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Mary Grace Albanese, *Black Women and the Energies of Resistance in Nineteenth-Century Haitian and American Literature*

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Mary Grace Albanese, *Black Women and the Energies of Resistance in Nineteenth-Century Haitian and American Literature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture, 2024, 193 p., ISBN: 978-1-009-31424-4, \$110.

- 1 Haiti, once named San Domingo by its colonizers, disrupts Western conceptions of how power is racialized and gendered. Empowered, disempowered: this simplistic logic can be said to overdetermine the popular understanding of political possibilities. In its most literal and material manifestation, one might make links between the power outages experienced by modern Haiti and the overpolicing of Black communities including the Haitian diaspora during the 2019 Brooklyn blackout: different scales of ongoing antiblack and colonial transnational violences and structural deprivations since the Haitian Revolution. The story of Haiti becomes a sadly predictable one of extraction, commodification, and deficiency. Mary Grace Albanese's *Black Women and the Energies of Resistance in Nineteenth-Century Haitian and American Literature*, however, uses these opening examples to reframe the question of power to a focus on *energy*, refusing the usual developmental and capitalist ideologies that undergird the energy humanities to implicitly reify the hierarchy of the Global North over the Global South. As Albanese writes, "Black political and spiritual life has long theorized and practiced energy not as an extractable commodity coerced from human stockpiles but instead as a form through which to reclaim one's own body, organize political labor, and work toward emancipatory political futures" (5). Here energy is no mere synonym for power:

attending to the energy practices of Black women and gender-variant peoples, the monograph shifts away from the standard Marxist and Foucauldian understandings of power and builds upon the foundational work of Colin Dayan in order to center the Vodou cosmological formulation of energy as both spiritual and political potential.

- 2 What does it look like for nineteenth-century American literary studies to reckon seriously with radical Black feminist theorizing and scholarship? *Black Women and the Energies of Resistance in Nineteenth-Century Haitian and American Literature* presents itself in clear indebtedness to scholars like Marlene Daut who have reoriented our perspectives on the Haitian Revolution away from the overrepresentation of heroic cis men. Yet in particular, I want to address how this monograph engages the challenges raised by Hortense Spillers's and Saidiya Hartman's interventions which have been unevenly taken up by the field despite decades during which they could have percolated into wider practice. The titular focus on Black women does not presume a bioessentialized Black female subject; instead, throughout this project Albanese offers a nuanced exploration of the processes of gendering and ungendering for Black women, gender-variant people, and men. Indeed, in this regard Albanese follows the lead of academics working in pre-twentieth century periods like Jessica Marie Johnson—and especially C. Riley Snorton on racialized gender through Black trans studies—showing the ever-trenchant influence of Hortense Spillers's iconic 1980s essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe." Similarly, the influences of Saidiya Hartman's "Venus in Two Acts" and other writings about Black women in the archive permeates Albanese's methodology in the ways in which she discusses silences, traces, the emancipatory potential of minor modes, while being wary of institutional histories and state projects.
- 3 This is a project that plainly voices its ethical commitments and makes clear the urgency of its stakes. For instance, Albanese addresses her deliberate use of Haitian terms in Kreyòl, not French. Perhaps, however, there is a missed opportunity to fully articulate what it means for nonblack scholars to draw upon Black studies and work on Black archives. Such a moment is teased in the second chapter on midwifery when Albanese reflects on how the work of midwives might act as a methodology for the archive: "As a scholar, my place here is propositional and medial, proximate but marked by difference and distance," where the critic, much like the midwife, engages in "a network of mutual care" in the process of "a mode of nonlinear birthing" (48-49). I underlined this section with vigour: this insight would shine even more greatly if it were positioned more prominently.
- 4 Across five chapters Albanese galvanizes arcs between Haiti and its diaspora, from the late eighteenth century, clustered in the nineteenth, to the twenty-first and back again. Chapter 1 lays out the necessary worldbuilding of Vodou as practice, philosophy, and cosmology where energy operates as a pivotal concept. Here the chapter brings into conversation Dayan and Daut alongside Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley and M. Jacqui Alexander to weave together how Vodou defies the extractive cisheteronormative logics of colonialism and the plantation. The extensive exegesis of this intellectual tradition is necessary to set up the queerness of the Ezili pantheon, the ceremony of Bwa Kayiman, and, therefore, how the Haitian Revolution itself disrupted normative colonial gender and the Enlightenment theories about individualism even for the famous men upheld as its leaders.
- 5 The undermining of the singular unified sense of self is crucial to Chapter 2's investigation of New Orleans's Marie Laveau as person and as cultural icon in what

Saidiya Hartman calls the subjunctive mood. Critical evaluations of over a century's worth of racist and reparative scholarship on Laveau sit alongside considerations of writings by George Washington Cable, Charles Chesnutt, and Zora Neale Hurston's formative fieldwork into Hoodoo. This section concludes with Albanese's compelling reading of her multiplicity, her supposed daughter/double Laveau II, and the unnamed network of other occult practitioners of birthwork and abortion—as the generative energies of non-linear mothering and care. These networks of care extend into Chapter 3's attention to the first known work of African American short fiction, the anonymously-authored "Theresa, A Haytien Tale" (1828), as a case study of the internationalist concerns of the newspaper *Freedom's Journal*. A take on the Haitian Revolution that foregrounds the revolutionary and spiritual struggles of an all-female family, the story undoes the presumed gender binary of nineteenth-century African American literature exemplified by the dyad of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs: playing with crossdressing against the French, heroic women of action, the absence of fathers and husbands, and the emphasis on intimate spirituality which leads to a prophetic female futurity whose divine energies produce not a child, but political sovereignty. These women echo the many faces of the Ezili pantheon while also providing a political and spiritual rebuttal to the whiteness of Lee Edelman's famous critique of reproductive futurity.

- 6 Chapter 4 presents perhaps the greatest challenge to the project since it promises a new perspective on Sojourner Truth, who looms as such a well-studied significant figure, posing similar methodological obstacles as the study of Marie Laveau. Albanese argues that Truth, who never left the United States, is an exemplary cosmopolitan subject of the networked Atlantic world, creolized much like the Dutch festival of Pinkster as celebrated by Black Dutch communities in New York and New Jersey which involves the iconography and cultural memory of Black kingship in Haiti. To me, the most compelling part of this chapter is the presentation of Sojourner Truth's eponymous wandering as anticipatory of twentieth- and twenty-first century Caribbean philosophy such as Sylvia Wynter's theory about Black women as demonic grounds and the Négritude concept of fugitivity informed by marronage, not only the substantiveness of *grand*, but also the ephemerality of *petit*. Truth's famed maternity must be reframed since she had no children once emancipated; she can be seen as Grand Nanny, the famous maroon, redefining the care associated with maternity towards spiritual and political forms of care.
- 7 To more traditionally literary sensibilities Chapter 5 may present the strongest argument of the monograph: Albanese rereads Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood* via Haiti and Hopkins's own anti-imperialist writings and editorship for *The Colored American* and *New Era*. P. Gabrielle Foreman's concept of simultextuality plays an important role as Albanese attends to the novel's names, symbols, and allusions that would have been legible to the readership as associations to Haiti such as Makandal's use of poison. The chapter tracks three generations of women usually read as minor characters, Hannah, Mira, and Dianthe, who subvert sexual abjection through reworking the dubious science of mesmerism into liberatory Haitian energy practices linked to Vodou. These women's engagement with rootwork, visions of the future, and fearless adoption of violent resistance undercut the bourgeois respectability of the Cult of True Womanhood.

- 8 It only makes sense that the coda of *Black Women and the Energies of Resistance in Nineteenth-Century Haitian and American Literature* turns to award-winning Afrofuturist writer N.K. Jemisin's "The Effluent Engine" because the short story offers a queer, feminist vision of revolutionary Haiti and New Orleans powered by steampunk. Jemisin paints a picture of two queer women, Haitian and African American, joined in political solidarity to help grow a collective vision of steampunk technology leveraged for a liberatory future that imagines government, spirituality, farms, and factories in harmony. This speculative history of energy redefines modernity and was published two years after the earthquake that made Haiti prey to disaster capitalism under the predatory aegis of "relief." If the conclusion sometimes sounded to me a bit repetitive, I attributed that to the strength of the book's reiterated arguments which make clear the electric potential of those gendered energy practices, often overlooked for their premodern queer and feminine connotations, towards Haiti's place leading the charge in the vanguard of countermodernity.
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