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The Sacred Music and Dance of Haitian Vodou from Temple to Stage and the Ethics of Representation

by
Lois Wilcken

“What is true and at the same time quite remarkable about the Vodou,” wrote Moreau de Saint-Méry (1958 [1797]: 68, my translation), “is the kind of force that induces those present to dance to insensibility. . . . Without doubt in order to calm the fears that this mysterious cult inspires in the colony, [the blacks] pretend to dance it in public, to the sound of the drums and the clapping of hands. . . . But I guarantee that it is all the more a calculated move to escape the vigilance of the authorities and even more to ensure the success of the secret meetings.” Moreau’s eyewitness tableaux describe both Vodou and its first public representations in the Americas. The struggle that was about to explode in revolution and the situation of the sacred in that struggle are implicit in such phrases as “calm the fears,” “vigilance of the authorities,” and “secret meetings.” Knowing that Vodou troubled the tranquility of those in power, the faithful raised representational smoke screens in public arenas. Since Moreau’s time, outsiders have also represented Vodou in literature, theater, film, and scholarship, for the most part denying Vodouists the opportunity and the capacity to contest those representations. What are the moral and political meanings and consequences of this denial? How must we address them?

I do not claim that my essay will answer these questions, but I am in a good enough position to explore them. I have lived with Vodou and its theatrical representations for nearly 24 years. Since 1983 I have managed a folklore company that performs out of a Haitian immigrant base in New York City. I completed a program in ethnomusicology with a doctoral dissertation on staged representations of Vodou music and dance in 1991, and in 1998, after

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18 years in the field, I joined the ranks of Vodou initiates. Along this tortuous route, curved with the dialectics of participant-observation, the quiet specter of ethics has appeared again and again—a bit like a Vodou spirit long overdue for a party.

I begin with a brief tour of Haitian Vodou. Our tour is part descriptive, part subjective, and it devotes some attention to the theatrical and dramatic elements of the tradition. We then follow the trajectory of Vodou's representation from Moreau's day to the present. It is my fervent wish that these minijourneys will on their own make an irresistible argument for an ethics of representation.

THE SACRED MUSIC AND DANCE OF HAITIAN VODOU

Before walking through Haitian Vodou, let us pause to remind ourselves that the social sciences can no longer regard any culture as homogeneous, circumscribed, and consistent. The Vodou I describe lives in the motley neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince and New York City at the turn of this century. The details of its unfolding practice may differ from those of the central plains or the southern peninsula or Miami's Little Haiti—or Melville Herskovits. For the sake of discussion I describe the general patterns I observe in the houses I haunt.

Vodou life revolves around the dance. Specialists also conduct private card readings and luck baths, but the dance is the time and the place for a community to get down with the spirits. An all-night affair, the dance draws a day of preparatory work to a festive close. Preparatory work means animal sacrifice, tracing magic diagrams on the floor of the temple, and dressing the altar. When the guests arrive, they seat themselves on the perimeter of the temple space, which also accommodates an altar at one end of the room and the drum ensemble. Members of the society (the initiated followers of the officiating priest) use the floor space for a variety of ritual activities. A *poto mitan*, or center post, orients activity, but many of the crowded basements to which Vodou is confined in the diaspora do without one. With or without it, music and dance rank so high on the list of activities that Vodouists call the nocturnal feast *dans* (dance).

Vodouists pattern the dance as a series of greetings to spirit nations. We can trace most nations to places or linguistic groups from Africa, with concentrations around the Gulf of Guinea and the Congo River Basin. Rada, Djouba, Nago, Ibo, Kongo, Petwo, and Gede are all names of nations. Dances in Port-au-Prince and New York City—it seems that Port-au-Prince is home

to a great number of Haitian immigrants in New York—follow a ritual order, or *regleman*, that begins with the nation called Rada, undoubtedly a corruption of Arada, a people from the slave coast (Bight of Benin). Moreau noted a clustering of Aradas in the West of the colony, and the West includes Port-au-Prince. This might explain the leading position of the Rada nation in the Port-au-Prince *regleman*, but I would add that Rada rites make a fine overture because they open with the cosmic spirits, among them Ountò, the grand drummer.

Maya Deren, dancer and filmmaker and author of *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, called Vodou dance “the meditation of the body” (1983 [1953]: 240). Generally, two slow beats of the drum ensemble pattern embrace one dance pattern. The details of the movement characterize a spirit nation. The dance *yanvalou*, for example, mimics the movement of a serpent. The dance that Moreau attributed to the Aradas focused entirely on a sacred serpent and even used a live snake in its “secret meetings.” Today’s Vodou rarely uses the live snake, but the spirit Danbala, whose songs and visual imagery refer to the serpent, remains the centerpiece of rites for the Rada nation. A circular movement that entails contraction of the solar plexis, undulation through the spine, and release of the chest (Dunham, 1983 [1947]: 61) defines *yanvalou*. This liquid movement works for other Rada spirits, who share Danbala’s affinity for water and air. As for Deren’s “meditation of the body,” movement focuses the dancer’s body and soul on the spirit to whom the congregation sings at the moment.

The call-and-response structure of Vodou song stresses collective and recollective needs. A soloist “sends” (*voye*) the song, and a chorus “answers” (*reponn*) with either the same melody and text or an abbreviated version of it. The participatory nature of singing prescribes economy of song structure: concise phrases within a relatively narrow range. Songs are in Haitian Kreyol, with a generous salting of Fongbe, Yoruba, Kikongo, and other keepsakes of Vodou’s African ancestry.

Vodou drumming provides fuel for the dance and guides participants in their movement. Dancers derive their energy from the pronounced beat of the drums, a slow pulse that highlights key words in the song text. The spice of Afro-Haitian rhythm is the simultaneous or successive subdivision of a slow pulse by two and three, a technique that effects cross rhythms and offbeat phrasing. Each Vodou rhythm generates a kind of “antirhythm” called a *kase*, meaning “break.” During the course of Vodou rites, the master drummer, acting either on his own assessment of the psychic forces present in the temple or on a signal by the presiding priest, launches a pattern that opposes the main one, suddenly turning upstream against a downstream current. Vodou

drummers use various tonal and temporal techniques to create opposition. The form of the *kase* opposes that of the main pattern, and it often destabilizes the dancer, leading to possession.

Vodouists ground spirit possession in a complex theory of the soul, and I must point out that theoretical variance within the Vodou camp partly accounts for the complexity. Generally, we distinguish between the unique spirit with us from birth and the universal spirits, or *lwa*. Generally, my associates know that the *lwa* reside not *anba dlo* (beneath the sea) or *nan Ginen* (in Africa)—both recognizably metaphorical—but rather in the psyche. The widespread practice of *lave tèt*, or head washing, realizes the residency of a *lwa* within a person's head. The master of the head, or *mèt tèt*, may share the psychic space with other spirits. A spirit housed in a person's psyche may speak to the person during sleep by way of dreams, but that same spirit manifests itself publicly during the dance, when forces set up by drumming, movement, song, and the display of visual imagery rouse him to dance in the head, submerging his host's consciousness during the period of possession. The behavior of Vodou spirits identifies them to the congregation. They greet the faithful and, according to their capacities, eat, drink, sing, dance, comment, counsel—in brief, perform.

The Vodou dance is readily compared with theater and drama, and more than one scholar has been tempted to do so (Alcide, 1988; Anderson, 1982; Clark, 1983; Fouché, 1976; Lapiere, 2001; Louis-Jean, 1970; Schmiderer, 1990). Marie-José Alcide has elaborated on the relationships between acting and spirit possession. The possessed use gesture, facial expression, vocalization, and props and costuming to project the character of a *lwa*. Even players who are not possessed perform, for example, the priest in her protagonist role. Theatrical elements include salutatory gestures, the pouring of libations, and interaction of the possessed with the society. The Vodou chorus recalls the ancient Greek chorus, and the text it carries reveals the dynamics of spirit-human relationships. Vodou drumming, always intense, heightens the sense of drama and partners with dance to “reproduce the character and actions of the Gods” (Alcide, 1988: 98). Finally, the sacred space itself is a theater: a peristyle with altar, center post, and elaborate decor. On the wings of these thespian elements, Vodou transfers its magic from temple to stage.

FROM TEMPLE TO STAGE

The modern staging of Vodou music and dance is a recent development in more than 200 years of representation, primarily in literature and scholarship. Because ethical issues that entail identities constructed partly from

elements of the sacred have developed across representational modes, I offer a historical sketch. A complete account would exceed the range of this article, so I have selected from among the salient historical developments and reserve elaboration for my experiences with a Haitian performing group.

The earliest accounts of Vodou appear in the writings of missionaries, travelers, and historians. The volume of Moreau de Saint-Méry, cited earlier, along with his essay "De la Danse," published in Parma in 1789, provide exceptionally rich descriptions of Vodou music and dance. Moreau reveals himself as a dance aficionado, and the reader might imagine him stepping lightly to the measures of "le menuet Congo" (1969 [1789]: 54). Nonetheless, a racist perspective that foreshadows social Darwinism colors such accounts of the slaves' dances as the following: "This dancing in the round, clapping of hands, antiphonal song, raucous instruments, all attest to the antiquity of this dance which, as I have said, comes from Africa, where its characteristics are widespread, even among the Hottentots" (58, my translation). Moreau uses the phrases "horrible contortions" and "a sort of epilepsy" to describe the incipient dance *petwo* (59) and the word "monotonous" to characterize African drumming, despite its intricacies (57). These pejorative images imply an assumption of black racial inferiority.

Nascent Afro-Haitian rites claimed a role in one of the most dramatic and pivotal events of Atlantic history, and its subsequent interpretations forcefully illustrate how racist assumptions configure both history and national identity. In August 1791, following weeks and perhaps months of groundwork, a general insurrection of slaves shook the northern plains around the vital port city Cap Français. A story about preparatory African rites has taken its place as an essential part of the narrative, although historians debate its timing, its import, and even its authenticity.¹ We know the rites as the ceremony of Bwa Kayiman (alternatively, the French "Bois Caïman"), named after their purported site, a wooded area of a northern plantation. Most versions of the Bwa Kayiman story date the ceremony August 14, but some suggest a date closer to the first armed revolts on August 22. All name Boukman, a plantation foreman, as officiant. Some versions include an unnamed female priest, the sacrifice of a swine, a blood pact, Boukman's invocation of an African deity, and the distribution of *wanga* or *gad* (spiritual tools of offense or defense, talismans). The tellers' interests and their positions on the validity of oral history (Julien, 1991; Geggus, 2000) determine their representations of the Bwa Kayiman dance.

The sacred ceremony of Bwa Kayiman as a tool in the construction of Haitian national identity merits the attention of scholars. Its parade of representations through time carries a key to the formation of that identity. Predictably, early reports by the colonists used the ceremony to paint the black

revolutionaries as primitive practitioners of lurid sacrificial blood pacts. Thus characterized, the revolutionaries could be tagged cowards even as they sacrificed their lives (Dalmas, 1814 [1793–1794]: 117–119). Gauthier (2000: 21) and Trouillot (1995: 90–95) both note the effort on the part of whites to explain the insurrections as manipulations of the slaves by competing interests, and Trouillot interprets this denial of slave agency in terms of an ontology, rooted in the European Renaissance, that failed to see Africans as fully human (70–107). This is germane to the study of Haitian national identity because the men who came into power in the tumultuous years following independence were the mixed-blood offspring of white planters.

As had their white Christian fathers before them, the new elites of the newly independent nation cloaked their fear of the masses in a loathing for black spirituality, and they gradually cultivated an amnesia regarding Bwa Kayiman and any role of the black underclass in the revolution. Elites identified an armed revolt in 1790 by Vincent Ogé and Jean-Baptiste Chavannes—two of their own—as the beginning of the revolution. But the mutiny of Ogé and Chavannes cannot mark the beginning of a revolution, since, according to their own words, what they were seeking was not change in the condition of the majority class—the slaves—but full rights for themselves as citizens of France.² By the late 1830s *L'Union*, the newspaper of the descendants of Ogé and Chavannes, had clearly dismissed the black uprising of August 1791 and its preparatory rites as part of the revolutionary narrative. Christianity, not Vodou, would be the spiritual dimension of Haitian identity.

Nonetheless, factions among the intellectual class continued to ply Vodou in the distillation of that identity when it suited their purposes. When the ruling class agreed to compensate former French colonists for losses incurred during the revolution, certain large- and medium-sized landowners organized a liberal opposition with a nationalist orientation. Young liberal writers argued for a nativist literature. The short-story writer Ignace Nau experimented with Kreyol, and in his *Isalina ou Une scène créole* he described a Vodou dance. The fascinating scene is cut off when his hero, Paul, who has just broken a spell that his rival cast over his beloved Isalina, takes Isalina home for fear that this “orgy” will overcome her (Nau, 2000 [ca. 1836]: 67). Paul’s behavior illustrates that of generations of privileged Haitians who championed the culture of the oppressed, as exemplified by Vodou, while maintaining a safe distance. Likewise, when liberal success inspired poor cultivators to rise up in 1844, the new liberal government deflated their movement through a policy of deception. The cultivators’ central demand was access to literacy, a tool that would have given them the power to represent themselves.

Racist and sensational depictions of Vodou from abroad, at first in literature and then in film, stimulated Haiti's intellectuals to come increasingly to its defense, because these depictions soiled the entire national image. In 1884, Sir Spenser St.-John, a retired British diplomat, told the infamous story of the *affaire de Bizoton* in his memoirs. A group of eight had been executed in Port-au-Prince in 1864 for the crime of cannibalism, but rather than characterize this as the crime it was, he cast the episode as evidence of Haitian savagery and superstition—the stuff of Vodou. The Haitian lawyer and diplomat Hannibal Price composed a rebuttal to St.-John that friends and family published in 1900, seven years after his death. *On the Rehabilitation of the Black Race by the Republic of Haiti* (my English rendition of the title) argues that France and Africa both contributed to the evolution of superstition in Haiti and that charlatans, to increase their clientele, had duped enthusiasts of the Vodou dance. In his rush to defense, Price said nothing of Vodou theology and wasted the opportunity to have Vodouists respond to St.-John in their own words.

The United States's invasion and 19-year occupation of Haiti (1915–1934) criminalized Vodou and exploited it as a means of rationalizing the occupation. Any marine or journalist with a flair for writing could produce a potboiler about “voodoo,” with special attention to the *zonbi*, the soulless body of Haitian legend. The *zonbi* took center stage in William Seabrook's *The Magic Island* (1989 [1929]), and the book inspired the film *The White Zombie*, directed by Victor Halperin and released in 1932 with Bela Lugosi in the lead role. The plot of *The White Zombie* bears a message that has been repeated in the dozens of voodoo-zombie films succeeding it: Haiti needs white North Americans to solve the problems caused by its own ignorance and superstition. Needless to say, the films use little or no input from ordinary Haitians.

This intensified misrepresentation of Haiti and its sacred traditions spirals into punch and counterpunch, usually with Vodouists lost in between blows. During the occupation, Haitian intellectuals rallied around Jean Price-Mars, a physician who produced *Ainsi parla l'oncle* (1973 [1928]), an ethnography of the nation's masses that introduced to Haiti the notion of “folklore,” valorized Vodou, and appealed to writers and musicians to incorporate the elements of Haitian folklore into their work. The neonativist movement thus spawned matured rapidly into black nationalism, called *noirisme* or *négritude*. The generation that followed Price-Mars included upwardly mobile black youth, and one of their own took the presidency in a 1946 coup d'état. Inspired partly by its success, partly by the dream of attracting tourists, and partly by developments in black and Latin nations emerging from

colonialism, the new regime built a national theater to house national performing groups and established La Troupe Folklorique Nationale.

The people who shaped the style and repertory of the national folkloric company, artists and intellectuals of privilege, set Afro-Haitian music and dance patterns—culled largely from Vodou but also from Carnival and other more secular activities—in a European dance framework. They called the creative unit “choreography,” an eighteenth-century French term for the composition of dances for ballet. The choreography uses floor patterns that are at home on the proscenium stage. In the Vodou temple, the demands of ritual and the unpredictable words and acts of spirits shape activity; on stage, the choreographer predetermines action. On stage, the dynamic engagement of the drummer, as inspired by the great spirit Ountò, shrinks to accompaniment. On stage, the *kase*, the antirhythm associated in the temple with possession, serves choreography as a structural device. While folklore, the name used since the 1940s for the staged representation of Afro-Haitian music and dance, draws more extensively from popular forms than any other performing-arts style in Haiti, it fits these forms into frames foreign to their popular contexts—but not so foreign to privileged actors.

Where are the people in this picture? The Haitian masses have long constituted the head, the heart, and the spinal column of Vodou, with a smattering of the upper classes at the extremities. Now that a *noiriste* government has elevated Vodou to the status of national symbol, where are the people? Vodouists did serve the folklore movement from the start—as ethnologists’ informants during the necessary research stage, as singers and dancers recruited from the temples to add a dash of authenticity, and, not least, as drummers, also recruited from the temples, because no one knew how to put together a score of Vodou drumming. For the folk artists who found employment in the companies that mushroomed all over Port-au-Prince during the 1950s, this was not a bad thing, but no one was calling on them to fill decision-making positions in the companies.

The vagaries of the Duvalier dictatorship unwittingly altered these relations. At first, most company directors fled Haiti and regrouped artists in the diaspora. Then, in the late 1970s, a revival of tourism created a new demand: the voodoo show. Destitute community groups found ways to entice tourists to their temples, where they charged a fee to see “the real thing,” but Anderson characterized these representations as “floundering between chaos and control,” with possessions that were “wild parodies” and a breakdown of authority due to “confused confrontation with the boundaries of reality” (1982: 110). During this same period, a group of teenagers living in an impoverished but Vodou-rich community of Port-au-Prince were experimenting with their

own blend of folklore and the voodoo show. They named their company after the eighteenth-century magician and revolutionary Makandal. La Troupe Makandal built a repertory featuring magic and daring, an ethos not foreign to the Petwo, or Congolese, side of Vodou. The company used its magic to secure visas to New York in 1981.

Driven by the excesses of the Duvalier regime and the blunting of hope by the Reagan victory, the Haitian migration to New York was a bouillon boiling over in the early 1980s. What started as the flight of light-skinned elites from a corrupted black nationalism in the 1960s progressed to the chain migration of middle-class families to New York through the 1970s and on to more creative forms of migration by the underclasses in the 1980s. Makandal came out of a struggling community. Two local men who belonged to Duvalier's paramilitary organization, nicknamed *tonton makout*, used the young artists to give authenticity to a sham company they had organized for bogus performances in New York. Each member of the sham group paid the two men to secure visas for them. The two men used part of the money thus raised to forge papers and pay off officials. The real Makandal artists earned free passage to New York. At the time, folklore companies commonly served as vehicles for this type of scheme.³ I want to emphasize that this particular experience of migration was fraught with risk and anxiety, and one wrong word could lose a visa, yet the poor and working-class neighborhoods of central Brooklyn swelled with these latter-day Maroons.

Makandal migrated into a cultural scene that had evolved throughout the 1970s with the establishment of an entertainment type called the *spektak* (spectacle). Modeled on festivals back home that presented commercial dance bands, the *spektak* that played to Haitian immigrant communities in Brooklyn and Queens (New York City), East Orange (New Jersey), and various towns in Rockland County (New York State) developed into a variety show that included comedians and folklore troupes along with the popular *konpa* bands. The late Firmin Joseph, a newspaper editor and entrepreneur who deserved credit for developing the *spektak*, told me in 1983 that the folklore group satisfied the community's "nostalgia [for] Haiti" but that it was not strong enough to headline a show. He did add, however, in the style of the *noiriste* I knew him to be,⁴ that folklore possessed the unique capacity to satisfy second-generation Haitians' need for an identity they could call their own (Firmin Joseph, interview, Brooklyn, NY, July 1983). A review of an early Makandal performance that Joseph published in his newspaper (*La Nouvelle Haiti Tribune*, June 2, 1982, my translation) elaborated on this idea:

Perpetuating the essence and the highest expression of the popular culture has always been a drama for emigré artists—above all, in an environment where it is easy to lose one's identity, to become alienated in a materialistic civilization where the sacred gesture has no place and where the dance is only a caricature of mechanistic society. La Troupe Makandal aims for victory in the struggle for the perpetuation of Haitian authenticity. Success born of resistance.

Joseph had premiered Makandal at a Thanksgiving weekend *spektak* at Brooklyn College a month after the group's arrival in New York in October 1981.

Other folklore artists had preceded Makandal in the migration, but the new group distinguished itself by its raw energy and its stress on magic. The group had named itself after a notorious Maroon whom the colonists of the 1750s had executed for terrorizing inhabitants of the northern plains with poison. The Makandal artists were all native to Upper Belair, a community in Port-au-Prince that had evolved out of slave quarters known for harboring Maroons (Laguette, 1976: 30). Vodouists recognize Belair for its accent on Petwo rites, associated with magic and aggression.⁵ The artists were born and raised during the ruthless years of the Duvalier dictatorship, and they grew up in Vodou. These factors shaped the troupe's repertory and set it apart from its predecessors in New York, whose directors—Jean Léon Destiné, Arnold Elie, Paulette St. Lot, André Germain, and Louinès Louinis—had defined their style before Duvalier and during the height of tourism. In brief, the earlier generation produced a repertory polished for tourists seeking a romanticized image of the folk. Generally these directors came from middle-class or upper-class families, and with the exception of Arnold Elie, none was initiated. In the fall of 1981 Makandal danced and drummed its way onto their scene.

Notwithstanding praise for the group's authenticity, social and economic forces slowly altered Makandal's singular style of representation. The older generation of directors had succeeded in reinterpreting a repertory designed for tourists in Haiti for the consumption of their compatriots in New York. Both upwardly mobile middle-class Haitian immigrants (those who could afford admission to the festivals) and foreign tourists identify themselves as modern but maintain a fascination with our wild and "primitive" past. Makandal's daring, mind-over-matter dances (handling of fire, piercing of skin, risqué movement) exploited this at a new level, reminding the Haitian public of the inexplicable and subversive elements of their culture. The obvious thrill felt by some in the audiences disturbed others, including directors and presenters, who encouraged the group to tailor its act in conformity with a tamer Haitian identity. At the same time, financial pressures drove three artists to jobs that removed them from the group, and one artist died. Less than

two years after Makandal's debut at Brooklyn College, more seasoned New York artists had replaced half the company.

The space created for folklore companies in festivals for the immigrant community gradually closed throughout the 1980s. In 1990 I surveyed back issues of the Brooklyn newspaper *Haiti Observateur* for mentions of folklore groups in festival advertising around the winter holidays and the Easter and Mother's Day holidays—high times for the *spektak*. The survey showed that folkloric appearances in festivals had numbered 16 in 1979 but dwindled to 3 in 1990. Eleven groups were named in 1979, only two in 1990 (Wilcken, 1991: 266–267). The sudden death of Firmin Joseph in September 1983 facilitated the change. In Joseph's generation folklore expressed *noiriste* values, but a new generation of entrepreneurs either did not share those values or searched for newer approaches to expressing them. Following the astonishing exit from Haiti of Baby Doc Duvalier in February 1986, a new style of commercial dance band music called *mizik rasin*, or roots music, captured the hearts of the same second-generation Haitians whom Joseph had hoped to satisfy with folklore.

The drama of the “émigré artist” and the “sacred gesture” in a population now spilling into North America displays to the analyst an intricate and perpetually evolving panorama of identity—or, more accurately, identities. Carole Charles, a Haitian sociologist living in New York, describes and explains the display of multiple, fluid identities as strategies Haitian immigrants employ for the enhancement of social mobility, status, and/or political power (1992: 101–123). This extremely welcome and fecund analysis of fluidity, an outcome of migration studies from a transnational perspective, needs to incorporate spiritual affiliation or inclination as a constituent of identity. Elizabeth McAlister does this in her study of Rara, a traditional Lenten festival with a strong Vodou dimension that some Haitians have recontextualized in New York City parks. Building on Charles's work, McAlister argues that Haitian immigrants in Brooklyn who perform Rara adapt the accouterments of the Haitian peasant to “express solidarity with other Black groups while nevertheless maintaining and privileging their Haitianess” (2002: 203). The Brooklyn Rara bands, in dialogue with the *rasin* movement in Haiti, recast the sacred gesture for a new generation.

In further testimony to the vagaries of identity in migration, links between Haitians and other New Yorkers with an interest in the sacred opened new venues for Makandal just as the old ones were closing. Makandal had come under the direction of the master drummer Frisner Augustin, a Vodouist resident in New York since 1972. Eager to promote his culture and make a living from it at the same time and knowing that an occasional performance in a *spektak* was not going to support such a goal, Augustin had forged a network

of relationships beyond his ethnic community. I, a graduate student with ties to public-sector folklore and musicology, was his drum student; he and troupe members were my research informants. Moved by the inherent asymmetry of our relationship, I promoted the group to a musicologist/presenter who immediately booked it in October 1982, one year after the group's arrival. In research, marketing, and presenting, players who were not nationals would have a say in what it meant to be Haitian.

Although the folklorists, ethnomusicologists, anthropologists, and other trained scholars who were making decisions about programming for performances in the 1980s approached the representation of black spirituality with a critical, postcolonial awareness, their visions of Vodou in performance often suffered from the myopia of a rigid, outdated, and sometimes nostalgic authenticity. The musicologist/presenter who hired Makandal in the fall of 1982 asked for a performance of a "ceremony"—the term North Americans prefer for the Vodou dance—"just like you do it at home." She didn't know how the troupe struggled with this version of "the real thing," pondering such questions as, How do we do an all-night dance in 90 minutes? What spirits do we leave out? Is authentic possession in unconsecrated space okay? How do we cover the cost of materials, especially the consumables? Makandal found answers to these questions because the artists wanted to inform the public about Haiti while receiving compensation for what they did best. They pared the dance to four or five nations, with salutations to one or two spirits within each nation and a possession performance in each segment. The abridged ceremony satisfied the presenters.

The failure on the part of some culture brokers to recognize the chameleon in "authenticity" presented Makandal with a dilemma as it struggled to define its style in New York. The demands of the presenters and certain funders contradicted the inner tendencies of Vodou's self-representation. One tendency is what I call "masking," after Alan Goldberg's observation that "Haitians have developed ways of masking their cultural resources in order to avoid the opprobrium and exploitation of outsiders" (1981: 229). Choreography, for example, can be a form of masking. In that spirit, a Vodou priest counseled Makandal, "Don't make it too real. People will see what they want to see, anyway." A second self-representational tendency entails innovation. Haitian performing artists, responding to the new contexts in which they find themselves, explore new instrumentation and new technologies and engage with artists who are not from Haiti. Makandal did all of these as we incorporated the company and secured nonprofit status, but a government agency asked us to withdraw our first grant application when an auditor attended a performance of choreographed pieces accompanied by drums, horns, and bass guitar played by a mix of Haitians and white North Americans. This

story demonstrates the power of privileged outsiders to delimit the identities of others, and it triggers important ethical concerns.

In response to the pressure from my own colleagues to bring Makandal into conformity with a notion of tradition it did not fully share, I wrote term papers and conference papers that mulled over the meanings of authenticity, tradition, and insiders and outsiders (1989; 1994), and I devoted parts of my doctoral dissertation (1991) to these issues. Some in my discipline were living through stories similar to my own with their research participants, and others held positions in presenting organizations and agencies that redistributed funds to arts groups. Our debates lived within the broader discourse on ethnographic representation that the work of such thinkers as James Clifford (1988) stimulated, and the notion that authenticity is relational gradually gained ground. In 1994 I went to work for a cultural center in New York City that became a mentor organization to Makandal and helped me reposition the company in grant proposals. The troupe now benefits from the support of government agencies and private foundations.

Outside the rarefied debates of academics, Makandal continued to navigate the volatile seas of public performance, where presenters competed fiercely for the right to represent Vodou. Following Wes Craven's release of *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, a horror film that proved that the zombie genre was alive and well, we appeared on NBC's *Phil Donahue Show*. Despite our respectful performance, the live broadcast, dominated by a New Orleans priestess who could repair relationships with "Forget Me Not" oil, contributed generously to the perpetuation of "voodoo" stereotypes. Such stories were fortunately rare in our experience. Throughout the 1990s we made most of our contracts with educational institutions—schools, libraries, museums, and cultural centers—touched by the growing multicultural movement. At its best, multiculturalism rejects the assumption of the universality of privileged European culture and "enables students to view concepts, issues, themes, and problems from different perspectives and points of view" (Banks, 1994: 26). Did this mean that the time had arrived for Vodouists to represent themselves? This question is central to our discussion of Vodou theater and the ethics of representation.

THE ETHICS OF REPRESENTATION

Ethics refers to explicit philosophical reflection on morality (beliefs and practices about good and evil by means of which we guide our behavior). The difference between ethics and morality is similar to the difference between musicology and music: ethics is a conscious stepping back and reflecting on

morality, just as musicology is a conscious reflection on music. Applied to the subject at hand, ethics reflects on the morality of how one represents Vodou, as measured by such results as racial bias or class bias. Some ethical questions germane to my own work: Does this performance represent Vodou the way Vodouists see it and/or the way they want others to see it? Does the experience of representing Haitian Vodou by way of theatrical music and dance empower the artists?

The history of literary, cinematic, and theatrical representations of Vodou in the Americas displays a pattern of control by voices of authority from outside Vodou communities. Vodou has been an oral tradition, transmitted largely by people who are not literate. In much of the world, and certainly in the popular sectors of Haiti, literacy means privilege, and so the privileged, foreigners and Haitian intellectuals alike, have monopolized written accounts of Vodou. Because a film industry has been virtually nonexistent in Haiti, Hollywood has dominated its cinematic representation. Haitian intellectuals who identified with *négritude* shaped the first representations of Vodou music and dance on the modern stage, but by 1955 one from among their ranks, Michel Lamartinière Honorat, was complaining of hyperstylized dances, a lack of respect for the popular rhetoric, and the veneer of Western civilization on “our social corps” (1955: 10). Honorat was only the first to identify this problem. Authenticity, related to the problem of authority—who gets to represent the culture of a group of people—has been an ongoing issue in the staging of Vodou music and dance.

The social sciences have scrutinized the crisis of authority in representation in the past two decades. James Clifford, in a 1983 essay that became the first chapter of *The Predicament of Culture* (1988), locates the dispersion of authority in ethnographic writing in “the breakup and redistribution of colonial power in the decades after 1950” (1988: 22) and hails “the Negritude movement’s reversal of the European gaze” as a positive development in the breakup of colonial authority (119). But the discourse of *négritude*—a form of black nationalism—has failed to include the voices of the oppressed. The Haitian writer René Depestre (1980: 82–83, my translation) offers this critique: “Negritude dissolves *its blacks* and *its black-Africans* into an essentialism perfectly inoffensive to the system that robs men and women of their identity. Today, the ‘negrologists’ of negritude present it as a world view . . . exclusive to blacks, regardless of their relation to production, property, and the distribution of material and spiritual goods.” In other words, nationalism equates itself with culture, ignoring differing experiences of socioeconomic class among people living within the national borders. In the Haitian context, nationalists have claimed Vodou as their own, reducing it to a matter of blackness. But Vodou has been largely a spirituality and a dance of Haiti’s masses,

embodying specific experiences of marginality, oppression, and resistance, in contradistinction to the Haitian intellectual's experience of privilege. Rather than reversing the gaze, Haitian nationalists have produced another spin on it, a spin that one can see in the sanitized stage representations over which they have had authority.

How, and under what conditions, will Vodouists represent themselves, free of direction from outside the temple? Must they bar the mediation of outsiders? Ethnographers, generally outsiders to the groups they study, have experimented in recent years with self-conscious texts that foreground the voices of their subjects, but Thomas McCarthy, in a 1992 review in the journal *Ethics*, critiques these experiments as inadequate as long as asymmetries of power permeate cross-cultural encounters. I would argue, with McCarthy, that cross-cultural encounters are more than pale reflections of power relations and that they participate in the transformation of those relations. Consider, for example, the public performances of Moreau's day that protected the secrecy of revolutionary meetings while they also unnerved some observers, and consider the double-edged parodies of impoverished Haitian teenagers en route to New York City, where they continue, despite the discomfort of some compatriots, to deliver pieces highlighting revolution and the sublime.⁶ Vodou performances have challenged asymmetries of power, and they will continue to do so with varying degrees of success. Artists systematically deprived of literacy may transcend this need through the aural and visual modes of theater. The potential exists for an ethics of representation through which Vodou art wins participation on an equal footing in the conversation of humanity.

NOTES

1. In a paper he presented at a Conférence sur Haïti in Paris in 1990, Léon-François Hoffman argued that nineteenth-century Haitian elites fabricated the famous ritual to underscore the cultural gulf that separated them from the black masses (Geggus, 2000: 150–151). Hoffman's paper has fueled the controversy surrounding the ritual.

2. People of mixed blood made up about 7 percent of the Saint Domingue population, and some unknown number of them were either enslaved or without property. Equal rights for the privileged among them, while significant, would not have constituted a revolution.

3. The members of the original troupe shared this story with me, and I met the two men on more than one occasion in Brooklyn and in Port-au-Prince. When a group applied for visas, a representative of the American embassy usually attended a "rehearsal" to verify the group's authenticity. In 1983 I attended a rehearsal for such a rehearsal in which the pretend artists followed simple instructions and the real artists performed spectacular dance feats. That same year, an American embassy official estimated that in 1981—the year Makandal emigrated—Haiti lost more than 350 people through so-called stacked dance companies.

4. I spent several months during the spring and summer of 1983 working for Joseph's *La Nouvelle Haïti Tribune*. The many articles I pasted up included selections from the classics of négritude. My job was cut short with the death of Mr. Joseph, a murder that remains unsolved to this day.

5. I have no one source for this statement. Over the years I have heard it again and again from friends in Vodou. Jean Paul Joseph, lead drummer of the migrant Makandal, was a master of petwo rhythm, a fact invariably explained in terms of his community of origin.

6. Both of these examples invite criticism. Academics may claim that the performers are simply "letting off steam" as the system that exploits them holds firmly in place. This seriously denies the intelligence, creativity, and extraordinary achievements of Haiti's masses in a long and complex struggle—a denial that arguably bolsters the system.

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