

Bodies Scared Sacred at the Crossroads: Vodou Loa Erzulie in Mayra Montero's *The Red of His Shadow* and Ana-Maurine Lara's *Erzulie's Skirt*

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Édouard Glissant argues that “immobility and alienation are the necessary consequences and the facilitating circumstances of exploitation” (xliii). Through representations of Dominican-Haitian Vodou loa, Erzulie, Mayra Montero's *The Red of His Shadow* (2001) and Ana-Maurine Lara's *Erzulie's Skirt* (2006) critique the doubly vulnerable position disenfranchised women face in local and global exchanges. Both novels present traditions of the spirit and more specifically the women's relationship to loa, Erzulie as a conduit to negotiate sexual agency and citizenship. The relationship between sexual agency and citizenship in the novels critiques heteropatriarchal notions of normative couples as the nucleus and foundation for family and, by extension, social recognition and continuity for the nation. Montero and Lara move away from heteropatriarchal relationships and present the women protagonists Zulé, Miriam, and Micaela, as accessing their sacral and sexual personas as critical registers for identity construction. According to William J. Spurlin “One dimension of the study of sisterhood [within post-colonial queer theory] must include...attention to erotic ties between women and the ways in which these operate oppositionally as sites of decolonization and erotic autonomy, thereby constituting other forms of resistance to heteropatriarchy” (196). In this essay, I argue that the relationships between Zulé and Erzulie and then Miriam and Micaela with Erzulie introduce a sacral feminist politics. Within worldly and otherworldly exchanges, these women resist their bodies becoming social tools for physical labor, gendered control, and sacral discipline.

As cultural representations, *The Red of His Shadow* and *Erzulie's Skirt* attempt to resignify Vodou as a meaningful religion. Margarite Fernández-Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert cast Vodou as “The oldest, least understood and perhaps most maligned of all Afro-Caribbean belief systems” (4). Vodou has historically suffered a tension-ridden relationship with Haitian and global political discourse shedding light on the intricate connection between sacral practices and political identities. A brief background on the relationship between Vodou scholarship and politics tracks its multiple restructuring, whether it has been aligned with Catholicism, a Pan-Africanist agenda, or most indelibly Dictator Francois Duvalier’s use of Vodou myth to incite fear and maintain control. Taking it a step further, Dominican Vodou is not only misunderstood similar to Vodou in Haiti, but it is the least represented Afro-based Caribbean religion, primarily due to a Dominican preoccupation with Europeanness that maintains neo-colonial attitudes towards race and social hierarchy (Alegría-Pons 47).

The practice of Vodou originates in the Dahomean, Congolese, and Nigerian regions of West Africa; in the New World, it was syncretized with Roman Catholic symbolism. Within Vodou, there are multiple families of loas, and therefore a few loas have more than one counterpart. According to Maya Deren, “The majority of the deities are Dahomean and the rites of these are called Rada” known as protective and more tolerant loas; however, in the New World “there arose a new nation of loa...the Petro nation” (61). The Petro loas are considered “the patrons of aggressive action” (61). Cultural anthropologist, José Francisco Alegría-Pons claims that Dominican Vodou prioritizes the more severe Petro loas in their pantheon. He argues that Dominican Vodou,

...va dirigido a auspiciar, propiciar, celebrar o conciliar específicamente – pero no exclusivamente – a los ‘Loases’, ‘Misterios’ o ‘Seres’ Petró: Una de las

grandes divisiones que conforman el mundo sobrenatural del Vodú, la religiosidad popular dominicana, y las creencias y prácticas que ocurren en el *sincretismo* (socio-religioso y socio-cultural) Dominico-Haitiano. (59)¹

Dominican Vodou is largely practiced by Haitian descendents and Haitian-Dominican individuals living and working in rural cane labor communities called “the bateys” near the Dominican Republic/ Haiti border. Through Vodou, these individuals form microcosmic socio-religious groups called Gagás. Dominican Vodou is a doubly syncretic religion since Haitian Vodou and Dominican popular culture are already initial products of syncretic relationships between African and European socio-cultural elements. Therefore, Gagás are socio-religious communities formed from the relationship between two already syncretized political spaces.

As the female loa that both Montero’s *The Red of His Shadow* and Lara’s *Erzulie’s Skirt* pay tribute to, Erzulie is a paragon of virginity and promiscuity. Whether it is loa Erzulie, the Rada goddess who is “the epitome of the feminine principle...concerned with love, beauty, flowers, jewelry” or the promiscuous Erzulie-Fréda who loves both men and women, or even Erzulie Ge-Rouge, the more severe and militant Petro counterpart, Erzulie is mythically offered up as the loa who is sacrificed for divinity and creation (Deren 62). Although the goddess of love, she is depicted as constantly weeping as she longs for more affection. Erzulie Ge-Rouge, however,

...is awesome in her poignancy. When she possesses a person...the neck is rigid and the tears stream from the tightly shut eyes, while through the locked jaw and

¹ My translation is as follows: *The Gagá cult celebrates and worships, although not exclusively, the loas, mysteries, and beings of the Petro rite: One of the largest divisions of Vodou’s supernatural world, mixed with popular Dominican religiosity and the beliefs and practices that occur within the syncretism between the socio-religious and socio-cultural Haitian-Dominican.*

the grinding teeth there issues a sound that is half groan, half scream, the inarticulate song of in-turned cosmic rage. (Deren 62)

Navigating these tensions, “Maîtresse Erzulie,”² assumes a position in the pantheon as the figure through which creation, myth, dream, and desire are fashioned while she remains forever unfulfilled and lacking. Erzulie is painfully sacrificed in order for a sacral connection between Vodou practitioner and loa to subsist. Deren explains that,

The wound of Erzulie is perpetual: she is the dream impaled eternally upon the cosmic cross-roads where the world of men and the world of divinity meet, and it is through her pierced heart that ‘man ascends and the gods descend.’ (145)

Mayra Montero(’s) Haiti and *The Red of His Shadow*

Mayra Montero explores the literary potentiality of not only Erzulie’s powers but also Dominican-Vodou. In the “Author’s Note” she combines her journalistic training with her novelistic persona when introducing the novel as narrating

real events...involving a ‘houngan,’ or Vodoun priest, and a ‘mambo,’ or Vodoun priestess...The names of the people and some places have been changed to protect certain informants. Behind a case closed by the Dominican police as a simple ‘crime of passion’ pulse the magic spells of a war that is still being waged. (Montero xiv)

The Red of His Shadow is set in a contemporary batey, a sugarcane plantation in Yerba Buena, La Romana, Dominican Republic. The open-endedness of the phrase quoted above may allude to a multitude of conditions including, but not limited to: the inter-ethnic animosity between

² According to Thelma B. Jiménez Anglada in “Rito y otros cuerpos (in)disciplinados en tres textos de Mayra Montero” Maîtresse Erzulie has multiple names including but not limited to, “*Erzulie-Fréda, La Balianne, Ti-Quitta, Gran Erzulie, Erzulie-Ge-Rouge, Marinette-Bras-Chêche, Brigitte, Erzulie Mansour, Mai-Louise, Marinette-Congo, Erzulie Lemba, Marinette- Pied-Chêche, Erzulie Mappione y La Sirène ...*” (128).

Dominicans and Haitians, the violent drug traffic ring that claims so many lives each year, the caricatured, but simultaneously feared, Vodou practice as well as the inhumane treatment of Haitian cane cutters particularly and “peripheral migrants” in general throughout the world (Montero xiv).³ Despite the physical dislocation from Haiti, the novel presents haggard Haitian bodies that perform work in dire conditions. Although this is work that no Dominican national would ever be caught doing, the Dominican state perpetually accosts the thousands of Haitians that work in these bateys near the border. Zulé and her Gagá, her spiritual and socio-political community, depict this debased group of laboring bodies who endure the systemic political unbelonging while, in private, earn great metaphysical powers.

Twentieth century Dominican and Haitian-American literature periodically represents the cane fields and surrounding areas as a space outside time where mythic retrieval is possible but also where great pain and bloodshed is located. In Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), the Dominican police take the main protagonist, Oscar, to the cane fields and beat him after he continues to pursue a woman who is involved with a fellow police officer (296). This scene somewhat parallels a torturous moment for Oscar’s mother, Beli Cabral, who, thirty years prior, had an ill-fated love affair with “the Gangster,” who turned out to be married to “La Fea,” President Rafael Trujillo’s sister. “La Fea” and two men kidnapped her, beat her and left her for dead in the cane fields (Díaz 157). While near death, she hallucinated a Mongoose guide who told her that she lost the baby she was carrying but that there was peace and life for her future. It was this mythical connection beyond her present state that saved her. This is also the place where, in 1960, three of the four infamous Mirabal sisters (strong dissidents of the Trujillo

³ Samuel Martínez describes “peripheral migrants” as belonging “to a ‘second tier’ or lesser privileged migrants internationally, whose standards of living are inferior to those of most Third World migrants with whom social researchers are familiar... Commonly, peripheral migrants stand at the very bottom of regional and international divisions of labor. They go to the least desirable destinations and take the most arduous, worst paid, and least secure jobs available in the host area” (27).

dictatorship) find their death. Julia Alvarez portrays the violent scene in her historical novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994). Further, Haitian-American Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* (1998) depicts the 1937 massacre of about 17,000 to 22,000 Haitian men, women, and children; the title of the novel itself is the colloquial phrase referencing the cruel nature of cane labor. The workers regard the harvesting of cane as farming the bones because of its decimating harshness.

Similarly to the novels noted above, Montero endows the sugarcane plantations with both mythic and violent dimensions. The protagonists are initially described as laboring bodies exploited for unethical profits which they never benefit from. Within their exploited circumstances, the body becomes central to how Montero conveys their exploitation. Montero emphasizes the term "flesh" when discussing physical labor stating: "She [Anacaona] knew what burned cane meant: more work and less pay, because the piles of cane lost weight. She had already suffered through it in the flesh of her dead husband [Jean-Claude], who would come with singed clothes and labored breathing" (28). The narrator utilizes the term here within a paradoxical semantic construction as Jean-Claude is dead and hence his flesh is decomposing. Soon after Jean-Claude's death, Anacaona marries Luc, Zulé's father, which leads to the second reference to flesh on the same page. The narrator explains how Anacaona rewards Luc with an abundance of food during lunch due to their "difficult contest of the flesh," which is how he wins her over the previous night (28). Jean-Claude's rotting flesh and his singed flesh when alive and working the fields are juxtaposed with the vitality of flesh used in sport. This is a critical moment in locating the symbolic importance of the community's batey and their Gagá as a social and psychological departure from the fields since the narrator portrays the male protagonists like

zombies with burned flesh. However, when secluded within their intimate collective, they perform machinations of the body that grant pleasure unlocatable in their laboring selves.

Although their personal space within the batey could be considered a social safe haven, the protagonists negotiate grand sacral identities in private that inadvertently institute their own inequitable gendered space. Through Vodou rituals, the body's flesh maintains its central role in negotiating power within the Gagá's socially constructed reality. In the novel, the phrase *taking on flesh* is recalled multiple times illustrating this point. One occasion is when Zulé first hears about her archrival and former Tonton Macoute, Similá Bolosse's plan of attack. The narrator states, "Zulé closes her eyes and seems to see the villain's face. How many goats, she wonders, and how many guinea hens had their heads cut off so that the bokor's huge body could be submerged in the tide of blood? Similá knows all too well that only in this way will his vow take on flesh" (2). Similá's vow to break Zulé *takes on flesh* through a Vodou ritual of bathing in the blood of sacrificed sacred animals. It is only when he literally dons animal flesh that Similá accesses the spiritual powers needed to take on Zulé and her Gagá.

Prior to Zulé and Similá's meeting, Zulé is first marked as a Vodou prodigy through her flesh. When her father escorts young Zulé to watch a Gagá ritual, shy Zulé defiantly walks straight to the queens while they are invoking loa of the crossroads, Papa Legba. Witnessing Zulé's mounting by, at the time, an unnamed loa, the leader of the Gagá, Coridón, lights a cigarette and approaches Zulé to burn her: "Master Coridón pushed hard until the reddened ash was extinguished on Zulé's throat. She remained standing but he dropped like lead, rolled in the dust, twisted and turned as he gasped for breath, mute and choking on a pellet of terror"

(Montero 11). Papa Coridón then asks Luc to “promise that girl,”⁴ “the girl who had been tested by fire” (Montero 11). Although Luc was hesitant to promise Zulé at only twelve-years-old, he endures a severe fever that almost kills him and, in his state of weakness, asks Zulé to go to Coridón and promise herself to the practice. Papa Coridón teaches her the trying tasks of caring for the dead and learning *amarres* (spells) and *resguardos* (protections) (Montero 25). In a short period of time, Zulé evolves into an exceptional mambo and word of her powers reach individuals from other rural areas across the country.

Once a Vodou priestess and the leader of her own Gagá, Zulé’s body is most contested with regards to how she performs self amidst heteropatriarchal constructs.⁵ As an adult, she occupies a dichotomous position of ultimate sacral power as well as a marginal second-class status. First, Zulé’s position within the Gagá as the absolute priestess grants her great political and metaphysical power. She is presented as having authority above all others, male and female. As priestess, her leadership role echoes infamous Vodou prophet, Olivorio (Liborio) Mateo, who, in the early twentieth century, initiates Liborismo, a counter-cultural practice of modernity. Capturing the attention of Haitian and Afro-Dominicans along the border, Liborio and his followers challenged the Dominican elites’ capitalistic labor and land privatization within the sugar industry. Liborio “established...Cuidad Santa (Holy City), based on shared volunteer labor (*convite*), equitable distribution of resources, subsistence agriculture, communal lands, self-sufficiency, spiritual law, and the celebration of Afro-Dominican culture. He also refused to

⁴ It is important to note that to “promise that girl” is both to acquire Zulé as a spiritual apprentice and to appropriate another wife. Therefore, her sacral knowledge is hinged upon her sexual union with Papa Coridón; one she is eager to make.

⁵ Prior to meeting Similá, once Zulé’s mentor and first sexual partner, Papa Coridón, foresees his own death, she is immediately re-gendered female and, thus, an agent for procreation. I bracket the prefix “re-” because it is not until she is perceived as a single Vodou priestess that she is re-branded as a woman first and a Vodou practitioner second. Coridón quickly urges Zulé to marry his son, Jérémie Candé, because he foresees that once he dies she needs to worry about the next man she will meet. She ignores his advice and, fulfilling the prophecy, Similá suddenly appears seeking Zulé’s medical and spiritual assistance. Similá is a man near death when he reaches Zulé.

charge for his services: ‘Curaba pero no cobraba’ [He cured but did not charge]” (Adam 65). The direct correlations between Zulé and Liborio begin with their metaphysical prowess and extend to their stance against socioeconomic abuses within their respective communes.⁶ The novel depicts Zulé aiding a number of physically and spiritually ill individuals without expecting anything in return, but it is Similá, the triple-balled, yellow-eyed bokor from Paredon who challenges Zulé on all fronts.

Upon their meeting, Zulé instantly desires Similá and cures him of his injuries, while he wishes to subdue her and her powers with sex. At first, Similá flatters Zulé, telling her of the reputation that precedes her:

‘The people who go back and forth buying the dead. They tell me about the untamed daughter of a luckless houngan who lived on the slopes of Mayombe; they told me about the dead Coridón’s widow, as tough as a man; they told me about the long courtship of a black Chinaman who isn’t mute but never opens his mouth. All three times it was you.’ (Montero 72)

Each iteration Similá speaks refers to Zulé in different phases in her life but nevertheless always in direct relation to a male figure. According to Vilma Manzotti,

La idea que no hay un solo ‘yo’ sino una multitud de ellos, que se apropian de los actos de un cuerpo según sus deseos y necesidades, es la realidad que Zulé sostiene como ‘verdad.’ Ella es según ‘quien se la monte.’ Luce Irigaray

⁶ According to Robert L. Adam Jr., “Olivorio (Liborio) Mateo was a fifty-year-old Afro-Dominican campesino from the valley who, long before his elevation into a Vodú prophet, had developed a reputation as a credible clairvoyant... Popular history maintains that Liborio unexpectedly disappeared during a tremendous storm in 1908. Relatives and friends presumed that he had died during the storm. On the ninth and final day of the memorial services being held in his honor, he reappeared and recounted the story of his disappearance to those present: he had traveled far away, he told them, carried to heaven by an angel on a white horse. While in the spiritual realm, God recruited Liborio to be his servant to spread His word, cure illness, and save the world” (64).

conceptualiza este procedimiento como la evidencia de nunca ser simplemente ‘uno’ (31). (364)⁷

Summoning French Feminist Luce Irigaray, Manzotti attributes the multiple names which she argues indicate Zulé’s sexual multiplicity as both her resistance and the manner in which Similá *sees her* and reads her body.

While there is a sexually subversive multiplicity to Zulé’s body which is linked to her sexual relationship with Christianá Dubois discussed later, for Manzotti, however, Zulé’s subversiveness are all the sexual encounters and spiritual mountings that she experiences. My reading diverges here since her sexual identity is not at all these names which link her to men, but her sexual and spiritual mountings that are for pure physical and spiritual pleasure. These experiences do not submit her body to heteronormative practices. The names that Similá calls Zulé cast her as a daughter, then as a wife and lover of another. And nevertheless, whom she evolves into when in proximity to Similá is the woman who uses her tongue to cure him, sexualizing her powers but ultimately leaving her powerless.

Zulé and Similá are positioned to relive the mythical re-encounter between the fateful lovers –Erzulie and Bull Belecou. Similá’s physical descriptions are that of Bull Belecou, and it is after their final sexual encounter that the narrator most decidedly calls him Bull Belecou:

Similá Bolosse, still panting from their farewell lovemaking, wanted to go out to enjoy the landscape of cottony chaos that half the world was navigating through. [After,]...She brought him a piece of mirror so he could see himself: the flying tufts had stuck to his face, and now he looked exactly like the most feared and rancorous mystery...Bull Belecou. (Montero 77)

⁷ My translation is as follows: *The idea that there is no single “I” but rather a multitude of selves which all appropriate bodily acts based on one’s desires and needs is Zulé’s reality and what she regards as truth. She is who mounts her. Luce Irigaray argues that this process is evidence of a woman never being one.*

It is inexplicably snowing in the Caribbean, and the residents are all outside, mesmerized by the phenomenon which they do not name as snow but rather “cottony chaos,” echoing the history of slavery within the contemporary moment (Montero 77). It is then that the narrator confirms that Similá now more than ever resembles Bull Belecou, foreshadowing their imminent and cataclysmic war. Zulé’s (Erzulie) and Similá’s (Bull Belecou) relationship evolves from a tortuous affair into competing socio-economic ideologies where Zulé casts her Gagá as parallel to Liborio’s Holy City. Their exchanges reveal Zulé’s unwavering stance on preserving her Gagá’s integrity as their godly battle stems from her refusing that his drug ring pass through her batey. Counter to all of their batey’s labor and social regulations, Similá’s drug trafficking is based on privatization, unchecked capitalism, and greed.

Unlike her relationship with Similá, and men in general, Zulé’s same-sex relationship proves empowering and produces a spiritual trance more closely resembling Erzulie Ge-Rouge through which Zulé gains great powers. On the eve of the major battle between Zulé’s Gagá and Similá, Zulé has sex with the war queen, Christianá Dubois: “Christianá Dubois, still stupefied by her recent pleasure, opens first one eye and then the other, then closes them both and stretches, her body marinated in the nocturnal saliva of the woman who licked most” (129). This moment thrusts Zulé into her strongest Erzulie mounting that leads to her untimely demise; however, it is not the trance that causes her death. Jérémie who is not only Zulé’s closest advisor, but also her former lover, the “black Chinaman” Similá mentions earlier, sees Zulé’s sacral crossing as his perfect opportunity to accuse her of her inappropriate antics with Similá. This scene exposes Jérémie’s obsession with Zulé and with trying to control her sexual body:

‘You covered over the cracks, Mistress but I heard you. Even in Papa Luc’s house I could hear you howling, you and the dog Similá, when you were fucking,’

Christianá tells him to shut up, Papa Luc's daughter is suffering a great mounting, you only have to look at her eyes or hold her hands, ten fingers that are no longer Zulé's fingers but those of the angry mystery who rides her. (Montero 131)

Just as Zulé is controlling her trance, Jérémie becomes ruthlessly mounted by Carfú, Papa Legba's Petro counterpart, and lunges at Zulé. Anthropologist Soraya Aracena, who Montero pays tribute to in the novel's dedication page, describes Carfú or Kalfú as a "lúa, ser, misterio del Vudú que habita en el lugar en donde se unen los caminos, los cuatro puntos cardinales. Antes de la medianoche pertenece a la division Radá y despues de esta hora a la de los petroses" (51).⁸ Deren notes that this shift from the rada to the petro rites signifies the loas' transformation from a just "divinity of the cardinal points" to the loa who "commands the daemons of the night" (101). It is the forces of the sensual night that incites Jérémie's mounting.

This scene highlights the nature of Zulé's relationships with her sexual partners. While Jérémie attacks Zulé and seeks to violently contain her, Christianá "convinced that Papa Luc's daughter is in danger, heroically covers her body with her own body" (Montero 133). Thus, Zulé's multiple partners productively threaten the relationship between identity and sexual practice. Within her sexual exchanges, Zulé (as does Erzulie-Fréda) feels at home with both men and women; it is rather her object choice's intentions that cast her relationship with Christianá as nurturing. In her final scenes where she rejects both Similá and Jérémie altogether, Zulé welcomes the marginalization linked to her sexual subversiveness when she prioritizes self-making pleasure. Zulé's subversive sexuality along with her Liborista attitudes against capitalistic abuses like Similá's drug cartel reconfigures citizenry. Her practices move from conceptions of citizenry as an individual serving a larger collective to a dynamic quality of

⁸ My translation is as follows: [Carfú is a] *Vodou loa, being, mystery, who inhabits the cross-roads, the four cardinal points. Before midnight he belongs to the Radá rite and after midnight to the Petro rite.*

belonging through a giving of the self for personal, immediate, and qualitative gains.

Legitimation is no longer what one produces for the invisible body politic, but rather what one's loving and mutual labors produce for the self in the very present.

Dissecting Race, Love, and Death on a Godly Plane

Within this godly state, Zulé and Similá discuss a worldly contest of wills, as Similá is only interested in whether Zulé will accept his alliance and let his cargo pass through her “shitty batey” (Montero 150). The disconnect between the baseness of the content discussed and the sacral stage evoked seems ironic. The richness of the text, however, lies in its presentation of such worldly, mortal issues as problems pertaining to the gods. Vodou tradition, especially a spiritual mounting, is about gods transmitting messages and intermingling in human affairs. Erzulie, Bull Belecou, and Carfú each play a vital role in negotiations of land, social, racial, and gendered scripts. And it is at the moment where all these negotiations intersect that Erzulie and Zulé fully share a space of being. Montero states:

...her knife in the air and her hair loose, [Zulé] looks more than ever like the Metressa Erzulie Freda, a hot whore with a deep heart...The saints say that the Metressa Freda insisted on trying the seed of Bull Belecou. But Bull Belecou humiliated her, he mistreated her at night and obliged her to drink white urine passed in those days by black snakes... (150)

This passage brings to the fore all themes previously discussed concerning Zulé's relationships with others. Aligned with Erzulie, Zulé is named a whore, and a sad, humiliated lover which encompasses her wedged status between Similá and Jérémie.

On the other hand, the narrator also describes Zulé as armed, holding a knife and prepared to defend her retinue. As a woman of great social, political and otherworldly powers,

the Gagá respects and loves her, but they also regard her as crass, inappropriate, and transgressive. As the community stands by in awe of Zulé, Zulé's possession shatters the constrictive notions of patriarchal feminine control plaguing her thus far. She produces an alternative to conventional beauty and power by displaying an undisciplined female body. Through Erzulie, Zulé reinvests the female body with control, agency, and beauty.

Nevertheless, her perpetual tragedy, echoing Maya Deren, is that Erzulie is "impaled eternally upon the cosmic cross-roads...and it is through her pierced heart that 'man ascends and the gods descend'" (145). Just as Zulé is reaching a compromise with Similá and saving her Gagá from bloodshed, "The machete comes down, brushing her cheek, plunging into her neck, and in passing cutting off the tip of her nipple. She raises an arm to protect her face, and it is the second blow of the machete that slices off at the root those fingers that twitch on the ground like living worms" (Montero 152). Zulé's final trance (as Erzulie) ends tragically when she finds her death, not at the hands of her adversary Similá Bolosse (Bull Belecou), but her trusted confidant, Jérémie Candé (Jérémie Carfú), the patron of sorcery of the crossroads. Zulé is killed by the man, who, through proposing marriage and family, was never able to restrict her within domestic confines.

Following the allegorical story, it is no surprise that Erzulie perishes at the spiritual crossroads. In life, Zulé is unapologetic about her eroticism, her intellectual and spiritual powers, and although she is relentlessly policed, she never loses the ability to transmit a feminist history that is usually silenced. Whether she is embodying Erzulie's sacred history, using her body to practice 'obscene' and 'crude' behaviors, loving both male and female partners, or tending to her domestic chores bare-breasted, her materiality creates an affront to her patriarchal community. Her sacral subjectivity throughout her personal journey from a young girl to an absolute priestess

should not be diminished because she perishes. Her existence as a spiritual leader is entirely accessible due to her ability to create feminist self despite sexist oppression.

In addition, Zulé's tragic demise positions her body as still producing signification beyond death.⁹ Her dismemberment is brought right back to the materiality of her corporeal self as her stepmother, Anacaona, takes on the responsibility of caring for Zulé's body (Montero 153). Anacaona pieces Zulé's body together, covering where her nipple would have gone and generously applying perfume and talcum powder. While in life Zulé is resistant to observing the rules of *appropriate* femininity, in death Anacaona dresses her with the frills of a life never had, a life loved by her loa, Mistress Erzulie. This act should not be read as weakening her resistance to patriarchal power. In fact, it is through caring for Zulé's corpse that the reader hears about not only the war scene, but also the moment in which the socio-political realities of their daily laboring lives are thrust back into the forefront.

From the moment Jérémie inflicts Zulé, Jérémie fades from the page once the narrator states that, as a response to his act, someone, left unnamed, clobbers him across his knees and, writing in pain, he crawls away. The narrator never recounts the war between Zulé's Gagá and Similá, but rather, the narrator repeats Similá's initial ritual where he bathed in the blood of one hundred goats. The participants in Zulé's wake all agree that his opening ritual really benefitted him "as the war with Similá was bad" (Montero 156). "Bad" is otherwise never quantified, and the wake is immediately disrupted by the dawn of a Monday morning where the cane cutters (no longer gods) "are waiting for the overseer's bell to set out slowly for the fields" (Montero 155).

⁹ According to Thelma B. Jiménez Anglada, Zulé's body in life and then more forcefully in death represents the fragmentation of the female body: "El cuerpo de Zulé es ahora mujeres todas uniéndose y fragmentándose perennemente como parte de la estrategia de resistir al poder, a las disciplinas, a los silencios y a las sujeciones que el otro les impone. Su muerte representa el desmembramiento forzado por el otro del cuerpo femenino" (73). My translation is as follows: *Zulé's body is now all women coming together while perpetually fragmented as a strategy to resist oppressive power and discipline, against the silences and subjugation the other forces. Her death represents the dismemberment forced upon the feminine body by the other.*

Where once the physical and spiritual worlds were interchangeable, now there is only the baseness of reality.

According to Margarite Fernández-Olmos, *The Red of His Shadow* “interconnects such postmodern tools as feminism, ethnography, mysticism, and an analysis of otherness with localized circumstances to enhance our understanding of Afro-Caribbean spirituality and culture” (280). The text reconfigures corrupt socio-political events like the drug cartel and back-breaking labor regimes through myth and mysticism, creating new perspectives on the intimate relationship between Vodou’s socio-cultural facets and the political ramifications of abuse in marginalized spaces. The body is constructed as a material yet sacral vessel where all rituals from sex to spirit possession are understood through the flesh. Vodou is ultimately cast as available within a collective cultural memory, directly connecting these individuals to their loas not only in worship but also in lineage. The political significance of such connections presents ideological and spiritual tensions within the island of Hispaniola and the Caribbean at large as integral to understanding the socio-political selves that belong to these spaces. Thus, the state’s “crime of passion” packaging fails to capture the intricacies depicted in the novel.

Physical Travels and Sacred Trances: In the Folds of *Erzulie’s Skirt*

Like Montero’s *The Red of His Shadow*, Lara’s *Erzulie’s Skirt* positions the female body as the scene where sexual and sacred politics are negotiated.¹⁰ Exponentially more expansive than Zulé’s physical travels, Miriam and Micaela negotiate identity through movement. Echoing Gloria Anzaldúa, these women move through multiple spaces of oppression and cultivate self

¹⁰ Just like *The Red of His Shadow*, it is unclear exactly when *Erzulie’s Skirt* is set; however, it is some time after Trujillo’s dictatorship. And so somewhere between the bloody 1937 massacre of thousands of Haitian in the Dominican Republic and present-day Dominican Republic, the painful and enduring love story between Miriam and Micaela is depicted.

anew. In Anzaldúa theory, this perspective is emphasized through the New Mestiza Consciousness when she states

...la *mestiza* is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another. Being tricultural, monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, speaking patois, and in a state of perpetual transition, the *mestiza* faces the dilemma of the mixed breed. (100)

The New Mestiza journeys beyond multiple oppressions, both at home and abroad, and successfully constructs a borderland space of belonging within difference.

In *Lesbian Utopics* Annamarie Jagose reads Anzaldúa's "lesbian *mestiza*" as residing in a "home [that] is split in two" (145). Jagose continues, "... there is the home that is familiar to her childhood but from which she is alienated and there is the 'home' that she constructs for herself which, in that it is not her childhood, is alien and yet, by virtue of its alien character, familiar" (145). While the novel never names these women as 'lesbian,' their sexual and intimate relationship is the very practice that sustains their lives. Miriam and Micaela mirror the transformation Jagose argues as each woman cannot sustain a relationship to their childhood home and therefore those identities. They then construct identities for themselves within multiple border spaces. I argue that their borderland spaces of belonging is most successfully represented by their final endeavor of opening a *colmado* (a small market) together, once back in the Dominican Republic. This space rich with sacred elements and women centered entrepreneurship not only grants them belonging but also socially teeters between the familiar and the alien as the community does not know what to make of their endeavors. Jagose ultimately reads Anzaldúa's *mestiza* as re-affirming the very borders Anzaldúa states that the figure destroys:

...the mestiza, does not signify a utopic space, a triumphant excess of the border's legislation. Rather, it demonstrates the way in which the border's legislative authority is always already in crisis. In this respect, my reading of the mestiza reinstalls her within that economy of the border from which Anzaldúa represents her as making a break. (157)

This perspective is significant to Miriam and Micaela because rather than the women stagnantly presented within a utopic and therefore untested space of identity construction, the women are constantly in spaces where not only do they interrogate the social conditions that keep them as other, in their final space within the *colmado*, they shatter these conceptions. It is their perpetual residence on the border that allows for them to shed light on the crisis of conformity and the need for a vigilant critique of abuse. Their journey leading to this end, however, is not easy, and it is Erzulie's guidance that produces the possibilities for these fateful lovers to engender spaces of intimacy throughout despite acts of physical and sexual abuse that cast them as second-class citizens.

The first chapter, "Now," starts at the end of the women's journey with Micaela's death and the first introduction of Erzulie as messenger. Contrasting the voracious and sexually-potent Erzulie in *The Red of His Shadow*, the narrator first describes a matronly Erzulie as a gentle woman with silver tears: "Through her tears she saw the woman was now a grandmother, dressed in old rags and skirts, her head covered with a red cloth as she picked up cowries from the floor and shook them..." (Lara 7). In a dream-like scene, a wall of water appears that has come to guide Micaela in her final journey and at that moment Miriam notices the old woman's face "was filled with the sorrow of ten million stories" (Lara 7). Unlike *The Red of His Shadow*, where Erzulie was solely connected to Zulé, in *Erzulie's Skirt*, the loa is both representative of

Miriam and Micaela's particular story along with all the stories she comes in contact with. This seems to be a more liberating and mythic position for Erzulie, who was destined to relive her personal tragedies through Zulé in *The Red of His Shadow*. Grief-stricken by her partner's passing, Miriam asks Erzulie to be taken with Micaela; however, the request is left unaddressed as the subsequent chapter, "Before Now," details their back story. While Miriam is described as a Haitian orphan who loses her parents in a cart accident while she is mounted by Changó, Micaela is banished from her Dominican home when her two-year-old brother, Fernandito, drowns while in her care (Lara 91).

Naming, Loving, and Teaching the Sacred Self

Once the women meet, the spiritual dimensions of the novel serve to advance their mutual belongingness and counter their initial states of dejection. Erzulie then enters as an active agent in worldly happenings, all the while maintaining a pristine distance from the women's experiences. For instance, the multiple spiritual mountings Miriam experiences are with Changó and not Erzulie. Unlike *The Red of His Shadow*, the sensual, sexual, and psychological connections of the loas mirror the experiences between Miriam and Micaela, but their histories do not overlap.

When Micaela meets Miriam, she summons Erzulie's myth, exalting their love and their imminent union:

‘You know Miriam, one day we will all return to Guinée. Erzulie will guide us home through her waters, and we will rest. Until then, we must dance like Erzulie Freda.’ Micaela's eyes flickered, a spark shining in them as she spoke. She felt their bodies stir, getting hotter at the mention of Erzulie Freda's infamous character. Freda the sensual full-bodied woman, Freda the woman adorned with

jewels and perfume. Freda the queen of lovers and the metressa of female flirtations. Miriam smiled and whispered back. (Lara 120)

In this passage Erzulie possesses a vitality that does not necessarily align with the dignified woman who accompanies Micaela in death. At this juncture in the novel, Erzulie is a coquettish loa who prepares the women for sex. Erzulie embodies multiple iterations which suggest her intimate connection to Miriam and Micaela. She is a flirtatious loa as Miriam and Micaela nurture their young love and a matronly woman when their mortality looms near.

In the subsequent scene, Miriam's second mounting by Changó converges sacral history and erotic energies while queering desire. Unlike the first time where Changó exclaimed her body was not yet ready,¹¹ this time Miriam withstands Changó and he invites Micaela to join in the sacral and erotic experience:

Changó took her [Micaela] by the waist, dancing against her as he led her around the center pole. She danced with him, excited by the feel of Miriam's breasts pressed up against hers and the rum that laced her breath like halos. She felt Miriam get excited, and Changó had breathed into her ear, 'Later, Cherie, later.' (Lara 121)

Changó invites Micaela to join him in dance, and they participate in a tapestry of sensual movements where, despite being mounted by a male deity, Miriam's female attributes are sexualized. Rather than have Changó mimic a masculine sexual movement, Lara makes him aware of the horse he is mounting and plays to their attraction. When Micaela presses up against Changó's/Miriam's breast, the women are aroused, yet Changó defers their sexual moment for when he no longer resides in Miriam's body. Lara writes,

¹¹ It is interesting to note that when mounted by Changó the first time, her body is called Changó. Therefore, Changó and not Miriam eats glass, strips his clothing, and walks on fire (Lara 34).

Out of the trance, Miriam fell back, exhausted, into the bed of arms awaiting her return. Micaela took her away from the light and music...and laid Miriam down on the mat. She slowly undressed her, running her palm between the wet fabric and Miriam's moist skin. (122)

It is not until Changó releases Miriam that Miriam and Micaela join sexually. And it is at this very time when Changó has sex with, according to Lara, the "Dominican voodoo spirit/goddess of love," Anaísa: "Anaísa and Changó loved each other...Anaísa a mirror of Changó's thunderous sound...Anaísa fed Changó's thirsty skin with water..." (Lara 122). It is significant to note that the narrator relegates Changó and Anaísa's sex to the world of metaphors. Changó as deity of thunder, his most common epithet across Afro-Caribbean religions, and, Anaísa, defined in Lara's glossary as a "spirit," is materialized as the fresh water quenching Changó's insatiable thirst. This is particularly crucial because while the sacral dimensions of the novel are indispensable to identity construction, when the deities are interacting between each other and not with Miriam and Micaela, it is always secondary to the present exchange between the women. Throughout the novel, Miriam and Micaela's bodies experience pleasure alongside, at the same time, and within the same space as that of the gods.

As a textured scene where multiple embodiments come into focus, the queering aspects are two-fold. In the introduction of *Post-Colonial Queer* "Annamarie Jagose defines queer...as a description of 'those gestures or analytical models which dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire,' and then notes its protean nature" (Hawley 3). Miriam's spiritual mounting here adds a sacred dimension to this tri-polar construction. By replacing Miriam's name with Changó's name altogether, her body becomes the scene of racial and gendered deconstruction. While Changó is an essential fixture of

Cuban Santería, he is also the “Yoruban deity of thunder and lightning, used among a few Dominican voodoo practitioners” (Lara 250). According to James J. Pancrazio, “Changó/St. Barbara is African/American, Yoruban/Catholic, black/white, and male/female” (55).¹² As a fundamentally creole and queer deity, Changó’s role within Yoruban-based faiths is one of strength and power. However, his multi-faceted identity as he is both black/white, male/female is troubled when mounting a body that blurs these very social distinctions – black/white, male/female.

When Changó spiritually mounts Miriam, it is a male deity who, in Afro-Caribbean practices is also translated as Santa Barbara, a white female and Catholic saint. This scene epitomizes the indeterminacy of the sacral body such that in sharing Miriam’s corporeal space with the gods, the reader is privy to a body that, during the mounting, is beyond racial and gendered categorization. Within their social realities, these women are marginalized due to their otherness; however, when mounted by gods who those very agents of discrimination also worship, the assumed power dynamic is ephemerally inverted. These women construct spaces to be for themselves, and they also represent magnificent grandeur, prompting a critical engagement with the very structures of representation that marginalize them.

Lara does not remain within this utopic space for long, as she contrasts these loving caresses with dire living conditions. Lara describes Miriam and Micaela’s shed, which is made out of a tin roof placed on top of dirt floors, as increasingly intolerable due to a series of violent police raids where cops drag out Haitian individuals living in their *barrio*. Fed up with the fear of losing one another, Micaela recalls the luxuries her aunt, Angelica, boasted of New York, and they instantly plan to immigrate to the United States. However, when Miriam and her son,

¹² In order to position Changó within queer conversations of transvestism, Pancrazio tells one of the most common *appataki* (legend) of Changó entitled “Changó y Oyá.” Pancrazio states, “...Changó is corralled by his enemies and uses cross-dressing as a means to save his life” (55).

Antonio, cannot apply for a visa because they look Haitian (even though they were born in the Dominican Republic), they resort to *La Gata*, a woman, who for six-hundred U.S. dollars, has someone take them aboard a *yola*, a small fishing-boat sized craft, across the Mona Strait to Puerto Rico.

In this scene, the state denies Miriam and Antonio's legal mobility because they resemble a Haitianness that, within socio-political Dominican circles, is viewed as sub-class. This boundary-fixing act seems contradictory since this group is marginalized within Dominican society. Political restrictions such as this one birth the black market demand for trafficking bodies. While *La Gata* promises a successful voyage, there occurs unspeakable horror. Antonio dies and, while the women do end up in Puerto Rico, they are forced into prostitution and, therefore, entrenched in yet another socio-political reality where they are considered to be exploitable.

Lara writes Miriam and Micaela's passage across the Mona Strait similar to a slave narrative.¹³ The scene becomes chaotic as Lara describes the "heavy loud wails that echoed against the wooden boards of the *yola* [and]...the sharks [that] mangled the others, blood tingeing the water a crimson gold" (Lara 165). In a contradictory fashion, not only is *La Mar* (Erzulie) guiding Miriam and Micaela, but also she is claiming bodies currently dying. Although the women are slightly comforted when Erzulie appears, Miriam and Micaela are so physically and emotionally drained by all the commotion that they do not comprehend Antonio's death and immediately collapse.

¹³ Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley describes the contemporary phenomenon stating, "Dominican maritime migration to Puerto Rico fosters ever-growing informal businesses, headed by organizers and captains who overcrowd fishing boat-sized crafts with hundreds of people desperate for economic opportunities in the global northern territory across the strait. Ten thousand Dominicans arrive in Puerto Rico by *yola* each year; many others die in the process. Because of the earthquake-rocked roughness of the waters and the tight packing of boats, migrants routinely perish when *yolas* capsize, passengers are thrown out to lighten loads, or unexpectedly long trips lead to dehydration or starvation" (199).

This scene marks a sense of collectivity previously unavailable in the novel. Lara expands from narrating Miriam and Micaela's lives to textually recuperating the thousands of lives lost and histories forgotten within these waters. Through Micaela's conversation with La Mar (Erzulie) once aboard the *yola*, Lara constructs a collective by casting history as a place and not an abstract concept imprisoned in the mind and bound by linear time: "La Mar told her of a place where two people lay with irons on their ankles...Micaela watched as She appeared, beautiful and decorated, to reclaim her tortured children, to soothe their skin torn and mangled by the irons of slavery" (Lara 160). I read this deployment of history as critiquing the structural blockages present within social and political spheres of remembrances. Lara's construction of history as a place gives materiality to the act of remembering and creates a literary representation of the notion of embodied history.¹⁴

Another instance where sacred history and imaginary are recast is when Miriam and Micaela arrive in Puerto Rico. *Ifé*, the sacred Yoruban city still inhabited today, is attributed anthropomorphic qualities through short vignettes between chapters about a nameless woman, "She," and her journey as a captive slave. The vignette explains, "*She looked for Ifé. Ifé had pressed herbs and roots into her hand as they boarded the ship – rough white men pushing and pulling them up the thin boards...After handing over a small parcel of herbs, Ifé made as if to run back to the forest...*" (Lara 173). According to Jacob K. Olúpòna, "Within the Yorùbá historical tradition, Ilé-Ifè is the first city in the world: the birthplace of the gods and the place where the principle deities, òrìsà, first came to the world and became associated with all that

¹⁴ There is a moving multi-media project by the University of Albany that visually plots the physical and spiritual journey Miriam and Micaela experience in Lara's *Erzulie's Skirt*. The two project authors, Danielle Charlestin and Nina Fei Yang, titled the page "Sexual Migrations from Haiti and the Dominican Republic in Ana-Maurine Lara's *Erzulie's Skirt*," which belongs to a larger internet project entitled, *Middle Passages, Gendered Diasporas*. The page features a map of Miriam and Micaela's journey through the Mona Strait, a video clip of Lara reading a scene from the book, and Viv Logan's acrylic on canvas work, "Waves in the Ocean" (2004) which captures the multiple deployments of the physical and sacred body constructing a blanket of protection for the too many forgotten female bodies that have perished. <http://www.albany.edu/faculty/jhobson/middle_passages/caribbean/project.html>

came to exist” (7). By corporealizing Ifè as a protector of devotees who are forced to endure slavery and slavery-like conditions, the collectives oppressed across time and space are once again connected. In this scene, Ifé becomes a transportable Ilé, or home, for all bodies of the historical past and present to claim belonging despite their states of un-belonging.

The following chapter, “Micaela and Miriam: Puerto Rico” is interesting because it portrays prostitution. It begins with the two women waking up locked in a room in Puerto Rico, although they do not know where they are or how long they have been there. Dazed, “She [Micaela] looked in her hand for the herbs, only to find she clutched a bed’s edge. She looked toward Miriam, hoping to find Ifé in her eyes, finding only Miriam’s curled body and mangled hair, the dim light of defeat a halo around her” (Lara 174). Neither Ifé nor the herbs are available and the sacral crossing that saves the women from their circumstances is temporarily deferred. Completely stripped of any legal rights, the women are taken in as sex workers. A racist woman named Delia keeps Miriam and Micaela locked up and constantly prostituting themselves for her benefit.

One day, a customer violently punches Miriam after refusing his advances. This encourages Micaela to “pray for a miracle” as they cannot sustain such an existence (Lara 186). Micaela summons her mother and father’s spiritual guides, Ogun and Damballah, and in the next scene a snake appears coiling around Miriam and Micaela’s bodies and then slithering under the door of their room (Lara 187). Micaela realizes that the room is no longer locked. One of the walls then becomes an entrance into a forest labyrinth where Micaela enters and bathes in the mist: “She felt herself become transparent as she rose, her body blending into the sky... Uttering one final prayer, she turned from the forest and returned to her bed... Micaela held out the fruit in her hand. Its scent filled the room with sweetness” (Lara 188). Despite not clarifying whether the

forest maze is a dream or not, the narrator points to the convergence of that moment of freedom with the women's macabre reality. When she returns, Micaela brings a part of this feeling into the room as she shares with Miriam a fruit from the forest. The narrator interrupts the scene with the information that at that very moment Ligia, Miriam's mother, is dying in the Dominican Republic. In Ligia's moment of crossing she learns that Miriam is in danger. At the same time, Miriam dreams of her mother and understands that they will leave the room soon: "A strange light filled the room...bright and silver through the opened door...Micaela sat up and walked toward the door that had sealed them in the room for endless days and nights" (Lara 191).

As they walk out, they start learning about where they were. Realizing that they are still in Puerto Rico, they learn that Delia had kept Miriam and Micaela locked away in a room overlooking a courtyard. Sprinkled on the floor were U.S. dollar bills, which Micaela picks up: "I'm charging for services. We're going to go home. Forget this country, the gold is too expensive. Let's go home, Miriam...Let's go" (Lara 192). This scene epitomizes the layered mythical setting guiding Miriam and Micaela through their experiences of marginality. While Ifé is summoned with the forest Micaela walks through, Miriam experiences a connection with her mother as she crosses over, learning of their imminent salvation. The magically appearing door is problematic in its purpose of saving the women from their destitution, as it is not an experience directly related to the protagonists' relationship to the sacred. However, this scene is not the women's decisive, self-affirming moment. Rather, it is a conduit to their final constructions of self.

While thus far the novel has placed Miriam and Micaela as second-class Dominicans, Mona Strait survivors, and sex workers, it is their final and most redemptive set of opportunities that allow them to reinvent self despite attributed social markers. Once back in the Dominican

Republic, Miriam and Micaela reconstitute self by coalescing their long acquired sacred knowledge with personal space. Now with *dólares* (U.S. dollars) in their pockets, the two women set out to open a *colmado* in the batey. Initially they face social ostracism, as when they return to the batey, the community calls the two women *brujas* (witches) and *putas* (whores), social categories exclusive to marginalizing women that transgress accepted social codes.

Despite their initial experience, their *colmado* becomes a sacred space of belonging for them and their intimate collective. In this space, Micaela and Miriam labor with dignity and love each other and their community. They also secure the optimism of futurity when Micaela takes in an apprentice. The relationship nurtured between Miriam, Micaela, and Yealidad redeploys the institution of family through a non-heteronormative formulation. The intimate relationship between Miriam and Micaela's family romance is ultimately practiced on dual registers. First, the women pass down the *colmado*, their autonomous economic and quantifiable market, and, second, Miriam and Micaela leave Yealidad their sacred body of knowledge in order to continue their qualitative sacral work. Talking to Yealidad about the value of their work and the intimacy through which these processes carry forth one's body as well as one's history, Micaela states:

Everything in this store is sacred. We do not cheat people...Everything in this store carries the breath of Dios and our ancestors' hard work. Even the bread that comes here every afternoon has been formed by someone's hand that has been helped by a force more powerful than us. I want you to remember that as you work, now that you can understand the force that I am speaking of. (Lara 232)

The narrator describes Yealidad as a gifted child who possesses a halo around her head. Micaela first teaches her about Elegba, since nothing begins or even ends without his evocation (Lara 229).

Elegba, who is the rada counterpart of Carfú from Montero's *The Red of His Shadow*, is, according to Deren, the fundamentally more just of the two loas, who "commands the divinities of the day" (101). However, since Micaela is Changó's horse when she believes Yealidad is ready, she offers Changó to Yealidad. Once this transfer of sacred responsibility is complete, Miriam and Micaela both pass, and it is Yealidad who finds them on the bed, which is where the reader begins the story (Lara 240). The wealth of sacral understanding continues as Yealidad is Changó's next horse. She also promises the women to continue the *colmado* and, most importantly, to continue their practice: "Miriam and Micaela...had shown her with every story that had graced her ear and every medicine that they had taught her. They had shown her how to walk, how to breathe and how to believe...Yealidad reached down to the ground for the keys, her body filled with a new sense of belonging" (Lara 242).

Regardless of opposition, both novels present the main women protagonists as initiating alternative socioeconomic constructs within their private and personal spaces. While Zulé refuses the possible economic benefits of 'selling' her batey and allowing Similá to pass with his drug cargo, Miriam and Micaela practice a capitalistic mode of subsistence through their *colmado*. Although Zulé and Miriam and Micaela cannot excise themselves from the larger economic networks of survival – Zulé's Gagá still cuts cane for the Dominican elite and Miriam and Micaela's *colmado* sell to all customers that enter their intimate space – they continuously strive to practice belonging within their social spaces. This sense of belonging manifests as sexual relationships that defy patriarchally-defined heterosexuality. Zulé, with her brief yet elixir-like

sexual encounter with Christianá Dubois, and Miriam and Micaela with their long-standing sexual and spiritual connection, practice same-sex desire that does not eradicate Zulé's love and passion for her ill-fated lover, Similá, or Miriam's identity as mother to deceased Antonio. Thus, both novels investigate the realm of sexual and sacral subjectivity, and it is through sexual practices and not Western conceptions of sexuality that these protagonists negotiate a sense of self within their social spaces of intimacy. Through Vodou loa, Erzulie and their physical and spiritual relationships, Zulé and Miriam and Micaela negotiate a more expansive set of markers for disenfranchised Caribbean and Latin American women.

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