Vodou songs are an important art form in Haitian culture, and an essential part of Vodou ceremonies. Some families pass down collections of songs that honor lwa, and some Vodouists even write their own. While Haitian immigrants are not afraid to incorporate aspects of other cultures into their lives, songs are significant to Haitian refugees and immigrants because they help keep the roots of their religion and culture alive. The collection of songs by J.L., a seventeen-year old Haitian refuge living in the United States, is not only a remarkable collection of personal and familial Vodou songs. These songs also possess a psychological aspect; the reader is provided with insight into this young male’s perspective of the world, and we are given a more individualistic view of Vodou. J.L.’s commentary and portrayal of women is also incredibly diverse, and adds an intriguing splash of color to the portrait of his religion and life provided by these songs. J.L. speaks of great compassion for his mother, yet also makes uncouth sexual references, and doesn’t speak so highly of other women. The Virgin Mary is praised and Èzili (mostly Èzili Dantò), a female lwa who takes many forms, is spoken of as strong, powerful and awe-inspiring, but also portrayed as dangerous and unpredictable. These songs about the female influence in J.L.’s world seem to display conflicting feelings. In some, women are everything, and in others, women are not to be trusted.

One theme consistent throughout J.L’s songs seems to be feelings of loss and love for his mother. In J.L.’s collection, “mother” has a higher, almost saintly overtone and appears to be separate from “women”. There are nine songs that mention J.L.’s mother, and even more that recognize “mother” as a sort of status, but may be referring to the Virgin Mary, or mothers of the world. The huge impact of the loss of his mother on J.L.’s life is expressed in these songs. “What you did for me, mother, I am unfortunately never going to finish repaying you for that.” As made evident in this line, J.L. is incredibly grateful that his mother brought him into this world, but these songs express that J.L. is not done dealing with the loss of his parents, especially his mother. “Oh mother, you put me on the Earth and you left me.” Lines like this display the grief and strife J.L. has faced since his mother’s death. “Wherever you are, you can hear my groaning, I feel as though I can’t stand it.” The torment of surviving while your parents have been taken by death is a difficult issue for anyone to comprehend, especially a young person. Through these songs, insight is brought to us about this teen’s grieving process and emotional trials.

In contrast to the praise, love, and heartache J.L. displays when discussing his mother, in other songs, J.L. refers to women only as “slut.” In another, J.L. warns young men to never take a woman and “make a habit of it,” that young boys must be careful in “the company of these women.”

There is one song where J.L. mixes Vodou, women, and sex. He is speaking to “Little Mary”, in a sexually explicit way. He declares that it is Gede, the lwa whom he acquired from
his mother, that taught him his sexual ways. He then asks Mary where her sexual ancestors are. It is curious to note that even when discussing sex very frankly, and quite vulgarly, J.L. still mentions his mother. We must keep in mind that J.L. is only seventeen. These songs allude to J.L.’s inexperience with the opposite sex. This is a young man who is still developing his opinions and has much to learn about the world and his commentary on these issues brings us descriptions from the eyes of a youth. On the same page as the somewhat derogatory songs, J.L. tells young men not to mistreat women because they are “more than our mothers.” It is interesting that J.L. does not want to mistreat women, but does not make the connection that referring to someone as a “slut” could be considered mistreatment. The mystery of J.L.’s collection is his use of keen philosophical statements and high praise for his mother juxtaposed with songs where he refers to women in derogatory ways or as sexual objects.

Èzili, is the female lwa who takes many forms and embodies not just femininity, but creativity, maternity, sexuality and pleasure. A significant portion of J.L.’s song collection is about Èzili, specifically Èzili Dantò. Èzili Dantò is the side of the feminine ideal that is the mother. She is a mother who has lost her child and had her tongue removed; she has suffered. It is interesting that J.L. praises Èzili Dantò, the more intense Èzili, as opposed to Èzili Freda, the flirtier lwa of beauty and love. The fact that J.L. praises Èzili Dantò, the hurt mother, may be because he identifies with her because of his own pain, and possibly because she can be his own “spiritual mother” even though his earthly mother is gone. It is in the songs about Èzili that the dichotomy between “woman” and “mother” is pronounced. J.L. initially speaks of a woman being his lucky woman, and then refers to her as the “mother of his woman.” “Woman” takes on an earthly tone in these songs, and by referring to Èzili as “the mother,” her status is elevated. She is “number one.”

In one song, Èzili Dantò is portrayed as a bit dangerous. There is reference to her eating people and that she is “a woman who is criminal” and a woman who “is all lit up.” Although J.L. speaks of her intense side, there seems to be respect and admiration for Èzili Dantò, and it may be in part because J.L. identifies with her and envisions her as his lwa mother.

The collections of J.L.’s songs portray a complicated young man dealing with personal strife. J.L. appears to be quite inexperienced in dealing with women other than his mother, and is not yet prepared and able to understand the complications of romance. J.L. makes the connection between mothers and women in some songs, but in general, the word mother is given a high status; “mother” is above all else in J.L.’s literature. J.L. speaks of masculine lwa, but his father is relatively absent in his songs. He praises the male lwa, as a good Vodouist would, but there is more of an emotional connection displayed with Èzili, mostly Èzili Dantò, the pained mother. There are moments when J.L. connects Èzili, mother, and women all as one, but the dichotomy between being a woman and being his mother is quite intact and is very real in J.L.’s world.

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9 Hebblethwaite, p.152 #23
10 Tinsley, p.1
11 Hebblethwaite, p. 180 #74
12 Hebblethwaite, p.180 #74
13 Hebblethwaite, p. 170 #117
14 Hebblethwaite, p. 169 #115, p.170 #117
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