EZILI'S MIRRORS

IMAGINING BLACK QUEER GENDERS

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For my daughter, Baía Tinsley,

who is all the black girl magic,
all the Ezili that fill my life.
I love you more today than I
did yesterday—and tomorrow,
I'll love you even *more*
than I do today

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Because this book is a praise song for the world-making, mirror-breaking power of black queer artists, my first thanks go to those who so generously shared their work with me. Sharon Bridgforth, the mermaid we black queer folk have been waiting for, not only sent multiple versions of her work-in-progress and a beautiful set of black mermaid oracle cards. She hosted me with utmost grace and care when I followed her to New York to see her work, came to my house to sit with my mermaid art for photos, and offered support and watery conversation from near and far. Nalo Hopkinson made my dreams come true when she answered our request to give the keynote presentation at the University of Texas's symposium "Mapping the Afro Imaginative: Black Queer Diaspora Studies and the Work of the Imagination." Once there, she was kind enough to indulge me in conversation about Jeanne Duval, light-skinned black cisfemmes, Beyoncé, and her own black mermaid art, all punctuated with a rich laugh I won't soon forget. When I met Ana Lara at a writers' workshop with Sharon Bridgforth and Omi Oshun Jones in 2005, I asked for a copy of the unpublished novel she came to talk about—*Erzulie's Skirt*—and her vision of La Mar has colored my imagination ever since. She also kept me safe when spirits came knocking at my head at the Transnational Black Feminist Retreat she brilliantly organized in Santo Domingo. Cindy Elizabeth's vision of Whitney and our black queer foremothers grounded and lifted me as I wrote this, and I'm honored

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this work that I was able to present and taught me so much about Ezili's beauty and precision.

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bridge

READ THIS BOOK LIKE A SONG

Read this book like a song. No never, ever like a book of theory. Creating theory, Barbara Christian told me years ago, means "fixing a new constellation of ideas for a time at least."[1] *She refused to fix constellations & so do I. This is a book in motion—in singing, falling, faltering, weeping, hip-circling, moaning, yellow-boning, following, insisting. The motion makes me dizzy sometimes, trying to sing & move at the same time. It may make you dizzy, too. I want it that way. So we can lose our bearings & find new ways to make sense, together & coming-apart-at-the-seams.*

Read this book like a song. One day I sat down in front of my keyboard & decided to play language. With the rise & fall of her beautiful voice Barbara's essays told me to do this, too. To string words in the tradition of black women whose "language, and the grace and pleasure with which they played with it" sounded all the ways that "sensuality is intelligence, sensual language is language that makes sense."[2] *No language is neutral & English is not a language made for me. Geechee & Creole would be my languages if there were any women alive in my family to teach them to me. Since there*

aren't, I try to do something unexpected with the words & letters & sounds I have at my disposal.

*Read this book like a song. This song for Ezili is written in many voices. Read it like you listen to a song by my favorite group, Destiny's Child. Every chapter has three voices. The most serious font—*this one*—is the one I was trained to write in, the voice of academic knowledge & close textual readings. Imagine it's the book's Beyoncé, the voice easiest to recognize. My favorite font—*this one*—is the voice of spirit knowledge, the mark of vignettes telling stories of Ezili's manifestations. Think of this as the Kelly of my song, the quiet power that holds black women together but we don't ever publicly acknowledge enough. The last font you'll see—*this*—is the voice that speaks with black feminist ancestors, those who dropped knowledge & walked the path of Ezili before us. This is the Michelle, the voice you didn't expect to show up & who sings more quietly than the others, maybe. Sometimes the voices will confuse you. Like Destiny's Child, too: Weren't there voices that used to be there then just went away? Why is Beyoncé singing again when I wanted to keep hearing Kelly? Follow the voices you like, trace them back from one break to another. Listen to them in & out of order, always, & know their stories are partial, incomplete, & fractured. In writing them, I practiced living with—making melodies from—the disjunctured & syncopated, the sounds of black queer world making.*

Read this book like a song. This is the bridge.

INTRODUCTION

FOR THE LOVE OF LAVEAU

Water is eternal summer, and the depths of winter, too. When I arrived on the west bank of the Mississippi River in August 2005, everything, *everything* in my life was midsummer, bright, and new. I had just moved to Minneapolis to start a new job at a new university, was living in a newly painted apartment by a glinting lake I ran around every new morning, was newly single, and every day wore new white clothes and answered to a new, seven-day-old name, Iyawo, the name of a priest newly initiated in the Ifa tradition. So who would be surprised that even though I hadn't finished my first book—literary criticism caressing the writing of Caribbean women who love women—I was suddenly inspired to research a new, second project. An analysis of twenty-first-century Caribbean fiction by queer writers, the project seemed bright and shiny as beaches and I rushed into it headlong, in one weekend penning an article that I thought would become the introduction to my next book.

But the longer I sat with this book the more choked, the more stagnant it became. The directions I followed and answers I found seemed too easy, too pat—and while this apparently pleased funders and tenure committees, it left me cold and uneasy. So I went back to texts I'd gathered for my project and other texts I'd loved in the past ten years, looking for what unexpected things they might have to say about Caribbean lesbian, gay, transgender, and queer experience that I was still missing. I quickly found my answer: *nothing.* This was because the vocabulary I had been using to describe these

authors, the descriptors that they used for their own identities—queer, lesbian, transgender—appeared nowhere in their work. *Nowhere.* No characters, no narrators, no one in the novels used these words. Instead they talked about many kinds of desires, caresses, loves, bodies, and more. And over and over again, they talked about something that was such a big part of my life, but that I never expected to find in most queer fiction: spirituality, Afro-Caribbean religions. Not one of these authors wrote about "queers," but almost everyone wrote about lwa—that is, about the spirit forces of the Haitian religion Vodou. And, finally, finally tuning into this other vocabulary, I was fascinated by the recurrence of one figure, who multiplied herself in these texts as if in a hall of mirrors: the beautiful femme queen, bull dyke, weeping willow, dagger mistress Ezili. Ezili is the name given to a pantheon of lwa who represent divine forces of love, sexuality, prosperity, pleasure, maternity, creativity, and fertility. She's also the force who protects madivin and masisi, that is, transmasculine and transfeminine Haitians.[1] And Ezili, I was coming to see—Ezili, not queer politics, not gender theory—was the prism through which so many contemporary Caribbean authors were projecting their vision of creative genders and sexualities. Finally, five summers later and into the middle of a winter, I was coming to see.

That winter, discarding plans so carefully laid out in grant applications, I decided I wanted to write a book that would be a reflection on same-sex desire, Caribbeanness, femininity, money, housing, friendship, and more; I wanted to write a book about Ezili. My loving, unfinished meditation on Ezili would open space to consider how, as Karen McCarthy Brown writes of the pantheon, "these female spirits are both mirrors and maps" for transfeminine, transmasculine, and same-sex-loving African diaspora subjects.[2] And it would reflect on Ezili as spirit, yes, but also on Ezili as archive. That is, I wanted to evoke the corpus of stories, memories, and songs about Ezili as an expansive gathering of the history of gender and sexually nonconforming people of African descent—an archive which, following Brent Hayes Edwards, we might understand not as a physical structure housing records but as "a discursive system that governs the possibilities, forms, appearance and regularity of particular statements, objects, and practices."[3] I wouldn't be looking to cast light on the (somewhat familiar) argument that this archive shows how spirituality allows trans* and queer people particular kinds of self-expression, sympathetic as I may be to such claims. My choice to follow the lwa instead would explore how a variety of engagements with

Ezili—songs, stories, spirit possessions, dream interpretations, prayer flags, paintings, speculative fiction, films, dance, poetry, novels—perform black feminist intellectual work: the work of *theorizing black Atlantic genders and sexualities.* This is the kind of theorizing Barbara Christian asked us to take seriously when she reminded feminist scholars "people of color have always theorized . . . and I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and in proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking."[4] Reflecting on Ezili's theorizing, then, I look to situate a discussion of black Atlantic genders and sexualities not primarily through queer studies, but rather within a lineage of black feminisms: a lineage which pushes me to ask what it would sound like if scholars were to speak of Ezili the way we often speak, say, of Judith Butler—if we gave the centuries-old corpus of texts engaging this lwa a similar explanatory power in understanding gender.

Nwaye nape nwaye! Ezili, si o wè m'tombe nan dlo pranm non. Sove la vi zanfan yo. *Drowning, we are drowning! Ezili, if you see me falling in the water, please rescue me. Save the life of your children.*[5] The Ezili are watery spirits whose name derives from Lac Aziri in Benin, and are associated with seas, rivers, waterfalls, springs, and other bodies of fresh and saltwater in Haiti.[6] Yes, as you're certainly thinking, this association suggests a metaphoric connection between femininity and fluidity that scholars have aptly explored.[7] But as I began research on Ezili in the wake of the January 12, 2010, earthquake, watching media displays of the dispossessed and their search for uncontaminated water, I wondered uneasily: when Haitian servitors of Ezili think of water, how often do they think of "a river that empties into no known sea" (as Luce Irigaray describes feminine sexuality)[8]—and how often of the very real, very well-known spring or tap from which they draw their daily water? As of 2008, 10.7 percent of Haitians had access to piped water at home. Surface water drawn directly from springs or piped from rivers makes up the principal water supply in rural Haiti, while communal taps serve this purpose in Port-au-Prince.[9] (Cisgender) Men generally don't collect water since, as one interviewee told a researcher studying water quality, "It's a woman's concern because we don't cook, clean the house or wash clothes."[10] But women, masisi, and children walk long, sometimes dangerous distances to

haul water home, where they disinfect it with bleach. They purify their daily haul because they know that, even when a spring runs clear, there's too much in the water they can't see: pollutants they understand to cause diarrhea, malaria, typhoid, cholera, dysentery, skin problems, colic, cancer, female genital infections, malaria, and more.[11] Connections between femininity—whether transfeminine or cisgender—and water—whether brought home by women or by masisi—are not only metaphoric here but concrete, quotidian, and life-or-death; and women's and masisi's desires to conjure the clean-running water that Ezili represents are not purely idealistic but eminently practical, literally down-to-earth.

Let me locate this water quality discussion for a moment in the northern coastal city of Gonaïves and the body of water it opens into, the Gulf of Gonâve. On September 18, 2004, Tropical Storm Jeanne devastated Gonaïves and surrounding areas. Flash floods killed 2,800 people, displaced thousands more, and damaged or destroyed 80 percent of the city. A water shortage ensued as the "previously limited municipal water supply was further compromised and other drinking water sources"—that is, rivers and springs—"were contaminated with cadavers, excrement, and debris."[12] For weeks afterward, while city residents vied for bottled water provided by nongovernmental organizations, people outside the city center traveled longer distances than usual to seek potable water from semifunctional wells or rivers they hoped to find still unpolluted. This extra work, undertaken while grieving people and homes lost, and the consequences of being unable to find clean water even after extended searches, disproportionately fell on Ezili's children—on women and masisi, Gonaïves's water carriers and purifiers. Ezili, rescue us from the waters; Ezili, save your children.

But women and masisi are not only, by necessity, water purifiers on the Gonâve coast. They are also, and also by necessity, water polluters. While contamination like that suffered after Tropical Storm Jeanne may be sporadic, the gulf is daily, visibly polluted by trash disposal in city neighborhoods unserved by sanitation services. "In these conditions, people perceive the sea and gullies as vacant spaces into which trash can be thrown," Michel Desse explains. "The first meters along the coast are covered with detritus."[13] Since women are routinely responsible for cooking and sanitation, many items choking the water must have been thrown from their hands: soiled food wrappers, used sanitary products, empty relaxer bottles, unlucky lottery tickets. And there must be other things, too, thrown by other hands. While this contamination

does not show up in any official studies or reports, storytellers document it. Nice Rodriguez's short story "Throw It to the River" depicts an urban poor community on the banks of a river near Manila Bay, which, much like Haiti's west coast, jettisons its domestic refuse—pet carcasses, dirty diapers, old love letters—into the water flowing by their back doors. "*Throw, throw, throw. The river hauls it all*," the story's narrator intones. This narrator is a butch lesbian named Tess, whose tale revolves around the last item she threw to the river: an uncomfortable, rough-edged dildo she bought to make love to Lucita, the femme lover who's just left her to marry a Filipino American man.[14] Like Tess, the Gulf of Gonâve's madivin and masisi must throw queer detritus to the river, too—must throw to the river parts of their experience that, like Tess and Lucita's dildo, are too uncomfortable, no longer fit, are not useful any more, have become painful. Documented or not, the effluvia and refuse of same-sex-loving, same-sex-fucking, gender-reworking, gender-reharmonizing bodies must be polluting these coastal waters, too. Drowning, we are drowning! Ezili, if you see me in the water, pick me up.

Water is the depths of winter, and a premonition of summer, too. In December 2011, two days after the winter solstice, my daughter, my husband, my cats, and I traveled to Austin, Texas. With a semester off from teaching before beginning a new job in the University of Texas's African and African Diaspora Studies Department, I planned to use this time to start writing my reflections on Ezili. The new year showered us with an unusually warm winter of unexpected thunderstorms, the beginning of an end to the drought that parched central Texas. On these wet nights, someone I never expected to see arrived to visit me in dreams. Marie Laveau, famed Vodou queen who presided over New Orleans for much of the nineteenth century, came gently and imperiously to command I include her in my book. On those nights and mornings after, I didn't understand what the connection between this queen and my project was, no, I certainly didn't. But I set out to make sense of it in any way I could—reading everything I could get my hands on about Marie Laveau, trying to listen to what I was being told.

That Marie Laveau continues to appear in New Orleans over a hundred years after her death, I knew. She regularly presents herself in businesses and tourist attractions that flank the French Quarter where she lived, showing up during

readings by famed gay psychic Phillip Humphries at Marie Laveau's House of Voodoo and brushing past patrons at the Quarter's oldest and most haunted queer bar—Cafe Lafitte in Exile—where ghosts of Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote perch on bar stools and chat with patrons.[15] And in the days following Hurricane Katrina, passersby saw her sitting at the site of her former house on St. Ann Street, sobbing for the city she loved and loves. But as I started to read more about her, I learned that while I knew her as a still-present ancestor, Marie Laveau was undergoing what Caroline Morrow Long calls a "Vodou canonization"—the process of being elevated to the status of a lwa.[16] This canonization is galvanized by the leadership of New Orleans–based mambo Sally Ann Glassman, who calls Marie the "historical lwa of New Orleans" and, at the midsummer ritual she performs in her honor at St. John's Bayou, draws a vèvè for her that merges her initials with a curvilinear, snake-like cross.[17] In her beautiful *Vodou Visions*, Glassman describes this emerging lwa as a spirit who performs

> a primal seductive dance with history and race. . . . Marie Laveau operates on many levels, most of which are misinterpreted, and all of which cause her much pain. She used these misinterpretations on the secular level during her life to promote awareness of the Lwa. She is seemingly open, but actually she is intensely private internally. She is open to the core of the psyche, that dark, magical territory where she works creatively. . . . Hear her drum rhythms pulsing like blood. It is the ongoing passage of the bloodline in the eternal feminine.[18]

Much of this description echoes that of the Ezili, lwa of the feminine and of the inner depths of creativity, mistresses of the erotic and the esoteric. During her lifetime, Marie Laveau, like Ezili Freda, was known as the bride of Danbala. Does this make the lwa Marie Laveau—or, perhaps, the pantheon of Marie Laveau—sisters to the Ezili? Cousins? Lovers, or wives? And what to make of the queer connection that the Ezili and Mademoiselle Marie share? Is it just geographical accident that Marie appears with such regularity to gay psychics and bar patrons in New Orleans, or does she share with the Ezili a special relationship to same-sex-loving folk? As I was asking myself these questions, Madamoiselle Marie, perhaps dissatisfied with my progress, started to send messages into my husband's dream world. Marie Laveau's children, we were called in his dream, and invited to participate in a night of raucous sex on the

beach, a black gay party to end all parties. What kind of Mother Marie was this, and what did she need me to know about her?

The first question I asked myself, as I approached this project: Why Vodou? Why would contemporary novelists, performers, and filmmakers—many of whom explicitly state they are *not* Vodou practitioners—choose to mediate their reflections on gender and sexuality through the epistemology of this spiritual practice? To trace my answers to this question, let me begin with the very briefest of sketches of what Vodou is. The Kreyòl word Vodou was transculturated from the Fon kingdom, where sacred energies were called *Vodun*. Haitian Vodou practitioners work to communicate with these sacred energies, here called lwa (from Yoruba, meaning "spirit master")—forces of nature including the ocean (Agwe), land/agriculture (Azaka), metals (Ogou), death (Gede)—in order to achieve personal harmony and fulfill their life purposes.

In its cosmology as well as its community formation, Vodou is radically inclusive of creative genders and sexualities. The Ezili are one of many pantheons of lwa who model and mentor the divinity of gender and sexual nonconformity. Yes, Danbala, the simultaneously male and female rainbow serpent; Gede, the hypersexual lwa of death and sex; and Nana Buruku, the primordial, androgynous moon-sun, all inspire and protect creative genders and sexualities. A significant number of people who serve these lwa are gender and sexually nonconforming, too. Straight-identified manbo (priestess) Jacqueline Epingle attests to the important role that straight and same-sex-loving women, as well as masisi—in fact, everyone *but* cishetero men—play in Vodou priesthood: "There are more women than men, more *manbo* than *houngan* [male priests] in Vodou. . . . The majority of *houngan* are either homosexuals or bisexuals. Men would rather not go into trance: male pride. Men do not like to lose control. Women are freer! The homosexual's spirituality directs him toward religion, and certainly toward the Vodou religion. Many manbo are bisexual or lesbians."[19]

Manbo Racine Sans Bout asserts that there is a "higher percentage of homosexuals at Vodou ceremonies, and in the priesthood, than in the general population" because gender and sexually complex Haitians are excluded from

the priesthood and congregations of Catholic and Protestant churches, leaving Vodou the only spiritual community open to them.[20] In fact, *every* Vodou temple is understood to need gender nonconforming practitioners. Marilyn Houlberg reports that masisi "are important to guarantee the efficacy of a service; as I have seen, they often play a special role in ceremonies," facilitating the arrival of spirit presences through their expert dancing.[21] And some houses, in fact, need only the gender and sexually creative. Manbo Racine, Houngan Aboudja, and scholar Elizabeth McAlister report several temples "composed entirely of gay men, or of gay women," as Manbo Racine puts it.[22] None of this means that Vodou's current organization is not practically patriarchal. Indeed it is, with (often purportedly heterosexual) men occupying positions of greatest power from which they routinely exploit the labor of women and masisi. But this does mean that Vodou offers more conceptual and spiritual space for expansive gendered and sexual practices than western European epistemologies circulating in the Caribbean. And so, it offers a particularly open space from which contemporary black queer artists can imagine love and possibility.

In addition to this queer present, Vodou has (what I would call) a queer past. As any Caribbeanist will tell you, Vodou is literally revolutionary. The world's only successful slave revolution, when Haitians emancipated themselves and defeated Napoleon's army to form the first black republic, began during a Vodou ceremony at Bwa Kayiman on August 14, 1791. Historians usually narrate the revolution that erupted afterward as a series of events propelled by a cadre of hetero-cismasculine heroes, including Toussaint L'Ouverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Alexandre Pétion, and Henry Christophe. Less often documented are the roles of feminine and gender-nonconforming leaders. Kate Ramsey records the leadership of an unnamed "old black woman" who assembled groups of rebels in the Cul-de-Sac plain; she also cites the case of Maman Dio, decried as a "witch" and leader of a "band of freedmen" in Le Cap, who was accused of "terrifying the weak minded and . . . propagating the type of fanaticism abused to lead into disorder all the Africans who allow themselves to be taken in by these hallucinations."[23] There's also the story of Romaine Rivière, the Léogâne landowner of color who assembled a following of thousands of rebels and, acting on instructions from his "godmother," the Virgin Mary, waged guerrilla warfare against planters and soldiers during the revolution's first year. He adopted the name Romaine la Prophetesse, choosing the femi-

nine title of Prophetess rather than prophet for reasons which, according to Terry Rey, no one knows. No one knows, no; but his choice of this name suggests not only that Romaine had feminine identifications, but felt those feminine identifications led him to do divine battle.

I want to return to Bwa Kayiman, that primal moment of Vodou revolutionary impulse. Most historiographical accounts record early revolutionary leader Boukman Dutty as the ceremony's presiding houngan, then note he was assisted by a (often unidentified) manbo sometimes named as Cecile Fatima or, alternatively, Manbo Marinette. But while this priestess plays a supporting role in canonical histories, other sources suggest she may, in fact, have been the *sole* officiating priest. Ramsey explains: "Boukman, one of the most important figures of the first months of the revolution, may or may not have been a spiritual leader himself; the earliest accounts of Bwa Kayiman do not mention him, and even Céligny Ardouin's oral-historically informed description of the ceremony in which he does figure represents the ritual being led by a woman."[24] What remains consistent in stories of Bwa Kayiman is that the most important presence that night was not human at all. Rather, the Haitian Revolution began with the arrival of fierce, dagger-wielding Ezili Danto, who (through the medium of the manbo) killed a black pig, distributed its blood to participants, and sent them to fight.

Danto, whom Brown describes as a "hardworking, solitary, sometimes raging mother," is a warrior spirit who fights alongside the oppressed—particularly oppressed women.[25] "And," as devotee George René puts it, "there's one thing you should know. Dantò, she's a lesbian."[26] Manbo Racine explains: "Homosexual women are considered very often to be under the patronage of Ezili Dantò who, while heterosexual in the sense that she has a child, is a fierce and strong female image. Many people think of Dantò herself as a lesbian."[27] What would it mean if we listened to these testimonies as part of the story of Bwa Kayiman; if we took seriously that the Haitian Revolution was launched not by a man or even a woman, but by *the spirit of women who love women*?

Dark-skinned, hard-working, woman-loving Danto's power to start a revolution came from her position standing firm on what Sylvia Wynter terms *demonic ground.* Drawing on the language of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Wynter theorizes demonic ground as the conceptual space assigned to Enlightenment Man's sexual-racial other: the black woman, whose rational,

nondemonic self-expression cannot even be imagined because such a radically different way of understanding the world would explode the master's discourse. What better way to electrify this demonic ground than a ceremony for Danto: not only the mother figure in a religion too often decried as satanic, not only the darkest of the Ezili pantheon, but, as "lesbian," (arguably) the most outside patriarchal dominance? And, as Katherine McKittrick puts it in her beautiful analysis of Wynter's concept, what better to force us to imagine "what would happen to our understanding and conception of race and humanness if black women legitimately inhabited our world and made their needs known? . . . What does her nondeterministic impossibility add to our conceptualization of humanness?"[28] Perhaps, then, in calling on Vodou and its revolutionary past and potential, the artists I'm looking at also explore ways to speak from demonic ground; also explore ways to upend a world that refuses to recognize how heavily its self-conceptualization rests on the backs of black women, madivin, and masisi.

If Ezili *is* water, then you know she contains all kinds of trash: seen and unseen, organic and inorganic, from individuals, companies, natural disasters, unnatural histories. The trash that circulates in Ezili is not only a concrete collection of detritus but, literally and metaphorically, an istwa de fatra—that is, a (hi)story of remains. I take my understanding of this concept from Jani Scandura's incisive discussion of the myriad linkages between archives and dumps in *Down in the Dumps: Place, Modernity, American Depression*. Excavating the long academic history of garbage, Scandura opens a discussion of nineteenth-century German historian Johann Gustav Droysen's "theory of remains." Following Cornella Vismann, she explains how Droysen "distinguished between materials that had been intentionally preserved for posterity and those 'more truthful' fragments that had been accidentally or unconsciously preserved from the past . . . calling these remnants or 'remains' (Uberreste) rather than 'refuse' (Abfall)."[29] Of course, Haitians who use their rivers either as a source of household water or as a garbage dump occupy precarious social positions such that they rarely have the remnants of their lives preserved in traditional archives. But the waters, the Ezili, become a history of remains that at once archives their past and predicts their future. In serving as a waste receptacle they collect unclaimed cadavers, (literally) broken homes, household waste, shit, blood, and, why not,

unwanted dildos—which, like all the Ezili and unlike most official histories, tell stories of women's, masisi's, madivin's, and poor people's lives. And, in serving as drinking water, they witness that it is possible for the remnants of the past to poison you, yes—but, if properly filtered, that same water can become the key to survival.

For 90 percent of Haitians—because of their multiply perilous positions relative to class, gender, sexuality—this water, this history has not been adequately processed, and so has the capacity to sicken and kill those who imbibe it. But if the water-bearers, if Ezili's children can process and filter this water/history themselves, with their own hands and resources, then this same substance has the capacity to sustain and heal those who cook, wash, pray with it. Because they are in a position where their history—like their reproductive and other labor—is considered trash, women, madivin, and masisi will be those most often charged with processing the figurative as well as literal remains circulating in Ezili's waters. And if they can strategize and learn how to keep themselves alive by finding nourishment in Ezili, in the istwa (histories and stories) that she gathers, in all the reflections and surfaces that she claims: well, then, this becomes the most defiant act of resistance possible in the interpenetrating conditions of classism, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia in which we all live.

The very, very beautiful Marie Laveau was born a free woman of color in New Orleans in 1794, where she reigned as Vodou queen for nearly seventy years until her death in 1881. "Marie Laveau" was in fact plural—not one woman, but two: Marie I and Marie II, the latter perhaps the biological, perhaps the spiritual daughter of the first Voodoo queen, who continued to reign in her mother's name after her death.[30] Mam'zelle Marie, as she's called, lived through two major events in the history of New Orleans Vodou. The first began in 1809, when the port of New Orleans received almost ten thousand Haitian refugees, suddenly doubling the population of Orleans parish. Nearly twenty years before, these masters and slaves, whites, mulattoes, and blacks had fled revolutionary Haiti and settled in Cuba, until the Spanish—fearful of Napoleon's ongoing campaigns—began a crackdown on Frenchmen that forced Haitians there to seek refuge in Louisiana.[31] While elements of African-based religions had been practiced in Creole Louisiana prior to 1809, New Orleans's sudden

Haitianization sparked the systematization of Vodou (or, as it is often spelled in New Orleans, Voodoo) in the city where Marie Laveau was coming of age.

The second shift in New Orleans Vodou began in the 1850s, when local police undertook an unprecedented crackdown on practitioners. As Ina Fandrich puts it, "Until the middle of the nineteenth century, the New Orleans police force had been turning a blind eye on the Voodoo events mushrooming in the city. During the decade before the Civil War, however, the city's Voodoo practitioners increasingly came under attack. The aggression culminated in numerous spectacular Voodoo arrests in the 1850s and 1860s." She then adds: "Interestingly, all those arrested were women."[32] As the *Daily Delta* reported, these women were charged with engaging in "an unlawful assemblage . . . of white women, free women of color, and slaves."[33] While interracial gatherings had long been illegal, in the decade following successful slave resistance among the Black Seminoles and on the Louisiana-bound ship *Creole*, enslaved women mixing freely in Vodou ceremonies with their "superiors"—white and free women of color—was perceived as a mounting, doubled threat to social order: because of both the well-known ways that Vodou had sparked revolution in the not-too-distant Haitian past, and the ways that interracial collaborations were fomenting slave resistance in the contemporary U.S. South. "There can be no doubt of the vast injury [Vodou ceremonies] do to the slave population," the *Picayune* insisted with venomous concern. "Carried on in secret, they bring the slaves into contact with disorderly free negroes and mischievous whites. The police should have their attention continually alive to the importance of breaking up such unlawful practices."[34]

At the same time, it was no coincidence that all those arrested were women. This was doubtless in large part because New Orleans Vodou was overwhelmingly a women's tradition, including a vast majority of female leaders and practitioners. In fact, not just Vodou but the entirety of New Orleans's Creole of color society was dominated by women. Two-thirds of the free population of color was female, and free women wielded significant social and financial success as shopkeepers, hairdressers, cooks, small business owners, and real estate brokers. The woman of color–led, women-only Vodou gatherings that police interrupted, then, stood out as metonyms for a social order in which female and African social power insistently threw unnatural challenges at the white supremacist patriarchy on which chattel slavery was so precariously, irretrievably based.

Newspaper articles covering these Vodou arrests and ensuing trials suggested another disturbing, titillating element to these all-female gatherings: was *something erotic* part of these ceremonies? The *Daily Crescent* reported in 1860 that police raiding a Vodou ceremony found "six Negro women in a state of perfect nudity, dancing obscenely"; three years later the *Daily Picayune* noted that an officer investigating a suspicious meeting "found about forty naked women—all colored except two—who were dancing the Voudou."[35] High priestess Betsey Toledano, defending her right to religious assembly after her 1850 arrest, testified that "she frequently had meetings of women only, at her house, to go through certain feminine mysteries" and that "there were secrets connected with the society, which it was intended were not for the coarser eyes and ears of the body masculine."[36] What feminine mysteries, and what women's secrets might those have been? Descriptions of Vodou ceremonies as orgies of naked, writhing dancers were commonplace in nineteenth-century newspapers, and recent historians have reacted to these with well-founded outrage. They point out that "naked" might have meant anything less than fully dressed in the nineteenth century; and, more importantly, that reading the ceremonies' dances as hypersexual betrayed a racist misunderstanding of the embodied nature of Vodou worship.[37] I agree with both of these points—but neither means there was *not* anything erotic going on in ceremony. Precisely because Vodou understands the body as divine, practitioners have been known to make use of breaks in ceremony to have a variety of kinds of sex, and certainly many end up in someone else's bed afterward. Why gloss over the possibility that the women dancing naked and sharing the secrets of the female body at New Orleans Vodou ceremonies may have been loving those bodies, too? Then the threats to the social order going on behind these closed doors multiply again, as the police break in to find not only white, black, and of color mixing promiscuously; not only women taking care of each other without patriarchal help; but women finding a kind of pleasure in these comings-together that could only lead them to cry out from demonic ground.

The second question I asked myself, the question I've never, ever finished answering: why do these artists return over and over again to Ezili—not Danbala, not Gede, but always Ezili? I knew easy answers to this question.

One of Vodou's complexities is that though day-to-day practice of this religion is dominated by women and masisi, few of its lwa are feminine spirits. The pantheon of spirits known as Ezili is the richly, expansively, riverinely powerful exception to this rule: Gran Ezili, Ezili Freda, Ezili Danto, Ezili Je Wouj, Ezili Taureau, Lasirenn, and others are immensely influential for all those practitioners who embody and/or desire femininity. Ezili's most prominent paths include Ezili Freda, the luxurious mulatta who loves perfume, music, flowers, sweets, and laughter but always leaves in tears; the fierce protectress Danto; and Lasirenn, a mermaid who swims lakes and rivers where she invites women passersby to join her and initiates them into mystical (erotic?) knowledge.[38] Indeed, no other lwa maps and mirrors queer femininity and womanness in the way Ezili does.

Because of this prominent, unique femininity, Ezili is also, as Colin Dayan notes, the lwa who most often appears in Caribbean literature, and her faces prominently mark work by Haitian women novelists from Marie Chauvet to Edwidge Danticat.[39] In anthropology as well, Elizabeth McAlister claims, "most fieldwork and writing on gender and sexuality in Vodou focuses on the spirit or goddess Èzili."[40] Building on these literary and anthropological writings, key theoretical texts in Caribbean gender studies often take Ezili as their focal point. The most foundational of these is Dayan's "Erzulie: A Women's History of Haiti." Her fiercely insightful, unrelentingly iconoclastic essay argues that the pantheon of Ezili, with their intimate, obscured connections to enslavement and emancipation, offer a more complex way of knowing Haitian womanhood than hegemonic feminism can produce—one that preserves "histories ignored, denigrated, or exoticized" by standard historiography, and "tells a story of women's lives that has not been told."[41] This is a story that complicates feminine sexuality, for "though a woman, Erzulie vacillates between her attraction for the two sexes."[42] And, though artistically, gloriously feminine, Ezili also quite spectacularly explodes gender binaries: "She is not androgynous, for she deliberately encases herself in the trappings of what has been constituted in a social world (especially that of Frenchified elites) as femininity. . . . She takes on the garb of femininity—and even speaks excellent French—in order to confound and discard the culturally defined roles of men and women."[43] Dayan opens academic space—or better, academic demonic ground—to think of Ezili as both sexually and gender queer, but never develops this pos-

sibility. She instead goes on to analyze novels in which the lwa appear in resolutely heterocentric plots. The novels, films, and performances I turn to here enter intertextual conversations with many of these earlier texts—novels, ethnographies, theories—but, rather than keeping the Ezilian sexual creativity they find in the margins, open directly *there*, moving deeper into where other possibilities for gender and sexuality break open in Ezili's arms. And I, in turn, try to follow.

But there was also a less straightforward, more sinuous answer that inspired me as I began this project. In her watershed study *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, Maya Deren writes of Ezili as "that which distinguishes humans from all other forms: their capacity to conceive beyond reality, to desire beyond adequacy, to create beyond need. . . . In her character is reflected all the élan, all the excessive pitch with which the dreams of men soar, when, momentarily, they can shake loose the flat weight, the dreary, reiterative demands of necessity."[44] In other words, Ezili is the lwa who exemplifies imagination. And the work of imagination is, as other scholars have already beautifully stated, a central practice of black feminism—indeed, it remains a black feminist necessity to explicate, develop, and dwell in the demonic grounds of realities other than the secular Western empiricisms that deny black women's importance in knowing, making, and transforming the world. As Saidiya Hartman writes, the deepest, most pathbreaking black feminist scholarship around sex and sexuality may be to imagine new possibilities for black women's bodies, stories, desires: "to imagine what cannot be verified . . . to reckon with the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance."[45] Reaching even more broadly, Grace Hong asserts, "Calling for a black feminist criticism is to do nothing less than to imagine another system of value, one in which black women have value."[46] As a principle of both femininity and imagination, Ezili calls out a submerged epistemology that has *always* imagined that black masisi and madivin as well as black ciswomen *create our own value* through concrete, unruly linkages forged around pleasure, adornment, competition, kinship, denial, illness, shared loss, travel, work, patronage, and material support. So in addition to engaging Ezili to enter conversations with well-known literary and academic texts, I see queer artists turning to her as the figure of a submerged, black feminist epistemology: one that, like their own work, testifies to the important antiracist, antiheteropatriarchal work that

imagination can do, when it creates mirrors in which the impossible becomes possible.

Manman mwen, manman mwen kote ou ye? Nou tande nan dlo. Kote ou ye, manman mwen? *My mother, my mother where are you? We're waiting in the water. Where are you, my mother?* Yes, the Ezili are water. And every summer, to remind themselves of and immerse themselves in the power of this, thousands of her servitors make pilgrimages to bodies of water all over Haiti. During the last week of July, pilgrims pay homage to the patron saint of pilgrimages, St. Philomene—who doubles as the mermaid lwa Lasirenn, known as the Ezili of the waters—at the northern seaside town of Limonade. Not surprisingly, foreign observers register as much shock at what they understand to be the dirtiness of this annual pilgrimage as they do over the region's poor water quality. Wade Davis, in his controversial *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, reports his frank disgust at seeing the invalids who arrive to seek healing and appear to him "the most diseased and wretched display imaginable."[47] In August 2003, ostensibly to reflect on Jean-Bertrand's historic recognition of Vodou as one of Haiti's national religions earlier that year, the BBC published an article about the Plaine-du-Nord and Limonade pilgrimages titled "Voodoo's Spell over Haiti." Reporter Nick Caistor notes that pilgrims arrive in Limonade at dawn to cleanse themselves after visiting the sacred spring and mud baths at Plaine-du-Nord, where the lwa Ogou (syncretized with St. James) is honored, and where a black pig is sacrificed and "thrown into a pool of brown, bubbling mud. Many of the blue and red-robed believers jump into the pond as well."[48] He does not note any echo between this ritual and the events of Bwa Kayiman, but instead encourages another reading of the black pig by citing the disapproval of Catholic priest Adonais Jean-Juste, who complains, "The Bible tells us we are made in the image of God. But these people who bathe in mud are behaving like pigs—they're the animals who like to roll in mud. These voodoo believers need to be made clean by being baptised in Christ."[49]

Those who make this pilgrimage, of course, have a very different understanding of what it means to find springs and seasides full of so much more than just water. Yes, there's something in the water there—and that something is the lwa they've come in search of. Daniel Cosentino explains the mud baths that raised Caistor's eyebrows are understood by servitors as "St. James' own pond, known

as the Trou Sen Jak. Its celestial sludge . . . mark[s] the emergence point for a saint who is a generalissimo of a military family of spirits named Ogou."[50] And though at the sea baths of Limonade which follow the next day, observers like Caistor or Davis might not be able to see anything clouding the waters, the servitors there also experience it infused with invisible power—the power of the invisibles, as lwa are also called in Haiti. Pilgrims bathe in the sea not to be cleansed so they can prepare to meet Lasirenn, no, but so that they can meet, commune with, and become Lasirenn as she exists in those waters: as she penetrates their eyes and mouths, washes in rivulets down their chests, fills the space between their legs, reshapes the skin of their feet, softly, forcefully, and irresistibly.

And the pilgrims know that she's there because as they bathe, Lasirenn mounts—that is, possesses—one after another after another, leaves them temporarily moving, seeing, and speaking as Lasirenn. Just as I believe it's important to take seriously that the Ezili *are* water in its most concrete form, I find it crucial to take seriously that, in moments of possession, these servitors *are* the Ezili of the waters. Because, as Roberto Strongman so beautifully puts it in his description of what it means to witness a possession by Lasirenn, taking this seriously is part of the psychic and corporeal decolonization that Vodou challenges us to undertake: "You have plunged into her watery domain, and as any uninitiated European or North American visitor to a Haitian Vodou ceremony, you find yourself having to reappraise Western notions of selfhood in order to understand the complex interactions between the practitioners and their gods in this religious community. What enables the initiates to go into trance for these deities? . . . And you dive deeper into the waters when you ask yourself, how is the Vodou concept of the body different from your own?"[51] Part of the differing body concept that Strongman references is an understanding that, in moments of possession, not only practitioners' souls but their bodies are activated by Lasirenn. So now regardless of skin color, age, genitalia, or ability, when the servitors enter into trance, their body *is* temporarily that of the lwa.

You might think this means that this seaside full of Lasirenn is now a space of all women, all women who passionately love women, all Lasirenn who passionately love Lasirenn. This is true, but something else is, too. When you are Lasirenn, you are never purely woman. Half fish and half human, Lasirenn is never one, but more: two races—black and white; two sexes—male and female; two sexualities—straight and same-sex loving. Practitioners understand that while her upper body is generous-breasted, her body below the water can by

itself change into either a penis or vagina depending on the lovers she takes, so that everyone s/he makes love to finds whatever, whoever they most desire. This seashore full of Lasirenns, then, is full of bodies that are endlessly gender-mutable, a space where everyone experiences their divine capacity for gender and sexual creativity: that invisible power that, like the lwa herself, is part of the unseen *something* that charges the waters full of seminude, semimermaid bathers. Yes, the water in Haiti is contaminated with things you can't see, and this constricts the lives, bodies, and possibilities of those who live there. And yes, the water in Haiti is full of powers you can't see, and this endlessly expands the lives, bodies, and possibilities of those who immerse themselves there. Lasirenn, Labalen, Chapo m tonbe nan lanmè. M ap fe kares pou Lasirenn, Chapo m tonbe nan lanmè. *Lasirenn, Labalen, my hat falls into the sea. I caress Lasirenn, my hat falls into the sea.*

Mam'zelle Marie, fe chauffez. Mam'zelle Marie, chauffez ça. *Mademoiselle Marie, make it hot. Turn up the heat, feel the power.*[52] Police raids never touched Marie Laveau, who apparently knew very well how to surround herself with political as well as spiritual protection. And this protection served her well despite the fact that so much of her work took place just feet from the center of police intervention, at her house on St. Ann Street. The house was shielded from street gazes by a large front yard with a garden of fruits, vegetables, and flowers—pomegranate and fig trees, banana plants and honeysuckle vines.[53] During the day the yard was full of Marie's biological and adopted children, of female visitors and relatives crossing in and out of her doors, and of Indian women who, in town from the country by the river and the gulf to sell wares at market, slept in her yard and left baskets and vegetables in return.[54] Beyond the endless mix of sounds, smells, and sights in this teeming exterior, Marie received a steady stream of clients of all races, classes, and genders who came for consultations inside her personal altar room. And Friday nights she presided over well-attended ceremonies that often spilled from the altar room into the fenced backyard, where, not surprisingly, voyeurs reported seeing participants dance naked while Marie stood regally clothed, crowned by her signature tignon and glinting gold at her ears and wrists.[55]

C'est l'amour, oui Mam'zelle, c'est l'amour. *This is love, yes girl, this is love.*[56] When Marie moved into this house she shared it with her white cismale lover,

Christophe Glapion, with whom she had seven biological children and informally adopted several "young orphans whom no one else laid claim to," as the *Picayune Guide to New Orleans* put it.[57] Her partnership with Glapion was part of a dual marriage system well known throughout Caribbean societies: propertied white men were given social sanction to form two conjugal households at the same time, one with a legally wed white wife and another with a mistress of color. In New Orleans, the colored lover was often, like Marie, maintained in a house in the French Quarter, where she would doubtless have come into contact with men involved in another kind of conjugal arrangement. This is what one interviewee calls the "uptown marriage," in which "you live with your wife and children uptown and you keep a boy in the Quarter. In the last century the Creoles kept mistresses in the Quarter, and more than one kept a boy—it's a very old custom."[58] No doubt some of these boys were clients who came to Marie for readings, dancers who filled her yard on Friday nights.

Mam'zelle Marie, fe chauffez. Mam'zelle Marie, chauffez ça. After the Civil War, as emancipation led to a Jim Crow hardening of the color line and police tracking Vodou intensified once more, Marie Laveau moved her Friday night ceremonies to Bayou St. John on Lake Pontchartrain. On June 23, she continued to hold the most famous of all New Orleans Vodou ceremonies at this bayou: the midsummer celebration of St. John the Baptist. "Like so much in the life of Marie the Second," as Martha Ward writes, this ceremony "was about water and the flow of spirits . . . history through a woman's body."[59] Marie made a dramatic, watery entrance recounted by Zora Neale Hurston in *Mules and Men*: "Nobody see Marie Laveau for nine days before the feast. But when the great crowd of people at the feast call upon her, 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."[60] There, she ordered a huge fire lit, began dancing, and, at midnight, led followers to bathe in the waters.

C'est l'amour, oui Mam'zelle, c'est l'amour. Veiled suggestions, as well as outright accusations of scandalous sexual practices, surrounded these ceremonies. There were the usual intimations of interracial and group sex: a white woman who lived on Lake Pontchartrain complained, "On St. John's Eve this whole section was looking like a scene in hell. . . . Can you imagine all them people, white and colored, dancing around like devils, and all of them naked as jaybirds?"[61] Demonic grounds and demonic waters, too. Marie was known to consort with sex workers and was accused of running a house of prostitution

at a nearby cottage; "to her influence may be attributed the fall of many a virtuous woman," the *New Orleans Democrat* moralized in her obituary.[62] While men were certainly present at these ceremonies, there were also suggestions that most of the devilish dancing—and other lewd acts—took place among women, since, as one *Times* reporter bemoaned, of the participants "two-thirds were females of the lowest order."[63] Was this, I began to wonder, the night of debaucherous black queer sex on the beach that my husband had been told about in his dreams? Were some of the few men there boys from the Quarter, too? Certainly, the celebrations at Bayou St. John seemed queer in that they offered a promiscuous meeting point for what Cathy Cohen describes as "relationships which have been prohibited, stigmatized, and generally repressed" and that trace "spaces of shared or similar oppression and resistance."[64] Oui mademoiselle, this, *all* this, is love.

But the question that I struggled with by far the longest before I could sit down to write a word of this book, the question I truly feared I'd never find an answer to, was *how* to write about Ezili. I was clear from the beginning that I wanted to write this as a serious, quite literal response to M. Jacqui Alexander's call "to move beyond the more dominant understanding of African spiritual practice as cultural retention and survival, to get inside the meaning of the spiritual as epistemological, that is, to pry open the terms, symbols, and organizational codes that the Bantu-Kongo people used to make sense of the world."[65] But if I wanted to, really wanted to, write of Vodou and Ezili as epistemology, to engage the religion and pantheon not just as subject matter but as a way of knowing that counters Enlightenment rationality, would standard academic discourse—the Enlightenment-inspired literary theory I'd been so well trained to produce—suffice? That was one way of reflecting on Ezili, certainly, but if I mirrored it back as the *only* way, I knew I'd be playing it too safe, refusing to tread the demonic ground I was praising from afar.

At first, I thought I might write each chapter in two voices: one which drew on my training as a priestess to reflect different manifestations of Ezili, and another which drew on my training as a literary critic to elaborate textual readings. In this way, I wanted to present the stories of Ezili as theo-

rizing, but not in the way of a theory applied to a text. Rather, both Ezilian theory and fictional text would occupy the common space of the page in such a way as to interact in your reading, producing meaning somewhere between theorizing and imagining. It sounded like a good idea—at least for a few weeks. But I quickly realized that *two* voices was the wrong number. Vodou epistemology understands that one plus one equals (not two, but) three. And Vodou conceptions of human sentience work with the understanding that we come to konesans (knowledge) through the knowledge of the intellect (which I wanted to index by academic prose) and spirit (which I wanted to index by my explorations of Ezili), yes, but also by that of our ancestors, who continue to live in our cells, psyches, and imaginations. So, adding one and one, I came to the decision that I needed to add a third section to each chapter, one exploring the life and lessons of intellectual, spiritual, and biological ancestors who reflect into Ezili's mirrors.

Interspersing these voices on the page, then, is my gesture toward honoring Vodou's way of knowing the world. My deliberate heaping of disparate things together also honors the logic and aesthetic of an altar to Ezili, where you might find stacked together, say, a statue of the Virgin and Child draped in beads, a family picture, plastic dolls with hand-sewn clothes, rolled Vodou flags in red and blue, and Kongo packets doing work.[66] As Daniel Cosentino describes in his landmark *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, the sections "jostle one another like objects on a Vodou altar. In the manner of disparate votive objects, they are arranged according to an aesthetic first described by Heraclitus two and a half millennia ago, 'a heap of rubble, piled up at random, is the fairest universe'; and refined for our time by Charles Simic, 'You don't make art, you find it. You accept everything as its materials.' "[67] The disjunctures between sections in *Ezili's Mirrors* similarly challenge Enlightenment concepts of order and sense to reach for the other, black Atlantic senses that Alexander points toward. So when fonts change and you read the ruptures, breaks, breakdowns between sections and think, rightly, *this doesn't make sense to me*—please know this is because I'm reaching for that other kind of sense. And while, like Ezili Freda, I dream of perfection . . . I often create most through imperfection. Written in a language of gaps, fissures, and queer assemblage, *Ezili's Mirrors* is a difficult text. And while black women are often discouraged from claiming our right to be difficult, I'm asking you to wade through this recalcitrant disjointedness to bear

witness to the difficulty of piecing together divinity from fragments of black queer life.

In the sea at Limonade, servitors can so easily become water because they already are just that—because 70 percent of their bodies are water, and they're only connecting to what is so ever-present to them. And they can so easily become Ezili, too, because they already are; because like all ancestors she (they understand) is in their genetic code, and when she enters them in trance they're only bringing to the surface one of the many parts that make them who they are. Lwa are not gods. Like Catholic saints or bodhisattvas, they're elevated ancestors: humans who once lived and whose experiences so exemplified a force of nature that they merge with that force after death. As real people whose lives never disappear but are continually available to the living, the Ezili act as what Keith McNeal discusses as "mythistorical archives"—sources of information about the past that "activate the past by accessing a kind of memory not much given to everyday consciousness, at least not explicitly so."[68] Ezilian songs, dances, stories, and spirit possessions form a mythical archive of stories lost to the official record but that servitors not only refuse to forget but in fact bring into their very bodies.

McNeal's work focuses on how Afro-Caribbean Orisha worship and Indo-Caribbean Shakti puja in Trinidad and Tobago record histories of slavery and immigration that "offer imaginative truths in relation to which people make sense and compete over life; apprehend the present, past, and future; work out complex identifications and relations among self and other; legitimate or mystify social relationships and inequities of power; and seek self-transformation or greater forms of collective change."[69] *Ezili's Mirrors* focuses on how Vodou also preserves istwa (stories/histories) like that of woman-loving Danto and gender-shifting Lasirenn, stories of gender and sexual creativity that are also mythistoric records of slavery and revolution. Much immensely powerful work has already explicated how ungendering—particularly defeminization—became a crucial component of the systematic dehumanization strategized under conditions of enslavement. I want to add to this discussion a consideration of how the ongoing, unending development and archiving of creative genders and femininities also enacts resistance to slavery and its aftermath. As Matt Richardson so beautifully puts it, "For Black people to claim gender at all is brave given the

array of violences done physically and epistemologically to strip us from gendered being. However, to claim such an assemblage of creative interpretations of the self is dangerous in its dizzying audacity and flagrant noncompliance with the terms of our dehumanization."[70] And as her servitors sway, turn, and fall into the arms of the lwa, the Ezili are an archive of this dizzying audacity, and a beautiful one.

As I worked through my first reflections on Marie Laveau, I sent my early writing to Manbo Sallie Ann Glassman along with a series of questions that I was puzzling through on the connections between my project and Mam'zelle Marie, and she immediately, very generously responded to each and every question. She explained something of how and why Marie Laveau is becoming a lwa at the turn of the millennium: "She fulfills many of the prerequisites of becoming a lwa: as living memory of the person dies out, some stories are forgotten; some are embellished or maybe made up, or maybe two people's stories get mixed up until an archetypal force emerges. People continue to go to Marie for help, healing, insight, empowerment, guidance. As we struggle to bring balance to forms of leadership—i.e. to balance male-oriented, competitive, top-down, command and control leadership with more feminine modes: bottom up, consensus-driven, collaborative, intuitive—Marie becomes increasingly important."[71] Ms. Glassman made clear to me why the emergence of Marie Laveau as lwa would be important to the people I've been writing about in this introduction, to Cecile Fatima and Romaine la Prophetesse, women and masisi who draw water and pollute it: glinting with gold and crowned with cloth, Mam'zelle comes to push us to imagine what it will be like when Ezili's children—the water carriers and the revolutionaries—lead their own worlds. And in a lighting-flash moment, Ms. Glassman also made clear for me why it is that Marie Laveau has come to be part of this project; and it was, of course, not *at all* for the reasons I had imagined on my own.

What kind of work do you do with Marie Laveau? I asked Ms. Glassman. As part of her answer to this, she told me, "I find her especially empowering to women, who lack confidence or are fearful. Like John the Conqueror, she helps people overcome their perceived limitations."[72] *She helps people overcome their perceived limitations, unlimiting their perceptions.* These people could be a collective, I understood from Ms. Glassman; could be the work of a society shifting

its perceptions around gender and sexuality, or the work of gender and sexually creative communities as they respond to the tremors these shifts engender. Because, as Marie Laveau told Ms. Glassman: "Sexual backlash (against gay marriage, for instance) is part of the healing process. As the world shifts and becomes more tolerant and accepting, the repressive forces act out and get more judgmental than ever. Soon this too will be a thing of the past."[73] The people could also be individuals, female and transfeminine people doing the black feminist work commanded by the Ezili—yes, the work of expanding our imaginations. We are empowered to begin this work as Marie Laveau "helps women especially, overcome emotional enslavement" so that, as Audre Lorde wrote in "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," "we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering, and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like the only alternative in our society. Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within."[74]

And the people could also be me, just me, a black feminist scholar struggling with a second book she felt too small to hold but who was told by a manbo years ago in a reading, "You were born to lead, but you stay behind." Yes, this message was for me, too; Marie Laveau was here, in this imagination and on these pages, because she was telling me to finally, *finally* let go of the limitations I wrapped myself in like a cocoon and realize that even as I doubted that I could find the way and the words to tell these stories, I could. I could, and I must, and I am, and, even where my words and I fall short, I try in the hopes of opening space for those who come after. And so now, I knew: I'm writing this introduction, this book *for the love of Marie Laveau*. For the love of Laveau, love that expands the dark spaces in us like a rain-swollen bayou; pushes the barriers of the world we know like a hurricane unleashed; and heals what has been unloved like the flow of a river. Love that joins Haiti and New Orleans, Ezili and Mam'zelle, demonic and divine, history and istwa de fatra, archives and bodies, women and masisi, my readers and me.

There's another beginning to this book, a story I haven't told yet. My first trip to Haiti, in August 1998, I never went to a Vodou ceremony. But on August 15, the Feast of the Assumption and of Ezili Danto, I did something I've never done before or since. Wandering off from Aux Cayes in midday heat,

I left my wrinkled summer dress on the shore and went swimming naked in a pond, laughing and drawing the women friends I had come with into the water with me. And she didn't claim me then, in daylight, but that night I learned a lesson I never expected from Ezili. Yes, that night when I went to listen to drumming on the beach, something happened that I couldn't explain. All I knew was that it felt like the first time I kissed a woman—like my body was not mine, and my body was made for this. And in the space of a moment, in one movement of my hand, the safe fences that I'd drawn around my research and myself—here is Afro-Caribbean religion as I study it in a book, here is desire as another someone theorized it, here is what I know and here is what I feel—they all collapsed, torrentially, and still I am swirling. Still, there are no words for this and still, I search to learn them.

NOTES

Bridge: Read This Book Like a Song

1. Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Cultural Critique* 6 (spring 1987): 52.
2. Christian, "The Race for Theory," 52, 61.

Introduction: For the Love of Laveau

1. Several spelling variations of this spirit's name are common in English, including Erzulie, Erzuli, and Ezili. For consistency, I have opted to use "Ezili"—the most common spelling in Kreyòl—throughout.
2. Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 221.
3. Lisa Ze Winters citing Brent Hayes Edwards in "Specter, Spectacle and the Imaginative Space: Unfixing the Tragic Mulatta" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2005), 23.
4. Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," in *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1990), 336.
5. Song for Ezili cited by Marie-Jose Alcide Saint-Lot, *Vodou: A Sacred Theatre—the African Heritage in Haiti* (Miami: Educa Vision, 2004), 154–155.
6. Marilyn Houlberg, "Sirens and Snakes: Water Spirits in the Arts of Haitian Vodou," *African Arts* (Spring 1996): 31, 32.
7. See, for example, Ursula Szeles, "Sea Secret Rising: The Lwa Lasirennn in Haitian Vodou," *Journal of Haitian Studies* 17, no. 1 (spring 2011): 193–210.
8. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex That Is Not One* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 209.
9. For these statistics and others relating to Haiti's water supply, see Paul Farmer et al., "Meeting Cholera's Challenge to Haiti and the World: A Joint

Statement on Cholera Prevention and Care," *PLoS Neglected Tropical Diseases* 5, no. 5 (May 31, 2011).

10. Quoted in GreenCOM, "Haitian Urban Sanitation Project Formative Research," USAID, 1996, 6, http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pnacd457.pdf.
11. GreenCOM, "Haitian Urban Sanitation Project Formative Research," 19.
12. Romulo E. Colindres et al., "After the Flood: An Evaluation of In-Home Drinking Water Treatment Combined with Flocculent-Disinfectant Following Tropical Storm Jeanne—Gonaives, Haiti, 2004," *Journal of Water and Health* 5, no. 3 (March 2007): 368.
13. Michel Desse, "Les difficultés de gestion d'un littoral de survie à Haïti: L'exemple du golfe de la Gonave," *Cahiers de Geographie du Québec* 47, no. 130 (April 2003): 79, 72. Translation mine.
14. See Nice Rodriguez, "Throw It to the River," in *Throw It to the River* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1993), 93–101.
15. On this haunted history see "Top Ten Most Haunted New Orleans Locations," Haunted New Orleans Tours, accessed April 30, 2012, http://www.hauntedneworleanstours.com/toptenhaunted/toptenhauntedNewOrleanslocations.
16. Carolyn Morrow Long, *A New Orleans Voudou Priestess: The Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), xxxvii.
17. Sallie Ann Glassman, *Vodou Visions: An Encounter with Divine Mystery* (New York: Villard, 2000), 53. Martha Ward describes this vèvè in *Vodou Queen: The Spirited Lives of Marie Laveau* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 188.
18. Glassman, *Vodou Visions*, 53.
19. Quoted in Claudine Michel, Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, and Marlene Racine-Toussaint, "From the Horses' Mouths: Women's Words/Women's Worlds," in *Haitian Vodou: Spirit, Myth, and Reality*, ed. Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2006), 80.
20. Quoted in Randy P. Conner with David Hatfield Sparks, *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Participation in African-Inspired Traditions in the Americas* (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park, 2004), 96.
21. Marilyn Houlberg, "Magique Marasa: The Ritual Cosmos of Twins and Other Sacred Children," in *The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Daniel J. Cosentino (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 425, n. 27.
22. Quoted in Conner and Sparks, *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions*, 97.
23. Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 48–49.
24. Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law*, 44–45.
25. Brown, *Mama Lola*, 220.
26. George René and Marilyn Houlberg, "My Double Mystic Marriages to Two Goddesses of Love," in *The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Daniel J. Cosentino (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 299.
27. Quoted in Conner and Sparks, *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions*, 60.

28. Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xxv.
29. Jani Scandura, *Down in the Dumps: Place, Modernity, American Depression* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 21.
30. Carolyn Morrow Long gives thorough consideration to which of Laveau's biological daughters might have taken her mother's place and concludes that most likely it was a spiritual, rather than biological daughter. Long, *A New Orleans Voudou Priestess*, 200–205.
31. On the history of Haitian migration to New Orleans, see Shirley Thompson, *Exiles at Home: The Struggle to Become American in Creole New Orleans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 73–74.
32. Ina Johanna Fandrich, "Defiant African Sisterhoods: The Voodoo Arrests of the 1850s and 1860s in New Orleans," in *Fragments of Bone: Neo-African Religions in a New World*, ed. Patrick Bellegarde-Smith (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 187.
33. Cited by Fandrich, "Defiant African Sisterhoods," 192.
34. Cited by Ward, *Vodou Queen*, 135.
35. Cited by Fandrich, "Defiant African Sisterhoods," 197.
36. Cited by Fandrich, "Defiant African Sisterhoods," 194, 195.
37. Ward, *Vodou Queen*, makes the point about nakedness, 142.
38. The color differences between these paths of Ezili—two of her emanations being mulatta, while Ezili Danto is dark skinned—have important implications for how race, class, and gender intersect in Haiti and elsewhere in the Caribbean. Although these divisions of racialized gender are not my focus here (as they are the focus of the film), they would deserve an in-depth look in a wider study of representations of Ezili.
39. On Ezili as the most textualized of lwa, see Joan Dayan, "Erzulie: A Women's History of Haiti," *African Literatures* 25 (1994), 18. On the presence of the lwa in the works of Saint and Gerestant, see Jana Evans Braziel, *Artists, Performers, and Black Masculinity in the Haitian Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 85–142; and on Ana-Maurine Lara's novel *Erzulie's Skirt*, see Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," *GLQ* 14, no. 2/3 (April 2008): 191–215.
40. Elizabeth McAlister, "Love, Sex, and Gender Embodied: The Spirits of Haitian Vodou," in *Love, Sex, and Gender in the World Religions*, ed. Joseph Runzo and Nancy Martin (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 132.
41. Dayan, "Erzulie," 5, 6.
42. Dayan, "Erzulie," 6.
43. Dayan, "Erzulie," 6.
44. Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (1953; reprint, Kingston, NY: Documentext, 1983), 138.
45. Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 26 (June 2008): 12.

46. Grace Hong, "The Ghosts of Transnational American Studies," *American Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (March 2007): 38.
47. Wade Davis, *The Serpent and the Rainbow: A Harvard Scientist's Astonishing Journey into the Secret Societies of Haitian Voodoo, Zombis, and Magic* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), 160.
48. Nick Caistor, "Voodoo's Spell over Haiti," BBC News, August 4, 2003, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/3122303.stm.
49. Caistor, "Voodoo's Spell over Haiti."
50. Daniel Cosentino, "It's All for You, Sen Jak!," in *The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Daniel J. Cosentino (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 243.
51. Roberto Strongman, "Transcorporeality in Haitian Vodou," *Journal of Haitian Studies* 14, no. 2 (2008): 5.
52. This song is cited and translated by Ward, *Vodou Queen*, 140.
53. This description is taken from Ward, *Vodou Queen*, 14.
54. On Laveau's relationship with Native American women, see Ward, *Vodou Queen*, 76–77.
55. See Ward, *Vodou Queen*, 113–115.
56. Cited and translated by Ward, *Vodou Queen*, 142.
57. Cited by Long, *A New Orleans Voudou Priestess*, 53.
58. Anonymous interviewee in Frank Perez and Jeffrey Palmquist, *In Exile: The History and Lore Surrounding New Orleans Gay Culture and Its Oldest Gay Bar* (Hurlford, Scotland: LL Publications, 2012), 107.
59. Ward, *Vodou Queen*, 111.
60. Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), 193.
61. Cited by Ward, *Vodou Queen*, 143.
62. "Marie Lavaux: Death of the Queen of the Voudous," *New Orleans Democrat*, June 18, 1881, available at Wendy Mae Chambers, Voodoo on the Bayou, accessed May 1, 2012, http://www.voodooonthebayou.net/marie_laveau.html.
63. Cited by Ward, *Vodou Queen*, 150.
64. Cathy Cohen, "Bulldaggers, Punks, and Welfare Queens," *GLQ* 3 (1997): 453.
65. M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 293.
66. I take my inspiration for this description from George René's altar to Danto, photographed in René and Houlberg, "My Double Mystic Marriages to Two Goddesses of Love," 293.
67. Daniel Cosentino, "Imagine Heaven," in *The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Daniel J. Cosentino (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 28–29.
68. Keith McNeal, "Pantheons as Mythistorical Archives: Pantheonization and Remodeled Iconographies in Two Southern Caribbean Possession Religions," in *Activating the Past: History and Memory in the Black Atlantic World*, ed. Andrew Apter and Lauren Derby (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), 226.

69. McNeal, "Pantheons as Mythistorical Archives," 188.
70. Matthew Richardson, personal communication, September 13, 2011.
71. Sallie Ann Glassman, personal communication, May 2, 2012.
72. Sallie Ann Glassman, personal communication, May 2, 2012.
73. Sallie Ann Glassman, personal communication, May 2, 2012.
74. Sallie Ann Glassman, personal communication, May 2, 2012; Audre Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (New York: Crossing Press, 1984), 54–55.

Bridge: A Black Cisfemme Is a Beautiful Thing

1. See Caryn Ganz, "The Curious Case of Nicki Minaj," *Out*, September 12, 2010, http://www.out.com/entertainment/music/2010/09/12/curious-case-nicki-minaj.
2. See Oprah Winfrey's interview with Raven-Symoné on the broadcast "Where Are They Now?," YouTube video, October 5, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QXAho8vlmAI.
3. See Cardi B's interview on *The Breakfast Club*, Power 105.1, March 8, 2016. http://www.vh1.com/news/249697/cardi-b-admits-bisexual-dabbles-with-women/.
4. Kanye West, "I Don't Like," on *Cruel Summer* (New York: G.O.O.D. Music, 2012).
5. Cyree Jarelle Johnson, "Femme Privilege Does Not Exist," *Femme Dreamboat* (blog), January 5, 2013, http://femmedreamboat.tumblr.com/post/39734380982/femme-privilege-does-not-exist.
6. Julia Serano, *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive* (New York: Seal, 2013), 62.

Chapter 1: To Transcender Transgender

1. Adia Whitaker, "Ezili," YouTube video, May 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDwN2DNschc.
2. Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (1953; reprint, Kingston, NY: Documentext, 1983): 139, 140.
3. Whitaker, "Ezili." Transcription by author. Ellipses in original.
4. Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 84.
5. Keeling, *The Witch's Flight*, 9.
6. Keeling, *The Witch's Flight*, 143–144.
7. Quoted in Dora Silva Santana, "Trans-Atlantic Re-turnings: A Trans/Black/Diasporic/Feminist Auto-account of a Black Trans Brazilian Woman's Transitioning" (master's thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 2015), 30.
8. See Santana, "Trans-Atlantic Re-turnings," 29–36.
9. Quoted in Ulrika Dahl, *Femmes of Power* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2009), 45.
10. This performance appears in Gabriel Baur's film *Venus Boyz* (Onix Films, 1998).
11. Dréd cited in Ifalade TaShia Asanti, ed., *Tapestries of Faith: Black SGLBT Stories of Faith, Love, & Family* (Long Beach, CA: Glover Lane, 2011), 34.