death of Images: Ethics and Aesthetics*, ed. by Diarmuid Costello and Dominic Willsdon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 229.

<sup>155</sup> Pollock citing psychoanalyst Judith Kestenberg. Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

undo the discourses being produced about Haiti.

I turn now to my analysis of Wyatt Gallery's *Tent Life* and *TIME Earthquake Haiti: Tragedy and Hope*, to demonstrate seeing diasporically, labors of unseeing and the discourses of specters, detritus, and trauma that are typical of photographic documentations of Haiti.

### ***Specters, Detritus, and the Colonial Imaginings of Haiti***

The room glows in a scarlet-warm light. Shades of amber and yellow intensify at the center of the image pointing to the "hot zone," a possible light source that exists beyond the backdrop of this interior, suggesting that were you to unzip the half-moon that marks the barrier between this space and the beyond of the picture, you would meet the bright light that casts its glow on the inside of this warm place. It feels strangely cozy and luxurious. The rounded folds and tucks of the walls cocoon us in, serving as an invitation to stay in the red womb-like warmth. *I feel nestled in Ezili Freda's lair. Vodou lwa of love, lover of perfumes, laces, and luxury. Is Ezili "married" to the owner of this tent?*<sup>157</sup> *Is this her bed?*

The objects within the room alert us to the sheer absence of a figure. These items are the evidence of things not seen: the dweller of this tent and the owner of these effects. Who is he, and why has he left behind his hat, jacket, belt and valise? Why do they seem so untended to when everything else seems so *orderly*? Why is there a partial opening in the tent? We are left wondering about the owner of these items, and how we happened inside of *this* space. Are we kneeling, crouched, or standing upright and erect? We/I

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<sup>157</sup> Here I refer to the spiritual marriage that can occur between a Vodouist and a *lwa* (spirit).

become aware that there exists an *exterior* to this interior, and that *that exterior is not as orderly as this space*. The scarlet-warm tent no longer feels inviting but violent and *bloody*. African art historian Suzanne Preston Blier has argued that within West African cultures and aesthetic value systems, hotness/heat is associated with “danger, trauma, [and] difficulty.”<sup>158</sup> Hotness is aggressive and evidenced in the color red, symbolically and metonymically associated with blood, warfare, and terror. The bright red tent interior is heated and masks danger. It no longer conjures *Ezili*. The images that precede and will follow this image of Haiti call forth and remind me that outside is pandemonium.

*Red Tent Interior, Delmas 31* (Figure 3) is one of the first featured images of Wyatt Gallery’s *Tent Life: Haiti*.<sup>159</sup> Part photo-book and photo-diary, *Tent Life* includes an introduction by American born photographer Wyatt Gallery, an essay by Edwidge Danticat, a brief timeline of Haiti’s history, and over 50 images of post-quake Haiti that are concentrated on the tent neighborhoods that were formed after the earthquake to house newly homeless individuals. The images are meant to capture what Wyatt Gallery refers to as the “immeasurable spirit of strength, hope, and resilience” that “the people of Haiti continued to embody” after the quake.<sup>160</sup> Yet in viewing these images, many of them quite stunning in their color saturation and documentation of spaces, we get the sense not of spirits of strength, hope and resilience, but of the *evidence of things not seen*

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<sup>158</sup> Suzanne Preston Blier, *African Vodun: Art, Psychology, and Power* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 119.

<sup>159</sup> *Tent Life*, was Wyatt Gallery’s first publication. Gallery’s website indicates that his works are intended to “raise awareness and support for communities damaged by natural disasters.” According to Gallery 100% of the royalties from *Tent Life* went to relief efforts through Sean Penn’s J/P Haitian Relief Organization, The Global Syndicate, an organization of financial professionals who organizer fundraising initiatives around the globe; and the Christian-based missionary organization, Healing Haiti. See [www.wyattgallery.com](http://www.wyattgallery.com) for more details about the artist and his work.

<sup>160</sup> Wyatt Gallery, “Introduction,” *Tent Life: Haiti* (New York, NY: Umbrage Editions, 2011), 7.

*and not said*. The images featured in *Tent Life: Haiti* can be categorized into panoramic shots of tent cities, images of detritus, and the specter of the Haitian body, the continued ghosting or absenting of Haitian people even when they appear in the pictorial frame. The specters of these photos continue to mask a quiet terror, a hot aesthetic of danger, tragedy, and anxiety for the viewer.



**Figure 3:** *Red Tent Interior, Delmas 31, 2010*  
Archival Pigment Ink Print on Hahnemühle Fine Art Paper, Edition of 5.  
18 x 22 inches

Along with *Red Tent Interior*, *Plastic Chair in Water Canal, Delmas 31* (Figure 4), foregrounds the specter of the Haitian body. In both images presence is simultaneously marked by absence; the blackness of Haitian bodies circulate as what Jared Sexton describes as a “form of disappearance, a spectral blackness.”<sup>161</sup> *Plastic Chair* continues to absent the Haitian body but does so by focusing on Haiti as detritus. By “detritus,” I literally mean the ways that *waste* is a character figure in images of Haiti. I suggest that these two images work to produce a quiet terror in their absenting of Haitian bodies and foregrounding of detritus.



**Figure 4:** *Plastic Chair in Water Canal, Delmas 31, 2010*  
Scanned from Wyatt Gallery's *Tent Life: Haiti*, 18-19

Similarly to *Red Tent Interior*, no physical human is present in the photograph *Plastic Chair*. Yet unlike the orderly dwelling documented in *Red Tent Interior*, *Plastic Chair* offers us an uncompromised wasteland. An overhead shot captures a floating white

<sup>161</sup> Jared Sexton, “Captivity, By Turns: A Comment on the Work of Ashley Hunt,” *Art Journal* Vol. 66, No. 3 (Fall 2007): 78.

chair with one leg either broken or buried beneath the surface of mucky water. It is encased in a wet tomb of trash surrounded by plates, cartons, crushed soda-pop bottles, and plastic bags. *Is this the trash that builds after dinner rites for the dead (similar to the one held for my uncle), where dozens of people come to mourn, feast, and send-off those who passed?* By focusing on waste and an object that suggests human life (a chair) but is marked by the absence of a live body, *Plastic Chair* documents Haiti as waste. The detritus functions as a stand in for human life. The mired chair is an apocryphal image of post-quake Haiti that actually beckons “Post-Haiti;” life after people.

*Tent Life* is not unique in its representation of Haiti and Haitians through detritus, specters, or images of chaos that beg for containment. The visual tropes of Haiti as a nation in need of outside “ordering” are some of the first photographic images that ever emerged from Haiti. The 1916 publication of *The New Negro* by British explorer/colonizer Sir Harry Johnson was the first publication to include a large number of illustrations and photographs of Haitians. Art historian Lindsay J. Twa argues that the 19<sup>th</sup> century photographs of Haiti that began to circulate during and following *The New Negro* were used to reinforce pre-existing stereotypes of Haiti as childlike, violent, lazy, and sexually excessive.<sup>162</sup> These stereotypes were reinforced during the U.S. occupation of Haiti (1915-1934), which saw an increased number of photographers, tourists, and journalists entering Haiti. The photographs produced during this period of occupation and increased travel to Haiti extended the dual rhetoric(s) of Haiti as both a destination for “tourists seeking picturesque adventures”<sup>163</sup> and a violent mystical and, ultimately,

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<sup>162</sup> Lindsay J. Twa, *Visualizing Haiti in U.S. Culture, 1910-1950* (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2014), 2.

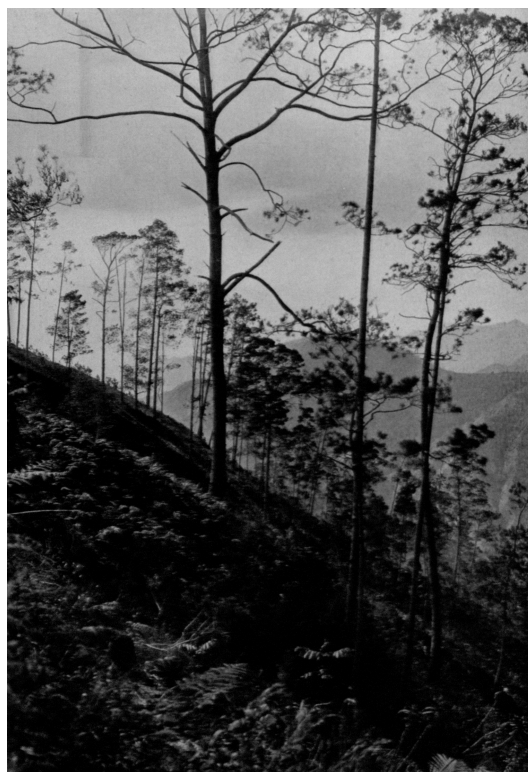
<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.



African place where, “voodoo” became synonymous with various fictions such as child sacrifices and cannibalism. As Twa argues, the increased photographic attention on Haiti only managed to

set the representational paradox of visualizing Haiti in the United States. That is, when Haiti is represented in images and discussed in text in great extent, this greater ‘depth’ more often served to enforce previous stereotypes or outright slanders rather than present a more nuanced and current accounting of Haiti’s history and culture.<sup>164</sup>

The 1916 National Geographic article, “Wards of the United States: Notes on What Our Country is Doing for Santo Domingo, Nicaragua, and Haiti,” best demonstrates Haiti as a beautiful landscape calling out for adventure *and* Haiti as a nation populated by black bodies incapable of taking care of themselves. Images like *Mountains of Haiti* (Figure 5), with captions that praise the country’s soil, rainfall and mineral resources, share the same pages as *A Street Scene in Port Au Prince, Haiti* (Figure 6), whose captions force readers to imagine stench-filled roads that “[offer] more offense to the sense of smell than the odors of any other

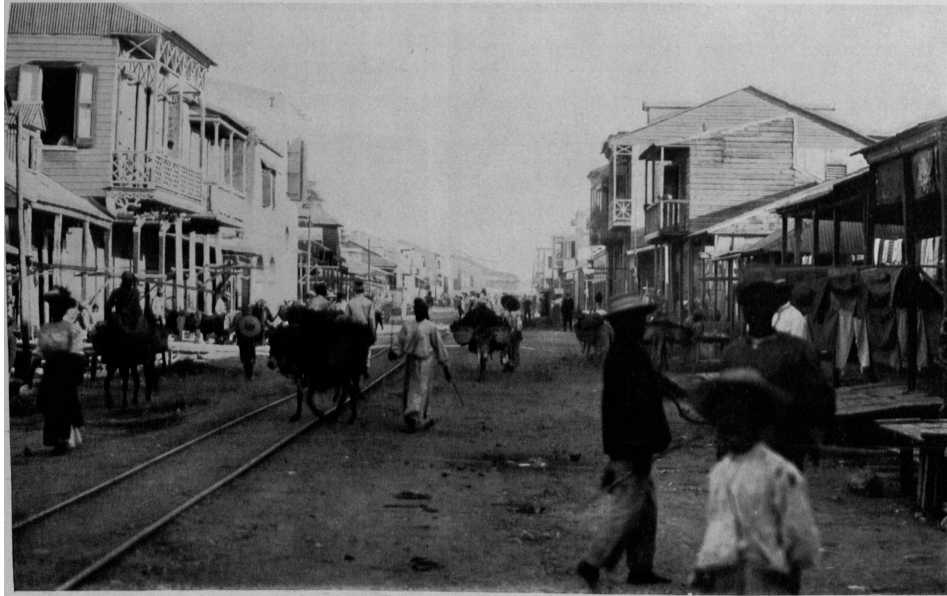


**Figure 5:** *Mountains of Haiti* (unattributed author) featured in “Wards of the United States: Notes on What Our Country is Doing for Santo Domingo, Nicaragua, and Haiti,” Henry Gannett et al., in *National Geographic*, Vol. 30 (August 1916), 170.

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

spot they [American navel officers] have ever visited.”<sup>165</sup>



**Figure 6:** *A Street Scene in Port-Au-Prince, Haiti* (unattributed author) featured in “Wards of the United States: Notes on What Our Country is Doing for Santo Domingo, Nicaragua, and Haiti,” Henry Gannett et al., in *National Geographic*, Vol. 30 (August 1916): 149.

The imagined stench of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Haiti is reimaged in *Tent Life*’s post-quake photographs. Along with *Plastic Chair in Water Canal, Delmas 31*, the image *Boys Swimming in Cité Soleil* (Figure 7) foregrounds detritus and the absencing of the Haitian body. *Plastic Chair* offers us no signs of life. Instead we are presented with an uncompromised wasteland—an area where *on a hot day in Port-Au-Prince, even my Haiti-based Aunt Sabine, the one who I consider, “ride or die,” would complain of the stench of Cité Soleil: the foul mix of garbage, waste, and seawater. What is this stench compared to the stench of unclaimed bodies on the streets of Port-au-Prince?* The waste of *Plastic Chair* is repeated in *Boys Swimming*.

<sup>165</sup> *National Geographic*, 149.



**Figure 7:** *Boys Swimming, Cité Soleil*, 2011  
Archival Pigment Ink Print on Hahnemühle Fine Art Paper, Edition of 5.  
18" x 22"

The photograph is a wide shot of a group of boys in various stages of diving, swimming, and standing upon a rock, a few with arms wide open, presumably calling out to the passerby taking the photo. The image frames a cool blue sky with soft clouds of white and a green sea, yet dominating this scene of would-be-tranquility is a trash-covered beach. The boys are dwarfed in comparison to this landscape of discarded tires and sundry evidence of human effects. The boys are caught in the interstices between idyllic fancy and an intimated hot wasteland. The photo's caption documents this juxtaposition:

March 9, 2010

My colleague Alessandro and I followed the truck driver down a tight alleyway to one of the neighborhoods on the ocean. Boys were swimming naked and playing in the tranquil blue sea offshore from the

trash-covered beaches. The neighborhood was a maze of rusty galvanized iron walls that formed the exterior of the many homes. The boys screamed ‘Hey you!’ at us like all others we encountered. We learned that it basically translates to: ‘Give me...’ chocolate, food, candy, money, attention, a smile, anything, but in essence...love.

*Boys Swimming* typifies how photographs and captions become “a mode of arrest and incarceration.”<sup>166</sup> Photographs and captions structure the ways that viewers are supposed to see the subjects/objects of photographs. Thus, depending on how the photograph is framed, by both the camera and the accompanying texts, the people in the photographs are imprisoned by the language of the photo-text.

*Boys Swimming*, as the caption implies, captures the merging of tranquility and trash. Yet what is also documented in the photograph is a sense of Haitian *wanting*, the calling out to predominately White people—obvious foreigners in the predominately Black nation—for goods, services and affect. There is a duality in this list of accepted offerings, from the material goods of money and candy to the immaterial such as attention and the hesitant, “love.” *Is this how Haitians are viewed—always wanting and willing to call upon anyone for anything? Is Haiti seen as a love-less place that must import its love from elsewhere?* *Boys Swimming* offers us some signs of human life in search of attention, yet the desired connection is quite literally blocked by the garbage, inferring that Haiti *is* a wasteland, yet still, perhaps, capable of housing beauty amidst the tragedy.

The simultaneity of beauty and tragedy is the message conveyed in Danticat’s

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<sup>166</sup> Kaja Silverman, *Thresholds of a Visible World* (New York, NY: Routledge Press, 1996), 205.

contributed essay to *Tent Life*. Danticat's essay, "In Flesh and Bone,"<sup>167</sup> is a personal narrative about her own extended family in Haiti. Danticat describes one female cousin's experience in a tent city before she eventually finds shelter in the countryside with extended family. Danticat writes that despite the length of time it will take to rehouse the "one and a half million people living in tent cities," for Danticat, "it is extremely inspiring to see—as in these photographs [*Tent Life*—how people have tried to make a nearly impossible life bearable."<sup>168</sup> Danticat's essay tries desperately to remind us not to romanticize the images in *Tent Life* because "[t]ent life is not to be idealized."<sup>169</sup> The essay feels like a well-intentioned gesture, a reminder to look beyond the beauty of the images and to not objectify images of Haitian people. Yet in the end, it feels as if the photos not only idealize tent life, they shuttle back and forth between idealizing tent life and presenting Haiti as a ghostly wasteland.

Perhaps more so than the images from Wyatt Gallery, the photo-texts from *TIME Earthquake Haiti: Tragedy and Hope* function more overtly to imprison Haitian people as objects. Distributed as a journalistic record of the earthquake, the book intersperses photographs with articles by *TIME*'s then-Managing Editor Richard Stengel, various *TIME* contributors, as well as an essay by Bill Clinton. While the essays in *Tent Life* reveal personal memories of Haiti, *TIME* takes a more impersonal and journalistic stance in documenting post-quake Haiti, one that at times conflicts with the journalist's urge to "document" and the human urge to actively "help." Richard Stengel in his introduction writes:

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<sup>167</sup> Edwidge Danticat, "In Flesh and Bone," in *Tent Life*, Wyatt Gallery, ed. (New York, NY: Umbrage Editions, 2011), 8-9.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*

*When we shine a light on a natural disaster like Haiti, we force the world to take notice and foster the will to take action.* True, we are not giving immediate aid to those individuals who need it. But our writing and reporting make the case for fixing what is broken, and in doing so, for helping thousands, millions.<sup>170</sup>

Stengel constructs *TIME* as a self-aware group of journalists cognizant of their role as mediators of information as well as moral and ethical sentiments. This justification of published graphic photographs is nothing new for *TIME* magazine. In 2004, in the reflection piece, “Brokering the Power of the Image,” *TIME*’s then-editor James Kelly revealed that editors at *TIME* were often met with the personal challenge of “showing the consequences of war and keeping the sensibilities of readers in mind.”<sup>171</sup> The article cited the publication of photographs from the Gulf War, the Rwanda genocide of the Tutsi, as well as the political uprising that occurred in Haiti following the 2004 political coup of Jean-Bertrand Aristide.<sup>172</sup> With regards to photographs of Haiti, Kelly writes, “when I viewed photographs of bodies piled up in morgues [they] were among the most unsettling images I’ve ever seen. (In that particular case, *photographs of the chaos on Port-au-Prince’s streets* were so vivid that I chose to use them to illustrate the story.)”<sup>173</sup>

Although Kelly, similarly to Stengel six years later, argues that the selection of photographs to publish in *TIME* is taken seriously and that “picking a picture comes down to instinct and taste,”<sup>174</sup> the ease with which photographs of Haitian bodies (and

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<sup>170</sup> Richard Stengel, “To Report and Respond,” in *TIME Earthquake Haiti: Tragedy and Hope* (New York, NY: TIME Books, Time Inc., 2010), 6.

<sup>171</sup> James Kelly, “Brokering the Power of the Image,” in *TIME* magazine, Vol. 163 Issue 22, 8.

<sup>172</sup> Haiti’s first democratically elected president following the 30-year dictatorship of François “Papa Doc” Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier. The three figures are discussed in greater depth in Chapter 3.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

more generally Black bodies such as the images from Rwanda and Somali) are used indicates the callousness with which the dead and dying Black body is circulated. In their use of images of anonymous Haitian bodies stacked on top of each other both in 2004 and 2010 (*Heavy Loads*, Figure 8), Kelly and Stengel demonstrate the ways that race and the colonial disregard for Black lives inform how images are seen. Despite the journalists' desires to act or help either in the moment or through the published photograph, trauma becomes the primary mode of documenting Black life. The photographer's desire to help or to "shine a light on a natural disaster like Haiti," reproduces the same stereotypes and visual tropes that were first documented in early photographs of Haiti in 1916. Images of Haiti during times of crisis, both pre- and post-quake, peddle disorder—heated states of frenzy—not humanity. Chaos and detritus lend themselves to what Algerian writer and critic Malek Alloula terms, "fertilizer of the colonial vision."<sup>175</sup> Haiti is depicted as a nation that has been a "slow-motion disaster for decades," a country that, "has never been able to fulfill its potential as a nation."<sup>176</sup>



**Figure 8:** *Heavy Loads* from *TIME Earthquake Haiti: Tragedy and Hope* (New York: Time Books, 2010), 24-25.

*Frantic* further demonstrates this ability for photographs to become fertilizer of

<sup>175</sup> Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, trans. Myrna Godzich and Wlad Godzich, introduction by Barbara Harlow (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 4.

<sup>176</sup> Nancy Gibbs, "Lost City," in *TIME Earthquake Haiti: Tragedy and Hope* (New York: Time Books, 2010).

colonial visions, how Haitian subjects are made objects by the photographer.

Published in *TIME: Earthquake Haiti: Tragedy and Hope*, *Frantic* is a centerfold image of a woman lying outstretched on a pile of rubble (Figure 9). Her figure dominates the page. Her pose is Christ-like, with her arms stretched out to both sides reaching beyond the folds of her pastel green shirt, hands agape with fingers outstretched. Her legs are wide open with feet flexed, accentuating the traces of dust that cover her heels and move up her calves, her green skirt falling at the back of her knees. Seated beside her is a slender woman dressed in a blue, long-sleeved shirt and a white headscarf. The women do not touch each other, but there is a shared sense of mourning as they stare at a pile of rubble, the full scope of the collapsed building/home cut off by the right edge of the frame.

Though cut off by the binds of the centerfold, a closer observation of the lady in blue reveals that tears are streaming down her face. The barely noticeable caption at the bottom right of the screen reads, “Frantic: Two women cry in desperation for family members presumed dead under the rubble of a home in Port-au-Prince on Jan. 14. Tens of thousands of the people who died will never be identified.”<sup>177</sup> Haitian-American poet Patrick Sylvain once stated that, “Haitian people don’t cry, they *wail*.”<sup>178</sup> In opposition to the introverted mourning of the woman in blue, the woman in green is indeed *wailing*, her contorted face and open mouth evoke sound, *and I am reminded of/returned to the outstretched figure of my mother. Her body prostrated on our cold kitchen floor after learning that her youngest brother has died during the quake. Her body and lungs offer up a guttural sound that is other-worldly and I wonder, “Is this what she will sound like when I die?”*

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<sup>177</sup> *TIME Earthquake Haiti: Tragedy and Hope*, 15.

<sup>178</sup> Patrick Sylvain, “Through the Eyes of the Artist: On the Aftermath of the Disaster in Haiti,” panel co-sponsored by Anna Deveare Smith and New York University. New York. May 2010.





**Figure 9:** *Frantic* from *TIME Earthquake Haiti: Tragedy and Hope* (New York: Time Books, 2010), 14-15.

The woman in green's body and her (noiseless) sound are both extensions of her "pose." The "pose" is what film theorist and art historian Kaja Silverman, reading Roland Barthes, defines as "the single image that puts the subject into the picture."<sup>179</sup> The pose is how we corporeally position ourselves "close to the cultural ideal."<sup>180</sup> If the pose is, as Silverman suggests, fashioned out of the cultural ideal, *whose* cultural ideal does *Frantic* present? Art historian Robert Farris Thompson has argued that amongst the Yoruba and KiKongo people, and their New World descendents in the Americas, it is coolness, or *itutu*, which dominates our comportment and poses. Coolness is, "part of character," tied to ritual *balanse* (balance) and nobility, and indicative of the ability to "exhibit grace

<sup>179</sup> Kaja Silverman, *Thresholds of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 205.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

under pressure.”<sup>181</sup> The idea of coolness as a pose does not suggest that emotions such as anger, frustration, and distress are non-existent within Yoruba peoples across the Atlantic. It does, however, suggest that as an aesthetic and ritual principle of self-fashioning, coolness dictates the way that Yoruba people and their descendents, including Haitian people, present themselves outward to the world. *Frantic*, as a captured pose, is heated precisely because it documents without consent a moment where *itutu* (coolness) is temporarily ruptured. These Haitian figures/bodies, the women in green and the bodies photographed in various stages of life and death on the streets of Port-au-Prince, have not posed for the camera, but have been positioned by the photographer within the camera’s frame. The heat of the image is emboldened by the woman’s pose, which is vulnerable and performs affective excess. *I take another look at the photo and then I close the book. I don’t want to hear or see the women crying or screaming anymore. Did Aunt Sabine also cry and scream in front of Uncle Vaudray’s collapsed house? I’ve never asked her.*

Images of women and children in states of distress evidence Griselda Pollock’s argument that photographs of dead or dying women and children become iconic and bearable for spectators because of the ways the feminine has become associated with death.<sup>182</sup> To push Pollock’s claim a bit further, we might also add Susan Sontag’s argument that it is easier to view pain at a distance.<sup>183</sup> Although Sontag’s claim was based on geographic distance, here I want to suggest that this includes racial distance; that watching the death and maiming of black bodies in Haiti is easier for Western

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<sup>181</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1983), 16.

<sup>182</sup> Griselda Pollock, “Photographing Atrocity: Becoming Iconic?” in *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis*, eds. Geoffrey Batchen, Mick Gidley, Nancy K. Miller, and Jay Prosser (London, England: Reaktion Books, 2012), 66.

<sup>183</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York, NY: Picador Press, 2003), 66-72.

viewers because of what James H. Cone described as blackness's "ontological symbol."<sup>184</sup> Blackness as an ontology means that blackness, particularly the black female body, becomes synonymous with pain—the physical and psychological violences of white supremacy.

Blackness as an ontological symbol structured images of Haiti from their earliest publication in the late 1910s to post-quake. These images underscore what has always been a dominant trope for representing Haiti and Haitian people: the failure of an always chaotic, always "frantic" nation and by extension, its Diasporic subjects. The image-texts of Haiti that circulated post-quake, such as those discussed in Wyatt Gallery's *Tent Life* and *TIME Earthquake Haiti: Tragedy and Hope*, remind us of the relationship between vision, power, and colonial knowledge; for as art historian and visual culture scholar John Berger in his famous treatise *Ways of Seeing* contends, "[t]he way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe [...] To look is an act of choice."<sup>185</sup>

Yet, despite knowing that images of Haiti have historically predetermined how Haitian people are seen, I argue that seeing diasporically *requires* these images in order to access Haiti as homeland—in order to *see* from afar. In other words, my Diasporic-longing for Haiti *craves* a body in the midst of post-quake Haiti and tries to catch one between the folds of the images in *TIME Earthquake Haiti* and *Tent Life*. Yet, in searching for photographs of Haiti that will provide me access to home and an opportunity to witness what is happening on the ground, I am cognizant of the spiritual and psychological *threat* of uncovering a familiar face amongst these photographs, of being "thrown off" balance as I piece together stories from these photographs from a

<sup>184</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 26.

<sup>185</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London and New York: Penguin Books), 8

distance. The uniqueness of seeing the earthquake diasporically is foregrounded by not only a near-constant mediated witnessing of the homeland but also the distinct possibility of recognizing one's own in the image-frame, of quite literally *seeing* one's kin (alive or dead) captured in a photograph and thus (by your ability to be a viewer of the image) circulating in the public/global sphere. The want to see is weighed against the fear of seeing; curiosity battles self-preservation.

In the remainder of this chapter, I turn to the photographic works of Haitian American photographer Régine Romain. I read selections from Romain's photography series "Portraits for a Self-Determining Haiti,"<sup>186</sup> produced three weeks after the earthquake. More specifically, I analyze two of the images that emerged from Romain's published series, *Holding Innocence* and *Granmere* and the ways that these images produce, what Romain refers to as a "counter-archive" of images of Haitian life. In my own Diasporic seeing of these images, I argue that the scenes of Haitian life (as shown by Romain) are a required cooling-relief from the previously circulated images of Haiti that re-balance images of the country. Moreover, in discussing these images and Romain's physical return to Haiti, I posit that her photographic process and the ways that Romain learned to see diasporically are facilitated by black womanist traditions and ancestral worship. In this way Romain's (re)turn to Haiti and her post-quake photographs circle the cosmogram by using ritual paradigms of ancestral care and aesthetics of balance to document the continued humanity of Haitian people, especially Haitian women.

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<sup>186</sup> Many of the images from this larger corpus were included in an essay penned by Régine Romain, "Ayiti: Reaching Higher Ground," published in the special issue journal of *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* Vol. 11, No. 1, (2011): 132-140.

### Régine Romain and Portrait's for a Self-Determining Haiti

February 2010: It has been three weeks since the earthquake and Régine Romain, a New York-based Haitian-American photographer and writer, has been watching the events of the earthquake unfold on televisions, computer screens, and in printed media. She is watching these images alongside an “extended Haitian community,” who cheers as bodies are pulled from rubble weeks after the earthquake.<sup>187</sup> The excitement and glee are temporary. Community members begin recoiling at the return of the familiar images of Haiti's lost, disparaging, and desperate bodies. For Romain the tragedies of January 12, 2010 were multiple. The event united the Haitian Diaspora and provided glimmers of hope while also reminding us of the ways that we, as a people, are viewed:

The multiple tragedies of January 12, 2010 in Haïti [sic] connected the Haitian diaspora into one large family in a way I have never seen or felt in my lifetime. Accordingly, when we watched the news coverage of members of our extended Haitian community being rescued after two weeks or a month under the rubble, we cheered and gave thanks as if it were our very own kin. Our tears and prayers were unified with those of the world, as we continued to anxiously await more good news from a country that has already endured so much hardship since its independence from French rule in 1804 [...] The aftermath of Haïti's horrific earthquake also brought an avalanche of stereotypical images that were dispersed throughout the global media, depicting Haitians as nameless, lost bodies, and disconnected from community.<sup>188</sup>

Romain's words describe how seeing diasporically moves across time, space, and geographies through the image: how *watching* Haiti through the eyes of others becomes a way of *knowing* what is happening on the ground in the home-country—the stories of hope and rescue. For Romain, seeing the immediate images of earthquake-stricken Haiti

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Romain, “Ayiti: Reaching Higher Ground,” 133.

dyasporically means watching one's people being depicted in ways that imply to us and the world that our bodies and our names do not matter, producing its own discursive violence upon the *idea* of Haiti.<sup>189</sup> Yet as Romain stated during one of our interviews, the power of the images are two-fold in that they both negate *other* narratives of Haiti as well as reproducing Haiti as an uninhabitable place:

[T]he images that I saw of Haiti in the global media didn't reflect my family archive. I was like, "this don't look like anything of my family album." When I look at my family album [...] I *don't see this. What is this?* [...] And then I realized, 'Oh this is a narrative that somebody else has for us.'<sup>190</sup>

Born in Washington D.C. on August 14, 1971,<sup>191</sup> to Haitian immigrants, Romain grew up in a household that valued arts entrepreneurship—her father and mother were both artists and vendors—and African diasporic people. In her visual and audio archive are the images and sounds of various Black people. Romain recalls, "My father [a musician] is someone that loves black culture. So I grew up with Celia Cruz, Al Jarreau, Anita Baker, Luther Vandross, [and] Sergio Mendes."<sup>192</sup> Romain, thus, grew up in a home that was proud of Black African diasporic heritage, and this work informs her photographic storytelling, which she argues, "was always about Black people. I think we're absolutely beautiful and I think that sometimes we don't know how beautiful we

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<sup>189</sup> For more on the ways that the colonial ideas of Haiti led to and inform post-quake Haiti see Millery Polyné's edited volume, *The Idea of Haiti: Rethinking Crisis and Development* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

<sup>190</sup> Régine Romain in discussion with the author, October 24, 2013.

<sup>191</sup> Romain notes with great pride that her birthday also marks the anniversary of the Ceremony of Bois-Caïman held on August 14, 1791.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

are. We are so badass.”<sup>193</sup>

For Romain, photography was always a means of “telling our [diasporic] stories,” particularly for Haitians in Dyaspora, “[f]or those of us that are not in Haiti—those of us that are here and having our own experiences.”<sup>194</sup> The Dyasporic experience and perspective has always been important to Romain who does not shy away from calling herself a Haitian-American artist, because for her, to be Haitian is to have a connection to the land of Haiti, and to identify as Haitian-American means acknowledging that being American has shaped her experiences and outlook on the world, including how she *sees* Haiti and Haitian people.

The disconnect between the images of Haitian people, and Black people more broadly, that Romain saw directly after the earthquake (and the images of Haiti that were *not* part of her family archive) was the catalyst for Romain’s (re)turn to Haiti. Three weeks after the earthquake, three weeks after witnessing Haiti through the eyes of others, Romain boarded a plane to Haiti with her camera in tote determined to “offer assistance, resources, and to photograph a necessary historic counter-perspective.”<sup>195</sup> While some of her friends criticized her Dyasporic drive to go to Haiti, proffering a cynical, “what are you going to Haiti for, are you a doctor?” For Romain there was no question of what she should do: use her camera and time to share another side of Haiti, because, as she replied to her friend, “Haiti has [doctors and] Haiti also has me.”<sup>196</sup> Seeing dyasporically, for Romain, functions and facilitates multiple (re)turns: her physical return to Haiti as well as

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Régine Romain in discussion with the author, October 2013.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

the (re)turn of positive images and memories of Haitian and Black people, through her own mission to document these positive images herself.

Arriving with a fellow Haitian friend and artist, Romain entered Haiti via the Dominican Republic bringing “huge bags of aid”<sup>197</sup> and her camera. What emerged from Romain’s travels to Haiti—and what continues to emerge—are the images that constitute the photographic series “Portraits for a Self-Determining Haiti.” Romain’s project takes its title from James Weldon Johnson’s series, “Self-Determining Haiti.” The NAACP leader’s articles were published in 1920, in the African-American newspaper *The Nation*. The series was the first written account of the true reason behind the U.S. Occupation of Haiti: financial gain in the strategically placed island, which was seen as a gateway between the U.S. and Latin America.<sup>198</sup> Romain’s photographic series “Portraits for a Self-Determining Haiti” borrows from both the title and spirit of Weldon’s essay, unveiling the ways that photo-journalistic efforts to document post-quake Haiti are singular narratives that portray Haitian life as a perpetual disaster. “Why would I want to take those other pictures [of tragedy-stricken Haiti]?” Romain lambasted:

I would tell people that people are still here, there are still survivors. You would never know from the images what a powerful place Haiti is, but you know from the *people*. When you meet Haitian people, we’re so vast, we’re so beautiful, we’re teachers, we’re doctors, we’re rappers, we are very creative people and a lot of us are risk takers.

Romain’s efforts to be responsible for the depictions of Haitian people resulted in a series of photographs where Haitian people (not bodies) dominate the frame such as in *Holding Innocence* (Figure 10). A young, chocolate-skinned girl stands at the center of

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> James Weldon Johnson, “Self Determining Haiti,” *The Nation, Inc.*, (New York, NY,) October 1920.



the image. She is dressed in all white, with her hips jutted out to the right, striking a “womanish” pose. In her left hand is a bottle of soda and a tissue, and her right hand is gathered in a way that suggests that she may be holding on to a morsel of food or emphasizing a point. The girl’s gaze is to the right, her stare concentrated, so much so that we easily narrow our attention to her face, losing sight of the patched and worn tin structure behind her and the slightly warped table that is hip height to the girl and upon which stands a white coffee canister and another indiscernible object.

*Holding Innocence* is the first photograph to appear in Régine Romain’s photo-essay “Ayiti: Reaching Higher Ground.” The essay was published in the special issue of the journal of *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, guest edited by Haitian scholar and performer Gina Athena Ulysse. The essay features seven photos of Haitian people/life post-earthquake, as well as a two-page introduction penned by Romain herself. The article provides both context and background for Romain’s photo series—how her work is influenced by a history of migration, “transcultural influences,” as well as Haiti’s “shifting presence throughout the diaspora.”<sup>199</sup>

Romain did not travel to Haiti intending to produce the photographs that would appear in *Meridians*, but it is clear that the images redress the visual images of Haitian people as anonymous and panicked black bodies “disconnected from community.”<sup>200</sup> The young girl in *Holding Innocence* is not disconnected from community. Though she stands alone, her picture is co-informed by objects and gazes that call her attention to others while simultaneously producing her in relationship to others. She stands before

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<sup>199</sup> Régine Romain, “Ayiti: Reaching Higher Ground,” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, Vol. 11, No. 1, (2011):132.

<sup>200</sup> Romain, “Ayiti: Reaching Higher Ground,” 133.

the tin structure, does she live there and if so, who with? Who warmed that pot of coffee? Did the young girl, in her haste to pour out the coffee, create the streaks that appear up and down the front of the coffee pot? Who purchased the soda that she clings to and the morsel of food in her hand? Did she plait her own hair and tie those long ribbons herself? And who is the girl's gaze and womanish posturing addressing?



**Figure 10:** *Holding Innocence*, February 2010, Digital C Print, 12 x18

It does not take long before my own memory-images begin to co-inform the image:  
*afternoons spent with my mother, on the days she was not working, washing, parting, and*

*greasing me and my sister's hair. The ways that ribbons were reserved for two occasions: formal gatherings (including church, marriages, and birthdays) and school photos. We were decorated to be worshipped and seen, if only by Bondye (God). The girl's skirt and shirt are crumpled, as though she has been sitting for a long time, was she just in a service? Her eyes appear slightly puffy, more worn than they should for a girl of 11, 12? Has she been crying?*

It suddenly occurs to me while viewing this photograph of the young girl that I know what all the context and cultural cues of the photograph might be suggesting: she may be at a *rêve*, funeral rites that last for three to seven days in which Catholic liturgies are read, songs are sung, and the person who has transitioned is prayed for and mourned. The family of the departed, according to tradition, wears white (though black is alright if the person is a parent or sibling), and it is the family's responsibility to feed all the people who attend and participate in the *rêve*. The simplest of offerings could include bread (with or without peanut butter), *pates* (pastries filled with veggies, meat or fish), and coffee. Soda can be served, but in my experience hot chocolate or coffee are standard and less costly. While my memory-images move, the girl is given further context. She may be posed in a moment of respite during one of these honorings and celebrations for the dead. The process of running back and forth, serving others, and even the stillness of prayer take a surprising and incalculable toll on the body and psyche. *Is she, perhaps, jutting her hip to the side in order to displace the weight on her feet?*

The possibility that this young girl might be at a funeral rite substantiates Romain's title for the photograph, *Holding Innocence*. The young girl becomes a marker of not only survival in Haiti but, more specifically, *children's* survival. By the time that

the photograph was taken in February 2010, the majority of mass graves had been removed, as Romain observed, “when I got to Haiti three-weeks after the earthquake, there weren’t dead bodies on the street anymore. There were still dead bodies in the cars and in the houses, so you could go past certain places and the stench of death was horrific [.]”<sup>201</sup> While we do not know the lived experiences of the young girl in *Holding Innocence*, we do know that she has been surrounded by death since at least January 12, 2010. Whether she is indeed at a *rêve* or not, the young girl holds innocence because her body is simultaneously the carrier of childhood idyllic fancy *and* the traumatic events of the January 12, 2010. Similarly to Wyatt Gallery’s *Boys Swimming in Cite Soleil*, *Holding Innocence*, plays on the tension between the childhood play and the material realities of Haiti (e.g. poverty, death, and hyper-urbanization in select cities such as Port-au-Prince). However, while the girl’s youth suggests the potential for play, her stance and the objects in the photograph—particularly the coffee kettle suggest female labor, a womanish sensibility and relationship to place.

Alice Walker defines “womanish” as a black feminist or “womanist” epistemology. Reflecting a Black vernacular understanding of “feminism,” one that is inherited from watching elder-women in our communities (i.e. mothers, aunties, grandmothers, etc.), a “womanish” girl is a girl who “acts grown,” who wants to know more than what is considered socially acceptable for a girl. A “womanish” girl reflects the inherited and idealized labor(s) of her Black women-elders; she is “[r]esponsible. In charge. Serious.”<sup>202</sup> She is thereby a girl with a sense of both responsibility and awareness—a craving for knowledge that resists heteropatriarchy’s push to keep young

<sup>201</sup> Régine Romain in discussion with the author, October 2013.

<sup>202</sup> Alice Walker, “Womanist: Definition,” 1.

girls undereducated. Earlier, in my analysis of *Holding Innocence*, I referred to the young girl's hip-jutting stance as "womanish." Here I want to argue that the young girl is both womanish *and* innocent, and that Romain documents black female bodies and "attitude" in ways that asks viewers to reconceive Haitian female subjectivity, body posturing, and emotional (non)passivity. To be a womanish girl is to tap into a consciously Black woman-centered—or in Walker's term, "womanist"—sensibility. By charging us to hold womanish and innocence in the same conceptual frame, Romain asks us to reconceive how we look at Haitian women and black women in the diaspora. Following the earthquake, images and narratives of women and young girls in various stages of physical pain, death, and suffering became standard (such as in the photograph, *Frantic*).<sup>203</sup> Régine Romain's photograph of a young girl not in a state of duress post-quake but in a moment of cool stillness with undercurrents of action, asks us to look, to notice how it has become far too easy to both image and imagine Haitian women in a state of pain and violence.

For these reasons, *Holding Innocence*, as the opening image in "Ayiti: Reaching Higher Ground," takes on even greater importance for its refusal to show a black female body in a state of frenzy or suffering. Like *Holding Innocence*, Romain's photographs show Haitian women in postures of womanish self-comportment. The cover photo for the

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<sup>203</sup> In some cases even as narratives Haitian women's bodies were displaced by the white journalists. The most revealing example is journalist Mac McCelland's "I'm Gonna Need You to Fight Me On This How Violent Sex Helped Ease My PTSD" (2011) which documents her experience after having returned from assignment in Haiti where she accompanied a rape victim, named "Sybille" to a clinic in Haiti and was with her when the two spotted one of Sybille's rapists. Gina Ulysse details the ways McCelland's story in fact appropriates Sybille's narrative for her own journalistic gaze, a sad trend in journalism. See Ulysse's *Why Haiti Needs New Narratives* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2015) for more on Ulysse's critique of McCelland as well as additional expositions on the conditions in Haiti for women and girls post-quake.

Meridians issue, *Thank You for the Flag* (Figure 11), which debuted Romain's work to a larger audience, shows a young woman, in a purple t-shirt, stands in front of a structure whose wall is fashioned out of/decorated by a faded flag of the U.S. One arm rests on her hip, the other drapes down and around her lower back. What is womanish about the woman is not only her stance (which continues the hip jutting of *Holding Innocence*), but the way this young woman looks at us as though she is mid-speech. Her eyes and her mouth seem to confirm that she is questioning *us* rather than allowing us to feign any assumptions about knowing her, her background, or what she has witnessed. Such images widen James H. Cone's theories of blackness as an ontological symbol, suggesting black femaleness is its own ontological symbol; one that does not equate all black female lives with heteropatriarchal trauma. As bell hooks has argued, one of the pitfalls of black feminism is its recirculation of narratives of violence as the epitome of black female experiences.<sup>204</sup> These singular narratives of black female suffering, according to hooks, makes it impossible for black women to create more complex narratives of their/our lives and to connect with each other across our social (class, gender, etc.) differences. Thus, any attempt to portray black women's lives beyond the limits of victimization is an act of (re)telling and expanding the possible narratives of black female lives.

Romain's choice to depict black women as agents and not victims is rife with political and social overtones, both within the fields of photography and black feminism. Romain does not subscribe to a black female ontology of suffering: "I'm not a victim. I think that sometimes, different movements are emerging from a place of powerlessness to

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<sup>204</sup> bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 45.

power. I am power. Period. Nothing else can come through this life, without a woman. Period.”<sup>205</sup>



**Figure 11:** *Thank You for the Flag*, February 2010, Digital C Print, 12 x18

Romain does *not* call herself a feminist, arguing instead that “feminism” produces a series of white female and anti-male ideals which she views as divisive rather than uniting. However, Romain’s womanist-centered perspective is one that informs her personal philosophy and therefore her photography:

This [womanness] is my being, this is how I carry myself in this existence. I carry myself in this space and this is the space from which I create. This space is the space in which I birth. And it’s also the space in which I am able to share [...] I can also see that all of our experiences are connected to our human relations. And that we are really spiritual beings sharing a human experience, right? But I definitely see being a woman is very significant because I feel that my perspective is fabulous. It’s on point.

<sup>205</sup> Régine Romain, in conversation with the author, October 2013.

It's the shit. Don't miss it, coming at *chu* [spelled to emphasize her pronunciation].<sup>206</sup>

Romain's womanism, perhaps unbeknownst to Romain herself, is one that mirrors the tenets of queer black feminists' praxis, such as that of the 1970s-80s association the Combahee River Collective. These Black womanist traditions are a radical politic that "evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters, and our community[;]" the ultimate purpose being "[t]o be recognized as human, levelly human, [which] is enough."<sup>207</sup> Recognition of a shared humanity makes Romain's project of seeing diasporically not only an aesthetic practice (an engagement with photographs) but an ethical one, a way of conceptualizing the interconnections between people, particularly people of the African diaspora.

The interconnections between people, particularly Black people are made through the shared language(s) of Black woman-centered traditions and African cosmology. The photograph *Granmere* provides the perfect cross between woman-centered traditions and African cosmology. In *Granmere* (*Grandmother*, Figure 12) a woman stands before the camera and photographer. Her age is unknown but the title of the image works in tandem with what we see in the photo to suggest that she is older. Her crisp striped dress rests slightly akimbo on her body. Her arms are bent but held close to her frame. Though the details in the back of the photo call our attention—the patched tin dwelling space, the table with containers and a large bowl of rice and beans (*diri a pwa*), the straw hat curiously perched on the roof of the constructed space, and the bodies that intrude into the left side of the picture frame—it is the woman's face that dares me to stare.

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> The Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory* (New York, NY: Routledge Press, 1997), 65.



Granmere's eyes are buried deep within her face, and *I lean forward* to see her irises, only to stop at the swollen bags under her eyes that kiss her high cheekbones. *Does she sleep? How early did she get up to prepare that meal? Her mouth is taut, and I am waiting for her to unfurl her lips and speak. I get the feeling that we've interrupted her work. I cannot know the dynamics of the exchange between Romain and the subject of Granmere. I can only know what I see diasporically in the image—a woman standing front and center who gazes back at me gazing at her. The pushback of the gaze along with the straightforward posture makes me feel as though I/we are not in control of this image.* The photograph stands quite differently from *Boys Swimming in Cité Soleil* and *Frantic*, as *Granmere* hasn't been captured amidst chaos, she has been strategically—by herself and Romain—positioned outside of chaos. Taken in Port-au-Prince in February 2010, *Granmere* captures a woman not against the backdrop of rubble but against the backdrop of her living. The photo offers an almost banal normality to Haitian daily life, one that the Haitian subjects in the photograph co-inform in their decisions to pose before the camera.

*Granmere* not only points to the banality of daily life in post-quake Haiti, but conjures up two different ideologies of Haiti and womanhood, one linked to maternal care and the other connected to ancestral worship and veneration, more specifically, Vodou. The image referred to as *Granmere* on Romain's website circulated under the title *Mama Ginen* in her *Meridians* article.



**Figure 12:** *Granmere* or *Mama Ginen*, February 2010, Digital C Print, 12x18

When asked about the two titles, Romain replied, “I found that *Mama Ginen* fit the energy of the image better than the previous title.”<sup>208</sup> I suggest that Romain’s conscious decision to circulate the photographs under the title of *Mama Ginen*, marks Romain’s circling of the cosmograms—her Diasporic return not only physically to Haiti but to

<sup>208</sup> Régine Romain, in conversation with the author, February 26, 2017.

Vodou—the very thing many Haitians try to leave behind in their quest for respectability and modernity in the West.<sup>209</sup> In Vodou “Ginen” is understood as the land beneath the water, the ancestral homeland to which all are descended and from which all people emerged.<sup>210</sup> “Mama Ginen” is thus conceptually best translated into “Mother Africa,” a phrase with resonances throughout the African diaspora that is meant to draw upon a sense of nostalgia and ancestral connection to the African continent. “Mother Africa” connects the woman in the portrait, as well as Romain the photographer/namer of the photograph, to an ancestral Africa and an ancestral Vodou cosmology.

Romain’s photograph and multiple names for *Granmere/Mama Ginen* identify her versatility as a Diasporic subject—her awareness of Vodou as both a stigma within and without Haitian society, and for many second-generation Haitian Americans, a means of returning to Haiti. Similarly to the other artists discussed in this dissertation, Romain was raised in a conservative religious household, where as she grew up, she began to see the disregard for Vodou as part of a colonial and anti-Black project. Her parents, as converted Jehovah’s Witnesses, did not observe or pass down Vodou rites or rituals. She recalls, “I did not grow up with my parents teaching me anything about Vodou [or] much about Haitian history.”<sup>211</sup> For Romain, being a Jehovah’s Witness or part of any tradition

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<sup>209</sup> For more on Vodou, respectability, and the West see such texts as Jean Price Mars, *So Spoke Uncle* trans. Magdaline W. Shannon (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1983) and especially Kate Ramsey’s *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>210</sup> For further discussion on Ginen, see Maya Deren *Divine Horsemen: Living Gods of Haiti* (London, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1953), Alfred Metraux, *Voodoo in Haiti* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1959), Donald Consentino ed. *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* (Los Angeles, California: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), and Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>211</sup> Romain in conversation with the author, October 2013.

where your image of God does not look like you, is part of the colonial experience of stripping African-descended people of their sacred and ancestral knowledge(s).

Inspired by her own need to self-educate and decolonize her spiritual practices, Romain's (re)turn to Vodou and Haiti began with the stories she heard from her Aunt Fleur.<sup>212</sup> Romain's Aunt was "the family storyteller," who because of a prior illness in her childhood, traveled from family home to family home until the time of her passing. Romain recalls that Aunt Fleur

was the griot [storyteller] and so she would tell the stories about *Bwa Kayiman*. She's the one who told me about the people who walk the streets at night but they're not really people, they're really animals or they're really spirits [...] Oh my God, so [while listening to these stories] I'm kind of excited and then fearful of Haiti, you know because this is my aunt, she's the one telling me these stories so it must be true. You know, and I'm thankful for her because I didn't get that from my parents.<sup>213</sup>

Romain's Aunt Fleur was *also* her "champion," the figure in her life who believed that Romain could do anything she desired. For Romain, such encouragement was important, "I realize that sometimes, that's what you just need. You can go to somebody else for a critical [perspective] but its good to have someone in your corner that just loves you and believes in you [...] that was my aunt."<sup>214</sup> The idea of just wanting unconditional love returns us to the image of *Boys Swimming in Cité Soleil* (Figure 7). The boys calling out for "attention, a smile, anything, but in essence...love," are asking for the same recognition and affect that Romain received from Aunt Fleur.

In many ways, Aunt Fleur's encouragement and stories about Haiti, spirits, and ancestors were what prompted Romain to begin her own research and travels to West

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<sup>212</sup> Name has been changed.

<sup>213</sup> Romain in conversation with the author, October 2013.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

Africa to study ancestral traditions in Ghana, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and at the time of this writing, Benin.<sup>215</sup> Romain's travels and independent study cultivated her understanding of the afrocentric underpinnings of Vodou and Haitian society. Returning now to the image of *Granmere/Mama Ginen*, we can see that ancestral traditions, particularly those tied to women as healers/guardians of the spiritual rites, are important thresholds for understanding the totality of Haiti and Haitian people's experiences. Thus for Romain, Vodou and Vodou-centered womanism is not simply a penultimate signifier of Haitian people, but another means of "telling our stories" and documenting what Elizabeth Alexander has termed the "black interior." Alexander describes the black interior as "black life and creativity behind the public face of stereotype and limited imagination. The black interior is a metaphysical space beyond the black public everyday toward power and wild imagination that black people ourselves know we possess but need to be reminded of."<sup>216</sup>

To be clear, I do not wish to suggest that the singular thrust of *Mama Ginen/Granmere*'s photographic power lies solely in its referential work to Vodou or its configuration of the woman in the photograph as a matriarch whom all Haitians or people might read through the familiar and familial tropes of the grandmother. While these are indeed ideological aspects of the photograph, for me, the *punctum* of the photograph lies in the subject of *Mama Ginen/Granmere*—the woman's refusal to properly pose for the

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<sup>215</sup> Romain currently resides in Benin, the birthplace of Vodou. In living and working in Benin, Romain has fully circled the cosmograms, returning to the place she believes is the birthplace of her ancestors.

<sup>216</sup> Elizabeth Alexander, *The Black Interior* (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2004), x.

camera.<sup>217</sup> *Mama Ginen* does not smile and her stoic poise offers us a glimpse of the Yoruba idiom, “[her] mouth is cool,” signifying not only a silent character but a cool and conscientious one as well.<sup>218</sup> Unlike the women of *Frantic* or the *Boys Swimming in Cite Soleil*, the woman does not allow us to view her without question. She questions us as she looks back at us and somehow interpolates us into the photograph, thus reminding viewers that we can only access what is upon the surface and not *her* interior.

As we aim to penetrate her with our gazes, “Mama Ginen” offers us a cool stare in return. Against the images of Haitians as specters and detritus, Romain offers us a glimpse of this Haitian coolness amidst chaos. Robert Farris Thompson refers to the “cool” as an Afro-Atlantic concept that exemplifies “control” and “transcendental balance.”<sup>219</sup> To be cool is to demonstrate the “[a]bility to be nonchalant at the right moment...to reveal no emotion in situations where excitement and sentimentality are acceptable—in other words, to act as though one’s mind were in another world.”<sup>220</sup> Coolness is about agency, level-headedness, and strategic withholding.<sup>221</sup> The agentive potential of the cool is marked by the gaze-backs and postures of the photograph’s subjects. Against the “hotness” of images and poses such as those seen in *Frantic*, we have the cool stoicism of *Mama Ginen*.

The pose of *Mama Ginen/Granmere* is both self-fashioned and curated, and it

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<sup>217</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1982).

<sup>218</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 13.

<sup>219</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, “An Aesthetic of the Cool II” in *Aesthetics of the Cool: Afro-Atlantic Art and Music* (New York, NY: Periscope Publishing, 2011), 16.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> I borrow this term from Shane Vogel’s discussion of Lena Horne and withholding as a method of performative resistance. See Vogel, “Lena Horne’s Impersona” in *The Scene of the Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, and Performance* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 167-193.

highlights Romain's engagements with her subjects. Romain disclosed that she did not always ask people to take their photographs, but regardless, it was important that the camera was secondary and that she not walk "with a camera first."<sup>222</sup> For Romain, placing the camera and potential photograph ahead of the human interaction is what is typical of photographs of Haitian people: "Often the work that I see about Haiti, it's like the person shooting it, never sees themselves in that other person. They are a Haitian; Something [they] don't want to touch [or] be around."<sup>223</sup> Romain laments this tendency, choosing instead to relate to Haiti and its people in her photographs, "I see [Haiti] as me, as us, not separate. I am not separate from it, I'm there."<sup>224</sup>

Romain's photographic intention to produce photographs that bear witness to and with her photographic subjects engages both co-performance and the co-performative witnessing of such ethnographic practices articulated by Dwight Conquergood and D. Soyini Madison. The praxis of co-performance and co-performative witnessing are grounded in resisting the flattening of narratives within time and space. Madison argues that co-performative witnessing is animated within the exchange between "ethnographer" and "subject." It is a mutually "shared temporality, [inclusive of] bodies on the line, soundscapes of power, dialogic *interanimation*, political action, and matters of the heart."<sup>225</sup> Romain's photographic process is a form of dialogical performance that sees herself and her self-image entwined with the people she comes to meet and photograph.

While Romain does not always ask subjects if she can take their photo, the dialogic

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<sup>222</sup> Romain in conversation with the author, October 2013.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> D. Soyini Madison, "Co-performative Witnessing: Dwight Conquergood- In Memoriam," *Cultural Studies*, Vol.21, No. 6 (November 2007): 827.

interanimation between herself and her subjects, the shared witnessing, is what separates her work from the work of other photographers of Haiti. Romain's photography encourages the "*being there and with* as a political act in the excavation of subjugated knowledges and belonging for the creation of alternative futures."<sup>226</sup> Her photographic method does not preface the "camera first" but instead encourages building a rapport with the people she comes to meet. Romain emphasizes *seeing people* before seeing them as photographic subjects. For Romain, bearing witness to "what [she] saw" was both her way of supporting Haiti following the earthquake, as well as (re)minding and (re)turning international attention to the agentive power, survival, and humanity of Haitian people.

(Re)turning and (re)minding the world of Haitian people's humanity is done not only through Romain's photographic process, but also through her carefully curated photographs—what she chooses to disseminate publicly. The image of *Granmere/Mama Ginen* is both self-fashioned by the woman in the photograph *and* strategically circulated by Romain, who described the process of taking the photograph during an interview:

[T]he one picture of the older woman, I was at a funeral and I was talking to her, and she kind of has a stern look on her face and I said, "*oh manman, sak pase? Ou fache?* [Oh, 'mother,' what's wrong? Are you mad?]" and she says "nooooooooo!" [*imitates her high inflection*] and she started smiling and I took another shot of her too. But that picture is the one I decided to use because that one is also her, it's also us. You know? We're also stern people. We're kind of forceful. We're kind of "we'll kick your fucking ass." [...] But there is another [photo in her series, *Mama Cherie*] that I love which is like the sweet *granmere*. She's in the marketplace, and she's the one that [...] you want to hug [while] the other *granmere* is like, "*pas joue ave'm okay?! [don't play with me okay?!]*"<sup>227</sup>

<sup>226</sup> Madison, "Co-Performative Witnessing," 829, emphasis author's.

<sup>227</sup> Régine Romain, in discussion with the author, October 2013.



As Haitian and Black American women, Romain recognizes the power of being both a “stern” and “forceful” people, even as she points to a need to temper and nuance such a binary and stereotypical representation of Haitian “fierceness” with the sweetness that *also* characterizes the sentimental narratives and livelihoods of Haitian people. Romain thus taps into the “transcendental balance” of the cool proffered earlier by Robert Farris Thompson. She implicitly connects Haitian “stern-ness” to a sense of power, and in her choice of which photographs will circulate publically, she *balanse* those that will display Haitian people’s force and innate power.

Deborah Willis has argued that:

To capture the attitude of black women on film, without categorizing their posture as sassy, docile, and/or threatening, is a transformative act. This image defies the objectified images of African Americans made by many photographers from outside the community. It allows us to look at and reclaim our neighborhoods and to identify the community as a place with a distinctive and productive personality.<sup>228</sup>

In discussing these two women together Romain asks that we reconsider the full scope of Haitian emotional dimension. To be present in the moment is to recognize the fallacy of either/or representations of Haitians as the ass-kickin “*koupé têt, boulé kay* [cut the heads, burn the houses]” descendents of Haitian Revolutionary figures such as Toussaint L’Ouverture or Jean-Jacques Dessalines, or as the sweet and benevolent people that are forever welcoming of travelers. These binaries are not enough, for Haiti, as does the rest of the world, houses both.<sup>229,230</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Deborah Willis, “Introduction: Picturing Us,” *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, ed. Deborah Willis (New York, NY: The New Press, 1994), 10.

<sup>229</sup> The popular phrase “*koupé têt, boulé kay*” is attributed to the violent rule of Emperor Jean-Jacques Dessalines (1758-1806, who reigned in Haiti from 1801 till his assassination in 1806. See Charles Forsdick’s “Madison Smartt Bell’s Toussaint at the Crossroads: The Haitian Revolution

For Haitians in the Diaspora, I argue that Romain's work begs us to see dyasporically, to be reminded of our complicated familial and historical legacies: the violence of revolution, the catastrophes that make us stronger, and the traumatic events, such as the quake, that enable us to come together and to honor life. To view the images from Romain's *Portraits for a Self-Determining Haiti* series is to not only *feel good* because we are *seeing Haitian life*, but to remember our own family legacies—the complexities that are central to our experiences of family members (the loving *and* stern grandmother, father, mother, auntie, etc.) that are erased in photographs of Haiti that circulate specters, detritus and trauma, instead of humanity. We are thus reminded of the important need to balance our spirits and visions, and to see beyond the pictorial frame for the continued humanity of Haitian people.

### ***Conclusion***

In this chapter I have attempted to show how all photographs trigger narratives and memories—of parents telling stories, affective ties to people across the waters, and desires to know an inherited land better. Romain's work, therefore, is not merely a way of “doing” photographs “better,” but provides one way of understanding how seeing dyasporically can elicit a more complicated, spiritual, and ethical approach to taking photographs, particularly when the camera is placed in the hands of Haitian women. As Romain writes, to bear the camera is to be responsible for our own experiences and depictions; “the need remains for our own gaze to be seen; one that creates honest,

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between History and Fiction,” *Small Axe*, Issue 23, (June 2007): 194-208. Madison Smartt Bell's “Mine of Stones: With and Without the Spirits Along the Cordon de l'Ouest,” *Harper's Magazine* Vol. 308, Issue 1844 (January 2004): 64.

<sup>230</sup> Often this rhetoric is found in the travel photography books on Haiti that were previously mentioned.

dynamic, innovative portraits of Haitian people.”<sup>231</sup> If seeing diasporically is about negotiating the formidable necessity of images as material access to home and the problematic representations of Haitian people, then the work of Haitian artists such as Romain, emphasize taking ownership of the means of production. These are calls for Haitians the world over to be more accountable for our own viewing/representation.

While the first tactic of circling the cosmograms, seeing diasporically, has examined vision and how it constructs a relationship to Haiti as homeland and the viewing of transitionally circulated photographs, Chapter 3 examines local processes and performances of Diasporic living. In the next chapter, I examine the second tactic of circling the cosmograms, the creation of Diasporic *lakous* (courtyards). I look at the ways the agricultural structure of the Haitian *lakou* becomes a Diasporic epistemology for community building, Diasporic organizing, and ultimately a model for healing oneself amidst local and/or international tragedy. I turn now to the work of Queens, NY-based printmaker Rejin Leys and her Diasporic *lakous* of the 1990s and early 2010s.

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<sup>231</sup> Romain, 133.

**Chapter 3:**  
*Rejin Leys:*  
 Mourning Elizée and Building Lakous in Dyaspora



**Figure 13:** Rejin Leys, *Will Rice Accept You?*  
 2010, Linoleum print, 19"  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 13"  $\frac{1}{2}$

I can clearly remember where I was and what I was doing when I heard news of the earthquake. For many of the artists discussed in this dissertation, *learning* of the quake is as important as the event itself; the moment provides a clear memory-image of the event—bracketing it as an important moment in our lives. Following January 12, 2010, I believed that the earthquake was the preeminent and redefining moment in the lives of the Haitian Dyaspora, forcing us all to (re)consider the importance of Haiti and rally with our local and Dyasporic Haitian community to support our broken nation and spirits.

Even after the quake, Haitian Dyasporans continued to rally and raise awareness on behalf of rebuilding efforts. One year after the earthquake, on January 16, 2011, I

attended the New York closing reception for *AQ/Art Quake* (“*AQ*”), a print-portfolio fundraiser and curatorial project co-organized by Haitian-American artist Rejin Leys and fellow New York-based Haitian artists Vladimir Cybil and Andre Juste. The fundraiser was on behalf of rebuilding efforts in Haiti, and I learned about the event through a friend and fellow Haiti scholar, Dasha Chapman.<sup>232</sup> We made plans to meet at the reception held in Harlem at the Renaissance Fine Arts Gallery on Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard.

On that brisk day in New York, as I made my way down the iconic Harlem Boulevard, I moved past barbershops, Caribbean stores, and brownstones. I found myself looking for eye contact and connection, a warm “Haitian”-seeming face that would meet my glance and communicate, “Yes, WE made it. We don’t know how, but we survived the year.” I imagined that if I didn’t find this sense of our lives, over the past year, “together tak[ing] on full meaning,” this “*communitas*,”<sup>233</sup> on the streets of Harlem, then I would certainly find it in the *AQ* exhibition, amidst Haitian supporters and artists using their works to concurrently mourn, celebrate, and support Haiti. More importantly, I was excited to finally meet Rejin Leys a Brooklyn-born and Queens-based mixed-media artist and printmaker whose practice I had been following since 2007. Her activist-based work

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<sup>232</sup> *AQ* curated a diverse body of ten primarily Caribbean descended printmakers in support of Haiti’s rebuilding efforts. The internationally known artists donated 25 original prints to the *AQ* project that were then bound into 25 portfolios, featuring the 10 artists’ works. Proceeds from the *AQ* print portfolio sales, which are priced at \$1500 each, would support a collective of artisans living in Jacmel, Haiti who lost their homes and materials as a result the earthquake. At the time of writing, two portfolios have been sold.

<sup>233</sup> This definition of communities comes from anthropologist Edith Turner, research partner and wife of anthropologist Victor Turner. Turner’s own articulation of *communitas* will also be discussed in the following section. Edith Turner, *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 1.

of the 1990s made me curious to see how she would bring her delicate paper-based practice and social justice lens to the earthquake and its aftermaths.

Leys was the first person to greet me at the gallery and I was struck at how unequivocally *un*-Haitian both she and her contribution to the *AQ* portfolio seemed. Leys's physical body was racially ambiguous; her sandy skin, short and silky black hair, thin nose and equally thin lips were disarming, to the point where I initially read her as South Asian. Leys's contribution to *AQ*, was a surrealist print titled, *Will Rice Accept You?* (Figure 13). Leys's print departed from the portraits I had come to expect in post-earthquake exhibitions: images of rubble, of Haitian people as "survivors," or representations of Haitian "naïve/primitive" art forms that are often heralded as the traditional arts and crafts of Haiti.<sup>234</sup> Against these ubiquitous images of Haiti, Leys's *Will Rice Accept You?* appeared trite and disconnected to the earthquake and its

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<sup>234</sup> The "traditional" arts of Haiti are most-often associated with the visual arts (paintings, metal sculptures and crafts) that emerged from the Centre D'Art during the 1930-40s. Popular artists of the period include self-taught artists such as Hector Hyppolite, Philomé Obin, and Rigaud Benoit. The artworks of period included Vodou as a major subject in addition to scenes of everyday life in Haiti--parochial scenes of Haitian markets, Haitian countryside and gingerbread houses, and tropical-themed works. These arts and artists garnered international claim from artists, historians, and collectors including André Breton, Wilfredo Lam and Selden Rodman. The popularity of Haitian art gave rise to a Haitian art market. Today, "Haitian art" often refers to works that are deliberately stylized to appear "naive" or "primitive," and that portray themes of Vodou and parochial life. These limitations not only foreclose contemporary Haitian art they also romanticize and delimit the ways that the earlier Haitian artists were experimenting with aesthetics, perspectives, and were very much contemporary and modernist in their approach to art creation. For more on the history of Haitian art practice see: Eleanor Ingalls Christensen, *The Art of Haiti* (South Brunswick, England and New York, NY: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1975); Selden Rodman, *Where Art is Joy: Haitian Art: The First Forty Years* (New York, NY: Ruggles de Latour, 1988); and Candice Russell, *Masterpieces of Haitian Art: Seven Decades of Unique Visual Heritage* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 2013). For a more critical examination of Haitian art, culture, and contemporary art aesthetics see: Karen McCarthy Brown, *Tracing the Spirit: Ethnographic Essays on Haitian Art: From the Collection of the Davenport Museum of Art* (Davenport, IA: Davenport Museum of Art, 1995); LeGrace Benson, *Art and Religions of Haiti: How the Sun Illuminates Under the Cover of Darkness* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2015); and Kate Ramsey, *Transformative Visions: Works by Haitian Artists from the Permanent Collection* (Miami, FL: University of Miami, Lowe Art Museum, 2015).

aftermath. On a clean sheet of ivory paper, the silhouette of a gold chicken floats above a clump of hand-drawn rice granules and printed kidney beans. The chicken's form strikes me, signifyin(g) in its "black [Haitian] double-voicedness."<sup>235</sup> It reminds me of home and the unfamiliar, family gatherings over large meals of *poule kreyòl avec diri a pwa kole* (creole chicken with rice and beans) and Vodou superstitions—chickens as sensationalized "Voodoo" offerings.<sup>236</sup> I lingered on Leys's print, temporarily suspended in the here/there of the image, until I was abruptly awakened by its seeming frivolity in this *post-quake* catalogue. I eventually found myself asking a variation on the question used to critique Leys's contemporary body of work (2000-present), "Where is the Haiti, the earthquake-stricken Haiti, in *this* work?" More specifically, "where is the post-quake mourning?"

I believed in the universal effect and reach of the Haitian earthquake until I began spending more time with Rejin Leys. Over the years of meeting over food, coffee in her Queens home, and the occasional spontaneous printing lesson, we shared stories. Anthropologist Edith Turner argues that *communitas* "can only be conveyed properly through stories."<sup>237</sup> Over the course of these rituals of gathering and sharing, I learned Leys's story about the earthquake. She knows where she was and what she was doing at the time of the quake: preparing a funeral for her husband Andre Elizée (née Daniel Simidor), an intellectual and longtime organizer in the Haitian community, who died

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<sup>235</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1989), 51.

<sup>236</sup> The introduction to the dissertation discusses "voodoo" as the stereotypical, media-spectacle of zombies, human sacrifices, and devil worship. A search for literature and films about "voodoo" and "chickens" itself yields results of spells, and kitsch objects, such as chicken feet necklaces that can be purchased, with many buyers making use of them for Halloween costumes.

<sup>237</sup> Turner, *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy*, 1.

early on the morning of January 10, 2010, two days before the earthquake. Leys recalls the experience of mourning her husband and receiving news of the earthquake with a mixture of guilt and trepidation:

I always feel really guilty about that [post-quake] period. Which I know is not rational [...] I was shell-shocked [at Elizée's passing] and when the earthquake happened it was blip for me because my entire world had already ended, pretty much [...] I did know that it was important, you know, rationally, but my emotions were...I was just dead. I was just numb so I couldn't feel any worse.<sup>238</sup>

The Diasporic guilt that Leys espouses over not being able to actively engage in Haiti-based relief efforts is not unique. As stated in the Introduction to this dissertation, this sense of Diasporic guilt is a consequence of the Diaspora's historical position as "outside" of Haiti. Haitians in Diaspora are "*lot bo dlo*" ("on the other side of the water") and this physical distance becomes a metaphor for our emotional separation. Part of the Diasporic experience, particularly for those invested in Haiti's future, includes balancing the tensions between the *here-ness* of Diaspora, the *there-ness* of Haiti, and our desire to stay actively involved despite our "outsider" status. Diaspora's *here-ness* includes dealing with the every day challenges and joys of negotiating our local landscapes (including dating, mourning, paying rent, meeting work deadlines, etc.). Conversely, Diaspora's *there-ness* means paying attention and responding to the political, social, and economic climate in Haiti. The inability to "show up" for Haiti, as was Leys's case in the aftermath of her husband's passing, reinforces the ways our *here-ness* separates us from Haiti thereby producing feelings of guilt, distance, and Diasporic privilege.

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<sup>238</sup> Rejin Leys in conversation with the author, August 2015.



The evolution of Leys's practice and involvement in New York City's Haitian community is one that performs the tensions between the here/there-ness of Diasporic life. Leys is an artist whose works have been both heralded, criticized, and/or ignored for their lack of attention to "Haitian" culture. Yet in observing her work as an art-activist I wonder if there is another way of considering and validating her experiences as both an art-maker and a Haitian community member—of understanding the integration of her interior need to heal following Elizée's passing with her external commitments to Haitian people. Leys's experience has forced me to ask a new series of questions about life in Diaspora: How do you grieve the personal and local in the midst of the (inter)national crisis of the Haitian earthquake? What does it mean to be Haitian-American and to turn your attention, even if momentarily, *away* from the events in Haiti? How can we reconcile the Diasporic turn towards the local (here) with the transnational needs (there) to organize on behalf of and alongside Haiti and Haitian people?

This chapter considers these questions and the Diasporic tensions between here-ness and there-ness as it pertains to the visual and arts-organizing practice of Rejin Leys. Through an examination of Leys's practice, from the 1990s to 2015, I proffer an alternative mode for conceiving of the here/there split, a Haitian *lakou* (compound)-based model for conceptualizing the affective, socio-political, and spiritual work of Diaspora. I argue that Leys's work as an artist-activist models what I term a "Diasporic lakou praxis," an embodied practice of individual and collective care that adapts to multiple contexts: political organizing, social gathering, and the individual healing necessitated by death and grief. Traditional discussions of the Haitian lakou describe it in spatio-

relational terms—as a compound in which the extended family lives.<sup>239</sup> In contradistinction to this static configuration of the lakou in relationship to place, I configure the Diasporic lakou praxis, as an affective space that delimits the boundaries of the traditional lakou. The lakou praxis is *how* the Diaspora navigates the physical and geographic distance from Haiti, the here/there rift between Haiti’s material realities and the material realities and day-to-day “grind” of Diasporic life.

The Diasporic lakou praxis marks the banal and at times extraordinary ways in which Haitians in Diaspora produce what performance studies scholar May Joseph describes as “an extended imaginative geography.”<sup>240</sup> May Joseph, writing in her study of “nomadic citizenship” amongst East African Asians in India, the Gulf states, Europe and North America, argues that citizenship is not fixed or “organic, but must be acquired through public and psychic participation.”<sup>241</sup> Joseph emphasizes the material aspects of citizenship and the ways that “authentic” performances of citizenship are accrued in practices including social customs, memories, music, art and other objects. I support and extend Joseph’s claims that citizenship and, more to my point, Diaspora are not organic but a things of *work*. One of the ways that Diaspora comes to be practiced is through the performance of collective care that is central to the Haitian lakou structure. Consequently, I argue that within the Diaspora the lakou moves from being a physical structure rooted in Haiti, into a performance of feeling—a way of building and maintaining *communitas* both within Haiti and its Diaspora.

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<sup>239</sup> I review the many definitions of the “lakou” in the following section.

<sup>240</sup> May Joseph, *Nomadic Identities: The Performance of Citizenship* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*

My construction of the Diasporic lakou praxis is indebted to performance scholarship that attends to physical spaces and environments as conductors of affective interdependence. Diasporic lakous are not physical and ordered locations—what Michel De Certeau would term “places.” Diasporic lakous are instead “spaces,” “composed of intersections of mobile elements.”<sup>242</sup> Within the Diasporic lakou, these mobile elements are people and the ways in which they show care both locally and internationally: creating social spaces for other Diasporans to gather; organizing on behalf of Haitian migrants; sending funds raised back to Haiti in order to support the work of area grassroots organizations; or hosting guests in their homes for coffee and spontaneous printing sessions, as was the case with Leys and myself. These acts of care produce “spaces” that engender a sense of local and transnational “communitas.” Anthropologist and early proponent of the field of performance studies, Victor Turner, defines “communitas” as “a relationship between concrete, historical, idiosyncratic individuals.”<sup>243</sup> The Diasporic lakou praxis draws upon the history of Haiti-based lakous to create communitas and a sense of collective care that moves between *here* (Diaspora) and *there* (Haiti). Stated more plainly, the Diasporic lakou praxis “exports” and animates the Haitian lakou model and its spirit of collective work, cooperation, and the shared management of community crisis. These models become integral in the social and political lives of people of Haitian descent living in the Diaspora.

The Diasporic lakou praxis is the second tactic of circling the cosmograms. It marks the way Haitian Diasporans perform cultural mores, relying on them to build local

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<sup>242</sup> Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 117.

<sup>243</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), 131.

ties and reconcile everyday needs, all while maintaining international commitments.

Performance studies provides some models for how to reconcile with the seeming bifurcation of cultural mores (which encompass history and memory) and the local and material realities of being a Diasporic subject. Performance studies scholar Elin Diamond argues that performance “drifts between present and past, presence and absence, consciousness and memory.”<sup>244</sup> Performance is contested and the site where “being is de-essentialized, when gender and even race are understood as fictional ontologies.”<sup>245</sup> These ontological fictions are comparable to what French anthropologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu termed as “habitus,” the system of “structuring structures” that determines our individual movements through the world.<sup>246</sup> Habitus, Bourdieu continues, is “embodied history, internalized as second nature and so forgotten about in history.”<sup>247</sup> I configure the Haitian lakou as one of these habitus-histories that plays a central role in the historical production of Haitian social, cultural, and interpersonal behaviors. The material Haitian lakou, which emerged out of a historical need, became a critical component in the maintenance of Haitian families economically, politically, and spiritually.<sup>248</sup>

As this dissertation argues in all of its case studies, habitus-histories are central to “circling the cosmograms,” the ways that women-identified artists in the Haitian Diaspora (re)turn to Haiti—physically, spiritually, psychically, and emotionally—while

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<sup>244</sup> Elin Diamond, “Introduction” in *Performance and Cultural Politics* (London and New York, NY: Routledge Press, 1996), 1.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>246</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 53.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>248</sup> I discuss the emergence of the lakou in depth in the following section.

simultaneously rejecting fixed notions of what it means to successfully perform

“Haitianness.” In the case of these Diasporic artists, including Rejin Leys, this includes a sense of Diasporic guilt over being unable to consistently participate in the collective work of supporting Haiti and Haitian people because of the stresses of living that can occur in Diaspora. The Diasporic lakou praxis, as I conceive it, aims to assuage Diasporic guilt by configuring a metaphorical space that supports both the social/collective work required of Diaspora-based organizing *and* the personal work of self-care. The Diasporic lakou praxis negotiates the push-and-pulls between the social exterior and the personal interior; it allows for retreats to the interior in order to refortify oneself, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. These forays into the interior do not forget the material realities in Haiti; rather, they are tactics of self-care that are vital to our individual and collective efforts to create sustainable communities and connections both in our local cities and in Haiti. To summarize my point(s), the Diasporic lakou praxis is forged by the habitus of the Haitian lakou, using it as a model for collective- and self-care in order to build a sense of *communitas* locally and internationally, between here (Diaspora) and there (Haiti).

I continue this chapter with a theoretical and historical overview of the lakou structure. Through these varied interpretations of the lakou as a familial, agricultural, and Vodou-enabling place, I note the multiple uses of the lakou and the why a Diasporic lakou praxis is capable of holding the here/there-ness of Diasporic living. I then examine how Rejin Leys developed her aesthetic technique in New York during the 1990s and how New York’s then rhetoric of fear, security, and anti-Black sentiments informed her visual language. Following this discussion I turn to Leys’s Haiti-based arts-organizing

career and how her art addresses the dual aspects of the lakou: 1) the socio-political dimensions; and 2) the spiritual center of the lakou, based on rituals of repetition.

### ***Defining Lakou Spaces***

In short, *space is a practiced place*. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers.<sup>249</sup>

In June 2015, the Milwaukee Art Museum hosted a gathering with Haitian community members in order to discuss the museum's upcoming reinstallation of their Haitian gallery. The central structure in this reinstalled gallery was a large open area modeled after the Haitian concept of the lakou. The lakou structure soon sparked a heated debate amongst the Haitian community members. The gathered individuals represented a broad cross-section of the Diaspora: members of Haiti's Consulate General in Chicago; academics; cultural workers; and Haitian citizens of all classes, ages, and educational backgrounds. Within this group, no two individuals could decide on a singular definition or function for the Haitian "lakou."<sup>250</sup> The lakou was defined by its sundry components: a spiritual space where ancestors and the *lwa* (spirits) are heralded; or, a place that was reserved solely for family "servants." Others kept with the more formal definition of the lakou, describing it as the "family compound," "household," or "courtyard."<sup>251</sup>

While the meeting with the Haitian representatives in Milwaukee gathered a small group, the divergent opinions demonstrate the multifunctional uses of and relationships to

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<sup>249</sup> Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 117.

<sup>250</sup> These proceedings were communicated to me by several participants of the event, including Museum staff as well as Haitian and Haitian-American invitees.

<sup>251</sup> Donald Cosentino, "Lakou" definition in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Fowler Museum, 1995), 432.

the physical lakou. The various uses and *practices* of the lakou are not only indicative of the multiple performances possible in the lakou (i.e. physical labor, spiritual work, familial bonding, etc.), it also substantiates the distinction between place and space. If place, as Michel De Certeau asserts, positions elements in spatial relationship to each other, then the *space* of the lakou is one that is activated and animated by its assorted dwellings, possibilities, people, and how they work and live in relationship to one another. In this section I review theories of the lakou in order to advance my own construction of the Diasporic lakou praxis as a Haitian and Haitian Diasporic framework that enables collective and individual spiritual, socio-economic, and political work and care.

Historically, the lakou shares its spatial and relational structure with West African-style compounds. During my first trips to Gambia and Senegal, West Africa in 2005 (long before my own physical return to Haiti in 2010), I noticed a spatial familiarity between the dwellings occupied by my drumming and dance teachers and the home structures of my family in Haiti. Both compound structures were home to multi-kinship networks and clustered homes that enabled the social, agricultural, and economic development of the extended family.<sup>252</sup> The Haitian lakou has its roots in these systems but also developed as a post-independence tactic for protecting newly independent Haitian people from their re-enslavement, by either European colonials (French, English,

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<sup>252</sup> For a discussion of African extended family networks in Africa and its diaspora see Osei-Mensah Aborampah and Niara Sudarkasa, editors, *Extended families in Africa and the African Diaspora* (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 2011). Robert Farris Thompson discusses the ways Mande people of the Mali Empire on the architectural styles of compounds in Costa Chica, located along the southern coast of Mexico. This example points to the ways that African enslavement and crossing of the Atlantic may have influenced the place-space making of African descended people throughout the Americas.

Spanish, and the United States) as well as from the Haitian government. Historian Laurent Dubois tells us that the word *lakou* comes from the French word *la cour*, for courtyard.<sup>253</sup> Following Haitian independence, land was increasingly distributed to Haitian people of all classes in an effort to stimulate the economy. The lakou, as a place, traditionally refers to this post-independence spatial configuration of homes on these land plots: multiple structures including homes, cooking lodges, and/or religious temples (*ounfò*), organized on a plot of land, typically around an open courtyard. The lakou's spatiality provided autonomy and a sense of mutual protection. Dubois writes, "the lakou enabled communities to repel a threat that came from within Haiti, from the state itself as it attempted to reconstruct the plantation order."<sup>254</sup> The lakou system was thusly a protective means of maintaining "individual freedom" amidst the encroachment of plantation economies, which sought to exploit peasant labor.<sup>255</sup> Under these conditions, lakous became self-controlling systems in which families could cultivate their own food, live off the land, sell crops at the market, and barter and share food with other neighbors within the lakou. Families owned and maintained the land and its products and these relations were "overseen entirely by community and family institutions," even as they existed in the broader economic and political system of Haiti.<sup>256</sup>

Dubois provides us with the historical roots of the lakou: to politically and economically protect Haitian people from the return of forced-labor. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, anthropologists working in Haiti began studying the role of the lakou in

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<sup>253</sup> Laurent Dubois, *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History* (New York, NY: Metropolitan Books, 2012), 107.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 107-112.



determining the family structures of Haitian “peasants.”<sup>257</sup> Latin American and Caribbean sociologist Remy Bastien in his 1948 study of rural organization and economic life in the city of Marbial, Haiti,<sup>258</sup> centralizes the lakou in the extended kinship networks and spiritual rituals of Haitian people. Bastien observes the lakou as the “resident unit of the large family,” composed of clusters of homes.<sup>259</sup> These families are headed by a *mèt*, an elderly, “chief,” who can be of either sex and is the sole owner of the land.<sup>260</sup> The *mèt* lakou’s extended family lives on the land including their children and children’s spouses, aunts, uncles, grandchildren, and in some cases godchildren. The extended family is sustained within the lakou and by the “strong ties of kinship and the right of all to inheritance of the land[.]”<sup>261</sup> A shared sense of ownership of the land means that the extended family shares in the responsibility of cultivating each other’s land plots. Moreover, the construction of separate homes on the lakou provides separate dwellings for spouses and nuclear family units within the multi-generational lakou system.

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<sup>257</sup> See for instance George E. Simpson’s “Sexual and Familial Institutions.” Simpson’s text is also interesting for its discussion of the division of male and female labor. His article also discusses an instance of female homosexuality, referred to as “ma divine.” I discuss this term in Chapter 3. George Eaton Simpson, “Sexual and Familial Institutions,” *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 44. No. 4, Part 1 (Oct-Dec., 1942): 655-674. See also, S. Comhaire-Sylvain, “The Household in Kenscoff, Haiti,” in *Social and Economic Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (June, 1961): 192-222; and Caroline J. Legerman, “Haitian Peasant, Plantation and Urban Lower-Class Family and Kinship Organizations: Observations and Comments,” *Papers of the Conference on Research and Resources of Haiti* (Research for the Institute of Man, 1969): 71-84.

<sup>258</sup> Approximately 25 miles south west of Port-au-Prince. Bastien’s own work is based on the anthropological studies of Melville Herskovits and his *Life in a Haitian Valley* (New York, NY: Alfred A Knopf, 1937). Herskovits does not use “lakou” but rather the French colonial term “habitation” to refer to the “farm, plantation” or “center of relationship group,” 342. I prefer to keep with present day discussions of lakou, the more popularized understanding of the relationship groups/spatial dwellings of Haitian extended families.

<sup>259</sup> Remy Bastien, “Haitian Rural Family Organization,” in *Social and Economic Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 4, (December, 1961): 481.

<sup>260</sup> My review of the literature notes Bastien as the only scholar who documents women as potential chiefs of the lakou.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, 482.

*Vodou in the Lakou*

The extended family, in addition to these secular tasks, shares responsibility for maintaining the Vodou rituals of the land. It is not uncommon for lakous to also include a family cemetery where multiple generations are buried as well as an *ounfò*, a Vodou temple where both the family ancestors and the family lwa are worshipped. Bastien notes that in addition to the family lwa (which are inherited), the original lwa of the land<sup>262</sup> are often found “dwelling in a *mapou* tree (Ceiba), a large rock, or some odd natural feature of the [lakou] property.”<sup>263</sup> Whether the spirit being served is a familial one or one inherent to the earth, the ritual rights remain the same: all living beings who dwell within the lakou partake in a “collective homage” to the spirits in the form of food offerings or larger ceremonies that may involve a Vodou priest. Those who serve the spirits may themselves come be served for, as Bastien notes, the dead are often buried on the estate and continue to offer help to the living. Failure to give thanks to the lwa is often met with death, sickness or malady befalling the family.<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> Bastien theorizes that these spirits might be those of the original colonial owners of the land or the spirits inherent to the natural elements. Bastien, “Haitian Rural Family Organizations,” 480-487.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 485-486. It is also important to note here that Bastien makes a distinction between the family lwa and the lwa of the estate, or *bitasiô* (contemporary Kreyòl spellings include *abitasyon*, “*labitasyon*,” and “*bitasyon*”). The *abitasyon* from the French word for habitation, or plantation, and according to Bastien, these estates were tied to French colonial settlers and take the names of these French landowners. The spirits of these estates are honored by living people who take up residence on these lands, in thanks for being able to dwell on these spirits’ lands. Some scholars have posited that the *bitasyon* and the *lakou* are one in the same thing (Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, email communication with the author, October 2015). In my own family, the *bistasyon* has been understood as the ancestral lands of our family. All of those living and descended from the original owner (my great-great-great grandfather) own a piece of it, but is quite distinct from the *lakou* which has a more living and lived quality to it. In other words, the *bitasyon* is the land of the spirits and the *lakou* is the dwelling place of the living. I refer to the “*lakou*” in the vernacular understanding of the term, a gathering of extended family dwelling in the same area, which can be used for sacred and secular work.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

Although as early as 1948, Bastien observed a decline in large lakous in southern Haiti, he makes a point to note the lakou's paramount role in maintaining the spiritual health of the community: "[t]hus the lakou and its members enjoyed union, protection and security through the land. Nowadays few peasants fail to link their misery with the decline in the cult of the spirits of the land and of the family brought by the action of the Catholic and Protestant clergies."<sup>265</sup> Bastien captures the lakou as a complex social, economic, and communal system integrated into Vodou traditions. Vodou and subsequently kinship ties are threatened as individuals move away from the spirits, or, more accurately, as Catholic and Protestant missionaries colonize and convert Haitian people.<sup>266</sup>

Continuing on the topic of Vodou in the lakou, globalization and Haitian scholar Michel S. Laguerre concentrates his discussion of the lakou within Vodou. Writing in

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 486.

<sup>266</sup> My use of "colonize" is not meant to strip away the agency that is inherent to Haitian people. However, I do want to trouble and call attention to the ways that conversion is often a means of attaining access to food, finances, economic/social stability, and rhetorical power that members of Haiti's lower-classes are without. These conversions date back to before the earthquake, to as early as the 1960s, when Protestant sects became increasingly associated with modernity and literacy with many of them opening schools and educating Haitian in the populist language of Kreyòl as opposed to French, the language of the elites and the one, at the time, that dominated Catholic services. A month following the earthquake, the *Jamaica Observer* published an article about the growing violences being enacted by Protestants upon *Vodouist* (Vodou practitioners). Vodou ougan Max Beauvoir (1936-2015) who held the title of "Supreme Serviteur" (the highest position in the Vodou tradition of Haiti) is stated to have "accused Evangelical denominations of using post-quake aid supplies such as food and medicine to try to 'buy souls.'" ("Haiti's Voodoo Leader Vows 'War' Against Attackers," *Jamaica Observer*, February 26, 2016). For more on the relationship between Catholicism, Protestantism, and Vodou, see: Paul E. Brodwin, "Catholic Commentary on Protestant Conversion in Rural Haiti," in *The Journal of Haitian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring 1995): 1-7 and *Medicine and Morality in Haiti: The Contest for Healing Power* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Claire Payton, "Vodou and Protestantism, Faith, and Survival: The Contest over the Spiritual Meaning of the 2010 Earthquake in Haiti," in *Oral History Review*, Vol. 40 (2) (September 2014): 231-250; and Karen Richman, "Religion at the Epicenter: Agency and Affiliation in Léogâne After the Earthquake," in *Studies in Religion*, Vol. 41 (2): 148-165.

1973, and during the height of the Duvalier regime, Laguerre argues that following Haitian independence, Vodou became the religion of the “masses” and was directly influenced by the “infrastructure and social organization” of the lakou system.<sup>267</sup>

Laguerre elaborates:

The coming of [the] Lakou [sic] caused Voodoo [sic] to change from a secret to a familial orientation, post-independence Voodoo is a familial cult which reflects the organization of the Lakou which is characterized by the gathering of a few nuclear families under the authority of the patriarch, the ‘pe’. The patriarch was also a religious chief of this extended family. The *placage* (common law marriage) flourished and the practice of Voodoo [sic] became the cult of the extended family.<sup>268</sup>

Laguerre’s scholarship organizes the lakou around the male head, the family patriarch.<sup>269</sup> Moreover, Laguerre’s scholarship allows us to theorize the ways that Vodou, because of the familial lakou system, adapted a broad range of male-centered local and regional particularities in Haiti. This idea extends Bastien’s own discussion of the homage paid to individual family spirits on the lakou; the individual family spirits on the lakou subsequently give way to adaptations in Vodou ceremonies from lakou to lakou. Similarly to Bastien, Laguerre notes an increasing decline in the lakou system due to urbanization, the continued parceling of land, and the disappearance of “patriarchal authority” in the lakou system.<sup>270</sup> The decline of lakous, according to Laguerre, means

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<sup>267</sup> Michel S. Laguerre, “The Place of Voodoo in the Social Structure of Haiti,” in *Caribbean Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 3, (September 1973): 46.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> A similar patriarchal organization of the lakou is given by Melville Herskovitz.

<sup>270</sup> Indeed, of all the scholarship observed on lakous for this chapter, Laguerre’s is the one that most fervently espouses the heteropatriarchal structure of the lakou.

that Vodou loses a sense of structural and social integrity including its foundation in the (patriarchal) family.<sup>271</sup>

Laguerre's emphasis on the patriarchal structure of the lakou is quite unique. Neither, Bastien or any other articulations of the lakou social structure that I have researched at the time of this writing specifically emphasize the "loss" of patriarchal authority as part of the lakou's decline. Moreover, Laguerre's hyperfocus on the loss of male authority erases womens' importance in the economic, social, and spiritual continuity of the lakou. Contemporary scholars and feminists such as Haitian Diasporic performer and scholar Gina Athena Ulysse redress such erasures.<sup>272</sup> Ulysse cites her own family experiences as she details the female presence and management of the lakou and the "absorbing knowledge" women would experience from watching and interacting with other women. Ulysse provides her own aunt "Tante Botte," as an example of the female power present in the lakou. Tante Botte was the family midwife and healer who every Saturday in the lakou "had the most important job of all. Her entire household congregated in the [lakou] to roast coffee and make tons of peanut butter from scratch."<sup>273</sup> These early Haiti-based

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<sup>271</sup> While Laguerre does not explicitly state this, it is impossible to separate the time of his writing (the Duvalier Regime) from his lamenting of this separation of Vodou from the Lakou system. Laguerre's text builds towards an argument of Vodou's appropriation outside of the lakou by individuals as well as the state apparatus. François "Papa Doc" Duvalier's rule (1957-1971) is the pinnacle of this ruling with his use of Vodou as an aesthetic symbol for his regime including his wardrobe (he fashioned himself after the Masonic-like lwa of the dead, Bawon Samdi) and his use of the Vodou hougans and mambos (priests and priestesses) to create a ruling order in the countryside known as the *Tonton Macoutes*.

<sup>272</sup> The corpus of Ulysse's work, particularly her essay "Papa, Patriarchy, and Power: Snapshots of a Good Haitian Girl, Feminism & Diasporic Dreams" highlights the relationship between patriarchy and Haitian female subjectivity in Duvalier Haiti and the Diaspora. In *Journal of Haitian Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Spring 2006): 24-47.

<sup>273</sup> Gina Athena Ulysse, "Going Home Again and Again and Again," in *Geographies of the Haitian Diaspora*, ed. by Régine O. Jackson (New York, NY and London: Routledge, 2011), 267-268. Other scholars who focus on women's role in the lakou structure include Yanique M. Edmond, Suzanne M. Randolph, Guylaine L. Richard's "Lakou System: A Cultural, Ecological

childhood memories of women teachers, healers, and entrepreneurs complicate Laguerre's analysis of the patriarchal lakou and loss of male authority. Rather, for Haitian women, particularly those of us in the Diaspora, the lakou becomes a space to "affirm the many kinds of survival that brings [us] together."<sup>274</sup>

Ulysse's writings on the lakou are important not only for redressing the erasure of women from the lakou structure, but also for showing how the lakou informed her 21<sup>st</sup> century Diasporic subjectivity. Ulysse addresses urbanization, the increasing abandonment of the lakou, and the *devaluing* of Vodou as factors for the lakou's physical and spiritual decline. Ulysse writes, "over the years, certainly before I was ever born, different family members moved away from our *lakou* (family compound) in what was once a rural area. Their individual connection to Vodou became increasingly tenuous, leaving responsibility mainly to those who remained behind. As time passed, fewer within the family upheld these obligations."<sup>275</sup> Ulysse's own family experience highlights the ways that the lakou was central to maintaining familial Vodou traditions and how leaving the lakou creates a distance not only between family members and the land, but also between family members and the Spirits.

The historical and contemporary discussions of the lakou crystallize the lakou as a space where family bonds are reinforced in relationship to agricultural and spiritual work. Yet, if lakous in Haiti were viewed as being on the decline as early as Bastien's 1948 study, then why do they matter today, and how do they affect Haiti and its Diaspora?

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Analysis of Mothering in Rural Haiti," in *Journal of Pan African Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 01 (November 2007): 19-32.

<sup>274</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 1.

<sup>275</sup> Gina Athena Ulysse, "Going Home Again and Again and Again," in *Geographies of the Haitian Diaspora*, ed. by Régine O. Jackson (New York, NY and London: Routledge, 2011), 274.

Diaspora and transnational scholars such as Chantalle F. Verna remind us that diasporas are practice spaces where “lifestyle[s] reinforce [a] sense of attachment to Haiti.”<sup>276</sup> How can the lakou serve as a lifestyle that reinforces a practice of space rooted in kinship networks, freedom, and collective work when it is on the continued decline in Haiti?

We find such a theory espoused by Haitian-American and education scholar Charlene Désir in her post-quake discussion of the “diasporic lakou.” Désir writes of her experience growing up in a Dyasporic and Vodou-practicing home. She describes the lakou as a “sacred family space in which to connect to her ancestors and cultural ways of knowing.”<sup>277</sup> This conceptualization of the lakou reinforces the lakou as a habitus capable of structuring behaviors and knowledge systems. Moreover, Désir’s observations build on Haitian and Vodou scholar Claudine Michel’s argument that in contemporary Haiti, ““real or imagined, today’s lakou(s) are relational spaces that serve our communities, ensure participation and ownership in communal affairs, and provide pillars to build and develop projects and possibilities of all types that benefit the group.””<sup>278</sup> Désir and Michel remind us that the lakou is a relational matrix and a post-independence strategy for socio-political and economic survival, knowledge transference, and ancestral maintenance between the living and the dead. Thusly a Dyasporic lakou praxis is one that

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<sup>276</sup> Chantalle F. Verna, “Haitian Migration and Community-Building in Southeastern Michigan, 1966-1998,” in *Geographies of the Haitian Diaspora*, edited by Régine O. Jackson (New York and London: Routledge Press, 2011), 163.

<sup>277</sup> Charlene Désir, “Diasporic Lakou: A Haitian Academic Explores Her Path to Haiti Pre- and Post-Earthquake,” *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 81, No. 2, (2011): 278.

<sup>278</sup> Claudine Michel, quote in Charlene Désir, “Diasporic Lakou: A Haitian Academic Explores Her Path to Haiti Pre- and Post-Earthquake,” 293.

brings the theoretical discussions of the lakou into contemporary Haitian-American subjectivity.

My discussion of the Diasporic lakou praxis works in conversation with Désir and Michel to espouse a relational way in which a Haitian cultural and Vodou ethos is enacted in the everyday performances (lives) of second-generation people. I posit the lakou praxis as a physical and imaginary complex that enables the performance and (re)inforcement of community ties, affective bonds, and solidarity across geographic, cultural, and spiritual borders. Moreover, I contend that the multiple contemporary definitions of the lakou—hinted at the opening of this section—are in fact the reason why the lakou serves as a matrix capable of holding multiple potentialities—the continued work over “there,” in Haiti (one side of the lakou) and the day-to-day grind located “here” in Dyaspora (another side of the lakou).<sup>279</sup>

I expand my discussion of a Diasporic lakou praxis in the following section, where I examine the work of second-generation Haitian-American Rejin Leys in the 1990s. The 90s were a time when the social and political organizing by New York City Haitians was at its height due to the political and economic policies being enacted by the U.S. and U.N. on Haiti. I discuss Leys’s involvement in these efforts alongside her husband Andre Elizée. More specifically, I consider how Leys’s arts-based organizing contributed to the cultivation of a Diasporic lakou in New York City.

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<sup>279</sup> My use of Diasporic lakou is not meant to collapse time, geographies, or local particularities, but to enhance them. I heed the calls of other scholars of transnationalism who see the local experiences of being Dyaspora as varied depending on the political economy and areas of settlement. I am moved specifically by the works of Nina Glick-Schiller and George Eugene Fouron, *George Woke Up Laughing* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001); Karen Richman, *Migration and Vodou* (Jacksonville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2005); and the groundbreaking volume edited by Régine O. Jackson, *Geographies of the Haitian Diaspora*, (New York and London: Routledge Press, 2011).



*Aestheticizing New York, Fear, and Public Lakous in the 1990s*

Rejin Leys was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1966. Her parents arrived to the U.S. in the 1950s, having left during the early days of the Duvalier regime. Leys's immediate family was small, including her parents, an older brother, herself and her younger sister. However, Leys narrates her childhood as one spent moving with the tide of her extended family network, "I feel like I've moved back and forth between Brooklyn and Queens all my life. You know, at some point Haitians started moving to Queens and then I moved back to Brooklyn, and now [since 2009] I'm back in Queens."<sup>280</sup> The family's migration pattern from Haiti to New York City mirrors the migration pattern of Haitians more broadly from the early to mid-1960s to the 1980s. Haitian and Romance Language scholar Flore Zéphir, in an early study of Haitian American immigrants, notes that of the recorded 89,034 recorded Haitian immigrants to the United States between 1965-1969, 76.1 percent of them settled in New York City.<sup>281</sup> The numbers of newly arrived Haitians continued to grow over the decades and climaxed between 1985-2000 when New York recorded 79,113 legally admitted Haitian residents (followed by Miami with 67, 010).<sup>282</sup> Many Haitians would settle in Brooklyn, which of all the boroughs in New York "has the largest concentration of more modest-income immigrants."<sup>283</sup> The Leys extended family, like others, moved about in search of a neighborhood where they could settle and

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<sup>280</sup> Rejin Leys in discussion with the author, October 2013.

<sup>281</sup> Flore Zéphir, *The Haitian Americans* (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 2004), 73.

<sup>282</sup> According to the Migration Policy Institute, Miami now leads with the greatest population of Haitian migrants. As of 2012, 197, 000 Haitians live in Miami, Fort Lauderdale, or Pompano Beach, Florida, followed by New York City, New Jersey and Long Island, NY with a combined total of 158, 000 legally recognized Haitian residents.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid, 76.

maintain their kinship networks. Unlike some Haitian families who considered themselves as temporarily displaced ex-patriots who would return to Haiti after Duvalierism, the Leys family harbored no dreams of returning to Haiti. Leys recounts:

I know a lot of people who always thought they would go back [to Haiti]. When my mother came, her family, they were never planning on going back. They put it all behind them. I remember when I was a teenager and I was starting to read stuff about Haiti and getting into it, I remember having conversations with my uncle and I don't know if he was joking or if that was his way of dealing with it but he would say, 'Haiti?! What is that?! I'm not Haitian, I'm American!' [Leys laughs]. He didn't want to talk about it, he never had any interest in going back. I have an aunt, her summer place was in St. Martins; they never went back. Actually, she got back to it later but that's when she found Vodou.<sup>284</sup>

Leys's remarks are interesting for several reasons. First, they observe the multiple sentiments that members of her family held about their new lives in the U.S. Haiti was now in the past, a place that held no possibilities of return. Assimilation and adopted citizenship, as was the case with her uncle, were strategies of survival and (as suggested by his unwillingness to talk about it) forgetting. Second, Leys's comment indicates that her second-generation knowledge of Haiti was made possible by research—reading and learning more about the country both through literature and oral storytelling. Finally, Leys's observation about her aunt suggests that physical (re)turns to Haiti *did* happen in Leys family and that Vodou facilitated these travels.

Aside from the aunt mentioned by Leys, her family in New York was not, according to her knowledge, Vodou practicing. Yet the family did maintain a kinship network via their urban Dyasporic *lakou* that spanned boroughs and was maintained by *mèt lakou* (chiefs) such as Leys's Aunt Esther.<sup>285</sup> Aunt Esther lived with the Leys family

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<sup>284</sup> Rejin Leys in conversation with the author, August 2015

<sup>285</sup> Name has been changed to protect confidentiality.

when Rejin Leys was little. Aunt Esther arrived to the U.S. in the 1950s and became the family member who met new arrivals from Haiti at the airport and looked after the extended family's children. It was Aunt Esther who shared stories with the young people, including stories that parents would not share with their own children. "That's the aunt that told us the story of my father's accident," Leys recalls, "He always had one leg straight [and the children never knew why]. She had all the stories, and she had all the photos." Remy Bastien argues that "life in the lakou facilitates" genealogical knowledge because "family history is informally taught [to] the younger generation by the elders."<sup>286</sup> Leys childhood in New York models this passing of ancestral knowledge through oral storytelling with her family's own Diasporic lakou, maintained by elders such as Aunt Esther who transferred history to the next generation.

Leys began drawing at an early age stating, "I [wanted] to be an artist even before I knew it was something that you could do other than as a hobby."<sup>287</sup> Her parents encouraged her work, and she studied illustration in high school and at Parsons School of Design. It was at Parsons, during her senior year, that Leys took a printmaking class and realized that she "never wanted to do illustration ever [again]."<sup>288</sup> Upon graduating from Parsons in 1988, Leys simultaneously grew her skills and developed a network of fellow artists through her work with local arts organizations such as Coasts-to-Coasts, National Women Artists of Color, and Kouran, a collective of contemporary Haitian artists in New

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<sup>286</sup> Bastien, "Haitian Rural Family Organization," 487.

<sup>287</sup> Rejin Leys in discussion with the author, March 2011.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

York. It was in these small collectives and art organizations that Leys felt her

“education really began.”<sup>289</sup> She expands further:

[A]fter college I did a lot of internships, I worked for free for a lot of arts organizations and I feel like that’s where I got a lot of my education from. Like all these skills that I know, practical stuff that I incorporate in my work, I didn’t learn from art school. I learned printmaking from this art organization upstate and I learned bookbinding from the Center for Book Arts. I worked with all these great printmakers, and I still incorporate all that stuff in my work so I feel like it was really this first education, after school, with all these different little studios that was most important.<sup>290</sup>

At the time when Leys volunteered at all of these organizations, her sister lampooned her efforts, joking that she represented the West Indian stereotype of the immigrant that held “five jobs and [was] underpaid.”<sup>291</sup> Yet, the idea of exchanging labor and/or skill sets for objects or other services is ingrained in the lakou model. The barter economy of the lakou, means that people are able to exchange their time and labor for resources. Leys bartered her labor for knowledge, or more specifically, what performance and dance studies scholar Judith Hamera calls “technique” and “aesthetics.” In her study of how dancers build community through technique and aesthetics, Hamera argues that technique and aesthetics are “local,” for as she claims “[b]oth are uniquely produced affected and inflected by the exigencies of those who keep them in play, set them to

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<sup>289</sup> Rejin Leys in discussion with the author, October 2013.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

<sup>291</sup> Rejin Leys in discussion with the author, October 2013. The character was more specifically described as “Jamaican.” The inter-Caribbean hailing of stereotypes, even jokingly shows the ways that even within the Caribbean, race and regional differences become ways of othering other people of African descent in the region and obfuscating the intimate histories shared by the nations. For more on the shared history of post-emancipation Haiti and Jamaica see Matthew J. Smith’s *Liberty, Fraternity, Exile: Haiti and Jamaica after Emancipation* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

music, or deploy them to fashion both the sublime and the banal.”<sup>292</sup> Technique and aesthetics are not inherent but created from work, an intense amount of labor that occurs in relationship and concert to others. Hamera explains further:

[R]elationships to aesthetics, learned and demonstrated through relationships to technique, are crafted through daily labors, with the physical often being the least of these. There are labors of employment and recreation certainly, but more foundationally, the labors demanded by technique are affective and relational. They are social, political, spiritual—labors of love and labors of Sisyphus.<sup>293</sup>

While Rejin Leys’s free labor at all of the New York-based organizations was lambasted by her sister, her internships at art organizations throughout New York served as spaces where she could cultivate and rehearse her aesthetic eye and build her technique as a printmaker, artist, and activist. These art organizations served as Diasporic lakous where Leys, like Gina Athena Ulysse and Charlene Désir, could transfer the knowledges of her elders and peers into praxis. Leys came to understand the “work” of these arts-organizations, their own lakou systems, by watching, gathering stories, and trying her hand at the work. In addition to learning the practical skills of making art in these spaces, Leys also worked with mixed-media artists such as Clarissa Sligh (b. 1939) and Juan Sanchez (b. 1954). These two artists, along with the networks of artists that Leys trained with served as a community of mentors and practitioners who taught her that her “art didn’t have to be separate from [her] social consciousness.”<sup>294</sup>

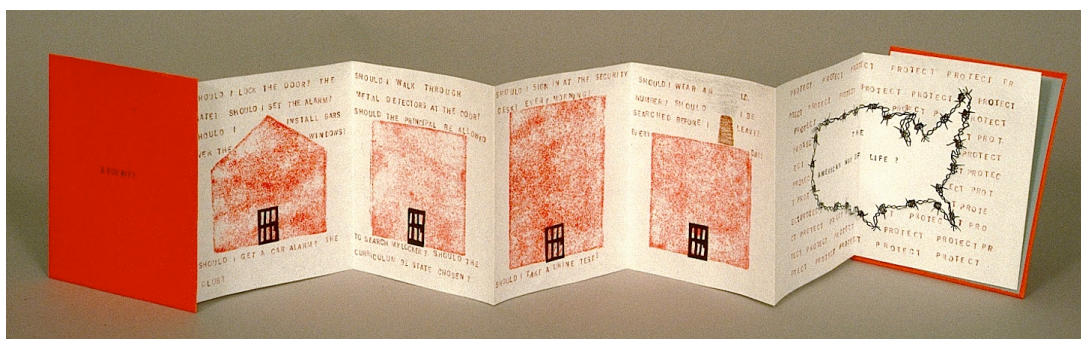
We can see the effect of this socially conscious art training in Leys’s *Security* (1994, mixed-media book). The crimson red cover of the book bears the title “Security”

<sup>292</sup> Judith Hamera, *Dancing Communities: Performance, Difference, and Connection in the Global City* (Basingstoke, England and New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 4.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

<sup>294</sup> Rejin Leys, interviewed by Kay of Kreyolicious, [www.Kreyolicious.com](http://www.Kreyolicious.com), January 8, 2012.

in typewriter font. As the accordion book opens, each cream page reveals a different red printed image, variations of a house or dwelling whose doors are barred. The red-lettered texts that encase these printed homes heighten our growing anxiety. Each panel reveals a new series of questions that suggest a need to protect ourselves from some unknown terror: “Should I install bars over the window?”; “Should the principal be allowed to search my locker?”; and “Should I be searched before I leave everyday?” The questions intensify, reaching their summit in the final two pages where, upon opening the book to reveal its full dimensions, we are able to see the silhouette of the United States, its borders fashioned out of barbed wire. The interior of the U.S. is whitewashed with the question “The American Way of Life?” written in black text and the word, “Protect” written in the same crimson red reproduced dozens of times in the background.



**Figure 14:** Rejin Leys, *Security*, 1994, Linoleum Print, 6.25 x 50"

*Security* is one of the earliest forms of politically inspired art Leys produced in the early 1990s. The mixed media book bears all of the concerns that dominated New York during this period: fear, violence, border safety, and security. The narratives about New York that circulated locally and nationally throughout the 1990s reinforced these concerns. More specifically, New York's unemployment rate, crack cocaine, and

violence were major headlines that shaped New York's security and stability as a city during the decade.

Unemployment was not a major concern in New York City between the late 1970s and early 1980s, which was a period of economic growth, particularly in the financial and private sector. However as economics and labor scholar George E. Defreitas notes, "early in 1989, New York's economy fell into recession well ahead of the rest of the country, and unemployment rose from 6.9 percent in 1989 to a high of 11 percent in 1992—when the national rate peaked at 7.5 percent."<sup>295</sup> Unemployment disproportionately affected Black Americans, and by late 1988 when "job growth came to a virtual halt,"<sup>296</sup> the unemployment ratio between Black and whites in New York City was 1.7.<sup>297</sup>

April 1989 saw the peak of New York's unemployment rate and crime rates. The April 19, 1989, brutal rape and beating of a white female jogger and the subsequent trial and conviction of five young men of color, collectively referred to as the "Central Park Five" fueled the image of Black men as "wolf pack's"<sup>298</sup> that preyed on the city's innocent.<sup>299</sup> Journalist Annaliese Griffin contends that what made the Central Park jogger

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<sup>295</sup> George E. Defreitas, "Urban Racial Unemployment Differentials: The New York Case," in *Prosperity for All? The Economic Boom and African Americans*, eds. Robert Cherry and William M. Rodgers III (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2000), 112.

<sup>296</sup> Samuel M. Ehrenhalt, "Economic and Demographic Change: The Case for New York City," in *The Monthly Labor Review* (February 1993): 42.

<sup>297</sup> Defreitas, 112.

<sup>298</sup> The April 21, 1989 cover of the New York Daily News featured the cover story "Central Park Horror: Wolf Pack's Prey, Female Jogger Near Death After Savage Attack by Roving Gang," *New York Daily News*. For more on the attack, the trial, and the ways it influenced the cultural landscape see the documentary *The Central Park Five*, directed by Ken Burns, David McMahon, and Sarah Burns (United States: PBS Distribution, 2013), DVD.

<sup>299</sup> The Central Park Five, who would eventually be released after DNA evidence cleared them in 2003, were persecuted as part of a larger fear-mongering campaign that cast suspicions on young Black and Latino men and that could be tied to the crack cocaine epidemic of the period. Historian Craig Steven Wilder has argued that Central Park Jogger case and its ensuing coverage were intended to spark racialized fear and panic. Wilder writes, "We were supposed to be afraid,

case so alarming was “[t]he fact that the attack occurred in the park, New York City’s great backyard, not in an alley or a graffiti covered subway car, violated a fundamental public sense of shared space. No single place remained safe.”<sup>300</sup> It was the threat to the city’s shared spaces, these urban lakous, that left people feeling violated, scared, and without a sense of communitas’s “quick understanding, easy mutual help, and long-term ties with each other.”<sup>301</sup>

Race and class were woven into the narratives of violated public space. Robberies, assaults, burglaries, theft, and crack cocaine usage skyrocketed during the 1990s while murder rates peaked with the NYPD reporting 2245 murders in 1990.<sup>302</sup> Young African American and Latino men were routinely viewed as perpetrators of crimes. Concurrently, black women were being hailed as overly fertile “welfare queens” who allegedly put their children at risk of/through crack exposure and abused the welfare system. Social spaces and safety nets—from parks to welfare—were perceived as under attack by the Black body.

As New York City battled its supposed Black rapists, welfare queens, drugs and unemployment, in 1993 the city received its first attack upon the World Trade Center on

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It would have been irrational not to be afraid. But the people who suffered most, with the rise of criminality, gang wars, drug wars, were actually the people we blamed. Most of the homicides were young, poor, working class, black and brown kids. And the dominant social message was no one cared if you lived or died.” See Craig Steven Wilder in *The Central Park Five* as cited by Annaliese Griffin, “The Climate of New York in 1989,” *The Daily News*, April 8, 2013.

<sup>300</sup> Griffin, “The Climate of New York in 1989.”

<sup>301</sup> Edith Turner, 3.

<sup>302</sup> “NYPD—The Historic Reduction of Crime Rates in New York,” *NYPD*, accessed December 9, 2016, [http://www.nyc.gov/html/nypd/html/home/poa\\_crime.shtml](http://www.nyc.gov/html/nypd/html/home/poa_crime.shtml). The Disaster Center lists the total murder rates in New York State as 2,605. See “New York Crime Crime Rates 1960-2015,” accessed December 9, 2016, [www.disastercenter.com/crime/nycrime.htm](http://www.disastercenter.com/crime/nycrime.htm).



February 26, 1993.<sup>303</sup> Local and national officials were on a state of high alert following the attack. Then-New York City Mayor David Dinkens went to great measures to show that his office bore “no responsibility” for the attacks while also trying to ensure the safety of New Yorkers.<sup>304, 305</sup> Meanwhile, in a radio blast, then-President Bill Clinton reassured the nation that “[w]orking together, we’ll find out who was involved and why this happened [...] Americans should know we’ll do everything in our power to keep them safe in their streets, their offices, and their homes.”<sup>306</sup> “Safety” and “security” were the dominant concerns of local and national communities.

The international attack on the WTC along with the economic instability, peak rates of violence, and doubts about social programs such as welfare coalesced into a period where safety and security—economic, social, and physical—were topics of discussion and survival. Rejin Leys’s *Security* uses a minimalist approach for documenting the elevated anxiety in New York during this period. In a close-up of the mixed-media book, we can see how the techniques and aesthetics that Leys’s learned during her internship days translated into her creations. A close-up of *Security* (Figure 15) allows us to see that the bright red structures on the pages of her building are non-descript. Their generic geometric shapes are banal except when they and the text that

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<sup>303</sup> While America associates the “War on Terror” with the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center (WTC), as American Studies and Culture scholar Colin Harrison notes, “the menace of international terrorism” was on the U.S. horizon following the February 26, 1993 WTC bombing and attacks at U.S. embassies in foreign countries. These include the embassy bombings in 1998 in Kenya and Tanzania. See Colin Harrison, *Twentieth-Century American Culture: American Culture in the 1990s* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 206.

<sup>304</sup> “Of normalcy and amour proper: New York,” *The Economist*, March 6, 1993.

<sup>305</sup> This was proven during legal proceedings held between 1993-2006. The verdict found The New York Port Authority of New York and New Jersey were found liable for the bombings.

<sup>306</sup> Robert D. McFadden, “Explosion at the Twin Towers: The Overview; Inquiry Into Explosion Widens; Trade Center Shut for Repairs,” in *The New York Times*, February 28, 1993.

encases them are placed within the context of New York's 1990s and the failed security measures to "protect" citizens from terrorists (WTC, 1993) and Black male "wolves" who were imagined as dominating the city streets.

Leys's red printed shapes are surrogates for the homes, schools, and buildings that are supposed to guard us but instead become containers for our fears of the racialized "other." Gender and performance studies scholar Jasbir Puar, reading the work of postcolonial theorists such as Franz Fanon and Sara Ahmed writes of fear and racialized subjects. Puar writes:

[T]he materialization of the feared body occurs through the visual racial regime as well as the impossibility of the containment of feared bodies. The anxiety of this impossibility of containment subtends the relegation of fear to a distinct object, producing the falsity of a feared object. Further, it is precisely the nonresidence of emotions, their circulation between bodies, that binds subjects together, creating pools of suspicious bodies.<sup>307</sup>

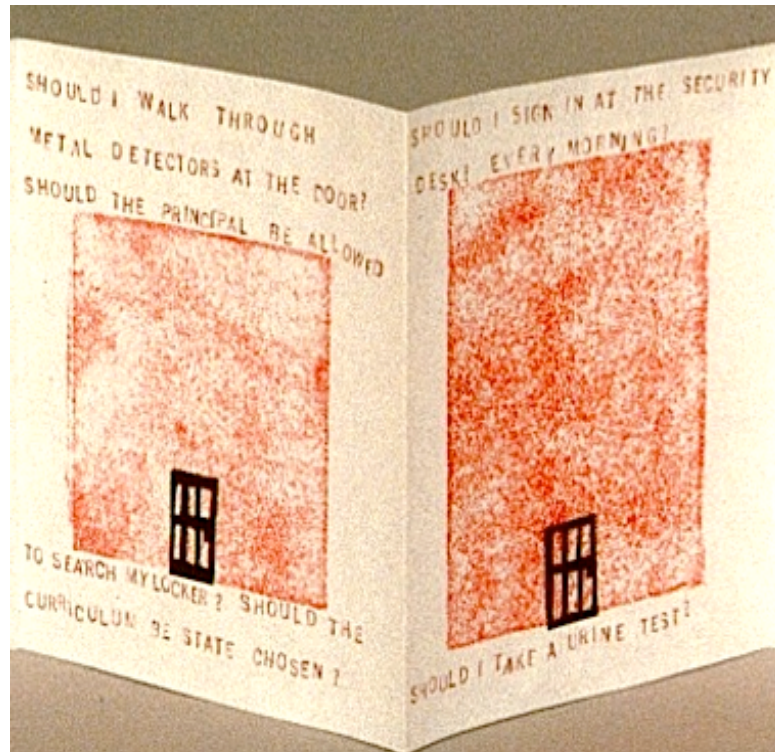
Puar speaks to the ways in which fear affectively circulates between bodies. In search of a place to "land" fear materializes in the bodies of those most marginalized: low-income urban people. The "feared" body is the Black body that is out of bounds.

Leys's *Security* literally screams from the pages the fear-based questions that consumed the period. The all caps and other red questions emerge in a stream of consciousness: "SHOULD I INSTALL BARS ON THE WINDOW? SHOULD I WALK THROUGH METAL DETECTORS AT THE DOOR? SHOULD THE PRINCIPAL BE ALLOWED TO SEARCH MY LOCKER? SHOULD THE CURRICULUM BE STATE

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<sup>307</sup> Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 184.

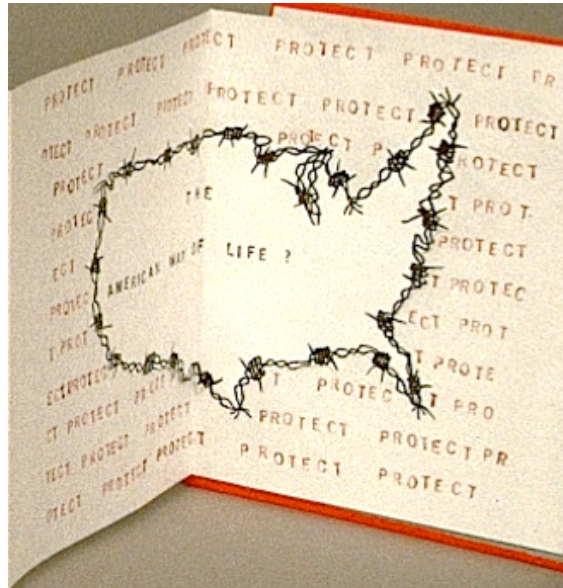
CHOSEN? SHOULD I GET THE CAR ALARM? THE CLUB?" The questions unfurl, leaving no answer instead showing us the ways that fear lives inside *us*.



**Figure 15:** Rejin Leys, *Security*, close up, panels two and three

Fear builds, circulates, and questions itself after every news report, newspaper article or present day social media (re)post. Fear literally ensnares the structures in Leys's print, becoming a metaphor for the ways that fear followed New Yorkers, including, and perhaps especially, Black New Yorkers. In a 1998 article that captured the nature of this fear and the stress that it placed on neighbors, a young resident of the Washington Heights area of New York stated, "Safe is when you [can] walk from the train station home, or from your corner to your building, or from the street downstairs to your

apartment door, without nobody trying to bother you or follow you [...t]hey got a long way to go [before the community is safe]."<sup>308</sup>



**Figure 16:** Rejin Leys, *Security*, close up, back panel

Safety, in other words, describes an ability to create spaces—to move through place with a sense of positive emotions. The ability to “hang out” with one’s neighbors, to leave one’s home and share space is what characterizes safety in the urban lakou. Or as an older resident in the same article on Washington Heights states, “‘I’ve got to get over my fear, too [...] It controls you. It does not allow you to be. It makes you feel like a prisoner when you have not committed a crime.’”<sup>309</sup> The sense of being imprisoned not only in your own home but also within the nation-state is captured in Leys’s final two panels of her book (Figure 16). The white silhouette of the United States, encased by barbed wired fences questions if this is “The American Way of Life,” if the protocols and fears that govern us to “PROTECT PROTECT PROTECT,” are, in fact, keeping us from

<sup>308</sup> David M. Halbfinger, “In Washington Heights, Drug War Survivors Reclaim Their Stoops,” in *The New York Times*, May 18, 1998.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid.

building communal spaces, lakous. *Security* functions not as a solution to the questions of violence and their material consequences, but a meditation on the ways that fear is antithetical to a lakou praxis of communal engagement. A hyper-focus on our “security” prevents the creation of spaces where people could “provide for each other through financial and other forms of support.”<sup>310</sup>

New York City between the late 1980s and mid-1990s was a time when the city’s rhetoric of fear and security were the backdrop in which Leys created visual work while building artistic lakous in which she advanced her technique and aesthetic. Race and class were integral in the conversation of safety, with Black people being portrayed as perpetrators who violated public space (i.e. the Central Park Five). During this period, Leys used simple forms to meditate on the social context in which she lived and moved. I now turn to the ways that Haiti and Haitian immigrants were folded into these conversations on fear, safety and the securing of borders. I demonstrate how Leys’s art praxis developed in her increasing Haitian-based activism. I focus especially on how her relationship with future husband Andre Elizée sustained a Diasporic lakou praxis committed to politically supporting Haitian migrants to the U.S., while also building a local network of Haitian community members and activist.

### ***Haitians Enter New York Lakous: Diaspora Activism***

As New York dealt with threats of insecurity due to high levels of unemployment, increasing drug-based violence, and the racialization of crime that scapegoated young and

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<sup>310</sup> Yanique M. Edmond, Suzanne M. Randolph, Guylaine L. Richard, “The Lakou System: A Cultural, Ecological Analysis of Mothering in Rural Haiti,” in *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (November 2007): 20

poor Black people, it also saw the rise in its immigrant population. In his New York City survey of record unemployment during the late 1980s, Gregory E. Defreitas notes that, “One reason some suggest to explain why New York’s unemployment levels have exceeded the national average [from 1988-1998] may be its high immigration concentrations. Long the destination of more new immigrants than any other American city, New York saw the foreign-born portion of its population jump from 18.2 percent in 1970 to 28.4 percent by 1990.”<sup>311</sup>

Haitian people made up a substantial amount of these legal immigrants to the United States. Transnational migration scholar Nina Glick-Schiller notes that during the 1970s and 1980s the “worldwide restructuring processes of capital accumulation”<sup>312</sup> birthed the emergence of neoliberalism. Policies enacted by nations in Europe as well as the United States put into effect a series of measures which would destabilize the social, economic and political infrastructure of nations in the global south. In Haiti the U.S.’s neoliberal policies resulted in the abolition of tariffs on imported goods, the devaluation of national currencies, and the reduction of state services. Financial instability resulted in people leaving their family lakous in search of financial and educational opportunities in major cities such as Port-au-Prince. Simultaneously, the U.S.’s use of Haiti as a source of cheap industrial labor meant that Haiti’s poor majority faced higher costs for food, less government support, and an increased devaluation of their labor. In response to these

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<sup>311</sup> Defreitas, 118.

<sup>312</sup> Nina Glick-Schiller, “Forward: Locality, Globility and Popularization of a Diasporic Consciousness: Learning from the Haitian Case,” in Régine O. Jackson, editor, *Geographies of the Haitian Diaspora*, (New York and London: Routledge Press, 2011), xxvi.

neoliberal policies, migration increased from all over the world with immigrants such as Haitians entering the U.S. by plane and by boat.<sup>313</sup>

Haitians immigrants who arrived to New York City, in part because of the neoliberal policies enacted by the U.S., were ensnared in local and national conversation around security, fear and Blackness. Sociologist Régine O. Jackson observes that while many Haitians “claimed they knew little about the struggles of African Americans” the racial animosity that Haitians in Boston, and I would argue New York as well, received, “made clear the unmarked racial boundaries in [U.S. cities] and the racialization of Haitians as black.”<sup>314</sup> Or, as performance studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson notes, Haitians soon learned that white constructions of “blackness” are “grounded in racists stereotypes to maintain the status quo [white supremacy].”<sup>315</sup> Thusly the material and social performance of “blackness,” as Johnson argues, do “not belong to any one individual or group”<sup>316</sup> but can be used to include and exclude others in ways that serve to extend and maintain the matrix of white heterosupremacy. The racialization of Haitians, as well as other African-descended immigrants, as Black was realized in two incidents: the August 9, 1997, attack and sexual assault of Haitian immigrant Abner Louima outside of a Brooklyn nightclub and the shooting death of Guinean immigrant Amadou Diallo on February 4, 1999. Haitian-American writer and activist Edwidge Danticat writes that both these events revealed that for African diasporic people “the

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid., xxi-xxix.

<sup>314</sup> Régine O. Jackson, “The Uses of Diaspora among Haitians in Boston,” in *Geographies of the Haitian Diaspora*, ed. Régine O. Jackson (New York, NY and London: Routledge Press, 2011), 137-138.

<sup>315</sup> E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authority* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

streets were never ours to begin with, because on these same streets our sons and brothers, fathers and uncles, were and still are, prey.”<sup>317</sup>

Haitians entering New York and the rest of the United States during the late 1980s were seen not only as “Black” people, and therefore “prey,” they were also seen as individuals who would further stress the economy. This is evident in the decidedly racist refusal to consider Haitian boat migrants as political refugees (unlike their Cuban counterparts, who were granted political asylum when they arrived on the shores of the U.S.). Instead, Haitians were deemed “economic” refugees, which Flore Zéphir notes, “ignored the correlation between the political situation and the economic condition in Haiti.”<sup>318</sup> As a result of racists, classist, and xenophobic fears of migrant Black bodies, and growing anti-Haitian immigrant sentiments dominated the news media and swept areas with high populations of Haitian people, including New York, during the 1980s-1990s.<sup>319,320</sup> Haitian-Americans, including Rejin Leys, galvanized around the plight of Haitian boat migrants, named “boat people” by media outlets. Many of the Haitian boat migrants, who arrived to the U.S. in search of political and economic asylum, were

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<sup>317</sup> Edwidge Danticat, “Enough is Enough,” in *The New Yorker*, November 26, 2014. Danticat’s essay attempts to place the deaths of these Black men in conversation with the then recent decision to not indict Officer Darren Wilson in the shooting death of Michael Brown.

<sup>318</sup> Zéphir, 78.

<sup>319</sup> Sociologist Alex Stepick, in a 1990 ethnographic report on Haitians in Miami prepared by the Center for Survey Methods Research (Bureau of Census), notes the first detection of a Haitian boat of refugees in September 1963. Boats of refugees would also be detected in the 1973, 1977, and between 1977-1981. See Alex Stepick and Carol Dutton Stepick, “Ethnographic Exploratory Research Report #11: What’s In It For Me? What’s in it for You?: Ethnographic Research on the Possible Undercount of Haitians in Miami,” *Report for Joint Statistical Agreement 88-26*, Prepared by Center for Survey Methods Research, Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C., 1990.

<sup>320</sup> See Nina Glick-Schiller, “Forward: Locality, Globility and Popularization of a Diasporic Consciousness: Learning from the Haitian Case,” in Régine O. Jackson, editor, *Geographies of the Haitian Diaspora*, (New York and London: Routledge Press, 2011), pp. XXI-XXIX



denied access to the U.S., some after a stay in Guantanamo Bay.<sup>321</sup> Haitians in New York as well as Haitians in other cities, organized on behalf of Haitian detainees and the growing racial and ethnic stigmatization that Haitian people were suspect to in the 1980s and into the 1990s.<sup>322</sup> Haitians were not only represented as illegal boat people, they were

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<sup>321</sup> Some boats would simply be returned back to Haiti. A Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report to Congress written by Ruth Ellen Wasem, Specialist in Immigration Policy, states that the arrival of undocumented Haitian immigrants by sea to the U.S. dates back to the late 1970s. The report (which uses the language of Haitian “boat people”) also documents the shifts in reception, interdiction policies (stop and search by sea) and policies enacted by various Presidential Administrations. Of note is the 1981 agreement established between the Reagan Administration and Jean-Claude Duvalier, which established the first program to interdict boats suspected of carrying undocumented Haitians. Between 1981-1990 22,940 Haitians were interdicted at sea by the Coast Guard. However, Flore Zéphir cites a CNN reports that claim over 67,000 “boat people” were intercepted during 1991 (Zéphir, *The Haitian Americans* 2007).

During the administration of President George H.W. Bush Haitians interdicted by the Coast Guard were taken to Guantanamo to be pre-screened for asylum in the U.S. Many of these migrants were labeled as “economic refugees” and thus denied political asylum in the U.S. The detention of Haitians at Guantanamo also included the forced detention of all Haitians immigrants who tested HIV positive, a policy enacted on the bases that Haitians were one of the “four Hs” that carried HIV: homosexuals, hemophiliacs, heroine addicts, and Haitians.

Boat migration remains a practice to this day, with the U.S. Coast Guard citing 1,103 interdictions of Haitians during Fiscal Year (FY) 2014, a number second only to Cuban interdictions. From 2009-2011, Haiti led the numbers of interdictions with 1,782 (FY2009), 1,377 (FY2010), and 1,137 (FY 2011). The number dropped dramatically during FY 2012 (977) and 2013 (508), perhaps due to the granting of Temporary Protected Status. For more on U.S. policies towards Haitian immigrants see: Ruth Ellen Wasem, “U.S. Immigration Policy on Haitian Migrants. (Congressional Research Service Report),” *Congressional Research Service (CRS) Reports and Issue Briefs*, 2011, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Reports and Issue Briefs, May, 2011; U.S. Coast Guard, “Alien Migrant Interdiction: Maritime Migrant Interdictions,” last updated May 31, 2015, <http://www.uscg.mil/hq/cg531/AMIO/FlowStats/currentstats.asp>; “The Guantanamo Bay Public Memory Project,” last updated August 15, 2015, <http://gitmomemory.org/>; Thomas D. Boswell, “The New Haitian Diaspora: Florida’s Most Recent Residents,” in *Caribbean Review*, Vol. 11, Issue 1 (1982), 18-21; and Jana Evans Braziel, “Haiti, Guantánamo, and the ‘One Indispensable Nation’: U.S. Imperialism, ‘Apparent States,’ and Postcolonial Problematics of Sovereignty,” in *Cultural Critique* No. 64 (Autumn, 2006): 127-160.

<sup>322</sup> For more on how Haitians in various parts of the Americas organized on behalf of Haitian boat migrants see Tatiana Wah and François Pierre-Louise, “Evolution of Haitian Immigrant Organizations and Community Development in New York City,” in *The Journal of Haitian Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1, (2004):146-164; and Régine O. Jackson, “The Uses of Diaspora among Haitians in Boston” and Chantalle F. Verna, “Haitian Migration and Community-Building in Southeastern Michigan, 1966-1998,” in *Geographies of the Haitian Diaspora*, ed. Régine O. Jackson (New York and London: Routledge Press, 2011).

also being accused of being HIV/AIDS carriers. Sociologist Régine O. Jackson

describes the confluence of media presentations of Haitian people:

Keep in mind that Haitians were making national headlines within the media coverage of desperate asylum seekers washing up on Florida's shores, the designation of Haitians as AIDS carriers by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the ousting of Jean-Claude Duvalier in 1986. In the popular imagination, Haitians came to be regarded as impoverished, AIDS-infested 'boat people.'<sup>323</sup>

In effect, Haitians were being characterized through the language of contagion.<sup>324</sup>

Performance studies scholar Barbara Browning notes that rhetorics of infection and contagion have been strategically deployed when discussing the migration of African diasporic peoples and cultures. Browning writes, "[t]he metaphor of African influence as cultural contagion was constructed in the West in an effort (largely unconscious) to contain or control diasporic flows, whether migrational or cultural."<sup>325</sup> Haiti and Haitian people were thusly viewed as politically and physically unstable and "infectious" bodies that posed a threat to America's geographic and corporeal borders.<sup>326</sup>

Rejin Leys became an active part of the New York organizing scene during this climate of the New York Haitian Dyaspora's anti-racist protests against Haitian people's perceived "contamination" of the U.S. citizenry. Leys and her future husband Andre Elizée met around this time of heavy organizing. Elizée was 11 years Leys's senior, a

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<sup>323</sup> Régine O. Jackson, "The Uses of Diaspora among Haitians in Boston," in *Geographies of the Haitian Diaspora*, ed. Régine O. Jackson (New York and London: Routledge Press, 2011), 151.

<sup>324</sup> For a discussion on Haitians and the language of contagion and/or infection, see Barbara Browning, *Infectious Rhythms: Metaphors of Contagion and the Spread of African Culture* (New York and London: Routledge Press, 1998) and Paul Farmer, *AIDS and Accusation: The Geography of Haiti and Blame* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>325</sup> Barbara Browning, *Infectious Rhythm: Metaphors of Contagion and the Spread of African Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge Press, 1998), 54.

<sup>326</sup> For more on the HIV/AIDS crisis and how it informed racist and exotic rhetoric about Haiti see Paul Farmer, *AIDS & Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1992, 2006).

longtime archivist and intellectual at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and a prominent organizer in New York's Haitian community. Together Leys and Elizée participated in the political happenings occurring in the Brooklyn, NY-based Haitian community:

Andre and I got together in the early 90s, shortly after the first [Jean Bertrand] Aristide coup [1991]. It was a time when a lot of Haitians felt it was their responsibility to make their voices heard, and showed up to rallies and marches every day. There were weekly organizing meetings; there were debates that were scheduled at the last minute but could still pack a school auditorium.<sup>327</sup>

The Leys-Elizée Brooklyn home became a gathering place for Haitian intelligentsia, artists, community members and radicals. Elizée and Leys hosted figures such as Chevannes Jean-Baptiste, leader of the *Mouvman Peyizan Papay* (*The Papaye Peasant Movement*, MPP), an independent grassroots organization that mobilizes small farmers and peasants in order to improve their living conditions. The Leys-Elizée home served as a hub for organizing talks, fundraisers, and direct action efforts in support of MPP as well as the pro-Aristide movements. Their home joined what urban planner Tatiana Wah and political scientist François Pierre-Louis total as the nearly 300 formally recognized, and countless informally recognized, Haiti-based organizations that existed in New York in the 1990s.<sup>328</sup> All of these organizations, formal or informal, functioned as Diasporic lakous where people mobilized around a growing sense of “culture and identity that [...] helped them [Haitians in New York] in times of crisis, enabling them to gather quickly to

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<sup>327</sup> Rejin Leys in conversation with the author, August 2014. Aristide was the first democratically elected president in Haiti following the Duvalier regime.

<sup>328</sup> These organizations were a combination of private, student-, and church-based social, policy, and advocacy organizations. See Tatiana Wah and François Pierre-Louis, “Evolution of Haitian Immigrant Organizations and Community Development in New York City,” in *The Journal of Haitian Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1, (2004): 146-164.

respond to issues at a political level.”<sup>329</sup> In this way, these Haitian Diasporic lakous became Diasporic *poto mitans*, what Charlene Désir describes as, “the centerpost—that brings strength to all parts of the surroundings, including all aspects of family and community life.”<sup>330</sup> Thusly, the Leys-Elizée home embodied the praxis of the Diasporic lakou, becoming both a place of gathering and a space that embodied the “theoretical and social framework,”<sup>331</sup> of the lakou in its vigilant focus on creating and sustaining an extended kinship of organizers, both in Brooklyn and in Haiti, with the MPP. Moreover, in concentrating their efforts on political engagement and the independent movements of rural farmers, the Diasporic lakou paralleled the original 19<sup>th</sup> century development of the lakou, as previously discussed by historian, Laurent Dubois. In other words, the lakou continued to be a place that rallied against the exploitation of the poor majority.

Leys’s most graphic and acclaimed work emerged during this period of lakou-based activism, her “The Ties That Bind” series (1994) that connected early 90s migration of Haitians by boat, and their subsequent detainment at Guantanamo, to issues of migration, diaspora, criminal injustice, and the Atlantic Slave Trade. “The Ties That Bind” (“*Ties*”) series<sup>332</sup> presents a continued emphasis on simplicity, form, and the use of seemingly banal geometrical patterns to represent the most pressing concerns of the

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<sup>329</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>330</sup> Charlene Désir, “Diasporic Lakou,” 282.

<sup>331</sup> The *lakou* is a multifunctional space that can be both a place of social gathering and/or a place where family-community rituals may be held. My own family lakou in Deschappelle has simultaneously been a stage for business transactions between community farmers, ceremonies for the dead, and places for “deep hanging.” For more on Haitian *lakous* see: Elizabeth McAlister, *Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and Its Diaspora*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002); Claudine Michel, “Vodou: Theory and Praxis in Conversation,” Paper presented at the International Colloquium IX of the Congress of Santa Barbara (KOSANBA), Mirebalais, Haiti, July 2009; and Jennie M. Smith, *When the Hands Are Many: Community Organization and Social Change in Rural Haiti*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

<sup>332</sup> Due to the lack of archival images, image “IV” of six part series is pictured here.

lakou. Leys's *Ties* series was fashioned out of the conversations that were being held in her Diasporic lakou, this time with a focus on the plight of Haitian migrants.



**Figure 17:** Rejin Leys, *The Ties That Bind IV*, 1994, mixed media collage, 19" x 16"

The principal image of *Ties* (Figure 17) presents the relief print of a boat, which occupies the majority of the collage. The boat is a simple black parallelogram but nonetheless remains a popular “afrotrope”<sup>333</sup> that grounds the print in the shared African history of forced transatlantic migration. The lines of the boat reveal the physical labor of Leys’s hands, the many scores that she produced on the cardboard in order to create the texture of wood. It is the textured element of the ship that transforms a mere

<sup>333</sup> My use of this term “afrotrope” is borrowed from the Art History course of the same title co-taught by Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson in the Fall of 2011. Art History 460: “Afrotropes,” considered, “how and why certain visual tropes recur within and have become central to the formation of modern African diasporic culture and identity” (course syllabus). I invoke afrotrope here to speak to the visual resonance of boats, migration, and water within the African diaspora and the ways that Leys’s work invokes the ideations first proposed in the course.

parallelogram into a boat. The ship is given life by Leys's hands, anthropomorphized, without a formal head, arms, or legs, the ship is made human through the black feet that sprout from beneath it. The feet seem delicate, they do not rest flatly on the ground, rather they are on their balls, approximating a half demi-pointe position. Dance historian Brenda Dixon-Gottschild in her study *The Black Dancing Body* argues that within the world of dance, "the feet seem to hold a key to understanding the dance values of several cultures."<sup>334</sup> Mastery of the feet—from African-American tap, to Indian classical, to ballet—is a process of aesthetic "enculturation" whereby "the feet can be educated and disciplined to the 'correct' aesthetic position."

If the feet are aesthetic agents of enculturation and are capable of teaching us the dances and, I would argue, the cultural values of a group, what do the Black dancing feet of this ship have to tell us about the culture from which they emerge? The feet tread delicately upon the "floor" of the collage, a floor fashioned out of a seabed of alternating slave ships and bones. The slave ships are cutouts of the 18<sup>th</sup> century engraving of the Brookes slave ship, which famously displayed African bodies lined up in the interiors of the ship as it crossed the middle passage. The feet perform a somber motion upon the bones and memories of the enslaved Africans trafficked across the waters. The anthropomorphized ship, a literal "boat person," is an emblematic manifestation of what cultural scholar Paul Gilroy terms "the black atlantic;" it "desire[s] to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity."<sup>335</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 131.

<sup>335</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993), 19.

I would add here that the black Atlantic, as refigured in Leys's *Ties* not only gestures to the "living means by which points of the Atlantic world were joined,"<sup>336</sup> it also gestures to the ways that the Atlantic is the place where the living and the dead are joined. The lakou, as I have detailed earlier in this chapter, was traditionally a space that housed extended members of a family and where the family cemetery was typically located.<sup>337</sup> The proximity of the dead to the living is what performer and filmmaker Maya Deren has referred to as "the beginning: [death is] the condition of [man's] first consciousness of self as living. Death is life's first and final destination."<sup>338</sup> Death is a continuation of life, and the dead are the foundations for the lakou. Yet, there is a second aspect of death/dying in which the sea becomes critical and *also* serves as a final resting place. Within a Haitian Vodou context, after death, the physical body is mourned and buried, but it is believed that a part of the spirit, the *ti bon anj* (literally, the little good angel), goes beneath the water. It is underneath the water, *anba dlo*, where ancestral *Ginen* (Africa) resides and where the spirits return after death. Leys's *Ties* moves through the water and honors the veil between the living and the death, but it also mourns the actual and metaphysical ways that the "Atlantic ocean itself [is] a giant graveyard for those lost on the Middle passage, as a site of ancestral death and memory."<sup>339</sup> *Ties* gives knowledge to *Ginen* and the spirits beneath the water.

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>337</sup> Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, email communication, October 8, 2015.

<sup>338</sup> Maya Deren, *Divine Horseman: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New Paltz, NY: McPherson & Company, 1983), 23.

<sup>339</sup> Erol Josué, Laurent Dubois and Jacques Pierre, "Depi m soti nan Ginen" ("Since I Left Africa") in *Transitions*, No. 111, New Narratives of Haiti (2013): 3.

The anthropomorphized “boat person,” who walks on a foundation of slave ships and bones, functions as a reminder that “slavery is never quite in the past”<sup>340</sup> and that the black Atlantic is the birth place and grave to many of us. Yet, while the collage does capture a sense of a larger black Atlantic connectivity, we must also acknowledge the ways in which the piece makes direct associations to Haiti and the plight of boat migrants during the 1990s. This is overtly evidenced in the “boat person,” which, during the work’s unveiling in 1994, would have been synonymous with the diminutive name given to Haitian boat migrants who arrived on U.S. shores. Indeed, in the collage, the black Atlantic and shared African diasporic experience of the middle passage couches Leys’s comments on the plight of Haitian migrants. This continuity of (forced) migration is evidenced in the “frame” of the image of the blood red citational reference to the “middle passage” and “windward passage.”<sup>341</sup> These passages which frame the experience of the “boat person” are reminders of the continued violences and parallels between the slave trade and the contemporary boat passage of Haitians from Haiti to the U.S. and other areas of the Caribbean. Thus, the shared afrotrope of boats and migration by boats is a way of discussing the present-day voyages of Haitian people, who themselves were migrating not of their own volition, but because of the deadly combination of political and neoliberal forces at work in Haiti.

Yet, the contemporary asylum seekers of *Ties* are/were kept out of the nation, as told by the barbed wired fences that are the backdrop to *Ties That Bind*. The barbed wire, which we saw earlier in Leys’s *Security*, is a repeated trope that viscerally pricks us. We

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<sup>340</sup> Krista Thompson and Huey Copeland, “Perpetual Returns: New World Slavery and the Matter of the Visual” in *Representations*, Vol. 113, No. 1 (Winter 2011): 6.

<sup>341</sup> The windward passage is the straight that passes between the eastern tip of Cuba and the northwestern tip of Haiti.



are left imagining the ways that these wires provide a false and bloody division between borders, nations, and people. Haitian boat migrants were refused admissions to the U.S. on the basis that undocumented aliens posed a “serious national problem detrimental to the interests of the United States.”<sup>342</sup> In many ways, such an anti-immigrant stance and a hyperfocus on protecting U.S. borders highlight performance studies scholar May Joseph’s claims that “[c]itizenship is an ambiguous process vulnerable to changes in government and policy.”<sup>343</sup> This ambiguity towards Black boat migrants (enslaved Africans and Haitian boat migrants) is not lost upon Leys. Through the blood-red sail of the boat-person printed on stock report clippings, Leys pairs the U.S. disavowal of Haitian immigrants in the 1990s with the U.S. economic prosperity generated from the middle passage, suggesting not only the national wealth produced by the slave economy, but its continued vestiges in large corporations whose capital was formed in part (or whole) by the profits of slave plantations. Leys gestures to the irony of the black Atlantic experience as seen through the Haitian Diasporic body—that the ghosts and perils of sea voyages remain today and that the Black Atlantic body is still a body in crisis.

*Ties that Bind* is not only a way of discussing the Black Atlantic body; it distills the Diasporic organizing and sentiments around U.S. policies towards Haiti around the time of its creation. The protest-based series is a symbiosis of art and political praxis, reaffirming the ways that the Haitian Diaspora rallied *through* art in their efforts to raise

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<sup>342</sup> These statement was made by President Ronald Reagan in 1981, during an early period when Haitian boat migrants were being intercepted at sea and sent back to Haiti. Cited in Bill Ong Hing, *Defining America Through Immigration Policy*, (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2004), 147.

<sup>343</sup> Joseph, *Nodamic Citizenship*, 3.

awareness and support Haitian people. The blending of art and social commentary to address Haitian culture is what Haitian art historian and cultural critic Jerry Philogene, while speaking of Leys's *Ties*, has called a "visual diaspora" that "resonate[s] with a sense of cultural memory, survival, and historical reflection [,] artfully comment[ing] on the ills of oppression, political injustices, labor exploitation, and economic poverty endemic to various cultures of African descent, especially that of Haitian culture."<sup>344</sup> I suggest that for scholars such as Philogene and commentators such as New York Times art critic Holland Cotter who described Leys's *The Ties That Bind* as "merging the past and present,"<sup>345</sup> what attracts and attracted them to Leys's work of the 1990s was not only its material qualities, but its ability to produce multi-referential works that conjure the "here" and "there" of Dyaspora, but through accessible and muted forms that are disarming in their repetition: barbed wire, geometrical patterns fashioned to create boats, and a reductive pallet of color that plays with "hot" and "cold": reds, blacks, and tans.<sup>346</sup> In other words, Leys's ability to produce a visual diaspora and to merge the past and present is made possible by an aesthetic of the lakou that is both spatially simple but relationally complex—tying together histories and bodies through forms that when used become vehicles for bridging multiple histories and people—Haitians in Guantanamo with Haitians in Brooklyn; Haitians in Haiti with Africans on the continent; the living and the dead. Leys's work demands that we open our lakous to a greater and interconnected

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<sup>344</sup> Jerry Philogene, "Visual Narratives of Cultural Memory and Diasporic Identities: Contemporary Haitian American Artists," *Small Axe*, Vol. 8, No. 2, (September 2004): 87.

<sup>345</sup> Holland Cotter, "Art Review; Eclectic Group New to the Limelight," *The New York Times*, August 11, 1995.

<sup>346</sup> I discuss the aesthetics of the hot and cold in the previous chapter.

set of histories. These histories, in turn, ask that we question the very borders that we die and kill protecting.

*Ties that Bind* is one of the few pieces from Leys political work of the 1990s that survives. The works that she produced were often ephemeral pieces created within and around her Dyasporic lakou's political organizing. She massed-produced images anonymously that would eventually be used for movement posters, pamphlets, and t-shirts.<sup>347</sup> These works were assembled in the shared workforce of the Dyasporic lakou:

There were a lot of intersections [in the work]: there were a lot of graphics on the flyers [Elizée] wrote [...] There was always a lot of support if they wanted to raise money to print the flyers or rent a room to do a program, or [if] I wanted to work on a graphic for a t-shirt, he would get the guys to go and buy some boxes of shirts and then have people come to the studio to help me print. I don't know that I would have felt so at ease if it wasn't him. I don't know that I would have felt at ease telling someone else, "Okay, now go get shirts!" (*Leys laughs*).<sup>348</sup>

Leys's memories of this period describe the lakou space as a multi-gendered cooperative work force where labor was distributed amongst all participants. Moreover, although individuals were gathered for a serious matter—to produce politically charged artifacts—joy was central to the work. This amalgamation of joy and forms of labor are echoed in

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<sup>347</sup> The praise and attachment of her name to the project was less important than the effect of the work itself, "[i]t was really gratifying that I was able to use my skills and help. I'm not gonna take credit for [the art], I got to give people images to [help them] understand the issue or rally around the issues so it's nice that I was able to use my skills that way." Leys also failed to document much of this anonymous work. The work often circulated throughout the Haitian community and, even to this day, reappears from time-to-time. During one of our interviews Leys relayed the experience of having seen one of the anti-Guantanamo t-shirts that she produced in the 1990s being worn by a passerby years later in the mid-to-late 2000s. Furthermore in the summer of 2015 she received an email invitation to the centennial anniversary of the U.S. occupation of Haiti (1915-1934). Leys had the uncanny experience of seeing an image she had printed being used as the central design on the invite. These recurring images exemplify the use of her skills to influence the ideas of others. However, I would argue that the anonymous circulation of her work also raises the question of the appropriation and consumption of female labor and artistry in an already male-dominated field.

<sup>348</sup> Leys in conversation with the author, August 2015

the Haitian lakou, in the forms of “mutual self-help”<sup>349</sup> known as the *konbit* or *Société Congo*. Anthropologist Melville Herskovits describes these collective work forces through the language of labor and joy arguing, “though strenuous physical labor is involved in the work of the konbit, for the Haitian it symbolizes recreation and enjoyment—the stimulus of working with one’s fellows, the pleasure of gossiping with friends, and the partaking of the feast which marks the climax of the day.”<sup>350</sup>

The affective spirit of the konbit, a structure that emerges from the lakou model of collective care, is reproduced in New York’s Haitian Diasporic lakous of the 1990s, where individuals were applying their various skill sets (i.e. running to get materials; raising funds; writing, etc.) in order to do the work they believed would help support Haitian people and bring about liberation. The effect and affect of this collaboration is what performance studies scholar Jill Dolan defines as “utopian performatives,” the “small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense.”<sup>351</sup> In the case of the Diasporic lakou’s collective workforce, the utopian performative extends beyond the staged performance and is instead made by the collective work (the performance) of the

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<sup>349</sup> Melville Herskovitz, *Life in a Haitian Valley* (New York, NY: Alfred A Knopf, 1937), 70. Herskovitz differentiates the kombite from the société Congo by region. He attests that the kombite is the term given to the Mirebalais region (in the central west Haiti) while société Congo is the name used elsewhere in Haiti.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid.

<sup>351</sup> Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 5.

art-maker-activists who circulate this affective energy, this sense of hope in being able to change the living conditions of Haitian people.

Despite the utopian spirit that circulated through the Diasporic lakou, Leys's efforts to organize on behalf of changing the living conditions of Haitian people led to a cycle of output—witnessing, protesting, and visually responding—that eventually left Leys burnt-out and creatively empty. The fatigue was a collective one. The Diasporic lakou of the Leys-Elizée household eventually tapered. In retrospect, Leys acknowledges that there was a lot of Diasporic guilt around these feeling of being burnt out; an acknowledgement that to make a living in the U.S. *and* to politically support and mobilize on behalf of Haiti and Haitian people meant having to make material sacrifices that often pitted one's ethical and practical commitments. Leys states:

There were people who lost their jobs because they were literally in front of the U.N. everyday all day protesting. They pretty much gave their lives to trying to end the occupation and forced the U.N. to bring Aristide back and then got completely burnt out and I think there was a lot of guilt too in either having dropped all your responsibilities from your life here because you needed to move back, or guilt to stay that active in them and you had to go back to pay the rent and make sure that your kid[s] were....I dunno, a lot of people had to go back to their daily lives, and I think there was a lot of guilt that they weren't able to accomplish what we needed to [...]<sup>352</sup>

The 1990s were a period of heavy activism that demonstrated the complexities of being here and organizing on behalf of friends, family, and comrades there, back in Haiti. Haitians in Dyaspora attempted to bridge this work by building Diasporic lakous, networks of organizers who shared in the labor and the political work of mobilizing on behalf of rights and representation for Haitian people, particularly those boat migrants who were interred at Guantanamo. In her reflections on this period, Leys demonstrates a

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<sup>352</sup> Rejin Leys in conversation with the author, August 2015.

shared sense of Diasporic guilt and ineffectivity for being unable to effect sweeping political changes for Haiti. Leys's personal feelings of Diasporic guilt and ineffectivity would resurface following the passing of her husband, her constant co-organizer in Diasporic political efforts.

In the final section of this chapter, I explore how the passing of Andre Elizée on January 10, 2010, has influenced Leys's current body of work. I focus especially on Leys's "100 Drawings" series, a daily drawing project that she began following Elizée's transition.<sup>353</sup> I read Leys's work and mourning as a respite period where she went further into the interior of the lakou, her own personal *ounfò*, spiritual dwelling and altar space. I examine several images that emerged from this period and how they subtly embrace a Vodou-aesthetic of contemplation, mourning, and mediation.

### ***Mourning in the Lakou: 100 (Repetitive) Drawings***

As news and shock over the January 2010 earthquake spread, Leys negotiated the public mourning of her husband and her own desire for quiet space. Eulogies for Elizée paint him as a deeply invested cultural workers who was a strong influence on the intellectual, social, and political history of not only New York's Haitian community, but also the greater pan-African network. While Leys's loss was public and both Haitians and non-Haitians expressed condolences, Leys remained private in her grief.<sup>354</sup> The months

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<sup>353</sup> I use "transition" because it seems to be the only term that makes sense here. "Death" is too final for Elizée's life and he continues to affect/effect Leys' life even after his material body has been buried. Transition, thus, marks the movement of Elizée from the physical world to a metaphysical presence.

<sup>354</sup> This fact is highlighted in my own interactions with Leys. While Leys and I formally met and began corresponding in January 2011, it was not until October 2013, that Leys even mentioned that she was married, that she was now a widow, and that her husband had passed around the time of the earthquake.

following Elizée's transition were a dream for her, one that eclipsed any other responses she might have had during the earthquake. "There would have been no response from me at all [about the quake]," Leys said, "I basically slept-walked through at least the first six months because I literally kept thinking that when I wake up in the morning this nightmare will be over, and he'll be next to me so none of this will have happened."<sup>355</sup> Leys spent the next six months after Elizée's passing coming to terms with the "new reality" of her life.<sup>356</sup> She was now a widow, a single mother, and a new transplant to Jamaica, Queens, where she and her family had returned to live in the upper duplex of her mother's home.<sup>357</sup>

The return to the lakou of one's parents is a common occurrence in Haiti, particularly after the death of a spouse.<sup>358</sup> During this time, Leys felt physically and emotionally disconnected from her activist-based Diasporic lakou of the 1990s, which was now working to provide post-quake relief efforts. "I knew I wasn't going anywhere. I wasn't going out. I didn't want to do anything."<sup>359</sup> Leys disengaged with her former lakou and, in a sense, the earthquake. It was during this period of self-imposed isolation/mourning that Leys found herself turning more towards her artwork with an

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<sup>355</sup> Ibid.

<sup>356</sup> Ibid.

<sup>357</sup> Leys, Elizée and their son George moved to Jamaica, Queens in the late fall of 2009, 3 months before Elizée's passing. The family moved into the top floor of a two family house, owned by Leys's mother who lives on the bottom floor.

<sup>358</sup> See George Eaton Simpson, "Sexual and Familial Institutions in Northern Haiti," in *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 44, No. 4, Part 1 (Oct.-Dec., 1942): 655-674; S. Comhaire-Sylvain, "The Household in Kenscoff, Haiti," in *Social and Economic Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (June 1961): 192-222; Remy Bastien, "Haitian Rural Family Organization," in *Social and Economic Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 4, (Dec. 1961): 478-510; and Yanique M. Edmond, Suzanne M. Randolph, and Guylaine L. Richard, "The Lakou System: A Cultural, Ecological Analysis of Mothering in Rural Haiti," in *The Journal of Pan-African Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1, (Nov. 2007): 19-32.

<sup>359</sup> Leys in conversation with the author, August 2015.

emphasis on form and freedom. In the death of her husband she experienced a personal loss that engendered her own mortality:

[My husband dying] that's really what changed everything for me. I could barely think or work for at least a year, but when I got back to it, it was with a greater sense of urgency. I felt like everyday could be my last one, too, so I didn't want to waste that time. But I also felt a sense of freedom to make what I really wanted to make, without having to worry about where it would fit within the narrative of my work or within the art world.<sup>360</sup>

In her study of trauma, scholar Cathy Caruth asks us to consider: what does it mean to survive, and what is the guilt of having been passed over by death?<sup>361</sup> These are the very questions of traumatic departure that Leys describes following Elizée's passing. The answer to "what does it mean to survive?" is one that led her to return to her art making practice. Death's overhang resulted in a *new* approach to art making that was uninhibited and a departure from Leys's old form(s). Pre-Elizée's passing, Leys's art practice typically involved an organic movement and exploration between one idea and the next, where "nothing is actually ever really finished," and "everything kind of goes in the bag and kind of pops out at anytime," particularly when she is stuck.<sup>362</sup> We can see this in *Ties that Bind* and *Security* as well as Leys's reuse of particular images such as barbed wires, a simplicity of geometric forms (i.e. trapezoids which become boats or houses), and a repetition of texts. The repetition of images often left Leys feeling as though the work was never over. Projects never culminated in a "finished" product

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<sup>360</sup> Email communication with the author, August 2014.

<sup>361</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore, MD and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

<sup>362</sup> Rejin Leys in conversation with the author, October 2014.



because as she states, “I don’t really get closure [on a project]...there’s no clear break between one thing and the next.”<sup>363</sup>

In the months that followed Elizée’s passing, Leys produced images that continued to repeat particular forms. However these repetitions were more deliberate. Leys moved away from an earlier overtly political and “didactic”<sup>364</sup> aesthetic, in favor of work that *felt good* to create. Her 2010 linoleum print, *Will Rice Accept You?* (Figure 18) submitted for the *ArtQuake (AQ)* print portfolio exemplifies this new aesthetic.<sup>365</sup>



**Figure 18:** Rejin Leys, *Will Rice Accept You?*  
2010, Linoleum print, 19” ¼ x 13” ½

<sup>363</sup> Ibid.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid.

<sup>365</sup> Although Leys is credited with the idea of assembling a culturally diverse group of printmakers, the execution of the print portfolio fundraiser on behalf of the Haitian earthquake was orchestrated by Vladimir Cybil, because, as Leys herself notes, she was too distraught over Elizée’s passing to negotiate the details of the project or to contact organizations in Haiti that the portfolio’s sales could support.

The silhouette of a gold chicken takes up the majority of the picture plane. There is no fine detail to the animal. We know it is a chicken because of the familiarity of the shape: the pronged feet and the erect head that ends in a pointed noise. The gold chicken hovers several inches above the bottom of the picture plane. Beneath it is a faint circle and a series of six reddish-brown bean or kidney-like objects. It is only by getting close to the image that you can see the details of the bottom in full, thereby noticing that the circle is rendered through hundreds of pencil-drawn rice granules. If you remain close to the image, you begin to notice how good it feels (how composed *you* feel) looking at the print—getting lost in the white paper, the gold chicken, trying to count the rice granules, and creating a story for how the beans landed in their current positions. As *I* linger on the image, I am thrown into memories of large meals—*poule kreyòl avec diri a pwa kole* (creole chicken with rice and beans) prepared for multigenerational families. These are my grandmother’s recipes fashioned in her outdoor cookhouse, reconfigured in my mother’s (and later my own) American kitchen. Like many Diasporic subjects, I am reminded that “[f]or years the only way I recollected Haiti was through food,”<sup>366</sup> produced in our lakous in Brooklyn, New York or Milwaukee, WI. I linger on these images, temporarily suspended in the here/there of the images, forgetting about the continued sense of grief and distance between Haiti and me.

It was this quality of feeling good amidst grief that Leys tried to capture in her repetitive drawings of rice granules, “I found the repetitive quality of that very meditative,” Leys shares, “some people couldn’t do that, but I could draw rice for hours.”

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<sup>366</sup> Gina Athena Ulysse, “Going Home Again and Again and Again,” 268.

Leys comments further:

What I learned during that period was that I couldn't think. I just couldn't think, but I could draw rice. That was very meditative and it kind of took me out of myself. And it offered me time [...] I just had to get through the day [and] if I did this drawing of rice that was one more day.<sup>367</sup>

Leys does not measure her rice drawings in granules but in hours, “how many hours of rice have I drawn?” The emphasis on drawing, and more specifically repetition as a meditation to work through her grief is a stark contrast from her work in the ‘90s. The performance of Leys’s body and the sensation she felt while drawing the same object repeatedly were key to her ritual healing. Cathy Caruth states that repetition “is not simply the attempt to grasp that one has almost died but, more fundamentally and enigmatically, the very attempt *to claim one’s own survival* [sic].”<sup>368</sup> The hours of drawing rice became feats of “endurance” for Leys.<sup>369</sup> “There is something durational about it,” Leys describes, “usually I can’t tell where I started but when I first sit down and start drawing rice I’m a little more tense, they’re a little more jagged; then as I start to relax and get in the zone, then I am drawing more smoothly and getting into a certain pace.”<sup>370</sup> For Leys, then, the act of drawing is a way of entering into the “liminal phase,” what Victor Turner observes as “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremony.”<sup>371</sup> It is this liminal phase, this being “betwixt and between,” that binds Leys’s “100 Drawing” series and her political art of the ‘90s to a larger Dyasporic lakou praxis. Central to the

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<sup>367</sup> Leys in conversation with the Author, August 2015.

<sup>368</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 64.

<sup>369</sup> Leys in conversation with the author, December 2016.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid.

<sup>371</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), 95.

collective practice of the 1990s and her personal practice in 2010, is the experience of being between the here and there—between Haiti and the U.S., between life and death, and between feeling “good,” and feeling “bad.” The lakou is capable of holding the here(s) and there(s) by allowing us to perform our dislocation in concert *with* others in the in-between space. Death, mourning, agricultural work, laughter, joy, and frustration—these are the dramas that populate the lakou and enable *communitas*. While Leys’s work in the 90s occurred with others and on behalf of Haitian migrants, in 2010, this work occurred with the metaphysical—the spirit of Elizée and the omnipotence of grief. The repetition of Leys’s drawing was a conduit for transcending the sorrow. This was the ritual of repetition.

Repetition is labor. Performance studies teaches us to honor repetition as embodied acts of artistic, intellectual, and sacred depth. Repetition as performance is observed in the very articulations of everyday life, for as performance studies scholar Richard Schechner has argued, performance is “restored behavior.” Schechner explains, “[t]he habits, rituals, and routines of life are restored behaviors [...] Restored behavior is the key process of every kind of performing life, in healing, in ritual, in play and in the arts.”<sup>372</sup> These events are a (re)combination, (re)creation, and (re)articulation of the same process, gestures, symbolic and benign actions. Performance studies scholars Eirini Kartsaki and Theron Schmidt further explore the concept of repetition. They write:

We might think of performance as the art of the ‘re’: from the labour [sic] of rehearsal and systems for remembering the broad spectrum of restored behaviors that are ‘not for the first time’; from tragic scenes of recognition and reversal to conventions of citation and recitation; from the dreams of

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<sup>372</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London and New York, NY: Routledge Press, 2003), 28.

representation without reproduction to the ethics of reenactment and the care for what remains.<sup>373</sup>

Kartsaki, Schmidt, and Schechner extend performance beyond stages and into the domain of everyday life. These include the “scenes” of trauma that reperform themselves on the global stage (i.e. scenes of Haitian “boat people”) to the “care that remains” for the recently deceased and the performances of mourning that rely on repetition in order to make us feel whole and reordered.

The concept of restored behavior is quite useful for discussing Leys’s work following the death of her husband as a vital aspect of her mourning. Leys’s continued focus on drawing hundreds of granules of rice over the course of a day, reprinting the same outline of a chicken, or painting kidney beans are repeated performances. On the outside the actions remain the same, a dance between the artists, her art supplies, and a few visual tropes. Yet from the inside, Leys *felt* the work of this repetition—each action, though outwardly similar, became a step closer towards completing her day, surviving life without her partner. The repetition becomes critically different in that it enables Leys to see a possible future for herself without her now-deceased husband.<sup>374</sup>

Leys’s printmaking after Elizée’s passing was a performative break that provided her a structured space for mourning her husband and creating artwork that had a definite end. The structured practice of art-making, for Leys, is concretized in her *100 Drawing Series*, which she formally began in January 2011 (a year after Elizée’s passing and the earthquake). The *100 Drawings Series* found Leys continuing to experiment with abstract

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<sup>373</sup> Eirini Kartsaki and Theron Schmidt, “Editorial: On Repetition,” in *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, Vol. 20, No. 5 (September 2015), 1.

<sup>374</sup> My gesture towards repletion as critically different cites the Linda Hutcheon and her discussion of parody as “repetition with a critical difference.” See Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuan Press, 1985), 2-7.

form rather than producing work that was a direct response to an event (i.e. Haitian rights). The series was a personal challenge for Leys, one where she had to produce a work of art each day. This structure allowed Leys “to get myself outside of myself and make myself continue or make myself get back to work.”<sup>375</sup> The performed ritual of making art, for no clearly defined audience but herself and anyone who might follow or stumble upon her website, was a self-healing practice for creating art regardless of whether or not she “felt like it.”<sup>376</sup> The practice reflects what British dancer and performance artist Rachel Gomme articulates as “a repetitive engagement with the material [...] located in a continually alive present, consistently required to attend.”<sup>377</sup> There is an “intense pleasure” in being “forced back into the moment,”<sup>378</sup> and this is made possible through the direct working of the material—the repetitive creation.

Leys’s series undergirds an urgent need for repetitive creation, for transformation through the materiality of the work. The series, therefore, has its conceptual roots in performances of/as ritual. Richard Schechner defines performance as “ritualized behavior conditioned/permeated by play.”<sup>379</sup> Schechner elaborates:

Rituals are a way people remember. Rituals are memories in action, encoded in actions. Rituals also help people (and animals) deal with difficult transitions, ambivalent relationships, hierarchies, and desires that trouble, exceed or violate the norms of daily life.<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>375</sup> Leys in conversation with the author, October 2014.

<sup>376</sup> Ibid.

<sup>377</sup> Rachel Gomme, “Repetition Compulsion: How I learned to Love Doing it Again,” in *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, Vol. 20, No. 5 (September 2015), 10.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid.

<sup>379</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York and London: Routledge Press, 2002), 45.

<sup>380</sup> Ibid.

Leys's desire to mourn her husband was a desire that violated the norms of daily life for Haitian people, when it seemed that much of our Diasporic existence was focused on the January 12, 2010 earthquake. Leys's rituals of mourning were more personal in nature, moving from an outward (re)turn to Haiti and Haitian people and instead towards an inward need to recover from her own loss at home. The focused attention on herself and the sensations of making her work gave Leys a new creative and emotive freedom to play and produce non-literal work.

The return to art as ritual circles back to our idea of the lakou as space capable of holding the social and personal work of healing. Scholars and observers of Haitian Vodou culture, such as Melville Herskovits and Maya Deren have noted how important funerary and death rituals are to maintaining Haitian extended kinship networks. Within the lakou Vodou is a framing device in honoring the dead and mourning our loss. The lakou is host to wakes, funerals, and preparations of the home as well as the body of the deceased. All of these rituals of mourning are methods of ensuring the dead are honored and that the living continue to receive the divine gifts (knowledge and good favor) of the ancestors through their vigilant mourning.<sup>381</sup>

Leys's work typifies the ways that Vodou's aesthetics, at times unknowingly, enter the Diasporic lakou. In a contemporary practice that merges the land, funerary rites, and grief, Leys manages to metaphysically and aesthetically create a visual representation of home through her repetitive calling upon images that are specific to her Haitian cultural background but that also allow cultural groups where rice cultivation and

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<sup>381</sup> See Maya Deren, *Divine Horseman: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New York, NY: McPherson & Company, 1953, 2004), 41-53; and Melville Herskovitz, *Life in a Haitian Valley* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1937), 199-218.

consumption are high to see themselves and their own cultural lacks reflected in the image. For Leys this cultural knowledge is presented as an archive of paper-based images:

Until today I haven't cared for the idea that artists should keep all kinds of junk that we will one day use in our work. But now I have this image of myself traveling through life with an archive of paper. Bits and pieces come out that are *coincidentally relevant*. Periodically I dip into the archive and whatever emerges will influence how I frame the issues of the day [emphasis added].<sup>382</sup>

Leys's expanding archive of papers now includes the recurring motifs of chickens and rice, as well as other objects "in her bag,"<sup>383</sup> such as sketches of skeletons, feathers, and images of stick figured-women. For Leys, these tricks of her craft, which she often returns to when she seeks inspiration or needs to work through being "stuck" in her art practice, are both "coincidentally relevant" objects within her archive as well as objects that she physically enjoys drawing. Vodou, and its predecessors of Yoruba and KiKongo traditions, teach us that there is no such thing as coincidence. The spiritual forces of the universe both "above" (the lwa) and "below" (the ancestors) are always speaking to us vis-a-vis these "coincidences," which we might better understand as performative ruptures of our everyday routines—encouragements to pay attention to our present course of action. Thus, while Leys repeatedly states that she is not a spiritual person and that Vodou is neither a muse nor part of her visual lexicon, it is nearly impossible to *not* read the "coincidental" invocations of Vodou that Leys' drawings produce. Leys's work is informed by a Vodou tradition that places her drawings along the same visual continuum as the sacred ground drawings, or *vèvès*, of Haitian Vodou.

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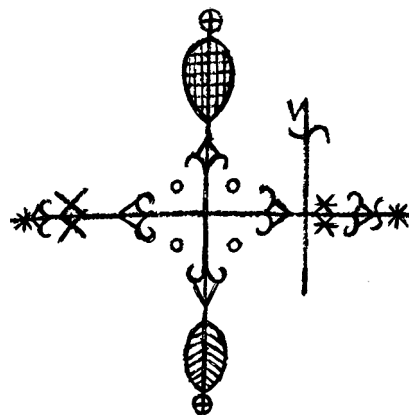
<sup>382</sup> [www.rejinleys.com](http://www.rejinleys.com)

<sup>383</sup> Rejin Leys in conversation with the author, October 2014.



In Vodou, vèvès are drawn to speak to or call upon the lwa. Vèvès are the new world descendants of the Kongo cosmogram drawings (Figure 19), which mark the passage of time, the four phases of the sun, and the separation of the land of the living (the horizontal plane) and the land of the spirits (the vertical plane). It is said that there are over a thousand variations of vèvès, each one calling upon a different lwa to enter the realm of the living—by way of possession, of “riding the horse,” during spiritual ceremonies.

Just as a Vodou *ougan*, or priest, might find a meditation in painfully drawing the ornate patterns of the vèvè in flour or cornmeal upon the ground of the Vodou temple, for Leys, her drawings become both a personal meditation as well as a way of “speaking” to the present day realities and concerns of not only



**Figure 19:** Vèvè for Legba as presented by Maya Deren. Compare this to the images of the KiKongo cosmograms presented in Figures 1 & 2. All three depict the four moments of life and the crossroads.

Haitian people and Haitian women, but more broadly, the disenfranchised, dispossessed, poor, and hungry people of the global south/neo-colonial era. By unintentionally creating images that speak through the coded visual language of Vodou iconography, Leys circles the cosmogram by performing the physical act—the drawing of vèvè or cosmogram-like objects. These objects are loaded ritual signifiers whose primary purpose is to speak something into existence—in the case of the vèvès/cosmograms, it is the spirits, and for Leys, it is a sense of global justice and interconnectivity.

*Emerging Superpowers (It's Not What You Think)* (Figure 20) is one such image that makes (unintentional) use of Vodou references to propound a sense of global and

economic justice and interconnectivity. At the center of *Emerging Superpowers* is the figure of a red hen with a white silhouette. Chickens, and birds, in general are venerated within Yoruba and KiKongo traditions and their New World descendants. According to art historian Babatunde Lawal, the use of animal motifs in Yoruba religious art is meant to “allude to supernatural powers that the human figure cannot adequately express.”<sup>384</sup>

Lawal writes:

According to the Yoruba cosmogony, it was a bird—a five toed chicken given by the Supreme Being [God] to Odùduwà (the progenitor of the Yoruba)--that spread the divine sand over the primordial waters at Ilé-Ifè (the cradle of Yoruba civilization), thus creating solid earth. When the first batch of *òrìsà* was about to leave heaven for the earth, Olódùmarè [God of the heavens] gave the only female among them (Odù) a special power in the form of a bird enclosed in a calabash--apparently to counterbalance the male majority [...] On earth, she used this power so effectively, for both good and evil, that all the male *òrìsà* were obliged to reckon with her.<sup>385</sup>

The chicken represents both the beginnings of the earth and the powers of female-driven sorcery. As Robert Farris Thompson has noted, the power of the visual representation of the chicken is not limited to life but extends well into death rites, where the placement of images of white chickens on the tombs of the Kongo in both Africa and the Americas were meant to honor the deceased while situating their spirits in the land of the dead.<sup>386</sup> In both life and death, birds are “a metaphor for *àse* (the enabling power), which accounts for its prominence in Yoruba religion and rituals.”<sup>387</sup> It is the chicken as

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<sup>384</sup> Babatunde Lawal, “From Africa to the Americas: Art in Yoruba Religion,” in *Santeria Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art*, ed. Arturo Lindsay (Washington D.C. and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 22.

<sup>385</sup> Ibid.

<sup>386</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy*, (New York, NY: First Vintage Books, 1984), 134.

<sup>387</sup> Lawal, 23.

àse (ashe) that makes it such a prominent sacrifice to the spirits of the living and the dead.



**Figure 20:** Rejin Leys, *Emerging Superpowers (It's Not What You Think)*  
Mixed media, 11" x 30", 2011

The red chicken at the center of *Emerging Superpowers* is poised and ready, but for what is unclear. Is the chicken ready to be sacrificed? To act out some magical force that is indicative of the force field that it has created for itself? *Emerging Superpowers* taps into the supernatural power of the chicken. Created towards the end of 2011, but inspired by the food shortage crisis of 2007-2008,<sup>388</sup> Leys's image of the lone chicken, outlined in white and painted the repeating color of ochre or blood red, heightens the sacrificial potency typically associated with the chicken motif. The color red is a charged color in nearly all traditions. Red signifies heat and virility, and its association with blood makes it understandable why red is related to both life and rage, as in the phrases "blood boiling," "hot blooded" or "seeing red."

<sup>388</sup> While Leys ties this piece to the food crises, at this time it was also well documented that earthquake survivors were also battling hunger and the lack of financial resources to purchase food, including rice.

Indeed the red-chicken seems to have effectively shielded (or blasted away) scores of red-outlined rice granules. Perhaps it is no coincidence that both the chicken and the rice are colored red in this image about the food shortages occurring both in Haiti and globally. In Haiti the shortages and increased costs of foods led to rioting across the nation's capital. The heavy rioting was also indicative of the already high costs of local rice in Haiti, the result of USAID policies that have left Haiti with the lowest rice import tariffs in the Caribbean and have flooded the Haitian market with genetically modified U.S. rice that is cheaper to purchase than the locally produced rice in Haiti.<sup>389</sup> When we consider the neoliberal policies that resulted in both the increased cost of food globally, as well as the already devalued cost of local Haitian rice, the full political purview of Leys's *Emerging Superpowers (It's Not What You Think)* comes into being, as do the proverbial "golden eggs" that align either side of the drawing. Images and sayings are blended, and we are, in a way, forced to ask, "which came first, the chicken or the golden egg?" The force field around the chicken includes the golden eggs, and the distance between the two objects suggest that it was not this "goose" that laid these golden nuggets of wealth and luxury. The seeming detachment and simultaneous interrelatedness of the rice, the eggs, and the chicken mirror the seeming detachment but interrelatedness of foreign policy, food shortages, and wealth that are at the heart of *Emerging Superpowers* and Leys's larger food series. As Leys states herself:

[*Emerging Superpowers* is] from late in the food shortage series, when I first began to see the hen not just as a symbol for food but more as a

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<sup>389</sup> See *Poto Mitan: Haitian Women, Pillars of the Global Economy*, directed by Renée Bergan and Mark Schuller (Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources, 2009), DVD; Mark Schuller's "Rasin Neyoliberal Kriz Lavi Chè A (The Neoliberal Roots of Haiti's Food Crisis)," in *The Journal of Haitian Studies*, Volume 17, Issue 1 (April 2011): 140-154; and Robert Buddan's "The World Food Crisis," in *Jamaican Gleaner*, April 13, 2008.

character in her own narrative. We think of animals as food, but they don't see themselves that way, they're just beings going about their business, not knowing their fate. So I kind of saw her as this victimized creature. But playing on 'Superpowers'--which globally are rich countries that have the power to manipulate trade, food policies, populations, etc.--I wanted her (the hen) to develop her own superpowers to protect herself from being a pawn for humans. As I was drawing this, I realized it looked like she had a force field around her repelling the rice, and that maybe if domesticated animals had such force fields and other super powers, that might be the only way they could just be animals instead of commodities<sup>390</sup>.

It is important to note that Leys genders the chicken as feminine—hen. For Leys, the hen moves from being a victimized creature and commodity to becoming an agent capable of protecting itself. Leys's own reading on the politics of food and animal justice is informed by her many years as a vegetarian, yet I also believe that her analysis of the hen can be read within a feminist critique of labor and economic justice in Haiti, the Americas, and across the global south, where women's labor serves to literally reap the food and wealth of their local and extended families and communities. The gendering of the hen takes on greater meaning when we acknowledge that the chicken, as Leys states, is "valued for its parts" more than as a whole.<sup>391</sup>

The subtlety of Leys's work nearly masks her feminist critiques. Perhaps nowhere is this criticism more evident than in the female stick figures that have been an intermittent image in Leys's works since the year 2000. *Not Rocket Science* (Figure 21) features at front and center a black stick figure woman—the kind that might appear on the sign for a bathroom door. She is enclosed in a rectangular palette and behind her are six gold-colored chicken wire fences that together form a large barrier between the

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<sup>390</sup> Email communication with the author, October 2014.

<sup>391</sup> It is also important to note that another reason why Leys uses the hen is so that she does not use the image of the rooster, the symbol of Jean Bertrand-Aristide's Lavalas party. Rejin Leys in conversation with the author, October 2013.

woman in/on a palette and the accumulation of rice behind the barbed wire fence.

The image is a stark contrast from the more abstracted chickens and the masses of rice that occupy Leys's other works. However, *Not Rocket Science*, gestures towards the ways that Leys's aesthetic vocabulary continues to engage with play, politics, and the notions of collective care.

Leys, by her own definition, does not do a lot of "figurative references" in her work. For this reason, the stick figures that occasionally appear in her drawings or collages are ways for her to represent human subjects "without getting all painterly or rendering it all."<sup>392</sup> Consequently, Leys's use of the stick-figured woman is meant to unequivocally position women and women's access (or lack thereof) to not only food—as indicative of the hoard of rice that stands on the other side of the chicken wire—but to Haiti's market economy, which is one that has been traditionally sustained by the labor of women who are in charge of vending, bartering, and buying in area market places, their income often being the sole income for the whole household.<sup>393</sup>

*Not Rocket Science*, similarly to Leys's corpus, does not judge or tell us what to think, instead it asks us to pause and reflect, to read the image and how it might affect/move us. It gestures towards the ways that Leys is exiting her internal lakou and returning /continuing to trace the connections between the lives of Haitians here (in Diaspora) and there (in Haiti). Leys circles us back to the Diasporic lakou praxis,

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<sup>392</sup> Rejin Leys in conversation with the author, October 2014.

<sup>393</sup> See Karen McCarthy Brown's *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), Beverly Bell's *Walking on Fire: Haitian Women's Stories of Survival and Resistance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), and *Poto Mitan: Haitian Women, Pillars of the Global Economy*, directed by Renée Bergan and Mark Schuller (2009, Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources), DVD.

reminding us of the labors of women over there (in Haiti) and why their conditions should matter to us here (in Dyaspora).



**Figure 21:** Rejin Leys, *Not Rocket Science*, mixed media, 14 x 14", April 2014

In reducing her images to their barest components—a stick figure, grains of rice, and chicken wire—Leys manages to create works that upon first viewing seem reductive, but are, in fact, are palimpsests of meaning and evocative of the interconnections between food, power, and finance. In this way, Leys's images produce a similar effect as the Haitian *vèvè*, a layering of ideograms that requires *knowing how* to read the object in order to understand its meaning. I assert that the meditation that Leys finds in producing her work—in tracing hundreds of grains of rice and using her constructions to create visual narratives—is an extension of the work Vodou *serviteurs* (servers of the lwa) undertake as they create the visual narratives of the *vèvè*. Though Leys does not claim to

be inspired by Vodou and is not a practitioner herself, she circles the cosmogram and produces from her art “bag of tricks”<sup>394</sup> objects that, while not deliberately tied to Vodou are part and parcel of Vodou’s lexicon—including the images of chickens, rice, and objects of binding/containment such as the chicken wire. Through this gathering of Vodou iconography, Leys becomes an accidental serviteur, producing images that link her back to Haiti, back to Vodou, and back to a set of visual iconographies that produce meaning both in the sacred and secular realms. These returns are ones that reimagine the force of the lakou—its sacred and secular knowledge(s) being remixed in the here and now. It is an elliptical return to Haiti, a circling of the cosmograms.

### **Conclusion: Rethinking Post-Quake Lakou Participation**

In this chapter I examined the second tactic of circling the cosmograms: the Diasporic lakou praxis. Leys work shows the effort to negotiate the desire to support the political, social, and economic development of Haiti, with the day-to-day challenges of living in the U.S. Furthermore, it highlights the ways that rituals of the lakou, including an attention to extended networks and the importance of rituals processes of/for mourning are critical components in negotiating the tensions between being *here* (the U.S.) and wanting to be/participate in the activities over *there* (Haiti). Leys’s post-quake/Elizée art practice offers us another model for Diasporic participation, one that is able to move back and forth between the lakou’s public and interior spaces.

I continue my examination of Vodou as a framework for art creation in the following chapter. I explore the poetry-performance of Haitian-American lesbian Lenelle

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<sup>394</sup> This notion of the “bag of tricks” takes on greater meaning when we consider that hougans, mambos, and even certain Lwa such as Azaka, the lwa of agriculture, are known to carry bags featuring their necessary implements for working. For spiritual workers these implements may include books of prayers, candles, herbs, perfumes, etc.



Moïse and her work as an embodiment of the Vodou lwa Ezili Dantò, often identified as the patron lwa of poor black women and queer people. In reading Moïse's work as reflections of Dantò's critical shamelessness, I highlight the third tactic of circling the cosmograms: the critical deployment of the aesthetic of the lwa.

## Chapter 4

### *Dantò's Daughter:*

Lenelle Moïse's Womb-Words for the Shameless *Madivinez*<sup>395</sup>

glamorous, holy, haitian dyke heart.  
something i want  
to be.

Lenelle Moïse, "Madivinez"<sup>396</sup>

I first met Lenelle Moïse in February 2007, during my junior year at Oberlin College. Moïse was one of the guest performers for our yearly Black History Celebration, sponsored by the Multicultural Resource Center. She would be performing her one-woman show, *Womb-Words Thirsting*,<sup>397</sup> which she began circulating around colleges and community-based theaters in 2006.<sup>398</sup> As the designated and only "out" Haitian-female ("out" as queer *and* "out" as Haitian) on campus, I was charged with picking up our Haitian-American poet-performer from the airport. I did not know Moïse or her work at the time, but during our 30-minute drive from the airport we learned that we shared similar stories: both of us had been raised in strict Seventh-Day Adventist households; both of us identified as queer<sup>399</sup>; and both of us had begun learning about Haiti and Vodou as a means of *unlearning* what we had been taught as children to believe about Haitian people and Vodou cosmology.

<sup>395</sup> An early draft of this chapter appears as "The Viscera: Memories of My Mother/The Reflection: Shameless," in *Nou Mache Ansanm* (We Walk Together): *Queer Haitian Performance and Affiliation*, Special Issue, *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, co-edited by Dasha Chapman, Erin L. Durban-Albrecht, and Mario LaMothe (forthcoming at the time of this writing).

<sup>396</sup> Lenelle Moïse, *Haiti Glass* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2014), 65.

<sup>397</sup> Now titled, *Word Life*.

<sup>398</sup> Artists Website, [www.lenellemoise.com/Womb\\_words\\_thirsting](http://www.lenellemoise.com/Womb_words_thirsting)

<sup>399</sup> While to this day I would still use "queer" to describe my non-heteronormative political and personal commitments, Moïse has called herself "queer," "lesbian," and "pomosexual." The use of these terms is fluid and mobile; they evidence the uncompromised importance of being able to name ourselves for ourselves when, where, and how we choose to do so.

The story-sharing ride with Moïse was a true reminder of black feminist epistemologies as well as the importance of self-definition and safe spaces for speaking with other black or, in this case, Haitian women. By sharing each other's stories Moïse and I validated our individual and shared-experiences as Diasporic, queer, and Vodou-learning women. We thereby replaced "controlling [negative] images" of Haitian queer-Vodou-inspired women with what Black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins calls "self-defined knowledge deemed personally important [and] essential to Black women's survival."<sup>400</sup> In other terms, Moïse and I were reflections of each other's divinely queer Diasporic bodies.

*Womb-Words Thirsting*, as it was performed in 2007 at Oberlin College, continued to reflect the divinely queer Diasporic body. The performance began with Moïse off-stage, with nothing on the lit stage except a table transformed into an altar through fabric, flowers, oranges, and a candle. When Moïse began her show she announced that the altar was for Ezili Dantò, a Vodou lwa often referred to as the "mother" of Haiti and the patron of gay and queer people.<sup>401</sup> I marked this moment as the second time that I ever saw my queer Haitian Diasporic body reflected back to me in the divine.

I would meet and see Moïse perform *Womb-Words Thirsting* for a second time at Northwestern University in February 2010, a month after the January 12, 2010

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<sup>400</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (London and NY: Routledge Classics, 2000, 2009), 110-111.

<sup>401</sup> "Ezili" is often spelled as "Erzulie." I use the Haitian Kreyòl spelling throughout this document.

earthquake.<sup>402</sup> Our reunion began at the Chicago O'Hare Airport. Moïse, scholar-performer Gina Athena Ulysse, and myself had all arrived to Chicago around the same time. We gathered, hugged one another, and laughed at this fated congregation of Haitian feminist artists-performers. As the three of us shared a shuttle to Northwestern, we began to recount where we were and what we had been doing at the time we heard about the earthquake. There was an emotional *shift* that occurred in our ride together, similar to my 2007 exchange with Moïse. In the solitary space of sharing our feelings from a Haitian subjectivity, the three of us were able to let down guards that it seemed we had been carrying (on and off) since the earthquake. We relinquished the need to perform a sense of being “emotionally together,” despite the fact that Haiti remained a constant thought and topic of discussion for us. Together, we no longer had to publicly perform “proper” affective responses. Performance studies scholar José Estaban Muñoz has argued that minoritarian affect is viewed as “inappropriate” within a predominately White-culture where the “‘official’ national affect, [is] a mode of being in the world primarily associated with white middle-class subjectivity.”<sup>403</sup> Consequently, to “feel brown,” as Muñoz terms minoritarian affect, is to take into account how people of color have had to “navigate the material world on a different emotional register.”<sup>404</sup> For Moïse, Ulysse, and myself, the emotional shift that occurred in the car was due to our ability to not only “feel

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<sup>402</sup> Moïse's *Wombs-Words Thirsting* was presented on Friday and Saturday, February 19 and 20, 2010, at Annie May Swift Hall, Alvina Krause Studio, 1920 Campus Drive, Evanston, Illinois. The performance was part of the “solo/black/woman performance series,” funded by a grant from the Mellon Foundation and co-organized by Professor E. Patrick Johnson and Ramón Rivera-Servera. Gina Ulysse served as the respondent to the performance, and her analysis is published as “Rasanble: Some Critical Reflections on Lenelle Moïse's *Womb-Words, Thirsting*,” *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, 15: 1-2 (2013): 133-145.

<sup>403</sup> José Estaban Muñoz, “Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho's *The Sweetest Hangover (and Other STDs)*,” in *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (March 2000), 69.

<sup>404</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

brown” in relationship to one another but, more importantly, to “feel Haitian-Woman,” to be able to be both happy, sad, frustrated, worried, and unapologetic about these conflicting emotions in each other’s company.

I could not imagine how this “feeling Haitian-Woman” would inform Moïse’s performance, nor my own viewing of her solo-show. Haiti and spirituality remained central to the performance, yet while Moïse’s altar had grown smaller, Dantò’s presence was *even more* pronounced. During the course of her performance Moïse revealed to her audience one possible reason why she *had to/must be* queer: her immigrant mother had refused to serve the lwa Ezili Dantò and, for this reason, the lwa claimed her child as a lesbian. Dantò’s role in the life of Moïse is crystallized in this moment. The lwa is a figure that predetermined and *justified* Moïse’s sex and sexuality. Ezili Dantò was the important thread that linked Moïse to her mother while also (re)turning them *both* to Vodou.

I have returned to this intimate sharing by Moïse frequently over the years for several reasons. Moïse’s anecdote triangulates the experiences of Moïse, her mother, and Dantò—the spiritual mother of them both—within a web of Vodou, shame, motherhood, and queerness. Furthermore, Moïse’s performative disclosure became the third instantiation of our mutual reflection of each other. Both our mothers refused to serve the lwa out of a sense of fear and a shame of Vodou. However, both their daughters had chosen to (re)turn to the spirits while “en route” to Haiti.<sup>405</sup> In the moment of Moïse’s reveal, I was reminded of my first Yoruba-Lucumí spiritual reading and the messages I

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<sup>405</sup> As my argument throughout this dissertation contends, the “travels” to Haiti are not only physical but also spiritual and ideological. Haiti becomes the location and muse of thought as well as physical action within the Diaspora.

received from my *madrina* (spiritual godmother): that mothers and daughters have a special relationship, and while it is well known that mothers can heal their children, children can also heal their mothers through their spiritual work. I contend that this work is realized when daughters begin claiming their spiritual paths and speaking their truths, articulating a shameless love for Spirits.

In this chapter I analyze the work of Lenelle Moïse through the language of spirit and shame in order to crystallize the ways that the (re)turn to Haiti vis-à-vis Vodou is made possible not only through a deliberate engagement with ritual aesthetics but through the intimate relationship Diasporans may have with one lwa in particular. More specifically, I theorize the relationship between Ezili Dantò and Lenelle Moïse as one that embodies a black lesbian shamelessness that undermines the inherited shame often associated with Vodou, queer, and Diaspora subjectivities. I position this black lesbian shamelessness as a byproduct of being one of “Dantò’s daughters.” To be Dantò’s daughter is to speak on behalf of those people who are protected by Dantò: poor, black, women, lesbian and/or queer people. Dantò’s daughters are her mediums, enacting the lwa’s feminist imperatives in their everyday performances, both in their quotidian lives and their lives on the formal stage. Dantò’s daughters are not limited to cis female or woman-identified peoples; her children include all those, such as black gay filmmaker Marlon Riggs who states, “I was mute, tongue-tied, burdened by shadows and silence. Now I speak and my burden is lightened lifted free.”<sup>406</sup> Dantò’s “daughters” are those who, despite the risk of being (a)shamed, unfurl their tongue and speak the(ir) truth so that they and others might be freed.

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<sup>406</sup> Marlon Riggs, “Tongues Untied,” in *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, Essex Hemphill, ed. (Boston, MA: Alyson Publications Inc., 1991), 205.

Dantò's daughter, as an aesthetic performance device, enacts a theatrical "composition," where, in the words of Sharon Bridgforth and Omi Osun L. Jones, theatre is imagined "as a prayer, as a raunchy healing gutbucket number carrying all of us to our best selves [...It] encourages audiences/witnesses to consider what truths they will finally tell, and who they need as support in the telling."<sup>407</sup> In many ways, this fashioning of the audience-as-witnesses or co-performers is central to the creation of shamelessness because it produces what feminist theater and performance scholar Jill Dolan has referred to as the "utopia in performance," a theatrical and live experience "where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of the world."<sup>408</sup>

Moïse builds an audience of witnesses as she casts aside any shame associated with lesbianism and Vodou. When Moïse announces in her performance the divine "origins" of her lesbianism—that her mother refused to serve the lwa and that the lwa consequently claimed Moïse as a lesbian—she claims herself and her life history as divinely queer before us. Moïse's own telling serves as a "performative utterance" that speaks her queer divine presence into being by sharing her *istwa* (story).<sup>409</sup> I take this performed oral history seriously and use it to trace how the lwa's spiritual attributes—Dantò's feminist, black, and queer agenda—manifest themselves through Moïse's own

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<sup>407</sup> Sharon Bridgforth and Omi Osun Jones, "Black Desire, Theatrical Jazz, and River See," in *The Theater and Drama Review*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (Winter 2014): 136.

<sup>408</sup> Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 2.

<sup>409</sup> See J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, editors (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975). For a discussion of Austin's performative utterances and a queer application and critique of the term see Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Performativity and Performance* (New York, NY and London: Routledge Press, 1995), 1-18.

divine lesbianism as well as her performances of truth-telling. Moïse, I contend, is a medium for the lwa and she reveals the lwa in her performance work. In this way, I position Moïse's relationship to Dantò in similar ontological terms as traditional practitioners of Haitian Vodou and/or Puerto Rican and Cuban Santería. Interfaith scholar Joseph M. Murphy in his discussion of Santería cosmology writes:

*Santeros* [initiates of Santería] find the *orisha* [divine beings] both within and without. They see it as an influence from outside the person since it takes a ceremony to 'seat' one in the devotee's head. On the other hand, since the *orisha* is consciousness itself, it can be said to emerge through the human body as its material medium.<sup>410</sup>

Analogously to how the orisha operate as independent of their medium, I position Moïse's relationship to the lwa Dantò along the same spiritual potential and continuum. I argue that the lwa is simultaneously independent of Moïse and within her. In this way, Moïse is not only Dantò's daughter because the lwa claimed her, but because she also acknowledges the lwa as a force in her life and (un)consciously embraces a feminist-centered truth-telling in her poetry that is demonstrative of Dantò. As a result, I posit that Moïse not only redresses the absence of queer-Diasporic bodies within larger discussions of Haiti and the Haitian Diaspora, she also heals the shame of her mother and enables both mother and daughter to (re)turn to Vodou and claim the centrality of Dantò in their shared-experiences.

The chapter's emphasis on the relationship and influence of Ezili Dantò on Lenelle Moïse's work demonstrates the third tactic of "circling the cosmograms": the critical deployment of the aesthetics of the lwa. This tactic extends the work of the previous chapters to discuss the ways that ritual has been an essential aesthetic and moral

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<sup>410</sup> Joseph M. Murphy, *Santería: African Spirits in America* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1992), 139-140.



compass that guides Haitian-American artists in the Diaspora back to Haiti. As I have explained elsewhere, circling the cosmograms uses the spiritual traditions of Vodou as an epistemological framework and is indebted to M. Jacqui Alexander's discussion of feminism, spirituality and the sacred and embodied knowledge(s) of women of color.<sup>411</sup> The ritual systems of enslaved Africans continue to provide "terms, symbols and organizational codes that the Bantu-Kongo people [and their Haitian descendents] used to make sense of the world."<sup>412</sup> This application of metaphysical frameworks to provide meaning and shape one's subjectivity is "spiritual work."<sup>413</sup> Spiritual work is capable of being aestheticized in ways that borrow from ritual traditions and insert new possibilities and uses in order to meet the needs of the practitioner. Accordingly, while my project is indebted to the ways that Vodou serves as a spiritual framework, a habitus<sup>414</sup> capable of structuring individual and collective behavior, in studying how Haitian Vodou informs the cultural productions of members of the Haitian Diaspora, I honor the ways that Vodou is not a static system but an ever-evolving improvised practice shaped by the practitioner-artist. Performance scholar Margaret Thompson Drewal observes

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<sup>411</sup> See M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossings: Meditations of Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and The Sacred*, (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>412</sup> Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 293. It is important to note that Haitian Vodou, while informed by Kongo and Yoruba is also coproduced by the integrated systems of the indigenous Taino peoples of the Caribbean, Judaism, Catholicism, and the spiritual traditions of other African ethnic groups who were taken to the New World including members of the Fula and Mandingo empire, Ashantis, Dahomean, Hausa, Benin, Fon, and Kongo. For a discussion on the geographic influences of Haitian Vodou see Maya Deren, *Divine Horseman: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New York, NY: McPherson & Company, 1953, 2004), Melville Herskovitz, *Life in a Haitian Valley* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1937), Laënnec Hurbon, *Voodoo: Search for the Spirit* (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), and Donald Cosentino, editor *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Fowler Museum, 1995).

<sup>413</sup> Alexander, 295.

<sup>414</sup> See the previous chapter for my discussion of Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "habitus," particularly as it refers to collective care. See also Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Trans. Richard Nice (New York: Cambridge UP, 1977).

practitioner-artist improvisations in her study of Yoruba ritual. Writing of a Jibgo Oyinbo performer who combined a traditional Jigbo mask with a western tuxedo suit in his ritual performance “just for fun,” Drewal argues that bringing together these seemingly oppositional forms “tells us something about the openness of Yoruba ritual, the power of performers to improvise, and the willingness of participants to entertain alternate possibilities.”<sup>415</sup> According to Drewal, these are the ways that ritual functions as “rhetorical play.”<sup>416</sup>

The act of circling the cosmograms—the ways that artists (re)turn to Haiti through an aesthetic engagement with Vodou—embraces these rhetorical plays and how artist-practitioners have always improvised ritual practices in order to make sense of the world. The third tactic discussed in this chapter, the aesthetics of the lwa, perhaps more so than the previous chapters, encapsulates the numerous ways in which artists deliberately activate and improvise the material, spiritual, and physical attributes of the lwa in their art works.<sup>417</sup> The direct activation of the lwa Ezili Dantò can be seen in Moïse’s 2007 performance of *Womb-Words Thirsting* in which she constructed an alter to Dantò, and again in her 2010 performance which began with a propitiously placed opening invocation to Papa Legba, the keeper of the crossroads who opens Vodou ceremonies. The aesthetics of the lwa is also apparent in the indirect ways in which artists embody the

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<sup>415</sup> Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Rituals: Performers, Play and Agency* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 5.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid.

<sup>417</sup> In many ways these acts can be read through the Haitian Kreyòl concept of “pwen,” pointed statements or phrases that deliver complex and coded messages and meanings. For more on pwens see Karen McCarthy Brown, *Tracing the Spirits: Ethnographic Essays on Haitian Art: From the Collection of the Davenport Museum of Art* (Davenport, IA: Davenport Museum of Art, Distributed by the University of Washington Press, 1995) and Karen E. Richman, *Migration and Vodou* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2005).

attributes of the lwas, and their respective emotional and social concerns. For Ezili Dantò, as I detail in the following sections, these attributes include representing the plight of poor black women, lesbians, and/or mothers.

I document the aesthetics of the lwa by tracing how Moïse becomes “Danto’s daughter” through her performance of black lesbian shamelessness and her deliberate acknowledgment of Ezili Dantò in her work. I argue that Moïse’s work as Danto’s daughter circles the cosmogram specifically through the spirit of Ezili Dantò and the brand of black feminist shamelessness and directness that are characteristic of Dantò *and* Moïse’s writing. Using Moïse’s 2014 publication, *Haiti Glass* as a case study, I examine how Moïse circles the cosmograms and (re)turns to Haiti vis-à-vis her spiritual embodiment of Ezili Dantò’s black lesbian shamelessness. These embodiments of Dantò accent Moïse’s turn to Vodou as a means of shedding the yolk of anti-Haitian/anti-Vodou, and anti-black rhetoric that she had not only grown up with, but that had been articulated, in various degrees, in her strict Seventh-Day Adventist and non-Vodou practicing home. Therefore, Moïse’s performances of black lesbian shamelessness are pathways for articulating her truth while also complicating Haiti through her agentic performances as a queer Haitian-Diasporic subject, as one of Dantò’s daughters.

The chapter begins with a discussion of shamelessness as an aesthetic practice in the writings of Black lesbian-identified writers. I then produce a portrait of Ezili Dantò and how the lwa functions as a shameless feminist and forthright lwa who safeguards poor women and their children and encourages the telling of their *istwas* (stories). I rely upon black and/or feminist theories of spirituality and Haitian history to construct my discussion of shamelessness as a strategy for survival that is embodied in the legend and

lore of Ezili Dantò. Lastly, I turn to an analysis of Moïse's 2014 publication *Haiti Glass* and the ways the lwa's influence on Moïse is evidenced in the black feminist perspective that Moïse brings to her shameless istwas of Haiti and Haitian history. These are stories that trouble Haiti's perception from within and without, challenging our visions of the nation's revolutionary history, while critiquing the heteropatriarchy and silencing of queer narratives within Haiti and the Diaspora. Thus, Moïse's poems, similarly to the works of Régine Romain (Chapter 2) and Rejin Leys (Chapter 3), complicate our notions of Haitian women because it challenges the patriarchal, heterosexists, and neocolonial history of Haiti and its Diaspora. These challenges are made possible by a Vodou (re)turn and ultimately, I gesture towards the ways that shamelessness encourages collective healing from the inherited shame Haitian Diasporans face as Vodou sympathizers and practitioners.

### ***Shamelessly Black Queer Diaspora***

my poem wears a skirt  
and tells the truth

the only blush on her  
brushed on cinnamon

her name  
she shameless

Lenelle Moïse, "Kissed There Myself"<sup>418</sup>

Shame and spirituality converged in acute ways following the January 12, 2010 earthquake in Haiti. Post-quake the country saw a rise not only in non-governmental

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<sup>418</sup> Lenelle Moïse, "Kissed There Myself," in *Nou Mache Ansanm* (We Walk Together): *Queer Haitian Performance and Affiliation*, Special Issue, *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* (forthcoming at the time of this writing).

organizations (NGOs), but also subsequent homophobia and Vodou-based violence.

The swelling of Evangelical NGOs in particular proffered two choices for quake survivors: conversion or no-aid.<sup>419</sup> The hostile conversion landscape correlated with increased acts of violence towards Vodou-practitioners who were often scapegoated as the cause of Haiti's earthquake and the ensuing cholera epidemic. Homophobia towards LGBTQ identified people in Haiti has also seen a rise, not only in the aftermath of the earthquake but in the rise of Euro-American colonialism and growing Protestantism.<sup>420</sup> Several years following the earthquake and amidst this sea of homophobia and queer-based violence, Haitian scholars Dasha A. Chapman, Erin L. Durban-Albrecht, and Mario LaMothe co-edited a special issue of *Women and Performance* journal, *Nou mache ansanm (We walk together): Queer Haitian Performance and Affiliation*. The co-editors asked me to respond to two poems by Moïse for inclusion in the publication, including the one from which this section's epigraph is pulled, "Kissed There Myself."

Several years had passed since I had seen Moïse's or her work, yet her poem continued to be a reflection of a divinely queer and Diasporic body. "Kissed There

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<sup>419</sup> A month following the earthquake, the Jamaica Observer publish an article about the growing violence being enacted by Protestants upon Vodouists. Vodou ougan Max Beauvoir (1936-2015) who held the title of "Supreme Serviteur" (the highest position in the Vodou tradition of Haiti) is stated to have "accused Evangelical denominations of using post-quake aid supplies such as food and medicine to try to 'buy souls.'" ("Haiti's Voodoo Leader Vows 'War' Against Attackers," *Jamaica Observer*, February 26, 2016). For more on missionaries and NGOs see Shirley A. Fedorak, *Global Issues: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Ontario, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 31-43. Vodou and Haitian historian Kate Ramsey notes that following the initial cholera outbreaks of 2010, at least 45 Vodou *ougans* (priests) and *mambos* (priestesses) were blamed and killed for "spreading the disease through occult means." See Kate Ramsey, "Vodou, History, and New Narratives," *New Narratives of Haiti* special issue of *Transitions*, No. 111, (2013), 36.

<sup>420</sup> For more on the relationship between colonialism, imperialism, and homophobia in Haiti see Erin L. Durban-Albrecht, "Postcolonial Homophobia: United States Imperialism in Haiti and the Transnational Circulation of Antigay Sexual Politics" (Doctoral Dissertation, The University of Arizona, 2015).

Myself” evokes circling the cosmograms, drawing inferences to Vodou while centering the imagery of the texts on a female subjectivity. In “Kissed There Myself” we have a poem personified as a truth-telling, skirt wearing, female spirit who is “shameless.” The poem-personified is coolly confident, highly self-aware and determined. Regal despite possibly being “flat broke,” the female spirit described in “Kissed There Myself” dons an extremely curated costume that is nothing short of bold: fishnet stockings, print Dutch wax headscarves, clogs, amongst other items. My memory of Moïse wants to interpret the poem-personified as Moïse herself, a woman whose own style and beauty is a fine patchwork of bold colors and natural essences, similar in quality to a blush of “brushed on cinnamon.”

Despite the poem’s similarities to Moïse, I am also drawn to the ways that the female characterized by/as the poem is an apt portrayal of a modern-day Ezili Dantò.<sup>421</sup> In many ways the poem, feels like a homage to a Dantò incarnate, a woman who shamelessly blends the sacred and profane in Moïse’s text: “twerking by moonlight” and

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<sup>421</sup> The previously mentioned Ezili Dantò is but one form of a series of lwa who falls under the umbrella of “Ezili.” The most popular of the Ezilis are Ezili Freda, of the Rada nation of spirits originally from Dahomey (present day Benin). Freda is often described as light skinned with a sweet and feminine nature and she loves all things pertaining to luxury especially perfumes, lace, and sweet cakes and is often described as the lwa of “love” and male-desire. Ezili Dantò is the sister-spirit (literally) of Ezili Freda. Dantò contrasts Freda in nearly all regards; while Freda is of the “Old World,” light-skinned, genteel, and displaying a sort of colonial and coquettish nature, Dantò is a dark-skinned, fiery, and a warrior woman who defies notions of feminine gentility. For more scholarly/practitioner texts on the Ezilis and Ezili Freda see: Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005); Harold Courlander, *Haiti Singing* (University of North Carolina Press, 1939); Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: Living Gods of Haiti* (London, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1953); Kenan Filan, *The Haitian Vodou Handbook: Protocols for Riding the Lwa* (Rochester, VT, 2007); Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (New York: Harper’s & Row, 1990); Milo Marcelin, *Mythologie Vodou: Rite Arada* (Port-Au-Prince, Haiti, 1949); and Alfred Metraux, *Voodoo in Haiti* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, Inc., 1972).

bathing her nude body in “chango storms.”<sup>422</sup> The Ezili Iwa, which include Ezili Dantò and her sister Ezili Freda, amongst others, are a pantheon of women who are a variety of ages, skin-tones, shapes, and temperaments.<sup>423</sup> The Ezilis model the broad range of women’s experiences in this world for as anthropologist Karen McCarthy Brown assessed, “[i]n addition to providing examples of love, care, and hard work, they model anger—righteous and raging—power and effectivity, sensuality, sexuality, fear, frustration, need, and loneliness. In so doing, they become mirrors that give objective reality to what would otherwise remain, as it does in so many cultures, women’s silent pain and unhonored power.”<sup>424</sup>

Ezili’s boldness comes from her/their critical *shamelessness*; her/their uncompromised bringing of her full self anywhere and everywhere. Ezili doesn’t hide from the truth of who she is—a woman capable of love and anger, beauty and ugliness, sacred and profane acts. Ezili always stands firm in her complexity and similarly to Moïse’s “Kissed There Myself,” is a manifesto of self-recognition and acceptance. Ezili announces her presence without retreat, marking her space in a kiss, a cry, and a sashay, anything that lets you know that she has arrived.

The qualities of being unabashedly present and announcing one’s self is an aesthetic shared by both Ezili Dantò and Lenelle Moïse. However, Moïse sees her poetry and experience as a black lesbian poet as part of a larger tradition of black lesbian poets

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<sup>422</sup> Chango (also referred to as Shàngó or Sango) being the Yoruba-Lucumi spirit often associated with thunder and lightning.

<sup>423</sup> Ezili Dantò and Freda will be discussed later in the chapter.

<sup>424</sup> Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 221. For more on the Ezili’s and their colonial and post-colonial legacy see Joan (Colin) Dayan’s, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

and storytellers, including black queer, feminist, and diaspora poet Audre Lorde.

Lorde, in her 1985 keynote address to The Black Women Writer and the Diaspora conference proclaimed to her audience:

I am a black feminist lesbian poet, and I identify myself as such because if there is one other black feminist lesbian poet in isolation somewhere within the reach of my voice, I want her to know she is not alone.<sup>425</sup>

Lorde's words highlight the thematics of shame, isolation, and a call for recognition in the works of black feminist and lesbian writers. Heterosexism, racism, and classism converge in the experiences of black lesbian and feminist writers producing an overarching sense of shame.<sup>426</sup> Lorde astutely observes this shame and its incumbent social and political isolation in her essay, "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference." Lorde writes, "a fear of lesbians, or of being accused of being a lesbian, has led many Black women into testifying against themselves. It has led some of us into destructive alliances, and others into despair and isolation."<sup>427</sup>

Nearly thirty years after Lorde announced her presence and resisted her isolation by naming herself as a black lesbian and feminist poet, Lenelle Moïse cited these very words as reasons for writing her own poems and plays. In a 2013 article about the Haitian-American poet and playwright published by the free lesbian publication *Go Magazine*, Moïse cites Audre Lorde's comments verbatim stating that she writes so that

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<sup>425</sup> Audre Lorde, "Conference Keynote and Address: Sisterhood and Survival," Delivered at The Black Women and Writer in the Diaspora, October 20-25, 1985, published in *The Black Scholar*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 5.

<sup>426</sup> A brief sampling of writers who identify the intersections of race, sexuality, and social shaming include Dionne Brand (b. 1953), Octavia Butler (1947-2006), Stacyann Chin (b. 1972), Cherly Clarke (b. 1947) Anita Cornwell (b. 1923), Jewel Gomez (b. 1948), June Jordan (1936-2002), Mia McKenzie (Alice Dunbar Nelson (1875-1935), and Barbara Smith (b. 1946).

<sup>427</sup> Lorde, "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 121.



other black lesbian poets will know they are not alone. Moïse goes further, “I [Moïse] am out to combat loneliness, shame and fear [...] I am out to celebrate passion and commitment. I feel successful when my plays and performances inspire people to walk taller, to live prouder.”<sup>428</sup> For Lorde, and 30 years later, Moïse, naming themselves, or “outing themselves,” allows them to speak in concert with others—to reflect each other’s experiences and inspire each other to “walk taller, to live prouder.” Outing themselves is an act of resistance that denies the societal shames associated with non-heteronormative behaviors. Telling their stories as queer women writers is a strategy for survival and connection. Furthermore, for Haitian women, storytelling is critical in redressing gender and cultural stereotypes. Beverly Bell has documented how important storytelling is for Haitian women who attempt to navigate their lives in a male-dominated society. These women become *griyo* who tell their *istwa*, her history/story to “defy cultural and gender essentialism and implicitly rebuff any attempt to create a paradigm or symbol of ‘[the] Haitian woman.’”<sup>429</sup>

Writing becomes one means by which black lesbian women tell their stories, building a practice of shamelessness that binds them to the sacred while also creating more complex narratives of black womanhood. Performance studies scholar Omi Osun Joni L. Jones documents the connection between storytelling and faith in the works of queer playwright and director Sharon Bridgforth. Jones observes that:

To tell a story is to construct a history, to assert a vision of reality. A history links the living with ancestors and divinities across spatial and

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<sup>428</sup> Lenelle Moïse interviewed by Go! Magazine, “Go! 100 Women We Love,” June 2013, <http://192.254.197.18/~gomag/100-women-we-love-lenelle-moise/>

<sup>429</sup> Beverly Bell, *Walking on Fire: Haitian Women’s Stories of Survival and Resistance* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press: 2001), xvi.

temporal dimensions, moving back to retrieve lineage lessons and forward to cast a vision of what might be.<sup>430</sup>

Storytelling, as articulated by Jones, bridges the past, present, and future. The storyteller is able to honor their experience by “assert[ing] a vision of reality,” combining the lessons of the past to create another tomorrow. These visions reflect and connect the experiences of multiple generations and geographies of black lesbians and black women from Lorde, to Moïse, to the Haitian women griyo described by Beverly Bell.

When this storytelling is done through solo performance, as is most often the case with Moïse, the performance substantiates performance studies scholar D. Soyini Madison’s observation “that when a black woman stands onstage alone, she must become the consummate griot, the epic storyteller, the virtuosic alchemist letting loose blood, red, woman cycles of hard truth, unabashed literacies, and black female abjection.”<sup>431</sup> Asian-American and performance scholar Karen Shimikawa defines abjection in relationship to the tensions between “Asian-Americanness” and “Americanness.” The abjected body is one that “occup[ies] the seemingly contradictory, yet functionally essential, position of constituent element *and* radical other.”<sup>432</sup> For Shimikawa, the Asian-American body, though “othered,” is needed for differentiating the ideal “American” figure, presumably white and heteronormative. The language of abjection, used by Shimikawa and D. Soyini Madison, is a stark reminder of how people

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<sup>430</sup> Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, “‘Making Holy’: Love and the Novel as Ritual Transformation,” Introduction to *Love Conjure/Blues* by Sharon Bridgforth (Washington, DC: RedBone Press, 2005), XVIII.

<sup>431</sup> D. Soyini Madison, “Foreward,” in *Solo/Black/Woman: Scripts, Interviews, and Essays*, eds. E. Patrick Johnson and Ramón Rivera-Servara (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014), XII.

<sup>432</sup> Karen Shimikawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body On Stage* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 3.

of colors' lives, stories and performances are imagined and measured against whiteness. For the black female body in particular, the "mule"<sup>433</sup> of the world, as Zora Neale Hurston observed, this abjection makes our storytelling that much more political and necessary in the face of our constant and public abjection. American studies scholar Nicole Fleetwood has argued that "the dark black woman, because of the inescapability of her body as excess in the visual sphere, is ironically rendered invisible as a subject, and yet hypervisible as an abject."<sup>434</sup> Black women who stand alone and tell their stories unabashedly do so in the face of their ever present erasure, hypervisibility, and abjection as black and female subjects. Black women solo performers therefore stand to tell stories that are *already* deemed "shameless" because of the bodies that they occupy. I would venture to argue that because of this, all black women solo performers, to some effect, are Danto's daughters, shameless in their blackness, their economic status, their sexuality, and their corporeal presence.

My use of black lesbian shamelessness as a mode of understanding the performance of Danto's daughters is reflected in the work of African American and literary scholar Christopher S. Lewis. The scholar uses the phrase "black lesbian shamelessness" to analyze the writings of black lesbian and "lesbian allied" writers of the 1970s and 1980s, including Lorde, Cheryl Clarke, Barbara Smith and Alice

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<sup>433</sup> See Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006). Hurston allegedly wrote her most famous novel in three weeks while in Haiti conducting ethnographic research on Voodoo in Haiti and Jamaica. For a selection of essays on the relationship between Hurston and Haiti see La Vinia Delois Jennings, ed., *Zora Neale Hurston, Haiti and Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2013).

<sup>434</sup> Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 90.

Walker.<sup>435</sup> Lewis argues that an ethic of black lesbian shamelessness emerges in these authors' works, typified by

its celebration of the fact that same-sex relationships sustain and nurture the lives of countless black women, as well as by its acceptance of vulnerability and mutual dependence as fundamental conditions of human relationships.<sup>436</sup>

Black lesbian shamelessness is shameless not only because it celebrates the same-sex sexual relationships of black women but also because it does so through the *telling* of these stories. The black lesbian writers discussed by Lewis speak to the issues of domestic violence, same-sex desires and intimacy, and sexual abuse within the Black community—topics which were seen as “dirty laundry” within the Black pride rhetoric of the Black Power and Black Arts Movements of the 1960s. Black lesbian shamelessness resists the silence often demanded of black women in the service of racial uplift and respectability, and instead presents tales of vulnerability and black-female interdependence which Lewis argues “does not position identities like ‘black,’ ‘woman,’ and ‘man’ against one another in re-structured hierarchy, but rather conceives of blackness as an experience through which the vulnerable, inter-subjective qualities of gender, racial, and sexual identification are clearly seen.”<sup>437</sup> Blackness, femaleness, and sexuality are mutually informing systems that compose the black lesbian experience and,

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<sup>435</sup> Christopher S. Lewis, “Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness: Alice Walker’s ‘The Color Purple,’” in *Rocky Mountain Review*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (Fall 2012): 159.

<sup>436</sup> Ibid.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid. I believe that this approach to transracial, gendered, and sexual work is most evident in the Combahee River Collective Statement of 1977, which articulates a ethics of mutual dependency in the work of eliminating the interlocking systems of oppression including racial, sexual, heterosexual and class-based oppression. See The Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed. (New York, NY: New Press: Distributed by W.W. Norton, 1995), 232-240.

for this reason, black lesbian shamelessness *must* restructure the hierarchies of power and representation in order to accurately portray and complicate the lived experiences of same-sex loving black women and their allies.

The construction of black lesbian shamelessness is useful for conceiving of an aesthetic and political tradition of black lesbian writers that is woman-centered, intersectional, and defies respectability politics. However, I want to extend and challenge Lewis's singular focus on African American women writers.<sup>438</sup> American and Africana Studies scholar Jerry Philogene's analysis of Lenelle Moïse's work reveals how her performances challenge Haitian homophobia and do so through the insertion of an equally transnational and Diasporic voice. Philogene in her 2015 article, "Lenelle Moïse: Postscript, Swimming in the Waters of *Endezo*"<sup>439</sup> combines performance and postcolonial studies in her examination of two works by Moïse.<sup>440</sup> Philogene argues that

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<sup>438</sup> To be clear, the attention paid to African American women's writings is necessary and important theoretical work, yet, were we to observe the writings of Lorde *alone* we would see the ways that Black women writers have had a long tradition of thinking across physical and geographic borders and boundaries. Lorde's keynote address to The Black Women of the Diaspora conference, which Moïse later references, was not only a call against shame and isolation through the recognition and seeking of other Black lesbians, it was also a diasporic call that quite literally asked those in attendance (and those who would read her keynote years after), "What is our work for sisterhood and survival as black women writers of the Diaspora [sic]? Our responsibilities to other black women and their children across the globe we share, struggling for futures?" (Lorde, "Sisterhood and Survival," 6). Lorde moves beyond the African diaspora in her discussion, talking about her own personal experience supporting the work of Aboriginal women in Australia and New Zealand and the importance of reconsidering the fight for land rights of Indigenous Americans. In making these moves beyond the African diaspora, Lorde attempts to model the transnational feminist and mutual dependency that is at the heart of a diasporic, feminist, and shameless agenda. Lorde rightly asks that we think not only across nationalities but also across temporalities, framing (collective) motherhood and care giving as folded into the work of black diasporic queerness.

<sup>439</sup> Jerry Philogene, "Lenelle Moïse: Postscript, Swimming in the Waters of *Endezo*," *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (May 2015): 335-345.

<sup>440</sup> These works include her 2005 poem, "Madivinez" and a 2002 video directed by Mara Alpha *To Erzulie*, which featured Moïse's performance, "the number." "Madivinez" will be examined later in this chapter with attention paid to Philogene's interpretation.

the interplay between Moïse's use of Haitian Kreyòl and English within her work as well as her acknowledgement of her lesbian identity contest "sexualized alterity" within Haitian culture's "homophobic nature."<sup>441</sup> Philogene's central concern is how Moïse's work exemplifies the important place of transnationalism in the narratives of Haitian Diasporans. Philogene argues that this transnationalism is evidenced in Moïse's fusion of memory, spirit and myth in ways that reside "*endezo*" ("in two waters"), neither at home in Haiti or in Diaspora.<sup>442</sup> Moïse's transnational performance of "Haitianness" emerges in its acknowledgement and reclamation of black queer diasporic bodies. This performance therefore joins black lesbian shamelessness, transnational politics, and subject formation.

Up to this point, I have reviewed the ways that black lesbian shamelessness and storytelling are key factors in documenting the lives of same-sex loving women both in the U.S. and in the Haitian Diaspora. Here I want to return to my own argument on Moïse's work and the importance of attending to her relationship to the Haitian lwa Ezili Dantò as, what I term, "Dantò's daughter." Rather than seeing Moïse's work as *either* a performance of black lesbian shamelessness or an example of Diasporic transnationalism that makes use of "Haitian" tools—such as language (Kreyòl) and spirit-myth (Vodou and the stories of the lwas)—I see Moïse in constant effort to *bridge* these discourses through the language of spirit, through her "working" of and with Ezili Dantò. Paramount to my argument is that Vodou is not just an additive element to Moïse's work; it *is* the foundation that makes her story possible.

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<sup>441</sup> Philogene, "Lenelle Moïse: Postscript, Swimming in the Waters of Endezo," 336-339.

<sup>442</sup> Philogene uses the Haitian Kreyòl terms to postulate "lakay" ("home") as Haiti and "*lòt bò*" as "diaspora" [sic].

I am, for lack of a better term, on a “rescue mission.” I hope to discover how Ezili Dantò shows herself in the works of Lenelle Moïse and how *together* they illuminate the intersections of performance, sexuality, shamelessness, and queer Diasporic identity. These intersections make possible a new way of articulating Haiti and Haitian Diasporic subjectivity, one that according to Gina Athena Ulysse provides, “pluralizing understanding[s] of Haiti.”<sup>443</sup> These pluralizing understandings of Haiti are vital to (re)creating how Haiti, Haitian people, and Haitian Vodou are viewed and (re)presented in the global imaginary. To see the ways that Vodou provides a foundation for understanding the Haitian-Diaspora, particularly second-generation members of the Diaspora who did not grow up around Vodou, is to allow us to see the ways that *Spirits are real*, they guide us back to nations that we have never known but still consider our “home,” and they teach us how to create lives that are interdependent and suture multiple generations through a spiritual epistemology. Ezili Dantò, does this suturing by creating an interdependent web of women who are not afraid of their life circumstances. The lwa, as a group, are shameless and teach us how to own our individual and collective truths. Vodou scholar Karen McCarthy Brown reminds us that the lwa are “much closer to the human drama”<sup>444</sup> of mortal life and for this reason they become pathways for understanding the ways gender, sexuality, race, and economic status continue to shape the experiences of Haitian women. In the following section, I review the ways Ezili Dantò and the Ezilis as a pantheon serve as tangible models for Haitian women both in Haiti and in the Diaspora. I then focus on Ezili Dantò and how her narrative and moral

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<sup>443</sup> Gina Athena Ulysse, “Rasanblé: Some Critical Reflections on Lenelle Moïse’s *Womb-Words, Thirsting*,” in *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture and Society*, Vol. 15, No. 1-2 (July 2013): 134.

<sup>444</sup> Karen McCarthy Brown, 221.

compass determine the spiritual and aesthetic framework for Diaspora shamelessness in the work of Lenelle Moïse.

***Ezili Dantò: Shameless Queer and Feminist Truth-Teller***<sup>445</sup>

The potential for violence, heartbreak, joy, and struggle in the lives and stories of the Ezilis serve as tangible models for Haitian women both in Haiti and the Diaspora. Ezili Dantò is but one form of a series of lwa who falls under the umbrella of “Ezili.” The most popular of the Ezilis is Ezili Freda, of the *Rada* nation of spirits originally from Dahomey (present day Benin).<sup>446</sup> Freda is often described as light skinned with a sweet and feminine nature. She loves all things pertaining to luxury especially perfumes, lace, and sweet cakes and is often described as the lwa of “love” and male-desire.<sup>447</sup> Ezili

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<sup>445</sup> Please note: Lenelle Moïse declined to be interviewed as part of this project, though she supports the discussion of queer and feminist Haitian Diasporic narratives. Due to this reason, this section uses her creative works and secondary sources to build my case study.

<sup>446</sup> For more scholarly/practitioner texts on the Ezilis and Ezili Freda see: Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005); Harold Courlander, *Haiti Singing* (University of North Carolina Press, 1939); Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: Living Gods of Haiti* (London, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1953); Kenan Filan, *The Haitian Vodou Handbook: Protocols for Riding the Lwa* (Rochester, VT, 2007); Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (New York: Harper’s & Row, 1990); Milo Marcelin, *Mythologie Vodou: Rite Arada* (Port-Au-Prince, Haiti, 1949); and Alfred Metraux, *Voodoo in Haiti* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, Inc., 1972).

<sup>447</sup> Maya Deren, in her seminal text on the Vodou *lwa*, argues that Ezili’s love of luxury and sweet things is reflective of her being “a lady of sublime luxury” (Deren, 138). Ceremonies and *serviteurs* (people who serve the lwa) are required to supply these offerings to Ezili in order for her needs and desires to be met. The irony of gathering such objects, particularly the gathering of these objects by impoverished people is not lost on Deren, or other scholars who have observed elaborate Vodou rituals. Rather, the quest to furnish these objects highlight the ways that the “dream of luxury,” is ever present and even highlighted within Vodou. Rituals only point to the material absences and desires of those who service the lwa. Ezili, in her own way, demonstrates the “existence of a world in which [man’s] difficulties do not occur” (Deren, 137-145). For more on Vodou rituals in Haiti and the gathering of objects, see Katherine Dunham, *Island Possessed* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969). I discuss the material realities of Haiti and Vodou, in later parts of this chapter.



Dantò is the sister-spirit (literally) of Ezili Freda. Dantò contrasts Freda in nearly all regards; while Freda is of the “Old World,” light-skinned, genteel, and displays a colonial and coquettish nature, Dantò is dark-skinned, fiery, and a warrior-woman who defies Western notions of feminine gentility.

The spirit Ezili Dantò was born in Haiti and is a “New World” lwa of the *Petwo* nation. Between Petwo and Rada, Petwo is the “hotter” nation.<sup>448</sup> The Petwo nation of Vodou was fashioned in colonial Saint-Domingue out of necessity; created in order for enslaved Africans to become self-determined and free. It was the Petwo nation of Vodou that was called upon the eve of the Haitian Revolution at the ceremony of *Bwa Kayiman* (Bois Caïman) on August 14, 1791. The ceremony was co-led by the Vodou *ougan* (priest) Boukman Dutty and *mambo* (priestess) Cécile Fatima.<sup>449</sup> During the ceremony, it was Ezili Dantò who manifested, or “mounted,” one of her *serviteurs* (“servers”) and rallied the enslaved to pursue their freedom.<sup>450</sup> Following Bwa Kayiman, Dantò became

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<sup>448</sup> While the exact number of Vodou nations is unknown, estimates have stated between 30-100 forms of Vodou nations may exist throughout Haiti’s interior alone. For more of a discussion on Vodou nations and diversity see: Mimerose Beaubrun, *Nan Domi: An Initiate’s Journey Into Haitian Vodou*, trans. D.J. Walker, Preface by Madison Smartt Bell (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2013); Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, ed. *Fragments of Bone: Neo-African Religions in a New World* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005); Donald J. Consentino, ed. *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* (Los Angeles, California: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995); Leslie G. Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti* (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), and Laënnec Hurbon, *Voodoo: Search for the Spirit* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995).

<sup>449</sup> Joan (Colin) Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 47.

<sup>450</sup> While other scholars use “possession” to describe the moment when the lwa makes contact with a serviteur, I follow the lead of scholars such as Dayan and Roberto Strongman who argue that we must use the term that Vodouists and/or Haitians themselves use when describing the relationship to the lwa. I use “mount” instead of “possession,” because for Vodou serviteurs the act of being contacted by the lwa is an act described as “being mounted by a horse.” The phrase provides us with not only a better understanding of the relationship between the lwa and the human (both are autonomous beings engaged in the act of ritual communication) *and* it reminds us that the use of the term “possession,” encourages a violent one-sided relationship born of

known as the mother of the revolution, led her revolutionary children into battle and, subsequently, received two to three scars on her cheek while on the frontlines.<sup>451</sup>

Dantò's revolutionary role in the emancipation of Haiti's enslaved Africans is memorialized in the Haitian flag. Africology and Haitian scholar Patrick Bellegarde-Smith notes, "[t]he dark blue symbolizes cosmic energy, particularly in the form of the 'female' deity, Ezili Dantò, which represents maternal love and collective welfare."<sup>452</sup> Dantò's scars, her blackness, and her standing as mother of independent Haiti, are alluded to in her Catholic incarnation, the Mater Salvatoris Our Lady of Czestochowa, the facially-scarred Black Madonna who holds her black Christ-child close to her left bosom. Perhaps the solemn face of Our Lady of Czestochowa is another reason why the saint is paired with Ezili Dantò; for mother Dantò would come to have her tongue cut out, allegedly by her own children. Vodou Hougan [sic] Kenan Filan (Hougan Coquille du Mer) writes of this attack:

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slavery (Dayan, 64). For more on language, Vodou and ethics see Roberto Strongman, "Transcorporeality in Vodou," in *Journal of Haitian Studies* Vol. 14, No. 2 (October 2008): 4-29. For more on Haitian Kreyòl's origins, syntax and its connection to African and Indigenous American language systems see the works of Michel DeGraff, especially, "Haitian Creole," *Comparative Creole Syntax: Parallel Outlines of 18 Creole Grammars*, John Holms and Peter Patrick, eds. (London, England: Battlebridge Publication, Westminster Creolistics Series, 7, 2007), 101-126 and "Creole Exceptionalism and the (Mis)education of the Creole Speaker," *The Languages of Africa and the Diaspora: Educating for Language Awareness*, Jo Anne Kleifgen and George Bonds, eds. (Bristol, England: Multilingual Matters, 2009), 124-144.

<sup>451</sup> Some legends suggest that Dantò received the scars on her face because of a fight with Ezili Freda. The suggested tension between them not only allows us to see the ways the two spirits serve as spiritual counterparts to one another, but also the tension between skin-coloring, class, and female-sisterly discord in Haiti. See for example Mambo Chita Tann, *Haitian Vodou: An Introduction to Haiti's Indigenous Spiritual Tradition* (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2012), 112-113 and Krista White's "Espousing Ezili: Images of a Lwa, Reflections of Haitian Women," *Journal of Haitian Studies*, Vol. 5/6 (1999-2000): 62-79.

<sup>452</sup> Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, "The Spirit of the Thing: Religious Thought and Social/Historical Memory," in *Fragments of Bone: Neo-African Religions in the New World*, edited by Patrick Bellegarde-Smith (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 54.

Some say slavers cut out her tongue as punishment for participating in the revolution. Others say Dantò was made mute by the black guerrillas so that she could not betray them under torture if captured. All agree that thirteen years after she made her appearance, the last French soldiers were gone, and the Free Black Republic of Haiti was born.<sup>453</sup>

Dantò's lacerated tongue, whether at the hands of the slavers or her comrades-in-arms (traditionally depicted as males) demonstrates the ways that even during the colonial period of slavery, the dark-black female body posed a threat to patriarchal and racial domination. Scholar Colin (née Joan) Dayan, has argued that the figures of Ezili, when taken as a whole, can be understood as the "collective physical remembrance"<sup>454</sup> of colonial Saint-Domingue and the gender-based violences that were customary during the period. Furthermore, Dayan argues that the splitting of Ezili into multiple female lwas/characteristics represents the splitting of Haitian/African-descended women into "objects that are to be desired or feared."<sup>455</sup>

Dayan's articulation of Ezili as a split female figure who embodies the collective physical remembrance of slavery's trauma allows us to reconsider popular discussions of Ezili Freda as a simple figure of amorous love. Rather, Dayan argues that Ezili *in all of her forms* asks that we redefine love especially within the context of slavery's economy, where black female bodies were subject to the tensions between slavery, property, poverty, and love(rs).<sup>456</sup> Literary scholar Saidiya Hartman makes similar observations of

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<sup>453</sup> Filan, *The Haitian Vodou Handbook*, 144.

<sup>454</sup> Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, 56.

<sup>455</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>456</sup> Indeed, earlier in the text Dayan argues that Haiti *itself* is often narrated as born from the violence enacted upon enslaved black women, in particular, the story of "Sister Rose," a woman whose violent rape produced Haiti. Dayan discusses Sister Rose's appearance as narrative emblem during the *noirist* revolution of the 1940s in Haiti, a period of black-centered ideology that was ushered in following the first period of U.S. Occupation (1915-1934). Sister Rose embodies an "authentically" Haiti(ian), violently raped by a black slave, she is born of violence,

the precarious role of affect and the impossibility of seduction within the slave economy because, as Hartman writes, “[t]he dual existence of the slave as property and person and the interests and absolute dominion of the slave owner were to be maintained in precarious balance by forwarding the role of affection in mitigating brutality.”<sup>457</sup> In other words, “love,” as the Ezilis demonstrate, became a “task of feeling” that depended on the experience of servitude and gender-based violences including rape and other forms of torture inflicted by both the white colonial master *and* his wife.<sup>458</sup> Under the threat of female violence, the Ezilis emerge as figures who are aware of the (limited) purchase of black female sexuality, and the ways that the material conditions of poverty and race-based oppression inform all of their choices—economic, housing, geographic, and relational. The historical violences enacted upon the black female body and rendered in the mythic-history of the Ezili Iwa mark the violence and silence that frame black womens’ experiences in the New World. The cutting of Ezili Dantò’s tongue hyper-accentuates the threat that black women *speaking* pose to the institutions of both slavery (white supremacy) *and* black rebellion (modeled as patriarchal and male-driven,

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speaks only “Haitian” (Kreyòl), and is revered as a black Madonna by the men around her—be they her lovers, her sons, or her male relatives. Yet, as Dayan note, Sister Rose is a passive character, she never speaks or *acts* in history, rather she is acted upon; a body/symbol for men to articulate and project their own notions about women, Haiti, and Haiti-as-woman. See Dayan, 48-52.

<sup>457</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York, NY and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 90.

<sup>458</sup> *Ibid.*, 56. Dayan argues that under slavery both the enslaved woman and the colonial mistress shared a fate. On the one hand the enslaved women and/or free Creole (mixed-race) woman is under the threat of rape because she is perceived as the possession (or “love”) of her master. The black female body is the object of lust that makes the white female colonial body the object of chastity and marriage. Thusly, while the enslaved black women becomes the object of desire, for Dayan, the white colonial wife pines for this love and attention, and when it is not given, takes her anger out on the black enslaved female body. For more see Dayan, 54-66.

especially when we take into account stories about Dantò's tongue being cut by her own Haitian male children).

Dantò's physical attributes—her dark skin and rebellious nature—as well as the physical and rhetorical violence inflicted on her/black women form the basis of “the spiritual as epistemology,” not only in the lives of Haitian women but also for queer Haitian people.<sup>459</sup> Scholar Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley acknowledges that the pantheon of Ezili is “immensely influential to those practitioners who embody and/or desire femininity,” including but not limited to *masisi*, the Kreyòl term for “gay men.”<sup>460</sup> As the lwa of fertility and sexuality, Ezili loves *all* sexualities and femininities equally; thus, for those gender and sexual non-conforming people who serve her/them, Ezili is a protective mother who loves and supports sexual and gender creativity, and “claimed” her gender and sexually non-conforming people, including Lenelle Moïse, from birth. The Ezilis, in other words, see beyond the static limits of heteronormativity. For Tinsley, it is the Ezilis ability to imagine and support gender and sexually complex lives that exemplifies Ezili as the lwa of imagination and black feminism:

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<sup>459</sup> See M. Jacqui Alexander's discussion of feminism, spirituality and the sacred and embodied knowledge(s) of women of color in *Pedagogies of Crossings: Meditations of Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and The Sacred*, (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2005), 293. Additionally, I use “queer” as an umbrella term for all people who identify as non-heteronormative including but not limited to: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, two-spirited, asexual, and cisgendered men and women who do not identify with the gender/sexual binary.

<sup>460</sup> It is important to note that *masisi* does not directly translate into “gay men.” Though it's origins are not entirely known, the term may represent the spirit or practice of homosexual behavior between men, rather than a label. Robert Strongman, speculates that the term *masisi* is derived from the Fon of Benin and their word, *mamisisi*. The *mamisisi* are the devotees of Mami Wata, a spiritual “counterpoint” to Ezili. Mamisisi are females or males who dress and braid their hair like, “or perhaps as’ women.” Robert Strongman, as cited in Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, “Songs for Ezili: Vodou Epistemologies of (Trans)gender,” *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 420. For more on Mami Wata see Henry Drewal, *Mami Water: Arts for the Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diaspora* (Los Angeles, CA: Fowler Museum, 2008).

Ezili is the lwa who exemplifies imagination. And the work of imagination is [...] 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 empiricism that deny black women’s importance in knowing, making and transforming the world.<sup>461</sup>

If Ezili is, as Tinsley argues, the example of imagination and self-making *outside* of secular Western traditions, then Ezili embodies spirituality as a theoretical praxis for self-making in the traditions of black feminist thought. Under Tinsley’s logic, Ezili Dantò’s importance to poor, black, Haitian women becomes clear—she embodies the battle(s) against patriarchy and white supremacy. Dantò’s subsequent patronage by queer people and queer creatives (artists, writers, etc.) gives credence to black feminist and lesbian poet Cheryl Clarke’s assertion that being a lesbian is an act of resistance in a “male-supremacist, capitalist, misogynist, racist, homophobic [and] imperialist culture.”<sup>462</sup> In other words, being a proud and out black lesbian writer who vocalizes one’s sexuality and race is an act of shamelessness that defies notions of respectability and the necessary silences that have been demanded of queer people of color within imperialist and heteronormative frameworks.

I weave together Tinsley’s construction of spirituality as a space of black feminism with Colin Dayan’s compelling argument that the Ezilis embody the collective physical remembrance of slavery’s trauma. Reading these theories together aids our understanding of why Haitian women have turned to the Ezilis as alternative sources of power, strength, and wisdom: because the lwa themselves are familiar with how, for

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<sup>461</sup> Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, “Songs for Ezili: Vodou Epistemologies of (Trans)gender,” *Feminist Studies* Vol. 47, No. 2 (Summer 2011): 424.

<sup>462</sup> Cheryl Clark, “Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance,” in *Words on Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York, NY: The New Press, 1995), 242.

black women, “black *and* female difference is registered by virtue of the extremity of power operating on captive bodies and licensed within the scope of the humane and the tolerable.”<sup>463</sup> The lwa have experienced how gender, race, and power have historically converged upon the black female body in order to dispossess women of their autonomy. Because of this shared-experience, the lwa, for Haitian women, are models for “making do,” for resisting, coping, and/or surviving their circumstances. These acts of coping, of “making do” in light of poverty, blackness, and gender-based violence are shameless acts of survival that women glean from the legacy and stories of the lwa.

Ezili Dantò, perhaps more so than all of her sisters, represents poverty, blackness, and the legacy of slavery in present-day Haiti and its Diaspora. The dark-skinned lwa, silenced and betrayed, remains a figure that poor, black Haitians, particularly single-mothers and non-heteronormative identified people, harness to make sense of their lives. Dantò is known for being both a fierce warrior and a protective and proud single-mother. The lwa is “above all else a loving mother who gives her children strength to face any obstacles. She may be a fearsome warrior but she is also a faithful protector who works hard and quickly for her devotees.”<sup>464</sup> Ezili Dantò is the demonstrative lwa of shamelessness, maternity, and female-interconnectedness throughout the Haitian Diaspora. Moreover, as the female lwa who demonstrated “masculine” bravado on the battlefield and who would later care for her children as a devout single parent, Dantò is often said to *be* a lesbian (not just the saint of lesbian and/or queer people). Krista White

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<sup>463</sup> Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 86.

<sup>464</sup> Kenaz Filan (Hougan Coquille du Mer), *The Haitian Vodou Handbook: Protocols for Riding with the Lwa* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 2007), 144.

has argued that because Dantò's aggressive behaviors are gendered "male behavior,"

that is why she is depicted as a lesbian:

By patriarchal social standards, in whatever part of the world one goes, women should be soft, vulnerable, and need caring for. Ezili Dantò defies these cultural norms, and is thus placed in the role of the lesbian. Since sex and gender issues are always intertwined, women's sexuality is often defined in terms of adherence to gender standards.<sup>465</sup>

White's criticism takes aim at the "patriarchal social standards" that delimit Dantò's sexual and gender performance as masculine and, consequently, lesbian. I too reject the assumption that *because* Dantò is not "soft, vulnerable and need[s no] caring for," that she is "*thus placed* in the role of the lesbian" (emphasis added). This over-simplification of Dantò's sexuality and gender performance echoes American, Gender, and Queer scholar Jack Halberstam's assertion that "female masculinity is generally received by hetero- and homo-normative cultures an apathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment, as a longing to be and to have a power that is always out of reach."<sup>466</sup> My point is not that female masculinities are removed from performances of vulnerability, rather I take issue with what both Halberstam and White acknowledge in their works: that traditional heteronormative depictions of masculinity remain the only frames for conjuring "power and legitimacy and privilege."<sup>467</sup> Dantò, I would argue, is powerful *because* of her vulnerability, her mothering, and her female masculinity. The popular causality of Dantò's power to her lesbianism oversimplifies Dantò's sexuality as an unintelligible performance of female masculinity that consequently reads as "lesbianism."

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<sup>465</sup> Krista White, "Espousing Ezili: Images of a Lwa, Reflections of the Haitian Woman," *Journal of Haitian Studies*, Vol. 5/6 (1999-2000): 71.

<sup>466</sup> Judith (Jack) Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 9.

<sup>467</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.



Reducing lesbianism to gender performance erases the spectral performances of gender that are possible within Vodou cosmology. Moreover, reading Dantò's female masculinity as only "lesbianism" ignores how slavery's economy predicated seeing African descended women as "masculine" labor forces and provided rationalizations for enslavement and the gender-based violence inflicted on enslaved black women and men.<sup>468,469</sup>

Were we to return to Tinsley's argument about Ezili serving as a spiritual epistemology, we might understand Ezili Dantò's expression of love and sensuality as existing in a field of its own, rather than as a consequence of her (failed) performances of femininity. It would be more accurate to see Dantò's sexuality as implicitly tied to her ability to be vulnerable and to show love beyond *our* heteronormative and respectable politics in ways that are more akin to the black lesbian shamelessness described by Christopher Lewis. Religion scholar Randy P. Conner, quoting Vodou mambo Mama Lola, describes Dantò as "a woman, a man, straight, gay, bisexual. She loves

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<sup>468</sup> Religion scholar Randy P. Conner posits same-sex relationships exists between other lwas within the Vodou pantheon as well as other African spiritual systems. According to Conner discussions of the sacred tend to eschew conversation of sexuality and sensuality because erotic relations have been seen as not only a "private matter," but also because "the argument is often advanced that expressions of gender and sexual diversity represent corruption of [African] traditions by European and/or Euro-Americans." Contrary to this believe Conner sites examples of same-sex relationships in Vodou, Yoruba Lucumí and Candomblé traditions. See "Rainbow's Children: Diversity of Gender and Sexuality in African-Diasporic Spiritual Traditions," in *Fragments of Bone: Neo-African Religions in a New World*, edited by Patrick Bellegarde-Smith (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005) and Randy P. Conner with David Hatfield Sparks, *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Participation in African-Inspired Traditions in the Americas* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>469</sup> Black feminist scholar Angela Davis discusses the ways that Black women under slavery were emasculated so as to justify the institution of slavery and the brutalities inflicted upon women and men in *Women, Race, & Class* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1983). The women's rights speech of former slave Sojourner Truth is a true testament to the confluence of slavery, race, and gender performance for Black women "Woman's Rights," speech at Akron, OH, 1851 in *Words on Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought*, edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York, NY: The New Press, 1995), 36.

everybody.”<sup>470</sup> Dantò is thus not a “lesbian” because she defies female gender roles; she is a lesbian because she cannot be contained within the gender roles that we, as mere mortals, create for the lwas.<sup>471</sup>

Given the previously stated arguments about the Ezilis honoring all forms of sexuality and femininity, Dantò’s proposed-lesbianism is *both* probable *and* an indication of the ways that she supersedes traditional constructs of female behavior, thereby performing shamelessness. For this reason, Dantò represents the queer potential of non-conforming female behavior because she exists outside of the matrix of marriage, notions of the genteel female, and because she has been colloquially described as a lesbian.<sup>472</sup> Stated more bluntly, whether or not Dantò is a lesbian is irrelevant because it does not deaden the fact that she remains a symbol for lesbians, queer potentiality, and female-interconnectedness.

Lenelle Moïse demonstrates both Dantò’s queer potential and female-interconnectedness. In the February 2010 performance of *Womb-Words Thirsting*, Moïse

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<sup>470</sup> Randy P. Conner, “Rainbow’s Children: Diversity of Gender and Sexuality in African-Diasporic Spiritual Traditions,” in *Fragments of Bone*, 147.

<sup>471</sup> Conner suggests that for this reason it would be more accurate to read Dantò as “bisexual.” The political choice to identify as “bisexual” or “lesbian” exceed the bounds of this dissertation, but I do believe that what the terms share is a commitment to concretize Dantò’s sexuality beyond heteronormativity.

<sup>472</sup> These non-conforming female behaviors are rooted in Western ideals of white femininity. Thus, these notions of non-conforming female behaviors do not only influence Haitian women but all Black women, particularly those living in the imperial U.S. Scholars such as Angela Davis, Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw, among others have demonstrated the ways that the legacy of slavery and inter/intraracial violence(s) enacted on the black female body have informed the cultural stereotypes and myths surrounding black women’s racial and gendered performances. See Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1983); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*, eds. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller and Kendall Thomas (New York, NY: New Press, 1995).

took to her “stage” at the front of Northwestern University’s Annie May Swift black box studio. Her costuming was understated—as a tunic and long leggings are her performance costume of choice. Moïse’s props were also the barest of materials including a chair, a microphone, a loop pedal that Moïse would use from time to time to create soundscapes from her sung phrases, and the altar for Dantò that Moïse kept downstage right. As the stage lights casted a glow upon Moïse and her performance arena, during a moment between poems, Moïse “tells us about the Haitian Vodou explanation for her queerness.”<sup>473</sup> Moïse’s grandmother had gone to see a Vodou Mambo (priestess) in order to receive herbs that would induce an abortion. Following the visit a “tall woman visited the grandmother in her dream and told her, ‘this child is mine that you are trying to kill.’”<sup>474</sup> Moïse mother was supposed to serve Dantò, because the lwa saved her life but instead, she converted and became a Seventh-Day Adventist. As Gina Athena Ulysse writes of this moment in the performance, “[t]he spirit’s revenge then was to make her daughter, Moïse, a lesbian. The debt that family members owe to spirits must be paid one way or another.”<sup>475</sup> The telling of this queer “origin” story was understated, yet in this moment there was a quiet, revelatory, and divine weight in the room. We, the audience, were transfixed and bound to each other and to Moïse. It became impossible not to see Moïse’s story and personhood as part a destined web of Vodou causality, worship, and epistemologies.

While Moïse’s mother and dominate heteronormative logics might read Lenelle Moïse’s lesbianism as a Spirit’s “revenge,” as stated previously in my introduction to

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<sup>473</sup> Ulysse, “Ransamble,” 140.

<sup>474</sup> Ibid.

<sup>475</sup> Ibid.

Moïse, she understands her queerness to be divinely ordained by Dantò's spiritual protection and connection to her family, specifically her mother. Moïse's queerness is understood by Moïse herself as both a blessing and a spiritual call to make her mother's wrongs right. By choosing not to serve Dantò, Moïse's mother ignored the spiritual call of the lwa, leaving her daughter to complete this spiritual work. It would be easy to read Moïse work as a burden, however, this story of a daughter completing the spiritual and life work of her mother is very much in the tradition of Haitian Vodou. Karen McCarthy Brown describes the connection between Dantò, mothers and their daughters, "[e]verytime a Haitian woman looks at Dantò's image, she sees there the potential for a daughter who will stick by her, one who will extend her life and expand her world."<sup>476</sup> Moïse, then, can be understood as one of Dantò's daughters, one of the children chosen and claimed by Ezili Dantò to follow her path and in so doing, heal herself as well as the person closest to her spiritually and physically—her mother.

The path of Ezili Dantò, is not only defined by a queer potential and the black feminist imagination characterized by all of the Ezilis, it is a path indebted to speaking the complex stories of black women, of speaking from a position that embraces their full being as raced, sexed, and classed individuals. Dantò's daughters are shameless and direct istwa-tellers. The work of sharing one's istwa is not simple. As stated previously, Dantò's tongue was lacerated because it posed a threat to male power—of revealing too much. For this reason Dantò herself cannot speak and *must* employ her daughters to speak on her behalf, to share their istwa and speak their self-truths, even at the cost of going against the dominate voice.

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<sup>476</sup> Brown, 246.

In the final section of this chapter, I analyze the work of Lenelle Moïse as a shameless istwa-teller in the queer and black feminist tradition of Ezili Dantò. Moïse's Vodou aesthetic is about using Vodou to "tell it like it is" *as she sees it* in service of her larger community. Moïse deliberately shares "too much," in her poetry-performances, all in a simultaneous effort to narrate her subjectivity as a queer Haitian-Diasporan while encouraging new modes of reading Haiti and Haitian people. Through a reading of Moïse's debut book of poetry, *Haiti Glass*, I argue that Moïse circles the cosmogram by conjuring the istwa and truth-telling spirit of Dantò, acting and speaking for what she perceives to be the betterment of Haiti's futurity: telling the truth about our land and our people, even when it feels like a betrayal—the sharing of dirty laundry and secrets.

***Lenelle Moïse: Haiti Glass***

i want to talk about haiti  
i always talk about haiti  
Lenelle Moïse, "quaking conversations"<sup>477</sup>

*Haiti Glass*, Moïse's debut publication is light. The book contains 27 poems between the pages of this 4 in. x 5 ½ in. paperback. *Haiti Glass* is small enough for you to carry without feeling encumbered. You are *meant* to hold and carry these words. The cover accentuates the materiality of the book. The coolness of glass is reflected in the collage that decorates the front cover. The "Untitled Collage, 2013" that graces the cover was created by Moïse herself; crafted from scraps of fabric, primarily shades of blue, with maroons, pinks, whites, circular and triangular shapes assembled together. The

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<sup>477</sup> Lenelle Moïse, "quaking conversations," in *Haiti Glass*, 37. The titles and all of Moïse's poems are transcribed as they appear in the book, uncapitalized and with line breaks as they appear in the text.

patchwork of fabric and the brown “fingers” along the front left side of the cover, creates the illusion of quilting, “women’s” work of weaving together sundry materials in order to create something new out of fragments.<sup>478</sup> African American art historian Alvia Wardlaw, writing about the quilting traditions of African American women in *Gees Bend*, contextualizes the social practice of quilt making as:

at once solitary and collaborative. Many women learned to piece quilts from mothers, grandmothers, sisters, aunts, in-laws, and neighborhood women. However, a good quiltmaker’s mind was free of all preconceived notions of how a quilt should be created, even from an influence as close as one’s mother.<sup>479</sup>

The cover prepares us for the poems found in *Haiti Glass*. There is tradition in *Haiti Glass*, but there is also creative rhetorical play of Moïse’s own design as her collection weaves together poems that have made their way into her performances and various publications over the years. The text is an amalgamation of pieces that are meant to be read and performed, if they have not been already. The first of which is the title poem, “haiti glass.”<sup>480</sup>

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<sup>478</sup> The weaving of fabric is a motif that is apparent in much of Moïse visual work published online on her website. The illusion to fabric, sewing and women’s labor, as I suggest here, may be entirely intentional. Haiti, during the 1980-1990s and even today, served as a source of cheap labor for the garment industry. Factories in this Port-au-Prince, were filled with female workers earning around \$3 U.S. dollars a day for upwards of 12 hours or more of work in poorly ventilated factories often with none or only one bathroom to be shared by hundreds of workers. Unable to organize, laborers often had to choose between working for nothing or quitting. For more on garment labor in Haiti see Renée Bergan and Mark Schuller, dir., *Poto Mitan: Haitian Women, Pillars of the Global Economy* (Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources, 2009), DVD.

<sup>479</sup> Alvia Wardlaw, “Introduction: The Quilts of Gee’s Bend,” in *Gee’s Bend The Women and Their Quilts*, edited by John Beardsley, William Arnett, Paul Arnett, Jane Livingston, (Atlanta, GA: Tinwood Books, 2002), 16.

<sup>480</sup> See the performance here: <https://vimeo.com/119639512>

Moïse's video-performance of "haiti glass" is demonstrative of the ways that "her body remains ever so present"<sup>481</sup> even when she is using digital means to tell her story. The poem begins with Moïse's head turned to the right. The medium close shot of Moïse reveals her short two strand twists, smooth brown skin, and her gray-black clothes. Moïse dominates the right half of the screen; the other half is the empty peach-colored room that she occupies. The room seems vacuous; the only light-source appears to be the off-screen window that shines sunlight on Moïse's face.



**Figure 22:** Lenelle Moïse, "haiti glass," film still, 2014.

The shot of Moïse cuts to a black title shot screen. All white text appears announcing "Haiti Glass Poem By Lenelle Moïse." The screen fades back to Moïse and she begins to clap. More precisely, she begins to slap her hands together. Her right hand serves as the base drum and remains open while her left hand moves quickly back and forth across the palm of her right hand, making a sound every time it lands on her "drum." If we were to slow down footage it would look as though Moïse were painting

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<sup>481</sup> Gina Ulysse, "Ransanblé," 134.

her right palm with her left hand, however as the footage stands the pace of her drumming-clapping-slapping hands produces steady three-count beats that are accentuated on the first: CLAP-clap-clap, CLAP-clap-clap, *ONE-two-three, ONE-two three* (...). Moïse's clapping seems easy. It is not until I try my own hand at maintaining the rhythm (and fail to keep the rhythm going) that I see Moïse's rhythmic virtuosity at play. The music is both improvisational as it subtly shifts tempo and a reminder that the "in-body formulas" of Moïse's music-making reflects a learned mastery that "distinguishes a brilliant performer from a merely competent one."<sup>482</sup>

The claps reverberate in the room. The effect is ghostly as the claps echo throughout the space. Yet it is also ghostly in the ways that Avery Gordon reminds us, that "[t]he way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening."<sup>483</sup> The ghosts of Moïse's claps and chants are tied to the histories that she makes known on and through her in-body formulas. Performance scholar and ethnomusicologist Kyra D. Gaunt tells us that hand-clapping's melodic rhythm has its roots in the social and music-making practices of enslaved people, "this kind of embodied music-making played a central role in social music during slavery and continues to play a role in formulating social experience in black communities today."<sup>484</sup> Moïse's clapping sets the tone of the "haiti glass" poem using verbal rhythmic punctuation to draw connections between the Spirits, or ghosts, of the past and present.

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<sup>482</sup> Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency*, 7.

<sup>483</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: 2008), 8.

<sup>484</sup> Kyra D. Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes From Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006), 23.



“Haaaiti glass. Ayyyiti glass.” Moïse is singing the words of her poem. This turn is reflective of African-derived rituals of music and sound. Black music historian Samuel A. Floyd Jr. notes that “the aim of African music has always been to translate the experiences of life and of the spiritual world into sound, enhancing and celebrating life through cradle songs, songs of reflection, historical songs, fertility songs, songs about death and mourning, and other song varieties.”<sup>485</sup> Moïse singing continues this tradition by enacting a ritual through song and voice. As Moïse sings, her alto voice layers itself over the clapping. Haiti is said both in English and Haitian Kreyòl, and both pronunciations are extended in her opening line.

Moïse continues to sing and as she does she averts her eyes from the camera/us. Her head moves slowly from left to right as her eyes close and she seems to gather the notes from deep within her belly. Moïse repeats the line, “Haiti glass, Ayiti glass,” this time shortening her delivery of “Haiti” and “Ayiti” into their rightful syllabic count. Moreover, she punctuates her singing of “Haiti glass,” and “Ayiti glass,” with a sharp sounding utterance: “Haiti glass—ssscceeeewww—Ayiti glass.” We do not get a chance to reflect on the sharp utterance that links these two phrases instead Moïse forges ahead with her next line, “Staaar in my mouth. My mouth. Beautiful burning, spiiiiiiiiiiiky light.”

The opening lines of Moïse’s performance are disarming, particularly for anyone who first became acquainted with “haiti glass,” as a published text piece. In a post-quake world, the book and titular poem *Haiti Glass* might suggest Haiti’s fragility as a nation-state, its near constant condition of brokenness. Yet *Haiti Glass* is not divided into neat

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<sup>485</sup> Samuel A. Floyd Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History From Africa to the United States* (New York, NY and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 32.

sections of pre- or post-quake; rather, tales of survival—surviving dislocation, tremors, heartbreak, family loss, and coming out, fill the pages of *Haiti Glass*.

The title poem, “haiti glass,” is the first poem featured in the book. Written post-quake, the poem is one long line, divided into six stanzas:

haiti glass  
 star in my mouth  
  
 beautiful burning  
 spiky light  
  
 wish so hard  
 scrapes my soft palate  
  
 tongue a shadow  
 of swollen loss  
  
 language of shards  
 flicker stutter  
  
 pronouncing the distance  
 rays bruise gums<sup>486</sup>

The performance of “haiti glass” takes liberties and riffs off the text version of the poem, extending certain phrases, improvising sound utterances, and repeating lines as needed. For instance, the line, “Star in my mouth. My mouth,” is one that is added for performative effect and brings us to the heart of this poem-performance and the reason why Moïse must sing her poem into being. Moïse’s opus on Haiti is not simply the tale of a broken nation, but a movement on broken nations and tongues. The performance of “haiti glass” is a requiem that moves back and forth between being haunted by the critical

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<sup>486</sup> Lenelle Moïse, “haiti glass,” in *Haiti Glass*, 7.

distance between Haiti, between language(s), and perhaps also between the loss of lives following the January 12, 2010 earthquake in Haiti.

Avery Gordon writes that the ghost is a “social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life.”<sup>487</sup> In the first few bars of Moïse’s poem the “social figure” that emerges, both in the performance and the text-based version of “haiti glass” is a Haiti that embodies loss and distance. The ghostly quality of the poem continues and is heightened by the convergence of cadences, the interworking of Moïse’s claps, short and long notes, and improvised utterances. While Moïse possesses a powerful voice that is able to shape and hold the contrasts of her phrases, there is a clear haunting in the performed poem. An uncomfortable dirge-like tone to the post-quake performance, uploaded in 2014 on Vimeo.<sup>488</sup>

Returning to Moïse’s performance of the poem, the dirge quality of the performance reaches its summit in the third and fourth verses/stanza of her poem, “wish so hard, scrapes my soooft palate. Tongue a shaaadooow of swollen loss.” Following this line Moïse diverges from her written poem and returns to the line, “beautiful burning, spiiiiky light.” The image of light is a sharp contrast against the “shadow of swollen loss.” In the quiet echo of this performance, the visuals of words “light,” “shadow,” and “loss” create a sense of distance. Light, shadow, and loss remind us of the distances between our location (here) and Haiti (there). They also reminds us of the movement and distance between the realms of the living (here) and the dead (there). Moïse’s song, her dark clothes, and her refusal to meet our gaze produce a sense of distancing and somberness—a want to be close to that which we are mourning: Haiti.

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<sup>487</sup> Ibid.

<sup>488</sup> The same year that Moïse’s book *Haiti Glass* was released.

The distance between Haiti and Moïse is further stressed in the next verse of the performed poem, “Language of shards, flicker and stutter. Language of shards, flicker and stutter.” In the poem this line is singular, yet in the performed version of “haiti glass” repetition of the line highlights the dual aspects of language at work in the poem. Firstly, the line emphasizes and mourns a linguistic distance to Haiti. Throughout the poem we have been a witness to Moïse’s personal relationship to Haiti set up by the line, “haiti glass/ star in my mouth.” With this verse, Haiti moves from fragility to a thing of brilliance, a star lodged in Moïse’s mouth. Haiti, as both a physical country and the actual word, is an accumulation of letters transformed into sounds, transformed into a beautiful burning but “spiky light” in Moïse’s mouth. Haiti is almost a sensual word and nation, hard to know physically (indicative of the use of “spiky” as an adjective), yet beautiful as it moves and lives within Moïse’s mouth and voice (Figure 23). The poetics of this moment, Haiti as a star lingering in the mouth of the poet, gives way to the actual fragility documented in the poem. It is not Haiti itself that is made of glass and fragile, it is Moïse’s own mouth and tongue that are insecure, incapable of speaking not “Haiti” per se, but the language of Haiti, Haitian Kreyòl.

Moïse’s mouth is insecure and incapable of speaking Haitian Kreyòl. This language gap is illustrated in the second half of the line “language of shards, flicker and stutter.” There is a precariousness and brokenness of language that is highlighted by the words “shards,” “flicker,” and “stutter.” There is also a sense of exhaustion indicated by these lines, a futile sense of grasping onto the words and phrases that can be strung together to articulate the inarticulable: what it feels like to be of Haitian-descent watching life (and death) unfold in Haiti from afar. This distance and inability to articulate the full

extent of one's sorrow and frustration becomes a metaphor in Moïse's performance-poetry, one that uses her own heavily accented Haitian Kreyòl to perform the distance between Moïse and Haitian Kreyòl and, accordingly, Moïse and Haiti the country.



**Figure 23:** Lenelle Moïse, “haiti glass” film still on “spiky light.” 2014.

Moïse's post-quake poem mourns the (linguistic) distance between herself and other Haitians in Haiti and the Diaspora, specifically through her inability to speak Kreyòl. Haitian Kreyòl has been described as the language of the “people.” While French is estimated to be spoken only by the top 10% of Haitians in Haiti, it is spoken and understood by 100% of the population. MIT Linguist, Haitian Kreyòlist, and Haiti-born Michel DeGraff, in keeping with the Haitian Constitution of 1987 which placed Haitian Kreyòl alongside French as national language in Haiti, argues for the “genuine ‘defense of Kreyòl’” stating:

[i]t is Kreyòl, not French, that is at the core of Haiti's identity, and must be promoted and used as the essential engine of education and development. The misrepresentation of Haiti as a “great French-speaking country” only serves the interests of France and Haiti's French speakers (relatively few

in number), and contradicts the social and linguistic reality of the vast majority of monolingual Kreyòl speakers.<sup>489</sup>

DeGraff articulates why Kreyòl supersedes French as the democratic language of the island: its general accessibility makes it central to communication, education, and Haitian identity.<sup>490</sup>

Kreyòl as the language of the Haitian people is evidenced in the works of Lenelle Moïse. *Womb-Words Thirsting* makes little use of Kreyòl and, when I last saw it in February 2010, was performed primarily in English. The performance *did* however include an opening song, performed in Kreyòl, for Papa Legba, Vodou lwa of the crossroads, who opens all ceremonies. Moïse performed a traditional Vodou song for Legba announcing, “*Legba lan baryé a (Legba’s at the gate)*,” that it is he who “carries the flag and blocks out the sun for the other spirits.”<sup>491</sup> Moïse’s invocation of Papa Legba at the top of her ceremony is an indication that her understanding and use of a Vodou framework or aesthetic in her performance. Traditionally, Papa Legba is called upon first in any Vodou ceremony because as keeper of the crossroads, his arrival allows for and facilitates the arrival of the other Spirits.<sup>492</sup> By opening her performance with a song for

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<sup>489</sup> Michel DeGraff, “France’s Misconceived ‘Marshall Plan’ for Haiti,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, May 26, 2015, <http://mondediplo.com/blogs/france-s-misconceived-marshall-plan-for-haiti>.

<sup>490</sup> DeGraff and other scholars have also been fervent in trying to establish the linguistic relationship between Haitian Kreyòl and the languages of other West African people. See Hilda Koopman, “The Genesis of Haitian: Implications of a Comparison of Some Features of the Syntax of Haitian, French, and West African Languages,” in *Substrata Versus Universals in Creole Genesis*, edited by Pieter Muysken and Norval Smith (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Press, 1986), 231-258.

<sup>491</sup> Lenelle Moïse performance as described by Gina Ulysse, “Ransanblé,” 143.

<sup>492</sup> See Deren, Rigaud, Metreaux and Robert Farris Thompson’s *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1984) for a discussion of the figure of Legba in Haitian Vodou.

Papa Legba, Moïse collapses the distinction between ritual and performance; her performance is ritual and the ritual is performance.

The opening of Moïse's performance signals not only her alignment with Haitian Vodou, but also her efforts to return to Haiti vis-à-vis Vodou *and* Haitian Kreyòl. Her attempts to sing a praise song for Legba, even in her heavily English-accented Kreyòl (one of the preeminent markers of one's "Diaspora" status) suggests that Moïse in her performance practice understands the relationship between Vodou, voice, text, and the *language* that one performs, worships and cries in.<sup>493</sup> Moïse is aware that Kreyòl is no longer her mother tongue or the language she is most confident speaking. Indeed, Moïse's relationship to language and loss is highlighted in "haiti glass," and we begin to see why, "tongue a shadow of swollen loss," announces how Moïse's tongue no longer retains Haitian Kreyòl. The language of Kreyòl exists as choppy shards of glass in Moïse's mouth and it emerges as "stutter[s]" that pronounce the distance between Haiti—the islands and its Kreyòl speaking inhabitants—and Moïse herself.

In the final moments of Moïse's performance of "haiti glass" she abandons formal words all together, instead she returns to improvised utterances moving back and forth between *ssscceeeewws* and guttural *agh-aghs*. If, as African American, visual culture,

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<sup>493</sup> Here, I riff on the title of the 1998 documentary, *The Language You Cry In*, which describes the reunion between Amelia Dawley, distant relatives in Sierra Leone. The connection between Dawley and her distant relatives was made by the remnants of a five-line song that Dawley sang. The song was passed down through Dawley's family but she did not know what language it was in, until a Sierra Leonean student identified it as his native language of Mende. The short linguistic phrases of the song were all that were needed to connect Dawley's family from the Gullah Islands, to their ancestors who arrived on slave ships, and ultimately, to their distant kin back in Africa. I reference the "language you cry in," here, as evidence of the ways that language is an important tool of cultural and historical retention and connection that human beings pass down to one another; the distant traces of language allow us to produce stories, connections, and histories unbeknownst to us but that shapes affective practices across time and space. See *The Language You Cry In*, directed by Alvaro Toepke (San Francisco, CA: California Newsreel, 1998), DVD.

and performance studies scholar Fred Moten writes, “black radicalism is (like) black music”<sup>494</sup> one that gives power to the black body as commodity/object, then, the potency of Moïse’s turn towards sounds/shrieks/guttural utterances can be interpreted as radical push-backs against the confinement of language. Moïse’s rift on non-verbal sounds eschews the language of either the U.S. or Haiti. Instead, Moïse announces and names herself in “the breaking of such speech.”<sup>495</sup>

Moïse escapes to a jazz break in order to repossess herself. It is an act bridled with Spirit. Jazz singer and activist Abbey Lincoln articulates the connection between spirit and jazz:

I think that’s the problem for a lot of the musicians on the scene now. They think that they’re playing jazz. But there’s no such thing, really/I’m possessed of my own spirit/This is the music of the African muse/I just want to be of use to my ancestors/It’s holy work and it’s dangerous not to know that ‘cause you could die like an animal down here.<sup>496</sup>

Lincoln points to the ways that jazz is not merely a form that one “plays,” but a strategy and act of survival; one that is connected to spirit and African ancestry. Moïse’s performance of “haiti glass” evokes this connection to spirit in her use of jazz rifts, handclaps, and her own poetry about Haiti. In the breaks of her poetry-performance, Moïse names herself as a Dyaspora whose fragile relationship to Kreyòl serves as a metaphor for her physical distance from Haiti. Moïse performs her truth here, acknowledging that despite her own heavy tongue she has stories to tell. Moïse’s Kreyòl may be as fragile as glass, but it is Haiti that shatters and is capable of wounding, even those who love it with its shards.

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<sup>494</sup> Fred Moten, *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: 2003), 24.

<sup>495</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>496</sup> Abbey Lincoln as recorded by Fred Moten, *In The Break*, 23.



Moreover, in returning to the non-verbal and spirit possessed possibilities of affective expression, Moïse draws a direct line to Ezili Dantò a lwa whose own linguistic abilities were made impossible after her tongue was lacerated. In fact, as Vodou scholar Karen McCarthy Brown notes, because Ezili Dantò's tongue was cut out, "when Ezili Dantò possesses someone these days, she cannot speak. The only sound that the spirit can utter is a uniform 'dey-dey-dey.'" <sup>497</sup> Other sounds produced by Ezili Dantò include "a repeated 'kuh' or a sound produced, ironically, by sucking the tongue up against the roof of the mouth, a kind of 'thwap.'" <sup>498</sup> Brown comments that these "inarticulate sounds gain meaning in a Vodou ceremony," <sup>499</sup> through the simultaneous use of the body and the interpretive work of the spiritual community. Dantò's reliance on sound, the body, and the interpretive support of her community is mirrored in her daughter Lenelle Moïse's "haiti glass" poem and performance, one where viewing the performed text allows one to see the mourning that occurs between the breaks in the lines, the breaks in rhythm and the breaks in language. Similarly to the revolutionary children of Haiti who cut the tongue of their mother Dantò to quiet her, present-day Haiti is capable of hurting those it deems as "threatening," be they intimate relations or non-conforming Diaspora queers. The subtlety of Moïse's "haiti glass," sets the tone for the dual love-conflict that is forever in tension in her poetry and prose.

The collected poems in *Haiti Glass* are a compilation of works that bear this dual mark of conflict and sadness. The book offers no linear or easily identifiable movement between one piece and the next, but we can read several overarching themes at work:

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<sup>497</sup> Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, 229-230.

<sup>498</sup> Ibid.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid.

Diaspora and Diasporic identity; queerness; and post-quake Haiti. Moïse does not hesitate to speak nor does she guard what she has to say; her English-bearing and baring tongue will not hold back despite the cuts inflicted upon it by Haiti glass. In this way, Moïse models the warrior spirit and tongue of her original guardian and muse, Ezili Dantò. As Krista White has said of the lwa, “[e]verything about Ezili Danto [sic] is straightforward.”<sup>500</sup> Dantò does not hold back or shy away from the truth; her revolutionary spirit and *love* emerge from her ability to “do things quickly, fiercely, and without hesitation.”<sup>501</sup>

Dantò’s spirit of revolutionary directness and swiftness is echoed in the second poem featured in *Haiti Glass*, “mud mothers.” Moïse performed this work, written pre-quake, at the *Split this Rock Poetry Festival: Poems of Provocation and Witness* in Washington D.C. during the weekend of March 10-13, 2010, only a month after her performance of *Wombs-Words Thirsting* at Northwestern University. Moïse entered the stage wearing long black leggings tucked into her knee-high black boots, a white long sleeve shirt layered with a yellow peasant top. Her long locs cascaded past her shoulders. She approached the podium carrying her poem, a bottle of water—which she immediately placed on the floor beside her right foot—and as the claps of the audience settled Moïse took her final place, upright, at the podium.

Moïse’s poem, wastes none of her language and words on professing Haiti’s myth-making revolutionary history in her post-quake performance. She begins her poem with the brazen lines:

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<sup>500</sup> White, *Espousing Ezili*, 66.

<sup>501</sup> Ibid.

“The children of Haiti are not mythological...”<sup>502</sup>

Moïse begins, her eyes slowly passing over her audience. She is upright and her hands grasp onto either edge of the podium. There is a marked seriousness to her countenance, one that seems strikingly different from Moïse’s performance of *Womb-Words Thirsting* in February 2010.

“[The children of Haiti are not mythological]...We are starving or eating salty cakes made of clay.”

If the poem “haiti glass” as the opening poem of her volume introduces us to a post-quake Moïse who mourns her mother-tongue and her physical distance to a beautiful but oft-perceived fragile Haiti, then “mud mothers,” is an introduction to Haiti aimed at reminding us of our continued myths and misconceptions of the island nation. Activist, scholars and writers have lauded Haiti’s revolutionary history.<sup>503</sup> Caribbean scholar Patricia Mohammed has stated that within the Caribbean alone (and I would argue the larger world), “Haiti provides [...] a polemic for the Region [sic]. The country has attained the curious mythological position of ‘nuff respect’ within the territory, while at

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<sup>502</sup> Moïse, “mud mothers,” *Haiti Glass*, 8. See the performance of “mud mothers” here: <http://lenellemoise.com/videos.html>.

<sup>503</sup> While these list is not exhaustive, some Non-Haitian scholars-writers-activists informed by the Haitian Revolution include Jacob H. Carruthers, *The Irritated Genie: An Essay on the Haitian Revolution* (Chicago, IL: Kemetite Institute, 1985); Frederick Douglass, “Lecture on Haiti,” from Speech of Frederick Douglass Haitian Pavilion Dedication Ceremonies at Chicago World Fair, 1893; and CLR James, *The Black Jacobins*, (New York: Random House, Inc., 1963); Langston Hughes, *Emperor of Haiti*, (Play, 1936). See Leon D. Pamphile’s *Haitians and African Americans: A Heritage of Tragedy and Hope* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2001), for more on the Haiti-African American connection from slavery to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. For more on the effects of the Haitian Revolution on the age on enlightenment see Susan Buck-Morss’s, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburg, PA: University of Pittsburg Press, 2009) and Nick Nesbitt’s *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and Radical Enlightenment* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2008).

the same time perceived as backwards, poor, unstable and unable to govern itself.”<sup>504</sup>

Even Diasporic identity and projects of nationalism have the tendency to laud Haiti’s revolutionary history without addressing or complicating Haiti’s present day reality in relationship to said history. “Mud mothers” dispels the mythological position of Haiti in the Caribbean and in the Haitian Diasporic imaginary, attesting that the children of Haiti are not superhumans; they/we are in fact humans who are dying.<sup>505</sup>

Moïse marks her positionality with the line “we are starving,” indicating that she is well aware that the people who pick up the book *Haiti Glass* or witness her performance of “mud mothers” may not draw an immediate connection between Moïse and the people of Haiti. In using the first person plural, the “royal we,” Moïse marks her body and history in solidarity with that of *all* Haitians, thereby humanizing “Haiti” for readers who may have no concept of the nation and its people beyond the discourses of the media.

“Mud mothers” makes reality out of Haitian history. It is not a homage to revolutionary figures such as Toussaint L’Ouverture and Jean Jacque-Dessaline, but an acknowledgement of Haiti’s vulnerability as a Black republic following the revolution. Moïse writes-performs, “Because in 1804 we felled / our former slave captors / the

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<sup>504</sup> Patricia Mohammed, *Imagining the Caribbean: Culture and Visual Translation* (Oxford: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 5.

<sup>505</sup> In using they/we I want to draw attention to the multiple positionalities at work. On the one hand, *I* am not starving; my Diasporic body does not want for food the way that other children of Haiti (both in Haiti and in Diaspora) have want for food, clothing and shelter. On the other hand, I stand by the principles of African-centered traditions of thought, specifically the Nguni Saba, Kiswahili principle of “UMOJA” or “Unity,” that has corollaries in other Black diasporic traditions including “I am because we are,” “ubuntu” (human kindness, of the Nguni Bantu tradition of South Africa), and even the Haitian call-and-response traditions of “*Krik/Krak*” or “*Onè/Respè*” (Honor/Respect), which are about embracing the collective potential of the individual and the community, the ever-constant I/We.

graceless losers sunk/ vindictive yellow / teeth into our forests.”<sup>506</sup> Moïse reads her poem simply; her arms and head are the only things that sway from behind the podium. Her poem has a speech-like quality to it, as though she is aware that these two minutes that she has on the mic are her only chance to be direct in presenting a new image of Haiti, one that produces a colonial critique of Haiti’s present-day realities. Moïse speaks to the consequences of Haiti’s revolutionary actions being met by the continued ransacking of Haiti’s natural resources and her ultimate economic isolation from the rest of the world. Ecologically speaking, when Haiti’s doors were forced open by occupation in particularly the U.S. Occupation of Haiti from 1919-1934, Haiti’s suffered acts of deforestation which left both its land and its people starved.<sup>507</sup> Spiritually speaking, trees are the original doorways between the physical realm and the cosmological realm. Nature’s original *poto mitans* (center poles) were decimated and for Moïse, “this is what happens to warriors who / in lieu of fighting for white men’s countries / dare to fight / for their own lives,” their lands and connection to spirits, quite literally, are taken.<sup>508</sup>

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<sup>506</sup> Moïse, “mud mothers,” *Haiti Glass*, 8.

<sup>507</sup> The continued deforestation of Haiti is also the reason why mudslides can be a dangerous occurrence. At the time of this writing Hurricane Matthew has left a death toll in Haiti’s southern region with numbers rising towards a 1,000. Many of these deaths, both in Haiti and its neighboring Dominican Republic were cause by mudslides.

<sup>508</sup> The relationship between environmental activism, Vodou, and the arts is strong in Haiti and its Diaspora. One poignant example occurred in April 2011 during a lecture titled, “Music and Human Rights,” which featured a question and answer session with iconic Haitian Rara band Boukman Eksperyans. The group, known for their political activism and calls for Haitians to maintain their spiritual traditions were also highly influential in Moïse’s understanding of the ecological politics of Haiti. During the Q & A Moïse announced that it was because of Boukman’s music that she learned of the spiritual importance of trees and the need to protect mother earth. This vignette highlights the ways that cultural arts become tools for instructing and passing on spiritual paradigms to the next generation as well as to the Diaspora.

Moïse's truth-telling, extends beyond her demythification of Haitian history.

Cultural staples such as carnival and Vodou become sobering means for articulating the costs of freedom in neocolonial Haiti:

during carnival  
we could care less  
about our bloated empty bellies  
where there are voices  
we are dancing

where there is vodou  
we are horses  
where there are drums  
we are possessed  
with joy and stubborn jamboree

but when the makeshift  
trumpet player  
runs out of rhythmic breath  
the only sound left is  
guts grumbling

and we sigh  
to remember  
that food  
and freedom  
are not free

is haiti really free  
if our babies die starving?  
if we cannot write our names  
read our rights  
keep our leaders in their seats?

Moïse continues her critique of Haiti's neocolonial reality, even while referencing iconographic and joyful cultural events and rituals such as Carnival and Vodou

ceremonies—where Spirits are said to “mount” people as a rider would mount a horse.<sup>509</sup> Moïse’s performance of these lines are not jubilant, she does not crack a smile or invite us “in” with stories of herself. Her stance, mouth, and body remain direct and unwavering, delivering a message and reflecting the intended tone of the poem. Amidst these exuberant gatherings, Moïse reminds us of the undercurrent of disenfranchisement that makes these rituals necessary and possible. Moïse writes of “food and freedom” not being free, alluding to food insecurities in the country. These insecurities are due to a combination of internal forces (low government investment, a monopolization of land by a minority of Haitian elites and business, and a dwindling amount of arable land) as well as external forces. Externally, Haiti’s aid packages in the late 1980s to mid-1990s often came at a steep price, including changes to trade tariffs which have flooded Haiti’s markets with surpluses of U.S. rice and corn, imports that prove(d) detrimental to Haiti’s own cereal industry. In 2010, as stated earlier, post-quake relief efforts bartered aid for religious conversion, meaning that for Vodou practitioners, food and other forms of aid came at the costs of spiritual practices.<sup>510</sup> The economic and spiritual costs of freedom are alluded to in Moïse’s juxtaposition of joyful euphoria (Vodou possession and Carnival) with reminders of Haiti’s economic exploitation. These juxtapositions echo

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<sup>509</sup> Zora Neale Hurston’s *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*, takes its title from this phenomena when a spirit comes down and speaks through its “horse.” (New York, NY: First Perennial Modern Classics Edition, 2009).

<sup>510</sup> For more on economic policies, neoliberalism, and trade deals enacted between the U.S. and the Haitian government see Alex Dupuy, “Disaster Capitalism to the Rescue: The International Community and Haiti after the Earthquake,” in *NACLA Report on the Americas* 43:5 (2010): 14-19 and *Haiti, from Revolutionary Slaves to Powerless Citizens: Essays on the Politics and Economics of Underdevelopment, 1804-2013* (New York, NY : Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014); Josh DeWind and David H. Kinley III, *Aiding Migration: The Impact of International Development Assistance on Haiti* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1988); *Poto Mitan: Haitian Women, Pillars of the Global Economy*, directed by Renée Bergan and Marc Schuller (Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources, 2009), and Marc Schuller, *Humanitarian Aftershocks in Haiti* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016).

what scholars of the Caribbean including Antonio Benitez-Rojo and Kristie Soares have argued as the evolution of an embodied playfulness within the Caribbean, which emerged out of plantation slavery (and subsequent colonialism) and allowed for survival and the pursuit of social, political, and economic justice.<sup>511</sup>

Moïse and her Ezili Dantò spirit of shameless *istwa* (story)-telling do not shy away from troubling notions of Carnival and Vodou as simply embodied forms of joyful bliss. Though these national and cultural traditions are sacred, and will continue to live in the bodies of Haitian people, we must not forget that even in the midst of the (inter)national reverie and “consumption”<sup>512</sup> that they conjure, they do not quench hunger or prevent poverty-induced deaths. Moïse’s truth-telling on behalf of Haiti’s starving children remains a fitting reflection of Ezili Dantò’s spirit: the mother of Haiti asking that we see her children for what they are *right now*: unfree. “Mud mothers” provides the context for the rest of *Haiti Glass*. Moïse’s discussion of Haiti as unfree, of her children as starved, and of Haitians, the world over, as humans and *not* mythological, all serve to dispel any misconception or ideas of “Haiti,” held by her readers. “Mud mothers,” and *Haiti Glass* as a whole, signals Haiti as the inheritor of centuries of violent colonial foraging.

From this context of Haiti as a complex neocolonial matrix emerges all other discussions of Haiti and Lenelle Moïse’s relationship to the island, particularly as a queer

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<sup>511</sup> See Antonio Benitez-Rojo’s *Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Post-Modern Perspective* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992) and Kristie Soares, “Salsa Epistemology: On the Present, Utopia, and the Caribbean Intervention in Critical Theory,” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California Santa Barbara, 2015).

<sup>512</sup> Here I am referring to Mimi Sheller’s discussion of the colonial exploitation or “consumption,” of Haiti’s resources including its land, people and culture. See Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003).



Haitian immigrant. Moïse's pre-quake work has never shied away from her queerness and its relationship to her Haitian Diasporic identity. Her poetry and performances have always been acts of self-naming, of acknowledging her family and personal narratives as rooted in a spiritual, queer, feminist and Diasporic sensibility. Moïse's inheritance of Ezili Dantò's queer potential and advocating spirit is most evident in those moments when Moïse resists the absenting and silencing of her queer female body such as in the poem "madivinez."<sup>513</sup> Written pre-quake and reproduced in the latter-half of *Haiti Glass*, "madivinez" begins with a description of the home that Moïse shares with the "woman that she loves" her partner.<sup>514</sup> The "bright yellow bookcase" that the couple uses as an altar to house their images, crayons, and art supplies, and behind the colored pencils is Moïse's Haitian Kreyòl-English dictionary. Often "too afraid to open it," Moïse discusses picking up the dictionary one day and searching for the word "lesbian." However, "the little red book denied [her] existence." Unable to find "Lesbian" in the Kreyòl-English dictionary, Moïse calls her mother asking her:

"Mommy, how do you say 'Lesbian' in Kreyòl?"

Enacting her mother's Kreyòl accent Lenelle Moïse replies to herself: "OHHHH! You say 'Madivinez' but it's not a positive word, it's vulgar. No one wants to be called 'Madivinez.'"

"It's like saying 'dyke,'" Moïse tells us. "But how can cruelty sound so beautiful? Madivinez sounds so glamorous, something I want to be," she says blissfully, striking a pose with her arms outstretched. "Madivinez, 'My Divine,' sounds so holy."

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<sup>513</sup> View online at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmefqtixGeM>

<sup>514</sup> Lenelle Moïse, "Madivinez" performance. The performance upload is dated 2006.

Moïse thanks her mother for the “vulgar gift” which she then writes into her dictionary next to the Kreyòl word for “heart.” Moïse concludes the performance of “Madivinez” reiterating the definition, mapping it onto her heart. Moïse pounds her chest with an open fist as she announces: “Glamorous, holy, Haitian-DYKE heart. Something I want to be.”

Haitianness, doesn’t include lesbian; it doesn’t include the non-heteronormative body of Moïse. She/we, our queerness is either unfathomable or erased from language, and so it must be (re)inserted by way of “Madivinez.” Once again, we see the ways that language becomes instrumental in naming/claiming one’s identity as Haitian. “There is no real word for *lesbian*,” Moïse once stated in an interview, “[a]nd if your language doesn’t have a word for *lesbian*, then you have to work a little harder to find your value.”<sup>515</sup> Jerry Philogene theorizes Moïse’s performance of “madivinez” as a “pedagogy of race/sexuality/queer identity,” that “animates the body into newly imagined possibilities of Americanness and Haitianness on her own terms.”<sup>516</sup> Moïse’s verbal-physical distance is manifested through the absence of “lesbian” from the little red book. As Philogene notes, Moïse “[b]y asking her mother for the definition of a term that she cannot find in a dictionary that services as the linguistic confirmation of her culture, at once, [inserts] herself within that culture [...] exposing its homophobic nature.”<sup>517</sup> By taking up this idiom—seeking, finding, and loving, “madivinez”—Moïse bourgeois the construction of the Haitian woman, widening the possibilities so as to

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<sup>515</sup> Lenelle Moïse, interviewed by Beth Greenfield, “The Word is Out: Lenelle Moïse [sic] gives voice to her Haitian-lesbian identity with some powerful poetry,” TimeOut.Com, July 4, 2007.

<sup>516</sup> Jerry Philogene, “Lenelle Moïse: Postscript, Swimming in the Waters of Endezo,” *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (May 2015): 339.

<sup>517</sup> Ibid.

legitimize Madivinez. By enthusiastically claiming “Madivinez” as something she wants to be and *is* Moïse also legitimizes her own Haitian-Diasporic, non-Kreyòl speaking, dyke body as part of the fabric of Haitianness, contesting her erasure and the unfathomability of her life and love.

There is a second, and perhaps more expansive purpose that is served in Moïse’s poem, as well as its performed archive. In turning to *my* Haitian Kreyòl dictionary, the word “Madivinez,” *does* appear, defined simply as “lesbian.” The inclusion of “madivinez” in another dictionary does not undercut Moïse’s performed theorization of her lesbian-absenting. “Madivinez’s” strategic (dis)appearance brings to the fore the idea that “lesbian” is a term whose inclusion or exclusion within conversation is carefully curated when translating the Haitian experience across tongues. What is most fascinating about the word “madivinez” is that it can be broken into two parts, “ma” which can mean either: (1) residue, sediment, lees; (2) mast (as in “flag mast”); or (3) puddle. Whereas “divinez” is the female version of a “fortune-teller” or “seer.”<sup>518</sup> Together these two words combine to create a rough translation of “madivinez” as the residue, mast, or puddling of the seer/divine. Madivinez, in other words, springs from the esoteric, and is woven into the experience of the other-worldly. The sacred roots of madivinez become profane when madivinez circulates as a pejorative.

Moïse, I argue, doesn’t simply reclaim “madivinez,” she circles us back to the cosmological beginnings of the term. Moïse reminds us queers in the Diaspora that this idiom points to “lesbian” and more broadly “homosexuality,” not as an “American

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<sup>518</sup> Jean Targète and Raphael G. Urciolo, entry for “Madivinez,” “Ma,” and “Divinez” in *Haitian Creole-English Dictionary with Basic English-Haitian Creole Appendix* (Kensington, MD: Dunwoody Press, 1993).

disease” as our parents have often led us to belief, but embedded in the cultural, historical, and affective fabric of Haiti. This circling back—a circling of the cosmograms—for Moïse, is made possible by going *back* to her mother to find the word “lesbian” and being gifted the performative word “madivinez.” The word enacts a shameless women-based intimacy through its excavation by mother-daughter. Moïse the daughter shamelessly acknowledges her need for translation, information, and self-definition, and her mother gives her Diasporic daughter the words she needs so that she might become fully realized in language and in Spirit. Together, daughter and mother bring the practice of female-intimacies into being and thus into the light.

The performance of “madivinez” is not Moïse’s only insertion of her lesbian-self into her performance practice; it continues the work of Moïse’s *Womb-Words-Thirsting*. The performance is a blend of what she refers to as “womanist *Vodou* jazz, queer theory hip hop, spoken word, and song and movement” (emphasis added).<sup>519</sup> As stated in my earlier introduction to Moïse, one of the ways that Vodou enters into the performance arena is by way of an altar that Moïse created for the Vodou spirit Erzili Dantò. Moïse’s constructed altar and reappropriation of the term “madivinez,”<sup>520</sup> serves several purposes: the altar roots her in a Vodou tradition that was *not* the tradition that she was raised within as a child; and the queer-potentiality already present in Vodou is amplified

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<sup>519</sup> Lenellemoise.com, accessed October 30, 2009.

<sup>520</sup> *Madivinez* translates literally into “my divine” in Kreyòl, but the term is also a pejorative term for lesbians. Although Dantò is identified as a patron spirit to/for lesbians, Erzili Dantò has also become a patron figure for LGBTQ Haitian-identified people throughout the Diaspora. For more on information please see: Karen McCarthy Brown’s *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) and Randy P. Conner and 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).

to the point where Vodou, and Vodou as an indelible marker for Haiti, become queer in and of themselves. Moïse has created a performance space in which ritual, Vodou, and queerness are seamlessly interconnected. The relationship between these traditions reflects Moïse's own political, cultural, and spiritual affiliations: simultaneously queer, Vodou-inspired, multi-tongued, and poetic. This newly imagined-Haiti works *for* her by *reflecting* her. Haiti represents Moïse, not vice versa. Moïse in telling her own istwa as a Haitian-dyke heart, inserts her history/truth into the larger fabric of Haitian and Haitian Diasporic subjectivity.

The performance of "madivinez" as well as Moïse's post-quake publication of it in *Haiti Glass*, mark the same attempts to rebuff singular paradigms of "the" Haitian woman. The poem-performance encourages not only Moïse's existence as a "glamorous, holy, Haitian dyke heart,"<sup>521</sup> it also furthers our understanding of Moïse's mother. Throughout *Haiti Glass*, Moïse's mother remains a near constant figure, a woman who we might easily judge one way or another but whom, at the end of *Haiti Glass* becomes too complex a figure for us to easily dismiss. Moïse's mother moves from the unknown woman who Moïse only knew through scented letters and is reunited with at the airport ("adaptations"), to the mother who discloses to her child that she attempted to abort her ("children of immigrants"), to the now older woman who, presumably, knows her daughter is a lesbian and provides her with the information necessary to name herself as "lesbian" ("madivinez"). Through these apparitions, Moïse's mother becomes as multifaceted as Moïse herself. We also see the ways in which Moïse's own Ezili Dantò spirit, is mirrored in her mother's character: a woman who does not hold back the truth

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<sup>521</sup> The line as written in "madivinez," *Haiti Glass*, 64-65.

and who, by immigrating to the U.S. and leaving Moïse behind with her father, quite literally, travelled ahead of her child in order to make a better way for her daughter.

### **Conclusion: Writing Beyond**

In the same email where I received an early copy of Moïse's "Kissed There Myself," I received a second poem, "Rada Raincoat." If "Kissed There Myself" is an ode to Ezili Dantò, then "Rada Raincoat" seems a sensuous dedication to the objects of adornment that grace Ezili and/or her children in the Diaspora. The poem gets its name from the titular line, "rada raincoat tent this faith." Rada, is one of the primary nations of Vodou, brought to Haiti from Dahomey, present day Benin. As stated earlier in this chapter, Ezili Freda, lwa of love is traditionally associated with the "cooler" Rada nation, while her sister Ezili Dantò, known for being a fierce warrior and mother of the Haitian Revolution is typically associated with the "hotter" Petwo nation, which was born in Saint-Domingue under the context of slavery. The Rada raincoat thusly becomes the penultimate signifier of Haitian longing and displacement: an object/artifact/spiritual guard and connection to Africa and Haiti.

An initial reading of the poem "Rada Raincoat" takes *me* into Haiti. It is hard to imagine how the words might read and *feel* to those without a cultural context for them, those who have never been to Haiti, or longed for her affects. "Rada Raincoat" is an ode to those objects that are inherited memories from my parents' childhoods in Haiti, and that peppered our home (whenever possible) after a trip to a local Caribbean grocery store or a long sojourn back to Haiti. Barbancourt rum (the de facto national rum of Haiti), the sacred mapou around which Vodou ceremonies may occur,<sup>522</sup> water from the Saut-d'Eau

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<sup>522</sup> Referred to as the silk-cotton tree in English.

waterfalls where pilgrimages are made throughout the year but especially in July where people bathe in Ezili's waters, and the sweet sticky fruit *kenap*.<sup>523</sup> "Rada Raincoat" is a reminder of the material realities of Dyaspora, the ways that artifacts—be they rum, fruit, flowers or costuming—serve as signifiers of home. Vodou is also one of those previously shameful signifiers. Yet, Vodou and the Ezilis who dance on the pages of Lenelle Moïse's poems remind us to be shameless. Vodou becomes a way of activating myths, memories, and the inheritances of Dyaspora that are both material and spiritual. Moïse, as Dantò's daughter, circles of the cosmograms using Vodou epistemologies of Dantò to shamelessly share her *istwa* as a Haitian woman who does not fit into neat boxes of what it means to be female, Haitian, queer, and Dyaspora. Moïse enacts a black feminist politics in her work that embraces, includes, and understands that Haitian women's lives are not lived in isolation, but in relationship to humanity at large. Sharing their stories and the stories of Haitian people, especially Haitian women, is not a solipsistic gesture, but a means of altering the ways people see Haiti, so that Haiti might be seen as radically human in ways that Ezili Dantò demands.

In many ways, the effort to (re)present Haitian people took on a greater urgency following the January 12, 2010 earthquake. This post-quake urgency is highlighted in an October 2014 interview that Moïse conducted while promoting *Haiti Glass*:

[After the earthquake] it took me a while to write again. I was really focused on details, specificity and zooming in. Just making that devastation human. How do you get in, zoom in, find someone's favorite color, find those details that make us who we are instead of victims? You don't get to see much of that when we talk about Haiti and the media.<sup>524</sup>

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<sup>523</sup> Also known commonly as Spanish limes.

<sup>524</sup> Lenelle Moïse interviewed by Chris Carosi, *Live from City Lights*, Podcast, October 3, 2014.

For Moïse, Vodou, as a spiritual framework and aesthetic, is a tool for zooming in and returning to a tradition that allows Haitians to name themselves as Haitian, Diasporic, Feminists, and/or Queer, and to do so with an awareness that naming themselves, or “outing themselves,” allows us to speak in concert with others. Dantò’s daughters continue to labor to tell the istwa of Haitian women in ways that are women-centered, queer, and shamelessly unapologetic of their status as Black, Dyaspora, and Queer. In so doing, they/we demand new ways of configuring Haitian people world-wide.



**Conclusion:**

*Gede and Oya Go to School:*

Auto-ethnography, Spiritual Pulls, and Performing Ritual in Diaspora and the Academy

From the spiritual viewpoint, ritual is inevitable and necessary if one is to live.

-Malidoma Patrice Somé<sup>525</sup>

*Circling the Cosmograms: Feminist Art, Vodou, and Diasporic (Re)turns to Post-Quake Haiti* has argued that following the January 12, 2010 earthquake in Haiti, the work of feminist and/or queer identified Haitian artists has been characterized by a (re)turn to Haiti vis-à-vis their (re)turn to Vodou. It has done so by demonstrating how these artists “circle the cosmograms” and use Vodou as a spiritual framework and aesthetic tool for naming themselves as Haitian, Diasporic, Feminists, and/or Queer. In so doing, I have argued they subvert dominant heteronormative notions of Haiti and Haitian-descended people. I theorized the concept of circling the cosmograms—the return to Haitian Vodou—through a discussion of three artists and their works: Régine Romain (b. 1974, photographer); Rejin Leys (b. 1966, mixed-media and paper artist); and Lenelle Moïse (b. 1980, poet-playwright). Through these artists and their works I investigated three emergent tactics of “circling the cosmograms”: 1) seeing diasporically; 2) the Diasporic lakou praxis; and 3) the aesthetics of the lwa.

Chapter 1, the introduction, outlined the theoretical questions and concerns at stake in this project. I defined my use of keywords including “circling the cosmograms,” “Diaspora,” and “queer.” The chapter also detailed the tropes that make Vodou a framework for Diasporic engagement and aesthetic practice: Vodou as Africa reblended;

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<sup>525</sup> Malidoma Patrice Somé, *Ritual: Power, Healing, and Community* (Portland: Swan Raven & Company, 1993), 28.

Vodou as communal philosophy; and Vodou as service towards liberation.

Chapter 2 investigated the first tactic of circling the cosmograms, “seeing dyasporically.” I explored post-quake photographs of Haiti and the ways they function as ritual objects capable of “heating up” or “cooling down” stereotypical representations of the country. I examined photographic representations of post-quake Haiti in the mass media and their depiction of Haitians as detritus, specters and a people in a constant state of crisis and trauma. Countering these mass portrayals of Haiti is the work of Régine Romain, whose physical (re)turn to Haiti, Vodou, and her subsequent “Portraits for a Self-Determining Haiti” series serves as a counter-archive that depicts Haitians as human. Romain’s work allowed Haitians in the Diaspora to “see dyasporically” by evoking a “cooling” *balanse* (spiritual balance) an aesthetic (re)turn, intervention and middle ground between the Diasporic desire to see and thereby (re)turn to Haiti—to know what is happening *over there*—and the ethical dimensions of documenting Haitian/black bodies in states of crisis.

Chapter 3, “Rejin Leys: Mourning Elizée and Building Lakous in Diaspora,” examined the second tactic of circling the cosmograms, the Diasporic lakou praxis. The Diasporic lakou praxis marks the way Haitian Diasporans perform cultural mores, relying on them to build local ties and reconcile everyday needs, all while maintaining international commitments. I documented the performance of the Diasporic lakou system in the life and art works of Rejin Leys from the 1990s to 2013. As an artist whose pre-quake work gained popularity because of its Haitian sociopolitical and historical content, I investigated Rejin Leys’s artwork following the earthquake and how the work was inspired not by the quake but by the passing of her husband, Andre Elizée who died two

days prior to the earthquake. I contend that Leys's personal loss as well as the art that emerged during this time highlights the reality of Diasporic existence: the Diasporic tensions between *here* (Diaspora) and *there* (Haiti). Through an analysis of Leys's work pre- and post-quake/Elizée's passing, I addressed how the Diasporic lakou praxis serves as a framework for local and transnational engagement, personal healing, and community work.

Chapter 4, "Dantò's Daughter: Lenelle Moïse's Womb-Words for the Shameless *Madivinez*," focused on the third tactic of "circling the cosmograms," the critical deployment of the aesthetics of the *lwa* (spirits) of Haitian Vodou. This tactic encapsulates the numerous ways in which artists deliberately activate and improvise the material, spiritual, and physical attributes of the Haitian Vodou pantheon in their art works, using ritual symbols, colors, and characteristics of these lwas in their art to signify the spiritual forces. I spotlighted the aesthetics of the *lwa* through an analysis of the relationship and influence of the Vodou *lwa* Ezili Dantò on Haitian-American and queer poet, Lenelle Moïse. I theorized the relationship between Ezili Dantò and Lenelle Moïse as one that facilitates a black lesbian shamelessness that undermines socially inherited shame around Vodou, queer, and Diasporic identity. In so doing, I position Moïse as one of "Dantò's daughters," a medium who speaks on behalf and with those people who are "protected" by Dantò: poor, black, women, lesbian, and/or queer people.

The majority of this dissertation has moved between personal and objective discussions of the works of Régine Romain, Rejin Leys, and Lenelle Moïse. Central to my analysis of their art has been *my own* relationship to these women's work. Admittedly, this was a deliberate writing strategy—a way of personalizing the work for

the unknown reader. However, my discussion of these women's work and their stories through my own encounter(s) with them was also an unavoidable consequence of knowing these women, of realizing our shared approaches to our works through a shared desperate love for Haiti, for the U.S., and for art. Ultimately, our work is rooted in using our art as a platform for connecting people to each other and to Haiti, while simultaneously calling for us as Haitians, Haitian-Americans, and Diasporic subjects to "do" better—to change our heteronormative, heterosexist, and patriarchal ways so that all experiences can be given shared political, social, and spiritual value. Such a way of engaging others would embody the Haitian Kreyòl proverb, "*Men anpil chay pa lou*. (many hands make the load lighter)." Vodou is key for this work, providing a corpus of aesthetic, philosophical, and moral principles for shaping our intentions, our work, and our relationship to Haiti and Haitian people.

As a conclusion, and a way of making myself as vulnerable as the artists who have graced me (and the world) with their time and creations, I offer my own work as a Spiritual practitioner and performer as a site of inquiry. More specifically, I examine how Spirit and/as scholarship was central to my emotional processing of the earthquake. In many ways, this chapter elucidates what it means to cross boundaries—rhetorical, spiritual, and academic. What does it mean to be guided by Spirit in and through the academy? How does spirit manifest itself even before we reach the ivory tower? Lastly, what does knowledge of the Spirit do for us when we give it a name and a proper place within the every day and sacred practices of our lives, art, and activism?

As a means of answering these questions and pointing to the ways that Spirit, Haitian performance, and the academy intersect, this chapter examines the fourth and

final tactic of circling the cosmograms, crossing pedagogies, the bridging of the sacred and the scholarly. Using M. Jacqui Alexander's theorization of "crossing pedagogies" as a theoretical framework, I analyze the works of two artists who bridge Vodou aesthetics in their performance and scholarly work: anthropologist Gina Athena Ulysse and myself. I document how both Ulysse and I rely on two African-based spirits to organize our spiritual and academic lives. The Haitian Vodou lwa Gede, keeper of the dead, and the Yoruba Lucumí *orisha* (spirit) Oya, keeper of the cemetery, become respective "guides" and muses in Ulysse's and my work as we produce performance-scholarship that addresses Haiti's continued colonial condition. I first analyze my own solo performance *Picking Up Stones* to discuss how African cosmology as a spiritual epistemology is birthing new modes of scholarship that places spirit, performance, and embodiment at the center of our analysis and inquiry. It is only fitting that the end of the dissertation goes to Gede, always the last lwa to enter the Vodou ceremony. I detail Ulysse's own scholarly-performance interventions vis-à-vis her Gede-infused scholarship and staged performances. Using these two artist-scholars as examples, I gesture towards the fate of African cosmology, especially Haitian Vodou in the Haitian Diaspora, as an ever-expanding spiritual framework for understanding the world, critiquing oppression, and redressing popular perception of Haiti, Haitian people, and Haitian Vodou.

### **Crossing Pedagogies: Spirited-Scholarship**

The Spirit has been an ally in this dissertation; a way of discussing the emotive, spiritual and historical return that many of these artists have made deliberately (Moïse and Romain) and subconsciously (Leys) in their efforts to (re)turn to Haiti. These are

artists who have in many ways *crossed borders* that were deliberately closed to them:

the adoration of Vodou; the (re)turn to Haiti; and even the ability to mourn their losses of loved ones locally and internationally. Crossing these borders and (re)turning to Haiti is not just a symbolic act of defiance, it is an act of self-making and (re)education that honors other forms of knowledge that do not receive much purchase in Western and colonial society: Spirit and art.

Women and gender scholar M. Jacqui Alexander names these crossings as “crossing pedagogies.”<sup>526</sup> Alexander describes the political underpinnings of crossing pedagogies:

Put differently, pedagogies that are derived from the Crossing fit neither easily nor neatly into those domains that have been imprisoned within modernity’s secularized episteme. Thus, they disturb and reassemble the inherited divides of Sacred and secular, the embodied and disembodied, for instance, pushing us to take seriously the dimension of spiritual labor that make the sacred and the disembodied palpably tangible and, therefore, constitutive of the lived experiences of millions of women in different parts of the world.<sup>527</sup>

The whole of this dissertation project takes seriously the spiritual labor of Vodou in Haitian women’s lives. I echo Alexander’s claim that crossings are modes of disruption, performatives that reconstitute our understanding of scholarship, knowledge, and “work.” Yet the question remains, what does it *look* like when Spirit enters the Academy? I provide a model by turning towards my own work as a growing scholar-spiritualist.

To be clear, Vodou has not been the sole language of my healing and processing of the earthquake. Following the January 12, 2010 earthquake in Haiti, amidst the news

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<sup>526</sup> M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations of Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>527</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

of chaos, death, and panic that traveled across Haiti to the Haitian Diaspora, I was overcome by a personal truth that I have since been unable to shake: *Oya* had her hand in this. Although, the Yoruba-Lucumí orisha is commonly known as the goddess of violent winds and hurricanes, in my mind, how could so much death and social upheaval *not* bear Oya's mark? Oya, Yoruba for "she-tore," brings change through chaos. She is both whirlwind and carrier of "souls between the land of the living and the dead."<sup>528</sup> Oya underscores the deep-seated connection between life and death and the emergent hope following the catastrophe—a hope that might unite, in a sustained way, Haiti and the Haitian Diaspora.

It was through my first post-quake solo performance, *Picking Up Stones*, that I truly came to understand Oya as a muse and framework for accepting both the earthquake and my potential role in rebuilding Haiti. Before the earthquake, I struggled as an artist to articulate *why* the voices of women and queer people mattered in discussions of Haiti and its Diaspora. It was only when I engaged with Oya artistically and spiritually in solo performance, that I discovered a path to answering why gender and sexuality matter in (re)building Haiti and our Diasporas.

I review *Picking Up Stones (PS)* and my spiritual pull towards Oya to posit queer-solo performance as a site where artists use African-derived ritual and the Spirit to underscore the importance of gender, sexuality, and queer narratives in the formation of the Haitian Diaspora. I present and analyze excerpts of the performance moving between segments of "script" and "theory." My aim is to posit performance as *praxis*—where artists produce theories vis-à-vis text and their embodied work in order to critique and

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<sup>528</sup> Alexis Brooks de Vita, "Oya," *Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora: Origins, Experiences, and Culture*, ed. Carol Joyce Davies (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 734.

transform the status quo.<sup>529</sup> Configuring performance as praxis highlights the broader trajectory of solo performance by Haitian Diasporic artists who employ their/our bodies and Spirits to legitimize female and/or queer second-generation narratives within the Diaspora.<sup>530</sup> Within this context, the labor of composing, (re)drafting, and rehearsing a script engages the same principles of research, structure, and argument that are central to academic discourse. Moreover, by engaging only a segment of *Picking Up Stones*—Oya as a central figure—I highlight one of the many theoretical implications of the performance, namely, ritual as a site where queer Haitians interrogate notions of gender, sexuality, and Diasporic subjectivity.

Here, auto-ethnography and critical re-engagement with my art praxis become modes of “showing myself to myself.”<sup>531</sup> I take seriously performance ethnography’s belief in performance as a means of inciting culture, rupturing everyday experiences, and a process capable of transforming both the performer and the audience.<sup>532</sup> By interrogating my work critically, I archive and announce how the earthquake continues to work in and on my body, shaping my art-scholarship as well as my Diasporic ties to Haiti and Haitian-descended people. This approach to theorizing my work continues the

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<sup>529</sup> See Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach.” Marx Internet Archive. February 2005. [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm), and Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

<sup>530</sup> I am gesturing to the works of poet-performer Haitian-Americans Lenelle Moïse and scholar-performer Gina Ulysse, and performance artist Josefina Baez.

<sup>531</sup> A play on Victor Turner and his discussion of human beings as “homo performans.” See *On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Experience* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1985).

<sup>532</sup> See Bryant Keith Alexander, “Performing Ethnography: The Reenacting and Inciting of Culture,” in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, eds. Norman K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005); D. Soyini Madison in *Critical Ethnography: Methods, Ethics, and Performance* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2012); Dwight Conquergood, *Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography, and Praxis*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013).



work of crossings, moving from personal and/as collective, sacred and/as secular, and ritual and/as theater.

### **Crossings Ritual as Theater/Theater as Ritual**

The topics of performance and ritual in the African diaspora have their origins in tactics of survival and colonial resistance. As stated previously in this dissertation, the Vodou ceremony of Bwa Kayiman on August 14, 1791, which hailed the Haitian Revolution, evidences the ways that ritual, performance and black “theater” were central to the formation of independent Haiti. Victor Leo Walker II has argued that within the African diaspora, “theater” and “drama” are terms that are “inclusive of ritual, ceremony, carnival, masquerade, testimonials, rites of passage, the blues, improvisation, ‘Negro spirituals,’ spoken word, hip-hop, storytelling and other performative modes of expression *rooted* [sic] in the ancestral ethos of the black Africans in the Dyaspora.”<sup>533</sup> Applying this language of theater to sacred and communal practices in the African diaspora allows us to understand how traditions, such as Haitian Vodou and Cuban and Puerto Rican Yoruba Lucumí (Santería) performance, are a site of social action and embodied knowledge—what dance and ritual scholar Yvonne Daniels refers to as “knowledge found within the body [.]”<sup>534</sup>

My interest in Haitian performance is rooted in the political potentials of ritual and performance as communal sites of action and knowledge production beyond Haiti’s

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<sup>533</sup> Victor Leo Walker II, “Introduction,” in *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora*, ed. Paul Carter Harrison, Victor Leo Walker II, and Gus Edwards (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002), 13.

<sup>534</sup> Yvonne Daniels, *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 4.

territorial borders. Neither ritual nor performance are static abstractions, both are *driven* by the need to make life better. As Maya Deren states in her masterful and poetic study on Haitian Vodou, “[i]n Haiti the idea, the principle, must live, must function, for the conditions of Haitian life are indeed difficult to endure.”<sup>535</sup> Vodou, similarly to Yoruba-Lucumí, is a living and *working* tradition that animates the principle that “every person and every thing is sacred and must be treated accordingly.”<sup>536</sup>

Borders are also active and capable of determining how people perform their sense of cultural identity and belonging.<sup>537</sup> Ramón Rivera-Servera and Harvey Young, in their discussion of performance and borderlands, argue that the border, whether it is a wall or an ocean, is a “force of containment that inspires dreams of being overcome and crossed [...] The border alters the way that bodies carry and, indeed, perform themselves not only in the moment of encounter but also for years (and even generations) afterwards.”<sup>538</sup>

If Vodou is defined by the sacredness of all life, then Haiti’s territorial borders do not limit the spiritual pull and performance of Vodou. The ability of Vodou to “cross” the waters and inform the daily rituals and art practices of Haitian in Diaspora has been shown in the vast body of scholarship on the Haitian Diaspora, including the works of Karen McCarthy Brown, Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, Claudine Michel, Elizabeth

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<sup>535</sup> Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New Paltz, NY: McPherson, 1983), 73.

<sup>536</sup> Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, *Haiti: The Breached Citadel* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), 12.

<sup>537</sup> The historical relationship between Haiti and the Dominican Republic alone are fertile points for discussing the ways that race, nationality and belonging are performed individually and by the state.

<sup>538</sup> Ramón H. Rivera-Servera and Harvey Young, eds. *Performance Interventions: Performance in the Borderlands* (Basingstoke, Hampshire, GBR: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 2.

McAlister, and Karen E. Richman.<sup>539</sup> The growing pool of Haitian theater and performance art and artists demonstrate that Vodou and its popular outlets such as rara music can help Haitians “adapt to life as transnational migrants.”<sup>540</sup> The works of several female Haitian Diasporic artists featured in this dissertation activate Vodou’s border-crossing, performative and queer political potential including Chapter 2’s Régine Romain and Chapter 4’s Lenelle Moïse.<sup>541</sup> Vodou and, more broadly, African cosmology are ways that these Haitian-American artists have come to perform and define themselves. In what follows, I mark the ways that my performance praxis coexists with these artists and how I continue the traditions of using African cosmology, in my case, Yoruba-Lucumí to continue the spiritual and ritual work of performance and embodied learning.

### **Performance Excerpt: Scene 1 - “The Spirit”<sup>542</sup>**

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<sup>539</sup> See Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001); Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel, *Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Elizabeth McAlister, *Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and Its Diaspora* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002); Karen E. Richman, *Migration and Vodou* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2005).

<sup>540</sup> Elizabeth McAlister, *Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and Its Diaspora* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 5.

<sup>541</sup> For more on the works of Lenelle Moïse see Gina Athena Ulysse, “Rasanblé: Some Critical Reflections on Lenelle Moïse’s *Womb-Words, Thirsting*,” in *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, Vol. 15: 1-2 (2013), 133-145. For more on the work of MilDréd Gerestant and queer performance see Jana Evans Braziel, *Artists, Performers, and Black Masculinity in the Haitian Diaspora* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008) and “Dréd’s Drag Kinging of Race, Sex, and the Queering of the American Racial Machine-Désirante,” *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 15:2 (2005), 161-188; Judith (Jack) Halberstam, “Mackdaddy, Superfly, Rapper: Gender, Race, and Masculinity in the Drag King Scene,” *Social Text*, 52/53, *Queer Transxions of Race, Nation, and Gender* (Autumn-Winter, 1997), 104-131; and Tara Pauliny, “Erotic Arguments and Persuasive Acts,” *Journal of Homosexuality*, 43:3 (2003), 221-249.

<sup>542</sup> *Picking Up Stones*, by Kantara Souffrant, Northwestern University, June 3, 2011. Italics will designate performance excerpts. Larger excerpts will be sectioned off.

*The stage is dimly lit in a deep indigo wash. A pile of stones sits upstage center. We are in an artist's studio. Paint cans, art books, and paintbrushes lie on the ground. On stage left and right are two black panels. On them are sketches of cosmograms, future projects, and images of Haitian artists/poets.*

*Two banners, with charcoal figures and text hang on either panel. Banner One: "There is so much sadness in the faces of my people. I have called on their gods, now I call on our gods. I call on our young. I call on our old. I call on our mighty and the weak. I call on everyone and anyone so that we shall all let out one piercing cry that we may either live freely or we might die."<sup>543</sup> Banner Two: "Papa Legba ouvri bayè-a pou mwen. Pou Mwen Pase. Lè ma tounen, ma salye lwa yo. (Papa Legba, open the gate for me, So I can go through, When I return, I will pay honor to the lwa)"*

*Stage Right: Kantara enters in a rainbow colored skirt adorned with bells. She carries a spirit bottle, filled with salt. She cleans the space, moving from East, West, North, and South, carefully treading earth as she traces the ground with salt, lingering at the cardinal points.*

*She sings a section of the Haitian Kreyòl Vodou song: "Manman Mwen (My Mother)"<sup>544</sup>*

*Kantara Ends Upstage Center, pouring salt on stones. Reciting a passage from Marilène Phipps: "...Pour water on my head so the sun might glimmer on me. It is for hope that God will pull them up by the hair to heaven...."<sup>545</sup>*

*Kantara: Ayiti, cheri. My muse, my love.*

## **The Spiritual Pull of Oya**

So begins, *Picking Up Stones (PS)*, my first sustained engagement with performance art following the earthquake. *PS* sprang from the dislocation of space, time, spirit, and praxis. Combining original text, adapted interviews with Haitian-Americans,

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<sup>543</sup> Edwidge Danticat, "A Wall of Fire Rising," *Krik?Kra!* (New York, NY: Soho Press, 1995), 79-80.

<sup>544</sup> The version adapted from this performance is from Pierre Cheriza-Tambour Mystere, *Haiti: Musique Du Vaudou*, Compact Disc, Buda Musique, 1999.

<sup>545</sup> Marilène Phipps, "Pour Water on My Head: A Mediation on a Life of Painting and Poetry," *The Butterfly's Way: Voices from the Haitian Diaspora in the United States*, ed. Edwidge Danticat, (New York, NY: Soho Press, 2001), 115-120.

and the writings of Haitian Diasporic artists including Edwidge Danticat, Assoto Saint, and others, *PS* hoped to weave multiple narratives that continue to permeate Haitian Diasporic art practices and relationships to Haiti pre and post-quake.

Oya became a way of rearticulating myself after the dislocation of the earthquake and the rupturing of Haiti's timeline into the periods of "before" and "after" the quake.<sup>546</sup> Oya is what Judith Gleason has called, "a goddess of edges [...] of transformation from one state of being to another."<sup>547</sup> Oya's ability to transform is best realized in her roles as keeper of the cemetery *and* the protector of newborns. For Oya, death and life are intertwined, and it is for this reason that *PS* begins with a ritual cleaning. I enter the performance dressed in a manner that signifies Oya. My skirt is fashioned of the nine colors of the rainbow—Oya's colors—and I carry a spirit-bottle<sup>548</sup> decorated in the same pattern. As I move across the stage, saluting the cardinal points and singing *Manman Mwen*, a slide show plays featuring images that have come to define post-quake Haiti—bodies buried beneath rubble in various stages of distress. I tread across the stage singing a call to my "mother" Oya, a force who I ask to find me as I undergo my ritual work of cleansing the stage with salt. Several years ago I learned from my mother that salt was a

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<sup>546</sup> Edwidge Danticat, *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 162.

<sup>547</sup> Judith Gleason, *Oya: In Praise of an African Goddess* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1987, 1992), 2. The Yoruba Lucumí figure of Oya has Diasporic counterparts throughout the Black Atlantic. Oya in Haitian Vodou manifests as Gran Brigit, a member of the Gede family, spirits of the dead, and wife of Baron Samdi, chief spirit of the Guede family. In Brazilian Candomblé Oya can be seen in the whirlwind figure of *Iansá*. See Patrick Bellegarde-Smith's *Haiti: The Breached Citadel* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990) and Alfred Métraux's *Voodoo in Haiti* (New York, Schocken Books, 1972).

<sup>548</sup> For more on spirit-bottles see Elizabeth McAlister, "A Sorcerer's Bottle: The Visual Art of Magic in Haiti," in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, Donald J. Cosentino, ed. (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Fowler Museum, 1995), pp. 305-321; Donald J. Cosentino, *Vodou Things: The Art of Pierrot Barra and Marie Cassaise* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998); and Leslie Ann Brice, "Nou La, We Here: Remembrance and Power in the Arts of Haitian Vodou," Doctoral Dissertation, University of Maryland, College Park, 2007.

means of clearing out the spirits of the dead. In pouring the salt I am attempting to cast out evil spirits and prepare the space for the “working” of the spirit that will take place during the performance (Figure 22). This spiritual work is suggested by the various ritual codes that are embedded in the mise-en-scène: images of cosmograms which signal the transition between life and death; books on Haitian Vodou, Santeria, KiKongo and Yoruba art piled on the floor; and the banners on either side of the stage that call upon “our gods,” and more specifically Legba, the keeper of doorways/crossroads and penultimate communicator between the orisha, the living and the dead.



**Figure 24:** Kantara Souffrant, “Pouring Salt,” photography still. Photography by Haydée Souffrant. Interestingly, the image is blurry, which in my spiritual community indicates the presence of Spirit.

By beginning the performance with Oya and within a mise-en-scène of ritual-related artifacts and aesthetics, I ground *PS* in the language of spiritual work. Here the constructed artist’s studio is a ritual home/temple—a space where art making is possible because of the cosmological framework of cleansing, preparation, and spiritual work. My reliance upon a cosmological framework for sense-making is nothing new.

People have been “working the spirit”—to borrow from Joseph Murphy—in service of community empowerment and healing for centuries. The language of the spirit is a productive entry into discussions of diasporic practices that “bridg[e] the gap of theological explanation among the different diaspora traditions.”<sup>549</sup> The emphasis on the spirit is not meant to collapse key differences between Santeria, Vodou, or Black American traditions of worship for the sake of furthering romantic constructions of a unified African diaspora. Rather, “the spirit” encompasses a connection within these differences—the multiple ways spirit is invoked by diasporan people: “[t]he spirit can, at once, refer to God in the person of invisible power, to one power among other powers that emanate from God, and to the spirit of a diasporan people, the *geist* that characterizes and inspires them.”<sup>550</sup> As Joseph Murphy suggests, the language of “the spirit” describes a diasporic sensibility—a metaphysical and philosophical engagement with the world and sense-making.

For Murphy, “the spirit” is a vital organizing principle that highlights the shared epistemologies of Cuban Santeria, Haitian Vodou, and other African-derived practices in the Americas. Yet, Murphy limits these practices to the fixed spaces of their respective countries. What happens when “the spirit” jumps borders *and* generational ties? I am a queer, second-generation Haitian-American calling upon the Santeria figure of Oya because of my ties to Yoruba Lucumí traditions. My embodied practices, both sacred and secular, leave me feeling like an outsider—because I do not meet the norms of heteropatriarchy, or the “Christian” models of worship that my family turned towards

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<sup>549</sup> Joseph Murphy, *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994), 8.

<sup>550</sup> Ibid.

when they left Vodou behind generations ago. Here “the spirit” serves as a means of placing me within a larger discourse of Diasporic circulation, ties and transnational sense-making that sees the slippages between gender and Diasporic subjectivity.

As I reflect on this performance and place it in conversation with other 1.5 and second-generation Haitian Diasporic artists, I am reminded of how vital a “spiritual pull” is in structuring our performances and our relationship to Haiti and the African Diaspora more broadly. Dance and performance scholar Celia Weiss Bambara, while writing on her relationship to Haitian dance and spirituality, has described spiritual pulling as what “occurs when one is not possessed but feels the spirits ‘pulling’ on the head, emotions, and body.”<sup>551</sup> I want to expand this definition of spiritual pulling to frame not only the workings of the spirit upon the body, but what also happens when a non/worshipper pulls *on* the spirit, moves towards it in order to make sense of the world through performance.

In many ways, this spiritual pulling has already been rehearsed in the previous chapter in our discussion of the “aesthetics of the lwa” as it relates to the work of Lenelle Moïse and her work as “Dantò’s daughter.” Here, spiritual pulling animates the physicality of calling upon the lwa, the way the performing body attempts to approximate, as much as possible, what performance, dance and ritual scholar Yvonne Daniels, as previously noted, calls “embodied knowledge.” Daniels explains that within the ritual-performance space of spiritual worship in which dancing bodies are integral to manifesting the Spirit(s) through possession:

They [the dancing/performing practitioners] are expressive dancing bodies in the same space at the same time performing the same movements to the same rhythms. The dancing bodies accumulate spirit, display power, and

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<sup>551</sup> Celia Weiss Bambara, “Yanvalou’s Elliptical Displacements: Staging Spirit Time in the United States,” *The Journal of Haitian Studies* 15:1 & 2 (2009): 291.



enact as well as disseminate knowledge. Worshipping performers reenact what they have learned, what they have been told, what they feel, and what they imagine. They re-present feelings, ideas, understandings, and knowledges.<sup>552</sup>

The performing and more specifically, the *moving* body becomes a stage onto itself for pulling on the spirit which allows for showing and sharing knowledge and spiritual content with the rest of one's audience-community. I consequently apply this concept of spiritual pulling to show the deliberate ways in which the spirit is directly invoked through the body in order to cross the scholarly-ritual divide. In pulling on Oya, I am calling upon Oya's connection to the living and the dead, to chaos and rebirth but more importantly, I am asking her to manifest herself through me as much as possible on the ritual-performance stage.

### **Oya and Constructing Queer-Dyasporic Solo Performance**

Feminist scholars of the African Diaspora have revered the figure of Oya and her dedication to women and social justice. As a fierce warrior who grows a beard, wears trousers to battle, and *precedes* the arrival of her husband Shango onto the battlefield,<sup>553</sup> Oya's attributes of thunder, lightening, wind, and renewal can be found in the literature of authors such as Toni Cade Bambara and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.<sup>554</sup> It is not surprising that the mythical qualities of Oya would be applied to the fictional portrayals of women's everyday realities. Oya's mythical aspects are

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<sup>552</sup> Daniels, *Dancing Wisdom*, 59.

<sup>553</sup> Miguel "Willie" Ramos, "Afro-Cuban Orisha Worship," *Santeria Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art*, ed. Arturo Lindsay, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 67.

<sup>554</sup> See Brooks de Vita, "Oya," and Katie L. Mullins, "'My Body is History': Embodying the Past, Present, and Future in Dionne Brand's *San Souci and Other Stories*," *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (April 2011): 5-22.

rearticulated as personal attributes that can be called upon during times of duress.

Moreover, as feminist Yoruba historian Oyeronke Olajubu argues, gender, within Yoruba religious traditions, is fluid and informed by “complimentary gender relations,”<sup>555</sup> whereby the categories of female and male cannot exist independently of each other. Oya’s fierceness and unpredictability—on par with her husband’s—gives her “qualities and attributes that are contrary to those assumed for females.”<sup>556</sup> However, Oya’s qualities *open*, rather than foreclose, the “multiplicity” of gender amongst the Yoruba; her qualities can be understood as a means of complicating the performance of femaleness and gender within Yoruba traditions.

*Picking Up Stones* draws upon Oya’s expansion of female performance, as well as her transportation of spirits of the dead to heaven. In Scene 2, “The Question/The Witness,” I move from the ritual space of Oya to a character now dressed in paint-colored overalls and in their art studio. The rest of the set is illuminated and I begin observing the pile of stones center stage, gently picking them up and placing them on and around salt systematically.

Kantara: Growing up, I was told to tread lightly upon the earth, because the ancestors below can feel you, and hear you and it’s best not to disturb them [*traces circle around the stones*] And so, it had been done for generations by the Yoruba and KiKongo, and so it had been passed down to me. Tread lightly. Because they are paying attention to our movements and our every tremors. [*Ends with ears pressed to ground. PAUSE/BEAT*]

She asked me if I had been studying Haiti since before the earthquake. An innocent enough question, with a simple enough answer: “Yes...”

But I didn’t know her well enough to bother filling in the details. The sense of overwhelming guilt and self-doubt---that maybe I *should* have

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<sup>555</sup> Oyeronke Olajubu, “Seeing Through a Woman’s Eye: Yoruba Religious Tradition and Gender Relations,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Spring 2004): 43.

<sup>556</sup> Olajubu, 51.

been a doctor. That while I'm over here trying to reimagine my world people are still buried under rubble somewhere. [...] Now tell me, where's the beauty in art and talking about the spirit now?

Scene 2 foregrounds the earthquake as both an event in Haitian history/scholarship, and the Haitian Diaspora. The scene juxtaposes the question, “have you been studying Haiti since before the earthquake?” with accounts of witnessing the earthquake culled from interviews that I held with Haitian-Americans following the quake. Several characters emerge in the scene pointing to the earthquake’s impact: the Haitian-American Christian woman who hears of the earthquake at the gym and leaves to call her family as well as call upon God to understand why this is happening; the defensive and dismissive character who critiques the sentiments of guilt and gratitude that floats within the Diaspora thereby highlighting anti-Diaspora narratives in Haiti; and the non-Haitian friend, “a white boy in Maine,” who sends notes of support and love to me and my family insisting that “the world at large is in desperate need of your art, intellect, poise, and capacity for greatness.” These voices bleed into one another, including my own. The only beat from one character to the next is the dis/placing of stones along the salt cosmogram.

My sustained engagement with Oya, even in the “secular” space of the artist’s studio allows me to interrogate the concepts of life, death, and art-scholarship post-earthquake. The assorted characters highlight the multiple voices of women and men of the Haitian Diaspora—some with deep emotional ties to Haiti and some who had no connection to Haiti pre-earthquake and no interest in reconnecting to Haiti post-quake. As the muse of *Picking Up Stones*, Oya channels these discrepancies within “hegemonic formations of

diaspora.”<sup>557</sup> These diasporic hegemonies, according to Tina Campt and Deborah Thomas, create a fixed and unified sense of diaspora/Dyaspota that privileges the mobility of masculine subjects as well as the “general masculinisms in the conceptualization of diasporic community.” *PS* highlights the fiction of the unified “homeland,” even after the event of the earthquake. What emerges from the event are the affective and spiritual dimensions of Dyaspota: the relationship between family members, friends, sentiments of guilt *and* gratitude, and the Spirit(s) of “God.” There is no longer one unified “Haiti” or “Haitian Dyaspota” but a series of first- and second-generation voices trying to rearticulate themselves after witnessing the earthquake.

The multiple temporalities and voices of Scene 2 are tempered by Scene 3, “Memories Priors,” where I offer up visions of Haiti before the earthquake through the performance of Marc Christophe’s poem, “Past, Present, Future.” Yet it is in Scene 4 “Tracing Paths/Picking Up Stones,” that the moments of the previous scenes coalesce. In this final scene, the namesake of the show becomes apparent as I detail a habit developed during my first return trip to Haiti in March 2010:

When I went back, I got into the habit of collecting stones. Like some compulsion: when I walked my grandfather’s land, when I stood before the home that buried my uncle, when I bathed in the sweet waters of Saut D’eau. I carried them with me. Tracing paths between homes. Taking earth and spirits with me.

Throughout the final scene, I pace the four corners, moving stones from the pile to four corners in the hopes of completing a cosmogram. What begins as a careful treading upon the earth grows into a feverish attempt to complete the cosmogram of stones: “It isn’t that I *can’t* work, it’s just this doesn’t make any sense. This split, this limbo. This

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<sup>557</sup> Tina Campt and Deborah Thomas, “Gendering Diaspora: Transnational Feminism, Dyaspota, and Its Hegemonies,” in *Feminist Review*, Vol. 90, No. 1 (2008): 2.

memory that has taken hold of me. Mourning a nation that has long ago spat me out of its folds.” As the energy maddens and the “splitting” grows deeper, I am no longer able to arrange stones. Frustrated with this work and process, I move upstage and grab a large handle broom, sweeping both salt and stones from the corners to center stage. A reprise of “*Manman Mwen*” begins briefly before the final few lines are delivered:

There’s an unpleasant lightness in my head. A splitting. As if the many parts of my brain are being gently disengaged and dispersed. In its wake is a space of emptiness. But there are no tears. There is no more time for tears this year. Neither the body, nor the mind can spend a lifetime of possession. But what of these things, these stones??? *Ayiti*, cheri, my muse, my love.

I have been working on Haiti since before the earthquake. But I think she’s been trying to work on me too.

I move from treading lightly upon the earth, a gesture I learned out of respect for



**Figure 25:** Kantara Souffrant, photography still, destroyed cosmograms. Photograph by Haydée Souffrant.

the always-listening ancestors, to brisk walking, with heavy steps about the circumference of the stage, to frantically running around the remnants of salt and stones, creating my own Oya thundering whirlwind (Figure 22). This frenzied scene varied from rehearsals to staged performances. Indeed, the spiritual pull of this moment meant that at times, I would find myself gripping to the ground in hopes of returning back

to the present moment, regrouping in order

to end the scene and the show, barely level enough to deliver the final lines and bow.

It is only now that I am able to see the ways that this “splitting,” and my own difficulty staying grounded during the final scene, was emblematic of possession. In my effort to signify Oya I nearly *called her*. I had been unprepared—and perhaps uncritical—of the thin veil between “staged” ritual and the performance of ritual, the seamless crossing of pedagogies.

### ***Picking Up Stones: Reflections***

Beverly Robinson, while writing on ritual and performance in the African diaspora has defined ritual as a survival tactic, stating, “[r]itual can be defined as a recurring pattern of action that represents the desire to bring life anew, and the need to find some way of expressing that desire.”<sup>558</sup> Within feminist, queer, and ritual-based solo performances of the Haitian Diaspora, spiritual pulls, ritual, and performance are not only survival tactics, they are tools of self-making, refashioning, and Diasporic (re)turns. Within the space of the performance, with Oya as both my guide and muse, I sutured myself into the fabric of Haiti, alongside Rejin Leys, Lenelle Moïse, and Régine Romain. Oya expands our notions of feminine performance and legitimizes my queer Haitian Diasporic body. Through an engagement with ritual, and the polyvocal nature of Haitian feminist and art praxis, I contested my erasure and the unfathomability of my life as an artist-scholar of Haitian descent.

I now turn to the work of performer-scholar Gina Athena Ulysse and the ways her work and life embody the Vodou lwa Gede. The lwa, I argue, is the figure in Haitian

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<sup>558</sup> Beverly Robinson, “The Sense of Self in Ritualizing New Performance Spaces,” *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in The African Diaspora*, eds. Paul Carter Harrison, Victor Leo Walker II, and Gus Edwards. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 332.

Vodou who breaches decorum and speaks up for the poor and most silenced people in Haiti and its Dyaspora: poor, black people, including women and children. As a figure able to transcend moral and social codes of behavior, I posit Gede as the penultimate figure for crossing pedagogies.

### **Performing Gede in the Academy: Gina Athena Ulysse**

Gina Athena Ulysse is easy to spot in the crowd. On the second floor of the Marriot Hotel in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, her yellow and black African wax print dress, cropped ruby-red hair, and umber skin stand out from fellow Caribbean Studies Association Conference attendees. Today is the second day of the conference and Ulysse and I have made plans to reconnect at some point. Now seems as good a time as any as the conference goes enjoy a break between sessions and the day's momentum slows.

Ulysse greets me with a big smile as I move towards her. She is standing with a colleague and academic/spiritual mentor of hers, Dr. M. Jacqui Alexander, whose quiet demeanor and cream outfit gives off a coolness and is a fitting counterbalance to Ulysse's own playful exuberance.<sup>559</sup> I join them and we exchange hellos and our thoughts on the conference thus far. Ulysse begins to recount the events of her opening performance, held the previous night. The performance was plagued by delays with conference organizers and the technical crew wanting to get the lighting and the sound "right" before Ulysse made her entrance. However, Ulysse tells me that irrespective of the formalities of time and getting things "right" she was "ready." In a move that disrupted decorum Ulysse began singing from the audience sans being called, sans the audience being ready, sans

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<sup>559</sup> I detail the importance of the concept of "coolness" in Haitian visuality and practices of the African Diaspora in Chapter 2.

adhering to the *proper* order of things. She began to belt out from within the gathering of scholars, artists, and Caribbeanist the opening line of her performance, one that she has used over the past few years as an invocation to her staged-work:

*MWEN RIVE LAN LAKOU  
MAPE MANDE SI PA GEN GRANMOUN O LAN LAKOU A  
MWEW RIVE MWEN RIVE MWEN RIVE LAN MITAN LAKOU  
READY OR NOT HERE I COME YOU CAN'T HIDE  
I AM GONNA FIND YOU AND TAKE IT SLOWLY*

(I have arrived in the lakou  
I ask if there are no elders in the lakou  
I have arrived, I have arrived, I have arrived in the middle of the lakou  
Ready or not here I come you can't hide  
I'm gonna find you and take it slowly).<sup>560</sup>

Ulysse's stentorian voice is beguiling and unexpected from such a petite frame. When Ulysse finishes her invocation, her face, which was stoic and cool as she sang, releases itself to a giant smile. Ulysse begins to laugh as the audience of (majority) academics breaks into applause. It is clear that despite being called Ulysse has arrived and whether we were ready for her or not, she and her audience are now tied for the next few moments on a performance journey through Haiti, spirit, life, death, and memory couched within Vodou chants.<sup>561</sup>

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<sup>560</sup> Translations of the Haitian Kreyòl section are my own. Ulysse's lyrics remain in caps as they appeared in scripts Ulysse shared with me between 2013 and 2016. The song will return in various forms throughout this chapter.

<sup>561</sup> Ulysse's use of Vodou chants will be discussed later in the chapter. Her Caribbean Studies Association 2016 performance, "Lakou Mashup" is a remixed version of earlier performances, poems and essays. The vignettes presented in Ulysse's performance included the roots of Haiti/Spirits traveling (slavery); childhood memories of Haiti; Ulysse's experiences losing and finding herself as a young graduate student in Jamaica; her conflicted relationship to Haiti as a place she loves and hates and finally, a poem about Jean Michel Basquiat, an artist of Haitian ancestry who himself, as Ulysse's poem suggests was possessed by the lwa Gede and this possession went unnamed by Basquiat himself and others. The unnamed possession, as inferred by the poem, is one of the things that led to Basquiat's demise.



As Ulysse, M. Jacqui Alexander, and I discuss the events of the previous night's performance, it becomes evident that Ulysse is aware that her actions were rude. But, Ulysse professes, despite her unexpected and rude entrance, she could neither help nor stop herself; "*We're ready*," Ulysse told me, looking me straight in the eye, her body upright and feet firmly planted on the ground. "*We're ready and I now know what that is.*" Ulysse's "rude" behavior, as well as her performance, were predetermined by a spiritual pull. The ancestral spirits were prepared to disrupt the order of things, usher in the performance, and transform the space of the CSA conference room, even at the risk of being interpreted as uncouth.

Within the lexicon of Haitian Vodou there is one family of *lwa* (spirits), above all others, known for their performances of disruption and agitation: the Gede spirits, the trickster *lwas* of death and life. The Gede's are evidenced in Ulysse's brazen and *uncalled* beginning to her CSA performance for it is the Gede, who often arrives to the Vodou ceremony "uninvited but not unexpected."<sup>562</sup> A *lwa* known for his bawdy, humorous, and honest nature, when Gede enters a Vodou ceremony, it is typically at the end of the festivities and he announces himself in multiple ways that eschew traditional notions of decorum, including but not limited to laughter, pranks, lascivious behavior, and an uncontrollable level of showmanship.<sup>563</sup> On the eve of Ulysse's performance, Gede arrived ready to disrupt and speak through and with Gina Ulysse. I have learned over the years, however, that Gede has always been here, in Ulysse.

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<sup>562</sup> Donald J. Cosentino, "Gede Rising," in *In Extremis: Death and Life in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Haitian Art* (Los Angeles, CA: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2012), 43.

<sup>563</sup> For more on Gede's apparition at Vodou ceremonies see Maya Deren *Divine Horseman: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New Paltz, NY: McPherson, 1983) and Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1992).

Ulysse draws an immediate relationship between herself and Gede in her opening invocation. Ulysse's opening positions her as a child entering the room/performance arena, "*Mwen rive lan lakou/Mape mande si pa gen granmoun o lan lakou a* (I have arrived in the lakou/I ask if there are no elders in the lakou)." In asking if there are any elders in the room, Ulysse acknowledges her youthfulness entering into communal performance arena, now transformed into a sacred communal space by Ulysse's song. Simultaneously, as Ulysse opens singing to the lakou she announces her arrival as well as her search for elders. The invocation suggests that Ulysse the child has presumably entered the lakou uninvited and is making her presence known. Ulysse is here and she's here to stay. Her announcement is cheeky if not also deviant for, as she later states in her invocation, "ready or not here I come you can't hide. I'm gonna find you and take it slowly."

The youthful, cheeky, somewhat condescending and/or sexual undertone of Ulysse's invocation—"I'm gonna find you and take it slowly"—is mirrored in the behaviors of Gede. The name "Gede" refers not to a singular lwa but to a "family" of spirits who collectively oversee the matters of death. The Gede family is a unique from other lwa within the Vodou pantheon who can be categorized into one of the many Vodou nations.<sup>564</sup> Alternatively the Gede family exists as their own subset and at the helm of this family are Grann Brijitt, said to be the first woman buried in a cemetery,<sup>565</sup> and her more popular husband Baron Samedi, associated with the first man buried in the cemetery and known for his signature top hat and freemason tailcoat. While Bawon

<sup>564</sup> See my discussion of the Vodou nations in my introduction and the previous chapters, particular the chapter on Régine Romain and Lenelle Moïse.

<sup>565</sup> Elizabeth McAlister, *Rara!: Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and Its Diaspora* (Berkley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 99.

Samedi's international popularity<sup>566</sup> often makes him synonymous with "Gede," THE Gede are in fact the children of Gran Brijitt and Bawon Samdi. These Gede are the workers and healers of the family who enjoy laughing, playing pranks, and disrupting our notions of decorum.

The Gedes, more than any other lwa in the Vodou pantheon, are known and feared because of their disruption of social customs and norms. In fact, the emergence of the Gede can be considered as a disruption, or rather, a performative break, in the history of African cosmology in the Black Atlantic world. Art historian Donald Cosentino has argued that Gede's trickster-like antics can be seen as a reassignment of the traits of the Yoruba-KiKongo figure of Eshu Elebara. However, historically, there are no antecedents for the Gedes—a family unit who venerates death as well as life within African cosmology.<sup>567</sup> Katherine Smith, in her exquisite study of Gede's emergence as an lwa notes that prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century there is no mention of the Gede's in the ethnographic records of Vodou.<sup>568</sup> Gede is, by all accounts, a 20<sup>th</sup> century lwa without a beginning but whose realms signify the totality of human life from birth to death. As the lwas who shuttle back and forth between the land of the living and the land of the dead, the Gede spirits *know* the futility of borders and denying multiple forms of knowledge.

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<sup>566</sup> For a contemporary examination of the Gede's historical emergence and contemporary appeal see the edited volume of Haitian contemporary art in Port-au-Prince, *In Extremis: Death and Life in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Haitian Art* (Los Angeles, CA: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2012).

<sup>567</sup> See Donald Cosentino's "Gede Rising," in *In Extremis: Death and Life in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Haitian Art* (Los Angeles, CA: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2012), 43. Cosentino argues that although Haitian Vodou has within it the figure of Papa Legba, as figure often described as older man who walks with a cane/walking stick and personifies the opening and closing of doors at the cross-roads, Legba lacks the youthful spry and bawdry hijinks of the Gede figure and for this reason, Gede is more in line (though not the same as) the Eshu-Elegbara figure in Yoruba traditions.

<sup>568</sup> Katherine Smith, "Genealogies of Gede," in *In Extremis: Death and Life in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Haitian Art* (Los Angeles, CA: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2012), 85-100.

Moreover, because of the Gedes' ability to cross the *ultimate* border, they laugh at the boundaries that human beings create on the earthly realm, including the borders that divide sacred/secular, scholarly/performance.<sup>569</sup>

Similarly to Gede, Ulysses has reckoned with and laughed at borders throughout her life. Ulysse was born in Haiti in 1966 during the ruling of François "Papa Doc" Duvalier. She emigrated to the U.S. at age 12 and from that time on nurtured dreams of becoming a rock star, to the distress of her parents, particularly her father. In Ulysse's auto-ethnographic essay, "Papa, Patriarchy, and Power: Snapshots of a Good Haitian Girl, Feminism, & Diasporic Dreams," Ulysse describes coming into her Diasporic and feminist consciousness through her refusals to pursue the dreams of her father. When Papa Ulysse<sup>570</sup> proclaimed that his three daughters would become "a doctor[,] a lawyer [,] and a dentist,"<sup>571</sup> Gina Athena Ulysse challenged him. Ulysse recalls her refusal in a poem:

I remember saying to him  
I don't care if I never have any money  
(though I would change my mind later)  
I don't care if I never have money  
even if I live in a tent as long as I have my music.  
What are you asking me that I live this life my life for you

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<sup>569</sup> Haitian and Vodou scholars Claudine Michel and Patrick Bellegarde-Smith note this transformative property of the Gede: "Death, the hidden face of life! An almost seamless transition between states, the transformation from water to ice—while properties change, the essence remains. The rupture instills fear, since one cannot see the bliss felt by the own who has transitioned, the beauty newly found. The Gede spirits respond, try to assuage our fears, try to console us by their candor, their humor, our laughter." See Claudine Michel and Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, "Introduction" in *In Extremis*, 15. It is for this reason that the Gedes, including head Gede Bawon Samdi, wear sunglasses, so that their eyes are protected when they enter the realm of the living.

<sup>570</sup> Ulysse in her article fashions a link between the two patriarchal "Papas" of her childhood: her own father (who we will refer to as "Papa Ulysse") and "Papa Doc," the father of the Haitian nation-state.

<sup>571</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

*In all my sassiness I dared him.*<sup>572</sup>

The bold sassiness with which Ulysse defies her father is noteworthy, particularly in Haitian culture. Ulysse elucidates: “To understand the significance of my talking back, it is important to note that I grew up in a household and broader social environment where obedience was understood in terms of acquiescence. ‘Oui papa,’ and ‘oui maman’ were the appropriate responses to parental directives.”<sup>573</sup> The deference paid by a Haitian child to their parent, as Ulysse observes, is steeped in an inherited form of cultural respect that associates authority with silence.

I would argue that these early demonstrations of talking back, and more specifically, refusing to give in to those in (parental) authority mark the early performances of Gede in Ulysses’s life. These acts of verbal-defiance, of speaking out of turn to those of authority are aspects of Gede-par-excellence. Zora Neale Hurston, in one of the earliest extended theoretical interpretations of Gede’s apparitions, writes:

One can see the hand of the Haitian peasant in the boisterous god, Guedé [sic], because he does and says the things that the peasants would like to do and say. You can see him in the market women, in the domestic servant who now and then appears before her employer ‘mounted’ by this god who takes occasion to say many stinging things to the boss. You can see him in the field hand, and certainly in the group of women about a public well or spring, chattering, gossiping, and dragging out the shortcomings of their employers and the people like him. *Nothing in Haiti is quite so obvious as that this loa is the deification of the common people of Haiti. The mulattoes give this spirit no food and pay it no attention at all. He belongs to the blacks and the uneducated blacks at that [...]* This manifestation comes as a near social criticism of the classes by the masses as anything in all Haiti.<sup>574</sup>

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<sup>572</sup> Gina Athena Ulysse, “A Poem About Why I Can’t Wait: Going Home Again and Again and Again,” in *The Butterfly’s Way: Voices from the Haitian Diaspora*, Edwidge Danticat, ed. (New York, NY: SOHO Press, 2001), 231.

<sup>573</sup> Ibid.

<sup>574</sup> Ibid., 219-223. Emphasis added.

Gede pushes the boundaries of propriety. From Hurston's writings we can surmise that Gede rebukes decorum in favor of (re)presenting the narratives and experiences of those most silenced: the poor, the black majority, and, from Hurston's example, women. For Ulysse, these crossings emerged not only in her speaking out against her parents, they would show themselves in her future life as a graduate student, and, ultimately, in her turn towards performance as a means of salvaging her mind, body, and spirit.

### **The Vodou that You Do: Remixing and Crossings in the Academy**

In an email correspondence with Ulysse about her performance and scholarly practice, she stated that in order to understand her art one must understand that "[t]he Vodou is the Key! Without it there ain't no story!"<sup>575</sup> Vodou grounds Ulysse's performance, especially the theories of embodiment and scholarly (dis)connection that she elucidates in her TEDx University of Michigan talk, "Untapped Fierceness/My Giant Leaps."<sup>576</sup> During her 13-minute talk Ulysse makes a series of movements between poetry, prose, and what seems like carefully scripted but still intimate disclosures to her audience. Her performative armament is geared toward delivering the same message: how Ulysse's spoken word performance was "born during graduate school" at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor where she received a PhD in Anthropology.<sup>577</sup> It was in graduate school that Ulysse began to wrestle with the dual aspects of herself, "[her]

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<sup>575</sup> Personal communication with the author, October 2014.

<sup>576</sup> Gina Athena Ulysse, "Untapped Fierceness/My Giant Leaps," TEDx Talk, University of Michigan, March 2013.

<sup>577</sup> Gina Athena Ulysse, "TEDxUofM: Untapped\_ Future Game Changers," *Huffington Post: The Blog*, April 15, 2013.

decision to seek a doctorate to become a change agent for Haiti while putting aside a childhood desire to sing.”<sup>578</sup>

Ulysse’s vocal and scholarly proficiency creates smooth transitions between her opening invocation, a blending of a traditional Haitian Kreyòl Vodou song “Mwen Rive Lan Lakou,” with lines from “Ready or Not” by the wildly popular and iconic band The Fugees.<sup>579</sup> The citation or rather, the *remix*, is not accidental; it is a deliberate performance practice central to Ulysse’s artistic and scholarly engagements, for she is, in her own words, “always doing a REMIX.”<sup>580</sup> Whether she is moving between Kreyòl and English, theory or poetry/prose, these remixes are the pedagogical crossings that sustained Ulysse as Ph.D. student in Anthropology at the University of Michigan.

In her own writings, Ulysse acknowledges that although she had pursued her dream of becoming a rock star, she turned her attention away from singing and decided to pursue a doctorate in anthropology, a calculated decision so that she could “contribute to helping [her] native country.”<sup>581</sup> However, during the first month of her first semester of graduate school, on September 30, 1991, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, Haiti’s first democratically elected Haitian President since the Duvalier regime, was ousted by a political coup. The election of Aristide was a marker of hope and change in Haiti, one ushered in by the political mobilizing of Gede’s *pèp la* (people). The coup of Aristide crushed the hopes of those in Haiti and the Diaspora. Ulysse, who had not been to Haiti

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<sup>578</sup> Ibid.

<sup>579</sup> I believe this citation by the Fugees is deliberate, a way of referencing a globally successful Haitian-American group that also managed to achieve respect in Haiti and the Haitian Diaspora.

<sup>580</sup> “Untapped Fierceness/My Giant Leaps,” emphasis in the original script.

<sup>581</sup> Gina Ulysse, *Downtown Ladies: Informal Commercial Importers, A Haitian Anthropologist, and Self-Making in Jamaica* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 2.

since her migration 15 years prior, felt that her “sense of purpose began to fall apart.”<sup>582</sup> Ulysse shared the same sentiments of hope deferred experienced by other Haitians, both in Haiti and abroad following Aristide’s coup, “there had been talk and excitement about this new president representing change. Hope. I simply could not turn away, so I got involved.”<sup>583</sup> The young graduate student responded to the Haitian political situation by co-founding the Haitian Solidarity Group. “From then on,” writes Ulysse, “I led two lives at Michigan. In one, I was a graduate student. In the other, I was a political activist.”<sup>584</sup> It became clear to Ulysse that her community commitments were seen as interferences. One well meaning faculty-member, another scholar-activist-woman of color, told Ulysse that if she wanted to work for Haiti while earning her degree, “know that you will always have to do it on your own time.”<sup>585</sup>

Ulysse negotiated this splitting of herself while concurrently wrestling with the colonial history of her discipline and the realities of being one of the only people of color in her department. Graduate school was a near-constant reminder of which people and belief systems were of value and which were not. The academy, for Ulysse, was a site of enculturation into “white[ness], I was supposed to embrace the West.”<sup>586</sup> Ulysse attempted to negotiate colonial and Eurocentric epistemologies while also navigating the whiteness of her landscape. The isolation grew to be too much:

I wanted out of the anthropology Ph.D. program at the University of Michigan [...] Tormented, I grappled with the racist history of a discipline in which I would always be a subject. I did not belong in this white institution and was exhausted from feeling I was desegregating the

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<sup>582</sup> Ulysse, *Downtown Ladies*, 3.

<sup>583</sup> Ibid.

<sup>584</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>585</sup> Ibid.

<sup>586</sup> Ulysse in conversation with the author, August 2016.



department all over again. [...] I broke into sobs. I can't be a pioneer, it's not the 1950s.<sup>587</sup>

Amidst this continued sense of splitting, Ulysse found hope in both performance and scholarship, and more specifically where the two met and remixed—Vodou scholarship and performance. Ulysse found inspiration in Karen McCarthy Brown's, then recently published, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, a book that Ulysse in a 2015 tribute to the late McCarthy Brown names as "book that kept me in grad school." The subject of Brown's work was "close to home," for Ulysse.<sup>588</sup> Until *Mama Lola*, Ulysse had had limited contact with Haitian Vodou because her family had, since before their migration to the U.S., begun to turn away from the African-based religious practice. The Ulysse family's turn away from Vodou was and is typical of Haitian attempts to enter into modernity, Western enlightenment, and decorum. Vodou, in the words of Ulysse's cousin, is "*pa a la mode ankò*," no longer "in style."<sup>589</sup>

Brown's text, in many ways, became the doorway through which Ulysse was able to, as I have termed, "circle the cosmograms," (re)turn to both Haiti and Vodou.<sup>590</sup> For Gina Ulysse, *Mama Lola* formed a concrete example of what she hoped to enact in her own life: producing work (scholarly, performance-based, genre bending) that situated Vodou as an epistemology. The academy, during Ulysse's experience as a grad student, was a place that systemically silenced Vodou epistemologies because, according to Ulysse, "[the academy and] Western thought being what it is tends to eschew anything

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<sup>587</sup> Gina Athena Ulysse, "Tribute to Karen McCarthy Brown: Author of *Mama Lola* or the Book that Kept Me in Grad School," Tikkun Daily, March 18, 2015.

<sup>588</sup> Ulysse, "Tribute to Karen McCarthy Brown,"

<sup>589</sup> Ulysse, *Why Haiti Needs New Narratives*, 91.

<sup>590</sup> It is important to note here that although Ulysse entered academia in order to support her native country, Haiti, her graduate studies were based on field work in Jamaica with

that's not recreating itself[.] Here [in Vodou] we have an entire world with its own logic, its own reason and for some reason we devalue it because it is black.”<sup>591</sup> In contradistinction to this racist view of Vodou, *Mama Lola*, as an example of Vodou-centered scholarship, became a reconstituting principle in Ulysse's life—one that validated what her childhood Gede-spirit already knew, that Vodou is “its own way of knowing.”<sup>592</sup>

Ulysse's performance remixes embrace this way of knowing that is both physical, intellectual, and spiritual. Her work sits at the threshold of Vodou's orature—Vodou's necessary reliance upon the vocal (chants, songs, prayers), the literary (the “text” of scholarship as well as the liturgical text of the *akson degreas*, the ritual words borrowed from Catholicism, which are recited during the opening of every ceremony), and performance (the physical movements and drum beatings of ritual as well as the overall service and performance of labor in order to bring down the lwa). Performance scholar Soyica Diggs Colbert, reading Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Joseph Roach, defines orature “as an aesthetic, [that] recognizes performance, orality, and literacy as mutually constitutive.”<sup>593</sup> A multi-formed practice that moves beyond the binaries of text, oral tradition, and performance (as an embodied act), orature stresses the dynamic investments of these three performative elements upon each other. Ulysse's performance of this mutually constitutive aesthetic is not *unique* to this dissertation or the artists previously discussed. The artist featured in the previous chapters—Régine Romain, Rejin

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<sup>591</sup> Ulysse in conversation with the author, August 2016.

<sup>592</sup> Ibid.

<sup>593</sup> Soyica Diggs Colbert, “Black Movements: Flying Africans in Spaceships,” *Black Performance Theory*, eds. Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 131.

Leys, Lenelle Moïse, and myself—are multidisciplinary artists who make use of whatever medium to tell our stories. Yet, it is Ulysse’s consistent determination to use her remixes to break down the walls between the Academy, knowledge, and Vodou that demands attention.

Vodou’s orature and Ulysse’s remixes enable her to defy academic, performance, and Haitian expectations of her. Ulysses performance-scholarly work denounces the false borders between “wannaberockstar [sic]” and Gina the “anthropologist.” As Ulysse states:

I didn’t know it at the time wannaberockstar [sic] and anthropologist were always bartering. Remember, one wanted to sing her guts out while the other wanted to master theory. The body was being disconnected from the mind. So they fought it out. Wannaberockstar kept pushing against traditional anthropology. Bits of theory spilled into songs with samples from favorite writers. I’m always referencing other poets, that you practically need a bibliography. *Haiti came in through Vodou chants*. That’s how my spokenword performance was born right here in Ann Arbor. I am always doing a REMIX [emphasis in original].<sup>594</sup>

Ulysse embodies and theorizes her remixes as a product of her doctoral life in her TEDx talk “Untapped Fierceness/My Giant Leaps.”<sup>595</sup> Following Ulysse’s opening invocation, “*Mwen Rive*,” the pithy 13-minute performance begins. The lights in the auditorium come up revealing Dr. Gina Athena Ulysse. She is dressed in flowing black pants and a mauve top, the colors of the Gede family. Without even a pause, Ulysse

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<sup>594</sup> Ulysse, “Untapped Fierceness/My Giant Leaps,” shared draft of script.

<sup>595</sup> In a nearly perfect circle, Ulysse was asked to return to the University of Michigan by a team of undergraduate students who organize the TEDxUofM talks. The young student who encouraged Ulysse to present her spoken word found her on YouTube and the groups goal was to “‘bring together a collection of the University of Michigan’s most innovative and inspirational alumni, professors, and students to share [TED’s](#) mission of ‘ideas worth spreading.’” See Gina Athena Ulysse, “TEDxUofM: Untapped Future Game Changers,” *Huffington Post: The Blog*, April 15, 2013.

launches into her next piece, a spoken word performance whose beginning lines evoke the terror that silence inflicts on the body. Ulysse speaks:

Silence chose me	I didn't choose silence
silence immobilized me	I could not breathe in my own skin
without breaking the silence	I could not live in the castle of my skin

The poem's beginning creates a sense of one's body being one's own claustrophobic and silencing prison. The silence that Ulysse names as her oppression, as well as her pale mauve clothing and female-body, invoke Gran Brijit, matriarch of the Gede family, wife of Bawon Samdi, and mother to all the Gedes. Curator and cultural scholar Patrick A. Polk has described Gran Brijit as "a former prostitute turned compassionate advocate in the afterlife."<sup>596</sup> However, when Gran Brijit arrives in a Vodou ceremony she "sits impassively—it is said she never speaks."<sup>597</sup> If the lwas, as historian Colin (Joan) Dayan have argued "were born out of the slave's awareness of the demands and fineries of their masters,"<sup>598</sup> then Gran Brijit's silence, whether self-induced or externally imposed, reminds us that the body is a repository of violence, labor, and transgressions. Silence becomes a way of sealing access to the repository, thereby denying access to the contents within. Silence enacts a slow death, a disconnection between other bodies and spirits.<sup>599</sup>

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<sup>596</sup> Patrick A. Polk, "Remember You Must Die! Gede Banners, Mememto Mori, and the Fine Art of Facing Death," in *In Extremis: Death and Life in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Haitian Art*, edited by Donald Cosentino (Los Angeles, CA: Fowler Museum at UCLA), 118.

<sup>597</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>598</sup> Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, 64.

<sup>599</sup> In many ways, the silences of Gran Brijitt as well as Ezili Dantò due to her lacerated tongue (Chapter 4), reflect why the telling of Haitian women's stories is a revolutionary, anti-colonial and anti-patriarchal act.

For Ulysse, death can only be averted through the act of screaming and hollering. Ulysse unleashes a concert of screams and shrieks within her poem:

As I came of age colonized	Knowing I wasn't meant to survive
I screamed	Knowing the power of the erotics
I screamed out	
Loud words that resonated the sound of a hammer slammer on a nail going through flesh	

Ulysse's scream vocalizes her frustration and reconstitutes Ulysse's body, mind and spirit through an embrace of her most viscera: the "power of the erotics." Audre Lorde defines the "erotic" as "a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plan, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling."<sup>600</sup> Ulysse screams in contradistinction to Gran Brijit's silence. Ulysse also screams alongside other women of color who have mobilized the erotics, women whose names she reads of in her performances like a litany of feminist comrades: Ella Baker, Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Anzaldua, and Audre Lorde.

The power of the erotic is Gede behavior. Gede, whose humorous and sexually charged nature and penchant for disruption is captured through live or digitally circulated footage of the Gede's sexually charged *banda* dance, famous for its winding of the pelvic region and "lighthearted mime of sexual fun."<sup>601</sup> Embedded in Gede's sexual gestures is what Lorde, when speaking of the erotic, describes as "an assertion of the life force of women;

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<sup>600</sup> Audre Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider*, (New York, NY: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1993), 53.

<sup>601</sup> Joseph Murphy, *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 36.

of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives.”<sup>602</sup>



**Figure 26:** Gina Athena Ulysse, Youtube Still, *Untapped Fierceness/My Giant Leaps*, March 2013.

Gede shows the creative potential of all acts—even those deemed “inappropriate” for public consumption. It is this staging of the inappropriate that appears in Ulysses work, particularly as she (re)presents Black female rage in her scholarly and staged works:

I choose the stage. Performance provides me with a space—a clearing—albeit a public one. The stage becomes the site to occupy and articulate the embodied. The primeval. Releasing sound bites of horror. Unhinging the raw. Expressing that which is most guttural, and which for black women must too often remain the unspeakable. There is no fourth wall. Everyone present participates and becomes implicated in the denouement.<sup>603</sup>

If, as scholar-practitioners such as Mimerose P. Beaubrun have argued, “the objective of Vodou is to convey a universal message, destined for all people without exception for

<sup>602</sup> Audre Lorde, “The Uses of the Erotic,” 55.

<sup>603</sup> Gina Athena Ulysse, “It All Started with a Black Women: Reflective Notes on Writing/Performing Rage” in *Are All the Women Still White? Rethinking Race, Expanding Feminisms*, edited by Janell Hobson (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 2016), 258.

race or culture,”<sup>604</sup> then Ulysse uses her Gede inspired performance to cross borders and speak to multiple constituencies (Haitians, non-Haitians, “scholars” and “activists,” etc.).<sup>605</sup> These constituents include the living and the dead members of Ulysse’s family whom she discusses in her work, “Being.” Ulysse writes:

She never apologized for who she was. With her there was no pretense. There was no shame. What you saw was what you got. She was a peasant, **so what**. She was illiterate, **so what**. She had a lot of children, **so what**. She smoked a pipe, chewed tobacco and was a heavy drinker, **so what**. She was born of a family who loved to serve their spirits, **so f-u-c-k-i-n-g what**.

Ulysse performs the poem and immediately follows it with another one, “Embracing,” that is equally defiant in its tone, if not blatantly condescending:

We/I dwell just beyond your logic---  
If we/I didn’t define myself, for myself,  
I would be crunched up into other people’s fantasies for me and be eaten alive.  
I exist as I am and that is enough<sup>606</sup>

The poems “Being” and “Embracing” form the summit of Ulysse’s TED talk. Who is the “We/I” and the “She” of which Ulysse speaks? These subjects are Ulysse and Gede, but they are also Ulysse and her maternal grandmother. Ulysse’s grandmother, as described in “Being” appears plucked from every single Gede-description that appears in the vernacular and written accounts of Gede. The illiterate, poor woman who smokes, drinks, tells it like it is and serves the spirit is both Gede embodied *and* a predecessor to Ulysse. Grandmother Ulysse was the original Gede-like spirit who was not concerned

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<sup>604</sup> Mimerose P. Beaubrun, *Nan Domi: An Initiate’s Journey into Haitian Vodou*, trans. D.J. Walker (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2013), 237.

<sup>605</sup> My use of quotations around “scholars” and “activists” aims to question the assumed division between these two bodies.

<sup>606</sup> Ulysse, “Untapped Fierceness/My Giant Leaps,” shared draft of script. Ulysse’s poem borrows from Audre Lorde and Walt Whitman’s “Songs of Myself.” The pairing of these two (queer) authors is an example of Ulysse’s politics of remixing, which I will discuss later in the chapter.

with decorum and broke silences. “So fucking what” if she did not meet standards of gender, class, or spiritual conformity, during her time, this is the woman whom Ulysse views as a model for her life’s work.

The legacy of Ulysse’s grandmother is a way for Ulysse to validate her continued (re)turns to Haiti to uplift her family by continuing in the spiritual traditions that were abandoned by her mother’s generation. Ulysse’s work speaks for her and her silenced spirit which long ago broke with Vodou traditions. Ulysse writes of this spiritual fracturing of faith on the part of her mother and the ways this fracture produced a silencing and death-like quality in her mother’s spirit:

I’ve seen what silence has done to my family. I live it every single day. I spoke to my mother last night and it practically broke my heart. It breaks my heart that my mother refuses to become a Vodou priestess. Refuses. And it’s part of her [...] So when I’m talking—that’s why I’m so like, “you can’t shape me.” I have seen that pain, I have seen it kill someone’s spirit [...] I’ve seen it take the light out. [...] Now I just have to work to figure out the language to be able to say it in a certain way. [...] My mother, secretly enjoys when I do that. When I call people out she’s just like, “oh yeah.” Because she doesn’t do it, she wishes she could.<sup>607</sup>

The above quotation from Ulysse reminds us that she speaks out of turn, and performs Gede’s disruptive crossings not just for herself, but to honor her grandmother and to heal her own mother, who is unable to break through her own silence(s). The ability for Ulysse to speak *for* her mother, and subsequently remedy that which is spiritually wounded and fractured, highlights Gede’s premiere role within the Vodou pantheon: the penultimate healer. Gede is the lwa who Maya Deren has referred to a “repository of all knowledges of the dead” and is accordingly “wise beyond all others.”<sup>608</sup> By speaking with and through Gede, Ulysse’s Diasporic body—born in Haiti, raised in

<sup>607</sup> Gina Ulysse, interview with the author, October 2013.

<sup>608</sup> Maya Deren, *Divine Horseman*, 38.



the U.S.—(re)turns her family back to the *konesans* (spiritual knowledge) of her grandmother, back to the spirit of Gede, and back to Vodou. These are knowledges that exist beyond the confines of academia but that continue to be realized in Gede-inspired performance.

For Ulysse there is no doubt that these (re)turns to Haitian Vodou are made possible because of her position as a *Diaspora*. Ulysse's spirit of disruption is made possible by her existence in the borderless space of Diaspora. In a moment of reflection, Ulysse contemplated how her life could have been different, had she not crossed physical borders long ago, Ulysse says:

I always wonder, who would I have been had I not migrated? Would this person you know here right now, with all the sassiness with all the craziness and all the fun all the whatever be the same person had I not migrated. That's a real question to me. This is something I think about.<sup>609</sup>

Ulysse laughs at her own ponderings, knowing that her Gede thrives in between borders—geographic, spiritual, and academic. She laughs loud and deep and I know she is not laughing alone. Ulysse has comrades both within and without of the academy who are using Spirit, performance, scholarship, and art praxis to laugh while crossing borders.

As I write these final words, only days after another anniversary of the quake has passed, I am reminded of Ulysse and Gede. In the early weeks following the earthquake, when I had no inkling of how *I* could contribute to supporting Haiti, it was Ulysse/Gede who responded to me via email and told me:

Yes, Kantara, Yes! The world is upside down right now. Haiti is upside down right now. Things are crazy you know. But NOW is the time for us Haitians to be making art. Not a year from now when things aren't still up

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<sup>609</sup> Ulysse, interview with the author, August 2016.

in the air. Now. Haiti needs [our] voices. She needs OUR narratives and OUR visions. Okay? *Kembe Fem [Stay Strong]*. Love, Gina.<sup>610</sup>

It is in and with the Spirit of these words that I, and the artists featured in this dissertation, continue to circle the cosmograms, in order to create works that continue to add to the growing narratives and visions of Haiti, the Haitian Diaspora, and the Spirit.

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<sup>610</sup> Ulysse in email communication with the author, January/February 2010.

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## VITA

Kantara Souffrant is a Haitian-American artist, scholar, curator, and museum educator. Souffrant was born in Brooklyn, New York and grew up in New Jersey in a large Haitian Diasporic community. Souffrant received her B.A. in 2008 from Oberlin College in African American Studies (Highest Honors), Comparative American Studies, and Studio Art (Honors). Kantara Souffrant completed her M.A. in Performance Studies at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts where she studied with Barbara Browning (advisor), Andre Lepecki, Karen Shimikawa, Diana Taylor, and the late José Estaban Muñoz. Souffrant's work examines the effects of Haiti's January 2010 earthquake on feminist and queer art practices in the Haitian Diaspora. Her work appears in the anthology *Vodou, I Remember* (Lexington Books, 2016). As an artists-scholar Souffrant uses her scholarly, performance, and community-based work to encourage dialogue, personal and communal transformation, and social advancements in her communities. As an installation artist and performer she has presented her scholarly-artistic work at numerous venues including: The Whitney Biennale under the Dance Diaspora Collective, The Caribbean Cultural Center and African Diasporic Institute (CCCADI), New York University, Judson Church, the American Studies Association (ASA), The Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE), Northwestern University, Fisher Gallery (Oberlin, OH), The University of York (UK), and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Ghetto Biennale in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.