

BOOK REVIEW

Ezili's Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders

Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2018 (ISBN: 9780822370307)

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Ezili's Mirrors is undoubtedly a *destabilizing* book in the most ravishing sense of the word. In the tradition of “scholarly anarchy” epitomized by personalities like Henry Louis Gates, LaWanda Stallings, and Kelly Hayes (Gates 1988/2014; Stallings 2007; Hayes 2011),¹ Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's research is about black Atlantic expressions of female gender, sexuality, and pleasure exploding traditional Western approaches to queer and African studies alike. Rather than offering canonical analyses on the performativity of identity in Butlerian terms (Butler 1993), Tinsley produces reflections on nonnormative racial and gender performances in the circum-Caribbean world by way of turning to Haitian *lwa* Ezili as the mythological “prism” (4) through which individuals understand themselves and share their creative visions of gender and sexuality.² Within the radically fluid realm of Haitian Vodou, the rich pantheon of Ezili's heterogeneous manifestations “maps and mirrors queer femininity and womanness” (16) in multiple, imaginative ways. Although “artistically, gloriously feminine, [in fact] Ezili also quite spectacularly explodes gender binaries” (16), and coalesces onto herself a plethora of compelling, yet seemingly contrasting, desires that defy the Western praxis of looking at the different modes of (self-) presentation and articulation of pleasure as forms of deviance. The quintessential manifestations of eros, Ezili's avatars—and the countless realms of literature and popular culture they inhabit—provide Tinsley with a submerged epistemological archive of creative genders and femininities that reveals the potential of diaspora spirituality to meet the need for imagination that black feminist theorizing advocates. As the author explains in the final part of her work:

[E]ngaging Ezili as a mode of theorizing means embracing theoretical polyamory. Like most scholars, I was raised to be academically monogamous: to be “married to” a single coherent subject, “faithful to” a line of theorizing. . . . I tried to open my conceptual relationship here. A philosophy as well as a practice, theoretical polyamory encourages movement between different modes of theorizing: music videos, popular songs, dance, film, erotica, speculative fiction, all married into one theorizing enterprise—all accorded as much explanatory power as academic prose to make sense of black queer lives. (172)

If it feels challenging to firmly grasp the markedly diverse and dynamic corpus that makes this labor of “polyamorous love” an example of the exquisitely black way of

understanding and formulating theory,³ Tinsley's arrangement of the materials further destabilizes the reader's attention because of the Vodou aesth/ethics that informs its organization: in honoring a Vodou epistemology, each of the four chapters in the volume focuses on one particular manifestation of Ezili that, in turn, embodies very specific ways of understanding and performing black female sexuality and desire in the Black Atlantic. A circumstance where shape indeed defines matter, the book imagines each chapter in the form of a conversation among three cultural products whose analysis is cyclically suspended and later reprised twice more in the form of a spiraling "abc abc abc" structure. In carrying out such an articulated operation, Tinsley rejects the presence of a linear, uniform, authorial voice in favor of the ambitious attempt to replicate on paper an "Afro-diasporic cultural representation of the human psyche as multiple, removable, and external to the body" (Strongman 2019, 2). Ultimately, Tinsley mimics how Vodou female practitioners come to achieve *konesans*—that is, sacred spiritual knowledge and power—by attributing to each of the sections into which the author has divided the book chapters, either the function of mirroring "the knowledge of the intellect" (23)—indexed in the text by academic prose—or the two forms of knowledge of the "spirit" (23)—indexed both by the author's personal exploration of Ezili and by that of what she deems her "intellectual, spiritual, and biological ancestors" (23).

For instance, chapter 1, "To Transcender Transgender," calls upon the powers of *Ezili Freda* to highlight and dissect the manifestations and representations of black fem(me)ininity through an interconnected analysis of: 1) Aida Whitaker's videoclip "Ezili" (2010); 2) MilDréd "Dréd" Gerestant's performance show *I Transcender* (2010); and 3) the ancestry provided by Janet Collins (1917–2003), the first US black prima ballerina. In the author's vision, Freda—the luxurious mulatta goddess and protectress of Haitian *masisi and madivin*⁴—represents the clearest path for manifesting the subversive power that lies within black trans- and cis-fem(me)ininity, a realm of coalescing desires and identity still too often confounded with, and reduced to, normative enactments of heterosexual womanhood. All of the materials proposed show how Freda is evocative of an exquisite delight in beautifying, adorning, and choreographing the feminine self. In doing so, however, they elucidate how brave black fem(me)ininity is because of its standing as a complex "archive of embodied knowledge [specific to African diaspora histories] whose beauty is in its self-conscious artifice" (34) relentlessly enacted despite the simultaneous denial of black womanness and femme identity. And though the fluidity with which Dréd moves from offering a queered impression of Bawon/Bawonesse Sanmdi to enacting her black "female to Femme" transition into the divine *Freda* speaks to the absence of discrete contours of the body (and to the possibilities therein for infinite gender expressions),⁵ Whitaker's emphasis on her beautifying process in the toilettes that take place in "Ezili" prove how nothing about being femme is either neutral or the default; on the contrary, it is an "intentionally orchestrated process" in the face of white heteronormative prescriptions of femininity.

In a similar way, chapter 2, "Mache Ansam," positions the goddess *Ezili Danto* as the mythological trope through which black diaspora performances of transfemininity are looked at in the documentaries *Of Gods and Men* (2003) and *Poto Mitan* (2009) and in the life and achievements of ballroom Mother Angie Extravaganza (1964–1993), founder of the homonymous New York City-based House of Extravaganza. Traditionally, *Ezili Freda* is the *lwa* associated with the creative possibility within the expressions of gender; as such, Haitian *masisi* usually turn to Her as their divine mother. However, the fact that all the *masisi* interviewed in *Of Gods and Men* proclaim their loyalty to *Danto* leads Tinsley to draw important conclusions about black queer gender that, though addressed

mostly as a matter of performative imagination, has also very much to do with labor. Like *Danto's* fierceness and utmost dedication to the pleas of her daughters, the *masisi* of the documentary (2003) are painstakingly absorbed in the endless, laborious act of inhabiting and performing black womanhood—what Marion Bailey calls *performance labor* in the context of gender and sexual refashioning within ballroom culture.⁶

And ballrooms become exactly the background for Tinsley's analysis as she fixes her inquiring eye on Angie Extravaganza. Presented in the docufilm *Paris is Burning* (1990) as the perfect embodiment of mothering, Angie is famously filmed at one point walking the streets of New York City with two of her house sons, all laughing, showing desire for the camera, and taking special pride in having provided their mother with a new pair of prosthetic breasts. Then, one of her sons even takes Angie's breast in his hands and, after covering her nipple with his mouth, exclaims: "our Mother even nurses us. She is a good woman. She even nourishes us." Concurring with Barbara Browning on the multiple meanings that the breastfeeding scene conjures—from the queered version of mass-produced images of nursing black mothers to an ironic commentary on the very exploitation of black female labor in mainstream society—Tinsley relies on Browning's comparison of the transwoman to *Ezili Danto*, "the solitary, sometimes raging mother" (Browning 1998, 159) to produce an in depth-analysis of how Angie reworks definitions of motherhood that fit the complicated contexts of black transfeminine life in the city, a context where sex-work is the most available—yet still life-threatening—option at hand for many working-class transgender people of color. Under such circumstances, Tinsley explains, Angie provides the perfect example of "the laugh-love mother who can walk the streets right beside you and tell you what you need to know, the generous mother who loves her children so hard she could will an empty breast to give milk" (73).

Ezili Le Wouij is the epistemological referee through which Tinsley makes sense (in chapter 3, "Riding the Red") of the BDSM work of prodomme Domina Erzulie, Nalo Hopkinson's speculative fiction *The Salt Roads* (2003), and the historical figure of entrepreneur Mary Ellen Peasant (1814–1904). Described as furious, resentful and vengeful, Tinsley sees *Le Wouij* as the spirit who "feeds on the servitor's pain . . . [v]iolently recoloring her servitor's body if she needs to, turning their flesh inside out if she needs to . . ." (102). However, though She certainly conjures vivid terror in the mind of the practitioners, the goddess's interventional modalities might "also evoke frissons of pleasure" (102). In other words, *Ezili Le Wouij* is speculated upon as the cosmic dominatrix who "transforms pain to her own uses, power and pleasure" (103) in the attempt to bring the individual to a destabilizing yet higher consciousness; one who empowers black women's iterations of sexuality by creating illicit fantasies "that explode assumptions about what constitute proper gendering of, and appropriate pleasure and pain for, the black body" (Miller-Young 2014, cited in Tinsley, 103).

Within this cosmological framework, Tinsley ponders Domina Erzulie's role as a black dominatrix as one that, coherently with the position of *Le Wouij* in Ezili's pantheon, forces the boundaries of decency and acceptability by indulging in the most deviant articulations of black female sexual deviance itself—spanning from spanking and bondage to urination—in the attempt to, even if only temporarily, reverse the logics of power distribution of a society that places black women at the bottom. As Tinsley argues, "[p]art of the bravery of this kind of play—part of why it requires goddess-like strength to allow yourself, as a woman of color, to embody the cosmic tantrum—is the overwhelming likelihood that once the ceremony and/or BDSM scene is done, participants will walk outside without much having changed" (117). In a similar way,

the scholar's exploration of Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads* intends to draw the similarities between speculative fiction and kinksters, as both potentially "contest the limits of normative realities," questioning, for instance, the very phallogocentric path of arousal, climax, and coital resolution that both BDSM practices and spiritual ceremonies alike explode with their own untraditional notions of time (105–6). Ultimately, Hopkinson's open desire to depict black women's kinky practices reads for Tinsley as a crucial way to remove the socially constructed veil of sexual mystique that traditionally denies black women's sexual life to ever be thought of as articulated and deep, like anybody else's.

As this review demonstrates, the complexity of *Ezili's Mirrors* cannot be exhaustively addressed in a few lines. Tinsley's work is indeed a rather challenging enterprise for a scholar to take on. Because she moves so naturally, so swiftly, not just through the pages but through the different cultural productions that cover all the possible reflections of black female queer worldmaking, because of the different styles the author uses and the voices she conjures, readers will find themselves overwhelmed by confronting a scholarly endeavor that is willfully defiant and unruly of traditional academic practices. It is a work that one may call ancestrally choral and polyphonic, reproducing sounds that belong both to a black diasporic present, and to the multitude of voices inhabiting black diasporic pasts. This book draws from Ezili's mythistorical archives of stories, dances, spiritual ceremonies, and songs that have been ignored in the official records; at the same time, however, it builds on such a concealed abundance to create new versions of those archives that the different individuals this book addresses—as contemporary servitors of the *lwa*—"not only refuse to forget but in fact bring into their very bodies" (24). At its core, *Ezili's Mirrors* offers a system of cultural references that is as composite and fluid as the identities of the black bodies—human and divine—that it seeks to join in/through the sacredly profane exploration of pleasure. It is pleasure, then—differently reflected as many times as the numbers of the mirrors of Ezili—that provides the vocabulary to properly address a history of circum-Atlantic celebration of black queer femininity. Black cisfemmes, black transfemmes, *masisi*, *madivin*, and prodømmes are all daughters of Ezili. This book is indeed a song for them.

Notes

1 By "scholarly anarchy," I refer to what I see as a pattern among several scholars of Africana studies to counteract the forced universality of Western epistemologies with forms of theorizing embedded in Afrocentric systems. In his groundbreaking *The Signifying Monkey* (Gates 1988/2014), for instance, Henry Louis Gates relies on the role of trickster Esu-Elegbara as the divine reference for semiotic indeterminacy "to identify a theory of criticism that is inscribed within the black vernacular tradition and that in turn informs the shape of the Afro-American literary tradition" (Gates 2000, 339). In a similar way, LaWanda Stallings's *Mutha is Half a Word* produces an analysis of the trickster as a model of gender and sexual indecipherability and indeterminacy within black oral mythic tradition through several cultural texts—from the folk tales and the female slave narratives to late-1990s black women's literature and their appearance in pop culture—and reframes it in a gendered discourse in order to explore radical Black female sexual subjectivity within those sources (Stallings 2007). Finally, Kelly Hayes's *Holy Harlot* approaches the cult of Pomba Gira—the Brazilian goddess of sex—"as a form of social discourse: a conceptual and experiential frame for the expressions of various disjunctive experiences [and] interpersonal conflicts . . . a creative yet culturally sanctioned response to restrictive gender roles or inadequate love relationships, a way to express otherwise forbidden thoughts or feelings . . ." (Hayes 2011, 9).

2 *Lwa*, also written as *loa*, are spirit forces from the Haitian Vodou religion. They correspond to the African and Brazilian *orishas*.

- 3 Black diasporic theorizing has been studied in the form of sonic, visual, and narrative productions. In her classic study *The Race for Theory*, Barbara Christian argues that “people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western forms of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories that we create, in the riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, because *dynamic* rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking” (Christian 1987/2000, 281).
- 4 As the author indicates, *masisi* is a Kreyol term that “references the fem(me)ininity or womanness of someone assigned male at birth, and/or their desire for male lovers. . . . The term describes a spectrum of transfemininity that could include those labeled ‘feminine gay men’ in the United States as well as those identified as ‘transgender women’” (68). *Madivin*, however, is the Haitian word that indicates female homosexuality.
- 5 An foF, or female to Femme, transition represents the progressive and radical step into the realm of queer fem(me)ininity, a mode of being often belittled as a result of automatic association of lesbianism with butch identity. By wearing the garb of Ezili, Tinsley explains, Dréd-as-queer Bawon is thus “movingly, seductively embodying a kind of luxurious, champagne-kissed, sugarcoated womanness that, as a queer black female, she was never supposed to claim—let alone dance and be applauded for” (58).
- 6 As Marion Bailey argues, “[s]ince all identities are produced in large part through rituals of the self and communal forms of representation, quotidian performance plays a vital part in Ballroom’s members’s reconstitution of their gender and sexual identities. . . .” and its execution has, therefore, to be intended as unending work on the part of the subject (2013, 34). According to the author, “performance labor consists not only of the presentation of gender through comportment or behavior but also of one’s efforts to reconfigure and fashion the body as a part of constructing and claiming a gender and sexual identity” (34).

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