Celucien L. Joseph & Nixon S. Cleophat (eds.)

_Vodou in Haitian Memory: The Idea and Representation of Vodou in Haitian Imagination._ Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2016. xx + 228 pp. (Cloth US$ 90.00)

Celucien L. Joseph & Nixon S. Cleophat (eds.)

_Vodou in the Haitian Experience: A Black Atlantic Perspective._ Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2016. xii + 276 pp. (Cloth US$ 95.00)

Despite the heterogeneity of topics in these two volumes, Celucien Joseph, Nixon Cleophat, and their contributors have mindfully nurtured a specific approach that asserts Vodou as exemplary of an ethos of liberation theology (_Vodou in Haitian Memory_) and that privileges a comparativist methodology (_Vodou in the Haitian Experience_). Most excitingly, they illustrate two essential facts: first, that any erudition of Haitian studies must include an understanding of the polyvalent “uses” of Vodou by scholars and politicians; and second, that the emerging voices of Haitian and Vodou studies are giving new meanings to Haitian scholarship of the past decades, incorporating contributions from researchers working in Haiti, Québec, Europe, and the United States. As such, the volumes confirm that Vodou studies are a vital part of the academe. That said, the expansion of Vodou studies does not come without its perils. These two books then find themselves at the precise intersection of what Claudine Michel names the “Kalfou Danje”—“dangerous crossroads,” at once accepted by, and adapted by the academy.¹

Taken together, the two books contribute to a common intellectual project. Joseph is assistant professor of English at Indian River State College, and a prolific scholar of Haitian intellectual thought who has published extensively on _longue durée_ approaches to understanding Haitian political philosophy and religion. Cleophat studied at the Harvard Divinity School, where Professor Jacob K. Olupona has been instrumental in creating academic dialogue among and between religious traditions in Africa and the Americas; Cleophat is now assistant professor of Religious Studies at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Both of them stress the importance of understanding Vodou as a thought system as much as a religious practice. For example, in his article on Jean Price-Mars, in line with new scholarship by Jhon Picard Byron, Joseph argues that it is time for scholars to stop thinking of Price-Mars as a proponent of Vodou, and to

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see him rather as a philosopher of religion: And Cleophat explains how a Vodou perspective on life, shared by the majority of the Haitian population, represents a liberation theology avant la lettre, one that predates Central and Latin American iterations of liberation theology by a century and a half. Their argument is to consider Vodou as a form of “secular humanism,” a phrase that appears in the title of Joseph’s forthcoming book about Haitian early-twentieth-century writer Jacques Roumain, which itself corresponds to the new turn in the humanities toward a postsecular renewed interest in spiritual practices as a means to navigate the fractured geographies of our present-day not-so-humanistic realities.

*Vodou in Haitian Memory* includes essays by Joseph and Cleophat as well as a series of others that look at the way specific stakeholders in Haitian society and within the societies in which the Haitian Dyaspora exercises its influence (notably Canadian and U.S.-American) have deployed or currently put the term “Vodou” to work. The stakeholders in question include activist-intellectuals—both advocates of Vodou, but also its most staunch critics—as well as individuals who are not usually recognized as intellectuals, notably Haitian “women merchants” (p. 180) and “evangelical Haitian Christians” (p. 113). Essays are also devoted to Catherine Flon, the “Haitian nurse, military strategist, and heroine [who] sewed the first flag of Haiti” (p. 26); four members from two generations of the Holly family (1829-to possibly the mid-1900s); Jacques Stephen Alexis (1922–61); Dantès Bellegarde (1877–1966); Jean-Price Mars (1876–1969); Edwidge Danticat; and Myriam Chancy. Notable is the leading essay by Brandon R. Byrd, which traces the changing value assigned to Vodou by members of the Holly family: James Theodore Holly was born “in Washington, D.C. in 1829, the freeborn son of a shoemaker [who] became a leading black nationalist and emigrationist during the 1850s” and moved “his family to Haiti in May 1861 from a ship that set sail from New Haven. [...] Despite the deaths of his mother, wife, daughter, and an infant son,” Holly stood steadfast in his belief that emigration to Haiti was the most “noble cause” (p. 8). The article traces his descendants’ efforts to provide the international press with nonexoticist images of Haiti, examining the work and writings of James Theodore’s sons Alonzo Potter Holly and Theodore Faustin Holly in the late 1880s, and the younger son Arthur Holly in the late 1920s. Anne Brüske and Wiebke Beushausen’s article offers an interesting analysis of the way that the words “aesthetics” and “poetics” contribute (and fail to contribute) to a better understanding of the role of Vodou in Chancy’s and Danticat’s novels. Myriam Moïse’s article offers a compelling analysis of “self-assertion through bodily doubleness” in Danticat’s fiction (p. 132). Also of interest is Schallum Pierre’s analysis of Alexis through the prism of “care” as an ethical practice (p. 53).
The first of *Vodou in the Haitian Experience*’s two parts deals with the arts, including performance and dress, and features four excellent articles. Ann E. Mazzocca addresses the relationship between physical trees and the musical and performative practice around *Mizik Rasin* and its vital role in articulating relationships among several *lakou* in the Artibonite Valley in Haiti and musical communities as well as a *lakou* in Brooklyn. Kantara Souffrant’s stunning article on *Dyasporic* performative practices of Vodou—which focuses notably on Gina Athena Ulysse’s, Rejin Leys’s, and Kantara’s own artistic practice—establishes the importance of young second- and third-generation Haitians in North America in nurturing the renewal and transformation of Vodou practice as a means for dealing with their own vexed family histories. It also asserts Vodou aesthetics as an important voice in contemporary performative practice in the Americas. In examining the 1995 play titled *Seven Guitars*, Barbara Brewster Lewis pays homage to August Wilson’s unprecedented success on Broadway, tracing his achievements back to his childhood and particularly the role that the Little Haiti community in Pittsburgh played in his larger artistic œuvre as a playwright. Charlotte Hammond’s brilliant work on the role of dress (how clothing was worn by colonial actors in Saint-Domingue, notably colonial wives, mistresses, and slaves) draws on archival documents and oral history, arguing that the agents of fashion in Saint-Domingue were not any one group of people, but the tensions between all the actors of an extremely dynamic, but also volatile society.

The second part of *Vodou in the Haitian Experience* employs a comparative methodology to study Haitian Vodou alongside other religions. It recalls the work of scholars such as Réginald O. Crosley and Susan Buck Morss, placing Haitian Vodou in dialogue with West African “Vodun” (both colonial and present-day), histories and spiritual practices of the Ancient Nile Valley, Arabian religions and Islam in the 600s and 700s, Emersonian Transcendentalism of the mid-nineteenth century, and mid-twentieth-century Louisianan herbal healing. In its own way, each article deals with the extremely difficult issue of using the Cartesian form of an academic peer-reviewed article to articulate truth systems that do not emerge directly from Europe. In particular, Bronwyn Mills’s informative article on the relationship among Fon, Dahomean, and colonial history struggles to make sense of three archives: oral histories that she has herself collected; the problematic scholarship generated by Melville Herskovits or Wade Davis; and the very ethic of *konesans*. Similarly, Benjamin Hebblethwaite and Michel Weber inscribe Vodou into a methodology of the “comparision of world religions” (p. 209), admitting both the viability and the problems encountered when conducting such a methodological exercise. Finally, in line with efforts to work through the thorny ontological territories
prescribed by the words “aesthetics,” “ethics,” “pedagogy,” and “poetics,” Patrick Delices, Patricia Marie-Emmanuelle Donatien, and Mambo Vye Zo Komande La Menfo DaGinen (Patricia D. Scheu) offer their own contributions to what it means to explain to a European and North American academy—one that takes a Judeo-Christian weltanschauung for granted—what it means to “reason” using Vodou-informed intellectualisms.

The series out of which these two volumes emerge, under the leadership of Valerie Orlando and Lindsey Porambo, takes the risk of publishing what is literally to come. The scholarship asserts an era in which more and more non-Haitian scholars are learning Kreyòl, and more (even if not enough) works are being translated into English from French and Kreyòl, and from English into French and Kreyòl. This fact of course does not resolve the perils of Michel's warning that Haitian studies finds itself at a Kalfou Danje, but it does show that attempts are being made, in Michel's words, to “think about Haiti from multiple perspectives [...] reverting the gaze and, more generally speaking, demanding that researchers and journalists engage Haiti more ethically and with respect for their subject” (p. 205).

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