

# Transcendence, Submersion, and Suspension

Fluidities and Spirits in Edouard Duval-Carrié's *Le Monde des Ambaglos*, and Some Reflections on the Haitian Revolutionary Romaine-la-Prophétesse

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*Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries.* ~ Thomas Tweed<sup>1</sup>

Three Vodou spirits appear in Edouard Duval-Carrié's large 2007-2009 sculptural installation *Le Monde des Ambaglos* (*The World of the Underwaters*): Manbo Inan, Agwe, and Èzili Freda. They are suspended/submerged in boats on/under the water, transient and transcendent, trans in other ways, some gendered, amidst and traversing the abode of the *lwa* (spirits) in Haitian Vodou. The crossing of water and the submergence in water are two of the religion's most powerful metaphors/tropes/experiences. This article discusses these matters at length, along with the identities and cults of the three *lwa* featured. In fluid iterations, they cross binary gender norms in ways that reflect Vodou's liberative and expansive meanderings of spirit, sexuality, and space – meanderings that, of course, began in West and West Central Africa, in *Ginen*.

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1 Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006, 54. This chapter is dedicated in loving memory to Paul Farmer, who can go back home now, which means Haiti, I am sure.... From *Ginen* no less, where he recently joined the ancestors. *Kenbe pa lage, frè'm la*.

If in this article there seems to be a confusion between gender and sexuality, it is because the lens operating in the analysis, as shall become more apparent, is the fluidity of spirituality. There are also important Catholic fluidities to consider here, especially a range of Marian devotions. Altogether, our discussion requires attention to both the transatlantic trade of enslaved persons and to the experience of Haitian seafaring migrants (*botpipèl*) on perilous journeys to hopefully better lives, and thoughts about Mary, who is obviously deeply related to the sea in Catholicism (think *Stella Maris*, *La Virgen de Caridad del Cobre*, and Columbus' ship *La Santa María*, which wrecked off the coast of Haiti in 1492). Anthropology, Art Criticism, Religious Studies, and Historiography are the disciplinary approaches entailed in our analysis and interpretation, along with considerations of relevant gender theory.

## Overview

Spirits in dangling boats suspended both under and above the sea. "Although hanging . . . they do not fly but move below the surface of the water."<sup>2</sup> So says the catalog of the museum in which they sway motionlessly about Edouard Duval-Carrié's sculptural installation *Le Monde des Ambaglos* (2007-2009). In viewing and contemplating *Ambaglos*, and in flowing with it/them, one is immersed in water, even though it nowhere appears, the stuff of life, H<sub>2</sub>O. The three spirits – a trinity, like the ultimate symbol of the Christian God, of the *Iwa* of cemeteries, Bawon Samdi, and the three magi – are suspended from the rafters in boats, while we, the onlookers, the contemplatives, find our feet beneath them, beneath us, either wading in a river or standing on the ocean floor. Why are the spirits in boats and why does one of them have illuminated hair, is covered in Catholic saints, and despite being the most feminine of

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2 Museum Nationaal van Wereldculturen, <https://collectie.wereldculturen.nl/#/query/bf38e3f9-5b67-425c-8b0e-45e93e046749>; last accessed June 26, 2021.

all Vodou spirits, why does she look so patently (in conventional terms) “manly”? This chapter seeks to journey with the three *lwa* in contemplative flow with these and related questions in mind. And with the suspended, submerged spirits, in all their transcendent fluidity and inspired by their grace and this stunning sculpture.



**Figure 1** Edouard Duval-Carrié, *Le Monde des Ambaglos* (Mambo Inan), 2007-2009.

## Contexts

Water is one of the most important symbols, idioms, and ritual substances in the history of religion. The Bible opens with this arresting line that in the beginning “the spirit of God was moving across the faces of the water” (Genesis 1:3), while in a real sense the world’s most popular religion begins when Jesus Christ is baptized in the River Jordan by John the Baptist (Matthew 3: 13-17). In the Quran, Allah proclaims that “We made from water every living thing” (21:30). In Bhagavad Gita, perhaps the most beloved of all Hindu scriptures, Krishna (God) says “I am the taste of water” (7:8) and “I am the ocean” (10:24). In the *Pali Canon*, the scriptures that record his teachings, the Buddha compared himself to the lotus flower, which grows atop muddy waters. For “Buddhists, water is said to symbolize purity, clarity, and calmness” (Schelwald-van der Kley and Reijerkerk 2009, 49), while in Chapter Eight of the *Dao de Jing*, the great Chinese scripture on which rests the Daoist religion/philosophy, we read that “A person of great virtue is like flowing water . . . His mind is like the deep water that is calm and peaceful.”

But, what of water in religions that are not scriptural? A gathering of “indigenous” religious leaders in Japan at the third annual World Water Forum conference in 2013 mustered an answer to this question with the following declaration: “We were placed on this earth in a sacred manner . . . to care for water. . . . We recognize, honor water as sacred and as sustaining of all life” (Schelwald-van der Kley and Reijerkerk 2009, 49). Though centrally relevant to the topic of the present chapter, the term “African indigenous religion” is somewhat problematic, for it should be pluralized because “there are many” of them, as Walter van Beek observes, “and they are widely divergent” (van Beek 2021). In the case of Haitian Vodou, which itself derives from a diversity of “African indigenous religions,” especially Fon and Kongo, *and* Roman Catholicism, the religion is itself “widely divergent,” home to countless spirits and a per force daily expanding cult of the dead. To flow with Duval-Carrié’s *Ambaglos*, with the *lwa* hovering above, such historical, cultural,

and especially religious contexts would surely be helpful, so let's wade that way first.

Water is life, and without it we die. Water is also a connector between the living and the dead in Africana religions. Per Rebeca Hey-Colón: "To engage with Afro-diasporic waters . . . is to erode the border between life and death."<sup>3</sup> Life and death. The spiritual and the material. The sacred and the profane. The male and the female. As Karen McCarthy Brown once taught me, to paraphrase, there is no sacred/profane dichotomy in an Africana religion such as Vodou in which people hang laundry to dry in sanctuaries where goats sometimes piss and where women can literally be kings and gay "male" queens can be diviners and receive the utmost respect and occupy the supremist of stations – *and* be faithful Catholics. Like the *Ambaglos*, in fact. In Africana spirituality, such dichotomies are indeed eroded, often by water, as is the dichotomy of male/female. Consider, to wit, the following observation by Sandra Greene about indigenous religion among Ewe-speaking peoples in West Africa:

The ocean was understood to be a seemingly endless body of water over which one could travel to reach a desired destination. But it was also associated with a number of deities that had the power to both generate bumper harvests of fish and to consume through drowning the lives of those who depended on the ocean for their sustenance. . . . These sites and others were also associated with the sacred. They were sacred locations where the separately and intimately related worlds of the material and the spiritual came together (Greene 2002, 1).

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3 Rebeca Hey-Colón, *Channeling Knowledges: Afro-Diasporic Waters in Latinx and Caribbean Worlds*. Austin: University of Texas Press, forthcoming. Cited with author's permission.



**Figure 2** Edouard Duval-Carrié, *Le Monde des Ambaglos (Mambo Inan)*, 2007-2009.

*separately and intimately related worlds*

In this extraordinary sculpture hovering, floating, and drifting above our gaze, we are submerged in water, the spaces and the settings, the spiritualities and sexualities, of and for *Le Monde des Ambaglos* – or, if you like, the very world of the *Ambaglos*, which Duval-Carrié also has depicted elsewhere for example in his piece at the Collection Pérez Art Museum in Miami (2020), titled *La Triste Histoire des Ambaglos*.<sup>4</sup> The world is thus non-dual, and Descartes, Durkheim, and Eliade have been kicked to the curb. Materially speaking, air is full of water and water is full of air – just think of all of those rain clouds up there and those bubbles down there – to say nothing of foam or waterspouts! To be both submerged in water and suspended in the air is a remarkably transcendent experience, and at its heart is fluidity. In the beginning, according to the Bible, there was only water, while the sky is infinite. *There are no dichotomies in endlessness. Nor in water. Nor in air. Nor in transgender experience. Nor in being at one and the same time suspended in the air and submerged in water. The surface of the ocean is often tumultuous, but once you plunge beneath you find yourself in utter tranquility, and yet it is all the same – one sea, one body of water. One us.*

“Feeling a bit at sea”? In reviewing Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley’s book on the Vodou spirit Èzili (2018), the most beloved and popular of all the “female” *Iwa*, *Ezili’s Mirrors*, Gina Athena Ulysse remarks that the reading experience evokes a “feeling a bit at sea, but that’s part of the point.” How so? “Tinsley blurs genres, shifting location, time, and space to double-dutch the line between the sacred and the profane as she delves into self-reflexive Black feminist analysis, literary criticism, and spiritual meditations, all from a queer and performance-oriented standpoint” (Ulysse 2018). In another book, *Thieving Sugar* (2010), Tinsley writes – in a way quite evocative of Tweed’s definition of religion in our epigraph above – of “crosscurrents” that “offer an image of gender and sexual fluidity that ‘works’ in the Caribbean: A ‘wateriness’ that complicates as much as it liberates, whose myriad blues are

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<https://cci.pamm.org/en/la-triste-histoire-des-ambaglos/>

colored as much by stark global realities as by individual promises of beauty and pleasure" (Tinsley 2010, 139). In the *Ambaglos*, this is all quite apparent, as Èzili is as much about beauty and pleasure as anything else, and here we find this beloved *Iwa* not only submerged in aquatic crosscurrents/confluences but also suspended in aerial ones, spiritual ones, and evasively un-gendered ones.

Evocatively, in Kongo religion, one of the cornerstones of Haitian Vodou, the universe is spiral and reciprocal, oriented in sky and across waters. This is reflected in the *yowa*, the tradition's master symbol. The world of the living and the land of the dead are divided by a river, called *nzadi*,<sup>5</sup> which our souls cross when we die on our spiritual journey between and across it. The *yowa* is circular because it traces the cycle of a human being from birth to death, a cycle that symbolically begins at sunrise, which occurs almost always around 6:00 a.m. in equatorial regions. The rising sun is situated on the *nzadi*, the river connecting sunrise and sunset. An upwardly arcing line of ontologically cyclical motion traces our journey from birth to full adulthood, which is also a tracing of the movement of the sun from its rise to noon. Our eternal descent toward sunset proceeds, thus is traced a downward arc in the *yowa* toward the river, and once we are there, around 6:00 p.m., we die. Our sun has set.

But death is not the end, for now it is time for our souls to cross *nzadi* once again, to traverse water, leaving the world of the living and entering the land of the dead, becoming ancestors. Our journey in this land is toward midnight, now symbolized by the rising and sinking moon, flowing along another (now downward) arc in the *yowa*. On this journey, our living descendants keep our souls alive by feeding us, venerating us, naming their children for us, and tending to our graves. It is a dark and cold land, that of the dead, the ancestors, *nsi a bafwa*, hence it is symbolized in

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5 When the Portuguese arrived in the Kongo in the last fifteenth century, some of them learned enough KiKongo to ask the locals what their world was called, and the response was "Nzadi." It was tough for the *blan* to pronounce, hence the evolution of the word Zaire.



Kongolese religion by the color black,<sup>6</sup> while the world of the living that we left at sunset is light and warm, hence symbolized by the color white. The river that divides and connects them is symbolized by the color red.<sup>7</sup> Several things can happen to our souls at this point,<sup>8</sup> but ideally, we will begin to flow along another arc, this one upward, as the moon begins its descent (a paradoxical smashing of another binary), and we approach *nzadi* anew. The circle or the spiral is thereby complete once we reach the river, which happens at sunrise. Some of our souls will cross the river to return to the world of the living, being reborn, in effect, in infants who are our own descendants.

The symbol of our two-world universe is thus a circle, one tracing our path from birth to death to ancestorhood and to rebirth, along a hazy cyclical route that crosses the same red river twice, at birth and at death. Noon and midnight are connected by a vertical line, transected by the horizontal line, the river, that connects sunrise and sunset, placing a cross in the midst of the circle, of our cycle of life, death, and rebirth. This brings to mind a passage from the great poem “Éthiopiennes” (1956) by Léopold Sédhac Senghor:

*Je ne sais en quel temps c'était, je confonds toujours  
présent et passé  
Comme je mêle la mort et la vie. Un pont de douceur les  
relie. (Senghor 1964, 148-49)*

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6 This is oversimplified, as the land of the dead in Kongo religion is itself also called “white” (*mpemba*) because of the white skin that ancestors assume once they leave the world of the living. In the Congo, people engaging with or for the dead in ceremonies often dress in white.

7 This all recalls Victor Turner’s classic discussion of color symbolism in Ndembu religion. Though not directly related to the Fon or the Kongo peoples, it is well worth contemplating here. Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967, 49-59.

8 While living in Zaïre in the 1980s, I asked an elderly man why he was planting pineapples around the graves of his ancestors. He replied with a question: “Have you ever seen a lizard crawling up a pineapple?” To this day, I am a bit mystified by that reply, but it is possible that an ancestor in Central African indigenous religions could return as a lizard, hence perhaps the pineapples are planted to keep the dead near their graves?

And thus, the worlds of the living and the dead come together, and this is all about water. Such is the case in Vodou:

The crossing of water is one of the most powerful symbols in Haitian Vodou. For example, the religion's spirits and ancestors live "across the water" (*lot bò a dlo*) or "under the water" (*anba dlo*); hence commerce between them and their living human devotees implies such traversals of oceans, seas, or rivers.<sup>9</sup>

The symbolic registry of the crossing of water was expanded and infused with unspeakable pain and a resolute spirit of resistance during the Middle Passage, and much later during the incredible efforts of Haitian *botpipèl* to reach the shores of Miami. It should not be lost on anyone with those thoughts in mind that Edouard's Ambaglos are piloting boats! In the summer of 1994, 50,000 Haitians became *botpipèl*, fleeing the gruesome oppression of the Raoul Cédras junta regime, which murdered thousands of political adversaries and employed sexual violence against countless women and girls in a macabre effort to crush dissent.<sup>10</sup> I was living in Haiti at the time and doing human rights work, so I knew the horrors firsthand, having recorded the testimony of hundreds of victims and helped finance the burials of dozens of the dead, trying to help them cross the water to *Ginen*. That summer I was employed by the United States Coast Guard as a Haitian Creole interpreter during Operation Able Manner, the largest search and rescue mission in human history, one purposed to save the lives of *botpipèl* and, at the time, to bring them to the U.S. Naval base at Guantanamo Bay,

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9 Terry Rey, "Vodou, Water, and Exile: Symbolizing Spirit and Pain in Port-au-Prince." In Oren Baruch Stier and J. Shawn Landres (eds.), *Religion, Violence, Memory, and Place*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006, 198-213, 198.

10 On this, see Terry Rey, "Junta, Rape, and Religion in Haiti: 1993/94." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 15, 2, 1999, 73-100. See also Cécille Marotte and Hervé Razafimbahiny, *Mémoire oubliée, Haïti 1991-1995*. Montréal: CIDIHCA, 1997. The Haitian National Truth and Justice Commission also produced a massive report on the persecutions of the Cédras regime: Commission Nationale de la Verité et la Justice, *Si m'pa rele: Rapport de la Commission Nationale de la Verité et la Justice*. Port-au-Prince: Solidarité Internationale, 1997.

Cuba to have their political asylum claims processed.

One morning on the Caribbean Sea, in the Winward Passage somewhere between Haiti and Cuba, the cutter on which I served, the *USCGC Hamilton*, interdicted a wooden Haitian sailboat christened *Merci Jésus*. There were over 400 people crammed into/onto the vessel, which had left the southern Haitian coastal town of Pestel five days earlier, was taking on water, and had run out of provisions. The normal routine during such interdictions was to first send rafts propelled by outboard motors to distribute life preservers to the *botpipèl* and then ferry the migrants to the cutter in groups of about ten. Because this process was taking so long and the *Hamilton* had in the interim been tasked with interdicting other boats, the Coast Guard commander decided to have the cutter and the *Merci Jésus* brought driftingly together, side-by-side, and to drop rope ladders into the latter so that the migrants could climb up into the formidable iron American vessel, some 378 feet long. I was dispatched to explain to the captain of the *Merci Jésus* about this plan, and he hoisted sail as I returned on a raft to the cutter, which began then to slowly approach the Haitian boat. It takes a long time to k-turn such a vessel as the *Hamilton*, and I stood on its edge and simply listened, observed, and cried. As someone who was then writing a doctoral dissertation on the cult of the Virgin Mary in Haiti, as a Marian devotee myself,<sup>11</sup> I was so struck by the following:

By now the skies were bright and *Merci Jésus* was vibrant with glorious hymns of thanks and praise to the Virgin Mary (*Notre Dame de Perpetual Secours, Priez pour vos enfants toujours*: "Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Pray for your children always"), and "Queen of the Seas, Mother of God, Mother of Haiti." The united chanting voices of

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11 Terry Rey, "Classes of Mary in the Haitian Religious Field: A Theoretical Analysis of the Effects of Socio-Economic Class on the Perception and Uses of a Religious Symbol." Department of Religion, Temple University, August 1996. Later published in revised form as Terry Rey, *Our Lady of Class Struggle: The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Haiti*. Trenton and Asmara: Africa World Press, 1999.

hundreds of sun-burnt and exhausted but prayerfully hopeful black people in blaze orange life jackets rose and rose toward the scorching Caribbean sun as the boats slowly approached one another (Rey 2006, 206-207).

Though he himself did not cross the waters in such a boat as the *Merci Jésus*, Duval-Carrié, born in Port-au-Prince in 1954, did forcibly flee Haiti as a child with his parents, then because of the oppression of the Duvalier dictatorship. First it was to Puerto Rico for several years, then to New York, and Canada. Later Edouard lived in France, where he studied at École Normale Supérieure de Beaux Arts, in Paris. Duval-Carrié was part of a wave of Haitian refugees in the 1960s who were targeted for persecution or outright elimination by the brutal regime of Papa Doc.<sup>12</sup> This was not a wave of *botpipèl*, though, being instead generally comprised of people of means rather than peasants or urban slum dwellers (Stepick 1998, 4-5). Today Duval-Carrié's studio is in Miami, in the Little Haiti neighborhood where he is inspirationally surrounded by Haitian churches, Haitian refugees, Haitian murals, Haitian restaurants, and Haitian botanicas.<sup>13</sup> All of these journeys and experiences inspire his art, which has been lauded because, among many other things, it:

challenges the viewer to make meaning of dense iconography derived from Caribbean history, politics and religion, and to encounter the complexities of the Caribbean and its diaspora. His mixed media works and installations present migrations and transformations both human and spiritual. His works ask the viewer to complicate the Western canon and to consider how Africa has shaped the Americas and how the Caribbean has shaped the modern world.<sup>14</sup>

12 Leslie A. Wolff, Bio of Edouard Duval-Carrié. <http://duval-carrie.com/>; last accessed June 18, 2021. See also the entry on Duval-Carrié in Kristin G. Congdon and Kara Kelly Hallmark. *Artists from Latin American Cultures: A Biographical Dictionary*. Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 2002, 74-77.

13 On religion in Little Haiti, see Terry Rey and Alex Stepick, *Crossing the Water and Keeping the Faith: Haitian Religion in Miami*. New York: New York University Press, 2013.

14 <http://duval-carrie.com/art-history-and-slavery-a-discussion-with-the-artist-edouard-duval-carrie/>; last accessed June 18, 2021.

We read in the catalog that the title of Duval-Carrié's *Le Monde des Ambaglos* translates as "The world of the underwater creatures."<sup>15</sup> This is not inaccurate, for the spirits (*Iwa*) depicted here are creatures, just like the people whom they serve and who serve them. In Haitian Vodou, which inspires and permeates so much of this prolific and celebrated Haitian artist's multimodal work, the spirits are believed to come from and live under the water, even as they live in our heads, eat the animals we sacrifice in our temples, dance bawdily with us in cemeteries, marry us, chastise us, and sometimes accompany seafaring migrants on desperate, dangerous voyages across the Windward Passage. Many *botpipèl* told me in the summer of 1994 that they invested a fair bit of time, energy, devotion, and money to ensure that the *Iwa* would watch over them in their passage across the waters. The *Iwa* are thus quite accustomed to traversing the sea, so this makes deep sense.



**Figure 3**  
Edouard Duval-Carrié,  
*Le Monde des Ambaglos*  
(Agwe), 2007-2009.

15 Museum Nationaal van Wereldculturen, <https://collectie.wereldculturen.nl/#/query/bf38e3f9-5b67-425c-8b0e-45e93e046749>; last accessed June 26, 2021.

"*Ambaglos*" is a marvelous word, but also beckons attention. In Haitian Creole, one speaks of the spirits, the *lwa*, as living *anba dlo*, literally "under the water," though, to my knowledge, they are not referred to as such in the nominative; that is, I have never heard the *lwa* referred to as "the underwaters." Duval-Carrié's alternate spelling is a mystery, and perhaps it is best to leave it at that, as often is the case while studying religion.<sup>16</sup> Under the water is, at any rate, "an important metaphor in Vodou," as Benjamin Hebblethwaite explains, but it is so much more, for:

Vodouists become possessed when they make contact with the water because the *lwa* dwell in water. Some Vodou priests with impressive healing powers are said to have lived for a period of seven years under water or in the sea. Eminent oungan [Vodou priests] and famous political figures are said to spend lengthy periods of time under water, where they receive directions from the *lwa* (Hebblethwaite 2012, 230).

Duval-Carrié himself explains that the *ambaglos* and the frequency with which water and boats appear in his work are inspired by his belief that "everything in the African cosmography happens in the water." The artist also has in mind a Vodou funerary rite "of going under the water to go back to the homeland." Back to Africa,

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16 Duval-Carrié has at least one other piece that carries this word in its title, *La Triste Histoire des Ambaglos*. Pérez Art Museum, Miami, Caribbean Cultural Institute. <https://cci.pamm.org/la-triste-histoire-des-ambaglos/>; last accessed June 26, 2021. Here the term is translated as "Underwater Spirits." A catalog for another installation describes Duval-Carrié's sculpture *Sugar Boat* as effectively making "the gallery into an oceanic seascape, and the viewers into *ambaglos*, reverential ancestral Vodou figures that live beneath the water and which Duval-Carrié portrays as bodies floating in vegetal space in *La Vraie Histoire des Ambaglos*," a 2003 sculpture. Lesley A. Wolff, Paul D. Carrasco, and Paul B. Neill, "Ritual Refinements: Edouard Duval-Carrié's Historical Pursuits." In Paul B. Neill, Paul D. Carrasco, and Lesley A. Wolff (eds.), *Decolonizing Refinement: Contemporary Pursuits in the Art of Edouard Duval-Carrié*. Florida State University. Tallahassee: The Museum of Fine Arts Press, 2018, 12-25, 21-22. [file:///C:/Users/krish/OneDrive/Documents/Articles/Decolonizing-Refinement\\_Catalog\\_compressed.pdf](file:///C:/Users/krish/OneDrive/Documents/Articles/Decolonizing-Refinement_Catalog_compressed.pdf); last accessed June 26, 2021.

to *Ginen*. In an interview with Jenny Sharpe, the artist reflects interestingly on this very rite:

It's like sending the spirits back to Africa. From the Haitian point-of-view, there was no way to return. At least when you're dead, you can go back home. The rite is like buying a plane ticket for your dead family. I once saw a massive group of people and a very old woman being carried in a chair on people's backs. She was so old that she requested the rite so that she would be able to go back faster to Africa. And it wasn't near the water at all; it was up in the mountains. So, it is much more of an imaginary thing (Sharpe and Duval-Carrié 2007, 551-569, 563).



**Figure 4** Edouard Duval-Carrié, *Le Monde des Ambaglos (Erzulie Freda)*, 2007-2009.

*At least when you are dead, you can go back home.*

In Vodou, the *lwa*, along with the angels, saints, and the dead, are also called *mystè*, “mysteries,” collectively, and sometimes “devils,” *dyab* or *djab*. With the spelling of the collective name of these dangling spirits in boats being a mystery, so too are they. By name, in fact. And who precisely are these three *ambaglos* in boats in Duval-Carrié’s installation? From left to right, the greenish one is Manbo Inan, the blueish one is Agwe, and the reddish one is Èzili Freda. Manbo Inan seemingly has a limited regional presence in Haiti. Agwe is an obvious choice, as he is the *lwa* who rules the ocean, the seas. Èzili Freda is one of the most popular of all *lwa* in Vodou, and although she is more associated with freshwater than with saltwater, Èzili does live under the sea, like all *lwa*.<sup>17</sup>

### Contemplations

Duval-Carrié’s work is in part motivated by a conviction that “the history of all of the Americas, it has to be replanted and revisited.” In such replantation and revisitation, “exclusion cannot be perpetuated, if not there will be strife, and it’s happening before our eyes.”<sup>18</sup> Thus unsurprisingly Duval-Carrié’s artistry, per Martin Munro, “refers repeatedly, through images of traveling gods, people, ideas, and images, to the strife and tribulation of those forced to uproot” (Munro 2019, 95-102, 95). The sculpture/installation that we contemplate here depicts three of these “traveling gods.” In boats, no less.<sup>19</sup>

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17 In an interview with Benjamin Hebblethwaite, one Vodou priest in fact states that “you will not find Manbo Inan in the south, in the south-east [of Haiti at all].” Benjamin Hebblethwaite, Interview with Welele Noubout, Gonaives, Haiti, March 13, 2013, 18. <https://dloc.com/AA00019346/00001>; last accessed June 27, 2021.

18 Anthony Bagues, “Art History and Slavery: A Conversation with the Artist Edouard Duval-Carrié.” Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice, Brown University, December 1, 2020. <https://vimeo.com/486826423/d8a4a563a8>; last accessed Jun 18, 2021.

19 Beyond Haiti, among the three *lwa* depicted in the installation, Èzili Freda has the most robust presence in the Haitian Diaspora. On this, see Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991, especially 219-257; and Elizabeth McAlister, “The Madonna of 115th Street Revisited: Vodou and Haitian Catholicism in the Age of Transnationalism.” In R. Stephen Warner and Judith G. Wittner (eds.) *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998, 123-160.



Let us now contemplate the *Iwa* in *Le Monde des Ambaglos*:

### Manbo Inan



**Figure 5** Edouard Duval-Carrié, *Le Monde des Ambaglos* (Mambo Inan), 2007-2009.

Though the term *ambaglo* is nearly impossible to find in scholarly studies of Haitian Vodou,<sup>20</sup> *Manbo Inan* is mentioned in a few academic articles or books but has a much more robust narrative in popular fora online. *Manbo Inan* is a *lwa* of considerable importance in three of the largest Vodou temples in Haiti, Nan Soukri, Lakou Badio, and Yatande. They are all located in or around the coastal city of Gonaïves. Luc de Heusch identifies the former as a distinctly Kongolesse-influenced *ounfò*, or temple, and writes of the prominence there of a *lwa* named King Bazou. King Bazou is the object of much devotion at Nan Soukri, home to:

the preferred abode of Jatibwa, a son to whom King Bazou entrusted all the secrets of magic. Bazou himself dwells in a dry well located to the west, towards the road leading to the stream where his wife, Mambo Inan, likes to abide. People bathe in this stream on her feast day, August 15. . . . In the realm of myth, Bazou and his wife represent the divine kingship of the Kongo. . . . his feast day is January 6, whereas that of Mambo Inan, the Kongo queen, is Assumption Day, the feast of the Holy Virgin, the celestial queen. (de Heusch 1989, 290-303, 300)<sup>21</sup>

A queen is this *lwa*, yet interestingly in Duval-Carrié's installation it is Èzili Freda, not *Manbo Inan*, who wears an illuminated crown, atop her decidedly square-jawed head (which very well might be a

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20 Besides the article cited in this chapter's second footnote above and in the preceding endnote, the term only appears, as far as I know, in a couple of other pieces that discuss the work of Duval-Carrié, e.g., Toni Pressley-Sanon, "Exile, Return, Ouidah, and Haiti: Vodun's Workings on the Art of Edouard Duval-Carrié." *African Arts* 46, 3, 2013, 40-53; and Lesley Wolff, "From Raw to Refined: Edouard Duval-Carrié's Sugar Conventions." *African and Black Diaspora* 12, 3, 2019, 355-374.

21 January 6 is the Feast of the Epiphany in Roman Catholicism, also called the Feast of the Three Kings, referencing the three magi, the black one among them being conflated with Bazou in Haitian Vodou. For footage of communal ceremonies for *Manbo Inan*, who is also called *Manbo Limba*, at Lakou Badio and the Yatande temple, see the following videos: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zLXJPdCYRTk>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g8hyk2kChTc>; and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t4788ACaW5g>; all last accessed June 27, 2021.

Marian inflection). But more on her in a moment (these spirits can be jealous and lash out, so we need to balance our attention here!).

Manbo Inan clearly reigns among the supreme *lwa* at the three temples mentioned above, but Hebblethwaite's extensive list of *lwa* does not mention Inan (even if she appears elsewhere in his book), but it does include several other spirits with the title "manbo": "Manbo Ayizan: Manbo Delayi Penmba: Manbo Kalavi; Manbo Lisa; Manbo Lisagbadja; Manbo Sayira; Manbo Sentelèn; Manbo Zila." But no Manbo Inan. The word "*manbo*" in Haitian Creole is usually taken to mean "Vodou priestess." Etymologically the term "may be related to the Fon word *nanbo*. *Nan* (mother) and *bo* (knowledge), when combined, mean 'mother of knowledge.'" Hebblethwaite helpfully adds that "*manbo* is a gendered title of respect for a well-established *lwa*," while in certain instances "the name suggests a deified human manbo" (Hebblethwaite, 2013).

Thus, in Manbo Inan we have a Kongo queen who may be the reincarnation of an actual queen from the African past (perhaps the seventeenth century Ana Nzinga?),<sup>22</sup> from the homeland, who traversed the ocean in a boat – a slave ship, to be more precise, painfully. She also has 101 children, all of them *lwa*, and "is considered to be the mother of all of the children" at Nan Soukri – that is, of all the faithful there, the *sèvitè*. At this renowned Vodou Temple, "she is represented by a snake." There are many *sèvitè* at Soukri who call her "mother" because the sacred compound sprawls across several acres where some 200 huts dot the landscape (Domerçant 2013). As one priestess explains in an interview with Hebblethwaite, Manbo Inan "helps all one hundred and one children. When you go to see her, she helps for anything, for any problem" (Hebblethwaite and Payton 2012, 43).

Just as Inan liberated herself and her children from bondage, so does Duval-Carrié's installation have all three *lwa* liberated from slave ships and traversing the waters below, unchained, each alone

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22 A Haitian Vodou priestess named Èzili Dantò makes this claim in a few places on social media, but without citation or evidence, hence there is no way of knowing how reliable her claim is. For example: <https://groups.google.com/g/tout-haiti/c/KMvdS43B-bIw?pli=1>; last accessed June 27, 2021.

and clearly in charge, while dutifully overseeing an entire people. Manbo Inan is here mostly swathed in yellow, the color of her boat, even though at Soukri she is known to be tolerant of “all colors” of dress at her feast day celebration in August, whereas most *lwa* are very picky about such things (Domergant 2013). During her feast day, she is such a queen that “even if he [King Bazou] has his own dance style,” explains Ronite Louima, “he always dances to the rhythm of his wife during the entire month of August” (Louima 2014, 128). While dancing, she “is the mother of life, life that is the balance of all other elements [of the other dancing *lwa*] in a controlled, directed harmony . . . placing the equilibrium of everyone in a basin of water on the earth” (Louima 2014, 137).

*he always dances to the rhythm of his wife*

### **Agwe**

Agwe is the ruler of the seas. This supremacy in Haitian Vodou is amplified by the belief that all the *lwa* reside under sea (though they are in many places at the same time), that the dead go under the sea for a year and a day before being reclaimed by the living, and by the fact that Vodouists’ African ancestors were forced to traverse the sea, kept alive but by the grace of the king of the sea, Agwe. His “wife” is Lasirenn,<sup>23</sup> a mermaid *lwa* who is one of the most widely depicted figures in Haiti’s rich artistic tradition, having been painted by virtually all of the great Haitian masters and appearing in some of Duval-Carrié’s other work.<sup>24</sup> Though “married” to Lasirenn, Agwe has a mistress in Èzili. “He is represented as a handsome white man,

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23 “Wife” is a term used widely by “Western” anthropologists in their work on Haitian Vodou spirits. More often, in my experience, devotees use the terms “madame” (*madam*) or “girlfriend” (*menaj*) in speaking of such gendered partnerships among the *lwa*. Sometimes people simply say “they walk together” or that one member of the partnership “walks under” or “walks behind” the other. On notions of marriage in the Caribbean and West Africa, see Cécile Accilien, *Rethinking Marriage in Francophone African and Caribbean Literatures*. Lanham: Lexington, 2018.

24 For a discussion of Lasirenn’s Catholic Shrine in northern Haiti, see Deborah O’Neil and Terry Rey, “The Saint and Siren: Liberation Hagiography in a Haitian Village.” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 41, 2, 2012, 166-186.

and his *vèvè* is a warship named *Imamou*,” notes Hebblethwaite.<sup>25</sup> “In temples dedicated to *Agwe*, a small boat is suspended from the ceiling” (Hebblethwaite 2013, 207-208). His Catholic counterpart or representation is St. Ulrich, whose hagiography depicts the canonized tenth-century Bishop of Augsburg holding a fish.<sup>26</sup>

It thus seems altogether fitting that Duval-Carrié has *Agwe* in a blue boat, one smaller than those in which *Manbo Inan* and *Èzili* ride on at once above and beneath the sea, and he lags slightly behind them in the installation. Strikingly different, too, is that whereas the other *lwa* have their arms raised and outstretched, instead of “arms” *Agwe* has two exceptionally long tentacles that reach from his sacred shoulders to the ocean floor. Here he is a crownless king, but his thick tufts of flowing hair are raised, as if *Agwe* is on a swift descent to the bottom of the sea. At the descendent, surrendered end of his tentacles are two green hands that are clasping at dried flowers, perceivably retrieving an offering.

Rendering offerings to the *mystè* is one of the most common practices in Haitian Vodou. Coins are left at crossroads for *Legba*, bottles of rum left on graves for the dead, eggs and salt left on altars for the serpent *lwa* *Danbala*, etc. Unique to devotion to *Agwe*, though, is a moving and elaborate ritual of offerings brought to the sea on *bak Agwe*, *Agwe’s Barque*. This ceremony, in which a small raft is constructed and loaded with offerings for the *lwa*, is beautifully described by Maya Deren. Prior to going to sea, the *sèvitè* in this instance sacrifice a ram who had been first purified and covered in indigo to make the animal appear blue, *Agwe’s* sacred color. The *bak* is thus blue and stocked with a range of gifts for the *lwa*, like “vegetables, cakes, maize, bananas, pigeons, rams, chickens, etc.,

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25 A *vèvè* is a symbol that represents a Vodou spirit, often traced on the ground with chalk, flower, or cornmeal during communal rituals. On *vèvè*, see Karen McCarthy Brown, “The *Vèvè* of Haitian Vodou: A Structural Analysis of Visual Imagery.” Ph.D. diss., Department of Religion, Temple University, 1976.

26 Legend has it that Ulrich did not actually hold a fish but rewarded a messenger from the Duke of Bavaria with a goose leg, one that miraculously turned into a fish on Friday, a day on which Catholics generally refrain from eating the meat of land animals. Alfred Woltmann, *Holbein and His Time*. Trans. Fanny Elizabeth Burnètt. London: Richard Bentley and Sons, 1878, 85.

etc.” (Deren 1953, 123). Once the *sèvitè* have prepared the *bak*, they gather with it in a small sailboat and embark out to sea with the *bak* on their own boat, chanting hymns all the while. At an opportune moment, as they arrive over the island beneath the sea that is Agwe’s abode (*zilet*), they lower the *bak* onto the surface of the water for the beloved *Iwa*:

Our boat lurched and righted itself and then, below us, and already behind, the barque was drifting swiftly away in our backwash. It looked incredibly lovely, the high-piled offerings, crowned with the sparking white cake, drifting in the deep blue sea. As we all watched it silently, it seemed to hesitate to a stop, and then, as if a great hand had reached up from below and grasped it, it disappeared abruptly into the quiet water. (Deren 1953, 130)

### Èzili Freda

From a purely aesthetic point of view, Duval-Carrié’s Èzili in this installation is altogether striking and quite provocative, especially for her adornments, to say nothing of the crown of Christmas tree lights atop her head. A “creature” from beneath the sea, Èzili Freda is a goddess, Vodou’s mother goddess, the Virgin Mary. The *Iwa* in Haitian Vodou, and the dead, are all associated with aquatic submersion and traversal, and some also transcend gender, being able to “marry” humans of whatever gender assignment or identity. In the installation her boat is red, which is the color of traversal in Kongolese cosmology, to recall – the color of the river that one crosses into life and death and the transcendent, cyclical return thereto. The catalog says that the boat is “orange” (maybe it’s a Dutch thing!) in color, but I see red, and I see traversal, not just in the boat but in the river, *nzadi* in Kikongo.

When one considers how profoundly and stereotypically feminine and cisgender Èzili Freda is in Haitian Vodou, Edouard’s “Erzulie Freda” comes off as quite de-gendered and radical: An assertive square head, no perceivable breasts bulging from her blouse, outstretched arms, as if saying “I am in charge here,”

almost like George Washington crossing the Delaware River, a risky metaphor perhaps, but one that keeps present the revolutionary role that the *Iwa* played in both the Haitian revolution and abolition. Blond hair, a white-washed, somewhat orange face that almost evokes another US-American president who is here doomed to go unnamed. Gone is the perfume (I am guessing), the lace, the fine wines, the pink dress, while here is a figure who appears, well, at the risk of stereotyping or mansplaining, masculine. It all seems more congruous with the symbology of the fiery Èzili Dantò than the cool Èzili Freda, though in either manifestation – especially Freda – Èzili is very much the patron *Iwa* “of effeminate gay men,” as Elizabeth McAlister notes, a spirit who “is often considered to be their *mèt tèt* (patron spirit, literally ‘master of the head’).”<sup>27</sup> The boat, the concentration, and the scapulars of Dantò on this Èzili Freda are thus perceivably not only de-gendering, but also de-pacifying.

Such was the Haitian appropriation of the Virgin Mary during the Revolution – transforming a saint referred to by Mary Daly as “the archetypal rape victim” into the militaristic godmother of black insurgents,<sup>28</sup> a mother goddess who stridently endured being slashed by machetes or sabers on her cheek in the name of human liberation (Isherwood and McEwan 2001, 69). Èzili has scars. Dantò’s main Catholic representation is Our Lady of Czestochowa, the Polish Madonna, a black Madonna with two scars on her right cheek. For, “Czestochowa was wounded while fighting alongside the insurgent Africans in Saint-Domingue, hence many Haitians allude to the scars on this Black Madonna’s face as a result thereof” (Rey, 2023). Scarred, motherly, flirtatious, sexy, luxurious, torn, worn,

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27 Elizabeth McAlister, “Love, Sex, and Gender Embodied: The Spirits of Haitian Vodou.” In Joseph Runzo and Nancy M. Martin (eds.), *Love, Sex, and Gender in the World’s Religions*. Boston: Oneworld Publications, 2000, 129-145, 132. On Èzili and queerness, and many related matters and for broader context, see also Randy P. Connor, with David Hatfield Sparks, *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Participation in African-Inspired Traditions in the Americas*. Binghamton: Harrington Park Press, 2004.

28 For work on rethinking rape victims as victim-survivors see Régine-Michelle Jean-Charles’s *Conflict Bodies: The Politics of Rape Representation in the Francophone Imaginary*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2014.

and resilient is Èzili Dantò. And there she is, Czestochowa, dangling from Èzili Freda's neck amid a host of ribbons and scapulars. Look closely and you shall see. Two of them, actually: a black Madonna with scars on her cheek, testimony to the triumph of the Haitian Revolution and the role of the Virgin Mary therein.

The spirit's head illuminates. Illumination evokes revolt. World history's only successful national slave revolution was led by Africans who had been forced to cross the water, launched, as legend has it, by Boukman Dutty. Boukman had been a slave in Jamaica before finding himself sold again and enslaved in Saint-Domingue, and Cécille Fatiman, who, judging by her name, was likely a Muslim from West Africa. This was their jihad,<sup>29</sup> and it was initiated on the evening of August 14, rallying in a boisterous Vodou ceremony in the woods through to the next morning, August 15, 1791, the feast day of Our Lady of the of the Assumption, hence of Èzili and of Manbo Inan. Our Lady of the Assumption was, for all intents and purposes, the patron saint of slavery in Saint-Domingue, as the French named the Catholic churches in the colony's most important cities for her: Cap-Français, Port-au-Prince, Les Cayes. The sad irony of this is noted by Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique: "The symbol of the bodily ascension of the Virgin, the purity of this carnal representation, would seem fundamentally opposed to the physical violence committed against thousands of enslaved men and women" (Beauvoir-Dominique 1991, 14). Prior the Spanish had "imposed Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception as the colony's reigning Virgin," though that all changed when Hispaniola became two colonies in 1697, one French and one Spanish (Rey 2002, 519-

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29 In a classic study, Eugene Genovese refers to the Haitian Revolution as a "holy war." Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. New York: Random House, 1976, 175. On jihad in West Africa and the Americas during the revolutionary age, see Paul E. Lovejoy, *Jihad in West Africa during the Age of Revolutions*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016. On Haiti in this regard, see also Susan Buck-Morss, *Haiti, Hegel, and University*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018. There are reasons to believe that the ceremony was largely, if not entirely, mythic, but it is important to remember that religion is more about meaning than truth, I would argue. On doubts about the story of *Bwa Kayiman*, see Léon-François Hoffmann, "Un mythe nationale: La ceremonie du Boi Caïman." In Gérald Bathélemy and Christian Girault (eds.), *La République haïtienne: États des lieux et perspectives*. Paris: KARTHALA, 1993, 434-448.



545, 531). Both places were the unwelcome home of Africans and Creoles, who would go on to make the former their own, as an independent republic, as Haiti, a true gift to the world and to all who care about humanity and justice.

### **Revolution, the Virgin's Godson, Botpipèl, Gender as Sacred?**

The Virgin Mary's godson was one of the most militarily successful leaders during the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution, Romaine-la-Prophétesse. Though it is unclear whether Romaine was also a devotee of Èzili, certainly some of his African followers would have been. He himself was a "passionately devoted" Catholic who communicated with his saintly godmother. To me, someone who has spent literally decades thinking about and intensively studying *him*, Romaine is evoked by Duval-Carrié's sculpture, as a mystic who radicalized the Virgin Mary to legitimate a violent revolt against racist oppression in Saint-Domingue, in 1791/1792. Romaine also dressed and wafted about the world with the appearance of a "woman," such that one contemporary observer called him a "hermaphroditic tiger" (Rey 2017, 52). In my book on Romaine, I stuck to the pronoun usage of his period, in which all the references to the prophetess in the primary sources use he/him/his. Furthermore, a few of the leading scholars of queer religion in my field, religious studies, as well as my editors at Oxford, cautioned against anachronistically retrojecting more recent twentieth and twenty-first century identities nomenclatures such as "transgender" or "gender fluid" to identify anyone in a distant historical period – which in an earlier draft of the book manuscript I had done, but I revised in accordance with their advice. This said, the theoretical frameworks, which I have weaved into my piece, do resonate with much of my work in this article. Even if more recent theorizations do offer promising ways to rethink the historical, my own work argues that the critical category of analysis that Romaine deployed was the sacred, and as such gender in the context of my article is an expression of

the sacred.<sup>30</sup> As noted throughout, this present article purposefully engages and cites scholars who are working to think gender theory generated from the “West” in conversation with theoretical spaces as per the Kwayama or Vodouyizan.

In both West African and West Central African contexts, Romaine’s cross-dressing would be conceived spiritually, where the primary theoretical framework is not gender but rather the sacred, which may be read materially through the sartorial and the gestural (Rey 2017, 51-53). Consider the likelihood that Romaine, though born in the Caribbean, was the child of Central African or West African parents (more likely the former) and raised in a way that imbued him with their spiritual practices. As James Sweet explains, “Among the Kwayama, an ethnic group of planters and herders from Angola . . . many spiritual leaders wear women’s clothes” (Sweet 1996, 184-202, 191), while J. Lorand Matory offers an echoing observation from West Africa (among the Yoruba, to be specific): that “initiates of the possession priesthood are called *iyáwó*, or “brides” of the gods, whether those initiates are male or female” (Matory 2008, 2008, 513-558; 519-520). On a broader note that also deserves consideration in this regard, Roberto Strongman reminds us that: “The recurrence of the prefix “bi-” in reference to location, desire, and behavior is important as it underscores how the unique sexual manifestations that these religions [i.e. Candomblé, Santería, and Vodou] afford are grounded in the scattering of their population on both sides of the Atlantic” (Strongman 2019, 72). I contend that anything “bi” or “trans” about Romaine was indeed a transatlantic “scattering” that was deeply religious in evocation, drawing on social and legal contexts whose conceptions of gender

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30 See Vanessa Agard-Jones, “What the Sands Remember. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, 2-3, 2018, 325=346; Erin L. Durban, *The Sexual Politics of Empire: Postcolonial Homophobia in Haiti*. Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2022; Kaiama L. Glover, *A Regarded Self: Caribbean Womanhood and the Ethics of Disorderly Being*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021; Charlotte Hammond, *Entangled Otherness: Cross-Gender Fabrications in the Francophone Caribbean*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018; Régine Michelle Jean-Charles, *Looking for Other Worlds: Black Feminism and Haitian Fiction*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2022; Régine Michelle Jean-Charles, *Conflict Bodies: The Politics of Rape Representation in the Francophone Americas*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2014;; and Roberto Strongman, *Queering Black Atlantic Religions: Transcorporeality in Candomblé, Santería, and Vodou*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019.

do not fit into a “Western” historical and especially legal context.

As such, I have taken seriously Michel Foucault’s caution that: “Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries to gradually uncover” (Foucault 1990, 105). But what if we de-centralize, or de-Europeanize, Foucault’s remarkable discussion in *The History of Sexuality* about how “alliance” conceptually precedes “sexuality?” Just as Jane Gordon has so marvelously demonstrated the power and theoretical profits of “creolizing” Rousseau by way of reading Fanon (Gordon 2014), let us take a moment to try to do so here with Foucault on the notion of “alliance” (Foucault 1990, 108). Though scholars who work in postcolonial theory have found much benefit in Foucault, neither he nor Rousseau ever wrote seriously about the Global South – in fact, the French white privilege that enabled their work in the first place depended in large part on the exploitation thereof, including the enslavement of Africans and Creoles in Saint-Domingue, like Romaine’s wife, Marie Roze. So, let us liberate Foucault from his own Eurocentric position of white privilege for a moment and do a bit of spiritual creolizing work here. In the case of Romaine-la-Prophétesse, I declare that this remarkable person’s sartorial and spiritual expressions deeply informed and inspired one another. And, that the notion of alliances in Foucault, which I find to be very compelling, once creolized, can lead us to consider not just material, intimate alliances, but also and more so spiritual ones. In Romaine’s case, that was with the Virgin Mary, for whom he in fact named all three of the children that he had with Marie Roze, a mixed-race former slave.

*Sexuality must not be thought of as a natural given*

As to which icon of the Virgin Mary was dearest to Romaine, “the possibilities were relatively few: Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception . . . Our Lady of the Assumption . . . Our Lady of the High Grace (Altagracia)” (Rey 2017, 59). Because the prophetess had been born and raised on the Spanish side of the island, migrating to

Saint-Domingue sometime in the 1770s to seek fortune as a coffee planter, chances are that personally Altagracia was his Blessed Mother of choice. She was, after all, original to his native homeland, having first appeared there, in Higüey, in 1502, while most likely Romaine had been baptized as an infant at a church named for her (Rey 2017, 49).

These considerations of Marian preferences/perceptions/leanings sway my reading/viewing of Duval-Carrié's *Erzulie Freda*, while at the same time complicating it. Some of Duval-Carrié's most famous earlier paintings were deeply political in nature and form, portraying a violent despot like Duvalier and related atrocious injustices in Haitian history. But over time, the artist came to realize that "a level deeper was reached when the fabulous world of spirits, old and new, real and imagined, made themselves felt at different planes of consciousness . . . all conveying a sense of foreboding inspiring the nebulousness from whence they came" (Duval-Carrié, 2009). Èzili first came from West Africa to Saint-Domingue on ships in the hearts, minds, and souls of enslaved devotees. Eventually she made her way to Miami, often on other boats like the *Merci Jésus* in the hearts, minds, and souls of her unchained but otherwise somewhat enslaved devotees. So, it is altogether apt that Duval-Carrié's sculpture depicts this lwa, one of the most beloved in Haitian Vodou, in a boat, suspended in the air, for Èzili watches over us sailingly, driftily, sexually, and motherly, much like the Virgin Mary, with whom she is so deeply conflated in the religion. In this vein, it is well worth considering how extensively the Virgin Mary influences conceptualizations of Èzili, who, like her spiritual counterpart Ochún in La Regla de Ocha (Santería), is a freshwater spirit whose confluations with the Virgin Mary propel her to hover over and ply across saltwater as well. In Ocha, Ochún is affiliated with the Marian icon of Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre, Cuba's patron saint, who rises above the sea and over three fishermen in a boat on turbulent waters, placing a freshwater goddess atop the ocean (Tweed, 1997; Rey 2000).<sup>31</sup> Such occurs

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31 On Caridad in Miami, see Thomas A. Tweed, *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Re-*

for Èzili in her manifestation as Lasirenn, Saint Philomena, and with the Virgin Mary's sprawling associations with the ocean. So, perhaps Catholicism is to thank for Duval-Carrié's placing Èzili on a ship. After all, Catholicism is so integral to Vodou that the *lwa* themselves are Catholic and sometimes ask their devotees to take them to receive Communion (Métraux 1972: 332).

The artist wonders what would become of Èzili once she reached the shores of Miami with her *botpipèl*: "Where will the goddess of love, Erzulie Freda Dahomey, show up? In the local strip club?" (Duval-Carrié, 2009). Here, Duval-Carrié is presumably reflecting on his 1997 painting *Le débarquement à Miami Beach*, from a marvelous series entitled *Serie migration*. *Le débarquement* depicts several Vodou spirits as *botpipèl* who've just made it to the shores of Biscayne Bay, in Miami, with the Rickenbacker Causeway and Miami's glitzy city lights in the distant background. Donald Cosentino notes about this painting that "Èzili Freda is swaying like Carmen Miranda down by the beach. What a motley crew of boat gods, washed-up revelers on Ash Wednesday morning" (Cosentino 1994, 54-55). In the fall of 2006, Duval-Carrié and I lectured together at the University of Central Florida and the Orlando Museum of Art, where he had a major exhibit at the time. He then explained to me that in this painting Èzili is lagging behind the other *lwa* on the shore because she needed to straighten her dress and make sure she looked good for her new journey in life... one that perhaps weaved its way through a strip club.

*Where will the goddess of love . . . show up?*

A strip club in Miami Beach might hardly be a place that a more traditional form of Catholicized devotion would expect to find the Virgin Mary, especially one who arrived in her new world on Ash

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*ligion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. On the Virgin Mary, Africana spirits in the Americas, and sexuality, race, and gender, see also Terry Rey, "The Virgin's Slip is Full of Fireflies: The Multidimensional Struggle over the Virgin Mary's *legitimierende Macht* in Latin America and its U.S. Diasporic Communities." *University of California-Davis Law Review* 33, 3, Spring 2000, 955-972.

Wednesday, but Èzili is not at all virgin and she both celebrates and flaunts her sexuality, being “the sensual and elegant, flirtations and frustrated one,” as Brown informs (Brown 1991, 220). Furthermore, “Although they are often called *sen-yo* (saints), they are not saintly types in the traditional Christian way.” They “are larger than life but not other than life” (Brown 1991, 6). There are different manifestations of Èzili that are conflated with and represented by a range of icons of the Virgin Mary, but, for Brown:

the Ezili are much closer to the human drama. In addition to providing examples of love, care, and hard work, they model anger – righteous and raging – power and effectivity, sensuality, sexuality, fear, frustration, need, and loneliness. In doing so they become mirrors that give objective reality to what would otherwise remain, as it does in so many cultures, women’s silent pain and unhonored power. (Brown 1991, 221)

## Conclusion

In their remarkable documentary *Des hommes et dieux* (2002), Anne Lescot and Laurence Magloire follow several transgender women who find refuge from and inspiration for resistance against homophobia in their religion, Haitian Vodou (Lescot and Magloire, 2013). They also find empowerment, thus honored as devotees, while on pilgrimage to springs and waterfalls, two of the most beloved dwellings of the *Iwa*, like the stream at Soukri where Manbo Inan resides. The film opens with a striking comment by Blondine: "If I can't be who I am living in Haiti, I would rather die or maybe move to the Dominican Republic." Leave Haiti, as many have done over the last seventy years, though usually for other reasons, mostly political or economic, like Duval-Carrié himself. Blondine can be herself in Haiti, though, thanks to Vodou and to Èzili. Her friend Denis notes that she "must dance for them [the *Iwa*] and feed them, and then they can do things for me." Èzili also made them who they are, trans and deeply spiritual, and in some cases *manbo*.

*feed them, and then they can do things for me*

The *Ambaglos* in Duval-Carrié's marvelous sculptural installation are *Iwa*, spirits in Haitian Vodou who live under the sea, though here floating above the surface on colorful boats. One of them, Èzili Freda, cherishes being lavished with gifts, just as she lovingly showers us with hers. Flattery will get you everywhere with Freda, maybe even to the heights of blissful carnal intimacy, as some devotees sleep with her each Tuesday and/or Thursday night – men, women, straight, gay, trans alike. Her presents (and presences) come in many forms beyond sensuality, though, especially like divine protection and one's very identity as a person who walks, on whatever path, and bathes, in whatever body of water, with spirits. In Edouard's piece, it is almost as if she has pushed her lover, Agwe, to the ocean floor, saying something like this: "Go and get your flowers," while rising and opening her arms

to us children. Manbo Inan does the same for her kin. When the sea king's tentacles stoop so low in the water and the girls' arms reach so high to the sky from their yellow and red boats, leaving him behind in his little blue one, gender is confluently disrupted in such elegant, provocative, and vibrant ways.



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*We publish these articles as the museums consolidate into one nominal entity, het Wereldmuseum: since the articles were written between 2020 and 2023, they do not yet reflect the March 2023 name change.*