

Tornadic Black Angels:
Vodou, Dance, Revolution

ABSTRACT:

This article explores the history of Vodou from outlawed African dance to revolutionary magic to depoliticized national Haitian religion and popular dance, its present reduction to Diaspora interpersonal healing, and a possible future. My first section, on Kate Ramsey's *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti*, reveals Vodou as a sociopolitical construction of racist legal oppression of Africana dances rituals, and artistic-political resistance thereto. My second section, on Karen McCarthy Brown's *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, a "postmodern ethnography" of intersectional oppressions and Black female Haitian resistance in the Diaspora, foregrounds the figure of Gedelia, a feminist variant on Papa Gede, central Vodou spirit (*lwa*) of resurrection and healing. Finally, my last section, on the "observing participant" analyses of Black dance anthropologist Yvonne Daniel's *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé*, finds a dancing Gedelia in her centering of Oyá, a warrior spirit of storms and death. On this basis, I propose the figure of tornadic black angels as a possible magical tool (in Vodou, a *pwen*, or "point") intended to re-spiritualize and thereby re-politicize the secularized and whitewashed social Latin dance called "salsa" for social justice.

KEYWORDS: Vodou; Afro-Latin dance; Haiti; angels; revolution; social justice

Having previously argued for the self-conscious deployment of the Afro-Caribbean dance of salsa as a decolonizing gestural discourse for social justice, I here consider its history, namely as a secularized form of Neo-African religious dance, including what has become known as Vodou.¹ This religious origin is suggested, in part, by the explicit references to Santería (the Cuban equivalent of Haitian Vodou) in the lyrics of the Black "Queen of Salsa," Celia Cruz (Daniel 46).² Santería is also invoked in the popular Latin dance music of Desi Arnaz, whose signature song, in his role as "Ricky Ricardo" on the *I Love Lucy* television show, invokes the

¹ See Joshua M. Hall, "Afro-Latin Dance as Reconstructive Gestural Discourse: The Figuration Philosophy of Dance on Salsa," *Research in Dance Education* 22(1): 2020, 73-87.

² For more, see Frances R. Aparicio, "The Blackness of Sugar: Celia Cruz and the Performance of (Trans)Nationalism," *Cultural Studies* 13(2): 1999, 223-236.

healer spirit “Babalú-Ayé.”³ More generally, Black dance anthropologist Yvonne Daniel writes that from the Vodou spirit Danbala’s dance, “*yanvalu*,” and “the dance for Ochún to salsa,” all Black Diaspora dance is spiritual and religious in part insofar as it “allows humans to transcend into altered spaces and altered time” (149).⁴ Finally in support of salsa’s religious origins, during the research for the present investigation, a Black Cuban immigrant friend revealed to me that, at our local social Latin dance events, when he customarily plays a large gourd percussion instrument (similar to an *ason*, the central sacred tool of Vodou priests), he self-consciously dedicates that performance to another spirit, called Ochosi. Thus, for the last twenty years, I have been unwittingly participating in a religious ritual dance, layered with my own presumptively secular salsa dancing.

The present investigation is structured as follows. First, starting in Haiti’s colonial past, I retrace the legal construction of what has become known as Vodou, with the recent (2015) history by Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti*.⁵ Second, I turn to the present, in an “ethnographic spiritual biography” written by a white U.S. American Vodou convert, entitled *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (xxxviii).⁶ And finally, I explore the futural applications of Black sacred dancer and anthropologist Yvonne Daniel’s *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé*. What emerges from this academic ritual narrative is that that the collective revolutionary power of

³ See, for example, Lizette Alvarez, “After Years of Secrecy, Santería Is Suddenly Much More Popular. And Public,” *The New York Times* 27 January 1997, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/01/27/nyregion/after-years-of-secrecy-santeria-is-suddenly-much-more-popular-and-public.html>.

⁴ Yvonne Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

⁵ Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

⁶ Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

dance, which directly empowered Haiti's war for independence and later anticolonial fighters, has been sapped in favor of a dance-optional Diaspora religion of interpersonal healing and survival, which implies that reinfusing the religion with dance (Vodou into salsa) and vice versa might also reinfuse the militant political force for social justice back into the individual.

More precisely, I offer the figure of tornadic black angels as a kind of magical tool which in Vodou is known as a *pwen* ("point"), an object into which the power of a spirit is condensed.⁷ I will now briefly unpack the three parts of this proposed *pwen*. First, the etymology of tornado derives from the Latin *tonare* "to thunder" and the Spanish *tornar* "to twist, to turn." Second, black suggests not only the dominant racial group in Haiti and the Africana Diaspora, but also the so-called "black magic" associated with the revolutionary-empowering violence of Vodou's "Petwo" rites, and it is the primary symbolic color of the Gede family of spirits in their function as lords of death. Third, there are numerous references in Vodou's sacred texts to the spirits as angels, and Brown notes that "Saint Gabriel," the archangel Gabriel, "is one of the Catholic saints conflated with Gede," who is "the protector of small children," and "master of the healing arts" (270).⁸ In sum, especially when identified with the Yoruba/Cuban warrior spirit of storms, Oyá, the Vodou spirit Gedelia can inspire an entire revolutionary host of black tornadic angels to move from the secularized social dance of salsa to renewing the militancy of Vodou's fight for social justice.

⁷ In Brown's description, *pwens* "may consist of words, gestures, ritual objects, or herbs rubbed into a small cut in a person's skin," and that, regardless of their form, they "represent the condensation and appropriation of spiritual powers," more specifically as the result of ritual "baptisms" that makes them "condensations of powerful truths" (94n1). Thus, in the example of tornadic black angels, it illuminates the truth of the transformative (and potentially disastrous) power of Vodou spirits in a revolutionary context.

⁸ Two examples from popular Vodou songs are as follows: "Alert the angels down in the water, / Beneath the mirror," and "We're calling Dambala [a central snake spirit]. He's our angel" (Brown 111, 284; Daniel 168).

I. Dancing with the Ancestors, the Revolutionary Past

It can be difficult, seeing primarily through the lens of our anti-Black, anti-Latinx racist present, to appreciate the depth of the sociocultural construction of what has come to be called Vodou, and its centrality to Afro-Latin Caribbean social dances today. This is one reason why I begin with Ramsey's critically acclaimed history of Vodou and its relationship with the law in what is now Haiti. "Between 1835 and 1987," Ramsey summarizes, "many popular ritual practices in Haiti were officially prohibited, first as *sortilèges* (spells) and later as *pratiques superstitieuses* (superstitious practices)" (1). The paradox is that, among the many living Haitians whom Ramsey interviewed, most of them "acknowledged the laws but cautioned me not to read them too literally, given their infrequent application against Vodou" (2).

Provocatively, Ramsey uses a popular Haitian saying—"law always has a trap inside of it"—to suggest that "the potential trickiness of the law might seem analogous to that of magic," as frequently attributed to Vodou. To wit, the law and the *lwa* "share a common potential for mobilizing power for good and for ill, as relatively defined" (6). This polarity is also reflected, Ramsey notes, in the common distinction between Rada and Petwo spirit 'families,' regarding which "The Petwo are magically-identified *lwa*, and their proximity to the Rada spirits is always well buffered and marked off" (8).⁹ More precisely, "for its self-definition Ginen tradition relies in part on the critique of self-seeking and malevolent *maji* (magic), considered the business of specialists who 'work with the left hand' dealing in spirits that have been stolen from the dead or

⁹ Kreyol musicologist Benjamin Hebblethwaite claims that "Petwo" derives from both "the Petwo region of the Kongo," and also the figure of Dom Pedro, "A Black man of Spanish colonial origin" who "introduced in 1768 a dance that was analogous to but more precipitous than the one in Vaudoux," in which dance "gunpowder is added to the communal rum" (24). Quoting noted historian David Geggus, Hebblethwaite adds that Pedro "'incited' enslaved people to 'rebellion' and to be 'independent of their masters,' and was therefore 'killed in a hunt' (Geggus 2014, 24-25)" (Hebblethwaite 24). See David Geggus, *The Haitian Revolution: A Documentary History* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2014); and Benjamin Hebblethwaite, *A Transatlantic History of Haitian Vodou: Rasin Figuer, Rasin Bwa Kayiman, and the Rada and Gede Rites* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021).

purchased and can thereafter be made to perform magical works for their owners” (9).¹⁰ In short, there is a black magical side to Vodou that threatens unjust regimes, and which might be justly marshalled again in a revolutionary tornado of tornadic black angels.

This “left-hand” magical tradition took on explicitly political importance with the infamous presidency of Haiti’s François Duvalier. Ramsey writes that Duvalier “was well-known for his efforts to iconographically appropriate, ideologically manipulate, and institutionally co-opt the popular powers of Vodou” (12). In contrast, a later president, the populist Jean-Bertrand Aristide, “signed a decree granting official recognition to the Vodou religion for the first time,” which decree “authorized religious leaders to register with the government and become licensed to officiate at civil ceremonies such as baptisms, marriages, and funerals” (13). Telescoping this history, Ramsey writes that “In making *vaudou* a metonymic gloss for Haitian ‘sorcery’ and *pratiques superstitieuses*, Haiti’s nineteenth-century detractors unwittingly paved the way for the word’s resignification, by defenders,” and thereby “for the emergence of the sign of Vodou as an indispensable object of political identification and struggle” (13). In other words, legal oppression directly contributed to the solidification of Vodou as a central, populist political force in the tornadic history of Haiti. During that history, Ramsey continues, in part due to the “weakness of the judiciary and the rule of law in Haiti,” across “the country alternative judicial orders have also existed, such as the “‘nighttime’ legal system organized through networks of” secret societies which “evolved in slave resistance, *marronage* (flight from slavery), and revolutionary struggle” (17). These societies, she elaborates, “based their claim to authority in the ethos of Ginen and may share membership and leadership with local *ounfò* (Vodou temples)”

¹⁰ “Ginen” can refer to the Vodou spirits, their mythical African homeland, and/or the religion that outsiders call “Vodou” (and which Haitians tend to call “serving the spirits”).

(17). In this context, Ramsey suggests that the word *lwa*'s "phonetic affinity with the French word for 'law' ought not to be dismissed as mere linguistic coincidence" (19).

Ramsey relates that the first explicit conflict between the law and the *lwás*—named for the first time as spirits of Vodou—took place "in 1796, five years after the start of the massive slave revolts in northern Saint-Domingue and three years after general emancipation" (21). At that time, "France's commissioners in the colony legally prohibited for the first time what they called 'the dance known by the name of *Vaudou*' on the grounds that it was contrary to republican institutions, good morals, public health, public safety, and, implicitly, the strict plantation labor regime" (21). Note that, in this first historical reference to Vodou, the latter is named specifically as a "dance" (rather than, for example, a "ritual" or "religion"). This suggests that the material kernel to the historical construction of "Vodou" might be nothing other than the art of dance, in which case the removal of drums and most dancing that Brown documents in Brooklyn seems like a substantial voiding of its heart.

The implicit persecution of these Haitian Africana dances that became "Vodou" started much earlier, however. For example, a French colonial ordinance in 1704 forbade "the Dances and Assemblies of Blacks during the night on Sundays and on holidays during the Divine Service"—behind which, according to Ramsey, lurked "the figure of the black *sorcier*" (31). The most infamous alleged sorcerer, she relates, was the "African-born, possibly Muslim *marron* leader François Makandal, who had once been enslaved on a plantation," and whose "reputed botanical and magical knowledge inspired widespread panic as deaths on plantations, both of livestock and humans, mounted during 1757" (33). More generally, the French colonizers concluded that "seemingly innocuous ritual practices" such as the community social dances that were first called Vodou, "were serving as a gateway to more serious crimes" that in the

colonizing imagination portended insurrection and rebellion (35). Again, therefore, colonizing laws viewed the distance from dance to revolution to be dangerously short.

Undoubtedly the most famous and hotly contested episode in the history of the laws and *lwas* concerns the ceremony called Bwa Kayiman (or *Bois Caïman*). In Ramsey's retelling, "on the stormy night of Sunday, 14 August 1791, enslaved representatives from all of the major plantations in the colony's northern province met in a secluded wooded spot," there "to finalize plans for the revolt that was to begin a week later" (42). The "rebel leader Boukman presided over this gathering," Ramsey continues, "joined by a priestess who consecrated his oath to take up arms against the whites by sacrificing a black pig, the blood of which everyone imbibed" (42). According to later researchers, who in 1999 conducted "oral historical interviews about Bwa Kayiman," Ramsey adds, "14 August is the eve of the annual celebration of Ezili Kawoulo, a spirit who is 'before all the appanage of secret societies' and is popularly believed to have spiritually embodied the woman who partnered with Boukman at the ceremony" (43).¹¹ (The Ezili family of spirits also plays a major role in Brown's biography of the *manbo* Mama Lola, to which I will return below). Overall, despite the wide divergence of scholarly views regarding the details of this ceremony, Ramsey affirms that "there is a wide scholarly consensus that, as Geggus puts it, 'during the Revolution magico-religious beliefs served to mobilize resistance and foster a revolutionary mentality'" (44).¹² Thus, a ceremony that almost certainly involved what would now be called Vodou dance directly catalyzed the Haitian war of independence.

¹¹ Rachel Beauvoir and Didier Dominique, in collaboration with Eddy Lubin, "Investigations autour du site historique du Bois Caïman: Rapport," commissioned by the Ministère de la Culture, République d'Haïti, January 2000.

¹² David Geggus, "Haitian Voodoo in the Eighteenth Century: Language, Culture, Resistance," in *Jarbuch für Geschichte von Staat, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Lateinamerikas* 28(1991): 21-49, 48.

Detailed evidence of Vodou dance as revolutionary catalyst, marshaled by Ramsey, includes the fact that “one of the most important insurgent leaders in the north,” Georges Biassou, is “described by the Haitian historian Thomas Madiou (1814-1884) as having been attended by ‘sorcerers [and] magicians,’ who formed ‘his council,’ and as having his tent covered with ‘symbols of African superstition’” (45).¹³ A second, more famous example concerns “a landowner of color, possibly of Spanish descent, who was named Romaine Rivière but called himself Romaine la Prophétesse” (45). This transgender prophetess, Ramsey continues, “attracted a following of thousands of rebels when he announced that the king had already emancipated the slaves and that he himself was the godson of the Virgin Mary, with whom he was in direct communication” (45). Channeling this supernatural power, “he and his band waged a campaign of terror against the planter establishment and its military forces in the region” (45).¹⁴ Thirdly, still further evidence can be found in the fact that the famous revolutionary leader Toussaint Louverture “promulgated his own ordinance against *le Vaudoux* and ‘all dances and all nocturnal assemblies’ in January 1800,” which for Ramsey “seemed to figure *le Vaudoux* as another internal parallel political power to be contained if not eliminated” (48). In short, Ramsey concludes, it was “to some extent precisely because popular religious organizations and leadership played a role in empowering rebels who first overthrew slavery, and ultimately French colonialism, that the new authorities placed them outside the law” (52).

¹³ Thomas Madiou, *Histoire d’Haïti*, Vol. I, 1492-1799 (Port-au-Prince: Editions Henri Deschamp, 1989).

¹⁴ Intriguingly given the transgender rights movement today, Hebblethwaite notes that “During his rule” over the Haitian town of Léogâne, the mayor of that town called the rebel leader “a ‘hermaphroditic tiger,’ a reference to his transgender sensibilities” (25). Also inspiringly for LGBT+ activism today, la Prophétesse “asserted that the abolishment of slavery was a divine mission, demanded total personal freedom, and inspired his followers with militaristic Kongolesse Marianism (Rey 2017, 51-52, 72)” (25). Terry Rey, *The Priest and the Prophetess: Abbé Ouvrière, Romaine Rivière, and the Revolutionary Atlantic World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Taking the next dancing step in her history, Ramsey turns to the relationship between *lwas* and laws in the new Black Republic of Haiti. She begins by citing Haitian “lawyer, anthropologist, and diplomat” Anténor Firmin’s view that “defamers of the black race” and their Haitian homeland claimed that “people of African descent were incapable of administering justice (demonstrating “an habitual contempt for the law”),” and that they were also “incapable of true religion (that is, ‘unable to rise above fetishism and totemism’)” (55).¹⁵ Central to these Haitian laws is the Haitian Code Pénal of 1835, especially the “penultimate section of the final law,” entitled “Des sortilèges” [“Magic Spells”] (58). Crucially, in Ramsey’s view, “Nowhere did the law define what constituted a sortilège, except through the listing of names that appeared under its heading,” which names were, “in popular understanding, neither necessarily objectified as such nor grouped together in such a way” (60). Especially counterintuitive and problematic was “the inclusion of the word *voudoux*,” since most Haitians considered it diametrically opposed to the phenomenon of “*maji* (magic),” a distinction often articulated as “that which qualifies as Ginen versus that which his considered ‘sorcery’” (61, 62). Thus, Ramsey concludes, “The law made a category mistake” (62). In other words, the former revolutionaries, having benefited from both “hands” of Vodou, now sought to outlaw the rebellious “left hand” (of the Petwo rites) and ended up technically outlawing also the “right hand” (of the Rada rites), including the dances that the Haitians have never surrendered despite centuries of its oppression.

In this light, Ramsey writes, “One might even suspect that the ban against *le vaudoux* was” in fact “partially motivated by state concern with intensifying peasant labor, as frequent rural dances were believed to diminish agricultural productivity” (67). In support of this point, Ramsey quotes Laënnec Hurbon’s claim that “suspicion of ‘sorcery’ tended to fall on ‘two poles

¹⁵ Anténor Firmin, *The Equality of the Human Races*, trans. Asselin Charles (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 313, 319.

of the social scale: on the one hand, politicians and the rich, and on the other, the poor and the weak”; however, it was only the poor and weak “who ‘in ordinary times (as opposed to times of crisis)’ were most often accused of malicious sorcery” (Hurbon 266, 267, quoted in Ramsey 71). Relatedly, Ramsey then survey the history of peasant uprisings and revolts in Haiti, whose leaders were often Vodou priests. More generally, she adds, “It is a truism of anthropological theories of magic that an inverse relation has often obtained between attributed supernatural power and socioeconomic and political power; that is, those reputed to be the most powerful ‘sorcerers’ are often the most socially marginal and structurally weak” (75). Again, therefore, both dance and the magic of Petwo are disproportionately associated with racial Blackness and the class of the poor.

The next dancing step of Ramsey’s history concerns similar dynamics during the U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1914-1934. Ramsey focuses there on “the close association U.S. military personnel drew between popular rebellion and ‘native sorcery,’” particularly in the context of the “U.S. military imposition of the *kòve* (French *corvée*, or forced-labor crew) for road construction across central and northern Haiti in 1917-1918” (120). In legislating against such indigenous rebellions, Ramsey emphasizes that only three sections of Haiti’s Penal Code—including the section against “magic spells”—were translated into the “the only legal handbook distributed to U.S. forces in Haiti during the first seven years of the occupation” (128). The U.S. occupiers used this handbook, according to “marine reports and oral historical accounts,” in part “to compel peasant labor” (129). More generally, “the practice of ‘voodooism’ (or, increasingly, ‘voodooism’ or ‘voodoo’) is officially invoked” in these accounts “to serve as a kind of ultimate symptom of Haitian ‘disorder,’ in need of American military ‘cleaning up’” (130). One reason for this view, Ramsey observes, is that “Unquestionably, popular spiritual beliefs, magical

works, and religious leadership and organization were a key locus and force of peasant opposition during the occupation” (132).

In brutal response to these decolonizing uprisings of the Haitian people, U.S. military officer General George Barnett testified to the “practically indiscriminate killing of natives,” for which he “was indirectly censured” by his colonizer superiors (133, 135). As in the present-day War on Terror, U.S. “misconduct was so well-documented in the military record that it could not be refuted and was frequently explained and justified on the grounds that Haitian insurgents practiced ‘savage warfare,’ which warranted the suspension of protocols of ‘regular’ or ‘civilized’ warfare” (139). Among the most effective forms of Haitian Vodou resistance to this U.S. occupying oppression were (1) “counterintelligence that advertised a false postponement of [a given dance] ceremony, which was moved to another *ounfò* [temple] that night”; (2) “drums used during the *sèvis* [services]” having “been stuffed with cotton fiber...in order to muffle their volume”; and (3) many Vodou priests becoming “part of the policing structure themselves” (149, 150). Elaborating on the latter phenomenon, Ramsey quotes a marine officer’s testimony that “It was convenient to have a wizard attached to the police station,” who in that position served the U.S. military “as a back-stairs link with the powerful voodoo fraternity” (152). More specifically, the Vodou *oungan* “interpreted the law to his fellow *bocours* and told them what they could do and what they must not attempt” (152).

Thanks to these efforts, Ramsey notes, “stories were constantly circulating not of defeat, but of the resilience and transcendence of the spirits in the face of their persecutors; of their retribution against the same...and of the punishment, affliction, capitulation, or conversion of those who attempted to suppress popularly sanctioned religious practices” (155). In short, “the *lwa* are consistently ascendant over the law, and its would-be enforcers are ultimately forced in

the face of their confrontation with these higher powers to soften their regime, or even to honor those powers themselves—the ‘*loi* of the *lwa*,’ as one *oungan* put it” (156). Additionally, Ramsey notes, “The strict enforcement of the law could ultimately serve to instantiate belief in ‘superstition’ rather than, as occupation apologists defensively claimed, to weaken or undermine it” (157). In short, “the law of the state,” she concludes, “ensorcelled itself” (157).

Vodou also achieved another pyrrhic victory over the U.S. military in the form of waves of best-selling novels, armchair anthropologies, and racist films, especially the genre of zombie movies that “would proliferate over the course of the 1930s and lose their specific referentiality to Haiti” (170). Against the mainstream racist interpretation of zombies (namely of Black people as inherently mindless laborers), however, Ramsey proposes a revolutionary Marxist alternative, arguing that the true “zombies” are the poor oppressed workers kidnapped and forced to work for the “Haytian American Sugar Company (HASCO), a large American-owned sugar operation” (173). This early multinational corporation was “steadily displacing peasant sharecroppers across these regions by means of land appropriations,” thus making it “a highly likely object of sorcery discourse in early-occupation” Haiti,” specifically at a time when “popular outrage over the *kòve* system of forced labor reached its height” (173). HASCO tried to dodge responsibility for this unpopular practice by subcontracting its workers from local criminal organizations, and therefore it was “generally ‘outsiders’ and ‘mountain people’ who performed agricultural day labor in the area,” people who “locals referred to derisively” as, among other things, “*zonbi*” (174).

Further supporting this analysis, Ramsey quotes Karen Richman’s claim that “in the first half of the twentieth century ‘the immorality of wage labor and [the] inhuman capitalism that exploits it’ came to be identified with magic and the utilization of *pwen*—in this context, spirits

purchased from outside the community for the pursuit of individual gain” (176).¹⁶ Among other results, Ramsey concludes, “this produced a countervailing expansion and augmentation of the power and prestige of Ginen as a social category and moral standard” (176). The cost of Vodou’s elevation, however, was a tendency to whitewash and depoliticize it, in part by marginalizing the drumming, dancing, and the militant collective manifestations associated with Petwo and magic. To see how this tendency manifests, and how my proposed *pwen* might help restore Vodou’s power for politically militant revolutionary force, I now turn to my second section, on the upshot of Ramsey’s history for Haitians in the Diaspora today.

II. Dancing with Gede(lia), the Diaspora Present

Brown begins *Mama Lola* with an admirable goal, namely “to speak indirectly but forcefully to this racist rhetoric” that Ramsey describes in the U.S. and beyond (xxxviii). But in stating her method, namely to “plant images of quotidian Vodou practice in the minds of thinking people, images that would linger and soften the formulaic association of Vodou with the superstitious and the satanic,” Brown starts to reveal a possible white middle-class U.S. bias (xxxviii). This bias can be seen clearly in the fact that Brown discusses *Mama Lola* almost exclusively, despite acknowledging that “Many other Vodou leaders—mostly men—operate on a much grander scale,” and that *Lola* “does not usually have drummers; they are expensive, and, more to the point, she does not want to attract the attention of her neighbors” (4). To abandon the drums, however, is to lose the heart of the dance, and the heart of its potential for revolution, which is precisely why drums have so often been outlawed by colonizing forces.¹⁷ Instead, and

¹⁶ Karen Richman, *Migration and Vodou* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 164.

¹⁷ In support of this centrality of drums, Hebblethwaite notes of the West African roots of Vodou that “*Hũn* is the ‘heart’ and a ‘drum’; *hùn* is ‘blood,’ a ‘Vodun divinity,’ and the ‘region Abomey,’ and when used as a verb it also

even though Brown occasionally references the importance of literal dance for Vodou, she uses dance throughout her biography primarily as a metaphor.¹⁸

Despite these shortcomings, there are several reasons why including *Mama Lola* in the present investigation seemed advisable. First, it is the most critically acclaimed ethnographic study of a living Vodou priestess, now in its third edition, celebrated in part for destigmatizing Vodou outside Haiti. Second, it centers the same U.S. Diaspora context where I am urging a spiritual and political reactivation of Afro-Latin social dance. Third, its self-critical foregrounding of the author's white Anglo identity, and unwitting complicity with injustice, provides a helpful template for present-day participants in Afro-Latin social who are embodied in similar ways. In other words, the figurative interracial dance between Brown and Mama Lola, in both its strengths and weaknesses, has much to teach participants in literal interracial Afro-Latin dances in the Diaspora. And finally, by centering the Gede family of spirits, and introducing a new female and feminist spirit, "Gedelia," *Mama Lola* bridges my first section on Vodou's political history and my last section on a future for feminist Vodou dance. In part, this is because Gede is excluded from Ramsey's history (except for one pejorative reference to Duvalier), and Gedelia seems Vodou's closest analogue to Daniel's feminist heroine, the Yoruba spirit Oyá. Put in terms of Hegel's dialectic, *Mama Lola* represents the quietist "antithesis" of the present, after the "thesis" of Vodou's revolutionary past, and before a possible "synthesis" with salsa in the future—a calm between two storms, the once and future tornados of revolution.

means 'to open' (Seugrola and Rassinoux 2000, 239)," and that a "poetic sense of *hun* or *houn* is 'opening the heart to the spirit," for which reason "the leader drummer is the *hùngán* (Brand 2000b, 46)" (97). Basilio Seguroa and Jean Rassinoux, *Dictionnaire Fon-Français* (Madrid: Société des Missions Africains, 2000); and Roger Brand, *Ethnographie et Vocabulaire Religieux des Cultes Vodoun* (Munich, Lincom Europa, 2000).

¹⁸ For example, Brown retells a story from the *manbo* Lola about her family's ritual event wherein "people danced so energetically that a dust cloud that could be seen a mile away rose over the Mauvant [family's] land" (216).

In the “Preface to the 2001 Edition” of *Mama Lola*, framing its authorship as plural, Brown writes that “My voices were several, as were Alourdes’s (Lola’s given name),” which in the latter case “included the voices that regularly speak through her,” and that “Once I had the chorus of voices, it became clear that my role was to be the conductor” (xxxiii). Brown later elaborates that these voices reduce to four primary ones. First, that of the *manbo* Lola herself. Second, Brown-as-scholar. Third, Brown-as-Vodou practitioner. And the final voice is “perhaps that of Gede—the one who tells the ancestral tales [throughout the book] in the form of fictionalized short stories and in so doing plays with truth, seeking to bring it alive for its immediate audience” (20). To emphasize this last point, Brown claims here that her entire book is a Vodou ritual performance—more precisely a possession ritual in which the spirit of Gede—or perhaps Gedelia—is channeled to speak the tornadic truth of Vodou.

Potentially compounding this problematic ventriloquism, Brown then reveals her controversial choice to establish an intimate relationship with both the *manbo* Lola and Vodou, via “an initiation I underwent in the summer of 1981” (8). In the *manbo* Lola’s words, this initiation transformed Brown into “one of the ‘little leaves’ (*ti-fèy*) on Alourdes’s Vodou family tree,” specifically via “a ritual ‘marriage’ to two of the Vodou spirits, Ogou and Danbala” (10). Speaking therefore from this very specific subject position—of a white, middle-class academic and recent convert to Vodou in the U.S. diaspora—Brown asserts that “there is no Vodou ritual, small or large, individual or communal, which is not a healing rite” (10). In sum, “Vodou is a system they have devised to deal with the suffering that is life, a system whose purpose is to minimize pain, avoid disaster, cushion loss, and strengthen survivors and survival instincts” (10). While this claim admittedly seems accurate for the *manbo* Lola’s work, and for Brown’s, and for the Rada rites of Vodou in the Diaspora today, it nevertheless seems highly counterintuitive and

inaccurate when applied to the black magic of the Petwo rites, especially in the history of revolutionary and decolonizing violence related from Ramsey above. In this way, Brown arguably distorts Vodou toward interpersonal ethical pacification and away from collective political transformation.

Nevertheless, there seem to be a limit to how much the collective, political, and militant aspects of Vodou can be submerged, and thus there are frequent moments in Brown's text where one might find a potential deployment of my suggested *pwen* of tornadic black angels. For example, Brown writes of her *manbo* friend that "Alourdes moves in a *spiral* fashion over and over the same ground when telling an important ancestral story"; and that "When other family members are present, they add their versions of the stories, twisting their word *spirals* in and around those of Alourdes" (17, emphasis added). Combining this with Brown's subsequent claim that "Virtually no story is unrelated to the *lwa*," one could compare this storytelling ritual to a tornado-of-tornadoes, each spiraling individually, but also choreographed delicately around the others, and all ultimately revolving around the spirits (18).

For a second example of a potential deployment of my *pwen*, Brown echoes Ramsey's narrative in her observation that "In a traditional Vodou view, the land, the family, and the spirits are, in a way, one and the same," although "for many contemporary Haitians the three legs of this tripod on which their world rests have been wrenched apart" (36). That is, most Haitians in the Diaspora work with the spirits not on the lands where their ancestors are buried, with neither natural earth (being stranded in concrete jungles like New York City) nor most of their biological families. In short, contemporary Vodou outside Haiti is a much more like a conventional liberal Western religion than it was in its origins, because the "spirit" part of it (as opposed to its "land" and "family" parts) is doing about 300% more work today. Nevertheless, Brown adds, the other

two parts do still find ways to manifest, thereby suggesting that the potential for revolution is never totally lost. Consider, for example, one specific possession that Brown recounts. “Alourdes was not only relating to one of the most venerable spirits,” Brown writes of this possession event, “she was also relating to an elderly woman who had once saved her life” (57). More generally, Brown observes, “The social drama is never far from the surface in the religious drama of Vodou” (57). And where the social goes, politics cannot be far behind, which further manifests the power of Vodou to facilitate insurrection and revolution. Fittingly, therefore, Brown’s description of this possession is heralded by a return to the figure of the spiral, writing how the *manbo* “was stirring the room into a spiraling intensity” in preparation for the *lwa* (61).

In a third example of a potential place for my proposed *pwen*, Brown’s detailed account of this possession is also directly relevant to the angel part of my tornadic black angel *pwen*. A successful possession ritual, Brown explains, is the result of “the struggle between the *lwa* and Alourdes’s *gwo bònanj* (big guardian angel), who ordinarily presides ‘in her head’”; and “When the spirit wins the content (it almost always does), the *gwo bònanj* is sent from the body to wander, as it does routinely during sleep,” thus accounting for the astral dimension of dreams (61).¹⁹ On the night of this particular possession, the first new “angel” to steal the dance floor of the *manbo*’s psyche was the *lwa* Azaka, followed by Alourdes’ primary spirit Ogou, and then “finally Gede, the trickster spirit whose habit is to come last and stay long, his comic performance serving as a buffer between Vodou and the outside world” (66). Or, put in terms of my proposed *pwen*, the dance of possession began with a peaceful Rada spirit, followed by a

¹⁹ As Daniel explains these concepts, “the *gwo bonanj* (literally, ‘big good angel’ of an individual (i.e., the soul, psyche, or character essence energy)” contrasts with “the *ti bonanj* (‘little good angel,’ meaning conscience, impersonal self-energy)” (83). Put differently, the big angel is individualized persona (being one person rather than another) and the little good angel is mere consciousness (being sentient/awake versus insentient/asleep). Thus, every human being is composed, at the metaphysical level of the psyche, of multiple figurative angels dancing in one’s head, the dominant one of which can be replaced by literal angels with their own signature choreographies.

militant Petwo spirit, and then swirled together by the dialectical tornado of Gede, whose domains (love, sex, humor, death, resurrection) transcend *Eros* and *Thanatos*, thereby suggesting a possible mutual infusion of these two forces, culminating in the love of freedom and community exploding in revolution.²⁰

For a fourth example, Brown's analysis of the concept of a *pwen* takes place in her chapter on the spirit Ogou, "the proud and powerful warrior who is [Alourdes'] chief counselor for the spirit world" (94). More precisely, Ogou's animal familiar is a rooster, one incarnation of which was an allegedly magically powerful fighting cock owned by the *manbo*'s Lola's male ancestor, in whose honor she later baptizes another rooster with the *pwen* "Thunder" (94). And in support of the dancing dimension of my tornadic figure, Brown observes that "at nearly every occasion on which he makes an appearance," the thundering angel Ogou "performs his dance with the sword," which dances one could compare to a whirling tornado (95).

A fifth support for my proposed *pwen* can be found in Brown's analysis of Vodou ritual in relation to mobility and heat. "In Vodou," she explains, "there is a pervasive contrast between being immobile and blocked and having a life of energy and flow," and thus the "goal of all Vodou ritualizing is to *echofe* (heat things up) so that people and situations shift and move, and healing transformations can occur" (134). Similarly, a tornado is a superheated mobilizing of the air with transformative consequences, and angels are frequently associated with healing. My proposed *pwen* also resonates with Brown's further point that "The opposite of this openness, heat, and flow, is the state of being arrested or stopped (*rete*) or, worse, of being bound (*mare*),"

²⁰ In support of this interpretation, consider the meaning of the word "buffer" which as a noun means something that absorbs blows, reconciling opposing forces, while as a verb means to initiate blows as a way to polish and improve something. In this way, Gede is a tornado that takes opposing forces (like a cold and a warm air front), twists them into a new force, and uses that to strike away what is holding the community back from being its best and most beautiful self.

including with “slave chains” (135). In short, when enslaved like the pre-revolution Black population of Haiti, even a tornado can be greeted as a welcome liberation.

In a sixth example, further supporting the link between Vodou and Haiti’s war for independence, Brown asserts that the Petwo *lwa* Ezili Dantò “fought fiercely beside her ‘children’ in the Haitian slave revolution,” wherein “she was wounded, Haitians say, and they point to the scars on Our Lady of Czestochowa’s right cheek as evidence” (a “Polish black Virgin” whose “chromolithograph Haitians most often use to represent” that *lwa*) (229, 228). Ezili Dantò’s resonates with my proposed *pwen* is illuminated by Brown’s observation that “One of Alourdes’s favorite songs for Dantò has the line... ‘When you see Dantò pass by, you say it is a thunderstorm’” (231). This thunderstorm dimension of Ezili Dantò also connects that *lwa* to one of Daniel’s primary spirits from Cuba, Oyá, a warrior spirit of storms who wields as her favorite weapon the tornado. For which reason, as Daniel observes, all the sacred texts, including the nonverbal gestural language of ritual dance, “describe her as tornado energy” (248).

The *lwa* most often analogized to Oyá, however, given that both are also spirits of the cemetery, is the wife of Papa Gede, to whom Brown’s final chapter is devoted, wherein lies a seventh example of a place for my proposed *pwen*. Describing this perhaps most important *lwa*, the *manbo* Lola tells Brown that “Papa Gede is a cemetery man. He lives in the cemetery, but that not mean he’s bad. He very good man. He love children a lot. He love woman a lot. He a very sexy man” (330). According to Brown, Gede is also “Alourdes’s main helper in the healing work she performs” (330). More precisely, Brown elaborates, “all Vodou healing is the healing of relationships,” because in the Vodou “understanding of personhood, the individual is given identity, solidity, and safety in a precarious world by a thick weave of relationships with other human beings as well as with spirits and ancestors” (331, 344-345). This healing often involves a

pwen, Brown notes, and with said tool “in hand, the client’s participation becomes crucial, for a point must be ‘worked’” (349). Just so, each individual tornado must turn and twist itself, if the tornado-of-tornados that Black angelic revolution is to prevail.

For an eighth example, in this active, transformational work with the *pwen*, Gede(lia) is central, in part because, according to Brown, “He alone can satirize the powerful and the privileged; only Gede could get away,” for example, “with making fun of Catholic priests” (361). Moreover, given the severed connections to the homelands of Haiti and Africa in the Diaspora, “Gede, a generalized spirit of the dead, has come to take over much of the day-to-day caretaking that, in former times and still in many rural areas, would be the domain of the spirits of influential ancestors” (368). Finally on this point, Brown observes that Gede “pushes at people, forcing them to find in themselves a way of staying steady in the midst of conflict,” with “a flexible centeredness, a dynamic balance,” just like Vodou dance generally, which “demands that the dancer maintain yet another beat with his or her feet, a beat that integrates those of the drums” (374). More generally, Brown notes that while in “ordinary creole, to *balance* (balance) means to weigh choices,” in Vodou the term means “to swing ritual objects from side to side or to hold them as you turn yourself around and around,” which “balancing ‘heats up,’ or enlivens, the object” (374). Thus, again, Brown evinces an awareness of dance, and invokes it briefly, but primarily as a metaphor, and perhaps for that reason passes too quickly over its collective, revolutionary potential.

Finally in regard to my proposed *pwen* in Brown’s text, perhaps the most promising locus for activating it lies at the very end of the first edition, which briefly mentions a new spirit that emerged at “Papa Gede’s birthday party in November 1982,” the abovementioned “Gedelia” (380). Gedelia, Brown relates, “came in like a powerful burst of energy, sexiness, and humor”

(380). This exciting new spirit is, moreover, not unique to this one possession, nor to the *manbo* Lola, because Brown recalls seeing the name Gedelia “written across the front of a bus in Haiti,” which she interprets hopefully as a sign of feminist futures to come (381). What we are perhaps witnessing, Brown, concludes, is the arrival of what may turn out to be a major new spirit in a more feminist Vodou future. To this, I would tentatively agree, on the condition that we can reactivate the collective, dancing, militant dimensions of Vodou, the rest of the chorus whom Gedelia might lead.

In that spirit, gesturing to both my home state, which is one of the most tornado-ravaged in the U.S., as well as to the trans-religious dancing analyses of Daniel in my third section, Brown’s “Afterword” mentions that the *manbo* Lola knows Alabama personally, having “returned” to after the book’s publication to “do treatments on site” (389). This geographical connection is more than mere coincidence, given Alabama’s close regional and immigratory connection to Haiti. Like the Santería priestess Maria Concordia, whom Brown introduces at the end of the book (as *manbo* Lola’s newer “little leaf”), I too share the hope “that bringing Vodou and Santería together can help reduce the tension between” differently embodied oppressed ethno-racial groups in the U.S. and beyond (399). One powerful dimension of this alliance would be the potential to channel the Neo-African religious roots of Cuba’s own revolution, which as an explicitly Marxist one, might help offset the middle-class atomized individualism of Brown’s biography and its minimizing of revolutionary violence.

III. Dancing with Tornadic Black Angels, for a Socially Just Future

I begin with Daniel’s account of the abovementioned tornadic spirit Oyá. First, Daniel initially describes her as follows: (a) “supposed to wear nine vivid colors—all the colors of the

other *orichas*, which ritually connected her importance to them” (b) centrally connected to “the spirits of the dead, the elevated ancestors,” and (c) “invoked and supported for her association with the cemetery and dead in general” (24-25). This connection to death, the cemetery, and the connecting centrality are all reasons why Oyé is compared to Vodou’s Gede(lia). The Gede family of spirits, more generally, Daniel writes, “represent an ethnic group conquered by the royal family of Abomey [in present-day Benin, descendants of the Fon people], many of whom were shipped to Saint Domingue as slaves,” and “having disappeared in Benin, in Haiti they became the *lwa* of death” (Hurbon 74-75, quoted in Daniel 114).²¹

Second, Daniel later recalls Oyé’s origin story, wherein she “pretended to be a boy in order to be alone with Changó,” the powerful spirit of thunder, fire, and war, thereby mastering all of his traditional masculine and warlike skills, ultimately becoming “as powerful as Changó,” and perhaps even “superior, especially because Changó knew fear [of his former protégé], and Oyé remained fearless” (214). Appropriately, then, at the level of her dance, Oyé’s “foot pattern” “does not exude femininity,” being instead “more like that of several male divinities, emphasizing the warrior-like strength of womankind” (247).

Third, drawing on her formal dance training, and her experience as a practitioner of (among other things) Vodou, having therefore danced the very wisdom she describes, Daniel recounts her own experience of being possessed by Oyé in dance. “It is through repetition that dancing worshipers harness and display all the energy possible in a given set of movements,” she explains, adding that, “with maximum repetition, the dancing worshiper is fully confident, engrossed in the muscular movement, articulating every nuance in every part of the body” (249). In this way, Daniel concludes, “The mind is submerged in the dancing and the music, discerning

²¹ Laënnec Hurbon, *Voodoo: Search for the Spirit*, trans. Lory Frankel (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995).

mysteries,” whereby “Both the body and the mind transcend” (249). Daniel justifies this positional privileging of dance as a lens for exploring Neo-African religions on the grounds that dance is similarly pivotal for them all. “Dance behavior is central,” Daniel writes, “because it is a constant in most African American religious practices, as well as in many social, secular settings” (51). More precisely, Daniel describes these dancing rituals as “choreographed improvisations” that “vibrate with both spiritual and social ideas” (52). This power to straddle the (perceived) divide between the sacred and the political is undoubtedly one reason why Vodou has been so instrumental in Ramsey’s history of insurrection and revolution.

The central conceptual distinction in Daniel’s dancing analysis is Neo-African religions’ distinction among what she calls the “three realms of existence: the human, plant, and animal realm; the ancestral realm; and the cosmic realm” (54). While “some ancestors are classified as those who have passed on and exist in the ancestral realm,” Daniel elaborates, other ancestors “have been deified and thereby exist in the cosmic realm” (54). In this metaphysical context, ritual dance allows practitioners to transcend their home realm (that of humanity), connecting it to the other two realms, and thereby facilitating equilibrium among all three. Daniel christens this phenomenon “social medicine,” which she then describes as follows: “The congregation performs the dances,” she writes, “until specialists in divine manifestation emerge,” who then “lead and intensify the performance, moving the ritual forward from extraordinary activity (ritual behavior) through transcendence or transformation (spiritual behavior)” (55).

Daniel baptizes these dancing moves as “time-revered body-behaviors,” and affirms how in these Neo-African religions “Body knowledge is given its fair hearing,” in contrast to “European and American mind/body dualism” with its denigration of bodily knowledge (56). The pinnacle of this embodied knowledge is what Daniel calls “the suprahuman body,” defined

as “human body that has been transformed by a spiritual incorporation” (59). These suprahuman powers have meant individual survival and collective revolution for generations of enslaved and oppressed communities. “In the Americas,” Daniel observes, “the dancing body allowed temporary escape from the extraordinary hardships of enslavement and continued as a primary vehicle for spiritual communication and artistic expression” (61). In short, “The communities dance and support the transformation of the few for the benefit of the many” (61).

More concretely, and here Daniel’s knowledge and experience as a sacred dancing practitioner becomes directly relevant, “Ritual dance performance was a repository of remembered movements” along with their “complementary legends, beliefs, and attitudes” (64). In this history of injustice and brave resistance, Daniel continues, “When or if circumstances changed, ritual believers could choose from their repository of wisdom among differently powerful divinities and adjust appropriately” (64). In other words, dance is more than the physical movements that briefly occupy the spacetime of a small group of dancers; it is, rather, a living, breathing compendium of knowledge and wisdom, flaring open in the winds of change to be reread, memorized, and chanted by the entire community whose continuing necessary priority is grace under oppressive fire. As evidence of the impact of these dancing sages, Daniel notes that the community “feels the immense loss of such knowledge when a great dancer or musician passes on—a ‘library’ of information, of embodied knowledge, is ‘burned’” (66). Perhaps needless to say, in the history of slavery, murder, torture, and assault that is Africana history in the Americas and beyond, such burning has often been just as literal as metaphorical.

Translating this gestural library of dancing sages into the visual language of academic graphs for her readers, Daniel introduces her central figure for ritual dance, across the three realms of (living/ancestor/spirit) existence, namely as “a dynamic, rotating, revolving, three-

dimensional spiral, like a tornado in space” (82). This image, which is what first inspired my own proposed *pwen*, Daniel then fleshes out as follows:

The spiral cuts through multiple realms within the planes of existence: the horizontal plane of living things—humans, animals, and plants; the sagittal plane of the ancestors, the powerful ‘living dead’; and the coronal plane of eternal essences—infinite cosmic energy of the *lwas*, *orichas*, and *orixás* [the words for “spirits” in Haiti, Cuba, and Brazil, respectively] ... When at least two realms of existence interact, either the ancestral and human realms or the cosmic and human realms, dancing divinities can emerge ... Within dance performance at the moment of the arrival of the divinity, the *gwo bonanj* separates to create interaction with the divinities, *lwas* (distilled or exceedingly refined *gwo bonanjs*) (82, 83).

More precisely, in Daniel’s complex description,

- (1) “Circling energy on the horizontal plane of the believer (dividing the energy between top and bottom) first connects the *gwo bonanj*” and the *ti bonanj*;
- (2) “As the circling energy rotates on a spiraling axis, it is able to separate the two, the *ti bonanj* remaining on the horizontal plane and the *gwo bonanj* moving toward either”
 - (a) “the sagittal plane of the ancestors” or
 - (b) “the coronal plane of the *lwas*”; and
- (3) “Human *gwo bonanj* energy converges with and is replaced by distilled energy when, as Haitians say, ‘low monte chwal’ or the *lwa*/rider mounts his devotee/horse.

In this way, two realms of existence are then in simultaneous interaction (84).

To clarify point (3) above, and thereby introduce a distinction not named in the Vodou scholarship I have encountered thus far, it is not in fact the whole or entire person who becomes

the “horse” for the spirit. Rather, only the body and one part of its psyche (namely the “little good angel”) become the horse. Moreover, the other main part of the psyche (the “big good angel”) is freed during the possession to travel the cosmos, thereby prefiguring its potential later existence as itself a spirit. Put differently, the world is composed of horse-bodies and spirit-riders (duets, in other words, of little and big angels, with each big angel a potential or actual *lwa*).²²

The net sociopolitical result of these possessions, Daniel claims, is that “The energy forces they call *name*, *espri*, *aché*, or *axé* metamorphoses within a dance performance to yield wisdom and knowledge that affects all types of social behavior” (85). To repeat this vital point, dancers’ actions for a limited time, in a circumscribed performance space, directly and profoundly transform the entire community’s actions, across and beyond its boundaries, and for all future time. Thus, throughout Africana history, as Ramsey’s history (for example) describes, “The spiral of living, dynamic energy has been routinely activated for the moral integrity of the community” (85). When things threaten to fall apart, as they so often do during the history of racist oppression, then dance is what allows the center to hold. It is for this reason, Daniel concludes, that these “worshippers have looked to the dancing body as an embodiment of philosophy for centuries” (85). The wisdom, for how to remain alive and truly live, comes alive when the philosophers dance.

For those of us alive today, we struggle in the wake of the mid-twentieth century distinction that Ramsey notes between ritual Vodou dance and “popular dances,” which was

²² Also relevant regarding this topic of the “mount,” Daniel notes the distinction between a spirit “riding” the practitioner (as it is most often expressed in Haiti) and the spirits “coming down [or descending] to dance or rising to the heads of their ‘sons and daughters’” (as more often expressed in Cuba) (22). In these terms, the *oricha* (“spirit”) dances in a person’s body while the person’s “good big angel” dances in the cosmos.

instituted by a 1934 law against “superstitious practices” in post-occupation Haiti (177).²³ Citing U.S. scholar George Eaton Simpson, Ramsey writes that, “according to his informants, the ‘dance without sacrifices’ had been popularly ‘invented’ in the late occupation period [of Haiti by the U.S.] ‘to circumvent the law’” (188).²⁴ Ramsey’s overall interpretation is that post-occupation Haiti struck a deal with the global devils, whitewashing the ritual Vodou dances, extracting their explicit sacredness, in order to repackage them as a popular dance that could be marketed to globalized consumers as social Latin dances like “salsa.”

For anecdotal evidence, and by way of conclusion, the scholarly consensus is that “salsa” is a late twentieth century rechristening of the Caribbean dance called “mambo”—which word looks as if it might also be an alternate spelling of “manbo,” like Brown’s *manbo* Lola. Whether this is a direct connection, or merely a coincidence, perhaps it is time to put the “*manbo*” back in the “mambo” of salsa dance, to re-spiritualize gringo-diluted practices, in part to re-politicize them for militant revolution. The need for global social justice is too urgent, and our failures thus far too many, for us to miss a chance to try something new. And nothing, in my experience, Lola’s life, or Haiti’s Vodou history, matches the promising power of ritual Africana dance.

²³ The cultural foundation for this distinction Ramsey finds in the Indigeneity movement, led by “Jean Price-Mars—medical doctor, teacher, statesman, and founder of what became the Haitian school of ethnology” (178). Crucially, Mars critiqued the empowered Haitian classes for rejecting Haiti’s folklore. “Above all, it was ‘the religious sentiments of the rural masses’—glossed, not unproblematically in Price-Mars’s view, as ‘Vaudou’—that should be recognized as the wellspring of Haitian folklore” (179).²³ Returning to the 1934 law, Ramsey explains that it “made ritual animal offerings a legal litmus test of what was defined as ‘superstitious practice,’” which effectively—for the first time, explicitly—made all Vodou practitioners outlaws (185). It was in response to that reality that the recent phenomenon of allegedly non-ritual dances was popularized and expanded.

²⁴ George Eaton Simpson, *Religious Cults of the Caribbean: Trinidad, Jamaica, and Haiti* (Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico: Institute of Caribbean Studies, 1970), 255.