

Whosoever Doubts My Power: Conjuring Feminism in the Interwar Black Diaspora

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation uses the revolutionary potential of Caribbean religion to theorize black feminism between the two World Wars. It argues that women artists and performers across the diaspora produced both ethnographic and artistic representations of Haitian Vodou (and its sister religions) in order to formulate a radical and pan-African feminism. Unlike accounts of the savagery and hedonism of a sensationalized “voodoo” perpetuated by white male travelers to Haiti, black women’s narratives of Vodou focused specifically on its status as a theology of resistance. By re-animating apolitical narratives of “voodoo” with their original spiritual provenance in Vodou, women of color laid claim to the political force of the religion behind the largest successful slave revolt in the Western hemisphere.

Over four chapters, the Vodou lens of “Whosoever Doubts My Power” shows that black feminism and black radicalism are inextricable. Following the tradition of Karen McCarthy Brown and Natasha Omi’seke Tinsley, I take the religious forms of the African diaspora as potential sources of feminist political mobilization. Haitian Vodou, hoodoo of the American South, and other Afro-diasporic cosmologies allow women to attain the highest positions of leadership (Marie Laveau), and to follow the example of powerful female spirits (Ezili). My dissertation unpacks the radical underpinnings of Afro-Caribbean religious symbology in works by and about black women. In doing so, I address the gender imbalance in scholarship on interwar figures such as Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Dubois, Aimé Césaire, and Léopold Sédar Senghor, which often portrays the black radicalism of the interwar period as an endeavor crafted solely by men. If, as Brent Edwards argues, “black radicalism *is* an internationalization,” I seek to call attention to the transnational movements of women in this time period, despite their more limited

access to international circuits. “Whosoever Doubts My Power” bridges the works of Anglophone, Francophone, and Creolophone women whose paths crossed, collided, or simply ran parallel in the shared transnational dream of the voodoo queen. I also include the life and travels of little-researched figures like the essayist Suzanne Césaire and the performer Florence Emery Jones in order to correct the archival elisions of black women’s contributions to the construction of a Pan-African radical tradition.

At times metaphorical, at other times quite literal, this dissertation argues that Black female artists deployed African-derived religious practice in order to intentionally blur the line between cultural inheritance and invention. These practices were not just a means of deflecting or circumventing racism and misogyny; rather, engagements with New World religions became a world ordering system, a cosmology meant to replace the traditions that had been lost over time and in the Middle Passage. Often, these practices were processes of invention as much as they were processes reclamation. In fact, the power of the voodoo/Vodou lens lies precisely in its liminal status between factuality and invention, between myth and history. In a lacunar archive of the Middle Passage that makes past African traditions unknowable and Pan-African solidarity untenable, Afro-diasporic artists must come to terms with the loss of their histories and communities. However, rather than succumbing to the loss of that realization, Black artists of the interwar period used the idea of Vodou to conjure imagined histories and mobilize imagined communities in the present. It was not so much the end of a worldview as the beginning of one.

Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgements	viii
1. Introduction	1
2. The Spirit of Dessalines Possessed Me: Dancing Diaspora.....	24
2.1 Orgiastically Successful: The Challenge of Haiti	26
2.2 The Old Gods Come Home to Harlem	35
2.3 An Ethics of Discomfort: Katherine Dunham in Haiti	43
2.4 “The Essence of Life Seemed in Bodily Motion;” or, Helga Crane in the Jungle ..	52
3. Witchcrafts of Color: The Doudou’s Vodou.....	63
3.1 Strange Fruits: Women, Nature, and the Challenge of the Doudou	67
3.2 A Man Who Questions: The Woman of Color and the Black Man	72
3.3 The Doudou’s Revenge: Suzanne Césaire’s Grand Camouflage.....	84
3.4 Coda: Surprise and Solitude	95
4. Looking for Marie: Hoodoo Histories and the Making of a Black Feminist Genealogy	99
4.1 The Silence of the Initiated	99
4.2 The Crown of Power	110
4.3 The Black Cat Bone	121
5. Florence’s Place: Host(ess)ing Revolution in Interwar Black Paris	136
5.1 Bricktop’s Place	141
5.2 Cults of Leadership: The Scene of Interwar Black Nationalism	152
5.3 Florence’s Place	164
6. Conclusion.....	177
References.....	183

Biography 191

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1. Introduction

She steps out of the wings and sings, “*Whosoever doubts my power, let him stand forth.*” We all know this cannot end well, yet we watch anyway. She is wearing the requisite hoop earrings and head-wrap, the unofficial uniform of the voodoo queen, and holding her arms aloft. No one stands forth. So she asks again. Her followers, all transformed into birds and beasts by carnival masks, break into riotous screeches of violins and horns.¹ She has all she needs for the incantation to work: an orchestra of minions, reptiles for her potion, a knife-edged soprano that soars over all the chaos. She obliterates her rivals from the earth simply by uttering the word “Voodoo!” But she is killed anyway. After all the sound and the fury, the voodoo queen is vanquished by a mere mortal with a rifle, and the audience goes home.² The audacity of the thing, a black woman asking who doubts her power, as though her power were not constantly in doubt. It is 2015. It is 1928. It is 1914.

Harry Lawrence Freeman’s opera *Voodoo* was written in 1914, performed in 1928, and restaged by the Harlem Opera Company in 2015. The plot itself is not what interests me here—staged on a Louisiana plantation, the opera chronicles a woman called Lolo’s turn to voodoo to win the affections of a man who loves someone else, and her use of voodoo to kill her rival, and her death at the hands of the man she loved. More interesting is the trope of Lolo herself. Why does everything about her, from her colorful headwrap to her immoderate anger, feel so familiar? This is because the figure of the voodoo priestess haunts representations of black women.³ In some moments powerful,

¹ From the libretto: “a horde of Voodoo worshipers, subjects of the Snake-God, are discovered, attired as witches, owls, bats, frogs, cats, etc.” Freeman (1928).

² Freeman’s original libretto differs slightly from its 2015 resurrection at the Miller Theater at Columbia University. In the original, the line is written: “Should there be one here who doubts my pow’r? Let him stand forth.” Freeman (1928), 12.

³ She finds her male analog in the figure of the “witch doctor,” whose equally fraught nexus of associations offer a fruitful counterpart to the voodoo queen. Though it is beyond the scope of this study to undertake an

authoritative, and alluring—at other times over-sexed, frenzied, and vengeful—this stereotype stands in ambivalent relation to black women’s engagements with magic and religion. As Nina Simone, the so-called “high priestess of soul,” puts it in her song, “Obeah Woman”: “I didn’t put the name on myself / And I don’t like it sometimes / The weight is too heavy.” In other words, Lolo is not the first or the only woman to know the weight of the crown of the voodoo queen, nor is she the first to have found it both empowering and punitive.

I situate this study in the interwar period, not because it was the beginning of aesthetic representations of the voodoo queen,⁴ but because the time period represents a flowering of such representations. Freeman’s opera was just one example of a genre of “voodoo” themed plays of the 1920s and 1930s, all of which enjoyed varying levels of success on the interwar stage: *Kyunkor* (1934), *Bassa Moona* (1936), *Earth* (1927), *The Emperor Jones* (1920), “voodoo” *Macbeth* (1936).⁵ The first two plays were created by Asadata Dafora, a choreographer of Sierra Leonian origin, who enjoyed a brief period of success as the founder of this genre of “voodoo” plays. Dafora’s popular 1934 opera,

excavation of the rich and storied history of the witch doctor, suffice it to say that he is almost always a means of discrediting black knowledge and leadership—the “doctor” part of the title is almost always satirical, or at least obtained through some kind of duplicity. Unlike the voodoo queen, the witch doctor’s associations are not so easy to reclaim for positive purposes—he is almost always a wholly evil rather than ambivalent figure in the Western imaginary (a notable exception to this is Rudolph Fisher’s novel *The Conjure-Man Dies*, in which the witch doctor is Harvard educated and—though misguided in his pursuits—knowledgeable of human ailments and psychology). This dichotomy is illustrated, for example, in the differences between the benevolent white magic of the priestess and the evil black magic of the witch-doctor in the Disney film *Princess and the Frog* (2009).

⁴ Representations of voodoo practitioners in fiction and travel writing are as old as the Middle Passage. Moreau de Saint-Méry’s 1789 travelogue, for instance, described a voodoo ceremony that would be cited and recycled for the next two hundred years of racist literature—for more on this, see Pettinger (2012). These representations were not exclusively products of a white gaze, however; in African-American literature of the nineteenth century, notable representations of the voodoo priestesses appeared in George Washington Cable’s *The Grandissimes* and Charles Chesnutt’s *The Conjure-Woman and Other Conjure Tales*.

⁵ Indeed, these performances were such a staple of the interwar period that they later became something of a cliché in the black arts. The musical *Stormy Weather* (1943), in many ways a retrospective of the Harlem Renaissance, included a parody of the genre when Bill Bojangles Robinson refuses to be taken in by the primitive spectacle of jungle imagery and feathered loincloths and begins to tap-dance on one of the toms, for which he receives thunderous applause.

Kyunkor, Or The Witch Woman, was a tom-tom inflected dance performance depicting a fairy tale set in a rural African village in which lovers are separated and then reunited by the machinations of witches.⁴ The performance received rave critical reviews, with reviewers waxing particularly enthusiastic about the performance of the drummers in the opera, who, in the words of one 1934 reviewer, “become almost possessed as the action progresses by the very hypnosis of their own playing.”⁵ Dafora was also responsible for the choreography of Orson Welles’ WPA stage production of “voodoo” *Macbeth*. Dafora’s fingerprints on the two projects—one set in Africa, the other in Haiti—indicate that the common heritage of diasporic traditions is often bridged by a complex though geographically non-specific symbology. The term “voodoo” itself, though it has become a derisive catch-all term for any African-derived spiritual or magical practice,⁶ has its etymological provenance in the word Vodou, which refers to an actual religion practiced in Haiti.⁷ I go so far as to say that the geographic and linguistic imprecision of symbology concerning Haiti is intentional: Americans, both black and white, both racist

⁴ One of Dafora’s most curious collaborators was the Nigerian-born actor Abdul Assen, who appeared to make a living as a professional witch-doctor impersonator. Assen began his career as a witch doctor at the 1933 Chicago Century of Progress exposition, and later appeared as a witch-doctor in both *Kyunkor* in 1934 and voodoo *Macbeth* in 1936. John Martin, in an enthusiastic review of *Kyunkor* from the May 9, 1934 issue of the *New York Times*, describes Assen thus: “With strange incantations chanted in falsetto, alternating with bits of tune played on a primitive pipe, with animal expletives and beatings of the breast, he works himself into a frenzy of devil-baiting” (23). The fact that, during the decade of the 1930s, an African immigrant could essentially make a living as a professional witch-doctor impersonator speaks volumes about the ideological climate of interwar America and its appetite for the “primitive.”

⁵ Quoted in Perpener (2001), 112.

⁶ In 2011, in the aftermath of the devastating 2010 earthquake in Haiti, a group of scholars successfully led a campaign to have the word “voodooism” changed to “Vodou” in the Library of Congress subject headings. For more on this, see Ramsey (2012). This incident highlights the fraught cultural baggage of the word. It is a time-honored tradition for both foreigners and Haitians alike to blame Haiti’s woes on so-called voodoo, the most egregious recent example being televangelist Pat Robertson’s claim that the 2010 earthquake was caused by Haiti’s “pact with the devil.” Ironically, practitioners of Vodou rarely refer to themselves as practicing Vodou; in their terminology, they “serve the spirits.”

⁷ Forgive this crude and flattened summary of an entire belief system, but for informational purposes: Haitian Vodou is a belief system that involves a pantheon of major and minor gods (each with many different versions) and ancestors. These spirits enjoy a symbiotic relationship with humankind by which humans sustain them with ceremonies and offerings and they aid in human material and spiritual affairs. Studies of Haitian Vodou are too numerous and rich to include here, but a few classic ethnographies see genre include Herskovitz (1937), Métraux (1959), and many of the texts to be discussed in this study, including Hurston (1937), Deren (2004), and Dunham (2005). For more on the theology of the religion, see Beauvoir (2008), Hurbon (1972), and Beaubrun (2010).

and anti-racist, have long since used Haiti as the lens through which the African heritage in the New World is analyzed. This dissertation situates itself at the crossroads between the religious practice of Haitian Vodou and the concept of “voodoo” as it is (mis)understood by American popular culture. The idea of “voodoo” in America both is and is not a matter of clearcut lines of influence stemming from the practice of Haitian Vodou or from Haitian culture itself. For, as Jeremy Glick argues in *The Black Radical Tragic* (2016), Haiti is a “place-keeper of impossible possibilities” for many Afro-diasporic artists, who view Haiti’s emancipation and its continued existence in spite of a colonialist global economy as a Pan-African triumph over the forces of racism.¹⁰ In a white supremacist imaginary, the metonymic connections between Haiti and the larger possibility of global black rebellion was often outlined and neutralized onstage and in literature.

Haiti’s symbolic stature as the pinnacle of black audacity was epitomized by the “voodoo” *Macbeth*, which opened at the Lafayette Theatre on April 14th, 1936 and was “conceived, arranged, and staged” by Orson Welles. While Shakespeare’s original text is mostly unedited, though abridged, the magic and the liberties are clearly in the staging: the play is set in Haiti at the time of the revolution, with an all-black cast. The dialogue is underlaid by a constant and persistent drumming, described as “the throb and wail of the voodoo.”¹¹ But what is this voodoo? Is it a person, a musical style, or simply a vague shadow meant to inspire dread in the listener? The setting oscillates between “the castle” and “the jungle,” the jungle being the domain of the witches and their voodoo rites. That is, until the jungle comes to the castle. As in the original play, Macduff leads his soldiers, camouflaged in the branches of Dunsinane Wood, to the Macbeth’s doorstep—however,

¹⁰ Glick (2016), 48. “Haiti is the generative site *par excellence* for creative work by African diasporic artist-intellectuals attempting to break free from impasses in their respective political conjunctures” (5).

¹¹ Shakespeare (1936), 24.

in Welles' version, the forest is made of dried palm fronds, and interspersed with the Macduff's soldiers are the witches' supporters.²² For, Welles replaces the typical three witches with a cast of no less than thirty-four "witch women," "witch men," "voodoo women," and "voodoo" men. This proliferation of witches—and their infiltration into the ranks of the revolutionary forces—points to the important fact that African-derived religious practice is often conceived of by a white imaginary as a dangerous collectivity. The priest or priestess seldom acts alone—their power is in the black masses that do their bidding. In Welles' staging, the witches command and mobilize the whirling dancers, the unruly collectivity. They catch Macbeth's severed head and "hold it high, triumphantly." However, in Welles version of the play, the role of the traditionally-female role of the goddess Hecate is occupied by a male witch-doctor figure wielding a bull whip, who "lashes out at the three witches with it," clearly engaging them as subordinates.²³ Overall, this play reveals an obvious anxiety about the dangers of black male leadership and a lack of concern or acknowledgement for the potential of black women to be leaders.

However, in Haitian Vodou, women leaders play a prominent role. It is one of the few world religions, in fact, in which women can access the highest roles of leadership. As such, black women's reclamation of it in the interwar period has very high political and ideological stakes. Vodou provides a useful rubric for black feminist praxis because of both the stature of female spirits within its cosmology, as well as the availability of women's leadership positions at its highest ranks. As Karen McCarthy Brown argues in her seminal ethnography of Vodou practice, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*:

²² This observation is based on a photo from New York Public Library Performing Arts Library, which depicts this intermingling of soldiers and "witch" people in the final scene.

²³ Shakespeare (1936), 18.

The adaptability of Vodou over time, and its responsiveness to other cultures and religions; the fact that it has no canon, creed, or pope; the multiplicity of its spirits; and the intimate detail in which those spirits reflect the lives of the faithful—all those characteristics make women’s lives visible within Vodou in ways they are not in other religious traditions, including those of the African homeland. This visibility can give women a way of working realistically and creatively with the forces that define and confine them.”

Brown’s formulation describes Vodou as a New World religion that offers its female practitioners unparalleled social and spiritual power. This is the kernel of truth that lies at the heart of distorted representations of the voodoo queen: that, in the social and historical reality of the Haitian *mambo* that serves as the basis of her diasporic mythology, she is a figure with real power. She is charged with both communicating with ancestors and spirits and with mobilizing a community of living worshippers. In keeping with these tasks, the lens of Vodou helps us to understand how black women relate to history, community, and political obligation. It was this role of mediator between a divided community and its history that a number of woman across the diaspora sought to claim by enlisting, engaging, and re-fashioning the figure of the voodoo queen for their own purposes.

Spurred by the Great Migration and the transatlantic circulation of African-Americans and West Indians in Paris after the Great War, the rise in public interest in African religious practice allowed black women unprecedented geographical mobility in the years between the two world wars. For artist-anthropologists like Zora Neale Hurston and Katherine Dunham, both funded by the prestigious Rosenwald Fellowship for African-American intellectuals, Caribbean spiritual practice served as the primary

“ Brown (2001), 221.

point of interest in their ethnographic fieldwork.¹⁵ For other writers, such as Nella Larsen and Suzanne Césaire, the spiritual practices of ecstatic dance and dream divination afforded them a symbolic means of transcending geographical and historical limitations on their mobility. Thus, by re-animating the voodoo priestess with her evacuated spiritual meaning, diasporic artists were able to regain some control over their self-representations. Into the empty shell of the voodoo priestess, they poured the stuff of their spiritual strivings. Thus, Haitian Vodou and its sister practices of hoodoo and *quimbois* serve as both the theoretical framework and the object of this study. At times metaphorical, at other times quite literal, this dissertation argues that Black female artists deployed African-derived religious practice in order to intentionally blur the line between cultural inheritance and invention. These practices were not just a means of deflecting or circumventing racism and misogyny; rather, engagements with New World religions became a world ordering system, a cosmology meant to replace the traditions that had been lost over time and in the Middle Passage. Often, these practices were processes of invention as much as they were processes reclamation.

The purpose of this study is not to catalogue the list of what Melville Herskovitz calls “New World Africanisms” in black American culture. The power of the voodoo/Vodou lens lies precisely in its liminal status between factuality and invention, between myth and history. Of course, there are a number of threads connecting black

¹⁵ Interestingly, Zora Neale Hurston’s Jamaican and Haitian fieldwork overlapped with Katherine Dunham’s, to the extent that Hurston accused Dunham of stealing her research itinerary (Hurston (2002), 384, 399, 403). There was even some suspicion on Hurston’s part that the Rosenwald Foundation, which renegeed on a portion of its fellowship offer for her research, simply used the intended funds for Dunham’s research instead (Dunham did, indeed, travel to the Caribbean with a Rosenwald Fellowship). She wrote to Dr. Henry Allen Moe, the secretary general of the Guggenheim Foundation, whose funding allowed Hurston to finish her Caribbean fieldwork, that “Miss Catherine [sic] Dunham” was “a petty dancer of Chicago,” and that “she stayed here [in Haiti] six months with infinitely less preparation than I have for the work.” Hurston (2002), 385. While I will not embark on a large-scale comparison of Dunham’s and Hurston’s research on Haitian Vodou, given Dunham’s lifelong relationship with Haiti and her initiation into Haitian Vodou, it is safe to say that Hurston’s concerns about Dunham’s anthropological rigor were personally-motivated. It is one of the great sadnesses of the interwar period that the patronage system for black artists made these two brilliant women, who could have shared their ideas, into competitors rather than collaborators.

religious practice in the New World to Africa: “The acknowledged presence of “Africanisms” in black American religion, such as the use of rhythm as a liturgical device and performance traditions like the “shout,” spiritual dancing and possession, shows the organic connection between African and African American religious cultures,” not to mention the historical antecedents of such practices as charm-making, dream divination, and herbal healing in American conjure.¹⁶ However, these threads are so tangled, split, and chopped that they allow no simple tales of origin. Black culture in the New World is always more complex than “Black Americans today do X because Africans did Y.” Despite the desire to suture together a historical narrative and a sense of Pan-African identity from a tattered list of communalities, attempts at diasporic solidarity are often thwarted by the realities of cultural difference. Many of the women described in this study must come to terms with the shocking realization that the idea of their “African” past, to which they turned for validation, offered more questions than answers to the grand problem of how to attain a sense of dignity as a black woman in the Americas. They were expecting the past, but what they encountered was the present. They realized Haiti was not Africa. In many ways, they suffered the same sense of disillusionment that Saidiya Hartman narrates in her sojourn to twentieth century Ghana, which, far from restoring a sense of kinship her with estranged African “brothers,” “shattered any illusions of a unanimity of sentiment in the black world and exposed the fragility and precariousness of the grand collective *we* that had yet to be actualized.”¹⁷ However, rather than succumbing to the loss of that realization, Black artists of the interwar period flourished in the gap between imagination and reality. It was not so much the end of a worldview as the beginning of one.

¹⁶ Chireau (2003), 37.

¹⁷ Hartman (2007), 75.

Zora Neale Hurston's ethnographic work in Haiti is an excellent example of complexities and cultural stumbling along the path of Pan-African solidarity and historical interconnectivity. Hurston's decision to conduct ethnographic research in the Caribbean is presumably predicated on a desire for Pan-African solidarity, for the exchange and exploration of shared spiritual traditions between Haiti, Jamaica, and the American South. However, when faced with unfamiliar practices that disaggregate the idea of a coherent black spirituality, Hurston chooses a self-defensive retreat into facile stereotypes rather than an open embrace of the unknown.

In contrast to her sympathetic account of New Orleans hoodoo in *Mules and Men*, Zora Neale Hurston's account of Haitian Vodou in her 1937 ethnography *Tell My Horse* is famously uncharitable and inaccurate. In the eyes of an anti-racist readership, she is uncomfortably pro-US occupation of Haiti, enamored of authoritarian male leaders of the Haitian Revolution, and generally supercilious toward the Haitian peasantry, for whom, in her words, "freedom from slavery only looked like a big watermelon cutting and fish-fry to the irresponsible blacks, those people who have no memory of yesterday and no suspicion of tomorrow."¹⁸ She traffics in much of the Occupation era sensationalism regarding zombies and alleged human sacrifice, and her mingled derision of local "superstition" and her fear-tinged uncertainty about zombification and rumors of cannibalism are typical of sensationalist literature from the era. What happened to the Hurston who lay naked on a snakeskin for three days straight in New Orleans, who left her hoodoo mentor "with great sorrow" that she could not stay longer?¹⁹ Why is Hurston a believer and respector of religious traditions in New Orleans, but in Haiti she dismisses spirit possession as "a blind for self-expression"?²⁰

¹⁸ Hurston (1937), 81.

¹⁹ Hurston (1935), 205.

²⁰ Hurston (1937), 221.

Hurston's shortcomings in *Tell My Horse* stem from a preoccupation with the phenomenon of both spiritual and physical forms of possession, with the beast of burden serving as a stand-in for black bodies. The title of *Tell My Horse* comes from the language of possession in Haitian Vodou, which refers to people who are possessed as the "horses" of the spirits. The title of *Mules and Men* comes from folklore from the first half of the book, but if we follow the maxim of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in which black women are the mules of the world,²¹ the title can also be a commentary on the interpersonal power disparities between women and men. Both titles highlight Hurston's discomfort with bodies robbed of agency, bodies made bestial by cruel usage.

In her limited research on Haitian Vodou, Hurston encountered a pantheon of spirits whose personalities are already scripted by generations of possessions and are thus immune to representational manipulation by mere mortals. Some always wear top-hats or prefer rum infused with pepper. Some slither on the ground like snakes, some fan themselves coquettishly. Regardless of whom they possess or where the possession occurs, the spirits maintain their predilections, habits, and styles of dress.²² Karen McCarthy Brown calls this "possession-performance"—"not to indicate that possession is playacting but to emphasize the theatrical quality of visits from the Vodou spirits." The pre-scripted personalities of Vodou spirits is a source of great discomfort for Hurston, given that she views cruelty and a desire for dominance over their human subjects as one of their immutable characteristics. One of Hurston's first observations of the Haitian peasantry is "their enormous and unconscious cruelty towards animals."²³ In Hurston's representation of Haitian life, this metaphor extends to all levels of society, upward into the spirit realm. Hurston perceives the Vodou pantheon in much the same

²¹ Hurston (2009), 17.

²²Brown (2001), 6.

²³ Hurston (1937), 82-83.

language as those peasants who work their mules until “great pieces of hide scraped off the flesh of these patient little beasts, yet they were still being driven.”²⁴ The gods are equally cruel with their human mounts, in Hurston’s depiction: “The person mounted does nothing of his own accord. He is the horse of the loa [sic] until the spirit departs. Under the whip and guidance of the spirit-rider, the horse does and says many things that he or she would never have uttered un-ridden.”²⁵ Paradoxically, however, Hurston questions the authenticity of religious possession. She concludes that she is “forced to believe that some of the valuable commentators are ‘mounted’ by the spirit and that others are feigning possession in order to express their resentment general and particular.”²⁶

Hurston’s confusion about possession—is it an expression of human or divine will?—comes to a head in this anecdote she recounts about a woman possessed by Gede, a Vodou spirit of death and procreation:

A woman known to be a lesbian was “mounted” one afternoon. The spirit announced through her mouth, “Tell my horse I have told this woman repeatedly to stop making love to women. It is a vile thing and I object to it. Tell my horse that this woman promised me twice that she would never do such a thing again, but each time she has broken her word to me as soon as she could find a woman suitable to her purpose. But she has made love to women for the last time. She has lied to Guedé [sic] for the last time. Tell my horse to tell that woman I am going to kill her today. She will not lie again.” The woman pranced

²⁴ Ibid., 83.

²⁵ Ibid., 221.

²⁶ Ibid., 221.

and galloped like a horse to a great mango tree, climbed it far up among the top limbs and dived off and broke her neck.²⁷

Hurston includes this story without any proffered analysis. The reader does not know, then, whether this woman's suicide is caused by cruel gods or internalized social pressures. Without Hurston's commentary, the two are indistinguishable. The gods themselves are representatives of human interpersonal cruelties, enforcers of hetero-patriarchal domination rather than sources of refuge. These gods indeed behave like the people who made them, and Hurston represents those people as fearful, mean-spirited, and obsessed with ensuring normative behaviors. Whether possession is socially or divinely produced in Hurston's framework, the end result is often the mistreatment of the one who is possessed. Her fears of displaced and foreclosed agency ultimately foreclose a sympathetic reading of the gods or the culture from which they spring.

Concerns about agency a constant theme throughout her work. Through her use of the trope of the beast of burden, Hurston defines possession throughout her oeuvre as a social process, as a symptom of structural violence. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, for instance, she represents the black laborers of Eatonville, Florida as physical husks prone to possession by lesser beings: "mules and other brutes occupied their skins."²⁸ It is not until the end of the workday that "the skins felt powerful and human."²⁹ I argue that this problematic in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which was famously written over the course of seven weeks during Hurston's time in Haiti, was crucially informed and framed by her Haitian fieldwork. When encountered with religious and supernatural forms of displaced agency, Hurston inevitably thinks of them as violent forms of social

²⁷ Ibid., 222.

²⁸ Hurston (2009), 1-2.

²⁹ Hurston(2009), 2.

control, as social relations that mirror and reproduce the relationship between master and slave.

Hurston's fascination with displaced agency is also present in her research on the phenomenon of zombification. As numerous scholars have noted, the Haitian *zombi* is a fable of slavery. According to Stefan Palmié, in his study of Afro-Cuban spiritual practice:

the image of the zombi and the reduction of humans to commodified embodiments of labor power to which it speaks are deeply cut from the cloth of a single social reality in the making, a reality deeply riven with a sense of moral crisis unleashed by a predatory modernity and experienced, chronicled, and analyzed by its victims in the form of phantasmagoric narratives about how even the bodies of the dead, bereft of their souls, do not escape conscription into capitalist social relations of production.³⁰

The true terror of zombification is in seeing a person robbed of their personhood, not just in the legalized institution of slavery, but in a psychic, spiritual, and moral sense. It is not the labor that terrifies, nor indeed the idea of conscription, but the reduction of beings to mere bodies, unconscious of the fact that they are enslaved. Hurston views servitude as a crisis of consciousness, and as a result Hurston views two vastly different phenomena—spirit possession and zombification—under the same rubric of suspicion.

One of the first documented cases of zombification in Western anthropology is Zora Neale Hurston's encounter with a Haitian woman called Felicia Felix-Mentor (see Fig. 3).³¹ Hurston meets Felix-Mentor in a hospital in Gonaives. She is a battered woman with "dead eyes," and she "showed every sign of fear and expectation of abuse and

³⁰ Palmié (2002), 66.

³¹ William Seabrook also wrote about a crew of zombies working for the US run sugar company HASCO in *The Magic Island* a few years before Hurston, during the US occupation of Haiti. For an excellent reading of Seabrook's anecdote, see Ramsey (2011), 172-176.

violence.”³² She is unable to speak. The attending doctor tells Hurston that Felix-Mentor died and was officially buried in 1907, only to appear in her hometown 29 years later, naked, alone, and robbed of her mental faculties. Hurston attributes zombification not to an awakening of the dead, but to a drug, “some secret probably brought from Africa and handed down from generation to generation,” that “destroys the part of the brain which governs free will and action.”³³ Zombies are thereby used as beasts of burdens by their masters, a transformation from human to beast that Hurston describes thus:

Think of the fiendishness of the thing. It is not good for a person who has lived all his life surrounded by a degree of fastidious culture, loved to his last breath by family and friends, to contemplate the probability of his resurrected body being dragged from the vault—the best that love and means could provide, and set to toiling ceaselessly in the banana fields, working like a beast, unclothed like a beast, and like a brute crouching in some foul den in the few hours allowed for rest and food. From an educated, intelligent being to an unthinking, unknowing beast.³⁴

This language of beasts is shared between Hurston’s reflections on gendered power dynamics, possession, and zombification. Hurston, in other words, applies the powerful metaphor of zombification, already implying conditions of enslavement and compromised agency, as an analytic of gender. Her obvious horror upon meeting Felix-Mentor—“the sight of this wreckage was too much to endure for long”—is due in large part to the fact that this woman can no longer speak, cannot even narrate the damage that has been done to her.³⁵

³² Hurston (1937), 195.

³³ *Ibid.*, 196.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 181.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

However, contrary to Hurston's fears, this process of zombification is actually quite the opposite of the phenomenon of spirit possession. In Vodou, when a person is ridden by a spirit, the person's *ti bon ange*, the part of the soul that governs individuality, is displaced to make room for the spirit. Quite the contrary to Hollywood depictions of mindless enjoyment in Vodou ritual, this can be a terrifying prospect for the serviteur. Indeed, Hurston's fear of possession is not unfounded or unshared. Dancer and anthropologist Maya Deren, who conducted her fieldwork in Haiti a decade after Hurston, also courts experiences of possession and displaced agency in her ethnography, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*. According to Maya Deren, "the possessed benefits least of all men from his own possession. He may even suffer for it in material loss, in the sometimes painful, always exhausted physical aftermath," and yet in spite of this suffering, he "must triumph against that final terror which attends the loss of self."³⁶

In this ethnographic account, Deren narrates her possession by Ezili, which she initially resists as a feeling of "persistent vulnerability." To her, it is terrifying to watch someone succumb to possession, describing its onset as a time when the *lwa* and the human "wrangle violently over possession of the bodies, as two hands might fiercely compete for a single glove."³⁷ Before Deren herself is possessed, she feels its telltale signs: lightheadedness, a sense of being caught by the leg. Upon recognizing the signs, she leaves the temple in order to think about what she is about to do. She confronts her fear and acknowledges that "it is not fair to stay only when it is easy, or pleasurable, or exalting and to withdraw in the face of discomfort."³⁸ When the possession occurs, however, it is not a displacement of self, but a doubling—she feels she is observing

³⁶ Deren (2004), 249-250.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 255.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 256

herself from afar, and realizes “like a shaft of terror struck through me, it is no longer myself that I watch. Yet it *is* myself.”³⁹

Possession in this framework is not the merciless use of a human body by the spirit, but the spirit and the human speaking together—the spirit with its presence, the human with her body. It requires trust on the part of the human, in both their community and their spirit, that their body will ultimately be returned to them. But this return strengthens the bond between the individual and their community, both living and dead. As the individual awakens from possession, which is both physically and spiritually taxing, the community of worshippers assists in “the tender mercy of worldly restoration; so that, to the body which must walk the earth, is returned the self that is appropriate to such dimension.”⁴⁰ It is not a loss of self but a strengthening of self, a testament to the human capacity for acceptance as much as a testament to the power of spirits, as evidenced by the epigraph of Deren’s ethnography: “Great Gods cannot ride little horses.” Deren uses the available language of horsemanship to describe possession, but in her conception, the human “horse” is not the downtrodden beast of burden for a cruel spiritual master. Rather, both horse and rider are equally invested in a journey that “is long and hard, alike for the strong horse, alike for the great rider.”⁴¹ This possession is a symbiotic relationship in which the god becomes corporeal through the body of the serviteur, and the serviteur gains access to the principles that the *lwa* represent.

Hurston’s fear is ill-matched to this different spiritual context, in which possession can fulfill many of the same goals of self-fashioning and ancestral validation that Hurston longs for. But Hurston—dwelling in the realm of a very different kind of possession enacted by global capital over racialized, female, and queer bodies—does not

³⁹ Ibid., 259.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 256.

⁴¹ Ibid., 262.

see it. Too absorbed in her struggle to wrest her agency free from the forces that compromise it, Hurston does not learn the lesson possession teaches: that in the diaspora, agency is always already compromised, and bodies are always already shared. This dissertation will consider what Hurston did not see—the other kind of possession, the possession-performance by which spirits and ancestors speak through the living—as a taxing yet ultimately rewarding form of narrative collaboration. In seeking out the spiritual possession of Haitian Vodou, black women can trade one form of possession—their status as captive bodies in the New World—for another—those bodies as beholden to a complex web of ancestral values. I consider the female priestess and the Vodou pantheon, in the language of Haitian Vodou, as riders of the women in this study. This simply means that two spirits share and animate the same body in a dance of belonging, history, and community. Possessed by the narratives they have been given, women across the diaspora engage with the principles represented by African-derived spirituality (perceived or actual) in order to legitimate and strengthen their creation of new narratives, narratives in which they are powerful, narratives in which they can heal. These are the possession-performances of a black diaspora robbed of its female deities yet, nevertheless, grasping for the traces of a cosmology that would reinvest black femininity with its value.

One such cosmology is the idea of Ezili, a group of spirits in the Vodou pantheon.⁴² To Hurston, Ezili is a jealous mistress who favors men and treats women

⁴² I have chosen to use the Haitian Creole orthography rather than the often-used French orthography of *Erzulie*. The much-simplified explanation of Ezili in the genre of voodoo kitsch is as “goddess of love.” In Haiti and New Orleans, her symbol (a heart pierced with a dagger) has been somewhat decontextualized and used for commercial purposes. A number of gift shops in Haiti sell merchandise emblazoned with Ezili’s *vèvè* [symbol]—handbags, wallets, even temporary tattoos—without any explanation of its original religious meaning. In New Orleans, there is a tourist shop in the French Quarter called “*Erzulie’s Authentic Voodoo*,” which sells voodoo dolls, tarot readings, and New Orleans kitsch unrelated to Haitian Vodou.

with cruelty.⁴³ If Hurston's Laveau connects women in an intergenerational network of apprenticeship, Hurston's Ezili disrupts solidarity between women:

To women and their desires, she is all but maliciously cruel, for not only does she choose and set aside for herself young and handsome men and thus bar them from marriage, she frequently chooses married men and thrusts herself between the woman and her happiness.⁴⁴

Hurston's distaste appears to be with the version of Ezili who revels in beauty and luxury, which Hurston equates with the pure vanity. Hurston begins her meditation on Ezili with: "Nobody in Haiti ever told me who Erzulie Freida [sic] was, but they told me what she was like and what she did."⁴⁵ Hurston seems both unimpressed by what Ezili does—dressing in flowers and perfumes, throwing tantrums and kisses—and simultaneously unconvinced that Ezili *is* anything, that she has deeper meaning beneath the trappings of a spoiled and beautiful woman. However, Ezili is not so much a figure as a set of principles organized under one name. There are many versions of Ezili, each representing a different version of femininity: Ezili Freda, a beautiful light-skinned woman with an implacable love for luxury. Ezili Dantò, a dark-skinned single mother with a scarred face, ferociously loyal and impossibly brave. Lasyrenn, a mermaid who lives at the bottom of the sea surrounded by secret knowledge.⁴⁶ In her often-contradictory incarnations, she is not fallow ground in which to plant feminist aspirations, and she was never human and thus cannot serve as a model for human behavior. And yet, Ezili has been co-opted for a number of feminist scholars of Haiti. For Natasha Omise'eke Tinsley, Ezili is a queer figure that gives gender nonconforming

⁴³ Hurston (1937), 122.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁴⁶ These are just the three most common aspects of Ezili; there are still many others. For an introduction to the three major aspects of Ezili, see Brown (2001), 220-257.

individuals a supportive and creative ideological framework within which to express their sexualities.⁷ For Colin Dayan, the caprices of Ezili Freda are a complex negotiation of the legacies of slave mistresses.⁸ And for Maya Deren, Ezili is the symbol of “that which distinguishes humans from all other forms: their capacity to conceive beyond reality, to desire beyond adequacy.”⁹

This is only to say that our gods are malleable, that we as diasporic subjects “fashion dark gods too” in the absence of clearcut genealogies.¹⁰ Ezili’s fluidity is already encoded in the riotous multiplicity of her aspects. Like blackness itself, she is multi-variegated, and it is possible to behold each of her representations and to say, “But Ezili is more than just...” Like blackness, Ezili is a retreating horizon, never grasp-able or attainable even to her most ardent and sincere admirers. Each of the following chapters uses tropes and metaphors of Afro-diasporic religion to capture some shard of the fictive communities black women in the Americas construct out of the multivariegated and often contradictory concept of “blackness.”

Chapter One, “The Spirit of Dessalines Possessed Me: Dancing Diaspora,” focuses on the revolutionary symbology of African-American social and concert dance during the Harlem Renaissance via an exploration of the American occupation of Haiti (1915-1934). I argue that the occupation allowed Haitian Vodou and its associated musico-spiritual practices, specifically ecstatic dance, to infiltrate the American artistic imaginary. Through an engagement with Nella Larsen’s novel *Quicksand* and Katherine Dunham’s ethnographic memoir *Island Possessed*, I show how these women use dance to articulate a form of Pan-Africanism that exists in the borderland between choice and

⁷ Tinsley (2011).

⁸ Dayan (1998).

⁹ Deren (2004), 134.

¹⁰ This comes from Harlem Renaissance poet Countee Cullen’s wonderful poem, “Heritage,” which contains the lines, almost as a warning to a white God: “Lord, I fashion dark gods too” Cullen (1995), 145.

inheritance. Dunham's and Larsen's constantly-thwarted desire to "belong" to their cultural milieus is also a desire to access an African heritage to which they feel connected by blood, yet severed by history. Far from an essentialist embrace of their "African" essences, the practice of ecstatic dance allows these writers to be both "in the jungle" and "in the nightclub" at once. It allows Larsen and Dunham to create a cosmology that pays homage to, but does not claim certainty in, the spiritual trappings of an obscured African past and the unease of a conscripted diasporic destiny.

Chapter Two, "Witcheries of Color: The Doudou's Vodou," is a feminist intervention into the French West Indian intellectual landscape as it has been shaped by Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Edouard Glissant. In this chapter, I argue that the anti-colonial efforts of these thinkers often established a strict dichotomy between a violated, abject, and feminized Martinique and a masculine and authoritative France. In this way, they reify and perpetuate a tradition of colonial literature that establishes Martinican women of color, like the island itself, as both sexually-available to the colonizer and resigned to exploitation and abandonment. Through an analysis of two French West Indian woman writers—Mayotte Capécia and Suzanne Césaire, both writing during the Vichy occupation of Martinique in the 1940s—I suggest that the seemingly monolithic trope of the sexually-inviting Martinican woman contains a loophole that could lead to its own dismantling. More specifically, I argue that the element of the supernatural that is often imbedded in the colonial lore of female-shapeshifters and sorceresses provides a counter-reading to the beautiful and subservient woman of color of colonial fantasies. By situating West Indian femininity in a genealogy of supernatural camouflage, subterfuge, and transformation, Capécia and Césaire undermine misogynist colonial fantasies by revealing teeth, fangs, and venomous hearts beneath the seemingly obliging flesh of the Martinican woman of color.

Chapter Three, “Looking for Marie: Hoodoo Histories and the Making of a Black Feminist Genealogy,” explores black feminists’ search for mentors in the historical archive. I argue that, under the guise of snatching the ancestor’s true story from the jaws of historical oblivion, black feminist “successors” can take the ancestor’s power for themselves by positioning the ancestor as the victim and themselves as the heroes, sometimes reifying existing narratives of black women’s historical disempowerment. The chapter first follows Zora Neale Hurston’s search for the nineteenth-century priestess Marie Laveau in New Orleans in 1928, then contrasts Alice Walker’s parallel search for Zora Neale Hurston’s grave in Florida in 1973. While Hurston positions herself as an apprentice to Marie Laveau’s fantastic and semi-fictive public legacy, while Walker represents herself as a loving daughter speaking her mother’s buried truth. In this chapter, I argue that both models of historical reclamation respond to a lacunar and unknowable history of black women’s resistance, and that their creation of alternative historical narratives is always in the service of political goals in the present. In the face of lost archives, the methodology of black feminists must often resemble the methodology of hoodoo practitioners: using the grave dust of the dead for the empowerment and advancement of the living.

Chapter Four, “Florence’s Place: Host(ess)ing Revolution in Interwar Black Paris,” turns to the intersecting paths of two African-American woman performers in 1920s Paris: Ada “Bricktop” Smith and Florence Emery Jones. Both women began their Parisian careers at Le Grand Duc, the Montmartre nightclub where Langston Hughes worked as a waiter in 1924. Both grew to be immensely popular as singers and as hostesses in their own nightclubs. Their paths, however, diverge radically, as Langston Hughes notes in his autobiography *The Big Sea*: “Ten years later, Florence was dying on Welfare Island in New York, and Bricktop was the toast of Montmartre, with dukes and

princes at her table.” Each in her own way, both Bricktop and Florence Emery Jones, sought to lay claim to a foreclosed black femininity in order to rise to power in their nightclubs. By considering the nightclub as a political space, this chapter seeks to make black women visible in a narrative of black male leadership in interwar Europe, which was construed by a white imaginary as a magico-religious phenomenon whereby male charlatans manipulated unthinking masses. I argue that Florence Emery Jones seizes upon the fears of black religious leadership and successfully uses it to construct herself, be it briefly, as a warrior-goddess and orchestrator of anti-colonial revolt in the space of her nightclub performances.

All of these chapters pose the following problematic: What if, contrary to the representations I described at the beginning of this section in Welles’ and Freeman’s plays, we regarded the figure of the voodoo queen and the pantheon of female-embodied spirits in African-derived religious traditions as models of the possibilities rather than the limits of black power? To do so would be to acknowledge the unseen, the affective, in black power. Beauty and caretaking, song and dance, love and tenderness—these are part of black power too, and just as destructive to white supremacy. Furthermore, the bad affects that would seem to undermine black power—uncertainty, disgust, lust, luxury—are already assigned to femininity and thus inescapable. The figures of this study do not access power by claiming a fictive heroic masculinity, but by crafting their power out of what masculinity has deemed un-heroic, in order that their dreams may be livable. The voodoo priestess—in her locally-specific incarnations as the New Orleans conjure-woman, the Haitian mambo, and the Martinican *quimboiseuse*—is uniquely positioned to conceptualize black feminism as a transnational aesthetic and spiritual heritage. The pervasiveness of Vodou imagery in diverse geographic locations allows me to analyze the communalities of black women’s resistance across the

diaspora. The voodoo priestess is a symbol of diasporic womanhood: powerful yet unfree, her image at once self-fashioned and overdetermined. She is precisely the kind of ambivalent figure needed, in other words, to fully capture the double-binds and false choices of being a black woman in the New World.

2. The Spirit of Dessalines Possessed Me: Dancing Diaspora

Lafanmi sanble,

sanble nan.

Se Kreyòl nou ye,

Pa genyen Ginen ankò.

[The family is assembled,

Gathered in.

We are Creoles,

Who have Africa no longer.]

—Priyè Deyò, as translated by Karen McCarthy Brown

In the New World context, there is no more exalted and storied example of black revolt than the nation of Haiti, and its continued existence in spite of international sanctions and internal strife. The proliferation of twentieth century texts written by non-Haitian authors on the subject of the Haitian Revolution attests to its incredible tidal pull upon the diasporic imaginary: C.L.R. James' *Black Jacobins*, Aimé Césaire's *La tragédie du roi Christophe*, Edouard Glissant's *Monsieur Toussaint*, and Lorraine Hansberry's unfinished play *Toussaint*, among others. Furthermore, the explicit Marxist and postcolonial commitments of these authors speaks to Haiti's repurposed image abroad as synonymous with revolt, marronage and resistance. As Jeremy Glick convincingly argues in his recent study, aesthetic engagements with Haiti serve as "blueprints, theaters of battle that prepare its participants for that other Pan-African, proletarian

battle—the battle to come.”¹ Members of the African diaspora have long enlisted Haiti into their anti-colonial rhetoric under the presumption that there is a grand cosmic “we”—a Pan-African community—waiting for the same liberation that Haiti has achieved first. For many, Haiti serves not just as an example, but as an inheritance. The Haitian Revolution is a creation myth of Pan-African community, serving to situate black communities throughout the Americas in a teleology of not-yet actualized but imminent liberation.

In this chapter, I argue that the revolutionary imagery association with Haitian Vodou provided interwar black artists with a uniquely Pan-African discourse through which they could mobilize their desire for connection with an obscured past and an imagined community in the present. I consider both Katherine Dunham’s ethnographic work in Haiti and the religious scenes in Nella Larsen’s novel *Quicksand* as interrogations of the supposedly innate nature of blackness. Haitian Vodou—or its abstraction, in Larsen’s text—served as both an occasion for both writers to “re-connect” with an estranged African past. When their explorations inevitably shored up against the wall of cultural difference, however, the metaphors of Afro-diasporic religion proved flexible enough to provide both these writers with the vocabulary to describe a more nuanced, yet still liberatory, version of New World blackness. This chapter attributes the migration and transformation of the rituals associated with Haitian Vodou onto the scene of American arts to the US occupation of Haiti (1915-1934). The methodology of Vodou worship—specifically, of ecstatic possession heralded and induced by ritual dance—had a profound influence upon the entire American imaginary of the time period. The figure of the black dancing body, possessed and ventriloquized by spirits, begins to appear in the dreams of Americans both black and white during the

¹ Glick (2016), 81.

interwar period; itself a kind of possession. But whether this spirit is construed a god or a demon, an ancestral impulse or a deliberate response to the conditions of modernity, is dependent entirely upon the author's political and cosmological commitments. Possession and ecstasis serve as framing metaphors for American meditations on blackness as either socially-constructed or composed of inherited racialized tendencies. Despite the obvious racist pitfalls of the inheritance or atavistic model of blackness, black artists and intellectuals nevertheless remained committed to its propagation. This often entailed an embrace of the trappings of a primitivist symbology of tom-toms, witchcraft, and jungles, but the Haitian revolutionary subtext of these symbols allowed diasporic thinkers to funambulate on the line between atavism and agency, between fetishization and empowerment. For if Vodou cosmology provides the ideological or magical backbone that enables resistance to colonialism and racism in Haiti—then its importation to the United States suggests that perhaps black revolution is also exportable to other shores.

2.1 Orgiastically Successful: The Challenge of Haiti

The tangled symbology of Haitian revolt abroad is complicated by the addition of Haitian Vodou into the nexus of images as an instigating force of the revolution itself. While the relationship between Vodou and revolution is by no means a simple affair of cause and effect, the coentangling of the two phenomena is precisely the source of Haiti's imaginative force abroad. There is a lively discourse, both popular and academic, which attributes the practices of Haitian resistance to the revolutionary nature of Haitian religious practice. Undeniably, Haitian Vodou is a religious practice with a long history of resistance to racism and imperialism. While scholars disagree on the extent to which Vodou played a role in the Haitian revolution, it has come to play a powerful role in the

mythological apparatus of Haitian historiography.² Most historical accounts reference the August 1791 meeting at Bois-Caïman, where various members of the Haitian revolution met to make a pact to end slavery. While there is some debate as to whether this gathering was in fact a Vodou ceremony, officiated by a putative *houngan* called Boukman, the existing written archival sources from the time period agree that a gathering incorporating elements of Haitian Vodou, including the sacrifice of a pig, occurred.³ As historian Laurent Dubois notes in his study of the Haitian Revolution, the ceremony's mythological presence in Haitian post-revolutionary discourse is largely metonymic: "The invocations of the mysterious ceremony at Bois-Caïman serves as shorthand for the complex and varied presence of religion in the planning and execution of the insurrection."⁴ While I will not weigh in on the historical facticity or specificity of Vodou's role in the Haitian Revolution, I will discuss some of the ways in which Vodou has become a revolutionary theology in its contemporary incarnation.

Whatever role Vodou played in the Haitian Revolution, it is undeniable that, in the years since 1804, the Haitian Revolution has become a large part of Vodou. As scholar Joan Dayan notes in her seminal study of Haitian Vodou, the revolutionary leader Jean-Jacques Dessalines has been incorporated into the Vodou pantheon by being made into a *lwa*, a spirit or deity. He was the only revolutionary leader to infiltrate the religion in this way, as, according to Dayan, "neither the radical rationality of Toussaint

² C.L.R. James, for instance, affords it a largely symbolic role in slave revolts, mentioning it only three times throughout all of *The Black Jacobins*; but Cedric Robinson, on the other hand, cites it as the framing ideology of Haitian revolt. Admittedly, these two projects were more invested in their contemporary ideological commitments than in archival engagement with materials from the Haitian Revolution. Historian David Patrick Geggus provides a comprehensive review of the available historiographical and archival materials on eighteenth century Vodou and comes to the conclusion that its role in the revolution is "ancillary rather than central." Geggus (2002), 80.

³ Geggus (2002), 81-92. As Geggus notes, the Bois-Caïman gathering may have been two separate gatherings in August of 1791, one secular and the other a religious ceremony.

⁴ Dubois (2004), 101.

nor the sovereign pomp of Christophe led to apotheosis.”⁵ This detail serves as a useful analytic for the problematic of white fears of black militancy and diasporic hopes of black resistance. Dessalines’ deification signifies a very specific brand of black armed resistance which refuses cooperation with the disguised forces of neo-colonialism. Dessalines, after all, is the Haitian revolutionary leader who is reputed to have ordered the massacre of all the French in Haiti in 1804 with the injunction “*Koupe tèt boule kay*” [“Cut off heads and burn down houses”]. Not only does Dessalines’ mythical injunction demand the literal and metaphorical severance of the exploiters from their source of supposed rationality,⁶ but also the destruction of plantations, which are their accumulated wealth and the sites of capitalist production. The most radical part of Dessalines’ command is the burning of the plantations, as it denotes a complete contempt for racial capital and a commitment to finding an economic system completely outside of it rather than investing in the continuance of slavery under another guise. While this dream proved difficult and illusory over the years since 1804, its call resonated like a conch horn over oceans and centuries, urging members of the black diaspora to be otherwise.

An evocative Haitian idiom describes the state of vengeful anger as “*Lespri Desalin monte m*” [“The spirit of Dessalines possessed me”].⁷ The historical significance of black rage and the potential of its mobilization through the practices of Vodou was not lost on the Americans occupying Haiti. In the spectacularly racist oeuvre of Arthur J. Burks, a Depression-era American writer of sensationalist voodoo pulp fiction, for

⁵ Dayan (1995), 17.

⁶ The word “tèt” [head], in Haitian Creole, signifies the self and rationality, as well as the physical body part. Formulations like “pou tèt mwen” [for my own benefit], “travay tèt ansanm” [working together], “lwa monte tèt m” [the spirit possessed my head] speak the head’s symbolic significance as the locus of Haitian personhood.

⁷ Renda (2001), 45.

instance, is a legend concerning the statue of Jean-Jacques Dessalines which still stands near the Haitian presidential palace:

And the people say that when the point of the sword of Dessalines points straight out towards the waters of the Gulf of Gonaives, there will be the bloodiest uprising in the history of Haiti; the whites will be slaughtered and their bodies hurled to the sharks which patrol the gulf [...] Did these black men of the jungle know? Was that the reason for brewing the 'black medicine'?

The link between Vodou and resistance, here, is Vodou's capacity to channel the anger of ghosts. When the "black men of the jungle" brew their "black medicine," it is unclear whether the Vodou practitioners of Burks' description perceive their revolt as obeisance to magical forces or whether the magical forces serve only as a justification for their current revolutionary projects. The "black medicine" conjures an ancestral anti-colonial rage to justify and compel a current anti-neocolonial rage against the American occupation, muddling the line between atavism and agency. Vodou itself constantly troubles and frustrates any attempt to draw a distinction between ancestral impulses and contemporary black desires. Thinking through the lens of Vodou is a particular way of relating to the opacity of history and the crisis of filiation in black culture; namely, Vodou conjures an Africa whose tenuous factuality makes it no less culturally and spiritually salient. Practitioners of Vodou would not ordinarily refer to themselves as practicing Vodou, they would rather term themselves devotees of the mysteries of *Ginen*, the Haitian Creole term for Africa. In Haitian Vodou, *Ginen* also comes to stand in as the geographical location of the afterlife.⁹ It is more accurate, therefore, to characterize Vodou as a system of knowledge committed to negotiating ancestral desires without resorting to simplistic dichotomies between inheritance and self-fashioning. It is a New

⁹ Burks(1966), 153.

⁹ Beauvoir (2008), 11-15.

World relationship with a longed-for and lacunar memory of Africa, as well as to the memory of less distant relatives crushed in the machinery of racial capital in the Americas.

On July 28, 1915, a group of Haitians assassinated Vilbrun Guillaume Sam, then president of Haiti, in retaliation for his execution of nearly two hundred political prisoners in the weeks previous. The embroidered tale of President Sam's death at the hands of angry Haitians—construed as an act of mob violence in which the Haitian people continued to brutalize Sam's corpse long after it was dead— provided crucial ideological fodder for the justification of the subsequent US invasion.¹⁰ *The New York Times* headline for July 29 1915, reads: "Haitians Slay Their President; We Land Marines," with the tagline "Body is Cut to Pieces," emphasizing the causal connection Americans sought to establish between Haitian savagery and the moral/pedagogical necessity of the occupation.¹¹ President Sam's murder came to stand in for an atavistic lust for violence, for the fragility of Haitians' psychic and cultural self-control. This inaugural narrative of a black dionysiac went on to inform a genre of occupation-era literature by American soldiers and civilians in which Haitians were presented as slaves to debased ancestral and bodily impulses.

One of the inaugural texts of the genre of voodoo pulp fiction of the 1920s and 1930s is William Seabrook's pseudo-ethnographic novel *The Magic Island*.¹² Despite Seabrook's insistence that "it happens that I like blacks. On the whole I like them better

¹⁰ Renda (2001), 19.

¹¹ The article goes on to describe Sam's murder: "Even then the anger of the people was not appeased. The body of the President was mutilated, and, tied to the end of a rope, it was dragged through the streets of the city." Another, more graphic description of the barbarism of Sam's murder comes from William Seabrook's *The Magic Island*: "The mob, of course, simply tore him to pieces. Mostly they used their hands. But one woman cut off his head with a machete and marched with it. Another woman, they say, ripped out his heart and marched, tearing it to shreds with her teeth." Seabrook (1929), 281-282.

¹² These texts are legion, but their content is predictably somewhat uniform. Orgies, drums, and a Conradian fascination with eye-rolling black bodies are the tropes that reign supreme. For a more detailed account of interwar pulp fiction and pseudo-ethnography written by interwar white visitors to Haiti, see Renda (2001), 175-185 and Ramsey (2011), 118-176.

than whites,"¹³ his texts exhibit the same revelry in racialized sex and violence as the most of virulent of anti-black tracts. In a description of a Vodou ceremony at which he claimed to be in attendance, for instance, he represents a religious dance as overtly sexual in its aims and culmination:

in the red light of torches which made the moon turn pale, leaping, screaming, writhing black bodies, blood-maddened, sex-maddened, god-maddened, drunken, whirled and danced their dark saturnalia, heads thrown weirdly back as though their necks were broken, white teeth and eyeballs gleaming, while couples seized one another from time to time and fled from the circle, as if pursued by furies, into the forest to share and slake their ecstasy.¹⁴

This orgiastic description is by no means uncharacteristic of the genre.¹⁵ I include it here as an illustration of the generic tendency to sensationalize the ritual dances of Vodou. However, in this passage, the characterization of the dancers as "god-maddened" suggests a certain moral gravity that the other adjectives do not. While the drunkenness, bloodlust, and sexual excitation of the dancers suggest impulses that originate in the body, whatever gods that drive their frenzy are external to their bodies. The religious language shifts the site of these impulses from a debased vision of bodily need to a more transcendental notion of divine will. In this way, it offers an unintentional but powerful corrective to the animalistic imagery which Seabrook himself has provided us, of black appetite unimpeded by any ethics of restraint. Seabrook's meditations after the ceremony are laced with a heady longing, in fact, for the spiritual fullness of the ritual he has just described:

¹³ Seabrook in preface to Wirkus (1931), xiv.

¹⁴ Seabrook (1929), 42.

¹⁵ Readers interested in further exploring this genre may turn to the following texts: *White King of La Gonave* by Faustin Wirkus, *Cannibal Cousins* and *Black Bagdad* by John Houston Craige, *A Puritan in Voodoo-Land* by Edna Taft, *Voodoo Fire in Haiti* by Richard Loederer, *Black Medicine* by Arthur Burks, and *The Invisibles: Voodoo Gods of Haiti* by Francis Huxley.

What, after all were they doing [...] that was so different from things which occur in our own fashionable and expansive nightclubs, except that they were doing it more successfully? [...] There is nothing so stupid and pathetic as an orgy that doesn't quite come off [...] Perhaps if we mixed a little true sacrificial blood in our synthetic cocktails and flavored them prayerfully with holy fire, our night clubs would become more orgiastically successful and become as sacred as temples were in the days of Priapus and Aphrodite.⁶

What exactly does it mean to be “orgiastically successful”? It appears that the line between the Vodou ceremony and “an orgy that doesn't quite come off” is entirely cosmological. Seabrook's semi-flippant allusion to sacrificial blood and ancient Greek temples would suggest that religious fervor is the line that separates African religious dance from American secular dance forms. For all its racism, Seabrook's text constructs a kind of black dionysiac aligned with a Western sacral inheritance from which the white denizens of Western nightclubs has been irreparably severed. In doing so, Seabrook constructs the black dionysiac as a potential balm to the spiritual wounds and amputations inflicted by interwar modernity. I use the term “dionysiac” both as a loose catch-all term for the practices of religiously-motivated ecstasy, but also as a term with a certain cultural cache in the intellectual context of both white and Afro-diasporic writers.⁷ Like the word “voodoo,” the word “dionysiac” signals the extent to which the concept is mediated through an ethnographically-nonspecific yet ideologically powerful set of associations. It is a term with gravity, with history, a term that shifts the register from the language of uncontrolled bodily impulse to the language of the choreographed.

⁶ Seabrook (1929), 42-43.

⁷ A return to a pseudo-classical notion of the Dionysiac, or sometimes the classics mediated by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, is fairly common in the interwar period, present overtly in Bataille's conceptions of ecstasy, as well as more implicitly in texts like Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*. For an analysis of Aimé Césaire's engagements with Nietzsche, see Donna Jones' *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Négritude, Vitalism, and Modernity*.

It is the difference between Fanonian muscular spasm, that inchoate anger which the colonized feel as a physical affliction,¹⁸ and the choreographed dance of revolution itself. It marks the difference between a mob and a community.

Despite the conditions of domination under which Haitians and Haitian religious practice operated under the American occupation, Seabrook's profoundly ambivalent stance regarding the allure of Vodou was by no means uncharacteristic of the occupational force as a whole. As Kate Ramsey notes in her study of the history of anti-Vodou legislation in Haiti, the American occupation capitalized on previously unenforced Haitian laws against sorcery in order to further exert their control over Haitian social life and organized assembly. American Marines and civilian travelers, meanwhile, also engaged in a lively traffic in confiscated Vodou material culture, seizing drums, icons, and other religious artifacts from temples as trophies and souvenirs commemorating their Haitian adventures, to say nothing of the stories about zombies, possession, and human sacrifice that were marketed as commodities in the United States.¹⁹ The American occupation of Haiti was justified by and bolstered by the perceived civilizational menace of Haitian Vodou. While the reasons for occupying Haiti were of the usual self-serving variety of imperialism that focused on the exploitation of native land and labor, American representations of Vodou constituted a kind of ideological warfare on pan-African solidarity.²⁰ The challenge of Haiti was perceived as spiritual just as much as it was political. At this point in American history, it was of crucial importance to America's imperial reputation at home and abroad that the self-

¹⁸ "The muscles of the colonized are always tensed. It is not that he is anxious or terrorized, but he is always ready to change his role as game for that of the hunter." Fanon (2005), 16).

¹⁹ Ramsey (2011), 118-176.

²⁰ Members of the Haitian elite chafed under the assumption that all Haitians practiced Vodou, and were cognizant of the American deployment of Vodou as justification for the occupation. As one Haitian citizen said in anonymous article in *Le courrier haïtien* on March 12, 1921: "When one reminds oneself that the Americans associate cannibalism with the practice of *vaudou* [sic], one understands that they are trying to spread *vaudou* among us in order to say that we are cannibals." Ramsey (2011), 159.

determination of Haiti be perceived as a failure rather than a success. As an upswing of racial violence in the American South and the carnage of the Great War revealed the hypocrisy of so-called civilization, Americans began to fear that the seductive lure of “primitive” ontologies might provide a viable alternative to the project of American civilization. While this fear of catching or choosing primitivism was one to which white Americans were not immune,²¹ the anxiety of white American policy-makers and artists also focused largely on the fear that black Americans would succumb to primitive pleasures. That black Americans would throw off their chains and their clothing for a life of tropical debauchery, not just outside of but antagonistic to Western civilization. In the negrophobic imaginary, possession obliterates the treasured psychic gifts conferred by civilization upon its chosen sons: agency, control, rationality. It is one thing for black Americans to seek out this experience when it is already perceived to be internal to them, when it is a return rather than a departure. But even worse than the idea that one could willingly put oneself at the mercy of dark forces which obliterate one’s rationality and self-control was the idea that these forces have the power to claim you whether you invite them or not.

While this narrative was mired in a kind of geographical determinism that situates Haiti as the soil from which the black dionysiac springs, the sheer pervasiveness of primitivist tropes in Europe and America during the interwar period negates the notion that it is a purely “tropical” delirium sparked by hotter climes and verdant jungles. John H. Craige, a US Marine who wrote a popular travel account of his time in Haiti, wrote of the various forms of psychic unease experienced by white Americans when confronted with Haitian religious practice as products of the Haitian landscape:

²¹ For a brilliant representation of the contagion narrative surrounding primitivism in the time period, see Ishmael Reed’s novel, *Mumbo Jumbo*, in which the 1920s urge to dance is construed as a voodoo-born disease called Jes Grew.

The old resisted. One sensed its spiritual resistance. We whites were vaguely uncomfortable. We experienced queer sensations, tense psychic currents. It was as though one could feel, dimly, a struggle of soul against soul. Ancients believed that each race and each place had its gods. At times one was tempted to believe that it was the old, mystic gods of the locality that brought these floods of indefinable, subconscious unrest. White men think queer thoughts and sometimes do queer deeds in the tropics.²²

Craige's unease speaks to the way in which travelers to the West Indies frame the Antillean landscape as a feminized seductress, a theme which I will take up in more detail in the following chapter. For now, however, suffice it to ask this question: what happens when these terrifying local gods and the "queer sensations" they evoke are removed from the tropics and imported to the streets of Harlem? Can the gods grow through concrete as easily as they sprout up in soil; is the heart of the "modern" American (black or white) a hospitable enough ground for the demands and machinations of these ancient gods? And if so, what are the implications for twentieth century subjectivity if it transpires that the individual must relinquish his or her psychic control with the advent of these old gods, which return (if the individual happens to be black) or arrive (if the individual happens to be white) to claim them?

2.2 The Old Gods Come Home to Harlem

Concert dance in interwar Harlem explored these very questions. The interwar period saw a flowering of theatrical performances in which African-Americans performers, writers, and choreographers danced the diaspora into being. All under the heading of "African" dance, these performances created their own genre of "African"

²² Craige (1933), 37.

dance in which African, West Indian, and African-American traditions became interchangeable. Katherine Dunham's 1930s research in Martinique, Jamaica, and Haiti led to thirty years of staging a number of choreographed dances drawing explicitly from West Indian dance traditions. Even Zora Neale Hurston, best known for her fiction and ethnographic writing, choreographed a series of little-researched but popular dance performances based on her research and employed a group of Bahamian dancers to perform a traditional fire dance.²³ In March of 1937, choreographer Edna Guy organized a program called "Negro Dance Evening," a program which began with African ritual dance, moved through West Indian material choreographed by Dunham, and ending with an anti-lynching dance in the modern dance style.²⁴ While the source material of these performances came from a variety of national provenances, they invariably featured drumming and some element of the supernatural or religious themes as framing characteristics of diasporic musical expression. My purpose in detailing this rather disparate list of performances and traditions is to show the way in which African-American, African, and West Indian dance traditions were deeply co-entangled on the stage in interwar Harlem. In other words, any representation of a specific black culture onstage implicated all black culture in a complex web of "shared" culture, creating a Pan-African community in the present while laying claim to an African inheritance from the past.

Black performers, however, were not the only ones to play out dramas of black inheritance onstage. The same fears of ancestral black revolt that permeated occupation-era travelogues in Haiti had infiltrated American narratives, dramatizing the fear that black Americans might "revert" to a primitive desire for freedom. *The Emperor Jones*, in its various incarnations as a play (1920), opera (1933), and film (1933) is one such

²³ Kraut (2008).

²⁴ Manning (2004), 94-100.

narrative. In Eugene O'Neill's play, a black American convict who escapes from prison and installs himself as dictator of an unnamed West Indian island. When Jones' tyranny grows too great for the native population to bear, a character called "The Congo Witch-Doctor" leads the mob of angry islanders on a tom-tom-fueled expedition into the jungle to kill their erstwhile emperor. O'Neill admits that the inspiration for this play was an engagement with Haitian history: he was prompted to imagine the tyranny of a black New World "emperor" by the example of Henri Christophe, a Haitian ruler who crowned himself king in 1811; and the bloody demise of the tyrant Lebrun Guillaume Sam served as the inspiration for Jones' death at the hands of the people he oppressed.²⁵ O'Neill also alludes specifically to Haiti when he sets the action of the play "on an island in the West Indies as yet not self-determined by US Marines."²⁶ Furthermore, the bone rattle and charm-stick wielded by the Witch-Doctor character are also direct borrowings from imperial contacts with *houngans* [male Vodou priests] in US-occupied Haiti; *houngans* always carry an *ason* (rattle) in one hand and a bell in the other during the ceremonies to summon *lwa*.

In this Haitian setting, O'Neill engages in the elision of differences between Haiti and Africa through the inclusion of a character called the Congo Witch-Doctor. This character's body is at once over-burdened with bric-a-brac and practically naked:

He is wizened and old, naked except for the fur of some small animal tied about his waist, its bushy tail hanging down in front. His body is stained all over a bright red. Antelope horns are on each side of his head, branching upwards. In one hand he carries a charm-stick with a bunch of white cockatoo feathers tied to

²⁵ Ramsey (2011), 205.

²⁶ O'Neill (1988), 173.

an end. A great number of glass beads and bone ornaments are about his neck, ears, wrists, and ankles. He struts, noiselessly, with a queer and prancing step.²⁷

Here, the trappings of primitivism are represented as performative in the sense that these horns, bracelets, and loincloths can be discarded at will. Paradoxically, however, it is not this accoutrement of the primitive that O'Neill represents as truly primitive, but the black skin itself. The only difference between the black bodies of Brutus Jones and the Congo Witch-Doctor, despite the evidently superficial difference marked by their different languages and cultural affinities, is the clothes they wear. In direct contrast to the Congo Witch-Doctor, Brutus Jones is almost ludicrously overdressed for the tropical climate:

He wears a light blue uniform coat, sprayed with brass buttons; heavy gold chevrons on his shoulders; gold braid on the collar cuffs, etc. His pants are bright red with a light blue stripe down the side. Patent leather laced boots, with brass spurs, and a belt with a long-barreled, pearl-handled revolver complete his make-up.²⁸

Jones' costume is at once a reference to the attire of revolutionary-era Haitians like Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and Henri Christophe, as well as a reminder to the audience that the garb of Western imperial civilization is easily appropriated by imperial subjects, and just as easily torn and cast aside. As he runs through the jungle over the course of the play, Jones tears off his coat, removes his tattered boots, and finally finds himself wearing nothing but pants that "have been so torn away that what is left of them is nothing but breech cloth."²⁹ This heavy-handed metaphoric representation of the disposability of African-American civilizational

²⁷ O'Neill (1988), 173.

²⁸ Ibid., 173.

²⁹ Ibid., 178-190.

characteristics is symptomatic of what historian Lee D. Baker identifies as a white American belief of the time period, which posited that “slavery created a thin veneer of civilized characteristics for American Negros. Lurking behind the veneer was the savage from Africa, incapable of morality and civilized behavior and predisposed to crime.”³⁰

Facing one another, loincloth to loincloth, vying for the power to command the play’s chanting black chorus, Jones and the Congo Witch-Doctor have a peculiar kind of battle. While critical materials on *The Emperor Jones* have often situated it as a retelling of *Heart of Darkness*, it is not the Conradian battle of Kurtz versus the madness of his Congolese jungle milieu, whose defeat at the hands of the jungle is made all the more shocking by the contrast of his white skin to that of the natives (for it is the jungle’s effect upon all who live there, to make the behaviors of a European gentlemen not just ludicrous but impossible). Unlike Kurtz, whose incongruity with his surroundings (both human and vegetal) constitutes the tragedy of *Heart of Darkness*, Jones’ relationship with his island setting and with the natives themselves is one of similitude. His decline is not meant to be construed as a tragedy but rather as a homecoming, an affirmation that Africa rules the heart of this New World black man. When Jones stumbles upon the Congo Witch-Doctor’s jungle temple, he remarks upon its familiarity rather than its strangeness: “What—what is I doin’? What is—dis place? Seems like I know dat tree— an’ dem stones—an’ de river—I remember—seems like I been heah befo’.”³¹

Unbeknownst to Jones, he has found himself at the altar of some unnamed African deity, and though his biological memory is only of the landscape rather than the rituals of worship of this nameless cosmology, he feels compelled to bow before its power: “as if

³⁰ Baker (1998), 58. Barrett H. Clark, a contemporary of O’Neill and one of his first biographers, calls the play “a magnificent presentment of panic fear in the breast of a half-civilized Negro,” further exemplifying the worldview that constructed the black American as possessing a liminal status between the inherited savagery of Africa and the borrowed garments of Western civilization. Ranald (1984), 72.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 201.

in obedience to some obscure impulse, he sinks into a kneeling, devotional posture.”³² Later, the Congo-Witch Doctor will command Jones to kill himself, a command which, in the opera version, he eventually obeys. Jones is already ruled by religious forces unknown to him, forces whose obscurity does not negate their power. As a black body, Jones follows “African” commands unwritten and unspoken, present as physical reflexes rather than conscious decisions.

The Emperor Jones may a Harlem staging of anxieties about African-derived religions as vehicles for murderous or suicidal impulses, but like its analogues in Haiti, this brand of Negrophobia contains within it the possibilities for its own dismantling. The opera version of the play cast Hemsley Winfield, one of the leading black dancers and choreographers of the day, as The Congo Witch-Doctor. Winfield’s is only character in the opera whose part does not require singing; “The Congo Witch-Doctor” is labeled as “Dancer” rather than as a vocal part. Despite the nonverbal nature of this performance, it is labeled as a “pantomime” and thus as the vehicle for some kind of intelligible meaning which the witch-doctor’s “shrill cries do not convey.”³³ And despite the racism and sensationalism that positively drips from O’Neill’s descriptions, the fact that the witch-doctor uses his body to speak in this way confers upon the body an unanticipated expressive power that exceeds the realm of words, reason, and articulacy. This black body, whose voice is strangled and made inarticulate by the author’s staging, must rely upon his body to express that which the Baritone, Tenor, and Soprano characters can use their voices to do. But this only serves to highlight the superfluity of words in this jungle context and to reify the body’s abiding power in this particular

³² Gruenberg (1932), 23.

³³ In O’Neill’s original staging, the witch-doctor’s voice “rises and falls in a weird, monotonous croon, without articulate word divisions.” O’Neill 1988, 201.

landscape. The Congo Witch-Doctor opens a space of possibility for the ways one can speak when one has no voice—or when the body is all one is perceived to have.

Lest we develop an overly-idealized view of the potentiality of African musico-spiritual practice, I must emphasize the fact that its history in the New World is by no means unproblematic. If we rewind from the chorus lines and African operas of the 1920s and 1930s, into the not-so-distant past, we reach the stumbling block of minstrelsy, whose deleterious effects upon black performance have been well-chronicled. Delve even further into the past and we find ourselves in the territory of plantation-era slave dances both voluntary and involuntary, slaves dancing on the auction block in order to fetch a higher price and thereby ensure their master's careful treatment of their commodified bodies, all the way back to the practice of "dancing the slaves" on slave ships.³⁴ This is the primal scene of black dance in the New World: the sick and exhausted men and women in chains brought up from the holds of the slave ship and forced to stretch their stiff limbs by dancing under the shadow of the whip. But, as dance scholar Katrina Hazzard-Gordon states in her eponymous chapter, "dancing under the lash" has significance in excess of the constraints and coercions responsible for its performance:

For most of the captive Africans, dancing was a cultural vehicle used to mediate between mankind and the deities. African captives on slave vessels attempted to evoke deities who could assist them in revolt and escape. Indeed, they might have attributed their failures to their inability to perform ceremonies properly, with appropriate religious objects and the aid of the entire community.³⁵

Hazzard-Gordon's conjecture gestures towards an anteriority to dance in bondage: dance in worship. Ritual dance, of course, cannot stand in as an edenic practice

³⁴ Hazzard-Gordon (1990), 11.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

developed in “Mother Africa,” a way of experiencing pleasure unsullied by bondage and community unmarred by ambivalence. However, the stakes of the attempt to reconstitute the elements of ritual dance in the context of New World performance practices are these: if diasporic performance is an investigation into the way “to perform ceremonies properly,” the result may be an ontology that peels back the layers of pain to reveal a more livable form of New World blackness.

As Saidiya Hartman reminds us, the act of dancing in the context of slavery was so deeply tied to dehumanizing narratives of happy-go-lucky darkies content in their bondage that black pleasure is forever haunted by the specter of complicity.³⁶ However, Hartman does not rule out the possibility of pleasure in dance as a means of redress for “the body broken by the regime of work, the regularity of punishment, the persistence of torture, and the violence of rape and sexual exploitation.”³⁷ The incompleteness and impossibility of redress through dance does not invalidate the imperative to dance, however. Hartman’s acknowledgement simply articulates a different but equally salient social utility of dance. Rather than the pleasures of performance constituting a means of redress in and of themselves, they become “an articulation of loss and longing for remedy and reparation.”³⁸ This compelling note on the elegiac power of dance is an unanswered question dangling provocatively at the end of a chapter, forcing us to meditate upon the character of this mourning, of dance’s dream deferred, and whether it shrivels or whether it explodes. The surge in “African” dance practices in America in the 1920s and 1930s, however far removed though they may be from the African context from which they are professed to originate, is an

³⁶ “Songs, jokes, and dance transform wretched conditions into a conspicuous and apparently convincing display of contentment. As a result, this circumscribed recognition of black humanity itself becomes an exercise of violence.” Hartman, (1997), 35.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

articulation of the loss of that African context. It is the diasporic subject's grappling with the loss of history, the loss of kinship ties, the loss of the very rituals which would enable them to conjure and hence mourn their unburied and unmemorialized ancestors. And no dancer of the interwar period one more fully explored the articulation and redress of this loss than Katherine Dunham.

2.3 An Ethics of Discomfort: Katherine Dunham in Haiti

Ignoring the painful legacy of African dance in the New World, John Martin, a prominent dance critic and *New York Times* columnist of the 1920s and 1930s, wrote on "the essence of Negro dance" in a 1940 tribute to Katherine Dunham's work: "There is nothing pretentious about it; it is not designed to delve into philosophy or psychology, but to externalize the impulses of a high spirited, rhythmic, and gracious race."³⁹ Martin's assessment of Dunham's dance reviews, which were the product of years of research in the West Indies, characterizes the stance of many white critical reviews of African-American concert dance of the time period to relegate black dance efforts to the ethnographic; that is to say, as an expression of ancestral racial characteristics rather than as a concerted intellectual effort to define and articulate identity out of the inconsistencies of diasporic cultures.⁴⁰ Dunham herself, however, in her 1969 memoir of her 1935 fieldwork in Haiti, finds the practice of ritual dance far from easy or natural. In fact, the goal of her ethnographic memoir *Island Possessed* is to disaggregate the notion of ancestral blackness by denying any semblance of belonging to foreign cultural contexts.

³⁹ In Dunham (2005), 212. Similar in tone is John Martin's review of the 1934 African dance opera *Kyunkor*, and his backhanded critique that "Though obviously some of the company have been taught their material over a foundation of Harlem, there is the utmost sincerity throughout the cast, and a general conviction of authenticity" (23).

⁴⁰ For a more extended analysis of the relationship of African-American concert dance to the pressures of "ethnographic realism," see Manning (2001).

Katherine Dunham's primary affective state, throughout her explorations of Haitian Vodou in *Island Possessed*, is one of discomfort. Whether she is drinking water from a scum and tadpole-filled basin in the depths of a bokor's temple, or wearing under her ceremonial head-kerchief a mixture of "feathers, sacrificial food, liqueur, orgeat, [and] blood" for her Vodou initiation, she is constantly in a state of disgust, confusion, and embarrassment.⁴¹ Ironically, even the Vodou lwa to whom Dunham is pledged is a source of revulsion; despite her marriage to Damballa, the snake lwa, she admits: "I have never overcome a fastidiousness since childhood when near serpents."⁴² Perhaps because of some of these emotions, one of her friends chastises her, after a particularly disastrous midnight excursion to the Haitian countryside, for being "thoughtless, obstinate, unkind, inconsiderate, and finally stupid in his estimation, to follow continually this obsession to get to the bottom of things."⁴³

Though undoubtedly a part of every anthropologist's experience in the field, these admissions of personal failures are certainly out of place in an ethnography published in 1969, in a genre then dominated by scientific models of objectivity and observation mostly disseminated by white men. While often understated in her text, her moments of unease are always inflected by gender, as when a sinister bokor in Léogane laughs at her unwillingness to drink from a slime-covered basin in his temple, "like any man might do upon discovering a weakness in a woman who thinks she has it well guarded."⁴⁴ In the context of her field research and her writing, Dunham's signs of disgust, confusion, or general lack of ethnographic mastery always brings to the surface the cultural assumptions that equate femininity with weakness and irrationality. However, rather than disavowing this uncomfortable position in which she finds herself,

⁴¹ Dunham (1994), 143.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 206.

Dunham crafts her entire narrative around it. In an effort to create a brand of ethnography that comprises “an essential kindness to humanity,” Dunham makes discomfort an ethic.⁴⁵ The doubts and crises of authority that mark Dunham’s experience as a woman of color following an unprecedented career path in a field that demands authority and mastery, become the foundation of her practice. Dunham highlights discomfort because discomfort is not just something she *does* feel as a female anthropologist, but something any outsider to a culture *should* feel. If the alternatives to discomfort are a false sense of mastery or an easy elision of the power differentials between anthropologists and informants, Dunham both chooses and avows discomfort.

This discomfort becomes the sacrificial price of diasporic knowledge. Dunham comes to Haiti, after all, as not just as an anthropologist investigating the ways of foreign peoples, but as an African-American following her own “awakened and undefined need” for a renewed connection to the lost and lacunar history of the Black Atlantic.⁴⁶ At every corner, Dunham refuses to embrace a sense of belonging she does not feel, to sink into the comfort of an over-simplified Afro-centric kinship that ignores language barriers, income disparities, and diverging systems of belief. Dunham comes to Haiti with a number of illusions about the possibilities of diasporic community, all of which she is disabused of by the long and arduous process of *lave tèt*, or initiation into Haitian vodou. *Lave tèt* means literally “to wash one’s head,” but in Creole also includes connotations of selfhood and mental capacities. I would like to propose the alternative translation of “washing one’s mind” in order to account for the process of discovery Dunham undergoes during this ceremony. Rather than cultivating a feeling of acceptance into a given community, as initiations are meant to do, Dunham’s *lave tèt* purges her of any illusions about the simplicity and easiness of belonging to a

⁴⁵ Ibid., 210.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 79.

community. Explaining the difficulties of the ceremony, Dunham provides an ironic rejoinder to those who would believe in the possibility of an easy entry into the community of Haitian Vodou:

It is conceivable that some Prête[sic] savant directly from 'Nan Guinée, still damp with sacrificial blood from his own temples and scarred with tribal markings and jangling gris-gris from neck to ankle, as is the custom in Africa, could so impart his 'belongingness' that taboos would fall, the way would be immediately opened, and centuries and oceans bridged in moments.⁴⁷

Of course, Dunham's tongue-in-cheek remark of "it is conceivable" highlights the ludicrousness of her imaginary "Prête savant." The very notion of an American, even a black American, gaining easy access to one of the world's most complex belief systems becomes a kind of joke, in Dunham's formulation. And this joke stands in sharp contrast to the rigors of the *lave tèt* ceremony, which (mirroring the Middle Passage) requires her to lay on a dirt floor with her co-initiates for two days straight without moving, finding her eventually "at four in the morning, wearing a nightgown wet by someone else's urine, chilled, disconsolate, feeling none of the promised ecstasy, and no signs of it, alien to gods, people, and land."⁴⁸

Another important instance of unbelonging and discomfort occurs after Dunham's *lave tèt*, at the home of the Léogane bokor Ti Couzin. Ti Couzin is rumored to live with a number of women he has made transformed into zombies, and Dunham is morbidly fascinated with the validity of these claims. As Dunham notes, the Haitian zombi is a beast of burden, an insensible and unprotesting slave to the person who made them. When the zombies become wives and constitute a kind of harem, the intersection between forced labor and sexual violence becomes pronounced. In the presence of Ti

⁴⁷ Ibid., 59.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 65.

Couzin, a man whose unique combination of condescension and charisma leaves her uncharacteristically flustered, Dunham wonders “if this was the beginning of being zombi-ized.”⁴⁹ Robbed of her usual articulacy and aplomb, Dunham’s fear of zombification is a recognition of her own vulnerability to the assaults to their personhood that black women across the diaspora must face, positioned as they are under the twin yokes of patriarchy and colonial/racial violence. However, Dunham does not choose the route of martyred identification or solidarity with the zombie wives, silent and industrious women, with “faces with absolutely no expression and which might as well have been the faces of the blind or deaf.”⁵⁰ Rather, she feels herself at once compelled by their plight and impotent to stop it, positioned as “a lone woman with others behind her in spectral attendance” rather than one of the specters themselves.⁵¹ Dunham’s anxiety comes from the tension between the privilege that safeguards her from the fate of zombie-wifedom and a sense of responsibility to the women who, by zombification or perhaps other more mundane means of power, have been silenced. Dunham strikes a sensitive balance between acknowledgement of the exceptionalism of her position and feelings of kinship with Haitian women, without ever falling into paternalistic imperatives to “save” Haitian women. Lamenting the woes of her adoptive country without presuming to be proportionately effected by them, Dunham admits upon one of her return trips to Haiti during the Duvalier regime: “they live there all year round. I for my part, felt sad and sick at the increased poverty, distressed at the lost melody of a wide eyed scholar.”⁵² Here, Dunham’s longing for a diasporic community dissolves into despair at the material realities that keep diasporic communities mired in difference and contradiction.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 200.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 199.

⁵¹ Ibid., 200.

⁵² Ibid., 225.

This is not to say, however, that Dunham succumbs to despair over the irreparable rupture between the scattered communities of the black diaspora. Rather, the pan-Africanism that springs from Dunham's experiences in *Island Possessed* is richer and more nuanced. To return to Africa is different than anyone supposed, and more complicated. In Dunham's work, the historical separation between diasporic peoples is not simply an inconvenience that can be overcome by geographic proximity, but rather, a deeply-rooted evil that requires complex processes of cleansing and exorcism. Putting this into practice, when she buys the former plantation (and site of numerous revolutionary-era atrocities) of Habitation Leclerc as her Haitian place of residence in her later life, Dunham says, matter-of-factly, "I knew that there must be an exorcism."⁵³ Despite its supposed curse of eternal unease upon its owner—"The master of Leclerc will never be happy," she is told, multiple times—Dunham insists upon occupying this space of ghosts.⁵⁴ Although she admits that indeed "the mistress of Leclerc was not happy," Dunham remains obstinate in her desire to live there.⁵⁵ Dunham's continued residence at Habitation Leclerc and her general woes, attributed to the ghosts of tortured slaves, stems from a sense of responsibility to the ghosts themselves, one of which is "a man, black, bare to the waist, hands tied behind his back, wearing only ragged trousers, had knelt in the doorway and pleaded for help."⁵⁶ In order to exorcise Habitation Leclerc, Dunham calls on her friend Kam, an older and respected priestess who served as her mentor throughout Dunham's time in Haiti. Kam's exorcism of Dunham's home is completely devoid of magical pyrotechnics or visible manifestations of demonic struggle; rather, Kam spends much of her time sitting with closed eyes while, "through

⁵³ Ibid., 244.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 237.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 238.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 254.

her body were passing many evils, and she was sending them far out into the sea.”⁵⁷ Kam’s actions constitute a kind of methodology that Dunham seeks to emulate in the staging of her writing and research. In her own research, Dunham uses her own body as a staging place for the evils of the slave trade to pass through in order to be spirited away. Hers are smaller, more interpersonal evils, but evils nonetheless: the drastic income and power disparities between peoples of color, patriarchal structures that both demand female labor and deny its importance, and all daily moments of cultural incomprehension and faux-pas that occur amongst any people trying to form a community in spite of language barriers and cultural differences.

Dunham’s use of her body in this process of exorcism serves as an interesting meditation on the practice of spirit possession, which is a constant source of anxiety and embarrassment throughout her first visit to Haiti. She admits that “after my ‘marriage’ to Damballa I longed for some indication, some inkling of possession,” a sentiment which retrospectively, she “can now observe with some pity, even amusement.”⁵⁸ Possession, in Dunham’s youthful conception of the practice, is the ultimate marker of belonging. Her possession by Damballa would proclaim—to both her observers and herself—the authenticity of her belief in Vodou. The assumption being, of course, that possession is such a spectacular and nonconsensual display of belief that it could not possibly be feigned. Through it, Dunham seeks to clarify “what part of me lived on the floor of the houngfor [sic], felt awareness seeping from the earth and people and things around me, and what part stood to one side taking notes?”⁵⁹ Possession would make her into the believer rather than the scientist in this formulation, and put to rest all those unsettling fears about whether or not she really “belonged.” But she fears the

⁵⁷ Ibid., 255.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 228.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 228.

relinquishment of self that possession would entail, wondering “what sort of spectacle I would make of myself if by chance possessed, what would be thought of me if I weren’t.”⁶⁰

Dunham later revises the uncompromising line she drew in her youth between sincere yet embarrassing possession and rational yet cold scientific observation. Rather, she ultimately embraces her position “on a fringe border of belief and non-belief, because the two are so close.”⁶¹ Dancing becomes the way Dunham resolves this tension. In one of her greatest moments of ethnographic unease, she claims that her “dancing had saved [her] from disgrace.”⁶² Unable to feign possession by Damballa by eating the sacrificial offering of raw egg and flour, lying on the floor crying with bits of flour and egg plastered to her face, Dunham fears that the community will reject her. But she rises from the floor and says I “danced out all my anger and unknown things and at myself for trying to know them, frustration at the rotten egg and weariness and strange mores.”⁶³ At the end of the dance, she realizes everyone is looking at her with “affection and encouragement.”⁶⁴ In this particular instance, the alternative to possession is not aloofness; the alternative to possession is itself a kind of spiritual transcendence. It is the kind of transcendence she longed for and did not achieve during her *lave tèt* ceremony: “the sheer joy of motion in concert, of harmony with self and others and the hounfor and Damballa and with all my friends and enemies past present and future.”⁶⁵ Dancing complicates the notion that belief is a self-annihilating process inimical to the being of the rational anthropologist observer, as dancing cannot be characterized as either completely secular or completely religious in this context. Dunham’s dance allows her to

⁶⁰ Ibid., 127.

⁶¹ Ibid., 105.

⁶² Ibid., 235.

⁶³ Ibid., 234.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 234.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 132.

exist in the borderland between belief and disbelief, between belonging and unbelonging, between surrender and self-discovery, and to revel in her liminal position.

Dunham is articulating these ideas, of course, in a memoir written nearly 30 years after her initial fieldwork, because, as she says, “the present diffused in the roundness of time is how I see events.”⁶⁶ By the end of the book, Leclerc has finally been cleansed of its restless spirits, “the souls themselves sent back to sleep peacefully in ‘Nan Guinée [sic].”⁶⁷ In Vodou cosmology, Africa (Nan Ginen) is both the provenance of one’s ancestors and the place to which one returns after death. In this sense, Dunham, too is both literally and metaphorically resting in ‘Nan Ginen, as she writes her memoir in the 1960s from her home in Senegal, where she spends part of her old age. But far from being an idealized space of unity and primordial simplicity, Africa is a perspective that allows her to comprehend the nuances and differences of diaspora. During her 1930s fieldwork, Dunham’s sadness is rooted in an over-simplified transcendental desire for belonging without discomfort, for belief without ambivalence. The older Dunham, looking backward from Africa, is able to conceptualize the heterogeneity of belonging and dwell in its contradictions as an imperative to discover rather than to despair.

Ultimately, *Island Possessed* is a reformulation, not a rejection, of diasporic community. Dunham’s informants assure her, “anyone issuing from anyone remotely joined in kinship with ‘Nan Guinée, from Africa, is potentially ‘vaudun’ [sic]. If they do not practice it, it is because of ignorance, and those of us black people carried from Africa to other parts of the world, especially to the United States, are known to be in total ignorance of many truths.”⁶⁸ Throughout her time in Haiti, Dunham’s informants also express admiration for her commitments to their religion, telling her “it was

⁶⁶ Ibid., 46.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 273.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 60.

important that I carry the meaning of the true vaudun to my people in that other country [the United States].”⁶⁶ Dunham’s text does so, though not in the form of “songs and litanies and instructions” her “well-meaning informants” intended.⁶⁷ In *Island Possessed*, Dunham does not bring back the key to a diasporic belonging that would suture the wounds of the Middle Passage. Rather, she brings back a deeper knowledge about “blackness in the sense of spirit, a charismatic intangible.”⁶⁸ This knowledge is not an empty comfort, but “of utmost importance to the cult [of Vodou] itself.”⁶⁹ Vodou derives its power, not from an ability to offer a simple return to a quasi-fictive origin in Edenic Africa, but in its ability to sing a diasporic song in the present. The songs, rituals, and incantations Dunham was supposed to import to the US, then, are not spells to resurrect a past sense of belonging, but fragile threads of a web being spun in the present, carefully, uncertainly, between Africa and the Americas.

2.4 “The Essence of Life Seemed in Bodily Motion;” or, Helga Crane in the Jungle

The lessons Dunham learns in her travels to Haiti are not exclusive to the Haitian context. As I have noted earlier in this chapter, America in the era of its occupation of Haiti became a prime site of articulation for black cosmologies of liberations and resistance through the lens of an “inherited” religious framework. In her novel *Quicksand*, Larsen stages a similar interrogation of the conscripted destinies of black Americans, and a similar disaggregation of the universal qualities black people are supposed to share, as in Dunham’s ethnography. This novel can be read as a restaging of the “African” concert performances of her contemporaries in the social world of the

⁶⁶ Ibid., 107.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 107.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 74.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 107.

novel. The same tropes reign supreme: charismatic religious leadership, the allure and threat of self-annihilation in ecstatic dance and primitivist spectacles, and the preoccupation with agency that succumbing to dance of these entails. Yet even as it traffics in a simplistic primitivist symbology, Larsen's work is an ode to opacity. Even as the material trappings of primitivism are constantly evoked, the interpretation of their significance is always thwarted by the nuances of the cosmological struggle of black personhood. Larsen's heroines are often read as commentaries on the specific tragic catch-22 of mulata life,⁴ but I feel that this reading elides the way in which Larsen is deeply invested in the past and future of a community of African descent, be it mixed or no. Larsen's work is not a manifesto of mixed race exceptionalism; the mulata's ambiguous coloring comes to stand in for the various psychic contradictions, vagaries, and complexities that keep blackness from being monolithic, yet do not preclude it from constituting a real community with a shared past and a conscripted destiny.

Quicksand tells the story of a mixed-race woman's fraught relationship with the geographical and genealogical constraints of blackness. Helga Crane, a disinherited young woman born to a Danish-emigrant mother and a black father, finds herself restless and unhappy everywhere she lives: in Chicago, where she is born and spends an unloved childhood among her mother's white family; at Naxos, a black technical school where she is a teacher at the beginning of the novel; in Harlem, surrounded by an African-American elite embroiled in respectability politics; in Denmark, where her mother's relatives parade her through their social world like a circus attraction; back in Harlem; and finally, back in the rural South in an unhappy and physically-exhausting marriage to a Southern preacher. Helga's constant motion is a hunt for joy, born of her lament of "the clear bareness of her own small life and being, from which happiness and

serenity always faded just as they had shaped themselves.”⁷³ One such instance of fleeting happiness comes in a Harlem nightclub:

For a while, Helga was oblivious of the reek of flesh, smoke, and alcohol, oblivious of the oblivion of other gyrating pairs, oblivious of the color, the noise, and the grand distorted childishness of it all. She was drugged, lifted, sustained, by the extraordinary music, blown out, ripped out, beaten out, but the joyous wild, murky orchestra. The essence of life seemed in bodily motion. And when suddenly the music died, she dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it, began to taunt her. She hardened her determination to get away. She wasn't, she told herself, a jungle creature.⁷⁴

Helga's rejection of her "jungle" impulse is not meant to be read as a prescriptive relationship to black community. Helga's self-fashioning is as much rooted in her occasional unconscious lapses into the beckoning arms of community as it is in a disavowal of kinship. Her constant emphasis on the fact that she has no family and no "people"⁷⁵ stands in contradiction to the sentiment that she feels "as though she were shut up, boxed up, with hundreds of her race."⁷⁶ This middle passage metaphor of kinship—of strangers rather than family hemming the borders of one's subjectivity—is one in which a common Afro-diasporic destiny takes precedence over individual differences in language, class, and origin. Larsen constructs as tragic Helga's inability to see this kinship as anything other than a constraint.

Reflecting the experience of blackness in the Americas, the jungle / dancefloor becomes a space where one can take pleasure in the complexity of blackness. A space

⁷³ Larsen (1986), 116.

⁷⁴ Larsen (1986), 59.

⁷⁵ "I haven't any people. There's only me, so I can do as I please." Ibid., 38.

⁷⁶ Larsen (1986), 54.

where the oneness that the individual achieves with the community is not the oneness of an essentialized common origin, but a oneness of broken shards of identities. On the heels of Helga's ecstatic experience and her shame in the possibility that she may be a jungle creature, she observes the other denizens of the jungle, all united on the dancefloor:

For the hundredth time she marveled at the gradations within this oppressed race of hers. A dozen shades slid by. There was sooty black, shiny black, taupe, mahogany, bronze, copper, gold orange, yellow, peach, ivory, pinky white, pastry white. There was yellow hair, brown hair, black hair; straight hair, straightened hair, curly hair, crinkly hair, wooly hair. She saw black eyes in white faces, brown eyes in yellow faces, gray eyes in brown faces, blue eyes in tan faces. Africa, Europe, perhaps with a pinch of Asia, in a fantastic motley of ugliness and beauty, semi-barbaric, sophisticated, exotic, were here. But *she was blind to its charm* [emphasis added], purposely aloof and a little contemptuous and soon her interest in the moving mosaic waned.⁷

The sensual pleasure in this litany of color and textures is not unlike the pleasure Helga takes in her wardrobe. However, unlike the scenes in which Helga chooses to adorn herself in sumptuous fabrics, Helga is "blind" to the way in which she might put on the beauty of this assortment of moving colors; in other words, she refuses to identify with and thus become part of this particular community. It is the omniscient narrator who must interject her voice to alert the reader to a reality outside of Helga's realm of perception: that of the elusive happiness for which she longs. When she returns from Denmark, Helga is more susceptible to the charm of black American life:

⁷ Ibid., 59-60.

These were her people! [...] How absurd she had been to think that another country, another people, could liberate her from the ties which bound her forever to these mysterious, these terrible, these fascinating, these loveable, dark hordes. Ties that were of the spirit. Ties not only superficially entangled with mere outline of features or color of skin. Deeper. Much deeper than either of these.⁷⁵

But even this realization does not lead to the sense of fulfillment Helga seeks. For the future of blackness, like its past and present, reveals itself to her as a set of further constraints when she finds herself in a cycle of relentless non-consensual child-bearing in rural Alabama at the end of the novel.⁷⁶ Helga's four children are each described as a "little dab of amber humanity,"⁷⁷ and later, when she considers abandoning them, she takes solace in the fact that the abandonment would be physical rather than cosmic, for "they were all black together."⁷⁸ The shift in her parlance from amber to black illustrates the tension between the brightness and fragility of individual singularity (amber) and the stereotypes and binaries that flatten the associative plain of blackness to pure abjection, suffering, and loss.

What Helga embraces at the revivalist meeting and in her subsequent marriage to the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green is "the regaining of simple happiness, a happiness unburdened by the complexities of the lives she had known."⁷⁹ Her acceptance of this simple happiness serves as a foil to her disavowal of the pleasures of the jungle in the Harlem nightclub scene earlier in the novel. This acceptance comes in spite of her initial terror and repugnance at the scene, which she initially finds "foul, vile, and terrible,

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁷⁶ Interestingly, Helga expresses a staunch moral aversion to having children at several points earlier in the novel: "giving birth to little, helpless, unprotesting Negro children as a sin, an unforgivable outrage. More black folk to suffer indignities. More dark bodies for mobs to lynch" and "Why add any more unwanted, tortured Negroes to America? Why *do* Negroes have children? Surely it must be sinful." *Ibid.*, 75 and 103.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 114.

with its mixture of breaths, its contact of bodies, its concerted convulsions, all in a wild appeal for a single soul. Her soul.”⁸³ The loss of self that Helga experiences at the revival prompts a tragic spiral into the reproductive nightmare at the end of the novel. The two bacchanals of *Quicksand*—the first secular and the second religious—are poles between which Helga drifts throughout her peregrinations in the novel, settling on the latter only because she is tired from traveling for so long. Not to say that this is a parable of the failures of a religious community and the triumph of a secular one. Rather, in the revival scene Larsen critiques the quest for the “holiness of far-off simpler centuries,” epitomized by reclamation efforts of an Edenic pre-diasporic Africa.⁸⁴ This stands in direct contrast to the “moving mosaic” of the dancefloor, which is a celebration of opacity and difference, a proclamation that no century has ever been simpler. The moving mosaic catches uncertainty in its embrace by giving lie to the notions of an authentic, monolithic blackness. The sinister quality of the revival scene and its grotesque representations of “the writhings and weepings” of the congregation, comes from its greediness, its demand for conformity with one version of blackness.⁸⁵ When Helga enters the room, her difference causes turmoil among the worshippers: “At the sight of the bare arms and neck growing out of the clinging red dress, a shudder shook the swaying man on her right. On the face of the dancing woman before her, a frown gathered. She shrieked: “A scarlet ‘oman. Come to Jesus, you pore los’ Jezebel!”⁸⁶ Helga’s difference, the amber dab of humanity which she might have contributed to the palate of this scene, is something to be feared rather than incorporated. The true tragedy of Helga’s capitulation to the will of the congregation rather than to the will of the “joyous,

⁸³ Ibid., 113.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 114.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 113.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 112.

wild, murky orchestra” of the nightclub is the congregation’s demand for her sameness rather than for her difference.

Dress and costuming come to stand it for the blurriness of the line between the demands of a fictional atavistic blackness and the desire for a more fluid, consensual blackness which one can both choose and create. Even within the apparent loss of agency that seems to characterize blackness, embracing black community’s non-consensual arrangement enables new theorizations of pleasure and joy in which free-market choice does not define happiness. No, one cannot choose the amount of melanin in one’s skin, but one can certainly choose the colors one drapes over it, and whether these colors serve as shroud or ornament. In fact, Helga’s love of color is the only element of her blackness which she takes pleasure in describing atavistically: “Certainly she loved color with a passion that perhaps only Negroes and Gypsies know.”⁸⁷ While “the shroud of color” conscripts all black subjects regardless of attire, Larsen portrays that ineffable “love of color” as beyond and in excess of the shroud.⁸⁸ The “dean of women” at Naxos, the school where Helga is a teacher at the beginning of the novel, has a range of opinions on what colors are appropriate for black people to wear: “ ‘Bright colors are vulgar’—‘Black, gray, brown and navy blue are the most becoming colors for colored people’—‘Dark-complected people shouldn’t wear yellow, or green or red.’ ”⁸⁹ Helga, on the hand, thinks that somber colors are “ruinous to them, actually destroyed the luminous tones lurking in their dusky skins.”⁹⁰ To choose color is to choose blackness as ornament rather than as abjection. Even the term “black” itself elides the nuance and beauty of the range of colors in which “black” people actually come. Helga’s brightly-colored attire is both a demand to be looked at and a commitment to that which is

⁸⁷ Ibid., 69.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 75.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 18.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 19.

“luminous” in her rather than that which is ashamed, cringing, effacing in her. To dress colorfully is a way of *wearing* blackness rather than denying or apologizing for it.

Against a backdrop of over-determined visuality and social constraint, the “plea for color” is a counter-narrative to the dehumanizing narratives of black abjection.

However, the acknowledgement of blackness as joyful and luxuriant can never avoid the pitfalls of racism and objectification. In one of the most famous sections of *Quicksand*, Helga spends a season in Denmark with her mother’s aunt and uncle. Helga’s Danish family orchestrates a social tour that seems to amount to a kind of one-woman circus act in the parlors and drawing rooms of bourgeois Copenhagen, complete with an array of costumes of their choosing:

There were batik dresses in which mingled indigo, orange, green, vermillion, and black; dresses of velvet and chiffon in screaming colors, blood-red, sulfur-yellow, sea-green; and one black and white thing in startling combination. There was a black Manila shawl strewn with great scarlet and lemon flowers, a leopard skin coat, a glittering opera-cape. There were turbans like hats of metallic silks, feathers and furs, strange jewelry enameled or set with odd semi-precious stones, a nauseous Eastern perfume, shoes with dangerously high heels.⁹¹

Like bone necklaces and loincloths, like headwraps and 18th century general’s attire, Helga’s sumptuous wardrobe and its strategic deployment by her Danish relatives serves as a marker “that in her there was something, some characteristic, different from any that they possessed.”⁹² In sharp contrast to the garish primitivism of the “leopard print” and “turbans” of her relatives’ choosing, Helga’s own choice of costuming is slightly unorthodox yet understated: “the colors were queer; dark purples, royal blues,

⁹¹ Ibid., 74.

⁹² Ibid., 82.

rich greens, deep reds, in soft, luxurious woolens or heavy, clinging silks.”⁹³ It is not true, however, that the “screaming colors” which she regards with such indignation are not wholly incompatible with her own aesthetic. The “vivid green and gold negligee”⁹⁴ in which Helga first appears at the beginning of the novel, as well as the “cobwebby black net touched with orange”⁹⁵ she wears on the eve of her departure to Denmark and the “clinging red dress”⁹⁶ she wears to the revival are all articles of clothing that exhibit the same showiness and loudness as her Danish costumes. The black and orange net gives Helga “the air of something about to fly.”⁹⁷ Indeed, Helga chooses to adorn herself in “screaming colors” at moments of departure, moments in which she is restless, moments in which she is about to fly. And while the moments at which Helga chooses to fly are similarly marked by the constraints of an over-determined visibility, Helga’s choice of color is not a futile act of self-objectification indistinguishable from her relatives’ imposed objectification. Despite its complicity with pathological narratives of black difference, Helga’s love of color—whether instinctive or chosen—actively lays claim to black difference as transformative and beautiful. By linking this love of color to an impulse to fly, Larsen urges the reader to conceive of costuming as a way of changing the way in which black bodies inhabit space. Monica Miller, in her study of black dandyism, identified the sartorial commitments of interwar Harlem as a spatial practice: “As threatening as comic to white onlookers, well-dressed blacks sauntering down shared city streets their Sunday best or Saturday night special represented an actual and symbolic contest for territory.”⁹⁸ Even within racist assumptions of blackness as a fixed

⁹³ Ibid., 19.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 56.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 112.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 56.

⁹⁸ Miller (2009), 199.

set of characteristics, there is room for an affective and geographical motion that sidesteps rather than escapes racism.

In other words, perhaps the “unhappy questioning mood”⁹⁹ that plagues Helga throughout the novel and prompts her wanderings is not a state to be avoided, but one to be cultivated. Perhaps her ephemeral movements on the dancefloor, like the circular tracks of her errantry, are meant to be embraced in their fleetingness rather than discarded simply because they do not last. Helga’s wandering takes Frantz Fanon’s final plea at the end of *Black Skins, White Masks*—“O my body, make of me always a man who questions” —to its ultimate, logical extension.¹⁰⁰ In this formulation, it is the embodied experience of blackness that prompts exploration, curiosity, questions, It is precisely that quality that makes spaces unlivable—the fact of being a black body in the world—which impels that body to seek out new frontiers, both psychic and geographical. The black body is itself the utopian impulse. Only when Helga’s body is moored to the small Alabama town where she has her four children does the possibility of a utopian elsewhere reveal itself to be a nowhere and crumble in her hands.¹⁰¹ But Larsen’s vision is not so much a nihilistic one about the futility of the search for black communitarianism, but rather it makes a case for the primacy and necessity of the search itself. Helga’s nomadism throughout *Quicksand* is of the variety which Glissant terms “circular”:
seasonal and redundant, exhausting its homeland and moving on, yet returning when the land has regenerated and sprouted new possibilities.¹⁰² As opposed to the colonial practice of “arrowlike” nomadism, the conqueror’s nomadism, which seeks to imbed itself deep into the flesh of foreign lands and to stay, even if its presence wounds.

⁹⁹ Larsen (1986), 83.

¹⁰⁰ Fanon (2008), 206.

¹⁰¹ “For one how had never thought of her body save as something on which to hang lovely fabrics, had now constantly think of it.” Larsen (1986), 123.

¹⁰² “Rather than the enjoyment of freedom, is nomadism not a form of obedience to contingencies that are restrictive? [...] Circular nomadism is a not-intolerant form of an impossible settlement.” Glissant (1997), 12.

Helga's peregrinations seek not to claim ownership over space, but to find a version of life that is livable, breathable, beautiful. And it is when her journeys end that Helga must resign herself to a life devoid of all of these qualities. If, for Larsen, "the essence of life" is "in bodily motion," that essence is quelled in the stagnancy of destinations and in the parasitic obstinacy of arrowlike nomadism. Helga's circular nomadism is itself a new dance for diasporic hearts and feet.

3. Witcheries of Color: The Doudou's Vodou

He who first gave to Martinique its poetical name, Le Pays des Revenants, thought of his wonderful island only as "The Country of Comers-back," where Nature's unspeakable spell bewitches wandering souls like the caress of a Circe. Yet either translation of the name holds equal truth: a land of ghosts it is, this marvelous Martinique!

—Lafcadio Hearn, *Two Years in the French West Indies*

if History saw them as pigs, History was Circe.

—Derek Walcott, *Omeros*

In the tangled web of diasporic kinship, Vodou stands in for a life-giving practice from whose rituals we have been severed by years of colonialism. Even in the West Indies, where a number of parallel and intersecting African-derived spiritual traditions continue to this day, Vodou is synonymous with unalienated and authentic spiritual practice. In a 1978 interview, Aimé Césaire claims that Vodou no longer exists in Martinique as a religion, but rather “as a tendency, as a sequel,” present in the psychic life of Martinicans.¹ But what exactly does he mean by this? The Martinican practices most closely related to Haitian Vodou—the traffic in various charms, curses, and healing rites performed by local magicians—are called *quimbois*.² However, much like obeah in the Anglophone Caribbean, *quimbois* is not a cosmology in itself, but a set of mystical rites that a specialist can perform in order to protect, venge, or heal his or her clients.

¹ “Il n’a pas de vaudou à la Martinique comme *religion constituée*, mais il existe, à mon avis, comme tendance, comme séquelle...” Césaire (1978), xviii.

² Revert’s (1951) classic but somewhat alarmist anthropological text, *La magie antillaise*, portrays *quimbois* as a practice which sows discord and mistrust among Martinicans, who must be constantly on guard against curses sent by the jealous or disgruntled. While more recent ethnographies, like the work of Bougerol (1997) have presented a more balanced vision of *quimbois*, the image of Vodou in the West Indian public imaginary remains along the lines of Revert’s opinion: sly, subterranean, and full of scarcely-concealed bad intentions.

There is no pantheon in *quimbois*, and its services are bought from an expert, not earned or requested from the gods.³ However, despite the absence of an overarching religious structure to organize the world of spirits, Martinican folk culture has a lively and long-lived tradition of engagements with supernatural beings, mostly malignant in nature. Part of the responsibilities of the *quimboiseur/quimboiseuse*, in fact, is to ward off, neutralize, or harness the presence of these evil spirits. *Zombis*, evil and uncanny beings who can disguise themselves as people or animals, but can be distinguished by the fact that their proportions are slightly altered—too tall, too small, faceless, missing one leg. *Revenants*, the spirits of the dead returned. *Loups-garou*, shapeshifters who wander at night. *Bêtes engagées*, animals charmed by *quimboiseurs/quimboiseuses* in order to do harm to humans. *Soukougougnans*, women who remove their skins at night, turn into birds, and wander the earth in search of children to eat. *Diablesses*, beautiful temptress spirits who lure men to their doom. As in many other parts of the Caribbean, women are often both the bearers of these bedtime tales to their children, as well as the villains of the tales themselves. Césaire’s original use of Vodou as a tendency was to explain Martinican group behaviors in times of election or carnival. However, a literal interpretation of Césaire’s maxim opens the possibility of a feminist reading. If Vodou exists in Martinique as a tendency towards the supernatural, then surely women are its principal servitors.

Because of this, the fraught and demonized status of the supernatural in Martinique is deeply informed by the fraught and demonized status of women themselves in the country. From Frantz Fanon’s searing indictment of Mayotte Capécia and her desire to “whiten the race,” to numerous scholarly dismals of Suzanne Césaire’s

³ Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert (2011), 179-82. This point about the lack of gods does not hold true for East Indian *quimboiseurs*, who have incorporated the worship of certain Hindu gods into their rituals. Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert (2011), 181.

work as purely derivative of her more illustrious husband's and as merely ancillary to her apparently otherworldly beauty, these two Francophone West Indian writers have met more doubt and denigration than consideration within the Caribbean intellectual tradition. The negative critical reception of both writers is due in large part to the lens of the "doudou," a colonial-era trope that positions West Indian women of color as the teachers and enforcers of West Indian alienation through their doomed romantic entanglements with white French colonialists. In this genre, according to French scholar Régis Antoine, "the islands are feminine, a femininity reduced to a caricature of disposition and situation, as wrecked and abandoned by love" ["des îles au feminine, et une féminité réduite à un stéréotype de caractère et de situation, l'épave de l'amour"].⁴ Literary historian Brent Hayes Edwards describes the trope of the "doudou" in French West Indian literature as a kind of "Antillean grammarbook" with which all Antillean women must contend in their attempts at self-representation.⁵ As a literary-historical trope, the "doudou" usually refers to a caste of mixed-race (as opposed to darker-skinned) women who are the passive and beautiful concubines of white French colonists. The Creole word "doudou" is a term of endearment created from the repetition of the word "dou," which means soft, gentle, or sweet to the taste. The woman who comes to be called "the doudou" encompasses all of these meanings. Despite the obvious racist and imperialist pitfalls of the doudou trope, West Indian male intellectuals' aversion to it—and their flight in the opposite direction—owes as much to misogynist fears about emasculation as it does to anti-racism and anti-imperialism. For intellectuals like Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire, rejection of the doudou often manifests as a rejection of the feminine as such. Or, if not a rejection, a relegation of the woman to a series of problematic tropes symbolizing the land's long-suffering tolerance

⁴ Antoine (1978), 354. Translation from the French is my own.

⁵ Edwards (2003), 159.

of colonial abuse and its role as the hearth-bound and child-bearing mother of all radicals, bearing but never participating in the revolutionary struggle. The persistent sexual metaphors of the Negritude poets depend upon the recumbent female body of Antilles-Africa, whose passive sensuality must be reclaimed by and for the black male.⁶ This feminized body of the land is a point of departure and return, but can have no movement of its own volition.

In this chapter, I argue that colonial narratives of the doudou's abjection are imbedded with their own counter-critique because of their incorporation of subversive female characters from Martinican folklore. Folkloric characters like the *soukougans*, women who remove their skins at night, turn into birds, and wander the earth in search of children to eat; and *diablasses*, beautiful temptress spirits who are actually demons seeking to lure men to their doom.⁷ *Soukougans* and *diablasses* are legends that pathologize female agency by representing clever women who travel as necessarily malignant. These legends introduce the intimation of anti-colonial and anti-patriarchal resistance beneath the fabled beauty and sweetness of the Martinican woman of color. The ever-present suggestion of magical and supernatural power within colonial narratives of the doudou runs counter to their representations of gendered submission and compliance, constantly unsettling the image of the women of color as a welcoming hostess to her colonial guests—an irony upon which both Césaire and Capécia capitalize in their own self-representation. Their constant suggestions of malignant magical power, rooted in West Indian folkloric traditions of female shapeshifters, asks us to read against the grain of colonial literature, allowing the woman of color to become a kind of Circe,

⁶ See, for example, Aimé Césaire's poem "Dit d'errance": "Body of woman isle restored / body of woman amply freighted / body of woman foam-begotten / body of woman isle rediscovered," which posits the spiritual work of Negritude as a reclamation of Martinique's feminized and abused body. Césaire (1984), 102.

⁷ For a full genealogy of the representation of female shapeshifting and vampirism in West Indian literature and folklore, see Anatol (2015). As Anatol notes, the *soukougnan* exists in various incarnations across the Afro-diasporic folklore, including that of the Anglophone Caribbean and the American South.

capable of inverting colonial power dynamics by turning her unwelcome guests into pigs.

3.1 Strange Fruits: Women, Nature, and the Challenge of the Doudou

In colonial literature, the doudou is portrayed as the product of generations of concubinage, yet perfectly conditioned to accept and embrace concubinage as a tropical form of love. One of the major disseminators of this idea was journalist and folklorist Lafcadio Hearn, whose 1890 travelogue *Two Years in the French West Indies* provides a wealth of information and opinions on nineteenth century Martinican colonial society.⁸ The woman of color in the tropics, according to Lafcadio Hearn, is bred to possess “an inherent skepticism in the duration of love, and a marvelous capacity for accepting the destiny of abandonment as one accepts the natural and the inevitable.”⁹ This woman’s sweetly accepting nature comes to stand in for various kinds of sweetness and compliance at all levels of Martinican culture, as in this passage from *Two Years in the French West Indies*:

You see youth good to look upon as ripe fruit; and the speech of the people is as soft as a coo; and eyes of brown girls caress you with a passing look [...] Love’s world, you may have heard, has few restraints here, where nature ever seems to

⁸ The publication of the French translation of this text in 1930s was popular both in the French West Indies and metropolitan France. Despite the racism and paternalism imbedded in Hearn’s writing, many twentieth century Martinican intellectuals consider themselves indebted to his legacy. Aimé Césaire writes a paeon to Lafcadio Hearn called “Statue de Lafcadio Hearn.” Césaire (1984), 66. Hearn’s writing on Martinican folklore is frequently excerpted and referenced in *Tropiques* [Césaire (1978), 14-18], and Raphaël Confiant goes so far as to attribute to Hearn the invention “of what we might now call ‘multiple identity’ or ‘creoleness.’” Confiant (2001), xii.

⁹ Hearn (1890), 330.

cry out, like the swart seller of corossoles:—“Ça qui lè doudoux”? [Who wants sweets?]. . .¹⁰

The intersection of racism and misogyny, in its Caribbean incarnation, has a deep anxiety about landscape. The doudou trope created a nexus of images around the Caribbean landscape that focused on its beauty, its fecundity, and its passive sexual availability to colonial rapine. The islands themselves, with their fruits and flowers, their gentle caressing breezes and wanton temperatures, are an analog to the platonic ideal of the mixed-race woman in colonial literature. All gentleness and compliance, all yielding flesh and sweet sighs, all soft obeisance to her colonial lover without ever a demand for reciprocity or a thought of resentment. The doudou becomes both the cause of colonialism (she must be possessed) and its justification (she wants to be possessed).

Doudou literature, as the traffic in these stereotypes comes to be called,¹¹ is the unique conflation of a sweet and inviting landscape with the bodies of the sweet and inviting women that people it. Hearn crystallizes all the hallmarks of doudou literature: a conflation of women, fruits, and flowers;¹² exoticized sexual fantasies of a “warm and childish race;” and the sentiment, with which he concludes the book, that the tropics are “inimical to thought” and that he must free himself from their clutches and return to his life of the mind in Northern climes.¹³ The same gorgeous island landscape that constantly amazes with its “witcheries of color” has a perplexingly septic atmosphere that creates a

¹⁰ Ibid., 381.

¹¹ This term was popularized by Aimé and Suzanne Césaire and their collaborators in the dissident journal *Tropiques* (1941-1945). See Césaire (2009), 63-66 for an example of an anti-colonial critique of doudou literature. While I have chosen to use Hearn as a metonymy for doudou literature, it is important to note that he is part of a wider narrative geography of colonial travel writing that includes Alexander-Stanislaus von Wimpffen, Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, John Antoine Nau, Leconte de Lisle, José María Heredia, and Francis Jammes.

¹² For instance, “among the brighter half-breeds, the colors, I think, are much more fruit-like;—there are banana-tints, lemon-tones, orange-hues, with sometimes a mingling of ruddiness as in the pink ripening of a mango. Hearn (1890), 46.

¹³ Ibid., 389.

variety of strange psychological and racial effects.¹⁴ One of these, according to Hearn, is the discrepancy between the dispositions of men and women of color:

Said a creole once, in my hearing:—'The gens-de-coleur [mixed-race Martinicans] are just like the *tourlouroux* [Hearn's footnote: "a sort of land-crab;—the female is selected for food, and properly cooked, makes a delicious dish;—the male is almost worthless"]: one must pick out the females and leave the males alone.' [...] he referred to the curious but indubitable fact that the character of the colored woman appears in many respects far superior to that of the colored man.¹⁵

Hearn mitigates this rather horrific meditation with a reflection that women of color are not exactly superior to men; they are just more compliant. According to Hearn, Martinican men navigated slavery through feats of arms, while Martinican women navigated slavery by offering themselves up as sexual playthings:

the colored male slave might win liberty as the guerdon of bravery in fighting against foreign invasion, or might purchase it by extraordinary economy, [...] but in either case his success depended upon the possession and exercise of qualities the reverse of amiable. On the other hand, the bondwoman won manumission chiefly through her power to excite affection. In the survival and perpetuation of the fittest of both sexes these widely different characteristics would obtain more and more definition with successive generations.¹⁶

Hearn's dichotomy lays the groundwork for a conception of Martinican women as not just apolitical, but anti-revolutionary. Choosing comfort over resistance, complicity over revolution, the woman of color of Hearn's imaginary is the perfect colonial subject. Bred

¹⁴ Ibid., 64 and 387-390.

¹⁵ Ibid., 332.

¹⁶ Ibid., 333.

to be beautiful, pleasant, and obliging—like a scentless flower, a seedless fruit, the carefully-crafted hybrid of generations of sexual abuse.

However, Hearn's interest in the supernatural dimensions of the Martinican landscape and his explorations of various shapeshifters in West Indian ghost stories quietly unsettles his depiction of the doudou. In Hearn's Martinique, nature is constantly on the verge of revolt, the air itself "pregnant with activities of dissolutions so powerful that the mightiest tree begins to melt to wax the moment it has ceased to live."¹⁷ The flora and vegetation of the jungles of Mt. Pelée symbolize Hearn's conception of nature waiting to pounce upon the unsuspecting colonizer. The lianas and creepers of the jungle bide their time until the death of their human pseudo-masters, after which lianas will invade, "feeling for the dust of hearts, groping among the bones;—and all that love has hidden away shall be restored to Nature,—absorbed into the rich juices of her verdure."¹⁸ Nature, in other words, unsettles notions of colonial domination and superiority by erasing their traces with such efficiency. This female-personified nature is a force to which Hearn attributes agency:

In the North a tree is simply a tree;—here it is a personality that makes itself felt; it has a vague physiognomy, an indefinable *Me*: it is an Individual (with a capital I); it is a Being (with a capital B).¹⁹

If in the tropics a tree is an Individual, what does this mean for the women who grow out of the same soil? If Nature herself dreams of destruction, who is to say her daughters, plant and human alike, do not share in those dreams? The metonymic relationship Hearn establishes between women and plantlife begins to eat away the

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

doudou's sweet nature, making it seem both unlikely and incongruous with the rebellious Nature from which it grows.

While Hearn turns a paternalistic eye upon the "superstitions" of Martinican women, he is clearly not immune to fears of unseen malignant forces.²⁰ Hearn devotes several chapters of his travelogue to legends of shapeshifters and malevolent local spirits, relying mostly upon the tales of his landlady and her daughter, to whom he poses such questions as "What is a zombi?"²¹ Not only are women the believers and disseminators of the "superstitious" tales of zombies, demons, and ghosts that Hearn details throughout his travelogue and novels, but they themselves are transformed through Hearn's words into the very creatures they fear in folktales. This is illustrated by Hearn's mingled fascination and repugnance regarding the labor of Martinican *porteuses* [women porters] and *blanchisseuses* [washerwomen]. These professions require incredible amounts of strength and endurance—the former involving the balancing of loads weighing hundreds of pounds upon one's head and carrying them over mountain trails for hours at a time; the latter entailing standing knee-deep in frigid flood-prone waters for thirteen hours a day, wringing heavy sheets.²² While Hearn devotes several chapters to their strength and beauty, he also presents these women as somehow not human:

You wonder of what flesh and blood these people can be made,—what wonderful vitality lies in these slender woman-bodies, which, under the terrible

²⁰ Hearn categorizes Martinican folklore as particularly outlandish: "Nowhere in the world, perhaps, is popular imagination more oddly naïve and superstitious; nowhere are facts more readily exaggerated or distorted into unrecognizability." Hearn (1890), 149.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 187.

²² *Ibid.*, 101-120 and 241-247.

sun, and despite their astounding expenditure of force, remain as cool to the sight and touch as bodies of lizards and serpents.²³

These women's work—"Remember, she has to walk fifty miles between dawn and dark, under a sun to which a single hour's exposure, without the protection of an umbrella, is perilous to any European or American"—is a demonstration of both their superhuman and subhuman qualities.²⁴ At once strong enough to endure any hardship, and mysterious enough to do so with effortless beauty, the *porteuse* and the *blanchisseuse* become mythic creatures in their own right by dint of the sheer impossibility of their tasks. Hearn's discomfiture lies not so much in the inhumanity of the work, but in the secret vitality of those who perform it. Already, the *doudou* has shed her skin and become a lizard-creature, a creature whose strength, were it directed elsewhere, has the capacity to destroy just as thoroughly as the lianas and creepers that surround her. In the following section, I will discuss the *doudou*'s metamorphosis in a different (but equally ambivalent) discursive landscape: that of the French West Indian intellectual tradition.

3.2 A Man Who Questions: The Woman of Color and the Black Man

The final exhortation of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*—"O my body, make of me always a man who questions!"—is dependent on the black man's disarticulation from a black woman who does not question.²⁵ This woman is epitomized by Mayotte Capécia's semi-autobiographical novel *Je suis martiniquaise*, which becomes the *bête noire* of the infamous second chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*. In this chapter,

²³ Ibid., 392.

²⁴ Ibid., 107.

²⁵ Fanon (2008), 206.

entitled “The Woman of Color and the White Man,” Fanon accuses Capécia of “advocating unhealthy behavior” in her narration of her desire for a white partner, which Fanon describes as “striving for lactification” (25). Capécia, whose name was the alias of Lucette Combette, a Martinican woman of color, comes to stand in for all Martinican women:

In a word, the race must be whitened; every woman in Martinique knows this, says this and reiterates it. Whiten the race, save the race, but not along the lines you might think; do not safeguard ‘the originality of that part of the world in which they grew up,’ but ensure its whiteness.²⁶

This attack is deeply rooted in the narratives perpetuated by Hearn, in which the woman of color yields to, and indeed comes to love, the sexual violence inflicted upon her. Fanon, as a black man married to a white woman, asserts that, unlike the power dynamic between white men and women of color and its historical baggage of rape and concubinage, “relations between a white woman and a black man automatically become a romantic affair. It is a gift and not rape.”²⁷ This vision of the Antillean woman of color as simultaneously brutalized and inviting brutalization is intimately tied with Fanon’s brand of pan-Africanism. Fanon’s quest for “true love, real love”²⁸ in the microcosm of interracial heterosexual relationships is the beginning stage of his quest for a cosmic love—the kind of egalitarian brotherhood in which man can “touch the other, feel the other, discover each other” in a postcolonial, post-racist world order.²⁹

Fanon’s reliance on the word “man” in the final chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* is not incidental. The new world order he is striving to create not only excludes

²⁶ Ibid., 29-30.

²⁷ Ibid., 28.

²⁸ Fanon goes so far as to state that the goal of the text is to enable an idealized form of love: “Today, we believe in the possibility of love, and that is the reason why we are endeavoring to trace its imperfections and perversions.” Fanon (2008), 24.

²⁹ Ibid., 206.

black women, but requires the wholesale rejection of their reproductive and emotional labor. When Fanon asserts “I have no right to put down roots” and “I am not a slave to the slavery that dehumanized by ancestors,” his renunciation of kinship runs deeper than his storied patricidal impulses towards the architects of the Negritude movement.³⁰ It is a matricidal impulse as well, because a rejection of history and of the West Indian landscape can only ever be a rejection of the maternity with which they are associated. An escape from the historical circumstances that produced him is also a relegation of the genealogy of rape and concubinage to a problem that can be overcome with sufficient agency, force of will, and heightened-consciousness. The woman of color of Fanon’s second chapter, so mired in false consciousness that she has come to love her rapist, is to be abandoned rather than reabsorbed into the postcolonial world. In a text concerned with the psychic rehabilitation of hu[man]ity, Fanon is strikingly silent on the subject of how to heal the purported psychic wounds of the woman of color. It is not simply that she is “advocating unhealthy behavior;” she herself becomes the symptom, the sickness of which the black man must rid himself, “the flaw that must be expelled once and for all.”³¹ If black abjection is a malady in the Fanonian imaginary, then it is Antillean women who pass it on and reinforce it in their children. Fanon’s desires to seize control of the means of reproduction and childrearing that has traditionally been in the hands of women. This desire is both biological—to halt the flow of “delightful little blue-eyed chromosomes, pedaling down the corridor of chromosomes” —and pedagogical—he meets a Martinican woman in France who says she would never marry a black man, and he admits, “I am worried because in a few years’ time this Martinican woman will graduate and return home to the French West Indies to teach.”³² He seeks to wrest the

³⁰ Ibid., 204.

³¹ Ibid., 25 and 44.

³² Ibid., 34 and 30.

future children of the world from the irresponsible hands of their mothers and create a race of enlightened, post-racial subjects.

Historically, scholarship on Capécia has been filtered through the lens of Fanon's critique, and often marked by a desire for anti-racist scholars to preserve Fanon's legacy as a champion of the oppressed. Scholarly considerations of Capécia are characterized by a paradoxical denial of her agency (claims that the text was actually written by her French-Swiss editors as a piece of colonial propaganda) and a tendency to diagnose the text as a purely autobiographical confession of the author's alienation.³³ However, *Je suis Martiniquaise* was a novel with some autobiographical detail, but by no means an autobiography, and the author's limited education certainly did not preclude her from writing a novel. In reality, Capécia was Lucette Combette,³⁴ a semi-literate Martinican woman of working class origins, whose affair with a Vichy naval officer during World War II served as the basis for the second half of the book. In the novel as well as in Combette's lived experience, the Vichy officer abandons her and the infant son he has fathered, amidst many grandiose explanations of the doomed and tragic nature of their love (Cottias and Dobie 2012, 16-17).³⁵ Fanon critiques Capécia's thwarted desire to be a respectable woman, when she ends the novel with: "I would have liked so much to become a respectable woman. I would have liked so much to marry a white man. But a woman of color is never entirely respectable in the eyes of a white man. Even if he loves her, I knew well" ["J'aurais tant voulu devenir une femme respectable. J'aurais voulu me

³³ A prime example of this brand of scholarship is A. James Arnold's article "Frantz Fanon Lafcadio Hearn et la supercherie de Mayotte Capécia," to be discussed later in this chapter. A few notable exceptions to this trend include Makward (1999), and Cottias and Dobie (2012).

³⁴ Following the lead of Cottias and Dobie (2012), 15, I choose to refer to the author of the text as Capécia unless I am discussing specific autobiographical information from Combette's life, in order to preserve the distance Combette herself sought to establish between herself and her narrative persona.

³⁵ Combette's lover, in real life, wrote a three-hundred page religious tract detailing why their interracial romance could never be. In the novel, his analog contents himself with a letter in which he explains to her that their love "must pass into the realm of ideas;" an answer which Mayotte, unsurprisingly, finds unacceptable. Capécia (2012), 159.

marier, mais avec un blanc. Seulement, une femme de couleur n'est jamais tout à fait respectable aux yeux d'un blanc. Même s'il aime, je le sais"].³⁶ As Capécia's narration reveals, her desire is not a desire for a white man as such, but rather for an escape from the narratives by which she is bound. She is looking for a new framework, one beyond the illusive qualities of "respectability" on the one hand and "devilry" on the other. This is exemplified by one poignant scene during a Carnival ball in Fort-de-France when Capécia is a teenager, in which she dresses as a man and dances with an alluring masked woman. Capécia takes the lead, describing her partner as both elegant and beautiful. Here, the possibility of occupying a position in which Capécia can lead, "grabbing her quite vigorously by the waist," is dashed when Capécia's paramour speaks and reveals herself to in fact be "a mixed-race man named Yvon, one of my neighbors, an insufferable windbag, who flirted with me every time he saw me" ["un métis nommé Yvon, un de mes voisins, un insupportable bavard, qui me faisait la cour chaque fois qu'il me voyait."].³⁷ It is with some sadness that Capécia resumes dancing with him "in the manner of a woman," a sadness which is mirrored by the "death of Carnival" ["la mort de *Vaval*"].³⁸ This briefly idealized social world—in which Capécia can lead a dance, flirt without fear, and choose a partner based on something other than social necessity—is revealed to be both temporary and unstable, confined as its socially approved compartment of Carnival. The social potentiality of gender fluidity dies and is buried with Carnival. The last day of Carnival is called "the day of the *guiablesse* [sic]," in which everyone takes to the streets screaming and dancing, all dressed in black with "faces so uniformly covered in flour that it is no longer possible to distinguish black people from white people" ["des visages si uniformément enfarinés qu'il n'est plus

³⁶ Capécia 2012, 169. All translations of Capécia's text are my own.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 126.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

possible de reconnaître les nègres des blancs”].³⁹ In this ritual, as well as in Capécia’s fleeting cross-dressed flirtation, the true subterfuge represented by the *diablesse* lies in the false promises of whiteness and masculinity, rather than in the woman of color’s desire to access them through performance and play.

Throughout her text, Capécia constantly reverses the notions of whose behavior can truly be considered devilish or duplicitous. In an argument with her god-fearing sister, Capécia feels unattached to the conventions of marriage and views extra-marital arrangements as an equally valid choice. When her sister expresses horror at her father’s extra-marital relationships, called in common parlance “se faire marier par le Diable” [to be married by the devil], Mayotte comes to the defense of this practice by saying she does not need the mayor and the priest to approve of her marriage as long as she finds a man who makes her happy, and tells her sister, “The Devil doesn’t exist. It just means there won’t be a church wedding [...] You disgust me with your talk of devilry” [“Le Diable n’existe pas. Cela veut di’ simplement que le ma’iage ne se fera pas à l’église [...] Tu me dégoûtes avec ton langage diabolique”].⁴⁰ When she establishes her relationship with André, the French colonial officer, however, Capécia quickly discovers that he does not offer the alternative social formation she has in mind. Even at the beginning of their relationship, she rejects the ring he puts on her finger, thinking of her childhood friend Loulouze, who was given a fool’s gold ring by her unfaithful lover before he impregnated and abandoned her. And when her sister remarks on how lucky she is and how happy she must be, she “[replies] sadly, “I am so happy.”⁴¹ By the end of the novel she hates him for abandoning her, for thinking she “could live off memory

³⁹ Ibid., 126.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 106.

⁴¹ Ibid., 147.

alone.”⁴² Thus, the respectability politics of this book could perhaps be more accurately titled the politics of respect. Capécia is searching for a mode of relationality that, based on her experiences, does not seem to exist in her society: that of a woman of color who does not live under the shadow of the doudou. Much like Fanon, perhaps, her quest is for a new and radically different formulation of love. The novel is a narration of the impossibility of that quest in West Indian colonial society.

This proves to be impossible in the literary as well as the social world. The literary scholar A. James Arnold calls *Je suis Martiniquaise* a “fraud” because of the editorial involvement of white men in its production. Arnold argues that Fanon, like most readers of the novel, was duped into thinking he was attacking a real woman: “Fanon, thinking he was picking a fight with a Martinican, was actually fighting the French-Swiss!” [“Fanon, croyant prendre à parti une Martiniquaise, combattait des Franco-Suisses!”].⁴³ He cites the numerous misspellings in her personal correspondence as evidence that “she would have been entirely incapable of writing even a mediocre literary text” [“elle n’aurait été bien incapable d’écrire un texte littéraire quelconque”].⁴⁴ Therefore, Arnold labels the similarities between Capécia’s descriptions of West Indian colonial life in the novel and those in Lafcadio Hearn’s *Two Years in the French West Indies* as plagiarism. Never mind that the popularity of the French translation of Hearn in interwar Martinique and France made it a possibility that even someone who was not well-versed in literature was familiar with it.⁴⁵ Never mind that both Hearn and Combette resided in the same region in Martinique, the northern Caribbean coast around St. Pierre. Never mind that there could be a variety of deliberate aesthetic and

⁴² Ibid., 159.

⁴³ Arnold (2002), 163. All translations of this article are my own.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 154.

⁴⁵ Paul Morand, who will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four, attests to the book’s immense appeal in the primitivist fads of the 1920s in Morand (1929), *Hiver caraïbe*, 47-48.

intellectual reasons why Capécia could have chosen to interpellate Hearn. It does not seem inappropriate to conjecture that perhaps, if an educated man had purported to be the author of this text, it would be lauded as intertextuality rather than attacked as plagiarism.

My concern is not whether *Je suis Martiniquaise* is a pure and unadulterated expression of a Martinican woman's psyche. More interesting is the incredibly vitriolic nature of the attacks leveled against it, and the pains both Fanon and Arnold go to in order to discredit it. What do they see in this novel that makes them so uncomfortable? Arnold spells it out explicitly: "The colonies being by definition 'feminine' in relation to male colonial power, there needed to be a feminine voice to define, the new overseas departments"["Les colonies étant par définition « féminines » par rapport au mâle pouvoir colonial, il fallait une voix de femme pour définir, aux yeux des Français, les nouveaux DOM"].⁶⁶ Arnold's article presents colonization as a process of feminization. It goes without saying that Arnold's conception of the feminine is wholly negative, making it synonymous with dependency, exploitation, and alienation. The recent efforts at reclaiming Capécia's work, according to Arnold, are the result of the over-eager "politically-correct" feminist criticism of "those who seek to make Fanon seem like a horrible misogynist" ["celles qui ont cherché à faire de Fanon un affreux misogyne"].⁶⁷ What is at stake here is not just Fanon's reputation, but a much larger debate about whether Antilleans are men who question, or women who do not. In setting Capécia's legacy against Fanon's, Arnold produces a kind of Manichaeism in which a masculine

⁶⁶ Ibid., 149.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 164. Note the feminine form of "they" in Arnold's original formulation, connoting that women are the ones attempting to undermine Fanon's reputation as a defender of the wretched. Indeed, in Sharpley-Whiting (1998), she also critiques some of the feminist scholarship on Capécia vis-a-vis their defense of Capécia's choice in sexual partners as foisted upon her by economic necessity. Sharpley-Whiting argues that this over-simplified reading actually denies the character the autonomy and financial agency that she exhibited in the book as a self-sufficient businesswoman [Sharpley-Whiting (1998), 38-39]. However, it goes without saying that scholarly explorations of Capécia are not limited to the realm of naïve glorification and/or antagonisms against Fanon personally, as Arnold suggests.

anti-colonial struggle is pitted against a feminine acceptance of the colonial order, epitomized by the referendum of 1946, in which Martinicans and Guadeloupeans voted for French departmentalization over independence.* Although Fanon does not explicitly avow this dichotomy, he lays the groundwork for it with his flagrant misreading of *Je suis martiniquaise*: “Mayotte loves a white man unconditionally. He is her lord. She asks for nothing, demands nothing except for a little whiteness in her life.”** To interpret Capécia’s rage and hatred for her French lover at the end of the novel as “unconditional love” and her relationship to André as one of subordination is flimsy at best. It is simply untrue of a novel whose heroine is financially independent, who rejects her lover’s excuses for abandoning her, and who assumes full responsibility for choosing to stay with and/or leave sexual partners of both races. *Black Skin, White Masks* certainly represents a more youthful version of Fanon’s thought, so it is entirely possible that his opinions on the irredeemability of West Indian womanhood changes over the course of his career, but given his pan-Africanist turn and his subsequent silence on the subject of the West Indies, I will conjecture that this is not the case. Fanon’s turn to Africa as the site of true revolutionary potentiality can be seen as a judgment leveled against the Antilles, from whose poisoned breast he drank the wine of alienation, and who he needed to abandon in order to grow into the full manhood of postcolonial emancipation.

Certainly, Mayotte Capécia refuses any simple or unambivalent relationship to whiteness or colonization. She does not endorse the politics of the Vichy occupation, but she certainly never embraces Gaullism. She rejects the philandering of West Indian and European men alike, the only difference being her unabashed interest in the social

* As Gary Wilder argues in his most recent book, departmentalization was by no means an expression of West Indian self-hatred and alienation, as it was championed by leading anti-colonial thinkers like Aimé Césaire as a pragmatist means of laying claim to the French republic their lives and labor had helped to build. Wilder (2015).

** Fanon (2008), 25.

potentiality of being the mistress of a white man.⁸ She is pained by the social stigmatization she faces because of her white-skinned son, yet she never repents nor feels ashamed for the supposed “betrayal of her race.” Her written dialogue, meant to portray the Martinican accent in French by dropping all of the ‘r’s, unwittingly mirrors the baby-talk of children who have not yet learned to pronounce their ‘r’s. She is, in other words, not the anti-colonial heroine Arnold and Fanon are looking for. Nor is she by any means a feminist heroine, given her aspersions against darker-skinned women and those who were involved in the Gaullist resistance. Yet here she is, in all her tenuous authorship and ambiguous moral choices, demanding that the reader interrogate all preconceived notions about the Martinican woman of color. The masterful interplay between fact and fiction even in the pen name of Mayotte Capécia is a commentary on the lie of the doudou. By constructing her own authorial image as a doudou-ist fantasy, potentially ventriloquized by the pro-colonial voices of her white editors, Combette undermines the stability and monolithic proportions of the doudou. Combette both avows and distances herself from Capécia’s life and opinions, and in doing so highlights the inescapable presence of the literary doudou in the lived experience of the Martinican woman of color.

One of Capécia’s moments of intertextuality with Lafcadio Hearn is, interestingly, her borrowings from Hearn’s story “La Guiablese,” a folk tale in which a beautiful woman lures a man into the jungle only to transform into a horrific demon, startling her unwitting suitor so that he falls off a cliff to his death. In this story, the woman asks her suitor to guess her name, and one of his false guesses is Maiotte [sic]. According to Arnold, Capécia’s description of a group of *porteuses* also mirrors Hearn’s

⁸“I did not want to touch those men of color who could not resist running after every woman, and I knew that white men do not marry black women.” [“Je ne voulais plus toucher à ces hommes de couleur qui ne peuvent s’empêcher de courir après toutes les femmes et je savais que les blancs n’épousent pas une femme noire”]. Capécia (2012), 128.

description of the *guiablesse's* straight shoulders and swishing skirts.⁵¹ Once again, the sinister undergirding of the *porteuses'* beauty is revealed, this time by aligning her with an explicitly diabolical figure. While this moment of intertextuality may seem to be an interpellation of Hearn, it is also an interpellation of Katherine Dunham, to whom Capécia dedicated a copy of *Je suis martiniquaise* following Dunham's performance in Paris in 1949.⁵² By 1949, Katherine Dunham was already famous for her role in the ballet "La Guiablesse," choreographed by Ruth Page, also based on and named after the Hearn story. Dunham had also done extensive fieldwork on Martinican dance forms in the mid-1930s, resulting in her West Indian-themed ballet "L'Ag'Ya."⁵³ This double allusion to Hearn and Dunham is itself a *diablesse*-like act on Capécia's part, a veiling and unveiling of the various motivations and allegiances of a woman of color. The ambiguousness of her allegiances—to the devil-woman or to the doudou? to the white colonial ethnographer or to the woman of color as ethnographer?—is precisely what this reference to "The Guiablesse" highlights. Capécia's interest in this theme of subterfuge and disguise is also evident in the most striking emergence of the supernatural in *Je suis martiniquaise*. Capécia finds out that her servant Elvire has employed the services of a *quimboiseuse* [sorceress] to deprive her of André. She expels Elvire from the house with a triumphal reassertion of her power:

The spell with which she attempted to curse me rebounded upon her. Her *quimboiseuse* [sorceress] must have mistaken the recipe. Surely she sought to venge herself by spreading the rumor that I charmed André with black magic, and as a result I soon had the reputation of being the most powerful sorceress in the neighborhood. But does one need a spell to charm men? Martinican women,

⁵¹ Arnold (2002), 157.

⁵² Makward (1999), 132-133.

⁵³ Dunham (2005), 201-207.

daughters of love and sunshine, are (everyone knows it) the most beautiful of all Antillean women. What is a Guadelopean woman, for example, compared to a Martinican women? Elvire was forgotten by the sun, she was a flower without perfume and all the *quimbois* in the world could not help her.

[Le mauvais sort qu'elle avait voulu me jeter se retourna contre elle. Sa *quimboiseuse* avait dû se tromper de recette. Elle chercha certes à se venger en répandant le bruit que j'avais charmé André par de mauvaises pratiques, de sorte que j'eus bientôt dans le quartier la réputation d'être la plus grande des ensorceleuses. Mais est-il besoin de sort pour charmer les hommes? Les Martiniquaises, filles du soleil et de l'amour, sont (chacun le sais) les plus belles des Antillaises. Qu'est-ce qu'une Guadeloupéenne, par exemple, à côté d'une Martiniquaise? Elvire avait été oubliée du soleil, c'était une fleur sans parfum et tous les *quimbois* du monde n'y pouvaient rien.]³⁴

Ironically, however, Capécia admits that she does employ the services of a *quimboiseuse* to ensure her lover's affection. This quote further reinforces the potential counter-narrative imbedded in the legend of the doudou's passivity. By framing the doudou's sex appeal as a kind of witchcraft, achieved through duplicity and subterfuge, Capécia casts a shadow over the doudou's legendary goodwill towards whiteness and colonization. *Quimbois* and the supernatural become a way Martinican woman can employ the doudou strategically, for their own social or material benefit. Strikingly, Capécia frames this sorcery as not just a personal practice, but as a characteristic innate to "Martinican women, daughters of love and sunshine" ["les Martiniquaises, filles du

³⁴ Capécia (2012), 149.

soleil et de l'amour"]⁵⁵. Like Fanon, Combette positions Capécia as a metonymy of the Martinican woman of color, but to very different effect. If, as Lafcadio Hearn has it in his novel *Youma*, the history of miscegenation in Martinique has created within the ostensibly placid woman of color “a darker passionate second soul, full of strange impulses and mysterious emotions,” who is to say what rebellions her beauty masks? Who is to judge the sincerity of her apparently willing subjection?⁵⁶

3.3 The Doudou's Revenge: Suzanne Césaire's Grand Camouflage

In the overtness of her political and ethical commitments, Suzanne Césaire is in some ways a foil to her contemporary, Mayotte Capécia. A self-avowed feminist, staunchly opposed to the Vichy occupation of Martinique, Césaire incited the attention and the ire of colonial administrators with her refusal to sing the mandatory national hymn in her secondary school classroom and with her writings in the dissident journal she founded with her husband in 1941. The colonial “informational services” eventually shut down the journal in 1943. Césaire’s response to the head of the censorship board, Lieutenant de Vaisseau Bayle, is a stunning reversal of doudouist resignation to colonial authority. In response to Bayle’s accusation that what he had thought was a “literary or cultural journal” was in fact “revolutionary, racist, and sectarian,” she finds none of those descriptors to be an insult, and avows “the racism of Toussaint Louverture, Claude MacKay, and Langston Hughes—against that of Drummond and Hitler.”⁵⁷ Despite the strength of her convictions, however, Suzanne Césaire has suffered as much intellectual and political denigration and dismissal as Mayotte Capécia. Anthropologist

⁵⁵ Ibid., 149.

⁵⁶ Hearn (1890), *Youma*, 98.

⁵⁷ Césaire (1978), xxxvii-iv.

Michel Leiris suggested that her radical politics were unsuited to a mother of five children. Critic Georges Ngala wrote in his text on Aimé Césaire that all of her ideas derived from her husband's. And most scholarly reactions to her have been a heavy and resounding silence.⁵⁸ Césaire's treatment at the hands of male intellectuals of all races and generations illustrates the difficulty of creating a woman of color's narrative outside the realm of the doudou.

Even Césaire's so-called friends and champions fall into the trap of colonialist representation. For instance, André Breton's paternalistic though enthusiastic writings about Martinique and Césaire herself are documented in *Martinique Snake Charmer*, written during the poet's brief stay in Martinique in 1941. In that text, Breton leans heavily on the "island as sensual woman" trope of the colonial past and present, going so far as to linger voyeuristically upon Césaire and her female students and wonder if their beautiful flesh is warmed by the wood of cacao trees, coffee plants, or vanilla beans.⁵⁹ Breton's writings on Martinique are, in many ways, a modern form of doudou literature. He indulges in explicitly pornotropic vaginal imagery of "sweet sorceresses under suction caps of sticky flowers" and "maternal crypts" and of the canna blossom as a "chalice brimming with this marvelous ooze."⁶⁰ Perhaps interpellating Lafcadio Hearn, he describes a young black woman porter without a burden as "the dream of a monument to the principles of fecundity."⁶¹ However, Breton attempts to exculpate himself from potential accusations of doudouism by saying:

Exoticism, people say in derision, exoticism, and thus they have the last word.

But what is meant by exoticism? The whole world belongs to us. Just because I

⁵⁸ Condé (1998), 62. In addition to Condé's essay, other notable scholarly work in English on Suzanne Césaire appears in Sharpley-Whiting (2002), Wilks (2008), and Richardson (1996).

⁵⁹ Breton (2008), 58.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 51-52.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

was born near a weeping willow does not mean I should dedicate my work to such a narrow theme.⁶²

Breton erects a vision of Martinique that belongs to him, the disingenuousness of his claim lying in its overtly colonial language of possessing the earth. For Breton in "Creole Dialogue," tropical landscapes and their female genital orifices are the means of ascending to the spiritual and psychic freedom which he theorizes in the surrealist manifestoes: "What ladders for dreams, these implacable lianas! These branches, what bows drawn for the arrows of our thoughts!"⁶³ Doudouism at its most refined, at its most liberal. Suzanne Césaire was surely not blind to its ironies, despite her respect for Breton as an artist and her investment in surrealism as an intellectual tool.

Suzanne Césaire's direct engagements with surrealism (as it has been defined by Breton) is evident from essays like "Le surrealisme et nous," in which she details her admiration for both surrealist methodologies and for Breton himself.⁶⁴ Like Breton, Césaire is committed to the expansion of human understanding of the real into the realm of the unconscious through dreams, "the future resolution of these two states of reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality."⁶⁵ However, rather than considering Césaire's work to be an homage to Breton, Suzanne Césaire's engagement with the altered realities of surrealism must be understood in the context of West Indian engagements with the world of dreams and the supernatural, which exert just as strong of a philosophical influence on her work as her avowed European intellectual mentors. Césaire's surrealism reformulates travel to encompass other kinds of movement more readily available to women: vertical growth, procreation, and dream travel. Her formulation of West Indian feminism occupies a space of the fantastic in

⁶² Ibid., 61.

⁶³ Ibid., 50.

⁶⁴ Césaire (2009), 76-83.

⁶⁵ Breton (1969), 14.

order to reanimate the inanimate body of the land. Martinique's symbolic status as both womb and tomb of Nègritude's aspirations—the site of birth, whose cramped space demands a departure in order for life to truly begin—also brings with it various metaphors of rampant vegetational growth. This language of weeds and lianas, of conquering carnivorous flowers and strange fruits rising from the mulched and dead carcasses of their fellow plants, envisions a different way of moving through space. For Suzanne Césaire, writing from within a blockaded Martinique during the Second World War, the movement of the traveler, the explorer, and the colonist was impossible. As a result, she resorts to the vertical (rather than lateral) movement of growing things, reclaiming and transforming the space from which she had historically been associated by men with access to lateral movement. Growth and, by association, female reproductive labor, is here valorized and qualified as a kind of movement, as a kind of exploration. Césaire's surrealism carries with it a supernatural subtext, where witches remove their skins and roam the earth in search of mischief, a world where haughty temptresses lead unwitting male travelers to their deaths, a world of Circes. It is a world where the surrealist and marvelous realities of night grapple with the mundane realities of a colonial daytime. Suzanne Césaire's embrace of surrealism, therefore, is more than a grateful paean to Andre Breton.

Surrealism is fundamental to Césaire's reorganization of the Antillean landscape, but it is not Surrealism as Breton imagines it. Much like Breton, she conceives of surrealism as “an activity that gives itself the goal of systematically exploring and expressing, so as to neutralize them, the forbidden zones of the human spirit” [“une activité qui se donne pour but d'exprimer systématiquement, pour les neutraliser, les

zones interdites de l'esprit humain"].⁶⁶ However, the forbidden zones of her spirit are found, thinly veiled, beneath the camouflage of her own skin rather than deep beneath the skin of dreams. For Suzanne Césaire, the surrealist project of piercing the veil of the real becomes one of piercing the veil of landscape, which in the Antillean context serves as the substitute for the interiority of all Antilleans. It is not simply a matter of blasting these images of man and nature apart. For Césaire, the beauty of the Martinican psyche is that it is so hopelessly entangled with the landscape and seasons. In her essay "Malaise d'une civilisation," Césaire adopts German anthropologist Léo Frobenius' explanation for the psyche of Ethiopian civilization: the Ethiopian (and by extension, Césaire argues, the Martinican) is a plant man. He does not struggle and strive, but simply grows irrepressibly and involuntarily. His placenta nourishes the roots of coconut trees, and his grave grows its stubble of grass in protest and defiance of death.⁶⁷ His ethos is abandon rather than war, and his motto is "laissez porter": an expression that means both to allow oneself to be carried and to bear fruit.⁶⁸ The idea of "laissez porter" perfectly evokes physical and spiritual displacement of the Ethiopian plant-man, and the fecundity of his legacy in the Martinican plant-man, who does not remember from whence came his seed but grows nonetheless as a result of the seed's travel. In her surrealist insistence on the literality of the Martinican's existence as a plant, Césaire insists upon the primacy of the psychic reality of Antilleans, almost superseding the reality of colonial exploitation. With this lens, the Martinican's very place as a worker and consumer in capitalist society, is formulated as a kind of delusion, a denial of the exigent realities of his plant-like soul: "ignorant of the profundity of his nature, he tries to live a life that is not his own. Widespread phenomenon of collective self-delusion, of

⁶⁶Césaire (2009), 77. All translations of Suzanne Césaire's texts are my own.

⁶⁷Ibid., 71. Here, Césaire makes reference to the West Indian practice of burying a newborn's umbilical cord and placenta in the yard of their home and planting a tree over the spot.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 70.

'pseudo-metamorphosis.'" ["méconnaissant sa nature profonde, il essaie de vivre d'une vie qui ne lui est pas propre. Gigantesque phénomène de mensonge collectif, de 'pseudomorphose'"].⁶⁶ Not only is his metamorphosis ineffectual, but it is also unconvincing. Quite the contrary of the *diablesse* and the *soukougnan*, the plant-man is unable to use his paltry disguise to manipulate or beguile his potential oppressor. Through this pseudo-metamorphosis, the West Indian has only managed to fool himself.

For all his flaws, Césaire's plant-man is in some ways a corrective to the objectifying discourse of the doudou, which she describes in the essay "Misère d'une poésie":

Come, true poetry is elsewhere. Far from rhymes, from complaints, from breezes, from parroquets. Bamboo, we sentence doudou literature to death. To hell with the hibiscus, the frangipane, the bougainvillea. Martinican poetry will be cannibal or it will not exist.

[Allons, la vraie poésie est ailleurs. Loin des rimes, des complaints, des alizés, des perroquets. Bambous, nous décrétons la mort de la littérature doudou. Et zut à l'hibiscus, à la frangipane, aux bougainvilliers. La poésie martiniquaise sera cannibale ou ne sera pas.]⁶⁷

Despite Césaire's searing indictment of an idealized colonial literature of the tropics, she relies heavily upon tropical flora as imagery in her own writings. In this way, she does not kill doudou literature, but rather zombifies it, using its already-dead husk to do her bidding. She understands that to disavow the landscape to which she is tied by birth and by literature, metonymically, is to disavow her own position as a woman of color. So, she re-animates and makes literal the tropes of the doudou in the person of the plant-

⁶⁶ Ibid., 72.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 66.

man, a changed and abstracted version of the flower and fruit women of doudou literature. Defamiliarizing and literalizing, she creates strange and surreal monsters out of the language that has been passed down to her. She shows Hearn, Breton, and all the writers of doudou literature that she too can personify, she too can use metonymies of women-land to her own ideological ends. The difference is that, unlike the doudouists before her, she presents her own and, metonymically, her island's reproductive capabilities as intellectual just as much as they are biological. Both kinds of reproduction are the fruits of life in the tropics.

In her longest essay, "Le grand camouflage," Césaire fully outlines her vision of both Martinique and the women who have come to represent it. When faced with the beauty of the tropics, even the most attentive poets feel their powers of perception desert them, too overwhelmed by beauty to interrogate the reality beneath its surface:

Here the poets feel their heads spin, and inhaling the fresh scent of the ravines, they seize the sheaf of islands, they listen to the water around them, they see the tropical flames heighten, not because of the heliconias, the gerberas, the hibiscus, the bougainvillea, the flamboyants, but because of the hunger, the fears, the hatreds, and the ferocity that burn in the hollows of hills.

[Ici les poètes sentent chavirer leur tête, et humant les odeurs fraîches des ravins, ils s'emparent de la grebe des îles, ils écoutent le bruit de l'eau autour d'elles, ils voient s'avirer les flammes tropicales non plus aux balisiers, aux gerberas, aux hibiscus, aux bougainvilliers, aux flamboyants, mais aux faims, aux peurs, aux haines, à la férocité qui brûlent dans les creux des mornes.] ⁷¹

⁷¹Ibid., 94.

It is the responsibility of these poets to see past the landscape into the human subjectivities that people them. The poets Césaire implicitly addresses—Breton, Hearn, et al—are blind to their own complicity in the colonial history of tropical representation, too mired in their ostensible appreciation of beauty to read the painful subtext this beauty masks. Theirs is an incomplete reality, an impoverished reality, a reality lacking in the wholeness and fullness which Suzanne Césaire’s surrealism provides. Hers is an expansion of the real to include the dreams of doudous far and wide. This vision serves as a tool, not just to situate the Antillean within her own geography, but within the wider imaginative geography that Césaire calls “Antilles-Africa”:

it is Africa herself, across the Atlantic and across the centuries since the slave ships, who confers upon her Antillean children that covetous solar gaze which dancers exchange [...] Antilles-Africa, thanks to the drumbeats, allows nostalgia for terrestrial spaces to live within insular hearts. Who will fulfill that nostalgia?

[c’est l’Afrique elle-même qui, par-delà l’Atlantique et les siècles d’avant les négriers dédie à ses enfants antillais le regard de convoitise solaire qu’échangent les danseurs [...] Antilles-Afrique, grâce aux tambours, la nostalgie des espaces terrestres vit dans ces cœurs d’insulaires. Qui comblera cette nostalgie?]²

The plant-men of Ethiopia and Martinique, here configured as dancers embracing from across the Atlantic, are reunited by Césaire’s metaphorization of the geographical, and her literalization of the psychic. The fulfillment of the nostalgia for a lost African past results in the fantastic space of Antilles-Africa, which demands a reality in which the dream of unknown places complements the lived experience of the local—in short, a reality of diaspora.

² Ibid., 93.

This reality is hard won in the face of great geographic and historical obstacles. In the first line of “Le grand camouflage” —“Plastered against the islands, there are the beautiful green waves of silent waters” [“Il y a plaquées contre les îles, les belles lames vertes de l’eau de silence”]—the ocean is not a space of possibility, but a force that works to hem in, crush, and silence the islands.⁷³ Césaire’s omniscient gaze sweeps over islands isolated from each other by the press of the sea: Haiti, Martinique, Puerto Rico, Florida. Their plight is symbolized by tail of a hurricane sweeping over the islands, unified in misery, standing in fellowship under the history that has happened to them, yet unaware even of their shared struggle. A Haitian farmer whose horse has been killed by the first lightning bolts of the hurricane, standing on a Haitian hillside, “starts to think of those other Antilles, of their volcanoes and their earthquakes, of their hurricanes.”⁷⁴ Misery, it seems, is general over the Caribbean, but can only be conceptualized in fragments. Only from above— from the window of a Pan-American Airways flight, from the heights of hills in Haiti—can Caribbean reality be grasped and visualized as one of union rather than separation:

Seen from high above, our islands take on their true seashell dimensions. And as for the hummingbird-women, the women of four races and dozens of bloodlines, they are no longer there. Nor are the heliconias, nor the frangipanis or the flamboyant trees, nor the palms in the moonlight, nor those world-famous sunsets...And yet they are still there.

[Nos îles vue de très haut, prennent leur vraie dimension de coquillages. Et quant aux femmes-colibris, aux femmes aux quatre race et aux douzaines de sang, elles n’y sont plus. Ni les balisiers, ni les frangipanier et les flamboyants, ni

⁷³ Ibid., 84.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 84.

les palmes au clair de lune, ni les coucher de soleil unique au monde...Pourtant elles y sont.]⁷⁵

Here the doudou tropes fade into a panorama of islands, into a unified Caribbean like a cluster of seashells. While the stereotypes remain, the pan-Caribbean perspective minimizes them. The doudou is superseded by a feat of perspective. The constant references to Haiti throughout the poem, including from Suzanne Césaire's own visit to Kenscoff in Haiti, from whose heights she contemplates "the intolerable beauty" of the landscape, are significant. The separation between the "success" of revolution in Haiti and its "failure" in Haiti's still-colonized island neighbors is in fact an illusion produced by history, which conceals the pain of colonization behind a veneer of natural beauty. But the beautiful camouflage the islands were born with is as much a defense as it is tragedy—a way of safeguarding one's essence from both colonialism and misogyny. "If my Antilles seems so beautiful," Césaire says, in the closing of "Le grand camouflage," "it is because the game of hide and seek has succeeded" ["si mes Antilles sont si belles, c'est qu'alors le grand jeu de cache-cache a réussi"].⁷⁶ In Suzanne Césaire's case, her beauty conceals her affinity with Africa and with Haiti, both of which stand in for a kind of cosmic escape from oppression. Allying Martinique with Haiti and ultimately with Africa shows that beneath the camouflage of a model colony—whose men have served as colonial administrators in West Africa, whose women have been concubines and lovers, whose children have learned French—lies a rejection of the sacrifices, inconsistencies, and betrayals necessitated by colonial life. Written in 1945, one year before the referendum in which Martinicans voted against independence from France, Césaire's essay shows how resistance can be otherwise. Far from labeling Martinique as

⁷⁵ Ibid., 86.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 94.

complicit in its own alienation, Césaire expands reality to include other kinds of resistance beyond the realm of armed revolt.

“Le grand camouflage” is a direct response to Breton in which Césaire asserts that he has misunderstood her, that her beauty and openness have masked the fact that she is not there for his consumption, that her face is turned towards Africa, towards Haiti. The doudou is a skin she removes, like the fabled *soukougnan*, to reveal the pain and rage of Creole femininity. In so doing, she shares a “covetous solar gaze” with other people mired in histories of pain, others raging desperate and futile battles against colonialism. Her camouflage into the beauty of the tropics masks her rebellious heart, just as her rootedness in the blockaded space of Vichy Martinique masks her affinity with other places of rebellion. Through surrealism, her rebellions become “real” because her surrealism expands the realm of the “real” beyond the outward realities of colonialism. The “reality” history has forced her to experience—of being a beautiful thing to be plucked and eaten, among many other beautiful things to be plucked and eaten—is acknowledged in Césaire’s surrealism, but that reality coexists with the reality of her pan-Caribbean and pan-African sentiments, which exist despite her limited geographical travels and her small corpus of writings. “Come along, true poetry is elsewhere,” she says, in her critique of doudou literature.⁷⁷ True poetry, for Césaire, is not the sole property of men who have had the time and leisure to vacation and adventure in the tropics, but of the women whose roots kept the soil from slipping into the sea, of women whose dreams cradled oceans they never crossed.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 66.

3.4 Coda: *Surprise and Solitude*

In July of 2014 I conducted an interview with Jean-Paul Césaire, son of Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, at his home in Case-Pilote. Eager to hear some news of his mother’s lost play, I will admit that my primary reason for setting up this interview was to gather information about the whereabouts of this document. However, Jean-Paul Césaire did not know what had happened to his mother’s play, and assured me that it was of little importance anyway—it was a pedantic feminist piece concerning “something like” *Surprise or Solitude*, two women revolutionaries in Martinican and Guadeloupean history. It was of such little importance, in fact, that Suzanne Césaire had lost it herself during a move between Martinique and France, and was never able to recover it.⁷⁵ This account poses a slight contradiction to the more widely-accepted notion that Suzanne Césaire based her play, *Youma, aurore de la liberté*, on Lafcadio Hearn’s novel *Youma*.⁷⁶ *Youma* is the the story of a tragic and noble slave who dies protecting her young white mistress during the uprisings of 1848.⁷⁷ Earlier in the novel, *Youma* even refuses to sail to escape to freedom in Dominica with her lover out of loyalty to the white masters who have given her so much. It is a story that juxtaposes the dignified yet subservient nature of a loyal woman of color to the ungrateful mob mentality a black mass too stupid to take advantage of the pastoral paternal setting of their enslavement, not realizing that “the time had long past when the whites could [...] hang men of color to the mango trees of Batterie d’Esnatz; but what they had done in other days was remembered

⁷⁵ Jean-Paul Césaire, interview with the author, July 3, 2014.

⁷⁶ Leiris (1955), 82. According to Leiris, the play was staged in 1952 by Martinican high school students in the theatrical group *Scènes et cultures*. There is no other recorded staging of the play.

⁷⁷ Though slavery was officially abolished in the French empire in 1848, Martinican slaves, impatient with rumors of their impending emancipation, staged a revolt to free themselves before the official ordinance arrived from across the Atlantic. For a wonderful fictionalized account of these events, see Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Texaco*, in which a sorcerer incites the revolution with the exhortation: “Yo di zot libètè pa ponm kannel an bout branch! Fok zot désann raché y, raché y, raché y!” [And I tell you freedom is not a sugar apple on a low-hanging branch! You must go and tear it down, tear it down, tear it down!]. Chamoiseau (1992), 111.

against them.”⁸¹ While it is entirely likely that Suzanne Césaire indeed based her play on Hearn’s novel, it is extremely unlikely that she shared in his vision of black revolt as petulant and unnecessary, especially given the play’s purported subtitle of “aurore de la liberté” [the dawn of liberty]. Jean-Paul Césaire’s casual elision of two vastly different figurations of West Indian womanhood—the doudou and revolutionary—alerts us to the possibility that Suzanne Césaire sought to bridge this gap between revolt and complicity. In giving this character who denied herself freedom an afterlife of freedom in the title of her own work, Césaire takes the reins of the historical representation of Martinican women.

The potentiality of a play about the West Indian revolutionaries known as Solitude and Surprise both overlaps and diverges with the potentiality of a play based on Hearn’s novel. Solitude was a Guadeloupean slave of mixed race who was known for her participation and public execution in the Guadeloupean branch of the 1794-1803 uprisings against Napoleon’s army across the French West Indies, the only successful of which being, of course, the Haitian revolution.⁸² Surprise was a Martinican woman born in 1848 (the year slavery was abolished in Martinique), whose revolt against the persistence of the plantation economy (she did, indeed, burn down the plantation of a wealthy white landowner) resulted in her exile to Guyana.⁸³ Both women were also noted as mothers who were inhumanely severed from their children by the forces of colonialism: Solitude’s engagement in battle while pregnant struck fear and shame into the hearts of the French invading forces, who waited until she had given birth to execute

⁸¹ Hearn (1890), *Youma*, 147.

⁸² Remarkably little scholarship has been done on Solitude, who is seldom mentioned even in accounts of West Indian slave revolts, with the exception of Lacour (1858), who in one paragraph describes her “hate and rage” for captured slaveholders. Dubois (2006), 31. Her story persists mostly in the realm of folklore, mythologized in statues all over Guadeloupe, and canonized in the fictionalized account by Schwarz-Bart (1972).

⁸³ For a brief biographical account of Surprise’s life, see Pago (2008). For a fictionalized account, see Dracius (2005).

her so they could sell her child into slavery; and Surprise, during her exile in Guyana, gave birth to a child who died shortly thereafter as a result of the privations of her imprisonment. In Césaire's refiguration of Youma, therefore, I envision the palimpsest of both Solitude and Surprise. Youma's inability to ask for freedom under the terms of the world Lafcadio Hearn created for her is a complementary silence to the archival silence of Solitude and Surprise. Together they express both the vocal unfreedoms of the doudou, and the muted and forgotten scream of the revolutionary. Together they can almost form the voice of one woman, one woman who is neither doudou nor revolutionary.

Adrift on that trans-oceanic silence between colony and metropole, between the revolutionary and the doudou, the fate of Césaire's "lost" work speaks eloquently of the fate of historical incarnations of black feminism. Unlike the subaltern of Spivak's formulation, Césaire does not speak without being heard. Rather, her words are garbled by time and loss, audible only in snatches—the rest is silence and guesswork. Perhaps the true patron saint of this historical black feminism is Ezili Dantò, the fierce and dark-skinned aspect of the Vodou goddess of love and femininity, who cannot speak. She mumbles or cries, some say because her sadness is of such great depths that it is beyond articulation, others say because her tongue was cut out during the revolution. Yet despite Ezili's inability to speak, her "inarticulate sounds gain meaning in a Vodou ceremony only through her body language and the interpretive efforts of the gathered community."⁸⁴ Ezili's articulate muteness may well be the symbol of the interpretive work of a community of black feminists in the present extracting meaning from the archives of women's resistance past. It is an archive of silences, but it is not a lost archive. The following chapter explores the methodologies of black feminists attempting

⁸⁴ Brown (2001), 230.

to catalogue an archive of silences, and the magical means by which they position themselves within it.

4. Looking for Marie: Hoodoo Histories and the Making of a Black Feminist Genealogy

I have landed here in the kingdom of Marie Laveau and expect to wear her crown someday.
— Zora Neale Hurston, letter to Langston Hughes, August 6, 1928

I realize that I must honor the dead, but between the dead great and the living starving, there is no choice.
— Alice Walker, “Looking for Zora”

The living do not serve the dead, it is the dead who are made to serve the living.
— Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen*

4.1 The Silence of the Initiated

Flora Café sits at the confluence of Franklin, Royal, and St. Roch in New Orleans. A narrow heart of land pierced three times by three different streets. Under banana-leaf bowers, tarot card dreams are spun, armchair philosophies laid out, and backgammon tiles are set down with a click-clack. For a brief but well-timed number of years, my summer afternoons at Flora’s coincided with Ramadan. During Ramadan, the owner Ali spent each of his thirsty, cigarette-less afternoons preparing for dinner. As soon as the sun had gone out and the bars across the street began to yawn and stretch their limbs, we were all invited to dinner. Whether you were an Iranian immigrant fleeing political disagreements, or a local drag queen, whether you were a former follower of Elijah Mohammed or a gutterpunk, a social worker or a self-proclaimed artist, you were invited. There was plenty of room for an over-curious, ethnically indeterminate girl in her early twenties, so I melted in with the crowd. At Flora’s, no one ever asked me where I was “really” from or compared my skin to any food products—caramel, honey, coffee-with-a-cloud-of-cream, each time as though I’ve never heard it before, each time as though all the ways in which I can be consumed are supposed to be a kind of compliment. No, not at Flora’s. Flora’s was generous, Flora’s asked no awkward questions, made no overtures thinking she was cute. Flora’s

existed the way a lake existed—queenly, needing to convince no one that her waters were good enough to drink.

*On one Ramadan afternoon, I sat outside Flora’s with Don Edwards, Omar, and Iem Bennu. Don, gray-bearded, moved to tears of laughter, sometimes, before the punchline of his own jokes. Omar, who owns a warehouse in the Bywater full of unhomed doors, one-eyed dolls, and chandeliers, among whose mazes film crews and antiquarians quarry for treasure. Iem Bennu, who auditioned for the part of the evil hoodoo doctor in *Princess and the Frog*, who cuts his grass by ripping it up with his bare hands. As usual, we were fending off mosquitoes and downing endless iced coffees, sometimes speaking, sometimes not. Huffing and puffing, a large white woman walking with the help of a cane sat at our table. I did not know her, but the others seemed to, because they nodded and inquired after her health. She made the obligatory comments about the heat, fanning her neck and chest with a real, flower-patterned fan she had conjured from somewhere in the depths of her bra. Then, pulling her skirt up to her hips, she beckoned the four of us closer to her thigh. There on the skin, haloed in the puffy redness of a fresh tattoo, was the head of a woman wearing a headscarf. The woman’s body, a line with four stick limbs, had been sketched on in pen.*

“It’s Marie Laveau,” she explained, before we could ask. “Hurt like a bitch, though, so I’m going back tomorrow to get the rest of her body done. I just had my friend draw it on so Marie Laveau’s ghost won’t juju me out.”

I got right up close to the thigh of this woman I did not know. Her tattoo looked nothing like the hoodoo priestess as I had imagined her. To me, the tattoo looked like the head of a white woman floating disembodied in a galaxy of mosquito bites. Marie Laveau’s fabled and fetishized mixed-raceness—her skin undoubtedly caramel, honey, coffee-with-a-cloud-of-cream—had been lost in the translation of this image. Black lines on white skin. The whiteness of this

Marie Laveau irritated me, and I had to hold my tongue to keep from saying that I hoped Marie Laveau's ghost did juju her out.

My friends, who had been going to Flora's for decades and for whom there was surely nothing new under the sun, delivered a few laconic compliments on the tattoo and changed the subject to Bobby Jindal. By comparison, my response seemed childish, spiteful. After all, this woman, who could not even shift positions in her rickety chair without wincing in pain, had not committed the greatest of all crimes against Marie Laveau's memory. What about all those so-called voodoo priestesses on Rampart Street, who for the low price of \$149.99, would permit the curious to witness their secret, savage rituals? What about Chicken Man, who in the 90s had made his living off "voodoo" tours for tourists, famous for the spectacular finale in which he would bite the head off a live chicken as a sacrifice to unnamed "voodoo" gods? What about all the generations of thrill-seekers, journalists, and born-again pagans who looked to the black population of New Orleans as gatekeepers to a demonic orgy to which they longed to be invited? This woman and her tattoo could not be blamed for all that. Nor could she be blamed for the fact that, in all my years in New Orleans, I had yet to meet a single black person who practiced hoodoo. Never once had I met someone's eyes in recognition of our mutual Afro-centric mystical leanings, never once had anyone offered me the keys to the sacred places I so hoped existed.

What was hoodoo if it was only practiced by white people who had only seen it in movies? And was I, black though I was, any closer to hoodoo than this woman with the tattoo? In the echoing silence surrounding Marie Laveau and her heirs, I did not know. I did not know the difference between my own attachment to Marie Laveau and the tattooed woman's connection to her. I did not know.

Once Bobby Jindal had been soundly skewered, the woman with the tattoo got up with the help of her cane, and as a parting gift, told us, "If you're craving figs, there's this tree on the corner of Port and Royal, and it's got the best figs I've ever tasted."

“Who does it belong to?” I asked.

“No one. Everyone.”

Despite the mythology around Marie Laveau, and her reputation as one of the most famous female spiritual leaders in American history, very few historical details of Marie Laveau’s life are certain. It is widely acknowledged that there were two Marie Laveaus in nineteenth century New Orleans. The elder one’s death in 1881 is well-documented by a number of obituaries, but the site of her grave is the source of great debate. It is known that the first Marie Laveau was a free person of color living in New Orleans from her birth in 1801 to her death in 1881. It is known that she lived in a house on St. Ann Street in the French Quarter. It is known that she was in two long-term partnerships, first a marriage to another free person of color called Jacques Paris, then a common-law marriage with a former military officer called Christophe Glapion. This is what can be gathered from newspapers and parish registries documenting births, marriages, and deaths. As for the exorcisms and love spells, the dances in Congo Square and the rituals on St. John’s Eve, the curing of yellow fever victims during the Civil War—there are no official documents to memorialize these actions.¹ And yet, they are said to have happened.

Historian Carolyn Morrow Long refers to the colorful narratives surrounding Marie Laveau’s life as the Laveau Legend. It is not my intention to undertake an uncovering of Marie Laveau’s truth, at least not in an archival sense. Rather, it is to dwell in the Laveau Legend, and to speculate about the motives of its authors, rather than the elusive truth of its subject. The archive is skeletal, and the authors of the Laveau

¹ The two most comprehensive historical accounts of Marie Laveau’s life are Ward (2004) and Long (2006). Most of the information for this chapter has been drawn from Long, but except for a few key differences (the identity of the second Marie Laveau, for instance), the accounts draw from the same archives and corroborate one another.

Legend clothe it in fear and aspirations. From Zora Neale Hurston to Lafcadio Hearn to Robert Tallant, authors with access to archives and interviews detailing Laveau's life have chosen to ignore, elide, or embellish the details therein.² None of these authors, for instance, mention some of the messiness and uncomfortable facts of her historical being: that she owned slaves, was the domestic partner of a white man, and that many of her descendents crossed the color line in the wake of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896. Everyone, it seems, has his or her own Marie Laveau. To her supporters, she is a feminist trickster, a champion of the oppressed, and a subverter of race and gender hierarchies.³ To her detractors, she is a charlatan, a glorified madam who exploits the superstitions of black and white people alike to make a profit.⁴ But in both representations, Laveau's power is clear. Whether it is feared or discredited, desired or harnessed, her power is never in question. Throughout the twentieth century, historical writing about Marie Laveau's legacy has revealed a number of male anxieties about the potentiality of black female leadership, but this is not the story of those who sought to undermine black female power. If in the words of Saidiya Hartman, "history is how the secular world attends to its dead," this is a story of the way a community—specifically, a community of black women—attends to its dead.⁵ This is a story of the way the act of narrating history uses people, and the way people—alive and dead—resist attempts to speak on their behalf. This is a story of the fine line between paying homage and appropriation. While this is not a critique of the living who construct themselves from the bones of their dead, it seeks to debunk the notion that the living cannot commit acts of representational

² In a few instances, Long (2006) cites the disparity between Tallant's representation of Laveau and the Louisiana state records and WPA interviews that (loosely) served as his source material.

³ Zora Neale Hurston falls squarely into this camp in *Mules and Men*. It is also important to note that contemporary popular conceptions of Marie Laveau often lean more towards this romanticization of her legacy.

⁴ See Tallant (1984) and Castellanos (1905).

⁵ Hartman (2007), 18.

violence against their ancestors. This is Zora Neale Hurston's story, Alice Walker's story, and my own story as well.

The paradoxes of living women attempting to speak on behalf of the dead can be understood through an Afro-diasporic religious framework, namely in the tensions between American hoodoo and Haitian Vodou.⁶ One of the key differences between the two spiritual traditions lies in their relationship to their ancestors. According to Carolyn Morrow Long, Haitian Vodou is "concerned with serving the deities and the ancestors, but hoodoo is directed toward enhancing one's own personal well-being, influencing the actions of other people and controlling external forces like luck."⁷ While this characterization of Haitian Vodou as uninterested in personal benefit is inaccurate,⁸ it is indeed true that hoodoo lacks Haitian Vodou's pantheon of spirits and ancestors and thus focuses on the practitioner's personal gain rather than on any notion of religious service to higher powers. In Zora Neale Hurston's account of New Orleans hoodoo, for instance, hoodoo rarely involves ancestors unless it is to take dust from their graves for a spell for personal gain; in other words, to use them.⁹ I argue that though historical

⁶ The Laveau Legend seeks to exaggerate the connection between New Orleans and Haitian Vodou, some people [including Hurston (1931), 318] claiming that Marie Laveau was of Haitian ancestry and that her brand of Vodou was imported to America by the thousands of Haitians who came to New Orleans in the first decade of wake of the Haitian Revolution. This confusion is based upon an Afro-centric desire to imagine a link between traditions of resistance. However, in reality, there is no evidence that Marie Laveau was of Haitian descent, although her first husband, Jacques Paris, was. And the relationship between spiritual practices in Haiti in New Orleans is not one of direct descent, though the practices of the Haitian immigrants were certainly incorporated into the preexisting practices in New Orleans, which were similar to forms of folk magic practiced elsewhere in the United States. Long (2001), 37-42. For instance, Hurston attributes the use of altars, candles, incense, holy water, and blessed oil in New Orleans hoodoo to Haitian influences because these elements are not common in other branches of hoodoo throughout the American South. Hurston (1931), 318.

⁷ Long (2001), 55.

⁸ For a full account of the symbiotic relationship between Vodou spirits and their human serviteurs, see Deren (2004) and Brown (2001). Both these accounts emphasize the idea that Vodou is a dialogic relationship between spirits and serviteurs, not one of dominance by one side or another. As Yvonne Chireau notes in her study of black magico-religious practice, the dichotomy between "Magic is a self-serving enterprise that derives from personal, egotistical motivations; religion, a public activity, yields benefits for an entire community. And yet this delineation of private versus public interests did not apply in all cases. In many accounts of indigenous African religious life, spiritual forces were involved in rituals for personal needs as well as those affecting the larger group." Chireau (20), 39-40.

⁹ On the uses of grave dust in hoodoo spells, see Hurston (1931) and Hyatt (1970-1978).

writing can purport to be an act of Vodou by those who undertake it—that is, an act of service to ancestors—that it is much more akin to hoodoo in its goals. The black feminist quest for ancestors in a lacunar archive is often marked by a desire on the part of contemporary black feminists to make these women from history “speak” their truth. As though speech is what these figures wanted or lacked in their lives. As though truth necessarily resides in speech. As though when you speak on behalf of your ancestors, it is their voice that speaks and not your own. This is why black feminists from Zora Neale Hurston to Alice Walker have gone looking for “ancestors” in the historical archive, so that the grave dust of black women past may give them power. This is also why, according to Henry Louis Gates, “while black male writers have ardently denied a connection to those who came before them, Hurston’s daughters [Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara] acknowledge her influence.”³⁰ This acknowledgement of filiation is hoodoo.

In literature on New Orleans hoodoo, female leaders are referred to as “queens” for a reason.³¹ In contrast to the male title of “doctor,” which is often deployed parodically,³² the term queen connotes a leadership role rather than a trade. The title of queen implies a power that is in the blood. But unlike the idea of genealogical inheritance implied by the word “queen,” the queens of New Orleans hoodoo are unrelated by blood but linked by complex networks of apprenticeship. Marie Laveau, for instance, was succeeded not by one of her own daughters, but by an apprentice who adopted her name and continued her ministry in the last two decades of the nineteenth

³⁰ Gates (1985).

³¹ Long (2001), 43.

³² For instance, in the case of the nineteenth-century hoodoo leader Dr. John, he was listed in the 1860 New Orleans city directory as a physician, but the notary who transcribed it could not resist writing in parentheses “quack.” Long (2006), 146. As Long notes in her study, most nineteenth-century newspaper sources speak of Marie Laveau with some degree of respect and acknowledgement of her gifts, while Dr. John is almost universally dismissed as a charlatan. Long (2006), 137.

century.³³ The question of this second Marie—the fact that her power is taken, not passed down in the blood—opens up the possibility of Marie’s successors as myriad and unpredictable. Unlike a blood lineage, Marie Laveau’s power cannot be stamped out by the genocidal machinations of a white supremacist state, nor can it be denied by generations of passing. The meaning of the second Marie is that black power is not the result of in-born qualities, but it is, rather, a craft. This broadens the scope and accessibility of Marie Laveau’s brand of magic, and perhaps explains her appeal in contemporary New Orleans to those unaffiliated with her by culture and ancestry. Even in the 1920s, Marie Laveau’s legacy was already open to the filial claims of those who are ideologically (but not genealogically) related to her: “There is a general belief that power can be transmitted, and for this reason most of the older doctors in New Orleans claim kinship with Marie Laveau.”³⁴ The benefit of the filial claim is that it places the son or daughter above reproach, above accusations of appropriation, basking in a glow of immaculate authenticity. It is a strategy deployed by black people against a voyeuristic white gaze that seeks to either undermine or steal black power. The language of kinship lays irrefutable claim to that power. But this can often come at the expense of the ancestor when the successor is posited as saving of the ancestor’s legacy, implying the ancestor’s lack of power. Under the guise of snatching the ancestor’s true story from the jaws of historical oblivion, “successors” can take the ancestor’s power for themselves by positioning the ancestor as the victim and themselves as the heroes.

Zora Neale Hurston’s 1935 ethnography *Mules and Men* is an expedition to New Orleans in search of power, but it is not a saving mission. Her goal was not to give

³³ A common tenet of the Laveau Legend was that Marie Laveau was seceded by one of her daughters, Marie Heloise, but Long makes a compelling case for the falsity of this claim, given that Marie Heloise appears to have died 20 years before her mother in 1862. Long (2006), 190-205.

³⁴ Hurston (1931), 320. The account of New Orleans hoodoo that appears in *Mules and Men* is a slightly abridged version of this article, which first appeared in *Journal of American Folklore* in 1931.

voice to a silenced archive, nor to unveil any kind of historical “truth” about Marie Laveau. When she traveled to New Orleans in 1928, Hurston encountered a tradition of hoodoo already shrouded in mystery, already embroidering Marie Laveau’s exploits with fictions. Hurston stitches together the scattered iconography of Marie Laveau’s legacy to create an archive of silences. Instead of viewing the gaps in the historical archive in the places where women’s voices should be as moments of irretrievable loss, Hurston meditates on the spaces of power that these gaps open up. Hurston asks us to think about the powers of those who might be considered as victims of the process of silencing that occurs when sources, archives, narratives, and history are made.¹⁵ In her ethnographic and historical philosophy, Hurston makes clear the ways in which historical actors can use silence both strategically and deliberately.

Sallie Ann Glassman, a contemporary Vodou priestess in New Orleans, suggests that Marie Laveau created the legend around herself even before her death, because as the first commercial priestess, she was “terrific at marketing and PR.” The spookiness and embroidery of her legend, according to Glassman, was what “kept Vodou alive in the world today.”¹⁶ Marie Laveau’s silence on the true nature of her identity and practices sparked the curiosity and admiration of non-practitioners, while shielding her religious rites from desecration or imitation by those non-practitioners. Of course, Marie Laveau’s nineteenth-century PR campaign, if that is indeed what it is, has had its consequences, as it leaves room to a number of appropriations and misinterpretations by critics who have too much to say.¹⁷ One such appropriation is

¹⁵ See Trouillot (1995), 26.

¹⁶ Sallie Ann Glassman, interview with the author, January 12, 2017.

¹⁷ The aphorism “If you are silent about your pain, they’ll kill you and say you enjoyed it” is often attributed to Zora Neale Hurston, but I have not found the source in which she says this. It will be interesting to think about which contexts push Hurston to valorize silence and which ones push her to speech.

Robert Tallant's popular pseudo-ethnography, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, which he begins with a description of a so-called "voodoo dance":

The dance grew faster now. They spun and gyrated and leaped high into the air. They fell to their hands and knees, imitating the postures of animals, some chewing at the grass, shaking their posteriors violently. They bit and clawed at each other. Their scanty garments fell upon the hot earth, still panting and gyrating. Some fell unconscious and were dragged away, into the deep darkness of the trees that edged the clearing.¹⁸

As is evident from this selection, in Tallant's imaginary, hoodoo is little more than an excuse for animalistic sex acts.¹⁹ Hurston writes a scornful review of Tallant's book in *Journal of American Folklore*: "It is rather a collection of the popular beliefs about hoodoo from the outside. The snake-worship sex-orgies, Greek Pythonesses, and goat-sacrifices, proceeding from false premises, and governed by hasty generalizations."²⁰ However, rather than laying bare the falsehoods of Tallant's text and speaking the "truth" of hoodoo on behalf of its practitioners, Hurston does not disturb the silence around the ceremonies she herself witnessed only ten years earlier.

Hurston's starting point is the inevitability of silence. Not only the silence of historical writing surrounding Marie Laveau, but the silence of hoodoo practitioners themselves regarding their practices: "That is why these voodoo ritualistic orgies of Broadway and popular fiction are so laughable. The profound silence of the initiated remains what it is. Hoodoo is not drum beating and dancing."²¹ For those initiated into

¹⁸ Tallant (1984), 8.

¹⁹ Interestingly, Tallant's accounts of spiritual/magical practices among African-Americans in New Orleans are drawn almost entirely from secondhand accounts (books, newspapers, WPA interviews, hearsay) and rarely from his own observation. Unsurprisingly, no practitioners of hoodoo invited him to their ceremonies.

²⁰ Hurston (1947), 438. The fact that Tallant's book, published ten years after *Mules and Men*, grew to become the definitive text on New Orleans hoodoo, adds insult to injury.

²¹ Hurston (1935), 185.

hoodoo, silence is a form of protection from the hostile and voyeuristic gaze of those who would interpret it as spectacle rather than religion. But the silence of the initiated is more than a defense mechanism—it is also a spiritual practice ingrained in the initiation ritual itself. As part of her participant observation of New Orleans hoodoo doctors, Hurston undergoes a separate initiation ritual with each one. Each initiation is different, but each entails a period of fasting and silence. In one particularly memorable initiation, Hurston lies naked on a snake skin with only a glass of water at her side: “Three days my body must lie silent and fasting while my spirit went wherever spirits must go that seek answers never given to men as men.”²² Silence, in this context becomes an ethical way of interacting with spirits whose voices may not necessarily be heard or remembered. Rather than speaking for them, the initiate is silent until the spirit chooses to speak to them. In this way, initiates give the spirits the respect someone like Tallant does not—when one is silent, one leaves room for another to speak, one *listens*. Once assured of the initiate’s sincerity and respect by their willingness to listen, the spirits confer their power upon initiates: “no one may approach the Altar without the crown, and none may wear the crown of power without preparation. *It must be earned.*”²³ Hurston eschews the language of filiation in favor of one of apprenticeship, representing her engagements with hoodoo as a process of learning rather than as the reclamation of a birthright. In so doing, Hurston emphasizes her own vocational skill as an ethnographer, without undermining Marie Laveau’s vocational skill as a priestess. She is not saving an obscure dead relative, but learning from a powerful mentor whose influence extends beyond the grave. While Hurston’s representation of Marie Laveau is as much of an invention as anyone else’s, the character of Hurston’s Laveau marks an innovatively symbiotic relationship between dead mentor and living initiate, whereby

²² Ibid., 199.

²³ Ibid., 198.

both women are represented as masters of their respective trades. Hurston's egalitarian approach is by no means typical of historical writing or historical reclamation projects in general. In fact, the asymmetries of power between the living and the dead is often the foundation upon which black feminist constructs the validity and imperative of her project: namely, in the claim that the living writer has the power rewrite the forgotten dead in her own image.

4.2 The Crown of Power

I had just come from Baltimore, and being home so quickly made my head spin, even though my feet were planted firmly on the corner of St. Ann and Rampart. I was, in some vague and new-agey sense, looking for Marie Laveau's house. I'm not sure what I expected—her ghost, purposeful and no-nonsense in its knotted headwrap, to stride up to me and say, "Chérie, it's this way"? In any case, I had been up and down St. Ann Street several times without any hints of spectral knowledge. As I turned towards the river, the muted unholy noises of Bourbon Street reached me. Towards the lake, the lights of Armstrong Park mocked the demise of that space formerly known as Congo Square. I was hemmed in by music to the south and silence to the north, in a city cradled in the crook of a river's arm. You would think I would find comfort, encased in so many unseen pasts. It was almost like an embrace.

But standing on the sidewalk outside of (who knew?) what was formerly known as Marie Laveau's house, I felt no comfort. In Baltimore I had been told, Not for you, black girl, the sanitary pleasures of Sunday afternoons, of camping, perhaps, or whatever white couples of a certain age do on the weekends. No, black girl. No no. Don't even dream of it. You are a body, black girl. And even if that body was piled on top of a hundred others like it, they would still fall short of wholeness. I eat bodies like yours for every meal,

black girl. I suck life from their paltry bones. I spit them out. Black girl. *In Baltimore, as though to shield myself from the blows, I had folded myself into the nothing he said I was.*

Power must be the opposite of what I felt in that moment. And whatever power was, I wanted it. I wanted Marie Laveau to put her arm around my shoulders and say: "Oh my daughter, I have heard your woes and your pains and tribulations, and in the depths of the wisdom of the gods I will help you find peace and happiness."²⁴ I wanted to knock at her door and ask her the recipe for power. I wanted her to tell me exactly what combination of lemon and gunpowder, what sacred root, what written plea, what black cat boiled and then eaten, would hold the key. By what means, by what spells could I be something other than a discarded black girl on a New Orleans sidewalk, sitting in front of a house that no longer existed?

Despite the frequent narrations of Vodou ceremonies ending in orgies, and Marie Laveau's reputation as a "procuress" of mixed-race prostitutes for the enjoyment of wealthy white men, the Marie Laveau of legend does not participate in sexual transactions. In most nineteenth-century journalistic accounts, the queen is imperious, above sex, above the machinations of white men. One reporter for *The Daily Picayune* remembers her on April 11, 1886, five years after her death, as "gifted with beauty and intelligence, she ruled her own race, and made captives of many of the other." Even representations that do revel in Marie Laveau's famously magnetic sex appeal are mitigated by an obvious admiration for her intellectual gifts. For example, George Washington Cable represents Marie Laveau as the seductive yet clever mixed-race hairdresser/priestess Palmyre la Philosophe in *The Grandissimes*, who holds even her former master under her thrall: "he tolerates her even though she does not present

²⁴ Ibid., 197.

herself in a 'strictly menial capacity.' Reason why—*he's afraid of her.*"²⁵ This is no small representational feat for a woman from a caste of women thought to be concubines to white men, performing the rites of a religion thought to be little more than an occasion for mass psycho-sexual satisfaction. Marie Laveau's sexuality is present, but never obstructive, and her works are never relegated to it. In her evasion of the burdens of black female sexuality and in her elevation to a status based on intellectual merit alone, the question one might ask as a black woman is: "How?" Or, perhaps more importantly, "How can I?"

Forty years after Hurston asks this question of Marie Laveau in New Orleans, Alice Walker asks the same question of Hurston in Florida. A constant theme throughout Walker's work is the contemporary artist's need for historical models. Walker frames this need as both an act of respect for ancestors and as an act of cultural nationalism in the present: "*We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. And if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists and as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children, and, if necessary, bone by bone.*"²⁶ This sense of responsibility to the dead is a fundamental question throughout black artistic production, especially when faced with archival gaps and elisions in the stories of the dead. While Walker's famous 1973 essay, "Looking for Zora," canonized Hurston as one of the greatest American authors of the twentieth century, it also propagated the idea that Hurston died alone and penniless, victim to the twin evils of racism and misogyny. Furthermore, the central figure of this essay is not Hurston, but Walker herself. What one remembers from this essay is not Hurston's genius, but the heroic image of Walker hacking her way through a snake-infested field of waist-high grass to find Hurston's sad, forgotten, unmarked grave.

²⁵ Cable (1929), 60-61.

²⁶ Walker (1983), 92.

Walker first came across Hurston's writing when she was researching the story "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff," about an impoverished old woman who uses hoodoo to curse a white woman who played a key role in her misfortunes.²⁷ After reading collections of African-American folklore by racist ethnographers, Walker wonders:

How was I supposed to believe anything they wrote, since at least one of them, Puckett, was capable of wondering, in his book, if "The Negro" had a large enough brain? Well, I thought, where are the *black* collectors of folklore? Where is the *black* anthropologist? Where is the *black* person who took the time to travel the back roads of the South and collect the information I need: how to cure heart trouble, treat dropsy, hex somebody to death, lock bowels, cause joints to swell, eyes to fall out, and so on. Where was this black person?²⁸

The repetition of the word "black" belies the fact that Walker is not looking for just any black person, but a black *woman*.²⁹ When she finds Hurston's ethnographic work in *Mules and Men*, Walker finds more than the historical background for her story. Walker's "discovery" seems to prompt a kind of magic for her, whereby Hurston's existence

²⁷ Walker (1973), 60-80.

²⁸ Walker (1983), 11.

²⁹ Walker's search for female mentors is also a response to the masculinist bent of some of her contemporaries, whose attempts at African-American literary canon-formation excluded or openly denigrated the contributions of women. Take, for instance, Ishmael Reed's depiction of Marie Laveau in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*, which represents her as a jealous and conniving woman trying to keep the hardworking black man down—represented by Marie Laveau's contemporary, a hoodoo doctor called Dr. John. In Reed's representation, it is Marie Laveau who is responsible for the malignant, suspicious brand of sorcery known throughout the novel as Louisiana Red: "toad's eyes, putting snakes in people, excrement, hostility, evilness, attitude, negroes stabbing negroes." Reed (1974), 140. In contrast, of course, to Doctor John's abiding wisdom, which was "medicine handed down through the generations and enriched by the fact that all of the African tribes merged their knowledge in the New World." Reed (1974), 142. However, her perceived sins are ultimately dismissed by the fact that "she had fifteen children" and thus "had to hustle," and she is thus demoted to "second vice-president in charge of wit and hustle" of the American hoodoo tradition, with Doctor John installed in her place as founder. This is essentially a Fall-narrative in which black women are responsible for the original sins of the black community. For Reed this is a matter of satire, but his laughter is the laughter of one who is secure in his right to laugh, the laughter of someone confident in the power of his ancestors. For Hurston herself as well as for Walker, this laughter is impossible, when it has been preceded only by silence. How can you laugh when you think the issue is not a joking matter?

endows Walker with a literary power equivalent to the hoodoo doctor's powers of death and healing. Alice Walker's purported mission, in her search for Zora Neale Hurston's unmarked grave, was to rescue a forgotten genius from obscurity. However, Walker's mission had less to do with ancestral respect than with contemporary struggles of black writers in general, and black women writers in particular. If, as Robert Hemenway says in his biography of Zora Neale Hurston, Hurston's burial in an unmarked grave is "a resting place generally symbolic of the black writer's fate in America,"³⁰ exhuming Hurston's legacy is a symbolic act of particular importance for living writers. Walker seeks to create a distinction between her own creative powers and the disempowerment of black women of the past—"the agony of women who might have been Poets, Novelists, Essayists, and Short-Story Writers...who died with their real gifts stifled within them"—in order to claim for herself the artistic career they did not have access to (or, in Hurston's case, could not complete successfully).³¹

This is why Walker considers the telling of Hurston's life to be a "cautionary tale" of unappreciated black female genius.³² Walker couches her representation of Hurston in a language of filial responsibility: the task of telling Hurston's story was "a duty I accepted as naturally mine—as a black person, a woman, and a writer—because Zora was dead and I, for the time being, was alive."³³ However, the language of duty exists alongside the more openly self-motivated concern of saving Zora, because if Zora fades into oblivion, Walker wonders, "what chance would someone else—for example, myself—have?"³⁴ While looking for Hurston's grave in Florida in 1973, Walker pretends to be her niece, and "the lie comes with perfect naturalness to my lips" because "as far as

³⁰ In Walker (1983), 83.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 234.

³² *Ibid.*, 90.

³³ *Ibid.*, 87.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

I'm concerned, she *is* my aunt—and that of all black people as well.”³⁵ Claims of matrilineage are often about subsuming the mother's heritage as much as it is about preserving it, and in fact makes the possibility of preservation impossible, because her image has been subsumed within the image of the searcher/ daughter/ niece. In Walker's case, Hurston's memorial is a testament of Walker's resolve rather than Hurston's life. Claiming descent justifies and elides the representational violence often enacted upon the dead by their living “descendants.” Zora becomes a victim so that Alice may be the hero. In a certain sense, the living consume the dead, as when Walker cannot afford the nicest tombstone for Hurston's grave when she finds it in Fort Pierce, Florida, and shrugs it off with the flippant remark, “I realize I must honor the dead, but between the dead great and the living starving, there is no choice.”³⁶ By framing it as a matter of the living's literal starvation if they are denied access to the resources of the dead, Walker justifies her symbolic consumption of Hurston's hard-won power and agency.

It is clear from Walker's research files on Zora Neale Hurston that this image of Hurston as a victim is at odds with Hurston's self-representation—and more significantly, that Walker must have realized the disparity and chosen to represent Hurston as disempowered. Among Walker's research files,³⁷ which include various photocopied articles by and about Hurston and requests for Hurston's WPA recordings, is one newspaper clipping from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* from April 24, 1950, entitled “Successful Author Working as a Maid: Zora Neale Hurston, Who Has Written Seven Books, Took Job in Florida Home as Change of Pace—Likes the Work.” Zora Neale Hurston is quoted: “You can use your mind only so long. Then you have to use your hands. It's just the natural thing. I was born with a skillet in my hand. Why shouldn't I

³⁵ Ibid., 102.

³⁶ Ibid., 107.

³⁷ Alice Walker papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

do it for somebody else awhile?" Here, we have a typical example of Hurston's storied capacity for blurring the line between tricksterly pragmatism and self-degradation. This tendency on Hurston's part has fueled critiques from Langston Hughes and Richard Wright. Hughes, for example calls her "the perfect darkie" in the eyes of her white friends,³⁸ and Wright, in a review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, asserts that "Miss Hurston voluntarily continues in her novel the tradition that was forced upon the Negro in theatre, that is, the minstrel technique."³⁹ Her defenders, on the other hand, celebrate her ability to negotiate and manipulate complicated interracial dynamics in her own favor. Either way, it is clear that Hurston never represented herself as a victim. Her oft-quoted declaration in "How It Feels to be Colored Me," for instance, explicitly positions her as above the fray of racism and misogyny:

But I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all but about it. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.⁴⁰

This is not to say that Hurston's bravado did not exist alongside significant financial and personal woes. But it does make clear that Hurston put considerable energy into downplaying the strain of structural injustice in her life, in favor of a persona as blithe and confident as any white man. Regardless of the "truth" of this persona, it is a tactic

³⁸ Hughes (1993), 239. It is also important to note that Hughes and Hurston had a famous falling out of their co-authored play *Mule Bone*, and that in 1929 Hughes broke with their rich white patroness Charlotte Osgood-Mason over disagreements about how "primitive" his writing should be, while Hurston continued a rather taxing and complicated relationship of financial dependency with Osgood-Mason until

³⁹ Wright (1937), 22-23.

⁴⁰ Hurston (1979), 155.

Hurston employed throughout her career, a tactic that Walker dismantles in her representation of Hurston. Walker appears to view Hurston's flippancy as a kind of false-consciousness that Walker must unveil, because "She did not complain [...] She was not the type."⁴¹ So Walker complains for her, without considering the variety of reasons that Hurston might not have been the complaining type. What is missing from Walker's representation of Hurston is the recognition that silence on certain topics is not universally disempowering. What is missing is an acknowledgement that black woman leaders of the past are not solely victims of historical processes of silences, but forces of power in their own right.

By pointing out that the search for historical mentors is motivated principally by the searcher's concern for the present, I do not seek to cast the search in a negative light. Rather, I argue, following Trouillot, that "only in the present can we be true or false to the past we choose to acknowledge."⁴² Like Walker, Hurston is deeply committed to changing the lives of black women in the present, but Hurston chooses to embrace rather than lament the lacunae in Marie Laveau's iconography. Hurston entered a social scene in which Marie Laveau loomed large as a mythological figure, and in her discussions with hoodoo doctors she found that "they all claimed some knowledge and link with Marie Laveau. From so much of hearing the name I asked everywhere for this Leveau [sic] and everybody told me differently."⁴³ The version of Marie Laveau Hurston chooses to recount comes from Laveau's self-professed nephew, Luke Turner, who presents Marie Laveau as a political as well as a spiritual leader:

The police hear so much about Marie Leveau [sic] that they come to her house in St. Anne Street to put her in jail. First one come, she stretch out her left hand and

⁴¹ Walker (1983), 90.

⁴² Trouillot (1995), 151.

⁴³ Hurston (1935), 191.

he turn round and round and never stop until some one come lead him away. Then two come together—she put them to running and barking like dogs. Four come and she put them to beating each other with night sticks. The whole station force come. They knock at her door. She know who they are before she ever look. She did work at her altar and they all went to sleep on her steps.”

True power, in Hurston’s estimation, is the power to make new social arrangements, not merely to change them. She cites Moses as the original and most powerful hoodoo doctor because “many a man thinks he is making something when he’s only changing things around. But God let Moses make.”⁴⁵ The Marie Laveau of Hurston’s account shares many qualities with the Biblical Moses: the ability to part waters, to make a mockery of state power, and to lead an oppressed people. However, the gendered nature of Hurston’s construction of power cannot be downplayed; the fact that Marie Laveau is a black female leader factors significantly into addressing the power imbalance between black men and women that Hurston critiques in both *Mules and Men* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In both texts, Hurston questions the uses of freedom, if even after emancipation, black women continue to be subject to the kinds of unfreedoms they experienced in their relationships under slavery.

In *Mules and Men*, Hurston’s search for Marie Laveau is motivated by Hurston’s own commitment to restructuring a sexual and romantic economy in which black women are systematically devalued. If, as a result of slavery, “De nigger woman is de mule uh de world,”⁴⁶ Hurston seeks to use Marie Laveau’s legacy to turn mules back into women. The shroud of mystery surrounding Marie Laveau’s allows Hurston to construct her own narrative of black women’s power. In Hurston’s account, most of her

⁴⁵ Ibid., 193.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 184.

⁴⁷ Hurston (2009), 186. This quote is attributed to Janie’s grandmother, whose views stand in for the hopelessness and fatalism of pre-emancipation conceptions of love.

informants' clients are women seeking to keep or revenge themselves upon men who abuse and abandon them. A woman named Minnie, who comes back to the same hoodoo priestess every week in tears, mistreated by her man, feeling him slipping from her grasp, and asks: "Miss Kitty, Gabriel done got to de place I can't tell him his eye is black. What can I do to rule de man I love?"⁷⁷ Miss Kitty gives the woman spells and rituals to perform, but they never change the character of Minnie's relationship. Similarly, the wife of a powerful hoodoo priest wants to leave him but cannot because he controls her with a piece of brain coral. Impatient, Hurston tells her, "But if that piece is so precious, and you're his wife, I'd take it and let *him* get another piece."⁷⁸ Still, she stays. Surely disheartened at the seeming inevitability of black women's exploitation, Hurston turns to Marie Laveau for guidance on how, not just to change the possibilities of black love, but to make it anew.

Power, in Hurston's worldview, paves the way for new forms of love.

Requesting power from black female leaders of the past is what enables black women of the present to reformulate their social relations with men.⁷⁹ For Hurston, Marie Laveau's voice is not submerged in a murky past, but powerfully present as a living god: "She go to her great Altar and seek until she become the same as the spirit, then she come out into the room where she listens to them that come to ask. When they finish, she answer them as a god [...] Marie Leveau is not a woman when she answer the one who ask. No. She is a god, yes."⁸⁰ In construing Marie Laveau as a divine voice in her own right, not as a voice lost to history, Hurston conjures a powerful corrective to the seeming inevitability of black women's voicelessness in the tides of sociohistorical processes. Here, the black female leaders of the past are not the silenced mules of history, upon

⁷⁷ Hurston (1935), 245.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁷⁹ "Go to your house and build an altar. Power will come." *Ibid.*, 194.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 195.

whose unprotesting backs history was made. As gods, their hand is evident in the shaping of historical narratives that do not seem to include them, because gods often walk invisible and unheard, but shape and direct events nonetheless. Indeed, this is in keeping with the notion that in today's New Orleans, Marie Laveau has been elevated to the status of a *lwa* [a spirit in Haitian Vodou], meant to provide her worshippers with guidance and protection: "She speaks, as all the *lwa* do, on how to free yourself from forms of slavery."³¹

As Turner describes Marie Laveau's dramatic entrance to the St. John's Day Festival over which she presided every year: "she would rise out of the waters of the lake with a great communion candle burning upon her head and another in each one of her hands. She walked upon the waters to the shore."³² Marie Laveau's control over the seemingly inexorable and destructive forces of wind and water in New Orleans is equally at work in her acts of vengeance as in her acts of pleasure, as evidenced by this spell of revenge she launches on behalf of one of her petitioners:

That the South wind shall scorch their bodies and make them wither and shall not be tempered to them. That the North wind shall freeze their blood and numb their muscles and that it shall not be tempered to them. That the West wind shall blow away their life's breath and will not leave their hair grow, and that their finger nails shall fall off and their bones shall crumble. That the East wind shall make their minds grow dark, their sight shall fail and their seed dry up so that they shall not multiply.³³

These lines are used as an antidote to loss and mistreatment, to degradation and abuse, to all the seemingly monolithic social formations that make black women the "mules of

³¹ Sallie Ann Glassman, interview with the author, January 12, 2017.

³² Hurston (1935), 193.

³³ *Ibid.*, 197.

the world.” Part prayer and part incantation, it takes to task all that is seemingly “natural” about black women’s disempowerment and turns these forces of nature upon those who have used their unquestioned powers to enforce black women’s disenfranchisement. With this prayer, Hurston questions the inevitability of black women’s historical disempowerment. Hurston’s Laveau, unlike Walker’s Hurston, is not a case study in the world’s unfairness towards black women, but its antidote. As such, Hurston and her Laveau are mutually empowering. The measure of Hurston’s prestige as an ethnographer is in Marie Laveau’s stature as a spiritual mentor, and Laveau’s reputation depends on Hurston’s representation of her as powerful. This results in a sympathetic rendering of the dead priestess, a representation in synch with the leadership role Laveau occupied in life. But it is a representation crafted for Hurston’s personal empowerment, just as surely as Walker’s is. In both cases, the dead women have no way of combating or disagreeing with the ways in which their legacies are reshaped by their successors. What happens when the person being spoken for is living, and views this process as an act of violence, a form of subjugation to be resisted at all costs?

4.3 The Black Cat Bone

Don Edwards holds my trust in the palm of his hand, and he has never closed his fist. In all our rambles across the city—to impromptu brass band concerts at nursing homes, to that donut shop owned by the guy from Beasts of the Southern Wild, to meet Mardi Gras Indian chiefs, to catch a bit of coolness along the Mississippi at sunset—my trust has never once soured to fear. I gave him my copy of Langston Hughes’ autobiography, and he loved it so much he said he wished he could keep reading forever. He gave me a picture of a young boy touching the forehead of the Louis Armstrong statue right before they put it up in Congo Square, and when I

look at it now in my living room I think about how the boy is blessing the statue. Once, when I walked into Flora's in a headwrap and fur coat, he told me I looked like Zora Neale Hurston, and it remains to this day the highest compliment anyone ever gave me.

Don Edwards lost all of his records during Katrina, but he sometimes wakes up forgetting he has lost them, thinking he can just reach for them and the needle will find its groove and all will be well in the world. Memphis Minnie will sing "Hoodoo Magic Lady." Sonny Rollins will play the saxophone and it will be so sublime, so irresistible that the mockingbirds will gather outside his window to sing along, just like they used to. Billie Holiday will ask us if we know what it means to miss New Orleans. And we will know, this time we will know.

What happens when water meets vinyl? Do the songs dissolve into the waters like sugar? Do they float on the surface like sargasso, reaching out tendrils, reaching for unknown throats, beached on unknown shores? Certainly, the songs are insoluble. Surely, the waters do not digest them.

During his Katrina-induced exile in South Carolina, where he truly learned what it meant to miss New Orleans, Don Edwards heard snatches of what had been submerged. In a Charleston bank, waiting in line for a loan, his phone rang in his pocket and played his ring tone, Lil' Wayne's "Ride for My Niggas." The young teller, no doubt surprised and pleased that a soft-spoken elderly gentleman should have such a ring tone, decided to help a brother out, one Weezy fan to another. He let Don Edwards skip the line. When he asked Don where he was from and Don told him, he shook his head and said what a shame, what a terrible shame it was.

Submerged does not mean gone.

It would seem that Hurricane Katrina was a death sentence for the black population of New Orleans. Not only were black bodies disproportionately represented among those killed or displaced by the storm, but in the much-heralded "revitalization"

of the city since 2005, New Orleans has lost almost one-third of its pre-Katrina black population.⁵⁴ So when the Louisiana Board of tourism continues to feature cheerful images of all-black brass bands on its pamphlets and billboards, when shops along Decatur Street sell postcards of mammies and pickaninny dolls, when through it all Louis Armstrong's name is emblazoned on the New Orleans airport, it feels as though a dead body is being ventriloquized by an evil marketing witch-doctor. A number of local tour companies have capitalized upon the intersection of New Orleans blackness and sensationalist tragedy, as evidenced by the proliferation of, in addition to "voodoo" and "ghost" tours, "Hurricane Katrina Tours" for an average of \$50 per person. These tours parade by bus through the Lower Ninth Ward and other neighborhoods most affected by flooding during Hurricane Katrina. Gray Line tours proudly advertises that it donates \$1 per passenger to a non-profit devoted to "recovery."⁵⁵ The Trip Advisor reviews of this service unanimously praise their guides' status as "lifelong" New Orleanians and their "first-hand experience" of the disaster.⁵⁶ The tourist industry of New Orleans continues to capitalize on the city's history of blackness while it constantly commits acts of representational violence that obscure and displace the lived experience of blackness in favor of a jazz-inflected spectacle of suffering. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, when the levees broke, when the buses did not come, when the Superdome filled up, it would appear that the black population of New Orleans was invisible. New Orleans historian Lynell Thomas argues in her study of post-Katrina New Orleans tourism that "New Orleans tourists [...] become acquainted with a

⁵⁴ Philip (2015).

⁵⁵ <http://www.graylineneworleans.com/all/tours/hurricane-katrina-tour> Accessed July 31, 2016.

⁵⁶ https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g60864-d599729-Reviews-Hurricane_Katrina_Tour_America_s_Greatest_Catastrophe-New_Orleans_Louisiana.html Accessed July 31, 2016. These tours are also described in Thomas (2014), 127-157.

representation of blackness that leaves actual black New Orleans invisible.”⁵⁷ However, I think the problem was not invisibility at all, but its opposite. In the words of Claudia Rankine: “For so long you thought the ambition of racist language was to denigrate and erase you as a person [...] you begin to understand yourself as rendered hypervisible in the face of such language acts. Language that feels hurtful is intended to exploit all the ways that you are present.”⁵⁸ The plight of New Orleans’ black population is entirely due to New Orleans highly-visible status as “the ludic space, the behavioral vortex, for the rest of the nation.”⁵⁹ Pat Robertson, the very same evangelical Christian who blamed the 2010 earthquake in Haiti on Haiti’s “pact to the devil” also viewed Hurricane Katrina as an act of God’s vengeance upon a modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah. In these narratives, New Orleans is simultaneously racialized, feminized and demonized. Inherent even in its nickname of the Big Easy, New Orleans is represented as a languid, loose woman—desirable, but never respectable. This nexus of images meant to convey New Orleans’ supposedly carefree attitude towards perversion and corruption is often described by one word: Creole.⁶⁰ The Creole (read: mixed-race) culture of the city is to blame for its carefree (read: degenerate) approach to life, given that it was conceived in sin by the unnatural mixing of races. The fantasy of the Creole allows its makers to revel in their own blamelessness and to simultaneously to spin narratives that justify their continuous exploitation of a person or place. This fantasy dates back to the eighteenth century, as Doris Garraway argues in her study of the nexus of fear and desire in French colonial discourse on miscegenation, in which the blame for the fact of miscegenation

⁵⁷ Thomas (2014), 8.

⁵⁸ Rankine (2014), 49.

⁵⁹ Roach (1996), 231.

⁶⁰ While the word “Creole” originally referred to anyone born in the Americas (as opposed to Europe or Africa) and could thus also apply to white people, the popular usage of the word in contemporary New Orleans has come to refer to the descendents of mixed-race Francophone and/or Creolophone peoples.

was legally and ideologically attributed to mixed-race women.⁶¹ This is evidenced by laws that labeled concubinage as a form of prostitution, and various sumptuary laws meant to curb the sex appeal of mixed-race women.⁶² In eighteenth-century travel writing, the mulata is as represented vain, luxurious, and sexually rapacious. According to Garraway, the fantasy of “monstrous female sexuality offered a way for colonists to resolve the paradox of transracial desire and racial paranoia into an acceptable fantasy of their own sexual slavery and submission at the hands of colored womanhood.”⁶³

Paradoxically, and in spite of its burdened sexual history⁶⁴ and complex social implications, the term “Creole” in present-day New Orleans is often used by people of color to mask or replace the humiliating narrative of slavery with a fantasy origin-point of autonomous, elite people of color.⁶⁵ Although the term gestures to a caste of often mixed-race Francophone and /or Creolophone people of color who in the antebellum period would have been called *gens de couleur*, its usage in contemporary New Orleans refers less to the linguistic group and more to a history of miscegenation. When someone in present-day New Orleans says, “I am Creole,” it is often to avoid saying, “I am black.” This fetishization of mixed raceness not only displaces the suffering of black peoples in favor of a more palatable (read: more white) form of suffering, but it also elides obscures the shared struggle of all people of color in the wake of *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

⁶¹ Garraway (2005), 194-239.

⁶² The most famous of these is the *tignon* law, which required women of color in the French colonies to cover their hair. The law’s fame comes from the extravagance and beauty of the head dresses which women of color wore to subvert this law.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁶⁴ In Louisiana, the practice of *plaçage* formalized the domestic and financial unions of white men and mixed-race women, who were often secondary to the men’s legal white wives. Recent scholarship by Aslakson (2012) argues that *plaçage* has been spectacularized by Anglo-American observers as a practice by which scheming mothers sold their innocent daughters into concubinage to depraved wealthy white men, when in reality most interracial relationships of this kind resembled common law marriages. Either way, it stands that even long-term relationships between white men and women of color took place in spite of drastic disparities of power and legal status between the man and the woman, and as such could place the woman in a vulnerable position.

⁶⁵ For more on this, see Thomas (2014), 53-91. As Thomas notes, the fantasy of New Orleans’ “Creole” origins can also provide a comfortable post-racial narrative that enables white tourists to engage with a respectable multiculturalism without having to consider the troubling fact of slavery.

Ultimately, the tripartite racial caste system of New Orleans came to an end with the passing of *Plessy*. Homer Plessy, himself a “Creole” in the contemporary sense of the word, failed to gain access to the benefits of his visible whiteness, thus solidifying America’s Manichean white-black divide and rendering irrelevant the tripartite caste system of the French colonial society that was nineteenth-century New Orleans. This was a clash between two distinct racial categorization systems, and the American system won, and continues to win. The reality of the situation is, in twentieth century New Orleans, Creoles were made to choose blackness or whiteness. It became irrelevant for anyone who is visibly black to claim Creole identity—the Creole as a group with distinct legal rights died with *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896.⁶⁶ The fate of Marie Laveau’s biological descendants is evidence of this. In the early twentieth century, several of her grandchildren chose to pass, registering their children as legally white. The white branches of the family left New Orleans and joined the white middle-class, while the black branches who remained in New Orleans were limited to service careers.⁶⁷ The contemporary term “Creole” is a grand self-delusion that ignores the mutual oppression of darker and lighter-skinned black New Orleanians throughout the twentieth century, in the vain hope of accessing the table scraps of white privilege. But the only way to access white privilege is to claim whiteness; there is no longer any in-between, no longer any nuance.

Between a caricatured blackness and a falsely idealized mixed-raceness, between hypervisibility and invisibility, the black population of New Orleans often chooses invisibility. While scholars may lament the instances of invisibility and silence in Afro-diasporic archives, invisibility can be what heals the wounds of a hypervisible blackness in New Orleans. New Orleans might be America’s most hypervisible city in

⁶⁶ Aslakson (2014).

⁶⁷ Long (2006), 182-189.

the sense that its visual markers are constantly used to denigrate and invalidate its continued existence. In this context, we should take seriously the advice of one of Hurston's informants: "Sometimes you have to be able to walk invisible. Some things must be done in deep secret, so you have to walk out of the sight of man."⁶⁸

At the time of Hurston's research in New Orleans, there were a variety of New Orleans city ordinances directed against fortunetellers, all for the purposes of stamping out the lively (and largely black-owned) market in the supernatural.⁶⁹ However, it would be wrong to think that hoodoo's lack of visibility in the present day was the result of these punitive laws. Hoodoo has not drowned. Rather, its subterranean existence makes itself known in strange ways and places. To miss New Orleans is to miss the space in which it is possible, at specific times, to be invisible. For instance, the self-protective invisibility of hoodoo dance, in which the religious rites are both shielded and refracted by the hypervisibility of the Congo Square dances:

Now, some white people say she hold hoodoo dance on Congo Square every week. But Marie Leveau never hold no hoodoo dance. That was a pleasure dance [...] Hoodoo is private. She give the dance the first Friday night in each month and they have crab gumbo and rice to eat and people dance. The white people come look on, and think they see all, when they only see a dance.⁷⁰

As Hurston learns during her ethnographic research, ritual dance is actually quite rare in the context of hoodoo, and is only used in cases of "death to the enemy."⁷¹ These two dances—the visible merrymaking and the invisible vengeance—are partners in the larger dance of black representation, balancing the precarious pleasures and pains of an overdetermined blackness without fully succumbing to either.

⁶⁸ Hurston (1935), 220.

⁶⁹ Hurston (1935), 192 and Long (2001), 132.

⁷⁰ Hurston (1935), 193.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 194.

This interplay between visibility and invisibility does not deflect or prevent acts of racial violence, but it does allow black people to have an existence outside of it. After two-hundred pages of detail about orgies and human sacrifices, even Tallant must bow before his ultimate lack of knowledge about hoodoo. In a study that was designed to assert his mastery over the subject matter, mastery ultimately eludes him. For he must admit that the scope and content of hoodoo is beyond him when, at the end of the book, a black waiter at a restaurant confides in him:

I've been all over the country and I've seen signs of Voodoo almost everywhere, anywhere people of my race live. You can always find it. Of course lots of white people don't know anything about it, but we always know. Anywhere my people go they know the signs.⁷²

In some sense, being black in today's New Orleans is a matter of "knowing the signs." Hoodoo in New Orleans may no longer exist as a secret brotherhood (or sisterhood, for that matter) of occult practices. The tradition of hoodoo that I longed to find among other black people does not exist in the form of baths or potions or incantations. Rather, it is a tradition of being black beyond the scope of hypervisibility, outside of violently-imposed forms of knowledge. This tradition has its ideological roots in hoodoo ritual, as illustrated by Hurston's narration of the ceremony of the Black Cat Bone, in which she boils a black cat alive and sucks on its bones in order to gain the power of invisibility. During the ceremony, Hurston's hard-won invisibility is accompanied by terrifying sentiments:

Great beast-like creatures thundered up to the circle from all sides. Indescribable noises, sights, feelings. Death was at hand! Seemed unavoidable! I don't know.

⁷² Tallant (1984), 247.

Many times I have thought and felt, but I always have to say the same thing. I don't know. I don't know.⁷³

In this ceremony, where Hurston's academic certainty falls away and she is left confused, frightened, and unable to access any knowledge or understanding of what she has witnessed. This disruption of knowledge, however, is the power of invisibility. Hurston experiences this lack of knowledge in the ceremony so that she too can have the power to disrupt the knowledge of others. The violence of the kind of knowledge exerted by Tallant and his ilk cannot stand before invisibility. Invisibility stands in defiance of false and appropriative knowledge. Invisibility is a refusal to be used.

This is perhaps what Hurston meant when she wrote to Langston Hughes during her New Orleans fieldwork: "It makes me sick to see these cheap white folks are grabbing our stuff and ruining it. I am almost sick—my one consolation being that they never do it right and so there still a chance for us."⁷⁴ The limits of appropriative knowledge and the "chance" for black New Orleanians to safeguard their own self-representations is curiously played out in the plot and backstory of Billie Holiday's only film. The 1947 film *New Orleans*, Billie Holiday's Hollywood debut, was so traumatic in this regard that she never made another film.⁷⁵ Falling on hard times after her battle with cocaine and a brief stint in a rehabilitation center, she signed the contract thinking she would be playing herself, but she realizes when she sees the script: "I should have known better [...] You just tell me one Negro girl who's made movies who didn't play a

⁷³ Hurston (1935), 221.

⁷⁴ Hurston (2002), 126. As far as "cheap white folks" go, Hurston was undoubtedly referring to the many white-owned hoodoo drugstores in New Orleans at the time, as described in colorful detail by Tallant (1984), a text in which he represents gullible black people take the advice of white "pharmacists," who once they leave will mutter, "Hell, it doesn't hurt to help these people [...] They are just like kids." Tallant (1984), 221.

⁷⁵ Within the three pages she devotes to the film in her autobiography (the chapter is poignantly titled "The Same Old Story"), Holiday mentions four separate times that she never made another Hollywood film.

maid or a whore.”⁶⁶ It is too late for her to walk out on her contract, so a drama coach is hired to “brief me on how to get the right kind of Tom feeling into this thing.”⁶⁷ Most of the footage of Holiday and Armstrong was not used in the released version of *New Orleans*. It constructs a narrative in which a maid called Endie (played by Holiday) and her boyfriend Louis (Louis Armstrong playing himself) provide the raw musical talent that the white protagonists refine and mass produce, bringing jazz to the city of Chicago and ultimately to Carnegie Hall.

Holiday was at odds with the lead actress when Dorothy Patrick (whom Holiday calls “Blondie”) accused Holiday of “stealing scenes from her.”⁶⁸ While Holiday emphasizes her own lack of acting experience and plays off this tension as ludicrous insecurity on her colleague’s part, Patrick is certainly not wrong. Holiday’s famously haunting voice indeed upstages Patrick’s rather mediocre and saccharine version of “Do You Know What it Means to Miss New Orleans?” As Patrick’s maid, Holiday teaches her mistress the song. But the true magic of Holiday’s style is a matter of tone rather than lyrics. The subtle and heartbreaking alchemies of tone by which a line like “Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans / When that’s where you left your heart?” can be so loaded with subtext that it takes the listener to the depths of despair. In this way, Holiday crafts a spirit for the song that is not replicable. The song resists Patrick’s appropriation, because Holiday injects something into it that exists independently of the words. This ineffable quality is not Holiday’s blackness, but it is inextricable from it—Holiday’s inflections give voice to the sad ironies of someone who has “fought [her] whole damn life to keep from being a maid,” and yet “[goes] to Hollywood and ends up

⁶⁶ Holiday (1976), 119.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 121.

as a make-believe maid.”⁷⁹ Holiday’s voice tells an alternate but parallel story to the vague sentimentalisms of “Do You Know What it Means to Miss New Orleans”: a person struggling to communicate to a listener an experience that the listener cannot know or understand. The question is rhetorical, something only Holiday’s voice can answer. In the context of the film, it becomes apparent that Holiday, not Patrick, is the one who truly knows what it means to miss New Orleans.

Holiday’s last appearance in the film, before Patrick’s character takes her songs to Carnegie Hall, is at the closing of Storyville. The red-light district of Storyville, which operated from 1897 to 1917, was historically home to a multiracial and often racially ambiguous cast of characters. As Joseph Roach argues, Storyville restages and replaces the spectacle of commodification of raced bodies that used to take place on the auction block. In fact, Storyville’s closing in 1917 marks a solidification of Jim Crow in the city of New Orleans, making impossible the kind of erotic interracial intimacies that had previously characterized life in New Orleans. Though Storyville was in no way a utopic space of interracial collaboration, its closing represents the strict demarcation of racial lines that exist in today’s New Orleans, and the sad futility of those people of color who seek to supersede it by claiming “Creole” ancestry.⁸⁰ Contrary to the historically mixed crowd of Storyville, the film represents the closing of Storyville as an exclusively black exodus. The scene begins in a Storyville bar, with Holiday striking up a song to comfort the soon-to-be Storyville refugees. A pied piper, a solemn priestess leading her enthralled congregation out of bondage, Holiday exits the film with a dignity that seems more planned than coerced, even though it is overseen by policemen idly swinging batons. The procession, complete with a lugubrious brass band, mirrors the tradition of the second line in New Orleans jazz funerals, in which a jazz band accompanies the

⁷⁹ Ibid., 119.

⁸⁰ Roach (1996), 224-233. See also Landau (2013).

funeral procession to the site of the grave. The funeral, it would seem, is their own. This scene gives the finale in Carnegie Hall, meant to be a triumphant moment of jazz's incorporation into American high art, an air of tragedy. The black characters' absence can be construed as a collective death, or perhaps a suicide carefully planned with a dirge that lays the community to rest. Henceforth, there are no more appearances by black characters in the entire film.

The collective walk-out of New Orleans' black jazz founders in the film, however, is a transition into invisibility rather than a definitive death. They are partaking in what Joseph Roach calls the "parade of circum-Atlantic identities," in both the symbolic and actual parades that characterize New Orleans life:

the participants literally succeed themselves before the eyes of the spectators. As the sound of one band dies, another arrives to lift the spirits of the auditors. Generations of marchers seem to arise and pass away. Because it is an additive form, passing by a point of review in succession, its ending is always an anticlimax, a provocation, and an opening.⁸¹

If the parade represents a uniquely New Orleans attitude towards history and inheritance, black feminism would do well to take this model to heart. The succession of the parade does not rely upon bloodlines, it does not ask its participants to build an identity out of (or at the expense of) those who came before. This sense of an opening is not to replace or mimic one's predecessors, not to claim knowledge of them or continuity with their goals. The logic of the parade is piecemeal, connected but not causal. The parade is unnarrativized, and as such is both resistant to over-simplifications and inviting of the wildest narrative connections. As in the case of Storyville itself, which was demolished before World War II in order to construct the Iberville housing

⁸¹ Roach (1996), 285.

projects. In an attempt at post-Katrina city renewal projects, the housing projects were demolished in 2012-13, only to reveal beneath them a number of caskets containing human remains.⁸² Here, history is not a neat process of sedimentation, of layer upon layer. The ground has already been disturbed, the bones easily unearthed in the jumbled collection of temporalities that makes a linear genealogy impossible to establish. If today we find a casket here, a skeleton there, who are we to say whose ancestor it is? Who are we to say if it is a reveler of Storyville or an ex-slave? Who are we to know if they are black or white? How do we know it is not our mother, and what do we do if it is?

If the black cast of *New Orleans* stages a walk-out in 1947, Beyoncé's 2016 song "Formation" invites them back in. The song, as well as the album from which it comes, is saturated with New Orleans imagery and allusions to the legacy of legalized sexual subjugation of mixed-race women in Louisiana. Dressed in sumptuous but restrictive antebellum dresses, wandering through ornate Southern parlors and under oak trees wreathed in Spanish moss, Beyoncé constructs a Southern gothic backdrop for her tale of disloyalty, abandonment, and exploitation. By linking the infidelity of her husband and father to the imagery of an octoroon ball, Beyoncé simultaneously disavows the idea that there is a Creole elite exempt from black suffering and capitalizes on its cache. In the song "Formation," Beyoncé seeks to re-order the black social world that has been divided by narratives of Creole exceptionalism, by explicitly claiming blackness: "I like my baby heir with baby hair and afros / I like my Negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils."⁸³ In "Formation," Beyoncé calls upon a New Orleans blackness dismembered by both the displacements of Katrina and by the ideological violence of the distinction between light-skinned and dark-skinned people. It is a call to consciousness as much as

⁸² <http://thelensnola.org/2012/12/13/discovery-of-human-remains-delays-iberville-redevelopment/>
Accessed July 31, 2016.

⁸³ Knowles-Carter (2016).

it is a call to arms, as evidenced by the pun on “Okay ladies, let’s get in formation”:
“Okay ladies, let’s get information.” The ladies Beyoncé rallies into formation heal not only the wounds of the interpersonal romantic violence detailed throughout the album, but also the enforced fractures between black women and encourages coalition building amongst them.

As a gesture of good faith, Beyoncé features local bounce artist Big Freedia, who represents the polar opposite of the respectable and aggressively heteronormative self-construction Beyoncé has spent most of her career crafting: queer, working-class, and dark-skinned.⁸ She enlists Freedia’s help because bounce is a genre that relies on the collective memory of New Orleans, and relies on references she is not privy to. Bounce songs are primarily composed of the repetition of a single word or catch-phrase, like Mr. Ghetto’s chorus to the song “Walmart” [“Wally wally wally wally wally”] and Big Freedia’s now famous “Azz everywhere.” For most of the history of bounce music before Hurricane Katrina, artists remained local and thus relied on the memorability of their catchphrases and personas to draw recurring crowds to their shows. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, both the performers and their audiences were dispersed and their shared knowledge seemingly fractured. However, the knowledge rebounds in other spaces, others dancehalls, other states. One of Big Freedia’s catchphrases is the gnomic refrain, “You already know,” which assumes an insider or local knowledge, to the exclusion of a voyeurist gaze. It is a watchword, a wink, a gesture towards a knowledge which, while invisible, is apparent and shared between those to whom it pertains. It is the same knowledge that compels New Orleans residents to avoid places like Bourbon

⁸ New Orleans bounce is a genre of music and dance which began in the 1980s but was popularized post-Hurricane Katrina by a combination of factors: the diaspora of displaced New Orleans residents in other parts of the country, Big Freedia’s participation in the popular show *Rupaul’s Drag Race*, and Miley Cyrus’ performance at the 2015 MTV Video Music Awards, in whose wake she was accused of appropriating black and New Orleans culture. Bounce is best known as the purported provenance of twerking, a fast-paced style of dance which emphasizes rhythmic manipulation of the buttocks. For a history of bounce music, see Miller (2012).

Street, which they label as “for tourists,” and to direct tourists who eagerly ask for “local haunts” to places they themselves would never go, all in the effort to demarcate the invisible boundaries of a New Orleans that does not have to perform itself. So when Billie Holiday asks, “Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans,” it is Big Freedia who answers across the chasm of the twentieth century, shouting over Jim Crow, over Hurricane Katrina, over the displacements and surrogacies of a rapidly gentrifying New Orleans, turning back to shout over the parade of history: “You already know!”

5. Florence's Place: Host(ess)ing Revolution in Interwar Black Paris

Why are her goddess images only white, western european, judeo-christian? Where was Afrekete, Yemanje, Oyo, and Mawulisa? Where were the warrior goddesses of the Vodun, the Dahomeian Amazons and the warrior-women of Dan? Well, I thought, Mary has made a conscious decision to narrow her scope and to deal only with the ecology of western european women [...] I began to feel my history and my mythic background distorted by the absence of any images of my foremothers in power.

—Audre Lorde, “An Open Letter to Mary Daly”

On January 3, 1932, the performer Florence Emery Jones died of heart failure in her Manhattan apartment.¹ She was 39 years old. Her death certificate declared that she was an “actress” and that she had been a resident of New York City for 25 years.² It mentions nothing of the fact that she had spent most of the 1920s in Paris, nor that she was celebrated as one of the most glamorous entertainers of the Parisian nightclub scene. This same Florence³ who died in a New York tenement once strolled nightly down amber avenues of champagne bottles in a Paris nightclub that bore her name, crooning sweetly; this same Florence once coerced a British prince into dancing the black bottom;⁴

¹ While most scholarly accounts of Florence list her maiden name as “Embry,” Florence’s 1932 death certificate and her 1920 passport application, which she filled out herself, list it as “Emery.” The inaccuracy probably stems from Langston Hughes’ *The Big Sea*, which, while providing the most detailed account of Florence’s time in Paris, nevertheless mistakes her last name as “Embry.”

² Certificate of Death for Florence Jones, 3 January 1932, File No. 464, Department of Health of The City of New York, Bureau of Records. Certified copy in possession of author.

³ I have chosen to use the first name Florence out of respect for the stage persona that Jones created and by which she was known in Parisian circles.

⁴ “Chez Florence” (1927), 12.

this same Florence was, according to Langston Hughes, the first person of color he ever saw “deliberately and openly snubbing white people.”⁵

It appears that, despite the sensation she created in 1920s Paris, Florence died in America in relative poverty and anonymity. As the hostess at two Paris nightclubs—first Le Grand Duc, where Langston Hughes was working as a busboy, then at a larger club called Chez Florence—Florence cut an elegant figure. She was known for her impeccably feminine self-presentation—beautiful dresses in the latest fashions, red lipstick, hair crowned with fresh orchids—and her haughty demeanor towards her rich white clientele.⁶ After this life of luxury, it might seem that dying in a New York tenement was a fall from grace. Perhaps this was why, while narrating the height of Florence’s success in 1924 in his 1940 autobiography, Langston Hughes felt the need to foreshadow her demise, “Ten years later, Florence was dying on Welfare Island in New York,” while meanwhile, her rival hostess, Bricktop, “was the toast of the town, with dukes and princes at her tables.”⁷ However, given Bricktop’s radically different relationship to the role of hostess, Hughes’ remark is far from a simple statement of facts. Florence’s fate, it would seem, is what happens when a black woman openly snubs white people, while Bricktop’s more convivial attitude towards her patrons becomes a model for success. Ada Smith-Ducongé, commonly known as Bricktop, was the Chicago-raised performer called upon by the managers of the Paris nightclub Le Grand Duc to replace Florence when she left the club in 1924. In contrast to Florence, Bricktop is described by Hughes as immensely likable, even “cute.”⁸ It was supposedly Palmer Jones, Florence’s husband,

⁵ Hughes (1993), 161.

⁶ Bricktop reports that “[Florence] was a wonderful dresser, and I once asked her why she paid so much attention to clothes. She answered simply, ‘Because my husband fools around quite a bit and when he comes home I have to look pretty and chic.’” Bricktop (2000), 89. Florence’s interest in haute-couture, whatever the reason, betrayed a commitment to cultivating her persona as an “all-licensed Negress”—someone who took as normal the luxuries that black people were not supposed to have.

⁷ Hughes (1993), 178.

⁸ Hughes (1993), 176.

who made the suggestion that the management of Le Grand Duc hire Bricktop in order to prick his wife's inflated ego, describing Bricktop as someone who "don't have no great big voice or anything, but she has got the damnedest personality."⁹ Bricktop sang in nightclubs throughout her career and rose to prominence as a private instructor of the Charleston to the Paris elite, but it was indeed her personality that made her famous. From the Prince of Wales to F. Scott Fitzgerald to Cole Porter (who was her particular friend), people came to Bricktop's because they liked her. In her autobiography, however, Bricktop describes herself as floundering in the Parisian milieu until a rich white patron promotes her in order to undermine Florence's success, because "Florence needs a lesson. She's too spoiled."¹⁰ In this anecdote, Bricktop becomes the instrument of the white patron's dismay that "Florence Jones got excited," the avenging angel who is meant to show that black women performers should never get too "excited" by their success.¹¹ In both Hughes' and Bricktop's accounts, Florence's rise and fall is represented as a cautionary tale, as a great tragedy of black hubris whose significance extends far beyond Florence's untimely demise.

This is not a reclamation project. In my last chapter, I discussed the dangers of the kind of historical reclamation project that dwells in the victimization of ancestors. However, the fact that Florence does not need me to save her does not undermine my need and respect for the lesson that she teaches the living. In this chapter, I argue that Florence's performance and practice laid claim to the idea of the warrior-goddess in order to make her nightclub a space of resistance to mirror the political climate of the 1920s. While black nationalism was on the rise during the interwar period, and it was often represented by its critics in magico-religious terms, very few of these critiques of

⁹ Bricktop (2000), 82.

¹⁰ Ibid., 92.

¹¹ Ibid., 92.

interwar black leadership considered the notion that black women could be leaders or agents of revolution. Far from being a failure, Florence's behavior was a masterful negotiation of preexisting notions of black femininity in order to situate herself within a revolutionary matrix. As evidenced from the epigraph, which was drawn from Audre Lorde's 1979 critique of Mary Daly's Eurocentric notion of goddesses, the idea of revolution is inextricable from the diasporic imagination of women deities in African cosmologies. The goddesses mentioned by Lorde—Oya, Yemaya, and Ezili—earn their categorization as “warrior goddesses” because they reconcile two seemingly dissonant elements: a so-called feminine imagery of flowers, fertility, and perfume with the so-called masculine work of rage and resistance.¹² Thereby revealing, of course, that these elements are the exclusive domain of neither gender. At Le Grand Duc and Chez Florence, Florence attempted to do the same.

In order to position herself as a black woman within a tradition of resistance, however, Florence was also obligated to carve out a space for herself within Western discourses on femininity, for, as Kara Keeling compellingly argues, “hegemonic conceptualizations of femininity are not visible in the black woman as ‘natural’ attributes; in the black woman femininity appears as either excessive or deficient.”¹³ Because black women were, as Hortense Spillers has it, “ungendered” by the Middle Passage and by the brutalities inflicted upon black flesh, Florence's claims to femininity constitute a radical reclaiming of a possibility long foreclosed to black women.¹⁴ Her reclamation exists, however, not within a tradition of white bourgeois femininity, but within a space of possibility that is innovatively offered to us by Angela Davis: “in order [for slavery] to approach its strategic goal—to extract the greatest possible surplus from

¹² Lorde (2007), 67.

¹³ Keeling (2007), 80.

¹⁴ Spillers (1987), 68.

the labor of the slaves—the black woman had to be released from the chains of the myth of femininity.”¹⁵ Florence’s high-femme aesthetic, when coupled with her sado-masochistic power plays over her clients, constitute an embrace of an alternative tradition to the “myth of femininity” from which she was always already excluded. The warrior goddess is disguised as a starlet. Florence’s performance of excessive femininity is an aesthetic with a political grammar book deep in the traditions of resistance of the African diaspora. It was not, however, the only political grammar book available to black women in the scene of interwar Parisian nightlife.

Florence, Bricktop, and Josephine Baker were among the few black American women to live in 1920s, and all three of some occupied the highly visible social role of “hostess” in their own nightclubs. Alongside the nightly fare of chicken and waffles and jazz standards, black American hostesses in French nightclubs were expected to serve up what it meant to be a black woman. As representatives of black femininity in a world that feared the possibility of black revolt, these women were expected to comment, through their beings if not through their words, on whether a black woman’s place was inside the revolution. The diverging careers of Bricktop and Florence Emery Jones bespeak conflicting viewpoints among black women regarding how to leverage femininity in the service of liberation. Both Bricktop and Florence were nightclub hostesses in Paris, catering to an elite clientele that included European royalty, celebrities, and legendary artists. Both enjoyed a momentary but extravagant financial success. What distinguished them were their attitudes towards their clientele. While Bricktop maintains a balancing act between performance and service inherent in the title of “hostess,” Florence constructs a seemingly paradoxical image as an inhospitable hostess from the symbols of an unruly blackness seeping into her nightclub from a

¹⁵ Davis (1995), 205.

medley of uprisings in Haiti, Harlem, Marseilles, and the Congo. As we will see in the following sections, both modes of hostessing sought to insert themselves into pre-existing discourses of the feminine, and both are a means of negotiating white fears of black internationalism.

5.1 *Bricktop's Place*

Unlike Florence, who had left Paris by 1930, Bricktop remained in Paris until 1939, enjoying considerable popularity among the European and American elite. In her autobiography, Bricktop constructs herself as the antidote to Florence's effrontery, as the bearer of the lesson someone like Florence needs. Friendly where Florence is cold, humble where Florence is haughty, Bricktop frames her difference from Florence in both moral and financial terms. Philosophically, Florence's cold demeanor towards her rich white patrons is indicative of someone who does not know her place, who lacks an understanding of the machinery of her social world and what is and is not possible for black women in the 1920s. Financially, the sheer longevity of Bricktop's extraordinary career (she retired in 1978) in contrast to Florence's scant decade of performance would indicate the success of Bricktop's worldview. However, Bricktop's narrative efforts to make her success seem unstudied and uncomplicated are at odds with the undercurrent of humiliation and degradation that calls into question the notion of her "success," or at least leads us to question its cost. Bricktop's apparent friendliness and openness is in fact a complicated act of mental juggling in which she alternately occupies the role of young girl, of maid, of aristocratic hostess in a genteel drawing room, all in the hopes of escaping the abuse that she sees as a defining condition of black womanhood. This series of masks ultimately allows her access to a glamorous world of European royalty and

American film stars, but it comes at the cost of eliding or foreclosing her commitments to a revolutionary blackness.

Bricktop is described by Hughes as a “plain little mulatto girl with freckles,” and such descriptions of Bricktop’s cuteness, girlishness, and likability abound in descriptions of Bricktop.¹⁶ She cultivates this image through her own self-descriptions, which, while lighthearted, are often deliberately infantilizing, as in the case of her lack of analysis of the rising tide of European fascism in the 1930s: “A woman with a grade-school education couldn’t be expected to understand the larger implications of what was going on around her.”¹⁷ For Bricktop, it is better to be a ward of the white elite than their sexual object, and her solution is to smudge out her womanhood in favor of servanthood or girlhood. Her tongue-in-cheek reasoning for never dating clients offers a bit of dark humor, but cuts to the core of the class dynamics she is navigating: “I didn’t want to be a backstreet mistress of any of those big clients of mine, however, and that’s all I could have been. What would we have talked about when we got out of bed? I don’t know nothing about polo!”¹⁸ Again framing her abstention under the guise of a blithe, girlish unknowing, Bricktop diminishes the political implications of her refusal to step onto the unequal terrain of relationships with upper-class white men. Bricktop’s refusal to comment on the political climate of the 1930s and her refusal to sleep with her clients rely upon a reified separation of public “male” spheres of knowledge and private “female” spaces—a separation which, as a worker in the public space of the nightclub, she knows to be untrue.

Bricktop is highly sensitive to the real threat of sexual exploitation, and as such appeals to preconceived images of sacrosanct or inviolable female-ness—girlhood, and

¹⁶ Hughes (1993), 176.

¹⁷ Bricktop (2000), 200.

¹⁸ Ibid., 130.

the hallmarks of a white-middle class femininity. As we know, these images are neither inviolable nor sacrosanct, but women have mobilized them at various times and for various causes to avoid abuse and exploitation. As Hazel Carby notes, “the cult of true womanhood”—based upon chastity, sensitivity to pain, and an ornamental status within the home—developed in tandem with, and was utterly dependent upon, black women’s exclusion from this category in plantation society. Female authors of slave narratives were sometimes able to demand rights by laying claim to their possession of these characteristics.¹⁹ In clutching tight to the bourgeois ideal of true womanhood, Bricktop deploys the politics of shame that worked so well in abolitionist causes by calling attention to the inhumanity of abusing women in particular. The problem is, in this different historical moment, that these images evoke a symbology that is antithetical to revolution, and in fact predicated on the black woman’s extreme vulnerability and need for protection from white patrons. Bricktop’s club becomes a space where “you can’t start a fight in here, I’m a girl,” implying not only that female-ness and fighting are mutually exclusive, but also that the men addressed should have the decency to shield delicate feminine sensibilities from their discord.²⁰

When Bricktop is not making appeals to a chaste and helpless femininity, she adopts other paternalist structures. Bricktop situates herself in a power dynamic with which both she and her white patrons are all too familiar: of a domestic servant who, as soon as she enters her pre-designated space of service, “becomes THE MAID, not somebody’s mother or sister or wife. Her primary function is to serve the needs of the family which has thus defined her.”²¹ Bricktop’s relationship with F. Scott Fitzgerald is a particularly illuminating example of the domestic burdens of her hostess role, which she

¹⁹ Carby (1987), 20-39.

²⁰ Bricktop (2000), 98.

²¹ Harris (1982), 12.

construes as a kind of caretaking. Bricktop refers to him affectionately as a “big, overgrown kid,” “a spoiled youngster” who brings out her “mothering instinct.”²² She refers with indulgence to the episode when Fitzgerald kicked out all the windows in a Parisian cab in the midst of a drunken tantrum because Bricktop would not accompany him home. Following the incident, he rebukes her, “See Brick, I’m not responsible, I was just trying to teach you a lesson.”²³ Eerily, this echoes the words of Fannie Ward, the actress who told Bricktop that Florence needed a lesson. In this context, the lesson appears to be the same: the customer is always right/white. Though Bricktop never mentions being galled by these “lessons” about the (im)possibilities of blackness, she clearly constructs her entire worldview around lessons such as these. It is because of these lessons that Bricktop identifies and neutralizes the threats of her sexual identity, and eventually even her own personhood. Bricktop the woman becomes Bricktop’s the place, fading into the machinery of a place that is “a combination mail-drop, bank, rehearsal hall, clubhouse—even a neighborhood bar.”²⁴ It is she who performs these tasks, but so seamlessly that it appears Bricktop the club rather than Bricktop the woman is performing them. When a patron’s jealous wife accuses him of talking incessantly about Bricktop’s, Bricktop replies matter-of-factly that “there’s a big difference between a woman and a nightclub.”²⁵ However, the difference between the woman and the nightclub is successfully elided by Bricktop’s sleight-of-hand. Indeed, Fitzgerald’s one allusion to Bricktop—in the story “Babylon, Revisited”—is not to her but the club:

After an hour he left and strolled toward Montmartre, up the Rue Pigalle into the Place Blanche. The rain had stopped and there were a few people in evening clothes disembarking from taxis in front of cabarets, and *cocottes* prowling singly

²² Bricktop (2000), 95-97.

²³ *Ibid.*, 97.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 162.

or in pairs, and many Negroes. He passed a lighted door from which issued music, and stopped with the sense of familiarity; it was Bricktop's, where he had parted with so many hours and so much money. A few doors farther on he found another ancient rendezvous and incautiously put his head inside.

Immediately an eager orchestra burst into sound, a pair of professional dancers leaped to their feet and a maître d'hôtel swooped toward him, crying, "Crowd just arriving, sir!" But he withdrew quickly.²⁶

In this story, the down-and-out hero prowls through the streets of black Paris. Despite his diminished social, spiritual, and financial status, he can always count on a coterie of black subjects to spring to attention, just like old times. It is almost as though the performers and servers, here becoming synonyms, are conjured into existence by his presence, and otherwise fade into the background. The "eager orchestra" and the so-called "professional dancers" are called upon to perform the role of servants alongside the performance of their music. Service becomes a kind of dance in itself in which the performers bend and twirl and shuffle, its choreography unwritten but deeply understood by all of its dancers.

This racialized performance of servitude, however, is somewhat complicated by Bricktop's unprecedented social function. In that she is the self-less, family-less caretaker of a carefree white elite, she flirts dangerously with the role of the mammy. Yet, in her self-described role of "hostess," Bricktop occupies a role of party-giving and social lubrication that was henceforth only open to women of more leisured backgrounds. Bricktop conceives of her role of hostess as an art form, despite the gendered and racialized prejudices against the artistry of this type of space construction. "I never thought of myself as an empress or a queen. I thought of myself only as a hostess to a

²⁶ Fitzgerald (2000), 599.

very select group of people.”²⁷ Bricktop’s avowal of the hostess, then, is a modest claim to aristocracy—not royalty, but at least middle-class respectability. Despite its pejorative connotations, Bricktop’s appeal to the leisured class title of “hostess” is not a futile or alienated act. Even in a white middle-class context, the role of hostess exceeds its bourgeois hegemonic implications and becomes a realm of women’s social power, as in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*. The debate between Clarissa Dalloway and her friend Peter over her function as a hostess is initially framed as a moral indictment. Why should Clarissa Dalloway begin to cry when Peter Walsh flings at her the idea that she is a perfect hostess — “the perfect hostess he called her (she had cried over it in her bedroom), she had the makings of a perfect hostess”²⁸ — when this is indeed what she strives to be? Perhaps because in her role as hostess Clarissa becomes a thing, a meeting point, a generator of banalities, an unseen social lubricant, but no longer an individual. And to add insult to injury, there is the implication that somehow this is not political, that her hostess role does not create tangible social effects. Yet, her hostessing permeates and implicates the entire city of London, creating a kind of social web that is under her control: “But it was her street, this, Clarissa’s; cabs were rushing round the corner, like water round the piers of a bridge, drawn together, it seemed to him because they bore people going to her party, Clarissa’s party.”²⁹ Bricktop outlines this concept of power in her autobiography and in the space of her club. She gives every indication that, despite the self-effacement that her job necessitates, she views the running of Bricktop’s as a craft that requires artistry, intelligence, and the significant personal gifts she has in her possession, and that it has tangible social effects. She compliments Elsa Maxwell, another professional socialite with humble origins, on the fact that “she managed to

²⁷ Bricktop (2000), 120.

²⁸ Woolf (1990), 7.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

push herself forward without seeming brassy. That took real skill [...] She knew how to run things *and* how to give service.”³⁰ This “real skill” of not appearing too ambitious, while simultaneously furthering her own goals, is one that Bricktop cultivates herself over her decades long career.

Like Clarissa Dalloway, Bricktop’s role as hostess is a result of her masterly construction of space and her deliberate blurring of the lines between the space of the club and her own person. Cole Porter suggested, when she moved to her own nightclub in 1927, that she call it Bricktop’s, because, “It’s your place, it’s you. You’re the reason why people come.”³¹ Despite relocations to several different buildings in Montmartre and alternate locations in the French Riviera, New York City, Mexico City, and Rome, Bricktop’s wandering club preserved its image across time and national boundaries, because she was the club.³² The creation of this space relies upon Bricktop’s cultivation of the illusion of friendship—of “a warm, intimate space where I could entertain my friends the way I wanted”³³—while holding herself at an emotional distance—“that meant being their friend in Bricktop’s, but I usually didn’t see them outside the club—and didn’t want to.”³⁴ Bricktop is hyper-aware of any way of relating with her guests that would undermine her sense of autonomy, and her wariness hardly seems to foster the promised intimacy of her club. Rather, this intimacy is based on “the illusion of being private and the special property of its clientele,” which she achieves by keeping the lightly simmering race and class hatreds in check beneath its surface.³⁵ Though the club belonged to Bricktop in name and spirit, not to mention that she legally owned it, this illusion effaces her power in order to make her clients feel safe in their whiteness.

³⁰ Bricktop (2000), 105.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 119.

³² “What hard times hit in the Forties and I had to move from place to place, I carried the name, and people knew where to find me because of it.” *Ibid.*, 119.

³³ *Ibid.*, 120.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

Whiteness here being the ownership of space and all the people and accoutrements of that space (the people being accoutrements, too). So fragile is whiteness that Bricktop's success hinges upon cultivating the feeling among her clients that "when people came to Bricktop's and belonged, it was as if they were coming to one of their own salons."³⁶ Being in Bricktop's was "almost like being in someone's parlor or living room" because Bricktop seeks to placate white privilege by constructing a space that is familiar to them, and then fading into the background when her presence might disturb their sense of social hierarchies.³⁷

Bricktop frames her negotiation of these roles as a choice with very clear benefits: "Back then [...] when I was going through the front doors of the most elegant homes in Paris, entertainers went in the back door and ate in a separate room from the guests."³⁸ Far from entering a web of racism and self-objectification, the performance scene of interwar Paris offers Bricktop a kind of insulation from what she perceives to be the greater racism of the American social context, because Cole Porter "and his friends formed a sort of protective cocoon around me."³⁹ Bricktop's negotiation of the caretaking imagery of the mammy—"taking care of people is my business,"⁴⁰ she says—is crucial to her own ability to travel and achieve financial independence as a black woman performer and manager. That is to say that she constructs a familiar façade of selfless, sexless caretaker to a carefree white elite, because this offers its own benefits and protections, which she ultimately prefers to the precarity offered by black female sexuality.⁴¹ This creates a rather bleak utilitarian worldview in which she is hyper-

³⁶ Ibid., 125.

³⁷ Ibid., 155.

³⁸ Ibid., 106.

³⁹ Ibid., 127.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 218.

⁴¹ "No maid could expect to keep a job if she appeared for it in her Sunday-go-to-meeting dress or if she arrived for an interview with luscious curls, lipstick, and beautifully manicured nails [...] It would raise stereotypical questions about motives. Why should such a good-looking black woman seek work as a maid?"

conscious of her “place” among the elite— “I was in their world,” she says, “but I wasn’t part of it.”⁴² Bricktop is constantly preoccupied with issues of class and belonging, of what is impertinence and what is aspiration:

I always knew my place. People today think that’s a terrible thing to say. I get criticized for it. I don’t mean I thought I was any less than anyone else, or that anyone was better than me. The rich and famous, royalty, they’re just people—they go to the bathroom just like you and me. But that doesn’t mean there aren’t certain rules to go by in life. I was a saloonkeeper, a hostess. My job was to make clients feel at home.⁴³

From a later historical vantage point, it is easy to dismiss Bricktop’s model of hostessing as servile and to valorize Florence’s as heroic. Bricktop herself, who published her autobiography in 1983, acknowledges yet ultimately disavows any “modern” demands for her agency or subversion. Bricktop’s ascendancy bespeaks mastery of a treacherous social landscape in which heroism was impossible. Despite her realistic/fatalistic reflections on her “place,” the place was hers. Her methods and worldview achieved the goals of (at times) financial independence and (always) unparalleled geographic mobility and access to the favors and affections of the Western elite. In her flirtations with the role of the mammy, Bricktop reveals that even the mammy is a creator, not an accessory, of the home. Bricktop creates and curates an environment which she constantly uses the words “intimate” and “warm” to describe, and it is not for the pure pleasure of serving her clientele —“I like people, but I like them in Bricktop’s”—but for

Might she just want to get into a position to engage in hanky-panky with the white master and thereby acquire a lover who might assist her financially?” Harris (1982), 13.

⁴² Ibid., 194.

⁴³ Ibid., 130.

the pleasure she takes in her own artistry in creating the scene.⁴⁴ She created a space in which she, a black woman born under Jim Crow in West Virginia, could call a prince of England “darling” rather than “Your Highness.”⁴⁵

Despite Bricktop’s personal sense of artistry and her chipper acceptance of her “place,” it is not without its underside. This knowledge of her place, which she refers to almost as though it were inborn or instinctive, is often revealed to be socially enforced: “That how the royalty were. They’d put you right at your ease—but you knew, if you had any sense, right where you belonged. And if you didn’t know, you’d soon find out, because they’d put you there.”⁴⁶ As a result of the pressures of her job, she suffers a nervous breakdown in 1930. “I was jittery, bad-tempered, depressed. I went to a doctor, who said I was suffering from repressed nerves, that I was holding myself in. It came from saying yes to everybody for so many hours each day.”⁴⁷ Her doctor suggests that she tell her clients how she really feels, but Bricktop balks; her solution is to take a daily early-morning walk and scream at the top of her lungs. This “nervous spell” is part of an emotional landscape in which Bricktop is unimpressed by the status of her white patrons—“royalty were just people to me”—and also enamored of rebellious black male celebrities of the day. Her nervous spell is part of a deep wish to put her clients in their “place” as pampered members of a dying social class and to valorize the meritocratic ascendance of a black elite. The boxer Jack Johnson, for example makes her “proud of being who and what I am” because “he bowed to no one, yet everything was ‘yes,’ ‘no,’ ‘please,’ and ‘thank you.’”⁴⁸ The potentiality of Jack Johnson’s physical power ripples beneath a veneer of politeness, but is altogether evident to the white world, the source of

⁴⁴ Ibid., 108.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 175. When an Englishman objected to her informality, Bricktop chose the occasion of a formal party to greet the same Prince with a deep curtsy in order to prove that she could follow protocol (175). This highlights the fact that Bricktop conceived of her club as a space apart with social rules of her choosing.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 175.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 141.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 184-5.

the fears that lead to his prosecution for interracial marriage. Bricktop admires this wellspring of black revolutionary power and talent that makes the white world quake, perhaps even feels that she possesses it within herself, if only the world would put aside its gendered construction of what talent is to recognize it. Jack Johnson demands precisely the kind of recognition Bricktop feels she has forgone in her life as a hostess; he is the bold Negro she has given up being in favor of “holding herself in” for her bold yet ultimately circumspect career aspirations. Paul Robeson also serves as one of her examples of the model Negro, as in the strange incident where she begins to cry tears of joy upon seeing him on the dance floor of her club beside Prince George, Duke of Kent:

When they met on the dance floor, they stopped—and since when royalty stops, everybody stops, all the dancers froze. Both Paul and the Duke were tall, but Paul was a little taller and had to look down on the Duke a bit. It’s an image that has stayed in my mind all these years—everyone frozen in position on the dance floor and Paul looking down on the Duke.*

Here, the club becomes the space of possibility for African Americans, who by dint of their artistry and sheer charisma, can “look down upon” European royalty. Just because Bricktop does not practice this tactic does not mean she does not value black leadership, does not mean she does not long for a world in which it is possible for black performance to enable a kind of social and political ascendance. This world, as we will see in the following section, was perhaps closer than she thought. In fact, the fear that this world already existed prompted a darkening cloud of anti-black sentiment in the 1920s and 1930s.

* Ibid., 198.

5.2 Cults of Leadership: The Scene of Interwar Black Nationalism

Bricktop's reluctance to frame herself within a political landscape is perhaps due to the fact that black political leadership was something of an impossible possibility in the interwar period. The very concept of black leadership was at once denied and dreaded in interwar France. Even the most despised political philosophies of the era were dismissed as too cerebral and ultimately inaccessible to black people, because admitting that black people could formulate a coherent political ideology was tantamount to admitting that black people were political subjects with the capacity to choose leaders other than colonial overlords. Instead, anti-black discourse on black leadership constructed an image of a black mob mobilized, not by any kind of political understanding, but ventriloquized by the sinister and quasi-magical forces of a black witch-doctor/leader. This notion of the witch-doctor/leader is, of course, exclusively male, invisibilizing the witch doctor's female counterpart. However, just because she is not visible does not mean she is not present. In this section, I will lay the groundwork for the magico-religious conception of black anti-colonial leadership, in order to set the stage for Florence, who makes visible the obscured female counterpart of the black witch-doctor/leader.

There was a concerted effort by European journalists, scholars, and administrators to relegate black political activity to anything but the political. Take, for instance, European views on black Communism. French surveillance records of French colonial subjects living in metropolitan France in the 1920s and 1930s reveal a deep concern with potential Communist influence over the colonies.⁸⁰ "Influence" rather than

⁸⁰ The Ministère des Colonies interwar surveillance archives are collected at the Archives nationale d'outre mer in Aix-en-Provence under the heading of "Service de liaison avec les originaires des territoires français d'outre-mer" (henceforth abbreviated as SLOTFOM). All translations from this archive are my own.

participation being the key term, as the French colonial regime could never bring itself to admit that the threat of Communism in black communities stemmed from a black desire for independence rather than a Communist desire for sovereignty. At every turn, anti-black and anti-Communist literature of the 1920s and 1930s preferred to attribute the organization and volition of revolutionary movements to white leadership rather than to acknowledge black leaders as such. From surveillance of the Parti Communiste Francaise's (PCF) "Ecole Coloniale," a lecture series organized in 1925 to teach interested community members about the basics of capitalist exploitation in the colonies,⁵¹ to the activities of the French Surrealists protesting the 1931 Exposition Coloniale,⁵² French intelligence agencies dwelled on presumed white instigators rather than black participants. Despite the prominence of black Communist leaders like George Padmore and Tiemoko Garan Kouyaté during this time period, black communism was usually represented as an external influence rather than the result of the people's will to politics. This sentiment was shared across the Channel as well, as in this 1924 article from *The Times* of London entitled "Soviet Propaganda Among Blacks":

The propaganda now in full swing among coloured peoples has nothing to do with Communism. It is on purely national lines. If the appeal of Moscow to the white races is "Proletarians of the world unite," to the coloured peoples it is "Unite against the white tyrants" [...] a large coordinated subversive movement

⁵¹ 3SLOTFOM/78.

⁵² The French Colonial Exposition of 1931 was a months-long exhibition comprised of Disneyworld-style colonial villages, staffed by authentic natives in "traditional" garb, to highlight the important "contributions" of the colonies to metropolitan France. Surrealists staged a Counter-colonial Exposition on September 20, 1931, organized by Louis Aragon, Georges Sadoul, and André Thirion. It included quotes from Marx and Lenin ("Imperialism is the last stage of capitalism") and graphics on the history of colonialism, as well as an exhibit in which they satirically paired "European fetishes" [Catholic icons] with "primitive" ones in order to denaturalize the category of primitive. Morton (2000), 98-110.

exists [in Africa] against the rule of the White races, and the direction of the movement is outside of Africa, for the Negro himself is incapable of directing it.³³

The “national lines” of black Communism are represented as a kind of political immaturity, in which black people have somehow missed the point of Communism. Too petty to subsume themselves into class struggle, black leaders use communism as a kind of pretext to kill white people, in which “class hatred is subsumed by race hatred” [la haine de classe se mue ici en haine de race].³⁴ Despite their disagreements with Communist ideology, the same people who sought to prevent the spread of Communism in the French Empire also gave it its due as a coherent political philosophy that was undermined by sectarian national politics.³⁵

When confronted with contradictory evidence of Pan-African or anti-colonial resistance, reportage on Pan-African and anti-colonial resistance is often saturated with a rhetoric that finds its origin in pseudo-scientific racism: that black masses are herd-like and susceptible to fascist leadership. As for the leaders themselves, the success of those who manage to rise out of the docile black masses to establish themselves as rulers is attributed to the “politico-religious.”³⁶ Black leadership is said to fulfill the religious needs of its people for a “black Messiah” and, for this reason, it shares a “secret

³³ (3SLOTFOM/63)

³⁴ 12/31/1924 “Note sur la propagande révolutionnaire intéressant les pays d’outre-mer” (3SLOTFOM/63).

³⁵ In this way, such reports are aligned with the Communist party idea that anti-racist struggle and anti-communist struggle are incompatible, though according to Brent Edwards “it is precisely the discourse of the Communist International that opens the possibility of a Black International—even if the Comintern insists that race-specific movements are ultimately antithetical to (and even a threat to) worldwide proletarian revolution [...] even to discuss the ‘Negro question,’ the term of choice in the Comintern, is to theorize a black internationalism.” Edwards (2003), 264. This tension between anti-colonial struggle and anti-capitalism is represented in real life by Aimé Césaire’s decision to leave the PCF, as well as fictionally by the narrator’s maddening Communist phase in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. However, many black people in the beginning of the 20th century pinned their revolutionary hopes to the Communist mission. An interesting case of this is Langston Hughes’ in the early 1930s visit to the USSR, in which he tours the Central Asian and Mongolia and is struck by the USSR’s commitment to the advancement of people of color within their own empire, yet he is ultimately disillusioned by their cooptation of the oppression of black Americans in order to make the USSR seem tolerant by contrast (Hughes was brought to the USSR to unwittingly participate in a Soviet propaganda film). For more information on Hughes’ trip to the USSR, see Hughes (1993).

³⁶ Garveyism, for instance, is referred to as a “politico-religious sect” [“une secte politico-religieuse”] in the 2/25/1925 “Note sur la propagande révolutionnaire intéressant les pays d’outre-mer” (3SLOTFOM/63).

sympathy” with black churches. However, there is the frightening possibility that religious feeling can give rise to rebellion:

The Negro who is driven to channel his strength to fight the colonial Power into obeisance to the precepts of his Black Messiah begins to acquire, little by little, ideas of independence in political matters.

[le nègre qui est conduit à puiser dans l’obéissance aux préceptes de son Messie noir la force de braver l’administration de la Puissance colonisatrice acquiert peu à peu des idées d’indépendance, même en matière politique.]⁵⁷

In the Negrophobic imaginary, these are the stakes of black social and religious organizing by black leaders: they are bottom rungs of a ladder that would lead their people to a political awakening that would demand the indiscriminate destruction of white people and property. Thus, the French press of the time period is full of stories that attempt to portray any act of social organizing, any skill that sets a black man apart, as an act of charlatanry. Examples abound, such as that of a supposed Haitian poet who threatens to hex newspaper writers who spoke badly of Vodou, but died himself in a shelter for aliens without any harm befalling the newspaper.⁵⁸ The curious case of Noël Corensin, a Guadeloupean sailor living in Dunkirk who attempted in 1934 to start a “Foyer des Noirs” [an aid organization for unemployed black men] and was treated to an article full of racist insinuations that he “did not lack audacity or guile to achieve his means” [le cran et la subtilité ne lui manquent pas pour arriver à ses fins”] of cheating his countrymen out of their unemployment benefits, pending an investigation from which he would “emerge white as snow” [sortir blanc comme neige]; and to add insult to injury, misspelled his name [Corenzin] and mistook his place of origin for

⁵⁷ 12/31/1924 “Note sur la propagande révolutionnaire intéressant les pays d’outre-mer” (3SLOTFOM/63).

⁵⁸ (3SLOTFOM/78)

Martinique.⁵⁹ These articles take great pains to ally black leadership with non-consensual or politically uninformed mob impulses and personal charlatanry, rather than to consider the frightening fact that, for black people, nation time is now.

This fear of black leadership was deeply informed by religious events outside of the French colonies. One was the rise of the religion of Kimbanguism in the Belgian Congo, a popular religious movement that was said to be controlled by British missionaries, despite its leadership by the Congolese prophet and healer Simon Kimbangu.⁶⁰ Though Kimbangu made no claims to political leadership, he was imprisoned by Belgian colonial authorities from 1921 until his death in 1951 because “his movement tends towards Pan-Africanism and he could incite the spirits of the natives to hostility towards the white race” [“Il est nécessaire de combattre Kimbangu parce que la tendance de son mouvement est pan-nègre et qu’il pourrait orienter l’esprit des natifs vers la race blanche.”]⁶¹ It was the deeply performative and public nature of Kimbangu’s ministry—hundreds of pilgrims flooded into the small town of Nkamba to watch Kimbangu speak in tongues, heal the terminally-ill, and give rousing speeches on the will of Christ—that frightened colonial authorities.⁶²

Haitian resistance to the American occupation also had a deep and religiously-inflected impact on the Western psyche. Paris was not immune to the literature of the US occupation of Haiti—both William Seabrook’s sensationalist pseudo-ethnography *The Magic Island*, as well as Faustin Wirkus’s account of his rise to power as

⁵⁹ 22/4/1934 “La police mobile enquête sur le fonctionnement de la caisse de chômage du ‘Foyer des Noirs’ à Dunkerque,” newspaper unknown (3SLOTFOM/63). Corensin had previously been investigated by French intelligence in 1930 regarding his Association et Fédération des Coopératives des Inscrits Maritimes Coloniaux, with the Guadeloupean governor fearing it might be associated with the radical dockworkers unions of Marseille and Bordeaux, but Corensin was found to have “never remarked on any political viewpoint” [“n’a donné lieu à aucune remarque au point de vue politique”] (3SLOTFOM/112).

⁶⁰ The monthly intelligence series, “Note sur la propagande révolutionnaire intéressant les pays d’outre-mer” includes a regular update on the status of Kibanguism (3SLOTFOM/63).

⁶¹ Luwawanu (2009), 48.

⁶² Ibid., 39-56.

a US Marine stationed on a small island titled *White King of La Gonâve*, were translated into French and enjoyed considerable press.⁶³ So much so, in fact, that French author Paul Morand felt compelled to include a short story inspired by the Haitian occupation, in which the menacing sound of “tom-toms” in the Haitian forest convey a secret message to bomb the American embassy.⁶⁴ During the Haitian occupation, the anti-imperialist guerrillas known as Cacos used drums both as a means of communication and as a form of psychological warfare against the occupying forces, whose distress and unease upon hearing the constant drumbeats and fears of the so-called voodoo behind them is itself a trope of occupation-era travelogues about Haiti.⁶⁵ For Negrophobic white authors, the tom-tom and its vaguely-religious connotations becomes a way of discussing the crisis of agency that the allure of black performance comes to represent for white audiences. In Carl Van Vechten’s famously sensationalist and exoticist work, *Nigger Heaven*, which was translated into French in 1927, the tom-tom serves as the call for the relinquishment of inhibitions and the reversion to primitivist urges. In the climactic final scene of *Nigger Heaven*, in which the educated black male protagonist is driven to murder in a nightclub, as “the music shivered and broke, crashed and smashed,” the frenzied jazz band has an almost hallucinogenic effect, bending the reality of the scene into a confused mixture of Africa and Harlem, of past and present. “Jungle, jumble,” writes Van Vechten, “waiters with shields, bearing poisoned wine: waiter-warriors....”⁶⁶ The jazz band’s function here is both historical and prophetic; it not only has the power to remind the cowed and captive “waiters” of a majestic past in which they were warriors, but also to encourage them to reclaim the militarism of the past in order to break their present bonds. Van

⁶³ Paul Morand wrote the introduction to the 1929 French translation of *The Magic Island*. Truly closing transatlantic circle of the negrophobic boys club, Morand also wrote the introduction to the French translation of Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven* in 1927.

⁶⁴ Morand (1929), 94-102.

⁶⁵ Burks (1966), 154; Craige (1933), 37-38; Morand (1929), 100-101. Note the originality with which these authors choose their titles.

⁶⁶ Van Vechten (1926), 284.

Vechten poses the question himself: “Might it not be possible that prejudice was gradually creating, automatically and unconsciously, a force that would eventually solidify, in outward opinion at least, a mass that might even assume an aggressive attitude?”⁶⁷

Though these acts of rebellion are discrete instances stemming from specific social contexts across the diaspora, in the mishmash of Afro-diasporic culture that allowed Josephine Baker to be crowned “Queen of the Colonies” at the 1931 Colonial exposition,⁶⁸ stirrings of “politico-religious” performance in Africa and the Americas had profound implications for the representation of black people in metropolitan France and its colonies. In France, no Negrophobic author devoted more time to exploring the perceived link between black religious sentiment, performance, and black militarism than Paul Morand. A prominent member of the French Academy, he was also the author of various Negrophobic texts, including a collection of short stories called *Magie noire* [Black Magic], which was translated into English to considerable uproar from the black American and Afro-French intelligentsia.⁶⁹ His conservative stance on immigration (build a wall!) and miscegenation (degeneration of the European race!), as well as his apocalyptic views on the downfall of Western arts and civilization, later translated into a government-appointed position in the Vichy regime and exile from France after the armistice.⁷⁰ Like many of his journalistic contemporaries, Morand believed in biological notions of the inherent docility of the black populace:

“The black mind, friend of absolutes, prone to enslavement, bows voluntarily before an abstract idea that does not ask to be understood, but to be feared and

⁶⁷ Ibid., 189.

⁶⁸ For more on Josephine Baker as a stand-in for a universalized primitive feminine disconnected from any specific national origin, see Edwards (2003), 161-163 and Rose (1989), 146-149.

⁶⁹ For further discussion of the critical response to Morand’s work, see Edwards (2003), 165-171.

⁷⁰ In his comprehensive yet apologist literary biography of Paul Morand, Louvrier (1994) discusses Morand’s views vis-à-vis blackness (177-191).

obeyed.” So it is defined by the author of *The Inequality of the Human Races* [Gobineau]. This is why all the civilizations with melanin in their blood need despotism.

[“La nature noire, amie de l’absolu, facile à l’esclavage, s’attroupant volontiers devant une idée abstraite à qui elle ne demande pas de se laisser comprendre, mais de se faire craindre et obéir.” Ainsi la définit l’auteur de *L’Inégalité des races humaines*. C’est pourquoi à toutes les civilisations teintées de sang mélanien, il faut le despotisme.”]⁷

Despite this characterization of the black mind, Morand is fixated upon the seeming exception to the rule: those black minds that rise above their so-called propensity to enslavement to become the slave-masters themselves. For, in Morand’s imaginary, despotism is the only possibility of black leadership. Ironically, given Morand’s support of the Vichy regime, he represents those black leaders who manage to distinguish themselves as dangerous demagogues. In his texts, black leaders are always represented as threats not just to empire, but also to reason and rationality.

The prevailing theme of *Black Magic* seems to be putting prominent figures of black leadership back into their place, that place being either death, madness, or a state of nature. Thinly-disguised analogues for black public figures run rampant: In “Syracuse or the Panther-Man,” W.E.B. Dubois, visiting Paris for a Pan-African congress, descends into a hellish fantasy of being a witch-doctor at an ethnology museum and goes mad. In “Goodbye, New York!” A’Leila Walker is left on the coast of Africa by her luxury steamer and falls into a state of savage decadence among the local tribespeople—“No longer was she worth three million dollars; she was worth three oxen, like the other

⁷ Morand (1991), 74. All translations of *Hiver caraïbe* are my own.

women.”⁷² And Josephine Baker, in “Congo,” drowns in the Mississippi after being afflicted by a voodoo curse. In all of these stories, Morand attacks a black elite who “take pride in a progress borrowed from others,” when for them, true progress “was a return.”⁷³ It is Morand’s goal to show that black civilization is mere ornament, and that the flesh beneath only needs to be taken back to primal sites to awaken its deep race memory, as when Congo/Josephine Baker returns to Mississippi:

Of Broadway and its lights, of the great boulevards, of the Pariserplatz, of her apotheosis in ostrich plumes and her triple-crested head dresses, she remembered nothing; she was now just one of the daughters of Shem, a child of the exploited race, sold, thrashed and martyred, the race who have not merited their lot, who can hope for no happiness this side the grave.⁷⁴

Supported by his eugenicist framework, Morand seeks to put errant black intellectuals and stars back into their “place”: that of an undifferentiated mass of black bodies meant to toil, suffer, and occasionally rise in thoughtless anger, like the sea, or as he describes a Haitian uprising in the story “Charleston,” “like the crust of one of those marvelous French *soufflés*, a chocolate one.”⁷⁵

For Morand, religion is the force behind these sudden outbursts of violent black energy. Morand was profoundly struck by his time in Haiti in 1927, curious about Vodou without ever experiencing it firsthand. However, in *Black Magic*, Vodou is the driving force of the novel. It comes to be a stand-in for the social disorder caused by black bodies when they—occasionally but violently—become aware of their plight. One has only to examine the leadership models in *Black Magic*—a grotesque wave of black bodies, always controlled by one sinister charlatan—to understand the simplistic yet

⁷² Morand (1929), 173.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

deeply rooted fears at the basis of Morand's imaginary. Morand's text is saturated with the inherent religiosity of black leadership, its fundamental character for Morand being its appeal to dark, primal forces in their structuring of a formless, but powerful, populist energy. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Morand does not disguise his fear of black populism behind the idea that it is spread through white propaganda. In Morand's work, it is always black people who demand their rights, as in his doomsday prediction of the triumph of European communism:

As soon as our peasant and solidier committees wrench power from our bourgeois hands, at their nouveau riche doors will come knocking Asian migrations starving and terrible, real poor people, real African beggars, West Indians, for whom Communism is not a word, but an eternal and organic state of being; horde of hands and teeth; with arms outstretched, with jaws open.

[A peine auront-ils pris le pouvoir de nos mains bourgeoises, nos comités paysans et soldats, qu'à leur porte de nouveaux riches viendront frapper les migrations asiatiques affamées et terribles, des vrais pauvres, des vrais mendiants africains, antillais, pour qui le communisme n'est pas un mot, une mode, mais un état éternel, oranganique; hordes tout en mains et en dents; aux bras tendus, aux mâchoires ouvertes.]⁷⁶

This classically xenophobic image is not just an image of European resources stolen by a horde of hungry brown people, but also one of European racial and class hierarchies leveled by the invasion of its colonies. It was Paul Morand's abhorrence of racial mixture—indeed, of any disruption of European class hierarchies of any kind— that

⁷⁶ Morand (1991), 46.

plays most prominently in the short story “Congo.”⁷ Josephine Baker’s analogue, Congo, is the hostess of a party. Her role as hostess becomes that of a “young sorceress” who “is heaping all classes, grinding all races in the mill, crumpling up the sexes; she has pounded all ages in one mortar; the universe must be shaken and fermented if it is to express itself and yield a stuff that can decently be drunk.”⁸ Anxieties about the postwar dissolution of the European aristocracy, combined with the presence of increasing numbers of black Americans and French colonial subjects in Paris, lead Morand to his sinister reflections on the chaotic social effects of people of color. What is striking about this representation is the power that he attributes to Congo herself, for she is undoubtedly the leader and the orchestrator of the magnetic chaos that surrounds her. And despite his best attempts to undermine this power by staging the character’s death/return to her proper “place,” it is undeniable that she is a leader just as surely as the male despots in his other stories. She does the same thing—only this time, she rules through music, through dance, and, like Bricktop, through her construction of a social space.

Morand’s representation of Congo/Josephine Baker as a destabilizing threat to the established colonial order is, in a perverse way, quite apt. In interwar Paris, the party and the nightclub are indeed spaces where black women, whether quietly or loudly, chiseled away at racial hierarchies and performed nightly acts of anti-colonial resistance. While both contemporaries and historians of the interwar period often coded

⁷ In *Hiver caraïbe*, for instance, he refers to the mixed race people of Martinique as “hideous” (40) and devotes several pages in support of Gobineau and early eugenicist literature, wherein he describes mixed race people of the United States with “an anguished pity mixed with revulsion, as is often inspired by human anomalies” [“une pitié angoissée, mêlée de repulsion, qu’inspirent les anomalies humaines”] (49). This is, curiously, under the guise of preserving the “color and poetry” of black nature (37), because: “Black is beautiful as white is beautiful; what is ugly is the gray” [“Le noir est beau comme le blanc est beau: ce qui est laid, c’est le gris.”] (69). Somewhat nihilistically, he views racial mixture and the obliteration of the white race as an inevitability: “the future humanity, where people are no longer yellow, nor white nor black, but universally mixed” [“l’humanité future, où les gens ne seront plus ni jaunes, ni blancs, ni nègre, mais universellement croisés”] (61)

⁸ Morand (1929), 7.

fears of black leadership as inherently male, it is evident that women played an active role in anti-colonial activism in the 1920s and 1930s. Referred to in the surveillance notes as “and a woman” or as “the political mouthpiece of her father,”⁷⁹ the participation of female anti-colonial activists was often dismissed or denied by the very organizations charged with repressing anti-colonial resistance. One notable exception to this characterization is the curious case of Comrade “Henriette” [most likely a pseudonym], who for a few months in 1932-1933 presided over the meetings of the colonial division of the French Communist Party (PCF). Described as “a tall young woman, shapely, wearing tortoiseshell glasses” [“une jeune fille grande, bien faite, portant des lunettes d’écaille”] who “cites Lenin by heart and interprets Engels with remarkable precision” [“cite Lenine par coeur et interprète Engels avec une remarquable précision”].⁸⁰ Her political sophistication swayed even the spy who was supposed to be recording her words for French counter-intelligence purposes:

“Henriette” presided over the debates with an authority betraying a well-practiced and strong political education. In all circumstances she remained mistress of the discussion and inclosing formulated concrete positions in the exact Party line.

[“Henriette” a présidé les débats avec une autorité denoncant une grande habitude et une forte education politique. En toutes circonstances elle est restée

⁷⁹ As in the case of Paule Odette Toublaud, a Guadeloupean dentist who in 1937 was the treasurer of an anti-colonial group in Paris called “Le Rassemblement Colonial” (3SLOTFOM/63).

⁸⁰ 12/19/1932 meeting of PCF on “Questions coloniales,” (3SLOTFOM/78). This is highly unusual in a genre of surveillance literature that usually notes women and non-white men without describing physical characteristics.

maîtresse de la discussion et a formulé en terminant des propositions concretes dans la ligne exacte du Parti.]⁸¹

Henriette continued to moderate the discussion between West African, West Indian, Malagasy, and Indochinese members of the PCF throughout 1933. This is a remarkable instance of someone who was not a white man commanding the respect of the French colonial establishment as a figure who is not represented as comic or marionetted by greater minds, but as a political force in her own right. The acknowledged example of Henriette, as well as the unacknowledged example of black female performers of the time period, open the possibility of women's political leadership in forms that are both legible and illegible to the French colonial government. I turn now to Florence as one such illegible example of women's anti-colonial leadership in interwar Paris, in the hopes that a consideration of her political meanings will add to a lacunar archive of black women's leadership.

5.3 Florence's Place

This elision of black women from the archive of interwar black radicalism reveals the way black women fall into the cracks between a black radicalism that is coded as male and a history of women's resistance coded as white. Where is the female Garvey, where is the black Henriette? Though it has been over three decades since Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith pointed out that "all the women are white, all the blacks are men," this knowledge does not suddenly illuminate the forms of women's resistance that has passed unnoticed and unrecorded in eras in which this supposedly self-evident phrase was not yet invented. It does not change the fact that women are

⁸¹ 12/19/1932 meeting of PCF on "Questions coloniales," 3SLOTFOM/78.

virtually absent from the aforementioned narratives seeking to expose the charlatantry of black male leadership. Even ethnographic and journalistic accounts of politico-religious struggle among people of African descent in the interwar period rarely give justice to the prominence of both female leaders and female spirits in Vodou.⁸² However, there was an appetite for black performer-sorceresses, and Josephine Baker was the most famous, but certainly not the only, black woman in Paris to capitalize on it. If when Bricktop arrived in Paris in 1924, there were approximately fifteen black American entertainers, with her and Florence being the only women among them,⁸³ African American women performers in Paris were not just selling their art, they were selling the as-yet unknown idea of black American femininity itself, as Josephine Baker masterfully realized when she arrived in 1926. Thus Bricktop and Florence, neither of whom was reputed to be an exceptional performer, became exemplary in interwar Paris. This allowed them to build their success upon what they marketed as their “personalities” rather than on their skills as performers. Just as the personality that Bricktop built was rooted in a domestic femininity, and Josephine Baker’s in the “primitive” and “animalistic,” the personality Florence built for herself was deeply rooted in the imagery of black religious leadership.

Florence capitalized on the fortuitous slippage of language between descriptions of black leadership and descriptions of black nightlife: namely, that both were described by white observers as religious phenomena. Nightclubs like Le Grand Duc, Bricktop’s, Chez Joséphine, and Chez Florence, all presided over by black hostesses, were called “dancings” by the French of the time period. Michel Leiris, in his nocturnal encounters in the dancings, describes them as the sites of a postwar *jouissance* that annihilates the boundary between self and other:

⁸² Two notable exceptions include the elderly priestess Maman Célie in Seabrook (1929) and Ti Memmene, queen of La Gonâve in Wirkus (1931).

⁸³ Bricktop (2000), 87.

In the free-licensed period that followed the hostilities, jazz was a rallying call, an orgiastic standard, in the spirit of the time. It operated magically and its mode of influence can be compared to a kind of possession. That is the best way to describe the true meaning of these festivities, a religious meaning, with communion through dance, eroticism latent or manifest, and drinking being the most effective means of leveling the barriers that separated one individual from the next.

[Dans la période de grande licence qui suivit les hostilités, le jazz fut un signe de ralliement, un étandard orgiaque, aux couleurs du moment. Il agissait magiquement et son mode d'influence peut être comparé à une possession. C'était le meilleur élément pour donner leur vrai sens à ces fêtes, un sens *religieux*, avec communion par la danse, l'érotisme latent ou manifesté, et la boisson, moyen le plus efficace de niveler le fossé qui sépare les individus les uns des autres.]⁸⁴

In a space that contains not only different classes of people but also different races and nationalities, this leveling of the walls that separate individuals poses a potential threat to whiteness. As I discussed in my first chapter, black performance is here presented as an expression of ancient race memory rather than as a fundamentally modern form of music. Jazz was relegated to a religious unconscious because it represented what white writers, spies, and colonial officers knew but were too afraid to admit: that the black will to power was at work all around them, and that it came from members of the black community. But in Leiris' formulation, jazz becomes the means by which a utopic new social and relational order is enacted. What distinguished a "dancing" from a traditional

⁸⁴ Leiris (1964), 174.

nightclub or a cabaret was its unique melding of the increasingly obsolete European nobility and the new money of movie stars and businesspeople.⁸⁵ But classes were not the only things being mixed at the establishments of black Montmartre—like Morand’s story, this motley crowd of white Europeans under the thrall of a black American woman represented a unique upset of racial hierarchies. As Brent Hayes Edwards discusses in *The Practice of Diaspora*, black Americans sometimes romanticized France as a utopic alternative space in which racism did not exist, hence eliding France’s history of colonial violence and the ongoing struggles of its colonial subjects.⁸⁶ However, if two performers as different as Bricktop and Florence Jones enjoyed unparalleled success as nightclub hostesses in interwar Paris, there must have been something about the milieu that aided their success. I argue that this magical “something” in interwar Paris was the Western artistic turn toward black performance as, not just raw artistic material, but as a worldview in itself. And what Leiris neglects to mention is that this worldview is presided over and orchestrated by a black woman.

Enter Florence. A magnificently-dressed and famously unfriendly young woman, she seems an unlikely candidate to instigate social revolution. Despite Florence’s reputation for haughtiness,⁸⁷ however, Hughes highlights something different; she is, for him, “as kind and sociable a person as you would ever wish to find. And those who worked with her, from musicians to waiters, loved her.”⁸⁸ The very word “haughtiness” is punitive when applied to black women, indicating that the woman in question does not share the low opinion that society would like her to have of herself. Similar to words such as “uppity” and “sassy,” accusations of “haughtiness” put

⁸⁵ Roeff (2013), 108.

⁸⁶ See the exchange between Alain Locke and René Maran over Locke’s idealization of the French military’s attitudes towards its African units during the Great War, in Edwards (2003), 105-108.

⁸⁷ “She was a sharp dressing little girl, very haughty” Bricktop (2000), 81; “Part of Florence’s reputation was based on snobbishness, a professional snobbishness which she deliberately cultivated” Hughes (1993), 160; “Pretty, perky, and said to be arrogant” Shack (2001), 31.

⁸⁸ Hughes (1993), 160.

Florence in her place rather than describe a moral failing on her part. In fact, what is perceived as haughtiness can be a calculated act in the service of personal and/or political goals. In his discussion of the singer Lena Horne, who made her career in segregated cabarets in the 1930s and 1940s, theater historian Shane Vogel identifies haughtiness as a self-protective act:

The cabaret performer, unlike the stage actor, addresses the audience directly, as her- or himself [...] To counter the violence of intimacy that organizes cabaret performance—the demand to make herself affectively available—Horne in turn created a psychic fourth wall that served as a substitute for the theatrical fourth wall missing from the nightclub.⁸⁹

The psychic goals of haughtiness may have been to avoid an episode like Bricktop's "nervous spell," but it was not without its political goals. Like Bricktop's, Florence's place at 61 Rue Blanche in Montmartre catered to a "particularly chic clientele" ["un public particulièrement chic"].⁹⁰ However, unlike Bricktop, Florence was never their "friend" in any sense of the word. Rather, it was almost as though her patrons had fallen under her thrall in spite of themselves. Thus, Florence's stage persona deliberately sought not just to protect herself, but also to launch an offensive campaign against her clients that constantly reminded them of their "place" in her club.

According to Ralph Nevill, a British clubgoer of the 1920s, at Chez Florence there was a kind of bouncer whose job was "tapping people on the shoulders to remind them that participation in the dance is one of the rules laid down by Florence."⁹¹ Florence ran her club and conducted herself far more like a master than a servant. In Florence's place, the white masters of the world were periodically relegated to positions of

⁸⁹ Vogel (2009), 181.

⁹⁰ *Guide des plaisirs à Paris* (1927), 112.

⁹¹ Nevill (1927), 43.

supplication or submission:

Rich but lowly, patrons could tip Florence ever so heavily, and she would not even condescend to accept a glass of champagne with them. But the amazing thing was that they would come back and tip her even better for her songs the next time. In the snob world of *de luxe boîte de nuit* society it was considered a mark of distinction for Florence to sit for a moment at your table.²²

Hughes marvels at the mysterious masochistic impulse that compels Florence's elite clientele to come back, night after night, to be insulted by Florence. The "amazing" fact of her success lies in her cultivation of space—inside of Le Grand Duc or Chez Florence, Florence's patrons accept a level of disrespect that is almost unimaginable outside of the club. Perhaps this is because, in the supposedly apolitical space of the "dancing," her patrons do not seem threatened by her snubs, because they occur in a place apart, outside of the "real" world.

However, as Morand and Leiris knew well, the "dancing" was a social incubator in which different social arrangements were tried, tested, and destroyed. Like Bricktop, Florence deliberately constructs a space with rules of her own choosing, only this time, her rules aim to provide redress and healing for the performance of servitude which the racist theater of the absurd demands daily from its black actors. In Florence's place, it is the white actors who must perform servitude:

Miss Jones has been an all-licensed Negress. Nightly she coaxes or drags celebrities out on her jazz floor, makes them perform, makes them ridiculous to their own intense delight—for the crowd are all clannishly impersonal and good-humored. Therefore, last week Prince Henry [of England] was not irked when Miss Jones sought to draft him as a contestant in an impromptu black bottom

²² Hughes (1993), 160.

contest [...] Florence's chic ankles twinkled toward him. Her figure is svelte, lithe—though she does not dance—her voice sultry, a blues voice. At a curt nod from her the huge, perspiring black who is Miss Jones' husband snapped his hot-time jazz baton. Prince Henry hesitated, then rose, followed Florence out on the floor and black-bottomed.⁹³

Here, with Palmer Jones serving as the master of ceremonies, Florence's exigency about dancing in her club mirrors the role of the Vodou priestess in her temple. In Vodou ceremonies, collective dance is the tinder that sparks the coming of the spirits. The spirits of Florence's place come in the form of ancestors wronged and humiliated, some ancestors trafficked and traded by the very monarchy whose representative is now being made to dance the black bottom. Not just any dance, but the black bottom, a masterful symbol of the Prince's momentary position of bottom in this black woman's socio-sexual performance. In an inversion of the historical scene of subjection in which black people are made to dance at white people's behest, sometimes overseen by whips, here it is white princes coerced to dance by working-class black people wielding jazz batons. Florence uses the dance to implement a kind of divine justice whereby black people enjoy a moment of what Beyoncé calls "love on top." In Florence's place, the European architects of empire are made to submit to the descendants of the slaves it has sold in a powerful sado-masochistic spectacle.

Chez Florence was founded in 1924 when Florence's audacity eventually overflowed and led to her departure from Le Grand Duc, the club where Langston Hughes was also working as a busboy. However, the episode that prompted Florence's departure from Le Grand Duc and the creation of Chez Florence did not revolve around an altercation with an offended patron, as one might expect. Rather, it was Florence's

⁹³ "Chez Florence" (1927), 12.

decision to defend a pregnant waitress who refused to be fired by the manager of Le Grand Duc that sparked a battle of the sexes that nearly destroyed the club: “A waiter laid hands on the danseuse, Florence laid hands on the waiter [...] and a battle royal [sic] began between the women (and those who sided with the women) and the management (those who sided with the men).”⁵⁴ Champagne bottles are tossed, tables are upended, punches are thrown. When the fighting subsides, Florence gives a grand speech:

Florence still occupied the center of the floor in the midst of the wreckage, hair awry, orchids gone, tears of triumph in her eyes and a run of gold sequins dripping from her dress. “Nobody’ll mistreat a woman in front of me,” she said. “ ‘cause I’m a woman and nobody’s gonna mistreat a woman in front of me. Everybody’s got a mother [...] And that poor little French girl’s going to have an *enfant*,” said Florence. “You men ought to be proud of any woman what has an *enfant*, ‘cause it takes guts to have an *enfant*. None of you men ever had a baby! *Écoutez! Je dis*, it takes all kinds of guts to be a mother! You hear me?”⁵⁵

Florence’s defense and claim of maternity—made all the more poignant by the fact that she left her own child in New York in order to work in Paris—is particularly powerful in a context of denigrated black motherhood.⁵⁶ The maxim “It takes guts to have an *enfant*” is just another way of validating and visibilizing the work of black motherhood. This

⁵⁴ Hughes (1993), 178. Hughes’ account of the events at Le Grand Duc is not corroborated by any other historical accounts. My reading of this story does not take his account as an unembellished truth, but I appreciate its speculative possibilities.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 174-175.

⁵⁶ Florence’s daughter Dorothy was listed as eleven years old the year Florence left for Paris, according to the 1920 census (Year: 1920; Census Place: Manhattan Assembly District 21, New York, New York; Roll: T625_1224; Page: 46A; Enumeration District: 1439; Image: 713. Ancestry.com. 1920 United States Federal Census [database on-line]). Children traveling abroad in the time period were typically listed as accompanying in their parents’ passport applications; Dorothy was listed in neither Florence nor Palmer Jones’ passport applications (Passport Application for Florence Emery Jones, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Washington D.C.; Passport Applications, January 2, 1906 - March 31, 1925; Roll #: 1354; Certificates: 89000-89375, 09 Sep 1920-10 Sep 1920. Ancestry.com. *U.S. Passport Applications, 1795-1925* [database on-line].).

allows her, in a sweeping act of intersectionality, to vindicate the working-class French waitress' parallel struggle to create and nurture life in spaces of impossibility.

In making this dramatic vindication of motherhood, Florence does not draw from a tradition of recourse to a precarious politics of respectability, but rather, from the anger of that deity born from the need for revolt against plantation slavery, “the maternal anger that is called into play when a mother must defend her children turned [Ezili] Dantò into a woman warrior during the slave revolution.”⁷⁰ If Bricktop's performance of the hostess is what Houston A. Baker calls “mastery of form”—adherence to and excelling in white-accepted narrative conventions in order to gain a seat at the table, then Florence's act is what he calls a “deformation of mastery.”⁷¹ Florence's subtext—Marcus Garvey's rousing oratory, the female-presenting deities of African cosmologies—indicate her deep commitments to a cultural nationalism and a nascent feminism that seeks tools other than the master's. This presents a sharp contrast to Bricktop's methodology. In her own club, Bricktop would use the phrase “you can't start a fight in here, I'm a girl”⁷² in order to prevent her customers from being too rowdy. If Bricktop uses her servant role to access certain parts of white femininity, Florence uses the denied femininity of black womanhood as a weapon. For, as Hortense Spillers argues, black women were “ungendered” the moment their bodies became chattel on slave ships, and in the New World the so-called protections of white femininity were out of the question for those who were not considered humans, let alone women. Florence makes no overtures to the delicate flower of white femininity from which her blackness

⁷⁰ Brown (2001), 231. Various scholars—Brown (2001), Dayan (1998), Deren (2004)—have noted that Ezili is a uniquely New World spirit, with no precedent in the female-embodied figures of West African religion.

⁷¹ According to Baker, mastery of form involves a kind of minstrel technique by which black thinkers (his prime example being Booker T. Washington) appropriate pre-existing and often dehumanizing stories to form a “mastery of stories and their telling that leads to Afro-American advancement.” Baker (1987), 31-32. The mastery of form “conceals, disguises, floats like a trickster butterfly in order to sting like a bee” while the deformation of mastery is a direct affront on a known adversary, producing an “indigenous *sound* [that] appears monstrous and deformed *only* to the intruder” Baker (1987), 50-52.

⁷² Bricktop (2000), 98.

precludes her. She lays claim to the gendered enterprise of fighting, but does not seek to reconcile it with her feminine presentation of gold sequins and orchid-crowned hair. In this way, she is much like the multivalenced feminine figure of Ezili in Haitian Vodou: a spirit with one manifestation who loves luxury and beauty, another who is wrathful, a defender of single mothers and women wronged, yet both forming part of a coherent feminine principal. This cosmology provides a rubric for female militancy that does not subsume itself in or make a claim to masculinity, yet neither does it relegate women to private spaces or passive roles. Because of this, the figure of the warrior goddess offers the promise of militancy for black femmes. This is not to claim that Florence was interpellating specific figures in African cosmologies; rather, these cosmologies have so permeated representations of black struggle and femininity that the goddesses were in, a sense, interpellating her. In a historical context in which black struggle was consistently coded as a religious rather than political act, Florence simply capitalized on the nightclub stage as a platform from which to establish herself as a politico-religious leader.

If we consider *Le Grand Duc* to be an extension of the real world, with real social consequences, Florence has staged a successful uprising. The women emerge triumphant: The pregnant waitress exits on the arm of a gallant male sympathizer. Florence herself has the luxury of staying true to her political commitments *and* moving to a larger and more glamorous club bearing her own name. However, Hughes presents the battle as a somewhat comical or melodramatic event, epitomized by the chorus girl Cornelia, who gets carried away by the moment and punches her boyfriend Joe in the throat for no apparent reason other than gender solidarity. She replies to Florence's speech with an enthusiastic yet uninformed, "Yes [...] I'm a woman too!" and "I got a mother, and I love her!" and ultimately makes up with her wronged boyfriend with a

kiss.¹⁰⁰ Hughes subtly undercuts the political significance of the moment by representing Florence's supporters as mindless followers, swept up in a wave of emotion rather than political conviction. In this way, he treats female leadership in the same way that decades of white journalists and politicians had treated black leadership generally: he attributes it to the herd instinct of the followers rather than to the leader's vindication of a shared history of injustice. This too, is part of the perceived failures of Florence's regime, and the reason why Hughes feels the need to report her death on Welfare Island right on the heels of her successful uprising in the club. Narratologically, the news of Florence's passing in *The Big Sea* seems to come as punishment for the events of that evening in 1924.

However, there is no real indication that Florence's unexplained departure from France and her untimely death were the results of her uprising. A number of extenuating family obligations could have caused Florence to abandon her successful nightclub in the late 1920s. Her husband's death of "chronic alcoholism" in Paris in 1928, for instance.¹⁰¹ Her daughter Dorothy, who appears to have stayed behind in New York when Florence immigrated to France in 1920. The club Chez Florence kept her name even after she had gone, and despite financial woes in 1933, operated successfully until it presumably became one of the many Parisian nightclubs to close during the Second World War.¹⁰² Despite the punitive tone of both Hughes' and Bricktop's autobiographies regarding Florence's short-lived Parisian career, there is no historical evidence to corroborate the idea that Florence learned her "lesson" and thus left Paris defeated. If we

¹⁰⁰ Hughes (1993), 175.

¹⁰¹ Death Certificate of Nathaniel Palmer Jones, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Washington, D.C.; General Records of the Department of State; RG59-Entry 205; Box: 4185, 1910-1929 France. Florence's husband, a musician from Mobile, Alabama, first came to France in 1914 after enlisting in the US army during the Great War (Draft Registration Card for Nathaniel Palmer Jones. Registration State: New York; Registration County: New York; Roll: 1786671; Draft Board: 139. Ancestry.com. U.S., World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918 [database on-line].

¹⁰² On May 16, 1933, Chez Florence went bankrupt because its owner committed fraud / tax evasion, according to socialist journal *Le Populaire*.

view Florence's career as an event whose briefness in no way undermines its significance, we can imagine an alternative model of interwar black radicalism.

In the mythic proportions of her actions, Florence resembles the warrior aspect of Ezili who sprang into being in response to the Haitian revolution. In the obscurity of her death and the absence of any written traces, she represents the kind of woman Hull et al. positioned as so crucial to the politics of black women's studies:

We cannot change our lives by teaching solely about 'exceptions' to the ravages of white-male oppression. Only through exploring the experience of supposedly "ordinary" Black women whose "unexceptional" actions enabled us and the race to survive, will we be able to begin to develop an overview and an analytical framework for understanding the lives of Afro- American women.¹⁰³

Florence's existence in the milieu of interwar Paris, however brief, points to a variety of black feminism that is seldom documented. Night after night, Florence engaged in a power play with her white patrons in 1920s nightclubs. There is no indication that she lost. Far from being brutally repressed or casually ignored, Florence's power moves were the foundation of her success. It is a matter of great consequence that, once upon a time in a nightclub in Montmartre, there was a space for radical femme fury, room for a fawn-colored woman with hot red lips to espouse the most confrontational of politics.¹⁰⁴ Without denying or disavowing the feminine, yet without making an appeal to white femininity, Florence carved out a place for herself in which rage and resistance were not couched within an acceptable façade of hospitality or hidden beneath a smile, but were in fact the primary affects of her space.

Florence's femme fury is both utterly mundane and utterly extraordinary. She

¹⁰³ Hull (1982), xxii-xxiii.

¹⁰⁴ "Ivory-white, lipstick-red, and a suave, tawny brown are the colors of Florence Jones." "Chez Florence" (1927), 12.

reflects a certain lived reality of black women who reject the polarities of revolutionary politics in order to dwell in a gray area of being their angry, yet ultimately ladylike selves. She also reflects an image of the diva that resurfaces later in the personages of Eartha Kitt, Lena Horne, and Beyoncé, a narrative in which the exceptional black woman can be militant in both her politics and her so-called caprices (the term “caprices” being, of course, a way to undercut black female desire and ambition) so long as she is represented as somehow exceptional or virtuosic and always, of course, beautiful. But, as Bricktop says, “I couldn’t understand why I had to be a very special Negro to be treated with even common courtesy.”¹⁰⁵ Perhaps the lesson that Florence teaches us is that, sometimes, an ordinary black American woman from Bridgeport, Connecticut can demand the respect of princes and celebrities by channeling darker gods.

¹⁰⁵ Bricktop (2000), 208.

6. Conclusion

“If we’re gonna heal, let it be glorious.”

—Beyoncé, *Lemonade*

I have chosen the above epigraph as a reminder of what is at stake in the narratives described in this dissertation. Even the most fraught juxtapositions I have framed over the course of these chapters—Zora Neale Hurston to Alice Walker, Frantz Fanon and Mayotte Capécia, Bricktop and Florence Emery Jones—are all debates on how to heal the cultural rupture of the Middle Passage. The narrative of the voodoo queen is nothing less than a meditation on healing, when it is in the hands of black women. The trouble is, it is not always in our hands, and has never been entirely in our hands, as evidenced by the number of pages I have been forced to devote to the Negrophobic antics of Carl Van Vechten, William Seabrook, Lafcadio Hearn, Robert Tallant, and Paul Morand. However, I refuse the cynicism of saying that this study was the mere cataloguing of a stereotype, just as I refuse the false optimism of victorious re-appropriations. I argue that we as scholars must move beyond the poles of victory and failure, of agency and coercion, when we historicize black women’s narratives. Rather, we must seek out ways to represent the always-already compromised agency of black womanhood, while still revealing and valorizing the ways in which black women throughout history have navigated this impasse. The voodoo queen is one of many such analytics that allows us to do so. By way of illustration, I will leave you here with two anecdotes of the voodoo queen.

Clearly, the voodoo queen is alive and well in the twenty-first century, still confronting black women with its pleasures and problems. Youree Dell Harris, most commonly known as Miss Cleo, was an infomercial psychic of the 1990s and early 2000s,

known for her Afro-centric garb, frank manner, and her patois-inflected exhortation to “Call me now!” She and the Psychic Readers Network were infamously sued for misleading callers about the price of the “free” calls, but despite the fact that she was dropped from the lawsuit as a mere representative of the company, her name has become synonymous with fraud. This perception is undoubtedly inflected by generations of perception of black religious leadership in general and Vodou in particular as mere charlatanry. However, in a 2014 interview with *Vice*, Miss Cleo presents us with a complex figure buffeted by the tides of Afro-diasporic affiliation:

I come from a family of spooky people. I don't know how else to say it. I come from a family of Obeah—which is another word for voodoo. My teacher was Haitian, [a mambo] born in Port-au-Prince, and I studied under her for some 30 years and then became a mambo myself. So they refer to me as psychic—because the word voodoo scares just about everybody. So they told me, “No, no, no, we can't use that word; we're going to call you a psychic.” I said, “But I'm not a psychic!”¹

Here, Miss Cleo reveals herself to be initiated into Haitian Vodou, knowledgeable of a religious tradition hundreds of years old, yet marketing herself at the request of her employers as a benign “psychic.” While her persona relies to a certain extent on the implication of the voodoo queen, its revolutionary connotations of black anger (as I described in chapters one and four) are ultimately too polarizing for nighttime television. Many critiques of Miss Cleo are centered on her inauthenticity, claiming that her patois is feigned and that she is not “really” Jamaican. But her response is not a straightforward yes or no—she is the child of Jamaican immigrants, who “beat it into

¹ Jordan Sowunmi, Interview with Miss Cleo for *Vice Magazine*, April 30, 2014. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/we-spoke-to-ms-cleo-about-her-fake-patois-and-getting-ripped-off-by-her-old-bosses Accessed on February 20, 2017.

you that the only way to succeed is by dropping the patois,” and only rediscovered patois for the purposes of the role of Miss Cleo. While religion and ethnicity promise to be the vehicles of authenticity for Katherine Dunham and Nella Larsen in chapter one, Miss Cleo’s complicated engagement with West Indian culture is a catch-22 from the very beginning. What does authenticity look like for Miss Cleo? Her practice of Vodou does not allow her a platform on which to find her true identity or speak her truth; it is, as it was in my third chapter, a truth in itself to be safeguarded in secrecy and invisibility behind a vague veneer of black mysticism.

And yet, black narratives of authenticity and self-discovery never cease to pass through the doorway of this black mysticism. Without ideological fanfare or explanation, Beyoncé has incorporated a number of symbols of Afro-Atlantic religion into her recent work. Beyoncé’s favorite figure seems to be Oshun, the female-embodied goddess of Yoruba tradition, whose imagery she employs in both her 2016 visual album and her 2017 pregnancy announcement photoshoot.² Oshun lives in rivers, dresses all in yellow, and is a lover of honey, sensuality, fertility, an advocate of women. Academics have written monographs-worth of online material unpacking the religious imagery in *Lemonade*. Meanwhile, Beyoncé allows the discussion forums and comment sections of the internet to speculate wildly about her motives. What’s the deal with Beyoncé’s kitschy pregnancy announcement? asks one blogger. All those flowers, that bright yellow—so tacky!³ Some white ladies don’t understand, replies another blogger, the significance of Yoruba symbology in African-American culture, and importance of

² Haitian Vodou is mostly influenced by x tradition, which does not include Oshun, as Cuban Santeria and Brazilian Candomblé, which are Yoruba-derived, do. However, the spirits appear to travel between the religions, as both Katherine Dunham and Alourdes Champagne have experienced in their engagements with Orisha in Dunham (1994) and Brown (2001).

³ Rebecca Farley. “Beyoncé’s Pregnancy Announcement Was Wildly Tacky—& I’m Okay With That.” http://www.refinery29.com/2017/02/139025/beyonce-tacky-pregnancy-announcement?utm_source=t.co&utm_medium=tweet&unique_id=entry_139025 Accessed on February 20, 2017.

positive representations of black maternity.⁴ All the while, Beyoncé enjoys a serene and blissful silence regarding her symbolic motivations. For all we know, she could just really like the color yellow.

If there is anything Beyoncé's artful silence teaches us, it is to be careful readers of the images of black womanhood we consume on a daily basis, their holy and unholy subtext. These symbols have acquired a rich life beyond Beyoncé's intentions, whatever those were. What I see in the lively online debates about the symbology of Beyoncé's works is a community of black women seizing the reins of their self-representation and re-investing them with spiritual value. Beyoncé's silence is a pedagogical tool to teach us to find the honey in denigration, the sunshine in fear, and to make lemonade from our beautiful and hole-ridden stories. It is a way of reading creatively against the grain of the representations we have been given without ever forgetting them. It is a way of writing our histories even as we live them. It is a possession-performance by which today's black American women allow histories of narrative to speak through their bodies, in the tradition of interwar black feminism.

As the fantasy of a post-racial America crumbles before the eyes of any optimistic souls who ever thought it existed, our possession-performances of mystical black femininity grow more elaborate by the day. As if to counter the images in the news of another black child crying, another bullet in an unarmed back, another pussy grabbed, we wrap ourselves in the glamour of our mystical blackness. Headwraps are in vogue. The National Museum of African American History has opened, and its waitlist is a year long. We burn palo santo and tell ourselves we are #magic. Soon we will realize, as did

⁴ Lara Witt. "White Women: This is Why Your Critiques of Beyoncé are Racist." <https://theestablishment.co/white-women-this-is-why-your-critiques-of-beyoncé-are-racist-a431e7e1f672-.7p4qakj7k> Accessed on February 20, 2017.

Dunham, as did Larsen, that this spiritual bric-a-brac is not a sign of our authentic blackness, but the narrative tools with which we redefine it.

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Biography

Marina Sofia Magloire was born on January 24th, 1989, in Queens, New York. She spent her childhood in Oregon and Louisiana. In 2011, she earned a B.A. *cum laude* from Harvard University in History and Literature with a specialization in Latin America. She earned her PhD in English from Duke University in 2017. While at Duke, she studied Haitian Creole with the help of a Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) grant. She is also the recipient of a Dean's Graduate Fellowship at Duke University (2011-2016), a James B. Duke International Travel Fellowship at Duke University (2016), and a Mellon/ ACLS Dissertation Completion Fellowship (2016-2017).