Snakes on a (spatial) Plane: Vodou Cosmology and History

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Abstract English

This thesis explores how Vodouists in 18th century Saint-Domingue used ritual practice to create their own religious and political spaces and to understand and enact a possibility of existence outside enslavement. Vodou's ability to transform to the specific context of Saint-Domingue as a foreign colonial space is at the heart of this discussion. Rather than acquiesce to the role of enslavement, Vodou provided its practitioners with a meaningful way to grapple with the essentialization and objectification of enslaved lives in the colonial sphere. Vodou embraced difference while supporting collectivity, bridged ethnic communities, and subverted spaces of colonial and Christian domination for its adherents' purposes. The religion permitted its practitioners a means to carve alternate spiritual and physical lifeways in a plantation system meant to constrict their existence.

By analyzing the systemic power of French colonialism through theories of Whiteness, ownership, and property, this thesis views how Vodou serves to disentangle Blackness from the imposition of colonial ownership. To help achieve disentanglement, this work employs the Indigenous methodology of cosmology-first approaches to understanding history. By doing so, this work aids in reevaluating narratives of Black enslavement in Saint-Domingue, arguing that Black bodies on the Island had a deeper connection and relation to the natural world than simply one of extractive labour for French enslavers. Instead, Vodou's capacity to spiritually connect Saint-Domingue and Africa for its adherents generated a sense of relationship with and to the Island.

This work thoroughly examines how Vodouists view the natural world, and how reverence for the natural influences the Island's history. To employ Vodou spatiality as an analytical tool, this work examines the stories of Mackandal, Boukman, Brigitte, and Marie Kingué. All these individuals' stories detail how Vodou's ability to create space and possibility comprised power for these individuals; and how their actions influenced Saint-Domingue's enslaved and free populations alike. Likewise, the work also examines Vodou's metaphysical concepts like death, possession, the soul, creation, healing, and poisoning, which empower its practitioners.

This work's emphasis on cosmology, spatiality, and relationality to others and the natural world provides a powerful rereading of colonial sources. This work's analysis allows for Vodouists' own understandings of the spaces in which they lived to guide a new historical narrative. By detailing the various metaphysical concerns of Vodou and how they colour enslaved lives, this thesis addresses how Vodou creates space and possibility. Further, it argues that understanding how Vodouists employ these religious notions is paramount to grappling with the experiences of those enslaved in Saint-Domingue and detaching Vodouist histories from colonial metanarratives.

Abstract French

Ce mémoire explore la manière dont les vodouisants de Saint-Domingue du XVIIIe siècle ont utilisé la pratique rituelle pour créer leurs propres espaces religieux et politiques, ainsi que pour schématiser et générer une possibilité d'existence en dehors de l'esclavage. Au cœur de cette discussion se situe la capacité du vodou à s'adapter au contexte spécifique de Saint-Domingue en tant qu'espace colonial étranger.

Le vodou a offert à ses practiciens un moyen significatif de faire face à l'essentialisation et l'objectivation de leurs conditions de vie sous l'esclavage et dans la sphère coloniale. Le vodou a accueilli la différence tout en soutenant la collectivité, a comblé les communautés ethniques et a subverti les espaces de domination coloniale et chrétienne pour les besoins de ses adeptes. Cette religion a permis à ses adeptes de se frayer un chemin spirituel et physique alternatif dans un système de plantation destiné à restreindre leur existence.

En analysant le pouvoir systémique du colonialisme français à travers les théories de la blanchité, de la propriété et des biens, cet article expose comment le vodou permet de dénouer la négritude de l'imposition de la propriété coloniale. Pour y parvenir, ce travail se base sur les méthodologies autochtones, qui, avant tout, s'appuient sur la cosmologie pour interpréter l'histoire. Ce faisant, cette analyse contribue à réévaluer les récits de l'esclavage des Noirs à Saint-Domingue, en soutenant que les personnes noires sur l'île avaient une connection avec le monde naturel qui etait plus profonde que le travail d'extraction pour les esclavagistes français. Au contraire, la capacité du vodou à relier spirituellement Saint-Domingue et l'Afrique a généré un sentiment de rapport avec l'île pour ses adeptes.

Cet article étudie minutieusement la façon dont les vodouisants concoivent le monde naturel et comment la véneration du monde naturel influe l'histoire de l'île. Afin d'utiliser la spatialité vodou comme outil analytique, ce travail examine les histoires de Mackandal, Boukman, Brigitte et Marie Kingué. Les histoires de ces individus démontrent comment le Vodou a eu la capacité de créer des opportunités pour eux et de leur donner du pouvoir. De plus, ces histoires illustrent comment les actions de ces individus ont affecté les personnes libres de couleur et celles soumises à l'esclavage à Saint-Domingue. De même, l'article examine les concepts métaphysiques du vodou qui ont été essentiels à l'émancipation de ses practiciens tels que la mort, la possession, l'âme, la création, la guérison et l'empoisonnement.

L'accent mis par cette œuvre sur la cosmologie, la spatialité et les relations aux autres et au monde naturel constitue une puissante relecture critique des sources coloniales. Cette analyse valorise le développement d'un nouveau récit historique qui est guidé par la façon dont les vodouisants ont conceptualisé les espaces dans lesquels ils vivaient. En détaillant les diverses préoccupations métaphysiques du vodou et la manière dont elles colorent les vies des esclaves, cet article aborde la façon dont le vodou crée un espace de possibilités pour ses practiciens. En outre il soutient que la compréhension de la manière dont les vodouisants utilisent ces notions religieuses est essentielle pour appréhender les expériences des personnes sous l'esclavage à Saint-Domingue et pour détacher les histoires vodouisantes des métarécits coloniaux.

Introduction: *Vodou Across Space and Time, Africa to Hispaniola*

1. Introduction and historical background

In 1517, the first ship of enslaved Africans arrived on the Spanish colony of Hispaniola's shores. By 1664, Hispaniola Island's Western portion would split from the Spanish East, becoming Saint-Domingue under the control of the French Empire.[1] The enslaved laboured under the French in plantation production of indigo, coffee, and, most lucratively, sugar. Since European contact, the Island was a space of colonial domination– where European economic and capitalist values demanded ownership of land, labour, and enslaved bodies.[2] As a method of self-preservation, the enslaved developed their own sense of community and culture, largely through unions of their disparate pre-existing religions. By 1700, the Creole and African-born enslaved constituted 90% of Saint-Domingue's population.[3] The number of enslaved deaths–due to the abuse of bodies through labour and punishment–demanded the constant influx of slaving ships to replace individuals. The vast numbers of Africans rapidly trafficked from varied communities contributed to Saint-Domingue's diverse spiritual life known as Vodou–one of the few pathways for the enslaved to enact their own wills in the face of colonial enslavement and oppression.[4]

A large number of the enslaved individuals subject to the French were those who presented challenges to dominant West African slaving empires.[5] The ranks of enslaved prisoners usually consisted of war captives–victims of local imperial expansion. Religious leaders of these enemy groups, whom kings perceived as alarming political threats to the

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[1] Laurent Dubois and John D Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804 : A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, Macmillan Learning, 2017), 4.
[2] Note: Island is capitalized throughout this text as a consideration of Saint-Domingue itself as an active participant in Vodou history.
[3] Dubois, 6.
[4] Laurent Dubois, "Vodou and History," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43, no 1. (2001): 93, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417501003590.
[5] James Sweet, *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 21.

monarchy, were often sold across the Atlantic.[6] The 18th century Dahomian King, Agaja, was particularly insistent on ridding his empire of dissidents. Born from legitimate fears of the religious and political powers that priestly individuals held in West African societies, those like the priests of Sakpata became monarchical enemies and thus were bound for the New World. When deporting the enslaved, the monarchy contained religious enemies in their own ethnic and geographic groupings, rather than randomly dispersing them to the Americas. This collective deportation meant that often, populations that believed in priests' power, if not outright followed them as leaders, accompanied the religious figures to the New World.[7]

The exodus of religious 'dissidents' relocated those with the religious knowledge necessary to build subaltern communities to colonial rule to the New World. In this way, Agaja transported his own domestic religious and political enemies who, in their pursuit of self-rule and preservation, were already purposeful or coincidental agitators against imperialism and enslavement. As power and religious authority were not separate notions in the majority of West African cultures, those individuals with established spiritual power regularly grew social power in the New World.[8] In turn, Agaja unknowingly forged antagonistic collectives which related to each other and their leaders on ethnic and religious grounds. The relative inclusivity of West African religious traditions afforded diversity in believers, allowing for the incorporation of religious and ethnic groups into loose, and at times, concrete parties. Through their acknowledged religious and spiritual power, these same parties sparked various revolutions and subaltern movements in the European colonial Americas.[9] Partially due to this forced exodus of religious leaders and partially due to the omnipresence of religious practices among the enslaved, the New World became a religious

[6] Sweet, 21.
[7] Crystal Nicole Eddins, *Rituals, Runaways, and the Haitian Revolution: Collective Action in the African Diaspora* (version 2nd edition.) 2nd ed. (Open Access Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 99.
[8] Eddins, 114.
[9] Eddins, 114.

melting pot of African spirituality and philosophy in myriad forms. From Obeah, to Santeria, to Vodou, West African religions which emphasized elements of community, balance, and harmony found expanding worship and practice in the Americas, even as they pushed against impositions of Christianity and colonialism. It is in this context that West African, and later Central African, religions adapted to their particular geographic and colonial realities while maintaining priestly leaders' pervasive influences and a particular African nature.

Like its denominational siblings, colonial domination and the spatial rupture of Africans and their knowledge systems from Africa heavily influenced Vodou. While forced to labour for the French imperial regime, Vodou provided the enslaved with a system to understand the world and its functions. These religious notions, heavily inspired by the ethnic groups of the Aja, Fon, Ewe, Yoruba, Ibo, Angolan, and Kongo religions, constituted the enslaved of Saint-Domingue's faith.[10] The practicality of Catholicism, mandated by French law, further altered West African spirituality making Vodou syncretic. As an effect of this rupture, Vodou became a coherent cosmology specifically adapted to the social and natural environment of Saint-Domingue, imposing a certain African character onto the Island's spatiality despite French rule.[11] Further than just resistance, Vodou created a (new) world for the Island's enslaved beyond bondage by insisting on their personhood, affirmed by religious ritual practice and belief.[12] Analyzing Saint-Domingue's history with this spatial reorientation provides a powerful rereading of the colonial sources and historical episodes that deal with enslaved cosmology, emphasizing the mobility and possibility that a Vodouist worldview afforded the enslaved.

2. Methodology

[10] Benjamin Hebblethwaite, *A Transatlantic History of Haitian Vodou : Rasin Figuier, Rasin Bwa Kayiman, and the Rada and Gede Rites* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021), 13.
[11] Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 43.
[12] Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel, *Haitian Vodou : Spirit, Myth, and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 2.

This thesis will use the methodological framework of relationality between people and their land from Haudenosaunee historian Susan Hill's *The Clay we are Made of: Haudenosaunee Land Tenure on the Grand River* (2017). Hill's approach to the history of the Grand River aids in my analysis of Saint-Domingue's history from a Vodou spatial lens in a novel application of critical Indigenous methodology to the context of Saint-Domingue and Vodou. Susan Hill discusses Haudenosaunee relationality with the world and a new understanding of the past made possible by reorienting ideas of belonging, framing land as a central element of Haudenosaunee identity.[13] Hill accepts the primacy of Haudenosaunee cosmology, taking it as a whole and functional lens with which to analyze their history.[14] Similarly, this piece will engage with Saint-Domingue's history, using a Vodouist sense of relationality and land to contextualize historical moments and ritual practice within a Vodouist sense of space.

Vodouist spatiality is the application of Vodou's metaphysical and cosmological philosophy to historical events and ritual practice. Historical applications of Vodou's ritual powers, and *axis mundis* like *Vèvè, potomitan,* and bodily conceptions, are all elements of Vodou cosmology that center space and inform a different interpretation of the Island's historical sources.[15] Part of this spatiality is also the Vodouist conception of and relation to land–which is foundational to understanding Vodou and cannot be divorced from the analysis. By following Hill's methodology and applying Vodou spatiality as a whole viable form of analysis, this work seeks to demonstrate that using Vodou spatiality is essential to understanding the enslaved's experiences in Saint-Domingue's history.

Further, approaching Saint-Domingue's history with a Vodou spatial lens helps unsettle the assumption that the enslaved's only relationship with the natural world was one

[13] Susan M. Hill, *The Clay We Are Made of : Haudenosaunee Land Tenure on the Grand River* Critical Studies in Native History, 20. (Winnipeg Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2017), 51.
[14] Hill, 51.
[15] Note: These terms will be defined in section 1 of the thesis.

of forced violent labour and extraction. With the imposition of enslavement, challenging past interpretations of place and space is vital in viewing how Vodou cosmology inscribed African spiritual understandings onto a space of colonial domination. These understandings instead resulted in a relationship with the land that is both communal and familial. This spatiality allows Vodou beliefs and practices to offer its practitioners mobility and opportunity. In this context, mobility and opportunity, both spatially and spiritually, are means by which the enslaved may live outside the imposition of French colonial norms and combat these norms by insisting on their personhood and cosmology.

In order to analyze Vodou spatiality's power in altering understandings of Saint-Domingue's history, this thesis will view French colonial domination as informed by theoretical frameworks included in Aileen Moreton-Robinson's *Nullifying Native Title* (2015) and Patrick Wolfe's "The Elimination of the Native" (2006). Race and legal historian Aileen Moreton-Robinson discusses the notion of Whiteness as property, detailing the tacit and active powers Whiteness holds in settler colonial projects. The tacit elements of Whiteness include status, hierarchy, and entitlement expressed through the right to own and accumulate wealth.[16] Whiteness as property also understands hierarchy within itself, with those in power often asserting masculine Christian Whiteness as the norm and all other modes of existence as deviations.[17] In the settler colonial context, White normativity functions as an unquestionable yet enforced social 'contract' imposed onto non-White 'subordinates.' As economic desires underpinned the institution of slavery, the enslaved were made property within the French colonial system as both a form of wealth and a means of achieving wealth. Being made property necessarily conscripts the actions of the enslaved to colonial ends–being almost exclusively forced into plantation work on the Island for the sake of naturally

[16] Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive : Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Indigenous Americas. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 56.
[17] Moreton-Robinson, 66.

destructive yet lucrative labour. The principles of Whiteness as property thus effectively outline the colonial framework's expected position of the enslaved as working automatons, with Vodouist cosmology challenging these assumptions.

In his article, historian of genocide Patrick Wolfe discusses the eliminatory effects of settler colonialism. While the primary goal of Saint-Domingue was economic extraction, the powerful White planter minority held a vested interest in realizing a settler colonial project. The planters viewed the Island as both a space for creating immense wealth and a physical space for themselves to own. Wolfe provides helpful insight into how the procedural effects of settler colonialism operate, systemically impacting a colony. Wolfe also directly grapples with Blackness and enslavement as fundamental parts of settler colonial economics. As such, Blackness is not subject to the same kind of elimination in the settler colonial machine as Native bodies–in fact, Black bodies exist in Saint-Domingue due to the labour gap formed by the elimination of the Taíno people under colonial rule.[18]

Thus, colonialism systematically equates Black existence with labour. One manifestation of these restrictions in Saint-Domingue was *Le Code Noir* (1685), a set of governing articles enacted by Louis XIV for the enslaved. Among them were stipulations against non-Christian religions, making Vodou's practice naturally clandestine.[19] Further, it detailed the punitive violence Frenchmen were legally permitted to dole out to enslaved bodies who deviated from their expected role as plantation labourers. Both these laws, along with the numerous others that conscripted existence for the enslaved in Saint-Domingue, are White normativity realized and systematized for the goal of capital. Thus, while colonialism may not eliminate Black bodies wholly, it attempts to eliminate any cosmologies that may

[18] Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 388. DOI: 10.1080/14623520601056240.
[19] King Louis XIV, *Le Code Noir* (Paris, at the Palace: Chez Claude Girard, 1685), Articles 3, 4.

oppose the normative power of the colony. For Saint-Domingue's colonial planters, Vodou was the prime target for elimination.[20]

These structural forces in turn produced French material prosperity at the cost of enslaved lives and bodies. At its production height, enslaved bodies on Saint-Domingue produced 40% of Europe's sugar and 60% of its coffee.[21] To maintain this production, the Island imported the second most enslaved workers after only Brazil, with one third to half of the workers who survived the journey dying within a few years of their arrival.[22] Enslaved men, women, and children worked hundreds of acres on large estates subject to severe discipline and deadly labour. Enslavers forced workers to live in squalid, disease-riddled conditions providing little, if any, food or clothing. Tortures and executions were commonplace to keep the enslaved, who massively outnumbered the enslavers, in line. Other enslaved peoples served as domestic workers, *commandeurs* or slave drivers, and sold goods in markets.

Free people of colour also profited off the backs of enslaved labourers, themselves often running indigo and coffee plantations rather than sugar. While the colonial elite recognized free people of colour as distinct from Whiteness, they understood that they played an important role in replicating hierarchy and violence for the continuation of plantation systems.[23] The French maintained 'order' through violence, both physical and structural, resulting in destitute material conditions for the enslaved and prosperity for enslavers who,

[20] Médéric-Louis-élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie francaise de l'Isle Saint-Domingue* vol. 1, (Philadelphia, 1797) in Laurent Dubois and John D Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804 : A Brief History with Documents*. (MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, Macmillan Learning, 2017), 99.
[21] Dubois, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean*, 2.
[22] Dubois, 2.
[23] Robert Debs Heinl, and Nancy Gordon Heinl, *Written in Blood : The Story of the Haitian People, 1492-1971* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 32.

despite having monetary wealth beyond comprehension, still accounted for their wealth in the number of enslaved peoples they owned.[24]

Moreton-Robinson and Wolfe helpfully describe the historical and social contexts of colonialism, which believers and practices of Vodou navigated. Both scholars provide insight into the systemic assumptions that guide the mechanisms of settler colonialism, capitalism, and French actors on the Island. Moreton-Robinson and Wolfe's appraisals of colonial forces also apply to the discussion of land and its ownership. While their theories concern the notion of 'owning' land in the capitalistic sense, it also involves an 'ownership' of conceptions of space and relation to the natural world. Further, the 'ownership' extends to the enslaved's own bodies, the ultimate structural denial of their willpower. Lastly, notions of French ownership monopolize knowledge as White jurisdiction, with even free and mulatto individuals several generations removed from the 'taint' of Blackness prohibited from holding certain official positions and practicing law or medicine.[25] Vodou spatiality does not adhere to these same principles. Vodou disavows the enslaved's estrangement from the land, knowledge, and their own bodies, thereby challenging the dogmatic pursuit of ownership which drives colonialism. As such, the enslaved developed Vodou in the context of Saint-Domingue's colonial hegemony, blending African religious origins, impositions of Catholicism, and the enslaved's life experiences into something new.

3. Thesis Outline

This thesis will apply the notion of Vodou spatiality in six sections. The first will address Saint-Domingue's historiography and question why Vodou, specifically Vodou spatiality, is missing from past historical studies. Second, this work will explore Vodou spatiality, providing necessary context and definitions of Vodou's spatial elements like the

[24] Dubois, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean*, 6.
[25] Bryan Edwards, *An Historical Survey of the French Colony in the Island of St. Domingo* (John Stockdale Piccadilly, 1797), 9.

Vèvè, potomitan, and ideas of the body, which permit the rereading of sources. Third, this work will explore concepts of healing, medicine, and death–as informed by relationality to the natural world–as they pertain to Saint-Domingue's specific geography. Next, this thesis will show how Vodouists use their own cosmology to navigate Saint-Domingue, providing opportunity and mobility against colonial oppression–primarily through maroon life and the famed poisoner, Francois Mackandal. The fifth section of this work will discuss women's role in using Vodou spatiality through the figure of Marie-Kingué and a broader exploration of Vodou's subversion of White masculine spaces. Lastly, this thesis will explore two colonial sources which address Vodou explicitly, demonstrating Vodou spatiality's power in reconfiguring Saint-Domingue's sources concerning Vodou and enslaved labour.

In re-examining colonial sources, this thesis looks primarily at the sources provided by colonials Moreau de Saint-Méry and Antoine Dalmas. Both authors' accounts directly describe Vodou rituals and are the sources traditionally examined to understand Vodou's implications in Saint-Domingue. A cosmology-first reading of these sources shows that an alternative Vodouist understanding of events and figures within Saint-Domingue's history necessitates applying a complete Vodouist spatial analysis. This approach depends on understanding enslaved Vodouist actions through their own cosmology–affording their own understandings of life, death, relationality to one another, relationality to the natural world, and existence to interpret the actual power of historical episodes which colonial sources have relegated as dangerous superstitions. All of these applications of Vodou spatiality are vehemently anti-colonial and critique the policies of colonial ownership outlined by Moreton-Robinson and Wolfe.

4. Vodou's 'absence' in Saint-Domingue's historiography

Vodou is a topic often missing from, or misrepresented in, narratives of Saint-Domingue's history, especially when concerning a Vodouist spatial analysis of history. As a

racialized, non-Christian religion, Vodou faces erasure from Saint-Domingue's historiography as a controversial 'other' irreconcilable with the economic and political fixation which dominates the Island's historical conversation. However, as anthropologist Claudine Michel contends, one cannot understand Saint-Domingue's history without understanding the religion of its people.[26] The contextualization of religion in enslaved experiences is what is often removed from Saint-Domingue's narratives. The following explores some of the historiographic works which contend with the Island's history. Further, it analyzes which subjects dominate the historical discussion of Saint-Domingue, and discusses how a Vodouist spatial analysis may supplement these existing works.

Anthropology and folklore studies provide meaningful contributions to understandings of Vodou. Scholars like Maya Deren and Zora Neal Hurston offer their various works as methods of engaging with Vodou on its own terms, at times undergoing ritual processes and initiations themselves. While certainly chronologically removed from colonial-era Vodou, these insights allow for a conceptualization of Vodou less dominated by the traditional turns of Island historiography. Anthropological work to a great degree pressingly engages with questions of Vodou cosmology, providing a lens to examine Vodouist understandings on their own terms. Further, anthropological assessments help to consider the degree to which Catholicism, as a more easily identifiable and digestible religion within traditional academic circles, confounds the study of Vodou. As French rule certainly imparted Catholic doctrine into and overtop of African religions, considerations of Vodou's adaptability greatly help to understand how Vodouists used the Catholic faith both truthfully and as a shield against religious persecution. As such, anthropology and folklore constitute vital threads of an interdisciplinary approach to the question of Vodou in colonial Saint-Domingue. The fields employ both modern and historical accounts of Vodou to relay a

[26] Bellegarde-Smith, *Haitian Vodou*, 21.

culture deeply entwined with notions of personhood and possibility. By virtue of operating largely outside the discipline of history, Anthropology and folklore examine the more cosmological and metaphysical properties of Vodou that are integral to a study of Vodou spatiality in its historical context.

With Saint-Domingue being the 18th century's most profitable colony, large components of the Island's historical research deal with economics, privileging the discussion of Eurocentric French notions of capital.[27] Books like *The Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in French Saint-Domingue and British Jamaica* (2016) by historian of Atlantic history Trevor Burnard, provide comprehensive views of enslaved labour and the global economy this labour upheld.

However, economic-centric and labour histories rarely consider the implications of a Vodouist spatiality despite looking intimately at the relationship between the enslaved and their daily engagement with the land. Part of this fixation is undoubtedly tied to how the institution of enslavement is conceptualized, with the triangular trade as dominantly a matter of economics and empire. These broader analyses trace–and at times grapple with–the essentialization of the Black enslaved experience as solely labour. However, even these discussions of essentialization have more to do with how European empires came to equate Blackness and enslavement, rather than exploring enslaved experiences beyond this condition. Thus, economic works provide helpful insights into colonial constructs, yet often fail to meaningfully address enslaved existence outside their economic lens. While various scholars touch on elements of Vodou spatiality, scholars have yet to use it as the primary lens for interpreting the Island's history.

[27] Clarence J. Munford, "The "Pearl" of the Antilles is Born: Haiti and Black Slavery-The Early Years, 1629-1715," *Jahrbuch für Geschichte Lateinamerikas* 28, no. 1 (1991): 1, https://doi.org/10.7767/jbla.1991.28.1.1.

Africanist Claudine Michel and Vodou priest and scholar Patrick Bellegarde-Smith's *Haitian Vodou: Spirit, Myth, and Reality* (2006) provides analyses of Vodou metaphysics and their place in coding life's everyday elements. Bellegarde views Vodou as a form of Humanism, a "practical means of comprehending the world, as well as ways of being in the world."[28] While comprehensive, *Haitian Vodou* does not attempt to engage with the religion's metaphysics on a historical level. However, it provides lengthy and detailed accounts of Vodou practices and cultural memory, demonstrating continuity in the religion's faith and practices at a cosmological level. Academics have both praised and criticized Michel and Bellegarde-Smith's work as simultaneously central to understanding Vodou cosmology, and at certain points lacking in areas of statistical analysis and evidence. As their account provides the cosmological information central to how this work constructs Vodou spatiality, from constructs of the soul to understandings of the natural world, it is important to briefly engage with scholarly appraisals of *Haitian Vodou.*

Anthropologist of religion and historian of the Atlantic world Susan Kwosek has criticized the work's emphasis on Vodou as a partial nationalist rhetoric which seeks to overly centre Vodou in the lives of Haitians.[29] While Kwosek's critiques regarding the work's lack of statistics and data are at times valid, she contends that the information regarding philosophy and the work's service to demystify Vodou provide a meaningful contribution to understanding Vodou practice.[30] Some of the lack of sources which Kwosek notes may be attributed to many of the individual scholars who aided in writing *Haitian Vodou* being Vodouists themselves, and thus referring to their own traditional knowledge and life experiences. Further, Kwosek challenges Bellegarde-Smith and Michel's categorizations of

[28] Kate Kingsbury and R. Andrew Chesnut, "In Her Own Image: Slave Women and the Re-Imagining of the Polish Black Madonna As Ezili Dantò, the Fierce Female Lwa of Haitian Vodou," *International Journal of Latin American Religions* 3, no. 1 (2019): 229, https://doi.org/10.1007/s41603-019-00071-5.
[29] Susan Kwosek, "Book Review: Haitian Vodou: Spirit, Myth, and Reality," *NWIG: New West Indian Guide / Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* 84, no. 3/4 (2010): 322.
[30] Kwosek, 322.

syncretism and creole, where they refer to other Afro-Caribbean religions like Santeria as syncretic, whereas Vodou is elevated to creole.[31] This seemingly downplays the relevance of Catholicism and colonialism in shaping Vodou, an aspect of *Haitian Vodou* which Bellegarde-Smith and Michel certainly should have further expanded upon. Yet, while the conversation of Catholicism and colonialism are largely absent from the text, Bellegarde-Smith and Michel's privileging of African doctrines helps to mediate against certain appraisals of Vodou which hold Catholicism and violence as the religion's dominant shaping factors.

Conversely, scholar of Afro-Caribbean religion Mary Ann Clark argues for *Haitian Vodou's* essential place on the shelves of religious and historical scholars alike. She praises the work's discursive shifts between varied areas of analyses, from herbalism to music to education.[32] Clark also commends the integration of practicing Vodouists' research into *Haitian Vodou,* offering the authentic words and worldviews of practitioners, rather than being wholly constituted by those outside the religion.[33] Importantly, both critics and supporters laud *Haitian Vodou's* exploration of the broader metaphysical truths of Vodou's religious system. It is a whole and meaningful look into how Vodouists engage with the physical and spiritual world, providing an apt contribution to Vodou spatiality as a theory. This thesis heavily relies on the cosmological information extolled in *Haitian Vodou*. In order to address some of the challenges raised by those like Kwosek, this work hopes to aid in grounding Michel and Bellegarde-Smith's work. This thesis hopes to achieve the goal of grounding their work by historicizing the philosophical insights *Haitian Vodou* provides within existing colonial sources, without forsaking the religion's African character.

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[31] Kwosek, 321.
[32] Mary Ann Clark, "Review: Haitian Vodou: Spirit, Myth and Reality, by Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel," *Nova Religio* 13, no. 4 (2010): 118 https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2010.13.4.118.
[33] Clark, 118.

Religious and legal historian Colin Dayan's *History, Haiti, and the Gods* (1998), a seminal work on Vodou, actively reads against the grain of historical sources, exploring how colonial history has impacted Saint-Domingue's sources. While examining the importance of Vodou in organizing, catharsis, and survival, Dayan's work does not wholly engage the relationship between Vodou spatiality and Saint-Domingue's history. Further, some of Dayan's claims seemingly reduce Vodou to a continual recitation of enslavement's trauma rather than itself an entire cosmological way of existence. Dayan states that "Vodou must be viewed as ritual reenactments of Haiti's colonial past, even more than as retentions from Africa," and that Vodou "reconstitutes the shadowy and powerful magical gods of Africa as everyday responses to the white master's arbitrary power."[34]

While the imposition of enslavement certainly transformed Vodou into something different from its origin, the relegation of the religion to the status of colonial ritual reenactments denies Vodou its very form and cosmological underpinnings. This critique is not to say that Vodou is not in conversation with Whiteness and enslavement–it very much is–but rather, limiting Vodou to only this role replicates damage-centric understandings. In turn, these understandings emphasize that the sole connection of Vodouists to their land is contingent on enslavement, extraction, and abuse, wherein Vodou serves to solely mediate abuse. Dayan's claim here is reductive of Vodou's ability to create, move, and shape Saint-Domingue as its own space for the religion's practitioners.

More recently, historian of language and culture Benjamin Hebblethwaite's *Transatlantic History of Haitian Vodou* (2021) has done impressive work tracing Vodou's transmission from Africa to Saint-Domingue but lacks full engagement with the question of spatiality in the Island context. Hebblethwaite provides significant considerations to the diasporic pathways of religion informed by the trade of enslaved bodies, and thus offers

[34] Colin Dayan, *Haiti, History and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), xvii–xx, 35–6.

important African contexts to the origins of certain Vodou traditions and rites. Likewise, Africanist Crystal Eddins' recent *Rituals, Runaways, and the Haitian Revolution: Collective Action in the African Diaspora* (2022) provides an excellent overview of some Vodouist spatial principles, and their connections to collectivism in colonial Saint-Domingue. Notably, her work discusses the gendered elements of enslavement and absconding from labour with great detail, importantly illuminating the often-overshadowed role women had in community action and resistance. Her work is comprehensive, and its thorough statistical analysis is helpful, yet she restrains her analysis from approaching Saint-Domingue with a cosmology-first approach.

The most dominant historical narratives surrounding Saint-Domingue deal with the Haitian Revolution. The revolution's status as the only successful enslaved revolt warrants the historiography's revolution-centrism. Questions of freedom and land are at the heart of the revolution and of Vodou.[35] Despite this, Vodouist perceptions of land are again missing from these narratives. When revolution-centric texts like Atlantic world historian Laurent Dubois' *Avengers of the New World* (2004) engage with Vodou, it is primarily a nod to *Bois Caïman* as the Vodou ritual that started the revolution rather than wholly appraising the power that the ceremony held within a Vodou worldview.[36] While revolutionary works contribute substantially to the bulk of literature regarding Saint-Domingue, their at times limited constructions of what resistance entails may at some points serve to dilute the revolutionary action inherent to Vodou.

The question remains as to why Saint-Domingue's historiography has largely ignored Vodouist's own cosmological perceptions of land. For a people so integrated with land and physical space through enslaved labour, transcontinental rupture, and revolution for control

[35] C. L. R James, and James Walvin, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* [New edition] ed. (London: Penguin. 2001), 7.
[36] Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World* (2004), 102.

of the land itself, the pressing question appears unanswered. Due to this gap, historians usually tie moments of enslaved 'agency' solely to physical resistance. When scholars deem ritual as a display of agency, it is usually in the political and social organization that comes from Vodou as a meeting place. What is missing is how these rituals rely on and establish a religious world space of possibility and notions of the land the enslaved occupy.

The dominant notions of ritual in the historiography and the importance of Vodou spatiality may be true simultaneously–just because an act is religious does not mean it is not political.[37] However, taking the religious elements out of Vodou obscures the actual effects of its practice for Vodouists. As with Kwosek's criticism, historians like Patrick Geggus, who caution against overly centering Vodou in the revolution, help temper against an areligious application of Vodou cosmology.[38] This thesis contends that by viewing Saint-Domingue's history through the religious lens of Vodouist spatial perception, historians may grapple with a missing part of the enslaved Vodouist experience. Thus, experience dictated by cosmology helps to understand the spiritual and physical mobility Vodou spatiality provided the enslaved under colonial domination.

[37] Lenny Lowe, "WHAT'S "RELIGION" GOT TO DO WITH IT?: RELIGION AND REVOLUTION IN HAITI" *Duke Performances Black Atlantic Series*. (2014) https://sites.duke.edu/blackatlantic/2014/03/18/whats-religion-got-to-do-with-it-reason-religion-and-revolution-in-haiti.
[38] David Patick Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies. Blacks in the Diaspora* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002), VIII.

SECTION 1: ***Trees and Serpents, Making Space and Place in Vodou***

1. The metaphysical grounding of Vodou

Prior to engaging with colonial sources on Vodou, it is crucial to characterize the omnipresence of Vodou in constructing spatiality. Vodou varies widely from region to region in exact practices, terminology, and even *Lwa* or spirits.[1] The religion's heterodoxy is largely due to the sheer diversity of African religions in Vodou's construction, along with its 17th-century ban, lending the religion to clandestine and divided practices rather than holding a single hegemonic doctrine. Vodou is an all-encompassing ideology, making it highly xenophilic, able to take and adapt from all sources and insert them within Vodou's wider cosmological understanding.[2] However, there are some similarities in Vodou's practice across the Island of Saint-Domingue, primarily tied to the broader metaphysical implications. This section will explore these broader commonalities, detailing how they relate to Vodou spatiality, and their importance to ritual practice.

One recurrent notion is that of multiple worlds. One is *Ginen*, described as both the spirit world located under the water, in the earth, and the sky–or as a mythical yet real version of Africa.[3] The other is the physical world, where humans serve the *Lwa*. The *Lwa*–spirits served by Vodouists–reside in *Ginen*.[4] *Ginen* is not the only place with spirits, as they fill every natural element of the physical world. Storms, rocks, trees, streams, and mountains are aspects of the spiritual universe, divine manifestations made physical and thus inhabited by holiness and life.[5] Nature's association with divinity is not to say that all these natural

[1] Leslie Gérald Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 4.
[2] Trevor Burnard and John Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 401.
[3] Julia Pfeifer, "The Loa as Ghosts in Haitian Vodou." In *Ghosts - or the (Nearly) Invisible: Spectral Phenomena in Literature and the Media*, (2016): 141, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2t4d7f.16.
[4] Pfeifer, 141.
[5] Benjamin Hebblethwaite, *A Transatlantic History of Haitian Vodou* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021), 15.

elements are themselves divine, but rather that they house the divine–an important distinction which precludes Vodou from being described as animistic. As Maya Deren notes, attempting to classify Vodou as animistic is a procrustean operation which necessarily undermines the complexity of divinity, spirit, and the natural within the religion.[6] As such, the physical and spiritual worlds are not wholly separate, with channels of communication and transition open at certain places and times, which permits the housing of spirits in every element of the physical world.

Another conception of Vodou metaphysics relates to the interconnectedness of all things. Vodou ritual uses this interconnectivity, creating a space where multiple distinct yet adjoined beings, worlds, and modes of existence collide and replicate themselves.[7] In this interconnectivity, Vodou holds every person and everything sacred and imbued with spirit. The living, dead, and unborn are part of an endless chain of relationality directed by two *Lwa*, Damballa and Ayida Weddo, who created the "world egg" from their intertwined bodies.[8] This egg is the blueprint of creation, perfectly masculine and feminine, to derive balance. The Kreyol saying *Tout moun se moun* or, "all men are (Wo)Men," nods to the aspiration for balance and the interconnectedness of the single person with all things.[9] Further, Vodouists conceptualize the passage of birth to death as a mirror of nature's fundamental transitoriness, reflecting the passage of the sun and moon or the seasons.[10] This spatial rendering establishes the broader positionality of the Vodouist within Saint-Domingue. For the enslaved, Vodou's notions of collective experiences and universality bolstered the religion's ability to create

[6] Maya Deren. *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New Paltz, NY: McPherson, 1983), 86.
[7] Eric James Montgomery, Christian Vannier, and Timothy R Landry, eds.*Spirit Service : Vodún and Vodou in the African Atlantic World* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2022), 195.
[8] Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, and Claudine Michel, "Danbala/Ayida as Cosmic Prism: The Lwa as Trope for Understanding Metaphysics in Haitian Vodou and Beyond," *Journal of Africana Religions* 1, no. 4 (2013): 465, https://doi.org/10.5325/jafrireli.1.4.0458.
[9] Bellegarde-Smith, 465.
[10] Hebblethwaite, *A Transatlantic History of Haitian Vodou*, 17.

community in the worst of situations.[11] Vodouists define personhood in relation to a spiritual collectivity that extends beyond the human–but centers the human.[12] Vodou's heterodoxy promoted the integration of new Island arrivals, presenting vital kinship opportunities through religious practices that were new yet familiar.[13]

The *Lwa* were also a universal presence in Saint-Domingue. Vodouists understand these spirits as controlling various aspects of life, encompassing domains like nature, wealth, love, war, and death. Many of these *Lwa* are interpretations of West African *Orisha*, the Gods of the Yoruba people. Others are deified ancestral spirits that enter into the Vodou pantheon after death. *Lwa* sit at the crossroads of the physical and spiritual, and it is by serving them that Vodouists are able to access spiritual life. Vodouists serve the *Lwa*, and while the spirits hold far greater powers than individuals, interactions with the *Lwa* depend on inter-reliance and reciprocity.[14] The *Lwa* have various aspects; thus, one deity may exist in multiple pantheonic sects.[15] The two major groupings are the *Rada Lwa* and the *Petwo Lwa*. The *Rada* are usually benevolent but are vindictive if crossed.[16] Other familial denominations of *Lwa* also exist, with some *Lwa*, like La Sirenne defying classification to a single branch while maintaining a singular identity.[17] The *Petwo* are "fiery," their character directly influenced by enslavement, thus are usually associated with violence and death but are not evil beings.[18]

The *Petwo Lwa* give insight into Vodou spatiality. Their existence is unique to Saint-Domingue, unlike their *Rada* counterparts or other religions of West African origin in the

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[11] Claudine Michel, "Vodou in Haiti: Way of Life and Mode of Survival," *Journal of Haitian Studies* 8, no. 1 (2002): 99, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41715120.
[12] Karen McCarthy Brown, "Afro-Caribbean Spirituality: A Haitian Case Study," In: *Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture*, (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2006): 2, https://doi-org.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/10.1057/9780312376208_1
[13] Laënnec Hurbon, "Haitian Vodou, Church, State and Anthropology," *Anthropological Journal on European Cultures* 8, no. 2 (1999): 28, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43234856.
[14] Brown, "Afro-Caribbean Spirituality," 12.
[15] Pfeifer, "The Loa as Ghosts," 140.
[16] Pfeifer, 140.
[17] Terry Rey and Alex Stepick, *Crossing the Water and Keeping the Faith : Haitian Religion in Miami. North American Religions* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 197.
[18] Bellegarde-Smith, *Haitian Vodou,* 53.

Americas. Therefore, the *Petwo* are direct manifestations of Island life–indicative of the violence produced by settler colonialism. The *Lwa* cross over from *Ginen* through ritual possession–ritual dances that call forth the *Lwa* to "ride" a participant in an act of willing submission to divine domination.[19] When a *Lwa* rides a participant, they make the human a divine actor, as the *Lwa* speaks through them, directing their bodies. The *Lwa* are subservient to the supreme God, who does not actively engage in mortal affairs but acts through the *Lwa*. Thus, *Lwa* are the prime divine movers of both *Ginen* and the physical world.

The *Lwa* and the Vodouist metaphysical construction provide the context through which enslaved Vodouists actively enforced Vodou spatiality. Many commonly analyzed sources in Saint-Domingue's history that deal with Vodou, like Antoine Dalmas' account of *Bois Caïman* in 1791 or Moreau de Saint-Méry's account of a Vodou ritual, discuss these metaphysical properties but have yet to be read as enslaved assertions of Vodou spatiality. As such, they are recorded moments–among countless moments that escaped colonial documentation–of the enslaved enforcing their own cosmology. Ritual creates a space wherein Vodou offers escape and power through its own world space, which the settler colonial 'reality' restricted and curtailed for the sake of ownership and capitalism. The enslaved did this by creating sites of spatial power, or *axis mundis,* where the enslaved affirm Vodouism, linking the physical world with the power of *Ginen* in ritual. These *axis mundis* are myriad, using *Vèvè*, *potomitan*, or the enslaved's own bodies as sites of spatial power.

2. Axis mundis and ritual

Vèvè and *potomitan* are two *axis mundi* that invoke or link the physical world to *Ginen* directly, thus the power of the ancestors, *Lwa,* and supreme God. *Vèvè* are specific symbols drawn on the ground with cornmeal or coffee grounds. Each sign is unique to a *Lwa*, and Vodouists draw *Vèvè* during rituals to invoke a connection to their desired *Lwa*. There is

[19] Bellegarde-Smith, 3.

some indication that *Vèvè* are West African cosmographs, stylized depictions of the stars which consign the divine *Lwa* of *Ginen* into the physical world.[20] This idea contradicts Alfred Métraux's notion that *Vèvè*, and their star patterns, are purely decorative and based on European ideas.[21] The *Petwo* cult of *Lwa*, those unique to Saint-Domingue, also have *Vèvè*. As the position and appearance of the stars are relative to latitude–with Saint-Domingue and areas of enslaved origin in Western Africa having different latitudes–it is a possibility that these 'new' *Lwa's Vèvè* are contingent on the spatial rupture of Africans, and therefore an active form of territorializing Saint-Domingue as a Vodou space. Saint-Domingue and the dominant enslaved ship ports from Western Africa are in the Northern Hemisphere, meaning the same stars would appear. However, differences in latitude would cause different orientations of the stars.

As such, the *Vèvè* unique to the *Petwo Lwa*–themselves, aspects of the West African *Rada*–may reconfigure the original cosmographs for new use. Thus, in every creation of the *Vèvè*, enslaved Vodouists not only demarcate their own cosmological worldview, physically tracing their 'constellations' onto the Island, but, in the worship of the *Lwa* and their various aspects, communicate the spatial disruption of enslavement.[22] *Vèvè* are an integral part of ritual invocation, directly communicating with *Ginen* as an *axis mundi* and as an affirmation of the cosmological elements essential to understanding Vodou spatiality.

Like *Vèvè*, *potomitan*s also function as an *axis mundi*. These trees are ritual objects affixed to the ground and often decorated with images of twin serpents representing the primordial male and female divines Damballa and Ayida Weddo, who hold the universe

[20] Donald Cosentino, Who Is That Fellow in the Many-Colored Cap? Transformations of Eshu in Old and New World Mythologies." *The Journal of American Folklore* 100, no. 397 (1987): 268, https://doi.org/10.2307/540323.
[21] Métraux Alfred, *Voodoo in Haiti* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 166.
[22] Julia Pfeifer, "The Loa as Ghosts," 140.

together.[23] This primordial divine pairing allows the *potomitan* tree to be an apt conduit for spiritual power and serve as a gateway of knowledge and experience.[24] The *potomitan* acts as a bridge for the *Lwa* and is the pathway by which the *Lwa* travel between *Ginen* and the physical realm in possession rituals.[25] In ritual, the tree represents Papa Legba, a *Lwa* of paramount importance. His domain is gates, crossroads, and messages, meaning that his presence and approval are required in all rituals to permit communication between the Vodouists and the divine.[26] Further, some trees house their own additional spirits or *atínmévódún*.[27] The importance of such trees has propagated tree-cutting taboos, or *pye repozwa,* to protect trees deemed sacred.[28] The prohibition of tree-cutting indicates the centrality of trees, and more widely the natural, to the Vodou universe.[29] Trees provide many ritual uses in Vodou, as objects of Damballa and Ayida Weddo's metaphysical stability, places of divine communication and possession through Papa Legba, divine residences themselves, and sources of roots, food, medicine, and poison.[30]

The human body is the other major *axis mundi* with wider applicability in Vodou. Vodouists understand the human soul as split into numerous parts. One part is the *gros-bon-ange.* This aspect of the soul is the metaphysical double of the physical being. The *gros-bon-ange* maintains the physical body and houses human memory, the self, and imagination.[31] When one dies, the *gros-bon-ange* remains with the body and may become a spirit. The *ti-bon-ange* is the other part of the soul, functioning as a guardian angel figure and moral guide for the practitioner. The *ti-bon-ange* is the part of the soul which abdicates the human in

[23] Dowoti Désir, "Kenbe Alada: Supporting the Pillars of Heaven," *Afro-Hispanic Review* 26, no. 1 (2007): 204, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23055262.
[24] Bellegarde-Smith, "Danbala/Ayida as Cosmic Prism," 460.
[25] Hurbon, "Church, State and Anthropology," 28.
[26] Bellegarde-Smith, *Haitian Vodou,* 38.
[27] Hebblethwaite, *A Transatlantic History of Haitian*, 16.
[28] Hebblethwaite, 17.
[29] Montgomery, *Spirit Service*, 246.
[30] Bellegarde-Smith, *Haitian Vodou,* 113.
[31] Julia Pfeifer, "The Loa as Ghosts," 141.

instances of ritual possession.[32] Other components of the soul include the *zetwal*, or the star, which functions as an astral double of the individual accounting for their predetermined fate, and the *nam* or *dan*, which animates the individual.[33] In ritual possession, the body is the final *axis mundi*, accompanying primary invocation via a *Vèvè* and the descent of the *Lwa* from *Ginen* along the *potomitan*.

The body and Vodouist construction of the *ti-bon-ange* and *gros-bon-ange* compress Vodou cosmology within the self and extend it beyond the self. Possession provides a functional display of Vodou's cosmological principles of relationality and oneness, literally allowing for the divine and the human to share form, again emphasizing Vodou's prime value of balance.[34] Further, possession by the divine defies the condition of enslavement. Rather than arbitrary violence inflicted on enslaved bodies for capital, Vodou possession destroys the power binary of enslaver and enslaved through consensual and mutually beneficial domination.[35]

Vèvè's, *potomitans*, and the bodies of the enslaved in ritual possession are all widespread elements of Vodou cosmology, informing of spatiality's importance. They–all located in the physical world–reflect, invoke, or house divine elements. In doing so, Vodou's practice affirms Vodou spatiality and contradicts colonial normativity, allowing both the natural world and Black bodies to exist and be powerful despite their structural exploitation. Vodou is about relationality, oneness, and balance, blurring the lines between 'nature' and 'human' and divine and mortal. French colonial notions of ownership and domination of land and bodies find no place in Vodou cosmology, which instead asserts principles of

[32] Bellegarde-Smith, *Haitian Vodou*, 4.
[33] Brown, "Afro-Caribbean Spirituality," 9.
[34] Claudine Michel, "Of Worlds Seen and Unseen: The Educational Character of Haitian Vodou," *Comparative Education Review* 40, no. 3 (1996): 288, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1189105.
[35] Laurent Dubois, "Vodou and History." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43, no 1. (2001): 11, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417501003590.

relationality and oneness to create order out of enslavement's disorder.[36] While plantation labour certainly was brutal, Vodou provided a relationship with the natural world and the enslaved's own bodies beyond solely labour and violence. Thus, Vodou disrupts the colonial assertion that enslaved bodies on Saint-Domingue's only relationship with the land is one of labour to French capitalist ends. Vodou reclaims a sense of self and space through understanding kinship with the natural world, the sanctification of space through ritual processes, and embodied divine revelations from the *Lwa*. As such, the cosmological essence of Vodou permits mobility and possibility far beyond enslavement's constrictions. Instead, spatially and spiritually, Vodou cosmology means balance, harmony, freedom, and even apotheosis.

[36] Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, and Claudine Michel, "Danbala/Ayida as Cosmic Prism: The Lwa as Trope for Understanding Metaphysics in Haitian Vodou and Beyond," *Journal of Africana Religions* 1, no. 4 (2013): 460, https://doi.org/10.5325/jafrireli.1.4.0458.

SECTION 2: Grands Bwa and Historical Memory

1. Christian and Vodou constructions of the natural

The above foundations of Vodou cosmology appear in myriad rituals and historical episodes, yet their contribution to creating space for the enslaved is often under-explored. Despite this, the creation of space is fundamental to the possibility and mobility Vodou instills in its practitioners. Part of creating Vodou space is predicated on notions of relationality which empowered ritual activity by drawing on the connection between the physical realm and *Ginen*. Thus, when Vodouists enacted their varied practices, they affirmed the connection between *Ginen* and Saint-Domingue, demarcating the Island as a Vodou space.[1] It is this core power which impacts all elements of enslaved Vodouist's lives. This section will explore these ideas through an analysis of the sanctity of the forest and the importance of ancestral memory. In doing so, this analysis will also require an incorporation of French colonial and Catholic discourse to show how Vodou spatiality challenged the notions of what the French deemed as 'correct' use and ownership of space inherent to Saint-Domingue's colonial design.

As historian Rebecca Dirksen indicates in her article, "Haiti, Singing for the Land, Sea, and Sky," (2019) Catholicism, as a highly anthropocentric religion, dictates that it is God's will that man exploit the natural world to his own ends.[2] Catholicism, as anthropologist and folklorist Zora Neal Hurston has extolled, requires its adherents to forswear being a part of the "natural world… in order to gain the transcendent realm" where, in a disparate manifestation, in Vodou cosmology, "bodily proximity to nature is a means to the divine."[3]

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[1] Claudine Michel, "Of Worlds Seen and Unseen: The Educational Character of Haitian Vodou," *Comparative Education Review* 40, no. 3 (1996): 286, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1189105.
[2] Rebecca Dirksen, "Haiti, Singing for the Land, Sea, and Sky: Cultivating Ecological Metaphysics and Environmental Awareness through Music," *MUSICultures* 45 (1-2), (2019): 124, https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/MC/article/view/28937.
[3] La Vinia Delois Jennings, *Zora Neale Hurston, Haiti, and Their Eyes Were Watching God*. (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 34.

Thus, exploitation rather than relationality broadly dictated how French Catholicism justified and emboldened colonial plantation efforts with the power of God's divine plan. Both these claims established the groundwork for the necessary disconnect between the self and the natural world, on which the physical and economic violence of plantations relied. Patrick Wolfe notes that for colonial societies, this 'righteous' exploitation extended to Black bodies toiling under colonial rule as a means to achieve wealth where often the 'divine plan' justified such exploitation. The plantation systems that dictated the activities of Black bodies within the system of 'production' is inextricably linked to the destruction and dislocation of environmental resources.

The colonist Antoine Dalmas provided a contemporary economic affirmation to Wolfe's ideas, stating, "slavery was necessary for cultivation and cultivation necessitated slavery."[4] This colonial design then sought to bifurcate Blackness from the natural world to instead toil under a Christian ethic endorsed capitalism. The legacy of this system still influences modern Haiti, with the slash-and-burn tactics used to transform the Island into monocultural sites of production having damaging and ongoing impacts on the Island's ecosystem.[5] Moreton-Robinson echoes this analysis through her discussion of ideas of ownership. Emboldened by the capitalist Christian ethic and sense of superiority, colonial systems afforded themselves dominion over the natural world and human 'subordinates.'[6] In turn, the 18th century French system in Saint-Domingue exploited Black bodies within the plantation system for economic gain at the cost of enslaved lives, the natural world, and human connection to the natural world.

[4]Antoine Dalmas, translated by Jonathon Schwartz, *History of the Revolution of Saint Domingue: Volume 1* (Amazon Digital Services, 2022), 14.
[5] A. S. Weber, "Haitian Vodou and Ecotheology." *The Ecumenical Review* 70, no. 4 (2018): 691, https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12393.
[6] Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Sovereign Subjects : Indigenous Sovereignty Matters* Cultural Studies Series. (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 35.

Conversely, Vodouist cosmological understandings pose a different ethic of engaging with others and the natural world. Like Hill's exploration of Haudenosaunee notions of relationality to one's environment–where connecting to the flora, land, and fauna function as ways of knowing–Vodou similarly emphasizes interconnectivity, allowing for a differing appreciation than colonial Catholicism of what is sacred.[7] Sites of religious importance, such as the *Grands Bwa,* or the sacred forest, speak to an active application of the enslaved's historical and spiritual memory to Saint-Domingue, employing specifically African ideas in the context of the Island. Disavowing the structural exploitation of the natural world and the enslaved's own bodies contradicts the colonial French doctrine which dictated 'proper' conduct towards both Black bodies and the environment. Thus, in practicing Vodou cosmology and holding a familial regard for the natural land, Vodouists engaged with the natural and spiritual outside the jurisdiction of French ownership for their own ends.

2. Forests and remembrance

The *Grands Bwa* holds a key place in the initiation of Vodouists, functioning as a natural temple. The sacred forest is the location of the *suleliye* ritual, a graduation ritual which transitions a practitioner from initiation candidate to priest.[8] In some traditions, the *Grand Bwa* is also incarnated as a *Lwa* in its own right, a protector of medical knowledge and the earth.[9] While multiple places hold sacred forests, they all exist on *démembré*, sacred ancestral land.[10] These are uncultivated places where the natural forest flourishes, kept safe by tree-cutting taboos. The earth, soil, and trees, often occupied by *Vodun* of the earth, offer powerful representations of sustenance–spiritual wells from where Vodouists may draw

[7] Susan M. Hill, *The Clay We Are Made of : Haudenosaunee Land Tenure on the Grand River* Critical Studies in Native History, 20. (Winnipeg. Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2017), 3.
[8] Eric James Montgomery, Christian Vannier, and Timothy R Landry, eds.*Spirit Service : Vodún and Vodou in the African Atlantic World* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2022), 247.
[9] Dirksen, "Haiti, Singing for the Land, Sea, and Sky," 120.
[10] Montgomery, *Spirit Service*, 249.

power.[11] In this way, the link of sanctity between the practitioner and the land is established and espoused in familial terms, forever binding the individual to the concept of one's ancestral land. Folklorist and anthropologist Harold Courlander succinctly expresses this connection by saying, "Vodou permeates the land, and, in a sense, it springs from the land. It is not a system imposed from above, but one which pushes out from below. It is a thing of the family, a rich and complex inheritance from a man's own ancestors."[12]

The physical loss of family land through the transatlantic slave trade was as disruptive as the loss of family itself.[13] Historians of enslavement have written widely about the 'social death' inherent to the transatlantic slave trade, but these ideas also find meaning in the dislocation of the enslaved from their own land, which sits at the heart of their cosmologies. Indeed, the loss of ancestral land and family were so grievous that the enslaved turned to suicide as a method of repatriating their souls to Africa. The common occurrence of enslaved suicide is a topic addressed later in this thesis. Yet, through the continued adaptation of Vodou traditions, practitioners instilled this idea of home and relation to the land to Saint-Domingue itself, creating a cosmological parity with African space. African translations of space in the New World were also performed physically, with some managing to carry small bags of soil from Africa with them.[14] Within the Island context, this bringing of land from Africa to the Americas is especially powerful as it shows a sense of belonging to–rather than ownership of–Saint-Domingue's physical and spiritual space, as well as a use for the natural world which is wholly Vodou in nature.

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[11] James Sweet, *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 111.
[12] Harold Courlander, *The Drum and the Hoe: Life and Lore of the Haitian People*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 7.
[13] Karen McCarthy Brown, "Afro-Caribbean Spirituality: A Haitian Case Study," In: *Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture*, (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2006), 5.
[14] Brown, 5.

Conducted on ancestral grounds, the *suleliye* ritual revolves around the *ason*, a small gourd covered in beads and a single bell, occasionally decorated with snake vertebrae.[15] Vodouists hold the initiation ritual at specific times, when Vodou spiritual leaders deem someone worthy of progressing to the rank of priest. The *ason*, constructed of materials from the forest itself, bestows the priest with divine powers to bargain and commune with the *Lwa*. Within Vodou, it is commonplace for music, rhythm, and dance to afford practitioners a form of engagement with the *Lwa* and *Ginen* as a ritualized form of communication and invocation. The shaking of the *ason* also falls into this category. At the core of the *suleliye*, and the effectiveness of the *ason,* is the *Lwa* Loko. Loko is *Lwa* of the forests and a powerful figure dictating healing, poisons, and relationships with the natural world.[16] Loko is associated with the majesty of trees, particularly linked to the iroko tree, also known as the gargantuan teak tree, which is the tallest in West Africa.[17] In certain sects, the sacred forest is the only place where one may interact with Loko and thus transition to the rank of priest. In this way, the forest holds paramount value to the continuation and proliferation of Vodou, tying the very existence of the religion to the idea of ancestry and nature's sacrality.[18]

The sacred forest's centrality to Vodou speaks to the religion's emphasis on connecting the spiritual and natural worlds. A sense of reciprocity emerges through the *suleliye* ritual, wherein the natural wildness of forests is protected and revered. In turn, Vodouism thrives through the continuation of *Lwa*-ordained priests. These same practices find their origins in West African Fon religions, which also view forests as moving forces of the natural world which impact, shape, and have an active relationship with those that live around them.[19] The Fon understood the forests to house *Azizà*, tree spirits which would aid

[15] Benjamin Hebblethwaite, *A Transatlantic History of Haitian Vodou* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021), 137.
[16] Hebblethwaite, 159.
[17] Hebblethwaite, 159.
[18] Montgomery, *Spirit Service*, 250.
[19] Montgomery, 234.

and commune with the local population and detested the destruction of the natural world.[20] Additionally, the Fon and other West African peoples engaged with forests as places of initiation into religious leadership.[21] The mass forced enslavement and relocation of ethnic Fon people from West Africa to Saint-Domingue show a clear translation of African cosmologies onto the Island's geography. The sacred forest's importance to the continuation of the Vodou religion and the practice's Fon origins show one of the myriad ways Vodouists relate to and engage with the Island's physical space through inherited African structures.

The importance of forests to the fabric of Vodou in Saint-Domingue would make them apt sites for future ritual practice, as accounted for in Saint-Mery's *Encyclopedia* and the famous *Bois Caïman* ceremony ritual, which began the Haitian revolution. The same forces which animate forests as powerful sites of connection within Vodou also extend to the various plants and animals which naturally grow on and inhabit the Island. Through a respectful and sustainable use of these resources, Vodouists may effectively transform them for their own purposes, whether those be to heal or to harm.

[20] Montgomery, 236.
[21] Montgomery, 243.

SECTION 3. Healing and Death as Radical Resistance

1. Vodou, balance, and order

Healing in its spiritual, social, and physical forms, demonstrates another way Vodouist notions of balance and space assert themselves onto Saint-Domingue's geography– and with the condition of enslaved life in Saint-Domingue, there was a great need for healing. While many French planters lucratively idealized Saint-Domingue, its reputation as a "torrid zone"–a place full of disease and death–tempered its reputation for monetary prosperity.[1] As such, both Vodouist healers and French medical professionals sought cures for the diseases which ran rampant on the Island. In these cases, Vodou influenced the physical world through the ritual use of different plants, animals, and items to heal both the enslaved and enslavers. Healing holds a place of primacy within Afro-Caribbean religions. Thus, Vodou found itself particularly equipped to deal with the various medical and social ills of Saint-Domingue.[2]

Within Vodou, Vodouists applied healing and cures derived from the religion's prime tenent of balance. These practices largely extrapolated West African healing systems into the new colonial context of Saint-Domingue. The original incorporation myth of *Vodun* into the Kingdom of Dahomey echoes the importance of Vodou in healing and balance. The myth goes that the various *Vodun* or *Lwa* of conquered people surrounding the kingdom of Dahomey refused to go un-worshipped by the empire. As a result of the kingdom's irreverence, humans could only give birth to goats and goats to humans.[3] To restore the natural cycle of reproduction, King Agaja incorporated the *Voduns* of the Fon, restoring the world's natural order. These same principles of order and balance with the natural world drove Vodou healing in Saint-Domingue. Thus, Vodou healing implicitly challenged the

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[1] Karol Kovalovich Weaver, "The Enslaved Healers of Eighteenth-Century Saint Domingue," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 76, no. 3 (2002): 434, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44448995.
[2] Karen McCarthy Brown, "Afro-Caribbean Spirituality: A Haitian Case Study," In: *Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture*, (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2006), 2.
[3] James Sweet, *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 18.

disorder and imbalance of the self and the natural world indicative of plantation enslavement and colonialism.

Within Saint-Domingue, colonial law forced the enslaved to eke out an existence heavily dominated by starvation, torture, and disease. To grapple with this systemic violence, Vodou developed an Island-specific holistic system of medicine. Vodouists designed this healing to redress an individual's ailments in their totality–thus addressing their mind, spirit, body, society, and universe.[4] Naturally, coping with these ailments relied on Vodou's cosmological structures, wherein connectedness, relationality, and balance are at the core of human existence. Thus, an emphasis on reordering the disordered self within a disordered colonial space would guide the development of healing within the Island context.

2. African 'magic' and French 'science'

The Island's varied geography relatively conscript the *Manbo* (priestesses) and *Oungan* (priests) who practice healing arts, where differing Island ecosystems presented different pathways to heal. Like Vodou itself, this separation and heterodoxy lead to numerous forms of treatment–yet, all relied on engaging with the natural and spiritual worlds to seek remedy. Unlike the extraction-based system, which dominated colonial Island practices, harvesting herbs for medicine requires communication with the natural world and strict protocols. This *règleman*, or proper conduct, necessitates a degree of respect for the plant conveyed through song and dance to ensure the plant's cooperation.[5] Additionally, the positions of the sun and moon are also vital to this kind of extraction, with certain parts of plants being more potent in their healing abilities at different times of year and with varying lunar cycles.[6] Alongside these cosmic considerations is the entire breadth of knowledge required to prepare cures. Knowing which plants heal, which harm, and which can be mixed

[4] Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel, *Haitian Vodou : Spirit, Myth, and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 113.
[5] Bellegarde-Smith, 116.
[6] Bellegarde-Smith, 116.

together requires a high level of expertise, necessitating the specialized care of a *Manbo* or *Oungan*.

As with plants, understanding the human body also requires a high level of expertise. Vodou informs knowledge of the body, wherein one's *dan*, life essence born from Damballah and Ayida Weddo's perfect union, may become ill or corrupted.[7] At the time of death, one loses their *dan* entirely. The continuation of *dan* requires complete harmony of the body, meaning that *Manbo* and *Oungan* must account for the entirety of one's physical and spiritual being in providing healing. Disequilibrium of one's spirit, and its various components, may result in small physical injuries, structural issues within one's body, dysfunctions of the mind, or most extremely, death.

In diagnosing issues of the spirit, the practitioner draws on the powers of *Ginen* and the *Lwa*. *Ginen* and the *Lwa* function as repositories of energy, thus they may empower the same forces which animate humans, plants, animals, and all things which hold life. Ill individuals may undergo an episode of possession wherein a *Lwa* realigns their energy, resolving the disequilibrium and curing the patient.[8] *Manbo* and *Oungan* may also prescribe more specific treatments as deemed necessary, guided by specific *Lwa* in various elemental denominations, such as temporary earthen burial, air sprays and fanning, bathing with fire, and bathing with water.[9] More severe ailments may require a practitioner to apply a guard to the body through ritual scarring.[10] In all forms of ritual treatment, the *Lwa* and the power of *Ginen* animate the healing, being a fundamental component of the process.

Importantly, the application of West African healing philosophies in Saint-Domingue was not a direct replication of African practices, nor a parroting of Indigenous Taíno

[7] Bellegarde-Smith, 121.
[8] Bellegarde-Smith, 129.
[9] Bellegarde-Smith, 131.
[10] Bellegarde-Smith, 132.

remedies. Instead, the vastly different environment provided and necessitated variance and the adaptation of African knowledge.[11] While the larger West African cosmological frameworks that guided herbalist *Manbo* and *Oungans* in Saint-Domingue remained largely intact, their actual practices developed in response to both the resources the environment allotted to them and the constraints of enslavement. At the core of these practices, and the continuation of African healing, is the Vodouist worldview, guided by the *Lwa*, holistic care, and relationality. In this way, the very act of healing relies on the complex and interwoven relationship between the physical world and *Ginen*, making Vodou healing a prime extension of spiritual power, which had very real consequences for enslaved experiences. Vodou healing functions as a rejection of White ownership over Black bodies within the colonial system. For the enslaved, the functionality to heal oneself and one's spirit outside the means of 'professional' medicine and the Catholic faith was revolutionary. Healing through traditional African structures served as a condemnation of the expendability of Black lives in colonial Saint-Domingue, achieved through careful and regimented cooperation with the natural world and the *Lwa*.

Expectedly, as with other expressions of deviation from Western epistemology, French colonial forces legally and socially painted healing *Manbo* and *Oungan* as sorcerers, outlawing Vodou medical practices. While the French instituted a rigorous medical board in Saint-Domingue, they seemed unable to fulfill the Enlightenment-era dream of conquering disease in the Empire's most important colony.[12] Thus, when African herbalists succeeded where they failed, they drew vitriol and fascination alike. Some French medical professionals like Jean-Barthélemy Dazille entirely decried other doctors from seeking Vodou herbalist knowledge. Dazille saw Vodou herbalist wisdom as an affront to the practice of medicine.[13]

[11] Weaver, "The Enslaved Healers," 441.
[12] Weaver, 439.
[13] Weaver, 442.

The sanctity of 'Western' scientific methodology likely informed Dazille's bias through the understanding that 'science' is the only valid episteme with which to understand human experience.[14]

Yet, this bias in medical 'validity' did not stop colonials like Nicolas Louis Bourgeois from seeking out healing and aid from Vodou sources when French medical techniques failed them. Bourgeois served as Secretary of the Chambre d'Agriculture du Cap in Saint-Domingue and was particularly interested in classifying and documenting enslaved healing practices.[15] He was fascinated by enslaved healers' abilities to cure "contusions, bruises, abscesses, and wounds considered incurable by [their] pharmacy."[16] While Bourgeois managed to convince some enslaved peoples to share their practice for him to document, he often lamented that many refused. Regarding the matter, Bourgeois notes that the "medicine is disparate, comes from all over, and that they are reluctant to share many things."[17] Part of this reluctance was no doubt informed by a certain protectivity over Vodou *konesan*, or sacred knowledge, which itself required study and progression as a Vodou practitioner to access.[18] Yet other French planters and physicians like Pouppée Desportes became fixated on understanding enslaved treatments and cures for particularly ravenous diseases. Desportes's obsession was partially out of a desire to cure these illnesses, but also for the economic gains that sales of such antidotes would bring.[19]

This fascination with African healing was not, however, a uniquely French disposition. Rather, European enslavers professed a collective incredulity with West African

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[14] Eric James Montgomery, Christian Vannier, and Timothy R Landry, eds.*Spirit Service : Vodún and Vodou in the African Atlantic World* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2022), 189.
[15] Weaver, "The Enslaved Healers," 439.
[16] Weaver, 440.
[17] Nicolas Louis Bourgeois, *Voyages Intéressans dans Différentes Colonies Françaises, Espagnoles, Anglaises, etc*. (Paris: Jean-François Bastien, 1788), 503.
[18] Claudine Michel, "Of Worlds Seen and Unseen: The Educational Character of Haitian Vodou," *Comparative Education Review* 40, no. 3 (1996): 287, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1189105.
[19] Weaver, "The Enslaved Healers," 442.

healing practices. In one report, a Dutch enslaver noted that "when slaves get holes in their legs, either as a result of disease or worms or accidents, they recover much more quickly by taking the medicines of their own land than by being compelled against their will to take European medicine."[20] At times this amazement would spark medical revolution. One famous account from colonial Massachusetts describes Minister Cotton Mathers learning practices of inoculation from Onesimus, an Akan-speaking African enslaved to him.[21] Mathers would then go on to popularize inoculation in both the New and Old Worlds. Further, Domingos Álvares, an enslaved healer and priest in Portuguese Brazil, became so notorious for his medicinal work that he was taken before the Inquisition in Lisbon to ascertain the root of his power.[22] For European outsiders to African healing traditions, the workings of medical West African priests toed the line between devil worship and herbalism, concurrently sparking religious and scientific outrage and fascination.

The positions of Dazille, Bourgeois, and Desportes broadly encapsulate the French colonial understandings of Vodouist medicinal practices in Saint-Domingue. These reflections, too, find voice in the notions of property, ownership, and status elucidated by Moreton-Robinson and Wolfe. Dazille's expressed abhorrence is indicative of a faction of French society, medical and otherwise, who understood Vodouist practices as utterly nonsensical at best, and at worst dangerous. This same fear and disdain for difference underpinned much of the colonial attitude towards Vodouists, predicated on their assumption that Vodou is antithetical to 'modernity.' Thus, Dazille's posed incompatibility of Vodou and 'real' medical practices posited a certain ownership over the very notions of medicine and healing. These ideas are tightly bound to the Enlightenment ethic of civilizational progress, which guided colonial ambitions. Catholic understandings of what constitutes divine healing

[20] Sweet, *Domingos Álvares, African Healing*, 32.
[21] Elizabeth A. Fenn, "Biological Warfare in Eighteenth-Century North America: Beyond Jeffery Amherst," *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 4 (2000): 1563. https://doi.org/10.2307/2567577
[22] Sweet, *Domingos Álvares, African Healing*, 186.

compounded the issue of non-Western religious healing. For the Church, only the Christian God may offer healing through faith, thus making Vodou healing akin to devilry.[23] Thus, for some factions of French society, Vodou–on both 'scientific' and religious grounds–was fundamentally 'incorrect.'

In contrast, Bourgeois and Desportes sought to incorporate Vodouist medical knowledge into their own understandings of the world. Both men operated out of a desire to own, but in differing ways. Bourgeois appears to have been more interested in classification, prying wisdom out of the enslaved, for African knowledge to be bound in books, foreign libraries, and Latin medical terminology. Bourgeois attempted a second rupture of the enslaved from their origin. However, rather than a geographical rupture, Bourgeois's work attempted to tear and confine holistic healing practices–dependent on Vodouist understandings–and render this wisdom foreign to their creators for European consumption. Desportes more specifically sought the monetary gain from exploiting Vodouist knowledge. In the pursuit of status, both financial and educational, Desportes and Bourgeois desired to claim Vodouist wisdom, aiming to capitalize on the knowledge for their own ends.

Amongst Desportes, Bourgeois, Dazille, and their contemporaries, there was also undoubtedly a desire to provide the best medical care possible. However, the colonial environment, which afforded and informed their extraction of knowledge, and the rejection of wisdom deemed 'other,' imparted violence onto Saint-Domingue's enslaved population for the sake of power. Vodouists also used their healing and harming prowess for power and capital, at times weaponizing these powers against one another. Yet, historians must contextualize these actions from the conditions of oppression and enslavement. In this way, rather than take or lambaste from the position of power like myriad French doctors, the enslaved operated their knowledge of healing, charms, and poison to grasp at a power

[23] Sweet, 125.

structurally denied to them. Thus, it is within the margins of the French unknown wherein healing through Vodouist spatiality developed as a form of social, economic, political, and religious power for the enslaved. While outwardly, the French imposed their notions of the body and medicine onto the Island, they too sought out the knowledge of Vodou healers to understand and combat the various illnesses which ran rampant on Saint-Domingue. In this way, the spatial knowledge transplanted from Western Africa found new life in Saint-Domingue and in the records of the French who struggled to deal with the various tropical illnesses and diseases which enslaved healers successfully combated.

Thanks to early colonial records, Martinique, another colony of the French, provides helpful insight into how enslaved West Africans were operating Vodou healing in the early colonial period. Coming from the earliest periods of the French chartered transatlantic slave trade to the Caribbean, the two spaces were functionally the same contact zone, with most of the enslaved in the French Caribbean coming from Senegambia and the Bight of Benin.[24] These demographics would later change for Saint-Domingue in the latter half of the 18th century, with an influx of Kongo Africans changing the population and further expanding Vodou's religious and healing repertoires.[25] The relationality between Martinique and Saint-Domingue during the early colonial period, as well as the records of a Dominican friar and botanist named Labat in *Nouveau voyage aux iles françoises d'Amérique*, help give insight into the scantly recorded history of early enslaved African practices in the New World.

As with the examples in Saint-Domingue, the enslaved combatted disease and danger in this new environment by mixing spiritual practices and their understanding of the natural world. Labat widely described those Africans who operate in matters outside his Christian knowledge pejoratively as sorcerers, yet he fixated on understanding their dances and healing

[24] Montgomery, *Spirit Service*, 18.
[25] Chris Davis, "Before They Were Haitians: Examining Evidence for Kongolese Influence on the Haitian Revolution," *Journal of Haitian Studies* 22, no. 2 (2016): 5, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44478387.

practices.[26] In conveying just how widespread both the practice and belief in Vodou was, Labat noted that "almost all Blacks who leave their homeland as adults are 'sorcerers,' or they at least have some tainting of magic, sorcery, and poison."[27] He too noted the prevalence of charmed amulets and his assumed function of their role in initiation into Vodou practices.[28] It is unclear how privy he was to actual Vodou practices, as it appears that, naturally, most of the enslaved were rather reserved in sharing their practices with their enslavers. Yet, his accounts do record a few episodes of healing which help to not only contextualize Vodou's spatiality in Saint-Domingue but frame the transcontinental spread of Vodou practices within the West Indies.

One of Labat's accounts discusses a venomous snake which bit a young enslaved man's leg, resulting in a need for immediate care. Labat held the man's hand and positioned him between two fires, covering him with blankets. Labat recorded that the man's leg was horribly swollen, indicating there was nothing to do but await his death.[29] Rather than allow the man's death, others summoned an enslaved African herbalist who promptly treated the man with various plants, saving the man's life.[30] When Labat pressed the healer on how exactly he had saved the enslaved man's life, he refused to reveal his secrets, but promised to cure Labat if he was ever in such a condition.

This encounter reveals the pivotal role which specialized and trained individuals in various *Vodun* healing practices in West Africa had in continuing and adapting traditions in the New World. The healer's secrecy about his practices may also speak to the high importance placed on sacred knowledge and initiation in both Saint-Domingue's and West African Vodou. Additionally, there was simply practical knowledge in keeping healing

[26] Montgomery, *Spirit Service*, 18.
[27] Jean Baptiste Labat, *Nouveau Voyage aux Isles de l'Amérique* (Paris, 1722 - 1724), 137.
[28] Montgomery, *Spirit Service*, 24.
[29] Montgomery, 18.
[30] Montgomery, 18.

methods a secret from enslavers. By doing so, knowledgeable healers protected their cultural wisdom and marked themselves as a person of importance–a person to keep alive. The snake bite episode shows yet another example of the enslaved operating Vodou spatiality and training in creating an African space in the Caribbean. Further, by concealing the wisdom of how to operate specific cures from enslavers, the enslaved were able to grasp and maintain a sense of power, in some way retaining power over life and death which was all but stripped from them by the condition of enslavement.

3. On death, repatriation, and midwives

Sitting on the opposite end of the healing spectrum are Vodou's cosmologically informed actions which dictate death. While the following sections of this thesis will address death by poison or *macandalisme* more closely, Labat's records provide a meaningful contribution to the continued discussion of enslaved suicide as a cosmologically informed action. As discussed through Vodou's conception of the soul, the endless chain of relationality informs life. Thus, death is not the end of one's existence within Vodou. Instead, the enslaved widely believed that upon their death, they would be returned to *Ginen*, achieving a form of immortality and permanence.[31] Notions of returning to *Ginen* proliferated suicide to the point where it became a common 'problem' for enslavers, where the enslaved would forcefully repatriate their souls to their homeland, denying their enslavers both their 'property' and their productive labour. The same mentality which emboldened the enslaved to take their own lives also partially accounted for the enslaved that poisoned other enslaved peoples, in turn 'freeing' them and concurrently damaging their enslavers' economic prospects.[32]

[31] Benjamin Hebblethwaite, *A Transatlantic History of Haitian Vodou* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021), 17.

[32] However, this is not to say that all instances of the enslaved harming one-another were driven by this cosmologic undercurrent. Doing so would only deny the drive of both 'moral' and 'immoral' actions and desires which constitute the human condition.

Labat's records also extol two accounts of enslaved suicide. One account tells of an enslaved woman named Mina who was constantly ill. Upon investigation, the priest discovered that this malady was from eating dirt.[33] Mina sought to die, and have her soul return to Africa, reincarnating alongside her people. Suicide by eating dirt was a common report in the Caribbean more widely, and Saint-Domingue particularly.[34] Anthrax, a potentially deadly bacteria found in soil and a focus of a later section of this thesis, may have accounted for some of the enslaved deaths brought on by these suicide attempts. One of Labat's own enslaved individuals also ate dirt to die, despite Labat having forced the enslaved person to convert to the "true faith."[35] The enslaved man purportedly committed suicide to be reunited with his father in Africa rather than suffer under Labat, despite the priest's claims that the enslaved man "loved his master."[36] Both these episodes and this recurrent narrative show a consistent and widespread Vodou understanding amongst the enslaved of the soul and its function, as well as a possibility of reclaiming the self through suicide. Additionally, in some cases, death could permit a person to achieve the status of ancestor, or, in cases of apotheosis as we will see with Mackandal, become *Lwa* or aspects of *Lwa* themselves. Death in Vodou permitted physical escape and spiritual expansion. Indeed, the prevalence of enslaved suicide became such an endemic issue for enslavers that they began to mutilate corpses of the enslaved, attempting to unravel the acts of spiritual repatriation and dissuade others from following their kin's example.[37]

The same understanding of Vodou that permitted suicide as a genuine recourse to the condition of enslavement animated several instances of infanticide among the enslaved. For many parents, infanticide was one of the few options the enslaved had to defend their

[33] Montgomery, *Spirit Service*, 19.
[34] Colin Dayan, *Haiti, History and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 247.
[35] Montgomery, *Spirit Service*, 19.
[36] Montgomery, 19.
[37] Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, 247.

children from the machines of colonialism and enslavement. Death through suicide and infanticide thus permitted a freedom of one's lineage and a structural denial of the needless replication of violence which predicated plantation labour. There are certainly gendered considerations for the practice of infanticide, especially with regard to the relative inability of Saint-Domingue's enslaved population to repopulate. As malnutrition, stress, and intensive labour led to high levels of infertility and death, Europeans prized enslaved women who were able to give birth as the fullest expression of plantation capitalism's claims over Black women's bodies.[38] Colonial idealism over 'replenishable' enslaved bodies pushed certain women on plantations into the position of "machines to produce other slaves."[39] This idealism was not held amongst all enslavers, however, as many feared the loss of productive labour certain to arise in the latter portions of an enslaved woman's pregnancy.[40] As such, infanticide took on a particularly gendered tone as a form of resistance to enslavement–a reclamation of women's bodies backed by the religious ideas of *Ginen*. The fear of pregnancy was a palpable threat. While not an instance of infanticide itself, the following report from the French during the 1802 campaign succinctly explains the condition of enslaved women and their relationship to their children and death. French soldiers arrested a rebel enslaved woman along with her daughters. While walking to their execution, the mother consoled her crying daughters with the words "Rejoice! Your wombs will not beget slaves!"[41] The jubilation–however depressing–at her own daughters' deaths as a way out of the cyclical doom embodied by the experience of being an enslaved woman speaks volumes.

At times, midwives also became targets of outrage about infanticide. The doctor Dazille noted this issue, wherein midwives worked with desperate enslaved peoples to plan

[38] Hebblethwaite, *A Transatlantic History*, 8.
[39] Ariette Gautier, *Les Sœurs de Solitude : La Condition féminine dans V esclavage aux Antilles du XVII au XIX siècle* (Paris: Éd. Caribéennes, 1985), 71.
[40] Gautier, 96.
[41] Crystal Eddins, "'Rejoice! Your wombs will not beget slaves!' Marronnage as Reproductive Justice in Colonial Haiti," *Gender & History* 32, no. 3: (2020): 562, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.12497.

the deaths of other enslaved peoples, their children, and even enslavers.[42] One woman named Arada served as a midwife on the Fleuriau plantation in Cul-de-Sac which was purportedly the site of poisonings in 1776. The French hanged Arada for her assumed role leading the poisoning efforts by a rope with 70 knots, each representing a child she had supposedly killed.[43] Another woman, Zabeth, absconded her role as midwife for the Duconge plantation in Port-de-Paix in 1786 after being accused of killing 30 infants and 10 children who all perished from the same disease.[44]

The social anger wielded by planters against enslaved women–which at times counterintuitively manifested as executions–indicates their anger at the violation of their supposed 'right' to the lost property of Black children. These children would have been the next generation of workers due to the hereditary condition of chattel enslavement. French planters also had expectations of enslaved women thrust into positions of midwifery as executors of an enslaved 'ideal' of femininity and domesticity. When enslaved women rebelled against this notion, they became victims of gendered and racialized violence, as we will see in the story of Marie Kingué in Section 6. Indeed, enslaved women's rejection of the colonial ideal of the domestic feminine midwife was so great that the practice of the enslaved holding the position of midwife was eventually outlawed.[45] The trends of infanticide, along with many midwives assumedly having some form of knowledge about Vodou healing, allows for an understanding of death as a defensive–and at times gendered–tool. Whether self-inflicted or imposed, death was not the final chapter for Vodouists, but rather a way through the destructive reality of enslavement and a pathway back to the spirits and Africa.

[42] Weaver, "The Enslaved Healers," 446.
[43] Crystal Nicole Eddins, *Rituals, Runaways, and the Haitian Revolution: Collective Action in the African Diaspora* (version 2nd edition.) 2nd ed. (Open Access Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 145.
[44] Eddins, 145.
[45] Boisvert, Jayne, "Colonial Hell and Female Slave Resistance in Saint-Domingue," *Journal of Haitian Studies* 7, no. 1 (2001): 67, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41715082.

Vodou's multifaceted nature of affording healing and harm, and even salvation through death, illuminates Vodou spatiality's various ways of impacting Saint-Domingue's history. These actions bind Saint-Domingue to *Ginen* through ritual practice, expanding the capacity of Vodouists to act empowered by Vodou spatiality on the Island. This cosmological backdrop helps to provide the rereading of sources as a key power of embracing a cosmology-first approach to the Island's historical record. It is through the frame of cosmology that the actions of the enslaved appear more comprehensively, and with cosmology that the understanding of how the enslaved demarcated Saint-Domingue as a space of Vodou possibility becomes clearer. This cosmological drive behind enslaved perceptions of space and belonging emerges as an animating force in enslaved action, both in the day to day and the revolutionary, as explored through maroons and Mackandal in the following section.

SECTION 4: Maroon Magics & the Practicality of Vodou's Cosmology for the Enslaved

1. Enslaved exploration and the Maniel

Understanding how the enslaved employed religious principles to demarcate the Island as a Vodou space means analyzing enslaved practices with the land through Vodou's own cosmology and principles of relationality. The focus on Saint-Domingue's economic condition has coded many historical writings about the Island, which continue to center the relationship between the enslaved and the land as solely consisting of violent exploitation. Likewise, revolution-centric works do the same, instead focusing on how the position of enslavement drove a revolutionary spirit within the African population to free themselves from their French enslavers. While both these narratives are vital to understanding Saint-Domingue's history, they obscure Vodouist's cosmological conceptions of land from history.

The enslaved were intimately familiar with the land they occupied. One apparent cause of familiarity was the plantation work which dominated the majority of their time. Yet, this was not the only recourse the enslaved had for exploring and relating to the natural world. Not all enslaved people were so closely bound to plantation work. One such enslaved man, Capois, was sent out by his enslaver to track down missing cattle.[1] As a result of his ventures into this wilderness, the man discovered a hot spring with healing properties. The spring cured one man suffering from extensive rheumatism and another whose condition was seemingly incurable.[2] While Capois' tale of discovery shows that the enslaved played a meaningful role in exploring the Islands' geographic spaces which Europeans had not, the enslaved also re-explored spaces wherein Europeans dominated. Through regular nighttime rituals and performances, the enslaved, through Vodou, transformed colonial territory into new terrain to meet their own spiritual needs. Exploration between the enslaved and the land

[1] Crystal Nicole Eddins, *Rituals, Runaways, and the Haitian Revolution: Collective Action in the African Diaspora* (version 2nd edition.) 2nd ed. (Open Access Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 206.
[2] Eddins, 206.

also manifested within cities permitting spaces of interaction and opportunity, especially in the trade of goods and foods. In turn, the enslaved reencoded these bustling urban spaces for their own means–wherein they interacted or even disappeared outside the purview of their enslavers. However, perhaps the individuals who explored all these various avenues best and most thoroughly were those who fled from enslavement entirely, escaping to build their own communities based on the principles of Vodou and an understanding of the sacrality of the land.[3]

Saint-Domingue's large maroon population provides a proficient insight into Vodouist cosmological ideas in practice. Demographic analysis estimated that there were 3000 maroons in 1750.[4] Maroons were enslaved peoples who absconded labour and fled from their enslaver's plantation. Some French understandings of *marronage*, the act of fleeing from plantations, held that it was a condition of mental illness.[5] Black bodies seeking alternate lifeways than those prescribed to them by Saint-Domingue's plantation system was a seemingly ineffable thought. Others more aptly characterized *marronage* as part of the undeniable human pursuit of liberty. Other enslaved peoples clearly understood this, aiding maroons in their escapes. It was commonplace for the enslaved and maroons to work together, with the enslaved concealing maroons from their enslavers, at times hiding them in a plantation's enslaved quarters or in the surrounding environments.[6] Thus, in pursuing liberty, maroons and the enslaved alike appropriated colonial spaces for their own needs of concealment, creating opportunities for protection, communication, and alliance. The ethnic, religious, and kinship connections maintained between the enslaved and maroons fomented a

[3] Eddins, 211.
[4] Benjamin Hebblethwaite, *A Transatlantic History of Haitian Vodou* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021), 19.
[5] Carolyn E. Fick, *Black masses in the San Domingo revolution, 1791-1803* (Concordia University, 1979), XII.
[6] Crystal Eddins, "'Rejoice! Your wombs will not beget slaves!' Marronnage as Reproductive Justice in Colonial Haiti," *Gender & History* 32, no. 3: (2020): 574, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.12497.

sense of loyalty and reliance. These avenues afforded the sharing of information and experience between the groups, religious or otherwise.[7] Many maroons found long-term refuge from enslavement in Saint-Domingue's mountains, joining other runaways in pre-existing communities, relying on subsistence farming to survive.[8] These maroons also occupied certain market spaces, participating in urban trade and hiding in hectic downtown cores. Thus, Saint-Domingue's maroon population created an intricate and largely covert web of geographic existence underneath French colonial rule.

The only officially recognized maroon community was the Maniel, a community of escaped enslaved peoples in the Baoruco mountains. Like the Taíno before them, the enslaved employed the Baoruco mountains as a strategic base, where they were able to foment revolutionary ideas, worship, and live outside the condition of bondage. Relative prosperity within the Maniel and other maroon societies allowed for the maroon woman-to-child ratio to be more than double that of their enslaved counterparts, offering a distinct opportunity for free family units not found on plantations.[9] Thus, maroon communities permitted the existence of free Black bodies born on the Island. These "Creol of the mountain," or Black persons born free, stood as a testament to the Maniel and *marronage's* success–not only in freeing the self, but in freeing one's lineage from chattel enslavement.[10] This particular maroon enclave existed prior to French occupancy of the Island, and, when France took over Hispaniola's Western half, it provided a consistent haven for Saint-Domingue's enslaved who took to the mountains. From the mountain, the Maniel conducted numerous raids on both the Spanish and French sides of the Island, mainly targeting plantations near Jacmel and Port-au-Prince. The Maniel was successful enough that

[7] Eddins, 574.
[8] Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel, *Haitian Vodou : Spirit, Myth, and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 53.
[9] Eddins, "'Your wombs will not,"' 563.
[10] Eddins, 565.

eventually, Santo Domingo granted some of the Maniel's maroons free Black towns like San Lorenzo de los Negros de Minas on the Island's Spanish East.[11] While some joined this town and thus Spanish society, others remained fixed in the mountain, continuing the maroon tradition. Maroon spaces like the Maniel would also become an important symbol and place of resistance for the enslaved when they finally threw off the yoke of French rule.

While the act of *marronage* itself was not wholly guided by Vodou spatiality, it still played a vital role in the reorientation of space. Maroon communities like the Maniel offer essential insight into constructing Vodou spatiality. They show how Vodou spatiality challenged the dogged ideas of ownership and control that underpinned the enslavement of the maroon's former lives. Maroon enclaves afforded a unique place of possibility for the enslaved, a place where one could be made free from bondage through their own actions, and thus practice life, however covertly, on their own terms. Vodou informed their terms, as the faith was akin to a creed for the maroons, finding wide and open practice in these communities.[12] Such practice facilitated a closer application of Vodouist metaphysical conceptions as they relate to the land itself. One such development was the incorporation of Kouzen Zaka, a *Lwa* of work, money, and agriculture. Vodouists depict Kouzen Zaka as a *peyizan* or rural farmer. His incorporation gives an understanding of the fundamental role the working class and enslaved production–in accordance with the *Lwa*–plays within Vodou. Kouzen Zaka's inclusion and worship offer an interesting look into the reterritorialization of African labour in Saint-Domingue among his worshipers.

Worship of Kouzen Zaka likely spread to the enslaved on plantations, given the channels of communication Vodou afforded.[13] Further, maroons often maintained their

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[11] Eddins, 233.
[12] David Patick Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies. Blacks in the Diaspora* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002), 74., Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* 1st ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 57.
[13] Laënnec Hurbon, "Haitian Vodou, Church, State and Anthropology." *Anthropological Journal on European Cultures* 8, no. 2 (1999), 28. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43234856.

connections to their enslaved counterparts through kinship, ethnic, or religious affiliations, affording a significant deal of discussion between parties.[14] Kouzen Zaka's identification with Saint Isidore, the farmer, is also telling. As the *Code Noir* outlawed all non-Catholic religions, including Vodou, associating saints with the *Lwa* allowed practitioners to worship covertly.[15] Conversely, for the maroon's, worship of the *Lwa* was a relatively open practice, meaning Kouzen Zaka's identification with a Catholic saint indicates that his worship also occurred in the enslaved's covert circles. As Vodou was pervasive in every element of life for its maroon practitioners, Kouzen Zaka allowed for even the agricultural labour which underpinned the institution of enslavement to be in consensual service of the *Lwa*. As part of Vodou metaphysics, the physical and spiritual components of the Vodouists may live distinct lives, allowing the soul to serve the *Lwa* despite the physical body toiling for an enslaver.[16] In the same way, including the farming *Lwa* into the Vodou pantheon helped mediate the disconnect between Vodou's emphasis on the sanctity of the natural world and the inherently environmentally destructive exploitation of land wrought by plantation systems.[17] Kouzen Zaka challenged the enslaver's domination by affording his worshipers the strength and will to produce food for a maroon community or survive the day's labour for the enslaved. Kouzen Zaka's role as a *Lwa* shows how the Vodouist worldview challenges the dominant essentialization of Africans and the land with enslavement and labour.

Further examples of ways in which Vodou permitted the enslaved to break out of their dominant association with land being one of labour manifested in the enslaved's use of the natural world for Vodou itself. Maroons again provide a helpful entry point with their refuges

[14] Eddins, "'Your wombs will not,'" 574.
[15] Fick, *The Making of Haiti,* 10, 168.
[16] Bellegarde-Smith, *Haitian Vodou*, 9.
[17] Rebecca Dirksen, "Haiti, Singing for the Land, Sea, and Sky: Cultivating Ecological Metaphysics and Environmental Awareness through Music," *MUSICultures* 45 (1-2), (2019): 122, https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/MC/article/view/28937

in the mountains, as Vodouists understood the mountains themselves to house spirits.[18] As this work has examined with healing, the same spiritual importance exists for the various trees, roots, and plants the enslaved and maroons used to their own ends. Exemplary of this is the account of Francois Mackandal, an enslaved man and eventual maroon famed for a string of poisonings allegedly killing six-thousand people in Saint-Domingue and tens of thousands of livestock.[19]

2. Francois Mackandal the famed poisoner and prophet

For 18 years, Mackandal resided in and around the Limbé mountains, fashioning himself into a charismatic and powerful maroon leader.[20] Mackandal bore a common disfigurement of plantation labour, missing a hand due to an incident in sugar production.[21] His fame and following were no doubt due to his religious proficiency, dealing in magics and allegedly poison for his maroon community and the surrounding plantations. Further, Mackandal claimed to be immortal and prophetic. He frequented surrounding plantations in the northern plain from Fort Dauphin to Port-de-Paix, stopping to share his prophecies.[22] Prominent accounts of Mackandal's prophecies discuss the destruction of White rule on the Island. Using coloured scarves, he illustrated that the yellow scarves, representing the Indigenous Taíno, had been overthrown by the Europeans, depicted by a White scarf.[23] Lastly, Mackandal would use his Black scarf to signify the fast-approaching time, wherein the enslaved Black people, to whom he preached, would overthrow the French and end slavery.

[18] Hebblethwaite, *A Transatlantic History*, 16.
[19] Laurent Dubois and John D Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804 : A Brief History with Documents*. (MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, Macmillan Learning, 2017), 39.
[20] Eddins, *Rituals, Runaways, Haitian Revolution*, 118.
[21] Eddins, 118.
[22] Eddins, 118.
[23] Eddins, 118.

Seemingly to bring about this future, Mackandal began widespread distribution of poisons, along with the news that the enslaved must create their own future and remedy their situation by harming their enslaver and their property.[24] Here again, the nature and status of being a maroon afforded Mackandal the power to instigate revolutionary ideas from outside the position of enslavement. His use of religion to establish power and convey philosophy further attests to the use of Vodou and Vodou spatiality to construct possibility. For Mackandal, the full expression of this possibility was a space wherein enslavement no longer reigns over Black bodies. Likewise, it is Mackandal's cooperation with the natural world to achieve this mission, through the use and distribution of poison, that relates the reciprocal relationship between Vodouism and the natural world. In this case, Mackandal's means and ends are contingent on Vodou knowledge geographically specific to Saint-Domingue and operating this knowledge through poison and prophecy to end enslavement. Further, in the consideration of ancestral land, his exploits seek to free the very Island of colonialism's imposition on the natural world. His operation of poison, Vodou, and collective power between maroons and the enslaved, indicates a profound connection between Vodouists, the land, and its future. His prophetic claims inform notions of shared liberty, of both peoples and the natural world, rather than the traditionally assumed relationship of enslaved labour and violent natural extraction.

Mackandal was not alone in his plots. Along with his core band of maroon followers, his wife, Brigitte, emerged as a key figure in his plan. Brigitte played the critical role of courier and ritual helper. While it is uncertain if Brigitte was a *Manbo* in her own right, her knowledge of ritual functions, especially in creating *Gry,* or talismans, indicates some proficiency.[25] The gendered balance pivotal to Damballah and Ayidda Weddo's union finds

[24] Eddins, 119.
[25] Eddins, 121.

expression through the mortal pairing of Mackandal and Brigitte. In some fashion, this notion likely empowered reception to Mackandal's prophetic visions by attaching familiar ideas of balance and harmony to a cause which sought freedom. Brigitte was indispensable to the cause, delivering poisons out of the maroon bases to those willing to participate. Upon her arrest, Brigitte claimed that the *Gry* she and Mackandal traded in did not poison and were, in fact, charms to reveal "where an escaped slave was, who stole something that was missing, the poisoner, and so forth."[26] Despite her claims to officials, one of her contacts was the "chief poisoner" of Le Cap, Marianne, who herself became embroiled in the plot, resulting in multiple deaths.[27] Women more widely aided in the transport and distribution of poisons to the enslaved, with Marie-Jeanne and Madeleine noted as two women who serviced multiple plantations for the purpose of poisoning enslavers.[28] The work of these women and other poisoners led by Mackandal and Brigitte caused numerous deaths and illnesses, to the point where one man spontaneously came forth about the nature of their plot.[29]

Following the poisoning spree, an enslaved man named Médor claimed that Mackandal and his ilk were the culprits and sought to destroy the colony.[30] Médor himself used 'poisons' on his enslaver and his family, though it is unclear what the exact effects of these poisons were. His enslavers, the Delavaud family, complained about some instances of lethargy but never experienced any severe illness during Médor's time 'poisoning' them.[31] The confusion surrounding the Delavaud family's health is what historian John Garrigus

[26] John Garrigus, ""Like an epidemic one could only stop with the most violent remedies": African Poisons versus Livestock Disease in Saint Domingue, 1750–88." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (2021): 640, https://doi.org/10.5309/willmaryquar.78.4.0617.
[27] Eddins, *Rituals, Runaways, Haitian Revolution* 119.
[28] Eddins, 121.
[29] Garrigus, ""Like an epidemic," 637.
[30] Louis Auguste Aymar et al., "Extrait des pièces deposées en le procès criminel instruite au siège royale du Fort Duaphin contre les nommés Daouin et Venus," May 26, 1757 in Laurent Dubois and John D Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804 : A Brief History with Documents*. (MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, Macmillan Learning, 2017), 40.
[31] Garrigus, ""Like an epidemic,'" 637.

deems as a confusion of words. Garrigus informs that, in many Western African medicinal contexts, poison and cure are referred to with the same word. Rather, it is how practitioners use medicine that gives it healing or harming properties.[32] As such, Médor's claim of 'poisoning' may be a miscommunication. Regardless, Médor did still espouse a sort of idea of collectivity behind the 'poisonings,' stating that there would someday be enough Blacks to "confront the whites if needed."[33] The surgeon who took Médor's confession determined, by the enslaved man's choice of words, that there was indeed a concerted effort among the enslaved to poison the Island's White population. When Médor learned that the surgeon, despite his testimony, still planned to turn him over to the courts to be tortured and executed, Médor took his own life.[34]

After Médor's testimony exposed Mackandal and his network, the French arrested 140 of his alleged followers, constituting maroons, free people of colour, and the enslaved along with their prophet in 1757.[35] The only choice for the colony to stamp out the indignation of challenging colonial rule was death for both Mackandal and his followers. Confessions of his followers further exacerbated Médor's testimony. One known adherent of Mackandal, an enslaved woman named Assam, admitted under torture that she had attempted to poison two enslaved people. Her enslaver, the Valler of la Souffrier, stated that she knew the potions she gave them were death-inducing.[36] Following their arrests, Mackandal's compatriots sang in Kreyol: "ouaïe, ouaïe, Mayangangué, zamis moir mourir, moi aller mourir, [... my friends are dying, I will die ...] ouaïe, ouaïe, Mayangangué."[37] While likely also a resignation to their fates at the hands of the French, even here, Vodou spatiality

[32] Garrigus, 639.
[33] Garrigus, 639.
[34] Garrigus, 639.
[35] Eddins, *Rituals, Runaways, Haitian Revolution*, 121.
[36] Boisvert, Jayne, "Colonial Hell and Female Slave Resistance in Saint-Domingue," *Journal of Haitian Studies* 7, no. 1 (2001): 71, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41715082.
[37] Eddins, *Rituals, Runaways, Haitian Revolution*, 121.

provides an alternative analysis. As discussed, death was hardly the end for a Vodouisant. Vodou cosmology informs that upon death, one's soul may return to *Ginen* to be free in their homeland or even take the mantle of honoured ancestor or *Lwa*–roles where they could continue to advocate and work with the enslaved to achieve their collective freedom. For some Vodouisants, this apotheosis happened to Mackandal and Brigitte following their state executions.

In 1758, the colony burned Mackandal alive as punishment, a common consequence of public violence to dissuade others. In another episode of Mackandal's Vodouist spatial relevance, some traditions see his *ti-bon-ange* fleeing the flame in the form of a mosquito, with his body evaporating rather than the flames consuming him.[38] One of Mackandal's prophecies further sensationalized his transformation into a mosquito. His foretelling claimed that a plague of mosquitoes would bring the destruction of Whites in the colony, freeing all the Island's enslaved.[39] This evocation of past prophecy and reliance on Vodou's cosmological ideas of the afterlife empowered the story of Mackandal for the enslaved. Not only was he a leader in his own time, but through his claims of immortality and by transforming into the very thing he foretold would free the enslaved, Mackandal entrenched himself within certain sect's Vodou pantheons as a *Lwa* of poisoning.[40] Vodouists and devotees of Mackandal's message gave Brigitte similar honours. Some Vodou traditions identify her as the *Lwa* Maman Brigitte, wife of the paramount *Lwa* of death, Baron Samedi. Maman Brigitte is said to have authority over cemeteries, important sites of ancestral power, and the gateways to the afterlife.[41]

[38] Eddins, 122.
[39] Eddins, 122.
[40] Victor Figueroa, "The Kingdom of Black Jacobins: C. L. R. James and Alejo Carpentier on the Haitian Revolution." *Afro-Hispanic Review* 25, no. 2 (2006): 57, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23055334.
[41] Eddins, *Rituals, Runaways, Haitian Revolution*, 6.

In addition to showing the planters' fears of enslaved uprisings, the account of Mackandal's life and death is also pertinent to discussing Vodou spatiality through his use of poison. Saint-Domingue historians often study Mackandal as a show of resistance, but not one which affirms Vodou spatiality. By looking at this spatial aspect, Mackandal's case elucidates the power and presence of Vodou in making colonial space usable for Vodouists– breaking the assumptions which code understandings of the enslaved and land. As a maroon, Mackandal likely had knowledge of Island plants and animals and the poisons and mind-altering chemicals used in Vodou.[42] While the actual poison Mackandal allegedly used is unknown, the recipe for his *Gry*–or talisman–did survive through Judge Courtin's interrogation of Mackandal. It is important to note that the court could not find evidence to convict Mackandal of poisoning, and thus it was for his organization and blasphemy that the French sent him to the pyre. Courtin noted that the *Gry* that Mackandal and his followers use was the first step towards desecration and poisoning–artefacts which bestowed initiation into his circle.[43] Courtin described the *Gry*'s ingredients–made with root plants like those of plantain and strangler fig trees, holy water, incense, the Eucharist, nails, cemetery bones, and a crucifix tied in string.[44]

The amulet which Courtin pejoratively described were relatively common protection artefacts in Vodou, made by fusing various spiritually important objects. The graveyard bones especially carry significant weight, as graveyards within Vodou are a locus of spirits and transition. Vodouist troops, like those who joined the rebel Hyacinthe, would also use amulets in the Haitian revolution, wearing talismans to protect against French gunfire, coding

[42] Elizabeth McAlister, "Slaves, Cannibals, and Infected Hyper-Whites: The Race and Religion of Zombies." *Anthropological Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (2012): 469, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41857250.
[43] Sebastien Jacques Courtin, "Mémoire sommaire sur les prétendus pratiques magiques et empoisonnements prouves au proces instruit et juge au Cap contre plusieures nègres et négresses don't le chef nommé Francois Macandal a été condamné au feu et exécute le vingt Janvier mille sep cents cinquante huit" 1758. in Laurent Dubois and John D Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804 : A Brief History with Documents*. (MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, Macmillan Learning, 2017), 41.
[44] Courtin, 41.

the battlefield too as a space of Vodou power.[45] Mackandal's use of *Gry* and 'alleged' use of poison speaks to Vodou's ability to sanctify colonial spaces and the natural world for its practitioners. Rather than a collection of stray items, plants, and Catholic symbols, Vodou allows its practitioners to transform and provide meaning to everything from a tree root to bones to a subversion of Christian symbols.[46] Further, there is some indication that Mackandal, along with other religious leaders like Boukman, had some Islamic influences and training.[47] As with Christianity, Islamic doctrine would find no hard contradiction to West African *Vodun,* allowing for the incorporation of specific elements.[48] As such, some scholars of Saint-Domingue, like Aisha Khan, raise the point that Vodou leaders like Boukman might have had some training as *marabouts,* or Islamic religious leaders. *Marabouts* hold close association with the production of *Gry*, the object of Mackandal's trial. The *Gry* themselves may represent a cross cultural expression of Islam within Vodou, as well as the flexibility of Indigenous African religion in incorporating the religious 'other.' Refusing to bow to assertions of essentialized labour and Christian dogma, Vodou incorporated the natural and the Abrahamic 'other' into its own spatial framework, allowing those like Mackandal to derive power and protection in a colonial space that afforded them none.

The *Gry*'s power as a symbol of protection and possibility within a colonial worldspace led to the charms later also being referred to as Mackandal. The mystique of Mackandal, his alleged use of poisons known as *macandalisme,* and his *Gry* workings caused the High Council of Cap-Français to outlaw their production as sacrilegious perversions of

[45] Colin Dayan, *Haiti, History and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 30., Eric James Montgomery, Christian Vannier, and Timothy R Landry, eds.*Spirit Service : Vodún and Vodou in the African Atlantic World* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2022), 27.
[46] Fick, *The Making of Haiti,* 168.
[47] Aisha Khan, "ISLAM, VODOU, AND THE MAKING OF THE AFRO-ATLANTIC." *NWIG: New West Indian Guide / Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* 86, no. 1/2 (2012): 32. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41850693.
[48] Khan, 33.

Christian order the year following his death.[49] Further, the clear ritual elements that empowered Mackandal's following also resulted in a ban on drumming and nighttime gatherings for the enslaved, with enslavers liable for a fine of 300 livres for allowing these activities to occur on their property.[50] Clearly, the concern surrounding the enslaved's talents with poison was daunting enough that the courts also sought punitive measures against enslavers. The court contended that these nighttime ritual gatherings and healings were where these revolutionary ideas formed and how the enslaved distributed poisons and *Gry*.[51] In this way, Vodou ritual, along with its practitioners' knowledge of plants and poisons, prophecy, and apotheosis, sit at the heart of Mackandal's episode as the very spatial means by which the enslaved were so powerfully able to instill fear into Saint-Domingue's White minority.

While Mackandal's actual role in poisoning is itself fascinating, his legacy and the fear he instilled in the planter class reverberated through Vodou networks in spiritual and physical ways. As mentioned prior, some Vodouisants adopted Mackandal as a *Lwa* of poisoning, while others donned his name to inspire the fear of *macandalisme* amongst White enslavers. In 1766, one man named Eustache escaped from Mr. Boyveau's plantation in Dondon.[52] As a maroon, he too took on the name Mackandal, perhaps to empower his own mystique moving forward while also serving as a topical measure of severing an enslaved person from their enslaved name. The solidarity and reverence shown towards Mackandal in both name and title transformed discourse around the name and the term in Black and White circles, establishing a legacy for the man which continues to exist.

[49] Marie Houllemare, "Marie Kingué and the Subversion of Colonial Order (Saint-Domingue, 1785)." *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire* 50, no. 2, (2019): 165, https://doi.org/10.4000/clio.17234
[50] Eddins, *Rituals, Runaways, Haitian Revolution*, 123.
[51] Eddins, 124.
[52] Eddins, 124.

3. Anthrax and the Mackandal narrative

In discussing Mackandal's fame as a poisoner, it is also vital to discuss critiques of how history has painted him and poisonings more broadly. Garrigus raises a vital consideration about the prevalence of disease in Saint-Domingue and to what degree disease and treatment of disease confound the historical record's understanding of poisoners like Mackandal. The height of claims about poisonings coincided with a mass influx of anthrax to Saint-Domingue and the Caribbean.[53] Anthrax, a bacterium found in soil, infected numerous livestock in Saint-Domingue, leading to widespread animal death and contamination. Despite the importance of ranching to Saint-Domingue's economy, livestock itself was terribly maintained, with the Island favouring plantation economics, making reports of dead animals and the putrid waters they drank from commonplace. So too were the reports of fatalities and lesions characteristic of anthrax on the enslaved that tended to and ate these animals.[54] The enslaved were more susceptible to disease than their White counterparts due to their living conditions. France's colonial system saw no real need to feed, clothe or house the enslaved. Concurrently, the laws that did afford them scant material protections were largely ignored, only proliferating the spread of disease on plantations.[55]

This same tainted meat reportedly killed several colonists in Cap Français in the 1750s.[56] Under the management of a new butcher in 1755, the quality of meat fell even lower, with townspeople claiming that the man would serve whatever meat out of his abattoir, no matter how sick the animal was.[57] With these reports coinciding with the apparent poisoning spree of Mackandal, Garrigus posits that it was indeed anthrax that sparked the high fatality counts, and it was through confusion around Vodou healing traditions and

[53] Garrigus, "'Like an epidemic," 638.
[54] Garrigus, 634.
[55] Karol Kovalovich Weaver, "The Enslaved Healers of Eighteenth-Century Saint Domingue," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 76, no. 3 (2002): 436. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44448995
[56] Garrigus, "'Like an epidemic," 634.
[57] Garrigus, 634.

miscommunications that the idea of enslaved poisoners exploded into its own epidemic. Further, Garrigus argues that the French of the early modern era did not distinguish magic from poison, further validating the idea of Vodou poisoners as the real menace behind the Island's invisible killer.

Both the enslaved and enslavers understood and treated disease through their own worldviews. For the enslaved, the *Gry,* which Mackandal passed out to his followers, was potentially a defense mechanism against the invisible force of disease. Deaths from anthrax, as stated, were highly recorded among the enslaved and animals–naturally forcing the enslaved to rely on their own ritualized methods of healing and protection. Thus, in uncovering the poisoners, which Brigitte claimed was a function of the *Gry,* it is possible that Mackandal and his ilk were simply protecting their own.[58] This does not mean that the collective was not also involved to some degree with concerted efforts at poisonings. Mackandal's claims of prophetic destruction for the White people of Saint-Domingue appear to support this idea more than just coincidental timing. Further, understanding Mackandal's prophecy and actions through the idea of 'healing' enslavement as a social ill provides more clarity. Thus, the confusion of words surrounding healing and poisoning to the French may be twofold, as acts of poisoning enslavers would indeed be a healing of the social condition of enslavement.

The ritualized conduct undertaken by Mackandal and his followers meant to inflict death through means both within and outside of human control. As such, poison or an invisible plague fits alongside his prophetic design. Mackandal's prophecy envisioned the destruction of enslavement and White rule as a plague of mosquitoes, insects known for their role as vehicles of disease, which themselves are potential carriers of anthrax.[59] Mosquitoes

[58] Garrigus, "'Like an epidemic," 640.
[59] Saleem Alameh, Gloria Bartolo, Summer O'Brien, Elizabeth A Henderson, Leandra O Gonzalez, Stella Hartmann, Christopher P Klimko, et al. "Anthrax Toxin Component, Protective Antigen, Protects Insects from Bacterial Infections." *Plos Pathogens,* vol. 16**,** no. 8 (2020): 2. doi: 10.1371/journal.ppat.1008836.

and plague would again rear their heads as colonial concerns during the Haitian revolution, which eventually ousted the French. A plague of Yellow Fever, likely brought over from West Africa and known to be carried by *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes, was the cause of death for 80-85% of French troops during the revolution.[60] This same disease likely emerged in such force due to the very environmental extraction of plantations that decimated the Island's ecology.[61]

As with the discussion of anthrax, certain 'natural' factors would endlessly confound other European efforts in maintaining the Island as a French colony. British troops reported that the ships on which they traveled to the Island became a "house of pestilence," and that those who came to win the "glories of conquest" found themselves instead dying aboard vessels from Yellow Fever.[62] Author Bryan Edwards noted in his 1789 historical survey of the French colony that a lack of sailing winds, unforgiving torrential storms which boomed the mosquito population, and disease doomed the excursion from its onset. In reference to the natural conditions, he noted that "a thousand accidents and casualties continually subvert and overthrow the best laid schemes of human contrivance."[63] When embracing Vodou cosmology as a whole form of analysis, it is crucial to consider the effective power these episodes would have for practitioners especially regarding Mackandal's prophecy.

As such, while Garrigus offers an interesting corrective to the historiography surrounding poisoners in Saint-Domingue's history, it is important to consider his claims and the role the figure of Mackandal plays within the context of Vodou cosmology. The environmental claims he discusses fit rather neatly alongside Vodou's capacity to make its

[60] Matthew D Turner, and Jason Sapp. "Failure to Plan: The Disease That Cost an American Empire." *Military Medicine* (20230516) (2023): 171, https://doi.org/10.1093/milmed/usad161.
[61] J. R. McNeill, "Yellow Jack and Geopolitics: Environment, Epidemics, and the Struggles for Empire in the American Tropics, 1640-1830." *Review (fernand Braudel Center)* 27, no. 4 (2004): 350, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40241611.
[62] Bryan Edwards, *An Historical Survey of the French Colony in the Island of St. Domingo* (John Stockdale Piccadilly, 1797), 164.
[63] Edwards, 171.

world usable and understandable to its practitioners. Even through epidemics and the treatment of disease, Vodou mobilized both cure and poison to animate Mackandal's story and provided a way for the enslaved to interact with the world and its invisible forces. This is not to negate Garrigus's point, but rather to say that two differing ideas may be true simultaneously. Poisoning was one of the few ways the enslaved could mete out justice against their enslavers.[64] The rather consistent discreet communications between maroon communities and the enslaved afforded both parties' intimate knowledge of plants and poisons. In certain cases, the enslaved then used poisons to harm enslavers directly, and their economic stability through poisonings of livestock and other enslaved peoples. While not the first nor the last to carry out poisonings, Mackandal certainly had the largest impact, with his apotheosis to the status of *Lwa* and inspiring actions changing Saint-Domingue's physical and spiritual landscape permanently.

Vodou provided the enslaved with a deeper connection to space in Saint-Domingue. Worship of Kouzen Zaka, maroon communities like the Maniel, and Vodou's ability to make the Island and its materials usable for the enslaved all speak to an engagement of Vodouists with the land that exists beyond enslavement. As a totalizing force, Vodou insisted upon itself in each recitation, ritual, and lived experience. It shaped how the enslaved perceived the world around them and how they lived in that world beyond simply being vessels of capitalist extraction, instead being active participants alongside nature, the *Lwa*, and all things.[65]

[64] Malick W. Ghachem "Prosecuting Torture: The Strategic Ethics of Slavery in Pre-Revolutionary Saint-Domingue (Haiti)." *Law and History Review* 29, no. 4 (2011): 993, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0738248011000514.
[65] Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, and Claudine Michel, "Danbala/Ayida as Cosmic Prism: The Lwa as Trope for Understanding Metaphysics in Haitian Vodou and Beyond," *Journal of Africana Religions* 1, no. 4 (2013): 465, https://doi.org/10.5325/jafrireli.1.4.0458.

SECTION 5: The Mysterious Life of Marie Kingué

1. Sorceress or healer?

Like Mackandal, other figures steeped in Vodou mystique became influential practitioners, developing almost cult-like followings. These individuals presented a tangible threat to colonial authority, as they used Vodou to undermine and restructure their environments, creating subversions of French authority. In these spaces of subversion, even enslaved women, the lowest rung of the French colonial social ladder, became powerful figures who were able to dominate both Black and White circles. Indeed, while drastically pushed aside within Saint-Domingue's historiography as 'helpers' of ritual and communication, women fomented their own power through Vodou and Vodou cosmology. Marie Kingué emerged as one of these powerful women, notable for her following and her Vodou powers which she used to transform the north of the Island into her own space of control and influence.

Marie Kingué was infamous to enslavers and the enslaved in Saint-Domingue for her prowess as a *kaperlata,* or healer for hire. It is possible that Kingué, an African-born woman, was previously held by another enslaver, with some indications that she may have absconded in the 1770s.[1] By 1785 she became enslaved to a M. Belhumeur, serving as a *Hospitalière*, a midwife, and assistant to plantation surgeons. Beyond her expected role in pregnancy, Kingué was purportedly a feared and respected Vodou sorceress or healer, depending on the account. Her wide reputation and Vodou prowess stoked claims among enslaved and enslavers alike that Kingué "had the power to kill and raise from the dead, [and] heal all sorts of maladies."[2] The claim of raising the dead was a common fear, specifically amongst Vodouists in Saint-Domingue. These fears also proliferated in White communities who were

[1] Crystal Nicole Eddins, *Rituals, Runaways, and the Haitian Revolution: Collective Action in the African Diaspora* (version 2nd edition.) 2nd ed. (Open Access Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 142.
[2] Karol Kovalovich Weaver, "The Enslaved Healers of Eighteenth-Century Saint Domingue," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 76, no. 3 (2002): 444, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44448995

afraid of losing their own agency, like the various populations the colony enslaved. The invocation of raising the dead, or the practice of creating *nZombi*, indicates that Kingué operated some of her medical knowledge out of a Vodouist worldview. Additionally, creating a *nZombi* relied on the use of specific plants and poisons, as well as the particular Vodouist understanding of the soul, meaning Kingué's practices relied on Vodou frameworks of spatiality and relationality to achieve their ends.[3] With these powers, a French report on the sorceress claimed she held an astonishing influence over the minds of the enslaved and had the power to make them believe that "the most disgusting absurdities were unquestionable facts."[4]

Kingué's widespread fame primarily emerged after she healed one of M. Belhumeur's enslaved pregnant women. Whether a misappropriation of Vodou beliefs and practices to acquire power or genuine applications of Vodou healing, Kingué's following actions elucidate the way Vodou shaped and mobilized her reputation within enslaved and free circles. In her role as *Hospitalière*, Kingué purportedly received a patient whom a sorcerer had bewitched.[5] At the onset of her birth, Kingué, along with her enslaver, went to the woman's quarters to oversee. Through Kingué's guidance, the woman delivered the child after a few contractions and promptly presented it to M. Belhumeur. What M. Belhumeur was certainly not expecting was for Kingué to hand him a giant dead snake.[6] The enslaver believed the snake was born from the curse of whichever sorcerer had bewitched the enslaved woman. Kingué herself may have been Kongo in origin, so the miraculous birth of the snake

[3] Elizabeth McAlister, "Slaves, Cannibals, and Infected Hyper-Whites: The Race and Religion of Zombies." *Anthropological Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (2012): 470, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41857250. 470
[4] Archives Nationales, Paris [AN], 27 AP 12, dossier 2, papers of François de Neufchâteau 1785, in Marie Houllemare, "Marie Kingué and the Subversion of Colonial Order (Saint-Domingue, 1785)." *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire* 50, no. 2, (2019): 164, https://doi.org/10.4000/clio.17234. 161.
[5] "Arrêt de la Cour, Qui condamne à être pendus les Moteurs des
Attroupements nocturnes & Assemblées prétendues Magnétiques d'Esclaves,
du quartier de la Marmelade. Du 23 Novembre 1786." Archives Nationales, Paris [AN], 27 AP 12, dossier 2, papers of François de Neufchâteau, Letter 1.
[6] [AN] Neufchâteau, 27 AP 12, dossier 2, Letter 2.

in relation to Mbumba, a snake deity often associated with Christ, may have held extra meaning for both her and her Kongo followers.[7] French records noted both M. Belhumeur's supposed wonder at this situation, as well as how it forever impacted his perception of Kingué as a woman able to perform miraculous deeds. For some more ardent followers in the North, this episode was tantamount to Kingué's deification with one report stating, "everyone wanted to consult her experience ... the fanaticism ... became to a point that the greatest disorder would arise in the work gangs."[8]

Kingué held a large following of both enslaved and lower-class White supporters in the North, operating particularly out of Limbé, inland at Plaisance and Le Borgne, and at Port-Magot along the coast.[9] Her followers adhered to Kingué's healing and religious practices and patronized her business of luck and protective *Gry* sales. As such, Kingué effectively commodified Vodou spatiality as a form of protection, appealing to planter and enslaved fears surrounding death which only her Vodou knowledge could placate. Kingué's sale of these charms boomed in the Island's North, where many wore them as if they were crucifixes, despite the Le Cap court's ruling of their illegality following Mackandal's execution. Ironically, despite following in Mackandal's wake as a chief antagonist of colonial order, the enslaved sorceress continued to make a name for herself by identifying enslaved poisoners or *macandals*.

While it is unclear that there was any merit to Kingué's claims, the consequences were quite real, with many enslaved peoples put to death by her instruction.[10] Yet, despite Kingué's supposed allegiance to the dominant planter power structure in her identification of poisoners, she also provided spiritual and medical services to the enslaved.[11] Here again, the

[7] Eddins, *Rituals, Runaways, Haitian Revolution*, 144.
[8] Eddins, 143.
[9] Marie Houllemare, "Marie Kingué and the Subversion of Colonial Order (Saint-Domingue, 1785)." *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire* 50, no. 2, (2019): 164, https://doi.org/10.4000/clio.17234.
[10] Houllemare, 167.
[11] Eddins, *Rituals, Runaways, Haitian Revolution*, 144.

complexity of morality within Vodou emerges. With no specific moral code, Kingué's actions themselves functioned to challenge the colonial imposition of Christian morality onto Black bodies by allowing notions of spiritual repatriation and collectivity to code her actions. In turn, Kingué may have identified poisoners to ingratiate herself to structural powers and gain a substantial following. This is but one Vodouist spatial reading, as, with no hard moral lines, it is possible Kingué used her Vodou knowledge purely out of personal ambition to alleviate her own condition as an enslaved Black woman in a colonial society.

However, Kingué's later actions, which lean more toward an idea of enslaved uprisings, even if it was to be one under her sole authority, indicate a more collectivist end to her means. In one case, Kingué identified the culprit of poisonings on the Chailleau plantation as the first *commandeur* who was the enslaved person who ordered about enslaved labourers under threats of violence.[12] Later, Kingué also publicly condemned enslavement, which raised the issue among her White and Black followers to a real matter of political concern that needed to be redressed.[13] While these contradictory notions about Kingué's 'allegiances' raise many questions about how she directed her influence, contradiction and opposition are inherent in Vodou and fundamental to the religion's ideas of balance. In all cases, however, it was her power through Vodou that allowed her to become a fixation in the minds and wallets of Saint-Domingue's North.

Through her work, Kingué made herself an indispensable part of her enslaver, M. Belhumeur's, plantation, reaping social gains off the fear Francois Mackandal's alleged poisoning ring instilled three decades prior. Mackandal's legacy firmly established the enslaved in planter's minds as an enemy domestic. Simple paranoia of domestic enemies and fear of colonial and personal futurity were enough for planters like M. Belhumeur to

[12] Eddins, 144.
[13] Eddins, 123.

wholeheartedly believe any accusation of poisoning, often exacting disproportionate and illegal retribution on the accused enslaved. The 'feminized' nature of poison as a 'passive' weapon, which the enslaved administered discreetly, made enslaved women the prime domestic enemy of the colonial plan.[14] This idea was no doubt exacerbated by the many women who upheld the trafficking of Mackandal's *Gry*, like Brigitte, and their association with Vodou as a mysterious, impenetrable force to the colonial body. Additionally, it was common for planters to engage in 'consensual' and non-consensual sexual relations with enslaved women, providing these women–through sexual violence–intimate knowledge of their enslaver's bedchambers.

These acts in turn introduced a sense of insecurity to enslavers upon the revelation of woman-filled Vodou poisoning rings. Thus Kingué, for the planters of the North, likely provided a natural foil to their conceptualization of poisoners. Rather than the sexual and feminine fear the French typically associated with poisoning, Kingué's older age, role as a *Hospitalière*, and her seeming willingness to use Vodou for enslavers' benefits allowed her to avoid accusations of wrongdoing, instead becoming an informant. The assumptions of White colonial rule, which formed her lower status, along with her Vodou knowledge, allowed Kingué to contort her social standing, transitioning from informant to a powerful figure who espoused anti-enslavement sentiments.

2. Arrest attempts and subverting colonial hierarchy

Official French reports on Kingué, detailed in the *Anonymous report on Kingé [sic] witch and healer* (1785) discussed her accusations of poisoning and divining work.[15] The anonymous nature of the report itself speaks to Kingué's dominance in the region, with even enslavers cowed into anonymity rather than feeling safe to speak publicly about Kingué's

[14] Malick W. Ghachem "Prosecuting Torture: The Strategic Ethics of Slavery in Pre-Revolutionary Saint-Domingue (Haiti)." *Law and History Review* 29, no. 4 (2011): 994, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0738248011000514.
[15] [AN] Neufchâteau, 27 AP 12, dossier 2.

powers. The report disparaged Kingué with markedly racialized and gendered terms, no doubt related to a colonial ineffability at understanding her growing authority in the region. The report described Kingué's work to find both poison and poisoners as trickery, wherein the enslaved would mediate personal conflicts by paying Kingué to accuse enemies or that Kingué herself accused her own enemies. They additionally repeatedly espoused the gullibility of M. Belhumeur and her followers to explain why her influence grew to a level of destabilizing the North of Saint-Domingue. Regardless of their official perspective, her seemingly uncanny 'ability' to identify poisoners translated into real social mobility for Kingué, who only found her following growing and her enslaver made supplicant.

M. Belhumeur's faith took more convincing than simple accusations. Outside of the snake episode, numerous instances point to Kingué explicitly and deftly employing Vodou and its use of physical and spiritual space to increase her number of adherents and the respect of her enslaver. One such instance came from repeated claims of Kingué undergoing trance-like states, likely through acts of possession. It is unclear if these instances of trance possession were during rituals or at random. The *Lwa* do not require ritual to possess individuals, as possession may occur at any time.[16] One indication of *Lwa* possession is Kingué's speech during these trances, which appeared to come from a multitude of individual voices, some being male.[17] Whether purposefully performed as a show of power or spontaneous possession, these trance episodes furthered Kingué's mystique as a powerful practitioner to both her fellow enslaved and her enslaver. Further, possession by the *Lwa* often served as a form of healing and empowerment. In these cases, the *Lwa* adjust those they possess to realign them with order and the natural world. Thus, while Kingué spoke in the

[16] Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel, *Haitian Vodou* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 129.
[17] Houllemare, "Marie Kingué and Subversion," 164.

voices of others, she may have also drawn on the power of *Ginen* to animate her healing endeavours while she concurrently displayed her affinity for the divine.

Kingué's treatment of M. Belhumeur's close friend only compounded the enslavers' awe of the woman. The *Anonymous report on Kingé [sic] witch and healer also* documented this episode and condemned Kingué's treatment of the district of the Plaisance commander, Chailleau. The *Anonymous report* again insisted that Kingué's powers are nonsense, instead reporting an 'epidemic of weak-willed minds tainted by African superstitions.'[18] Like many enslavers who suffered from sickness in Saint-Domingue, Commander Chailleau immediately presumed *macandalisme* to be the root cause of his illness. Perhaps in a mixture of Kingué's popularity and M. Belhumeur's urging, Commander Chailleau, in extremely ill health, arranged for the sorceress to treat his ailments. It was not uncommon for enslavers to hire out their enslaved who possessed knowledge of healing, both a tacit acknowledgement of African knowledge systems and an avenue for enslavers to make additional profits from such wisdom.[19]

The *report* stated that Kingué approached Chailleau's residence with malicious intent, seeing the weakened man and his station as a military commander, thus confirming the anonymous reporter's suspicions that Kingué had indeed poisoned Chailleau for her own social gain.[20] Kingué then assured Chailleau that she would extract all the poison from him and save his life. After a lengthy series of preparations, Kingué got to work treating the man. It is unclear what exact procedure she performed, but the end result was the reported removal of a pair of toads from Chailleau's skull and side, curing him of his illness.[21] Chailleau, spellbound by Kingué, insisted that she join him on his plantation, where she would continue

[18] Houllemare, 166.
[19] James Sweet, *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 56.
[20] Houllemare, "Marie Kingué and Subversion," 162.
[21] Houllemare, 165.

identifying poisoners and leveraging her magic to acquire social currency. This arrangement particularly upset the anti-Kingué planter crowd, as Kingué now resided with a man who held legitimate coercive military power.

Kingué's case presents an interesting application of Vodou spatiality and how–even in spaces directly dominated by colonial power like M. Belhumeur's plantation or the wider Northern areas of the Island–it afforded practitioners an avenue of power and mobility. Through Kingué's use of Vodou spatiality, she transcended her social station, weaponizing her knowledge of healing and poison. In doing so, the sorceress challenged French social order and the boundaries of French medical knowledge–clearly having an enthralling effect on those she treated or protected for her own ends. Further, her penchant for organizing secret meetings of her collective, and the French fear of her weaponizing her cures as poisons, positioned Kingue as a particularly formidable enslaved woman. Using her power, and the demographic threat of her growing collective, Kingué coalesced popular, medicinal, and economic power through an understanding of and practical application of the Vodouist worldview. Kingué's social influence, along with her economic backing, led to Saint-Domingue's elite classes pushing legal reforms that would specifically curtail her sort of practices. The 1764 law prevented the enslaved from practicing healing, medicine, and surgery of any kind, prohibiting the treatment of patients.[22] While the law did not specifically mention Kingué, she would later officially become a target of the colonial office when François Neufchâteau, the *Procureur* of Le Cap, issued a warrant for her immediate arrest.[23]

The French government and Neufchâteau understood Kingué's dominance in the North to challenge social order and scientific rationality. The reports clearly express these ideas through the numerous claims that all who followed her suffered from weak minds and

[22] Eddins, *Rituals, Runaways, Haitian Revolution*, 124.
[23] Marie Houllemare, "Marie Kingué and the Subversion," 169.

superstitious dispositions. The colonial system clearly despised Marie's popularity. With her being a Black, enslaved, Vodouisant, woman, her continued public support certainly informed the colonial office's assumption that her adherents must be victims of superstition and mental weakness. By dominating both White and Black men and women of the North, Kingué presented an antithetical corrosion of White French Christian social order. Their fear of the North's waning French social order was not unfounded. Kingué appeared to transform 'normalcy' around herself, with her followers recognizing her own sacred authority as normative, disrupting French social engineering with her mystique and prowess as a Vodou practitioner.

As a result of her authority, Kingué held unique mobility as an enslaved woman. The practitioner travelled relatively freely around the Northern part of the Island, unchallenged by those who feared retribution from her and her following. Her free movement via carriage and her bellicose demeanour with the enslaved and planters who ignored her denunciations drew particular ire as an assumed mimicry of Whiteness.[24] Her mobility in the North was so prolific that when the court filed charges against her, vagrancy appeared as one of her prominent 'crimes.'[25] A few reports indicated that arresting Kingué was no easy feat, with a planter's enslaved people allowing her to go free–despite his commands to detain her–out of a greater fear of Kingué than the enslaver.[26] Secondly, the reverence she received from Commander Chailleau, someone with military power and with whom she lived, only complicated an already complex threat to colonial dominance. When Le Cap Français finally summoned M. Belhumeur to bring the issue to a close, rather than present Kingué to the officials, he hid her away on another plantation. Additionally, following M. Belhumeur's deception, planters discovered that, rather than reprimand Kingué, he was in fact, paying her

[24] Houllemare, 168.
[25] Houllemare, 168.
[26] Houllemare, 168.

a monthly fee for her practitioning and healing services–a far cry from her supposed position as a woman enslaved to him.[27]

It is unclear if Kingué ever did appear before the judges of Le Cap, despite Neufchâteau's hatred of her. Even Almeida de Suarez, the deputy public prosecutor for Plaisance who organized her arrest, was highly dubious that the team sent to apprehend her would accomplish anything due to her popularity.[28] A fourth letter, written anonymously and dated October 7, 1785, suggests the issue escalated further. Supposedly, Marie mustered a working group of around 100 men and incited them to revolt against their enslaver–a shift from her previous allegiances to White power structures.[29] While potentially an act enacted out of her personal desires, the power dynamic of Kingue as an enslaved Black woman naturally made many of her targets, when she established enough power, White Christian enslavers. Further, Kingué terrorized her own followers into silence regarding her whereabouts. When she performed rituals on the Marsan plantation, she silenced her former initiates, Jean, Bernand Cherice, and Pironneau, preventing them from ever giving away her location to those pursuing her.[30] It is unclear what Marie's exact threats were. However, her supposed penchant for resurrecting the dead and the threat of eternal enslavement embodied by the *nZombi* were certainly powerful notions amongst Vodou believers.

It is evident that Kingué's knowledge of Vodou and her political deftness afforded her a great deal of power. Through her knowledge, she subverted gendered and racial social biases encoded by colonial notions of ownership and property. Instead, by using Vodou spatiality, Kingué metamorphosed the northern districts of Saint-Domingue into a space of her own control. So too did Kingué access unprecedented mobility for an enslaved woman, using Vodou's power to sever her enslaved and gender-coded tie to M. Belhumeur's

[27] Eddins, *Rituals, Runaways, Haitian Revolution*, 143.
[28] Houllemare, "Marie Kingué and Subversion," 168.
[29] Eddins, *Rituals, Runaways, Haitian Revolution*, 143.
[30] Eddins, 143.

plantation. Her account provides a concrete example of Vodou's ability to bend and restructure colonial spaces into domains which are usable for practitioners–thus creating possibility through the control of healing and harm founded upon the cosmological structure of Vodou. While Kingué may have originally aligned herself more closely with those already in power, Vodou and its subversive use in colonial spaces afforded Kingué her position as a real political threat to enslavement, her relative wealth, and her continued success as a healer and sorceress.

SECTION 6: Vodou Spatiality in Action: Rereading Colonial Sources

1. The Black 'unthinkable' and colonial sources

The accounts of maroons like Mackandal and healers like Kingué offer a meaningful contribution to the powers of Vodou cosmology in practice. The same cosmological notions which empowered these individuals and their stories may also be employed to reinterpret the power, meaning, and effects of some of Saint-Domingue's most prominent historical accounts of Vodou. Vodou's metaphysical and spatial implications allowed practitioners to construct and embrace their own worldview in the face of enslavement. As colonial planters and officials primarily made the sources that pertain to Vodou in Saint-Domingue, they are often solely descriptive, as these writers lacked the knowledge of the event's actual power. Part of the disconnect was the inability of the French to conceive the Vodouist worldview–an extension of the colonial mindset and what anthropologist Michel Trouillot poses as the "unthinkability" of Black sovereignty.[1] As planters, colonial enslavers held a vested interest in protecting the principles of owning both land and humans.[2] Thus, the subject of Vodou typically took on two differing opinions in planter circles.[3] Some thought these rituals were meaningless, so Vodou warranted no attention. Others thought Vodou was a prime agitator of the enslaved against the colonial agenda and thus needed to be destroyed at all costs.[4] Fear of practitioners harming colonial ownership grew as the enslaved acted against planters through *marronage*, poisonings, and rebellions, worsening Vodou's perception.

The accounts of Saint-Méry and Antoine Dalmas give insight into two key episodes where Vodouist spatiality is at the core of ritual action, yet historians have under-examined it.

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[1] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, and Hazel V Carby. *Silencing the Past : Power and the Production of History*. (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2015), 27.
[2] Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive : Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*. (Indigenous Americas. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 56.
[3] Kate Ramsey, "Vodou, History, and New Narratives." *Transition* 111, no. 1 (2013): 31. https://doi.org/10.2979/transition.111.31
[4] Ramsey, 35.

Privileging a spatial lens allows for a rereading of these sources, which hold Vodou ritual and action as reconfiguring relationships of Vodouists with the land and their own bodies. These actions challenge colonial norms of ownership and dominance by asserting personhood, community, and relationality with the natural world. As such, they provide opportunities for Vodouists to achieve their own desires and assert their own worldviews beyond the reach of colonial power.

2. Moreau de Saint-Méry, Deconstructing French notions of Vodou ritual

A famous account of Vodou, and its danger to French planters like himself, comes from Moreau de Saint-Méry's *Description topographique*, published in 1797. Saint-Méry intended his work to be an encyclopedia of Saint-Domingue and thus included one of the few contemporary accounts of Vodou worship's actual rituals. While historians have frequently relied on this account of Vodou to analyze its presence on the Island and as an indication of enslaved agency, it has yet to be analyzed within the broader metaphysical and spatial framework of Vodouists, and what the actual significance of its ritual elements may be to Saint-Domingue's history.

Saint-Méry recounted his secret witnessing of a Vodou ritual. In this ritual, a congregation of the enslaved headed by an *Oungan* and *Manbo* invoked the divine and initiated new members into their circle, swearing them to secrecy. A snake was present at this ritual and instructed the *Oungan* and *Manbo*. As such, they held the group's authority, who refered to the two leading the ceremony as King and Queen, master and mistress, and mother and father interchangeably. Saint-Méry noted these terms as "pompous," "despotic," and "sentimental," respectively.[5] He noted his perceived ridiculousness of the entire affair, calling

[5] Médéric-Louis-élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie francaise de l'Isle Saint-Domingue* vol. 1, (Philadelphia, 1797) in Laurent Dubois and John D Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804 : A Brief History with Documents*. (MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, Macmillan Learning, 2017), 47.

it a system of domination and blind submission.[6] He also dwelled on the clothing of the "Queen," noting European influence in a scarf, denoting the "simple luxury" of her body clothed in red fabric.[7] Saint-Méry then described the requests of the enslaved to the *Manbo*. Some asked for money, others for long life and health, and others for love. He noted, "even those planning a crime do not always disguise their prayers for success."[8]

As the ritual proceeded, the *Manbo* stood atop a box with the snake inside it and underwent possession. She took on a different character and called orders the enslaved congregants meticulously followed. After her possession, the gathered enslaved made a pact of silence on pain of death by drinking goat's blood and then dancing feverishly. Moreau ends his recollection of the events with both a call to action and a warning. He stated that Vodou's magnetism allows the enslaved to dance until they are senseless and that *Manbo* have touched spying planters to inflict the punishment of an endless dance on them until the *Manbo* is satisfied or paid. Saint-Méry did note that no man in the police who "declared war against Vaudoux" had ever felt this compulsion.[9] Further, he noted that the dancing and drumming the enslaved did in public was a diversion to protect these "shadow meetings" and continue their "school" where weak souls submit themselves to domination.[10] Saint-Méry closed his account of the ritual by stating, "nothing is more dangerous than this cult of Vaudoux" … "the ridiculous idea that the ministers of this being know and can do everything could be transformed into a terrible weapon."[11]

Despite the bias of his evident fear of the 'other,' Saint-Méry's recollection of the ritual provides a comprehensive account of Vodou's practice and the myriad ways this ritual superimposes Vodou cosmology onto a colonial space. Indeed, it is Saint-Méry's value

[6] Saint-Méry, 48.
[7] Saint-Méry, 48.
[8] Saint-Méry, 49.
[9] Saint-Méry, 49.
[10] Saint-Méry, 50.
[11] Saint-Méry, 50.

judgments of ritual action which denote his conceptualization of ownership, property and correct conduct, primarily informed by notions of capital gain and Christianity. Thus, Saint-Méry lacks an understanding of ritual practices which directly challenge these colonial modes of domination. He is also genuinely concerned about Vodou's consequences on the Island and its ability to become a "terrible weapon."[12] These understandings, and, without his knowledge, the ritual's creation and affirmation of Vodou spatiality for the enslaved, reveal Vodou cosmology's power in challenging colonial dominance and existing as its own religious system.

With a spatial and metaphysical understanding of Vodou, Saint-Méry's recollection takes on a very different tone than the esoteric and exotic description he relates. Rather than simply an indication of enslaved culture or the presence of Vodou, an understanding that privileges cosmology provides new insight. Vodou cosmology informs that the enslaved were constructing space within Saint-Domingue and using it as an opportunity to engage with the divine and their own desires. Saint-Méry discussed a 'supernatural' being that controls everything as dictating Vodou.[13] It is unclear where he draws this and other broader information from–if from his spying itself or other means–but some of his assertions are correct. He likely meant Damballa, one interpretation of the supreme deity, the same one who, along with Ayida Weddo, holds up the sky and whose serpent iconography adorns *potomitans*. Saint-Méry also noted the presence of a non-venomous green serpent at the ritual, which the congregation appeared to worship, and which directs the *Manbo* and *Oungan*.[14] The serpent is likely a representation of a *Lwa*, with Saint-Méry's recorded chant of "*Eh eh Bomba! heu heu*," an invocation of the Kongo snake creator deity.[15] Further, the

[12] Saint-Méry, 50.
[13] Saint-Méry, 47.
[14] Saint-Méry, 47.
[15] David Patick Geggus, "Marronage, Voodoo, and the Saint Domingue Slave Revolt of 1791." *Proceedings of the Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society* 15 (1992): 34, http://www.jstor.org/stable/42952215.

presence of a male and female high practitioner leading the congregation tells of the notions of balance, masculinity, and femininity crucial to Vodou. They again relate to Damballa and Ayida Weddo, who, through their union and the creation of the "world egg," provide the blueprint for perfection in creation.

The titles used by the congregants to refer to these two leading figures, and Saint-Méry's reaction to them, elucidate both his entrenched notions of ownership and domination and Vodou's cosmological subversion of these notions. Saint-Méry challenged the names of Queen and King as pompous, master and mistress as despotic, and mother and father as sentimental. Here, he found contradiction both in the names used and the creation of a hierarchy which contorts his preconceptions of royalty, domination, and servitude. Vodou is a cellular religion with no real hierarchy.[16] While, as we have seen with the likes of Mackandal, leaders did appear who used Vodou, the practice of the religion itself was not bound to the same ideas of hierarchy like those of the Catholic church. Likewise, Vodou has a propensity for fluidity and marrying ostensible opposites.[17] The *Oungan* and *Manbo* guide with the direction of *Lwa*, rather than rule–instead, Vodou empowers the congregation.[18] As such, the use of these honorifics for the priests is another sign of willing domination challenging colonial authority. Likewise, the inclusion of mother and father, while still having a semblance of domination, also connotes love, affection, and the divine pairing of masculine and feminine energies.[19] With a Vodouist cosmological lens, these titles are not contradictions but rather varying components which together derive balance. Vodou's

[16] Kirstin L Squint, "VODOU AND REVOLT IN LITERATURE OF THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION." *CLA Journal* 51, no. 2 (2007): 173, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44325417.
[17] Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel, *Haitian Vodou* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), xx.
[18] Claudine Michel, "Vodou in Haiti: Way of life and Mode of Survival." *Journal of Haitian Studies* 8, no. 1 (2002): 99, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41715120.
[19] Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, and Claudine Michel, "Danbala/Ayida as Cosmic Prism: The Lwa as Trope for Understanding Metaphysics in Haitian Vodou and Beyond," *Journal of Africana Religions* 1, no. 4 (2013): 465, https://doi.org/10.5325/jafrireli.1.4.0458

'hierarchy' challenges the colonial monopoly on dominating the space of the body by creating a ritual space wherein enslaved bodies may be Kings, Queens, masters, mistresses, mothers, fathers, and gods all at once.

The *Manbo's* possession is another crucial facet of Moreau's account. As noted above, possession is another component of consensual domination. It is unclear if Moreau did not know to record the presence of a *Vèvè* or *potomitan* or if he ignored these less spectacular aspects in favour of describing drinking goat's blood and the dangers of Vodou. Regardless, it is notable that the *Manbo* stands atop the box containing the snake prior to her possession. Here again, privileging cosmology as a lens reveals new insight. The *Manbo* here may have been functioning as the *potomitan* herself, making her body a fictive tree and conduit for the *Lwa* to move along from *Ginen* and possess. Like the *potomitan*, she becomes a structure which the snake adorns and permits the completion of the possession ritual. Her red scarf, which Saint-Méry described, also supports this notion. The colour red in Vodou is one of the colours associated with Papa Legba, the *Lwa* who facilitates communication and possession through the *potomitan*.[20] Thus, it is possible that the *Manbo* herself became the conduit of divine transmission and possession, abdicating her *ti-bon-ange* and being consensually ridden by an unknown *Lwa*, who then orderd her congregation. The enslaved then request love, money, and health, allowing the *Lwa* to know and realize their desires in the physical world. The same applies to those Saint-Méry described as criminals who make their wishes known. Vodou is not a religion which prescribes a strict code of morality.[21] Instead, its emphasis on balance and relationality allows the enslaved to make their own choices, 'good' or 'bad,' an opportunity which enslavement and involuntary Catholicism did not afford.[22]

[20] Bellegarde-Smith, Appendix 1. 139.
[21] Bellegarde-Smith, 34.
[22] Claudine Michel, "Of Worlds Seen and Unseen: The Educational Character of Haitian Vodou," *Comparative Education Review* 40, no. 3 (1996): 288, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1189105.

Last is the dancing element of Saint-Méry's account. In ritual dance, it is common for the *ti-bon-ange* to leave a congregant's body, allowing them to transition into a state of ecstasy through physical exertion.[23] As these ritual "shadow meetings" occurred at night– both as they were illegal and as planters forced the enslaved to work during the day–they are doubly an expression of self-ownership and the body itself as an element of Vodou spatiality. Despite the physicality needed to work a day of plantation labour, the enslaved, while practicing Vodou, maintained bodily autonomy. This ritual practice elucidates the power of Vodou to permit physical persistence and resistance against colonial domination and the role of the human body as an active space for the enslaved to realize Vodou cosmology. It is this physical persistence, along with Vodouist's devotion to their practice, which Saint-Méry constructed as the religion's "terrible weapon"–the freedom of the enslaved catalyzed by Vodou spatiality, which instilled corporeal authority.[24]

Moreau de Saint-Méry's Vodou ritual account speaks to the religion's power in creating spaces of physical and spiritual possibility for the enslaved. Through ritual, the enslaved subvert the assumed colonial dominance of Saint-Domingue, creating their own spiritual realities which, through *Ginen*, are realized in the physical world. Vodou metaphysics informs these spaces, facilitating possession, desire, dance, and consensual domination. Reading Saint-Méry's account with Vodou cosmology as the primary lens of analysis permits an understanding of Saint-Domingue as a space in which the enslaved actively constructed and enforced their own cosmologies. In turn, these cosmologies shaped life and action for the enslaved and reactions from planters like Saint-Méry himself.

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[23] Julia Pfeifer, "The Loa as Ghosts in Haitian Vodou." In *Ghosts - or the (Nearly) Invisible: Spectral Phenomena in Literature and the Media*, (2016): 143, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2t4d7f.16..

[24] Médéric-Louis-élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique…* (Philadelphia, 1797) in Laurent Dubois and John D Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804 : A Brief History with Documents*. (MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, Macmillan Learning, 2017), 50.

3. Antoine Dalmas and the *Bois Caïman* ceremony

Another well-examined colonial source of Vodou in Saint-Domingue comes from Antoine Dalmas's *History of the Revolution of Saint Domingue*, written in 1814. Dalmas reported that he witnessed the *Bois Caïman* ceremony, the Vodou ritual historians now accept as the start of the Haitian Revolution. Saint-Domingue's historians widely refer to this event but infrequently deeply explore it. Even in its exploration, history often downplays the metaphysical and spatial context of the ritual to center an only tangentially religious revolutionary political narrative. Part of the refusal to deal with the religious elements of the ritual comes from fears of invalidating revolutionary action by attaching it to a racialized religion.[25] As Moreton-Robinson and Wolfe detail, the eliminatory elements of colonialism are structural, impacting which narratives historians write, and which appear too 'different' to consider 'valid.' This fear of lacking validation was also true for Haitians following the revolution, wherein multiple governments oppressed the religion as rural backwardness antithetical to 'civilization,' further obfuscating the production of Vodou-centric recollections of *Bois Caïman*.[26] Dalmas's report also complicates this, as his actual description of the ritual was brief and inflammatory, instead primarily focusing on the violence and plantation destruction that followed.[27]

Dalmas noted that on August 20th, 1791, a mass congregation of the enslaved gathered in the uncultivated woods on the outskirts of the Choiseul plantation known as Caiman.[28] Like Saint-Méry's account and Judge Courtin's, Dalmas played up the 'demonic' elements of the religion. He detailed the sacrifice of a black pig and consumption of its blood,

[25] Bellegarde-Smith, *Haitian Vodou*, 22.
[26] Laurent Dubois, "Vodou and History." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43, no 1. (2001): 92, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417501003590.
[27] Antoine Dalmas, *Histoire de la révolution de Saint-Domingue* (Paris, 1814) in Laurent Dubois and John D Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804 : A Brief History with Documents*. (MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, Macmillan Learning, 2017), 77.
[28] Dalmas, 78.

which he stated the enslaved believed would "make them invincible"–but like the Saint-Méry account was likely more of a pact to see the revolution through.[29] Further, he names Dutty Boukman as a head of the insurgency and prime agitator in the enslaved's goal of killing all Saint-Domingue's White inhabitants.[30] These assertions likely come from the prayer Dutty Boukman recited during the ritual, which he is claimed to have stated as follows:

> The god who created the sun which gives us light, who rouses the waves and rules the storm, though hidden in the clouds, he watches us. He sees all that the white man does. The god of the white man inspires him with crime, but our god calls upon us to do good works. Our god who is good to us orders us to revenge our wrongs. He will direct our arms and aid us. Throw away the symbol of the god of the whites who has often caused us to weep, and listen to the voice of liberty, which speaks in the hearts of us all.[31]

Dalmas lambasted the ceremony, and this prayer, as an incident of absurdity. Again, like Saint-Méry and Courtin, guided by their entrenched notions of 'correct' Christian religious conduct, he was unable to grasp the ritual itself. Further insight into the *Bois Caïman* ritual came from Hérard Dumesle, a free Black Haitian politician in the 1820s who, while not naming his source, provided an account of the words prayed at the ritual, now attributed to Dutty Boukman.[32] Boukman's prayer detailed the power of the supreme God, and his role in creation, making the sun, light, sea, and storms. This God watches from afar while the God of the Whites pushes them to commit crimes. The God of the enslaved ordered them to take revenge and take their own liberty.[33] There is a clear relation between divinity, creation, and enslaved will here, acknowledging Vodou's universality and the shared parentage of all things by the supreme being.

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[29] Dalmas, 78.
[30] Dalmas, 78.
[31] Hérard Dumesle, *Voyage dans le nord d'Hayti, ou, Révélation des lieux et des monuments historiques (*Cayes: Imperimerie du Gouvernement, 1824), in Laurent Dubois and John D Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804 : A Brief History with Documents*. (MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, Macmillan Learning, 2017), 76.
[32] Dumesle, 76.
[33] Dumesle, 76.

As previously noted, many of the enslaved present at the ritual came from societies where spirituality mediated disharmony, imbalance, and social and political upheaval.[34] As there is perhaps no greater disharmony than the imposition of enslavement, it becomes necessary to understand *Bois Caïman* from the perspective of its conductors. Viewing the events of *Bois Caïman* and Boukman's prayer in concert with Vodou's spatiality and metaphysics provides a deeper insight into the legendary beginnings of the Haitian Revolution as a totalizing event, religiously empowered to alter the course of Saint-Domingue's history. Historians like Colin Dayan have analyzed the ritual further, extrapolating more of the actual ritual practice and worship but leaving out the impacts of Vodou spatiality. Absent from Dalmas' account was the actual presence and possession of a female *Manbo* at *Bois Caïman*, Cecile Fatiman. Again, a male and a female practitioner led the ritual, articulating the principle of balance at the core of Vodou philosophy. Ezili Dantor was the *Lwa* who possessed Cecile and whom the black pig's sacrifice honoured.[35] As she is the *Petwo Lwa* of violence and rage, her summoning was appropriate for the matter at hand.[36] In the act of this possession, Cecile offered her body to be the conduit for the *Lwa*, abdicating her *ti-bon-ange* and participating in consensual domination with the *Lwa*. Through Cecile's body, Ezili Dantor may hear the congregation's revolutionary desire and ensure its success. Ezili continued to participate in the revolution beyond *Bois Caïman* itself. Her distinctive facial scars are said to be from fighting in the revolution. Vodou memory retains that she possessed a rebel *Manbo* named Marinette, who became a skeletal aspect of Ezili, associated with violent resistance and who lit cannon fire against French forces.[37]

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[34] Crystal Nicole Eddins, *Rituals, Runaways, and the Haitian Revolution: Collective Action in the African Diaspora* (version 2nd edition.) 2nd ed. (Open Access Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 116.
[35] Andrew Apter, "On African Origins: Creolization and Connaissance in Haitian Vodou." *American Ethnologist* 29, no. 2 (2002): 238, http://www.jstor.org.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/stable/3095167.
[36] Apter, 238.
[37] Kate Kingsbury and R. Andrew Chesnut, "In Her Own Image: Slave Women and the Re-Imagining of the Polish Black Madonna As Ezili Dantò, the Fierce Female Lwa of Haitian Vodou," *International Journal of*

Petwo Lwa, like Ezili, take on further importance to the *Bois Caïman* ritual when considering an aspect of their ritual origin. As previously discussed, Vodouists often understand the *Petwo Lwa* to be hot and fiery, associated with pain and injustice, forged from the crucible of enslavement. *Petwo* rituals found their partial origin in Kongo rites, yet it was via their transformation to Saint-Domingue's geography and the needs of the enslaved that they became harbingers of anti-enslavement justice. In Saint-Domingue specifically, the *Petwo* rites are also attached to Dom Pedro. Vodouists cite Dom Pedro as having created the vigorous and energetic dances associated with this element of Vodou and, in the recollection of one De Beaudiere, actively encouraged the enslaved to turn their whips against the oppressors.[38] Other ritual elements of *Petwo* rites include drinking brandy mixed with gunpowder to create a stupefying effect on the consumer. While Moreau de Saint-Méry initially described it as separate from Vodou dance, through Dom Pedro and the inherent heterophilia of Vodou, the enslaved integrated it into their existing practices. Moreau de Saint-Méry also directly called for the prohibition of this specific ritual rite as it awakened ideas contradictory to "public peace"–a clear interpretation of the *Petwo* rite's power in unsettling colonial 'normalcy' for the sake of enslaved liberation.[39]

Dom Pedro and members of his spiritual group were associated with The Lemba society. This organization lauded justice, peace, and fairness, seeking to address social ills through healing rituals–again emphasizing the tenet of balance.[40] Their rituals and deities also existed in part to eradicate human-caused evils.[41] As such, the Lemba group enacted harsh

Latin American Religions 3, no. 1 (2019): 227, https://doi.org/10.1007/s41603-019-00071-5., Colin Dayan, *Haiti, History and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 31.

[38] Eddins, *Rituals, Runaways, Haitian Revolution*, 128.

[39]Mederic Louis Elié Moreau de Saint-Méry, "Danse. Article Extrait D'un Ouvrage, Ayant pur titre: Reepertoire des Notions Coloniales. Par ordre Alphabetique." (Philadelphia: Printed by the author, Printer and Bookstore, at the corner of Front and Walnut Street, No. 84, 1796), 237, 238.

[40] Eddins, *Rituals, Runaways, and the Haitian Revolution*, 127.

[41] Eddins, 128.

punishments on those who disturbed sacred order.[42] In Saint-Domingue, enslavers closely associated this group with thievery and malevolence, a likely indication of their attempts to redress the social condition of enslavement with the means at hand. Dom Pedro and his followers also quickly assumed roles as poisoners and rebels–again as a means to redress the vile condition of enslavement through ritual methods. Thus, when the Vodouists invoked Ezili as a *Petwo Lwa*, and she indeed inhabited the body of Cecile Fatiman, *Bois Caïman* through this specific ritual lens was a ritual of healing through religious power. By tapping into the mission of the Lemba society through *Petwo Lwa* for the sole purpose of ending enslavement in Saint-Domingue, the enslaved congregants relied on Vodou-specific notions of healing social imbalance to consecrate their actions in the revolution. Through the *Petwo Lwa*, Vodouists sought nothing short of an entire reorientation of what it meant to exist in Saint-Domingue–a literal transformation of the Island as a physical, political, and religious space.

The location of the ritual itself also speaks to the importance of spatiality in interpreting these events. The woods of *Bois Caïman* were both a covert location for the ritual and, as a place filled with trees and *atínmévódún* spirits which themselves may function as a kind of *potomitan*, highly spiritually charged and connected between the physical world and *Ginen*. As a sacred forest, *Bois Caïman* also has an association with *Grands Bwa* and Loko as *Lwa* protective of their people and as keepers of healing, compounding the ceremony's effective power as healing the imbalance of enslavement.[43] Further, Vodouists deem the specific type of mapou silk cotton tree found in the woods sacred, functioning as a conduit of ancestor reverence.[44] The combination of *Bois Caïman* as a ritual space, Cecile Fatiman's

[42] Eddins, 128.
[43] Rebecca Dirksen, "Haiti, Singing for the Land, Sea, and Sky: Cultivating Ecological Metaphysics and Environmental Awareness through Music," *MUSICultures* 45 (1-2), (2019): 120, https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/MC/article/view/28937
[44] Eddins, *Rituals, Runaways, Haitian Revolution*, 211.

possession, and the desires of the enslaved encapsulated by Boukman's prayer make this ceremony a spatial, religious, and political nexus for Vodou in Saint-Domingue.[45] While it was a moment of collective political will, this will was mediated and expressed through bargaining with the *Lwa*.[46] The *Lwa's* power allows the spirit of the revolution to transcend the woods themselves and reach into the interconnectedness of all things for the success of all revolutionaries on the Island. In understanding Vodou rituals like *Bois Caïman* as perhaps a literal self-fulfilling prophecy, one can better understand how the European forces which previously attempted to reinstate enslavement, like the British, found that for as much as they were fighting enslaved rebellion in Saint-Domingue, they too were fighting the natural landscape. This natural combatant was so immovable that all the British forces available would not have been able to retake the Island.[47]

4. Spiritually creating the Black 'unthinkable'

In finality, the *Bois Caïman* ritual conveys layered meanings of belonging and ancestry. The ritual processes are evocative of a belonging to not only one another and the land itself, but perhaps to a collective re-imagining of the self as something beyond and in spite of White French colonial rule. If understood as a restoration of balance, the ritual was a transfiguration of Saint-Domingue from French to African land, a return to *Ginen* so to speak achieved not through death but collective rage, revolution, nature, and power of the *Lwa*. To do so, enslaved bodies must achieve self-determination without the imposition of enslavement and French rule, instead as free peoples. *Bois Caïman* was indeed an enactment of the unthinkability of Black rule, and the 'mental defect' of *marronage,* assailing the very

[45] Lenny Lowe, "WHAT'S "RELIGION" GOT TO DO WITH IT?: RELIGION AND REVOLUTION IN HAITI" *Duke Performances Black Atlantic Series*. (2014). https://sites.duke.edu/blackatlantic/2014/03/18/whats-religion-got-to-do-with-it-reason-religion-and-revolution-in-haiti.
[46] Dubois, "Vodou and History," 94.
[47] Bryan Edwards, *An Historical Survey of the French Colony in the Island of St. Domingo* (John Stockdale Piccadilly, 1797), 172.

structures of colonial Whiteness and ownership. In turn, the revolutionary spark functions to disentangle the enslaved from enslavement.[48] The ritual then perhaps tapped into this well of spiritual power to, in finality, declare Saint-Domingue as a place for the enslaved rather than the enslaver. Dalmas noted, "the plot is too widespread to leave any refuge"–the effects of this ritual reverberated across the Island, sanctifying the entirety of space for the coming revolution.[49]

The accounts of Dalmas and Saint-Méry are two episodes where Vodou's power in constructing spatiality, thus the possibility for the enslaved to enact their own will in a Vodou world space, provides a deeper reading of the sources. Approaching these sources with a view that privileges Vodou cosmology allows for an understanding of how each ritual and recitation is an act affirming and creating the Vodou worldview. The enslaved may use this worldview to achieve various goals, from love to 'crime' to money to revolution. However, the application of Vodou to space itself is contingent on disavowing colonial norms and the imposition of its own. Vodouists' understanding of relationality with the world around them, while simultaneously using ritual as an arena to mete out desire, allows Vodouists to assert their own worldview–one based on relationality with the land, balance, and harmony.

[48] The trend of the "Black unthinkable" and its attachment to *Bois Caïman* would continue, often framed by foreign states and Christian religious leaders as the Haitian 'deal with the devil' which accounts for Haiti's misfortunes, rather than foreign governmental interference and occupation, their war indemnity to France and the "double debt," and exclusion from global markets. Even in cases of natural disaster, blame is placed on Vodou's corruption. See: http://www.cnn.com/2010/US/01/13/haiti.pat.robertson/index.html

[49] Antoine Dalmas, *Histoire de la révolution de Saint-Domingue* (Paris, 1814) in Laurent Dubois and John D Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804 : A Brief History with Documents*. (MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, Macmillan Learning, 2017), 77.

CONCLUSION: Space's Place in Saint-Domingue

Born of West African origins, and altered by Catholicism, Central African beliefs, and colonial violence, Vodou manifests as an endlessly complex system of beliefs. It is at once an amalgamation of these varying components, and a unique expression of ideas of culture, land and belonging. Rather than the shallow understanding of these ideas presented in colonial sources, Vodou creates a sound method of analysis based on Vodouist beliefs. These beliefs are at once spiritual, religious, political, collective, self-serving, and vehemently anti-colonial. Vodou served as a way to make ideas of enslaved freedom both communicable and tangible. It is the background force of ideology, affirmed through ritual and apotheosis of events and figures alike, that drives a notion of a possibility of collective and individual freedom.

By approaching Saint-Domingue's history with a view that centers on Vodou spatiality, reading colonial sources against the grain helps to uncover an often under-examined portion of the Island's history. Interdisciplinary research supplements this view, drawing on the disciplines of anthropology, religious studies, and folklore to offer a fuller construction of what exactly applying Vodou metaphysics to historical analyses means. When using a methodology which embraces Vodou's metaphysics, instances of ritual and religious practice become more than just social gatherings and outlets of anger for the enslaved. It is a disservice to the discipline of history to pose racialized religion and ritual as vestiges of pre-colonial ideology which served to singularly attempt to comprehend an ineffable colonial violence. Likewise, racialized religion should not be put aside as fringe, and a constraint on creating 'valid' historical interpretations.

Instead, embracing cosmology-first histories in the Saint-Domingue context details episodes wherein the enslaved acted under, above, and through colonialism. In doing so they actively demarcated the Island as their own space by challenging colonial hegemony's

dictation of space and labour. As demonstrated in this thesis, at its core Vodou cosmology sought an upsetting of the physical and spiritual notions of colonial ownership. Thus, Vodou served to reject the estrangement of the enslaved Black body from itself, standing against the machine of plantation production which this work has constructed through theories of Whiteness as property and capitalist extraction.

As embodiments of colonial deconstruction, Vodou history's central figures like Mackandal, Brigitte, and Kingué relied on an established and interconnected understanding of Vodou. This shared framework consequently empowered their actions, offering insights and avenues to existence outside the prescription of enslavement, be they through medical prowess, poison, community care, or prophecy. Through this shared cosmological backing, these figures instilled and created order–and fear–on their own terms, subverting the normalcy of colonial domination and instead providing alterity and challenge to hegemony. Further, while these individuals held differing goals in their application of Vodou, in all cases, reading their actions through the lens of Vodou spatiality allows for an interpretation of what their acts meant to themselves and others in their historical and religious contexts. Thus, the challenges they present to colonial hegemony are not, as cited in numerous colonial sources, grand delusions, but rather purposeful and cosmologically informed actions which had real-life impacts. These challenges operated in concert with notions of land, coursing through both the physical realms of Saint-Domingue and Africa, and the spiritual realm of *Ginen*. By using the world(s) they found themselves in, the enslaved became healers, poisoners, prophets, despots, and *Lwa* in their own rights by transforming a notion of what is possible through Vodou cosmology.

In essence, this work has demonstrated three key ways Vodou spatiality supplements historical investigations into colonial Saint-Domingue. By employing Vodou spatiality, creating spaces of possibility becomes the primary way Vodou offers its congregants refuge

and the ability to act in a society built to stifle them for purely economic gain. This power manifests in both the physical and spiritual manipulation of land, nature, and manmade items for the benefit of practitioners and, at times, their communities. Ideas of the afterlife, the soul, and of relating to the natural world code the idea of making space usable. As such, creating usable space extends to everything from the creation of *Gry* to the concept of suicide as a form of repatriation. These ideas presented challenges to what was possible under the control of Christian colonial structures, transforming Vodou cosmology into something new, contextually specific to Saint-Domingue, and wholly revolutionary. The ability to use space allows Vodou, and in turn Vodou spatiality to have a functional impact on enslaved lives, and the lives of those around them.

Second, looking at Vodou cosmology allows for an understanding of the relationship between Africans and the land in Saint-Domingue that is not solely informed by the condition of enslavement. While Saint-Domingue's historiography rightly emphasizes this angle of enslaved experience, and the narrative of the Haitian Revolution which follows, it is not the entire picture. Rather, Vodou posits a vibrancy and kinship between Vodouists and *their* land. The tightly woven concepts of ancestry, land, and spirituality are important considerations for Saint-Domingue's history which has largely escaped deeper historical analysis within the Island's scholarship. This idea is exemplified by the connections of the maroons with the natural world, as well as the cultivation and use of the natural world for habitation, medicine, and poison derived from notions of worship rather than labour. Inclusion of deities like Kouzen Zaka speak to this deeper connection which upsets traditional narratives of enslavement, instead offering a more complex analysis of the relationship between a peoples so characterized by diaspora and enslavement and their land. The notion of relating to the land serves to challenge the assumptions of enslavement, and confront the association and essentialization of Blackness with labour which greatly codes how historical narratives form.

Lastly, a reorientation to a worldview which privileges Vodou spatiality as a method of analysis allows for the reinterpretation of sources. In addition to works which already challenge colonial sources, Vodouist spatiality here implants the religion's metaphysical constructions into Saint-Domingue's narratives. The inclusion of Vodou spatiality into description of Vodou ritual seeks to recharacterize the rituals within the terms of their own powers rather than from the distant colonial gaze. Doing so reveals a much more complex system of religious notions at play which, if extrapolated to the broader histories of the Island, may yield helpful and insightful new perspectives. Further, with the relatively few colonial sources that outright address Vodou in the 18th century, the introduction of Vodou spatiality offers a chance to reengage with the existing material on Vodou's own terms. As the practice of Vodou itself replicates Vodou spatiality within the historical record, these historical episodes are contingent on the very worldview Vodouist actors created, lived in, and explored. As Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel have explained,

> the African spirit has argued that all things are energy and as such require feeding, thus opening the door to the very idea of sacrifice, of reciprocity, of a quid pro quo in the use (and misuse) of nature and its elements…What we have done is assign consciousness to nature and its constitutive elements as purposeful and deliberate, as fellow passengers in the vast enclosed cosmos we created—literally![1]

For Vodouists, their cosmology dictated all aspects of their lives. It was the very making of the self through space and reality, which, as an enslaved person, was a powerful and revolutionary ability. Vodou's persistence and ability to transform the enslaved's lived experiences in accordance with *Ginen*, the *Lwa*, and the supreme God allowed for an existence in Saint-Domingue defined by their own worldviews and in rejection of the combination of colonial norms' domination.

[1] Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, and Claudine Michel, "Danbala/Ayida as Cosmic Prism: The Lwa as Trope for Understanding Metaphysics in Haitian Vodou and Beyond," *Journal of Africana Religions* 1, no. 4 (2013): 4ind69.

By conducting this exploration, this work hopes to expand Saint-Domingue's archival record, offering a reevaluation of sources contingent on Vodou spatiality, adoptions from Indigenous methodologies, and cosmology-first histories. By doing so, the rich and valuable stories of Vodouists in Saint-Domingue become clearer and offer alternative insights into how the enslaved constructed their worlds and operated within them. Further, this thesis hopes that by following Susan Hill's framework of cosmology-first approaches to history, other works may also use and draw on Indigenous methods to reconstruct subaltern narratives of history across space and time. The hoped-for result draws in subaltern voices and perspectives absent from traditionally examined sources through their cosmologies. In doing so, cosmology-first histories allow for the discipline of history to supplement the more traditional streams and turns of historiography, incorporating worldviews and lifeways into how history described the experiences and understandings of groups, who would otherwise be afforded little room to speak.

This thesis presents a frame-shifting insight into history's structural assumptions of Blackness, Vodou, and relationships with the land. By focusing on Vodouists' own perceptions of identity, existence, and connection to the natural world, Vodou spatiality allows for a study of Saint-Domingue which distances itself from–but does not forsake–traditional Island narratives for the purpose of fuller appraisals of historical sources. This work has presented a discursive look at the multiple historical episodes wherein cosmology-first history emboldens alternative narratives, providing grounding in both sources and cosmology for differing historical interpretations. As such, Vodou spatiality, born from enslaved African cosmologies and experiences, centres its focus on a reevaluation of historical 'truths,' emphasizing interpretations which focus on possibility, relationality, and revolutionary potential that is not strictly tied to armed resistance, but also manifests in each and every iteration of Vodou practices in colonial spaces.

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Dictionary

Ason - A ritual gourd with beads and at times decorated with snake vertebra. Practitioners may use the Ason to guide *Lwa* in ritual.

Atínmɛ́vódún - Spirits which reside in trees, their presence marks places as sacred.

Axis mundis - A point established by a ritual artefact, time, place, etc. which allows for communication or transition between the physical world and the spiritual world.

Azizà - Fon tree spirits, understood to be pixie-like, which guard the natural world and speak for the forest. The *Azizà* abhor the destruction of nature.

Bois Caïman - Either used to refer to the woods where the ritual *Bois Caïman* took place, or used to refer to the ritual itself.

Démembré - Sacred ancestral grounds used for rituals and burials.

Ginen - The spiritual world of the *Lwa* which may manifest as an underwater world, a world in the sky, or as a mythical incarnation of Africa.

Grands Bwa - Interchangeably the woods themselves and a *Lwa* deemed the incarnation of the forests.

Gros-bon-ange - This aspect of the soul is the metaphysical double of the physical being and maintains the physical body, housing human memory, the self, and imagination.

Gry - Amulets or charm bags containing various natural and man-made items which together provide a form of protection.

Kaperlata - Vodou healers who sold their talents to those who needed medical aid. Enslavers also sold their enslaved's medical knowledge and practices, hiring them out to other colonists.

Hospitalière - Enslaved women who served in plantation hospitals, taking care of enslaved peoples and helping with childbirth.

Lwa - Spirits and deities of Vodou pantheons, some are interpretations of West African deities, some are elevated ancestors, others are unique to the experience of enslavement and Island life.

Macandalisme - The act of poisoning, or one who trades in poisons used by the enslaved.

Manbo - A female Vodou priestess.

Marabouts – Muslim religious leaders and teachers who hold close association with *Gry*

Marronage - Absconding enslaved labour permanently.

Nam/Dan - One's life energy bestowed in a person at birth, absence of one's dan results in death.

nZombi - Kongo term for a zombie, a sort of unliving automaton created in Vodou through ritual practices. They are often read as allegories of eternal enslavement.

Orisha - Yoruba deities of West Africa, many of which were transplanted under other names into Vodou as *Lwa*.

Oungan - A male Vodou priest.

Petwo Lwa - A family of *Lwa* which are known to be 'hotter,' often born uniquely in the Island, and have a connotation with violence, anger, and anti-enslavement sentiments.

Potomitan - Ritual trees or cut logs which are designed to communicate with *Lwa*, providing a bridge between the physical world and *Ginen*.

Pye repozwa - Saint-Domingue's tree-cutting taboos which protect forests and trees deemed sacred.

Rada Lwa - A family of *Lwa* which are known to be 'cooler,' often translations of West African deities.

Règleman- the necessary 'proper' conduct Vodouists undertake in their medicinal practices that deal with harvesting resources from the natural world.

Suleliye - A vodou initiation ritual to the rank of priest, which requires communication with the *Lwa* of healing and the woods, Loko.

Ti-bon-ange - The ti-bon-ange is the other part of the soul, functioning as a guardian angel figure and moral guide for the practitioner and is the part of the soul which abdicates the human in instances of ritual possession.

Vèvè - Ritualized patterns and designs meant to invoke communion with a specific *Lwa*.

Vodun - A term that refers to varied West African Vodou practices of individual ethnic groups, and a formalized practice under the Kingdom of Dahomey. The progenitor of Haitian/Saint-Domingue Vodou.