

Shaping New Vision

Gender and Values in American Culture

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The Power to Heal: Reflections on Women, Religion, and Medicine

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Women's difficulties in relation to western medicine, including psychoanalysis, are well documented in feminist literature. The relationships between particular sexist ideologies and medical perceptions, diagnoses, and treatments have been uncovered.¹ Women's difficulties in breaking into the medical profession are equally well known.² When women have sought access to the power to heal by becoming doctors, they have met resistance in one form or another in every place and every period of the history of Western scientific medicine.

The root metaphors of Western civilization are more visible in medicine than in many areas of life. On the most basic level, cultures are shaped by their root metaphors. These are the unarticulated yet deeply formative images that direct the flow of thought and action in any given culture. As in any operational thought system, there is a time lag between the root metaphors and current theory of Western medicine. There is a naive empiricism still deep in the medical ethos even though it has been set aside to some extent in medical textbooks. Feminist research, or research in general for that matter, has yet to reveal all the ramifications of Western medicine's intense physicalization of disease or of its view of healing as something done by an heroic actor who "possesses" power to an essentially passive, physical body that has no personal identity, social context, or history.

In Western medicine, healing power, like diseases and patients, is controlled by defining it as a piece of property. The power to heal is understood to reside in things—medical implements, drugs, and machines—whose use is restricted to those who possess other things—diplomas, licenses, and white coats—that indicate their ownership of a

particular body of knowledge. It is the view of healing power as material property which can be owned and used by an elite few that I wish to explore in this essay. Seeing healing power as property, subject to all the dynamics of a capitalist system, is one of the most significant root metaphors of Western medicine and one of the most damaging to women.

It is extremely difficult to become conscious of the root metaphors of one's own people and place. Once grasped, they are even harder to hold on to and pursue through the complex layers of daily life and collective history. It is precisely because they operate below consciousness that these metaphors are so efficient in the processes of culture formation and maintenance. If our root metaphors were available to us easily, if every day we could accept, reject or amend them, there would be no shared culture. Yet to see them as essential to communal life and to see their elusive character as integral to their functioning is not to conclude that they should not be tampered with. Change of the magnitude feminists call for requires that we pursue them. Yet this is not easy. One way to crack open the Western medical system to its root metaphors is to place it in relation to a healing system from another culture which is strikingly different. This is what I propose to do here.

The heart of this essay is a case study of healing in Haitian Vodou, the African-Catholic religion that grew up on the slave plantations of the eighteenth-century French sugar colony then called Saint Domingue. This case, drawn from a New York-based Haitian healer, will be preceded by a discussion of women healers in Haiti in which I will attempt to uncover the reasons for women's relatively easy access to this power domain and also show something of the women's style, as distinct from the men's, of using power within it. The actual case study will be followed by some analytical comments about healing in the Vodou system which will be used to locate and describe a healing power that cannot be privately owned and tightly controlled. The conclusion will address western scientific medicine and particularly the feminist critique of it. This section will include suggestions that feminists ought to focus on understanding the oppressive nature of power in Western medicine and on clarifying our own tendency to think of power as property.

Women Healers in Haiti

While in some parts of rural Haiti women can gain recognition and prestige as *manbo* (priestesses) and they can be herbalists and *fèm saj* (midwives) throughout the island, nowhere in the countryside do they effectively challenge the hegemony of the male in the healing sphere. This is not so in the cities where there are probably as many women as

men doing healing work. The urban Vodou context is the heritage of Alourdes, the woman healer who will be described in the case study which is the focus of this paper. This relatively recent phenomenon of large numbers of women heading Vodou temples is due in part to chance.

Haiti is a poor country with an extremely depressed economy where the agricultural productivity which once made it the "Pearl of the Antilles" is now long gone. The reasons are long-term political corruption, overpopulation, and soil erosion. The large, patriarchal extended family dominated in Haiti's past, and this is still thought of as the ideal family. Even moderately successful men in the countryside can enter into multiple *plasaj* (common-law) unions with women. Each of these women is then set up in a house of her own in which she raises the children born of their union. Having her own household gives the rural woman limited autonomy, and her freedom and responsibility are increased by the fact that it is women who run the markets.³ In the markets, women sell such things as baskets, candies, and bread along with the family farm produce. A market woman learns selling skills and money management through this work. The small profits she makes from the things she has produced with her own hands are hers to keep as insurance against natural and social catastrophe. These monies are often the only thing that prevents her children from starving.

As more and more young people have been forced off the family land, away from the rural extended families and toward the greater autonomy of city life, women have generally fared better than men. Their adaptable, small-scale market skills are one reason. The preference of piece-work factories for women, who are thought to be steadier workers and less likely to cause problems, is another. Women have become breadwinners and their relationships with men, many of whom have significantly less earning power, have become more unstable as a result. Women in the cities have thus found themselves the heads of their own houses, as they were to some extent in the country, but with no supporting (and confining) extended family to back up that household unit.

Urban Vodou is, at its core, an attempt to recreate the security gained from the extended families of the countryside. In the cities, it is the Vodou temple and the fictive kinship network it provides that compensate for the loss of the large rural family. The head of the temple is called "mother" or "father" and the initiates are addressed as "children of the house." The Vodou initiate owes service and loyalty to his or her Vodou parent after the pattern of filial piety owed all parents by their children in Haiti. In turn, Vodou parents like actual ones, owe their children protection, care, and help in times of trouble. In certain circum-

stances this help is of a very tangible sort: food, a place to sleep, assistance in finding work.

In rural Haiti the patriarch has unquestioned control, a control that extends to his role as priest when the family serves the Vodou spirits. But in urban Haiti, women's increased autonomy and access to money have made it possible for them to become heads of Vodou "families." Furthermore, I believe that certain aspects of healing and priestcraft have changed as a result of women's greater participation. I do not wish to overstate this conclusion, yet neither do I want to dismiss it simply because it is based on impressions. Starting when I first went to Haiti in 1973 and long before I considered undergoing initiation myself, many male and female friends offered this advice: "If you *kouche* [undergo initiation], do it in a woman's temple. The men will want to use you."

The urban Vodou temples run by men tend to mimic the patriarchal structure of the rural extended families. The authority of the priest is absolute. Also, the urban priest is notorious for fathering many children and recruiting desirable young women to be among his *huntsi* (brides of the gods), the ritual chorus and general workforce of a Vodou temple.⁴ He thus creates for himself a highly visible father role which he then extends to all those who serve the spirits under his tutelage. While the priestess who heads a temple is not necessarily more democratic in all of her relationships with those who serve in her house, she does tend to be so in the ways that a mother's role with her children is normally less inflexibly hierarchical than that of a father. For example, some temples headed by women function as day-care centers for the working mothers associated with them. The woman-headed temple tends to reiterate the tone and atmosphere inside the individual home, a place where women have usually been in charge. This is an atmosphere that allows the priestess more flexibility and play in human relationships than the priest who acts out of the more public, and therefore more static and controlled, role of the patriarch.

Thus it has been social change that has created a chink in the patriarchal armor. Women have slipped through and, in urban temples, created "families" of their own modeled partially on the patriarchal family but with important modifications. Women's healing style is subtly but significantly different due to the age-old roles they have played in child rearing and barter marketing. Haitian market women, like many North American Black women who support their families, probably have a greater sense of being effective in the world than do the white, middle-class, North American women whose voices dominate in feminist scholarship. This self-assurance is the firm base on which their flexibility operates. Furthermore, the greater flexibility and play of women's roles

as compared to those of men have meshed with central attitudes in the larger culture, specifically attitudes toward healing. This meshing has taken place in such a way that key aspects of the character of the people as a whole have been enhanced under the leadership of women. The following study of a woman healer at work will support these observations.

The Soldier Who Was Hungry for Family

Late in March of 1984, I went to visit Alourdes⁵ at her home in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn. Alourdes is a Vodou priestess and healer. In this African-American spiritual system, the terms priest or priestess and healer are synonymous. Mama Lola, as Alourdes is sometimes called, ministers to the many needs of a substantial immigrant community of taxi drivers, dishwashers, gas station attendants, nurses' aides, telephone operators and the chronically unemployed. She reads cards, practices herbal medicine, manufactures charms and talismans, uses her considerable intuitive powers ("the gift of eyes"), and the well-honed empathy of a strong woman of fifty who is now a homeowner and head of a sizeable household, yet spent the first half of her life in Haiti where at times she was driven to prostitute herself to feed her children. In addition to her personal skills and strengths, Mama Lola also provides her healing clients with access to the wisdom and power of the Vodou spirits, a configuration of African spirit entities loosely identified with Catholic saints, each of whom presides over a particular life domain such as child-bearing and rearing, family roots, anger and assertion, humor, and death. (Humor and death necessarily go together in the Haitian view of things.) Alourdes gains access to the spirits through dreams and through possession-trance, which is central in Vodou. In treatment sessions, she will frequently "call" the spirits for diagnosis, insight or specific instructions as to what is to be done to bring about healing.

I have known Alourdes for nearly ten years. She presided over my initiation into Vodou and now calls me her "daughter." We have been working together on a book about her life for the past eight years. I have an easy familiarity in her home. So when we sat at her kitchen table in March of 1984, it was not unusual for her to tell me what was currently going on in her healing practice. Alourdes can be discreet if that is what is called for; however, if there is nothing about a client's problem that needs protecting, she sometimes teaches by sharing the details of cases. "I got somebody," she said. "I'm doing some work for him. He is in the army. Oh boy, Karen! That man so big! When he go downstairs, he got

to go like this." With her usual refusal to reduce a story to words, Alourdes' stout and squat body sprang up from her chair and hobbled across the kitchen imitating a tall man in fear of hitting his head on the ceiling. Mama Lola continued:

He from Virginia, but his mother in New York. She live in Brooklyn. But when he come he don't stay with her. He stay in hotel. I say to him, "Why you don't stay with your mother? Let her take care of you." He say, "Not me. I not dependent on nobody. What I need that for? The army is my family. I love the army and I going to stay in it until I die . . . er . . . until I retire." That what he say. I look at him and I think, "That funny!", because I never meet nobody . . . that's the *first* person I meet who say, "I love the army." So you know what I think? I think he just hungry for family.

As is the custom, the lieutenant had presented himself to Alourdes with an introduction from a mutual friend and a non-specific problem. He had "no luck." Although she sometimes knows what is wrong with clients as soon as she meets them, Mama Lola told me she always performs the expected diagnostic card reading so they will not be intimidated by her. She did such a reading for the lieutenant.

As she told me the story I could imagine the two of them in her cramped altar room tucked away in one corner of the basement, the one tiny window blocked by a heavy curtain, bunches of odorous herbs and a collection of baskets hanging from the ceiling, smoke-darkened color lithographs of the Catholic saints attached to the walls above altar tables dense with tiny flickering flames, smooth dark stones sitting in oil baths, bottles of rum, vodka and perfume, herbal brews and sweet syrups. She would have sat in the big armchair with the stuffing coming out of one arm, her broad mocha face lighted from underneath by a candle stub that burned on one corner of the small table in front of her. I smiled to think of the big army officer hunched on the tiny bench opposite her where clients always sit.

After a preliminary sign of the cross, Alourdes would have shuffled the cards and offered them to him to cut. When they were spread in front of her in four rows of eight, she would already have been in a withdrawn, concentrated state of mind. After some minutes of silence, Alourdes would have begun to tap the cards ("heat them up") in an order determined by her inner vision and ask him questions, such as "You have some trouble in your house? You fight?"

At this stage of the divination process, the healer faces a large number of choices as to the direction of questions. Just as a healer such as Mama Lola is a combination medical doctor, psychotherapist, social worker, and priest, so the "problems" or "bad luck" she is faced with

may manifest across a spectrum ranging from the physical to the social to the spiritual. No matter how the bad luck is eventually defined, it will always be diagnosed as ultimately due to a disruption in relationships, whether these are relationships with the living, the dead, or the spirits. The presenting symptom, though carefully articulated and then attended to by the healer, is to some extent arbitrary. In other words, trouble with one's father could equally well result in stomach pains or difficulty on the job. Haitians thus see the person as defined by a relational matrix and disturbance at any point in that matrix can create problems anywhere else.

During diagnostic card readings, the client is free to answer yes or no to the healer's probing questions without prejudice. Thus the client is active in the diagnosis yet does not dictate the description of the problem. When the questions and answers have gone on for some time, a joint definition of the problem will usually emerge. Most clients would acknowledge a significant difference between the problem they thought they came with and the one that was defined through divination. The outsized lieutenant from Virginia was no exception, although it took him awhile to realize this.

After many questions and many negative responses from the lieutenant, it finally came out during his first session with Alourdes that he wanted a promotion to a higher rank in the army and thought one of his superiors was standing in his way. Alourdes was not sure.

I read card for him, but I don't see nothing. You know some people, they really got bad luck and you just see it. But with him, I don't see nothing like that . . . little thing maybe, but no real big thing in his path . . . nobody at work want to stop him. So I say to him, "How long you feel you got bad luck?" He think . . . he think . . . he think and he say, "Since I was a little boy." I say, "You can't have bad luck since you little boy!" Then I say, "What happened when you was a little boy?" Oh sweetheart, he tell me a story that was so sad . . . so awful.

The lieutenant had grown up in poverty in the Bahamas. A key event happened when he was no more than six or seven. One day his mother had nothing to give her children to eat. Neither did she have money to buy food. "He was so hungry . . . so hungry," Alourdes said. The enterprising and desperate young boy went, without his mother's permission or knowledge, to the factory where his father worked to ask for money for food. The man, shamed in front of his co-workers, turned on the boy with a terrible, hurtful truth that had been hidden until that moment. "Why you calling me Daddy?", he snapped. "I'm not your father." The young boy hid his hurt in anger and retaliated in a way that reveals much about the ideology of male power in Caribbean societies.

He yelled at the man he had always thought to be his father: "You going to be sorry. Someday I going to be rich and I going to support you. I not going to be a hungry man like you!" Then, Alourdes said, he went home and cried. But he never said anything to his mother about the incident.

A few years later the boy found out by chance who his real father was. There was a woman who lived not far from his house whom the child had always addressed as Auntie without knowing if she really was an aunt or only a friend given the honorary title as is common in the islands. One day as he walked by her house, a young blonde woman sitting on the porch called him over, took his chin in her hand, lifted his face for careful inspection and said to Auntie: "That brother of yours can't deny this one. Oh no!" Alourdes reported that Auntie then told the boy, "That your daddy's new wife. He marry her in Germany. She come to visit me." That afternoon, for the first time, the boy heard the name of his biological father.

As a young adult already showing signs of promise in an army career, he went to Germany with the intention of looking up his father. But he procrastinated and left the country without making contact. According to Alourdes, her client explained his actions by saying: "What I need to find that man for? He not my father . . . not really."

Alourdes began her treatment, in pace with her client, by addressing the problem the lieutenant had acknowledged: his failure to get promoted. I was temporarily living in Massachusetts, working on Alourdes' biography, so I did not stay in close touch with the details of his case. It is likely that Alourdes gave him a "good luck bath"—herbal infusions and perfume mixed with fresh basil leaves (a general prophylactic) and water—which was spread upward, in small handfuls, over his body. After such a "bath" he would be instructed not to bathe with soap and water for three days.⁶ She probably made one or more good luck charms for him as well. Surely she made an herb-doctored cologne that he could wear every day to enhance his luck. If she chose to take his story about the ill will of the senior officer seriously, she may also have manufactured a charm to "tie" or "bind" the supposed enemy. Making these charms is an interesting process for it requires exhausting amounts of concentration on the part of the client. The lieutenant may well have been given a container of straight pins and told to count out two piles of 101 pins each and then count the piles again, and then again. Once absolutely certain that he had the exact number he would have been instructed to push each one (it takes effort) into a thick wax candle, while repeating aloud his desire that the man get out of his way and doing so in the name of the appropriate saint at each thrust of metal into wax. Among other things, this would have helped the lieutenant get

clear as to whether it was his superior officer who was the source of his problems.

Some months after our first conversation about the soldier, Alourdes reported that deeper problems had been uncovered in the course of a subsequent card reading and they were now starting to work on those. It seems the woman known as Auntie had quarrelled with the boy's mother⁷ not long after the chance meeting in which he learned the name of his father. The now grown man had a dim memory of the boy witnessing an act of magic, the placement of a charm. The boy remembered seeing Auntie write his name several times on a piece of paper and bury it along with a tiny oil lamp beneath one of the trees in her courtyard. Alourdes had to work on a larger canvas now. There were relational problems within the extended family and, since the charm was buried under a tree which everyone knew was the dwelling place of a spirit, the spirits themselves were now involved. This would take time.

Again, I was not in New York and did not observe any of the particulars of the army officer's treatment. But it is unthinkable that it would have gone on without Alourdes calling Papa Gède, Master of the Cemetery, one of the two main Vodou spirits with whom she works. Once this spirit had struggled with and displaced Alourdes' *gro bonanj*, big guardian angel, an aspect of the human soul that is roughly equal to consciousness and/or personality, he would have begun to speak and act through Alourdes' body, slugging down herb- and pepper-laced rum (Alourdes herself drinks little and then only sweet wine or liqueur) and searching about for his bowler hat and his dark glasses with one lens missing.⁸ Some say Gède's glasses have only one lens because the penis has only one eye. Others take a metaphysical approach and suggest that Papa Gède sees between the worlds of the living and the dead and that this sense of disjuncture accounts for his randy behavior and merciless joking. Gède delights in going after straight-laced people like the lieutenant who exercise strong control over themselves and their lives. It is likely that Gède teased him relentlessly, though not without point or lesson.

Ezili Dantò⁹, the fearsome dark-skinned spirit associated with the Catholic Madonna known as Mater Salvatoris, may also have made a visit to Alourdes' tiny altar chamber while the lieutenant squatted on the low red wooden stool. If she did, she did not mince words with a man who neglected his mother and rejected invitations to sleep in her house and eat her food. Ezili Dantò can deliver frightening diatribes.

Whatever its specifics, the treatment went on for some months, with hiatuses when the lieutenant was not able to be away from the base in

Virginia. In the course of things, Alourdes got to know her client well and when he came for treatments, she offered him coffee and they sat at the upstairs kitchen table before descending to the basement where the proud soldier had to hunch and squat in order to squeeze himself into the presence of the healing spirits. I asked about him in one of the regular phone calls that went from Cambridge to Brooklyn during the summer of 1984. Alourdes reported a recent conversation she had had with him:

I talk to him real good. Oh sweetheart, I talk to him. I tell him to forgive his mother. She lie to him and tell him that other man his father. But she say that cause she ashamed. So he got to forgive his mother and forgive that man who tell him, "I am not your father." Forgive him, cause he hurt and angry. I tell him, "Even he angry at you and your mother, that not your fault. You was just a child. No child responsible for that. Maybe at first your mother lie to him too. Maybe she say 'I'm pregnant for you,' when it really not his baby. But . . . maybe she hungry. Maybe she got to do that so he could feed her all that time she pregnant. Maybe he not know you was not his baby til after you born and then he hurt and angry. Don't judge her. Women got to do all kind of thing." I know . . . cause when I got Robert [the third of Alourdes' four children and the last one born in Haiti] I tell somebody "I pregnant for you," but it not true. What I going to do? I got to eat or that baby going to die! I tell him, "You got to love your mother . . . do everything to see she happy before she dead . . . she an old lady now . . . send her money . . . go see her." But you know who I hate, Karen? Who the bum? That man who go to England! He the bum! Cause maybe he find out she pregnant and maybe he think that going to be expensive. So he just run away. And you know what? He a racist. He got to go marry a white woman. Black woman not good enough. Ehh!

The course of treatment had been decided on. Healing, forgiveness, and reconnection were the desired ends (as well as disconnection and moral censure for the biological father and his family) and, undoubtedly, Alourdes worked on these goals through her usual combination of prayers and charms and visits from the spirits who would variously tease, empathize, and deliver stern lectures.

To ask whether this clarification of the nature of the problem, when it finally did come, or the cure itself, when that finally was effected, should be credited to Alourdes or to the spirits is to ask a confusing question from the Vodou point of view. Those who serve the spirits do not make such neat distinctions between the person and the *lwa* (spirit) who resides "in" or "around the head" all the time and who "rides" the back of the neck during possession.¹⁰

Nearly a year later the name of Alourdes' sad and ungainly soldier friend came up in a conversation. "What ever happened to him?", I asked. "Did he get his promotion?" Alourdes responded in a vague and distracted fashion. She thought he did get it. She was not sure. Maybe

he did not. "But," and here she brightened up and turned her full attention to me, "when he in New York now, he stay with his mother. His mother the only family he got. That man who raise him dead long time. He don't come to see me no more but he okay now. Don't you worry, sweetheart."

Heating Up: Healing in Haitian Vodou

The word "power" (*pouvwa* in Haitian Creole) is rarely used to refer to the ability to heal. In fact it would hint of associations with malevolent magic if someone were to say of Alourdes, "li genyen pouvwa," she has power. Yet many do say of her, "li genyen konesans," she has knowledge. In Vodou circles *konesans* refers to sacred knowledge, the knowledge of how to heal. It is a word with a wide referential field including complex information about herbs, arcane teachings (including what we might call theology), and, most importantly, open channels of communication with the ancestors and the spirits which provide information as to what is going on at the deepest levels of a person or even what will happen in the future.

"Heating up" is another term used in relation to healing. It is always used in an active mode, as in the following example: "The spirits will not come to help us until the ceremony is *byen echofe*," well heated up. It is only when the singers, dancers, and drummers at a Vodou ceremony have moved beyond the fatigue and preoccupations of their difficult lives and are performing enthusiastically, drawing on a spiritual energy reserve tank¹¹, that the spirits will be enticed to "ride" one of the faithful. Yet it is not only large groups that are able to heat things up sufficiently to bring about transformation. Alourdes' own energy can be similarly raised and heated by gazing into a candle flame when she wishes to call one of the spirits for help in performing a treatment. And if charms are expected to work over time, they also must be periodically "heated up" by being focused on and prayed over. Often a candle is lighted by the charm or "point" as part of this process.

With the concepts of "knowledge" and "heating up" we move close to the root metaphors that shape the Haitian understanding of healing power. *Konesans* is a wide-ranging and mostly non-specific thing. Even those few priests and priestesses who have "the gift of eyes," highly developed intuitive powers, know that this knowledge, like the energy that enables a manual laborer to dance all night, comes from sources beyond themselves and is not something to be counted on in every situation. Thus a Vodou healer can never really be said to "own" such knowledge. Furthermore heat, even though its presence in the body is a

basic life sign and its transformative presence in the hearth makes cooking, eating, and therefore survival possible, is also an evanescent thing. It must be sought again and again, rekindled and recycled. Waxing and waning is part of the nature of heat and so, if healing is accomplished through heating, then it is never appropriate to think of the healer as "having" healing power in the way one can "have" a piece of property. The most that can be said of a Vodou priestess such as Alourdes is that she has mastered some techniques for enticing the heat to rise. In working with the soldier, Alourdes' initial problem was to heat him up enough for the real sources of pain and blockage to rise to the surface.

In Vodou, heat is life energy and it is intimately connected to death, humor, and sexuality. I do not have the leisure here to support these connections by teasing them out of the intricate details of ritual, although this can be done and presents the most convincing case since there is no scriptural canon or written doctrine in Vodou. I can make a few general comments, however, which will show the connections on a broad scale. The easiest place to begin is with Gède. This spirit is guardian of the cemetery; he is a trickster, and the dance performed for him is a mime of sexual intercourse. During the long and taxing rituals for the Vodou spirits, Gède appears in the interstices, between dramatic and somber possessions that touch deep emotional chords in those gathered to "serve the spirits." His role is not unlike that of a cheerleader who entertains the crowd and gets it revved up for the second half of the game. He also appears at the end of ceremonies, in the early morning hours, when the social and personal wounds cauterized during the long night of spirit contact must be covered with the soothing salve of humor so the participants can return protected to jobs and family. Gède was the humorous but effective medicine most likely applied early in the soldier's cure. Its purpose was to soothe him, but also to energize him, to shake him up.

The word *balanse*, to balance, has special meanings in Vodou circles. It refers to an active balancing as when something or someone is swung equally far between two poles. When sacred objects are taken off the Vodou altars and introduced into the ritual action, they must first be "heated up." To do this the ritual assistant is directed to *balanse*, dance, with the object in a side to side swinging motion. The word is also used in wider contexts. A Vodou priest once told me about the death of a mutual friend and, in commenting on the grieving family, he said "Gède, Master of the Cemetery, came to the house and balanced it," i.e. sent the household reeling.

Energy is what is sought in Vodou healing ceremonies, but like electricity this energy can be constructive or destructive. It all depends

on how it is used.¹² The analogy of electricity is useful and yet, from another perspective, it hides something of the wisdom of the system. Those who serve the spirits do not understand the life energy they work with as morally indifferent so much as they see it as actually created from clash and contradiction. And death is the biggest contradiction of all.

Death and sexuality work together to raise life energy. Without death, there would be no point to sex and birthing. Death and humor go together because humor is the only appropriate and strong response to what is both dreadful and inevitable. Gède's is not an easy dismissive humor based on a false sense of superiority, but one that arises when a person hits rock bottom and rebounds because, put simply, there is nothing else to do. As a result of their cruel history of slavery, oppression, and poverty (Haiti is the poorest country in the western hemisphere), Haitians individually and collectively have repeatedly hit rock bottom. The humor and energetic creativity that characterize their culture, and particularly the Vodou dimensions of it, come from acceptance of the conditions of life. "Moun fèt pou mouri," people are born to die, Haitians are fond of saying with a shrug of the shoulders.

Vodou is based on an open-eyed acceptance of the fact of death and, in a related way, all attempts at healing in Vodou begin with the recognition that there are limits to what human knowledge, effort, and will can accomplish. For example, the first determination that a healer makes is whether a problem is "from god" or "from the spirits." God, Bondye, is the distant and omnipotent creator. The spirits are god's "angels" or emissaries in the world. Healers cannot change the mood or will of god. If a problem is discovered to be from god, the healer simply leaves it alone. But healers can feed the spirits, coax and cajole them into being more gentle and forgiving with one of their "children." In the second stage of the soldier's treatment, this is what Alourdes had to do with the spirit whose ill will had been set in motion by the charm "Auntie" buried under the tree in her courtyard.

The Vodou understanding of the multiple dimensions of the human soul parallels the limits the healer faces in problems from god. In addition to several other facets of soul (including the *gro bonanj* that is displaced during possession) there is also *zetwal*, star, a person's fate. At birth, the larger outline of a human life is already determined from beginning to end. All maneuvering, whether it is that of a Vodou healer such as Alourdes or of an ordinary individual, is done within the confines of what is fated to be. Each client is thus a given, someone unique who simply is what he or she is. Clients of Vodou healing do not lose personal history or social identity, and this may partially explain why, at

all stages of the cure, the patient is an active participant. The lieutenant from Virginia helped define his problem through his responses to questions during the card reading; he participated in the manufacture of the baths and charms designed to prompt healing; and he engaged in conversation with Alourdes as well as with the Vodou spirits who were called in the course of his healing.

Modern Vodou healers acknowledge other limits to their powers. While most are skilled and effective herbalists, when certain symptoms are present, Alourdes and the hundreds of others like her who serve urban communities where there are scientific medical resources available will recommend that a patient see a medical doctor for x-rays or antibiotics.

Because Mama Lola operates out of a healing system based on an acceptance of limits, she is able to handle the power to heal in a flexible way that is neither grasping nor controlling. In curing the soldier, Alourdes employed a range of powers. She used "the gift of eyes," what I have been calling intuition, for her diagnosis of his problem. She used personal experience and empathy to understand the situation. She drew on community norms for judgment against the irresponsible biological father. She used herbs and charms. She also called on the spirits. Spirit possession when combined with her other skills provided range and flexibility in the postures she could take in relation to her client. At one time she could be a friend whose own experience of having a child in the womb and no man willing to take responsibility for it became the resource for wise counsel and deep compassion for the soldier. At another time she could be an awesome spirit, such as Ezili Dantò, censuring behavior and dictating the terms on which help would be given. This fluidity of roles means that any power a Vodou healer such as Alourdes exercises over a client is applied in a specific place and time, for a specific purpose. Her power as a healer does not adhere to her as a permanent attribute nor does it generalize itself to all her social relations.

Furthermore, because healing power in Vodou cannot be controlled and owned, neither can the object of that power be confined and controlled. Physical problems are taken seriously (and they are treated), but problems are not reduced to their physical manifestations. In Vodou there is a flow between the material and the non-material, the inside and the outside, the intrapsychic and the person, society, and history. Charms of the sort described in the story of the soldier's cure are examples of the internal externalized, of the temporary concretizing of a problem in order that it can be addressed directly. The "good luck bath" is an example of the reverse where an olfactory statement about how

things *should* be is manufactured, administered, and breathed in by a patient for a period of three days.

In sum, healing power, the process of applying that power, and the problems to which it is applied are all characterized by fluidity and flexibility. And, as I have argued above, the power can be held so lightly because those who orchestrate this power are neither denying their own or another's ultimate vulnerability, nor are they pretending there are no limits to their skills. Facing and accepting (though not surrendering in front of) the givens of the human condition and the limitations on one's own power is the source of the Vodou power to heal, just as death is the source of Gède's humor and drive to propagate life. Acceptance of the rules of the game, the clash of opposites that is life, enhances life energy, heats things up, and heals.

Conclusions

The point of these thoughts is, of course, not to convince anyone to throw over Western scientific medicine and attempt to introduce traditional Vodou healing into the mainstream of North American culture. The purpose of the exercise lies in using the stark contrast with Haitian Vodou to unearth the property metaphor deep in western medicine (and western civilization in general) and to examine the tendencies to parcel out, fence in, control, and defend which are fostered in the medical arena by this root metaphor. In Western medicine, unlike Vodou healing, the patient's body is fenced off from his or her identity, history, and social context. We have separate healers to deal with each piece of territory. The physical-psychological-social-historical-spiritual disease cycle is similarly broken apart and parceled out among the experts with few persons paying attention to the interrelations. Within medicine, those specialties which of necessity deal with the interrelations have the least prestige. Think of environmental studies, nutrition, public health, and preventive medicine in general. Furthermore, as a result of being divided, conquered, and colonized, the patient is rendered passive in the curing process.

None of these points is new, nor is it news that women have been especially strongly controlled within such a control-oriented system. If Friedrich Engels was right in connecting the rise of women's oppression with the development of the notion of property¹³, then we can appreciate why women have had so much trouble with western scientific medicine. This comparative exercise may make a modest addition to the feminist critique of medicine in demonstrating that otherwise diffuse insights into the nature of western medicine are knit together by the

hidden cultural metaphor that defines patients and diseases as pieces of property subject to ownership, use, and alteration.

The more substantial contribution may come in realizing that, unlike the fluid and flexible "heat" in Haitian Vodou, the power to heal in western medicine is also treated like a piece of prime real estate. Doctors own their power as if it were a thing and control access to it through the medical fraternities. One result of this unarticulated assumption about the nature of healing power is that it leaves doctors with a prestigious but rigid and greatly diminished human role. Doctors are required to deny significant portions of their humanity in order to function according to accepted standards. Doctors cannot bring their broader life experiences, their humor, or their own embodiedness into the healing process except as "bedside manner," and that is stage management having nothing directly to do with curing. Furthermore, the role of the western medical doctor, once defined and controlled, becomes the possession of the person with the diploma, a permanent attribute of that person. This in turn causes the power of the doctor while actually doctoring—a situation in which he or she has awesome power over the vulnerable patient—to generalize itself to other areas of life where it manifests as class status and economic bounty. Along this line, it is interesting that Alourdes strictly follows the unwritten rule of Vodou healing that the healer should never take undue profit from curative work.

Western medical consciousness is carefully controlled like the role of the doctor. Medicine is a science and science enshrines reason, a focused and consistent use of the mind that eschews wider and deeper though less controllable ways of knowing. The supposed universal claim of the well-reasoned argument, its ability to detach itself from the specificity of the person who thought it and function in an equally powerful way no matter where it is applied, is another attempt to reify a power and establish control over it. Western civilization as a whole therefore fears so-called altered states of consciousness (altered from what norm?) of the sort that are central to Vodou possession-trance. For example, while there are substantive reasons for our wariness of "recreational drugs" and alcohol, it is also clear that we fear them because they make people inconsistent and unreasonable. We even apologize when we have a cold for "not being ourselves today." It may well be that one of the reasons Vodou has attracted so many negative stereotypes in this culture is that, in heating things up, it brings out the many and not always consistent persona that inhabit each of us. Yet when trance and other altered states of consciousness are discussed in the academic and scientific communities, the question that seems to need answering is why some have chosen to spend time and effort exploring them. Rarely does anyone turn

the question around and ask why we, in the western world, have narrowed our consciousness to such a pure and unflickering beam of light. Erika Bourguignon's work seems to indicate that most groups at most times and in most places have utilized altered states in ways central to their societies.¹⁴ It would seem that our passion for consistent and controlled knowing is more anomalous in the larger human picture than is Alourdes' ability to move in and out of trance states in which spirit entities speak and act through her.

In Vodou healing, the power is not so controlled. Healing power is an evanescent thing raised for the moment through the humor and strength that lie on the other side of an honest facing of death and one's own more short-range limitations. This sense of limits is exactly what we do not have in western medicine where the doctor is a superhero and every disease is an enemy just about to be conquered, if it has not already submitted to the power of medicine to enforce change. In discussions about abortion and euthanasia as well as in such celebrated cases as that of Baby Jane Doe (an infant born with serious physical deformities), western culture reveals itself struggling but largely unable to integrate death into life or to acknowledge limits to the power of medicine.

Western civilization has generated a great deal of power and property. This has given us the opportunity to create the illusion that we can avoid the harsh limits that have become the source of strength and healing in places like Haiti. Such a statement is not intended to glorify Haitians, who are as human as any other group, but rather to point to the need for a kind of wisdom in our medical establishments that, among third-world liberation communities, has been called the "epistemological privilege of the oppressed."

One of the reasons it is so difficult for Western medical doctors to face and accept such major limits as death is that we have cut the healing arts off from spirituality, which would provide the only framework large enough and safe enough to make the confrontation possible. When religion and healing are separated, both appear to lose. The humorless, de-sexed, and death-denying monotheism that we currently pursue in western culture may well have parallels with the lonely beacon of reason that we follow in scientific thought. But I will leave that connection for others to explore.

Feminists who have found this comparison of healing in Vodou and in western medicine helpful may wish to ponder the formative powers of the property metaphor at greater length. When we fight the medical establishment for "control of our bodies" or for "control of reproduction," when we identify "our bodies" with "our selves," even when we

address a misogynist society by declaring our intention to "take back the night," we sound more as if we are battling over property than changing the terms of the debate. Changing root metaphors is not easy, but we might begin the task by taking a clue from Alourdes and attempting an act of radical empathy with those who wield the power that damages us. It seems to me that it is time for feminists to examine the ways in which we demonize men and male behavior. For a while we have needed to do that to gather strength and reach clarity, but the easy caricaturing of men which passes for humor in some (certainly not all) feminist circles is a thin and brittle humor far removed from the richness of Gède's laugh. If we could look at one male-controlled institution, the medical establishment for example, and see through the heroic antics and controlling ethos to the genuine human hunger for life and life energy from which they spring, then we might be able to do what Alourdes did. She treated the lieutenant from Virginia by exposing his hunger for prestige, power, and independence as what it truly was, a hunger for human connection.

Notes

1. Among the best examples of this work are G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes Toward Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) and Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *For Her Own Good: 150 years of the Experts' Advice to Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1978).
2. See for example, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1973).
3. For further insight into market women see Sidney W. Mintz, "The Employment of Capital by Market Women in Haiti," in *Capital, Saving and Credit in Peasant Societies*, edited by Raymond Firth and B. S. Yamey (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1964).
4. This point needs to be qualified by recognition of the large numbers of homosexual priests who have genuine power and prestige within Vodou. This is somewhat surprising given the homophobia observable in the larger Haitian culture. However this is only a partial qualification since many of these same priests would be more precisely called bisexual. They father children and have traditional families over which they exercise more or less traditional forms of power.
5. Alourdes is not yet certain if she wishes her full name to be known. I hope no one will see my use of only her first name in this article as a sign of disrespect.
6. A "bath" is applied in an upward direction, starting at the feet and ending with the head, when it is designed to enhance good luck and in a downward direction when it is supposed to remove bad luck. Leaving the bath on the skin for three days is in my view (I have taken many "baths" myself) a powerful form of aroma therapy. All are pungent. One lives with the smells, waking and sleeping, for a long enough period of time for them to address the deep self, more technically, the limbic mind where the sense of smell is located.
7. Punitive magic, something not nearly as central to Vodou as its image in North America would lead us to believe, is most often carried out between families or groups. But its target, intentional or de facto, is often the youngest and most vulnerable member of that family. This explains Auntie's charm being directed against the boy even though the quarrel had been between herself and the boy's mother.
8. Possession in Haitian Vodou is not a matter of putting on an act or assuming a ritual posture. It is a deep trance state which most often leaves the one possessed unable to remember anything that happened while being ridden by the spirit. It is a fascinating state from a psychological perspective because the spirit will often contradict and even, at times, severely chastise the very person being ridden.
9. Ezili Dantò is the woman who bears children. Her iconography and possession-performance work through all the permutations of mother-child relations from the most fiercely defensive to the most fiercely rejecting. Dantò is a member of the Petro pantheon of spirits, one of two major groups recognized in urban Vodou. Petro spirits are not evil but they are recognized as having "hot" temperaments and uncompromising standards.
10. The question as to whether persons and spirits are truly separate and distinct is answered in paradoxical ways in Vodou. Beliefs surrounding possession trance and the struggle of the *gro bonanj* with the possessing spirit point to a separation. Yet initiation rituals simultaneously "feed the spirits in the head" of the person and establish a repository for them outside the person. Also, when the ceremony is performed for an ancestor that calls his or her spirit "up from the water" and establishes it on the family altar, that entity is called both by the name of the ancestor and by the name of the chief Vodou spirit with whom he or she worked. Thus reference may be made to "Marie's Dantò" or to "Pierre's Gède."
11. Although the terminology is mine, the notion of a spiritual energy reserve tank is one that is actually quite developed in Vodou. In Vodou belief, one of the dimensions of the human soul is called the *ti bonanj*, little guardian angel. For a long time I had trouble understanding what this was. Then Alourdes gave me the following example of how it works: "When you walking a long way or you carrying something very heavy . . . and you know you not going to make it . . . then the *ti bonanj* take over so you can do what you got to do."
12. The notion that power has no moral direction of its own and thus can be used either constructively or destructively may account in part for the bad reputation that Vodou has in North America. There are instances of punitive magic being carried out by Vodou priests and priestesses but there is also a strong belief in the overall interconnectedness of things and events which makes them rare. The use of the will to damage another necessarily produces an equally damaging counter-effect on the one manufacturing the charm unless that person is either righteous beyond a doubt or very well protected.
13. F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972).
14. I believe this to be a fair conclusion to draw from Erika Bourguignon's research even if it must by necessity be an impressionistic one. The reader should know that Bourguignon herself is far too cautious a statistician and researcher to claim to have actually proven anything as sweeping as this statement. See Erika Bourguignon, *Possession* (San Francisco: Chandler and Sharp, 1976) and "World Distribution and Patterns of Possession States," in *Trance and Possession States*, edited by Raymond Prince (Montreal: R. M. Bucke Memorial Society, 1968).