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).