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In Her Own Image: Slave Women and the Re-imagining of the Polish Black Madonna as Ezili Dantò, the Fierce Female Lwa of Haitian Vodou

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Abstract
This article negates the stereotypes of slave women in Haiti as weak, passive and compliant to colonialism and also challenges the archetype of hypersexualised bodies without minds. The Vodou Lwa Ezili Dantò is discussed with the aim to reclaim a cogitating Black female subjectivity. We evince that slave women's agency, their creativity and resistance to colonial paradigms were manifested in sacrality, as we explore how the Polish Black Madonna became Haitian Vodou spirit Ezili Dantò. We uncover what female metaphysics reveal about the memories, complexities and identities of the women responsible for their engendering.

Keywords Women · Vodou · Slavery · Ezili Dantò · Haiti · Gender · Polish Black Madonna · LGBTQ · Black women · lwa · Agency · Possession · Africa · Afro-Caribbean · Anthropology

«*Tunnel de larmes*
Qui mène au pays du vide
Nostalgie sans lendemain
Qui balance au pôle du regard
Conduis mes lunes au logis fertile de LIBERTE...»
Marie-Soeurette Mathieu, Invitation, Lueurs et Quinze poèmes d'éveil

Ezili Dantò is a Vodou spirit, what is known by Vodouisants as a lwa. She is the compassionate mother of the oppressed and abused, protector of women and children, victims of sexual assault, the forgotten and more recently, lesbians. Ezili is far more

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sensuous, not to mention cantankerous, than the Virginal Marian advocation from which she was inspired. Considered *cho*, a 'hot' spirit, Ezili Dantò is invoked for love spells, often those which involve sensuality and lust. She is thus often alluded to by Vodouisants as a lwa of love, jealously, passion and sex. As she is mute, those 'mounted' by her spirit, may lose the capacity to speak. They may dance erotically. She is equally known for her uncontrollable wrath and her vindictive nature. Voduisants relate that she exacts vengeance on those who harm women and children. Ezili's moods are myriad, plunging from the apogee of joy to the depths of despair. She is a complex character.

In this article, by unravelling the chronicle of Ezili Dantor, we reclaim the history of Haitian women as active agents in the inception of the Vodou religion. Little literature exists on women's role in forging faith in this context. Black women have frequently been ignored or ethnocentrically conceptualised in the literature that relates to the New World (Bush 1990; Gautier 2010; Dayan 1994; Kafka 1997; Morrissey 1989). Enslaved women have often been reduced to caricatures that portray them as passive, feeble victims compliant in their New World roles and in need of a protector. They have been reduced to their physicality, either as asexual stereotypes, such as the 'mammy', the nurturing mother, or the hardy fieldworker (Coppola 2012:28). Inversely, Black women have been hypersexualized as aggressive sexual predators whose appetites are 'at best inappropriate and, at worst, insatiable' (Hill Collins 1990:83). We still have not divested ourselves of the images of our dark colonial past, which perdure, as studies of depictions of Black women in Hip Hop, Hollywood, pornography and TV culture attest (Harris-Perry 2011; Williams 2011). Symbolically, violent representations remain crucial 'in the ideological justification for race, gender and class oppression' (Hill Collins 1990:68).

Many recently published historical accounts continue to neglect the role of women in the Haitian colony (Donnadieu 2014; Dillon and Drexler 2016; Geggus 2002; Girard 2014). Dayan is one of the few authors who has produced novel and probing work which examines the experiences of Haitian women during the colonial era, as well as exploring the meanings attributed to feminine Vodou lwas (Dayan 1994, 1998). Her work analyses these topics through a literary lens, as well as appealing to social psychology. Her primary focus is on how Haitian women have been portrayed diachronically in narrative fiction and how such work has informed, as well as reflected, the cultural imagination. There is also a growing, yet still limited corpus of historical work by authors such as Bush, Gautier, Morrisey and Kafka (ibid) that seeks to include women in accounts of colonial life. Yet, this offers no insights on women's religious roles nor their cultural heritage. Our article differs from existing scholarship, in that it takes an anthropological stance that seeks to understand Haitian women's histories, roles and cultural legacies through the exploration of the Vodou lwa, Ezili Danto.

We coalesce the examination of historical texts and colonial records with ethnographic fieldwork data to reinterpret existing research, focusing on themes salient to anthropological discourse. These are topics that have not been hitherto alluded to in such a context: agency, weapons of the weak and power from below. As anthropologists, we seek to trace cultural continuities in religious praxis, referring to African belief and social mores. As trained scholars of religion,[1] our angle differs from that of the above-cited authors. In this article, we explore what female metaphysics reveals about the agency, complexities, contradictions, memories and identities of the women

[1] One of us is an Oxford-educated anthropologist and the other a UCLA-trained religious studies scholar.

responsible for their engendering, through the lens of Ezili. If as Feuerbach (1967:187) and Nietzsche (2010) assert 'man created God in his own image', then our question is how have female divinities been made in the image of women?

We evince that Ezili Dantò, like the spiritual practice she belongs to, goes beyond dichotomies. *Modus significandi* metamorphose with malleability. Ezili subverts binaries. She confounds gendered and racial stereotypes to provide palimpsestuous and polysemous meanings that are multilayered and multivocal. Above all, in describing the history of Ezili Dantò, we aim to illume 'the invisible Black woman' (Bush 1990) and reclaim her agency. We argue that if Ezili deeply resembles slave women it is because she is a sacred manifestation of the agency of those bondwomen. They sought psychically and physically through spirituality to resist the misfitting metaphysics and models of self and other imposed upon them by the colonialists. Today, women continue to appeal to Ezili to subvert binaries and question stereotypes.

As has been suggested, stereotypes entrenched in Cartesian dualism reduce Black women to a body without mind: 'the Other', who is both 'primitive' and 'animal-like' (Lyons and Lyons 2004:9). Represented as inferior, irrational, non-cogitating beings, these images have denied Black women their intelligence, agency, complexity and ability to creatively navigate, negate and challenge the mechanisms of power and the people who have sought to oppress them. The static stereotypes of passive female slaves that still infect much of the literature on the New World are a post-colonial carbuncle that continues to ooze colonial conceptions, thereby obfuscating the realities of Black women, that we seek to salvage.

A perusal of colonial archives (de Coulon 1797; Garran 1979-1814; Tarbé 1791) reveals that Black women were far from being passive and weak. Some history books written in the last decades on the colonisation of the Caribbean assert this, although they do not explore female faith. These largely remain a niche 'genre'. Usually penned by women (for women), this corpus seeks to counterpoise the innumerable narratives that treat slaves as a genderless mass. The authors aim to dislodge accounts that celebrate the victories of male leaders and that ignore the role of Black women in resistance, as well as their unique ordeals given the triple oppression of sexism, racism and economic hardship (Chancy 1997).

Much historical literature makes no mention of the denial of enslaved women's basic human right to bear and raise their children (Morrissey 1989). This combined with the rigours of the *Code Noir*, which compelled all slaves to be divested of their names, culture, and language, provides ample evidence for why it was 'arguably women who were more troublesome than men' thus more likely to seek to resist the reign of terror of their White Masters (Bush 1990:63). Whilst Toussaint l'Ouverture, Henri Christophe and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, to name but a few, are writ large in accounts, enslaved women 'have remained nameless' (Gautier 2010:221). The handful mentioned is briefly bracketed off as minor anecdotes, such as Suzanne Béliar, Toya Montou and Marie-Jeanne Lamartinière. Yet many bondwomen participated as freedom fighters in the Haitian revolution, commanding sections of the army that led to their independence from their slave masters. Vodou high priestesses termed *Manbos* — such as Cécile Fatiman another character who makes but a fleeting appearance in some accounts, whilst is discredited in others (Geggus 2002) — played a vital role in providing 'superhuman courage' and spiritual strength to insurgents (Gautier 2010:227). But what of the women whose names have not appeared in historical records? Our novel research proposes that Ezili, although revealingly a mute spirit, may provide some clues

as to the complex personas of the women who engendered her, embodied her during possession and served her spirit.

The enslaved woman's participation in Vodou, we propose, was an act of resistance. It was a means by which to assert her spirituality. It also comprised a creative and ratiocinating tactic to reformulate and refashion her own conceptions of gender and personhood through manipulation of multiplicities of meaning. To participate in any rituals other than Catholic was punishable by whipping and branding. Furthermore, anyone apprehended at a gathering already branded would be sentenced to death. We must surmise that women who took part in Vodou rituals were undeniably the obverse of the stereotypes of passive and simplistic Black women that abound.

These women, despite being violated, tortured and exploited, refused to be immured by the subordinate roles imposed upon them by their slave masters. They escaped the latter's clutches as through possession they negated the boundaries of personhood and agency, as Janice Boddy has described in reference to the Zar Cult of Northern Sudan (Boddy 1989). When Haitian women were mounted by lwa, such as Ezili, they interrogated and reassessed notions of self and other, as well as defying colonial authority structures. As Covington-Ward suggests 'the spiritual realm often provides access to an alternative form of authority through which people can upset the prevailing social order through effective use of their bodies' (Covington-Ward 2016:11). Likewise, as Castor has described in reference to Ifà worship in Trinidad, rites of possession create sites of social action where communities can express forms of spiritual citizenship (Castor 2017). Much like in Trinidad, in Haiti, through Vodou rituals, women could honour the lives and appease the spirits of those lost in the slave trade outside of the proper rituals and far from home, reclaiming social justice.

We will commence by providing a brief history of Haiti, as well as supplying a description of some of the many difficulties endured by bondwomen. We will also offer a brief background on Vodou. Information will be presented on the religious and cultural contexts from whence the slaves originated so as to clearly draw parallels and furnish the reader with a frame of reference that will situate our argument on Ezili. The latter will be elaborated in part two of this article.

The mixed methodology that is the basis of this article, consisted of perusal of colonial archives and historical records, digital and traditional ethnography, participant observation as well as formal and informal interviews with Voduisants, both online and in person. One of us has worked in person with a wide-range of Vodouisants since 2001, most of whom of Haitian origins, in Latin America and the USA, namely in New Orleans and Florida. The other researcher conducted digital ethnography joining numerous Vodou-forums (such as forumhaiti.com), groups on Facebook (such as Katiopa Kamit) and other networking sites. They also interviewed various Vodou-practising Haitian immigrants in Canada who were part of the cultural group *la Maison d'Haiti,* based in Montreal, Canada. The Anthropologist in our team of two, is an Africanist by training, specialising in West African religious traditions and the Religious Studies scholar is a Brazilianist who has published extensively on Afro-Brazilian Umbanda and Candomblé. As most of the slaves originally hailed from West and Central Africa, we also used our knowledge of these traditions and cross-referenced resources from this region, as

well as Brazil and Cuba, to gain deeper perspectives and seek to understand the *longue durée* of religious activities and cultural values. We reinterpreted pre-existing research on Vodou as well as historical accounts based on our mixed methodological approach.

The Ineffable Barbarity of Slavery

If Hispaniola's production was prodigious, it was due to the barbarous exploitation of slaves who initially received no emolument, and later were paid a pittance. Between 1681 and 1791, over 860,000 Africans consisting of men, women and children were shipped to Saint-Domingue. Multitudinous people were required to work the plantations, after the Indigenous population had been decimated. Due to the inhumane conditions, many Africans died both in Haiti, and also aboard the slave ships. These were floating concentration camps. Sailors cognisant of the atrocities adopted the aphorism 'Beware and take care of the Bight of Benin; For the one that comes out, There are forty go in' (Rediker 2008:17).

Africans of variegated classes, ethnic groups, ages and genders, usually snatched during formal warfare, informal raids or kidnapping were sold into slavery. Chained together, they endured the atrocities of imprisonment, violence, rape, disease and premature death. A plethora of people peppered the plantations from across West and West Central Africa, including Senegambia and the Gold Coast (Moreau de Saint-Méry 1797). Egregious working conditions, paltry nutrition, poor shelter, interminable work hours, corporal and capital punishment entailed that life expectancy was shockingly short.

The *Code Noir* legitimised the dehumanisation of slaves, legally defining slaves and their offspring as the chattel of their owners. It forbade them from speaking their own language, utilising their own names — new ones were allotted — and from practising their cultural mores, including their own religions. Large gatherings of slaves were prohibited. Estate owners were encouraged to baptise their slaves and compelled to instruct their slaves in Catechism. Likewise, planters purposely parted newly arrived Africans from members of their cohort. They did so to ensure that linguistic, cultural and communal bonds were severed, seeking to create a *tabula rasa* upon which the non-identity of slave could be inscribed. Nevertheless, far from assimilating, relinquishing and becoming 'docile' bodies, many slaves, both men and women, overtly and covertly resisted.

The Aberrant Position of the Bondwoman

Black women have frequently been ignored in accounts of resistance in Haiti. Many history books on the Caribbean appear to omit the role of women *tout court* (Buck-Morss 2009; Coupeau 2008; Donnadieu 2014; Dillon and Drexler 2016; Dubois 2012; Geggus 2002; Girard 2014). Their *sui generis* difficulties, namely the triple oppression and intersections of sexism, racism and economic hardship are overlooked. As outlined, bondwomen have been portrayed as passively accepting their New World roles. In some academic scholarship, such as that by the anthropologist Peter Wilson, they have

been described as 'more readily and firmly attached' to White society than their male counterparts (Wilson 1973). Nonetheless, perusal of colonial records reveals that Black women were frequently punished for their everyday acts of resistance, such as refusal to work or purposeful sabotage of tasks (Bush 1990:56; Garran 1979-1814; Tarbé 1791)[2] thereby negating views of compliant Black women. Kafka (1997) has combed colonial records noting that women featured in many protests against abominable working conditions, sometimes they were the leaders or acted alone as agitators. We suggest in this article that women also took active roles in Vodou, embodying lwa, such as Ezili Danto, who served as a means to assert themselves and contest colonial impositions.

The colonial literature of the epoch reveals the misogynoir of the White colonisers who hypersexualised Black woman. When visible, they were only so as silent bodies that were depicted as 'dark and debased' (Dayan 1994:8). White women were in contradistinction the apotheosis of the Victorian values of submissiveness, piety and purity. Women of colour in the Caribbean have also been depicted as possessing 'strong reproductive bodies, apt for the hard work in plantations', once again 'representing the opposite of the weakness and delicacy of the White female body' (Ruiz 2012:3).

Although forced sexual relations were common, some slave women learnt the value of sexual relationships with White men. We cannot discount that in some circumstances actual amorous affairs developed (Gautier 2010:150). Nevertheless, such relationships might be pursued by Black women as a strategy to improve their *modus vivendi* (Morrissey 1989:147*)*. Although bondwomen might engage in relationships with their White masters to reap financial benefits, or in the hopes of being manumitted, often they were intimidated into such sexual relationships. Moreau de Saint-Méry, whilst reiterating the myth of hypersexualized African women, for example as resorting to their 'native charms' to get their way, acknowledges that for male slaves 'the honour of their wives and chastity of their daughters were matters of the slightest consideration for the masters' (1797:39).

Although the *Code Noir* proscribed mutilation, it condoned whipping. Total or semi-nudity was enforced during whip-lashings. Bondwomen were often subjected to the sadistic, twin torture of rape and whipping. Rape is the ultimate form of 'dehumanisation, objectification, and domination' (Anderson 2012:625). According to the colonial paradigm, Jezebel stereotypes not only vindicated the commodification of bodies in the profitable business venture that was slavery but also furthermore justified the sexual abuse of women by White slave-owners (Harris-Perry 2011:55–56). The labelling of Black women as promiscuous and lascivious exonerated masters from rape, which was *ipso facto* not a crime.

It is likely that Black women rather than tractable, would have been more zealous than Black male slaves to resist the colonial system. Although some might have had privileged positions through relationships with White men, the majority were at the nadir of the skin and gender hierarchy that was the stanchion of colonial ideology. Many Black male slaves had low paying jobs in construction and agriculture. Nevertheless, numerous men were given access to skilled labour as sugar boilers, valets and

[2] See also how slave women were said to have plotted to have their white masters killed in National Archives, Paris, D/XXV/28, p.287, 'Troubles de Saint Domingue: Règlement de Police sur la culture et les cultivateurs, Procès-verbaux relatifs à l'exécution de ces règlements et autres pièces au soutien des opérations et de la correspondances des commissaires civiles, février 1794' (28 Feb. 1794).

watchmen (Moitt 2001:43). Such roles could potentially improve their status and economic autonomy. Black women had no access to such roles, were economically persecuted, and paid less than their male counterparts for the same work.

During the early days of slavery, plantation owners deemed pregnancy an impetus to production, as the bondwoman would be unable to work as productively. It was customary for slave owners to beat pregnant woman, delivering blows to their wombs, thereby ensuring miscarriage. In the French West Indies, women were often staked to the ground next to a hollow and whipped until the unborn child fell into the trough (Gautier 2010:86). Miscarriages were frequent due to gruelling toil. When a woman did manage to complete her pregnancy, slave owners seldom demonstrated an interest in ensuring children's well-being. Bondwomen were deprived of the right to raise their children. Their young might at any time be wrested from them and sold to other plantation owners. The father might also be traded to another planter. Paternity was disregarded by slaveholders. Marriage between slaves was illicit. The fact that Ezili Danto, as we will describe, is often depicted as a wrathful mother, ready to protect her child at all costs, we believe, reflects this dark history and the onerous experiences of motherhood in the Caribbean colony.

Women, however, did not blindly accept such circumstances. They resisted in multifarious ways. Although, due to ties to children and the dangers of the road, women were less likely than men to resort to *marronage*, they found other creative ways to manifest their agency. Some covertly resisted, feigning sickness to escape work hours or intentionally damaging crops. Others mounted official protests.[3] Some joined resistance groups. Others sought undercover roles in the slave revolt, spying on their masters, poisoning their food or stealing supplies to source the slave army.

Vodou formed an important mode of resistance. The revolution began in 1791 with a Vodou ceremony at Bois Caïman that was led by a female priestess, or *Manbo,* Cécile Fatiman, who led proceedings, alongside Boukman Dutty, an *oungan* or male priest. Fatiman has been excluded from many accounts that rely on colonial records and by historians who omit the role of women from chronicles, such as Jean Fouchard (2017). Yet accounts, such as Etienne Charlier (1954), that rely on the testimony of descendants of participants and analysis of local lore confirm Fatiman's presence. We were told by numerous devotees that during the ceremony — and this claim is supported in many academic accounts, as well as frequently depicted by Haitian artists — that Fatiman was mounted by Ezili that very night. According to Karine, a Voduisant from Orlando, 'the *manbo* started dancing listlessly, mounted by the spirit, Ezili Dantò. At the end of the ceremony she sacrificed a black pig to Ezili for protection. All the attendees were then invited to anoint themselves with the blood as they vowed to unite and kill their White oppressors.' Despite her central role in that ceremony, Cécile Fatiman disappears from historical narratives and like the nimieties of silent Black Haitian women, is effaced. Nevertheless, we argue that an analysis of Ezili Dantò will allow for a better understanding of the women who created her largely in their own image.

[3] For example, National Archives, Paris, D/XXV/37, 'Troubles de Saint Domingue: Lettres et Pétitions de divers individus et autres pièces adressées aux Cer Polverel, l'un des Commissaires N(aux) Civiles, mars 1794' (3 March 1794).

Vodou Vivified: a New Faith in a New World

Vodou must be understood as born from a cocktail of convictions that coalesced in the New World. Vodou has been misconstrued and portrayed as barbaric, bacchanalian, orgiastic and even satanic. The 'imagined religion' which permeates Western popular culture has little to do with the actual practice serving 'as a venue for the expression of more-or-less undiluted racial anxieties, manifested as lurid fantasies about Black peoples' (McGee 2012:232). Tellingly, practitioners have typically chosen not to objectify Vodou as a religion. They state that they 'serve the spirits'. Static definitions of religion demand self-reflexivity. These reflect our preconceptions rather than emic understandings that, as in the case of Vodou, involve ambivalence, and contradiction (Bellegarde-Smith and Michel 2006).

Haitian Vodou's inception commenced with communities of captives assembling together. They sought succour in spirituality, wishing to preserve and celebrate their mystical metaphysics, cohering congeries of complex ritual acts and beliefs. Faced with onerous conditions, captives sought to propitiate spiritual forces to intervene. More importantly, the repressive context of plantation life prevented them from expressing themselves. Africans 'nurtured the desire for both physical and cultural freedom' hence they utilised whatever 'means were available to them to preserve and perpetuate their sense of self', their cosmologies and ontological *weltanschauung* (Edmonds and Gonzalez 2010:113). Despite the interdictions of the *Code Noir*, which penalised large gatherings of slaves and prohibited African spiritual practices, captives furtively slunk into the womb of the night to meet in the woods and perform their rituals and dances in secrecy.

Initially, captives hailed from disparate regions of the African continent which had diverging beliefs and dissimilar languages. This made spoken communication arduous. Nevertheless, their spiritual practices had common elements, such as spirit possession, supplication and sacrifices to spirits related to nature, ethnobotany, ancestor worship as well as rituals led by male and female priestesses, as we have previously evinced (Our Publication 2003). Due to such affinities, religion comprised a sacred lingua franca. Vodou also allowed during what Westerners call possession, — a term which Vodouisants do not employ — for those mounted by spirits to enact different personas and express their own unique conceptions of self, gender, place and time.

Many academics have chosen to focus on the *fons et origo* of Vodou, which points to the multiplicity of ethnicities and creeds that were meshed to create a spiritual practice that has been compared to gumbo. Some scholars, such as de Heusch and Métraux, have insisted on the *Africanicité* of Vodou (Métraux 1959; de Heusch 1989).[4] To make such statements is to undermine the creativity and agency of those diverse people brought together in Haiti who from myriad influences created new spiritualities. Such assertions also shirk the Amerindian influences in Vodou and overlook the Freemason and Catholic elements which were ingeniously intermingled.

Lwa, or spirit entities, come from three main families, or *nanchon* (nations): Rada, Petro and Ghede. Rada spirits are said to be of Dahomeyan origins. According to Voduisants, they are calm and cool. Ghede are the spirits of deceased ancestors. Ancestor worship, as detailed, is ubiquitous across much of Africa. Petro lwa were

[4] For example, Métraux wrote that Vodou has 'in structure and spirit remained essentially Dahomean' Ibid, 32.

greatly influenced by Kongolese and Angolan cosmology.[5] Ezili Dantò is a Petro lwa. The Petro spirits are known to be 'fiery' and 'angry' (Edmonds and Gonzalez 2010:111). Whereas the drumbeats played for Rada spirits are measured and timely, those of the Petro are strident and syncopated. It is during drumming that spirits are said to mount the participants who are their horses, *chwal*. The appellation of Vodou rituals reveals founders came from disparate African nations.[6] Such rites generally take place to seek advice, healing and to perform service to the spirits.

In her Image

A lwa in Haitian Vodou is a spirit. There are numerous lwa, they are also known as '*misté*', mysteries, or '*anvizib*', invisibles. They have many manifestations which evoke the metaphysics of the multiplicity of personhood. Lwa are spirits who serve as intermediaries between the Supreme Creator, *Bondye* (Bon Dieu, God). He is a *deus otiosus*, a distant figure that cannot be propitiated as lwa such as Ezili Dantò can. Lwa aid human beings in their daily affairs and may carry messages from the dead. The primary medium of approaching lwa is through ceremonies led by priestesses, *manbo* and priests, *houngan*. Each lwa has its own distinct persona, specific dances, drum patterns, songs and tastes for particular worldly items. They also have their own *vévé*,[7] used to summon them. Lwa must not merely be prayed to, indeed Vodou is not so much about belief but rather praxis (Bellegarde-Smith and Michel 2013:463). A Vodou practitioner must make sacrifices to influence the spirits and enter into a relationship of reciprocity with them so that petitions will be looked upon favourably. Experienced initiates, *hounsi*, are regularly mounted by lwas during rituals, enabling them to take on the characteristics and powers of that spirit so that the mysteries may be spoken.

Lwa, also may mean image. How have female lwas been fashioned in the image of those women that hewed them from their memories, experiences, desires, ontologies and need for agency? It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the innumerable female lwas. Nevertheless, Ezili Dantò, her story, iconography, philosophy and performance, may offer us a glimpse into the past to unseal the hushed casket of the women who have long been silenced. After all, 'Haitian history has been written by men' (Dayan:17) about men, as we previously detailed.

During slavery, as outlined, African women were subject to ineffable exploitation and dehumanisation by colonisers both physically and mentally, forcing them to abandon the structures, languages, customs and cultures whereby they could convey their sense of self and experiences (Coppola 2012:31). Yet equally by omitting enslaved women's unique ordeals from the historical record, they have been depersonalised, muted and denied agency. When Black women have appeared in literature and colonial records, it is as a hypersexualised, corporal presence or the simplistic mammy, in toto as 'African/Caribbean woman as body without mind and as

[5] Indeed, many lwa bear names of Kongo origin such as Simbi, Nkita and Mbumba, spirits that are well-known in the sacred practices of lower Zaire (see de Heusch 1989: 293).

[6] For example, Rit Seneka indicates its origins from Senegal, as does Rit Bizango, which refers to Bissango Island. Rit Boumba which refers to a river in Cameroun whilst Rit Ibo refers to the Igbo people of southern Nigeria (Jil and Jil 2009: 160).

[7] These are geometrical patterns that represent the lwa generally used to invoke them.

primitive "other"' (Anim-Addo 2007:11). Our examination of the lwa, Ezili Dantò, aims to counterpoise this tendency and display what Philip terms 'thinking Black female subjectivity'(Philip 1997:135).

Ezili, and other female lwa, could be said to have been 'made in the image' of captive women, allowing them to articulate themselves. As Barber evokes, in her work on the Yoruba and their connection to their Orisa 'the idea that gods are made by men, not men by gods' is not only a 'sociological truism' but also a 'central impulse to devotion' (Barber 1981:724). It is women who made and to this today continue to be mounted by Ezili, a lwa whose complex, shifting, multifaceted persona goes beyond simplistic depictions of Black women to evince an omnifarious conception of personhood, that is unbounded by binaries and interrogates the categories created by colonial, Cartesian and patriarchal paradigms. Ezili must not only be construed as a spirit who empowered women who had no rights nor voice but also as a sentient, contemplative mode of self-generated resistance and expression. Before we analyse Ezili Dantò, we must first recall the origins of the women who engendered her, served her and adored her as this will allow us to understand their context and how Ezili represents continuity and change.

Herstories

Once again, the roles that enslaved women would have maintained in their homelands have been neglected in historical accounts. Thanks to the hard work of female scholars such as Dayan, Bush inter alia, we now have a solid corpus that relates the ordeals of slave women in the Caribbean. Yet there remains scant speculation about, or investigation into, the origins of these women. This may be due to the lack of hard evidence detailing the contextual origins of slave women, however, given the records maintained by slave traders, it does not take a vast leap of imagination nor hyperbolic indulgence to hypothesise.

In pre-colonial West and West Central Africa, from whence many of the slaves hailed, we are aware that women played an active, participatory role in many societies, which anthropologists have confirmed in their studies of the region. As Farrar points out, 'female title-holders placed in the highest levels of the political order were a common feature of ancient and pre-colonial African political systems' (Farrar 1997:579). Some of the Caribbean bondwomen would have originally also been slaves in Africa before their departure to the New World, since some communities chose to provide traders with their extant servants. Yet historical records attest that many women were captured during informal warfare and raiding. These bondwomen, therefore, originated from a wide range of sectors within African society (Geggus 1982; Rediker 2008) and indubitably would have had positions of power in their native lands.

Research into the native regions of these slaves confirms that not all but numerous women in West and West Central Africa maintained important roles politically, economically and spiritually. Such as amongst the matrilineal Akan peoples, where the *Ohemmaa*, Queen Mother, was not only responsible for electing the king but also under certain circumstances might assume full control of central authority thereby becoming the 'king', the *Omanhene* (Rattray 1969:81–85). In Benin, women held active, combative roles and fought during conflicts against outside aggressors. Much has written

about the female regiments who came to be known as 'the Amazons of Dahomey' (Law 1993). Women also occupied important roles in their religious traditions, such as amongst the Yoruba where *Iyaláwo* and *Ìyánífá,* priestesses, were highly respected for their mystical powers. Even today amongst the Yoruba, 'women possess certain extraordinary power equal to or greater than that of the gods or ancestors' reflected in terms such as 'our mothers, the gods of society, owners of the world' noting that this power can be 'beneficent or destructive' (Drewal and Drewal 1983). In the kingdom of Kongo, elite women exercised indirect as well as direct power, controlling entire sections of the country, whilst in the Angolan empires of Ndongo and Matamba, women took formal control of the state (Thornton 2006). As Bádéjo avouches, an analysis of mythicoreligious iconography, cosmology and oral literary traditions reveal that African women enveloped 'a complex matrix of power' (Bádéjo 1998:94).

It is impossible to confirm, and we cannot generalise as per all captive women, nevertheless it is unquestionable that some African women enslaved in Haiti came from societies where concepts of gender and gendered roles were entirely dissimilar to those subordinate roles they had to take on in the Haitian colony, cultural communities wherein women yielded economic, spiritual and/or political power. They also hailed from societies where concepts of personhood were vastly different. As anthropologists, Comaroff and Comaroff (2001) have evinced, the notion of the person as circumscribed and static is distinctly European. African people have other metaphysical models, these are often dynamic, whereby personhood is processual, rather than a mode of 'being' it is a mode of 'becoming'. The idea of 'autoplexy' to describe notions of African personhood, suggests 'playing and shifting with a multiplicity of …roles and identity patterns' (ibid: 273). Amongst the Akan, we also note conceptions of 'the multiplicity of the self' which are central to Vodou (Strongman 2008).

By exploring the iconography and personality of Ezili Dantò, and analysing it, we can better understand how this lwa provided a sense of continuity for slave women, allowing them to encapsulate memories of their homelands whilst also providing a means to record their actual experiences. Importantly, this lwa was a means for women to resist possession by the White man, his ontologies, and subservient roles thereby eschewing and, even if but temporarily, escaping physical as well as metaphysical impositions. As Boddy suggests, possession may negate the boundaries of personhood and agency and alter 'women's perceptions of themselves, each other' as women experience 'formlessness' (Boddy 1989:6, 274). As we will detail, Ezili is transformative, yet also transcends Cartesian and binary models, whilst re-appropriating positions of powerlessness to reclaim agency and mystery for herself. This divulges much about the women who created her. As Levinskaya has pointed out, religions do not exist primevally but are 'man-made' (Levinskaya 1993). In this case Ezili is 'woman-made'.

Ezili

The name Ezili is believed to derive from the Fon word Azlí, which refers to a lake and to the Vodun spirit of the lake. But Ezili is not of Fon origin alone. Water spirits are ubiquitous across Africa. As van Stipriaan points out 'in West-African … religions, water spirits, which are more often than not female, have played or still play a prominent role' (van Stipriaan 2003). As these aquatic spirits traversed the water, they

encountered local beliefs and were morphed by those who conceived of them for their needs. Equally, Taino Amerindians venerated a spirit of fresh water and fecundity, known as Atabey. Her characteristics also imbued this lwa. Born on Haitian soil, Ezili is the spiritual child of many mothers of myriad origins and she has multiple manifestations that, existing simultaneously, attest to the complexities of her makers. Ezili, like her Taino and African ancestors, has long been associated with water, and even in the eyes of devotees today is a symbol of sexual fertility, a cosmic womb, a mother of the world (Desmangles 1992:131).

Ezili exists in multiple guises, Ezili Freda, Lasyrenn and Granne Ezili to name but a few aspects of this lwa. It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider them. Our focus is Ezili Dantò. Her surname, Dantò, we were told, is said to come from *D'En tort*, which means Ezili of the 'wronged'. This evinces her distinctness as per other manifestations of Ezili, as she is the lwa who wrathfully exacts vengeance for those who have been maligned and abused. From our understandings of the conditions that slave women found themselves entrapped in, Ezili clearly represents their anger at their situation and likely allowed them to express social justice through the spiritual realm by honouring the memories of those harmed.[8]

Her story commences in the midst of the slave revolts. Polish legionnaires were sent by Bonaparte to quell the unrest that was shaking France's richest colony. The war was cruel. The Poles garbed inappropriately for, and unaccustomed to the tropical climes, were decimated by the rebellious slaves, as well as by diseases such as yellow fever. Numerous Poles, treated poorly by the French, switched sides as the revolution progressed. They brought with them their most important religious icons, notably Our Lady of Czestochowa (Rzeznik 2016), one of many Black Madonnas of mediaeval Europe (Fig. 1). There is no consensus as to why these Virgins were depicted with dark skin. Arguments vary, some suggest that the images may have been created to match the appearance of Indigenous people or that they were blackened over time due to smoke and ageing. Vodouisants, as we have seen, were banned under the *Code Noir,* from propitiating their own spirits. Ever innovative, they re-appropriated the Catholic saints whom they were encouraged to venerate, as part of the Vodou pantheon of spirits. Notwithstanding, they did so not through a Christian optic but rather transubstantiated these saints syncretically into representations of a lwa. This meant slaves could attend church and appear to be following the *Code Noir*, whilst mentally invoking Vodou spirits. As we have previously detailed Damballah, for example, the sky lwa whose *vévé* is dioscuric serpents, was syncretised with St. Patrick, who in Christian iconography is depicted with a snake at his feet (Our publication).

Gazing at the visage of Our Lady of Czestochowa, it is not effortful to imagine her tantalising appeal to Vodouisants, in particular female initiates, who identified her as one of the many aspects of Ezili, naming her Ezili Dantò (Cvetnić 2017). The chromolithographs of the *mater salvatoris* depict a Black-skinned Virgin, with two long scars on her cheek. In the crook of her left arm she protectively clutches a Black Christ child. Her expression is stoic, yet compassionate. The wounded visage of Our Lady of Czestochowa must have carried potent significance to the Haitian people who had been physically and psychologically scarred at the hands of the colonisers. In the horrors of the colony, where mothers struggled to protect their children from their

[8] As Castor points out in her work on Ifà worship in Castor (2017, 152).

Fig. 1 Our Lady of Czestochowa

White masters and might be separated from them at any time, the Black Madonna's tender and defensive stance to her child evoked important emotions for slave women. These are surely what led Vodouisants to ascribe particular powers and characteristics to Ezili that spoke of their trials and tribulations.

Noegenesis: A Sacred Multiplicity of Her

Our gods, goddesses, and deities represent our trajectories, memories, vulnerabilities, possibilities and the incomprehensibilities we encounter. They are a bricolage of that

which we esteem, the desires and dreams of innumerable people and their fight for social justice. Haitian women engendered and embodied Ezili Dantò, in order that specific notions of femininity be honoured, explored and kept in existence. Through the spirit medium of Ezili they inscribed their memories, evinced their values, contesting the identities imposed upon them as they represented womanhood in its multiplicities, contradictions and mysteries.

Lewis argues that women's possession cults are 'thinly disguised protest movements' in societies where women are oppressed (Lewis 1989, 26). Yet although possession may prima facie appear as social resistance, when women receive the spirits, this may allow them to 'continually rework contradictions' and achieve healing through 'depersonalization and reconstitution' (Comaroff 1985:226, 232). In a state of trance, women may, through mind-displacing manipulation, experience multiple subjectivities since spirits 'obliterate their mounts' consciousness in order to fully articulate a wholly "other" persona in the act of possession' allowing them to 'to mediate, subvert, or reinforce… relations, conventions, and contradictions that are often the echoes of … her own muted voice' (Masquelier 2001:157–158). Likewise, we must recall the 'importance of bodily movement for carrying cultural ideals and histories', and passing these on to others, noting how bodily gestures may reclaim power for communities 'as a way of remembering' (Covington-Ward 2016:13) thereby allowing communities to prevent their subaltern stories from being erased.

Slave women in Haiti were dehumanised. Ezili, we argue, was a tool for women to express their many facets and histories. They were robbed of their identities, forced to be subordinate to colonialists who exploited them, abused them, raped them, stole their children to sell to others. The Virginal figure of the Black Madonna replete with her Christian chorography bore little relevance to the experiences of slave women. They re-appropriated her, translating her into their own terms to map new mythologies and metaphysics. Through this noegenesis, the Black Madonna became Ezili Dantò.

Whereas in Poland, Our Lady of Czestochowa was claimed to be 'Healer of the Sick, Mother of Mercy and Queen of Poland', in Haiti she was re-imagined as a protector of women and children, as well as the sexually abused as devotees across the Americas have explained to us. Today Ezili continues to have this reputation. She is described by Vodouisants as a fierce mother who protects people, and this has been extended, as we were informed, to the LGBTQ community in more modern times. Yet we should not question the assumption that lesbians did not exist during the colonial era and might have been inexorably drawn into possession by Ezili. We should recall, that even if the term lesbian is a Western construct, that unlike in colonial, Western, Victorian society, in pre-Colonial African communities, such as amongst the so-called 'Amazons of Dahomey', the women warriors of Benin — a region where many slaves were captured from same-sex female relationships were common, as were woman to woman marriages (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999:42).

Mary, as a spiritual mother, was meek, mild and full of mercy. Ezili whilst gentle and compassionate with women and children, was synchronously envisaged as a battle-axe who vindictively exacted vengeance on those who harmed women, children and the abused. Ezili is sacrality suffused with the storm of anger of women who suffered ineffable physical and mental cruelty. The women who were beaten, who were raped, who lost their children, whether to miscarriage or to estate owners who sold them to others and who indubitably maltreated those children. Slave women could neither

forgive nor forget, thus neither can Erzulie. She bears 'the traces of torture and revenge' (Dayan 1998:35). Ezili *Ge Rouje* (red eyes), as Laetitia, a Haitian immigrant living in Florida explained to us, is the shadow of Dantò, Ezili at her most bellicose. She represents abused, irate women over the ages. Ezili is depicted with sanguineous sockets seeping blood and animus. Indeed, we were told by Laetitia, as well as other Voduisants, that one of Ezili's colours, aside from navy blue, is blood red.

In the Polish image, Our Lady of Czestochowa wears seven jewels in her crown. Likewise, Dantò's characteristic number is seven. In Christianity, the number seven is of import, referring to the seven sacraments, the seven deadly sins, the seven joys and sorrows of Mary. Yet again, this element is morphed into maternal terms by bondwomen, whilst also disclosing their dolor, as well as determination. We were told by numerous female Vodouisants both on-line and in person, that Ezili's seven jewels refer to her beloved seven children, but also alludes to the seven jabs of a knife she endured, as the song 'Seven Stabs' relates. This song is well known by most Vodouisants and we recorded variations of the same verses in various locations across the Americas:

Set koud kouto, set koud pwenyad
Prete'm dedin a pou m'al vomi sang mwen
Sang ape koule
Seven stabs of the knife, seven stabs of the dagger
Hand me that basin, I am going to vomit blood
The blood runs down

Prima facie this appears to be a song about Ezili's defeat. As we were told, far from this, it depicts the lwa's power and obdurate ferocity. Notwithstanding multiple stab wounds, she can still hold a basin, vomit blood and persevere. Another song that we noted used during rites related to Dantò also evokes her determination and belligerent nature:

J*ou ma' koule*
Jou ma' koule
Jou ma' koule
Map vomi sang mwen bay yo
The day I am run down
The day I am run down
The day I am run down
I will vomit my blood and give it to them

This song describes how even when worn down and defeated, justice will still be meted out by Ezili. Kerline described to us how 'handing a basin of her blood to someone shows how vexed she is', it also symbolises her readiness to retaliate. The mythology of the seven stabs wrests victory from defeat. We believe that, if seen through the lens of memory, this song could well be interpreted as a record of the torments endured by bondwomen. At a deeper level, it screams defiantly of the mental as well as physical strength of the Black slave mothers, who contested the power of the colonialists whose abuse could spill their blood, break their bones but not crush their spirits. In singing these lines, Vodouisants continue to embody and honour the memory of abused slave

women who resisted being beaten down, mentally, even if they were abused physically by slave drivers.

Polish sources have various hypotheses as to why the portrait of Our Lady of Czestochowa has a scarred cheek. One of the commonly recounted explanations is that these were inflicted by irate Hussites who in 1430 attacked the Pauline Monastery where the icon was housed (Niedźwiedź 2010). Denouncing Marian devotion, they pillaged the shrine, desecrating the Black Madonna with three sword slashes to her right cheek. Haitian mythology has again altered this account to co-align with realities of life in the colony. Voduisants frequently related to us that Ezili Dantò's scar is the result of wounds she received fighting in the Haitian Revolution. Women fought alongside men. Debbie, a Vodouisant from Orlando, told us that Ezili Dantò is believed to have possessed Manbo Marinette, a female revolutionary who fought in the war for independence against France who she has now become syncretised with.

Manbo Marinette's name means dry wood. It is recounted that Marinette was burnt alive for fighting against the French and for her part in the Bois Caiman ceremony that launched the revolution. Marinette is symbolised by Anima Sola, the Catholic image of a female soul amidst the flames of purgatory. Joan of Arc is also used to represent Marinette. As Debbie related to us, the legend is that the *Manbo*'s tongue was cut out by her own people, who feared she would give away her secrets if captured. Those possessed by her spirit can only utter 'ke-ke-ke' or 'de-de-de'. Like Ezili, Marinette is mute.

The fact that slave women chose to create and venerate a spirit that cannot speak, speaks volumes about the muzzled voice of Black women, who, as has been described, have long been depicted as a weak, wordless, non-cogitating, corporal mass. Yet in the guise of Ezili, bondwomen re-appropriated silence as strength, for her secrets cannot be stolen. Her thoughts cannot be extracted and are hers alone. As anthropologists such as Ardener (1975), and Hill (2010) have contended as a 'muted group', women appear inarticulate in the context of their surroundings, as well as vis-à-vis the men who appear to dominate them. Yet women manifest other ways to express themselves. Hill's work on female Sufi religious leaders has revealed that the dissociation of women from their voices in West Africa 'owes … much to West African traditions of power and nobility' (Hill 2018: 205). In Western phallogocentric schemas, the voice has been equated with power. Nevertheless, alternative paradigms evince the prepotency of not needing to speak to deliver a message. This simultaneously evokes the ambiguity and remoteness of silence, avowing a transcendental intimation beyond the mundane modulations of vocalisation, and moreover, in that which cannot be defined, allowing for the preservation of mysteries. And of course, lwa are known as '*misté*'.[9] Ezili Dantò despite, or perhaps because of, her tonguelessness is one of the most beloved and revered *misté* of them all.

Notwithstanding her mysticism, Ezili also evokes the multiplicity of changing sentiments of the slave women who shaped her. As we have seen Ezili's sentiments include rage and maternal love. She is a *cho*, a 'hot' spirit of passion, vengeance, as well as jealousy. Some Voduisants related that the lwa's scars are the result of a quarrel with her sister Ezili Freda, over a lover. She stabbed Freda with her dagger, who then scarred her with the poniard. Contrary to the Marian advocation from which she was

[9] *Misté* means mysteries.

engendered, Ezili Dantò is sensuous and passionate. She is often invoked in love spells, as well as supplicated for conception and childbirth. In Vodou, the Christ child that features in the Polish icon is transformed into Ezili Dantò's lover and son, Ti-Jean, according to some Vodou practitioners. Yet we were also told, that for some, the babe is considered her daughter Anais, also known as Ti Koukoun. Aside from her possible love affair with Ti Jean, Ezili is said to be married to the lwa known as Simbi Makaya, who is the master magician, or Ogou, who is the lwa of power, depending on the Vodou variant. She is intimately linked to the realm of reproduction. Vodouisants see no contradiction between her purity, virginity and her sensuality, promiscuity. Virginity in Vodou cosmology is understood unorthodoxly, rather than a physical condition it implies beauty, a transcendence that 'she is of another world, another reality' (Deren 1970:144). One undefiled by the corruptions of the profane mundane.

Furthermore, as Bádéjọ points out Western, patriarchal paradigms 'confused the relationship between women and nature by demanding that women be virginal and motherly at the same time' (Bádéjo 1998:101). Ezili Dantò displaces unnatural models of femininity replacing them with the lived realities of slave women. This includes not only enjoyment of one's sexuality but also inversely contesting the unwanted claims made on women's bodies by colonisers. Rage is a way of reclaiming one's psychic domains and an affront to those who try to enforce roles such as physical and sexual submissiveness, but sensuality is also a means to assert one's physical autonomy. When those mounted by Ezili dance erotically, their bodies and sexuality are overtaken by the spiritual forces in the form of the divine feminine, dispossessing themselves of male colonial control. If situations of sexual abuse and rape must be understood 'as an affront to the embodied subject …. a sexually specific act that destroys (if only temporarily) the intersubjective, embodied agency and therefore personhood of a woman' (Cahill 2001:13), then possession by Ezili reveals how the spiritual realm may disrupt the extant social order providing an alternative form of embodied, spiritual authority that supersedes all others.[10] Cultural performances of the body may delegitimate the status quo and bolster communities through common appeals to sacred authority.

Ezili Dantò also reveals bondwomen's complex understanding of sexuality, as the lwa subverts gender dualisms. Ezili is tough, hard-working and independent yet at other times she is feminine and maternal, with a penchant for perfume. Sometimes her masculine traits lead her to be seen as androgynous (Conner 2005:143). Vodouisants related to us that she is the defender of lesbians. She may vacillate between feminine and masculine traits. Today, some Vodouisants claim that although Ezili Dantò is a single mother who has given birth, she is bisexual or even a lesbian herself. She is said to oscillate in her attractions towards the genders. It is largely women who are mounted by Ezili's spirit, but the lwa does not discriminate. Male, female or transgender *hounsi* may become a *chwal* for the lwa, regardless of their gender or sexuality, and potentially become re-gendered. In Vodou trance 'self can be substituted temporarily by subjectivity of another gender' (Strongman 2008:14). The lwa's non-dualism and gender fluidity, as well as the complexity of the gender dynamics involved in what Westerners term possession, harkens to Black women's desire to maintain a metaphysics which hails from African origins and desist from accepting the edicts of Catholicism. Whilst Western, Cartesian philosophy situates the self as static and steadfast, African

[10] As Covington-Ward (2016, 3–4) evinces as per possession in the Congo and political authorities.

ontologies, as we have seen, allude to a self that exists as a process, transcorporeal and uncircumscribed in its multiplicities. In the space of the colony, where gendered roles according to Victorian dictates, of active male versus passive female were combined with the racism to lower Black women to the nadir, Ezili Dantò, a lwa that unsettles the precepts of such gender and sexual norms, reveals that bondwomen contested the codes of gender. Ezili morphed a Marian model of meek femininity into a means of subverting submissive status and deconstructing dualistic directives through sustentation of African metaphysics.

Indeed, the items which *hounsi* gift to their *lwa* on Tuesdays, her day, reveal the complexities, memories and fears of the slave women who created Ezili. She is said to have a love for the trappings of femininity, such as a fondness for luxurious French perfume, in particular *Rêve d'Or* and *Magie Noir*. Today, Voduisants typically spritz the scents around her *ogatwa*, altar. She is said by many to like strong cigarettes, rum (preferably Barbancourt), crème de cacao and sometimes wine. She also has a penchant for silver or white gold jewellery, and rings with blue or red stones in them. The desire for such items, is not a 'dream of luxury' (Deren 1970:138), as Dayan has pointed out (1995), but rather a memory and mimicry of the excesses of the colonialists whose opulent lifestyles came at the expense of the backbreaking toil of slave labour. They had the power to deny or grant slave women extravagances, gifting them such items, but these often came at a high cost, in return for sexual relationships that may have been established *nolens volens.* If these led to children, mothers had no rights over them. From our analysis, we believe this explains why, on her *ogatwa,* the *lwa* also asks for masculine, phallic items, usually daggers, knives, swords, and other sharp objects. These, we argue, are re-appropriated as weapons of female protection and retaliation, recalling the many injustices done to slave women. Yet when Ezili also requests dolls, she reveals slave women's longing for maternity, and the gift of childhood innocence. Her *vévé* an ornate heart with a dagger piercing it, evokes the wounded heart of the slave woman, seeking love in a space of death.

In the Polish depictions of the Black Madonna, the Christ child clutches a Bible, which Vodouisants believe represents a coffin. Thanatological symbolism and memento mori pervade Vodou. After all, due to brutal exploitation, physical and mental abuse by the colonisers, life for slaves 'was nasty, brutish and short' (Hobbes 1651). The fragility of life was omnipresent. Death was always near. Adult and infant mortality rates were exceptionally high (Morrissey 1989:120). Yet, death is not something to be feared within the Vodou paradigm, but an 'undeniable existential truth' and 'an imminent homecoming' where spirits welcome the deceased into the eternal paradise of Guinea, a mythologised, Africanised promised land where the ancestors await (Cosentino 2012:136–138).

Conclusion

As Michel and Bellegarde-Smith posit Vodou is a form of humanism (Bellegarde-Smith and Michel 2006, 2013). It provides a practical means of comprehending the world, as well as ways of being in the world. McCarthy Brown asserts that Vodou is not only a 'repository for wisdom accumulated by a people who have lived through slavery, hunger, disease, repression, corruption, and violence—all in excess but also allows

Voduisants to cope with suffering whilst strengthening survivors and survival instincts' (McCarthy Brown 2010:10). Ezili Dantò, although mute like the voice of slave women in Haitian history, tells the story of bondwomen, who ripped from their homes and dehumanised by the horrors of colonialism, reimagined, rehumanised and mysticised the Black Madonna in their own image. Ezili is a window into their memories, vulnerabilities, and identities. Far from being passive and weak, slave women resisted in many ways whether through profane means, such as armed resistance, or in seeking solace in the sacred. They fled into the depths of the forests where they assembled vespertinally with menfolk far from the prying eyes of the colonialists. There they engendered powerful *lwas* such as Ezili Dantò, reclaiming their identities, preserving their past, rewriting the present and unsettling the patriarchal paradigms that impinged upon them.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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