

# Ezili and the Subversion of the Holy Virgin in Edwidge Danticat's

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Although religion is not in the forefront of Edwidge Danticat's *oeuvre*, Christian allusions recur to varying degrees in each of her major works. Catholicism, often evoked in the image of the Blessed Virgin, dominates these references. However, in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) one perceives a pattern that suggests that the Christian references are subverted by a more dominant source of spiritual vitality: Vodou. The power play between these two religious traditions is particularly evident in the novel through the juxtaposition of the figure of Ezili, a Vodou goddess, with the Virgin Mary. The contrasting images of womanhood evoked by these iconic figures cannot be ignored, particularly because of the mother-daughter relationships that play such a vital role in Danticat's works. Like-wise, the subversion of Christianity in favor of Vodou defines salvific possibilities for Danticat's characters, namely reclamation of their cultural roots.

Myriam J. A. Chancy establishes a model of surreptitious revolution that is comparable to Danticat's undermining of Catholicism. Rejecting Western versions of feminism, Chancy argues that its practitioners often make presumptions about women's struggles that are not representative of women in many parts of the Third World who are

forced to consider issues more immediate than “wealth, health, and legal rights” (35).<sup>1</sup> The result is a form of feminism that is

ironically born of differing cultural matrices brought into conflict through the domination of one culture by another. The oppressed culture survives by resisting the cooptation of its own values at the same time that it adopts a mask of conformity (a mask not to be confused with the Fanonesque internalization of the oppressor’s norms that all but destroy the oppressed’s sense of self). When that mask is removed, revolutionary praxis is born. (38)

Chancy goes on to suggest that the paradigm of revolution found in many Haitian women writers is one determined by this sense of masking. The Haitian woman adapts a persona that conforms to the dominant culture’s expectations so that she may go about peacefully, but all along, rather than accepting that persona, the individual retains her own identity, merely waiting for the appropriate time to throw off her mask and emerge in the fullness of her self.

Such a religious unmasking takes place in Danticat’s works. While many of her characters participate in the practice of Catholicism, Danticat’s portrayal of them in their homes and private lives shows that it is not the Christian faith that bolsters them against the hardships and violence that they face, but the relationships that they share with their family members, both living and dead, and the recognition of a common cultural heritage. Danticat’s focus on generations of women

<sup>1</sup>Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert makes a similar observation about the incongruity of Western feminism in the context of women writing in the Third World, particularly the Caribbean: “One resonant critique of Caribbean female writing, from the postcolonial theoretical viewpoint, is that of impatience with its characters’ finding virtue and triumph in their ability to just come to terms with the limitations of their reality and endure. It goes against the theorists’ grain. A central feature of Western theory as it relates to women is that of the emergence of a fully emancipated woman out of the mire of patriarchal culture. . . . But you can scan your memories in vain for similar images in the Caribbean and conclude that we lag behind the United States when it comes

evokes a key component of the traditional rural family and, by extension, of Vodou. Especially before migration to larger cities occurred, the typical organizing unit was the *lakou*, a community generally made up of the extended family (Laguerre 46–47). It was in this familial context that Vodou was practiced, and many of the *lwa* (spirits) were directly tied to ancestors. According to Karen McCarthy Brown,

The Rada *lwa* are intimate spirits who surround one with their protection on a day-to-day basis. Their protective power is of a noncoercive sort and is said to reside mainly in spiritual knowledge. . . . Their protective role is further articulated in the fact that they are socially familiar beings who are well known and trusted. They are the elders of the family, and therefore they are sometimes experienced as stern and austere; their fundamental benevolence, however, is never doubted. (67)<sup>2</sup>

Danticat's more direct references to Vodou in the figure of Ezili serve to reinforce such cultural leanings.

The extension of Chancy's theory of "unmasking" to the religious realm can be more fully appreciated in the context of the relationship between Catholicism and Vodouism, especially as it developed in Haiti. While the formation of Vodou is complex and scholars seem to have varying views regarding its development, most concede that it derived primarily from the religions of western Africa as they were transported during the slave trade. Likewise, most agree that Catholicism, the dominant religion of those participating in western expansionism in the West Indies and one forced upon slaves, also played a role in the evolution and adaptation of Vodou to the New World. The main contention seems to be, though, the degree to which Catholicism influenced the African religions that were to form Vodou. Some scholars insist that Vodou is a purely syncretic religion; that is, it blends characteristics of both western African religions and Catholicism, forming a

<sup>2</sup>Brown goes on to contrast the Rada *lwa* with the Petro *lwa* who are identified as "strangers" and who "put stress on the use of coercive power and the pursuit of self-interest" (68).

unique religion. However, Leslie G. Desmangles claims that Catholic traits are much less fully integrated. Positing a theory of symbiosis as opposed to strict syncretization, he argues that

[t]his incorporation of elements from Africa and Europe has often been referred to by scholars as syncretistic, as the fusion of Catholic and African religious traditions. The present study describes the nature of this syncretism—that is, the relation between these religious elements—as symbiosis. As used in this book, *symbiosis* has a different meaning from that in the biological sciences, where it refers to the living together of dissimilar organisms in mutually beneficial relationship. . . . In its ethnological sense, symbiosis refers to the spatial juxtaposition of diverse religious traditions from two continents, which coexist without fusing with one another. Just as tiny parts of a stained-glass window are juxtaposed to form a whole, so too parts of the Vodou and Catholic traditions are juxtaposed in space and in time to constitute the whole of Vodou. (7–8)

Given this understanding, the traditions of western Africa adapted themselves to certain practices and rituals of the Catholic Church but retained an identity all their own. Still, as Terry Rey insists, the elements of Catholicism were not necessarily adopted without sincere interest in ritual and symbolism (214). After all, one of the strengths of traditional African religions, according to Rey, is their adaptability (213). However, while acknowledging the adaptability of African religions, Deborah Wyrick argues that appropriations from Catholicism did not necessarily imply a giving in to the dominant culture. In commenting on the assimilation of Catholic saints in Vodouism, for example, she notes potential revolutionary implications:

Representing the orishas and *lwas* through received imagery of Catholic saints may not be simply reactions to oppression. Repeating parts of the dominant material culture with “a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” may also be a way of appropriating [neo-]colonial power, creating a “transitive resistance” to that

power, and strengthening group identity.

Just as in Chancy's paradigm, Wyrick maintains that the subjugated religion retains distinct characteristics and thus the potential to unmask and demonstrate itself, separate from the dominant one.

While Desmangles' notion of "symbiosis" is primarily descriptive of the relation between Catholicism and Vodou, if one extrapolates from its larger implications the revolutionary potential that both Chancy and Wyrick conceive, Danticat's references to both religions in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* gain significance. For example, Danticat iterates the conflation of Ezili and Mary, the mother of Christ. Describing her grandmother's room, the narrator comments,

Her room was crowded with old baskets, dusty crates, and rusting steel drums. On an old dresser was a statue of Erzulie [alternate spelling of Ezili], our goddess of love who doubled for us as the Virgin Mother. Her face was the color of corn, and wrapped around her long black hair was a tiny blue handkerchief. (113)

Ironically, while the connection between these two religious figures is common in Vodou, the virginal humility of Mary contrasts with the sexual promiscuity of Ezili (Rey 227). In fact, the only consistent characteristic shared by Mary and Ezili is the protection they offer their adherents. The conflation itself, according to Rey, occurred mainly because of commonalities between Catholic iconography and descriptions of the *lwa*. He further suggests that the assimilation of Mary with Ezili is primarily—and simply—the result of their both being women (217).<sup>3</sup>

Thus despite any syncretic connection between Ezili and Mary, Dan-

<sup>3</sup>Defending this position, Rey argues that "[Mary's] identification with Ezili . . . is superficial and of far less weight than most writers on Vodou would be willing to admit. In several hundred interviews, very few of my informants have expressly identified Ezili and Mary as one and the same. For most of those who admitted to revering both, my impression is that each operates as distinct in their belief system—as parts of a mosaic consisting of Catholic and

ticat is legitimately able to leverage incongruities between the two, demonstrating a marked preference for the Vodouistic version of the icon. For example, when Sophie, the protagonist of *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, seeks solace from an identity crisis she suffers through, it is clearly not to any form of the Virgin that she turns, but to Ezili. After all, Sophie's crisis of identity is in part sexual, stemming from her mother's "testing": in order to ensure her daughter's purity, Martine inserts her finger into Sophie's vagina to ensure that the hymen is still intact. Seeking for healing from the trauma caused by this abuse, Sophie turns not to the virginal Mary who embodies everything her mother and culture dictate she should be; instead, she, along with other victims of sexual abuse, participates in a ceremony that imitates Vodouistic rituals. Marie-José N'Zengou-Tayo points out that the white dresses and headties that the women wear during this meeting are a variation of the outfits worn by the "hounsi," servants of Vodou gods (131). Significantly, Sophie brings the statue of Ezili, given to her by her grandmother, to this ceremony. However, in the context of the ceremony there is no mention of Ezili's relation to Mary; Ezili exists as a distinct figure, a fact emphasized by the Vodouistic qualities of the enactment.<sup>4</sup>

Chancy downplays these cultural references. Focusing on Danticat's exposure of the sexual oppression experienced by Haitian women, often at the hands of their own people, she attributes it to a cultural climate that retains certain ideals of women and expectations of sexual purity:

Sophie cannot reclaim her identity because her *Haitiennité* demands that she deny her desires as well as her need for sexual autonomy.

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to aid the believer in the struggle of life" (219). Rey concludes that the identification between the two figures is "merely visual and emotive and does not penetrate to a cognitive level" (221).

<sup>4</sup>Ironically, while N'Zengou-Tayo points out the ceremony's tie to Vodou rituals, she also maintains that evocations of Ezili must not be considered in isolation of Mary: "We know therefore that the two [Ezili and Mary] are interchangeable in the stories. When Sophie's grandmother gives her a 'statue' of Erzulie, we know that she gives her a statue of the Virgin Mary" (131). Based particularly on what Rey asserts, however, N'Zengou-Tayo's conclusion

This implicit denial of self . . . leads Danticat to reject those cultural markers most associated with Haitian Afrocentricity, such as vodou and matriarchal family structure, because they signify oppression rather than liberation; *this is not to say that, in so doing, she abandons what those markers represent* [Chancy's emphasis]. Rather, Danticat shows that in order to reclaim the landscape of the female body and of Haiti, both must be redefined. (126)

Yet despite the fact that Chancy's discussion of Danticat is convincing, one wonders if Danticat, rather than finding fault with Haitian culture proper (and by extension Vodou), attributes responsibility to Western intrusion into that culture, demonstrated in part by the persona of the Virgin.

In helping Sophie to rebuild her relationship with her mother, Sophie's psychologist—also identified as a priestess of Santeria, a Latin American religion comparable to Vodou—diagnoses her as having, in part, a “Madonna image of [her] mother” (220). The fact is that both Sophie and her mother need to recognize that they are each sexual beings. The “testing” and the association with the Virgin deny the sexual aspect of their beings and contribute to the rift that exists between them. Sophie turns to Ezili, the goddess of lovers and sensuousness, to assert her own sexual independence; she seems to have recognized, as Rey concludes in his sociological study of the conflation of Mary and Ezili, that

the Ezilis [there are several manifestations] give voice to what otherwise would remain, as it does in so many other cultures, women's silent pain and unhonored power. . . . In speaking out on behalf of women and serving women as a source of empowerment, it would seem that Ezili plays a role in Haitian women's religious lives that the Virgin Mary cannot. (229)<sup>5</sup>

Thus while Chancy argues that Sophie's interest in Ezili is simply an attempt to “cling to an elusive image of perfection” (126), Rey pro-

<sup>5</sup>The only exception, according to Rey, is the Mary of the Magnificat, but this image of Mary has not emerged to a place of primacy in Haitian Marianism (229).

vides a context for understanding Sophie's turning to Ezili as an insurgent move complicit with Chancy's own theory of unmasking.

One could find in the dominant feature of the Holy Mother, her virginal quality, the core of what Danticat views as the obstacle to sexual self-possession. The sexual purity manifest in Mary, which, according to Rey, is *not* a trait shared by Ezili, becomes an extension of the moral ideals of the Catholic church and the West. This is not to deny the historical abuses of women perpetrated by Haitian and colonizer alike—abuses which Donette A. Francis also focuses on. Danticat rejects the sexual mores of Haiti to the extent that they limit a woman's freedom over her own body. However, while Danticat addresses such abuses, the preeminence of Ezili implies that she still maintains an affinity with Haitian culture. Sophie sees the Haitian obsession with keeping daughters pure and chaste as being comparable to a "virginity cult" (154), but that this is manifest in the novel symbolically in the Virgin Mary suggests that while it is a social phenomenon, the fixation on virginity derives from a Western source which is countered by the more indigenous, sexually empowering figure of Ezili.

Despite the solace that Sophie finds in the Vodouistic ceremony to which she contributes her statue of Ezili—"I felt broken at the end of the meeting, but a little closer to being free" (203)—she has not found complete healing. The women participating in the ceremony, each having been sexually abused in some way, launch a balloon (green, for life) with the names of their oppressors inside, a means of freeing themselves. Later, however, Sophie finds the balloon caught in the high branches of a nearby tree; to finalize the exorcism, Sophie must, as her Santería psychologist urges, "reclaim [her] mother line" (207). She accomplishes this only when she fully recognizes her roots: her tie to her mother and her motherland.

Florence Ramond Journey establishes a precedent of tying the search for the maternal line with a search for the motherland. Drawing on Edouard Glissant's notion of "reversion" in which one must journey back to one's origin (16), Journey argues that

[t]he first step in the search for identity is then understood as a need to identify oneself within the context of a feminine struc-

ture, or to connect to a woman who has played, and will be able to play again, the role of the mother. . . . The second step is completed by the reconciliation with and/or the symbolic return to the mother of the origins (as mother or Mother/land).

Sophie accomplishes this in part by her literal return to Haiti and her appropriation of Ezili; still, full reconciliation cannot be achieved until she reestablishes her maternal line which links her to a long legacy of strong women. She attains a fullness of self only when, as Nancy F. Gerber maintains, she is able to recount the truth of what happened to her mother and “claim . . . [her mother’s] rape as her heritage and name . . . it in ways that her mother cannot” (196). She must reclaim her sexual independence from the misogynist virginity cult.

Unfortunately, Martine, Sophie’s mother, is in the end unable to rectify herself with her homeland; rather, she resorts to suicide. Feeling the stigma of her rape, she cannot reconnect to this place that despite the horrors of her past is very much a part of her identity. Sophie’s psychologist, even before Martine’s death, suggests that she needs to exorcise this demon, to go back to the place where her rape took place and face the demon head-on; in so doing, Martine could reassert the sexual independence taken away in the violent, oppressive act of rape and also reclaim both the land of her ancestors and her matriarchal line. Martine never does this, but Sophie’s final act in the book is to redeem her mother by returning to the place of her rape, exorcising the demon of the past, and forgiving her mother, thus reestablishing the “mother line.”<sup>6</sup> Martine’s reconnection to both her family and her heritage is demonstrated symbolically in the clothes Sophie chooses for her mother’s funeral attire, a red dress which evokes the

<sup>6</sup>Danticat in no way wants to suggest that the adaptations that the diaspora must make to survive in a new place are in any way inferior to what one might consider the purer ties to culture of those living in Haiti. In fact, in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Danticat discusses the crisis faced by both Sophie and Martine as a need to piece together fragments of self, which includes adapting to life in the United States. Sophie “has to recreate a self that can survive in this place. The mother never learns that, and that’s what she succumbs to” (114). However, there is also a need, Danticat seems to posit,

image of Ezili: “It was too loud a color for a funeral. I knew it. She would look like a Jezebel, hot-blooded Erzulie [Ezili] who feared no men, but rather made them her slaves, raped *them*, and killed *them*. She was the only woman with that power” (227). Martine, then, through this identification with Ezili has her sexuality reasserted. The Holy Virgin for all of her influence could not be associated with such sexual reempowerment, and when Martine’s lover suggests to Sophie that “‘Saint Peter won’t allow your mother into Heaven in that,’” Sophie responds, “‘She is going to Guinea [a Vodouist version of Heaven] . . . or she is going to be a star. She’s going to be a butterfly or a lark in a tree. She’s going to be free’” (228). Hers is by no means a Catholic understanding of Martine’s fate, for, red dress or no, her suicide condemns her to Hell.

Asked in an interview with Bonnie Lyons whether there was a “positive attitude” toward Christianity in her work, Danticat recounted the diverse nature of her religious upbringing, noting her current Unitarianism and concluding, “I don’t think there’s a positive or negative attitude towards Christianity in my work. I might have shied away from addressing or confronting it directly because of the way I grew up” (194). Even so, though Danticat’s fiction may not express a personal attitude toward either religion, the implications of her preference for the empowering characteristics of the figure of Ezili as opposed to the more passive characteristics of the Virgin reward exploration. Danticat affirms the personal identity of Haitians by asserting the validity of Haitian culture through direct references to Vodou which in turn subvert the Christian elements of her novel. According to Musa W. Dube, one means for decolonization is “a willingness to embrace and confront indigenous religious and cultural worldviews . . . [in order] to avoid the colonizing strategy of dismissing as negative all social systems of the colonized” (115–16). This is in a sense what Danticat accom-

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posit, to maintain a tie with the homeland (one of the fragments of which she speaks). Sophie’s mother is unable to adapt fully to life in the United States and to maintain a handle on her past, both of which are necessary to

plishes. In line with Chancy's paradigm of revolution, Danticat un-masks Ezili and reinstates her to a traditional position in Haitian spirituality by stripping away what is seen as the oppressive, virginal associations of Mary. In so doing, she validates what is Haitian.

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