

Kate Ramsey. 2011. *Vodou and Power in Haiti: The Spirits and the Law*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press. 425 pp. ISBN: 0-226-70379-7.

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Simply put, Kate Ramsey's study of the legalities surrounding the policing of *vodou* in Haiti since the inception of the nation to the late 1990s is, in a word, magisterial. Meticulously researched and documented, Ramsey conducts a close textual and investigative study of material that includes court documents, travelogues, historical and ethnographic studies, as well as some of her own and others' fieldwork, to expose the ways in which *vodou* has been systematically regimented. Those intent upon eradicating, manipulating or enforcing certain forms of peasant expressions of self-empowerment, argued primarily against the so-called "primitive" nature of peasant spiritual/ritual practices, while shaping the discourses surrounding such rituals as well as the nature of, and occasion for, their performance. Not a study on the nature of *vodou* itself, nor on how *vodouisants* participated in their own self-fashioning or resistance to such incursions upon their lives/practices, what Ramsey realizes is an intense and focused discussion of the ways in which the Haitian peasant class has been exclusively and purposefully positioned as the focal point for repression and control. What emerges through the text is an understanding of how, as Ramsey concludes, "[l]ong figured as modernity's constituted outside, sorcery belief ought rather to be understood as its internal production" (256). In other words, interdictions against *vodou* ought not to be understood as a means of ridding Haiti and Haitians of *actual* ways of being hampering their access to modernity but, rather, as the very *effect* of this refused access.

The most impressive aspect of Ramsey's study is the time she takes to critically assess the shifting nomenclature around peasant activities related to ritual, spiritual beliefs, and agency. These shifts reflect, in jurisprudence, an inability to grasp the content of *vodou* while also demonstrating a lack of true concern with its true meaning(s). As Ramsey explains in her introduction, her focus on the prohibition of "*sortilèges* (spells)" then "*pratiques superstitieuses* (superstitious practices)" from 1835 to 1987, explores a number of central questions, and, in particular, the "role...these laws play[ed] in producing the object of "*le vaudoux*" or "voodoo," particularly in foreign imaginings about Haiti" (1). She explores such questions within the context of Haiti's formation as "the

nation born of the world's only successful slave revolution" and hence "the preeminent locus for nineteenth-century debates about whether peoples of African descent had the capacity for self-government" (1), debates that came to center on the evidence of African belief-systems as a means to deny the latter.

In her first chapter, then, Ramsey argues that though the Code Noir of 1685 did not itself interdict "African-based ritual practice" (24), by the 1750s, however, as the population's mixed composition also gave rise to increased resistance to French rule and the plantocracy system, prosecutions of those suspected of divination or sorcery increased because "the reputation of spiritual and magical empowerment...threatened law and order if such figures then emboldened others" (32). Slave gatherings and ritual practices became increasingly proscribed and invigilated though "*le vaudoux*" itself was never mentioned in the various edicts produced through 1785 (40). Thereafter, "*le vaudoux*," including "dances and all nocturnal assemblies" become targeted, even by Toussaint Louverture's ordinance (48-49). Interestingly, only Dessalines' 1805 constitution provided freedom of religion or worship for all. If prior to the revolution, *vodou* groups were the basis for organization to overthrow colonial powers, afterwards, they represented a threat to the political order. Chapter Two expands on the former by tracing the evolution of interdictions against peasant organizing through the nineteenth century in which the rhetoric of control becomes part of the discourse of "civilizing" non-European/Western populations. This chapter is interesting for its development of a parallel concern to uncouple "continuities and commonalities between institutional Catholic practices and popular ritual ways" which gave way to the "*campagne anti-superstitieuse*" (Ramsey 56) or anti-superstition campaigns of the Catholic Church. Ramsey pays particular attention to conflicting reports of the "Bizonton" affair of 1864 (83). Her point is not to uncover what did or did not occur but how interpretations of the case served to perpetuate certain notions about the policing of the peasantry. According to Ramsey, reports of the event only reveal that the *fear* of human sacrifice for ritualistic purpose rather than the crime itself (murder) took precedence, so that the criminality of peasants or members of the underclasses is assumed *a priori* as derivative of occult beliefs rather than criminality. Justice, then, serves not the victim of crime but the fears of those who seek to enforce it. Following the Bizoton affair, interdictions against "*le vaudoux*" and hence against "vestiges of slavery and barbarity" were pursued, with African beliefs being situated as the vestiges of the past rather than the mechanisms of coloniality. Here, Ramsey is careful to work through the evolving slippage of terms used in legal language to define the State's understanding of what comprised *vodou* practices. What emerges, in fact, is a

continuous lack of clarity over these terms, on how to identify and thus interdict illegal activity.

The 1835 Haitian Code Pénal identified “les sortilèges” in a manner of ways in two articles, listing “magical” objects such as “*macandals*,” the trades of fortune-telling, divination, dream and card reading as punishable with incarceration and fines, and the threat of the confiscation of material lending themselves to the afore-mentioned, i.e., instruments or costumes. As heads of state became increasingly concerned with Haiti’s viability as a nation, since it had been locked out of global trade by France, control of the masses and attempts to demonstrate the “civilized” state of the population by suppressing indigenous/African expressions of identification became all the more strident, even though the term “*vaudou*” was largely absent from this discourse (Ramsey 66). Simultaneously, the State sought, through its bans of ritual practices and gatherings, to intensify peasant labor (Ramsey 67) which was perceived as being undermined by such practices, practices which were also the focal point of kinship groups who were also, since the Revolution, landowners. The State therefore sought to loosen the bonds between peasant landowners, the lands they worked, and the ways in which the land was itself inextricably bound to the rituals of assemblage dating from the period of enslavement and “*lakou*” systems that developed around them. The degree to which laws attempt to perform a “civilizing” force becomes the focal point of the penultimate chapter in which the neo-colonial presence of the American Occupation shifts the nature of the legal interdictions further in this direction.

Though the US military advanced that they were restoring “order” in Haiti, Ramsey’s close examination of testimony during senate hearings held in 1921 to investigate allegations of US brutality during the Occupation, reveals rather, that “imperial fantasies...became an alibi for the brutal forms that the counterinsurgency took” (133). In recounting some of the senate hearing testimonies, Ramsey concludes that the marines more often than not projected “savagery” onto the occupants in order to justify inhumane actions and reprisals against them. Stories about savagery rather than any evidence of its existence take the place of reality. On the heels of the Occupation, and thereafter, telling stories about Haiti and equating its national identity with the US-fabricated notions of “voodoo” becomes the order of the day. Ramsey’s final chapter thus turns to the post-Occupation period, in which “the law itself [became] a space for cultural nationalist re-evaluation” (183). She notes that for two summer months in 1935 Haiti suspended its penal prohibition against *sortilèges* as the hands of power shifted from Boyer to Vincent. During the period of the suspension, a renewed interest in the roots of the founding of the nation in *vaudou* had been re-asserted while many tools

of *voudou* were confiscated and found their way to American museums where they remain to this day. Under Vincent, however, a need to build Haiti's reputation abroad became again paramount and the old need to distance Haiti from folk practices, including ritual, was re-asserted.

This brief overview of the text cannot do justice to Ramsey's meticulous reading of historical documents as she pieces together the ways in which the policing of "magic," "sorcery," "vodou," "ritual," "sortilèges," "vaudou," "voodoo," details continuous and invasive attempts to control the Haitian peasantry. Given its precision of detail, one wonders why Ramsey did not extend the study to include a consideration of the treatment of *vodou* beyond the Duvalier years, and, even, since the 2010 earthquake, but I suspect that the text will inspire study of ensuing periods as well as considerations of how the policing of Haitian spirituality has also, perhaps, altered its manifestations through time in ways that have yet to be measured or clearly understood.

Monique-Adelle Callahan. 2011. *Between the Lines: Literary Transnationalism and African American Poetics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 208 pp. ISBN-10: 0199743061.

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Monique-Adelle Callahan's book, *Between the Lines: Literary Transnationalism and African American Poetics* is a transnational, tri-lingual, and translational comparative study of an African American, Afro-Cuban, and Afro-Brazilian female poets. Callahan examines the language of the poetry of resistance, contestation, and construction of new identities within the liminal spaces allowed *Afrodescendentes* in the Americas. The three poets, she argues, engage the politics of racial transnationalism and trans-hemispheric struggles to define the globalized struggles of African Diaspora peoples for racial freedom and gender equality. Callahan historicizes her reading of the three poets within the immediate (post)slavery cultural and historical background of Cuba, USA, and Brazil, and argues that African struggles against their enslavement undermined European hegemonic narratives of their discovery and conquest of the Americas. She engages race and sex/gender theories very briefly to unpack the socio-political, cultural,