

Caribbean Studies/Gender Studies

"This book reveals in a powerful way that the Caribbean, often criticized and represented as macho, hyper-masculine, violently homophobic, and sexually restrictive has in fact given gender and sexual transgression a prominent if not defining role in national and regional culture and history. In addition, *The Cross-Dressed Caribbean* illustrates that cross-dressing and other gender transgressions are often but hardly always about queer sexuality, and they are almost always part of a negotiation with or struggle against patriarchy and colonial/postcolonial oppression."—Leah Rosenberg, University of Florida

"This volume provides an impressively wide array of texts from different historical contexts and parts of the Caribbean. By situating their work in a traumatic history of colonialism, slavery, plantation regimes, patriarchy, and homophobia, in violent power struggles as well as in playfully riotous performances, the essays foreground the original contributions of Caribbean cross-dressing traditions and multiple transgressive cultures."—Supriya Nair, Tulane University

**Studies of sexuality** in Caribbean culture are on the rise, focusing mainly on homosexuality and homophobia or on regional manifestations of normative and nonnormative sexualities. *The Cross-Dressed Caribbean* extends this exploration by using the trope of transvestism not only to analyze texts and contexts from anglophone, francophone, Spanish, Dutch, and diasporic Caribbean literature and film but also to highlight reinventions of sexuality and resistance to different forms of exploitation and oppression.

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A volume in the series New World Studies

University of Virginia Press

Charlottesville and London

[www.upress.virginia.edu](http://www.upress.virginia.edu)

Cover art: "Koo, Koo, or Actor-Boy," plate 6, lithograph, from *Sketches of Character: In Illustration of the Habits, Occupation, and Costume of the Negro Population, in the Island of Jamaica*, by I. M. Belisario, 1837. (Yale Center for British Art)

ISBN 978-0-8139-3523-2



Fumagalli, Ledent, and del Valle Alcalá, Editors

The CROSS-DRESSED CARIBBEAN

# The CROSS-DRESSED CARIBBEAN



## Writing, Politics, Sexualities

EDITED BY

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and Roberto del Valle Alcalá

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## The Body of Vodou

Corporeality and the Location of Gender in  
Afro-Diasporic Religion

*Roberto Strongman*

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RECENT SCIENTIFIC experiments in the area of perception and cognition present further evidence that the relationship between the self and the body is not a universal given, but imagined and constructed. Out-of-body experiments conducted by two research groups using slightly different methods expanded upon the “rubber hand illusion.” In that illusion, people hide one hand in their lap and look at the rubber hand set on a table in front of them. As a researcher strokes the real hand and the rubber hand at the same time with a stick, people have the sensation that the rubber hand is their own. When a hammer hits the rubber hand, the subjects recoil or cringe. According to the August 2007 issue of *Science*, two different research teams led by H. Henrik Ehrsson and Bigna Lenggenhager created whole-body illusions with similar manipulations, this time through the use of virtual-reality technology.<sup>1</sup> The subjects wore goggles connected to two video cameras placed six feet behind them and, as a result, saw their own backs from the perspective of a virtual person located behind them. When the researcher stroked the subject’s chest and moved the second stick under the camera lenses simultaneously, the subjects reported the sense of being outside of their own bodies, looking at themselves from a distance where the cameras were located. The scientists infer from these experiments that they now understand how the brain combines visual and tactile information to compute and determine where the self is located in space. These experiments help us to understand that the location of the self vis-à-vis the body can and is culturally constructed through the senses. The body and its self need not be coterminous. The self need not reside inside the body, but may be imagined or placed externally. In different ways, current scientific discourse coincides with Afro-Diasporic philosophy in its exposure of subjective inwardness as an illusion.

The Western philosophical tradition clearly presents the concept of a unitary soul within the hermetic enclosure of a body. In *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor presents a genealogy of the Western self in which Descartes marks the most important milestone. He writes, "The internalization wrought by the modern age, of which Descartes' formulation was one of the most important and influential, is very different from Augustine's. It does, in a very real sense, place the moral sources within us. Relative to Plato, and relative to Augustine, it brings about in each case a transposition by which we no longer see ourselves as related to moral sources outside us, or at least not at all in the same way. An important power has been internalized."<sup>2</sup> It is important to place Taylor's claims concerning Descartes in the historical context of the Enlightenment. The theocentric philosophical tradition delineated by Plato and Augustine is characterized by man's search for an identity that lies beyond himself, in the Divine without. The intense secularization of the Enlightenment disrupts this theocentrism by foregrounding the individual, a move that brings about the internalization of identity. This sense of inwardness, however, is dependent upon a clear demarcation between the new boundaries of the self and the body. In the following passage, Descartes reasons how even if the mind or soul might be within the body, the two remain distinct parts of the individual:

In order to begin this examination, then, I here say, in the first place, that there is a great difference between mind and body, inasmuch as body is by nature always divisible, and the mind is entirely indivisible. For, as a matter of fact, when I consider the mind, that is to say, myself inasmuch as I am only a thinking thing, I cannot distinguish in myself any parts, but apprehend myself to be clearly one and entire; and although the whole mind seems to be united to the whole body, yet if a foot, or an arm, or some other part, is separated from my body, I am aware that nothing has been taken away from my mind. And the faculties of willing, feeling, conceiving, etc. cannot be properly speaking said to be its parts, for it is one and the same mind which employs itself in willing and in feeling and understanding. But it is quite otherwise with corporeal or extended objects, for there is not one of these imaginable by me which my mind cannot easily divide into parts and which consequently I do not recognize as being divisible; this would be sufficient to teach me that the mind or soul of man is entirely different from the body, if I had not already learned it from other sources.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, Descartes's concern is to negate the full absorption of the soul by the body in the process of subjective internalization. The two remain

distinct entities, even if one resides within the other. Apart from remarking on Descartes's famous *Cogito* in his description of the "I" as the "thinking thing," we should note his concern for divisibility and indivisibility as tests for integrity. Descartes believes that the possibility of the body to be separated into parts implies that it is of a different nature than the indivisible mind/soul. In fact, Western philosophy will not be able to develop a discourse for the parts of the mind until the twentieth century with Freud's "The Ego and the Id" and by Sartre, who in *L'être et le néant* claims that "alterity is, really, an internal negation and only a conscience can constitute itself as an internal negation."<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, through his reasoning, Descartes crystallizes the notion of a self within a body, establishing this self as internal, unitary, and inseparable from the body.

In the twentieth century, a strong Western philosophical current attempts to amend the internal subject posited by Descartes. Bataille, for example, posits the divine as self inside the body: "By 'internal experience' I mean that which normally is called 'mystical experience': ecstasies, rapture, as a form of mediating emotion."<sup>5</sup> Bataille here suggests that even though inwardness initially required secularization, once it is established it can become sacramental once again without forcing the self to exit the body. Similarly, Michel Serres in *Variations sur le corps* uses an aesthetic discourse to claim that the body's internalization of the self does not imply a rejection of the profound and transcendental mystery of artistic appreciation. While Bataille and Serres are interested in recuperating the Divine for the internal self, for Sartre "all other conceptualization of alterity will end up presenting it as in-itself, in other words, to establish between it and Being an external relationship, which would require the presence of a witness to verify that the other is different from that which is in-itself."<sup>6</sup>

In *Caliban's Reason*, Paget Henry explains that Afro-Diasporic philosophy does not exist as a tradition isolated from other manifestations of culture. Henry's argument implies the need to investigate Afro-Diasporic religion as a repository of philosophical information that can overcome the imposition of Western philosophical discourses on colonized peoples. In fact, a thorough study of Afro-Diasporic religions reveals how—unlike the Western idea of the fixed internal unitary soul—the Afro-Diasporic self is removable, external, and multiple. In his study of the Akan conceptual scheme, Kuame Gyekye presents a tripartite plan of the self composed of the *honam* (the material body), the *okra* (the immaterial soul), and the *sunsum* (the quasi-material spirit),<sup>7</sup> and Kwasi Wiredu explains Gyekye's systematization of Akan personhood by comparing it with Descartes's mind/body binarism:

One thing, in any case, should be absolutely clear: Neither the okra nor the sunsum can be identified with the immaterial soul familiar in some influential Western philosophical and religious thinking (with all its attendant paradoxes). This concept of the soul is routinely used interchangeably with the concept of mind while the concept of okra and sunsum are categorically different from the Akan concept of mind (*adwene*), as our previous explanation should have rendered apparent. Thus Descartes (in English translation) can speak indifferently of the soul or the mind and appear to make sense. In Akan to identify either the okra or the sunsum with *adwene* would be the sheerest gibberish.<sup>8</sup>

The multiplicity of the self displayed in the Akan scheme is prevalent in Western African societies and has been noted by the Haitian Vodou scholar Guérin Montilus in his study of Adja philosophy:

The Vodou religion of the Adja taught these same Africans that their psychic reality and source of human life was metaphorically symbolized by the shadow of the body. This principle, represented by the shadow, is called the *ye*. There are two of these. The first is the inner, the internal part of the shadow, which is called the *ye gli*; that is, a short *ye*. The second, the external and light part of the same shadow, is called the *ye gaga*; that is, the long *ye*. The first *ye gli*, is the principle of physical life, which vanishes at death. The second, *ye gaga*, is the principle of consciousness and psychic life. The *ye gaga* survives death and illustrates the principle of immortality. It has metaphysical mobility that allows human beings to travel far away at night (through dreams) or remain eternally alive after the banishment of the *ye gli*. After death, the *ye gaga* goes to meet the community of Ancestors, which constitutes the extended family and the clan in their spiritual dimensions.<sup>9</sup>

This multiplicity of the self found in African philosophy survives in the Caribbean Diaspora. The African duality of the immaterial self—the *okra* and *sunsum* of the Akan and the *ye gli* and *ye gaga* of the Adja—becomes the *tibonanj* and the *gwobonanj* in Haitian Vodou. Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert thus define these two elusive terms: “The head, which contains the two elements that comprise the soul—the *ti bònánj* or *ti bon ange* (the conscience that allows for self-reflection and self-criticism) and the *gwo bònánj* or *gros bon ange* (the psyche, source of memory, intelligence, and personhood)—must be prepared so that the *gros bon ange* can be separated from the initiate to allow the spirit to enter in its place.”<sup>10</sup> Here we begin to see that there is a cooperative relationship between the *tibonanj* and the *gwobonanj*. Alfred

Métraux further expounds on this cooperation: “It is the general opinion that dreams are produced by the wanderings of the *Gros-bon-ange* when it abandons the body during sleep. The sleeper becomes aware of the adventures of the *Gros-bon-ange* through the *Ti-z’ange* who remains by him as a protector and yet never loses sight of the *Gros-bon-ange*. He wakes the sleeper in case of danger and even flies to the rescue of the *Gros-bon-ange* if this faces real danger.”<sup>11</sup> For the self to achieve altered states of consciousness—in trance possessions, dreams, or death—the *tibonanj* allows the *gwobonanj* to become detached from the person. In the case of trance possession, the *gwobonanj* surrenders its place and its authority to the *mèt tet*, “the main spirit served by that person and the one s/he most often goes into trance for.”<sup>12</sup>

Karen McCarthy Brown further explains the multiple concept of the self in Vodou by presenting this notion of the *mèt tet*, roughly translated as “the master of the head”: “The personality of the *mèt tet* and that of the devotee tend to coincide, an intimate tie hinted at in the occasional identification of the “big guardian angel” (*gwo bònánj*), one dimension of what might be called a person’s soul, with the Vodou spirit who is his or her *mèt tet*.”<sup>13</sup> Here we see how the *gwobonanj* is the central element of the self in Vodou. Not only is it the seat of individuality but it also maintains links between *mèt tet* and the *tibonanj*, two aspects of the self that are not directly connected to each other. These links are broken after the death of the individual, in the Vodou ceremony of *dessounin*. We can summarize the roles of the two most important aspects of the self by saying that the *gwobonanj* is consciousness, while the *tibonanj* is objectivity. The *gwobonanj* is the principal soul, experience, personality, the personal soul or self.<sup>14</sup> The *tibonanj* is described as the anonymous, protective, objective conscience that is the truthful and objective, the impersonal spiritual, component of the individual,<sup>15</sup> whose domain also encompasses moral considerations and arbitration.<sup>16</sup> The *tibonanj* is a “spiritual reserve tank. It is an energy or presence within the person that is dimmer or deeper than consciousness, but it is nevertheless there to be called upon in situations of stress and depletion.”<sup>17</sup>

The complex relationship between the *gwobonanj* and the *tibonanj* has at times not been correctly understood by Western scholars, who have disseminated erroneous information, further muddying our collective understanding of the self in Vodou. For example, Desmangles ascribes to the *tibonanj* characteristics that most scholars attribute to the *gwobonanj*: “The *ti-bon-anj* is the ego-soul. It represents the unique qualities that characterize an individual’s personality.”<sup>18</sup> Comparisons to Western

philosophy underscore his confusion: "The Vodou concept of the *ti-bonanj* in heaven seems to correspond to the Roman Catholic doctrine of the soul, for Vodouisants believe that it 'appears' before Bondye to stand before the heavenly tribunal where it is arraigned for its misdeeds, and must suffer the appropriate penalties."<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Wade Davis ascribes to the *tibonanj* attributes that most scholars use to define the *gwobonanj*: "The *Ti bon ange* [is] the individual, aura, the source of all personality and willpower."<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Davis says that the *tibonanj* travels during sleep,<sup>21</sup> while most scholars agree that it is the *gwobonanj* who does so.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to the *gwobonanj*, the *tibonanj*, and the *mèt tet*, there remain three components of Vodou concept of personhood. The *nam* is the "spirit of the flesh that allows each cell to function"<sup>23</sup> or "the animating force of the body."<sup>24</sup> The *zetwal* is the "celestial parallel self, fate"<sup>25</sup> and the "spiritual component that resides in the sky"; it is "the individual's star of destiny."<sup>26</sup> The *kòr kadav* is "the body itself, the flesh and blood,"<sup>27</sup> "the dead body of a person," and "a material substance separable from these various animating spiritual entities."<sup>28</sup>

The phenomenon of trance possession needs to be explained through the multiplicity of the self in Vodou. The projection of Western philosophical concepts by anthropologists onto Vodou has been responsible for inaccurate understandings of trance possession: "The symptoms of the opening phase of the trance are clearly pathological. They conform exactly in their main features, to the stock clinical conception of hysteria."<sup>29</sup> Even as Métraux inaccurately equates trance possession with the already questionable notion of "hysteria," he does provide one of the clearest definitions of this phenomenon during the 1950s, the early period of serious scholarly investigation of Vodou. Métraux's work helps us to locate the seat of selfhood in the corporeal head of the individual. In Haitian Kreyòl, *tèt* has an interesting double meaning. It is a noun referring to the anatomical "head," and in its function as a reflexive prefix attached to personal pronouns, it also means "self." This synecdoche becomes important as it establishes the head as a referent for selfhood, in a part-for-whole metaphor. It also presents the head as the physical location for the multiple parts of the self. Writing in the interstices between African and European philosophies, Métraux describes trance possession using an ambiguous language implying penetration and hovering. This vacillation between metaphors for possession continues in the following quote: "The relationship between the loa and the man seized is compared to that which joins a rider to his horse. That is why a loa is spoken

of as mounting or saddling his chual (horse). . . . It is also an invasion of the body by a supernatural spirit; hence the often-used expression: 'the loa is seizing his horse.'<sup>30</sup> Métraux's use of in/out metaphors for the phenomenon of possession is a Western importation. The rider metaphor popularized by early scholars of Vodou such as Zora Neale Hurston in *Tell My Horse* (1938) and Katherine Dunham in *Island Possessed* (1969) articulates the language used by the initiates themselves.

Afro-Diasporic religions operate under a transcorporeal conceptualization of the self that is radically different from the Western philosophical tradition. Unlike Descartes's unitary soul, the immaterial aspect of the Afro-Diasporic self is multiple, external, and removable. These various subjectivities rest upon a concave corporeal surface reminiscent of a saddle or a calabash.

What are the possible implications for gender in a modular system in which the self can be substituted for temporarily by a subjectivity of another gender? Some of these gender implications of Afro-Diasporic transcorporeality are evident in René Depestre's novel *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*. In this, Hadriana—a white French woman living in Haiti—is turned into a zombi on her wedding day and becomes the leader of a Vodou community. Martin Murno sees in Hadriana's whiteness "obvious traces of Depestre's francophilia."<sup>31</sup> But he also concedes that there might be an element of resistance in Depestre's idealization of Hadriana's beauty by claiming that Hadriana might embody a "reversal of colonial eroticization of its tropical other."<sup>32</sup> Her aborted marriage begins a non-heteronormative characterization of Hadriana that continues throughout her spiritual evolution. At the outset of the text, Hadriana is associated with Nana Buruku, a *lwa* that is often represented as embodying a primordial androgynous gender. "The people of Jacmel, unable to accept that a heart attack brought Nana down to the foot of the altar, used their necrophilic imagination to reinsert their daughter into a fairy tale. Her body's disappearance from the sepulcher was the catalyst for such a leap from the fear of death into fantasy."<sup>33</sup>

At the end of the novel, she is associated with a male deity of spring: "I was Simbi-the-Spring. The gods of Vodou ordered me take a handful of emigrants from Jacmel to Jamaica."<sup>34</sup> The regendering seen in Hadriana's transmutation into various deities is also evident in the powerful trance a *Mambo* experiences at another point in the text: "From the first notes of the dance, Saint James the Greater—the first in the family of the Oguns—mounts Brévica Losange as his horse. In that manner possessed, the Mambo improvises a song in harmony with the drums."<sup>35</sup>

This female Vodou priestess's identification with one of the most virile of *lwas* demonstrates how the substitution of the *gwobonanj* by the *mèt tet* of another gender can have as a result the Vodouisant's corporeal regendering.

In addition to her association with Nana Buruku and Simbi-la-Source, Hadriana is constantly associated with yet another *lwa*: Gédé, whose domain is life and death. Although his demeanor is humorous, he is known for speaking harsh truths. His portrayal as an undertaker is enhanced by his top hat. His eyeglasses have only one lens, implying vision in this world and the next. His walking cane is a phallus, acquiring a transcorporeal aspect in the hands of his female devotees. Hadriana's death is presented as the responsibility of this *lwa*: "A man with a resemblance to Baron-Samedi invites those Gédés at his side to take the casket from the apostolic hands that carry it."<sup>36</sup> Hadriana's inert body becomes the very representation of death, and therefore that of Gédé: "Twenty meters around the spectacle, the musicians, in unison, impose the general fever of the drum: the crowd stops dancing to mimic the corpse-like ugliness of Hadriana Siloé, making the square a settlement of death's kingdom."<sup>37</sup> Hadriana's identification with this mortuary and highly sexual deity is evident in a description of a Vodou ceremony that foregrounds Gédé's transgression of the binarisms of death/life, masculinity/femininity, terrestrial/celestial, sacred/profane:

On the contrary, drums and wind instruments change Madame Losange's song into a sunny season of the night: their musical fury alternates in each of the living death and birth, cries of agony and exclamations of orgasmic triumph. The musical volcano reduced to ashes the legendary obstacles between Thanatos and Eros, beyond the prohibitions against the sperm of black males and the eggs of white females. The explosion of Gédés, enlivened by the warm blood, puts the souls and the bodies, the tumescent penises and the vaginas, in cosmic harmony with the crazy hope of rescuing Nana Siloé from death and light again, among us, the star of her life in her flesh.<sup>38</sup>

The transcorporeality found in the religious tradition of Vodou enables the assumption of cross-gender subjectivities in the secular arena. Depestre makes use of irony not only by having Hadriana's death take place at the wedding altar, but also by having the wake take place during carnival. Troupes of revelers parade by Hadriana's dead body. The contrast between feast and funeral highlights a reversal of gender norms in the Caribbean carnival tradition of the *mariage burlesque*: "I stopped in front of a group of men disguised as women. In order to simulate an

advanced state of pregnancy, they placed pillows under their satin dresses. They had breasts and buttocks fit for Venus Kallipygos. Supported by staffs, the cross-dressers chatted with people dressed in white clothes."<sup>39</sup> Édouard Glissant presents this tradition as one of the few places in which West Indian society is able to critique patriarchal heteronormativity:

There is an occasion in Martinique in which men and women meet in order to give a symbolic representation of their relationship. This is the tradition of the burlesque marriages during carnival, a critique of family structure. The man has the role of the wife (often pregnant) and the woman that of the husband; an adult has the role of an infant in a crib. It is not surprising that the burlesque marriage is one of the rare forms still alive of that great popular and collective questioning that can be none other than the Martinican carnival.<sup>40</sup>

Glissant's Martinican context prevents him from considering Haitian Vodou as yet another site in which West Indian societies are able to question the dictates of gender and sexual norms. However, this Martinican perspective enables us to consider the ways in which this transcorporeality extends beyond the religious and permeates the entire structure of West Indian society, even of those segments that have become greatly Europeanized as a result of departmentalization.

That the representation of West Indian society in Depestre is suffused with exoticism has not gone unnoticed by literary critics. In an effort to redeem Depestre's work, Martin Munro reminds us, "Exoticism is not, not always, a product of the hegemonic gaze. The processes of mass exile from the Caribbean have rendered the dualistic center-periphery concept of hegemony ever more redundant."<sup>41</sup> In other words, we could read Depestre's exoticism as stemming from a deep nostalgia and as catharsis for the loss and separation from his native Haiti as a result of his exile in France.

Likewise, unlike the Western idea of the body as the enclosure of the soul, the *kòr kadav* is an open vessel that finds metaphoric and aesthetic expression in the *Kwi*, *govi*, and *kanari* containers of Haitian Vodou. As Thompson explains, one of the most arresting sights for a newcomer into an Afro-Diasporic religious setting is the collection and assortment of ritual containers: "The close gathering of numerous bottles and containers, on various tiers, is a strong organizing principle in the world of vodun altars. That unifying concept, binding Haitian Rada altars to Dahomean altars in West Africa, precisely entails a constant elevation of a profusion of pottery upon a dais, an emphasis on simultaneous assuagement (the liquid in vessels) and exaltation (the ascending structure of the tiers)."<sup>42</sup>

In fact, some of the most striking art objects of the African diaspora are anthropomorphic receptacles, as noted by Falgayrettes-Leveau in his exhibit book *Réceptacles*: "The Kuba and their kin in Zaire have privileged in an almost codified, yet refined, manner the representation of the head in crafting the most beautiful of their receptacles: the cups for drinking palm wine."<sup>43</sup> These cephalomorphic receptacles emblemize the function of the head—and, through synecdoche, the body—as an open container. This association of the head with such ritual containers is evident in the use of a specific receptacle called *pò tets*, literally "container heads": "This part of the initiation also involves the preparation of the *pò tets*, as containers for the new selves, repositories for ingredients symbolic of the new union of spirit and human being: hair, sacrificial food, herbs, and oils. When the initiates join the community for their presentation as *ounsi*, they walk with these pots balanced on their heads and place them in the altar, as symbol of their entering the community as initiated *ounsi*."<sup>44</sup> This representation of the head as an open vessel becomes evident in the association between the material body and various types of ritual containers in Depestre's *Hadriana*: "I was overcome by violent internal convulsions. All my bones vibrated until they almost cracked. I was in a nightmare inside a nightmare. I was a stolen soul. They separated my *tibonanj* from my *gwobonanj*. They had enclosed the first in a calabash to take it by mule back to a penitentiary of souls in the mountains of Haut-Cap-Rouge. The second, arm tied behind his back, was flagellated like an ass in the opposite direction. All links were broken between my two forms of being."<sup>45</sup> Here it is possible to see Depestre's important depiction of the African multiple self. Through this quote we also become aware of the ways in which aspects of the self might be removable without producing the individual's death. It is also significant how Depestre presents the calabash as one of the receptacles that may be used as a substitute for the human body.

Davis explains how the separation of the corporeal and immaterial aspects of the self that Depestre describes constitute the phenomenon of zombification: "The spirit zombie, or the zombie of the *ti bon ange* alone, is carefully stored in a jar and may later be magically transmuted into insects, animals, or humans in order to accomplish the particular work of the *bokòr*. The remaining spiritual components of man, the *n'âme*, the *gros bon ange*, and the *z'étoile*, together form the *zombi cadaver*, the *zombi* of the flesh."<sup>46</sup> This very detached description of the process of zombification is consistent with Davis's clinical view of zombification as purely the result of neurotoxin poisoning.<sup>47</sup> However, for Depestre,

zombification has much more emotive connotations associated to loss of autonomy and spiritual imprisonment: "This place of detention was prepared to receive the bottled up souls of people condemned to a privation of their spiritual liberty. The practice consisted in bottling up the imaginary of individuals who have become living dead. The bottles that you will see are little forgotten things in glass, crystal, metal, ceramic, leather, wood, and stoneware!"<sup>48</sup> Through these passages we see that Depestre, like Davis, conceives the *tibonanj* as the principal soul and the seat of individuality. However, this view is incongruent with the work of other scholars who believe that "the famous zombies are people whose *Gros-bon-ange* has been captured by some evil *hungan*, thus becoming living-dead."<sup>49</sup> Moreover, apart from zombification, there are various forms of spiritual embottlement, all of which involve the capturing of the *gwobonanj*, not the *tibonanj*. For instance, when the individual willingly decides to bottle up part of his self, it is the *gwobonanj*: "A certain amount of immunity against witchcraft may be obtained by requesting an *hungan* to extract the *Gros-bon-ange* from the body and to enclose it in a bottle. The soul, removed from its bodily envelope, may either be hidden or buried in a garden or entrusted to the *hungan* for safekeeping."<sup>50</sup> While this procedure protects the *gwobonanj*, it does not prevent bodily damage to the material body from which it proceeds. This creates a potentially dangerous scenario in which people who have sustained severe bodily injury—either through spells or accidents—will beg to have their *gwobonanj* liberated from the bottle, in order to end their corporeal suffering through death.

The *gwobonanj* must be ritually removed from the person's head shortly after death through the ceremony of *desounmin*, in which "the *Oungan* calls the spirit, or in some cases the name of the dead, then removes the *lwa* and puts it in a pitcher or bottle, called a *govi*. In death, the link between the spirit and its human vessel must be broken, so that the individual's spirit can move beyond death, and beyond revenge, joining the ancestors under the waters in the mythical place called *Ginen* (Guinea)."<sup>51</sup> Then, a year and a day after death, the *gwobonanj* is called up from the water in a ceremony referred to as *rele mò nan dlo* (calling the dead from the water) and installed in a *govi* clay pot.<sup>52</sup>

Depestre and Davis are correct in their assessment of zombification as constituting the embottlement of one part of the self. However, they are mistaken by saying that this part is the *tibonanj*, since this and other types of spiritual embottlements involve the containment of the *gwobonanj*. Beyond noticing these important discrepancies, what is important for us

to consider here is how, regardless of what aspect of the self is bottled up, according to all of these authors, any type of hermetic enclosing of the self is seen as potentially dangerous or associated with death. The fact that one of the most dreaded Afro-Diasporic states of being should be so similar to the Cartesian view of the hermetically sealed soul points to the contestatory and critical relationship between these two philosophical traditions. Curiously, the zombified body of Haitian Vodou bears striking similarities to the body without organs that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari elaborate in *L'Anti-Oedipe*: "Death instinct, that is his name. Since the desire desires also that, death, because the body full of death is an immobile motor, because life's organs are the working machine. The body without organs is not the witness of an original nothingness, not any more than the remains of a lost totality. It is not a projection; it has nothing to do with the body itself or the image of the body. It is the body without an image. Him, the unproductive . . . the body without organs is anti-production."<sup>53</sup> In this sense, both the Western and the African view of personhood can be seen to coincide. By presenting the most abject state of being as that of the body that is deprived of its immaterial elements—organs, *gwobonanj*—both traditions present an image of the exploited, enslaved, unremunerated, and incomplete worker. Descartes's body-as-clockwork and Vodou's *kòr kadav* are more similar than previously thought.

One of the *gwobonanj* kept by the *bokòr* is that of a same-sex-loving male artist: "There is a queer painter imprisoned in the seltzer water syphon."<sup>54</sup> While Fanon famously insisted there is no homosexuality in the West Indies,<sup>55</sup> other French West Indian writers such as Depestre and Frankétienne present same-sex desire as intrinsic to the region. Frankétienne's Kreyòl novel *Adjanoumelezo* utilizes the voice of Gédé—the jocular Vodou *lwa* of life, death, overflowing sexuality, and bawdiness—to speak openly about the important role that queers play in Vodou: "Papa Gédé draws cosmograms with small fine letters for his pleasure on sheets of paper. He plays with words. He sows words. He solders words, He hems words. He dresses words and phrases in decorative lace. Papa Gédé has no problem or shyness to say that which he sees, hears or feels."<sup>56</sup> Gédé's lack of shame allows the articulation of an erotics of women-loving-women that turns *madevinez* from derogatory epithet into passionate poetic embellishment: "The smell of the divinity along the celestial route of the rainbow, dyke-route, dyke-mouth, open up the path as if cutting through the middle of a pineapple."<sup>57</sup>

Similarly, Gédé's voice in Frankétienne's *Adjanoumelezo* locates the source of sexual desire of men for men in the phallus of Dambala, the snake god. Paralleling his earlier beautification of *madevinez*, Frankétienne explains the effeminacy of the *masisi* as divine in nature, coming about through male devotion to Lasirenn. Frankétienne writes, "Wow! Wow! Wow! I am hot. I take a deep breath opening my mouth like the crab to exclaim hip! hip! hurrah! I am sucking on the head of a serpent. I am twisting the serpent's meat. I am eating the cock's vein. I am groping the tailbone. The mermaid calls the faggot sweet things, honey, cherry and mounts him. Oh boy! Oh boy! Oh boy!"<sup>58</sup> In fact, Frankétienne's spiralist word play leads us to the origins of the word *Masisi* in the Fon language of Benin and Togo: "Mami Wata is about fertility, femaleness, and beauty. Mostly women become Mamisis; men who become Mamisis are particularly good-looking and often dress and plait their hair like women."<sup>59</sup> The African counterpart of the Haitian Lasirenn is Mami Wata, whose initiates, *Mamisis*—read: *Masisis*—embody the femininity of the deity. The Fon term for initiates of the sea goddess becomes in Haiti a referent to male homosexuality.

While Frankétienne's *Adjanoumelezo* honors the full pantheon of Vodou laws—"Dambala's horse is on at the crossroads, torn apart. In order to go higher and farther, we ask Legba to open the barrier for us. We glide and descend into the fire of Ogun. We are troubling Simbi's water"<sup>60</sup>—Gédé and Lasirenn occupy a primordial role in the narrative, the first because of this unbridled sexuality and the second because of her associations with same-sex-loving male initiates.

In Anne Lescot and Laurence Magloire's film *Des hommes et des dieux*, *masisis* owe their desire not to Lasirenn, but to Ezili Dantò—the eternal mother spirit and a *lwa* whom some consider to be a lesbian.<sup>61</sup> With the backdrop of marketplaces, hair salons, Vodou temples, sacred waterfalls, and dance clubs in Haiti, this groundbreaking film gives voice to a range of Haitian *masisis*, most of whom explain their same-sex desire as stemming from their spiritual connection to Dantò.<sup>62</sup> There is Blondine, who sells tobacco snuff in the Port-au-Prince street market, as passersby mock him for his effeminate demeanor, appearance, and trade. He is tired of the insults in Haiti and would like to move to the Dominican Republic someday. He says that "Lwa gate'm" (the *lwa* spoiled me) and that his father accepts his orientation as "bagay mistik" (something sacred). There is Denis, whom we see at an *ounfò* (Vodou temple) singing to Dantò, "Maman kote ou ye?" (Mother, where are you?). There



is Innocente, who also feels he has been the victim of prejudice because “moun pa eklere” (people are uneducated). His public humiliations have lessened a great deal since he became an *oungan*, or Vodou priest. His family accepts him because it is “bagay mistik” caused by Ezili. He has adopted his sister’s child, acting out of the maternal instinct with which Erzulie has gifted him. All these men use Kreyòl terms to name their lived experience: *masisi*, *madevinez*, *en kache*. None use “gay,” “lesbian,” or “the closet.”

However, class divisions in Haiti become clear when the interviewees with a higher degree of education and better command of French come on the screen. Fritzner, an *oungan*, says that people are born like this, and that placing the origin of same-sex desire on Dantò is rubbish. In his Frenchified Creole, he uses French terms to define same-sex desire: “homosexuelle,” “homo,” and “lesbienne.” Speaking in French, Érol also speaks of “homos” and “héteros.” He explains that queer men say that they have been “appellé par Erzulie” (called by Ezili) in order to avoid Western taboos and find safety in the refuge of “la religion de la tolerance” (the religion of tolerance). According to his reasoning, men who love men choose Dantò, rather than her choosing them. They know that she is a mother who accepts her children just the way they are. She will not turn them away. However, his reason does not prevent him from accepting that in the phenomenon of trance possession something quite transcendental occurs with respect to gender. He acknowledged that when men lend their bodies to Dantò, these male bodies are transformed by the femininity of the goddess. Similarly, he believes that Ogun is able to “change l’esprit de femme en homme” (transform the spirit of a woman into a man’s).

While the film exposes the hardship of being part of a sexual minority in a country not always friendly to difference, its narrative is not one of tragedy, but of joy in the face of adversity and of the hope of overcoming difficulties. For instance, the dancers at the *kompa* club underscore the health dangers of casual sex in the country with the highest incidence of HIV infection in the Western Hemisphere. Nevertheless, there is catharsis for this anxiety, and the homophobia, at the ritual bathing at the St. Jacques waterfalls.

The film is to be commended for giving voice to men from a wide range of social classes and professions. However, the film is not always sensitive to issues of language when it translates *masisi* and *madevinez* in the subtitles using First World terminologies. Furthermore, the film should be critiqued for its foregrounding of the troubling issue of

causality: What makes these men gay? Perhaps a more helpful question would have been; What accounts for the large numbers of people who are non-heteronormative in these religions? Such a question would have likely yielded a fruitful exploration on the non-binary quality of Vodou, a multiplicity beyond the dualism of maleness and femaleness, and an elucidation of how the phenomenon of possession allows cross-gender identifications.

Unlike the Western idea of a unitary self that is fixed within the body, the African Diasporic philosophical-religious tradition conceives the body as a concavity upholding a self that is removable, external, and multiple. Allowing for a wider range of subjectivities than the more rigid Western model, the modular African Diasporic discourse of personhood becomes a vehicle for the articulation of noncompliant identities that are usually constrained by normative heteropatriarchy. Haitian literary works like René Depestre’s *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves* and Frankétienne’s *Adjanoumelezo* and filmic ones like Lescot and Magloire’s *Des hommes et des dieux* illustrate this modular and transcorporeal view of the African Diasporic self in their representations of trance possession, uses of ritual containers, and the phenomenon of zombification.

### Notes

1. Ehrsson, “Experimental Induction”; Lenggenhager et al., “Video Ergo Sum.”
2. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 143.
3. Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 105–6.
4. Sartre, *L’être et le néant*, 666. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.
5. Bataille, *L’expérience intérieure*, 15.
6. Sartre, *L’être et le néant*, 666.
7. Gyekye, *African Philosophical Thought*, 89.
8. Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, 129.
9. Montilus, “Vodun and Social Transformation,” 2.
10. Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions*, 118.
11. Métraux, “Concept of the Soul,” 85.
12. McCarthy Brown, “Afro-Caribbean Spirituality,” 10.
13. McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola*, 112–13.
14. Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, 44.
15. Ibid.
16. Agosto de Muñoz, *El fenómeno de la posesión*, 52.
17. McCarthy Brown, *Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture*, 9.
18. Desmangles, *Faces of the Gods*, 67.
19. Ibid., 69.
20. Davis, *Serpent and Rainbow*, 185.

21. Ibid., 182.
22. McCarthy Brown, "Afro-Caribbean Spirituality," 9; Montilus, "Vodun and Social Transformation," 4.
23. Davis, *Serpent and Rainbow*, 185.
24. McCarthy Brown, "Afro-Caribbean Spirituality," 8.
25. Ibid., 9.
26. Davis, *Serpent and Rainbow*, 185.
27. Ibid., 185.
28. McCarthy Brown, "Afro-Caribbean Spirituality," 9.
29. Métraux, "Concept of the Soul," 120.
30. Ibid.
31. Munro, *Exile and Post-1946 Haitian Literature*, 127.
32. Ibid.
33. Depestre, *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*, 99.
34. Ibid., 207.
35. Ibid., 77.
36. Ibid., 92.
37. Ibid., 68.
38. Ibid., 79.
39. Ibid., 59–60.
40. Glissant, *Discours antillais*, 1981, 299.
41. Munro, *Exile and Post-1946 Haitian Literature*, 134.
42. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*.
43. Falgayrettes-Leveau, "Avant-Propos," 32.
44. Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions*, 118–19.
45. Depestre, *Hadriana*, 175.
46. Davis, *Hadriana*, 186.
47. Davis, *Passage of Darkness*.
48. Depestre, *Hadriana*, 175.
49. Métraux, "Concept of the Soul," 87.
50. Ibid., 86.
51. Dayan, *Haiti, History and the Gods*, 261.
52. McCarthy Brown, "Afro-Caribbean Spirituality," 8.
53. Deleuze and Guattari, *L'Anti-Oedipe*, 15.
54. Depestre, *Hadriana*, 176.
55. Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1995), 146.
56. Frankétienne, *Adjanoumelezo*, 12.
57. Ibid., 249.
58. Ibid., 513.
59. Rosenthal, *Possession, Ecstasy, and Law*, 118.
60. Frankétienne, *Adjanoumelezo*, 60.
61. René and Houlberg, "My Double Mystic Marriages," 299.
62. Magloire and Lescot's representation of *masisi* culture is a palliative to its depiction in "Imagine Heaven," the introduction to *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*. In this introductory essay, Donald Cosentino uses Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp" to make a facile connection between Vodou trance and gay balls when he says that "trance possession may also be seen as a kind of voguing of the

divinities" (55). However, this is an erroneous interpretation. Trance is more than putting on clothes and it is certainly not drag. The concept of "realness" popularized in Jenny Livingston's film *Paris Is Burning* is dependent on impersonation, passing, parodying, and cross-dressing, but this is certainly not the case of trance possession in Vodou—as Consentino suggests. The transcendental and life-transforming act of a Haitian *masisi* being ridden by a *lwa* cannot be compared with black gay men in Brooklyn enacting a simulacrum of fashion runway shows. This conflation of the sacred and profane obfuscates what is at the core of both events.