



To Honor the Work of Karen McCarthy Brown

A letter to friends and colleagues

As most of you know, our beloved Karen, inspiring scholar of religion, is suffering from a particularly rare form of dementia. Before the disease dominated her life she was working on getting her path-breaking book, “Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn” translated into French. Karen had identified a remarkable translator in Paris and a distinguished French publishing house to take it on. Now that project is stalled for lack of funding. This is an appeal to a broad community of friends and fans to help raise the funding for this endeavor to honor Karen. It also honors Mama Lola.

The French version of the book has been long in coming but it is more than ever needed as many vicious media attacks on Vodou and Haitian society have taken place after the devastating earthquake of January 12, 2010. In the aftermath of the quake, at a moment when Haitians are seeking sources of support even beyond material relief, some believe that Vodou as national religion and source of humanistic values has much to offer to the project of national reconstruction and reconciliation. Haitian culture is not well understood, so the book is an opportunity to continue to educate and inform. Ultimately, this translation will help restore the Haitian ancestral religion to its proper place and will serve Haiti well at a time of such extraordinary challenge for the country and its people.

With this letter, we invite you to join the group of scholars and friends who believe that it is time to have this important book available in Haiti and in the Francophone world in general. Hopefully this will happen within this coming year. Our goal is to raise the necessary funds to undertake the project by December, 2010. To get there we need your help now.

How you can support this effort: Some of you may wish to contribute direct financial support as a way to honor Karen and Mama Lola and this extraordinary book. You may also have contacts with foundations or sources of grant funding and may know a broader network of friends and colleagues who should be alerted to this effort. Karen herself, her husband, Bob, and friends like us, Gail and Claudine, would so appreciate any thoughts and ideas you may have.

Background

Karen McCarthy Brown is a highly regarded scholar of religion and her book, "Mama Lola"—which first appeared in 1991 and now going into its 3rd edition—is used in university courses in women's studies, anthropology, and religion departments all over North America and the English speaking world. Karen's pioneering approach combined both anthropological methods with fiction. She placed herself in the picture, in relationship with Mama Lola, rather than as a disinterested observer." Claudine Michel, a Haitian scholar and editor of the *Journal of Haitian Studies*, based at UC Santa Barbara, is writing the new forward to the third edition for University of California Press. At Karen's retirement party earlier in 2009, Michel spoke passionately about the significance of "Mama Lola" in making the study of the most maligned religion in the world a respectable endeavor in the academy. She also contends that "This book is an insightful venture into the heart of a misunderstood religious system in which women have great claim to moral authority." Not only does Vodou now have a place at the table in comparative religion courses but by focusing on a Vodou priestess, Karen shed light on the fact that women were usually absent from the study of religion. Michel talked personally of her cohort of women scholars, some Haitian-American, and how this work inspired them and enabled them to pursue a meaningful course of inquiry and scholarship. The distinguished scholar Robert Farris Thompson of Yale University also underscored these aspects of Karen's groundbreaking work when he wrote in a blurb for the 2nd edition: "This is a masterpiece of fieldwork, feminism and moral interpretation."

"Mama Lola" – the book was path-breaking in the field of anthropology as well. A University of California Press blurb explains: "Weaving several of her own voices—analytic, descriptive, and personal—with the voices of her subjects in alternate chapters of traditional ethnography and ethnographic fiction, Brown presents herself as a character in Mama Lola's world and allows the reader to evaluate her interactions there. Startlingly original, Brown's work endures as an important experiment in ethnography as a social art form rooted in human relationships."

"Mama Lola"—the book—had a huge impact on Mama Lola's life and work as well. Soon after publication she was invited to be a consultant for a major exhibition "The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou" produced by the University of California's Fowler Museum which traveled around the U.S. She has been invited to do healing work in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Montreal. Most importantly, since Katrina she has been regularly invited to New Orleans to do healing work there. Together and separately, Mama Lola and Karen have traveled





to numerous universities to give lectures and presentations. They also traveled together to Benin. Their collaboration and friendship have inspired generations of scholars and assisted many practitioners.

Before Karen's disease she was working on editing a collection of her articles and essays on religion for Duke University Press. That project continues, but the project that was closest to Karen's heart was getting "Mama Lola" translated into French.

The translator

Our first choice for translator is Thibaut Mosneron Dupin, who has agreed to do the work for approximately \$22,000. Through research and consultation with other translators we believe this is a fair and reasonable fee. Jean Malaurie, the anthropologist who runs Terre Humaine, the prestigious French publishing house that published Levi Strauss in France, has also written a letter of support for publishing the book. However, given the state of affairs in publishing, they have no resources now for covering the cost of translation. If you would like to read a sample of Dupin's translation of "Mama Lola," or read Malaurie's letter or that of the publishing house, please let us know.

In the meantime, your tax deductible donations to this project are welcome and appreciated. See details below. Any suggestions for additional people to contact about this as well as foundation

sources of funding would also be of great assistance. If any of you have contacts with UNESCO that, too, would be very helpful.

Where to send your money

We request that donations be sent to KOSANBA—A Scholarly Organization for the Study of Haitian Vodou—housed at the Center for Black Studies Research at the University of California Santa Barbara. Checks should be addressed to UC Regents. In the memo section, indicate "KOSANBA/Brown Translation/Project."

Checks should be sent to

Center for Black Studies Research
4603 South Hall, University of California
Santa Barbara, CA 93106-3140

An acknowledgment of your donation will be sent to you by the university.

About KOSANBA—Karen served as a founding member of this organization and has been on its board since its inception in 1997. On the occasion of her retirement in May 2009, KOSANBA honored Karen for her life contributions to the study of Haitian Vodou and Culture. KOSANBA again recognized her achievements as one of Vodou's most distinguished ambassadors of all time at its IX International Conference in Mirebalais, Haiti, in July 2009. The leadership of the organization is pleased to assist in facilitating the translation of this monumental work that urgently needs to find its way to Haiti and other Francophone countries.





Again, we express our gratitude for your participation in this community effort to honor the work of both Karen McCarthy Brown and Mama Lola and the extraordinary relationship they nurtured in the process of working together for more than 30 years. It is also about continuing Karen's long legacy of restoring Vodou as a legitimate belief system that offers hope and communal support to its adherents in Haiti and beyond.

We join our voices to thank you for supporting this most cherished dream of Karen; we also thank you on behalf of those who have long awaited the translation of "Mama Lola." If we can answer any further questions about this project, please feel free to contact any one of us.

With our most sincere appreciation,

Bob, Gail and Claudine

Robert Machover
175 Adamic Rd
Milford, New Jersey 08848
revocam@hughes.net

Claudine Michel
Department of Black Studies
University of California, Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, California 93106
michel@blackstudies.ucsb.edu

Gail Pellett
Gail Pellett Productions
32 W 20 St.
New York, N.Y. 10011
gpellett@nyc.rr.com