

**Blessed Are the Binary Breakers**  
Episode 10: Alex is a Haitian Vodou Priest  
*Transcribed by Avery Smith*

[ Acoustic guitar intro music ]

**Avery:**

Hello, listeners, and welcome to another episode of *Blessed Are the Binary Breakers*. Um, you may have noticed that there was supposed to be an episode two weeks ago that never got posted. I'm so sorry about that, um, but I like to think I have a pretty good excuse. In fact, several excuses.

The first thing is that I graduated from seminary on May 19, and in the weeks leading up to that I was scrambling to, you know, get paperwork turned in, and to finish up like 4 or 5 essays and projects and all of that so I *could* graduate. I now have my Masters of Divinity, which is pretty rad!

And then literally 6 days after graduating I got married. So I had to, you know, get prepared for that -- drive down to Tuscaloosa, Alabama, which is where Leah and I got married because that's where we met in undergrad and we have a little church home there. Um, so that's where we got married, and it was wonderful and it was fun and a day after getting back from the wedding, we flew to Seattle, Washington, for our honeymoon.

If you're interested in hearing about our honeymoon, we had a lot of fun in a national park -- and just about our take on queer love, and what it's like to be in a partnership where one person is trans and the other is cis, and just us talking about how the more conservative / homophobic idea of complementarity or complementarianism -- why only men and women can marry each other and all that jazz -- we talk about why that's kinda bs and how we complement each other just fine as we are -- we made a YouTube video, um, talking about all of that! You can find it if you search Queerly Christian on YouTube, and I think the title is called "Queer Love: Complementarianism...and cookies!" (because we bake cookies during the video).

I decided to make the video, and Leah so kindly helped me make it, because, um, I wanted to sort of replace the missing podcast episode that you didn't get two weeks ago. So you get that content as well as the interview you are about to hear.

So again, so sorry about missing an episode, but let me tell you, the interview you are about to listen to is definitely worth the wait. I was so honored to talk to Alex Batagi, who is a Haitian Vodou priest!

It was really cool for me to get to learn a little bit more about Haitian Vodou, um, how it's all about the holistic self, um, and about connecting the physical and the spiritual; how the spiritual beings in the faith interact with humanity. It was really cool to get to hear about Alex's own spiritual mother, who has been so wonderfully understanding and supportive of Alex as a transgender male priest. So I hope you all really enjoy this episode.

*[audio quality changes as Avery moves into interview with Alex]*

**Avery**

I've been hoping to get people from all sorts of different faith backgrounds, and so Haitian Vodou is pretty awesome.

**Alex:**

Yeah, I think it's important to see as many viewpoints as possible.

**Avery:**

Yeah, especially, I feel like, in the US Vodou is -- people don't really know what it is and there's a lot of misconceptions.

**Alex:**

Absolutely.

**Avery:**

So are you ready to get started?

**Alex:**

Sure! Sure, I'm ready to go whenever you are.

**Avery:**

Awesome! Oh, um, one thing really quick: so your name's Alex, um...

**Alex:**

Batagi. [pronounced "Bah - tah - GEE," hard G]

**Avery:**

Batagi. Okay, so, emphasis on the last bit of it.

**Alex:**

Yep!

**Avery:**

So, Alex, the way I normally start these interviews is just to ask, um, what you want listeners to know about you right off the bat -- whether that's about faith and gender, or hobbies, career, anything like that.

**Alex:**

Okay. Um, so I think as a holistic person, I, you know, I am transgender, I've identified as transgender for quite a while, um, kind of even before I knew what the term meant or even had other examples to point at.

For me being a person of faith really permeates all aspects of my life -- kind of living my life out in the world really pulls in where my faith, where my faith kind of lives, um. For me I believe, you know, whatever you choose -- spirituality, religion, um -- that's kind of an action verb for me, that my beliefs are lived beliefs. It's not, just, for me something that I kind of hold behind closed doors. And for me, like, professionally I work in human services, I work with marginalized populations, and for me, um, where I view things as that's sacred work for me. I believe that that is bringing my personal faith principles and the principles of how I view my spirits or divine figures in the world.

**Avery:**

Yeah, that's really cool. And so -- you're in Boston, right?

**Alex:**

Yeah, I live in, I've lived in Massachusetts my whole life so, yeah I live in Boston right now.

**Avery:**

Cool. So, what, how did you find Haitian Vodou, is that part of your family background or what?

**Alex:**

No, it's not, I, I grew up, I grew up Protestant, um, and I'm a, you know, a pastor's kid. Um --

**Avery:**

Oh! Okay.

**Alex:**

[*chuckling*] you know, yeah, right! [*both laughing*] Uh, for me as I got older that kind of, that didn't work. And so I kind of did more exploration as an adult, and I kind of settled on, you know, casual agnosticism -- that something was out there but I didn't know what it was and that, you know, I was happy not knowing what it was. And I, you know, dabbled with kind of -- you know, I grew into polytheistic beliefs that, you know, from that casual agnosticism to realizing that there *were* bigger things and they had individual names and individual personalities. And then it was by chance that I reconnected with an old friend who I had known for, at the time probably for 10 years, um. He and I, our lives had moved in different directions and we had found each other on Facebook. And he had mentioned that he had become initiated in a religion. And it was something that I had not experienced before, um, and something that I was curious about in the way that I tend to be curious about many things -- that for me it's important to, kind of open my worldview and learn how other people live in the world and how they experience the world.

**Avery:**

Mhmm.

**Alex:**

And so he told me, you know, "Go check out a ceremony; my spiritual mother's house is there in Boston and, you know, there's a ceremony coming up on this date, you should go!" And so I went, kind of to, with the goal of seeing something I hadn't seen before and learning about other people and other cultures.

And I went, and it was a really transformative experience for me. Part of Haitian Vodou is, the spirits come down in possession: they come down into the bodies of their servants and speak to them and to the community.

**Avery:**

Ooh.

**Alex:**

And I had a moment of speaking with a spirit at that party, and he said some very interesting things to me, and he asked me if I would come back. And I said I would, and it kind of

developed from there, that it grew into a spiritual home for me, where there's been a lot of transformative experience and a lot of personal growth for me. And so it really became very important to me very quick.

**Avery:**

Wow. That's really cool.

**Alex:**

Yeah. I think it, for me, it has kind of been a life-changing experience.

**Avery:**

Yeah. And how long ago was it that you went to that first ceremony?

**Alex:**

Um, that was back in...2013. So a little while ago. It was, it was a ceremony for, um, there are family spirits for the Guédé, they are the elevated dead in the religion -- the spirits of souls who have gone, kind of, we call it under the water to rest. Um. And then they were lifted up as part of our family of spirits of the departed souls.

**Avery:**

Um, can I ask, did you know at that point that you were trans?

**Alex:**

Yes, I had, I had, I knew that I was gender variant at kind of a very young age but I didn't know what it meant.

**Avery:**

Mhmm.

**Alex:**

I'm 37 years old so, by my early 20s I had a really solid conception that I was not cisgender.

**Avery:**

Okay.

**Alex:**

I just did not have the language for that. Um. For me, um, how I grew up, I kind of grew up sheltered and grew up very conservatively in a lot of ways, and I didn't know that transgender men existed.

**Avery:**

Mhmm.

**Alex:**

Um, I knew about drag queens, you know, I heard all the salacious stories about trans women sometimes --

**Avery:**

Mm, mhmm.

**Alex:**

-- but I didn't know that, that there was another alternative.

**Avery:**

Yeah.

**Alex:**

And I met someone in my early 20s -- I don't think they identified as transgender; they were identifying at that point primarily as a butch woman, and they had chosen to have top surgery. And that kind of opened my eyes that there were other options --

**Avery:**

Yeah!

**Alex:**

Um, and it blew my mind, totally. Um. So I kind of went through a phase of kind of questioning who I was and trying to figure that out in relationship with my sexuality. Because for me part of

my journey, knowing that I was different, was you know exploring whether I was a lesbian or not. And that you know, that wasn't a fit for me.

**Avery:**

Mhmm.

**Alex:**

Um, so by my mid to late 20s I kind of settled on "gender different," and by my early, late 20s early 30s, I had really settled on the identity of a transgender man. Um. So yeah at the time when I went to that ceremony I identified as transgender. I had not, kind of, for me begun a medical position at that point.

**Avery:**

Mhmm.

**Alex:**

But for me, like the, really important part of Haitian Vodou for me is that I was able to bring my whole self to the table.

**Avery:**

Oooh, yeah.

**Alex:**

And when it became clear that I was becoming more involved and the spirits of the religion were asking me for more things, um, I met with the woman who would become my spiritual mother, who is the lineage head of this particular house. You know, in Haitian Vodou we organize ourselves into families that are often called "Sosyetes" or "societies."

So she was the head of this family, and I had a discussion with her, and it was clear at that point that initiating into the priesthood was, was gonna be a reality for me. And I talked with her at length about the fact that, for me, I could not in good conscience initiate as a female priest.

**Avery:**

Yeah.

**Alex:**

And in the religion that's called a *Manbo*. And I said, "No I can't, I can't initiate as a Manbo." And she looked at me and said, "Well okay, then I'll initiate you as an Oungan," which is the male priest.

**Avery:**

Oh wow.

**Alex:**

And it was something very new for the religion. There were very few transgender priests in the religion, um, for, for a lot of different reasons, mostly because in Haiti there's often a different conception of gender. Um, "transgender" is something very new in Haiti. So it wasn't something that was very common --

**Avery:**

Mhmm.

**Alex:**

-- but it was something that I was able to bring to the table and my spiritual mother kind of, didn't blink an eye.

**Avery:**

That's awesome.

**Alex:**

Yeah, she's an exceptional woman. And so it was really a process of really embracing my whole self, because I was able to bring all of myself to the table with her support. Um, she's, in a lot of ways, um, especially around gender issues she's been kind of a trailblazer. Because again, it's something new for the religion. You haven't seen too many transgender priests. So she's kind of, um, not been afraid to kind of embrace that and welcome people as they are.

**Avery:**

I love that, that's really cool.

**Alex:**

Yeah!

**Avery:**

And are, is there, like so there's two words for a priest whether it's a woman or a man, so is there, are there different roles for a female priest versus for a male priest?

**Alex:**

No, not really. Um, it's interesting, there are different words, but that's kind of really, in the religion, that's where gender division ends.

**Avery:**

Mmm, okay.

**Alex:**

Um, there's really no, no difference in what the ritual responsibilities are or what we do as priests, whether you're a *Manbo* or an *Oungan*. It's really just in name only. And I think that's something that's just part of the religion. And so for me, it was really left up to, where do you feel most comfortable? And what's the best place for you? It speaks a lot to how, you know, because Vodou is an initiatory religion, it kind of self regulates, in that outside factors are not what changes the religion, really. The religion decides how it changes, and the individual priests decide how that shapes their individual lineage. And I think, um, my spiritual mother Manbo Maude Evans has really decided that for her it's important to welcome whole people, and that means bringing all of us, all of our whole selves to the table.

**Avery:**

Oh I love that. So there's, that emphasis on that whole person as being valuable.

**Alex:**

Yeah. Absolutely.

**Avery:**

That's really, that's really powerful. If you don't mind, I'd love to hear a little more on your thoughts about what drew you to Vodou. So you've got that idea of the whole person; what other values are important to this religion?

**Alex:**

Um, I think, you know, for a transgender person like myself, I think something that was really important to me -- and I didn't know it was gonna be important, it was something that kind of crept up on me, um, was the concept of family. Is that, the religion organizes itself into family units. Um, and in Haiti, family is really important because family is how you survive. Um, you know Haiti is a very different place from the US and there are different challenges, so having a family is kind of how you make your way in the world. And, I kind of, I didn't know I was looking for a family so much until I found it. And so that's a really, really key aspect of the religion. I think, you know when I talk like about basic concepts of Vodou is, it's, the religion is based on relationships. You know, relationships to our spiritual family, our spiritual parent; relationships to our spirits; relationships to the community. And it's within those relationships that the religion functions. And I think, for me, having a, having a mother in this way has been really important for me. It's allowed me space to grow as a person and to understand myself in the world, um, and that's kind of a core value I think of the religion.

And I think, you know, within that you find, you find the aspect of working towards a communal good: nothing happens when one person works alone, it's when everybody works together.

**Avery:**

Oh, I like that.

**Alex:**

At ceremonies you get everybody working together to make them happen. Mothers, singing, dancing, drumming, um, kind of all of those things happen together. Um.

**Avery:**

Mhmm.

**Alex:**

Beyond that there's kind of 3 core aspects of the religion. The first being service to the spirits, um, we believe there is, you know, one supreme divinity that many people call "God," or, you know, the equivalent word in Creole would be *Bon Dieu*, um, which means "Good God." And after God there is many spirits, we call them the *Lwa*. Um, and they, the *lwa* themselves are organized into families as well, and so, kind of one of the big functions of service to those spirits is we build relationships with those spirits, and they, you know, they teach us, they love us, they protect us, they care for us. And in turn you know we feed them, we feed them, we keep them strong, we celebrate them, um, we you know we breathe them down into the ceremony for the community.

And so Vodou kind of emulates that part of Haitian life since it is a Haitian religion, and so the religion is done in family units, and so the lineage head or the priest who's doing the, you know, the ceremony for you is often considered your parent. And, you know, their, their other initiate children are your siblings. And for me, I do not come from a background where I am super close to my biological family, um....

Another kind of core function is healing. Healing is a big part of Vodou. Whether it's individual healing, community healing, family healing, you know; whether it's physical illness, spiritual illness, or a spiritual problem, um, a big part of the religion is healing. Healing those things that hurt us to make us stronger.

**Avery:**

Oh, I like that a lot.

**Alex:**

And the third, kind of the third big branch is magic. A lot of people on the outside kind of get caught up in that --

**Avery:**

Yeah.

**Alex:**

-- um, it is important, um, but it's not the only thing. So sometimes we do magic for outcomes, or magic for healing, or magic to kind of enhance aspects of our lives.

**Avery:**

Mhmm. That's really, that's really cool to think about, especially the idea of community and healing, um. Just knowing -- I don't know a ton about Haitian Vodou, but I do know that it, it sort of came with Africans who were brought over as slaves, right? That they...

**Alex:**

\*sound of affirmation\*

**Avery:**

So it makes sense that they've got this focus on healing.

**Alex:**

Absolutely. I think one of the interesting aspects of healing in Vodou -- especially, you know, know, when we keep gender, gender identity in mind is -- healing is not, it's not just aimed at, you know, taking care of an illness...

**Avery:**

Uh-huh.

**Alex:**

It's also kind of aimed at, like, resetting the balance.

**Avery:**

Ooh.

**Alex:**

I think that's another core aspect of Vodou too, is balancing out life -- we're making it balance, having everything be in balance. And that's never, you know, a one-step process, it's kind of a lifelong pursuit, of organizing different areas and making sure that everything stays as even-keel as possible.

And sometimes that healing is not, you know, it's not always gentle. It's sometimes it's more of a revolutionary approach. Because of its roots, um, in the enslavement of Africans who were brought across the Middle Passage. Um.

**Avery:**

Yeah.

**Alex:**

A quarter of Haiti's history is, um, the revolution where enslaved Africans said "enough is enough" and rose up against the French colonizers.

**Avery:**

Yeah, and won, right?

**Alex:**

Yeah! So Vodou really embodies revolution as a spiritual concept, so that comes through in our healing a lot. And for trans people in particular I think that's important for us. Because I think in some ways, you know, everyone identifies a little bit differently along the trans spectrum, um...

**Avery:**

Of course, yeah.

**Alex:**

For me, I see, you know, transgender as a concept -- as an evolutionary thing. We are evolving to be who we are --

**Avery:**

Ooh, that's cool.

**Alex:**

-- through the process of coming out; if we decide to take a, you know, medical transition.

**Avery:**

Mhmm.

**Alex:**

For me that fits within the purview of Vodou is that, we're both evolution in that concept, and it's like a personal revolution.

**Avery:**

Yeah!

**Alex:**

It's seeking to balance our lives.

**Avery:**

And like you said, it sort of is a, a thing you -- it's a lifelong thing, it doesn't happen right away.

**Alex:**

Oh absolutely, it's a process. I mean, for me, when I, like I said when I started Vodou I had not started a medical transition, and I was not sure I wanted one.

**Avery:**

Uh-huh.

**Alex:**

I had kind of tossed the idea back and forth, and then kind of tossed it out the window and said, "That's not for me."

**Avery:**

Uh-huh.

**Alex:**

But for me, it was...part of, you know, the last part of our initiation, um, that takes place in public is, we're baptized in the religion. We're baptized with a spiritual name, um, that includes, um, like the last bit of it is, it indicates whether we're an *Oungan* or a *Manbo*. And my spiritual name, um, came out as *Bonkira Bon Oungan*, and that means, um, "What is good is rare" -- and indicates that I'm a male priest.

And for me being baptized in the community as a male priest kind of changed my process around transition. I found for myself, you know when I came home from that and sat with it for a while, you know, I *couldn't* remain in kind of a space of being, you know, deciding that medical transition was not for me. For me it really pushed me to explore that more, and find what the right option for me was.

**Avery:**

Yeah, that's really cool that being initiated into that community helped you discover more about yourself too.

**Alex:**

Absolutely. I think it, for me, it was probably one of the first places in my life that I was really able to be my whole self.

**Avery:**

Yeah, that's beautiful.

**Alex:**

And didn't matter if everybody understood, it didn't matter if everybody thought it was great, but it mattered, you know, that my spiritual mother, my siblings kind of were behind me with that, um, and, and it fit! It was one of the first times that I really felt like a whole person.

**Avery:**

Mhmm.

**Alex:**

And my experience, my experience has been, like, even if -- in Haiti, it's kind of different than in the US, that even if people don't understand, it doesn't mean they don't accept you; it doesn't mean they don't respect you.

**Avery:**

Mmm. Mhmm.

**Alex:**

They...they might say to your face "You know what? I don't understand, but...I care about you." You know?

**Avery:**

Yeah. I did, if you don't mind talking about it, I am curious: is, are all the practitioners, all the people in your house, um, cool with it? Like have the reactions to you being trans all been positive ones?

**Alex:**

Um. I think...kind of...playing back to gender kind of being different in Haiti, uh...it's a, kind of a different wavelength of thinking about gender right now in Haiti. Um, transgender is a new concept, um, in Haiti, um, simply because it just, the idea -- there's kind of no option for folks who *would* undertake a transition there to have that, there's kind of no medical support for that or structural support.

**Avery:**

Uh-huh.

**Alex:**

And, and Haiti is still discovering itself in terms of what sexual difference means, what gender difference means.

**Avery:**

Mhmm.

**Alex:**

So a lot of folks in Haiti might not have had, um, kind of, exposure to trans people before.

**Avery:**

Yeah

**Alex:**

Um. And...It was a concept that was new for a lot of people to think about. Um. So I think -- there were no *negative* reactions but more very *curious* reactions.

**Avery:**

Oh yeah, that makes sense.

**Alex:**

So like, "Who's this person," um. Like at a time people looking at me might have identified me as female, um, you know, most folks in a spiritual setting in Vodou who identify as female might wear a dress or a skirt, and I wore pants and a shirt.

**Avery:**

Uh-huh.

**Alex:**

And so there were questions about, “Why is, why is this person dressed this way?” And it was nev -- I never felt it was negative, and none of the feedback I ever heard was negative. It was more just curiosity.

**Avery:**

Yeah. Yeah, in the United States, being confused about something, being ignorant about something, is tied to fear.

**Alex:**

Absolutely.

**Avery:**

Like, lack of knowledge is seen as such a, like, it's a negative thing, so if you don't know about something your first instinct is to be a bit afraid of it and defensive.

**Alex:**

Right.

**Avery:**

Yeah.

**Alex:**

Yeah, my experience in Haiti has been very different from that. Um. It's been met with curiosity and lots of questions sometimes, but for me it's never felt derogatory or disrespectful. Um, it's really just, people have been curious. And it's something because they haven't seen that before and they don't know what it means.

**Avery:**

Yeah. And like you said, like, you're a family, they want to get to know you.

**Alex:**

Absolutely. Um, and I think that in some ways, um, the ways that I've explained it to people, um, it *can* fall within our kind of religious, like, topography.

**Avery:**

Ooh.

**Alex:**

We believe that...we believe that our spirits can come down and possess a body, can possess a person.

**Avery:**

Right.

**Alex:**

And so that means for us, we explain that, it's kind of that our soul is moved over in that moment. Um.

**Avery:**

Mm.

**Alex:**

Because the spirit is taking, taking up a little space in us like that. And it doesn't matter whether the spirit presents itself as male or female, it will possess the person that they want to possess.

**Avery:**

Ah! Okay.

**Alex:**

And so we can talk about, we've talked about it in ways that like, you know, we've seen this male spirit come down into someone who identifies as female.

**Avery:**

Yeah.

**Alex:**

What does that mean? And then we talk about that, like I've talked about that with people in terms of like, my soul is different than what my body looks like.

**Avery:**

Mhmm.

**Alex:**

For me, with the people I've talked to, that has been, like, that has been a moment where they've gone, "Ohhh, okay! Like *that* makes sense."

**Avery:**

Yeah!

**Alex:**

Um, so being able to explain it in a religious concept has kind of helped folks in some ways.

**Avery:**

Yeah, that is really cool, um, that you have that spiritual language to use.

**Alex:**

Definitely.

**Avery:**

I like that a lot. And that's sort of, that's all I've -- like, I've only looked into Vodou, to be honest, like, for the specific purpose of, I was very curious about how, um, how it interacts with Christianity, since I am Christian and I know there's like syncretism there; and I was also kind of looking into, um, any sort of queerness, like, gender variance within it. And so I saw some of that -- that some of the spirits can present as feminine or masculine, is that, is that correct?

**Alex:**

Yeah, I think -- The spirits definitely have personalities. They definitely have personalities, they definitely can present themselves as masculine or feminine, kind of depending on who they are. And sometimes that has, you know, relationships to what their characteristics are, what their quote-unquote "job" might be, their favorite area of expertise. But when it comes to, like, how they move in community, like, their deepest desire is to meet their people. And so when they make a possession it doesn't matter, like, who you are. It matters that, you know, that you're the best fit for them in that moment, and so gender is kind of irrelevant.

**Avery:**

That's really neat.

**Alex:**

Um. Yeah, in a lot of ways, before our spirits our gender is irrelevant. You know, really the, the only kind of gender thing I've experienced in Vodou is just really the title of priest, or um, if you are a male priest or a female priest you know. And in the lineage that I have been a part of, it, you know, clearly it has been kind of mutable for me, it hasn't been "This is what you look like, so this is what you are."

**Avery:**

Yeah.

**Alex:**

So I mean the spirits, the spirits are, they're very flexible with us. And our personal relationships kind of show who they are with us personally. We learn who they are, through us. Um, so we --

**Avery:**

Ooh, I like that.

**Alex:**

Yeah. Like I think we, we are our own filters in some ways -- I know when I speak with my spirits, learn about my spirits, learn from them, I'm seeing them through my own reality. And so that might be different from a Haitian woman's reality. Or that might be different from a single mother's reality. Um. So we meet them as we are.

**Avery:**

Um, do you have any specific spirits that you sort of devote more time to, because I know there's a lot of spirits --

**Alex:**

Yeah [chuckles]

**Avery:**

-- do you, do you pick certain ones that you focus on?

**Alex:**

So, I mean, there are a lot of spirits in Vodou, and I think...we all have the spirits that we are closer to than not. I mean, I think that's just a part of human reality.

**Avery:**

Yeah.

**Alex:**

Um. Kind of, for us, maintaining balance is, maintaining balance among our spirits -- I wouldn't say that I have favorites, I think that's a place where, um, like I would shy away from that word.

**Avery:**

Okay.

**Alex:**

There are spirits that I've worked closely with over time. For me, the spirit that really drew me to Vodou was Guédé, the spirit of, you know the spirit family of the elevated dead.

**Avery:**

Mm. Mhmm.

**Alex:**

And for me, as a priest one of the things that I have learned about that spirit group for myself, um, you know we often refer to that spirit as "he" but Guédé is reflective of *all* dead people so there are all types of Guédé.

For me, I have really, you know, embraced Guédé as a spirit who understands humanity really deeply, because he is the family of spirits that has been human most recently.

**Avery:**

Ah! Yeah...

**Alex:**

And for me, I have seen Guédé as a spirit who cares particularly for LGBT folks.

**Avery:**

Ooh!

**Alex:**

Um, and has, kind of, for me, has a kind of unending well of empathy for the human experience. Um. Because Guédé knows what it is to suffer. Again, being the most recently human, Guédé knows what it is to kind of have heartbreak, have loss -- the whole scope of human experience. And I have found, um, for me, like, he is a really important ally for work I do with seekers who might be LGBT+, um, for gender variant folks in particular. Guédé comes with no judgment. Um. A lot of folks read up on Guédé, they'll hear that Guédé often makes sexual jokes or flirtations, you know, rude jokes or things like that -- that's because Guédé, you know, he's dead so he's kind of beyond all rules.

**Avery:**

[chuckling] Yeah!

**Alex:**

And he embodies no judgment because of that. For me I have not felt judgment from any spirit about my gender or my sexuality,

**Avery:**

Mhmm

**Alex:**

-- but Guédé in particular for me, he is that keyhole --

**Avery:**

Yeah

**Alex:**

-- For, for LGBT+ folks.

**Avery:**

Yeah, that's wonderful to...I'll have to look more into him.

**Alex:**

Yeah!

**Avery:**

I like the sound of him, he sounds really cool.

**Alex:**

That family of spirits is special, for sure. Like for me as a trans person and having that be my first contact with spirits in Vodou, it was, was...again like one of those nurturing experiences where the spirit was like, "I don't care, you're here!" Like, it doesn't matter. So that was really important for me.

**Avery:**

That is, especially...if you're interested in talking a little bit more about growing up Protestant, and like as a pastor's kid, it sounds like you probably didn't get that feeling that just, you know, showing up as you were was accepted. So...

**Alex:**

Yeah you know, it was interesting. I grew up, you know like I said, heavily Protestant, very involved in church stuff, um, I worked at a, uh, Christian summer camp for a time. My parent was, you know, is and was a pastor. I think for me, it was not -- for me I did not have an experience that was kind of embracing of who I was.

**Avery:**

Yeah.

**Alex:**

I stopped going to church when I was 18 because it was just not a good fit. I had, you know when I was involved in the summer camp I'd had some really, you know, homophobic experiences from, from that. Because we know that not all denominations are friendly to LGBT+ folks -- and "not being friendly" might be the most conservative way of saying that.

**Avery:**

Yeah.

**Alex:**

And so for me, I had a lot of ideas about what faith meant, what religion meant, and I kind of wanted no part of that. And so when I started coming around to Vodou, I was very, kind of, apprehensive about group religious exercises. Like I had said, I had been an active polytheist for a while, but most of my religious, you know, compatriots were queer, were trans, were gender variant in some way.

**Avery:**

Uh-huh.

**Alex:**

So coming into a new setting, I was very apprehensive. I'm not a big joiner, I don't rush into group things kind of willy-nilly, and so I was apprehensive and I was waiting to see if this was going to reflect a conservative outtake.

**Avery:**

Yeah. Yeah.

**Alex:**

Which for me growing up like, sexuality was not talked about in a religious context --

**Avery:**

Same.

**Alex:**

There were like, I don't think anyone around me really knew what transgender really meant. There were no examples of that kind of available to me.

**Avery:**

Mhmm.

**Alex:**

So, moving out into the world as a young adult -- you know, even, even as a young adult, that was the early 2000s for me, and for me I think that there was still not a lot of availability you know through the late 90s and early 2000s of religious figures who were queer or gender variant in some way. At least in my area of the world. And so kind of seeing that explode more and having this, kind of, constellation of experiences that led to this being okay for me was pretty transformative.

**Avery:**

Yeah.

**Alex:**

Really being able to embody, embody like a spiritual belief in a setting that was safe for that, um, which didn't, you know, didn't feel remunerative, or didn't feel kind of like it was, you know a repeat of the past was really good for me.

**Avery:**

Yeah.

**Alex:**

And I think for trans people a lot, my experience, my impression has always been that we ignore spiritual needs a lot. Um, because many of us have been hurt in the past.

**Avery:**

Yeah.

**Alex:**

We've been involved in religious organizations or communities that have not supported us, or you know on the other side of the spectrum have ridiculed us, tossed us out, told us that we need fixing or healing or that we're sinful or, all of these kind of pejorative terms. And I think that we kind of forget about our spiritual needs a lot.

**Avery:**

Yeah. Because we don't know that there are places where we can get our needs met and not be hurt.

**Alex:**

Right, and I think, for me I think the biggest place of personal healing was realizing that, that I could be accepted and wanted as my whole self and that -- to the point that it could be a non-factor, honestly, in my religious experience. Like the fact that it could both be embraced and be, like, the least consequential thing. You know?

**Avery:**

Yeah! Yeah.

**Alex:**

And I think, like, healing that for myself was really important and I think, we, we collectively as a community carry a lot of hurt around that --

**Avery:**

Mmmhmm!

**Alex:**

Um. And I think, it's really important for me that trans people know that there are options for them. You know, whether that best option is, of feeling like it's there. For me, part of my priest work is, um, is being visible as a transgender priest because that means there's options for other people.

**Avery:**

Yeah!

**Alex:**

That just, you know that it's there and you can seek it out if you want it.

**Avery:**

Yeah.

**Alex:**

And that, you know, regardless of your past experiences, like, there is a place for you, there are people who will welcome you, there are spirits who will embrace you as you are. And so I think, you know, that's part of who I am as a priest, is making sure that trans people know there are options if we want them.

**Avery:**

Yeah. Just by being who you are and being visible, you can provide hope for other trans people. That's so powerful.

**Alex:**

I think it's really important. I think, you know, there was a time, you know, when I left the Church, you know, as a 19-year-old, early 20-something, I was exploring my identity a lot -- it was something that I really needed, and I didn't know where to find it.

Cuz I feel that like, for a lot of people, faith, however that plays out, wherever we find it -- it is an important part of completing ourselves in some ways. Like, having a wholeness in our life. And for me for like a long time it was an empty spot.

**Avery:**

Yeah.

**Alex:**

Because, you know, there were places I felt like I could go, but I didn't have community, and I think that that's a need that a lot of us have.

**Avery:**

Mhmm.

**Alex:**

Especially, you know, not just a religious community struggling with our presence but even our family units.

**Avery:**

Yeah.

**Alex:**

You know, biological families not being able to welcome us -- you know, finding family wherever we can have it is important a lot of times.

**Avery:**

Yeah, absolutely. And it is true that, like, a lot of us can try to practice spirituality all by ourselves in isolation; but it's really, it's about community.

**Alex:**

Yeah, for me that's, I think that's really key. You know, not just for whatever religious commitments there might be that you need other people for, but just to know that there's someone who has your back, you know? That you're not alone in the world, that like there's someone who shares similar beliefs to you, who sees you for who you are and thinks that you're just fine the way you are.

**Avery:**

Yeah.

**Alex:**

I think that's really important for trans people. We get the short end of the stick a lot of times. We like, we're like the last one to dance at the party, you know?

**Avery:**

Yep!

**Alex:**

So I think it's really important, um, that there are spaces for that.

**Avery:**

Mhmm. You mentioning, um, sort of what you do as a priest leads to one question I did want to ask you is like, what does your sort of day to day or week to week...like, what do you do as a priest?

**Alex:**

So, there's kind of two aspects, two big aspects to being a priest, at least from my perspective. There is community work, and then there is personal work.

Kind of my personal work is my day-to-day. Um, you know, I have what some people might call an altar, um, in my home -- we often call it like a table for the spirits.

**Avery:**

Okay.

**Alex:**

And so each day I try to spend a little time there. You know, whether it's in prayer, in meditation, just speaking with my spirits, um, I try to spend a little time there every day because for me that's really grounding.

**Avery:**

Yeah.

**Alex:**

It, it reminds me kind of, who I am and what my purpose is in the world. Um, and kind of...it develops my personal relationships with my spirits and kind of gives me life through my day.

The second part is community work and that can kind of take a lot of different forms. Sometimes it's, you know, you know helping out at a ceremony at the temple for my house. Um, you know whether it's helping my spiritual mother or helping my siblings, or making sure that the ceremony is done for the community.... Sometimes it's, you know doing what other people might call pastoral counseling -- speaking with folks about their spiritual needs or spiritual worries; doing spiritual work for folks, like, stuff that we might call magic, um, things like that. Things that make the community work turn.

**Avery:**

Yeah.

**Alex:**

Part of that community work for myself is that I do keep a blog. I've kept a blog about my experiences for a long time.

**Avery:**

Cool!

**Alex:**

So I write in that kind of regularly. Um, for me that's kind of spiritual work for me.

**Avery:**

Sweet. Yeah, I'll have to make sure to get a link from you that I can include.

**Alex:**

Yes! Definitely. Um. I think that, kind of that, I mean honestly the blog has been huge part of my community work. You know, I can both put out information that is reputable about the religion versus the salacious stuff that we often find online --

**Avery:**

Oh yeah.

**Alex:**

And, like, have a touch-point of having, this is a trans person who is doing this. Cuz I've written a lot about that, so it's kind of two-fold purpose for me.

And then, you know, week by week, month by work we do community work, you know, supporting ceremonies, supporting um, you know, spiritual clients that may come to us for help, um, doing my writing projects, um...Kind of each year I end up going, I go back to Haiti each year.

**Avery:**

Oh cool!

**Alex:**

Yeah I go, I usually go in the summertime when our house has, you know, our big cycle of initiation ceremonies and ceremonies for our spirits down there. Because my initiatory mother is Haitian. Um, we have a temple here in Haiti and in -- or I'm sorry, in Haiti and here in Boston. Um. And I think going to Haiti as a non-Haitian is a special, is a special duty of ours.

**Avery:**

Is there sort of, in Vodou, like if you don't live in Haiti all the time is there a sort of expectation that you visit Haiti frequently, like? Because that's something -- and this is gonna prove that I'm kind of ignorant, like -- before you contacted me, I hadn't even thought of the fact that Haitian Vodou could exist outside of the country, and that potentially people who are not themselves Haitian, um, and that, like, even when it comes to race I would have assumed you know that everyone who's practicing Haitian Vodou is Black or Indigenous or whatever.

**Alex:**

Yeah. I mean it's, I mean there's a lot there. So, for us, in Haitian Vodou initiation can only take place in Haiti.

**Avery:**

Okay.

**Alex:**

And it's a core, there's many reasons for that, I think -- especially for folks who are not Haitian, um, it's really important to go visit the place where the spirits have lived.

**Avery:**

Yeah.

**Alex:**

Um, the spirits are with us all the time, um, but getting your feet on the soil, um, is important. **You know,** they sacrifice a lot to give us a lot of things so it's important that we sacrifice too.

**Avery:**

Yeah.

**Alex:**

And so going to meet them where they live is important. And I think it's important for folks who are not Haitian, or not, you know, Black or Black descended, um, it's really important to go to Haiti! Um. Because, you know, the community, the community and the spirits kind of decide who's welcome. And you know, each individual lineage plays that out how it decides to.

**Avery:**

Okay.

**Alex:**

And so...It's really important that if, if you have not been to the cont -- the country before, it's important to go there. I think it's important to be where the religion began in a lot of ways. Um.

And for me it's an issue of respect. I'm not Haitian and I'm not Black, um. So I, I take the religion as it is given to me, which is part of my promises, part of my initiation. And that means, that, I go to Haiti. It's an investment in my family there, it's an investment in my community, it's an investment in my spirits, um, to remember my gratitude for what they've given to me. And I think, I think -- and I think that's a big topic, and it's a topic that inspires a lot of strong feelings --

**Avery:**

Yeah.

**Alex:**

-- especially given the political climate both here in the US and in Haiti, to explore around race and Vodou. Especially because, historically and currently, white folks do so much bad stuff around Vodou. And do so much bad stuff around Haiti. In terms of, you know, we have the narratives of poverty porn, and colonialism. So it's really important to kind of continue to unpack that, and to kind of learn what it means to be a white person in Vodou, without burdening Haitians to do that work.

**Avery:**

Yeah, that's so awesome. So you are, you're not taking it for yourself and making it what you want it to be; instead you're humbly asking that you can enter into what it already is.

**Alex:**

I, I hope that's what I'm doing. I think I'm not the judge of that, I think it's kind of up to my elders to make sure I'm kind of, I'm living according to their directions --

**Avery:**

Yeah.

**Alex:**

But that's the goal. I think it's really important; for me, one of my messages that I write about a lot, and I talk about a lot, is that Vodou is a *Haitian* religion. If we're not Haitian, then we are learning new cultural norms and new cult -- if we are welcomed into that, it's our job to kind of live that as it is given. You know, I don't dictate what Haitian culture is, I don't dictate what the culture of the religion is; it's something I learn from my elders.

So part of my initiatory promises that we all make is that we give the religion and live the religion as it is given to us.

**Avery:**

Mhmm.

**Alex:**

So that means that I don't change it. Like. We don't change Vodou; Vodou changes us.

**Avery:**

Ohh, I like that.

**Alex:**

Yeah. **So it's som**ething that I hold as pretty important.

**Avery:**

Yeah. That's really cool, especially like, I know I as a white per -- that is something that white people really need to learn how to do is --

**Alex:**

Absolutely.

**Avery:**

Yeah is, how to be respectful, and...

**Alex:**

Yeah, I mean, our lineage, our lineage is, um, is, you know, we hold a lot of public ceremonies every year, both in the US and in Haiti.

**Avery:**

Uh-huh.

**Alex:**

So there are opportunities for folks who do not have, you know, contact with the religion...to see the religion in context. Um, versus you know reading a book or seeing what an interpretation of the religion might be, to kind of see it as it's done. Um, I think that's important for the religion, um, and for the people to, like for outsiders to see that.

**Avery:**

Yeah.

**Alex:**

I mean if people are interested in seeing kind of what things look like, I can give you a link later, if you want to post it, to videos of our ceremonies and stuff.

**Avery:**

Oh, that would be really awesome.

**Alex:**

Yeah.

**Avery:**

Well...is there anything else that we haven't gotten to that you would like to talk about?

**Alex:**

I think, I think, you know, kind of the overarching message that's important for me is that, for trans people specifically, you know, is that there's always a place for us. There are religious systems that welcome us as whole people; there are spirits or divinities or you know, whatever somebody's chosen word is, that welcome whole people. Um, where both our gender expression is sacred and, you know, inconsequential at the same time because we are whole people.

**Avery:**

Mm, mm.

**Alex:**

You know, we factor in our participation or, you know, how we choose to express things in there. There are places where you are loved as who you are, as a whole person. Unfortunately sometimes we have to search to find it, um, but for me, I know that there are places where we are welcome as whole people.

**Avery:**

That's all so wonderful. Thank you so much, Alex, for taking the time to tell me all about your faith and gender and all that. It's been really cool to hear about it.

**Alex:**

Well I'm really, I really appreciate having this opportunity to chat with you and kind of, you know, open the door a little bit for trans folks and other folks that may be curious. And just be available and, and -- cuz I'm here for that, I'm here to talk about how we operate in religious contexts and what we do to better our lives in a spiritual context, what we can do to kind of live as whole people. I think that's a really important message for us to hear, overall.

**Avery:**

Mmhm.

**Alex:**

I think that it's kind of, that's kind of where I'd like to leave it. And if people are questioning that or kind of, want to talk about that or explore what it means, like I'm always happy to talk to people. Um. And I'll make sure that you have, you know, where I can be reached --

**Avery:**

Yes, please!

**Alex:**

-- and things like that. To be able to just talk about it a little bit, like I think that community is good, you know, more community is always good for trans folks.

**Avery:**

Yeah.

**Alex:**

More opportunities to find our commonalities and find what's important to us is really good.

[shift in audio as interview ends and Avery is alone]

**Avery:**

I hope you enjoyed hearing from Alex as much as I did. I'm really hoping to get this transcript out in the next week or so. I'm moving out of my seminary apartment, and then I'm going down to Atlanta to help Leah move out of *her* apartment, and then we're probably gonna go move up to Cleveland to live with my parents until Leah gets a job.

So, it's still pretty chaotic in my life right now, but I'm still really hoping to get the transcript out, because it's a big, it's a big issue, you know? I wanna make sure that everyone has access to these beautiful stories being shared by all my lovely interviewees, and that's not possible until there are transcripts.

Um, my friend Eli is helping with a lot of the transcripts. You got to hear from them in one of the earlier episodes of this show. So with their help, um, I think I'll be able to really get going with creating transcripts for all the episodes very soon. When it comes to things like all the time and energy and stuff that comes with making transcripts and creating this show and also things like the YouTube video I published with my wife, and all the questions I try to answer on tumblr dot com, um, all these many things that I'm doing, um, that's why I have Patreon now! So just a reminder, like I said in the last episode, um, I have a Patreon. If you search for Queerly Christian on Patreon you will find it. Please only become a patron if you can afford it comfortably. Please support yourself first; only give what you are able.

Um, if you do become a patron, thank you so much. Whether you donate a dollar, or five dollars, or whatever, you're awesome and I really appreciate it.

Um, I have a few patrons who are at the 12 dollar level or higher, and they get a shout-out during every episode for their incredible generosity.

Those people are: Willow Hovingh, Ron Hartzler, and Rosina Paige. Thank you so much for being awesome and generous people.

So I think that's all I've got to say, um, at the closing of this episode. Um, I *will* see you all again in two weeks! I won't just drop off the face of the earth like that again. My issue this time around was that I was *so sure* I'd have time to edit the interview and put it up right before my wedding and it just didn't happen. If it ever happens again that I'm going to skip an episode posting, I'll make sure to give everyone a head's up.

So I *will* see you all --or, you all will hear from me again in two weeks! In the meantime, go break some binaries, and be a blessing to the world with your life.