

Roberto Strongman
University of California, Santa Barbara

Transcorporeality in Vodou

*Lasirenn, Labalenn,
 Chapo m tonbe nan lanmè.
 M ap fe kares pou Lasirenn,
 Chapo m tonbe nan lanmè.
 M ap fe kares pou Labalenn,
 Chapo m tonbe nan lanmè.*

The Mermaid, the Whale,
 My hat fell into the sea.
 I caress the Mermaid,
 My hat fell into the sea.
 I caress the Whale
 My hat fell into the sea¹

I chanted the Kreyòl song in the epigraph above at Vodou ceremonies for nearly a decade before I understood its meaning. The epiphany of *Lasirenn* marked an initiation rite for me, an awakening that this essay seeks to promote. Reader, beware of the seductive calling of the mermaid! You still have time to put down this article and avoid succumbing to her powerful knowledge and wisdom, to *konesans*.

Seeing that you have bravely decided to traverse the dangerous crossroads, the *Kalfou Dangère*, you are ready to receive the message of this female water Deity who goes by many different names throughout the religions of the African Diaspora: Mami Wata in Beninian Vodou, Yemayá in Cuban Santería, Iemanjá in Brazilian Candomblé, and Maman Dlo in the folklore and legend of the Eastern Caribbean. In Haitian Vodou, this *lwa* is known as *Lasirenn*, the supreme deity of the oceans. Her altars are decorated with seashells, sand, and starfish. Her devotees glow in satin blue fabric and foamy white lace as they beautify themselves to mirror their goddess.

You have plunged into her watery domain, and as any uninitiated European or North American visitor to a Haitian Vodou ceremony, you find yourself having to reappraise Western notions of selfhood in order to understand the complex interactions between the practitioners and their gods in this religious community. What enables the initiates to go into trance for these deities? You hear other voices and unhuman sounds coming from familiar mouths. Female initiates in trance by male deities point at you with wooden phalluses. Possessed dancers miraculously hover weightlessly over drums. Even in your skepticism, you concede that their beliefs about the nature of the self and the body are transcendental. And you dive deeper into the waters when you ask yourself, how is the Vodou concept of the body different from your own.

The Western philosophical tradition presents the concept of a unitary soul within the hermetic enclosure of a body. In *Sources of the Self*, historian of philosophy 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. (Taylor 1989, 143)

It becomes important for us 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. (Descartes 1996, 105-106)

Clearly, Descartes' concern here 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' 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 being separated into parts implies that it is of a different nature from 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 with Sartre, who in *L'être et le néant* claims that "L'altérité est, en effet, une négation interne et seule une conscience peut se constituer comme négation interne" [Alterity is, really, an internal negation and only a conscience can constitute itself as an internal negation] (Sartre 1943, 666). 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 Descartes' internal subject. Bataille, for example, posits the divine as self inside the body: "J'entends par *expérience intérieure* ce que d'habitude on nomme *expérience mystique* : les états d'extase, de ravissement, au moins d'émotion méditée" [By "internal experience" I mean that which normally is called "mystical experience":

states of ecstasy, of rapture, at least as mediated emotion] (Bataille 1943, 15). 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:

Voilà les cycles admirables de support réciproque entre le labyrinthe de l'oreille interne, chargé du port, et les volutes spiralées de l'externe, qui entend et produit la musique, convergeant dans un centre noir et secret, commun à ses deux réseaux, où je découvre soudain la solution aux mystères sombres de l'union de l'âme qui ouït la langue et du corps porteur ...

[Let's consider the admirable cycles of reciprocal support between the labyrinth of the internal ear and the spiraling corrugations of the external ear, which hears and produces music, converging into one dark and secret center, common to both networks, where I suddenly discover the solution to the shadowy mysteries of the union between the soul that hears language and the body which carries it] (Serres 1999, 23)

While Bataille and Serres are interested in recuperating the Divine for the internal self, for Sartre “[t]out autre conception de l’altérité reviendrait à la poser comme en-soi, c’est-à-dire à établir entre elle et l’être une relation externe, ce qui nécessiterait la présence d’un témoin pour constater que l’autre est autre que l’en-soi” [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] (Sartre 1943, 666). *As you follow Lasirenn, she looks back at you. You now understand that you are not diving deeper, but are swimming outwards. The oceans of consciousness are not contained, but are an endless expanse without a gulf, basin, or seabed to fully enclose the knowledge you are acquiring.*

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 a rubber hand set on a table in front of them. As a researcher strokes the real hand and the rubber 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 lead by Ehrsson, H. Henrik and Lenggenhager, Bigna created whole-body illusions with similar manipulations, this time through the use of virtual-reality technology. 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 a 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 are relevant to us in that they help us to understand that the location of the self vis-à-vis the body can be 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. *Lasirenn's fast moving fish tail disappears into the thickness of nothingness. You have lost your way in the sea of consciousness. You are disoriented. You are a space-walking astronaut severed from his ship, adrift in the vast expanse of the beyond. "Where am I?" you ask.*

In *Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy*, Paget Henry explains that Afro-Diasporic philosophy does not exist as a tradition isolated from other manifestations of culture:

Because traditional African philosophy emerged implicitly in the ontological, ethical, existential, and other positions taken in religious, mythic, genealogical, and folkloric discourses, its presence and visibility depended upon the continued vitality and growth of these systems of thought. Their contraction or decay would mean decline and eclipse for traditional African philosophy (Henry 2000, 43) ... In the Caribbean ... traditional African philosophy experienced an even greater eclipse as a result of the rise of colonial discourses and a literate, hybridized local intelligentsia. (Henry 2000, 45)

Henry's statement 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 *African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, Kuame Gyekye presents a tripartite plan of the self comprised of the *honam*—the material body—the *okra*—the immaterial soul— and the *sunsum*—the quasi-material spirit (Gyekye 1995, 89). In *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*, Kwasi Wiredu explains Gyekye's systematization of Akan personhood by comparing it with Descartes' 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. (Wiredu 1996, 129)

The multiplicity of the self displayed in the Akan scheme is prevalent in Western African societies and has been noted by 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. (Montilus 2006, 2)

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—become the *tibonanj* and the *gwobonanj* in Haitian Vodou. In *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo*, Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert 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. (Fernández Olmos 2003, 118)

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. (Métraux 1946, 85)

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” (Brown 2006, 10). In her landmark book *Mama Lola: A Vodou priestess in Brooklyn*, Karen McCarthy Brown further explains

the multiple concept of the self in Vodou by presenting the notion of 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 bònanj*), one dimension of what might be called a person’s soul, with the Vodou spirit who is his or her *mèt tet*. (Brown 1991, 112-113)

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 *desounen*:

In a certain sense, the *maît-tête* is the divine parent of the *gros-bon-ange*, the psychic inheritance from the parents. The ceremony of *dessounin* thus accomplishes two separate but related actions: it severs the loa cord of the *gros-bon-ange*; and it separates the *gros-bon-ange* from its physical parent—the now defunct matter of the body—launching it as an independent spiritual entity into the spiritual universe, where it, in turn, becomes either part of the general spiritual heritage of the descendants of that person, or even, perhaps, the divine parent, the loa *maît-tête* of some subsequent *gros-bon-ange*. (Deren 1970, 45)

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 (Agosto de Muñoz), the personal soul or self (Deren 1970, 44). The *tibonanj* is described as the anonymous, protective, objective conscience that is the truthful and objective, the impersonal spiritual component of the individual (Deren 1970, 44), whose domain also encompasses moral considerations and arbitration (Agosto de Muñoz 1976, 52). 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” (Brown 2006, 9).

The complex relationship between the *gwobonanj* and the *tibonanj* has at times not been correctly understood by scholars, who have disseminated erroneous information, further mudding 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-bonanj* is the ego-soul. It represents the unique qualities that characterize an individual’s personality” (Desmangles 1992, 67). Comparisons to Western philosophy underscore his confusion:

The Vodou concept of the *ti-bon-anj* 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 (Desmangles 1992, 69)

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” (Davis 1986, 185). Furthermore, Davis says that the *tibonanj* travels during sleep (Davis 1986, 182), while most scholars agree that it is the *gwobonanj* who does so (Brown 2006, 9; Montilus 2006, 4).

In addition to the *gwobonanj*, *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” (Davis 1986, 185) or “the animating force of the body” (Brown 2006, 8). The *zetwal* is the “celestial parallel self, fate” (Brown 2006, 9) and the “spiritual component that resides in the sky”; it is “the individual’s star of destiny” (Davis 1986, 185). The *kòr kadav* is “the body itself, the flesh and blood” (Davis 1986, 185), “the dead body of a person” and “a material substance separable from these various animating spiritual entities” (Brown 2006, 9).

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” (Métraux 1959, 120). Nevertheless, it is important to note how other scholars from the Haitian national elite have questioned the uses of Western philosophy to understand Afro-Diasporic trance possession:

Quoiqu’il en soit, si le phénomène de la possession—la transe ou l’extase—chez les criseurs du Vaudou est une psycho-névrose, peut-on la classer dans la catégorie de l’hystérie selon l’une ou l’autre doctrine ci-dessus

exposée ? Nous ne le croyons pas. Les possédés de la loi ne sont pas des criseurs dont on peut provoquer l'attaque par suggestion et qu'on peut guérir par persuasion.

[Even if the phenomenon of possession—trance or ecstasy—implies among Vodou practitioners a psychological breakdown, can one classify it within the category of hysteria according to one or another doctrine presented here? We do not believe this is to be a correct approach. Those possessed by lwa are not psychotics who can be induced into such a state by the power of suggestion or healed through persuasion.] (Mars 1928, 128)

However, 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 on Vodou:

The explanation of mystic trance given by disciples of Voodoo is simple: a *loa* moves into the head of an individual having first driven out “the good big angel” (*gros bon ange*)—one of the two souls everyone carries in himself. This eviction of the soul is responsible for the tremblings and convulsions that characterize the opening stages of trance. Once the good angel has gone the person possessed experiences a feeling of total emptiness as though he were fainting. His head whirls, the calves of his legs tremble; he now becomes not only the vessel but also the instrument of the god. From now on it is the god's personality and not his own which is expressed in his bearing and words. The play of these features, his gestures and even the tone of his voice all reflect the temperament and character of the god who has descended upon him. (Métraux 1959, 120)

Métraux's quote is helpful for us in that it 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 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.” (Métraux 1959, 120)

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—like Zora Neale Hurston in *Go Tell my Horse* (1937) 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 the unitary soul of Descartes’, 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. *All of a sudden, you realize that Lasirenn is above you. The swift movement of her tail glides her body closer to yours. She looks deeply into you eyes. She sings to you:*

*La Sirenn, La Balenn,
Chapo’m tonbe nan lanme.
M’ap fe kares pou La Sirene,
Chapo’m tonbe nan lanme.
M’ap fe kares pou La Balenn,
Chapo’m tonbe nan lanme.*

*She reveals her secret to you. And you understand it. She wants you to know that you have many immaterial parts—souls, if you will—and that these are not inside you, but floating above and around you. Lasirenn is your tibonanj self, your protector and guide. Labalenn is the gwobonanj, this is your spirit, consciousness, and identity. Your ego is as big as a whale. It can’t swim fast enough to keep up with the mermaid. Chapeau tombe nan lanme. Let your consciousness fall into the sea. Let me free you from the fixity of your consciousness. Remove your hat, salute the *lwa*. Let it fall into the sea, into the joy of oblivion. Swim under the waters, *anba dlo*, just for a little while. Ride the current of my waters. Be my seahorse, sweet child.*

What are the possible implications for gender in a modular system in which the self can be substituted 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 me 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 Munro sees in Hadriana's whiteness "obvious traces of Depestre's francophilia" (Munro 2007, 127). 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" (Munro 2007, 127). 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.

Incapables d'admettre l'arrêt du cœur qui a terrassé Nana au pied de l'autel, des Jacméliens à l'imagination nécrophile ont réincorporé leur fille à un conte de fées. La disparition de son corps du sépulcre était l'épisode qui menait à son terme ce saut dans un imaginaire aux prises avec la peur de la mort.

[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.] (Depestre 1988, 99)

At the end of the novel, she is associated with a male deity of springs:

J'étais Simbi-la-Source. Les dieux de vaudou m'auraient chargée de convoyer à la Jamaïque une poignée d'émigrants de la région de Jacmel.

[I was Simbi-the-Spring. The gods of Vodou ordered me take a handful of emigrants from Jacmel to Jamaica.] (Depestre 1988, 207)

The regendering seen in Hadriana's transmutation into various deities is also evident in the powerful trance a *Manbo* experiences at another point in the text:

Dès les premières mesures de danse, Saint Jacques le Majeur, chef de la famille des Ogou, monta le cheval Brévica Losange. Aussitôt possédée, la Mambo improvisa une chanson en harmonie avec les batteries.

[From the first notes of the dance, Saint James the Greater—the first in the family of the Oguns—mounted Brévica Losange as his horse. In that manner possessed, the Mambo improvised a song in harmony with the drums] (Depestre 1988, 77)

This female Vodou priestess' 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: Gede, 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:

Un homme à l'allure de Baron-Samedi invita des guédés présents à ses côtés à prendre le cercueil des mains apostoliques qui le portaient

[A man with a resemblance to Baron-Samedi invited those Gede at his side to take the casket from the apostolic hands that were carrying it] (Depestre 1988, 92)

Hadriana's inert body become the very representation of death, and therefore that of Gede:

A vingt mètres environ du catafalque, les musiciens, dans un accord parfait, imposèrent à la fièvre générale un casse-tambour: la foule s'arrêta de danser pour mimer la raideur cadavérique d'Hadriana Siloé, faisant de la place un canton du royaume des morts.

[Twenty meters around the spectacle, the musicians, in unison, imposed the general fever of the drum: the crowd stopped dancing to mimic the corpse-like ugliness of

Hadriana Siloé, making the square a settlement of death's kingdom.] (Depestre 1988, 68)

Hadriana's identification with this mortuary and highly sexual deity is evident in a description of a Vodou ceremony that foregrounds Gede's transgression of the binarisms of death/life, masculinity/femininity, terrestrial/celestial, sacred/profane:

Au contraire, tambours, vaccines, instruments à vent changèrent la chanson de Madame Losange en saison ensoleillée de la nuit: leur furie musicale fit alterner en chaque vivant mort et naissance, râles de l'agonie et cris triomphants de l'orgasme. Le volcan musical réduisit en cendres les obstacles légendaires entre Thanatos et Éros, au-delà des interdits jetés entre les spermatozoïdes des mâles noirs et les ovules des femelles blanches. L'explosion des guédés, vivifiée par le sang chaud, mit les âmes et les corps, verges et vagins éblouis, en harmonie cosmique avec l'espoir fou d'arracher Nana Siloé à la mort et d'allumer de nouveau l'étoile de sa chair dans notre vie.

[On the contrary, drums and wind instruments changed 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 Gedes, enlivened by the warm blood, put 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 lighting again, among us, the star of her life in her flesh.] (Depestre 1988, 79)

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*:

Je m'arrêtai d'abord devant un groupe d'hommes déguisés en femmes. Pour simuler un état de grossesse avancée, ils avaient placé sous leurs robes de satin vert des oreillers et des coussins. Ils avaient des poitrines et des fesses de vénus callipyges. En appui sur des gourdins, les travestis bavardaient avec des personnages enveloppés dans des draps blancs.

[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.] (Depestre 1988, 59-60)

Edouard Glissant presents this tradition as one of the few places in which West Indian society is able to critique patriarchal heteronormativity:

Il est une occasion en Martinique où hommes et femmes se rencontrent d'accord pour donner une semblable représentation de leurs rapports: c'est dans la coutume des mariages burlesques du Carnaval, critique de la structure familiale. L'homme y tient le rôle de l'épouse (le plus souvent enceinte) et la femme celui de l'époux ; un adulte y tient le rôle d'un enfant au berceau ...

Il n'est pas surprenant que le mariage burlesque soit une des rares formes encore vivaces de ce grand questionnement populaire et collectif qu'était et que ne peut plus être le carnaval martiniquais.

[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.] (Glissant 1981, 299)

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 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 (Munro 2007, 134). 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.

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). (Thompson 1983, 182)

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*: "Les Kuba et les peuples apparentés du Zaïre ont privilégié de façon presque systématique, mais avec raffinement, la représentation de la tête dans la conception des plus beaux de leurs réceptacles: le coupes à boire le vin de palme" [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] (Falgayrettes-Leveau 1997, 32). 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 *pòtèt*, 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 *ounsis*, 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*. (Fernández Olmos 2003, 118-9).

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*:

J'étais saisie de violentes convulsions internes. Tous mes os vibraient à se rompre. J'ai sombré dans un cauchemar à l'intérieur de mon cauchemar. J'étais un âme volée. On a séparé mon petit bon ange de mon gros bon ange. On a enfermé le premier dans unealebasse pour l'emmener à dos de mule dans un pénitencier d'âmes dans la montagne du Haut-Cap-Rouge. Le second, les bras liés derrière le dos, a été poussé à coups de fouet comme un âne, dans une direction opposée. Tout lien a été rompu entre mes deux formes d'être.

[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, arms tied behind his back, was flagellated like an ass in the opposite direction. All links were broken between my two forms of being.] (Depestre 1988, 175)

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 substitute for the human body.

Davis explains how the separation of the corporeal and immaterial aspects of the self that Depestre describes constitutes the phenomenon of

zombification:

The spirit zombi, 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. (Davis 1986, 186)

This very detached description of the process of zombification is consistent with Davis' clinical view of zombification as purely the result of neurotoxin poisoning (Davis 1988, 7). However, for Depestre, zombification has much more emotive connotations associated to loss of autonomy and spiritual imprisonment:

Ce lieu de détention a été aménagé pour recevoir les âmes embouteillées des chrétiens-vivants condamnés à une peine privative de liberté spirituelle. Le régime cellulaire consiste à mettre en bouteilles l'imaginaire des individus changés en mortes-vivants. Les bouteilles que vous allez voir sont des oubliettes en verre, cristal, métal, faïence, cuir, bois, grès !

[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!] (Depestre 1988, 175)

Through these passage 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 “[t]he famous zombies are people whose Gros-bon-ange has been captured by some evil hungan, thus becoming living-dead.” (Métraux 1946, 87). 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. (Métraux 1946, 86)

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.

In Haitian Vodou, the *gwobonanj* must be ritually removed from the person’s head shortly after death through the ceremony of *desounen*, 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). (Dayan 1995, 261)

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 (Brown 2006, 8).

Depestre and Davis are correct in their assessment of zombification as constituting the embottlement of one of part of the self. However, they are mistaken in 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 here is to consider how regardless of what aspect of the self is bottled, 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 the 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 Felix Guattari elaborate in *L’Anti-Œdipe*:

Instinct de mort, tel est son nom. Car le désir désire aussi cela, la mort, parce que le corps plein de la mort est son

moteur immobile, parce que les organes de la vie sont la *working machine* ...

Le corps sans organes n'est pas le témoin d'un néant originel, pas plus que le reste d'une totalité perdue. Il n'est surtout pas une projection ; rien à voir avec le corps propre, ou avec un image du corps. C'est le corps sans image. Lui, l'improductif ... Le corps sans organes est de l'anti-production.

[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.] (Deleuze 1972, 15)

In this sense, both the Western and 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' body-as-clockwork and Vodou's *kòr kadav* are more similar than previously thought. *Don't be afraid, my kwi, I will not let any harm come to you. I am your lover, yourself, your protector. I am swift and will call your gwobonanj, Labalenn, if she wanders into danger water. She might be stronger than me, but I am faster.*

In *Hadriana*, one of the *gwobonanj* kept by the bokòr is that of a same-sex-loving male artist: "Dans le siphon d'eau de seltz est détenu un peintre macici" [There is a queer painter imprisoned in the seltzer water syphon] (Depestre 1988, 176). While Fanon insists in *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* that there is no homosexuality in the West Indies (Fanon 1995, 146), 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 Gede—the jocular Vodou lwa of life, death, overflowing sexuality and bawdiness—to speak openly about the important role that queers play in Vodou:

PapaGede trase vèvè ak tilètfen pou bèl plezi sou fey papye. Li jwe ak mo jan li pito. Li koud mo, brase mo, bowde mo. Li taye mo gangans pou abiye pawòl bòzò, dekòre fraz ak bèl dantèl chèlbè. PapaGede pa gen pwoblèm ni lawontéz ni lakrentif pou di sa li wè, sa li tandè, sa li santi.

[Papa Gede 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 Gede has no problem or shyness to say that which he sees, hears or feels.] (Frankétienne 1987, 12)

Gede's lack of shame allows the articulation of an erotics of women-loving-women that turns "*madivinez*" from derogatory epithet into passionate poetic embellishment: "Lang zo doubout lemante boboun lakansyèl. Odè chalé divinite lavoutselès madivinvout madivinbouch louvri chemen ozannanna lan mitan pwèl jòf latoudlin mète'm sou sa" [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] (Frankétienne 1987, 249).

Similarly, Gede'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:

Wouy ! Wouy ! Wouy ! Boubounn mwen cho ap kontrakte hip hip hip dekalann yanyan kalmason lan djòl krab respirasyon gwosouf hip hip hip huraa ! Konyen mwen pran chè. M'ap souse piwouli tèt sèpan. M'ap moulen vyann koulèv. M'ap manje venn zozo. M'ap vale goupuyon zokoupyon zokòksis. Alsiyis lasirèn monte gam simidò similò lan mizik *masisi*, dyèz ak bemòl, sirèn siflèt, sirèt siwo, siwèl sikren, sisilibon. Wouch ! Wouch ! Wouch !

[Wow! Wow! Wow! I am hot. I take a deep breath opening my mouth like the crab to exclaim hip! hip! hurrah! I am fucking non-stop. 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!] (Frankétienne 1987, 513)

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. (Rosenthal 1998, 118)

The African counterpart of Haitian Lasirenn is Mami Wata, whose initiates, Mamisis—read: *Masisi*—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 lwa—"Alapòt chwal dambala soule lan kalfou demanbre. Pou rive pi wo pi lwen , nou mande atibonlegba louvri baryè nou. N'ap file glise desann lan dife ogoun, lan van liko. N'ap chire dlo simbi andezo" [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] (Frankétienne 1987, 60)—Gede and Lasirenn occupy a primordial role in the narrative, the first because of this unbridled sexuality and the second because of her associations to same-sex-loving male initiates. *You have other spirits, other selves around you. They come to greet you. Lasirenn introduces you to your family.*

In Anne Lescot and Laurence Magloire's film *Des Hommes et Dieux*, *masisi* owe their desire not to Lasirenn, but to Ezili Dantò—the eternal mother spirit and a lwa who some consider to be a lesbian (Rene and Houlberg 1998, 299). With the backdrop of marketplaces, hair saloons, Vodou temples, sacred waterfalls and dance clubs in Haiti, this groundbreaking film gives voice to a range of Haitian *masisi*, most of whom explain their same sex desire as stemming from their spiritual connection to Dantò.² 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, who we see at an *Ounfò* 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 a *hougan*, or Vodou priest. His family accepts him because it is “bagay mistik” caused by Ezuli. He has adopted his sister’s child, acting out of the maternal instinct with which Ezuli has gifted him. All these men use Kreyòl terms to name their lived experience: *masisi*, *madivinez*, *en kachet*. 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, a *houngan*, says that people are born like this, and that placing the origin of same-sex desire on Dantò is rubbish. In his Frenchified Kreyòl, he uses French terms to define same-sex desire: “homosexuel,” “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 tolérance.” 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 Ogou is able to “change l’esprit de femme en homme” [transform the spirit of a woman into a man’s].

While Lescot and Magloire’s film exposes the hardship of being 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 by 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 *madivinez* in the subtitles using First World terminologies. Furthermore, it should be critiqued for its foregrounding of the troubling issue of causality: i.e. what makes these men gay? Perhaps a more helpful question ought to 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 allow cross-gender identifications.

You wake up from your watery slumber. But you remember your dream. The secret of Lasirenn. 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 non-compliant identities that are usually constrained by normative heteropatriarchy. Haitian literary works like René Depestre's *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*, Frankétienne's *Adjanoumelezo* and filmic ones like Lescot and Magloire's *Des Hommes et 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. *You are beautiful seahorse. Such a nice ride! Such sweet caresses! When you are ready for another journey, sing my song.*

Notes

¹ All translations are my own.

² 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" (Cosentino 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 Cosentino 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.

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