

The Future is Now

The Future is Now:
A New Look at African Diaspora Studies

Edited by

Vanessa K. Valdés

CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS

P U B L I S H I N G

The Future is Now: A New Look at African Diaspora Studies,
Edited by Vanessa K. Valdés

This book first published 2012

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2012 by Vanessa K. Valdés and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-3638-9, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-3638-8

To God, To my ancestors,

And to all of the angels and spirits that walk with me

All praises and honor!

To my parents and my godmother, who taught me that everything is
possible

To future students and scholars of this field

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction	1
Vanessa K. Valdés	
Invocation	5
Because When God is too Busy: Haiti, Me and the World (excerpts from a performance by) Gina Athena Ulysse	
Chapter One.....	13
“ <i>Mistè a Gatem</i> ”: Deploying Ezili and Queering the Haitian Religious Experience in Anne Lescot’s and Laurence Magloire’s Film <i>Des hommes et des dieux</i> Sophie Saint-Just	
Chapter Two	27
Meticulous Production and the Embodiment of History: María Magdalena Campos-Pons’s <i>My Mother Told Me I Am Chinese</i> Series Heather Shirey	
Chapter Three	43
El arte como resistencia: Lo afropuertorriqueño María Elba Torres-Muñoz	
Chapter Four	67
Afirmación étnica y estética en la ensayística y poética de Jorge Artel Luisa García-Conde	
Chapter Five	87
The Holy Temple of Soca: Rev. Rudder in Attendance Alison McLetchie	
Chapter Six	107
Afro-Brazilian Literature, from the Periphery to the Center Vanessa K. Valdés	

Chapter Seven.....	131
Decolonizing the Banjo: Cultural Memory and a (Re)representation of Slave Performance 1700s – 1863 Katya Isayev	
Chapter Eight.....	161
The Challenge of Toni Cade Bambara’s <i>The Salt Eaters</i> : (Re)Claiming Wholeness Ashley David	
Chapter Nine.....	183
Performing the Archive: Photography and the Africana World Brendan Wattenberg	
Conclusion.....	215
Where Do We Go from Here? The Future of African Diaspora Studies Vanessa K. Valdés	
Contributors	221

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

No project of this size and scope can emerge without a great deal of collaboration; thank you first to God and His angels and spirits who have brought this to fruition. Thank you to Gina Bonilla, who breathed life into this when it was just a sliver of a possibility. I thank the contributors of this volume for their patience through the sometimes extensive revision process and their dedication to its success. Thank you all for trusting me with your work, I hope this collection honors your vision of how it would be presented to the world. A great deal of thanks to our press, Cambridge Scholars Publishers, and to the staff members who have labored to bring this study into existence, namely: Carol Koulikourdi, Amanda Millar, and Soucin Yip-Sou. To Carol and Amanda, thank you for working through your holiday with me, and for your patience, I greatly appreciate it. Thank you to Fred Reynolds, former dean of the Division of Humanities and Arts of The City College of New York, and to his successor, Geraldine Murphy, who have shown a great deal of support for this study through the years. Thank you to my colleagues at The City College of New York for your encouragement, and to our students, who inspire me each day. Thank you to the faculty of the Department of Spanish and Portuguese of Vanderbilt University, namely Marshall C. Eakin, Earl E. Fitz, Cathy L. Jade, William Luis, Elena Olazagasti-Segovia, and Benigno Trigo, who during those years of graduate school alternately challenged me, encouraged me, and supported me. Thank you to Ángeles Placer, who long ago shared a great lesson of editing and whose words never left. A final word to our readers: thank you.

—Vanessa K. Valdés

INTRODUCTION

VANESSA K. VALDÉS

The Future is Now: A New Look at African Diaspora Studies is a collection of essays born of presentations offered at the conference *Let Spirit Speak! Cultural Journeys through the African Diaspora* that took place April 22-24, 2010 at The City College of New York. It provides a glimpse at the breadth of cultural offerings to be found throughout the African Diaspora. For the purposes of this text, the African Diaspora refers primarily to the descendants of enslaved Africans brought to the Americas in the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. It also refers to those who have lived in Africa and who have left their countries to make their homes in Europe and the Americas. In the same way that the conference was deliberately interdisciplinary, this volume incorporates essays from throughout the humanities. In this volume there is a sustained focus solely on cultural production, on music, literature, and art from throughout the Americas, Europe, and Africa. The focus of the invocation and the first five essays is the Francophone, Hispanophone, and Anglophone Caribbean; attention then shifts to the continental Americas and finally to Europe and Africa.

In this collection there is continued attention on the efforts of the descendants of enslaved Africans to find their place in the world through the music, the art, the literature of their homes in the “New World.” In the collective memory of many artists of the African Diaspora there remains an insistent need for the circumstances under which many Africans were brought to these shores to be recognized. At the same time, there is the call for celebration and acknowledgement of the vital contributions made to national cultures throughout the Americas. Another trope found in many of the essays is paying homage to one's ancestors. It is an idea that is integral to traditional African culture, and can be found in discussions about the installations of Cuban artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons, the poetry of Colombian writer Jorge Artel, and the installations of Beninese artist Georges Adéagbo. The volume begins with a selection from “Because when God is too Busy: Haiti, me and THE WORLD,” a performance piece by Gina Athena Ulysse. A meditation on the

relationship between public and private identity, between national and personal selves, it calls for a recognition that these fragments may be brought together within the Haitian context. Sophie F. Saint-Just identifies a similar phenomenon in her essay “*Mistè a Gatem*”: Deploying Ezili and Queering the Haitian Religious Experience in Anne Lescot’s and Laurence Magloire’s Film *Des hommes et des dieux*.” She examines a film in which working class gay men resist marginalization by calling on an entity in the Vodou pantheon, Erzulie Dantor. The religion, then, acts as a conduit for admittedly limited social acceptance.

With the next four essays the focus shifts to the Spanish and Anglophone Caribbean. In her essay “Meticulous Production and the Embodiment of History: María Magdalena Campos-Pons’s *My Mother Told Me I Am Chinese* Series,” Heather Shirey examines how this Cuban artist complicates representations of African Diasporic memory by acknowledging the presence of her Chinese ancestors, laborers brought to Cuba to work alongside their enslaved African counterparts. In “El arte como resistencia: Lo afropuertorriqueño,” María Elba Torres-Muñoz rescues Puerto Rican artists of African descent who have been ignored in the hegemonic telling of the history of the island. She explores the effect of the annexation of the island to the United States on these artists: the industrialization of Puerto Rico allowed for greater distribution of art, which in turn spurred new expressions of the African past. In “Afirmación étnica y estética en la ensayística y poética de Jorge Artel,” Luisa García-Conde analyzes the theoretical production of Colombian poet Jorge Artel before turning to his most famous collection of poetry. She reveals how Artel celebrates the presence of Africans in the Americas, situating Afro-Colombians as central in the cultural production of the continent. Alison McLetchie highlights the religious element of soca music in her essay “The Holy Temple of Soca: Rev. Rudder in Attendance.” Using the figure of David Rudder, the famous soca singer, she shows how he juxtaposes the sacred and the profane in the music of Carnival. For him, Carnival presents an opportunity for liturgy, as those who participate in these celebrations emerge as a congregation, a group of worshippers participating in a ritualistic event that results in a new religion.

In the next three essays, the focus moves to Brazil and the United States. Next, I present a historical overview of Brazilian authors of African descent in “Afro-Brazilian Literature, from the Periphery to the Center.” Katya Isayev examines the representation of the banjo in art from the nineteenth century U.S. North, South, and Anglo-Caribbean in her essay “Decolonizing the Banjo: Cultural Memory and a (Re)representation of Slave Performance 1700s – 1863” She argues that the music-making of

enslaved Africans were sites of resistance and agency. In “The Challenge of Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*: (Re)Claiming Wholeness,” Ashley David puts forth that Bambara challenges her readers to recognize the existence of a whole that includes a broadly defined spectrum of reality that spans and encompasses the tangible, the intangible, the concrete, the imagined, in short, *everything/and*.

With the next essay, the focus expands to include Africa and Europe. In “Performing the Archive: Photography in the Africana World,” Brendan Wattenberg looks at how four African artists living in Benin, Cameroon, France, and the United States re-create their national histories by re-creating the archive in their works. In the final essay of the collection, “Where Do We Go from Here? The Future of African Diaspora Studies,” I call for the acknowledgment of interdisciplinary study as an element for the continued success of this field in the U.S. academy. In this age of globalization when the United State sees record numbers of immigrants, particularly from the Spanish-speaking world as well as from the African continent, we must cross national and linguistic boundaries in order to better appreciate the depth of the cultural expression of the African Diaspora.

INVOCATION

BECAUSE WHEN GOD IS TOO BUSY: HAITI, ME AND THE WORLD

(EXCERPTS FROM A PERFORMANCE BY)
GINA ATHENA ULYSSE

*Tranblé te a tranblé
Tranblé nou sot tranblé
Ezili, si ou wem tranble anko, pran nou
Oh Metres, si ou wem tranble anko,
pranm non
Sove pitit lakay yo, tranble nou sot tranblé*

Trembled the earth trembled
Tembled we just trembled
Ezili, if we tremble again, save us
Mistress, if we tremble again,
save us
Save the lives of your children,
trembling they are trembling

i make love like that...

*my knees folded beneath me
my arms stretched above my head
giving
touching
feeling
always seeking feelings that were beyond touch
i remember when i began to do this
i remember when i did this for the first time
it was with him
him
he was the man who would have validated my righteousness
my righteousness
righteousness that i later rejected
because hypocrisy always accompanies it
it was with him that i began to make love like that*

*i make love like that
my knees folded beneath me*

my hands stretched above me
needing
searching
looking
i keep my head down
no eye-to-eye contact
no! no eye-to-eye contact
with my body i give him everything
everything that my heart
that has not learned how to give
cannot give him
my heart
my independent heart
that screams out for power over him
power over all men
power over him that i have when i keep my eyes down
let him think that i exist for him
let him think that i exist only for him and nothing else
i keep my eyes down he doesn't need to see the victory i know
he is at my mercy because i am on my knees
on my knees before him
he doesn't know
he doesn't need to know
that i am powerful on my knees
i have been on my knees since i was born

i make love like that
my knees folded beneath me
my arms stretched out above my head
submission?
no
i was born like that in 1804
i was supposed to be free but i was forced to bow to
greater white powers that refused to respect my sovereignty
i was forced to bow to the creoles with their colonized minds
i was forced to bow to men and women like myself
that treated me cruelly as the whites who had brought me to this country
because in our eyes i was savage
after over 200 years i was still too african, too strong, too spiritual
not white enough, not nearly french enough
i make love like that because
i was born black in haiti and on my knees

i make love like that
my knees folded beneath me
my arms stretched above my head

searching
feeling
always wanting to feel feelings that went beyond touch
i have been on my knees every night before going to sleep
merci seigneur pour cette journée que je viens de passer
fais que je passe une bonne nuit
sans danger sans malheur sans action et sans omission
bon dieu protège maman, papa, dona, amoutou
soeur élie menm soeur cécil¹
with the tiny little wire rimmed glasses that rest on
her white red pudgy cheeks that's about to explode
forgive her for calling us patat boukane²
with our bony knees and flexible bodies
in blue/white checked uniforms
forgive her god for she does not know that she has sinned
i say this on my knees on concrete every night before sleep
these knees have been on concrete every night for eleven years
that's why i make love like that

i make love like that
my knees folded beneath me
my arms stretched above my head
once i was on my knees for a whole night
on two books in the front room in the dark
bo kote chez fe forge yo
on karo, on pik, on tref, on ke³
i remember mother coming to the room to see how i was
asking papa to let me, or was it dona, go to sleep in my bed
he said no i had to take my punishment
i don't even remember why i had to spend the whole night on my knees
on two books in the living room while everyone else was asleep in bed
i remember praying
i prayed to god my real father
i imagined that i was the chosen one and j.c.was ponce pilat
but i wasn't going to be crucified like jesus
no! i wasn't going to die on the cross like jesus
that's why i make love like that

i make love like that
my knees folded beneath me
my arms stretched above my head
searching looking needing
because when god is too busy
i get on my knees and open my arms
and call papa legba to open the gates for me
so i can enter a place where i always feel safe

*so i can enter a place where i am never forgotten
 so i can enter a place where i am always protected
 when i'm on my knees i'm with
 ezili danto, ezili freda, ogu feray, ogu badagri
 tout les saints, tout les morts tout les marassa
 tout nasyon
 bo maman m, bo papa m
 bo maman maman m, bo papa papa m
 i am powerful on my knees because i am never alone
 that's why i make love like that*

*i make love like that
 my knees folded beneath me
 my arms stretched above my head
 i keep my eyes down
 no eye-to-eye contact so he doesn't see my victory
 my hands searching touching feeling
 always wanting to feel feelings that went beyond touch
 always wanting to feel feelings that went beyond touch
 always looking desperately needing searching
 always desperately looking for home
 that's why i make love like that*

***The Passion in Auto-Ethnography:
 Homage To Those Who Hollered Before Me***

*Silence chose me
 I didn't choose silence
 silence immobilized me
 I could not breathe in my own skin
 without breaking the silence
 I could not live in the castle of my skin
 as I came of age colonized knowing I wasn't meant to survive I screamed
 knowing the power of the erotics I screamed
 using the erotics as power I screamed
 out of my passion I screamed out
 loud words that resonated the sound of
 a hammer slamming on a nail going through flesh
 screeches
 shrieks
 hollers
 screams
 another woman hollering
 hollers screams*

another woman of color hollering
 hollers shrieks
 just another black woman hollering creeks
 like zora, audre, cherrie, gloria, rosario, sandra
 hollering shrieks
 like zora, audre, cherrie, gloria, rosario, sandra
 hollering creeks that crack
 hollering creeks to crack
 to shatter the screens bordering the walls of the tower
 that safeguards the gatekeepers mirrored crick-crack
 crick crack
 no!
 krik! krak!
 krik! krak!
 cricks can crack the mirror
 keep out the cricks that can turn into cracks
 reaffirming their silences
 the cricks in the crack
 drowning our silences
 hollering screaming silently suffocating
 the cricks that make the crack
 that be too wild and need to be tamed
 the cricks that make the crack
 that be too wild and need to be contained
 the cricks in the crack that need to be erased
 be that or disappear
 fear or disappear
 always disappear
 crying hollering laughing they keep disappearing
 because they love themselves they disappear
 Barbara... Flo.... Audre...
 where are you?
 where have you gone?
 they love themselves when they're laughing
 Hell! I'm just trying to love myself when I am crying
 I'm just trying to love myself when I am hollering
 I'm just trying to love and rescue myself
 when I challenge these disciplinary acts

 you better get out of the front line girlfriend
 or you won't get home alive
 using the erotic of power to redefine myself
 I inserted myself in the diss
 I inserted myself deep into the diss
 I inserted myself into this form that stifles me
 into this diss that reflects me

*I and I must know the time and place
 so I can ask papa legba to open the gates at the crossroads for me
 And in the name of all the saints all the dead all the twins
 And the entire guinea nation from my mother's side
 And in the name of anacoana
 And in the name of nanny of the marroons and neg mawon
 And in the name of cecile fatiman and soujourner truth
 And in the name of jean jacques dessalines and toussaint louverture
 And in the name of charlemagne peralte
 And in the name of w e b dubois and marcus garvey
 And in the name of jean price mars and zora neale hurston
 And in the name of angela davis and nikki giovanni
 And in the name of patricia williams and peter tosh
 And in the name of gloria anzaldua and maryse conde
 And in the name of audre lorde and paulo friere
 And in the name of winnie mandela and martin luther king
 And in the name of irene diggs and roberta stoddart
 And in the name of kathrine dunham and assata shakur
 And in the name of malcolm X and mathatma ghandi
 And in the name of shirley chislom and michelle cliff
 And in the name of ruth behar and michel rolf-trouillot
 And in the name of faye harrisson and nesha haniff
 And in the name of walter rodney and bell hooks
 And in the name of miriam makeba and elias ferajaje jones
 And in the name of betty lou valentine and john gwaltney
 And in the name of lauryn hill and nelson mandela
 And in the name of the sisters of the cowries
 And in the name of june jordan and brenda cardenas and the last poets
 And in the name of my mother my grand mother my great-grand mother
 And my great-great-great grandmother
 You and I have had a date with history
 Eye and I need to know the time and place
 If not here, where?
 If not now, you'll have to tell me when*

<i>Tranblé te a tranblé</i>	Trembled the earth trembled
<i>Kanpé fok nou kanpé</i>	Stand we must stand
<i>Ezili, si ou wem tranble anko, pran nou</i>	Ezili, if we tremble again, save us
<i>Oh Metres, si ou wem tranble anko,</i>	Mistress, if we tremble again,
<i>pranm non</i>	save us
<i>Sove pitit lakay yo, kanpé fok nou kanpé</i>	Save the lives of your children,
	stand we must stand

Notes

- ¹ Thank you God for this passing day. Make me have a good night
Without any danger, without any action or omission.
God protect mother, father, dona and amoutou protect even Sister Cecil.
- ² burnt potatoes
- ³ Next to the wrought iron chairs. A diamond, a spade, a club, a heart.

CHAPTER ONE

“*MISTÈ A GATEM*”:¹

DEPLOYING EZILI AND QUEERING
THE HAITIAN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE
IN ANNE LESCOT’S
AND LAURENCE MAGLOIRE’S FILM
DES HOMMES ET DES DIEUX

SOPHIE SAINT-JUST

Blondine is walking among the early crowd of street vendors at a vast outdoor market in Port-au-Prince. She is absorbed and busy, looking for a spot where she can settle her merchandise. Few men or women are paying attention to her. Her back is to a camera filming every of her gestures. Despite her white jeans, black T-shirt, and a white and navy cap worn backwards, Blondine’s gender remains vaguely uncertain. She carries a grey tote bag on her shoulder and her hat barely hides a short bob of straightened hair. As the camera zooms in to a close-up that shows her carefully made-up face and neatly arched eyebrows, she states matter-of-factly: “*Si m pa ta kab santim ta viv jan ou wè m nan an Ayiti m’pito just pito mouri oubyen al viv Sen Domeng.*” (“If I can’t be the way that I am in Haiti, I’d rather die or go live in the Dominican Republic.”)

Blondine’s demeanor is that of any street merchant eager to sit down and start his or her day. Later, while she dons the dress-like flowery apron most street vendors wear, customers and vendors notice the camera following her deliberate gestures and impeccable make-up and they begin

¹ (“The *lwas* spoiled me”), as quoted from Blondine in *Des hommes et des dieux*, 15:27. All subsequent Creole citations by interviewees are followed with the film’s original English subtitles. I thank Emmanuel Joseph Duogène for transcribing the Creole.

to mock her. Now that she is settled among the stalls at the spot where she sells snuff (tobacco), men and women stare at this man² who looks like a woman and who does women's work. They hide their mouths, laugh, and point at her. Their reactions, though not excessively hostile, are often accompanied by the insult "*masisi*" ("faggot"). Despite such slurs, Blondine is able to make a living as a street merchant. A Vodou practitioner, she says she owes her safety to one of the *lwa* or *loas*, also called *Mistè* or *Mystères* (gods and goddesses of the Haitian pantheon)³.

In their groundbreaking documentary *Des hommes et des dieux*, (translated in English as *Of Men and Gods*) Diaspora⁴ filmmakers Laurence Magloire and Anne Lescot follow a group of several openly gay, effeminate, and cross-dressing Haitian men who use the authority of Erzili, Ezili, or Erzulie, (one of the *lwas* or spirits of Vodou in the syncretic Afro-Caribbean religion practiced in Haiti) to legitimize their sexual identity. My essay examines how Magloire's and Lescot's documentary portrays working-class Haitian gay men's resistance to marginalization. By linking

² In this documentary, several gay men (Blondine, Innocente, and Flanise) have adopted female first names that reflect their own gender affiliation rather than their sex. In these introductory paragraphs, I deliberately use the personal pronoun "she" and the possessive adjective "her" in reference to Blondine to emphasize her gender construction.

³ In her essay "Vodou in Haiti: Way of life and Mode of Survival," Claudine Michel defines *Lwa* as: "*Lwa* or *Loas* are the Vodou spirits of the Haitian pantheon. They serve as intermediaries between the ultimate God, *Bondye*, and the humans. Each *Lwa* is an archetype of a moral principal that he or she represents. Among the *lwa*/spirits most frequently "served" and invoked in ceremonies are the following: Dambala, supreme, oldest, most respected, represented by a snake; Aida Wedo, his wife; Legba the spirit of the crossroads who must be invoked to "open the gate" for the other *lwa*; Ogou who does not tolerate injustice, but who can be mean at times; Erzili representing sexuality, lesbianism, motherhood; Azaka the peasant, the worker, the one who controls money; Baron samedi and Gran Brigit, guardians of the cemeteries; Gede the spirit of death and sexuality" (36).

⁴ The use of the phrase "Diaspora filmmakers" paints an incomplete picture as several of the women filmmakers of Haitian descent who were raised, educated, and worked abroad (and as such, were once part of the Haitian Diaspora) have since returned to Haiti where they continue to shape cultural production and develop community-based activities. On the program for the 2004 New York edition of the Haiti on Screen film festival, co-organizers Guetty Felin and Michele Stephenson divided the festival's corpus of films into four main categories: "films from Haiti, Diaspora films, foreign films on Haiti, and Raoul Peck Retrospective." These categories overlap and make a complex and changing picture that includes fixed considerations such as Haitian origin and place of birth and variables like foreign education, various places of residence, return or departure.

their sexual identity to key elements of Haitian religious and cultural identity, these men attempt to carve a safe space for themselves and gain acceptance from Haitian society at large. Primarily through interviews and footage of the daily life of six men in their twenties —Blondine, Innocente, Madsen, Jean-Marcel, Flanise, and Denis—, Magloire and Lescot document Vodou as practiced in Haiti and how it allows for a religious-based acceptance of alternative gender norms and same-sex love.

Born to an Italian mother and a Haitian father, Anne Lescot seldom mentions that she is also the granddaughter of Haitian president Elie Lescot who in an effort to “clear land for United States rubber production” (14),⁵ allied himself with the Haitian Catholic Church when the latter launched an anti-superstition campaign against Vodou religious practices that vilified the Haitian peasantry, destroyed sacred objects and temples, and persecuted practitioners. During the New York edition of the 2004 Haiti on Screen film festival, Anne Lescot explained that the idea for their 2002 documentary came when she lost her computer and with it years of anthropological research for her doctoral dissertation on Vodou and gender relationships. She had also been working in Haiti for UNESCO on the Slave Route Project⁶ and decided to turn her dissertation work into a documentary narrative. She teamed with another producer and filmmaker of Haitian descent, Laurence Magloire, with whom Lescot shot *Lwa Yo Voye Rele’m* (2001),⁷ a six-minute poetic documentary. Together they founded, a Haitian film production company in 2001,⁸ Digital LM, through which they self-distributed their documentary. *Des hommes et des dieux* was released in 2002 and was selected at film festivals around the world.

Although born in Port-au-Prince, co-director Laurence Magloire grew up primarily in Montréal, where she produced children’s television programs for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. She returned to Haiti in the late 1990s, at a time when Anne Lescot was conducting

⁵ Joan Dayan, “Vodou, or the Voice of the Gods,” *Sacred Possessions, Santeria, Obeah, and the Caribbean*, eds. Margarite Fernandez Olmas and Lizbeth Paravisini-Gebert (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997) 14.

⁶ A UNESCO program composed of an international scientific committee of specialists initiated in Benin in 1993 that calls attention to the historical roots of the slave trade and slavery, explores their repercussions, and fosters dialogue.

⁷ “Lwa Yo Voye Rele’m,” *Africine.org*, eAfricine, n.d., Web, June 6, 2011.

⁸ Digital LM has now morphed into a wider structure: Collectif 2004 Images, a non-profit organization based in Paris. Its website, collectif2004images.org, sells and distributes films about the Haitian experience and promotes cultural events (art exhibitions, talks, and publications) across the Haitian Diaspora and beyond.

research.⁹ Magloire is also the founder of Sinéma Anba Zetwal (Cinema under the stars), a free outdoor film festival that shows selected films throughout Haiti. (Sinéma Anba Zetwal was one of the first popular cultural events scheduled in February 2010 after the devastating January 2010 earthquake.) Laurence Magloire belongs to a generation of Diaspora Haitian women who have worked for others in film, television, and animation (mostly in Francophone Canada, New York, and sometimes in France) before they began making their own documentaries for television.¹⁰

In her editing of the film, Laurence Magloire seamlessly weaves the sacred and the profane into an anthropological narrative, as the male protagonists define themselves as children of Ezili while they groom themselves or work at a hair salon. They are shown serving the *lwas* through ceremonies at the *onfò* (the hounfort or ceremonial dwelling) and speaking candidly about parenthood and family acceptance. Before they go on a pilgrimage to the Saint-Yves waterfall, the men discuss HIV, AIDS, and their own risky behavior (risky because they are visibly provocative in dress and in mannerisms—and sexually risky, as seen in a discussion about not wearing condoms) while they are seen dancing to Bachata and Compas music at a no-frills gay nightclub. This insistence on

⁹ “Anne Lescot,” *Africine.org*, eAfricine, n.d., Web, May 1, 2010.

¹⁰ In a personal interview during the Haiti-on-Screen film festival in New York in 2004, Laurence Magloire, her sister, Rachel Magloire, and Michèle Lemoine explained that one of the reasons many Haitian women filmmakers make documentaries is because these film narratives require less funds than feature-length fictions. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, this group of women filmmakers of Haitian descent included but was not limited to Rachel Magloire but also Michèle Lemoine in Port-au-Prince, Martine Chartrand in Montréal, Elsie Haas in Paris, and Michèle Stephenson in New York. The ways in which they have often given voice to marginalized subjects question preconceived ideas about what it is like to live in Haiti or to reflect on Haitian cultural, national, or individual identity from abroad. Although their films are sporadically selected at international and local film festivals, Haitian women filmmakers have remained in the margins of the Haitian filmmaking practice. Better-known men filmmakers such as pioneer militant documentarian Arnold Antonin and Raoul Peck whose filmography includes co-productions with Germany, France, the United States, and Haiti have made documentaries and feature films (in the case of Antonin low-budget Haitian fiction films and in the case of Raoul Peck films financed by prominent European institutions and American cable television channels). The experimental filmmaker Michelange Quay has so far made fiction films. Cheaper digital technology has facilitated the advent of low-budget filmmaking practice where men still make the majority of movies.

daily life, serving the spirits, and foregrounding one's sexual preference reveals a picture of the Haitian experience seldom depicted on the screen.

“Ezili Dantò, i reklamem depi'm te tou piti,” explains Innocente, another Haitian gay man whose daily life is portrayed in *Des hommes et des dieux* (2002 16:14). Such a statement, “Ezili Dantor claimed me since I was a child,” invokes a religious belief system where the boundaries between the sacred and the profane are loosely marked. To question the binary opposition between man and woman, Innocente summons a powerful agent in the pantheon of Vodou intermediary spirits. Lescot and Magloire convey this crossing of boundaries first in the film's title, *Des hommes et des dieux*, and secondly in its subject matter: working-class Haitian men who walk a thin line between spiritual devotion and subversive appropriation, sincerity and survival, brazen response to homophobia and reverence to the *lwa*. Dayan remarks: “Vodou, constantly redefined by the practitioners themselves, is further complicated by the finite and temporal predicaments of those who suffer” (1998: 90). Blondine, the street merchant, explains that her response to insults hurled at her and every so often to being hit, is docility (*Des hommes et des dieux* 3:56).

Although the title of the documentary faintly resembles John Steinbeck's 1937 novel *Of Mice and Men* (translated as *Des souris et des hommes* in French), loneliness and powerlessness are nowhere to be found in this film. The conjunction “and” in the film title does not merely connect the Haitian men mounted by their Haitian gods; it stands for an intense coupling. As Joan Dayan argues in *Haiti, History, and the Gods*: “For Vodou practice does not deny the flesh but rather confers on sexuality a sense of exaltation that surpasses fleshly desire or sentimental satisfaction. The feeling of sacred enhancement, shared equally by men and women, has little to do with abstract belief or morality. The experience is purely corporeal: a surfeit of matter so extreme it becomes utterly mystical” (100). This tangible feeling of exaltation is the result of known and shared ceremonial manifestations of Vodou divinities whose “pansexual identities,” according to Randy Conner and David Hatfield Sparks, are often fluid and express homoeroticism (55-64). Ritualized encounters between Haitian gods or *lwa* and Vodou practitioners permit affirmations of same-sex desire.

Linking the multifaceted *lwa* Ezili to same-sex desire is not entirely unprecedented.¹¹ Joan Dayan, for instance, draws from a 1962 study by

¹¹ See Karen Brown's *Mama Lola: a Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, (1991) and Elizabeth Mc Alister's *Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and its Diaspora* (2002).

Emmanuel Paul, *Panorama du folklore haïtien*, to explain the following: “Erzulie allow(s) her devotees to experience either ‘hetero or homosexual’ erotic ‘phantasms’.”¹² Dayan further paraphrases Paul’s understanding of how the authority of the sacred “can compensate for sexual repression...” (Dayan 1994: 27). Her characterization and readings of Ezili illustrate the various ways in which the *lwa* Ezili may appeal to same-sex loving men and women. In their film, Lescot and Magloire solely focus on men and although they briefly insert one representation of this shifting *mistè*, they fail to describe Ezili’s characteristics, function, and symbolic meaning, a necessary step to understand her appeal to devotees.

Joan Dayan has mapped the complex underpinnings of the Haitian religious pantheon, its ceremonies, and songs. In the various nations of Haitian gods or *mystères*, called *lwa*, Ezili is a highly volatile spirit. At turn loving, demanding, and authoritative, she bears multiple names: “Grande Erzulie, Erzulie Toro (the Bull), Erzulie Fréda, Erzulie-gé-rouge, Erzulie Mapian (Louse), Erzulie-dos-bas (Low-Back), Erzulie Zandor, Erzulie Boum’ba, Erzulie-séverine-belle-femme, Erzulie-Dantor,” (Dayan 1997: 21) and can take the features of a dark-skinned slave woman, her mistress, or a mulatto in between. For Dayan, not only does Ezili straddle race, class, and Western and African religions but when she mounts her devotees she also rewrites sex, gender, desire, and Haitian narratives about power and identity. In “Erzulie: a Women’s History of Haiti,” Dayan depicts her as:

the goddess, spirit or loa of love, [that] tells a story of women’s lives that has not been told. A goddess was born on the soil of Haiti who has no precedent in Yorubaland or Dahomey. In her varying incarnations, her many faces, she bears the extremes of colonial history. Whether the pale and elegant Erzulie Fréda or the cold, savage Erzulie-Gé-Rouge, she dramatized a specific historiography of women’s experience in Haiti and throughout the Caribbean (6).

The feminine traits and multiple of manifestations of Ezili also appeals to gay men devotees who identify and dress as women, and who wear make-up. Yet, what is it about this particular *lwa* that allows for more fluid and gendered identity?

The figure of Ezili may confer to the devotees she rides flexible and transformative identities. Ezili’s place among other Haitian deities, her variable manifestations, and her feminine attributes appeal to practitioners

¹² Joan Dayan, “Erzulie: a Women’s History of Haiti,” *Research in African Literatures* 25.2 (1994) 27.

of Vodou: specifically to men and women who question sex determination and heteronormativity. This demanding *lwa* redraws the boundaries between male and female. Most of the men interviewed in the film collapse these boundaries in their everyday life by wearing nail polish, feminine hairstyle or wigs, and several of them adopt female first names such as Blondine, Innocente, and Flanise. Lescot and Magloire show one interviewee occasionally putting on a dress and glitter to go partying. According to Dayan:

Unlike Western religions that depend upon dualisms such as matter and spirit, body and soul, for their perpetuation of power, Vodou unsettles and subverts such apparent oppositions. That subversion becomes most evident when we turn to the question of gender and distinction and color division. Maîtresse Erzulie-Freda, the mulâtresse blanche, is the lover of Ogoun, a very black god of war, often identified with papa Dessalines. But she also wears the rings of Damballah, the white-snake god of the sweet waters, and Agoué-Tarayo, the god of the sea who is figured as white. Though a woman, Erzulie vacillates between her attraction for the two sexes. She holds her servitor in between two irreconcilables: in between the supposedly antithetical constructions of masculinity and femininity. She is not androgynous, for she deliberately encases herself in the trappings of what has been constituted in a social world (especially for the Frenchified elites) as femininity. Erzulie thus goes beyond false dichotomizing, as she prescribes and responds to multiple and apparently incoherent directives. (1994, 6)

Thus, when Ezili rides her devotees, she interrupts what Judith Butler calls the “heterosexualization of desire” (23), relegates sex (the strict male and female binary), and manifests what Judith Butler has traced as gender: “because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with race, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities” (6). It is these “discursively constituted identities” Butler identifies that make possible the formulation of a Haitian syncretic religious narrative that is “neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex” (Butler 9-10). Anchored in the ritualized practice of Vodou, Ezili’s interruption of biological sex is “gender as a multiple interpretation of sex” (Butler 9-10). It is Ezili’s unbounded loving yet whimsical dispositions, her deconstruction of the Haitian woman as one, as whole, or as half of a biological sex binary, that some Haitian gay men and women deploy and therefore substantiate. In *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Participations in African-inspired Traditions in the Americas*, Randy P. Conner and David Hatfield

Sparks stipulate that if “Ezili is the patron of gay men” (58), several other Vodou divinities, Ayizan, Mawu-Lisa, Legba, and Gede (55-64), also manifest “gender and sexual complexities” (62). Interviewees in the film solely invoke the *lwa* Ezili but in its broadness the film title *Des hommes et des dieux* alludes to multiple anthropomorphic incarnations and to the sexual and gendered (social and cultural) between-ness of several divinities in the Vodou pantheon.

As an authoritative spirit who is both the Virgin and Venus, she forbids or allows sexual activity: “Erzulie demands of her servitors abstention from sex on her sacred days. But Erzulie “marries” women as well as men. Everything *written* about Erzulie can be contradicted. She is, some will tell you, the loa of lust most often prayed to by prostitutes. A goddess served by the Haitian elite or young virgins, Erzulie is sought after by those homosexual tendencies” (Dayan 1994: 6-7).¹³ The directors of *Des hommes et des dieux* do not place the many manifestations of Ezili in context. Instead Lescot and Magloire let a few of their informants explain how they were able to gain wider social acceptance by serving her and invoking her name in public. The interviewees’ living conditions and colloquial use of Creole mark them as people of low income. The filmmakers do not dwell on “regional modalities” but they implicitly contrast how the men’s gender bending is received in different neighborhoods of a large city such as Port-au-Prince as opposed to small provincial towns— where several of the men are seen working at a hair salon —such as Cabaret and Source Matelas, where the practice of Vodou is more entrenched and harassment appears less likely. Perhaps erroneously, the general feeling expressed in the film towards same-sex love is that serving and appropriating Ezili fosters tolerance. Innocente, for instance, explains:

Mwen gen kò gason men mwen gen stil fi. Pwoblem ki vin jwen avek li pwoblèm ti pèp, m ret nan la mas. Mwen jwen pwoblem de sa, paske kotem rete a yon sot de moun ki pa klere. Yon sot de moun ki we ak sa. (6:15)

(I have a man’s body and a woman’s style. My problem is that I live with the lower classes. Where I live people are not educated, they are not used to seeing people like me.)

While it is not clear whether Innocente implies that in upper or middle-class Haitian families, the stigma of one’s sexual orientation is approached

¹³ Joan Dayan, “Erzulie: a Women’s History of Haiti,” *Research in African Literatures* 25.2 (1994): 6-7.